

**Complacency: An Action Theoretical Approach via Paul Ricoeur and  
Anthony Giddens**

**by**

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## Abstract

In this work I make sense of complacency through an action theoretical perspective based on the action theories of Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens. Even though complacency is a prevalent phenomenon, there is hardly any philosophical, sociological, and anthropological research on complacency. Through my research on complacency, I thus start to fill this research-lacuna. Moreover, by describing complacency as action, I do not take the conventional approaches of assuming that complacency is a vice or a purely psychological phenomenon.

In order to describe complacency as action, I first clarify what complacency is by disambiguating ‘complacency’ through an analytic approach. In doing so, I arrive at a working analytical definition of complacency. I call this a ‘working’ definition, since this definition provides semantic stability while I discuss complacency as action. A working definition further provides analytical guidance as I navigate the action theories of Ricoeur and Giddens, and extract from their action theories the necessary action theoretical elements that are specific to complacent action.

Through the above analysis-action theory dialectic, I am able to determine that complacent action – as a continuous flow of action – is characterised by the (conceptual) action-components of (i) awareness and (ii) care about matter x, (iii) in conjunction with acts that contradict the agent’s acts of care about matter x, (iv) where *both* the acts of care and the acts that contradict these acts of care (about matter x) are wrongly evaluated by the agent as being congruous or in line with the agent’s care about matter x. These incorrect evaluative acts are due to the fault of the agent. The final action-constituent of complacent action is (iv) the act of self-satisfaction, where self-satisfaction ‘causes’ or maintains the other action-components of complacency.

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## Introduction

‘Complacency’ is a word that is widely used to describe a whole range of wrongs: from a rugby team that is resting on its laurels because of a recent victory, to a climate scientist who drives her SUV to her office to research global warming while not thinking it a contradiction. Hannah Arendt (1977) seems to describe something similar to complacency when she speaks of the banality of evil: ordinary people seem to be capable of great evil or negligent actions when “their sense of personal responsibility” diminishes (Jenni 2003:279). Complacent individuals are thus not necessarily evil psychopaths, but rather normal persons going about their normal lives, seemingly unknowingly contradicting their moral (or amoral) beliefs through their repeated and continuous actions. Those who act complacently seem to be happily oblivious about their obviously self-contradictory actions.

Based on the above description, one might think of other related vices, such as hypocrisy or weakness of will. These are indeed present in some instances of complacency, but I want to suggest that there is more to complacency. A complacent person, as I have said, does not seem to realise her actions are incongruous with her beliefs, and hence it is not a straightforward instance of weakness of will or hypocrisy. We usually notice when we want to do something, but fail to act on it, such as wanting to exercise, and knowing that you haven’t done so, (as in the case of weakness of will), and likewise, we tend to know when we are trying to fool or deceive someone else about our moral status (as in the case of hypocrisy).

Complacency is strange, because complacent persons seem satisfied with, or at least not bothered by, their shortcomings in relation to that about which they genuinely care. That is to say, a complacent person truly believes that she is doing the right thing regarding something that she cares about, even while she is acting inappropriately. One sees this every day. Most people, if asked, would tell you that they care greatly about human rights and that all human beings should be treated humanely. This they say and truly believe, while not doing anything to alleviate poverty around them, nor do they investigate whether their clothes were manufactured under humane conditions, nor do they pay their employees a living wage. If the same group of people were asked whether they treat others humanely, they would resolutely say ‘yes’ and not feel uneasy about saying so (they might even be smugly self-satisfied). Such is the oddity, the incongruity of complacent action.

Despite the oddness of the phenomenon that is complacency or complacent action, philosophical, anthropological, and sociological literature on complacency is scarce and sometimes non-existent. Hence, *the purpose of this thesis is to fill this lacuna, this undeveloped or untouched area of research, by illuminating complacency from an action theoretical perspective in order to make a direct contribution to the philosophical disciplines of ethics and action theory, and in order to make an indirect contribution to public discourse surrounding the matter of complacency.*

This project therefore not only has a philosophically unexplored subject matter, namely complacency, but also assumes an unconventional approach, namely action theory. A conventional approach to complacency is to view complacency as either a psychological phenomenon, *or* to view complacency as a vice or moral evil. Instead, I will clarify complacency from an action theoretical perspective and therefore obtain new and innovative insights regarding this phenomenon (and possibly phenomena related to complacency). Below, I will outline and explain the trajectory of this project which culminates in the description of complacency as action.

Before I can outline an action theory of complacency, I first need to clarify what complacency is by disambiguating ‘complacency’ through an analytic approach. In chapter one, my goal is thus to arrive at a working analytical definition of complacency. Such a working analytical definition of complacency is a necessary starting point in my investigation, since it captures some of the essential characteristics of acting complacently. In addition, it will provide me with the necessary semantic stability in order to eventually think of complacency as action. In other words, as I refer to ‘complacency’ throughout this thesis, I want the reader to know what I mean with the term.

In order to arrive at this analytical working definition of complacency, I begin by looking at how complacency is typically understood by laypersons. There seems to be a general consensus on what ‘complacency’ means in ordinary language, as demonstrated by mass media’s use of the word ‘complacency’ and as expressed by lexicons of natural language (and literary works). However, there is no such a coherent understanding of complacency on the philosophical level. Due to the lack of philosophical literature on complacency, I start my philosophical investigation into complacency by presupposing the ordinary usage understanding of the word ‘complacency’ through linguistic analysis. My philosophical

definition of complacency will thus be connected to the ordinary use of the term, but will also break away from the ordinary use and understanding of the term.

This deliberate break between the ordinary usage understanding of ‘complacency’ and the philosophical understanding of complacency is achieved by asking philosophical questions. In other words, by identifying the analytical constituents of a definition of complacency (derived by analysing the ordinary understanding thereof, but also by engaging with the little philosophical literature that is indeed available on complacency), I am able to move towards the philosophical level by investigating the philosophical problems posed by each of these analytical constituents. In chapter six, I will philosophically explore and clarify these analytical constituents in the light of an amalgamation of hermeneutic-phenomenological action theory, social action theory, and a perspective on modernity.

I conclude chapter one by comparing complacency with related vices and phenomena, so as to obtain an even clearer understanding of complacency through this juxtaposition. However, such a comparison also shows that complacency sometimes overlaps with its related phenomena and vices (such as inattention, hypocrisy, negligence, weakness of will, sloth, apathy, acquiescence, and resignation), to such an extent that it is hard to tell where complacency ends and the other related phenomenon starts. In some cases, complacency might sustain or facilitate some of these phenomena; while in other instances, complacency might be sustained or informed by some of these related phenomena. Lastly, such an inter-phenomenal mapping reveals that complacency is not an all-or-nothing matter; instead, there are more and less blameworthy cases of complacency.

After I have made the shift from an ordinary usage understanding of complacency to a linguistic, analytical definition of complacency in chapter one, I next need to make the transition towards action theory. This transition will be made in chapter two, where my aim is to join linguistic analysis with action theory. This I will do by highlighting the intrinsic links between language and action, following the example of Paul Ricoeur.

I wish to make an important qualification regarding the use of Paul Ricoeur in this thesis, however: although Ricoeur holds a prominent position in this thesis, this is not a study of Ricoeurian philosophy. I am primarily interested in Ricoeur’s action theoretical approach; when I follow Ricoeur’s example elsewhere in this thesis, as I do in chapter two (and very briefly in chapter one), this is simply because Ricoeur’s action theory progresses and grows through his interactions with English analytic philosophy. As such, I deemed it appropriate to



consult Ricoeur when investigating the connections between linguistic analysis and action theory. (I will say more about Ricoeur's action theory, and its inclusion in this thesis, later).

In chapter two I therefore argue that language and action, and by implication, linguistic analysis and action theory, are profoundly interconnected. All action is mediated by language, and language is a means of doing things or of acting. Yet, as I will show in this chapter, it is ultimately the agent that binds together linguistic analysis and action theory. From chapter two I will gain the important insight that in order to understand complacent action in a more holistic manner, one must do so through a continual interplay between analysis and action theoretical description, especially action theoretical description with a strong hermeneutic basis. That is to say, while analysis might provide one with a more technical and precise way to understand complacency, such an approach ignores that analysis is only possible through context, through being situated in a background that is action. In turn, while action theory is more comprehensive and descriptive, without the clarity or semantic stability provided to one by an analytical concept (of complacency), one might become so distracted by the richness and complexity of action that one loses sight of the particular character of complacency against the background. In short, coming to grips with complacency, or complacent action, will therefore be an ongoing dialectic between a hermeneutic action theoretical description and a more precise and analytic understanding thereof.

In order to initiate this interplay or dialectic, I first need to present and outline the action theories that I will draw on in an analysis and description of complacency as action. Consequently, in chapters three to five, I will proceed by examining the action theories of Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens, respectively. Chapters three to five thus serve as a kind of interlude before I again take up 'complacency' or 'complacent action' explicitly. That is to say, I will highlight those aspects of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories that might eventually help us to understand complacency as an action, and only after I have done so, will I explicitly connect the dots between action theory and complacency.

Chapters three and four are exclusively dedicated to the action theory of Paul Ricoeur: chapter three includes an outline of Ricoeur's action theory as found in three of his works, namely *Freedom and Nature* ([1950] 1966), *From Text to Action* ([1990] 1991), and *Oneself as Another* ([1990] 1992), while chapter four includes a clarification on how to make sense of Ricoeur's action theory as a whole (seeing that his action theory is scattered throughout various works and spans across a long stretch of time).

I have chosen to consult Ricoeur's action theory (or theories), since Ricoeur places a strong emphasis on the fact that action is neither determined, nor wholly voluntary action. Instead, Ricoeur describes human action as paradoxical, since certain constraints, such as one's body, one's personality, the unconscious, the world, one's history, and other persons also enable action. As such, Ricoeur provides us with an account of how it is possible to make changes in the world as a subject-body, while being simultaneously limited and affected by this world and one's body. Ricoeur's action theory therefore does not err on either the side of making the agent wholly responsible for his or her actions, or on the side of making the world, human nature (both physical and psychological), or other 'outside' factors wholly responsible for the agent's actions.

Moreover, Ricoeur's action theory provides one with the invaluable insight that action does not always follow on decisions in linear way; decision and action often coincide. In other words, for the most part agents do not *first* rationally calculate their actions, and *then* act. Agents are often only able to give reasons for why they have acted after they have acted. Ricoeur's account of action – largely because the body and other agents plays such a central role in his action theory – is thus not overly cognitive or rational. As I have said in the previous paragraph, the agent's actions are informed by motives that stem from the body (and thus needs, habits and emotions), history, one's context, and other agents. No action is fully conscious, nor completely rational.

In addition, I have selected Ricoeur's action theory to form part of my eventual action theory of complacency, because Ricoeur provides a hermeneutic phenomenological account of action: in other words, a description of action where action is not just a given, but is brought about through an agent who interprets him- or herself in relation to the world. Agents only become capable agents when they are able to make sense of (interpret) the world around them, since to understand the world is to understand oneself in relation to the world. As such, Ricoeur's action theory is valuable because it makes sense of action as happening in, and in conjunction with the (physical and socio-historical) world. Action does not just happen in isolation, stemming from an all-powerful independent agent.

Closely connected to this is Ricoeur's extremely insightful account of identity, and the connection that Ricoeur makes between being and doing: one's identity shapes one's actions, while one's actions shape one's identity. To understand this connection, Ricoeur explains identity and delineates how it is that the agent is simultaneously able to change *and yet also* be

a stable point of reference, someone that one can identify over and over again as being the same person, and someone that one can count on during interactions. Ricoeur therefore moves beyond the traditional dichotomy of the cogito as absolute certainty (such the Cartesian Cogito) and the anti-cogito as meaningless (such as the Nietzschean non-subject), and instead argues that the person is able to exemplify sameness (empirically and through commitment), and is simultaneously able to embody alterity within him- or herself. Ricoeur is thus neither for or against a subjectivism, and rather assumes a position which mediates between the two extremes of the self, which he calls 'attestation.' Attestation denotes that the subject self-reflexively attests to his or her self or being: therefore, attestation is neither dogmatic certitude, nor is it the kind of scepticism or suspicion that results in complete uncertainty. Attestation is knowing, in the phenomenological sense, that one can act, but can also reflect on, and thus critique oneself.

Moreover, Ricoeur describes how the agent makes sense of itself through narrative. By narrating one's life, one regards one's life as a whole, and can consequently make sense of it as being a 'good' or an 'unfulfilled' life, in the ethical sense. Narrative, according to Ricoeur, is thus inextricably connected to thinking of oneself as a moral agent. In addition, through narrative, one realises the extent to which one's narrative intersects with, and is constituted by, other agents. In other words, one realises the profound effects that other agents have on one, and the manner in which other agents inform one's action, but one simultaneously realises that as an agent, one affects other agents. Because of this power or influence that agents have over each other, and thus the potential harm that agents might do to each other, the need for moral conduct and rules arise.

Finally, Ricoeur thus provides a description (bordering on prescription) of what counts as good and ethical action, which he calls his 'little ethics'. Most importantly, Ricoeur's ethico-moral account is nuanced enough that it enables one to make sense of action as a morally graded notion. In other words, in his little ethics Ricoeur recognizes the extreme complexity of life and how hard it is to bring together moral arguments (universalism) and the moral impasses of real life (pluralism). Agents will often encounter real life situations where they will not know which course of action is the morally better or correct one to take. Ricoeur provides some valuable guidelines on how to determine which course of action is the most ethical, through his notion of practical wisdom. All these elements (and more) from Ricoeur's action theory will later be combined with the insights from Anthony Giddens's social action theory (discussed

below), which in turn, will ultimately enable one to make sense of complacency as action, in chapter six.

Chapter five is dedicated to elucidating Giddens's (more sociological) action theory, based on his three closely related works, namely *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979), and *The Constitution of Society* (1984). I have chosen to draw on Giddens's action theory for my action theory of complacency, because Giddens provides a detailed account of how agents, through their social interactions, constitute and reconstitute social structures. In turn, agents draw on these social structures to act. Structures are thus the media and outcomes of the reproduction of social interaction: Giddens calls this the 'duality of structure'. In other words, Giddens's action theory is valuable to my project of explaining complacency as action, since it enables one to understand how the agent is connected to social structures, institutions, and society. Not only is the agent central in Giddens's sociological account of action, but Giddens goes beyond the traditional sociological distinction of micro and macro analysis of institutions or societies.

In addition, Giddens emphasizes the continuous nature of action, as opposed to describing action as compartmentalized, or as an aggregate of acts or basic actions. In Giddens's (1984:3) own words: "Human action occurs as a *durée*, a continuous flow of conduct, as does cognition. Purposive action is not composed of an aggregate or series of separate intentions, reasons and motives. [...] 'Action' is not a combination of 'acts': 'acts' are constituted only by a discursive moment of attention to the *durée* of lived-through experience." Such a continuous notion of action seems truer to reality than accounts of action where action can be (apparently) neatly segmented and broken down into analytical bits and pieces.

Closely connected to understanding action as a continuous flow, is the continuous reflexive monitoring of action by the agent. That is to say, the agent is aware of herself as acting while acting, and is able to adapt her actions as she goes about her daily life. Giddens's explanation of how agents monitor their actions on an ongoing and routine basis yields some invaluable insights for an eventual action theory of complacency. The first of these is that action is not always preceded by clear goals; in fact, most action does not flow forth from clear intentions (Joas and Knöbl 2009:291). Instead, *within* the flow of action, agents monitor their actions and so become aware of goals, which they can then further modify in conjunction with their actions. As Joas and Knöbl (2009:292) writes: "action is thus a far more complex process

than the typically evokes temporal sequence of ‘goal-setting—action—achievement of goal’ suggests.”

Another insight closely linked to understanding action as a continuous flow monitored by a reflexive agent is that action is not a purely rational process. Reflexivity, according to Giddens, includes prereflexivity, however counter-intuitive this might sound. Prereflexive action, or what Giddens calls practical consciousness, is the casual mastery of day-to-day action which is closely connected to the body and to routine. For example, I do not think to myself as I walk: ‘right foot forward, left foot forward, right foot forward, left foot forward.’ I just walk. Walking, in this case, is a prereflexive activity that I do not consciously have to keep in mind in order to execute it; I can just do it. Reflexivity for Giddens thus entails that sometimes continuous action will be more conscious (it will be executed on the level of discursive consciousness) and, at other times and for the most part, will be executed at a more preconscious, prereflexive level (practical consciousness).

Finally, Giddens’s action theory is important to consult, because unlike many action theories, it accords a central place to the body. The body, as we have just seen, is essential to understanding prereflexive action. It is through the body, moving in routine and habitual ways, that prereflexive actions are established and sedimented, allowing the agent more casual mastery over her daily actions.

Lastly, at the end of chapter five, I will briefly outline Giddens’s ideas on late modernity. Giddens’s modernity studies can be thought together with Giddens’s action theory, since action is informed by the kind of society in which it is carried out. I will thus peruse Giddens’s *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), and *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991). I will argue, following Giddens, that we are still living in the age of modernity, and that, in order to understand complacent action which has risen to prominence in modernity to late modernity, one has to make sense of modernity. As such, when I interpret complacency from an action theoretical perspective in chapter six of this thesis, I will also consider how late modern societies inform or shape complacent action. However, this section on modernity from Giddens’s perspective is merely opening the door onto the field of modernity studies and what this field might contribute to understanding complacency. In no way will I pretend to provide a complex exposition of the field that is modernity studies and what this implies for complacent action.

These are thus some of insights that a perusal of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories yield, and that will ultimately contribute to an action theoretical description of complacency. Next, in chapter six, my aim is to synthesize these insights from Ricoeur and Giddens's respective action theories. Through this synthetization in section 6.2. I will obtain a coherent, and enriched action theory through which to interpret complacent action. I proceed by ensuring that Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories are first compatible at the foundational level, before showing how their action theories complement or supplement each other at various (weak) points. Through this approach, I will thus sketch out how to think Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories together, with the ultimate goal of understanding complacency from an action theoretical perspective.

After having worked out the relationship between Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories in section 6.2., I am next able to identify those elements that are essential to describing complacency as action. That is to say, I illuminate the action theoretic specificity of complacent action. Such a description of the specificity of complacent action cannot, however, progress very far without also entering into dialogue with my working definition of complacency that I have provided in chapter one. This is because one cannot speak of complacent action without first presupposing what complacency or complacent action is.

Subsequently, I put my initial working definition of complacency (from chapter one) into dialogue with the action theories of Ricoeur and Giddens (thought together) and my outline of the specificity of complacent action in section 6.3. By initiating this dialogue, I will finally be able to come to an understanding of complacency as action. By way of method, I will re-examine and re-interpret each of the analytical constituents of my working definition of complacency in the light of the combined Ricoeurian-Giddensian action theory.

Finally, I use a few case studies to illustrate what complacent action looks like in practice. In other words, I show how the unique or specific pattern of complacent action plays out in various contexts with various agents. I conclude by noting that understanding complacent action is an ongoing process, unfolding through the dialectic of analysis and action. On the one hand, linguistic analysis (working analytical definition of complacency) allows one to understand complacent action in precise terms according to certain characteristics that are essential to complacent action. On the other hand, action theory prevents one from clinging to the illusion and the ideal of understanding complacency in a perfectly transparent and unambiguous manner. Since complacency is action, each instance of using the word

‘complacency’ and each instance of an agent ‘acting out’ complacent action, slightly departs from, and even alters, the analytical understanding and definition of complacency.

## Chapter 1

### What is Complacency?

“Not to oppose error is to approve it; and not to defend truth is to suppress it; and indeed to neglect to confound evil men, when we can do it, is no less a sin than to encourage them” (Pope St. Felix III 1766:636).

#### 1.1. Introduction

Complacency is often understood as a vice which is due to a lack of appropriate action or attention (Doan 2014:636; Jenni 2003:279; Kawall 2006:353). Not only is complacency viewed as a vice, but it is also described as a meta-vice: that is, a vice that allows other vices to exist (Kawall 2006:343; Szabados and Soifer 2004:87). Because complacency is described as the absence of appropriate action and seems to operate as a type of background vice, complacency is commonly regarded as a subtle phenomenon which does not result in obviously “...vicious forms of behaviour” (Kawall 2006:343).

Complacency is thus harder to identify and observe than other vices, and perhaps some of its obscurity lies in the fact that we do not have a clear idea of what complacency is. Yet, at the same time, one finds that most people have at least an idea of what they understand complacency to be. We use the term ‘complacency’ freely in everyday conversation and the word is prevalent in the mass media. However, the moment that one compares complacency with other subtle vices such as negligence and hypocrisy (to name but two), one realises the lack of perspicuity surrounding our general understanding of complacency. The lack of philosophical literature on complacency has certainly not alleviated this problem.

Something peculiar thus becomes apparent here: on the one hand, it seems that we know how the word ‘complacency’ is ordinarily used: most of us understand what it means when someone says: ‘that person is very complacent’. ‘Complacency’ therefore has some semantic stability that most people agree upon, as reflected in the everyday use and understanding of the word ‘complacency’. On the other hand, upon critical scrutiny (one might add here, philosophical scrutiny), the notion of ‘complacency’ in fact seems to elude semantic stability and one finds that ‘complacency’ tends to become a catch-all word for various kinds of unwanted behaviour that is marked by some form of negligence and self-satisfaction. In some instances, ‘complacency’ is even conflated with another related phenomenon, such as ‘hypocrisy’ (Szabados and Soifer 2004).



Paul Ricoeur, in his work *The Course of Recognition* ([2004] 2005:ix) noticed something similar when he attempted a philosophical treatise on ‘recognition’: there seems to be a consensus, as expressed in dictionaries of everyday language, on what recognition means in all its various yet related forms, but on the philosophical level, there seems to be a lacuna. Likewise, there seems to be a general consensus on what complacency means in everyday language. Yet, there is no corresponding coherent philosophical understanding of complacency. Indeed, philosophical expositions on this term are extremely rare, and when attempted, are usually only done in passing.

What makes the above disparity between ‘complacency’ as a neglected concept in philosophical discourse and ‘complacency’ as a word that is used in everyday situations and carefully defined by lexicographers even more confusing, is the fact that the few philosophers who do discuss complacency each have their own understanding of the phenomenon. By this I do not mean that there are some nuanced differences, or minor inconsistencies between their definitions of ‘complacency’; instead, the dissimilarities between these philosophical definitions of ‘complacency’ are profound.

The aim of this chapter is therefore twofold: first, to address the lack of philosophical literature on complacency by disambiguating the notion of complacency through analysis and clarification, and by providing my own detailed description and interpretation of complacency; second, to emulate the “rule-governed” coherence of ‘complacency’ that is found on the lexical<sup>1</sup> and everyday level, on the level of philosophical discourse (Ricoeur 2005:x). In short, the aim is to obtain a better and coherent philosophical understanding of complacency via linguistic analysis.

Since there are very few philosophical works available on complacency, I will have to start my investigation by presupposing the ordinary use of the term ‘complacency’ in order to formulate the philosophical definition of ‘complacency’ (Parker-Ryan 2018: paragraph 49). This does not mean that my philosophical definition of ‘complacency’ will be limited to the ordinary language use thereof; instead, ordinary language will aid me on my way towards philosophical reflection. I will therefore first explore how we understand complacency in the everyday sense thereof. To achieve this, I will briefly consider examples of the use of the word

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<sup>1</sup> To borrow Ricoeur’s (2005:ix) words once again, there is a “kind of coherence that allows the word...” ‘complacency’ “...to appear in a dictionary as a single lexical unit, despite the multiple senses that this lexical unit embraces, of connotations attested to within at least one linguistic community,” in this case, that of modern-day English. It must be added here that ‘complacency’ seems to be a word unique to English (as far as I know): it seems as if ‘complacency’ cannot be directly translated into its related Germanic and Romance languages.

‘complacency’ in mass media and in addition consult dictionary definitions of the word ‘complacency.’ However, I will point out that surprisingly, some lexical definitions do not capture our everyday use and understanding of the word ‘complacency.’ As a consequence, one will have to supplement the explicit definitions of ‘complacency’ as found in dictionaries of everyday language, with an implicit understanding of complacency as derived from examples of the use of ‘complacency’ in mass media.

After consulting mass media and dictionaries to infer the common usage meaning of complacency, I will go on to establish a concrete philosophical meaning of complacency. Above I have said that my philosophical definition of complacency will not be limited by the ordinary language use and understanding of ‘complacency.’ However, by this I do not mean that I seek to establish a non-ordinary use of the word ‘complacency,’<sup>2</sup> nor do I seek to reform the way the word ‘complacency’ is used in everyday situations. Instead, I wish to advance a philosophical definition of complacency in order to make more explicit what exactly people *mean* when they speak of complacency. I thus wish to move from an intuitive and implicit understanding of complacency to an explicit and more nuanced understanding of complacency (at this stage of my thesis, before situating such an explicit definition of complacency within action theory).

However, before advancing a philosophical definition of complacency, I will first pay some attention to the questions of whether and why philosophers did not deem complacency worthy of their attention. Was complacency not deemed important enough? Was complacency obscured or encompassed by some other issue of the times?

To answer these and related questions, I will examine ‘complacency’ as a word, and complacency as a phenomenon. While examining ‘complacency’ as a word, I will take a lexicological approach and linger for a little while longer with dictionary definitions of complacency. I will also consult various literary sources in order to trace how the meaning of complacency has changed over the years to assume its current meaning. Pertaining to complacency as a phenomenon, I will claim that complacency – like all other vices – changes

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<sup>2</sup> As Adam Graves (2018:229) writes: “The misgivings I have about strategies that purport to explain our [...] practices in ways that require widespread revision of our basic intuitions about them [these practices] is that such strategies wind up producing philosophical theories that explain practices that we can no longer recognize as our own.” And what then, would be the point of describing complacency, if it is not somehow connected to self-understanding: how we understand and describe it ourselves and act complacently ourselves?

over time. Consequently, I will connect this with the philosophical neglect of the phenomenon we know today as complacency.

After I have completed my investigation into ‘complacency’ as a word, and complacency as a phenomenon, I will move on to engage with the little philosophical literature that is available on complacency. I will argue that the current philosophical definitions of complacency are more representative of our current understanding of complacency (than those of dictionaries), yet are still inadequate to the task of defining complacency philosophically. Throughout the chapter, as I engage with the available literature on complacency, I will amend the existing philosophical definitions of complacency to arrive at a more correct and clearer characterization of complacency. Such a characterization, however, will still only be a working definition, since I will later, in chapter six, interpret complacency from an action theoretical framework for an even fuller and more complex understanding thereof.

However, in the current chapter, by using this working definition of complacency, I will be able to contrast complacency with other vices which appear to be similar to, or pre-modern instances of, complacency. These include “apathy”, “indifference”, “akrasia”, “hypocrisy” (Kawall 2006), “inattention” (Jenni 2003), negligence, acquiescence and so forth. Contrasting complacency with these similar vices will serve as a good test for my preliminary definition, and also show how complacency overlaps with and differs from, these similar vices.

## **1.2. The Everyday Meaning of Complacency: Mass Media and Dictionary Definitions**

If one asks the average person what complacency is, many will answer that being complacent implies an acquiescent attitude: that of just letting things be and accepting circumstances without protest. Others will say that complacency is when a person does not do what is required of him or her, such as a schoolgirl who might be neglecting her homework. Complacency might contain all or some of these elements. What emerges is that most people understand complacency as something negative in the prescriptive sense. In other words, complacency is not something one should make oneself guilty of.

Media use of the word ‘complacency’ sketches an even clearer picture of complacency. In an online article published in the South African newspaper, *The Sunday Independent*, Tinyiko Maluleke (2015) writes that South Africa must embrace the student protests over tuition fees and a lack of transformation within tertiary education institutions. Student protests, Maluleke (2015:paragraph 31) writes, are finally achieving what “[...] a decade of task-teams, summits, reports and recommendations...” could not achieve. Maluleke (2015:paragraph 39-

40) asks that if the students fail to persist, “[w]ho and what will save our universities from the diseases of complacency and interminable acts of self-congratulation?”

The meaning of complacency emerges here as something which is negative. It is figuratively described as a disease, implying that has adverse effects on human beings or institutions. Finally, the word ‘complacency’ and the phrase ‘endless self-congratulatory attitude’ are grouped together and both are linked with universities’ lack of drastic change. Complacency and self-satisfaction, as this chapter will later divulge in more detail, are inextricably interconnected.

Another instance in which the word ‘complacency’ is evoked is within the context of transformation within post-apartheid South Africa. Although South Africa as a young democracy has a lot to celebrate, it must not lead to a complacent attitude (Ndlovu 2014:paragraph 3). Ndlovu (2014:paragraph 7) cautions that instead of being complacent, South Africans must work hard to replace “...perverted public moral systems...” that are still prevailing in the country. Again, the use of the word ‘complacency’ implies that complacency is an attitude of being contented, while circumstances demand otherwise or while one has no reason to be contented.

Reference to the phenomenon of complacency is not only common in South Africa. International mass media reference<sup>3</sup> to complacency is also pervasive, specifically pertaining to cyber-security,<sup>4</sup> the environment (especially climate change), economic stability,<sup>5</sup> road safety, and terrorism. However, funnily and interestingly enough, the word ‘complacency’ is used most often in relation to sport (perhaps revealing what we value most).

Rugby, soccer, and cricket teams (etc.) are constantly being admonished not to become too complacent, because complacency results in losses for the team. A complacent attitude

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<sup>3</sup> *The Economist* ran an article in 2011 (still relevant today) which illustrates what is perhaps the most baffling facet of complacency: why do we, almost irrationally, hurt our future selves by not doing the right thing in the present? The article tells of the fact that a large-scale earthquake, originating at the San Andreas Fault, followed by a tsunami, will soon occur in America. Evidence shows that this event happens every 240 years, and it is now 300 years later. *The Economist* (2011) warns that due preparations must be made by Americans, yet it appears as if Americans are complacent about the imminent danger, probably because the last earthquake struck “...too long ago to have much of an impact on current thinking.”

<sup>4</sup> Cyber complacency is described as occurring when “...finance and accounting professionals have unrealistically high levels of confidence in their defences against [cyber] security breaches – increasing the likelihood of such breaches happening” (*Banking Technology* 2015). Mark Huffman (2015) writes in an online article that “...consumers have something of a false sense of online security”, despite the fact that “...one in five American homes received a data breach notification last year [...]”.

<sup>5</sup> For example, investors might assume that investment returns will continue being as high as it has been in the past decades, while culpably ignoring the probability of low yields on investments in the near future.

appears to be a bigger danger than an unfit team, or a team with a weak captain, or coach. It is interesting that the sport-world acknowledges the power of complacency more than other spheres in society. What remains clear is that in whichever sphere or context the word ‘complacency’ is used by the media, it has lately meant to denote something undesirable and bad.

When one consults dictionaries, however, one quickly realises that the word ‘complacency’ did not always connote something negative. The English word ‘complacency’ has been in existence since the early 1600s,<sup>6</sup> and has its etymological roots in the Latin verb ‘*complacēre*’ which means “to please several persons at once”, “to please exceedingly” or “to take the fancy, [or] capture the affections (of)” (*Cassell’s New Latin-English English Latin Dictionary* 1975; *Oxford Latin Dictionary* 2012). The earliest uses of the English word ‘complacency’ somewhat reflects the meaning of its Latin root: ‘complacency’ merely meant to take pleasure in something or someone, or to be satisfied (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). Various authors used the word ‘complacency’ in this sense, up until the late 1800s (This is evident if one looks at the literary examples provided by the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1976) and *The Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>7</sup> (1989)). Only since approximately 1880 has the word complacency taken on a negative connotation: that of being unjustified or irrational in one’s self-satisfaction. However, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) still renders the word ‘complacency’ as a word which is used to denote something positive (in the sense of being good or desirable):

1. The fact or state of being pleased with a thing or person; tranquil pleasure or satisfaction in something or some one.
2. *spec.* The fact or state of being pleased with oneself; tranquil pleasure or satisfaction in one’s own condition or doings; self-satisfaction.
3. [archaic] Pleasure, delight, enjoyment.
4. Contented acquiescence or consent.
5. Disposition or wish to please, or comply with the wishes of, others; complaisance. *Obs.*

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<sup>6</sup> Although the word ‘complacency’ was only used from the 1600s onwards, the related word ‘complacence’ was used as early as 1430, but is now no longer in use (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 1989).

<sup>7</sup> For clarity: *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) only provides examples of the literary use of ‘complacency’ and ‘complacent’ up until 1875. On the other hand, the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1976) includes examples of the uses of ‘complacency’ and ‘complacent’ up until the year 1952. *The Oxford’s* failure to include or draw on more contemporary literary examples, I will argue later on, results in its failure to render the accurate and current (20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century) use of the word ‘complacency’.

What is immediately evident from the above definitions (with a particular focus on the first two definitions) is that they do not correspond to our everyday understanding and use of the word ‘complacency.’ During the time of my research, I have kept on perusing the mass media’s use of the word ‘complacency’, and have found that ‘complacency’ is always used in such a way as to denote something undesirable. However, if one were to understand complacency as *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, one would think that complacency is indeed a very desirable state to be in! Could it be that *The Oxford* has failed in its task to capture the everyday usage of the word ‘complacency’?

One could argue, in the defence of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, that when the dictionary was published in 1989, ‘complacency’ was still used by the public as denoting something good and innocent. Such a claim can be tested through first comparing *The Oxford* definition with other dictionaries’ definitions (published around the time that *The Oxford* was published), and second, by looking at the use of the word ‘complacency’ in literature around that time.

First then, I shall compare *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition with another authoritative dictionary of the English language, namely the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1976). Contrary to *The Oxford English Dictionary*’s positive definition of complacency, *The Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1976), (published well before *The Oxford English Dictionary*), provides a definition more in line with our current everyday understanding of complacency. Here is the *Webster’s* entire entry under ‘complacency’:

1. a: the quality or state of being satisfied: a calm sense of well-being and security; [*especially*]: satisfaction or self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies[;] b: self-satisfaction, vanity.
2. *Archaic*: complaisance or an instance thereof.
3. *Obs[cure]*: passive acquiescence.
4. *Archaic*: pleasure, delight.

Within the above definitions the positive aspect of complacency as satisfaction or self-satisfaction is still preserved. Yet, complacency is also introduced as something negative, in the sense of being normatively wrong or bad. According to the above primary definition, a person is complacent when she feels satisfied about what she has achieved, while she actually has not performed satisfactorily and is unaware of the fact. Onlookers can therefore see the deficiency (or the danger), while the complacent person or group of persons cannot. What

emerges, however, is that there is a clear discrepancy between the definitions of complacency as provided by *The Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*.

To what can one attribute this discrepancy? Could it be that complacency was used and understood to mean something else in Britain and America respectively? That is to say, did Americans understand 'complacency' according to the *Webster's* definition, and British people understand 'complacency' according to the *Oxford's* definition? This theory falls flat when one consults an additional American dictionary, namely *Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1965), and an additional British dictionary, namely *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987). First, the American *Funk and Wagnall's* rendering of the use of 'complacency':

1. The fact or state of being pleased with oneself or others; satisfaction with one's acts or surroundings; self-satisfaction.
2. The manifestation of tranquil satisfaction; pleasant good nature; serenity.
3. Theol. Delight or satisfaction (in an object or person) on account of inherent excellence [...]
4. Pl. Deeds or examples of complaisance.
5. †. Disposition or wish to please; complaisance.
6. †. A cause of pleasure or satisfaction; a comfort.

And second, the British *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary's* definitions of 'complacency' and 'complacent':

"Complacency is the state of being complacent about a situation; [the word is] often used showing disapproval." "If you are complacent, you are very pleased with yourself and do not think that there is any reason for you to worry or do anything about a situation."

The first conclusion is that, even though both the *Funk & Wagnalls* and the *Webster* dictionaries are American, their definitions are dissimilar. In fact, the American *Funk & Wagnalls's* definition of 'complacency' is very similar to that of the British *Oxford English Dictionary* definition. In addition, the British *Collins Cobuild's* definition of 'complacency' does not correspond to the – also British – *Oxford* dictionary's definition of 'complacency'. The second conclusion is thus that the discrepancy in definitions based on the American/British distinction is irrelevant.

Moreover and in support of the above conclusion, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989:ix) claims to represent English in its entirety for all English speakers “both native and foreign”. That is to say, *The Oxford English Dictionary* does not merely aim to represent English as it is spoken in the United Kingdom or in Britain, but claims to be representative of English as it is understood and spoken everywhere. One can thus conclude with certainty that the discrepancies between the dictionaries are not based on the American/British distinction.

As such, one can start confirming the view that *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), does not provide the correct rendition or definition of ‘complacency’ as it is used by the public. This fact can further be corroborated by looking at the use of the word ‘complacency’ in literature since its conception. As I have mentioned earlier, the English word ‘complacency’ has been in existence since the early 1600s, but has only recently (approximately since 1880) taken on a negative connotation (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* 1976). One should therefore expect literary use of the word ‘complacency’ to reflect this development. I shall consequently trace how our understanding of the word ‘complacency’ has changed over the years by consulting various literary works in which the word ‘complacency’ was used. It should evidently emerge that the word ‘complacency’ has changed from conveying that one is merely pleased or self-satisfied, to conveying that there is a certain unwarrantedness in one’s self-satisfaction.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) provides us with a few examples of complacency’s early use. John Milton ([1644] 1820:52), in his polemical pamphlet, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, writes: “[m]oreover, this note of mutual complacency forbids all offer of seducement...”. Roughly paraphrased, and with the context considered, this sentence reads as follows: despite mutual happiness [within a marriage], if the possibility exists that one [the Christian spouse] might be seduced into idolatry or non-belief by the other [the heretic or non-believer], the marriage should rather be terminated.<sup>8</sup> If one considers the context, the context being that Milton expressly emphasised the importance of being pleased with one’s

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<sup>8</sup> To understand the use of complacency here, one needs to know the context of what was written. Milton, controversially argues in 1643, that divorce is permissible if either or both of the two spouses are displeased with one another. In this specific quotation, Milton refers to one Corinthians seven verses 12-16 in which St. Paul speaks of marriage between new believers and their still non-believer spouses. Milton interprets St. Paul as saying that there must be a mutual liking or that both spouses should still be *pleased* with their marriage, despite the fact that one of the spouses has converted to Christianity. Milton, in addition to his main argument, argues that God does not want believers to be seduced by their pagan spouses. Hence, in the above quote, Milton cautions that despite the happiness that both spouses find in their union, the one (the Christian spouse) must not be led astray by the other (the non-believing or pagan spouse). If such a possibility exists, they must separate. In other words, there should be no place for the possibility of being seduced, or led astray, in a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian.



marriage partner in order for the marriage to continue, then the meaning of complacency is clear. The word ‘complacency’ in this instance then means to be pleased or contented.

Another author from approximately the same era, also used the word ‘complacency’ to denote pleasure, or to be pleased. The Puritan writer, Richard Baxter, writes in his sermon titled *The Life of Faith* ([1658] 1670:362) that “God hath no complacency in any thing but in good”. That is to say, God finds no pleasure in anything except that which is good. In the same work, Baxter ([1658] 1670:198) again uses the word ‘complacency’ in the same way: “[...] the change of man’s [sic] state and heart towards God, by true reconciliation, will make him again capable of peace with God; and as soon as man is made an object fit for the complacency of God, it cannot be but that God will again take complacency in him [...]”. The above examples are merely a sample of the older use of the word ‘complacency’ in literature. ‘Complacency’, I will venture, was always used to convey something positive and/or good before approximately 1880.

A possible outlier is the use of the word ‘complacence’ (which has largely fallen out of use) which seem to be coupled with vanity. Thomas à Kempis writes in around 1430 that “Better it is to sauour but a litel wip mekenes & litel under stondyng, pan gret tresoures of konnyng wip veyn complacence” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). In modern English it reads: Better it is to savour but a little with meekness and little understanding, than to have great treasures of cunning with vain complacence. However, Thomas has to qualify the word ‘complacence’, as “vain”. ‘Complacence’ or ‘complacency’ therefore does not have inherent negative meanings.

From the above positive uses of the word ‘complacency’, one can glean that the word has indeed got its origins in being pleased or pleasant. Yet, however obsolete these notions of complacency are, the old meanings still seem to persist in our current understanding of the word. Indeed, as in the case of *The Oxford English Dictionary’s* (1989) definition, ‘complacency’ is still defined entirely according to the old and positive understanding of the word ‘complacency’. It has to be added that although the old understanding of the word ‘complacency’ is interesting to note and might be useful towards a better understanding of complacency today,<sup>9</sup> the roots or the etymology of ‘complacency’ as a word does not bring us closer to a kind of purer understanding of complacency. *The Oxford English Dictionary’s*

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<sup>9</sup> Thus, the old and positive understanding of ‘complacency’ is not entirely arbitrary to our current, negative, understanding of ‘complacency’. As we have seen from the mass media’s use of ‘complacency’, the moment one is too satisfied, or when one rests on one’s laurels, complacency creeps in.

definition of ‘complacency’ is therefore also not justified on this account. For what reason, then, did *The Oxford* make the mistake it did by rendering ‘complacency’ according to the old understanding and use of the word?

The reason could be that those who have composed the entry on ‘complacency’, have consulted only old literary examples of the use of ‘complacency’. As I have mentioned above in a footnote, *The Oxford English Dictionary* only provides examples of the way the word ‘complacency’ was used up until the year 1875. It is somewhat ironic that *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) prides itself, in its preface, on the fact that over two million literary sources were consulted to obtain the meanings and uses of words from “the time of the earliest records down to the *present day*” (emphasis mine). It would appear as if the lexicographers did not consult recent literature containing the word ‘complacency’, since no literature of the past one hundred years in which ‘complacency’ was used, was quoted in the dictionary.<sup>10</sup>

On the contrary, the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1976) includes more recent examples of the use of ‘complacency’ in literature, which might account for its rendition that conforms more to the contemporary use of ‘complacency.’ The *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1976) draws on both American and British English literature to illustrate the use and meaning of complacency. The word ‘complacency’, as is used in literature in the late 1800s and early 1900s is similar to our understanding of the word ‘complacency’ today. Arthur Christopher Benson ([1908] 2014:x-ix) writes in *The Letters of Queen Victoria* that “...yet this prosperity [in the Queen’s career] brought with it no shadow of complacency, because the Queen felt with an increasing depth the anxieties and responsibilities inseparable from her great position.” Here ‘complacency’ is contrasted with fulfilling one’s obligations, and ‘complacency’ is therefore assigned a negative connotation.

Another early example which depicts ‘complacency’ negatively, is in *Signs of Change* ([1888] 2009:176-7) by William Morris: “The misery and squalor which we people of civilization bear with so much complacency as a necessary part of the manufacturing system, is just as necessary to the community at large as a proportionate amount of filth would be in the house of a private rich man.” Although ‘complacency’ in this sentence can perhaps still be

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<sup>10</sup> However, this mistake by the *Oxford* lexicographers was rectified in a newer, although smaller one-volume version of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), namely the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010). The *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010) defines complacency as “a feeling of smug or uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one’s achievements”. This time, with the help of modern technology, the *Oxford* lexicographers arrived at the correct way the word ‘complacency’ is currently being used. The lexicographers perused electronic databases and thus had access to hundreds or thousands of examples of how each word is used (*Oxford Dictionary of English* 2010:ix).

substituted by ‘contentment’ or ‘tranquillity’, the use of ‘complacency’ in this context is undeniably negative. One can glean from the way in which ‘complacency’ is used, that complacency is an unwarranted or wrong attitude to have given the circumstances.

It appears as if the word ‘complacency’ has since kept this negative meaning and has been firmly established in the realm of the moral. Reinhold Niebuhr (1952:5) writes that “[c]ommunism is a vivid object lesson in the monstrous consequences of moral complacency about the relation of dubious means to supposedly good ends.” Niebuhr clearly makes ‘complacency’ (about moral judgement or obligation) out as something objectionable and adverse to what is good or appropriate. Being morally complacent is deemed as a wrong which can result in “monstrous consequences.”

One can thus easily trace<sup>11</sup> a transition from a positive or neutral understanding of the word ‘complacency’ to a negative understanding in literature throughout the years. From this investigation, I have thus gleaned that the way people used and understood the word ‘complacency’ differs dramatically from one epoch to the next. Before approximately 1880, the word ‘complacency’ was understood to convey something pleasant or good. However, after approximately 1880 the word ‘complacency’ took on a negative connotation.

One can, therefore, distinguish between the early modern usage of the word ‘complacency’ (as connoting something positive), and the late-modern<sup>12</sup> understanding of the word ‘complacency’ as we understand it today (as connoting something negative). This brings us then to an issue raised in the introduction. If one conducts a literature study within the field of philosophy, one will find that philosophers are for the most part silent on the topic of complacency. The lack of philosophical literature on complacency consequently raises an issue: *why* is there so little literature on complacency? Why did philosophers not deem complacency worthy of their attention?

### **1.3. The Philosophical Neglect of Complacency**

To answer the question on why complacency is neglected in philosophical (sociological and anthropological) discourse, one should make the distinction between ‘complacency’ as a word, and complacency as a phenomenon. The first part of my answer to the lack of literature on complacency will, therefore, have to do with the word ‘complacency’ as examined above,

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<sup>11</sup> My study is, however, an educated guess, since I do not deem it part of the scope of this thesis to peruse every single work of literature containing the word ‘complacency’. I did however peruse a substantial amount of literature and did not dismiss any examples contrary to my postulation.

<sup>12</sup> Late-modern will henceforth be taken to refer to the era from approximately 1880 up until today (2019).

while the second part will pertain to complacency as a phenomenon. With regards to ‘complacency’ considered as a word, one of the possible reasons for philosophical neglect could be that the word ‘complacency’ was re-appropriated – as shown above – and consequently the lack of philosophical literature could be due to the fact that the word ‘complacency’ has only recently come to represent a problem worthy of philosophers’ attention.

In other words, one can say that ‘complacency’, understood as self-satisfaction coupled with an irresponsible regard of one’s moral performance as being good enough corresponding to some matter, is a new topic and concept in a sense. It is new because prior to the late modern era there was no one word to denote the specific phenomenon which we know and understand as complacency today. Before the late 1800s, and sometimes early 1900s, people did not use the word ‘complacency’ to describe the phenomenon of complacency as we understand it today.

This does not mean that no such a thing as the phenomenon of complacency existed before late modernity. Pre-modern instances resembling complacency did exist<sup>13</sup> but were known by different names. However, these pre-modern instances of complacency did perhaps not contain all the nuances of our current understanding of complacency as a phenomenon. A later investigation, where I contrast ‘complacency’ with other terms which might have denoted complacency (such as “apathy,” “indifference,” “akrasia,” “hypocrisy” (Kawall 2006), “inattention” (Jenni 2003), negligence, and so forth), will show how ‘complacency’ overlaps with, yet differs from these vices. As such, ‘complacency’ as a word hints at the fact that there is more to complacency as a phenomenon.

This brings me then to the second half of my answer to the lack of literature on complacency. First, complacency as a phenomenon and ‘complacency’ as a word are somehow bound up together. Only with a word assigned to a phenomenon, can it be fully understood and examined. Otherwise, the phenomenon remains vague. Complacency as a phenomenon can therefore only be fully understood and examined until we called it by the word ‘complacency.’ As Charles Taylor (2011:56) succinctly puts it: “...words don’t just acquire meaning through

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<sup>13</sup> Such as Pontius Pilate who washed his hands in innocence at the crucifixion of Jesus. Arendt (1977:114) writes of Adolf Eichmann that he also had a ‘Pontius Pilate’ moment and asked himself “who am I to judge?”. Absolving oneself of guilt in this manner (the ‘Pontius Pilate’ way) is reminiscent of complacency in that the person convinces himself of not exacerbating or committing an evil deed (and hence are satisfied with themselves).

the designation of things we already experience. On the contrary, speech, linguistic expression, makes things exist for us in a new mode, one of awareness or reflection....”

The word ‘complacency’ therefore highlights or expresses something about the phenomenon of complacency. Pre-modern or early modern instances of complacency were known by other names, and these names each elucidated something distinctive about the phenomenon of complacency. However, complacency as a phenomenon, being assigned the name of ‘complacency’, will perhaps reveal to us yet something else of complacency, since the word ‘complacency’ informs our understanding of the phenomenon of complacency.

Therefore, the phenomenon of complacency has arguably undergone a change in nature (however minor) by being subsumed under the word ‘complacency.’ The relationship between word and phenomenon is a reciprocal one,<sup>14</sup> however. The word ‘complacency’ was adopted because the phenomenon called for it, but the phenomenon of complacency is also informed by being called ‘complacency’. Thus, one can also say that we have adopted the word ‘complacency’ to describe the phenomenon of complacency, because some characteristic or characteristics about the phenomenon of complacency must have changed, or must have become more prominent. (Perhaps something like the element of self-satisfaction that was associated with the early modern use of the word ‘complacency’ became more pertinent to the phenomenon that was emerging as complacency as we know it today).

Following this argument, the lack of literature on complacency could consequently also be because the phenomenon of complacency has changed or has become more visible. Complacency, as we know the phenomenon today, could, therefore, be a new phenomenon to an extent (or from a different perspective, an old phenomenon, but with new characteristics and nuances). This then concludes the reasons for the lack of literature on complacency.

In summary, the previous section has started out with an exploration of how we use the word ‘complacency’ and understand the phenomenon of complacency today, by consulting both mass media use of the word ‘complacency’, and dictionary definitions of complacency.

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<sup>14</sup> Ian Hacking (1986:99) writes in his paper “Making up People” of the “feedback effect.” New ways of classification open or close possible avenues of human action. However, our actions or modes of being then also have a feedback effect on our classifications in return. “Human action is [...] closely linked to human description...” (Hacking 1986:108). For example, Hacking (1986:100-101) argues that there were no cases of multiple personality before 1875, because before 1875, there was no such a term, or classification as “multiple personality” or “split personality.” Creating the term has created a new way of being, and has thus resulted in new people being made. Hacking (1986:103) maintains that multiple personality was not a real entity which awaited discovery, but rather that once the term of “multiple disorder” was coined, it created a new possibility of being. Moreover, classes and classifications often emerge together, “... each egging the other on” (Hacking 1986:106).

While mass media's use of the word 'complacency' is unanimous (the word is always used in such a way as to denote something negative), it was found that there is a discrepancy between some of the definitions put forward by dictionaries. The reason for this discrepancy is because the meaning of the word 'complacency' has recently (approximately since 1880) changed. If lexicographers drew on old literary sources to construe the meaning of 'complacency', they arrived at an outdated meaning of the word. Finally, in this section I have shown that not only has the meaning of the word 'complacency' changed, but the vice that we understand as complacency has also changed since people have re-appropriated an already existing word to redescribe what they saw as the phenomenon of complacency. The new use of the word 'complacency', and the fact that complacency as a phenomenon has changed were finally posited as reasons for the lack of philosophical literature on complacency.

#### **1.4. Complacency: On the Way from the Everyday to the Philosophical**

Now that I have considered the everyday sense of complacency, I need to move further, to the philosophical treatment of complacency. As was seen, mass media's use of the word 'complacency' reveals that complacency is something undesirable, or even immoral. However, a perusal of mass media is unable to reveal why complacency is morally reprehensible, nor will it reveal how and why complacency, as action, takes place. Moreover, mass media merely denounce complacency without distinguishing between cases of complacency that are more or less severe. In other words, perusing mass media leads only to a first-level or surface understanding of complacency.

Neither can one draw on dictionary definitions for a philosophical understanding of complacency. Natural language dictionaries do not aim to provide philosophical definitions of terms; lexicographers do not ask, 'what is complacency?' Lexicographers of natural language dictionaries instead ask, 'what does the *word* 'complacency' mean?' Although philosophers also inquire about the meanings of words, philosophers go beyond this exercise. Linguistic dictionaries merely provide the appropriate ways in which words are used in everyday language, or a systemization of the common usage of words.

It would therefore be presumptuous to critique dictionary definitions of 'complacency' as if they were philosophical definitions. As Helenius (2013:86) writes: "[p]recise lexical definitions do not abolish philosophical problems...." Paul Ricoeur, during his investigation into 'recognition' in *The Course of Recognition* (2005:16), followed the same trajectory that is

playing out here – from the lexicographical to the philosophical – and also stresses that one must avoid the temptation of merely wanting to “improve [...] lexical reflection.”

Ricoeur (2005:16) adds: “[p]hilosophy does not advance by a lexical improvement dedicated to the description of ordinary language as it is commonly used.” Instead, philosophy progresses by breaking away from familiar usage of a term by asking philosophical questions that go deeper and beyond how a term is commonly used (Ricoeur 2005:16-7). For what reason, then, did I turn to dictionaries and mass media for an understanding of complacency? Simply because there is no coherent philosophical (or sociological, or anthropological) treatise on complacency, and one has to start somewhere to gain a semantic grasp on a term that is commonly used and invoked in everyday situations. Hence the reason for first presupposing the ordinary meaning of the word ‘complacency’ in this study.

This presupposition can now be used as a springboard from which to launch a philosophical investigation of complacency, even if this presupposed common-use definition of complacency is only a reference point from which to ‘break away’ in order to reach a philosophical definition of complacency. Along with Strawson (1959:9-10) one can consequently say that:

“[u]p to a point, [...] a close examination of the actual use of words is best, and indeed the only sure way in philosophy. But the discriminations we can make, and the connexions we can establish [...] in this way are not general enough to meet the full [...] demand for [philosophical] understanding. For when we ask how we use this or that expression, our answers, however revealing at a certain level, are apt to assume, and not to expose, those general elements of the structure that the metaphysician wants revealed.”

In other words, one wants to depart from “the list of connotations that a word or an expression can have in a given linguistic community [...such as English], in order to transcend the limitations of that particular idiom and find what can correspond to some sort of transcendental element in them, a philosophical relevance captured in the uses of that particular language but able to be translated into other languages, because it captures an essential dimension of our existence” (Marcelo 2011:113).

However, different from Ricoeur who insists on the break or the gap between the familiar usage of a term and the philosophical understanding of the term, *and* due to the fact that I am faced with a constraint in the form of a lack of philosophical discussion on complacency, I will insist on *both* a break and a continuity between the everyday and philosophical definitions of complacency.

Earlier I have indicated that it is not my intention to posit ‘complacency’ on a philosophical level without any connection, whatsoever, to the everyday use thereof. Of course, words may be reappropriated (in both philosophical and everyday discourse) to mean something entirely different from the way the word is usually used. But my philosophical project aims to arrive at a philosophical definition of complacency that is not wholly removed from the way the term is understood by laypersons (even if this understanding by the layperson is only implicit or intuitive).

My project is therefore *not* to reappropriate ‘complacency’ from everyday use and to redefine it in a way that radically breaks with the ordinary use thereof. In other words, although a philosophical discussion of complacency will depart from the lexical and common-use sense of complacency, one will still be able to see how the ordinary-use definition of complacency connects with the philosophical definition thereof. Phrased differently, an everyday understanding of complacency *anticipates* but does not *encompass* what a philosophical understanding of complacency might look like. My philosophical treatment of complacency thus *both* continues and breaks with the everyday understanding of the term.

While the continuity between the everyday and philosophical understanding of complacency will be obvious to the reader, it is necessary to say something more on what constitutes the break or the gap between a lexical and a philosophical treatment of complacency. Ricoeur (2005:2), in his own work regarding ‘recognition,’ speaks of a “semantic deficiency”, and the “not said, the unsaid” (or as in the quote from Strawson above, the ‘assumed’) present in the renditions of the everyday use of the relevant term. Ricoeur’s (2005:9) method is to use hermeneutic or philosophical thinking which goes beyond everyday usage, to bring “to light the tensions and contortions that linguistic usage accommodates.” In a similar way, I will investigate the gaps, the unsaid, the tensions, present in the everyday use and lexical definitions of complacency.

However, I first want to look at a possible pitfall of this method of finding philosophical significance in the gaps between ordinary uses of a word. Some may critique Ricoeur’s method as being problematic, since Ricoeur conducts his original investigation in French. In French, ‘recognition’ (or *reconnaissance*, rather) has some dictionary definitions that do not overlap with the all the dictionary definitions of the English ‘recognition’ (and the word as it is found in other languages). As such, Carr (2007:324) thinks that Ricoeur’s claim that one can “isolate three philosophically interesting” themes that, most importantly, “form a meaningful



succession”, from these dictionary definitions is hard to defend. In fact, Carr’s (2007:325) final verdict on Ricoeur’s *The Course of Recognition* is that: “[e]ach of his three chapters [in the *Course*] is impressive and insightful, but the connections<sup>[15]</sup> among them, in my view, remain dubious, rendered plausible more by features of the French language than by conceptual affinities.”

In defence of Ricoeur, Marcelo (2011:113) argues that

“...Ricoeur doesn’t ignore the differences between the many possible meanings of, *Anerkennen*, *Wiedererkennen*, *recognize*, *acknowledge*, *reconnaître* or *reconhecer*, nor is he trying to render absolute the meaning recognition assumes in French. Rather, he is going from the acknowledgment of the specificity of the semantic field a word assumes in a given language and trying to see what all of us can learn from it.”

Whether Ricoeur succeeds in transcending the specificity of language in order to arrive at ‘conceptual affinities’ in his own work, is not of import here. What matters is that I take note of Carr’s critique and ensure that I really arrive at essential aspects of our existence or of action that transcends a specific language (in my case, English), in my transition from ‘complacency’ considered on the level of ordinary language, to complacency considered philosophically. Thus, I return to the gaps between the ordinary uses of the word ‘complacency’, in order to find some philosophical impetus there.

The first of these gaps that stimulates thought is the break between the older, prescriptively positive definition of complacency, and the newer, prescriptively negative meaning of complacency. This gap or break is mostly found between different dictionaries, but sometimes the gap is present within the same entry on complacency, such as in the case of the *Webster* which holds that complacency is self-satisfaction, but *especially* self-satisfaction accompanied by actual dangers or deficiencies. I would like to venture that a philosophical exposition of complacency will reveal a continuity, rather than a radical break (‘radical,’ since there is some analytical discontinuity), between these aforementioned positive and negative meanings of complacency. In other words, philosophical investigation will reveal the underlying principle that keeps these two disparate aspects of ‘complacency’ as defined in ordinary-use lexicons, together.

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<sup>15</sup> Helenius (2013:87) argues that Ricoeur does not want to reconcile all the possible dictionary definitions of a word via philosophy: just that everyday language or lexical definitions might serve as encouragement or basis from whence to conduct a philosophical inquiry into the word in question. However, Ricoeur calls his work a ‘course’ on ‘recognition’ (the word or notion that he investigates), implying a connection through succession.

The second of these gaps that is revealed by dictionary definitions of complacency is the gap between complacency and other phenomena similar to it. I have already pointed out that complacency might have been subsumed under other vices, such as ‘apathy,’ ‘negligence,’ or ‘ignorance’ in the early modern era, before complacency has become the phenomenon that we know as ‘complacency’ today. In the same way, the phenomenon complacency might also have been included under other more morally neutral, and even desirable phenomena such ‘acquiescence’, or ‘being pleased or satisfied’, as is hinted at or stated explicitly in almost all the dictionaries’ renderings of ‘complacency.’ The fact that complacency is related to phenomena that are both morally positive (perhaps neutral) and negative, seems to reaffirm the above identified gap between complacency’s prescriptively positive and negative meanings. I believe that a philosophical inquiry into complacency and its related phenomena will show not only how complacency differs from these related phenomena, but also how complacency and these phenomena overlap. Therefore, the gap between complacency’s prescriptively positive and negative meanings will be bridged by showing how complacency is related to its siblings. In the process I will be able to identify several essential aspects of complacent action and thus move into the philosophical sphere.

Philosophy thus fills these gaps “...at a higher degree of complexity”; philosophy brings to light the underlying principles that govern the way ‘complacency’ (and even related terms) is used in ordinary language (Ricoeur 2005:18). However, I will not immediately set out to bridge these gaps or find the principles that underlie the way in which people ordinarily use the word ‘complacency.’ Instead, I will first take a look at the little philosophical literature that is indeed available on complacency, and examine how the authors who have written on complacency have gone about the task. In this process, I will put forward a working definition of complacency and hone it as I interact with the insights gleaned from the other philosophers who have written on complacency.

## **1.5. Literature on Complacency: Complacency Today**

### **1.5.1. Primary Philosophical Literature on Complacency**

Philosophers wanting to tackle the topic of complacency will find that they do not have a lot of philosophical sources at their disposal. The first and most basic philosophical definition of complacency that I have come across in my research is found in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (2005). *The Penguin’s* (2005) definition, however, is not very helpful: it simply defines complacency as “self-satisfaction.” However, *The Penguin* does add something that

lexicons do not state explicitly: a clear distinction is made between complacency's older and present-day usage, with 'self-satisfaction' being offered as the way complacency is understood today.

One would be hard pressed to provide a philosophical definition based on the above information. Defining complacency as "self-satisfaction," however, does leave open both the possibilities of a positive and a negative interpretation of complacency. On the one hand, a person who does a project well, and is self-satisfied with her performance pertaining to the project, can, therefore, be said to be complacent. On the other hand, self-satisfaction which is not sanctioned by proper actions can also count as a case of complacency. However, *The Penguin's* definition of complacency is so broad that it almost comes to mean nothing.

Another one of the few philosophers who provides a philosophical definition for complacency is Nicholas Unwin. Unwin (1985:205), in his article "Relativism and Moral Complacency", writes that complacency is a mental state. Specifically, complacency is "...a general unwillingness to accept that one's moral opinions may be mistaken" (1985:205). Put otherwise, the complacent person is unwilling to accept or entertain moral critique from others (Unwin 1985:213). Unwin's definition of complacency is thus more in line with how we understand the phenomenon today since it paints complacency as prescriptively negative.

However, this definition of complacency is not adequate either. Complacency can mean so much more, in the sense that it is not just a mere mental state, and that complacency is not just a kind stubbornness regarding one's own wrongdoing. That is to say, Unwin does not, in fact, provide a comprehensive and extensive definition of complacency, but rather seems to reduce complacency to stubbornness and obstinacy. Complacency might include moments of obstinacy, but, as I will show below, there are various critiques against defining complacency as an unwillingness to accept moral criticism.

The first problem creeps in due to Unwin's choice to reduce complacency *solely* to a mental, inner, or subjective phenomenon. Complacency certainly entails a mental or cognitive aspect, but it is not only a mental phenomenon. Complacency, I would like to assert, is *also* an observable or externally visible action. For example (staying for the moment still with Unwin's definition), it is possible for a person to be unwilling to accept moral criticism, yet still execute

the correct actions with regards to some moral task.<sup>16</sup> Such a person will *not* be considered complacent according to our common understanding of the word.

The opposite also holds true: if a person is indeed willing to be morally critiqued and accepts that his moral opinions might be mistaken (and is therefore *not* complacent according to Unwin), but still continues his incorrect actions, then he is still complacent in the eyes of observers. Unwin's definition is therefore incomplete in the sense that it does not take into consideration the embodiment or lived-out action element of complacency, but merely the subjective mental manifestation of complacency.

Jason Kawall (2006:347), who perhaps wrote the seminal work on complacency, also claims that Unwin's definition of complacency is "...too narrow and, incomplete". Kawall (2006:347) wants Unwin to include the component of self-satisfaction within the definition of complacency. While Unwin's definition of complacency can perhaps be rearticulated as being a type of self-satisfaction with regards to one's moral opinions, it is true that Unwin does not explicitly address self-satisfaction.

In addition, Unwin's definition of complacency does not account for the various ways in which one's moral opinions may be mistaken. Unwin just states that one's unwillingness to consider that one might be morally wrong, is "unwarranted or unjustified" (Kawall 2006:348). Kawall (2006:348) postulates that one's beliefs must be "...formed in an epistemically irresponsible (culpable) manner" for one to be considered complacent. In the former case, one is merely wrong,<sup>17</sup> but in the latter, it is one's fault or responsibility for being mistaken about one's moral performance.<sup>18</sup> Unwin, by not including epistemic culpability as one of the

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<sup>16</sup> Another slightly different approach to arriving at this critique is to consider that one sometimes has good reasons for not wanting to accept that one's moral opinion is wrong, the most obvious reason being that one's moral opinions are indeed correct. Self-satisfaction with regard to one's moral opinions entails that one might hold correct moral opinions (in accord with moral truth, if one takes a realist approach), and that consequently one is not willing to be convinced that these moral opinions are mistaken. A person might rightly opine that climate change is a reality, and that she should accordingly and constantly be adapting her lifestyle to fit in with this reality. If these correct moral opinions further overflow into morally correct actions, such as consuming only locally-grown and -produced products for example, she cannot be considered complacent. This person might feel morally superior as a result (and thus unwilling to be critiqued), but such a person is not being complacent about climate change. Such a person is merely unwilling to be critiqued on their moral opinion (by perhaps, denialists of global warming). Unwin's definition of complacency hence also falls short in this regard.

<sup>17</sup> A person can be wrong in a way that is not their fault. For example, a person can have unreliable reasoning abilities and be unaware of this fact. Hypothetically, one might be controlled by an evil genius who causes one to form irrational conclusions about one's moral performance pertaining to some matter (Kawall 2006:348). Finally, a person might be fooled by other people into thinking that they have performed morally or well pertaining to some matter (Kawall 2006:344). In all these cases, the relevant persons cannot be considered complacent.

<sup>18</sup> Kawall (2006:347-8) points out that there are various ways in which one can be epistemically at fault. One can, for instance, underestimate how much "...a given project or practice demands", and one can overestimate "...how well one has lived-up to these lowered standards" (Kawall 2006:348).

requirements for complacency, cannot account for cases such as the complacent person who “...embraces appropriate moral standards, but culpably overestimates how well [his/her] actions satisfy these standards” (Kawall 2006:347).

In addition to Kawall’s criticism of Unwin’s definition as being incomplete, the definition is too limiting. One does not necessarily have to be unwilling to reflect on one’s moral standards in order to be complacent. Consider the person who simply never reflects on the rightness of her own moral opinions (which is blameworthy behaviour in itself; but the point being that she is consequently not in the position of being unwilling to change her moral opinions). Such an unreflecting person can also be considered complacent (given that her behaviour meets certain other requirements for complacency), yet Unwin’s definition does not allow for the possibility of this behaviour to be classified as complacency (Kawall 2006:347).

Contrary to the above definitions, Kawall (2006:345) provides us with what is perhaps the most thorough and well-articulated philosophical definition of complacency available:<sup>19</sup>

“Complacency (with respect to some good or project G): is constituted by (i) an epistemically culpable overestimate of one’s accomplishments or status that produces (ii) an excessive self-satisfaction that produces (iii) an insufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain (or improve to) an appropriate level of accomplishment, that in turn produces (iv) a problematic lack of appropriately motivated, appropriate action or effort.”

I will henceforth interact with Kawall’s definition of complacency by first tracing how he has arrived at the above definition and its constituents, and second, by formulating my own definition of complacency as a response to Kawall’s (and by implication, Unwin’s) definition.

Kawall arrives at his definition of complacency by using dictionary definitions as a basis for his philosophical definition. Kawall (2006:343) explicitly states that, in his attempt to address the philosophical neglect of complacency, he “...begins by drawing attention to inadequacies in common characterizations of complacency.” Kawall (343) then says that he will provide “[a]n alternative account [...] that avoids these flaws.” With “common

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<sup>19</sup> Linda Radzik (2012) writes in passing of complacency while exploring the virtue of minding one’s own business and bases her definition on that of Kawall’s. Radzik (2012:174) writes that people who do not intervene “...frequently or strongly enough...” when they see that others are engaging in immoral behaviour can be considered complacent. Moreover:

“A complacent person is [...] unskilled and insufficiently critical in drawing moral judgments. But here the source is not a lack of caring about morality. A complacent person may care very much about morality. Her problem is that she is too inclined to believe that all is going well, that there are no moral problems that need attending to. This false sense of security is grounded in an inappropriate degree of self-satisfaction. Her contentment with herself and her own circumstances blind her to situations that ought to raise concern” (Radzik 2012:179).

characterizations of complacency,” Kawall indisputably means dictionary definitions. Kawall, therefore, presumptuously treats dictionary definitions as one would treat philosophical definitions. Kawall, in other words, gives in to the temptation that Ricoeur has warned of earlier: Kawall gains his philosophical definition solely by improving upon lexical reflection. By doing this, not only does Kawall take a superior stance towards the way language is commonly used, but he also partly precludes his inquiry into complacency from gaining philosophical depth.

Turning to dictionary definitions in this manner is perhaps understandable if one considers the absence of philosophical work on complacency. Moreover, despite the fact that Kawall makes use of dictionaries in an unqualified manner, Kawall does arrive at an analytically clear definition of complacency. I will thus follow Kawall to an extent: alongside Kawall I will interact with dictionaries (and with Kawall’s definition) to obtain my own analytical definition of complacency. However, different from Kawall who considers his study on complacency complete upon obtaining his analytical definition, I will consider my definition of complacency merely as a working definition (which is, nonetheless, an important component in thinking complacency philosophically). That is to say, my working definition of complacency provides some semantic stability throughout the rest of the chapter, while still being open to critique and amelioration. Our understanding of complacency will only gain some philosophical depth after various other deviations from the current course.

To return to our present path, let us look at how Kawall interacts with lexicons. Kawall’s definition of complacency is obtained by critiquing *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), then *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2006), and finally the *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1993). The first definition (as is already provided in section 1.2 of this chapter), namely *The Oxford’s* definition, is problematic for Kawall (2006:343) since it deems instances of warranted self-satisfaction as complacency. It would indeed be strange to say that a person who has performed a task splendidly and feels satisfied with the outcomes of the task and herself, is an example of complacency. As was pointed out before, complacency is generally considered to be a negative phenomenon in the prescriptive sense. The next two dictionaries considered, fare better at capturing this negativity.

Since *The American Heritage Dictionary* and *The Webster’s Dictionary’s* definitions are very similar, I will discuss Kawall’s critique of them taken together. I will restate the combined definition here: complacency is satisfaction or self-satisfaction accompanied by an

unawareness of dangers, troubles, deficiencies, or controversies (Kawall 2006:343). This definition of complacency is more accurate than *The Oxford's* definition, yet Kawall (2006:344, 348) argues that the second part of the definition regarding “unawareness” is still too ambiguous. It is unclear what is meant exactly, and therefore the latter part of the definition must be further qualified and amended.

First, the *Webster's* definition might be stating that people who are unaware of external dangers and deficiencies (for example, climate change), are complacent. However, unawareness of dangers and deficiencies of such a nature is instead indicative of ignorance. The complacent person, on the contrary, is *aware* of the moral wrongs taking place in society or elsewhere. Differently put, the complacent person at least knows *of* the things towards which she ends up being complacent (even though she does not know she is complacent towards these things). A person or a group cannot be complacent about issues that we (as humankind) cannot or do not know about. Thus, to be considered complacent, it is necessary but not sufficient that one must be aware of actual external dangers or deficiencies.

Second, and this is probably what the above *Webster's* definition means to convey, complacency is constituted by an unawareness of one's own faults or shortcomings. However, unqualified unawareness regarding one's moral inadequacy or wrong actions is not sufficient for one to be deemed complacent. We have already come across this critique when we looked at Unwin's definition of complacency. Not all types of unawareness are sufficient for complacency (Kawall 2006:344, 348). Kawall (2006:344) writes that an epistemic flaw (being unaware of one's own danger or deficiencies) is indeed a necessary component of complacency. However, it is a specific lack of awareness, an epistemically culpable lack of awareness, which is sufficient for complacency.

That is to say, one is complacent if, by one's own fault, one arrives at the wrong conclusion about the correctness of one's behaviour (not, for example when one has been fooled or deceived by others to believe one is good enough, or if one simply does not have the cognitive capacity to accurately assess one's accomplishments) (Kawall 2006:348). In other words, one is complacent when one forms one's beliefs about one's behaviour in an epistemically irresponsible<sup>20</sup> manner. A person must hence be “epistemically culpable” in order to be thought complacent (Kawall 2006:344-5).

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<sup>20</sup> Such epistemic irresponsibility can take many forms. Kathie Jenni (2003:281) writes: “[h]umans' capacity to avoid unpleasant awareness is remarkable in its versatility. We use selective attention, creative reinterpretation,

For example, if a person believes that climate change is real, and as a result starts to recycle and consequently thinks she is doing enough to save the environment, but is unaware that recycling is not enough to reduce her effects on the environment, and if this unawareness is due to no fault of her own, then such person cannot be considered complacent according to Kawall's definition. There will, of course, be borderline cases. Suppose a person who wears clothes produced in a third-world country sweatshop. The person does not wish harm to other people, and one can thus assume that he would be horrified if he found out his clothes were made in a sweatshop under inhumane working conditions. The person in question, however, goes about his daily life, never bothering to check where his clothes are produced, and under what circumstances. He is therefore unaware of his implicit contribution to a moral wrong. Would this mean he is complacent? Determining whether a person is blameworthy or not, would depend on various things.

Theoretically, the person *can* investigate and determine under what conditions his clothes are made. Following this line of argumentation, if the person then does not bother to do so, he would be considered complacent. However, if one were to consider that a person cannot – maybe due to time constraints, maybe due to the unavailability of information – verify where every single item that he has bought comes from, or under which types of circumstances the item was produced, then perhaps it would be incorrect to say that such a person is complacent. Add to this the complex structure of the global clothing industry's production and distribution chain, which “diffuses responsibility for sweatshop conditions”, which the agent will have to interpret, and one has a moral dilemma on one's hands (Young 2007:166-7). I will explore moral dilemmas such as these in detail, later in this thesis.

However, for now it remains clear that if one forms one's beliefs about one's behaviour in an epistemically irresponsible manner, one can be considered complacent (providing that the other conditions for complacency are met). As Kawall (2006:345) puts it: “Complacency [...] requires that one feels greater self-satisfaction than is warranted by one's accomplishments (where the status of one's accomplishments is or ought to be epistemically accessible).” The vagueness surrounding the concept of unawareness have thus been addressed. Next, Kawall

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selective memory, and other strategies of self-deception to avoid confronting problematic aspects of our lives. We discredit sources of painful information, fail to follow up disturbing leads, selectively control the data we acquire. Most effectively of all, we simply let the momentum of day-to-day pressures overwhelm moments of uneasiness or moral clarity that do occur.” Audi (2008:405) adds: “[i]f we have what is, or what we should see is, strong evidence against p, it may be prima facie wrong to seek evidence for p.”



looks at the use of ‘satisfaction’ and ‘self-satisfaction’ in the relevant dictionaries’ definitions of complacency.

Kawall (2006:344-5) writes that excessive self-satisfaction is indeed a necessary component of complacency and thus includes it in his philosophical definition of complacency. That is to say, the complacent person has more self-satisfaction than is appropriate given her behaviour. In addition, Kawall (2006:344-5) qualifies self-satisfaction by arguing that satisfaction or self-satisfaction does not *necessarily* have to contain smugness. With this I agree. The complacent person may indeed be smug or boastful, but may also be modest or unconcerned about her supposed accomplishments.

There is, however, another kind of ambiguity surrounding self-satisfaction which Kawall has missed. In a sense, it might be tied up with the just mentioned distinction between being smugly (self-) satisfied, or being (self-) satisfied in an unreflecting way. That is the question of whether the self-satisfaction experienced by the complacent person is (a) either a foreground experience of being contented and satisfied or (b) a vague background experience of not being disturbed.<sup>21</sup>

A person who is self-satisfied in way (a) will be pleasantly aware of her accomplishments and thus place other concerns in the background. On the other hand, if self-satisfaction is one of those objects in the background as in case (b), it is thus merely a steady, undisturbed part of the background horizon while the person’s focus is on something else. Complacency might involve either of these types of self-satisfaction. In some cases, persons might be smugly self-satisfied and pride themselves on their so-called achievements. In other cases, a person will have a vague background sense of self-satisfaction or contentment. It might even be so that in some cases of complacency one finds an oscillation between the two kinds of self-satisfaction. For example, when a person consciously starts to evaluate her achievements, her self-satisfaction might move to the foreground, but when she is going about her day to day tasks and habitually doing what she thinks is good in relation to the wrong, this

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<sup>21</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty writes of the experience of concrete objects in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), I have nonetheless drawn on his insights regarding the way one experiences objects. I have thus taken the liberty of extending the meaning of ‘objects’ to refer to mental objects, or objects found only in consciousness. Although I might not be justified in doing so, the insights gleaned proves helpful as a starting point. By focussing on an ‘object’, in this case, self-satisfaction, or being (self-)satisfied, one places other concerns or objects in the background and places one’s self-satisfaction in the foreground (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2005:78). Merleau-Ponty (2005:78) writes that “...objects form a system in which one [object] cannot show itself without concealing others.” Thus, the horizon or background-objects make it possible for me to see the foreground object since one needs the horizon to distinguish the foreground: the “object-horizon structure” is, therefore, the “means whereby [objects] are disclosed” (Merleau-Ponty 2005:79).

self-satisfaction is no longer the centre of her focus. The self-satisfaction moves into the background and perhaps sustains the person's complacent habits. I will return to this matter in chapter six.

Finally, regarding satisfaction, Kawall (2006:345) holds that it must be *due to* excessive self-satisfaction that the complacent person does not have a strong enough “desire” or “felt need”<sup>22</sup> to keep up or improve to the correct conduct.<sup>23</sup> However, I wish to suggest that there might be other reasons, besides satisfaction or self-satisfaction, for why a person might not feel the need or desire to act in accordance with the wrong that she cares about. For example, a person might feel overwhelmed by the wrong that she cares about, or she might not realise how much action is required in order to address or rectify the wrong that she cares about. Due to these other reasons, then, a person might not have the necessary desire or felt need to keep up the correct conduct.

As a result, my working definition will not follow the sequential pattern present in Kawall's definition of complacency, where an epistemically culpable overestimate of one's action is *followed* by excessive satisfaction, which is in turn *followed* by a lack of desire or felt need, and so on. Instead, I wish to suggest with my definition that excessive (self-) satisfaction is indeed a necessary requirement of complacency, but leave open the possibility that satisfaction might sometimes be the reason for not having the necessary desire to act appropriately, and at other times that one's lack of desire to act appropriately might in fact be the reason for one's satisfaction. I do not think that one can assign a specific sequential or consequential place to excessive satisfaction in a formulation of complacency. Satisfaction might be ubiquitous: it might sometimes precede, sometimes follow some of the components in a formulation of complacency in a way that is difficult to describe.

So far, by interacting – along with Kawall – with dictionary definitions, I have gleaned three insights to be incorporated into an analytical definition of complacency: (1) complacency is not mere satisfaction or self-satisfaction, but rather entails something negative, in the moral sense, *in addition to* (self-)satisfaction; (2) complacency is accompanied by an *awareness* of

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<sup>22</sup> Kawall (2006:345) uses the expression “felt need”, because it conveys that one does not necessarily *want* or *desire* to do something, but rather that one feels obliged to do it.

<sup>23</sup> By writing of a desire or felt need which is not *strong enough* or “insufficient”, Kawall (2006:345-6) allows for the fact that one can have at least *some* desire or felt need to keep up or improve to the correct conduct, yet still be considered complacent. In other words, desire or felt need to improve does not have to be wholly absent. However, to be considered complacent, the desire or felt need must either be “...insufficiently strong...” or it must be “...a desire (or felt need) for an insufficient level of activity, where one's belief about sufficient levels of activity is epistemically culpable” (Kawall 2006:345-6).

moral wrongs, but (3) an *epistemically culpable unawareness* of one's deficiencies or lack of action regarding the above moral wrongs. By considering the above three constituents, I have arrived at the following working definition of complacency (which is still very similar to Kawall's definition):

Complacency occurs when a person or a group is aware of a moral wrong, but evaluate themselves as not participating in, or exacerbating this moral wrong. Or, put differently, evaluating themselves as doing enough to oppose this moral wrong. This evaluation of one's performance pertaining to the known moral wrong, is made in an epistemically irresponsible way. Moreover, complacency is accompanied by an excess of (self-) satisfaction.

To return, once again, to Kawall's definition, Kawall (2006:345) writes that complacency can take place "with respect to some good or project" and thereby wishes to make it clear that complacency can be about moral and amoral<sup>24</sup> matters. Moreover, in stating it thus, Kawall (2006:345) wishes to clarify that one can be complacent about specific matters, while not being complacent about others. To this, I would like to add that one also needs to *care* about these specific matters to be considered complacent about these matters. This qualification is necessary, since one can be aware of specific matters, but just not care about these matters. One will hence just be apathetic, as opposed to complacent, about the matters above. I will consequently amend my preliminary definition accordingly (added parts are in italics, while removed sections are crossed out):

~~Complacency occurs when a person or a group is aware of a moral wrong~~ about some moral *or amoral wrong*, entails that one (a person or group) be aware of, *and concerned with*, the above wrong, but evaluates themselves as not participating in, or exacerbating the above moral *or amoral wrong*. Or, put differently, evaluating themselves as doing enough to oppose the moral *or amoral wrong*. This evaluation of one's performance pertaining to the known *(a)moral wrong*, is made in an epistemically irresponsible way. Moreover, complacency is accompanied by an excess of (self-) satisfaction.

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<sup>24</sup> That complacency can be about amoral wrongs, is evident if one peruses the profusion of news articles about complacency in sport. To say that it is a 'wrong' is not to say that it is objectively or normatively wrong, but rather wrong from the perspective of the person who knows and cares about the wrong. For example, I might think it wrong to eat fast food, but this notion of 'wrong' is neither a moral matter, nor is it a universal claim.

Next, pertaining to point (iv) of Kawall's definition which states that "[c]omplacency involves a problematic lack of appropriately motivated appropriate action or effort..." ("...where this is a result of the lack of a sufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain (or improve to) an appropriate level of accomplishment"), Kawall (2006:346) writes that the complacent person can still act, but does not act 'enough', so to speak, and so does not act appropriately. Kawall provides an example of a rich person who gives too little to charities. The rich person acts, but does not do enough and does not act appropriately in accordance with how much wealth she has, and is hence complacent (given that all the other requirements of Kawall's definition is met).

Besides appropriate action, the actions of a complacent person must also be "appropriately motivated". If a person does not have the right motive to improve his actions in relation to some project, then such a person is still considered complacent. For example, if one does the right thing because one expects some reward, or because one is forced to do the right thing, one is still complacent (Kawall 2006:346). Unlike Unwin, Kawall thus includes in his definition both the inner or subjective aspect, and the outer objective manifestation of complacency.

However, in an example to prove that complacency is not necessarily about excessive pride, Kawall (2006:344) seems to put too much emphasis on motivation while diminishing the action component of complacency. The example is of a wealthy person who gives a miniscule amount of money (proportionate to what she can afford) in a specific year to charities. As a consequence, she feels proud of her contribution, and further intends to give a little bit more in the year that will follow. Kawall (2006:344) stresses that such a person is *not* complacent, because even though she is excessively self-satisfied, she *intends* to do better next year.

Kawall (2006:344) perhaps aims to highlight the fact that complacent people "stop short" and do not "...make any further efforts at all..." Yet, mere intention will not exempt a person from complacency, because the complacent still performs the wrong actions. That is to say, complacency is indeed constituted in part by motive, but complacency is a phenomenon which necessarily requires certain actions to be performed. Even if I am, for example, doing a lot of things to combat climate change, I am still complacent towards climate change as long

as I am aware of climate change and while my actions<sup>25</sup> which exacerbate climate change (and reflects my self-satisfaction) are still present. Else, if a person who only recycles and intends to use re-usable shopping bags to lessen climate change later, should not be considered complacent. But this is wrong, since complacency, even by Kawall's own admittance, is when you do not act appropriately pertaining to some project (coupled with the relevant requirements). Mere recycling is not appropriate action pertaining to the serious threat of climate change, despite my good intentions.

In addition, and which perhaps explains why Kawall has committed this error, Kawall's view of action is incorrect. Kawall's (2006:345) definition states that complacency is in part a "...*lack* [emphasis mine] of ... appropriate action or effort." A lack of action, or inaction, is in fact a misnomer. There exists no such a thing as inaction<sup>26</sup> (Ricoeur 1992:157). Instead, inaction is just another form of action. If one is not doing the right thing, one is still doing some thing other than what is right. Rephrased, if one does not do enough relating to a certain project, then one is still doing some thing else; one is acting in such a way that is unhelpful or hurtful towards the given project.

An example might serve to illustrate how speaking of a wrong as an action, and speaking of a wrong as a lack of action, influences our understanding thereof. Take for example the following scenario: a student who lives at home is neglecting her studies. Instead of studying during her free time, she plays online games and watches television. Her father notices this and consequently tells her either: (i) "you are not studying enough" (lack of action), or (ii) "you are playing games and watching too much television"<sup>27</sup> (action). The former remark or reprimand, (i), obscures the actions (playing games, watching television) involved in perpetrating the wrong by *not* naming them. The student might feel guilty and study more late at night, but since it was not pointed out to her that her recreational activities are infringing upon her studies, she might still feel justified doing them. On the other hand, remark (ii) provides a better sense of what specific behaviour is incorrect. The student has a better idea of

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<sup>25</sup> That is to say actions which can reasonably be expected of one to be eliminated, since humans still have to eat and live on the planet (which inevitably entails carbon emissions).

<sup>26</sup> That is to say, inaction is an ontological impossibility. The word 'inaction' has its place in our vocabulary, simply because it is an easy and convenient way of saying the action which is not X (where X is the pertinent or desired action).

<sup>27</sup> Both remarks, of course, are situated in a context which both the father and the student/daughter knows. When the father says (i), he implies that his daughter is watching too much television, etc. Likewise, when the father says (ii), he implies that playing games and watching television is wrong because it detracts from his daughter's studies. This does not undermine the argument that explicitly stating the wrong actions involved in a wrong helps us to better understand their wrongness and helps us to correct our incorrect behaviour.

what wrong behaviour counters her studies and will likely (at least for a while) desist from playing games and watching television.

Therefore, speaking of a wrong (neglect of studies) in terms of actions (playing games, etc.), instead of inaction (lack of studying), yields a clearer conception of what is being done wrong in terms of studying. Likewise, in speaking of complacency, it might be more fruitful to define complacency as performing certain wrong actions, as opposed to *not* doing certain correct actions.<sup>28</sup> For example, complacency about climate change is when you buy and drive a car that is fuel-inefficient, buy unnecessary imported goods, and travel by air (with all other requirements for complacency being met). The aforementioned is an example of complacency defined as an action. On the contrary, one can speak of complacency about climate change as not recycling enough, or not buying eco-friendly enough. This is defining complacency in terms of a lack of action. One can recycle more, and buy more ‘green’ products as a response to the latter account of complacency, but the former account gives one a clearer picture of which actions blatantly run against one’s concern about climate change. A more action-oriented definition of complacency might hence look as follows:

Complacency about some moral or amoral wrong, entails that one (a person or group) be aware of, and concerned with, the above wrong, but evaluates oneself as ~~not participating in, nor exacerbating the above moral or amoral wrong~~ *performing the relevant and correct actions to oppose the moral or amoral wrong. Or, put differently, evaluating themselves as doing enough to oppose the wrong.* This evaluation of one’s performance pertaining to the known (a)moral wrong, is made in an epistemically irresponsible way. *The aforementioned requirements and the accompanying epistemic process results in inappropriate or deleterious actions with regards to the abovementioned wrong.* Moreover, complacency is accompanied by an excess of (self-) satisfaction.

In addition to misconstruing complacency as a lack of action, Kawall’s definition has one final shortcoming. Kawall’s definition of complacency assumes an autonomous agent, unaffected by external constraints or influences. Kawall does not consider that the agent’s

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<sup>28</sup> Put differently, suppose there is an issue, namely X. Actions A are the right actions pertaining to X, while actions B are wrong actions pertaining to X.

Statement (i) refers to not-A ( $\sim A$ ).

Statement (ii) refers to B.

It is preferable in the case of complacency (for clearer understanding) to speak of X in terms of B, than in terms of  $\sim A$ .

behaviour may be affected by the larger group of people or the society in which he finds himself. Michael Doan (2014:644), the most recent author to have written about complacency, perhaps sums this critique up the best: “[Kawall] depict[s] adult humans as fully ‘rational,’ autonomous agents existing prior to or outside of interpersonal and institutional contexts characterized by unequal relations of power and influence.”

That is to say, Kawall interprets complacency as something for which the autonomous agent is wholly responsible. Additionally, if one interprets complacency in this way, one places too much of an onus on the individual agent to overcome complacency on his or her own. In response and in contrast to Kawall, Doan (2014:643-4) defines complacency as a pattern of behaviour in which individuals are “...caught up in...” That is to say, the individual internalises the prevalent behaviour of “settled expectations of self-sufficiency”, and consequently such a person cannot be held epistemically responsible for their seemingly complacent behaviour (Doan 2014:636). Doan (2014:637-8) suggests that vices such as complacency can consequently only be combatted by political agency<sup>29</sup> or collective action known as “public ethics.”

Doan’s (2014:636) focus, in other words, is more on the “...relational dynamics and structural processes that foster, sustain, and enforce [complacency]”. A person is seen as being “in the grips of” complacency “... when the ways she has been constituted as a moral agent prevent her from inquiring into, understanding, and responding well to a range of complex ecological and social problems” (Doan 2014:636). Although Doan’s is correct in observing that Kawall should not exclude the role of societal structures in shaping our behaviour, Doan responds in the extreme and commits the opposite mistake from Kawall. The individual is completely subsumed under the group and social structures and becomes, in a sense, helpless and without responsibility.

Neither Doan nor Kawall’s expositions of complacency are therefore adequate pertaining to the individual-societal structure relationship. A more balanced account of complacency is necessary in which both the actions of the rational individual agent and societal or structural influences and constraints are taken into account, without giving precedence to either the agent or the structure. Such an account of the individual-structure relationship component with regards to complacency will be provided in chapter five of this thesis.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, public education and political activism (as opposed to just curbing one’s personal contributions to climate change) (Doan 2014:637).

Kawall and Doan further have in common that they both describe complacency as inaction. Doan (2014:634-5, 645) explicitly refers to motivational vices – among them, complacency – as forms of inaction. In short, both these authors’ accounts are insufficient accounts of complacency, because they do not realise that inaction is a form of action, and in addition commit the error of making complacency out as something for which an agent is either wholly autonomously responsible, or not responsible at all.

### **1.5.2. Secondary Philosophical Literature on Complacency: Complacency in Another Guise**

Although there are only three philosophers who have explicitly discussed complacency, other accounts of complacency exist. Such accounts do not directly set out to address or define complacency. Instead, these accounts either conflate complacency with some other vice (such as hypocrisy), or imply complacency by discussing a meta-vice (such as vices of inattention). In this section, I will only focus on one of each of the respective type of accounts.

#### ***Hypocrisy***

An account of complacency which conflates complacency with another vice, is by Béla Szabados and Eldon Soifer (2004) who wrote a book exploring the vice of hypocrisy. Although complacency and hypocrisy are normally viewed as different things, Szabados and Soifer (2004:260-3, 265-6) classify complacency as a type of self-deceptive hypocrisy.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, complacency is the assumption “...that all is well in one’s own moral house, in one’s own spiritual state. This sort of smug moral self-satisfaction deters and deflects the crucial tasks of self-examination and self-criticism [...]” Here then, self-satisfaction is a foreground phenomenon and is the cause of lack of self-examination.

Szabados and Soifer (2004:257, 266) argue that a necessary condition of hypocrisy is deception or culpable self-deception. And because complacency is defined by Szabados and Soifer (2004:266) as having a high self-regard, culpable self-deception is necessary to sustain this high regard of oneself. That is to say, culpable self-deception is used to perpetuate one’s complacency. The hypocritical complacent person, in other words, is hypocritical in the sense of not recognizing his shortcomings with regards to his own standards (266), or hypocritical in the sense of culpably deceiving himself in order to have a far more flattering conception of

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<sup>30</sup> Qualifying hypocrisy in this manner (to include other vices) is already problematic, since the moment one adds or removes a qualification from a definition (of hypocrisy), it changes in meaning and comes to define another vice (which is no longer just mere hypocrisy).



himself while not “...taking sufficiently seriously the demands that moral principles press on us” (262).

Some form of hypocrisy can thus be present in complacency. However, it is not the type of pure hypocrisy of which one typically thinks (deceiving someone other than oneself). One can indeed be purely hypocritical concurrently with being complacent, depending on what the complacent professes in front of other people. Recall that the complacent person believes (although culpably and wrongly) that the actions she is performing pertaining to some project are good enough. If she were to tell people “recycle!” (in relation to climate change) and she herself recycles, then she would not seem a hypocrite. However, if she were to tell people that “climate change is real: we have to drastically alter our lifestyles!”, and then drives a fuel-inefficient SUV (even though she recycles), she would appear a hypocrite in the eyes of others.<sup>31</sup>

To subsume complacency under hypocrisy, however, is not entirely justifiable. Nor are these two vices identical. As Kawall (2006:352) points out: hypocrisy according to Szabados and Soifer necessarily involves some sort of deception or culpable self-deception, but complacency does not have deception as a requirement (one’s beliefs about one’s actions can be formed in a sincere<sup>32</sup> way). The complacent person can certainly culpably self-deceive herself about her status or performance in relation to some matter. Yet, deception is only one of many epistemically irresponsible ways in which a person or a group can make the wrong inferences about their status or performance pertaining to some matter. Hypocrisy (as defined by Szabados and Soifer) can thus overlap with complacency. But complacency is still distinct from hypocrisy and should not be a mere sub-category of hypocrisy (Kawall 2006:353). Such a conflation, I believe, would result in confusion instead of enlightenment.

### ***Inattention***

A vice which can fuel or sustain an array of vices, in other words, a meta-vice, just like I have described complacency in the introduction of this chapter, is inattention. Kathie Jenni (2003:279) claims that inattention is probably the cause for the fact that we “...routinely betray moral commitments that, in some sense, we authentically embrace.” Or put differently: “failure

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<sup>31</sup> Under the condition, of course, that those to whom it was told, have a more accurate idea of what is necessary to combat climate change. For, if they believe that recycling is good enough, they will certainly not judge her as being a hypocrite.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in some cases of complacency the agent will deliberately avoid information that will show her actions as being detrimental to the environment (self-deception), while in other cases, she sincerely does not know that her actions are detrimental, because she is perhaps negligent and does not bother to investigate her actions.

to attend to morally important aspects of our lives” (279). Inattention does indeed sound like a description of complacency. More comprehensively, Jenni (279) writes that inattention refers to:

“... a range of moral failings, from simply not noticing the circumstances of our actions to more active and systematic strategies of self-deception; from an unmotivated lack of focus, which I call “simple” inattention, to purposeful and self-manipulative uses of selective attention and wilful ignorance.”

Complacency entails all or some of these failings (or epistemically culpable ways of ‘not knowing’ what is right) in varying degrees from case to case. Moreover, those who are complacent are aware of certain matters, such as climate change, and know that we must try to limit climate change. Yet they still act in such a way that increases the likelihood of extreme climate change. If one views such people from the outside, it indeed appears as if they are betraying their own moral commitments. Complacency, however, is about more than just outward appearances: complacency also has to do with the motive for *why* it is that people act against their own moral commitments. Inattention, especially since it is a meta-vice helps us to explore the motives or the inner workings of the complacent person.

Jenni (2003:280) uses the example of the norm of animal cruelty present in slaughtering practices to better illustrate the vice of inattention. Jenni points out that the public simply ignores the fact that their meat is obtained in a brutal and unethical way. If you saw your neighbour treating his animals in the same way as factory farmers and abattoirs treat the animals there, you would call the SPCA in an outrage. The main vice here is not “...sadism, cruelty, perversity, or greed...” (although it is present to an extent); it is that the general public does not pay sufficient attention, argues Jenni (280). Put differently, inattention as a meta-vice sustains or facilitates other vices such as cruelty, greed, and so forth. One can easily replace ‘inattention’ with ‘complacency’ in the above example.

In other words, one could say that the public is complacent about the rights of animals farmed for meat, even though some of these animals are as, or more intelligent/characterful/sensitive than, some of our pets. Jenni’s account of vices of inattention highlights a lot of elements of complacency: people that are complacent generally know of, or have a vague suspicion that they may be implied in some unethical practice by their day-to-day living. Yet, as Jenni (2003:281) says: “[i]t’s easier to maintain self-respect and peace of mind if we forget indications of trouble”. Such an attitude is typical of the complacent person who

knows that something is amiss, yet culpably (in this instance) ignores the trouble, deems himself as ‘alright’ and is self-satisfied, and continues doing the wrong things.

Even though complacency and inattention are closely connected, the one cannot be reduced to the other. At most, one can say that inattention, as a meta-vice, is *one of* the reasons for why complacency eventually takes place. Although Jenni’s account of inattention is helpful in leading us to a better understanding of complacency, complacency is more than just a vice of inattention.

### **1.5.3. Complacency and Related Vices or Phenomena**

From the previous sections it is clear that complacency overlaps with other related vices and phenomena. Either complacency is constituted, in some cases and in part, by another vice; or complacency may be construed in such a way that it is understood as constituting (in part) or sustaining other vices. Sometimes it is merely the case that it is hard to tell where complacency ends, and the other related vice/phenomenon starts; that is to say, complacency has some things in common with its related vices and phenomena. Or as McCall (1968:297) so colourfully expresses it, these related phenomena should not be treated like “unwelcome strangers”, but as “close relatives” of complacency. It is true that one can make analytic distinctions between complacency and apathy, akrasia, negligence, etc., as I will do. But, from a phenomenological perspective, (that is, a perspective that is fundamentally human, and where phenomena are meaningful objects that can be comprehended by consciousness) complacency might easily be experienced as, for example, akrasia, or negligence.

Moreover, and as I have written earlier, there is a semantic gap between the positive, older definition of complacency, and the negative, current use definition of complacency. ‘Positive’ and ‘negative’ should be understood here in the normative sense: according to early modern usage of complacency, it was good to be complacent since it meant one was satisfied and pleased; while according to late modern/current use of complacency, it is deemed morally bad to be complacent, since it implies one is unjustifiably satisfied or self-satisfied. This gap between complacency’s positive and negative meanings is bridged if one thinks of the various phenomena related to complacency as being part of a family. By exploring related phenomena, such as ‘apathy’, ‘akrasia’, ‘negligence’, ‘resignation,’ and ‘acquiescence,’ one gains an understanding of how complacency is interrelated with each of these phenomena, and in turn, how each of these phenomena are interrelated with each other. It is hence easier to trace how complacency has morphed from denoting something positive, to denoting something negative.

In this section I will thus explore the differences, but also the similarities between complacency and its related phenomena. To identify and select more of the various vices and phenomena that are related to complacency, I will draw on synonyms of ‘complacency.’ *Roget’s Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (2002) affords us an assortment of terms related to ‘complacency’: “*content*, contentment, ... satisfaction, ... self-satisfaction, smugness, *vanity*; ... quietism, tranquillity, resignation, ... ease of mind, trouble-free mind, easy mind, peace of mind, heart’s ease, ... comfort, sitting pretty; ... acquiescence, *consent*; ... submission. [...] *disinterested*; ... without desire, without passion.” In addition, the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1976) provides us with the following synonyms: “self-satisfied, smug, priggish [...] gloating superiority or a blameworthy lassitude and lack of drive [...] ill-based pride, self-deception, depreciation of others, indolent or blind inactivity, [...] self-righteousness.”

Concepts such as ‘content’, ‘contentment’, ‘satisfaction’, and ‘self-satisfaction’ and their relation to complacency have, of course, been addressed. The mark of the complacent group or person is their apparent contentment in the face of evil or some amoral wrong. However, satisfaction or contentment is merely a characteristic of complacency, and does not constitute complacency entire. If one further peruses the list of synonyms provided for complacency, satisfaction and contentment are also closely connected to ‘tranquillity’, ‘ease of mind’, and just generally being comfortable and untroubled. However, some element of the normatively negative sense of complacency is already present in some of these words. When one hears that someone is untroubled, or sitting pretty, or quietist, one cannot but wonder why such a person is so at ease.

If one looks up some of these words in a dictionary, one discovers that the calmness is usually achieved at the cost of something. ‘Quietism’ is usually obtained through being uninvolved in something or accepting things without wanting to change them, (*Funk & Wagnalls; Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* 1987), ‘contentment’ is obtained by ‘making do with something, rather than take further action’, while ‘satisfaction’ implies that one ‘settles’ or yields to a certain standard, without striving for more; it is fulfilment (*Encarta Concise English Dictionary* 2001). Or it could just be that the person is blissfully ‘stupid’ or foolhardy and therefore untroubled and contented. Ronell (2003:44) writes of stupidity that it “does not suffer from its own lack [...] stupidity can be situated in terms of its own satiety, as the experience of being full, fulfilled, accomplished: *le bonheur bête*.”

It is no wonder that these normatively positive words give way to a second set of words that are morally more equivocal, namely: ‘resignation,’ ‘acquiescence,’ ‘submission,’ ‘disinterested,’ ‘without desire, without passion,’ ‘lack of drive,’ ‘indolent or blind inactivity.’ Below, I will focus on four of these phenomena, namely ‘resignation,’ ‘acquiescence,’ ‘disinterestedness’ (which I will discuss under ‘apathy’ or ‘indifference’), and ‘sloth’ or ‘acedia’ (lack of drive or passion, and indolent or blind inactivity).

The third set of words – some of which I will also explore in detail below – have a definite negative connotation, while still being closely connected with the aforementioned set of words. These are ‘akrasia’ or ‘weakness of will’ (“blameworthy lassitude and lack of drive”), and ‘negligence.’ These two vices are further noteworthy, since they are perhaps the two vices that overlap the most with complacency. However, complacency lurks in all of these abovementioned phenomena (and *vice versa*). Whether one has to culpably deceive oneself about one’s participation in wrongs in order to be tranquil, or whether one is so at ease and satisfied that one does not care to investigate one’s participation in wrongs; both cases are instances of complacency, constituted in a complex way by a network of the abovementioned phenomena.

### ***Resignation***

The first phenomenon similar to complacency is resignation. Resignation is often associated with being discouraged, overwhelmed, and feeling debilitated. Just like the complacent person, the resigned person is aware of and values a certain moral or amoral project. And furthermore, like complacency, resignation results in the wrong type of actions (in relation to the aforementioned project). Finally, both the complacent and the resigned person form epistemically culpable beliefs that are incorrect (Kawall 2006:50).

However, different from the complacent who acts inappropriately *because* he (irresponsibly) believes he has done enough, the resigned irresponsibly follows (almost succumbs to) fallacious reasoning *because* they convince themselves that the task is too enormous, too difficult, or that some moral wrong is too evil and hopeless to overcome. As a result, those who are resigned come to the conclusion that their individual efforts do not help to solve a certain problem or correct a moral wrong, and therefore perform improper actions. Resignation thus entails that one deceives oneself about the extent of the difference one’s actions can make to some moral or amoral wrong, or that one is simply not capable of making a difference (especially when one thinks of structural or institutional injustices). Lastly, unlike

complacency, resignation is not accompanied by a feeling of satisfaction, but rather by a feeling of despondency (although despondency might also result in a type of satisfaction – a feeling that since one cannot do anything, why worry?). These are thus the analytic differences between complacency and resignation.

However, if one were to understand complacency and resignation as being part of the same ‘family’ so to speak, one would find that resignation is one of the ways in which one can be complacent. Consider the following case: a person is concerned with, and cares about a certain moral or amoral wrong, but culpably evaluates himself as doing enough to oppose this wrong (which is nothing, since he has culpably convinced himself that he cannot do anything); as a consequence he acts inappropriately regarding the above wrong, and feels more satisfied – than is justified – with his current behaviour.

In addition, the notion of resignation might alert us to different attitudes that agents might have about *what they can do* about the wrongs that they care about. Arguably, then, within different cases of complacency one will find different levels of resignation. Some persons will feel more hopeful about what they can do regarding a certain wrong, while others will feel more discouraged in relation to the wrong, and thus feel that they can only do a little. Persons who are more resigned will perhaps look more blameworthy to us, as their actions will probably be more discrepant in relation to the wrong that they care about (as opposed to the actions of their more hopeful counterparts). However, their hopeful (and thus less resigned) counterparts might, in fact, be guilty of a more blameworthy kind of complacency since they *feel that they can do more*, yet then fail to do so (because they have culpably convinced themselves, in some or other manner, that their actions are appropriate in relation to the wrong they care about).

### ***Acquiescence***

Acquiescence is typically associated with assenting to something, or just going along passively without really positively affirming or supporting that which one is going along with. In a sense, it’s a bit like resignation, since one ‘resigns’ oneself to how things are; yet, one assents reluctantly and not necessarily despairingly (Campbell 1985:335). There is thus a sense of still having a little bit of agency when one acquiesces; an element which is perhaps absent from resignation. Acquiescing to something could be due to one’s own (moral) weakness or to circumstances. Of the first instance, Campbell (1985:335) writes that the acquiescent person is someone who displays weakness, who has a lack of strength, passion or vigour to carry out his

activities. Of the second instance, Lachs (2005:97) writes that there are situations in which trying to act alternatively, or trying to improve, are irrational: “[u]nrequited love, unattainable ideals, the permanent absence of means, and hopes out of season, among many other conditions, leave room only for acquiescence....”

Of the first kind of acquiescence, where one acts out of moral weakness, one may ask *why* a person does not have the strength to make her own decisions or act independently from what she is acquiescing to. Such a lack of courage or vigour might be related to the above phenomenon, resignation: making one’s own choices may seem too difficult, or even overwhelming, and thus one acquiesces to what is easy. The lack of strength might even be ascribed to certain emotions, even depression (see ‘sloth’ below), or bad habits. Campbell (1985:336-7) writes that in cases of “misplaced acquiescence”, people are not trained or practiced in the ways of virtue.

Following from this, it is easy to see how complacency and acquiescence overlap. In both cases the acquiescent and the complacent care about some moral or amoral wrong or project.<sup>33</sup> Both the complacent and the acquiescent compromise. Lepora and Goodin (2013:18-9) describe compromise as an inner conflict, where you end up giving up something “of principled concern” to you (and in the process compromise yourself). The acquiescent might realise that he is compromising, while the complacent culpably manages to hide this fact from herself. That is to say, the acquiescent cares about some matter, but he knows that he is perhaps too weak-willed to act correctly regarding this matter, and so he goes along with what is easy. He does not necessarily feel satisfied, but he made the choice which is most comfortable, and in that sense, he is perhaps self-satisfied (or at least not uneasy). The complacent, on the other hand, perhaps also ‘goes along with what is easy’, but she culpably convinces herself that the easy-going route is the correct behaviour in relation to the wrong that she cares about, and so she feels satisfied. Complacency, however, still seems the more pernicious of the two, since those who are complacent are more thoroughly deceived about the status of their wrong actions.

However, there is a second kind of acquiescence which is not as morally blameworthy. In some cases, acquiescence might be a necessity, and will thus not be blameworthy (Lepora and Goodin 2013:143). For example, a person might care about the wrong of inhumanely killing animals for their meat, but he has a rare autoimmune disease which can only be cured

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<sup>33</sup> That the acquiescing person cares about the project, is evident if one considers that there is a reluctance, or a lack of passion or support for the wrong actions that he goes along with (that is, of course, if he acquiesces in deleterious actions).

if he eats a diet based on meat and a few selected vegetables and fruits (such as the Autoimmune Protocol diet). The person in question does not really want to follow this diet since he wishes to be a vegetarian (and he would still live if he does not follow the autoimmune diet, although miserably and not for as long as he would have, had he followed the diet). However, in the end he assents: he acquiesces to the diet out of a kind of necessity.<sup>34</sup>

Let us now frame the above case of acquiescence as complacency. The person in question cares about the wrong that consists of inhumanely killing animals for their meat. However, due to his illness, he has to eat meat (and by implication contributes to the wrong that is inhumanely killing animals). In order not to walk around with feelings of guilt, the person culpably convinces himself that he is not really contributing to the above problem, since his motives are pure. As such, he is able to achieve a state of contentedness (self-satisfaction). However, the person in question is still guilty of complacency since his actions do not correspond with what he cares about, and he has wrongly convinced himself that he does not contribute to the above wrong (he wrongly thinks that pure motives equals not contributing to a problem). However, the person in question is not guilty of a very blameworthy kind of complacency. “[Complacency, like many vices] is not an all-or-nothing matter [...] it is a graded moral notion” (Lepora and Goodin 2013:130). That is to say, this is a case of complacency, but not a very morally blameworthy case of complacency.

One thus approaches a conception of complacency that is not as prescriptively negative as the kind of complacency delineated in my working definition and Kawall’s definition of complacency. In fact, it seems as if the person in the above case needs to act complacently, so that he is not constantly in a state of anxiety or unease. The argument, in other words, seems to suggest that complacency is a necessary and normal part of modern-day survival. In other words, we need to be complacent, else we won’t be able to cope with the multifarious demands and stress that modern society places on our lives.

Someone who makes the above argument, is Robert Raup who provides a psychological account of complacency in his book titled “*Complacency: the Foundation of Human Behaviour*” (1930). This physicalist account of complacency defends the claim that complacency is a state of equilibrium (Raup 1930:xi), and that humans, as biological creatures, naturally strive and wish to be in this constant state of equilibrium (complacency).

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<sup>34</sup> If a person, however, acquiesces in inferior or inadequate actions with regard to some moral project, while knowing there are better alternatives, then his actions are morally reprehensible (Campbell 1985:335).



Complacency is moreover described as a habit or some sort of adjustment-mechanism of the human being which enables it to maintain constant equilibrium and a “...favourable relationship with its environment” (Raup 1930:1-2, 4). If this relationship is disturbed, we want it reinstated or resumed as soon as possible (Raup 1930:2, 7).

If one holds that complacency is normal human behaviour which is in fact good since it helps us to adjust to unfavourable circumstances, one must be careful to distinguish between amoral and moral good. Using ‘good’ in the amoral sense, one can speak of good coffee and good food. Complacency might be good or positive in this sense, since it is accompanied by ease-of-mind and self-satisfaction. However, complacency is not morally good. In addition, that which is the norm is not necessarily morally sanctioned. Complacency is therefore a positive or good phenomenon in a very restricted sense, namely being good in that it is pleasurable, comforting, and lets one go about one’s daily life in a worry-free fashion.<sup>35</sup>

#### ***[Aside] Complacency and Complaisance***

Yet, there remains another approach that can be taken to illustrate that complacency might have a positive meaning in the sense of being good in the moral way. This approach is to look at word closely related to ‘complacency,’ namely ‘complaisance.’ ‘Complaisance,’ adopted from the French language, means “the action or habit of making oneself agreeable; [the] desire and care to please; compliance with, or deference to, the wishes of others”, or to have a ready disposition to please (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 1989; *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* 1976). It is argued that ‘complacence’ and ‘complaisance,’ in addition to being homophones and sharing the same Latin root (*complacēre*: to be pleased or satisfied), were frequently confused in their spelling (Osland 2000:493). The meaning of ‘complaisance’ hence contaminated the meaning of complacence (and *vice versa*) (Osland 2000:493).

Complacency and complaisance are indeed similar in the sense that both entail that in practice, one trivializes one’s actual judgement or evaluation (about a matter about which one cares). However, in the case of complaisance, one does so in order to accommodate others, and in the case of complacency, one does so in order to decrease one’s ethical burden. For example, a person might come to the conclusion that it is immoral to kill animals and eat their meat.

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<sup>35</sup> Consider, for example, the word ‘complacency’s antonyms: dissatisfaction; concern; interest; discontentment; discomfort; disgruntlement; displeasure; pain; disapprobation; cold comfort; not what one expected; disappointment; soreness; irritation; uneasiness; disquiet; worry; strain; stress; tension; restlessness; unrest; agitation (*Rogert’s Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* 2002); egoless; humble; modest; uncomplacent (*Merriam-Webster’s Thesaurus*). It is indeed uncomfortable to *not* be complacent.

However, aware of how antagonistic and unsociable his friends might experience his newfound conviction, he decides to suppress his concern about the above moral wrong in order to please his friends and fit in with societal norms. In this case the person in question is acting complaisantly, since he wishes to remain pleasing to those around him. He does not wish to soothe his conscience by convincing himself that he is indeed acting appropriately, as the complacent would do.

There is another way in which complacency can easily look like complaisance (Osland 2000:493). To generalise, (non-complacent) people who are concerned with issues such as climate change, global justice, inhumane working conditions, and the mistreatment of animals bred for meat, are generally thought of as being annoying. Not only do they promulgate (often) distressing information to the public, they make others feel guilty, and moreover, uncomfortable, due to their apparent fanaticism about a cause. The non-complacent person might appear a zealot to the public: he is not pleasing to be around, because he challenges current norms. If a person is complacent and rests easy, however, he is part of the norm, the familiar, and thus quite agreeable to be around. In this sense he therefore becomes complaisant.

In conclusion, the same actions that make one a pleasant social agent and a compliant friend might potentially make place for complacency if one *additionally* convinces oneself that one's actions are indeed not 'so bad' and that one is not actually acting in contrast with what one cares about. Thus, even if one's motives are initially noble (trying to be pleasing to others), one will not be exempt from being deemed blameworthy of complacency if one meets all the so-called 'requirements' of my working definition of complacency.

### ***Apathy and Indifference***

Next, we consider apathy or indifference. Complacency and apathy also share a lot of common ground, because the action component of both appears the same. In other words, the complacent group or person's actions are very similar, if not identical to those of the apathetic. For example, both the complacent and the apathetic (while both are aware of the fact that texting on a cellular device while driving is dangerous), will still continue texting while driving in their cars. The difference, however, between apathy and complacency lies in the motivation, or the reason for performing a certain action.

The complacent person has irresponsibly convinced herself that she is not a hazard on the road while she types a message on her mobile phone. While driving, she argues, she only texts when there is a lull in traffic, or at traffic stops. She feels satisfied that she is not part of

the problem. The apathetic person, on the other hand, has heard that it is dangerous to text and drive, but simply does not care. The apathetic knows he is wrong in texting and driving, but is indifferent to this wrong and simply proceeds as usual.

Kawall (2006:349-350) provides a more detailed analysis of how complacency differs from apathy. First, the complacent person is concerned with some moral (or amoral) wrong and wishes to make a difference, while the apathetic person knows about this moral (or amoral) wrong, but “...fails to value or concern herself with the good or project at all” (Kawall 2006:39). Second, the complacent person feels satisfaction because she feels she has done enough to oppose some moral or amoral wrong, whereas the apathetic person feels nothing of the sort, since she does not care. Kawall (2006:350) concludes by saying that apathy can “...be construed as a limiting case of complacency”.

Apathy might also ‘feed into’ complacency. For example, a person might become apathetic towards the process of honestly and continuously appraising her actions. In such a way, then, her apathy might lead towards and sustain complacency. It might also be the case that, even though a person initially cares a lot about some moral or amoral wrong, a person’s enthusiasm or care about the wrong in question fades. Here, the line between complacency and apathy becomes blurred: it would be tricky to determine whether a person’s care for a specific wrong has merely moved into the background, or whether the person has become veritably apathetic towards the wrong in question.

### ***Sloth or Acedia***

Sloth (or its Latin form, Acedia) is one of those vices which has a long history (it originated in the fourth century), and consequently also has many interpretations (Courtney 1986:671). Sloth is sometimes associated with the “listlessness induced by the monotony of life [...] or by protracted struggle against temptation”, or associated with St. Thomas’s “aversion to spiritual good” (accompanied by bodily exertion to attain this good) or an opposition to *caritas* (love, specifically agape) (Courtney 1986:671-2). Other times, sloth is linked with Dante’s “‘neutrals’ [who are] unworthy even of hell because of their aimless and uncommitted lives” (Colón 2011:69). Sloth is even related to self-indulgence: it is wrong to indulge in refined and luxurious practices, such as wearing soft clothes, taking too many baths, or neglecting to provide for the poor (Howard 1986:759-760). Cook<sup>36</sup> (2013:54) writes that

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<sup>36</sup> The author (cook) does not capitalize her names.

today we have the zombie as an analogy of sloth (and related cultural phenomena such as mindless consumerism).

Sloth or *acedia* is characterized not by active evil-doing, but by a “fundamental lack of moral investment in life” (Colón 2011:69). This is very reminiscent of how some authors describe complacency. A sloth does not try to show care towards moral issues and other people, instead, he is contented to do that which requires minimal effort. The sloth does not initiate good actions, he is languid and sluggish, even despairing, suicidal and without hope (Howard 1986:760-1). (Sloth can thus be a type of resignation). Today, we think of sloth mainly as a type of laziness or depression (Howard 1986:760; Crislip 2005:144). The sloth does not fulfil his basic duties towards others: he fails to be on time, does not keep his promises, and can generally not be counted on.

Sloth informs complacency by reminding us that human beings are subject to weariness. That is to say, people might sometimes choose complacent behaviour, since they do not have the energy or capacity to do otherwise. Although our brief foray into the phenomenon of acquiescence has led us to more or less the same insight, ‘sloth’ is especially linked with *bodily* weariness. In some cases of complacency, it might be that a person is physiologically hindered from feeling that she can act otherwise (which might lead to her culpably and wrongly convincing herself that her actions are adequate in relation to the wrong that she cares about).<sup>37</sup> In addition, sloth draws our attention to the tedium of everyday life. One might become trapped in certain social patterns or rituals that preserve and maintain complacent action.

For example, suppose a person cares about eating healthily. However, she only cuts out soft drinks, while the rest of her unhealthy diet is still intact (perhaps cookies, chocolates, chips). Her actions are thus in discord with what she cares about. One could say she is a bit of a sloth: she is not particularly energetic about working towards the good (a healthy diet) and she seems to indulge herself through her minimal effort. Moreover, let us suppose she convinces herself that she is indeed acting in accordance with what she cares about. She feels satisfied that she is now eating healthily.

However, perhaps she lives the kind of lifestyle in the kind of environment which encourages unhealthy eating. She is also ‘addicted’ (if one may use the word so liberally) to

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<sup>37</sup> One would have to evaluate each case of complacency individually to see whether a person is wilfully fooling himself about not having the capacity to act, or whether he veritably is not instilled with a sense of being capable to act in line with what he cares about.

sugar and fatty foods. Her routines, her environment, and her bodily cravings thus make it wearisome for her to pursue a healthy diet. If one takes these factors in mind, one might find that she is perhaps not as blameworthy of complacency as initially thought. Thus sloth, which appears as a kind of laziness, harbours some clues about what might encourage slothfulness, and ultimately complacency.

### *Weakness of Will or Akrasia*

Another phenomenon related to complacency is that of being weak-willed (also known by the Greek term ‘akrasia’).<sup>38</sup> Weakness of will is generally defined as having reached conclusions about one’s moral duties, “...but then fail[ing] to act on these conclusions” (Guttenplan 1995:608). Just like complacency, akrasia also results in undesirable actions. However, different from the complacent, the weak-willed is more honest about his actions and is aware that his actions do not align with his beliefs or judgments, and will thus feel unsatisfied and guilty (Kawall 2006:350). The complacent person, on the other hand, irresponsibly believes that her actions conform to her beliefs (or concerns) about some wrong, and hence feels satisfied.

However, despite the analytic distinctions between complacency and akrasia, they coincide to such a large degree that it is worthwhile to investigate akrasia a little more, in the hopes that it will tell us more about complacency. Akrasia is often described as a lack of self-control (Berkich 2007:60): the akratic person does not seem to have a strong enough will to overcome passions or habits which prevent him from doing his duties (or to simply do what he believes he should do). However, this lack of control does not imply that the akratic was forced to act against his better judgment; the akratic still acts freely (Mele 2009:392). Following this, the akratic person will, for example, arrive at the judgment that (A) exercise is good for one’s health and that one should therefore exercise. Yet, when he wakes up early in the morning to exercise, he finds that his bed is so comfortable, that he ends up not performing the actions consistent with (A). When the akratic finally gets up and starts his day, he feels disappointment, even self-reproach, at the fact that he was not able to do that which he judged to be best.

The complacent also believes that (A) exercise is good for one’s health and that one should exercise. But, as the complacent wakes up and decides not to go jogging, she, for

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<sup>38</sup> Some philosophers argue that weakness of will should further be distinguished from akrasia (Berkich 2007:59-60; Mele 2009:391). However, this is beyond the scope of this thesis, and consequently the terms ‘weakness of will’ and ‘akrasia’ will be used interchangeably with the assumption that both denote the same type of phenomenon (which can be contrasted with complacency).

example, convinces herself that she gets enough exercise by walking to the train station every day, that she moves around her workplace often enough, and that cleaning one's house is enough of a workout. She consequently feels satisfied, because she believes (irresponsibly) that she is acting consistent with (A). Both the complacent and the akratic therefore subscribe to (A), and both their actions are inconsistent with (A), but their motivations for not performing the correct actions differ, as was outlined above. However, the complacent person largely follows an akratic pattern of behaviour: she too, is weak-willed and unable to act on her better judgement, but she does not acknowledge this. A person who is weak-willed might thus justify her actions to herself, and so easily become complacent.

In addition to being described as a lack of control over one's actions, akrasia can also be thought of as a lack of control over one's self. Gold (2013:48-66) argues that akrasia is a lack of identification with the self over time. In other words, the person that I am now – who does not act in accordance with what she judges best – fails to take into account the future me (or even the current me who judges what is best). In other words, the I-now fails to consider the other I, the future I. As such, the akratic is divided within him – or herself. The complacent person is similarly divided: because her actions do not correspond with what she cares for, she seems to undermine her very self. In the process, because the self is so divided, *self*-evaluation becomes more difficult.

Furthermore, akrasia is sometimes the reason for a person's complacency, in the sense that a person who is unable to control her thoughts, or her epistemic processes, is akratic (Mele 1985:170). If one is unable to keep one's imagination in check so that one does not deliberate on desires that are contrary to what one values, if one is not able to stay open-minded, or if one fails to evaluate one's actions pertaining to what one cares about, one is akratic. The premises are, of course, that one judges it best not to think about things that will lead one away from one's values, not to become narrow-minded, and not to fail at accurately evaluating one's actions with regards to what one cares about. The complacent person, in turn, is the kind of person who fails dismally at exercising this kind of epistemic care. In this sense, one can thus say that some (if not most, since most people would arguably ascribe to the value of epistemic control) cases of complacency have akrasia as their underlying cause.

## *Negligence*

Negligence is perhaps the most perplexing of all the vices related to complacency, since the word ‘negligence’ is often used to explain, or talk about complacency.<sup>39</sup> Negligence is certainly present in complacency;<sup>40</sup> however, negligence should not be confused with complacency. Negligence is broadly defined as “...the failure to exercise the care of an ordinarily prudent and careful [hu]man...” (Posner 1972:29). Milo (1984:84) writes that moral negligence is “a culpable failure to take those precautions necessary to assure oneself, before acting, that what one proposes to do is not in violation of one’s moral principles.” More specifically negligence occurs “...when an agent violates a moral norm, and is blameworthy for violating it, despite the fact that she is not, at the time of the violation, aware that she is violating it” (Sverdlik 1993:137).

The negligent person is therefore unaware of performing a wrong at the time of performing the wrong. In this sense, then, the complacent and the negligent person are the same. Both perform wrong actions. However, in some cases of complacency where the agent deliberately deceives herself, the complacent person is more blameworthy for her wrong actions than a negligent person who is simply unaware, in the sense of not consciously thinking,<sup>41</sup> of the inappropriateness of his actions at the time of performing them.<sup>42</sup> There are, of course, also cases of complacency where negligence plays a role, but more about this later. Sverdlik (1993:137) corroborates this notion by writing that those “...who negligently cause harm...” are “...less blameworthy than those who, say, intentionally cause it, but we do regard them as somewhat blameworthy.”

Besides the fact that complacency is often more intentional, and therefore often more blameworthy than negligence, there is another fundamental difference between the two. While the complacent is aware of, and cares about, some amoral or moral wrong – and moreover, culpably evaluate their own actions as being appropriate in relation to the aforementioned wrongs – the negligent person simply does not reach the point (during acting) at which he is conscious of some moral or amoral wrong to begin with (and therefore cannot be concerned with, and evaluate his current actions in relation to, this wrong). That is to say, the negligent

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<sup>39</sup> See for example Kawall (2006:353): “Complacency, with its easy self-satisfaction and lack of effort constitutes a paradigmatic case of vicious negligence and inadequate concern for one’s projects and achievements.”

<sup>40</sup> Negligence can, for example, be present in the moment that the complacent person evaluates her own actions.

<sup>41</sup> Yet, if the negligent person had thought about his acts beforehand, he might have realised that his acts might be harmful or dangerous.

<sup>42</sup> Negligence can be contrasted with recklessness for clarity’s sake: the reckless person is one who knows at the time of performing an action (is conscious of the fact), that it is a wrong or harmful action (Brady 1996:325).

does not engage in the epistemic process that the complacent follows. The negligent person's actions are unintentional, and thus also cannot be accompanied by a feeling of self-satisfaction.

Yet, like most of the other vices and phenomena above, negligence can feed into complacency. Even though negligence is not typically associated with a thought process (it often happens unthinkingly), there are cases where the agent's epistemic irresponsibility takes the form of negligence. That is to say, one might find a case of complacency where the agent does not deceive himself about his (inappropriate) behaviour (in relation to the wrong about which he cares). In other words, the agent is not actively avoiding information that might reveal the inadequacy of his actions. Instead, the agent, by chance, does not come across the necessary information that will help him to realise that he is acting inappropriately in relation to the wrong in question. As such, he seems quite innocent. However, according to the above definitions of negligence, the agent is still responsible to *seek* information in order to make doubly sure that his actions match what he values. If one takes negligence into account when one evaluates cases of complacency, one might find that the agents involved are more or less blameworthy than initially thought.

In conclusion, by looking at complacency's family members, one finds that one understands more about complacency as a phenomenon. Complacency's relatives reveal the many ways in which people can be complacent. In addition, complacency's related vices and phenomena alert us to the fact that there are more and less blameworthy instances of complacency.

## 1.6. Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, in this chapter my aim was to arrive at a working philosophical definition of complacency, in order to address the lack of philosophical literature on complacency and in order to obtain a starting place from where to refine our understanding of complacency on the philosophical level. I started this chapter by exploring how we use the word 'complacency' and understand the phenomenon of complacency today. This exploration of the common use and understanding of complacency was done by consulting both mass media use of the word 'complacency,' and dictionary definitions of complacency.

By doing so, I have discovered that 'complacency' denotes something negative, but that this negative meaning of the word is a recent phenomenon. Before approximately 1880 the word 'complacency' denoted something good and positive. In other words, the meaning of the word 'complacency' has recently changed. Moreover, not only has the meaning of the word



‘complacency’ changed, but the vice that we understand as complacency (today) has also changed, since people have re-appropriated an already existing word to redescribe what they saw as the phenomenon of complacency. The new use of the word ‘complacency’, and the fact that complacency as a phenomenon has changed were posited as possible reasons for why philosophers did not pay attention to complacency.

Next, I considered and evaluated the few philosophical definitions of complacency that are indeed available. From the best of these accounts of complacency, I identified a few shortcomings: complacency is described as a clear-cut, linear, causal pattern, where one thought or action follows on the next; complacency is either described as being overly voluntaristic or overly determined; complacency is defined as inaction; very little mention is made of the constraints (either bodily, structural or societal), motives, and reasons involved in instances of complacency, and no mention is made of more and less blameworthy cases of complacency.

Finally, in order to show that complacency is not as straight-forward and easily demarcated as is purported by other authors (and perhaps even my own working definition), I compared complacency with related vices and phenomena. By doing so, it emerged that complacency is sometimes so interconnected with related vices and phenomena that it is more correct to think of complacency and its related vices and phenomena as being part of a family, than as markedly distinct phenomena. In addition, by comparing complacency with its related phenomena, the essential aspects of complacency that I have identified and put into a working analytical definition of complacency were put to the test and thus put into relief. Lastly, it was found that there are more and less morally blameworthy cases of complacency. Each case of complacency, as such, warrants its own evaluation.

In conclusion, one can say that chapter one shows us some of the merits and limitations of linguistic analysis. First, I have brought to light those essential characteristics of complacency that seem to be implied in the everyday use of the word ‘complacency’; I have thus moved into the philosophical level. As such, linguistic analysis gives us clarity through delimitation and disambiguation. But then, by the end of the chapter, one reaches the limits of analysis: by comparing complacency to its related phenomena, one sees that complacency overlaps with other phenomena to such an extent that it seems wise to speak of family resemblances. In the next section, I will thus look at what lies beyond the limits of an analytic definition of complacency.

## Chapter 2

### From Linguistic Analysis to Action Theory

“It is first of all and always in language that all ontic or ontological understanding arrives at its expression” (Ricoeur [1969] 1974c:11).

#### 2.1. Introduction

In chapter one, I have sketched out a working analytical definition of complacency by looking at the way in which the word ‘complacency’ is used in day-to-day language. Complacency is defined as having a concern for a moral or amoral wrong and evaluating oneself as doing the right things with regards to rectifying the wrong in question. However, this evaluation is done in an epistemically irresponsible way. Hence, due to one’s blameworthy and incorrect evaluation, one is actually acting in an inappropriate way pertaining to the said wrong, and thus contributing to the wrong. Complacency, finally, is characterised by self-satisfaction.

The above working definition of complacency seems clear-cut and neat. It might be tempting to say that it captures what complacency is, and that there is consequently not much more to grasp about this phenomenon. However, within this very working definition of complacency one already detects that there is some kind of surplus or overflow: something that escapes this definition that I have derived through linguistic analysis.

The first hint that there is more to complacency than what is captured in an analytic definition thereof, is found in the examples of cases of complacency that I have consulted both to draw up an analytic definition of complacency, and to illustrate complacency. Some of these examples used to illustrate complacency are very flat and simplistic. Contrary to this, we know that life is seldom so simple: real cases of complacency are far more complex and ambiguous.

From whence this complexity? Here one finds the second hint: Complacency is closely connected to, and overlaps with, other similar vices to such an extent that it is often difficult to determine where complacency ends and something like *akrasia*, for example, starts. Complacency is not a phenomenon that can be demarcated once and for all: one does not look at a person’s actions, tick off the relevant criteria, and then declare them complacent. Complacency’s shifting boundaries can be attributed to the ambiguity of actions and behaviour playing out in real life, and to the contingency inherent in drawing up an analytical definition of complacency (for example, where to draw the line between one constituent of complacency

and another, or which constituents to group together under one term, or what to include or leave out of such a definition, and so on).

A third hint that there is more to complacency than what is reflected in an analytic definition thereof, is detected when looking at some explicit and implied notions undergirding an analytic definition of complacency. I have argued in the previous chapter that *motivation* or a person's *intention* plays an important part in determining whether a person might be deemed complacent or not. In addition, I have mentioned the importance of *culpability* or *responsibility* (during the process of self-evaluation) in determining whether a person is complacent or not. These notions, and ones similar to them, namely 'intention,' 'purpose,' 'motive,' 'reason for acting,' 'desire,' 'preference,' 'choice,' 'responsibility,' and 'agent,' all form part of the "vocabulary of action" (Ricoeur 1977:5; [2013] 2016:178).

Inferring from the above, one can therefore say that an analytic definition of complacency is bursting at the seams: it refers to human experience in all its ambiguity, it specifically refers to action and to agents. But how exactly does an analytic definition do so? In other words, what is the relationship between an analytic or conceptual definition of complacency – as found in chapter one – and action, or action theory – which will be the exclusive subject matter of chapters three to five?

To work out or understand this relationship between language (and finally linguistic analysis) and action (theory), I will turn primarily, and perhaps prematurely, to Paul Ricoeur. In the introduction to this thesis I have written that although Ricoeur features prominently in this work, this is not a study of Ricoeurian philosophy, but ultimately of action theory. I am by no means a Ricoeurian scholar who can claim to have a thorough grasp on Ricoeur's multiple works and the vast scholarship surrounding his work. My reason<sup>43</sup> for consulting Ricoeur's

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<sup>43</sup> Another reason for Ricoeur's widespread presence in my thesis (that I will unwillingly admit to – because to admit this, is to admit my initial ignorance), is that my thesis unfolded like a crime novel: it starts with the crime scene and then progresses both forwards and backwards in time as one unravels the events leading up to the crime through investigation. The crime scene is my action theoretical approach to complacency: this is the centre or the heart of my thesis. But before I could think of complacency as action, I first had to define what I meant with complacency: hence my journey to define complacency analytically in chapter one of this thesis. Chapter one was thus opening an investigation of the crime scene and collecting evidence. However, one needs to link the evidence with the crime scene in a meaningful way. This is where we are now: linking the analytical approach to the action theory. And because of how my thesis initially unfolded, with the goal of a Ricoeurian- and Giddensian-based action theory first, I noticed – during my reading of Ricoeur's action theoretical works – that Ricoeur has a long history of engaging with the linguistic analytic tradition during the construction of his action theory. Thus, when I saw the need to link action theory to linguistic analysis, I was led to reinvestigate parts of his action theory. For these reasons then, and for the sake of continuity throughout my thesis, did I consult Ricoeur here and in chapter one (although, in chapter one I merely draw on Ricoeur's method as an example), in addition to his action theory in chapters three and four of this thesis.

work at this point in my thesis, (in addition to his action theory) is for the sake of continuity or cohesiveness: by drawing on Ricoeur's work on linguistic analysis in relation to action, I am not adding another set of jargon to a thesis that is already filled with specialized terminology. In addition, Ricoeur's action theory progresses and grows (in part) through his interactions with English analytic philosophy. Since Ricoeur's action theory entails such a logical and almost natural progression from analysis to action theory, it seems particularly fitting for me to consult Ricoeur's insights in relation to the matter of how linguistic analysis relates to action theory.

Ricoeur's double heritage of philosophy and linguistics (Zielinska 2010:613) and the fact that he does not separate thought from action, is demonstrated by his view that saying or thinking is already a form of doing ([Ricoeur in dialogue with] Abel 2012b). Moreover, Ricoeur (2016:176) argues that language makes meaningful action possible, and that everyday language further acts as a kind of archive or depository of references to meaningful action (Ricoeur 1977:vii). The way we speak about action already reveals a great deal about action: the grammar of natural languages reveals something about the grammar of action. Finally, Ricoeur ([1990] 1992:16-7) argues that linguistic analysis is a necessary "detour" on the way to understanding the reflexive self or agent who acts (where this self or agent is central to the action theories that I will delineate later).

In this chapter, I will outline the above arguments and, in the process, demonstrate that linguistic analysis (of complacency) is not only helpful in the sense that it provides us with conceptual clarity, but also that a detour through linguistic analysis is essential in order to understand action and the agent. Thus, I will show that while my analytic definition of (complacent) action points towards action and the agent, it simultaneously reduces complacency to a mere empirical fact, conceptualized as distinct from an agent who executes this act and distinct from a society in which it takes place. That is to say, complacency is described more as a static and isolated event than an act which is carried out in time by embodied agents who are acting in particular circumstances in conjunction and in dialogue with others, with unique motives and reasons for acting as they do. It is true that there is a subject or subjects implied in an analytical definition of complacency; but these abstract subjects are not yet agents or selves who act self-reflexively. For this reason, it is necessary to supplement linguistic analysis with action theory: to pass through linguistic analysis, but also to go beyond it, enriched by this passing-through.

Finally, since I merely wish to link linguistic analysis (of complacency) and action theory (of complacent action) in this midway chapter, I am not going to provide a detailed account of action at this stage of my work. Such an exposition (or expositions) of action theory will be the content of chapters three, four, and five.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the term ‘action’ should be taken in its broadest sense, namely, action is actualized presence (Ricoeur 1966:205). In other words, action always implies an embodied agent who has the ability to form an intention to do x, and provide reasons for doing x (Giddens 1993:5; Ricoeur 1966:207). Action is to fulfil an empty intention in the object world: action is the possible made real, it is to bring about change or externalize action in the world (Giddens 1984:14-5; Ricoeur 1991:153). Finally, action should be understood as being social (Giddens 1984:43; 1993:25; Ricoeur [2013] 2016:176). That is, action is realised amongst other agents and is therefore informed or influenced by other agents and, in turn, affects other agents.

Below I will thus explore the connections between analysis and action, in order to arrive at the insight that an analytical definition of complacency and an action theoretical approach to complacency are in a dialectical relationship: one cannot have one without the other. I will look at two areas where linguistic analysis and action theory intersect, namely (1) language enables meaningful action, since language is the principal medium through which we understand and shape our actions (Ricoeur 2016:183), and (2) analysis is a necessary correlate to an understanding of the self-reflexive agent. I will thus follow a trajectory that starts from ‘what?’ (‘what is complacency?’ as described via analysis), and culminates in ‘who?’ (‘who is acting complacently?’ as captured in action theory). Put differently, this chapter will serve as an abridgement between complacency as concept and an eventual understanding of complacency as complacent action.

## **2.2. Intersection One: Language as a Depository of the Grammar of Action**

Ordinary language tells us something about action. The way in which people talk about action or use the vocabulary of action in their day-to-day lives, reveals that they understand action as something a person does, as opposed to something that is an event or that just happens,<sup>44</sup> such as a flower budding or thunder rumbling (Ricoeur 1977:7; 2016:178). In other

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<sup>44</sup> We use different language to speak of events or movements *caused* (in the Humean sense where a specific antecedent can be identified apart from the effect) by, for example, impersonal natural mechanisms (Ricoeur 1977:7, 22-3).

words, the grammar of language reflects the ‘grammar’, so to speak, of action. In this section I will thus outline Ricoeur’s argument to show that there is an organic tie between language and action (Dosse 2001:607), and thus an inherent link between linguistic analysis and action theory.

As a way to connect linguistic analysis with action theory, let us first look at their relationship to each other. To begin with, lived experience or action will always be primary in the relationship between analytic philosophy and action theory;<sup>45</sup> however, it remains that the experience of action is neither immediate nor beyond words: action theorists<sup>46</sup> miss their vocation if they try to describe action in pure abstraction from the fact that action is executed (and perceived) as meaningful (Ricoeur 1977:vii, 114-5; 2015:5). And since this meaningfulness is articulated only insofar as it is brought to language, it is in the discourse of action that the structures of human action are described. Thompson (1981:5-6) writes that actualized action cannot be understood “directly, in the fullness of experience, but can be approached only through the language in which that experience is expressed.”

In short, Ricoeur (1977:vii, 65) holds, alongside analytical philosophers of the Oxford school, that ordinary language is the depository of expressions that preserve the essential ‘grammar’ of the practical field. This ‘grammar’ engages and binds anyone who wants to speak meaningfully about what she does or what other agents do (Ricoeur 1977:vii). Therefore, a person does not only act, but also says her action (Ricoeur 1977:5). It thus follows that linguistic analysis reveals something about action.

Furthermore, a person’s ‘saying’ of action does not unfold according to her own idiosyncratic rules;<sup>47</sup> in talking about action, a person refers<sup>47</sup> to the specific structures of human action (Ricoeur 1977:vii; 2015:5). These structures are the grammar of action. The aforementioned implies that the principal object of the philosophy of practical language (and

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<sup>45</sup> “Analysis always presupposes some prior grasp of the concepts it employs and the subject into which it inquires” (Malpas 1992:118).

<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur first took a phenomenological approach to his action theory in the 1950s when he did not yet realise the importance of interpretation in order to understand the meaning of action. Only later does Ricoeur amend his phenomenological approach with hermeneutics. But more about this in the next two chapters.

<sup>47</sup> That is to say, language, as a cultural process giving form to experience, does not exist in isolation in one person’s mind only; instead language is a structure “established at a social level as a function in terms of which people do things to be understood” (for example, classifying one’s action as being ‘courageous’, or ‘good’, and so forth) (Ricoeur 2016:181). Language, by facilitating communication, therefore enables the practice of constituting meaningful action. Since language is public, action’s signification or meaning will also be social and shared amongst members of a cultural community (Ricoeur 2016:181).

by extension, linguistic analysis of an action) is not the language itself, but about what this language speaks. Linguistic analysis is ultimately about meaningful action.

A discussion on the meaning of action would thus be incomplete if it ignored the ways in which people continually describe action as meaningful to themselves and to each other. According to Pellauer and Dauenhauer ([2002] 2016), Ricoeur holds that the task of philosophy is the “study of the ‘fullness of language’.” Let us now look at the fullness of the language of action<sup>48</sup> by analysing this kind of language on three levels: the level of the concepts involved in the description of the action, the level of propositions where action comes to express itself (speech acts, or language as action); and the level of arguments in which an action strategy is articulated (Ricoeur 1977:5).

### *Language Considered on the Conceptual Level*

On the level of concepts, Ricoeur (1977:5) singles out the following notions without which one cannot make sense of action as action: ‘intention,’ ‘purpose,’ ‘reason for action,’ ‘motive,’ ‘desire,’ ‘preference,’ ‘choice,’ ‘agent,’ ‘responsibility.’ These concepts, unlike empirical concepts, have a meaning content and a transcendental scope: their function is to open up the way to observation, explanation and understanding of a field of experience called action (Ricoeur 1977:5). We use these shared concepts to tell others what we do, why we do it, what drives us to act in certain ways, how and with what means we do it, and for what purpose we do it (Ricoeur 1977:5; Ricoeur 2016:179).

Agents thus draw on communal expressions of action in order to explain their actions to others. In other words, “[i]n invoking a motive, a speaker asks others to understand his or her intention, which is singular, in light of a class of dispositions, feelings, or maxims” that have the characteristic of ‘generality’ (Ricoeur 2016:179). In other words, in order for the agent’s action to be *meaningful*, the reasons for the action must belong to a general class of motives.<sup>49</sup> A reason for action makes it possible to explain the action, where ‘explain’ means

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<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur (2015:7) writes: “I venture to say: speech *of* action and not only speech *about* action. It is really the progressive revelation of the meaning of being and of human reality as will and as action which is the stake of this [Ricoeur’s] investigation which continues in and by speech. Would it not be the function of a philosophy of the will and of action to restore the dimension of an ontology where Being is really act and acting?”

<sup>49</sup> However, agents can, while using general classes to explain their singular actions, slightly depart from these classes (Ricoeur 2016:182). Agents, by digressing slightly from general typifications, in the process extend classes beyond their original scope (Ricoeur 2016:182). In other words, classification is in a feedback-loop with action. While general classifications give form or meaning to action, action also gives form and meaning to these classifications. Classifications are therefore not extrinsically superimposed upon action; instead action and classifications are in a dialectical relationship.

placing a singular action into a class of actions that have a more general characteristic.<sup>50</sup> In other words, it is first because agents are capable, through their everyday language, of ‘classifying’ their motives, that a philosophical classification – like my working analytical definition of complacency – can be drawn up.

In addition, this passage through linguistic expression provides the agent with the advantage of relying on objective forms (of speech) in which experience is organized (Ricoeur 1977:6). To say that language offers the agent objective forms of expression (of both action and speech), is merely to say that these forms offer themselves simultaneously to outside observation and to the contemplation of meaning (Ricoeur 1977:6). Language thus ‘objectifies’ experience to an extent, so that one is no longer caught up in a solipsistic world with no interaction. This ‘objectivity’ is also why one is able to draw up philosophical classifications. Therefore, instead of relying on personal intuition to determine the essences of lived experience (by drawing on individual, although pertinent examples), language allows us (both the agent and the philosopher) to codify action and experience through discourse.

### ***Language Considered on the Propositional Level***

Next, on the second level of the analysis of the language of action, Ricoeur (1977:7) reflects on the propositional form of statements of action, elaborated by the speech-act theories of authors such as Austin, Strawson and Searle. Speech acts, as the act of speaking or discourse, intersects with the philosophy of action in a unique way: while the above concepts of ‘intention,’ ‘reason for,’ ‘choice,’ and so on, are necessary to talk *about* action, speech-act theory has as its subject matter the propositional structure in which the above concepts are used (Ricoeur 1977:8). Thompson (1981:12) writes: “[f]or words have meaning only in the nexus

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<sup>50</sup> Each action is thus under the force or influencing power of historical concepts, or their structuring capacity, while simultaneously being structured by singular situations (Dosse 2008:484). Yet, even though concepts are anchored in the field of experience and subsumes a multiplicity of meanings, this does not mean that the history of experience and language perfectly correspond to each other: language cannot exhaustively capture every essence and aspect of history (Dosse 2008:485). Action will always have ‘more’ than what can be expressed in language: Ricoeur (1966), one will see later, calls this the mystery of human willing and action, and this mystery can perhaps be best expressed or hinted at through metaphors. Dosse (2008:365) writes that by abolishing the obligatory relationship with the obvious (language and its referent), we are able express our deep belonging to the world of life. Metaphor allows us to say the ontological link of our being to other beings, and to being (Dosse 2008:365). In other words, metaphorical symbols or language considered beyond its ordinary sense, lead us to second-degree reference, which is actually the primordial reference. However, the gap between language and action remains. Abel (2006:paragraph 8) argues that the gap between language and action, and – as I will show later – the gap between traditional narrative tropes or genres, and the new, innovative narratives that are formed by drawing on these traditions, can be seen as part of Ricoeur’s poetics of the will. Action and new works of narrative (before becoming ‘typical’) are properly poetic in the sense that they attest to a capacity of invention that constitutes their singularity. There is thus a dialectic between tradition and innovation, between the rule and the gap (Abel 2006: paragraph 8).



of sentences, and sentences are uttered only in particular contexts.” Speech-act theory yields the remarkable insight that (besides the fact that language can be used to make assertions about reality, where these assertions can be judged as true or false), language itself can also be a kind of act.<sup>51</sup> For example, when I make a promise or a vow, or when I warn someone, or refuse something. These sayings that are simultaneously doings are known as performative utterances or speech acts (Ricoeur 1977:8, using the terminology of John Searle<sup>52</sup>).

In addition, it is only within performative utterances that the above discussed concepts become truly meaningful, for example: within the sentence “I *intend* to...” (a performative statement), the concept of ‘intention’ really becomes an intention (Ricoeur 1977:8). In other words, it is only in the use of language (which is already a speech act) as it is understood in a situation of interaction and inter-location, that the concept of ‘intention’ makes sense and can have a propositional value (Ricoeur 1977:31). Again, we see how action informs or underlies linguistic analysis in fundamental manner.

Furthermore, Ricoeur (1977:8) adds that there is another intriguing element to the theory of speech acts that is important for action theory: in addition to the distinction between constative statements and performative statements, there is also a distinction between (1) the meaning of a proposition as conveyed by the speech act, (2) and the different force that this proposition has according to the same meaning (Ricoeur 1977:8 referring to Austin<sup>53</sup>). Thus on the one hand one finds that a statement can have the same meaning, but depending on how a proposition is said, it can have different effects: a proposition such as ‘I do not get enough sleep these days’ can assume the form of a statement, a demand, or a wish, and so forth, depending on how the speaker says it.

This second dimension (different forces: statement, wish, request, and so on), which is shaped by the speech act, again reveals how language is connected to action. Finally, the dimension of force shows how linguistic analysis meets action theory: linguistic analysis shows us that the meaning content of a proposition might be the same, but action theory leads us to the insight that the way in which this proposition is performed in a speech act (within different contexts or different interactions) might alter the meaning of a proposition. Action and

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<sup>51</sup> Taylor and Ayer (1959:100) express this notion of language as action somewhat differently: when you learn a new word, you learn it in relation to yourself, and thus you learn a new piece of behaviour and acquire a new capacity to act (namely, “the use of the word”).

<sup>52</sup> Searle, J.R. 1969. *Speech Acts, an Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>53</sup> Austin, J.L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

language are thus intricately interconnected on our way towards understanding or making sense of action (and finally, complacent action).

Thompson (1981:12) writes that the very nature of concepts or words as polysemic “...depends on a contextual action which filters out some of the surplus meaning, so that a univocal discourse can be produced from polysemic words.” Thompson (1981:12) adds: “[t]o grasp this filtering effect is to exercise interpretation in its most primordial sense.” In Ricoeur’s (1973:125) words: “[t]he simplest message conveyed by the means of natural language has to be interpreted because all the words are polysemic and take their actual meaning from the connection with a given context and a given audience against the background of a given situation.” And this is why a perusal of everyday language within social interactions and interlocations is so important to understand action.

In my linguistic analysis of chapter one, this is more or less<sup>54</sup> what I have done: by looking at examples from literature (whether from newspapers or more classical literary sources), one observes how people appropriate the word ‘complacency’ in their day-to-day lives. Through this appropriation, new characteristics of the word’s meaning often appear (Ricoeur 2005:5). Ricoeur (2005:5) writes: “literature [and one might add more generally, discourse] is both a means of amplification and one for analyzing the resources of meaning available in the use of everyday language. This is why the art of citation is tangled up with that of classifying meanings.” It is for this very reason that lexicographers consult literature in the pursuit of defining words, and why I have chosen to examine mass media for uses of the word ‘complacency’ in order to arrive at my own working analytical definition of complacency. More importantly, this interconnectedness between ‘complacency’ as a word that can be analyzed and ‘complacency’ as it is used in discourse (and by extension, complacent action as it is enacted, so to speak), is one of the reasons both linguistic analysis and action theory form part of my investigation of complacency. One cannot ignore the action component in the process of understanding a concept.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> I say ‘more or less’, because I only looked at human interaction through mass media (newspapers, online forums, opinion pieces or blogs on the internet, and so forth), and not in ‘real life’ (in other words, I did not observe the kinds of interactions that involved the use of the word ‘complacency’ by being in the same place and time as the persons I was observing).

<sup>55</sup> To paraphrase Ricoeur (2005:5) again: on the one hand, it is by observing how ‘complacency’ as a word is used and how complacency is enacted (so to speak) that one can derive a definition of complacency; on the other hand, it is by having a concept or a delimitation of complacency that one is able to classify these examples of ‘complacency’ and complacency as such. Action thus ties in with the analytic process of defining complacency. Put differently, one can only define complacency analytically because agents *use* the word ‘complacency’ (a form of action) and act complacently.

The linguistic theory of speech acts therefore leads us to the insight that there is meaning outside the description of facts and empirical verification (Ricoeur 1977:9): the language of action “makes sense” in a situation that is not observation, but precisely in situations where this very language of action is appropriated or used, whether performatively or constatively, in discourse or interlocution and in interaction between agents (Ricoeur 1977:31). To demand or promise something (speech acts) is also to say something about reality or to make a statement about something, and to talk about action (to make statements about action) is also *do* to something, to alter our understanding of action itself (Ricoeur 1977:9-10).

### ***Language Considered on the Level of Logic***

Finally, Ricoeur (1977:10) writes that conceptual analysis and the theory of speech acts or utterances, are not the only elements in an analysis of the language of action. In fact, writes Ricoeur (1977:10), one has yet to discuss the logic of action (doing something in order to be able to do something else). The logic of action only becomes evident when one unearths the discursive nature of action.

Up until now Ricoeur has only considered segmented or isolated statements about action. In order to evoke the discursive element of action one needs to ask and answer various questions (Ricoeur 1977:10). These questions start with ‘*what* does A do?’ and proceed to questions such as, ‘*why* does A do N?’, ‘in view of what does A do N?’ The moment that one adds ‘*why?*’ one looks beyond simply what is done, to the intentions and motives driving the action. As a consequence, through discourse one now starts to understand action as a progression, as something that is done strategically, where the ‘*what*’ of action is the termination or the conclusion of the ‘*why*’ of action.<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur (1977:10) writes that a logic of action is the highest form of the discourse of action. This is then the third level of analysis of the language of action.

### ***Conclusion to Intersection One***

In this section I have outlined the three levels on which Ricoeur analyses action: first the level of concepts, then the propositional or performative level, and lastly, the level of the

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<sup>56</sup> In short, the meaning “of an action is the set of answers we can give to the questions that bring in play the conceptual network” constituted by the nodes of ‘agent’, ‘intention’, and ‘motivation’ (Ricoeur 2016:180). In other words, on the practical level, the way in which action makes sense is through our commitment to the “language-game of action” where we look for the meaning of action through the “back and forth play of questions and answers [namely, discourse] having to do with the intentions [...] motives, and agents of the action” (Ricoeur 2016:180).

argument or the logic of action as found in a discursive chain (Ricoeur 1977:5). Put differently, one can say that Ricoeur follows the following pattern to describe the relation between linguistic analysis and action: (1) the essence (the vocabulary which is conceptually essential to understanding action), (2) the mental (how a person understands action by appropriating or interpreting these concepts through action), (3) and recognition (the logic of action through which the agent opens his action to others: through presenting one's action in a logical chain, oneself and others can recognize and discursively make sense of action as being meaningful and intentional). Put differently, one has started with *what* (complacent) action is conceptually, then proceeded to *how* or *why* (complacent) action plays out in speech acts and acts, and finally, by answering *what* and *why*, one ends with the logical discourse of action which hints at the fact that there is someone *who* acts intentionally, who *desires*<sup>57</sup> to do something.

### **2.3. Intersection Two: Analytic Language as a Necessary Correlate to an Understanding of the Self-Reflexive Agent**

Above I have written that the analytic philosopher asks *what* complacency is and *why* or *how* people act complacently. Although an analytic definition of complacency is the first step towards answering these questions, an understanding of complacency is incomplete without also considering the person *who* acts complacently. And a person who acts is necessarily reflexive, a self (as opposed to the sterile cogito that only thinks): he or she understands him- or herself in relation to the world and is therefore able to act<sup>58</sup> (Michel 2018:127-136; Ricoeur 1992:18). In other words, the analytical questions asked above, namely '*what* is complacency?' and '*why* do people act complacently?' imply a reflexive subject or a self: someone who acts complacently. This leads us then to the question: '*who* is the complacent actor?' or for now, '*who* is the actor?' These questions are in a dialectical relationship or triad: without analysis (the '*what*' and '*why*'), one cannot answer the question '*who* acts?'

On the one hand, analysis leads us towards an action theory where the person or agent who acts<sup>59</sup> is central, since the *what* of action, namely action as intention to do something, is

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<sup>57</sup> Linguistic analysis tends to eliminate the force of desire and considers only what passes in language, namely the meaning of action as can be described by motives (action considered 'in light of...', 'as a kind of ...'). Linguistic analysis thus reduces desire to a mere verbal game: desire is stripped of its vitality (Ricoeur 1977:42).

<sup>58</sup> "Thanks to [the intentional] structure [of willing or action], the will finds its meaning in its actions; and it is in acting - and not 'shut up alone in a stove-heated room' [referring here to Descartes] - that human beings understand themselves and truly become selves" (Michel and Porée 2016:xiv).

<sup>59</sup> Action and its agent belong to the same conceptual horizon that covers many notions: that of circumstance, of intention, motive, deliberation, and the notions of the voluntary and the involuntary (Dosse 2008:537).

always *someone's* intention and the *why* or the motive of an action is the agent him- or herself (Ricoeur 1992:95). Regarding complacency, if one does not make sense of complacency in relation to the person, then complacency remains just that: complacency, a mere event, an empirical fact. The moment that one makes sense of complacency in relation to a person, it becomes complacent action. This is because when one asks *what* complacency is, and *why* it happens, one is referring to the agent, to the person *who* is both the origin of and the reason for complacent action (Ricoeur 1992:95). In other words, if an understanding of complacency or complacent action remains on the level of linguistic analysis, complacency remains an event; but the moment one introduces a person-centred action theory, one begins to grasp complacent action in a more holistic and complex manner.

On the other hand, one cannot understand the reflexive agent or the self without first taking a detour through analysis (Ricoeur 1992:16). To say that an agent is reflexive, is to say that the agent is able to assume a critical distance from herself and is thus able to evaluate various actions in relation to herself and attribute actions to herself. Ricoeur (1992:17) explicitly writes: “*The recourse to analysis, in the sense given to this term by analytic philosophy, is the price to pay for a hermeneutics*[<sup>60</sup>] *characterized by the indirect manner of positing the self.*” In other words, linguistic analysis goes hand-in-hand with an understanding of the reflexive agent, where reflexivity implies that the agent understands herself, and is understood by others, in a mediated manner (through language, symbols, actions etc.).

Why is it so that one needs analysis to understand the reflexive self? Except for the fact that analysis (what-why) evokes the agent (who), the answer further lies in what I have already delineated in the previous section. First, one speaks of action in “propositions, in particular on the basis of verbs and actions sentences [...and ...] it is in speech acts that the agent of action designates himself or herself as the one who is acting” (Ricoeur 1992:17). In other words, by saying something like ‘I will do that’ or ‘I wish to...’, the agent refers to herself and simultaneously indicates that she is able to analyze and evaluate her actions and ascribe them to herself. Such analysis is only possible through a reflexive use of language. Language provides agents with some critical distance in order to analyze their actions and think of themselves as ‘selves’. The aforementioned critical distance implies that agents have the freedom to choose how to act.

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<sup>60</sup> [R]eflection [or the reflexive agent] must be linked to hermeneutics not only because existence can only be grasped in its external manifestations, but also because immediate consciousness is an illusion which must be unmasked and overcome through an interpretative critique” (Thompson 1981:18).

Furthermore, by formulating one's action in language, one draws on historical and cultural reasons, motives or classifications (socially constituted analytical categories) to describe one's action in a way that is meaningful to both oneself and other agents (Ricoeur 1977:40). By appropriating an analytical category (by, for example, describing one's action as X), the agent is afforded some objectivity on, or critical distance from, his or her action. In turn, this objectivity permits the agent to evaluate and execute his or her actions. Without the critical moment provided by analysis, one would not be able to speak of action or the agent. In other words, analysis goes hand-in-hand with action theory.

Second, speaking or a speech act is already a form of action, and therefore "speakers are themselves actors" (Ricoeur 1992:17). The person who speaks and the person who acts are interconnected; it follows that linguistic analysis and action theory are similarly interconnected. Put differently, by the very act of discourse, the agent is constituted as an agent. If the agent were incapable of discourse, she would not be considered an agent. Moreover, as I have mentioned earlier, through the analysis of ordinary discourse one discovers the 'grammar' of action and – one might now add – what it means to be a reflexive agent capable of action.

Third, the question of the agent or the 'who?' of action reflects the contingency of the "grammar of natural languages, [...] ordinary language usage, and finally the emergence of philosophical questioning in the course of history" (Ricoeur 1992:19). There are numerous questions that can be asked about 'who' or with the word 'who'. As such, the creativity of language, or the polysemy of words helps us to understand the reflexive agent and action in all its facets: who is speaking?; who is acting?; who is responsible? (and so on). One can therefore draw on the history of questioning through linguistic analysis in order to understand action and the agent better (Ricoeur 1992:19). Or put differently, it is the "...variety and contingency of the questions that activate the analyses leading back to the reflection on the self" (Ricoeur 1992:19-20). Linguistic analysis, when taking into account the 'who' of action, therefore both stimulates a more holistic way of thinking about action, and acts as the necessary passage through which to understand the reflexive agent who acts.

In the previous section I have shown, following Ricoeur, that ordinary language tells us a great deal about the grammar of action and that action is mediated by language. Now, having traced the connections between analysis and action, and in this section, action and the self (this will be done in greater detail in the action theory chapters below), one can add the following insight that one will encounter again and again throughout Ricoeur's action theory:

“there is no self-understanding possible without the labour of mediation through signs, symbols, narratives and texts. The idealist romantic self, sovereign master of itself and all it surveys, is replaced by an engaged self which only finds itself after it has traversed the field of foreignness and returned to itself again, this time altered and enlarged, ‘othered’” (Kearney [2004] 2006:xix).

“The detour by way of analysis indeed imposes the indirect and fragmentary mode of any return to the self,” writes Ricoeur (1992:21). Understanding the self, or the ‘who’ of action can only proceed through analysis or passing through ‘what-why’ questions that fragments or shatters the notion of a direct cogito. It is only through the mediation of language – the agent can put into words what she is doing and why she is doing it – that one can come to an understanding of the indirect self who is capable of acting.

In other words, according to Ricoeur, language, or linguistic analysis is not just an instrument that one uses within action theory (Zielinska 2010:615). That is to say, my linguistic analysis of complacency provided in chapter one is not a mere instrument or a stepping stone on my way towards the action theories that I will outline in the following chapters (although it is also this). Instead, the linguistic analysis of complacency is a kind of action itself, it forms part of the type of action that is characterized as being complacent. Linguistic analysis is therefore intrinsically connected to both complacent action and an understanding of complacent action, just as complacent action and the understanding of complacent action are inextricably connected. I therefore argue that one cannot act nor have an action theory without analysis. Both the lay agent and the philosopher make use of analysis in order to make sense of action and to act. Having mentioned the lay agent, it is essential to always keep in mind that the indirect self or the person is central to action theory. Alternatively stated, action theory is primarily constituted by the notion of personhood, and not by ‘action’ itself (which would be a mere event) (Zielinska 2010:615). By making the connection between language and experience or action, one realises that the agent is central to making sense of the world (and ultimately to be able to perform a linguistic analysis of some concept such as complacency), *and* that language is “a means for *doing* things and not just a system of signs *representing* the world” (Zaccaria 1999:274). It is the speaking and acting agent that binds together linguistic analysis and action theory.

#### **2.4. Conclusion: The Inherent Link between Linguistic Analysis and Action Theory**

At the beginning of this chapter I pointed out that linguistic analysis has its limits. Linguistic analysis is ultimately unable to reflect on itself: linguists are unable to delineate in which language game we conduct our analysis of ordinary language, nor can they claim that

this metalanguage of analysis is a necessary one (Ricoeur 1977:12, 114). The metalanguage in which one conducts analysis of ordinary language seems to be a contingent linguistic configuration.<sup>61</sup> As Ricoeur (1977:12,114) writes, analysis is unable to assume a transcendental position.<sup>62</sup>

To go from the level of linguistic analysis to the level of reflecting on linguistic analysis, one has to assume that our experiences are organized according to certain basic structures or foundations (Ricoeur 1977:12, 114). The categories of language that regulate the discourse of action call for this foundation. For without this foundation, how does one make sure that linguistic analysis is indeed a *conceptual* analysis, that the form of language is a necessity in law? (Ricoeur 1977:12, 114).

In other words, if one does not assume that people have *meaningful* lived experiences, then linguistic analysis would be reduced to a collection of idioms (Ricoeur 1977:14-5). However, if one presupposes and argues, via a hermeneutic action theory, that there is a layer of lived experience underlying the layer of expression as analysed by the theory of utterances, then one can speak of linguistic analysis as a conceptual analysis, that is to say, an analysis which deals with structuring experience and the meaning of experience (Ricoeur 1977:15, 115).

Above, along with Ricoeur, I have shown that while at the foundational level, action theory takes the priority because it shows us that we have meaningful lived experiences, it is linguistic analysis that serves as the best guide that leads us towards understanding and expressing meaningful lived experience (Ricoeur 1977:15). Different from structuralists who study language in a closed system where words only refer to other words, linguistic analysis therefore entails that one clarifies language in the light of experience (Ricoeur 1977:115). Linguistic analysis thus presupposes action theory.

The aporias inherent in linguistic analysis (not being able to reflect on itself, being contingent and not necessarily conceptual) are not the only aspects that prompt one to think of linguistic analysis in conjunction with action theory. Linguistic analysis further needs to be supplemented by action theory (or thought of as interdependent with action theory), because there is no theory of the agent or the person who acts within such analysis. Above we have seen

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<sup>61</sup> In addition, linguistic analysis has a limitation in the sense that it cannot to lend itself to a complete enumeration, or even to firm distinctions or binary oppositions. Instead, linguistic analysis tends to lead the philosopher to the level of family resemblances, overlaps and encroachments, exactly as I have found at the end of the analysis of ‘complacency’ in chapter one of this thesis (Ricoeur 1977:70).

<sup>62</sup> Malpas (1992) writes an excellent article on why this is so, and like Ricoeur, argues that analysis is dependent on hermeneutics.



that linguistic analysis entails that one focuses primarily on the ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions regarding action. Action theory contributes ‘who?’, and not arbitrarily: the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ questions of analysis lead quite spontaneously to the agent<sup>63</sup> who is both the author of, and the reason for, action. In such a way, action theory and linguistic analysis support each other: together they constitute part of the descriptive-analytical discourse of action (Ricoeur 1977:15).

Yet, for all this disparaging of linguistic analysis, one needs to keep in mind that there is something mysterious and wonderful about language. Ricoeur was well aware of this aspect of language, following in Austin’s footsteps. Parker-Ryan (2018:paragraph 89) notes that:

“Austin became a master of the observation of the uses of language. He noted nuanced differences in the ways words very close in meaning are used that many others missed. Austin demonstrated, through his explorations, the flexibility of language, how subtle variations in meaning were possible, how delicate, sometimes, is the choice of a word for saying what one wants or needs to say. He called his method ‘linguistic phenomenology’ [...]. What his demonstrations of the fineness of grain of meaning, in very concrete and particular examples, showed was that philosophical uses of language take expressions *out* of their ordinary working environment, that is, everyday communicative discourse. [...]. Such philosophical uses, Austin showed, treat expressions as rigid, one-dimensional, rather blunt instruments, with *far less* descriptive power than ordinary language: thus contradicting the view that the philosophical uses of language are more ‘accurate’ and ‘precise’.”

In other words, linguistic analysis is not a standardized endeavour. One needs to be aware that there are two broad views on language and the analysis thereof: language as full and mysterious, and language as more accurate, narrow, and exact.<sup>64</sup> Malpas (1992:93) calls this distinction the hermeneutical-analytical distinction. In my thesis, up until chapter one, I have traversed both these views, but have explicitly tended and aimed more towards language and analysis that is accurate and precise (analytical), at the cost of descriptive or expressive power (hermeneutical). It is only now, in this chapter, that I am confronted by the value of the richness

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<sup>63</sup> Connected to the absence of the agent in linguistic theory, one also finds that linguistic analysis ignores the embodied agent or the individual body (Ricoeur 1977:23). I have not discussed this aspect of action in this chapter, but I will do so in the next chapter when I look at Ricoeur’s action theory. “Ricoeur’s project in *Freedom and Nature* [in particular...] understand[s] cognition as the result of a process of enactment in which our bodily relation with the world is the basis on which we experience the world and on which we act” (Dierckxsens 2018:213). Giddens’s understanding of the body and how it helps us to act in a prereflexive way (or a purposive way rooted in practical consciousness) from day-to-day will also address this lack.

<sup>64</sup> Pertaining specifically to Ricoeur: due to Ricoeur’s interaction with French structuralism, and later, the English analytic tradition, Ricoeur ended up belonging to two traditions, linguistics and hermeneutic phenomenology (Zielinska 2016:613). This affiliation to two traditions has the result that Ricoeur is always torn “...between linguists who considered linguistic communication as an unproblematic ‘given’ and philosophers who regarded the very fact of communicating as a fundamental mystery” (Zielinska 2010:613).

and mystery of language – facilitated by understanding language as profoundly connected to action.

Understanding complacent action in a more holistic manner, therefore, is possible only through an interplay between analysis and action theoretical description. While analysis might provide me with a more technical and precise way to understand complacency, such an approach ignores that analysis is only possible through context, through being situated in a background that is action. In turn, while action theory is more comprehensive and descriptive, without the foresight or semantic stability provided to one by an analytical concept (of complacency), one might become so distracted by the richness and complexity of action that one loses sight of the particular characteristics of complacency against the background. In short, coming to grips with complacency, or complacent action, will therefore be an ongoing dialectic between the mystery of language (as found in a hermeneutical action theory) and a more precise and straightforward (analytic) understanding thereof.

In conclusion, I will quickly outline how this action-analysis dialectic manifested throughout this chapter. In the first intersection that I explored, I found, on the one hand, that action is constituted by language in a fundamental manner. In addition, (ordinary) language tells us something about how action is constituted. Language objectifies (to some extent) the experiences shared by a cultural community, and because of this objectification allows for interaction, or meaningful action. On the other hand, language only obtains its full meaning in context, and more specifically in interlocution or in discourse: the way something is said, the context, and the intention of the person saying it, all contribute to our understanding of language. Put differently, language facilitates action, but a fuller understanding of language only comes about through taking into account the action component of language: namely, considering language as speech acts. Action thus ties in with the analytic process of defining and understanding phenomena such as complacency.

The second intersection between action and analysis also illustrates the above dialectic. Again, one finds that action is facilitated by analysis. However, the focus in this section of the chapter shifts explicitly towards the agent or the reflexive self, without whom action is impossible. In turn, the agent – and by implication, action – cannot be thought or exist without analysis. This connection between the agent and analysis is evident in the way that the agent is able to discourse about their action. Through discourse or speech acts, the agent designates herself within an action (for example, ‘*I did this, then I went home*’) and thus demonstrates that

she is reflexive: she is able to assume a critical distance from herself and is thus able to evaluate various actions in relation to herself and attribute actions to herself. Without this kind of analysis conducted by the agent via language (analysis of herself as agent and her actions), she would not be able to act, she would have no freedom (she would not be an agent).

In sum, an action theory of complacency without analysis, or an analytic definition of complacency that is not situated within action theory, would be incomplete accounts of complacent action. Complacent action contributes to the meaning of complacency or to our more analytical understanding of complacency by reinforcing its meaning, by emphasizing certain aspects of its meaning, or by creatively pushing the boundaries of complacency's meaning. On the other hand, philosophical analysis or "critical, second-order reflection" helps us to maintain semantic stability: it is only on this level "armed with knowledge drawn from something other than ordinary conversation, that [one can] bring[...] to light the tensions and contortions" that an everyday understanding or linguistic use of 'complacency' harbours (Ricoeur 2005:9).

In other words, linguistic analysis tempers the temptation to fall back on an understanding of complacent action as something ultimately and completely mysterious (and that can therefore not really be grasped in words); while action theory – with the agent at its centre – prevents us from clinging to the illusion and the ideal of understanding complacency in a perfectly transparent and unambiguous manner. One can only understand complacent action in a mediately reflexive (as opposed to immediate) manner. Put differently, one needs linguistic analysis for its analytical and methodological rigour in the process of understanding, and one needs person-centred action theory to remind us of the richness and mystery<sup>65</sup> of all action as it plays out in time and space via persons. Following Ricoeur's conclusions (more about this later), one can thus say that to eliminate either rigour or the 'mysterious' aspects of action would be disastrous to the project of understanding (complacent) action (Zielinska 2010:618). As such, my next three chapters will be dedicated to delineating the action theories

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<sup>65</sup> Complacent action tests the boundaries and the internal consistency of an analytical definition of complacency. As I have said before, it is relatively easy to define complacency in analytical terms, but when one looks at real life examples of complacent action (as I have briefly done in chapter one), one notices that complacent action hardly ever plays out in such a formulaic pattern. For example: within my working analytic definition of complacency I have stated that due to a complacent person's blameworthy and incorrect evaluation of his or her own actions, the complacent person will act in an inappropriate way pertaining to what he or she cares about. However, few people are so calculated. It is often the case that people only start evaluating their actions *during or after* executing those very actions. This is just one of many examples of how complacent action goes beyond an analytical definition of complacency. As such, an action theoretical approach is necessary to supplement analysis.

of Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens, in my philosophical quest of obtaining a more balanced action theoretical understanding of complacency.

## Chapter 3

### Paul Ricoeur's Action Theory

“More and more, it is not just life as a fact of nature and the basis of psychic life but nature as a whole as the human environment that asks to be protected. The whole cosmos falls under human responsibility: where something is possible, there is the possibility of harm and therefore the need for moral vigilance” (Ricoeur 2007:14).

#### 3.1. Introduction

As seen above, linguistic analysis intersects with action theory in profound ways. It is now time, however, to specify in more detail what is meant with action theory. The next three chapters will consequently be dedicated to examining the action theories of Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens, respectively. Chapter three, together with chapters four and five will thus serve as a kind of necessary groundwork before I again take up complacency (in the form of my working, analytical definition) and situate it within, or interpret it *via* the relevant action theories. While examining and recounting these respective action theories, I will, however, briefly highlight preliminary repercussions or effects that these action theories might have on my working definition of complacency.

The first action theory then, is formulated by the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to focus on three of Ricoeur's works, namely: *Freedom and Nature* ([1950] 1966), *From Text to Action* ([1990] 1991), and *Oneself as Another* ([1990] 1992). Within the first of these works, namely *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur takes a descriptive phenomenological approach which emphasizes the fact that the agent *wills* or *decides* to act, but does so while *consenting* to constraints. That is to say, human beings have a “paradoxical”<sup>66</sup> free will which is constituted by “deciding, moving, [and] consenting” (Ricoeur 1966:482-3).

Next, in *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur works out the relationship between hermeneutics and phenomenology, and consequently explores what it means to be an agent from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. Ricoeur saw the need to supplement (idealistic, Husserlian) phenomenology with hermeneutics, in order to rectify “phenomenology's centeredness on consciousness ...” (McGuire 1981:181). That is to say, phenomenological idealism holds that the self is the “ultimate ground” or foundation of knowledge and that the

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<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur often reconciles two concepts that are antinomies by recasting them as two poles in a dialectical relationship. In other words, “rather than constituting mutually exclusive poles... [two concepts, x and y]—... would be considered as relative moments in a complex process that could be termed interpretation” (Ricoeur 1991:126).

self is transparent to itself, and can hence have knowledge of itself directly via intuition (Ricoeur 1991:30-31). Ricoeur (1991:25, 30) counters the aforementioned and argues that all understanding, even of the self, has to be mediated by interpretation. That is to say, we know ourselves and our actions via the mediations of “language, symbol, culture and history” (Rainwater 1996:103). Or as Kearney (2004:1) puts it, “existence is itself a mode of interpretation.”

Thus, we come to know ourselves through interpretation of our actions, manifested in what we say, what we enact, the stories or narratives that we tell about our lives, and the judgements that we make about what is ethical and moral (Ricoeur 1999:45). The aforementioned insight is explored in detail by Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*. In *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur qualifies how exactly one comes to know one’s actions through interpretation. This is done by asking four questions: ‘who speaks?’, ‘who acts or suffers?’, ‘who narrates?’, and ‘who is the moral subject of imputation?’. In each of these questions, Ricoeur leads us back to the ‘who’, or the ‘self’ of these actions. It is always *someone* who speaks, or *someone* who acts, and so on. These actions (speaking, acting, telling stories, and imputing certain moral or ethical predicates to someone) are not just mere loose standing facts, they are intimately connected to the capable person.

In addition, not only are these acts connected to *a* subject: these acts are also intimately connected to others on both the interpersonal and the institutional levels. Others make action possible, in more than one sense. Since action does not take place in isolation and acting implies having power over another (which in turn implies that one can injure the other), Ricoeur places a strong emphasis on ethical and moral action. As such, Ricoeur’s account of action does not only tell us which capacities human beings have, but also explores the way in which human beings’ capacities are “vulnerab[le] or susceptib[le] to the diminution or loss of the capability or to its abuse” (Dauenhauer 2007:203).

A last word before I delve into each of the above works: throughout Ricoeur’s philosophical anthropology one will find that his focus is, above all, on action (Dosse 2008:15). This is because Ricoeur (1966:55-62) arrived at the conclusion that the best way to understand the human being is through his or her actions: “human beings fundamentally inhabit their world by way of *action*” (Dauenhauer 2007:203). On a more ontological level, Ricoeur argues that the very existence of the subject is characterized by movement, by action: the dialectization of the will in which external movement originates, the power of doing and at the same time to

receive from an external movement, manifests itself in an essential and constitutive relationship of the subject (Dosse 2008:246). By giving priority to action, Ricoeur's philosophy allows us think together the determined and the indeterminate; any attempts at closure are thus made obsolete. Being is defined as more or less being, according to its commitments in acts that reduce its indeterminacy and singles it out (Dosse 2008:246). Following this, I will trace Ricoeur's action theory throughout the three works mentioned above, and in addition show how each literary work sheds light on the subsequent (and sometimes preceding) work, in an attempt to unite Ricoeur's thoughts on action.

### **3.2. Ricoeur's Initial Action Theory as Found in *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* ([1950] 1966)**

#### **3.2.1. Introduction and Background**

*Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* was first published in 1950 as part of Ricoeur's doctoral thesis, and is part one of a three-part series on the philosophy of the will (Dosse 2008:194-5). Part two is called *Finitude et Culpabilité* (1960) (*Finitude and Guilt*), and consists of two volumes, namely *Fallible Man* (1965) and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), and concerns that which Ricoeur calls the 'fault' in humankind. Part three, which was to be a poetics of the will touching on transcendence, was never published.

In *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur's aim is to understand the "affective and volitional dimensions of [incarnate] human existence" (Thompson 1981:4), as opposed to understanding how the subject perceives and represents the world to itself (Michel 2018:128). At this stage of Ricoeur's research, Ricoeur does not explicitly refer to 'action', but rather to 'human willing'. Only later, when Ricoeur puts phenomenological description in dialogue with hermeneutics, will Ricoeur replace the notion of 'will' or the 'voluntary' with the more extensive and expressive notion of 'action' (Picardi 2015:540; Ricoeur 1966:31; 2015:4).

That is to say, Ricoeur speaks of 'will' when he considers the solitary subject (as Ricoeur does in *Freedom and Nature*); it is only when Ricoeur's philosophy takes an intersubjective turn via a detour through the human sciences and analytic philosophy, that Ricoeur (2015:4) adopts the richer notion of 'action' (Picardi 2015:544). Ricoeur thus adopts the term 'action', because action – different from the will, which is merely a segment of action and an intention accessible only by introspection – is defined by its *performance* and by its *public* manifestation; action implies interaction and insertion in technical, economic, and political structures and institutions (Picardi 2015:544; Ricoeur 2015:4). In addition, classical

philosophy understands the will only as the enlightened zone of human action; but Ricoeur (2015:4) will later incorporate the human drives or desires into his account of the practical field, and thus will start to speak about ‘action’ as that which also encompasses these ‘un-enlightened’ aspects of the human experience. ‘Action’ therefore denotes more than ‘willing’. Yet, one can say that action is already implied in *Freedom and Nature*, since to consider the subject as an *embodied cogito*, implies that one can no longer just refer to the cogito who perceives: this is because the “embodied cogito does not only perceive the world but also acts in it” (Vallée 2018:29).

Ricoeur starts his descriptive investigation into the human will by applying the phenomenological method to the phenomena of the ‘voluntary’ and the ‘involuntary’. That is to say, through his investigation Ricoeur wants to arrive at the most essential ways<sup>67</sup> in which we can think of and conceptualise the incarnate *experience* of the human will (in terms of the voluntary and the involuntary) (Pellauer 2007:5).

In order to arrive at a pure, conceptual description<sup>68</sup> and understanding of the essence<sup>69</sup> of the human will, Ricoeur brackets (leaves out or suspends) what he calls the ‘fault’ in humankind, as well as that which is Transcendent (that which is radically other to the subject (Jervolino 2011:151), and love between human beings) (Ricoeur 1966:3, 31). Phenomenological bracketing enables us to arrive at the “structures or *fundamental possibilities*” of humankind’s essence, without being distracted by the everyday empirical appearances of human freedom (which are tainted by moral evil, or the ‘fault’, as Ricoeur calls it) (Ricoeur 1966:3-4).

However, Ricoeur does not merely use the traditional phenomenological approach that was popularised by Husserl. In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur departs from Husserl’s idealistic phenomenological approach by discounting the self as a transcendental reference point. That is to say, Ricoeur swerves away from the kind of philosophy that “unduly elevate[s ...] the

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<sup>67</sup> In a sense, Ricoeur’s phenomenological project at this stage echoes chapter one’s linguistic analysis. Ricoeur (1977:72) argues that it is the Husserlian spirit of Wesensschau (the study or intuition of essences) which lies behind linguistic analysis of the ordinary use of language. In other words, just as Husserl wants to bring to light the pure essences or essential principles that lie concealed beneath all phenomena, so also does linguistic analysis entail that one makes explicit (or abstract from) that which is implicit in the ordinary use of language.

<sup>68</sup> Description is preferred over explanation, since explanation is moving “...from the complex to the simple” (and hence leads to a shallow and isolated understanding of the voluntary and involuntary respectively), while description uncovers a deeper and complex understanding which reveals that the voluntary and the involuntary are related and reciprocal (Ricoeur 1966:4).

<sup>69</sup> Essence, cautions Ricoeur, should not be interpreted in the Platonic sense. Rather, essence merely denotes the “...meanings or principles of intelligibility of the broad voluntary and involuntary functions” (Ricoeur 1966:4).



subject” (Vanhooser 1994:368). Ricoeur (1966:4) argues that Husserl’s ‘transcendental self’ is too detached, and thus is “...an obstacle to genuine understanding of personal body.” In contrast, Ricoeur’s phenomenological description of the will takes into account that the self is embodied and situated (in the world and in time). In addition, Husserl holds that the self can know itself directly, and that this immanent knowledge is indubitable (Ricoeur 1996:375). Ricoeur disagrees and argues that the self can only know itself through interpretation – thus already introducing a hermeneutic element into his phenomenology. (However, the implications of this observation will only be fleshed out in full by Ricoeur in his later works, *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*). In addition to the aforementioned, Clark (1990:20) adds that Ricoeur also rejects Husserlian idealism’s (i) “claim [...] to be self-founding prior to scientific discourse”, (ii) and its preference of “intuitive fulfilment” at the cost of deduction.

The above considerations, of course, shape Ricoeur’s phenomenological method: through this modified, non-idealistic phenomenological approach, Ricoeur reaches the conclusion that the voluntary (human will) stands in a reciprocal relation to the involuntary (Michel 2018:128). That which compels us – namely the involuntary forces of habit, need, and emotion – attains “... complete significance only in relation to a will [the voluntary] which they solicit, dispose, and generally affect...” (Ricoeur 1966:4). In turn, the will determines how important or weighty each of these involuntary forces are by the exercise of choice (by consenting, or even rejecting the adoption of the involuntary forces) (Ricoeur 1966:5). The voluntary can therefore not be understood without the involuntary, and *vice versa*. Only when considered together, are they intelligible (Ricoeur 1966:5). This is what Ricoeur refers to as the reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary.

Although the relation between the voluntary and the involuntary is reciprocal, each holds a specific position towards the other: the voluntary takes primacy in our understanding of a person, because one understands oneself first as an ‘I’ that wills (Ricoeur 1966:5). That is to say, “[t]he will is the one which brings order to the many of the involuntary.” The ‘many’ of the involuntary refers to that which provides the motives, capacities, foundations and limitations to the will (Ricoeur 1966:5). This is what Ricoeur means when he says that the voluntary and the involuntary only make complete sense when considered in a dialectical relationship. Pellauer (2007:12) explains this relationship as follows:

“The voluntary and the involuntary have to be considered as reciprocal because otherwise neither phenomenon is really intelligible. In a purely objective world,

one without freedom, there would be nothing to understand, because there would be no one to understand it, no subjectivity. But pure subjectivity without objectivity is also unintelligible if we consider human action, because this subjectivity would not exist in a world beyond itself or be able to act at all since the voluntary can reveal itself only by means of and in relation to the involuntary.”

Such is then the reciprocity between the voluntary and the involuntary. However, in order to describe in detail how this reciprocal relationship plays out in the human will manifested in action, Ricoeur (1966:6) first identifies the basic structures of human *willing* (as opposed to human perception, which was Husserl’s focus). In order to identify these structures, Ricoeur (1966:6) writes that one must keep in mind that consciousness always has an object of knowing, or that “[a]ll consciousness is consciousness of...”. This is also known as intentionality. However, when one attempts to describe the practical (human will), description becomes somewhat less straight-forward, and more elusive. This is because consciousness, as willing, has as its object that which is willed (Ricoeur 1966:7).

A description of willing consequently goes as follows: (1) what is *willed* is usually the project which I decide on. (2) This unrealised (as yet) project, only becomes real once action inscribes it into the course of things through *voluntary movement* (Ricoeur 1966:7). However, writes Ricoeur (1966:7), the “...difficulty [then] is to identify the intentional structure of consciousness insofar as it is an effective action, an action carried out.”<sup>70</sup> (3) Lastly, Ricoeur (1966:7) writes of a “residuum”: the will does not only entail the willing of a project and (a real intention and possibility of) executing it; the will is also constrained by and responds to certain external and unchangeable necessities. The third characteristic of willing is thus found within the involuntary in the form of consent. As such, a description of willing yields what Ricoeur (1966:6) calls the triadic structure of voluntary human willing: (1) “I will” or “I decide”, (2) “I move my body”, and (3) “I consent”. This triad is not a “temporal sequence” – the one does not follow on the other -; instead, these elements are “phenomenological distinction[s] between different levels of meaning” (Michel 2018:128). To say that one decides is simultaneously to mean that one moves one’s body and that one consents to constraints.

Because the voluntary stands in a reciprocal relation to the involuntary, it follows that the above description of (voluntary) human willing would evoke the involuntary. Within this reciprocal relationship, Ricoeur (1966:7-8) identifies three structural elements in which the

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<sup>70</sup> The intentional object (that object that consciousness is conscious of) is therefore action being carried out. The difficulty lies in determining how/in which way consciousness intends (is directed towards) the practical.

involuntary joins the voluntary. The following three points of the involuntary are thus a kind of reflection of the above three voluntary aspects of human willing. First, projects are always *because of* some reason or motivation. It is not possible to think of a project without thinking of the reason for it. On the level of motivation, one thus encounters involuntary functions such as desires and needs which inform decisions made by the voluntary ‘I’ that wills. Second, for a voluntary act to be effected, one requires certain subservient capacities (“psychological functions”, such as habit) which allow themselves to be used in a voluntary act (Ricoeur 1966:8). Third, the absolute involuntary (such as personality, or one’s physical/biological capabilities, and one’s mortality) joins the voluntary in an act of consent to one’s limits.

(1) Motive, (2) organ of the will, and (3) the absolute involuntary are thus the three involuntary structures that accompany and mirror the three voluntary structures of the will that (1) decide, (2) move voluntarily, and (3) consent, in a complete understanding of the subject that wills. However, in an understanding of the structures (or fundamental possibilities) of the voluntary and the involuntary, one needs to be aware of another unique characteristic of the self, namely self-referentiality (Ricoeur 1966:8). Pertaining to self-referentiality/reflexivity, Ricoeur stands in the Cartesian tradition.<sup>71</sup> The self – or the Cogito – according to Ricoeur, is inherently self-aware, and therefore asserts itself. The self knows that it knows, but most importantly, understands itself in the first-person reference to the ‘I’ (Ricoeur 1966:9). Finally, Ricoeur (1966:9) writes that “[t]he Cogito experience, as a whole, includes ‘I desire, I can, I intend,’ and, in a general way, my existence as a body.”

Put differently, since the cogito is primarily ‘willing,’ and since willing or the voluntary cannot be thought without the involuntary (deciding, moving, and consenting) which is constituted in part by the body, the cogito includes the body (Simms 2003:12). The ‘body’ in this context should not be understood as an empirical thing: neither one’s own body, nor the body of the other (Ricoeur 1966:10-11). The personal or subject body is instead somebody: it is someone’s body (yours or mine, for example). However, this does not mean that one cannot

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<sup>71</sup> However, Ricoeur (1966:8-9) departs from the Cartesian dualist view of the self which holds that the Cogito (the thinking self) and the body (as an empirical object) are distinct entities. Moreover, writes Ricoeur (1966:14), one should break the “sterile” circularity of the Cogito that posits itself by receiving the “...nourishing and inspiring spontaneity” of the body. Ricoeur’s reflexivity is especially influenced by French reflexivity, and in particular by Jean Nabert’s understanding of reflexivity where the subject is ousted from the centre of its existence (Michel 2006:27). In other words, Ricoeur does not adhere to the kind of reflexivity (and phenomenology, as was noted earlier) that has “subjectivist and substantialist underpinnings” (Michel 2018:127). Instead of the subject that is immediately conscious of itself, Ricoeur’s subject is mediate and concrete: only by the mediation of the body and the necessities that the body introduces, can the abstract and empty Cartesian cogito become an acting Cogito (Michel 2006:27). See also Jean-Luc Amalric’s (2018) article on the presence of Jean Nabert’s reflexivity in Ricoeur’s *Freedom and Nature*.

gather empirical or biological facts about the body (Ricoeur 1966:11-12). Ricoeur therefore rejects the subject as mere body-object, but inscribes the body-object with the tension of the body understood as *mine, his, hers* (etc.), as one's own body (Michel 2018:35). "Thus", writes Ricoeur (1966:10), "subjectivity is both 'internal' and 'external.'" Ricoeur thus "...helps us to escape from a simplistic dichotomy between internal and external, between introspective psychology and empirical psychology" (Depraz 2018:202). The body is both *my body* and a body which I see, yield to, and govern (Ricoeur 1966:17). As such, Ricoeur's understanding of the self or the cogito includes the body. Moreover, the unity of the cogito and the body is most visible in human action, and hence Ricoeur's concern with human freedom (Pellauer 2007:8).

Taking into consideration that the self is simultaneously intentional, self-referential, and a body, Ricoeur proceeds to delve into the depths of the human will. Yet, before proceeding, Ricoeur (1966:13-14, 18) admits that such a description of the voluntary and the involuntary is often shrouded in mystery, and moreover, that the voluntary and involuntary – despite being complementary – are in a conflictual relationship. First, with regards to mystery, Ricoeur has a very specific understanding thereof derived from Gabriel Marcel (Pellauer 2007:13). Pellauer (2007:22) describes Ricoeur's use of the word 'mystery' as denoting something which is "acknowledged and [can only be] marvelled at." Mystery should not be taken to mean something that is *not yet* solved.

Mystery is present in the very way one understands the structure of the will, because when one investigates the human will, one cannot do it objectively as a mere onlooker from a distance; rather one also "participates actively" in one's own "*incarnation as a mystery*" (Ricoeur 1966:14). Second, with regards to the conflictual relationship between the voluntary and the involuntary, consciousness and its physical constituents (the body and its world) are in a paradoxical relationship: consciousness is "...both a disruption and a bond" and the physical both enables and resists consciousness (Ricoeur 1966:18-19). This is evident when consciousness sometimes wishes to be free from constraints such as the body and the world of objects.

With an introductory background of the project of the will now complete, a description of the human will can be begun. Ricoeur's book, *Freedom and Nature* is structured along the triadic constituents of the human will (as identified above), namely: decision, voluntary movement, and consent. To identify the "...concepts of subjectivity (of the voluntary and the

involuntary)”, Ricoeur (1966:11) consults not only his own personal experience, but also those of other subjects. This is because one’s own consciousness is radically changed by assuming the consciousness of another (by stepping into the proverbial shoes of another, but also by looking at oneself through the eyes of another) (Ricoeur 1966:11). As Ricoeur (1966:11) puts it: “I treat myself as a you which in its external appearance is a presentation to the other. From this viewpoint, to know myself is to anticipate my presentation to a you.” This, can of course, also be applied in the opposite direction: because I know myself, I can infer what it is like to be someone else, and how they might think and feel in certain situations which I have also experienced (Ricoeur 1966:11). Thus, Ricoeur (1966:11) can state: “[t]he you is an other myself” (interestingly, *inversely* stating the title of his later work with which I will conclude this chapter, namely *Oneself as Another*).

### **3.2.2. The First Constituent of the Will: Decision or ‘I will’**

#### **3.2.2.1. Introduction to Section 3.2.2.**

In this section I will discuss the first constituent of the triadic structure of the will, namely decision. First, Ricoeur shows how decision, as first constituent of the will, is linked with the second constituent of the will, namely voluntary movement. Second, Ricoeur provides a descriptive account of decision: decision is first of all orientated towards a project (intentionality), the decision is decided upon by myself (reflexivity), and decision has motives that I (as an agent with power) choose to give – but also passively accept – for this decision. Third, ‘motives’ then further lead Ricoeur to consider the involuntary aspect of decision: the body. The body’s needs introduce involuntary motives that we do not ask for, yet we must include these within our voluntary decisions. Fourth and in conclusion, Ricoeur restores to decision its temporal aspect by investigating the hesitation that precedes decision.

#### **3.2.2.2. Decision’s Relation to Voluntary Movement**

Ricoeur explains the connection between decision and its execution, namely voluntary movement, by stating that these two are often indistinguishable in terms of time, yet decision differs from its execution in terms of meaning (Ricoeur 1966:38). In other words, a decision and its execution sometimes coincide. Decision can thus happen at the exact same moment of executing it, even if we are not consciously aware of the decision at the time of its execution<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> The fact that decision and its carrying out coincide temporally has interesting implications for our understanding of complacency. In my working definition of complacency, I describe complacency as a thought process which results in certain unwanted actions. I thus imply that deciding or making up one’s mind always *precedes* action. If, as Ricoeur says, decision and its execution often coincide, then one can no longer think of complacent action in this linear or processual way.

(Ricoeur 1966:38). At other times, execution of a project can be deferred (Ricoeur 1966:39). Yet, despite long delays, decision *cannot* be understood independently from its execution. This is because deciding on a project “always already presupposes an embodied” subject who is aware of, and knows the limits of “his or her own forces, capacities, and possibilities” (Vallée 2018:29). Decision and execution as phenomena are thus not temporally distinct; we merely speak of them as distinct entities in order to facilitate understanding (Ricoeur 1966:201).

Moreover, the actual accomplishment of a decision authenticates willing. Ricoeur (1966:201) writes that the person who “...does not carry through did not truly will.” If one merely intends to do a project, but does not execute it, it will be asked whether one’s intention or decision was ever really true. The “...embodiment of values in the world is not an external *addition* to their pure legitimacy [sic], but rather an internal part of it” (Ricoeur 1966:202). In addition, a decision is authentic if one has the capacity or power to act upon one’s decision (Ricoeur 1966:40). The power or capacity to act is defined by Ricoeur (1966:54-5) as three simultaneous moments: “the possibility opened up by [one’s] project and the possibility permitted by the world...”, in addition to one’s capacities (which can also be limiting, such as character, one’s body, one’s habits, and so on).

### **3.2.2.3. The Voluntary: A Descriptive Account of the Constituents of Decision**

Next, Ricoeur delves into a description of the voluntary facets of decision. These are: (i) the project, (ii) making up one’s own mind, and (iii) motivation. First then, the project: Ricoeur (1966:42-3, 48) writes that a project always refers to a future something that *I intend* to do. Intending takes place within one’s thoughts, but Ricoeur (1966:42) wants us to understand thinking in its broadest sense: namely, as a kind of action. Thought is moreover always a thought of something; thought “...relate[s] itself to an object” (Ricoeur 1966:42-3). In this instance, project is the object of decision (Ricoeur 1966:43). Not only is decision a thought, but it is also a judgment or an evaluation, because deciding on some action also entails *that* one wants to do that action (Ricoeur 1966:43-4). Ricoeur (1966:43) thus describes decision as a “type of intention which aims at a [future] project”, which “...depends on me and ... is within my power.”

Decision further entails that one takes a personal standpoint, such as “It will be so!” (Ricoeur 1966:46). Decision is therefore *not* just a vague whim; one commits oneself reflexively to one’s actions and asserts oneself as the author of one’s own actions. Decision is thus always self-referential, where self-referentiality includes what Ricoeur (1966:58) calls

“prereflexive (self-)imputation”. Ricoeur (1966:46) describes prereflexive self-imputation as follows: “[e]ven if I do not think of myself as *the one* who makes up *his* mind at that moment, though I do not stress the ‘It is I who...’ of the verb of decision, I involve myself in the project, I impute to myself the action which is to be done.” Put differently, one always posits oneself in every decision or action, even if one is not explicitly aware of this reference to oneself in every act.<sup>73</sup>

Ricoeur (1966:60) adds that making up one’s mind entails “...that there are now two selves, one projecting and one in the project”. Ricoeur (1966:47-8) calls this the inherent duality of consciousness: the “I who decide am the I who will do.” This further implies that the possibility to act also means that there is a possibility to *be* (in a certain way that one has decided) (Ricoeur 1966:55). One therefore reflectively determines oneself in the act of determining a project: “My possible being depends on my possible doing” (Ricoeur 1966:62, 64). Finally, to act freely is to act without anxiety (anxiety is tied to indecision), since being free is acting on one’s decisions (Ricoeur 1966:65).

However, decision is not an act which is wholly determined by the subject. Every decision also has a motive, or motives, which can be both rational and affective (Ricoeur 1966:70-1). The matter of motivation skirts the tension between the voluntary and the involuntary, since freedom can never be wholly indifferent to nature (Ricoeur 1966:66). That is to say, one should not think of will as just arbitrarily declaring itself as absolute freedom; instead, the “...highest form of will...” is a will which flows forth from initiative, but simultaneously has reasons that support it (Ricoeur 1966:66).

However, these reasons or motives must not be confused with naturalistic causes. Causes are known before and independently from their effects, while understanding motives is dependent upon knowledge of the related decisions (Ricoeur 1966:67). That is why we enquire into someone’s motives for doing something after it was done, and not before. We ask: “why did he or she decide to do that?” One can therefore think of motive as a justification, a legitimization, or as a basis for one’s decisions (as opposed to *causing* or *determining* one’s

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<sup>73</sup> Some might argue that becoming more aware of oneself within one’s actions, hinders the action from being performed. However, Ricoeur (1966:61) contends that it is rather when one is “beside oneself” (with anger, or whatever passion), and when one becomes part of the inauthentic crowd (the Heideggerian “they”) that one’s actions are corrupted, so to speak. Therefore, Ricoeur (1966:61) writes: “[s]elf-consciousness is the decisive moment of taking hold of myself which opens up a high vision of freedom....”

decisions in a closed system of laws). Motives thus incline, but do not compel (Ricoeur 1966:71). Ricoeur would later return to this matter (in *From Text to Action*).

The question of motivation also raises the question of ethics, because motive implies that one values certain things above others, and that one motivates one's project in the presence of others (Ricoeur 1966:72-3). This ethical aspect entails that one pauses and evaluates one's project (and one's own worth by implication, since one's doing is one's being: this connection between ethical doing and being will be explored in detail in Ricoeur's later work, *Oneself as Another*, under the concepts 'self-esteem' and 'self-respect'), thus temporarily removing the thrust from the project (Ricoeur 1966:73). The consciousness concerned with evaluating the project is a moral consciousness, and no longer the willing consciousness who projects the project (Ricoeur 1966:73-4).

Next, Ricoeur (1966:78) investigates how motive (initiative of the thrust) and self-determination (the basis of the thrust) come together in decision. Ricoeur (1966:78) holds that willing is not a pure act that consists entirely of activity. Instead, willing, or deciding, includes both an activity and a passivity: willing is also a kind of "receptivity", or an adherence and a consent to reasons for one's actions (Ricoeur 1966:78-9). As such, motive reminds us of the fact that decision, as voluntary structure of the will, has to consent to the involuntary in the form of consenting to reasons given. Thus, one can say that: "... I provide the basis for the physical being of my actions even while I base myself on their [reasons'] value, that is, their moral being" (Ricoeur 1966:78).

Decision, and its related concepts – project, making up one's mind, and motivation –, were thus discussed in pure descriptive phenomenological terms in the aforementioned paragraphs. As a summary: decision entails that one (1) "projects[s] a practical possibility of an action which depends on [oneself]," (2) "impute[s] [one]self as the author responsible for the project," and that (3) one "motivate[s] [one's] project by reasons and values which 'historialize' values capable of justifying them" (Ricoeur 1966:84). Next, Ricoeur moves from pure description to a phenomenology which includes our corporeal experience.

#### **3.2.2.4. The Involuntary: Decision and the Corporeal Involuntary as a Motive**

A phenomenological account of decision further entails that one considers the body as one of many involuntary sources of motive (Ricoeur 1966:85). Although one source amongst many, the body is the most basic, initially existent, and underivable involuntary source of motive, and therefore the body introduces an existential quality to the study of the human will



(Ricoeur 1966:85). That is to say, by removing “...the brackets that shielded pure description [...] the ‘I am’ or ‘I exist’ infinitely overwhelms the ‘I think.’”

How does bodily, or “organic”, values then relate to the will? Ricoeur (1966:85-6) writes that because there is a “circular relation” between motive and project, the body should be understood as “body-for-my-willing, and my willing as project-based-(in part)-on my body.” Put differently, “[t]he involuntary is *for* the will and the will is *by reason* of the involuntary” (Ricoeur 1966:86). Yet, even though we can eidetically describe the body in this way, Ricoeur (1966:86) adds that it is ultimately impossible to capture the entire bodily experience in words. This is because, “[t]o experience is always more than to understand” (Ricoeur 1966:86). However, just because we cannot entirely capture the bodily experience in language, does not mean that we cannot say *something* about our experience of the body.

Ricoeur (1966:86) argues that we can represent our affectivity or feelings since these are “...still [...] mode[s] of thought in its widest sense.” This can be achieved through the “...objectification of need and of bodily existence”, complemented by a conscious “introspection into personal body insofar as it is intelligible” (Ricoeur 1966:86-7). For example, an investigation into (bodily) need requires both perspectives: need (of food, rest, and so on) is experienced objectively through symptoms such as the “deterioration of blood and tissue”, *and* need is known, not as an outside force, but as an internal lived experience of need (Ricoeur 1966:87-8).<sup>74</sup>

Ricoeur’s study of the corporeal involuntary covers an investigation into the nature of (i) need, (ii) our motives and values on the organic level, (iii) and the body and the total field of motivation. Ricoeur (1966:88-9) begins by defining need as being only one part of the corporeal involuntary, as being related to appetite, and as something which sometimes assumes the form of rejection of things that threaten corporeal existence. Ultimately, need is a “lack of . . . and an impulse directed towards . . .” (Ricoeur 1966:89). My need is thus an “active affect”<sup>75</sup> and intentional in the sense that it strives for something (other than myself) due to a lack (Ricoeur 1966:89; 91).

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<sup>74</sup> The aforementioned alerts us that consciousness is not just a “symptom of the object body, but rather [one now understands] the object-body as an indication of a personal body in which the Cogito shares as its very existence. [...] The link between consciousness and the body is already functioning and is experienced at the core of [...] subjectivity” (Ricoeur 1966:88).

<sup>75</sup> Active affect, as opposed to a “sense affect”, such as pleasure and pain.

Moreover, need, because it is directed towards what is other, is not an “*inner sensation*”. One’s needs do not suddenly make one aware of one’s body; rather, needs work through my body to indicate what I lack (Ricoeur 1966:91). It is *I* (the I-body as a whole) who is hungry. One does not say that ‘my body is hungry’.<sup>76</sup> Finally, unlike pain which is an alien influence and a reaction, need emanates from one’s own body and is *not* a re-action (Ricoeur 1966:92). Need is a pre-action, because it precedes the pleasant sensations which indicate that the need is being met (Ricoeur 1966:91). Because need is not a reflex, but only inclines without compelling, Ricoeur (1966:93) writes that one must include it as a motive.<sup>77</sup>

Therefore, even though a person is subjected to needs, a person still has a will which can be exercised. Put differently, even though I have no control over the presence of a lack, I can still choose not to act based on this lack (Ricoeur 1966:93). Ricoeur (1966:93-94) cites various examples of people who choose to go hungry or live celibately in order to pursue other goals. “Need can thus be one motive *among* others”,<sup>78</sup> yet need is also a motive *unlike* others because need is the body taking its natural course (Ricoeur 1966:94). Ricoeur (1966:94) writes that needs as motives are given to the agent because of the agent’s corporeal existence; the agent did not evaluate needs and deem them as good or worthy motives to have. Therefore, “[t]he mystery of incarnate Cogito ties willing to this first stratum of values with which motivation begins” (Ricoeur 1966:94). Finally, the body is present in the “apprehension of all motives and through them of all values”, because the body is the “affective medium of all values” (Ricoeur 1966:122).

### 3.2.2.5. The History of Decision: Hesitation

Moving from the involuntary and back to the voluntary again, Ricoeur takes up another phenomenon present in decision: the hesitation which precedes decision. Ricoeur (1966:135) writes that the investigation of the body resulted that we had to go beyond pure phenomenological description; an investigation of hesitation will do likewise, since it introduces the temporal aspect of our existence. Opposed to the initial pure description of decision as non-temporal and a static fragment (the choice is described as already made),

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<sup>76</sup> Again, one sees how Ricoeur draws on ordinary use of language to tell us something about the nature of action.

<sup>77</sup> History is a similar motive to that of need: one does not choose to have a history, but one can choose how to respond and yield to it (Ricoeur 1966:125).

<sup>78</sup> Ricoeur (1966:95) writes that need as motive amongst others is also illustrated by the fact that we have a lot of learned behaviours and etiquette surrounding the satisfaction of our needs. We do not act like animals out of instinct. I do not grab a sandwich from a shop and start eating it when I’m hungry; instead I enter the shop, I purchase the sandwich, and only then do I eat it. As such, Ricoeur (1966:86) introduces the notion of imagination: we *represent* to ourselves how our needs will be or should be met and therefore our imaginations facilitate willing.

Ricoeur now turns to describing the making of a choice as a *movement* which grows towards a (i) project, (ii) itself, and (iii) its motives (Ricoeur 1966:135). In other words, Ricoeur (1966:135) now wishes to include the process or the history which terminates in choice.

Ricoeur (1966:136) writes that the voluntary process of choice is closely tied to the involuntary body, and not only because the history of choice includes corporeal motives, but because the body makes of human beings temporal beings. One can therefore say that the process of choice has two sides to it: it is done and undergone. I voluntarily choose, and I am a being bound by a body, and therefore bound by time (Ricoeur 1966:136). This temporal process of choosing is captured by the notion of hesitation. Hesitation is defined as "...a choice being sought" and a type of "in-decision" (Ricoeur 1966:137).

Ricoeur (1966:138) describes the process of hesitation as "a perplexed willing seeking to orient itself." In this process of indecision, one is "...lost among confused motives." (Ricoeur 1966:142). Because of the indecision, the un-decided consciousness tries out certain projects in a '*what if I do . . . ?*' exercise (Ricoeur 1966:139-140). As Ricoeur (1966:140) puts it: "I do not know which I I shall be" and thus to hesitate is to "try out different 'selves,' to attempt an imputation." Yet, just because one has not decided upon a way of being, does not mean that one is nothing; instead, one is a "self in a conditional mode"<sup>79</sup> (Ricoeur 1966:140). However, because one is divided, or many, and hence one does not cohere with oneself, hesitation can be painful or an anxious state of willing (Ricoeur 1966:137).

Finally, indecision or hesitation culminates in choice in a very paradoxical manner: Ricoeur (1966:164) writes that "...the event of choice stands in a peculiar relation to the process which precedes it: it *completes* it and at the same time *breaks it off*." With regards to the former aspect of choice, Ricoeur (1966:168-9) writes that "[t]o hesitate is to have confused reasons, to deliberate is to disentangle and clarify these reasons, to choose is to bring out a preference among the reasons." Choice therefore completes the deliberation over projects and their related reasons. With regards to the latter, choice can be understood as a leap or a jump which appears almost "discontinuous" with regards to the hesitation that preceded the choice (Ricoeur 1966:171-2). Such a decision is often the result of a situation which calls for immediate action, and therefore involves risk (Ricoeur 1966:174). However, Ricoeur

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<sup>79</sup> Ricoeur (1966:140) is adamant that "this inchoate, problematic mode of myself must be grasped as it presents itself." That is to say, "[w]e have no right to substitute for it the image of the triumphant self which is invariably one and which I build up beyond its own hesitations" (Ricoeur 1966:140). The latter triumphant self is a "cosmological prejudice" which entails that one builds up an invariable self which is a "hypostatized image" (Ricoeur 1966:141).

(1966:180-1) argues that both the irruption of choice and choice as completion of motives are “paradoxically identical” and the one cannot be read without the other: “The reading in terms of continuity stresses the guiding role of motivation, but cannot show the nullity of the act of choice; the reading in terms of discontinuity brings out the leap of the event but cannot annul the sustaining role of motivation.” Within one’s act, one thus brings together the two readings of choice (Ricoeur 1966:181).

### **3.2.2.6. Section 3.2.2 Conclusion**

As such, Ricoeur concludes his description of the first triadic component of the voluntary will, namely, decision. As said above, decision consists of three voluntary moments: (i) “I want *this* [project]”, (ii) I make up *my mind* to do this”, (iii) and “I decide *because...*” (Ricoeur 1966:135). The third of these voluntary moments also introduces the involuntary, namely the body. Being and having a body is part of subjectivity: the body as the ‘because’ of some of one’s actions, is not an external motive – it is part of one’s very existence as human being. Yet, the involuntary needs of one’s bodily existence does not overwhelm the voluntary: the body enables action, and the subject can choose how to respond to his or her bodily needs. Finally, making a decision is not an atemporal empirical fact. It is historical in the sense that hesitation often precedes decision.

### **3.2.3. Voluntary Movement**

#### **3.2.3.1. Introduction to Section 3.2.3.**

Section 3.2.3. includes a discussion of the second constituent of the triadic structure of the will, namely voluntary movement. First, Ricoeur again links decision, as first constituent of the will, with voluntary movement as the second constituent of the will. Second, Ricoeur provides a purely descriptive account of acting and moving: action is that which fulfils an empty intention and is oriented towards the object-world (intentionality), and action, as originally part of the cogito, is a fundamental way of experiencing oneself (reflexivity). Third, Ricoeur points out that although the body is part of the cogito, subjectivity’s relationship with the body is often polemical. Thus, Ricoeur proceeds to discuss bodily spontaneity as a type of involuntary. Fourth, and in conclusion, Ricoeur complements our abstract conception of motivation with the phenomenon of effort. That is to say, Ricoeur (1966:204) investigates the effort involved in controlling and guiding both one’s thoughts and one’s body in the process of looking at motives (since “...both body and thought can resist”). As such, Ricoeur (1966:204-5) holds that “[a] complete characterization of will is possible only in context of effort.”

### 3.2.3.2. Voluntary Movement and Decision

To tie the previous and current sections together, Ricoeur reminds us again of the inextricable relationship between decision and voluntary movement: the will as capacity to decide is not complete without the power to act or to move (Ricoeur 1966:201). In addition, Ricoeur (1966:202) writes that the soul and body unite within a decision. In turn, with regards to execution of the decision, the body connects us to the world or the actual. Because I am a corporeal being, I have the capacity or the power to act, or to bring change into the world (Ricoeur 1966:203). The I-body is the capacity to do, to make the possible into the actual (Ricoeur 1966:203). This, writes Ricoeur (1966:203) “...is what distinguishes will from imagination” (specifically the type of imagination which preoccupies itself with the unrealistic).

### 3.2.3.3. A Pure Description of Acting and Moving

To start with, a pure description of action encounters serious difficulties. This is because action escapes words: it is “*present and full*”, it is an event which creates something new in the world, something actual, and something which is present in the very “forward movement of existence itself” (Ricoeur 1966:205). The present, writes Ricoeur (1966:205), is both happening and doing. That is to say, the present is given and life goes on, but at the same time I can intervene in the present and change the world. Since action is actualized presence which cannot really be described, Ricoeur (1966:205) holds that we should talk about action in terms of its intentionality. In other words, we can describe action as that which fulfils an empty intention: action is the possible made real. (Later, with the hermeneutic and intersubjective turns in his work, Ricoeur will hold that action can only be realised in relation to and through the other.)

Describing acting as fulfilling a project, however, introduces a second difficulty: if one talks of ‘fulfilment’ or ‘realisation’ of an intended project, what exactly does one mean? (Ricoeur 1966:206). Can realisation, or acting, as something practical, be described as a thought? Ricoeur (1966:207) answers that one can approach such a description, especially if one conceives of thought in a broader sense (in other words, as ‘consciousness of...’), then action is “an aspect of intentional thought...” Ricoeur (1966:207-8) adds that the subject relates to the objects of the world through action (called “practical intentionality”),<sup>80</sup> and in

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<sup>80</sup> Vallée (2018:32) writes of Ricoeur’s understanding of ‘intentionality’ that it is not just a “theoretical intentionality [...] trying to shed light on an object of thought”, but rather a “...practical intentionality related to

such a way “[t]he power of producing events in the world is a kind of intentional relation to things and to the world.” Therefore, one should not conceive of action or movement of one’s body as first representing or imagining one’s body to oneself and then demanding it to move. Instead, we must understand that “acting is an original dimension of the cogito”<sup>81</sup> and so one must think of “consciousness which is an action” (Ricoeur 1966:209).

Regarding a description of ‘actualization,’ Ricoeur (1966:210) writes that actualization is not a movement,<sup>82</sup> but rather that which was “acted”: that which brought about a change in the world. Thus, when one talks about actualization, the focus is less on one’s body, and more on what was done in the world (Ricoeur 1966:210). In turn, Ricoeur (1966:212) poses the question of how we should think of the body within acting. The body is not the terminus of action, but the organ<sup>83</sup> of acting (Ricoeur 1966:212). Mostly, the body goes unnoticed when one relates to the world through acts, but sometimes one encounters obstacles which draws one’s attention to the movements and limits of one’s body (Ricoeur 1966:212). The capable body is therefore seldom the object of reflection. We can use our capabilities without explicitly thinking about them (Ricoeur 1966:215).

Finally, Ricoeur (1966:216-7) points out an issue at the very heart of understanding human action: even though we experience action as indivisible and immediate, in order for us to understand or interpret our own actions, we tend to dissect them and break them up into more comprehensible parts. As a result, we resort to dualisms. Epistemological dualism, writes Ricoeur (1966:226), can only be overcome when one does *not* exclusively attribute thoughts to subjectivity (as when one thinks of introspection as enclosed within itself and as removed from the body and the world), and movement to objectivity (as when one describes observed behaviour as movement which is without meaning, since it is not attached to the subject). Therefore, Ricoeur (1966:217) writes that we must “...reintroduce the body into the cogito as a whole and ... recover the fundamental certitude of being incarnate [and] ... corporeal....”

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a subjectivity understood as a driving force in the world.” Subsequently, intentionality is already a form of action (Vallée 2018:32).

<sup>81</sup> This understanding of action as an ‘original dimension of the cogito’ already cropped up when I looked at how decision and its ‘carrying out’ sometimes coincide. Once again, this insight is crucial for a fuller understanding of complacency. Kawall (2006:345) and I both defined complacency in such a way that it seems as if complacent action flows from complacent ways of thinking. However, if one now re-interprets complacency from Ricoeur’s action-theoretical perspective, then complacency is more like a complex of incorrect thoughts and actions.

<sup>82</sup> I do not perform a movement when I actualize a project; I pour some tea, or water my garden, or feed my cat. To describe a fulfilment of a project as a movement, or a sum of movements, is to be an outside observer regarding the body as a mere object (Ricoeur 1966:209-210).

<sup>83</sup> However, organ must not be equated with instrument. To say that one uses one’s limbs to perform some action, is a wrong description. Rather one dances, or one walks, but one uses tools (Ricoeur 1966:212-3).

The cogito can experience the body both as a subject, and as an object: that is, an experience of my body as “indivisible... willing-moving”, and my experience of willing when applying force to a submissive or resisting body (Ricoeur 1966:218-9). Ricoeur (1966:226) writes the following:

“If [...] the integral experience of the Cogito includes that of the personal body and through it the experience of acting in the world, if, in addition, the conduct of the other is described as revealing a subject, a ‘thou,’ the concepts of action or conduct which we have to formulate really concern *action of a subject in the world ‘through’ his body*. This subject is myself, yourself, it is my fellow man. My own experience of myself and the sympathy (or better, intropathy) for the other are two living experiences which give rise to phenomenological concepts immediately valid for subjectivity in general.”

However, even if one experiences the body as an inherent part of one’s subjectivity, Ricoeur (1966:227) admits that there is a type of duality still present within one’s lived experience: this is one’s ties with the body which are “polemic and dramatic.” We have to conquer the body, so to speak, dialogue with it, and learn to work with the chaos of the body in order to will through it. As Ricoeur (1966:227) succinctly puts it: “[e]very voluntary hold on the body repossesses the body’s involuntary usage.”

#### **3.2.3.4. Bodily Spontaneity: the Dramatic Relationship Between Subject and Body as Manifest in Emotion and Habits**

The abovementioned dramatic relationship in one’s lived experience as subject and body is apparent in bodily spontaneity. Bodily spontaneity further reveals itself in three ways, namely preformed skills, emotions, and habit. For the purposes of this thesis, I will only focus on emotion and habit, since these contribute most to our understanding of complacency.

To begin with, emotions do not function as motives, but rather emotion “presupposes a more or less implicit motivation which precedes and sustains it” (Ricoeur 1966:250-1). Emotion further introduces an aspect of burgeoning involuntary motion into the already extant ends (Ricoeur 1966:251). Moreover, emotion and habit cannot be understood independently, yet emotion is “more basic than habit” in the sense of initiating habitual behaviour (Ricoeur 1966:251). Ricoeur (1966:251) argues that with regards to emotion there is no break between thought and movement, and therefore “the passage from thought to movement is mysteriously carried out on the level of the involuntary” (Ricoeur 1966:251).

Emotion, as this involuntary movement, can only be understood “in relation to a willing which it agitates and which in turn only moves if it is moved.” Emotions therefore sustain

voluntary action in the form of foregoing, stimulating, or curbing voluntary action (Ricoeur 1966:251-2). Although emotion does not “...enslave the power of judging”, emotion has a disordering type of spontaneity to it, “which always poses a threat to self-possession” (Ricoeur 1966:252, 255).<sup>84</sup> Thus, emotion – standing in a polemical relationship with the voluntary – might be harnessed to make better decisions, or might alternately thwart better decisions. One can also decide to act despite one’s emotion.

As Ricoeur (1966:256) writes: “...all decision is tinged with some bodily effort.” One thus has to keep one’s body – eager to act while agitated by emotion – in check, while deliberating on motives for one’s actions. Yet, before Ricoeur moves on to discuss this effort in-depth, Ricoeur (1966:307) first looks at a phenomenon which contains an inverse danger to that of emotion, namely, habit. While emotions are dangerous in the sense of potentially throwing a person into disorder, habit’s danger lies within its tendency towards inertia or “order” (Ricoeur 1966:306-7). That is to say, one might fall back on the extreme form of habit in the form of automatisms or “mechanical inertia”, to such an extent that one does not innovate and that one fails to adapt to new situations (Ricoeur 1966:285, 307).

Habit,<sup>85</sup> writes Ricoeur (1966:280), further entails that, first, one has historically *learned* certain acts; second, one has been affected by this history of learning in the sense of having *acquired* certain habits; and third, the learned and acquired act is useful: one now *knows how* to do certain things. With regards to learning, Ricoeur (1966:280) stresses that the human being transforms its own “...being by its own activity...” and that this transformation or learning extends to bodily movement, affects (or tastes), and intellectual behaviours. Most importantly, learning takes place in time (Ricoeur 1966:280). We can thus speak of habit in temporal terms as “...an involuntary *continuation* of ourselves” (Ricoeur 1966:296). As such, habit is not preformed, but has an origin, and that is why one speaks of acquiring a habit after one has become proficient at something (Ricoeur 1966:281). Human habit is moreover not “...acquired entirely apart from the will”, yet habit is not entirely and thoroughly an act of constant willing either (Ricoeur 1966:282). Rather – and this touches upon the second aspect of habit raised above – habit is acquired: that is to say, habit affects the will (Ricoeur 1966:282).

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<sup>84</sup> “Thus all voluntary attention might have to be recovered from an initial involuntary attention involving even a muscular effort” (Ricoeur 1966:255). Consciously, we thus judge or “give meaning to” emotions in the way that we respond to them (Pellauer 2007:22).

<sup>85</sup> It’s rather difficult to ascertain what habit is. Ricoeur (1966:280) writes that habit is not “itself an intention” or “any particular function”, but rather that “it affects all the intentions of consciousness” (just like emotion affects our intentions).



Habit is thus a kind of involuntary: it is “...an unrepairable something which is the work of time” and it becomes a type of (“second”) nature<sup>86</sup> (Ricoeur 1966:282-3). One’s acquired habits therefore cease to be “...initiative and an activity” and functions according to structures “...created by living...” (Ricoeur 1966:282-3). The third aspect of habit, writes Ricoeur (1966:283), is its “use-value”. One *knows* how to do certain things, such as riding a bicycle, or how to respond in stressful situations. This characteristic of habit as comprehension should remind us that habit cannot be reduced to mere unconscious reflexes (Ricoeur 1966:284). Habit is not unconscious, it is only “*reflexive* knowing and willing” that disappears when one is acting according to habit (Ricoeur 1966:286). Moreover, and lastly, it is clear that habit is distinct from reflexes, since in habitual actions we are constantly innovating and improvising<sup>87</sup> based on different circumstances in which we find ourselves (Ricoeur 1966:287-9).

However, Ricoeur (1966:289) points out that habits aren’t just skills or know-how, but also tendencies: our spontaneous thoughts and gestures reveal these tendencies. These spontaneous habitual tendencies can both enable and frustrate voluntary actions (Ricoeur 1966:289). More specifically, Ricoeur (1966:290) writes that we “...only will the presence and, in a general way, the bearing of the useful gesture; the form arises as if of itself.” Habit as involuntary form therefore gives shape to our voluntary actions, but can also hinder willing when habit assumes its extreme form, namely being more mechanical or automatic (Ricoeur 1966:296-7).

Although automatization is as part of habit as invention is, “...when automatization predominates over spontaneity in habit, it is more of a danger than a help: the relation of ability [habit] to willing becomes obscure...” (Ricoeur 1966:297-9). Complete automatization would therefore do away with willing, and a person will consequently become more thing-like (Ricoeur 1966:297). Yet, automatic behaviour does not “overcome” a person. Ricoeur (1966:305-6) writes that we rather adopt an automatic attitude or “fall back” on automatic behaviour when we no longer apply our wills in an attentive manner. We can, therefore, still change our habits through some exertion.

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<sup>86</sup> Ricoeur (1966:285-6) writes: “Thanks to the passage of time, to repetition, [habit] indefinitely enlarges the body’s *irreflective usage*. What once was analysed, thought, and willed drifts bit by bit into the realm of that which I have never known or willed. This is why we can call it a ‘reversion of freedom to nature,’ understanding by nature that primitive characteristic of all power over the body of being neither known nor willed.”

<sup>87</sup> These improvisations are not willed in the strict sense and are therefore somewhat perplexing or bewildering to conscious effort (Ricoeur 1966:289).

In conclusion, both habit and emotion can either act as hindrance or help to the will: sometimes spontaneous ‘outbursts’ of the body might spur us into acting as we wish, or deter certain actions that we actually wish to do. In short, each person has to manage the abovementioned polemical aspects of their lived experience. Below, I will look at the effort involved in responding, choosing, shaping, or falling back on emotions and habits.

### **3.2.3.5. Moving and Effort**

This brings us, finally, to the third section of voluntary movement, namely moving and effort. Ricoeur (1966:308) writes that the problem of muscular effort, that is to say, willing controlling the body, is an enigma. However, there are some things that can be said descriptively about effort: (1) effort is known through reflection on our actions; (2) moreover, the aforementioned reflection or awareness of effort, arises because sometimes one meets with resistance in the form of one’s (otherwise docile) body, resistance from “some aspect of myself”, or resistance from things in the world; (3) in addition, while “voluntary motion ...passes unnoticed because it expresses the docility of a yielding body”, and is therefore “transparent”, effort is opaque and the frustrated movement becomes the “‘terminus’ of the movement”; (4) finally, effort results in the fact that we no longer experience ourselves as a unity, but rather as a battlefield where passions (that which renders one passive, such as emotions) make war on the flow between will and its abilities (Ricoeur 1966:308-310).

One can thus only describe effort in contrast to docility (Ricoeur 1966:310). That is to say, I know the feeling of effort, because I can contrast it with my usual experience of my body as compliant to my willing (in my usual experience I experience myself as picking up a book, or as walking through the garden; I am involved in my totality). The compliant or docile body thus reveals the fact of effort by acting as contrast. Therefore, ‘docility’ in the aforementioned context does not mean that a person as such is docile or passive, but rather denotes the problem-free relationship that the subject-body has to what has to be executed. The docile body is a body which acts out willing without resistance, and consequently without effort.

As mentioned above, habits and emotions act as resistances to the will. However, habits and emotions are functional resistances, rather than resistance as found in the body (such as reflexes, for instance) or encountered in external things (Ricoeur 1966:312). That is to say, emotion, for example, affects the way one is oriented towards the world: voluntary attention is therefore tinged with the “nascent disorder” that emotion introduces (Ricoeur 1966:312). It takes effort to either contain oneself or to dare to do something when one is affected by anger

or exuberant exhilaration, or fear, respectively (Ricoeur 1966:312). On the other hand, habit as structural forms of doing introduces resistance in the form of inertia (performing certain actions in one way, or responding to emotions in a set way) (Ricoeur 1966:315). Yet, as voluntary being, one is never entirely at the mercy of the involuntary: “...the principle of passion is bondage I impose on myself, the principle of emotion is wonder to which I submit” (Ricoeur 1966:312).

Emotions therefore only become obstacles when I view these emotions as antagonistic towards my body (Ricoeur 1966:312). On the other hand, habits are allies of effort in the sense that habit introduces discipline into the body when one is overcome by waves of emotion (Ricoeur 1966:314). Habit only becomes an obstacle when it becomes more automatic (manifested in prejudice, set ways of responding to emotions, sloth, or “an escape from consciousness”) (Ricoeur 1966:315-6). Finally, just as habit (as discipline) might aid a person in gaining control over emotions, so also can emotions shock or move the inert person, trapped in habitual ways, towards new voluntary action (Ricoeur 1966:316).

Lastly, Ricoeur (1966:318) proceeds to describe how effort moves the body via motor intentions. Voluntary motion entails “transitive consciousness” (consciousness which flows over or extends into movement in the world): however, one can only understand how voluntary motion takes place by taking account of motor intentions in the forms of desire and habit (Ricoeur 1966:318). That is to say, effort uses desire and habit – even though both of these are involuntary abilities – in order to enact an idea (Ricoeur 1966:318). Motor intentions are central to understanding voluntary motions because motor intentions both “exercise [a hold] on the body” and are “immediately *subordinat[e]* to willing” (Ricoeur 1966:318).

Put differently, “[m]otor intention is the power of willing” (Ricoeur 1966:327). Ricoeur (1966:327) writes: “There can be no willing without ability, and in the same way there is no ability without possible willing.” However, ultimately, it is impossible to completely understand motor intentions consciously, since “...this structure [of motor intention] is revealed to consciousness only by a general feeling of being alive, of being affected by my bodily situation” (Ricoeur 1966:326). As a final point in the discussion of effort, Ricoeur (1966:328, 332-4) posits that actions terminate in the world: we change the world, yet the world is available to us and completes our actions.<sup>88</sup> This relationship between the agent and the

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<sup>88</sup> Yet, the “presence of the world in perception has a mystery of its own, a mystery of sense intuition which does not permit itself to be absorbed in that of effort” (Ricoeur 1966:334).

world corresponds to the reciprocal relationship between willing and the involuntary. The structural involuntary can be an impediment to the will, yet the involuntary can also make itself available as an ability which facilitates willing (Ricoeur 1966:330).

### **3.2.4. Consenting to Necessities**

#### **3.2.4.1. Introduction to Section 3.2.4.**

Section 3.2.4 will include a discussion of the third and final constituent of the triadic structure of the will, namely consent. First, Ricoeur steps back and provides a summary of the description of the will, in which he situates consent. Second, Ricoeur identifies three kinds of necessities to which one can consent and which I will briefly discuss. Third, I will recount Ricoeur's descriptive account of consent: consent is an active (intentional) adoption of the necessary which one cannot change, and consent is making these necessities one's own (reflexivity). Fourth and finally, Ricoeur investigates the tension between freedom and necessity, which ultimately reflects an inherent and ontological tension in the human being.

#### **3.2.4.2. How Consent relates to Decision and Voluntary Movement**

As Ricoeur (1966:341) nears the final part of *Freedom and Nature*, he provides us with the following summary of the will (which also introduces us to consent):

“Deciding is the act of the will which is based on motives [part one]; moving is the act of the will which activates abilities or powers [part two]; consenting is the act of the will which acquiesces to a necessity [part three]—remembering that it is the same will which is considered successively from different points of view: the point of view of legitimacy, of efficacy, and of patience.”

According to Ricoeur (1966:341-3), one can identify three necessities to which one can consent: (1) character, (2) the unconscious, and (3) life. First, necessities here refer to bodily necessities since there are other contextual necessities such as other wills/people, history, and the course of nature, which Ricoeur (1966:343) says he will not now take into consideration. In addition, the body was discussed in part one and two of *Freedom and Nature* “as [a] source of motives, [and] a cluster of capacities”; but now, in part three bodily necessity assumes the form of “necessary nature” (Ricoeur 1966:10, 343).

#### **3.2.4.3. The Three Necessities: Character, Unconscious, and Life**

Next, Ricoeur discusses each of the three bodily necessities. I will only pass over each very briefly in this section. First, character is that particular style or uniqueness of each consciousness (Ricoeur 1966:341). Character is thus a finite outlook on the world (Pellauer 2007:24). Moreover, character is not a value nor a value system, but one's “...perspective

which is not reducible to values” (Ricoeur 1966:342). Here, that is to say, in *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur describes character as an absolute involuntary. However, later Ricoeur would amend this view. (See section 3.4. in this chapter).

Second, in contrast to Freud who holds that the unconscious should be thought of as *thoughts* that are suppressed or hidden, Ricoeur (1966:375) holds that one cannot attribute thoughts to the unconscious. Rather, one should understand the unconscious as that which refers to “indefinite *matter*, revolting against the light which all thought bears with it” (Ricoeur 1966:378). That is to say, the unconscious refers to those spontaneous and obscure emotions, or affects, needs, habits, or a ‘something’ which have not yet been articulated and put into words or formed into intellectual representations. The unconscious “...is not yet consciousness of...,” it is “...a form of unreflected subjectivity”, or a hiddenness present in consciousness (Ricoeur 1966:379, 387, 392). Last, but important, the unconscious is not a motive itself, but is “a source of motives” (Ricoeur 1966:342). Consequently, Ricoeur (1966:342) writes that there exists no such a thing as a purely voluntary and conscious choice motivated by a “total motivation”.

Third, Ricoeur (1966:342) writes that “[l]ife is the given which makes it possible that there can be values for me.” In other words, we did not choose this kind of existence, this life; instead we “*find*” that we exist and from there on go to live our lives by making choices and acting (Ricoeur 1966:413-4). Life, finally, is not something one gets to know as an observer or through knowing, instead, “life is enjoyed [and experienced]” (Ricoeur 1966:411). ‘Life’ is thus the third and last bodily necessity to which we are bound.

#### **3.2.4.4. A Description of Consent**

Following the above description of ‘character,’ the ‘unconscious,’ and ‘life,’ one might wonder how the voluntary human being should respond to the aforementioned necessities. Ricoeur calls this response ‘consent.’ Consent, understood philosophically, is puzzling since it is a willed action performed consciously and intellectually which “...stumbles against a fact it cannot change, a necessity” (Ricoeur 1966:344). Thus Ricoeur (1966:344) posits that we can only understand the “...essence of consent by a sequence of approximations”. Consent is the “...active adoption of necessity” in the present; to consent is to make reality, given necessity, one’s own (yet not in the possessive sense) and to link necessity “with the freedom which adopts it” (Ricoeur 1966:344-6). By consenting, “I change it [the pure fact of necessity] for myself since I cannot change it in itself” (Ricoeur 1966:344). Ricoeur (1966:346) further writes

that consent is patience, since patience “actively supports what it undergoes.” In summary: “Consent is the [asymptotic] movement of freedom towards nature in order to become reunited with its necessity and convert it into itself” (Ricoeur 1966:346-7).

### 3.2.4.5. The Tension Between Freedom and Necessity

However, Ricoeur (1966:354) writes that “...necessity always to some degree injures freedom.” Even though necessity enables freedom, it also limits the will negatively, such as the negation inherent in mortality (Ricoeur 1966:354). Following from this, Ricoeur (1966:354) writes that we can think of the will as refusing, or wresting itself from, that “which binds it to the earth.” Consequently, “*the yes of consent is always won from the no*”, but the ‘no’ will still be present to some extent in the ‘yes’ of consent (Ricoeur 1966:354, 444). Thus, writes Ricoeur (1966:444), the will and nature/necessity/the involuntary mutually negate each other (not only epistemically, but also in practice).

From the aforementioned one can distinguish between a negative negation (negation underwent) and a positive negation (negation willed) (Ricoeur 1966:446). On the one hand, necessity negates freedom by limiting the will through one’s character, one’s life, and one’s unconscious (Ricoeur 1966:445). In other words, one can say that everything that makes one unique and makes one who one is, also acts as a limit to one’s will (Ricoeur 1966:445). This is negative negation. On the other hand, negation is also present in the free act of saying ‘no’ to necessity (Ricoeur 1966:445). Freedom thus negates its constraints, and this is a positive negation. One therefore has the freedom to reject oneself, so to speak, and act and be otherwise (Ricoeur 1966:445).

Ricoeur (1966:446, 467) consequently introduces the notion of hope: we can hope to overcome negation. The ‘no’ of freedom can become a ‘yes’: instead of struggling against nature, freedom could become a completion of nature (Ricoeur 1966:446). Yet, the significant fact remains that the “Cogito is not wholly action, but rather action and passion [in the sense of being passive, as undergoing necessities]” (Ricoeur 1966:447). In response to realising or admitting that the self is also subject to passivity through necessity, the temptation lies in either positing the self as an absolute (“to exalt itself infinitely”) or, of losing oneself in the object (the body or the world) (Ricoeur 1966:446, 463-4). In the language pertaining to consent, one can speak of “imperfect consent” and “hyperbolic consent” (Ricoeur 1966:469, 473) That is to say, either a total repudiation of the involuntary necessities of the self which entails that: (1) the self, rid of character, becomes freedom itself, (2) the self, rid of the unconscious, as entirely

transparent to itself, and (3) the self, rid of life and the body, as transcendent and beyond time and space (Ricoeur 1966:464-5). Or, alternatively, a total association of the self with nature or necessity. However, due to suffering and evil, one cannot unconditionally consent to character, the unconscious, and life (Ricoeur 1966:480).

Ricoeur (1966:479) then proceeds to ask: “who could live in this authentic tension between a consent focused on the self and an admiration [of nature] careless of the self?” Ricoeur (1966:479) argues that this tension will never be resolved since consent is “...an act which is never complete.” Moreover, with regards to comprehending how the involuntary and the voluntary coheres in us, the human being is ultimately a mystery which the intellect cannot grasp. However, Ricoeur (1966:444) argues that it is not merely the case that we cannot intellectually grasp these two disparate constituents of human beings; instead there is an inherent rent, or lesion in the human being itself. The epistemological difficulty reflects an ontological mystery. Ricoeur (1966:444) thus concludes that the problem of existing remains unresolved; yet we can hope. In the patient act of hoping for deliverance from this tense state, we do not resort to either the absolute self or absolute nature: instead, hope is the “sustenance on the way of conciliation” (Ricoeur 1966:480).

### **3.2.5. Conclusion: Freedom and Nature**

In conclusion, Ricoeur (1966:482) writes that he has moved from an account of human freedom that is daring, unimpeded, and filled with possibilities, to an account of freedom that has to consent or subordinate itself to necessity. Yet, cautions Ricoeur (1966:482), one cannot, and should not, over-emphasize either the moment of choice and effort, or the moment of consent at the cost of the other. Both are essential to human freedom. Wisdom, argues Ricoeur (1966:482-3), is to be found in paradox:

“An appeal to daring and risk, an ethics of responsibility and involvement end in a reconciled mediation of the incoercible exigencies [sic] of our bodily and terrestrial condition. But in turn a meditation on irreducible necessity ends in the exultation of freedom in the assumption of responsibility in which I cry, it is I who move this body which bears and betrays me! I transform this world which situates me and engenders me after the flesh! I give rise to being within and without myself by my choice.”

In other words, by making choices and exerting effort to act in a responsible way, one inevitably encounters necessary limits such as one’s body or one’s contingent place in the world. And, on the other hand, faced with these necessary limits, one seizes sovereignty and

claims responsibility for oneself. However, Ricoeur moves beyond this contrast between different moments of our freedom.

The moments of freedom, that is to say, “deciding, moving, consenting—unites action and passion, initiative and receptivity, according to a different intentional mode” (Ricoeur 1966:483). In other words, when phenomenologically describing each of the aforementioned moments of freedom, one repeatedly encounters the active/passive or initiative/receptivity paradox. Ricoeur (1966:483) reminds us that when we examined choice or deciding, we were unable to resolve the paradox between irruption and continued attention. Thus, within choice one already comes across what Ricoeur (1966:483) calls the “grandeur and misery of human freedom”: freedom is an absolute initiative, an irruption, an action; yet freedom is also relative to motives, which are in turn determined by one’s body and life, and hence freedom also assumes the form of passivity and receptivity. Likewise, this paradox can be found when describing movement and consent. Ricoeur (1966:483-4) therefore concludes that the paradox is not between the moments of freedom or willing, but is rather “between the triple form of initiative and triple form of receptivity.” Ricoeur (1966:484) concludes that we can now say “willing which acquiesces to its motives *consents* to the reasons for its choice; and, inversely, that consent which reaffirms an existence which is not chosen, with its constriction, its shadows, its contingency, is like a *choice* of myself...” Such then, is human freedom: alternating daring and patience within the heart of willing (Ricoeur 1966:484).

In conclusion then, the above description of human freedom is immensely important to our understanding of complacency as action. My working definition provided of complacency in chapter one assumes an agent who’s freedom is more unconstrained. Although I have mentioned that there are external constraints on action, such as other people, one’s community, or one’s history, I have ignored the possibility that there might be internal constraints, such as character, the unconscious, and one’s very life. As such, I take from *Freedom and Nature* that the voluntary or the will is more fragile: it is a tension between activity and passivity, initiation and receptivity (Pellauer 2007:15). How this tension – found at the very core of being human – plays out during complacent actions, will be explored further via examples, in chapter six.

### **3.2.6. Transition: Lifting the Brackets.**

#### **3.2.6.1. Ricoeur’s Turn towards Hermeneutics via the Symbol**

*Freedom and Nature* is not Ricoeur’s final nor complete say on the human will or action. As was indicated above, *Freedom and Nature* presents a descriptive phenomenological



account of human action which is derived from an individual, first person perspective in dialogue with the natural sciences and empirical psychology (Depraz 2018:194, 198-201). Depraz (2018:202) writes that “[i]n contrast with the ‘empirical’ philosophical psychology of the ‘there is’ (or what we would call today ‘in the third person’), Ricoeur opposes a description in the first person where I am an actor in a specific situation, joined with a description ‘in the second person’ ‘by another person.’” In this account of the first person who wills and acts, Ricoeur has shown how the voluntary and the involuntary are connected: one cannot think of freedom without necessity, and therefore human freedom is always interconnected with biological, psychological, and sociocultural constraints.

This phenomenological exercise was crucial to illustrate that the subject has free will, as opposed to being a mere thing which is wholly determined by nature (Jervolino 2011:152). Moreover, in *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur has delineated what we can expect of ourselves and of other human beings (the possibilities of action: the capacities that the subject has) (Huskey 2009:22). In other words, Ricoeur’s phenomenological description of action spells out what the fundamental possibilities and limitations of human freedom and action are.

Working from this foundation of essential possibilities of action, the aim is to later arrive at complacent action. However, Ricoeur’s philosophy of action still needs to evolve before one can arrive at an understanding of something as contingent or specific as complacent action. This is partly because Ricoeur has placed evil, Transcendence, and the everyday empirical appearances of actions in parentheses at the start of *Freedom and Nature*. His account of action is still too abstract; it does not yet include a person who acts. In addition, as I have shown earlier, in chapter two, “[t]here can be no *praxis* which is not already symbolically structured in some way” (Ricoeur 2004:133). Because the description of the essence of human willing in *Freedom and Nature* lacks an acknowledgement of the symbolically<sup>89</sup> structured nature of action, one can claim that *Freedom and Nature* does not yet give us an account of action. Finally, and this is something I will only look at much later, action can only be actualized in a community of other agents. In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur (1966:32) only speaks of other agents as having a “secondary and nonessential role, as affecting [...the subject’s] decision, [as being] one motive among the motives from [...the subject’s] body, from society, or from a universe of abstractions.” Ricoeur does not yet provide an account of how

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<sup>89</sup> Where language is the symbolic structure “par excellence” (Ricoeur 1974c:35; 2016:183).

other agents and a community of agents *enable* the subject's action in a fundamental sense (Ricoeur 1966:32).

In order to progress towards an understanding of complacent action then, each of the above limits will have to be addressed. As a start, some of the above brackets will have to be removed. This is exactly what Ricoeur (2015:2) does during the course of – not only his philosophy of the will – but also during the rest of his work. In 1960, the second part of Ricoeur's philosophy of the will, namely *Finitude and Guilt*,<sup>90</sup> is published. In the first part, namely *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur removes the bracket around evil;<sup>91</sup> in the second part of *Finitude and Guilt*, namely *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur transitions from “possibility to actuality, from fallibility to fault” (Thompson 1981:5). From a methodological point of view, *Finitude and Guilt* is still strongly phenomenological and is thus methodologically close to *Freedom and Nature*. Nevertheless, a hermeneutics of religious symbols is grafted onto this phenomenology (Michel 2006:51).

Ricoeur therefore takes a step from freedom or the subject without the fact of fault, to freedom and self-understanding that is mediated by the symbols of evil or the fault (Ricoeur 1974c:30): this shift yields a truly meaningful kind of freedom. This is because freedom that is mediated by the symbols of the fault, is the kind of freedom that allows the subject to understand itself as being responsible for its actions (Amalric 2018:38-40). In other words, although Ricoeur's subject in *Freedom and Nature* can impute its actions to itself (the subject posits itself in every decision in a prereflexive manner: it becomes aware of itself in the midst of the effort to act, and so on) and the subject's projects or acts are objectified in the world as signs (through the natural sciences and psychology), the symbol (of evil) further helps the

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<sup>90</sup> Although this thesis will not include an in-depth perusal of *Finitude and Guilt*, it is important to mention this work here since it is regarded as an important step in Ricoeur's overall philosophy, and hence his action theory. In addition, although *Finitude and Guilt* might seem relevant to my study of complacency, my reasons for not consulting this part of Ricoeur's work are threefold: (1) I am primarily interested in exploring complacency as action, (in other words, in exploring the essential characteristics of our lived experience of complacency); (2) even though I am interested in the question of moral or immoral action and how to evaluate complacency, I do not wish to presuppose that complacency is plain and simple 'evil' (that is why, in chapter one, I prefer to refer to complacency as a 'phenomenon,' rather than a 'vice'); and (3) while Ricoeur treats the question of morality in this earlier work, he hardly grapples with it under the angle of intersubjectivity, rather opting to deal with it from the angle of individual guilt; in other words, the subject in *Finitude and Guilt* is not yet concerned with the vulnerability of others and the affairs of the city (Michel 2006:72). As I have indicated in the introduction of this chapter, I will instead consult Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* as a way to explore complacency as moral or immoral action.

<sup>91</sup> Michel (2006:51) writes that these moral parentheses are already lifted at the end of *Freedom and Nature*, when Ricoeur explores how human beings are susceptible to doing evil.

subject to “become aware of [its] freedom in an indirect, retrospective manner” (Amalric 2018:40; Michel 2006:48-9).

Michel (2006:51) writes that Ricoeur’s anthropological project is additionally extended to regions of consciousness other than those belonging to the absolute involuntary, namely the discrepancy or inconsistency of oneself in relation to oneself (consciousness to consciousness, as opposed to consciousness against the limits of the body, unconscious, or character). In other words, in the second part of his philosophy of the will, Ricoeur describes the human experience of being “estranged from [oneself], divided within, confronted by a ‘limit-situation’ which shatter[s] all illusions of autonomous sovereignty and expose[s] the self to disturbing experiences of finitude and fallibility” (Kearney 2006:197). Since the fault or human fallibility baffles consciousness and rebels against conceptualization,<sup>92</sup> Ricoeur’s phenomenological anthropology logically leads to a description of the fault and of guilt in terms of symbols and myths. These symbols and myths, in turn, call for a hermeneutics of reconstruction,<sup>93</sup> because they have double or multiple meanings.<sup>94</sup> An interpretation of the symbols surrounding evil and guilt is thus necessary in order to fill the discrepancy that exists between oneself in relation to oneself: it is only through symbols that we can start to think and make sense of the fault and human guilt (Michel 2006:51).

Since the subject is now able to become aware of its freedom through “reflexive re-appropriation” of its actions as expressed by symbols and myths, the subject is not only conscious of the fault, but is also able to confess the fault present in its actions (Amalric 2018:40). In turn, the fault introduces confession, and confession or admission of guilt implies discourse, while discourse is mediated by symbols or a symbolic system, such as language (Ricoeur 2015:2). The subject’s world is thus expanded and enriched through the mediation of

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<sup>92</sup> This does not mean that concepts and symbols are mutually exclusive, just that Ricoeur has to give more precedence to the symbol as a way of understanding action that is no longer bracketed. It is thus necessary to pass through symbols, as public empirical appearances, in order to understand action in an even more comprehensive way. We have already seen some of this methodology in chapter two, where Ricoeur looks at the ordinary use of language (a system of symbols) in order to garner insights about the lived experience of action.

<sup>93</sup> Ricoeur’s (1974c:62) hermeneutics consist of two strains (during his intellectual journey he sometimes stressed one strain at the expense of the other, but eventually saw the need for both in his hermeneutics), namely teleological (reconstructive) and archaeological (deconstructive) hermeneutics. A reconstructive hermeneutics facilitates amplification of that which one is interpreting: it is a hermeneutical method that makes one attentive to the surplus of meaning within the symbol or myth (Michel 2006:138-9). This is opposed to a deconstructive hermeneutics which is a hermeneutics of doubt, and that facilitates getting rid of illusions and lies held by consciousness (Michel 2006:138-9).

<sup>94</sup> Ricoeur argues that the idea that there are many ways to read a symbol belongs to the very notion of meaning (Abel 2012b). As soon as there is meaning, there is the possibility of several meanings, and hence interpretation is required (Ricoeur 1974c:48).

the symbol: not only does it gain more profound self-awareness, but it is also able to interact with others. Consequently, one can say that the subject in *Freedom and Nature* only has immediate reflexivity or rather, in Ricoeur's (1966:58) words, "prereflexive [self-]imputation", (the subject experiences itself as acting through its body in the world; it is a "mode of action"),<sup>95</sup> while, in Ricoeur's subsequent work, the subject is mediately reflexive and understands itself as acting in the world via the symbol.

Finally, symbols also make agents aware that they rely on socially established symbols to make sense of themselves, the world, and their acts. As such, no action is purely activity: the symbol introduces passivity into activity. Consequently, the symbol serves to break the pernicious charms of the narcissistic stage of self-consciousness that is only quasi-mediated by the sign (as in *Freedom and Nature*); the symbol shatters the cogito and removes it from its auto-position (Dosse 2008:282). Throughout the rest of the chapter, we will see how Ricoeur's phenomenological subject becomes a self or an agent through an apprenticeship or interpretation of symbols that objectifies its actions.

One can thus say that Ricoeur's original action theory that is primarily concerned with the essence of human willing, broadens and opens up – via the symbol – to action considered as fact, as empirical, as contingency, as action always susceptible to evil. One is thus one step closer to understanding particular actions such as complacent action. This transition is facilitated not only by removing the abovementioned brackets, but also by responding to the

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<sup>95</sup> I wish to elaborate the notion of 'prereflexive imputation' a little more here, since it will play an important part in my account of Ricoeur's action theory as a whole, and when I think Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens's action theories together. Later, when considering Ricoeur's action theory as a whole, we will see that Ricoeur (2015) (and Michel (2006)) insists that the subject in *Freedom and Nature* is reflexive. Yet, have I not just pointed out that the subject is *prereflexive*? In short, prereflexive self-imputation is strictly speaking a kind of reflexivity, since the subject experiences *itself* as acting and considers itself as the source of its actions during these kinds of prereflexive acts. More specifically, Michel (2018) points out that there is a *moment* of 'pre-reflexive (self-) imputation' during decision-making (as Ricoeur (1966:58) describes in *Freedom and Nature*). I will quote Michel (2018:134) at length:

"In fact, there is no contradiction in Ricoeur's reasoning: there are neither two different subjects, nor two antithetical philosophies of the subject, but rather two distinct moments in the course of the decision. At the point where I make a decision, where I project an action to be done, I am effectively absorbed in that projection. Not that self-awareness is absent, but it forgets itself as self-awareness. When I make a decision, I stop looking at myself; I stop presenting myself explicitly to myself. Someone is deciding, of course, someone is making a commitment; but consciousness is not focused on the one who is deciding, it is focused on that which is to be done. It is in this sense that Ricoeur speaks of "pre-reflexive self-imputation": the ego-subject is constantly present in its actions, but only implicitly; it adheres entirely to what it is projecting to do. (There is therefore no need to postulate an ego-substance that might exist [sic] independently from the acts of thought.) Decision's relationship to itself is not one of knowledge or of a reflective regard; it is a mode of the intentionality of consciousness. At the moment of decision, I am part of what I project, or rather, I am what I project."

call for a hermeneutics – or a critical element<sup>96</sup> – demanded by Ricoeur’s earlier phenomenological account of human willing (Depraz 2018:197). Ricoeur’s phenomenological subject in *Freedom and Nature* is able to decide on and execute projects or acts, only because the subject is able to reflexively objectify its projects and acts. And these objective works, in turn, call for interpretation or for a hermeneutics. In short, if the subject cannot explain the world to itself, if the subject cannot assume the necessary critical distance in relation to its project, it cannot understand itself (as having the capacity to act), and cannot therefore act (Michel 2006:48). All action therefore requires interpretation.

Ricoeur therefore does not continue to use a pure phenomenological method. It is for this reason that *Finitude and Guilt* (1960) is often considered as a turning point in Ricoeur’s philosophical journey (Dosse 2008:331). Some authors such as Dosse<sup>97</sup> (2008:279), even goes so far as to consider *Finitude and Guilt* as signifying a *radical* break between two discontinuous moments of Ricoeur’s work. Dosse (2008:279) does admit, however, that there is still some continuity, in the sense that Ricoeur continues his interrogation of the various modes of ‘being’ of the human will. The turning point – for those who stress the discontinuous reading of Ricoeur’s work – consists of the fact that Ricoeur makes an essential methodological displacement which will determine the course of the rest of his work: Ricoeur shifts from an *eidetic phenomenology* to a *hermeneutical or interpretative phenomenology*.

This hermeneutic shift, which Ricoeur will later describe in more continuist language as a hermeneutical graft on the phenomenological programme, is not only brought about through internal factors in Ricoeur’s own work (such as the challenge posed by evil and tragedy to an understanding of freedom, or the innate demand for a hermeneutics contained within action, or on the methodological level, Ricoeur’s first-person descriptive phenomenological approach which calls for methodological rigour (Depraz 2018:197, 208)), but also by external factors, namely English linguistic analysis and the rise of structuralism in the late 1950s (Dosse 2008:279-80). Since I have already shown how Ricoeur interacts with analytic philosophy – and the hermeneutic implications of incorporating this strand of philosophy into Ricoeur’s work – I will now briefly focus on the structuralist tradition and what this means for Ricoeur’s

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<sup>96</sup> As described in chapter two, language lends us objective form to understand and describe reality. Or, put differently, the symbol *gives rise* to thinking and meaning, but only on the condition of reflexive thought *drawing* a conceptual meaning *from it*. (Michel 2006:53). Ricoeur thus argues for a critical moment of distance between the symbol and reflexive thought.

<sup>97</sup> It must be noted that although François Dosse is no stranger to philosophy, he is primarily a *historian* whose subject matter is intellectual history. Since I only want to trace the progression or trajectory of Ricoeur’s work between *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action* in a very concise and surface way, I have consulted Dosse.

philosophy and action theory. However, this brief incursion into the structuralist tradition will only be a surface-level discussion of the movement and how it relates to Ricoeur's philosophical journey. This is because I merely wish to link *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action* in a very concise and simple manner so that the latter work does not look like a random leap away from the former. By no means do I pretend to have an in-depth understanding of the structuralist tradition and its relation to Ricoeur's work; nor will I pretend to have worked out the themes of this tradition pertaining to Ricoeur's work – outlined below – myself. Instead I rely on secondary sources.

### 3.2.6.2. Ricoeur's Encounter with Structuralism

The structuralist programme brought in its wake the French linguistic turn, structural anthropology, and psychoanalysis (Dosse 2008:310). Ricoeur actively engaged with structural linguistics and psychoanalysis on his journey towards a hermeneutic phenomenology. Structuralism is methodologically very different from the kind of analytic philosophy that we have seen Ricoeur engage with in chapter two of this thesis:<sup>98</sup> while structuralists aim to construct an ideal language that “is supposed to represent reality more precisely and perspicuously than ordinary language”, the English analytic philosophers focus on the ordinary use of language (Parker-Ryan 2018: paragraph 5). In fact, the structuralist project is directly opposite to ordinary language philosophy, since structuralists see everyday language as a barrier to a clearer understanding of reality. Every day or natural language is “thought to be opaque, vague and misleading, and thus stands in need of reform (at least insofar as it is to deliver *philosophical* truth)” (Parker-Ryan 2018: paragraph 5). By the end of this section, it will become clear that Ricoeur is more of an ordinary language philosopher than a structuralist. But this does not mean that Ricoeur does not learn and take from structuralism.

Although Ricoeur (1974c:30-1, 35) does not adopt the structuralist aim and methodology in full, Ricoeur acknowledges the (1) importance accorded to language by the human sciences influenced by the structuralist paradigm, and (2) the importance of

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<sup>98</sup> Tétaz (2014:67) writes that Ricoeur unites the structuralist scientific approach to language and the analytical philosophy of language in his theory and hermeneutics of the text. In the 1960s, these two traditions, the one French, and the other Anglo-Saxon, were complete strangers to each other: but by the start of the 1970s Ricoeur has managed, little-by-little, to put structural semiotics and analytical semantics in dialogue with each other (Tétaz 2014:68). And it is in the group of articles – collected together in the volume called *From Text to Action* – that I am going to examine in the section 3.3., that Ricoeur sketches his hermeneutics of the text derived from the integration of structural semiotics and analytic semantics (Tétaz 2014:68). Although I will not be able to explicitly formulate in this thesis how these two traditions meet, it is helpful to point out that Ricoeur is influenced by structuralism and analytic philosophy of action, in order to facilitate a clearer reading of his action theory.

methodological rigour advocated by structuralism (Dosse 2008:280, 320; Michel 2006:64). Through Ricoeur's incorporation of the two aforementioned aspects of structuralism, Ricoeur's phenomenological method is first challenged or critiqued, and then fortified.

### ***Ricoeur and the French Linguistic Turn***

To begin with, I will look at the importance accorded to language by structuralists. Above I have mentioned that structuralists in the linguistic field have the ambition of making language more transparent, more atemporal (synchronic), technical, precise, and univocal (that is to say, creating a closed system of univocal signs that is cut off from external referents) (Ricoeur 1974c:81-3). Ricoeur responds to this objective in a twofold manner.

First, Ricoeur (1974c:33) takes from structuralism the insight that there are structural laws of language that unconsciously condition speech. Such a conditioning of speech calls into question the primacy of the subject and the control the subject claims to exercise over the content of his thoughts and actions (Ricoeur 2015:3). One can see here how Ricoeur is gradually shifting from the 'subject' with all its associated traps of subjectivism (as described in *Freedom and Nature*) to instituting a critical distance that allows the "I" to be objectified into a "self" (Dosse 2008:326).

Second, Ricoeur responds to the structuralist objective of reducing language to a system of signs by positing a *different, yet complementary* approach to language: Ricoeur (1974c:30, 55-56, 60) aims to recharge the creativity of language by starting from the fullness of language that gives us the symbol (Dosse 2008:281, 325). The symbol, unlike the sign, has a double meaning or intentionality; and the symbol, unlike the sign under the structuralist aegis, refers to things outside of the system of symbols. In his hermeneutics, Ricoeur (1974c:47) will thus go on to put the sterile univocity of the sign and the fertile equivocity of the symbol in a dialectical relationship with each other. It is specifically in the *Symbolism of Evil* that Ricoeur (1974c:29) advances a hermeneutics which has the purpose of deciphering the ambivalence of symbols conceived as expressions of a double meaning. Symbolic signs are opaque, because the literal, patent, primary meaning itself aims analogically at a second meaning (Ricoeur 1974c:28). It is this depth, this '*mise en abyme*' of the symbol which gives rise to thinking. The structural method, although useful, does not "exhaust [the symbol's] meaning, for [the symbol's] meaning is a reservoir of meaning ready to be used again in other structures" (Ricoeur 1974c:47). Ricoeur (1974c:47-8) therefore uses the symbol as lever to resist, as a

retort to a modernity characterized by a forgetting of the fullness or the “surplus” of language which refers to the fullness of experience (Michel 2006:51-2).

Next, structuralism poses a challenge to phenomenology in the sense that structuralists maintain that structuralism is on the same epistemological level as the natural sciences (Michel 2006:153-4; Ricoeur 1974c:81). Structuralists are thus advocates of great methodological rigour (as can be seen in the abovementioned aim of reducing language to a closed system of signs) (Ricoeur 1974c:35). However, instead of rejecting this methodological claim completely, Ricoeur (1974c:30, 51) instead opts to incorporate structuralism’s methodological rigour into his (hermeneutic) phenomenology: the sign, or rather the symbol, provides a critical moment in which the subject comes to understand itself as agent (Michel 2006:152). Ricoeur (1974c:57) writes, “there is no recovery of meaning without some structural comprehension.”

Lastly, while Ricoeur accepts the structuralist critique of his descriptive phenomenology, Ricoeur also critiques structuralism. Ricoeur (1974c:79, 87) maintains that language can only be realised in action or by the event (that is to say, in discourse about something with someone); something which structuralists dismiss. Discourse (language as action) further presupposes an agent who has choices, who can form new combinations with language, and who refers to the world via language (Ricoeur 1974c:55, 83-7). Moreover, contrary to structuralists who study language as fixed and atemporal, discourse introduces a temporal dimension into language, not only in the sense that discourse takes place in time, but also in the sense that the use of language presupposes a culture which has historically produced the language in which the discourse is taking place (Ricoeur 1974c:48-9, 83-4; Thompson 1981:9).

In other words, by divorcing language from action, and by absolutizing language, structuralist philosophers leave no place for the acting subject (Ricoeur 1974c:33). Different from structuralists, but informed by the structuralist displacement of the subject through objectified language, Ricoeur maintains that there is a subject, albeit a broken or shattered subject who has passed through the objectifying moment. In other words, Ricoeur takes a detour through structuralists’ procedures of objectification of meaning, but maintains that even though semiological analysis regulates the internal ordering of the language, language can only become *meaningful* once a subject *interprets* language in relation to a world to which this text refers (Dosse 2008:323-5). Without the subject, there will be no understanding, and without methodological rigour that takes account of the objectivity of that which is understood, one is



left with a pernicious kind of relativism (Michel 2006:143-4). In short, Ricoeur's reflective philosophy is "receptive to the structuralist method, specifying its validity as an abstract and objective moment in the understanding of self and of being" (Thompson 1981:10). And through a constant movement via the hermeneutic circle as heuristic, the act of *interpreting* bridges the artificial gap between subject and object.

### ***Ricoeur and Psychoanalysis***

In conjunction with the structuralist linguistic influence found in Ricoeur's work, Ricoeur also grappled with Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>99</sup> Not only is it the topic of 'guilt' that leads Ricoeur into Freud's direction (Michel 2006:57), but Ricoeur also turns to Freud because the tension between the voluntary and involuntary as set out in *Freedom and Nature* reveals a gap, a residuum, which needs to be explored more systematically from an approach that is not only phenomenological, but also psychoanalytical. This residuum or overflow is the unconscious<sup>100</sup> (Dosse 2008:280; Michel 2006:57-8; Ricoeur 1974c:99-100). Although this thesis will not include an account of Ricoeur's in-depth work on Freud, it is important to point out that Ricoeur (1974c:104-6, 120) was influenced by Freud's idea of reading the unconscious (drives, desires or instincts) via symptoms that manifest themselves in symbols (Michel 2006:130-1).

Ricoeur's detour via Freud thus leads Ricoeur to realise the importance of questioning the symbol and the art of hermeneutics as discovering that which lies hidden in the representative symbol (and by extension in the subject's unconscious) (Michel 2006:130-2). By reflexively uncovering and re-appropriating the buried symbols in one's unconscious, by recognizing oneself in the otherness that is the symbol, one becomes more 'oneself', so to speak<sup>101</sup> (Ricoeur [1965] 1990:55-56). Ricoeur's (1974c:108) engagement with psychoanalysis further convinces him that the self is not an immediate "given but a task, a task to be accomplished through the long and tortuous by-way of a semantics of desire" (Thompson 1981:18). Although this aspect of coming to know oneself through the 'other' is already present

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<sup>99</sup> However, in the foreword of *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* ([1965] 1995:7), Ricoeur specifies from the start the limits of his investigation of Freud: Ricoeur states that his project is limited to Freud's work as a work of culture, without taking into account the analytic practice itself (Michel 2006:136).

<sup>100</sup> Taking the unconscious into account pushes the phenomenological programme to its limits: consciousness is confronted with its other or complete opposite in the form of the unconscious (Ricoeur 2015:3). It is important to point out that Ricoeur's notion of the unconscious is different from the structuralist notion thereof. Ricoeur holds that the unconscious lies outside of language, while structuralists, such as Jacques Lacan, maintain that the unconscious is structured by language.

<sup>101</sup> Busacchi (2010:23) writes that this re-appropriation of the unconscious via interpretation, reminds strongly of Ricoeur's suggestion of taking control of the unconscious via spirituality in *Freedom and Nature*.

in *Freedom and Nature* (for example, the subject learns how to act and know itself through quasi-interpretation of the other in the form of the body, the object-world, and psychological necessities), it will only be with Ricoeur's hermeneutic turn that Ricoeur (1974c:108) will explicitly state that one needs to actively recover oneself on the basis of an 'apprenticeship of signs' (symbols, texts, works, actions): consciousness is a "task."

As such, by passing through psychoanalysis, Ricoeur again encounters the broken or wounded cogito that needs to be recovered (although this recovery can never be complete) through an apprenticeship to signs or symbols (Michel 2006:132). When the self faces its archaeology,<sup>102</sup> namely those desires which are buried in its unconscious, it concurrently faces a teleology or a horizon of expectation; that is to say, becoming itself through reflection on the symbols that act as disguises for the archaic (Busacchi 2010:24-5; Michel 2006:58-9; Thompson 1981:8). Phenomenological teleology ("expansion of reflection") and Freudian teleology (therapeutic emancipation)<sup>103</sup> thus come together through the use of dichotomous models, via a dialectic between the concept of identification (of oneself with the other in the form of the symbol) and via sublimation (channeling one's impulses towards socially acceptable expressions and actions) (Ricoeur 1974c:120; Thompson 1981:8). In other words, the symbol is that which mitigates the conflict in subjectivity (between the regressive or the archeological, and progressive or teleological, thrusts of the mind), but also pacifies the conflict between the phenomenological and Freudian readings of the self (Busacchi 2010:25). Freud thus helps Ricoeur to graft hermeneutics into the phenomenological programme and contributes to the further decentering of the ego, the cogito, by crushing all temptations of narcissistic deification.

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<sup>102</sup> In the face of the challenge of the unconscious, Ricoeur proposes two possible hermeneutics that are in a simultaneous relationship of conflict and complementarity: a hermeneutics that is orientated towards new symbols with the hermeneutic phenomenological programme, and a hermeneutics that is rooted in the recovery of archaic, old and buried symbols as discovered and explored by the practice of psychoanalysis (Dosse 2008:292; Michel 2006:137). Indeed, Ricoeur (1969:101; 1974:120) rejects any interpretation that reduces this dialectic to a binary consisting of an unconscious constituting the low or the nocturnal aspects of the subject, as opposed to a consciousness embodying the high, lucid, diurnal part: the two conflictual-complementary hermeneutics do not each cover one half of the person; instead the two readings cover exactly the same field. Ricoeur will later insist that there are not only two, but several ways of reading symbols (and later, texts). Of course, not all readings will be equally convincing, but some readings might come close to being equally convincing (to the hypothetical non-existing objective bystander). According to Ricoeur we must therefore come to think of different readings *together* (Dosse 2008:339).

<sup>103</sup> If psychoanalysis is an explicit and thematised archaeology, it refers to itself, by the dialectical nature of its concepts (past and present, patient and analyst, regression and progression), to an implicit and non-thematised teleology, namely a therapeutic project of emancipation (Busacchi 2010:24).

In short, structuralism and Freudian psychoanalysis lend to Ricoeur the insight that one can draw on and use symbols as guides to help one become more of oneself, since understanding, or making sense of something, is to understand one's relation to that thing, and hence to better understand oneself. "The interpretation of symbols can only be called a hermeneutics to the extent where it is a segment of self-understanding (understanding of oneself) and understanding of being. [...]. If meaning is not a segment of self-understanding, I do not know what it is" (Ricoeur 1963:596, 636). Michel (2006:48) sums up Ricoeur's hermeneutics as a reflexive hermeneutics which has the subject as its center: Ricoeur's hermeneutics is the subject thought as existing, as incarnated, as a being for which the explanation of the world coincides with the explanation of the self.

In addition, due to Ricoeur's interaction with structuralism and psychoanalysis, Ricoeur proceeds to place the more methodological, analytical, reductive and rigorous mode of understanding of structuralism into a dialectic with his reflexive hermeneutics that aims to recover latent meaning (Dosse 2008:318). In other words, Ricoeur (1974c:161) puts a reconstructive, teleological hermeneutics in dialogue with a more archaeological or deconstructive hermeneutics (Michel 2006:56-9. 139). One only recovers latent meaning (teleological thrust) by deconstructing the symbol (archaeological thrust). In the end, this dialectic yields a critical hermeneutics. Abel (2012a: paragraph 3) writes that Ricoeur's

"[c]ritical hermeneutics then teaches us to live with the conflict of interpretations, to turn the search for a hermeneutics of agreement and quasi-oral understanding, under the thrust of a current question, toward rule-governed variations of past, possible interpretations of that question. Here the phenomenological technique of using eidetic variation [in *Freedom and Nature*] gets inverted."

In other words, in *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur seeks to determine the *essence* of the phenomenon of human willing: in so doing, Ricoeur starts from the notion of the 'essence of the will' and elaborates or feeds into the notion through consulting his own personal experience, but also via imagination, the experience of other subjects. However, a hermeneutics introduces fact or the empirical into essence: one is consequently led from unity to diversity. The very notion of human willing or action is questioned from the outside (by other traditions of understanding human action, everyday empirical manifestations of action, and so forth), and it is henceforth no longer accurate to speak of just the 'essence' of action or of human willing. Instead, one may postulate that a more holistic understanding of action will entail an interplay

between essence and fact, between conviction and critique (Abel 2012a: paragraph 32) between phenomenology and hermeneutics: namely, a hermeneutic phenomenology.

### 3.2.6.3. The Relationship between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

#### *The Complementary and Continuous Links between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics*

In the next text that will be considered, namely *From Text to Action*, I will trace how Ricoeur works out the relationship between hermeneutics and his phenomenology. In short, it can be said that hermeneutics of the symbol – by introducing an objective element – complements phenomenology by critiquing and (therefore) ‘removing’, so to speak, the idealistic element of interpretation from phenomenology (Ricoeur 1991:25). Jervolino (1996:71) writes of this hermeneutic turn in Ricoeur’s work that hermeneutics, as “the obligatory passage through the world of language and signs, is [needed] to free phenomenological reflexion from the idealistic temptations [the self positing itself] to which it is prone.” Put differently, the meaning we give to phenomena, to others, to ourselves – far from being transparent – is obscured and therefore requires an interpretational approach. Meaning is not given or posited, meaning is conquered by means of a hermeneutical strategy (Michel 2006:156-7).

Ricoeur (1991:25) himself argues that “a mutual belonging” exists between hermeneutics and phenomenology. Their relation, according to Ricoeur (1991:26) is that “*phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics*”, while “*phenomenology cannot constitute itself without a hermeneutical presupposition*”.

Based on the above relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics identified by Ricoeur, one can argue that Ricoeur’s earlier action theory (as found in *Freedom and Nature*) should not be discarded entirely. That is to say, one can maintain that due to the phenomenological presupposition that underlies hermeneutics, one should *not* discard the phenomenological presuppositions – detailed in *Freedom and Nature* – of the self who wills, who decides, who projects, who realises its actions in an object-world (and so on).

Thus, even though an explicitly hermeneutic approach does away with the remnants of idealism that are still present in Ricoeur’s earlier action theory (such as Ricoeur’s notion of the cogito that remains predominantly subjectivist since it is not yet able to formulate its experiences in symbolic systems such as language), a hermeneutic approach does not preclude

a phenomenological presupposition of the self who wills and is able to bring about change in the world through its actions.

Moreover, and as was indicated previously, the phenomenological subject in Ricoeur's earlier action theory, and the self who understands herself through mediation via the symbol, (and eventually language, text, actions, cultural objects, and so on) have in common that they are both broken or shattered. Ricoeur (1966:14) explicitly refers to the cogito as broken in *Freedom and Nature*; Ricoeur also points out that the act of attention is simultaneously receptivity by its adherence to an object and activity by its inherence in a subject (Dosse 2008:195-6). With Ricoeur's hermeneutic turn, the symbol serves both as a third mediating element (between the subjective and the objective), and as something which further shatters or breaks up the self-sufficiency of the subject. In other words, neither the phenomenological subject nor the hermeneutic self is self-sufficient in the sense of knowing itself directly, or being undetermined by otherness or the objective world.

However, in *Freedom and Nature* one is still only at the level of thinking the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity: Ricoeur delineates an action theory that is structured around the notion of putting these two elements into dialogue. But a hermeneutic approach, as one will see when looking at *From Text to Action*, shows that understanding this relationship between subjectivity and objectivity proceeds via an additional *third* element, via mediation. A hermeneutics therefore reinstates the subject in its totality, as both giving to and receiving from the outside world via the symbol. The symbol gives rise to the thought that the cogito is at the interior of being, and not the inverse (Dosse 2008:282). One can thus argue that the broken cogito is a continuous theme that Ricoeur builds on.

Another continuous thread to be found surrounding the notion of phenomenology as the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics, is that human beings have a tacit belief that they can make sense of the world, that meaning is given, and that they can thus act meaningfully in the world. In other words, agents need to believe that they can act meaningfully, in order to do so. As such, phenomenology manifested as this tacit belief that one can act meaningfully, is present throughout Ricoeur's entire action theory: first as a type of naïve (immediate, almost intuitive) knowing that one can decide, move one's body, and consent (naïve, since this knowledge has not yet been mediated by symbolic or textual interpretation and is not yet articulated by the subject in *Freedom and Nature*), and then later as attestation (a second naivety, still a tacit belief, but this time a belief that has passed through the symbol and which

therefore allows the agent enough objectivity in order to speak, act, narrate his life, and impute actions to himself) as found in Ricoeur's action theory set out in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*.

In addition, by ascribing to the idea of phenomenology as the presupposition of hermeneutics, Ricoeur accords primacy to intentionality and to the belief that one can act (as opposed to favouring representation, as is characteristic of the idealistic traditions of thought). This theoretical reversal echoes the primacy accorded to the 'I' who acts, or the voluntary subject in *Freedom and Nature*: Ricoeur states there that one should make sense of the many of the involuntary *in light of* the one of the voluntary. In Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, as one will see later, it is not the volitional and affective acts that come to be based on the representative level, but the former are constituents of action in a more original sense. One rediscovers, in other words, the vitalist foundation that is at play throughout Ricoeur's entire reflexive anthropology: the domain of representation, of reason, and of objectifying acts, stays subordinated to the desire of being and to the effort to exist and to act (Michel 2006:34-5).

### ***Discontinuities between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics***

Yet, one can argue against the above seemingly harmonious integration between phenomenology and hermeneutics by stressing the breaks between them. In other words, one can hold that the insights garnered from Ricoeur's phenomenological action theory are incongruent with Ricoeur's newer hermeneutic orientation, and should therefore be discarded. The argument goes as follows: even though the phenomenological insights in *Freedom and Nature* were garnered via a phenomenological method that takes into account a quasi-hermeneutics carried out by the cogito (that is to say, a kind of hermeneutics that is implicit in the way the broken cogito 'interprets' its body and its capacities – an "immanent perception and corporeal consciousness" (Depraz 2018:196) – in order to decide, to move, to consent), these insights should be rejected because Ricoeur has formulated a new, overt hermeneutic phenomenology in which the cogito is additionally shattered or broken by the interpretation of *external or public* symbols, signs, and eventually text (Pirovolakis 2018:137; Ricoeur. 1966:11). In short, should Ricoeur's newer hermeneutic phenomenology entirely replace his older descriptive phenomenology?

That is to say, while Ricoeur's earlier action theory in *Freedom and Nature* explicitly takes account of the fact that the cogito is broken from within (by its embodied nature) and

only implicitly from without (the passivity of attention, of accepting motives for one's decisions, and so forth), it does not include that the cogito is further broken by the interpretation of external and public symbols, language, texts, actions, and cultural objects. Is this not to say that Ricoeur's earlier action theory is made obsolete by its hermeneutic turn?

In addition, one might argue that the action theory in *Freedom and Nature*, while it does not exclude otherness in the form of the body, or the unconscious, or character, or the world in which one acts, does indeed bracket or exclude the 'other' in the form of the fault and transcendence. One may even go so far as to say that Ricoeur's earlier action theory is reductionist since the phenomenologist uses imaginary variations, instead of consulting empirical cases, to determine which instances of experience should be classified as a specific and essential phenomenon (Giorgi 1985:42-44). Therefore, one can say that this reductionist method skews or distorts our understanding of human action. As a consequence, Ricoeur's earlier action theory should be ignored or at least not accorded a lot of weight in a more comprehensive and overall Ricoeurian action theory.

However, I will only be able to reply to the above concerns after a detailed perusal of Ricoeur's later action theory as delineated in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*. For now, it remains sufficient to refer back to Ricoeur's own hermeneutic methodology to provide us with some guidance in the matter: there will always be more than one way to interpret something or some action. No single interpretation can pretend to have a monopoly on understanding the matter at hand. Instead one must look at the value and limits of each of the interpretative methods (in this context, Ricoeur's descriptive phenomenological method is considered as a kind of interpretation), in the pursuit of understanding. Ricoeur never defends an all-encompassing vision which alone would be able to lay claim to objective knowledge; instead Ricoeur advocates that each domain goes to the end of the requirements that defines it (Dosse 2008:198). For Ricoeur, interpretation is an ongoing process: there is no such a thing as the 'last word'.

It is also important to keep in mind what Ricoeur says of his own work. Ricoeur ([1969] 1974c:3) speaks of a graft of hermeneutics onto phenomenology. In other words, Ricoeur sees his hermeneutic turn as continuous with – and not as a rupture – with regards to his previous research under the banner of phenomenology (Michel 2006:44). Ricoeur's early phenomenological subject and later explicitly hermeneutic self are both reflexive and therefore hermeneutical (although in various degrees) subjects. Both are thought as existing, as

incarnated; as beings for which the explanation and understanding of the world coincides with the explanation and understanding of the self (Michel 2006:48). This allows us to say provisionally that Ricoeur's hermeneutic graft does not lead to an abandonment of Ricoeur's first phenomenological works (Michel 2006:48). Ricoeur's hermeneutics merely contributes something new in that it extends the ways in which the subject interprets itself by introducing the symbol, and finally the text.

In the next section I will consequently examine a few chapters (originally published as articles) from the book *From Text to Action* (1969), in which Ricoeur presents his ideas about the mediated self which can only be known through interpretation. However, in *From Text to Action*, different from the abovementioned theories of interpretation (first the symbolism of evil, then the more secular interpretation of symbols of the unconscious and language), Ricoeur moves on from the symbol with its double meaning, towards a more general theory of the text based on the paradigm of refiguration (Michel 2006:139, 235). In other words, Ricoeur broadens the scope of his hermeneutics by integrating into its orbit structures that exceed those of the symbol, namely texts (Michel 2006:162). However, what stays the same throughout Ricoeur's traverse from symbolic hermeneutics to textual hermeneutics is his commitment to a critical hermeneutics: the dialectic between explanation and understanding of the text and action echoes the archaeological (critically or analytically deconstructing meaning) and teleological (recovering latent meaning) dialectic of interpreting the symbol. In addition, structural analysis plays an important role in Ricoeur's conception of 'explanation' (Michel 2006:150). Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenological account of the self, built around the text, will consequently provide a more comprehensive understanding and explanation of the human experience (and therefore, of human action) (Agís Villaverde 2012:48).

Finally, throughout the next section I will indicate how some of the insights or themes (such as the tension or brokenness inherent in the human existence, and thus human action) of *Freedom and Nature* are taken up and reflected in *From Text to Action*. In addition, I will explain how Ricoeur's hermeneutics addresses some of the limits encountered in his first project: namely, being unable to solve the theoretical conflict between a phenomenology of motivation and an objective and causal explanation of behaviour; the absence of addressing the conditions for meaningful action, be it technical, economic or political; description that remains confined to the limits of a phenomenological psychology applied to "lived" volition, through all its degrees of mastery and impotence (Ricoeur 2015:2); and closely tied to the aforementioned, the lack of methodological rigour of a first person phenomenology (Depraz



2018:208). I will therefore make a tentative or surface-level connection between the two kinds of action theories found in the two respective sources.

### **3.3. Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Take on Action, as Found in *From Text to Action* ([1969] 1991)**

#### **3.3.1. Introduction**

This section will be devoted to Ricoeur's action theory as illuminated by hermeneutical phenomenology in his book, *From Text to Action* (1991), originally published in French as *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique II* (1969). The focus will first be on how text interpretation can serve as a template or paradigm for interpreting meaningful action (Ricoeur 1991:137), and second, how imagination (and finally, initiative) makes action possible (Scharlemann 1993:158). In the context of Ricoeur's work, text refers to a work of discourse (as opposed to mere language),<sup>104</sup> where "[d]iscourse is language-event or linguistic usage" (Ricoeur 1991:145) In addition, 'meaningful action' is "...that action which an agent can account for [...] to someone else or to himself in such a way that the one who receives this account accepts it as intelligible" (Ricoeur 1991:189).<sup>105</sup> While imagination, for Ricoeur, denotes the poetical: that which creates *new* meaning through saying "one thing in terms of another, or [...saying] several things at the same time" (Kearney 2004:38).

#### **3.3.2. Explanation and Understanding in the Text; Cause and Motivation in Action**

Above we have seen that Ricoeur is first occupied with the interpretation of the symbol as a way to understand the acting self. Ricoeur then moves on to the concept of discourse: it is only by actively using language, by forming sentences, that symbols can be discussed, interpreted, and put to work in order to make sense of, and redescribe the self and action. This is because "[i]t is only at the level of the sentence that language can refer to something" (Thompson 1981:11). Situating the phenomenology in *Freedom and Nature* within discourse, Ricoeur (2015:5) writes that phenomenology is only a phase within a larger discourse that can be called the discourse of meaningful action. Here, in *From Text to Action* however, Ricoeur takes yet another step: this time Ricoeur shifts his focus to the interpretation of the *text*.

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<sup>104</sup> The differences between discourse and language are as follows: first, discourse is temporal and real, while language is atemporal and virtual; second, discourse is always carried out by a subject (usually in conversation with another subject), while language does not require a subject; third, discourse refers to a world, while language only refers to other signifiers within its system (Ricoeur 1991:145).

<sup>105</sup> In addition, one can only investigate meaningful action ... "under the condition of a kind of objectification that is equivalent to the fixation of discourse by writing" (Ricoeur 1991:150).

Consequently, Ricoeur shifts from “semantics to hermeneutics proper” (Thompson 1981:13). The text “is any discourse fixed by writing” and therefore an organised totality that is irreducible to its constituent sentences (Ricoeur 1991:106; Thompson 1981:13). Most importantly, Ricoeur holds that the hermeneutics of the text can help us to understand action, since “action, like a text, is a meaningful entity which must be construed as a whole” (Thompson 1981:15).

To begin, Ricoeur (1991:137-8, 145, 151) shows us how text and action are related through similarity: just like text, action is externalised and hence becomes autonomous from the original author/agent. That is to say, the action has consequences independent of the presence from its agent (Ricoeur 1991:153). Moreover, action, just like text, leaves a metaphorical ‘mark’ (on its time) (Ricoeur 1991:152). Furthermore, “[l]ike a text, whose meaning is detached from the initial conditions of its production, human action has a weight that is not reduced to its importance in the initial situation in which it appears but allows the reinscription of its sense in new contexts” (Ricoeur 1991:138). Finally, action is similar to the text because both are open to a vast array of “readers” or interpreters.

Based on the aforementioned affinities between text and action, Ricoeur hypothesizes that certain aporias or dualisms found in the theory of texts will most likely have their counterparts in action theory, and moreover, that these aporias can be solved by using interpretation. The first of these aporias which Ricoeur identifies in the theory of texts is the dualism between explanation and understanding.<sup>106</sup> Ricoeur (1991:125-6) writes that explanation and understanding are usually regarded as each belonging to two separate epistemological fields, which then further leads to an ontological divide between the two.

That is to say, “...on the one hand [that of proponents of explanation, namely the structuralists], in the name of the objectivity of the text, any subjective or intersubjective relation would be eliminated by explanation; on the other hand [the side of understanding], in the name of the subjectivity of the appropriation of the message, any objectifying analysis would be declared foreign to understanding” (Ricoeur 1991:129). In the process of resolving the identified aporia, Ricoeur aims to do away with the hermeneutic bias which is in favour of understanding at the expense of explanation (Kearney 2004:3).

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<sup>106</sup> Ricoeur already encounters this dualism during his work on Freud when confronted with the unconscious. The temptation is to create a false alternative between Freudian explanation (based on drives or energies) and phenomenological understanding (Dosse 2008:296-7). Instead Ricoeur recognizes the equal right of rival interpretations as part of a true deontology of philosophical reflection and speculation (Dosse 2008:293).

Ricoeur (1991:118) argues that the above dualism between explanation and understanding is a false one, and instead proposes a hermeneutics in which explanation cannot happen without understanding, nor understanding without explanation. This is because explanation – as structural analysis which reduces narrative to a set of variables or signifiers with no correspondence to reality or the signified – needs a subject (subjectivity) to make sense of or to *understand* how these variables relate to each other and to the world (Ricoeur 1991:130-1). Alternatively, one often asks for *explanation* from others when one no longer understands (Ricoeur 1991:129). When reading a text, in particular, explanation aids understanding by providing inscription (the exteriorisation of what was said) and the codification of discourse (Ricoeur 1991:130). In a sense, the false opposition between explanation and understanding reflects that of the false dichotomy between freedom and nature, discussed in *Freedom and Nature*.

Just like explanation and understanding, freedom and nature are in a dialectical relationship. Ricoeur puts freedom, expressed by reflexive philosophy, in dialogue with nature, expressed by the natural sciences: both genres have the human as their subject, but they use different language to describe the subject (Dosse 2008:198). When reflexive philosophy takes a detour through the experimental sciences, and in the process has its own limits tested, it simultaneously gains the insight that necessity is part of the total experience of the cogito. It is this total experience of the cogito, or the cogito as integrated necessity and freedom that affirms the experience of necessity as merely *partial*. Empirical knowledge is thus made part of the experience of the cogito by understanding its meaning (Dosse 2008:198). In other words, “...rather than constituting mutually exclusive poles, explanation and understanding [and freedom and nature] would be considered as relative moments in a complex process that could be termed interpretation” (Ricoeur 1991:126). While there is thus some continuity between *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action* regarding the dialectic relationship between explanation and understanding, it is also necessary to point out that *Freedom and Nature* is methodologically more in favour of understanding, at the cost of explanation.

In the introductory section of *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur (1966:4) explicitly states that description is preferred over explanation, since explanation is moving “...from the complex to the simple”, while description uncovers a profounder and more complex

understanding of the subject matter at hand.<sup>107</sup> In addition, recall that Ricoeur (1966:5) states that the voluntary takes primacy in our understanding of a person, because one understands oneself first as an ‘I’ that wills (Ricoeur 1966:5). That is to say, “[t]he will is the one which brings order to the many of the involuntary.” The ‘many’ of the involuntary refers to that which provides the motives, capacities, foundations and limitations to the will (Ricoeur 1966:5). Now, in *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur admits that one also needs to explain better to understand better. Again, one can see the changes wrought by structuralist influence in Ricoeur’s work: explanation, which allows the agent the necessary critical distance and analytical categories to objectify his or her experiences, introduces a methodological rigour into understanding. As such, Ricoeur’s new methodology embraces a more balanced dialectic between explanation and understanding.

The above dichotomy of explanation and understanding, or structural analysis and interpretation (and their eventual dialectic solution) is moreover, according to Ricoeur (1991:132), also visible in action theory in the form of causation versus motivation. Ricoeur (1991:132-3) holds that human action is often described solely in terms of pure intentions and motivations, while natural events are referred to exclusively as being caused.<sup>108</sup> According to Ricoeur, this dichotomy is incorrect, since, as we have seen in *Freedom and Nature*, human action comprises both of these extremes: we are both subjects and bodies.

In other words, if one interprets human action as one would interpret a text, one would find that motives and causes are both necessary to understand human action in a meaningful way. Ricoeur (1991:134) writes that one can think of “... a scale that would have as one of its end points (i) causation without motivation and, on the opposite end, (ii) motivation without causation.” Causation without motivation would entail, for example, constraint, or force, or even violence (an example would perhaps be the affective constraint felt by desiring something, which, in this extreme case, would then be all-encompassing and obliterate any free will). Motivation without cause would entail an entirely rational decision to do something (that is to say, there is no constraint from outside; the rational and autonomous agent makes the decision independently) (Ricoeur 1991:134). The two aforementioned extremes are not part of human action. Instead, human action lies in between the two extremes of (i) and (ii). Ricoeur has

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<sup>107</sup> However, one must keep in mind that Ricoeur (1966:4-7) prefers this order, because he responds to a very specific problem in *Freedom and Nature*, namely the experimental scientific approach where explanation of the involuntary is favoured to the detriment of understanding the voluntary.

<sup>108</sup> Causality is understood in the Humean sense of the word: cause and effect are logically independent things (antecedent and consequence) that one can understand separately (Ricoeur 1991:133).

already drawn our attention to this fact in *Freedom and Nature*: all decisions involve activity and passivity in the form of *accepting* reasons for acting (and thus accepting nature – experienced as an affect – in every decision).

As humans, we use our imaginations to constantly compare more and less rational motives in order to arrive at the most desirable or preferable motive (Ricoeur 1991:134). Imagination allows us to “...distinguish, on the one hand, between a physically compelling cause and a motive, and, on the other hand, between a motive and a logically compelling reason” (Ricoeur 1991:178). The arrived-at reasons or preferences, or more specifically *desires*, then serve “...as premises in practical reasoning” (Ricoeur 1991:134). Considering this, desires can then be seen as that which both *causes* our actions, but are also the *reasons* for our actions. In reality, cause and motivation come together in human motive: one can hence speak of ‘motive’ or a ‘reason-for’ (which includes desire) to denote the coming-together of the two extremes of motivation and causation, instead of holding that motivation and causation denote mutually exclusive phenomena (Ricoeur 1991:132-4; Ricoeur 1992:63).

Therefore, just as the dialectic of explanation and understanding is necessary to interpret a text, so also is the motivation-cause dialectic necessary to interpret action. To sum it up in Ricoeur’s (1991:160) words: “I *understand* what you intended to do if you are able to *explain* to me why you did such and such an action.” Interpretation of an action thus means going beyond the just the intention of the agent who executed the action: the agent needs to be able to provide a meaningful and convincing (something that makes sense) explanation to others; the agent and the ‘reader’ or observer of the action need to be convinced.

To return to *Freedom and Nature* once more, one can say that the dialectic between motivation and causation helps us to better interpret the tension between the self who decides on a project (voluntary) and the self who is determined by his or her reasons for acting (involuntary). Although Ricoeur explained that the voluntary and the involuntary are in a reciprocal relationship in his phenomenology of the will, the hermeneutic element now sheds more light on how the voluntary and the involuntary can be understood as part of the same action. In deciding on a project, I both do my project *for* certain reasons, but I also do my project *because* of these reasons. To conclude, motive, understood as ‘reason-for’, is “...at one and the same time the motion of wanting and its justification” (Ricoeur 1991:134, 160).

### 3.3.3. Narrative and Plot: Action and the World as a Closed System

Another way in which the theory of texts intersects with action has to do with the fact that human action brings about change in the world (Ricoeur 1991:135). Here, once again, one can take the cue from written texts, and especially narratives. Just as a narrative progresses by surprising plot twists and leaps, which are ‘kept together’ by an over-arching and coherent developing story; so also does action as interception or interruption make sense in a natural world conceived of as consisting of closed systems (albeit incomplete ones)<sup>109</sup> (Ricoeur 1991:141). That is to say, the world’s nature is such that it enables human beings to introduce changes into it.

Once again, to jump back to *Freedom and Nature*, if one interprets human action as a text or a narrative, one can make better sense of how exactly human beings change the world (by drawing on their abilities), and how the world enables and even completes their actions. In other words, hermeneutics clarifies how the second aspect of the will, namely voluntary movement, is possible. Moreover, if one reads the two aforementioned constituents (the human with the capacity to change the world, and the world) as a narrative, they appear less disparate, and more interconnected. Hence, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics provides a more meaningful way of understanding his earlier phenomenological description of the second aspect of the will. Below will thus follow a more detailed hermeneutic account of how voluntary movement is realised in the world.

To commence, Ricoeur specifies how to think about the world in such a way that an understanding thereof will allow for the actualization of action. The answer is to think of the world as constituted by closed systems. Here, Ricoeur is strongly influenced by system theory, especially as presented by Georg Henrik von Wright. Thinking of the world in this way enables one to speak of various stages in the system (a beginning and a final state, as well as having a series of “internal alternatives”), thereby facilitating the notion of action as an “insertion” into a system (Ricoeur 1991:135-6). The nature of action as interception is in turn made possible by the isolation of a closed system, because action can now be situated (Ricoeur 1991:136).

Isolation of a closed system is achieved by putting a specific system into motion. Ricoeur (1991:217) additionally writes that “...the capacity to put systems in motion by producing their initial states is a condition of their closure.” In turn, a system can only be put

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<sup>109</sup> Incomplete, because it is not one universal “system of all systems”, and therefore does not imply determinism (Ricoeur 1991:135).

into motion by a first intervening moment; an exercise of power (Ricoeur 1991:136). The intervening moment or exercise of power is thus making an “...event occur as the initial state of a system” (Ricoeur 1991:136). Action is that which makes something happen, either by doing it immediately (basic action) or by doing something else first before being able to make that something happen (Ricoeur 1991:136). Action can therefore not be understood without the closed system as its counterpart (Ricoeur 1991:136). (Just as plot twists cannot be understood without a storyline).

Action – as bringing about a change in the world – thus implies that system theory and intentional action theory intersect. Ricoeur (1991:136) further explains the intersection:

“This intersection implies a reciprocal relation, since “knowing how” (what I can do) is necessary in order to identify the initial state of a system, to isolate it and define its conditions of closure. Conversely, action in its programmed form (doing this so that something else occurs) requires the specific concatenation of systems, considered as fragments of world history.”

Differently put, basic action (or what I know I can do, which belongs to the domain of understanding) puts in place or defines a system by establishing an initial action for that system.<sup>110</sup> On the other hand, systems (explanation) help one to perform meaningful actions.<sup>111</sup> In summary: “...the course of things and human action... are intertwined in the notion of *intervention* in the course of things” (Ricoeur 1991:137).

Finally, by speaking of ‘intervention’ or ‘interference’ in the course of things, one acknowledges simultaneously the free and unique action of the agent, *and* the natural order in which action takes place. Ricoeur (1991:137) writes: “the notion of interference puts an end to the untenable state of opposition between a mentalist order of understanding and a physicalist order of explanation.”

In the same way, a text is comprised of seemingly disorderly plot twists, yet assumes an orderly, or coherent plot. Action is therefore similar to narrative, in that “...the conclusion of the story [of one’s life and actions] can never be deduced or predicted” (Ricoeur 1991:141). That is why we follow the narrative in order to understand how a series of actions hang together: the plot of a story unites “goals, causes, and chance [...] within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action” (Ricoeur [1983] 1984:ix), and therefore also assumes an

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<sup>110</sup> For example, when I pick up my cello and bow and do the necessary movements with my arms and fingers (an initial action and intervention), I start a system of cello playing which terminates when I put my instrument down.

<sup>111</sup> If I know how to play cello, or more specifically, if I know that certain finger positions produce certain notes (the system of playing, so to speak), I can now start to play a song on my cello: system thus aids action.

explicative role (Dosse 2008:481-2). In other words, narrative, as “complex of network of action sentences” (that is to say, thinking of the world as comprised of closed systems) provides cohesion to our lives filled with seemingly disparate events (Clark 1990:175; Greisch 1996:93). Consequently, if one interprets action sentences and actions (and later, complacent actions) as narrative, one would have a fuller, contextual, and temporal understanding thereof. The development of the narrative theory also nurtures and strengthens Ricoeur’s structuralist and analytic linguistic turn (Dosse 2008:481-2). And once again Ricoeur’s thesis is illustrated: text can serve as a good example or pattern for human action (Ricoeur 1991:137).

However, not everyone agrees that text is a good paradigm for action. Louis Quéré, a sociologist with his roots in pragmatism, ethnomethodology, and hermeneutics, argues that one cannot move from text to action by treating action as analogous to text (Boltanski *et al.* 2006:54; Quéré 2016:5). This is because the model of the text makes it difficult to study action as a temporal event, as a process distributed amongst several agents and elements of the environment, and as originating from the subject (Boltanski *et al.* 2006:57). Quéré (2016:5), as pragmatist, is thus not interested in objectifying action as one would objectify a text. That is to say, Quéré holds that if one were to ‘fixate’ action (following the model of the text), one would arrive at a partial understanding of action. Instead, Quéré (2016:9) is interested in action in all its complexity as it is *happening*: action as plural, peculiar, uncertain and changeable. As such, the paradigm of text can only serve to elucidate action *in part*, since text cannot capture the contingencies of action while it takes place. Therefore, Quéré (2016:10) wants one to resist one’s natural inclination to interpret or represent action from the point of view of its completion (according to the pattern of the text), and to rather situate oneself in the action as a temporal, ongoing process which is distributed amongst several agents and elements of the environment (Boltanski *et al.* 2006:54). That is, Quéré wants the social scientist to *describe*,<sup>112</sup> and not interpret, action.

By basing the interpretation of action on the model of the text, does Ricoeur – as Quéré (2016:10) alleges – oversimplify action by reducing it to a “substance” or a quasi-object (as opposed to an “event”)? (Ricoeur (1991:146) argues that through interpreting action as text, he is ‘fixing’ not the event, but the meaning of the event; yet Quéré’s accusation that this fixation is reductionist still stands). I would like to argue that although Quéré’s approach to describing

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<sup>112</sup> Yet, to describe is already to interpret. Quéré does not escape the hermeneutical circle. Or, to put it in Michel’s (2006:244-5) words: the irony is that Quéré argues that the subjects or agents that Quéré (as sociologist) studies have interpretative abilities, yet denies this interpretative ability to himself.



and understanding action is different from (and presented as opposed to) that of Ricoeur's, the two approaches complement each other.

On the Ricoeurian side, one can concede that the interpretation of action based on the model of the text is limited. A common aphorism (used by statisticians) is that 'all models are wrong, but some models are useful.' Every paradigm of interpreting action will have its shortcomings. Ricoeur (1966:205) himself admits in *Freedom and Nature* that action escapes words since it is "*present and full*". In this sense, one can say along with Quéré that action escapes the paradigm of the text, *and* one can argue alongside Ricoeur that treating action as analogous to text is helpful to our understanding and making sense of action, not only during an action (when the agent know that performing action *a* will lead to action *b*, and thus understands her actions as a whole or as a system), but also after the action has taken place.

On the side of Quéré, one can simultaneously accede that one will obtain a more comprehensive understanding of action if one also takes account of the disarray and the contingency of action as it is *happening*. Yet, Quéré (2016:6-7; Boltanski *et al.* 2006:58) also admits that while the agent is acting, he or she grasps or perceives the situation as a meaningful totality: hence, as a coherency of a series of heterogeneous elements and the integration of events which, considered as a whole, form a kind of (narrative) plot. In other words, the agent makes use – so to speak – of the text as model for his or her actions. Without the ability of understanding action as meaningful, and as doing something in order to achieve something else (exemplified by the plot of a text), the agent would not be able to act. Ricoeur and Quéré's understandings or descriptions of action are thus in a dialectical relationship.

On the one hand, in order to act meaningfully one has to be able to understand one's acts, the context of one's action, the contingent elements within an action, and the contributions of other actors, and so forth, as a coherent meaningful whole (thus as a plot or a text). On the other hand, in order to make sense of action as a text, one has to take account of action as contingency, action in all its complexity, as peculiar, uncertain and changeable, since these seemingly random or contingent events 'drive' the plot of the text. Or, as Ricoeur (1992:142) writes in his later work, *Oneself as Another* (which I will look at later): narrative makes of contingent events, necessary events. Thus, by the very act of recounting, or making sense of actions, I am telling a story in which the contingent disturbances or actions seen as narrative events, advance the story. Without these contingent disturbances or events, the story cannot

advance: these contingent events are thus necessary to the plot and are thus taken account of in narrative.

In conclusion then, Ricoeur's narrative or textual model of interpretation of action is a good model of interpretation, since it does take into account the temporality, contingency, and complexity of action – yet, as Quéré has shown us, there are limits to this model. 'Objectifying' action as one would objectify the text in the moment of interpretation does indeed lead to a kind of petrification of action and a lack of wonder at the contingency of action in the moment of its execution. In addition, one loses some of the details of the action by narrating the action: not every aspect of action can be put into words. In addition, following Quéré's input, the 'objectifying' moment (of understanding action as text) has to be thought as being part of (inter) action. Quéré therefore challenges Ricoeur's static notion of action (action considered and objectified as a whole), and instead proposes that we understand action as it is *being* done in a multitude of small everyday practices by agents that are interacting with other agents and specific contexts.<sup>113</sup> Yet, despite these limits, Ricoeur's hermeneutic model based on the text (1) prevents the philosopher from falling into the trap of psychologism and idealism (where the meaning of an action is determined by the subject or agent); and (2) illuminates action in a way that is truly helpful when one wants to *analyse* in detail phenomena such as complacent action.<sup>114</sup>

To return to the point made above, Ricoeur's hermeneutics mediates between the agent and the world, showing that the self who acts and the world which facilitates change constitute meaningful action, just as plot-twists and a continuing storyline constitute a narrative. However, this is only half of the story. While a text may serve as a good paradigm for understanding action, action can also serve as that which text, or more specifically, narrative, can creatively imitate (Ricoeur 1991:137-8). This imitation through imagination, in turn, can again inform action: narrative takes action as "its reference, redescribes [action], and remakes [action]" (Ricoeur 1991:138).

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<sup>113</sup> I will show, in the last chapter of this thesis via Ernst Wolff (2014), that Anthony Giddens's conception of action as ongoing or as continuous also challenges Ricoeur's historical, static conception of action.

<sup>114</sup> Ricoeur's (1974c:85) model of the text manages to keep subjective idealism at bay since it is informed by the method of structural explanation, and not only by hermeneutic understanding. In short, Michel (2006) emphasizes that Ricoeur's concern is to extract action from the event in order to better analyse its configuration in an objective way and, thanks to the analogy of the text, to go beyond the strict opposition between explanation and understanding in favour of a dialectical articulation. Moreover, Michel (2006) argues that Ricoeur's aim is to make room for explanation; his primary concern being to avoid both the positivism of structural-functionalist currents (which leave out understanding) and the vagueness of the micro-sociologists or micro-historicists (who reject objectification by structures) (Lacour 2016:202).

### 3.3.4. Imagination: Semantic Innovation

Imagination is described by Ricoeur (1991:174) as semantic innovation, and thus as new ways – not only of seeing the world – but also of being<sup>115</sup> or acting in the world. Elsewhere, Ricoeur (1984:xi) writes that “seeing-as” is “being-as.” Semantic innovation is suggested in the place of thinking of imagination primarily in terms of images. Ricoeur (1991:171) maintains that “images are spoken before they are seen” and uses the poem as the ultimate example of semantic innovation. Poems redescribe literal discourse/text metaphorically, by making literal discourse “figurative” or giving an image to the text (for example, seeing “old age as the dusk of day”) (Ricoeur 1991:172-3). Imagination should therefore also be thought of as a method, instead of as content (Ricoeur 1991:173). The method of imagination is to give an image to a concept and thus create new meaning (according to Ricoeur, what Kant refers to as schematism).

Thus, semantic innovation entails using language metaphorically, or finding similarity between two hitherto disparate “semantic fields” – a “sudden glimpse of a new predicative pertinence...” (Ricoeur 1991:171, 173). These metaphorical utterances (the “deviant usage of predicates in the framework of the sentence as a whole”), lead to the “extension of meaning”, and hence opens up new ways of being and acting (Ricoeur 1991:172). Moreover, semantic innovation always *refers* to something else, and hence its creativity is not limited to the field of semantics only, but also encompasses the sphere of action (Ricoeur 1991:174).

Therefore, through creative imitation, imagination adds something to our understanding of reality. Imagination thus informs meaningful action. Yet, how exactly does the theory of imagination translate into practice? Ricoeur (1991:168-9) posits that fiction is one of the places in which the theoretical and the practical intersect: “fiction may contribute to redescribing an action that has already taken place, or it may be incorporated into the projected action of an individual agent, or again, it may produce the very field of intersubjective action.” This is because fiction, as an exercise of imagination, is exactly the position in which one can explore

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<sup>115</sup> Imagination is another continuous theme throughout Ricoeur’s earlier and later action theories: in *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur especially stresses how we use imagination to both “adapt to our bodies” and to “adapt the body to the world” in order to find the best solutions to our desires, needs and projects (Dierckxsens 2018:222-3). Michel (2018:131) writes: “[i]magination, as well as understanding, can be of use to me [...] in envisaging a future situation where my feeling of being-able-to-do encounters the possible or ‘possibilities’” (Michel 2018:131). Here, in this section, Ricoeur focusses more on how we use our imagination through language and narrative in order to inform our action. Later, in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur will show us how our imaginative capacity – precisely because it allows us to act freely and creatively – also allows us to form a personal narrative about our actions and identities.

various ideas and possibilities. Moreover, in another essay, namely “Listening to the Parables of Jesus” (1974b), Ricoeur (241, 244-5) writes that parables, or stories, are directed at our imaginations, “which are active *prior to* deciding [or willing] and choosing” (Huskey 2009:8). This is thus the relation between imagination and making a decision (as discussed earlier in *Freedom and Nature*).

The aforesaid position is a position of “...noninvolvement with respect to the world of perception or of action” (Ricoeur 1991:174). Imagining future projects – as discussed in *Freedom and Nature* – is similar to semantic innovation (to give images to concepts); however, one can now speak of giving actions to concepts – an enactment, so to speak (Ricoeur 1991:177). Ricoeur (1991:175) speaks of the “*heuristic force*” of fiction, namely its “...capacity to open and unfold new dimensions of reality by means of our suspension of belief in an earlier description.”

Imagination can thus serve to develop “practical possibilities”<sup>116</sup> (Ricoeur 1991:178). In fact, there is no meaningful action without imagination, since imagination structures or shapes our projects, allows for comparison and evaluation of motives, and allows us to impute our actions to ourselves (Ricoeur 1991:177-8). However, thus far, Ricoeur has only considered human action at an individual basis. Next, Ricoeur goes on to explore what he calls the social imaginary and how it affects and shapes action on a collective level.

Just like the individual, a group also has a fictional narrative. This common narrative is found in history (1991:179). Ricoeur (1991:180-1) writes that our actions can only be affected by history if we have the capacity to be affected. In turn, the capacity to be affected is obtained through imagination: one can imagine oneself in the place of another. Imagination enables me to recognize that another person thinks and feels, just like I think and feel; that the other person is a self, just like I am a self (Ricoeur 1991:180-1). However, Ricoeur (1991:181) writes that the social imaginary can function only through specific “*imaginative practices*”, which are ideology and utopia. Both have their merits, but both can also assume destructive or pathological forms.

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<sup>116</sup> Consequently, one can perhaps coax the complacent person to imagine a world that is good, hoping to open up possibilities of being non-complacent, and to initiate action that will align with the image of the world as good. However, imagining and forming one’s own narrative is in itself an ethical endeavour and is thus subject to perversions (Kearney 2004:101, 171). Narrative has the possibility to be ethical or unethical, because narrative is always other-related. That is to say, one understands oneself via an understanding of the world one finds oneself in: “[s]elf-understanding is always an understanding of one’s relatedness to others and to the good” (Dunne 1996:144, 151). In the case of a complacent person, one may consequently say that she has a lack of imagination regarding the good. Alternatively, she imagines projects which are incongruous with what she cares about.

Despite Ricoeur's suggestions of how imagination can be employed or put to use in order to enable action, imagination should not be thought of as a set formula or a science of praxis (such as Kant's notion of practical reason). Ricoeur briefly takes up this issue: that is, the issue of whether there is a type of reasoning which can translate into practice. Ricoeur (1991:198-9) argues that Kant was wrong to formulate his notion of practical reason along the lines of pure reason. That is to say, Kant posited the law of autonomy which held that reason is practice: action is only free if it is determined rationally and *a priori* (Ricoeur 1991:198). Therefore, one is a law unto oneself (since one is not dictated to by natural laws, which would leave one unfree). Following this, Ricoeur (1991:199) writes that the most dangerous of all ideas is "...that the practical order is amenable to a system of knowledge, to a type of scientificity, comparable to the knowledge and science required in the theoretical order."

Instead, along with Aristotle, we must conceive of practical reason as striving towards excellence, as joining "upright desire" with "just thinking" in each unique situation that calls for action (Ricoeur 1991:198-9). Ricoeur (1991:206) concludes that practical reason, as mediating between immutable or necessary laws, and individual opinions and desires of how to live a meaningful life, should always be open to discussion and criticism. Put differently, "practical reason recovers a *critical* function by losing its theoretical claim to knowledge" (Ricoeur 1991:206). Imagination should thus be innovative and critical: it should open up avenues of liberty, "as a horizon of hope" (Kearney 2004:39). This creating power of the imagination – that Ricoeur qualifies as the 'mythico-poetic' function – is the same driving force of the process by which the agent makes sense of herself via interpretation and action in the world. Ricoeur's poetics is conceived as a poetics of liberty, opening onto engagement, onto action (Dosse 2008:364, 432). As such, imagination as presented in *From Text to Action*, responds to the will which submits to necessities in *Freedom and Nature*. One must have a balanced view: although the will consents, the imagination opens up new ways of acting freely (Ricoeur, cited in Kearney 2004:39).

### 3.3.5. Initiative

In turn, the imagination through narrative provides us with the capacity of initiative (Kearney 2004:171). Imagination allows us to try out or play with different lines of possible action, which then results in a vision that one can follow: initiative is that which sets in motion "... a new course of events", often grounded on this vision (Ricoeur 1991:214; Kearney 2004:171). Ricoeur (1991:210-2, 215) writes that initiative is a category of action in which one

unites the living present (phenomenological time) with the objective instant or cosmological time. One thus inscribes one's actions into the world. On the individual level, Ricoeur (1991:217) identifies four characteristics or phases of initiative:

“I *can* (potentiality, power, ability); second, I *act* (my being is my doing); third, I *intervene* (I inscribe my act within the course of the world: the present and the instant coincide); fourth, I keep my promises (I continue to act, I persevere, I *endure*).”

Having pin-pointed these characteristics unique to individual initiative, Ricoeur moves on to initiative on the collective or social level. Collective initiative should be understood in terms of the historical present (Ricoeur 1991:218).

The historical present is situated at the intersection of the ‘horizon of expectation’ and the ‘space of experience’.<sup>117</sup> However, despite the role that we play in shaping and making history, Ricoeur (1991:219-220) points out that there are two ways in which the historical present diverges from the theory of action. (1) Despite our expectations and plans, action always results in unintended consequences, and furthermore, (2) action happens in *given* situations not created by action itself. In other words, writes Ricoeur (1991:220), to have a full comprehension of history, one must think *both* of our initiative (actions) in history, and how we are “...*affected* by history and that we ourselves are affected by the history that we make.” We are thus both agents and sufferers (Ricoeur 1991:221). Taking this into consideration, initiative is then to be found in the interruption (or “*the force of the present*” – Ricoeur 1991:222 paraphrasing Nietzsche) of the influence that our past history has on us: we must act un-historically, so to speak (Ricoeur 1991:222).

In summary then, it thus appears that Ricoeur has posited how it is possible for imagination to enable rational action. However, Scharlemann (1993:160) adds that imagination does not enable *praxis* in the same way that it enables new ways of thinking. That is to say, the “symbol [imaginary] presents to thought the reality that it means”, but according to Scharlemann (1993:160) it is not certain that the redescription of reality via fiction really enables action “...by providing the motivation, in addition to providing a new world in which to act.” Concerning the latter part of this critique, I do not think that Ricoeur purports that imagination gives us a ‘new world’ in quite the way that Scharlemann seems to mean it.

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<sup>117</sup> The horizon of expectation includes the anticipation of future events from the position of the present: one's expectations can range from “hope and fear, wishing and willing, care, rational calculation, curiosity...” (Ricoeur 1991:218). On the other hand, the space of experience is that past personal experience, or experience handed down from one's predecessors which becomes part of one's present (Ricoeur 1991:218). Ricoeur borrows these two terms from the German historian, Reinhart Koselleck.

Ricoeur's claim is rather that imagination might eventually change the world through shaping and transforming agency, but not without first being confronted by a world that is narratively constructed in a certain way, and which, conversely, affects the agent.

However, the former part of Scharlemann's argument warrants attention. The claim is that imagination does not provide us with the necessary motivation that will lead to action. A tentative rejoinder to this part of Scharlemann's argument might be found in *Oneself as Another*, where Ricoeur (1992:159) writes that awareness of our narrative identity allows us to more clearly link ourselves as agents with our own actions and aims, thus resulting in the fact that we are "better readers and authors of our own lives." I will pay more attention to this riposte later. However, a stronger rejoinder to Scharlemann's argument is that Scharlemann misunderstands imagination and motivation. In fact, Scharlemann lapses into exactly the kind of scientific or formulaic understanding of imagination that Ricoeur cautions against. That is to say, an understanding of imagination as a formula that one follows to achieve the outcome of *praxis*. Such an understanding of imagination robs it of its critical and innovative functions.

In addition, regarding 'motivation', Scharlemann seems to implicitly endorse the kind of motivation that is causal in the deterministic sense. If imagination resulted in certain motives which then completely constrained the agent to act in certain ways, we would no longer be talking about 'imagination'. Instead, it would be more apt to start talking about brainwashing; perhaps the kind that is so often depicted in science fiction. On the subject of complacent action, one could therefore say that imagination can act as catalyst for combatting complacent action. However, imagination will never exhaustively be responsible for leading the agent from complacent action (which entails self-satisfaction and being incoherent or divided), to a state of being self-critical (in a constructive way), honest, and integrated.

### **3.3.6. Conclusion and Transition to *Oneself as Another***

In conclusion, Ricoeur has delineated how text may act as a helpful model in order to make sense of action: action can be interpreted as a text, or more specifically as a narrative or a story, in order to make more sense of the initiative and receptivity involved in action. In other words, text or narrative helps one to think of action as a closed system,<sup>118</sup> as something with a

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<sup>118</sup> However, I have also pointed out – through the encounter with Quéré – that this reading of action as text has its limits: it might hinder one from interpreting action as continuous, as part of a social context carried out with others in everyday life. Reading action like text makes for a very sedimented or embedded notion of action (Wolff 2014:114), even though Ricoeur (1991:118) maintains that to read a text or an action is to connect the discourse of the text or action to one's current, or even new, discourses or actions. In this limited sense the text or action has an "open character" (Ricoeur 1991:118).

beginning and an end, and thus enables one to think of an action as initiating something new in the world. In turn, text is informed by action, and can consequently provide creative imitations of, and deviations from, action that has become routine. These insights have practical consequences: through stories, one can transform one's self-understanding and one's understanding of actions. Just as a text is reread and consequently re-interpreted, so also are our actions re-interpreted (and eventually re-evaluated). Such re-interpretation will consequently lead to changing our behaviour and changing ourselves (Huskey 2009:7). As such, Ricoeur starts to show us the importance of hermeneutics in understanding human action. No longer can one assume that phenomenological description is presuppositionless: there will always be some hermeneutic bias present in a description of human action, which will, in turn, affect our understanding of action and consequently our actions.

Not only does Ricoeur introduce a hermeneutics of the text into his earlier phenomenology (as can be seen in the way he revisits earlier themes<sup>119</sup> from *Freedom and Nature*), but Ricoeur also provides us with guidelines or a method of creatively thinking about the limits we have encountered in *Freedom and Nature*, and that are continued in *From Text to Action*. These limits manifest themselves in the paradoxical human being who both undergoes and chooses existence, who both initiates and receives, who acts and is subjected to action, and who introduces changes into the world and receives justification (Ricoeur 1966:164). In *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur writes that there is hope in the sense that semantic innovation is a way to respond to the inherent tensions found in action and in the human being (Huskey 2009:38). Huskey (2009:23) writes that "human beings are limited in their ability to decide, to act, and to assent, but there is also a limit to this limitation." We are able to transcend the initial limit through imagination.

In the next section, below, we will see how Ricoeur continues his hermeneutical-phenomenological account of the acting subject in *Oneself as Another* (1992). In *Oneself as Another*, one again encounters the 'tensive' or broken self. However, whereas *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action* contain an exposition of the self considered mostly by itself,

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<sup>119</sup> In *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur hermeneutically discusses the following tensions found in *Freedom and Nature*: the first of these hermeneutical insights is that interpretation requires both explanation and understanding of the text. Following this, action can be *explained* in a way that is *understandable* to another. That is to say, the tension between deciding and its motives is interpreted as "twofold causality" in human desire: what I desire to do is both the *reason* and *cause* of my actions (Dauenhauer 2007:205). A second hermeneutical insight is that of narrative interpretation. Stories proceed by a storyline, but also contain plot-twists. Similarly, voluntary movement (having the capability to introduce change into the world) can be understood as a narrative: actions introduce 'plot twists' into the continuing present, while the world – understood as closed systems ('plots') – allows for these actions.



in *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur elucidates the relationship of the self and the other person. That is to say, the former texts focus more on the ‘inner’ paradoxes, or inner alterity of the person acting in the world (deciding and receiving motives, moving through the body as organ, consenting to absolute necessities), while *Oneself as Another* – as the name implies – primarily considers alterity or otherness in the form of the second and third person who are always already present in the understanding of the self, and thus in action. Although Ricoeur has hinted in his earlier works at the presence of the other subject, (think for example, of the Transcendent other as limit, or the other implied in the fact that one is born, or even the other to which one has to explain one’s actions in a meaningful way), in *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur explicitly explores the relationship between the self and other selves. The other in the form of another person of course introduces an ethical aspect into action, since one’s actions do not happen in isolation, but now affects others. Hence, in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur additionally introduces and explains ethical and moral action in detail. To borrow the words of Davidson and Michel (2010:7):

“There is also a shift of focus in this movement from one hermeneutics to the other. The first hermeneutics of the self, developed in the 1960s, is conceived in terms of an ‘apprenticeship of signs,’ to borrow the words of Bernard Stevens. The care of the self is the care of a being who is understood through the interpretation of signs, symbols, narratives, actions and institutions that are outside of it, as an ‘objective spirit.’ The second hermeneutics of the self, such as it is articulated especially in *Oneself as Another*, is conceived both as an attestation of the self and as an injunction coming from the other. The care of the self is thereby converted into an ethical and moral concern for the other. [...] Perhaps here the expression ‘the hermeneutics of the self’ becomes paradoxical: it is introduced into Ricoeur’s text at the very moment that it is not so much a question of offering a new theory of the interpretive understanding of the self but of constructing a ‘little ethics’ in which the concern for the other seems to have overtaken the concern for oneself.”

One final observation before I delve into *Oneself as Another*: at first purview it is difficult to discern any phenomenological description in this work, since the focus is mainly on an on-going interaction between analytic philosophy and speech acts, and hermeneutics (Greisch 1996:85). However, Greisch (1996:85-6) points out that phenomenological description is present throughout *Oneself as Another* in the form of a new kind of certitude or belief, namely attestation, which lies between the extremes of either an absolute first truth (characteristic of the Cartesian subject) or that of mere opinion which is “*crushed* by the weight of a relentless suspicion” (such as the Nietzschean non-subject). One attests that one is the self who is speaking, acting, the protagonist in one’s life story, and finally, the one who takes up

ethical responsibility (Greisch 1996:86). These aforementioned attestations form the understanding or the hermeneutics of the self (Greisch 1996:84). All four the aforementioned aspects of the self will consequently be taken up to understand the self who attests to its own being, in *Oneself as Another*.

### 3.4. Oneself as Another ([1990] 1992)

#### 3.4.1. Introduction

*Oneself as Another* (1992) is considered by some to be Ricoeur's crowning work: several of Ricoeur's earlier themes, such as language, discourse, action theory, and narrative theory are gathered together under the study of the self as another linked with the other (Dosse 2008:246; Joas and Knöbl 2009:428; Marsh 2002:vii; Reagan 2002:4). Ricoeur ([1995] 2000:xii) himself writes of *Oneself as Another* that in it "the essence of my philosophical work can be found..." The very title, *Oneself as Another*, conveys the coming together of three philosophical aims.<sup>120</sup> That is to say, the title *Oneself as Another* contains three grammatical features "which correspond [to] three major features of the hermeneutics of the self, namely the detour of reflection by way of analysis, the dialectic of selfhood and sameness, and finally the dialectic of selfhood and otherness" (Ricoeur 1992:16). These three grammatical features are as follows.

First, by speaking of "oneself" (*soi-même*) Ricoeur (1992:1-2) wishes to indicate that the person is not an immediately posited *subject*, but a *self* who is reflexive (refers to itself). This position of the self who refers to itself as someone who thinks and acts (as opposed to the self who is merely a knower), was, of course, already assumed in *Freedom and Nature* (Amalric 2018:38-55; Michel 2018:127). Then, in *From Text to Action* which reflects the linguistic and hermeneutic turn in his work, Ricoeur recognized that all understanding of the self is mediated by interpretation. The self thus refers to itself through mediations such as language and symbols, and it is this hermeneutic self, understood through its speech, acts, narratives, and imputations, whom Ricoeur will describe in *Oneself as Another*.

Second, within narrative identity the "self" (or the French '*même*' in '*soi-même*', which, translated is 'same') can be understood as both referring to an *idem*-identity (that [empirical being] of the person which stays the same over time, such as fingerprints) and an *ipse*-identity,

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<sup>120</sup> Yet, one cannot refer to *Oneself as Another* as a synthesis, since the otherness that is constitutive of oneself forbids thought to be buckle closed on itself (Marcel Neusch [L'aventure de soi, *La croix*, 31 March 1990] quoted in Dosse 2008:540).

or *ipseity*, or selfhood (the self that is shaped over time through interpretation and which is constituted by its interaction with others; deliberate self-constancy despite change, and thus narrative identity) (Dosse 2008:534; Ricoeur 1992:2-3; [1990] 1999:53). Ricoeur (1992:2) derives the terms ‘*idem*’- and ‘*ipse*’-identity from the possible Latin translations of “identical” (as found in the word ‘identity’).

Third and connected to the second aim, Ricoeur (1992:3) wants to convey with the title that a self and action cannot be thought of, or even exist, without the other. Ricoeur (1966:128) already indicated in *Freedom and Nature* that the “being of the subject is not solipsistic; it is being-in-common.” The other myself “...completes me” (Ricoeur 1966:128). In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur will develop this idea in full.

The tension found within the self of *Freedom and Nature* (namely, between the voluntary and the involuntary) is thus continued in *Oneself as Another*; however, now the focus is explicitly on the tension found in the self which is both same and other (or in different terms, the tension between the two extreme notions of the ‘I’). On the one hand, following the Cartesian notion of the self, the thinking “I” or the cogito is advanced as an absolute first truth (Ricoeur 1992:5). More specifically, the cogito is a *thing* which thinks, with an identity constituted by a set of ahistorical predicates; not necessarily a person who can interact with others (Ricoeur 1992:6-7). Taken to the extreme, this conception of the self results in the “...loss of relation to the person who speaks, to the I-you of interlocution, to the identity of a historical person, to the self of responsibility” (Ricoeur 1992:11). This notion of the self thus construes the self as something which is always the same, since it is always only a knower.

On the other hand, one finds the cogito shattered by doubt: that is, the anti-cogito as posited by Nietzsche. Ricoeur (1992:12-13) cites Nietzsche’s argument which holds that the cogito is a mere illusion: it is something we posit to impose order on the chaos we cannot fathom. This notion of the self thus abolishes the notion of sameness within the self: ‘sameness’ is an artificial construct that we use to make sense of the unfathomable otherness of the self. The self, according to this view, is thus constituted of alterity: there is no coherent sameness inherent in the self.

Ricoeur (1999:45), however, moves beyond the above dichotomy of the cogito as absolute certainty and the anti-cogito as meaningless, and instead argues that the person is able to exemplify sameness (empirically and through commitment), and is simultaneously able to embody alterity within him- or herself. Ricoeur is thus neither for or against a subjectivism

(Michel 2006:28-9). Ricoeur posits attestation as that which mediates between these two extremes of the self. That is to say, the subject self-reflexively attests to his or her self or being: such attestation is neither dogmatic certitude, nor is it the kind of scepticism or suspicion that results in complete uncertainty. Instead, attestation is the “reflective and reflexive gestures of affirming the self while also questioning its nature; the self is that which both asserts and interrogates” (Huskey 2009:133). In Dauenhauer’s (2007:210) words, “[a]ttestation is a kind of assurance or confidence that a person has that he or she can and does act purposefully and thereby brings about some new state of affairs.” Attestation is thus phenomenological description, but also entails that one interprets oneself through speaking, acting, narrating one’s life, and imputing responsibility to oneself (Ricoeur 1992:7). As such, it is through self-reflexive action that the agent comes to know him- or herself as a person in whom both sameness and alterity exist – even if sameness and otherness are in a relationship of tension.

Ricoeur’s (1999:45) hermeneutic phenomenology of the self thus contains four layers: “...language, action, narrative, and ethical life.” These can be rendered in question-form in terms of the identity-related question ‘who?’: “‘who is speaking?’ ‘Who is acting [and suffers]?’ ‘Who is recounting about himself or herself?’ ‘Who is the moral subject of imputation?’” (Ricoeur 1992:16). Moreover, within each of these four levels of the person a “*threefold structure*” is present (Ricoeur 1999:45). This threefold structure consists of three moments, namely (1) the capable subject considered by him or herself, (2) “interpersonal forms of otherness” (3) and “institutional forms of association” which progressively work themselves out in each of the above levels of the person (Ricoeur 1999:45; 2000:5).

To elaborate, the person considered as an individual agent also needs to be understood as someone in a dialogical relationship with others, in the sense of face-to-face or ‘I-you’ relationships, and others in the sense of third persons with whom one interacts through institutions (Ricoeur 2000:5). Without the mediation of others in both the interpersonal and institutional sense, the subject cannot bring his or her actions to fruition. In other words, the movement of the threefold structure is progressive, since it leads us from an understanding of the agent as someone with the *capacity* to act, to an understanding of the agent who actualizes or realises this capacity for action, namely the ‘capable agent’ (Ricoeur 2000:5). The current section on *Oneself as Another* will therefore be divided according to the four abovementioned strata of the subject, within which I will clarify how the threefold structure of action unfolds.

### 3.4.2. Language: Who is Speaking?

The first question – “who is speaking?” – is answered by a detour into linguistic analytic philosophy. Speaking, writes Ricoeur (1999:48), is “...the first condition of personhood.” “Who is speaking?” should further be split up into two other questions, namely: “Of *whom* does one speak in designating persons, as distinct from things, in the referential mode? And *who* speaks by designating himself or herself as ‘locutor’ (addressing an interlocutor)?” (Ricoeur 1992:17). For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the latter question.

The person who speaks of himself or herself is able to grasp and correctly apply the use of the first and second person pronouns: ‘I’ and ‘you’. That is to say, such a person can distinguish himself or herself as an “identical pole” from whence his or her acts emanate (Ricoeur 2000:2). We thus move from semantics to pragmatics. Identifying oneself as the same person from whence one’s actions emanate takes place through simple locutionary speech acts<sup>121</sup> (Ricoeur 1992:43). These speech acts are as simple as saying: “I take a seat”, “I eat”, or “I proclaim”. In each of these speech acts, one refers to oneself; put differently, these speech acts attest to the fact that there is a speaker (Greisch 1996:87; Ricoeur 1992:43). However, this capacity of self-designation by the agent cannot be executed or actualized in isolation.

Self-designation ultimately takes place through speech acts (the act of speaking) in the context of dialogue or interlocution (Ricoeur 1992:40-1). It is only in the context of dialogue that ‘I’ and ‘you’ make any sense. However, interlocution and self-designation are in a reciprocal relationship with each other: if I am not able to designate myself as a person to whom speech is addressed, I cannot partake in dialogue (Ricoeur 1999:49). In turn, one recognizes oneself in the context of dialogue. As such, self-designation is made real through the second constituent of the threefold structure, namely interpersonal interaction. Or, as Ricoeur (1999:49) puts it: “someone addressing someone else is the difference between effective speech and a simple logical proposition.”

Furthermore, Ricoeur (1992:42) draws our attention the notion of performatives: performatives are those instances where the act of saying is simultaneously the performing or executing of an act. The prime example is saying “I promise”. For Ricoeur (1999:49), promising is significant, since it expresses a person’s commitment to the institution of

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<sup>121</sup> For the sake of clarification: “The act of speaking, according to these authors [Austin and Searle], is constituted by a hierarchy of subordinate acts distributed on three levels: (1) the level of the locutionary or propositional act, the act *of saying*; (2) the level of the illocutionary act or force, that which we do *in saying*; and (3) the level of the perlocutionary act, that which we do *by saying*” (Ricoeur 1991:146).

language, and consequently to other persons with whom one is not necessarily in face-to-face dialogue or relationship with (Ricoeur 1992:266, 1999:50). That is to say, through promising – by meaning what one says – one upholds the “institutional condition for every interpersonal relation”, since others can then trust the institution of language to convey meaning (Ricoeur 2000:6). Accordingly, the third person – he or she – comes to be regarded as a person, as a self (Ricoeur 1999:49).

In summary, the person who speaks or uses language, does so on the individual level through *locution*, on the level of interpersonal relations through *interlocution*, and on the level of institutional relations through *language as institution* (Ricoeur 1999:50). In other words, one must add to the theory of speech acts “a reflexive prolongation in order to get to the multiple acts of actual utterance...” (Ricoeur 2000:2). One can, at this preliminary stage of investigation into the self, make the broad inference that complacent action betrays the institution of language, and therefore betrays others’ trust. For example, if I say that I care about something, but do not act as if I care about that thing, I am betraying the institution of language. I embody the saying “talk is cheap”, and consequently give others a reason to doubt what I say.

In conclusion, the very term ‘speech act’, referred to above, denotes the coming together of language and action. The way is thus prepared for the second question pertaining to the person: ‘who is acting?’ (Or, alternatively, ‘who is suffering?’).

### **3.4.3. Action: Who is Acting (and Suffering)?**

As we have seen earlier, human action is only meaningful action if it can be made intelligible in language (Ricoeur 1991:189; Ricoeur 1999:48). For this reason, Ricoeur (2000:2) writes that the previous question “Who is speaking?” is the “most primitive inasmuch as all the other [... questions] imply the use of language.” We speak of actions using propositions and statements, and it is through speech acts that we designate ourselves as actors, both implicitly and explicitly<sup>122</sup> (Ricoeur 1992:17, 56). Ricoeur therefore continues his hermeneutical detour within analytic philosophy, but this time the focus is on the ‘philosophy of action’. Philosophers who take the analytic approach to action are specifically concerned with the questions: “*what* counts as action?” (or, “*what* action has been performed?”), and “*why* did the action happen?” (Ricoeur 1992:60-61). Moreover, ‘what’ is usually connected to ‘why’,

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<sup>122</sup> By speaking, I am acting. Hence it is an implied, or implicit designation of myself as an actor. On the other hand, I can explicitly say that it is ‘I’ who is doing such and such a thing.

since the reason or motive, the *why*, for action is held as the explanation for *what* counts as action (Ricoeur 2000:2). In the process, the agent, or the ‘who’ of action is neglected.

Ricoeur (1992:67) writes that it is the phenomenological concept of intention that leads us from the questions of “what?-why?” to the question “who?”. If one asks *what* human action is, the answer has to involve intention. Intention is “...the aiming of a consciousness in the direction of something I am to do...” (Ricoeur 1992:67). The concept of intention (especially intention-to) confounds analytical<sup>123</sup> action theories, since the intention to do something is private and future-oriented, and is therefore only accessible to the agent who has the intention (Ricoeur 1992:68). Moreover, what is intended is not-yet-realised, or may not be realised at all (Ricoeur 1992:81). Analytic philosophy, with its focus on the “truth of a description”, thus ignores the question raised by intention, namely “who is the agent of the action?” (Ricoeur 1992:72). It is only the agent who can attest to his or her own intentions. The real enigma surrounding action therefore lies with the agent, and not with the *what* and the *why* of action.<sup>124</sup>

The next issue that Ricoeur considers, is that of ascribing meaningful action – action which expresses a choice – to an agent. To begin with, this can be done linguistically, and more specifically, metaphorically: we speak of actions as depending on agents, as being within agents’ power, and as being the property or ‘children’ of agents (Ricoeur 1999:51). Yet more importantly, ascribing meaningful action to an agent is closely linked to attestation (Ricoeur 1992:87). A phenomenological perspective can shed light on the type of truth which is attested to by an agent (Ricoeur 1992:73).

As was mentioned above, attestation is “... a certainty that is not a belief, a *doxa* inferior to knowledge, that we can perform [...] basic actions” (Ricoeur 1992:112). This certainty, namely attestation, is based on “the phenomenology of ‘I can’, which itself goes back ultimately to an ontology of one’s own body” (Greisch 1996:89). That is to say, as Ricoeur

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<sup>123</sup> Just as in *Freedom and Nature* where Ricoeur inscribes the body-object with the tension of the body understood as *mine, his, hers* (etc.), as one’s own body, Ricoeur now inscribes private intentionality into the analytical subject that is only understood from the outside, so to speak. And just as naturalism (encountered in *Freedom and Nature*) erases the nuance of the body as one’s own (Michel 2006:35), so also does analytical philosophy of action tend to erase the nuance of the intentional subject by conflating two registers of speech (*what-why* conflated with *who*).

<sup>124</sup> The *what* of action, namely action as intention to do something, is always *someone’s* intention. One cannot speak of the action without evoking the agent. In addition, the *why* or the motive of an action is the agent him- or herself (Ricoeur 1992:95). Motive is thus traced back to the agent who has deliberated on his or her actions (Ricoeur 1992:94, 109-10). By tracing the ‘reasons-for’ acting to the agent, Ricoeur not only moves beyond the concerns of analytic philosophy, but also beyond his own focus on the reasons for acting (desire as both cause and motive) in *From Text to Action*. Although Ricoeur’s initial analysis of reasons for acting was an indispensable hermeneutic exercise which had a phenomenological basis (the agent has to explain his or her actions in an understandable manner), here, in *Oneself as Another*, the focus is more phenomenological since the agent’s experience of the world as meaningful (intentionality) is central.

(1966:203) describes in *Freedom and Nature* already, one's body is that which is one's own, but also that which allows one to bring change into the world, since it is part of the physical realm (Ricoeur 1990:111). Moreover, because one's body is an inherent part of one's subjectivity, action is a kind of consciousness (Ricoeur 1966:209, 227). Hence, the agent attests to the fact that the actions are hers, and thus designates herself as the agent of the actions.

However, moving from the individual considered in abstraction, to action on the interpersonal level, one finds that this designation is somewhat complicated (Ricoeur 1992:96). Actions can, of course, also be ascribed to another. (Ricoeur 1992:98) Due to the fact that actions can be ascribed to both myself and another, the actions ascribed to oneself, or each one, or someone, appears to be identical. However, the dilemma is resolved if ascription takes place within a speech situation in which speakers stand face-to-face within a context (Ricoeur 1992:98). Only within this context of *interaction* do actions take on agent-particular, or unique meanings. As such, regarding the 'I-you' moment of action, one can inscribe one's own actions "in a context of *interaction* where the other figures as my antagonist or my helper, in relations that vary between conflict and interaction" (Ricoeur 2000:6).

Finally, the '*who*' of action is not merely an isolated person or persons to whom acts can easily be ascribed. A person's actions are wound up with the rest of society in two ways: first, because actions bring about change in the world, it is implied that the actions of the agent become entangled or taken up in causal chains of physical systems; second, the actions of each agent become entangled with the actions of other agents (Ricoeur 1992:106-7). On the level of institutional association, ascription of action therefore becomes more complicated since it becomes intertwined with various social systems (Ricoeur 2000:6). One needs to judge, that is to say, weigh certain competing possibilities against each other, and then ascribe actions to the agents. At this level, ascription may then take on a more moral nuance, namely that of imputation (determining who is responsible) (Ricoeur 1992:107). Nonetheless, the historian might also be faced with the task of ascription, and in such a case ascription may remain non-moral.

In summary, on the level of action, one can speak first of *ascribing action* to the *subject considered by himself or herself*. At this moment of consideration, the agent *attests* to the fact that he or she is the author/parent/origin of his or her actions. Then, at the second moment of the threefold structure of action, namely *interpersonal* relations, ascription of action takes place in a context of *interaction*: interaction with others at the 'I-you' moment can range from



cooperation to conflict (Ricoeur 1999:51). At the third moment, namely *institutional association*, action is connected to the third person through *social systems*, such as “technical systems, monetary and fiscal systems, juridical systems, bureaucratic systems, pedagogical systems, scientific systems, media systems, and so on” (Ricoeur 2000:7). As was the case with language, introducing the ‘other’ implies that one introduces a moral element to, in this case, action. Consequently, one would speak of imputation, rather than ascription of action, to a person. Imputation will be discussed in more detail in chapter six, where I consider cases of complacent action that are morally blameworthy. What remains clear throughout Ricoeur’s investigation into action, however, is that action cannot be understood without the agent: as that self who has the “power-to-do” (1992:112-3).

#### **3.4.4. Narrative: Who is Recounting about Himself or Herself?**

Above we have learnt of two aspects of the self: the self as speaker and the self as agent. However, these need to be supplemented by a further theory which takes into account the temporal dimension of the person, namely narrative theory (Ricoeur 1992:113). Although we have looked at narrative as a way of understanding action as effecting change in the world in *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur now wants to draw our attention to the self that is revealed through narrative. This leads us then to the third question pertaining to the self: “who is recounting about him- or herself?” Approaching the agent in this ‘narrative’ way therefore leads us to an understanding of the *identity* of the agent: in other words, what is it of the agent that stays the same over time? (Ricoeur 1999:52).

If one thinks of the temporal person then, the question of sameness and selfhood comes to the fore. That is to say, personal identity assumes some sort of permanence or sameness in time, – we can empirically identify someone as being the same person from infancy to adulthood – yet, simultaneously personal identity is changeable (Ricoeur 1992:116). Ricoeur refers to the former as *idem*-identity, and the latter as *ipse*-identity or *ipseity*. In a sense, these two almost discordant aspects of identity reflect the conflict present on the level of the will in *Freedom and Nature*. Ricoeur (1966:18) writes that “[c]onsciousness is always in some degree both a disruption and a bond [in relation to the body]”; similarly, *ipse*- and *idem*-identity respectively denote change and sameness (or cohesiveness). One can understand sameness (*idem*-identity) and selfhood (*ipseity*) through asking “what?” and “who?” about personal identity, respectively (Ricoeur 1999:53). Sameness or *idem*-identity is *what* I am, while selfhood or *ipseity* is *who* I am. However, just like the voluntary and the involuntary are in a

reciprocal relationship, these two questions are bound up with each other: to ask what I am, is also to ask who I am.

Put in different terms, a person stays the same, yet is able to incorporate change into his or her own being. A person's identity is thus an "immutable substance", yet is also more than this; it is something which is not immutable, but rather other, diverse, or even contrary, and which is shaped through interpretation (Ricoeur 1992:131; 1999:53). Ricoeur (1992:118) writes of two ways in which we can think of permanence in terms of a person: character and keeping one's promises. While sameness (*idem*-identity) and selfhood (*ipseity*) meet within one's character, they depart from one another when it concerns keeping one's promises (Ricoeur 1992:118-9).

With character, Ricoeur (1992:121) means that "...set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized." Although Ricoeur (1992:120) initially thought of character as being an "absolute involuntary" as defined in *Freedom and Nature* (1966), Ricoeur now argues that character can be altered through interpretation: character can now also be regarded as an "acquired disposition." Character (that is to say, sameness) is formed through habit<sup>125</sup> (innovation which lead to permanence and forms a character trait), and by identifying oneself with certain societal values, norms, ideal persons and heroes (Ricoeur 1992:121). Habit and acquired identification imply a historical character formed in time, in which "character is me, myself, *ipse*; but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*" (Ricoeur 1992:121). In other words, I maintain myself as such and such a person (selfhood), who then becomes a character by which others can re-identify me as being the same (sameness). Change and alteration have thus led to a character that is the same from day to day. Character looks like sameness, but it also contains selfhood. Sameness and selfhood thus overlap.

Sameness and selfhood, however, seem to diverge or separate when one considers promises. Promises are permanent and maintain sameness in the sense of keeping to one's word, despite a lapse in time between making the promise and fulfilling the promise<sup>126</sup> (Ricoeur

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<sup>125</sup> It is interesting to note here that Ricoeur now considers habit as something "the subject can *be*": earlier, in *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur was adamant about the fact that habit is only something that a subject "can *have*", as is evident by the fact that Ricoeur (1966:281-3) described habit as an organ of willing, or as being "acquired" and as having "use-value" (Čapek 2018:74). Pirovolakis (2018:137) formulates this transition differently: habit is no longer described as nature (as second nature), but as human finitude: if you commit to one thing and it forms a habit, you exclude other habits or ways of being.

<sup>126</sup> Johnson (2018:120) points out that the germ of the promise is already present in *Freedom and Nature* when Ricoeur writes of decision: in order to stay *committed* to one's decision, one has to pay attention to right set of motives. To decide is to make a kind of promise to the future other, whether this other is oneself or another person.

1992:123). Yet unlike character, writes Ricoeur (1992:123), promises can only be inscribed “...within the dimension of ‘who?’”: “[t]he perseverance of character is one thing, the perseverance of faithfulness to a word that has been given is something else again.” Keeping one’s promises implies maintaining oneself (one’s selfhood) in such a way that is consistent with those promises, despite the fact that one’s desires or dispositions might change (Ricoeur 1992:123-4, 148). Promises thus evoke situations in which the sameness of character does not overlap with the self-constancy of selfhood (Ricoeur 1992:124). Sometimes, in order to fulfil a promise, one has to act despite one’s character.

Narrative, however, is the mediating ploy that enables a person (and others) to bring together *idem*- and *ipse*-identities in a dialectical relationship (Ricoeur 1992:118-9). That is to say, just as a narrative abridges the aporia between sameness/permanence (the same story) and change (plot twists); narrative identity makes sense of the *idem* and *ipse* aspects of one’s identity.<sup>127</sup> In fact, it is this dialectic between sameness and selfhood that constitutes narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992:140). By situating or ‘emplotting’ myself as a character in my life-story, it is possible for me to recount how certain character traits have been formed in me historically (through “...diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability”), and also to make sense of those actions which seem ‘out of character’ (Ricoeur 1992:140-1).

Narrative<sup>128</sup> thus configures discordance into concordance (Ricoeur 1992:142). In addition, Ricoeur (1992:146) writes that the answers to the questions ‘who?’, ‘what?’, and ‘why?’ “...form a chain that is none other than the story chain. Telling a story is saying who did what and how, by spreading out in time the connection between these various viewpoints. One can thus come to the conclusion that narrative identity accounts for action, since “...the best response to the question ‘Who is the author or agent?’ is to tell the story of a life” (Kearney 1996:181; Michel 2006:83).

Such a life story would therefore not only make sense of sameness and selfhood, but also of the actions which move the plot forward *and* changes or shapes the character’s (in the narrative sense) identity (Ricoeur 1992:142-4). A plot thus develops both the narrative and the character (Ricoeur 1992:144). It would thus appear as if Ricoeur has moved from the position

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<sup>127</sup> Michel (2006:83) writes that this new theorisation of personal identity under the narrative mode is indeed innovating, since it does not need a substantialist metaphysical framework in order to bring unity into the notion of the self.

<sup>128</sup> Narrative identity, as “historical fiction” or “fictional history” should not be confused with fiction, however (Ricoeur 1992:114). Historical and fictional narratives are ontologically distinct, writes Dosse (2008:472). History is ontologically connected to historical truth, while fiction is not necessarily connected to historical truth.

of basing an interpretation of action on the model of text interpretation in *From Text to Action*, to basing an interpretation of action on the pattern of the narrative in *Oneself as Another*. In the words of Sergey Zenkin (2012:86, 90) the “paradigm of the text” has made way for the “narrative paradigm”. Put differently, even though the theme of the text helps us to make sense of meaningful action, Ricoeur now takes understanding to another level by positing that one obtains a fuller understanding of action when one looks at action in terms of the narrative of a person’s life.

Furthermore, since actions are not just understood on their own or as isolated, but are couched in people’s narratives, it follows that one person’s narrative will intersect with another’s narrative at some point. There are thus interactions within narrative. Moreover, every interaction implies the presence of power. Ricoeur (1992:145) writes that the question of ethics thus arises here: acting implies having power over another, or exerting some influence over the other. Within a narrative, one can consequently speak of both an active and a suffering role<sup>129</sup> (where a role implies unity of actions and identity ascribed to one’s character) (Ricoeur 1992:144-5). Narrative thus serves as the mediator between action theory and ethics (Ricoeur 1992:145, 152). Ricoeur (1992:114, 140) speaks of the triad “describing, narrating, prescribing”, in which narrative takes us from a descriptive theory of action, to a prescriptive theory of action.

How does narrative selfhood aid ethical selfhood? Through the emplotment of myself in my life-story I attest to the fact that it was and is *my* body and *my* memories that are the same then and now; that it was *my* action (Ricoeur 1992:129, 163). To return to the ‘promise’, mentioned above, Kemp (1996:46) writes that “Ricoeur considers this concept of self-constancy essentially ethical”. The responsible person is that person who is both accountable for his or her actions (the same person), and who remains constant, who keeps promises, on whom others can count (Ricoeur 1992:165-6). Or, as Greisch (1996:90) writes, there is a “perseverance of character under the sign of identity-*sameness* and [... a] perseverance of faithfulness to the word under the sign of identity-*ipseity*.” The coherence achieved by emplotting myself within a narrative, allows and aids me to carry through the promises I’ve made (and as we will see later, allows others to hold me accountable for my action). There is

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<sup>129</sup> Ricoeur (1992:157) writes of suffering (and also related: omitting and enduring) that it is still action: “neglecting, forgetting to do something, is also letting things be done by someone else, sometimes to the point of criminality; as for enduring, it is keeping oneself, willingly or not, under the power of the other’s action...”

thus a remarkably strong connection between “the concept of narrative identity and the phenomenon of attestation” (Greisch 1966:90).

Moreover, narrative further aids ethical selfhood, since narrative functions as a mediation of the self (narrative facilitates self-interpretation), and consequently one can come to esteem oneself as certain type of person who is responsible for his or her actions (Greisch 1996:93). Such self-interpretation or attestation of oneself as a certain kind of person, bears witness to the fragility of identity. Yet, the very fact that identity is not set in stone, allows for reinterpretation in the process of seeking cohesion in one’s life narrative (Greisch 1996:92). As Ricoeur (2000:3) has illustrated above: “narrative identity [...] admits change.” Narrative thus enables one to reinterpret oneself and to gather one’s life together in the pursuit of the good life (Ricoeur 1992:158).

To frame it slightly differently: to speak of the good life, is to speak of a whole life – and life can only be grasped as a whole through narrative. By interpreting and re-interpreting one’s life as narrative, one is constantly looking to giving meaning to one’s life (Scott-Baumann 2011:594). Moreover, and as was mentioned before in *From Text to Action*, narrative provides us with “imaginative variations” in which we can explore different instances of practical wisdom (Ricoeur 1992:148, 164). In narratives we can imaginatively explore and evaluate which actions are good and bad, and whether an agent is praiseworthy or blameworthy (Ricoeur 1992:164, 170). Finally, through ethical imagination, the narrative can ultimately shape a reader’s feelings and actions. Therefore Ricoeur (1992:170) writes that “...actions refigured by narrative fictions are complex ones, rich in anticipations of an ethical nature.”

Moreover, and to return once again to the threefold structure that plays out on each level of the person, narrative, as we have seen, is ethical because it is other-related. When one recounts or hears one’s narrative or story, one cannot but notice how interwoven one’s narrative is with that of others (Ricoeur 2000:7). One’s narrative forms part of, or is a part of, other people’s narratives about their own lives.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, one’s own narrative is a segment in the

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<sup>130</sup> However, even if one realises how connected one is to the other through narrative, and even though narrative enables us to form a decentred self-understanding that is not egotistical (in other words, a self who discovers alterity in itself and who responds to the other by denying itself), narrative can still be unethical and other-denying (Altieri 2011:146; Kearney 1996:184; Wall 2011:53). (Michel 2006:83) writes that Ricoeur is not ignorant of the limits of his theory of narrative identity, which are essentially due to the gap between narrative and life. The stories we tell about our lives are subject to discourse in which lies, justifications, and concealments (cover-ups) have taken a hold. In addition, there is the problem of memory: memories are often truncated, imprecise (events are retained, others forgotten, and others still, transformed (Michel 2006:84). In the case of complacency, a narrative understanding of self does not result in goodwill towards the other, since the complacent person makes an inaccurate judgment of his position towards the good and the other.

narratives of others. Thus, while we focused on the ethical nature of narrative, we have moved, almost inadvertently, from a consideration of the agent in isolation, to a consideration of the agent in a face-to-face relationship with the interpersonal other. The next move, to that of association with the other through institutions, follows just as effortlessly. “[N]ations, peoples, classes, communities of every sort as institutions [...] recognize themselves as well as others through narrative identity” (Ricoeur 2000:7). In other words, through narrative identity, one associates (or disassociates) with others on the level of institutions.

In conclusion, narrative identity thus unfolds in the same threefold fashion as discourse and action. Moreover, narrative identity not only holds together the sameness and flexibility of identity, but also enables us to think of the speaking, acting, and ethical person, persons, and institutions. The threefold structure of action can consequently be stated in moral terms, namely: “desire for an accomplished life — with and for others — in just institutions” (Ricoeur 1999:45). Thus, the question is raised: “who is the moral subject of moral imputation?” The next section in this chapter will be devoted to Ricoeur’s in-depth answer to the aforementioned question. Ricoeur calls it his ‘little ethics.’

### **3.4.5. Ethical Life: Who is the Moral Subject of Imputation?**

#### **3.4.5.1. Introduction**

Ricoeur (1992:169-70), as is characteristic, answers the question of the subject of moral imputation by way of detour. This detour takes the form of investigating the difference between ethics and morals, or that which is good and obligatory, and how they act as a different set of predicates imputed to the actions of the self. Ricoeur (1992:170) defines ethics as the aim towards a good or accomplished life, and morality as the specific enunciation of how this aim should be achieved through following universal rules or laws which act as constraints. Ethics is therefore teleological (following, specifically, the Aristotelian tradition), while morality is deontological (one has a duty to obey these norms, as in the Kantian tradition).

Despite the differences between ethics and morality, Ricoeur (1992:170) holds that they are related as follows: (1) ethics has primacy over morality, (2) yet it is necessary for ethics to “pass through the sieve of the norm”, and (3) it is legitimate for the norm to seek recourse to the ethical aim “whenever the norms leads to impasses in practice”. Ethics therefore includes morality, but does not obliterate morality by incorporating it. Morality is still complementary to ethics (Ricoeur 1992:171). Ricoeur has thus identified two sets of predicates, namely the

‘good’ (the ethical) and the ‘obligatory’ or ‘right’ (the moral), that can be attributed to the subject’s actions.

Returning from the detour, so to speak, how does one now link these sets of predicates (the ethical and the moral), to the “who?” of the question “who is responsible?”? In other words, how can one impute these predicates to the self, and not merely to action? The answer lies in self-designation: the self connects with ethics in the form of self-esteem, and with morality in the form of self-respect (Ricoeur 1992:171). In other words, “[t]here is only ethics for a being capable not only of designating itself as a locutor, but also of designating [or esteeming] itself as an agent of its own action” (Ricoeur 1999:52). The same goes for self-respect: the subject is “worthy of [...] respect insofar as [he or she] is capable of [...] declaring permitted or forbidden, the actions either of others or of [him- or herself]” (Ricoeur 2000:4). Thus, writes Ricoeur (2000:4), the “subject of imputation results from the reflexive application to agents of predicates like ‘good’ or ‘obligatory.’”

The aim of the remainder of section 4.5 will subsequently be to (1) recapitulate Ricoeur’s argument for why the ethical takes precedence over the moral. In relation to this, I will bring to the fore what Ricoeur means when he speaks of the ‘ethical.’ Throughout, I will also trace the threefold structure of action as it unfolds in the ethical sphere. Following, this, (2) I will summarize Ricoeur’s argument for why one has to measure the ethical against the moral, and in the process explore morality on the spheres of the individual, the interpersonal other, and the institution. (3) Finally, the ethical and the moral will be connected through what Ricoeur calls practical wisdom: the kind of wisdom obtained by deliberating between moral conviction and one’s ethical desires or goals. Consequently, the threefold relationships between deontology and teleology will be explored, but this time in reverse order, from that of the level of the institution, to that of the level of the individual.

#### **3.4.5.2. Ethical Action: The Good Life**

Regarding the ethical, Ricoeur’s (1992:171-2) first task is to defend the primacy of ethics over morality: to do so Ricoeur investigates each component of the definition of “ethical intention”. Ethical intention is “*aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.*” First, the good life,<sup>131</sup> or living well, is the object of the ethical aim: it is what is

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<sup>131</sup> Ricoeur (2000:xv) writes in the preface to *The Just* that: “It is important that the word ‘life’ appears within the framework of a philosophy of action. It recalls that human action is borne by desire, and correlatively by a lack, as well as that it is in terms of these words ‘desire’ and ‘lack’ that we can speak of a wish for a full life.”

lacking in our lives and which we desire (Ricoeur 1992:172-3). That is to say, following Aristotle, if we establish the good life as our aim, we deliberate on what actions can meet the end, and perform these actions (Ricoeur 1992:173).

However, how does one determine the good life? In the case of practices<sup>132</sup> it is easy to determine one's course of action: if I am a doctor, I know which actions to perform in order to fulfil the aim of being a *good* doctor. However, how do I determine whether being a doctor is part of the good life? In other words, what exactly is the purpose, function, or life plan (Aristotle writes of *ergon*<sup>133</sup>) of the person, considered as a whole, as such? (Ricoeur 1992:177-8).

Ricoeur (1992:179) writes that “[w]ith respect to its content, the ‘good life’ is, for each of us, the nebula of ideals and dreams of achievements with regard to which a life is held to be more or less fulfilled or unfulfilled.” The good life can be determined by deliberation called practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). A person who has practical wisdom (*phronimos*) will know the good life and how to act in each unique situation so as to promote this desirable end (Ricoeur 1992:174-5). That is to say, one's everyday practices – although ends in themselves – are “nested” within one's larger life-plan: it requires practical wisdom to evaluate how one's actions and practices advance one's life plans (Ricoeur 1992:178-9). Practical wisdom thus requires that one constantly interprets and evaluates one's actions, and thus oneself with regards to the good life.

Finally, by interpreting one's actions (the text of action), one is ultimately interpreting oneself. I esteem myself as being worthy, to the extent that I esteem or evaluate my actions as worthy. As such, the ethical aim is tied to self-esteem. The connection between one's being and one's doing was already evident in *Freedom and Nature*, where Ricoeur (1966:62-4) pointed out that one's projects determine one's being. However, the intimate connection between the worth of one's projects, actions, or life plans, and one's self-worth was merely hinted at in *Freedom and Nature*: although Ricoeur (1966:72-3) explicitly wrote that one values some projects above others, and that one has to explain or motivate one's decisions to others, the implications for self-worth remained implicit, until now. Self-interpretation (which

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<sup>132</sup> Examples of practices are “professions, the arts, and games” (Ricoeur 1992:153). Practices give meaning to sub-ordinate, nesting actions in which “finality and causation” and “intentionality and systematic connections” are intermingled, where nesting actions are actions such as moving a chess piece in a game of chess: the practice, or the game of chess with its constitutive rules, gives meaning to one's action of moving a chess piece (Ricoeur 1993:153-8).

<sup>133</sup> Ricoeur (1992:178) writes: “[t]his *ergon* is to life, taken in its entirety, as the standard of excellence is to a particular practice.”



includes the interpretations of one's actions, projects, and life goals) thus becomes self-esteem (Ricoeur 1992:172).

However, it is only by taking the entire formulation of the ethical aim into consideration that one can form a complete picture of self-esteem (Ricoeur 1992:172). Within the first part of "living the good life", evaluating or assessing our own actions leads to assessing or valuing the quality of ourselves as their authors (Ricoeur 1992:177). This self-interpretation, it was said, leads to self-esteem. Self-esteem, however, does not imply that the self is isolated in a world of its own (Ricoeur 1992:180). Rather, self-esteem has a "dialogical dimension" to it: the self implies others to the extent that the other acts as mediator between one's capacity to esteem oneself and the actualisation, or realisation of self-esteem or self-worth (Ricoeur 1992:180-2).

Ricoeur (1992:180) thus introduces the second aspect of the ethical aim, namely living the good life *with and for others*. Ricoeur refers to this second component as solicitude: the goodness found in mutual giving and receiving (epitomized in friendship amongst equals). In contrast to the moral sphere which embodies a dissymmetry in the form of demanding justice (such as Lévinas's Other), obedience, and even suffering,<sup>134</sup> solicitude expresses a symmetrical relationship in the sense that both parties wish to live together as equals (Ricoeur 1992:188-190). Moreover, solicitude has a "...more fundamental status than obedience to duty", because solicitude arises from a "...benevolent spontaneity, intimately related to self-esteem within the framework of the aim of the 'good life'" (Ricoeur 1992:190).

Within the relationship of solicitude, both parties can thus esteem themselves as active agents in the search for the good life, with others (and eventually, in just institutions). In addition, bringing the other into the picture, writes Ricoeur (1992:180), is not an artificial "add-on". Rather, the ethical self cannot be understood independently from the other (and *vice versa*), because the self is mediated by the other (Ricoeur 1992:181). That is to say, even though I have the *capacity* or *power* to judge and esteem myself based on my actions, I can only perform these actions in relation to others who make life possible to begin with. Thus, the self living the good life can only be *realised* through the other.

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<sup>134</sup> Suffering does not necessarily mean mental or physical pain, but it also means reducing someone's ability to act (Ricoeur 1992:190). Such a person cannot initiate action, and so is initially reduced to being a receiver, either of sympathy or violence (Ricoeur 1992:190-1). In the case of sympathy, two persons with unequal capacities to act come together: yet, in the end, both find that they can give and receive. Tragedy thus also elicits solicitude.

To say I esteem myself, is to “esteem others *as* myself”: that is, others are also acting agents, capable of evaluating these acts and holding themselves in esteem (Ricoeur 1992:193). Thus one simultaneously acknowledges that one can assume another’s role, yet that each person is “irreplaceable”. In other words, on the dialogical level, one realises that the roles of speaker and listener are reversible (both have the “equal capacity for self-designation”), while the death of a friend or a beloved reveals that one is irreplaceable or non-substitutable (Ballantyne 2007:143). On the ethical level, Ricoeur (1992:194) writes that one can now speak of similitude or likeness: one esteems the “*other as a oneself*”, and esteems “*oneself as an other*”. To esteem what is good or bad in me, (and which leads to esteeming myself as good or bad), is to esteem what is good and bad in others (and thus to esteem them as good or bad). The other is my likeness and I myself am the likeness of the other, and hence I seek the good life for both myself and the other (Ricoeur 1999:46).

Solicitude, or friendship is moreover the transition between the solitary goal of the good life, and justice (Ricoeur 1992:182). The equal, reciprocal relationship between friends paves the way for “...the distribution of shares in a plurality on the scale of a historical, political community” (Ricoeur 1992:188). Which brings us then to the third aspect of ethical intention: living the good life with and for others, *in just institutions*. The third aspect involves those relationships with others which are not necessarily face-to-face: these are thus relationships of plurality (Ricoeur 1992:194-5). Ricoeur (1999:46) writes: “[t]he other is a partner without a face, the ‘everyone’ of a just distribution.”

Just institutions<sup>135</sup> therefore, in contrast to our relationship with the interpersonal other, should allow us to take care of the anonymous other as part of the good life (Ricoeur 1992:195). We consequently have to recognize each other as each playing a part and having a share in society’s goods and burdens in the pursuit of justice (Ricoeur 1992:200-1). Therefore, one can speak of justice’s “ethical content” as being *equality*; it is the institutions’ role to distribute not only economic goods, but also “roles, tasks, and advantages or disadvantages between the members of society” (Ricoeur 1992:194, 198-200). The virtue of solicitude (sharing in the good life with a face-to-face other) can thus be extended to the virtue of justice (being apportioned an equal share) (Ricoeur 1992:197, 200).

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<sup>135</sup> Institutions are those structures of “*living together*”, yet are more than the mere amalgamation of interpersonal relationships (Ricoeur 1994:194). More importantly, “[w]hat fundamentally characterizes the idea of institution is the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules” (Ricoeur 1994:194). Institutions are thus ethical in origin: institutions are “...the diverse structures of wanting to live together, which, to this end, secure duration, cohesion, and distinction” (Ricoeur 1992:227).

It takes a bit of probing, however, to realise that institutions are indeed constituted by the “ethical primacy” of historical communities’ desire to live and act together (“*power in common*”<sup>136</sup>), rather than by rules in the forms of judicial systems and political organization (“*domination*”) (Ricoeur 1992:194-5,197). Ricoeur (1992:197) writes that this initial desire has been forgotten, exactly because it has been subsumed under laws and contracts. We tend to remember only the governments or rules which have augmented institutions, and hence the underlying plurality and acting together (power in common) in the pursuit of justice becomes invisible or difficult to discern (Ricoeur 1992:196-7).

The aim towards the good, namely ethics, thus takes primacy over morality. The ethical aim, it was shown, consists of the good life, solicitude, and justice. The ethical arises out of the desire to live a fulfilled life, experience reciprocal friendship in order to better oneself and another, and to live well with others in just institutions (Ricoeur 2000:xv). The three constituents of the ethical aim can now be compared, augmented, and tested by the three moments of progression in Kantian morality: the first formulation of the categorical imperative (the *form* of morality), which is its unity and universality; the second, “‘*matter,*’ [multiplicity] in which persons are apprehended as ends in themselves [as a plurality]”; and the third which is the “*complete determination* [totality] of all maxims” as stipulated by the notion of the kingdom of ends (Ricoeur 1992:203, 211). Pertaining to human action, one thus moves from the predicate ‘good’, to the predicate ‘obligatory’. The obligatory denotes the “norm,...duty, [and] interdiction” (Ricoeur 2000:xvi).

### **3.4.5.3. Moral Action: Obligation**

First, then, the aim of living well is put to the test by submitting it to the criterion of universality (limited to “neither you nor me”) (Ricoeur 1992:204). Yet, the teleology of living well is not in complete contrast with the universal deontological law. In other words, the deontological view of morality and the ethical, teleological view are not wholly without points of intersection: (1) Aristotle posited the golden mean, the middle between two excesses, which might serve as a type of universal, (phrased differently, both teleology and deontology have a “transcendental orientation”: the one desires the good and the other, universality (Abel 1992: paragraph 34)), (2) and moreover, every human has the ability to deliberate by reason which actions they wish to perform (Ricoeur 1992:204). On the other hand, (3) Kant, while formulating his deontological morality, speaks of the “good will” which is reminiscent of the

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<sup>136</sup> Ricoeur borrows the terms “power-in-common” and “domination” from Hannah Arendt.

ethical aim of “determining oneself through reasons” in pursuit of the good (Ricoeur 1992:205).

Yet, Kantian deontology departs from Aristotelian ethics the moment that Kant adds that what is morally good, is good without qualification (Ricoeur 1992:205-6). In other words, good that is *not* determined through deliberation on the “internal conditions and the external circumstances of action” (Ricoeur 1992:205). In addition, the “will, [...] takes the place in Kantian morality that rational desire occupied in Aristotelian ethics; desire is recognized through its aim [the optative], will through its relation to the law [the imperative]” (Ricoeur 1992:206).

If what is good is characterised by universality, then the notion of ‘good will’ (as good without qualification) necessarily involves constraint and acting according to duty (Ricoeur 1992:206-7). But because the will is finite, the notion of self-legislation or “autonomy” is posited. That is to say, through practical reason an autonomous person gives herself a law and is free to choose whether she will adhere to it, or not (Ricoeur 1992:207-9). A person can determine what is good without qualification by “patient *examination*”; therefore, those actions which are tainted by empirical inclination or affects, do not meet the criterion and cannot be consequently regarded as good without qualification (Ricoeur 1992:207). In the process, one will arrive at categorical imperatives. The imperatives are categorical “by reason of the status of finite will” (Ricoeur 1992:207). Ricoeur (1992:208) quotes Kant’s formulation of the first categorical imperative as that moral obligation on the level of the self considered by itself: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

However, virtual inclination, in the form of disobedience to the autonomous law, is possible. “Evil is [...] perversion, that is, a reversal of the order that requires respect for the law to be placed above inclination” (Ricoeur 1992:216). Evil<sup>137</sup> is thus a misuse of freedom, it is radical (as opposed to original), and stands in “*real opposition*” to good in the form of freely acting out of duty (Ricoeur 1992:216-7). In other words, evil arises at the same place where inclination or respect for the moral law arises. Evil can thus corrupt the formation of universal

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<sup>137</sup> Already in *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur (1966:24) writes about the fault that it is not original (it does not form part of the circular system of the voluntary and the involuntary), and that the fault can distort those fundamental aspects found in the relationship between free will and the involuntary (such as “pleasure, power, custom, command, refusal, self-positing”). Simms (2003:16) clarifies this point and writes that Ricoeur is *not* saying that human beings are inherently evil, just that one’s very being, as a human, is susceptible to, or allows for, the possibility of evil. Moreover, Ricoeur (1966:22-23; 27; 31) writes that the fault or evil is absurd, or a type of nothingness.

maxims. As a consequence of radicalizing evil, Ricoeur (1992:218) writes that Kant also radicalized freedom. Freedom is only fundamental if it faces real opposition in the form of evil. In addition, and pertaining to the ethical aim, because evil is “...present in every opportunity to choose”, the good life must be subjected to norms and rules that will interdict evil actions (Ricoeur 1992:218).

Finally, on the level of the individual, morality is linked to self-respect (just as the ethical aim is linked to self-esteem): self-respect is identified on the first level of autonomy as a feeling<sup>138</sup> or inclination which venerates “...the power of reason in us” (Ricoeur 1992:213-4). A person who has self-respect is aware of her autonomy or her ability to determine what is wrong or right, and to act accordingly. More specifically, self-respect is self-esteem that has passed through the sieve of the norm: respect is “...the variant of self-esteem that has successfully passed the test of the criterion of universalization” (Ricoeur 1992:214-5). On the other hand, self-esteem that has failed the test of universalization, takes on the perverted form of self-love (Ricoeur 1992:215).

The second part of the moral project, just like the ethical aim, extends to the other on the interpersonal level. On the plane of morality this entails that respect for oneself includes respect for the other, or as Kant would state it, treating persons (including oneself) as ends in themselves (Ricoeur 1992:218-9). The universalizing rule thus makes space for plurality, or unique human beings. At this point, Ricoeur (1992:219, 222) upholds the Golden Rule as that which can serve as a stepping stone between solicitude (ethical aim) and the moral imperative of treating others as ends: do unto others what you would have done unto yourself, and, do not do unto others what you would not have done unto you.

On the one hand, the Golden Rule evokes solicitude, because it is a rule based on reciprocity. On the other hand, the Golden Rule introduces duty towards the other, while simultaneously prohibiting certain behaviour towards the other by *demanding* reciprocity (Ricoeur 1992:219). Moreover, Ricoeur (1992:219) argues that the positive and negative formulations of the Golden Rule balance each other, because the positive rule encourages benevolence (what can I do for the other?), while the negative rule demarcates, by forbidding

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<sup>138</sup> Ricoeur (1992:214) writes that Kant had to separate affects into two kinds of affects or feelings: those feelings that are motivated by wrong and selfish desires, and those feelings that are reasonable (which includes respect). This artificial split, argues Ricoeur (214), indicates another connection between the ethical aim and the moral norm.

certain things, a place for “moral invention.”<sup>139</sup> Moreover, Ricoeur (1992:219-20) argues that the Golden Rule is needed due to the inherent dissymmetry present in action between agents: the one does, the other is done unto (suffers or submits). Action almost always entails that one agent has power over another (Ricoeur 1992:220).

Therefore, power over another often implies some sort of violence; violence can range from subtle manipulation, to torture and murder (Ricoeur 1992:219). Violence is consequently defined as inhibiting another’s power-to-do or autonomy (and by implication, obliterating another’s self-esteem, and eventually self-respect) (Ricoeur 1992:220). Because interaction is so amenable to violence, we need moral interdictions in the form of ‘you shall not...’. In other words, Ricoeur (1992:221) holds that “morality replies to violence”: “to all the figures of evil responds the *no* of morality.” Moral laws, such as Kant’s second categorical imperative, thus protect and enforce the primary ethical aim of reciprocity between oneself and the other on the interpersonal level (Ricoeur 1992:221). The obligation of treating others as ends in themselves and not as means, elucidates the shared humanity (equality) between agents. This commands] asks that one treats (not just love – since love could be subject to pathology) the other as oneself: as someone who has self-respect and has worth in him- or herself (that is to say, a being who is rational and can thus act autonomously in accordance with universal law) (Ricoeur 1992:225-6).

Following from the first and second constituents of the moral triad, namely the autonomous (yet universal) law of the “predialogic” self and respect for other persons (and their plurality) in dialogic or face-to-face interactions, Ricoeur identifies what moral obligation looks like on the third level of interaction, namely the self and the other as connected through the institution. This leads us then to the deontological notion of ‘justice’.

Ricoeur (1992:227) borrows from Chaim Perelman the term, “*rule of justice*” to capture this deontological understanding of justice. According to Ricoeur, this rule is gleaned from looking at justice’s ethical origins, namely the wish to live together.<sup>140</sup> Living together, holds

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<sup>139</sup> Here, one can make the connection between Ricoeur’s earlier writings on imagination in *From Text to Action* and moral invention or innovation as discussed under the Golden Rule in *Oneself as Another*. That is to say, the Golden rule asks of us to use our imaginations for the good of others: to imagine in what ways we can be good towards others. This type of use of the imagination might be exactly the kind of thinking that could get rid of a complacent attitude. Since complacency is characterised by self-satisfaction which prevents people from questioning and improving their behaviour, the Golden rule is the exact opposite which asks that one thinks of creative ways to work for the good of the other.

<sup>140</sup> Compare the ethical wish to live together to that of the *imaginary* social contract, as basis for distributive justice. The idea of the social contract is antagonistic to the ethical aim. This is because the social contract presupposes a state of nature in which primitive chaos was the norm – the imaginary contract or agreement was

Ricoeur (1992:227), implies that equal shares be had by members of an institution. These shares do not only refer to “goods and merchandise but also rights and duties, obligations, advantages, responsibilities and honours” (Ricoeur 1999:47). Consequently, Ricoeur (1992:227) makes the case that distribution of shares is “...the point of intersection of the ethical aim and the deontological perspective.” However, it is the difficult task of the deontological perspective to clarify how shares should be distributed. (I will elaborate on why this is so difficult under the discussion of ‘practical wisdom’ in the next section). In such a clarification, one thus moves from an ethical “sense of justice”, to the moral “principles of justice” (Ricoeur 1992:227). An example of one such clarification is found in the work of John Rawls, namely the *Theory of Justice* (1971).

Ricoeur (1992:230-3) presents Rawls’s argument as follows: fairness is central to justice, because fairness is the defining characteristic of the initial devising of the social contract. Fairness is achieved, more specifically, through standing behind a metaphorical ‘veil of ignorance’ in the ‘original position’ and determining what is just. That is to say, in a non-historical hypothetical situation, free and rational individuals who do not know about their future positions in society, their wealth, nor their natural assets or liabilities, must draw up a social contract. If no-one knows what their place or lot in society will be, then the individuals will not be able to choose a system of justice based on their own interests. Consequently, the contract will be fair. More specifically, two principles of distributive justice will be the outcome of such a process: (1) “equal freedoms of citizenship” (such as freedom of expression, freedom to vote, and so on), (2) and the difference principle which expounds under which conditions certain inequalities are allowed to exist (Ricoeur 1992:234).

Ricoeur (1992:236-7) writes that the abovementioned deontological formalization of justice never fully departs from its ethical roots. Rawls himself admits that justice is the primary *virtue* of social structures or institutions, and that his theory of justice “rests upon a pre-understanding of what is meant by the unjust and the just” (Ricoeur 1992:197, 237). Finally, Ricoeur (1992:238-9) concludes that the teleological foundation of deontological theories is visible in all three moments of the deontological project: autonomy attests of itself that it is “good will” (that the “fact of reason” or morality exists); we treat people as ends in themselves because we know beforehand that people differ from things; and lastly, just institutions are

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made to establish peace and order. Ricoeur (1992:228) argues that this presupposition, made by some like John Rawls, is incorrect. Instead, just institutions, as part of the good life, are based on people’s initial desire to live together. The ethical aim is thus immanent in the rule of justice.

based on the forgotten<sup>141</sup> desire we have to live together. This then concludes the triad of how ethics passes through the sieve of the norm.

#### 3.4.5.4. Practical Wisdom

Next, Ricoeur (1992:238, 240) addresses the final aspect of how morality relates to the ethical, namely that when applying the above formulated moral rules (law of autonomy, people as ends in themselves, and the kingdom of ends or distributive justice) in practice, one is sometimes faced with “conflictual situations”. The only resort is then to return to one’s intuitive understanding of the ethical, that is to say, “...the vision or aim of the ‘good life’ with and for others in just institutions” (Ricoeur 1992:240). However, one must be careful of two mistaken beliefs surrounding morality’s recourse to the ethical aim (Ricoeur 1992:240). First, one must not commit the error of adding a third,<sup>142</sup> superior or transcendent supportive moment to the moral norm and the ethical aim (such as Hegel’s notion of *Sittlichkeit*) (Ricoeur 1992:240). Second, Ricoeur (1992:170, 240) again stresses that although ethics encompasses morality, morality is still a necessary, albeit limited, constituent of the ethical aim. Ricoeur (1992:241) subsequently writes that the “...point at which moral judgment in situation and the conviction that dwells in it...” meet, is “...worthy of the name of *practical wisdom*.”

In other words, one should draw on one’s ‘practical wisdom’, so to speak, when faced with conflictual ethical/moral situations (or impasses). Practical wisdom, in turn, is the process of submitting one’s moral judgements to ethical instruction (when faced with these difficult, even tragic situations). Such conflict, or difficulties, is in a way inevitable, since the (moral) universal law can only be actualized through more substantial ‘rules’ provided to enact the universal law in specific situations. During his exploration of the notion of ‘practical wisdom’, Ricoeur (1992:249-250) starts in reverse order regarding the three moments of the threefold structure of action: first Ricoeur discusses conflict in the sphere of the institution, then conflict found on the interpersonal level (“plurality of persons”), and lastly, conflict in autonomy (“the universal self”).

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<sup>141</sup> Ricoeur (1992:239) writes that this desire is forgotten, because we cannot believe that we truly wanted “...to live well with and for others in just institutions...”. Instead we have invented the fiction of the social contract, assuming that we needed it in order for us to live peacefully.

<sup>142</sup> Here we can clearly see Karl Jaspers’s influence on Ricoeur: Jasper’s method is to push to the end of the singularity of each of the philosophical poles in contradiction (between, for example, Kantian morality and Aristotelian ethics), without breaking the binding thread between the two extreme positions. Jaspers therefore does not look for a third term to solve the contradiction, nor for a meeting point in the middle. Instead a paradox remains and logic is humiliated: one is left with tensive, incomplete thought that reflects the tensive ontology of being human: being-on-the-way, being-in-motion (Dosse 2008:122-4, 245).



On the institutional level, conflict is already inherent in the notion of just distribution (Ricoeur 1992:250). This is because there are various “ambiguities” regarding distribution: (1) when one speaks of just shares, should one place the emphasis on separation (this share/responsibility is yours, this is mine; typically of the normative stance), or on cooperation (we *both* share in this good or burden; more in line with the ethical aim) (Ricoeur 1992:250)? (2) How should one define ‘equality’? According to arithmetic equality (every share is equal), or according to proportional equality (based on merit, for example, but also a point of dispute) (Ricoeur 1992:227-8)? To add to the complexity, the goods being distributed are dissimilar (Ricoeur 1992:251). Although some philosophers such as Rawls have more-or-less managed to provide clarification on how shares should be distributed, these clarifications will face dilemmas when confronted with real life situations (1992:227). In other words, some dilemmas will arise in which the rules will be inadequate to deal with the distribution of shares. In those cases, one draws more heavily on distributive justice’s ethical foundation to determine what is just.

Ricoeur (1992:251) identifies Aristotle as the one thinker who particularly incorporates the ethical into his (Aristotle’s) idea of proportional justice: distributive equality is reached when each person receives a share in correlation with his or her contribution. However, measuring the value of these “contributions” depends to a large extent on the notion of what contributions count as *good*, as contributing more or less to the *good life*. The ethical is thus evoked to supplement the moral rule of justice. This notion of justice also raises the question of how these contributions should be measured. Is there a universal measuring system, or should historical cultures measure the worth of these contributions? Ricoeur (1992:252) explores the universalist-contextualist issue in detail throughout his discussion of practical wisdom on all three levels of (inter-)action.

At the level of the institution, Ricoeur (1992:258, 261) is already able to posit that pluralism within a society is much needed, because pluralism allows for ethical deliberation and discussion. To this, Ricoeur (1992:258) adds: “Political discussion is without conclusion, although it is not without decision.” Pluralism attests to the fact that “...the public good cannot be decided in a scientific or dogmatic matter” (Ricoeur 1992:258). However, Ricoeur (1992:254) warns against “political atomism” where people are not bound “together organically”; instead, plurality must be thought of in terms of political society, so that pluralism does not lead to “...fragmentation into isolated individuals.” Individuals only become human beings, capable of meaningful human action, in the context of certain institutions. Since

institutions or political society enable human agency, it is in the interest of human beings to serve these institutions (Ricoeur 1992:254-5).

Ricoeur (2000:7) provides the example of a promise as that which illustrates the “intersubjective character of responsibility” on the level of the third person (and on the level of the second person). We need to keep our promises, and thus serve institutions, since by making a promise we are implicating the other, either as “beneficiary, as witness, as judge”, and ultimately, “as the one who, in counting on me, on my capacity to keep my word, calls me to responsibility, renders me responsible” (Ricoeur 2000:7). Thus, to break a promise is to betray not only the other person to whom one has promised, but also a potential witness to this promise, the institution of language, and by extension, a social pact held by members of the community (Ricoeur 1992:266). Institutions formalize these promises in the form of contracts, laws, and agreements. By so doing, the social trust that exists between the self and those that are beyond the face-to-face, interpersonal relationship, is sanctioned.

In addition, and as highlighted previously by Ricoeur (1992:194-5, 256-7), the power that we have in common (our ethical wish to live together) must not be subordinated by structures of domination (“...the set of organized practices relating to the distribution of political power...”). Instead, as citizens we must recognize our own sovereignty, our power-in-common, and consequently place domination under our control (Ricoeur 1992:257). Ricoeur (1992:257) further writes: “Now this task, which perhaps defines democracy, is an endless task, each new agency of domination proceeding from an earlier one of the same nature, at least in Western societies.” In other words, democracies – opposed to totalitarian regimes – allow for conflict and ethical deliberation. It is in democracies that pluralism, and thus public ethical deliberation, can flourish (Ricoeur 1992:258, 260-1). Ricoeur concludes by stressing the necessity of returning to ethical deliberation when formalized notions of justice fail us.

The second sphere in which conflict will lead us to rely on our ethical intuition, is that of the plurality of persons on the interpersonal level. On this level, conflict is present within Kant’s second categorical imperative: on the one hand, the universal imperative demands respect for every person based on their humanity (treat everyone as ends in themselves) (Ricoeur 1992:262). Yet, on the other hand, it is this very notion of humanity that leads to the individualist and pluralist notion of people as unique ends-in-themselves (Ricoeur 1992:262). That is to say, conflict sometimes arises when one wants to impose a universal law on a unique person (who wants us to respect his or her otherness) (Ricoeur 1992:262). Thus, concrete

situations challenge or test the maxims (Ricoeur 1992:263). Ricoeur (1992:262) consequently asks, shall one then respect the law, or respect the person?

As an answer, Ricoeur (1992:262) posits that "...practical wisdom may consist in giving priority to the respect for persons, in the name of the solicitude that is addressed to persons in their irreplaceable singularity." Moreover, central to solicitude is promise-keeping, since to keep promises is to make oneself accountable and available to others: if one makes a promise, one promises to be constant. These promises, as was noted above, are often endorsed by the courts or other institutions, but beneath the endorsement lies the ethical intention of the desire to live well with and for others. In other words, promising entails that others can count on you, and "[t]his *counting on* connects self-constancy, in its moral tenor, to the principle of reciprocity founded in solicitude" (Ricoeur 1992:268). Moreover, at the interpersonal level, keeping a promise is more than maintaining self-constancy, it is also about responding to an expectation or a request from another (Ricoeur 1992:267). Following from this, one should then ask the question: 'under which circumstances would it be acceptable to break promises and betray social trust?'

According to Ricoeur (1992:264,268-9), Kant only explores the possibility of making an exception – in this case, breaking a promise – because of selfish self-love; however, one must also consider the idea of making an exception "on behalf of others". To consider the latter, is to consider persons as ends in themselves and "responding to the expectation of the other who is counting on me..." (Ricoeur 1992:268). Ricoeur (1992:262) provides the following example of a complex instance in which one must draw on one's ethical insight and 'break a promise', so to speak.

Suppose that one is closely acquainted with a very frail person, nearing the end of his or her life. And suppose further that one has to tell this person a shocking piece of news (Ricoeur 1992:269). Should one withhold the news, considering that it might increase the person's suffering and/or hasten the person to his or her death, or should one tell them the whole truth, considering that it is a universal rule to always tell the truth? The universal rule of telling the truth, writes Ricoeur (1992:265), "...is submitted to another sort of test [than that of universality], that of circumstances and consequences." To exercise practical wisdom in such a scenario, entails "...inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception required by solicitude, by betraying the rule to the smallest extent possible" (Ricoeur 1992:269). If one then decides to lie to the patient, so as not to make them suffer, this must *not* be instituted as

rule (for example, the maxim, ‘one must always lie to the dying about distressing things’) (Ricoeur 1992:269). Practical wisdom cannot be translated into a rule; each person and each case demands deliberation. Ricoeur (1992:273) concludes by saying that solicitude on the interpersonal level is now critical, as opposed to naïve solicitude; that is to say, solicitude “...has passed through the double test of the moral conditions of respect and the conflicts generated by the latter.”

Third and finally, Ricoeur arrives at conflicts present in autonomy or self-legislation. That is to say, we are now at the level of the person considered by him- or herself. The principal conflict exists between the “*universalist claim*”, typically associated with moral rules, and the “*positive values*” produced by “*historical and communitarian contexts*” which claim to fulfil the requirements of the same rules (Ricoeur 1992:274). When both the universalist and contextualist claims have to be maintained, tragic action arises. (Indeed, Ricoeur claims throughout this entire section that all ethical decisions are tragic to some extent: no decision will ever be perfect and conflict-free (Dosse 2008:634)). The conflict between the universalist and contextualist positions can only be arbitrated by “...the practical wisdom of moral judgment in situation” (Ricoeur 1992:274).

Put differently, tragic action arises when one reverses Kant’s “order of priority” in which autonomy is given a superior and independent status in comparison with the “plurality of persons” and the “plane of institutions” (Ricoeur 1992:274). To prevent this, to practice practical wisdom, one must instead think of the autonomous self as also being constituted by “receptiveness, passivity, and ... powerlessness” (Ricoeur 1992:274-5). The autonomous self is not self-sufficient and purely rational: it was shown that the self is “affected by the very law it gives itself”, that it is affection for others (their humanity, or capacity for reason) that drives the self towards respect for them, and, finally, that the autonomous self can be radically affected by the tendency to do evil (Ricoeur 1992:275). Therefore, the self contains “otherness”, and is so joined to, “...and [is] dependent on, the rule of justice and the rule of reciprocity” (Ricoeur 1992:275-6). Ricoeur (1992:274) consequently holds that autonomy must be placed at the end of moral reflection.

In addition, Ricoeur (1992:280-1) argues that a system of morality must be constituted by both a regard for a universalization of the rules, and a respect for contextual rules applied

in concrete situations. Such a regard for both universalism and contextualism<sup>143</sup> can be brought about through what Ricoeur (1992:285, 287) calls the “ethics of argumentation”. In the case of a moral impasse, an ethics of argumentation<sup>144</sup> entails that various arguments be considered before making a moral decision based on the best argument (Ricoeur 1992:286). These arguments can be facilitated by “...public debate, friendly discussion, and shared convictions...” (Ricoeur 1992:290-1). Through argumentation, one thus establishes a dialectic between universalism and contextualism. Such a dialectic does not lead to a theoretical outcome, but instead leads to practical wisdom in concrete situations (Ricoeur 1992:287). One arrives at moral judgement in situation. In sum then, Ricoeur places Aristotelian ethics and Kantian morality in a dialectic relationship with each other: a moral system is not complete with only one at the expense of the other. As such, moral deliberation is a “*reflective equilibrium between the ethics of argumentation and considered convictions*” (Ricoeur 1992:289). As Huskey (2009:132) comments, one must thus seek a balance between taking a stance and being open to revising one’s stance.

In conclusion, Ricoeur (1992:291) returns to the question asked at the beginning of the investigation into ethical action: ‘who is the subject of moral imputation?’ Imputability, according to Ricoeur (1992:292), “...is the ascription of action to its agent, *under the condition of ethical and moral predicates* which characterize the action as good, just, conforming to duty, done out of duty, and finally, as being the wisest in the case of conflictual situations.” The moral subject is then someone who recognizes that his or her self-esteem is drawn toward solicitude, and then towards justice (Ricoeur 1992:296). Such a subject recognizes that he or she is a self, constituted by others. As Ricoeur (1992:296) puts it succinctly: “Reciprocity in

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<sup>143</sup> Although Ricoeur (1992:286-7) holds that one must take context into consideration, he does not agree that contextualism must be wholly distanced from the instruction of reason (else contextualism becomes cultural relativism: “...an apology of difference for the sake of difference, which, finally, makes all differences indifferent...”). Kant commits the opposite mistake: by demanding that all affects or emotions be removed from moral calculation, he tries to *purify* morality by getting rid of contextualism (Ricoeur 1992:286).

<sup>144</sup> Ricoeur’s ethics of argumentation reflects Ricoeur’s hermeneutic stance that there are always various interpretations of a text. To put it differently, one sees here how Ricoeur’s analogy between the text and action (as described in *From Text to Action*) is continued: there is something ‘tragic’ regarding interpretation of a text, since there can never be one final and penultimate interpretation; likewise, every decision that one takes to act will be tinged with tragedy, since there is no one perfect way to interpret the situation in which we act, and thus no perfect way to act. Therefore, just as one speaks of the plurality of interpretations, one can now emphasize the plurality of commitments: we are beings with multiple commitments that force us to always negotiate in ourselves these multiple affiliations ([Ricoeur in dialogue with] Abel 2012b). It is for this reason – “the gap of misunderstanding, of differing opinions about interpretations; the gap of generations, which opens between them an irremediable dissymmetry in interpretation” – that one can always go back to a text or an action to reinterpret it (Abel 2012a: paragraph 4).

friendship and proportional equality in justice, when they are reflected in self-consciousness, make self-esteem a figure of recognition.”

### **3.4.6. Conclusion: Oneself as Another**

In sum, Ricoeur has shown how the self-reflexive agent, through attestation to his or her capabilities of speaking, acting, narrating, and imputing, can be considered a subject which one can deem as blameworthy or praiseworthy of certain acts. Moreover, through the process of answering the question ‘who?’ (is speaking, acting, narrating, responsible), it was shown that the self can only actualize his or actions, or truly become a capable human being, through the other. The other, in the form of the second person relation (I-you), and the third person relation (I-he/I-she), enables the self to act.

Designating myself as “I” only makes sense in dialogue with another; while speaking or using a language implies the third person in the sense that there are others who share this language with me (Ricoeur 2000:6). Furthermore, I attest to the fact that a certain action is *my* action because I intervene in the world and am thus in interaction with the other who acts either as my helper or hinderer; while in the background, one has the institutional other as the very foundation of these interactions in the form of social systems or “orders of recognition” (Ricoeur 2000:6-7). Additionally, my narrative is partly constituted by the narratives of others’, which is in turn constituted by larger communal narratives that make up the temporal conception of social systems or “orders of recognition” (Ricoeur 2000:7). Finally, by esteeming my own and others’ spoken words, actions, and narratives as either good or bad, and by judging my own and other’s spoken words, actions, and narratives as either lawful or unlawful, I become worthy of self-esteem and self-respect (Ricoeur 2000:4).

### **3.5. Concluding Thoughts**

The main purpose of this chapter was to determine – through the thought of Paul Ricoeur – what human action is, so that one might later come to understand what complacent action might look like. In *Freedom and Nature*, we have seen that Ricoeur describes the paradoxical human will: the will consists of three voluntary actions (I will, I move, I consent) joined by three involuntary structures (reasons for willing, capacities or organs of the will for moving, and absolutes such as the body, and being born into the world). “Thus the act of willing involves a decision designating a future action which lies within the agent’s power; but the decision is based upon motives, the action is mediated by bodily organs, and the act of willing

as a whole is conditioned by character, the unconscious and life, to which the agent must consent” (Thompson 1981:5).

Next, we have seen how Ricoeur gradually introduces a hermeneutical graft into his phenomenology: first, Ricoeur shows that in order to comprehend human action (by both the lay agent and the philosopher alike), action has to be interpreted through symbols, language, culture and history. Then, in *From Text to Action* Ricoeur introduces the notion of action as text (or narrative), which helps us to both make sense of action in relation to the world and one’s history, and of action in relation to imagination. One’s actions are informed by one’s history, narratives (which include systems of knowing how to do things), and the physical world, while one also shapes and alters history, systems of ‘knowing-how-to-do’, and causal chains through imagining new ways of doing, and ultimately being.

Finally, in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur explains that action is always connected with the *who* (the self) involved in that action. To ask about action, is to ask who is speaking, acting, narrating, or imputing actions to him- or herself. Although Ricoeur introduces us to a reflexive subject as early as *Freedom and Nature*, this reflexive subject is not yet a reflexive *self*. This is because the subject in *Freedom and Nature* is still only considered in isolation. The moment that the subject enters into dialogue or community with others, as Ricoeur describes in *Oneself as Another*, the subject is able to think of itself as a ‘self’: a community of other subjects supplies the subject with language, symbols and narratives to make sense of itself as a self who acts, as someone who can describe his actions, tell others about his life plans, and impute actions to him- or herself. Meaningful action is only possible in a community of second and third person others. With *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur also introduces an ethical-moral element into his action theory. Because there are other people with whom the agent interacts, because there are others whose actions inform the agent’s experience, and the agent’s actions theirs, the possibility of harming each other exists, and thus a need for ethics arises.

Such are thus the three stages of Ricoeur’s action theory that I chose to highlight. Perhaps one should rather speak of ‘action theories’ in the plural, and not of a homologous Ricoeurian ‘action theory’. Despite the apparent continuous themes, of which the broadest and most evident is the subject matter of human willing or action (Ricoeur 1971b:xiii), these action theories each have their own methodology and emphasis that makes it questionable to speak of Ricoeur’s ‘action theory’ as if it were a unity.

While many “[r]eaders of Ricoeur have long searched for a common thread running throughout his thirty books, 500 articles, and sixty year career” (Kaplan 2008:2, 4), it seems that Ricoeur’s work resists synthesis. Indeed, Ricoeur’s work is characterized by an ever-present tension between the one and the many; between the universal and the particular; between disparate philosophical traditions; between philosophical and non-philosophical traditions (and so on). Ricoeur never attempts to downplay these tensions, never tries to reason them away; rather, Ricoeur abides by the aporias that arise in his work and follows their spiral-like movement. Ricoeur’s style is thus one of movement or of dialectic. It is not a style of repose where one pretends to have reached a total synthesis (Dosse 2008:244-5).

And so, true to Ricoeur’s style, I will not attempt to dissolve this ongoing “loving struggle” (as Domenico Jervolino, probably following Karl Jaspers calls it); I will not seek a synthesis of Ricoeur’s action theories. Instead, I will also be lovingly struggling along with all the other readers of Ricoeur. I will “stay with the trouble” (to borrow Donna Haraway’s (2016) words), or in Ricoeurian language, I will remain within the tensions present in and between his action theories and not try to smooth these tensions out in order to obtain a final and victorious third position. The next chapter is dedicated to this loving struggle.



## Chapter 4

### Ricoeur's Action Theories and Action Theory

What connects each action theory "...to its predecessors seems [...] to be less the steady development of a unique project, than the acknowledgement of a residue left over by the previous work, a residue which gives rise in turn to a new challenge." (Ricoeur and Thompson 1981:32).

#### 4.1. Introduction

In this chapter my aim is to think Ricoeur's action theories (based on the three works I have discussed above) together, while still respecting the uniqueness of each of these accounts of action. Thinking of Ricoeur's action theories as a totality will enable one to compare and connect Ricoeur's action theory to Giddens's action theory (discussed in the next chapter), and ultimately enable one to derive an action theory of complacency based on the integration of the two authors' action theories.

Following in the footsteps of Johann Michel (2006:14-15) I will primarily discuss and critique Ricoeur's individual texts from within his own work (internal intertextuality).<sup>145</sup> This method is characteristic not only of the hermeneutic circle which describes a constant interplay between making sense of the parts in relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to the parts, but it is also characteristic of Ricoeur's thought that is in a continual motion, never happy to settle a matter once and for all (Michel 2006:15).

From within Ricoeur's own work I will consequently use the notion of 'narrative identity' and apply it to Ricoeur's writings on action. Although not a person, one might refer to Ricoeur's action theories as having an 'identity' – they are written by the same author, after all. On the one hand, Ricoeur's action theory undergoes several changes over time: in many aspects the earlier action theory is dissimilar from the later action theories. On the other hand, it is possible to identify certain guiding threads, things that remain the same from the earlier to the later action theories: one can say that Ricoeur's action theories have the same identity, as unique as a fingerprint. Although I have written earlier that it is perhaps more honest to speak of Ricoeur's 'action theories' rather than Ricoeur's 'action theory', by introducing the narrative ploy one can speak of *an* 'action theory' or 'Ricoeur's action theory' as an encompassing term. However, one has to constantly keep in mind that this action theory, just like the narrative and

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<sup>145</sup> This does not mean I will not (continue to) highlight external influences on Ricoeur's work. The main focus of this chapter is, however, to delineate how Ricoeur's earlier and later action theories can be thought together-in-tension. For this reason the focus is more on the internal intertextuality of Ricoeur's work (as opposed to external intertextuality).

identity, is brimming with tensions that are woven and kept together by the author. Therefore, I will alternately speak of Ricoeur's action theory or his action theories, depending on the context or the point I wish to make.

In short, my position is thus that one can look at Ricoeur's action theory as a whole that makes sense, but that this whole will never form a tension-free system. It is necessary to take note that Ricoeur – from very early in his philosophical career – is adamantly against any systematic and dogmatic philosophy (Dosse 2008:20-21). Therefore, in my discussion of Ricoeur's action theory as a whole, it is important to always keep in mind the uniqueness or distinctiveness of each of Ricoeur's three works that I have chosen to discuss, and that this uniqueness must not be downplayed in the search for sameness or similarity. It would ultimately go against the integrity of Ricoeur's work to posit that his action theory is systematically coherent. Ricoeur's action theory considered as a whole, is indeed more like a person: the work is recognizable as stemming from the same author/origin, but at the same time, each act (read text) is relatively autonomous, in the sense that each text conveys propositions that are meaningful across different contexts (from that in which Ricoeur initially found himself in) (Michel 2006:14-5).

This approach, true to Ricoeur's own method and style, is also followed by Dosse (2008:14-16) when he speaks of the diachrony and the synchrony of Ricoeur's work. That is to say one finds transition (diachrony) in Ricoeur's work, as well as a core, something that remains the same (synchrony), throughout his work.

The diachronic logic in Ricoeur's work is most evident when he takes up his previous work, starting from the 'remainders' or the 'rests' of questions left unanswered in these anterior works (Dosse 2008:14;24, 245). That is to say, Ricoeur proceeds layer by successive layer; he answers the questions left in suspense by his previous work, without responding to the foregoing work itself<sup>146</sup> (Dosse 2008:24-5). Ricoeur (1998:81) himself admits that "...the theme of [each] new book is off-centre in relation to the preceding one, but with a return to subjects that had already been encountered, touched upon, or anticipated in earlier discussions." Jervolino (2004:660) also writes of Ricoeur's work as a spiral movement, where the earlier works become enriched through further work. The project of the will is exactly such an example of this spiral movement: the understanding of the will becomes enriched and expanded by

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<sup>146</sup> Ricoeur ([in dialogue with] Abel 2012b) states: "I would say that I have not been paying enough attention to the past. Moreover, in my way of writing, I do not repeat an earlier book in the following book, which is rather the result of the residue of previous work. And I do not reread the books I have written."

passing through the detour of language or the text (Jervolino 2004:660). In this manner a new philosophy of the will or action arises in Ricoeur's later works (Jervolino 2004:661).

In turn, the core, the synchrony, of Ricoeur's work nourishes or sustains these successive sedimentations (Dosse 2008:24). There are many continuous themes in Ricoeur's work: Dosse (2008:54) writes that human fallibility, the perfectibility of man (which always lies on the horizon), and the refusal to absolutize human action, that is to say, to always keep action open to incompleteness, are major themes in Ricoeur's philosophy. Busacchi (2010:28) writes that the notion of 'I can' (subjectivity as expressive power) can be posited as the pivot that collects the multiple questions on which Paul Ricoeur worked at length. Michel (2006:13) writes that Ricoeur is concerned with man's condition in the world, and that ultimately, Ricoeur's meditations converge towards a reflection on human action. Many readers of Ricoeur (Busacchi 2010:28; Dosse 2008:15-6; Michel 2006; 2018:127) thus agree that the overarching leitmotif is that of action: in particular, action that always leans more and more towards justice, towards the hope of creative living-together that will bring about collective happiness and well-being.

The above two logics, namely diachrony and the synchrony, are furthermore in a constant interplay or dialectic. By using a hermeneutic circle or a dialectic, a back and forth movement between each of Ricoeur's separate texts (events), and an over-arching and developing action theory (plot structure) will bring one closer to the identity, so to speak, of Ricoeur's action theory. Only through interpretation, and not through imposing a falsely unified action theoretical structure will one find some kind of stability in the face of differences and conflicts throughout Ricoeur's different works on action. Yet, true to Ricoeur's philosophical style, this dialectic will never be solved or completed once and for all: the 'identity' of Ricoeur's action theory remains in motion. Because of the fullness of experience of meaning, there will always be a place for new interpretations and new developments (Dosse 2008:25). Just as identity is always under construction and always in motion (Dosse 2008:25), just so will the texts that comprise Ricoeur's action theory be always under construction and in motion.

This chapter is divided into three sections that follow Ricoeur's evolving notion of the person who acts, namely: (1) the subject that becomes a self; (2) the intersubjective self, and (3) the ethical and moral self. The subject or the agent is central to Ricoeur's action theory: to be human is to will and to act (Michel 2006:13). Ricoeur (2015:7) states: "is it not the function

of a philosophy of will and action to restore the dimension of an ontology where being is really act and acting?” As such, by following the trajectory of the subject (and eventually the self or the agent) in Ricoeur’s work, one follows the course of Ricoeur’s action theory.

#### **4.2. The Subject Becomes a Self. (Or, Lose Yourself to Find Yourself)<sup>147</sup>**

##### ***The Decentred and Fragmented Subject***

In this section I will focus on the continuous element of the broken, fragmented or decentred subject who becomes a self through this very fact of being decentred and broken on an existential level (Michel 2006:64; Ricoeur 1966:17). Simultaneously, I will draw attention to the differences between Ricoeur’s earlier conception of the “broken Cogito” that wills and his later conception of the fragmented and mediated self who acts.

I will start with Ricoeur’s (1966:13-14) description in *Freedom and Nature* of “[t]he Cogito [that] is broken up within itself.” Recall that in *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur (1966:14) writes that the subject must radically renounce a hidden pretention that it has access to the whole consciousness; the subject “...must abandon its wish to posit itself, so that it can receive the nourishing and inspiring spontaneity which breaks the sterile circle of the self’s constant return to itself” (Ricoeur 1966:14). In other words, the subject described in *Freedom and Nature* is not the Cartesian cogito which is merely a knower (excluding a body), that thus knows itself in its entirety. Rather, the Ricoeurian subject includes the body. However, since one cannot exhaustively describe the bodily experience in words, because “[t]o experience is always more than to understand” (Ricoeur 1966:86), the Ricoeurian subject or cogito can thus never know itself comprehensively.

In addition, the subject is limited in its knowledge of itself, because it can only ever interpret itself from its own point of view: everything that the subject knows or wills is filtered through its character. Finally, in *Freedom and Nature* one sees that Ricoeur speaks of the unconscious as that which is “unreflected subjectivity”; in other words, that which the subject is not (yet) able to think or articulate, something which falls outside of intentionality (Ricoeur 1966:379). In these ways, too, the Ricoeurian cogito is ‘broken’ in the sense that it will never be absolute consciousness.

In *Freedom and Nature* then, Ricoeur (1951:9) breaks away from the triple “wish of absolute consciousness: the wish to be total, that is, without the finite perspective associated

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<sup>147</sup> Ricoeur ([1965] 1970:43).

with a particular character; the wish to be transparent in the perfect correspondence of self-consciousness with intentional consciousness; the wish to be self-sufficient, without the necessity for being dependent on the nutritive and healing wisdom of the body which always precedes the will.” Not only does Ricoeur ‘break’ the circularity of the subject by introducing the body and psychological necessities into an understanding of the subject, but also through introducing the world (the “practical correlates of consciousness”) to an understanding of the subject (Pirovolakis 2018:138).

In other words, the subject is further fragmented or broken because it is outward-looking, always aiming at (something), and has an ontology that Ricoeur labels as the ‘promised land’ (the not-yet) (Michel 2018:32). Not only is consciousness ‘consciousness of’ (Ricoeur 1966:387), but the subject also lacks what is other (think of bodily needs which motivates the subject to obtain things such as food in order to sustain itself). As such, the subject is always understood in conjunction with that which is objectified in the world, such as the project or action that the subject wills (Abel 2006: paragraph 3; Ricoeur 1966:7).

Taking this phenomenological insight of intentionality to its limit, one discovers – along with Ricoeur ([1965] 1970:55) – that consciousness has its meaning outside of itself (Dosse 2008:333-4). In other words, the subject only really becomes meaningful through what is outside<sup>148</sup> itself, through its actions, symbols, language, and other cultural artefacts:

“...existence arrives at expression, at meaning, and at reflection only through the continual exegesis of all the significations that come to light in the world of culture. Existence becomes a self [...] only by appropriating this meaning, which first resides ‘outside,’ in works, institutions, and cultural monuments in which the life of the spirit is objectified” (Ricoeur 1974a:106).

Put differently, in order for the subject to understand itself, it must interpret itself and assimilate its otherness (such as the unconscious, or the body, the world in which it acts) through these outside cultural detours and mediations. However, Ricoeur only realised the aforementioned at the end of his project of the philosophy of the will, and not yet in *Freedom and Nature* (Dosse 2008:279; Ricoeur [1965] 1970:37).

It is only when Ricoeur (1970:55) is challenged by the structuralist programme in its linguistic, psychoanalytic, and anthropological dimensions, that Ricoeur started to incorporate

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<sup>148</sup> By using the word ‘outside’ I do not mean to say that the subject cannot *internalize* this outside otherness, nor that ‘outside otherness’ is not inherently part of the subject.

a hermeneutics into his phenomenology<sup>149</sup> (Dosse 2008:285). Recall that the unconscious (as emphasized by psychoanalysis) and the structural laws of language acting as an "unconscious" conditioning of speech (as emphasized by the structuralist linguists), call into question the primacy of the subject and the control the subject claims to exercise over the content of his thoughts and actions (Ricoeur 2015:3). The subject can therefore only be known (and not even exhaustively, since it is an on-going task) at the end of a long detour through cultural mediations such as works, acts, symbols and language (Ricoeur 1970:43-5; 2015:3). These works, acts, symbols, and so forth, call for interpretation because of their uncertain or revocable meanings (Ricoeur 1970:46). This self-understanding via detours and interpretation consequently yields a more complex and accurate notion of subjectivity, since the self is rid of its self-positing illusions in the process (Ricoeur 1974c:11; 2015:3-4). "Thus", writes Ricoeur (2015:4) "I was led, by psychoanalysis and linguistics, to rework the original philosophy of reflection, to lengthen the detour by the structures of the unconscious and language, and to find the reflective power of the ego beyond the crossing of the regions of the anonymous and the impersonal."

In *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur specifically focuses on the text and on narrative as ways to mediate self-understanding and action. *From Text to Action* is thus the stepping stone between *Freedom and Nature* and *Oneself as Another* in this study. In this collection of essays (*From Text to Action*), Ricoeur removes the subject from its position of original meaning (the source of meaning, where reflection is intuition), and moves it into a more modest position of self-understanding through mediation (Ricoeur 1970:43). Later, we will see that *Oneself as Another* is the apogee of this reversal: Ricoeur outlines there how one understands the self through the other and thus focusses on the necessity and primacy of the other on the way towards self-understanding; in contrast, in the earlier *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur (1966:11) claims: "[t]he you is an other myself", thus placing the other in the primary position within self-understanding.

In other words, Ricoeur (1970:55; 1974c:11) – in his later works on action, namely *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another* – argues that a richer and more complete self-understanding comes at the price of a disappropriation, a decentering of the self through mediation. Or as Michel (2006:30) puts it, since the subject is defined by intentionality, it is inherently outward-looking and thus thrown out of itself. Consequently, the self is better

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<sup>149</sup> This statement can, of course, be disputed. I will pay attention to this when I discuss Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology (in the next subsection).

defined by the objects it aims at than by the consciousness that is aiming at them<sup>150</sup> (Michel 2006:31). Or, as Ricoeur (1750:55) puts it, “the home of meaning is not consciousness but something other than consciousness.” These outside objects, in turn, call for interpretation; Ricoeur (1974a:101) writes: “[e]very hermeneutics is [...] explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.”

As such, In *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur announces that his methodology is that of a hermeneutic phenomenology. The hermeneutic phenomenologist takes cognizance of the fact that language, text, and other cultural artefacts precede the subject, while preserving the phenomenological (and existentialist) intuition or belief that there is a subject or an agent that acts meaningfully.

### ***Ricoeur’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology***

In the previous chapter (specifically section 3.2.6.) I have briefly discussed the relationship between Ricoeur’s phenomenology and his hermeneutic phenomenology. I will now address some of the questions left unanswered by that section: in particular the question of how to make sense of Ricoeur’s earlier phenomenology in relation to his later hermeneutic phenomenology, and its related question, namely whether the earlier phenomenological account, as found in *Freedom and Nature*, should be dismissed due to its lack of hermeneutics.

First, it was noted that Ricoeur describes his hermeneutics as a graft<sup>151</sup> onto his phenomenology. Phenomenology is thus the basis, but hermeneutics contributes to phenomenology to such an extent that it drastically alters the original phenomenology. Consequently, one can say that (1) the notion of a ‘graft’ denotes a dimension of disruption, of incision, and thus tension (Dosse 2008:307), (2) yet simultaneously this analogy implies that phenomenology is the presupposition or the basis of hermeneutics. Phenomenology comes

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<sup>150</sup> Ihde (1971:27), however, argues that Ricoeur’s structural phenomenological account of action in *Freedom and Nature* already takes account of the ‘outside’, of action objectified; and that, in fact, the “experienced precedes the understanding of experiencing” in Ricoeur’s description of the will. Each time, Ricoeur focusses on the object or aim of the experience, and then only moves on to explore the subjective experience of the object: when one makes a decision, one has a *project*; when one executes one’s decision, it is a *deed* or an *action* in the world, and to consent is to consent to a *necessity* which one cannot change (Ihde 1971:27). Although I agree with Ihde’s first statement, I do not agree with the second. Ricoeur (1966:5) states in *Freedom and Nature* that the voluntary takes primacy in our understanding of a person, because one understands oneself first as an ‘I’ that wills: “...the various parts of this descriptive study will always begin with a description of the voluntary aspect, after which we shall consider what involuntary structures are needed to make that act or that aspect of the will intelligible.” Ricoeur’s notion of the cogito in *Freedom and Nature* thus ultimately remains more subjectivist (not completely!) since the subject is the source of meaning, and does not yet make sense of itself *through* that which exists outside of itself.

<sup>151</sup> Michel (2006:44) writes that the idea of a transplant may seem a bit surprising since hermeneutics as a discipline was formed well before the emergence of phenomenology (this is why Ricoeur (1974c:3) prefers to speak of a “late transplant” or “late graft”).

before and sustains a hermeneutics, and there is thus not a rupture between the two (Michel 2006:44).

I will first consider hermeneutics as an interruption of phenomenology: according to Johann Michel (2006:47), Ricoeur demands a more systemic coupling (usually, Ricoeur is very wary of systemizing his philosophy) of hermeneutics with phenomenology, to the point of claiming that hermeneutics subverts phenomenology. Ricoeur turns to Heidegger, in particular, in order to subvert phenomenology's tendency to elevate the subject to a sovereign status. Heidegger's decisive contribution to the problem of hermeneutics consists precisely in making understanding or interpretation, before any objectification, the mode of being par excellence of the subject (Michel 2006:47). If understanding calls correlatively for a hermeneutical task, it is insofar as the being of 'Dasein'<sup>152</sup> is first concealed to himself under facticity, or its thrownness in the world.

One can clearly see that Ricoeur is inspired by Heidegger,<sup>153</sup> first, regarding the cogito that is already incarnated in the world (Michel 2006:47), and second, regarding a shift in focus (that I have just described in the previous sub-section). Thompson (1981:25) writes that Ricoeur has shifted his focus from intentionality (how subjectivity experiences objects) and the symbolic manifestations of the self, to the text, and action as analogue of the text (as can be seen in *From Text to Action*). Action as manifested in the cultural world, thus becomes Ricoeur's new focus, since it is only by looking at how the agent expresses himself in the world, that one can understand the agent. Thompson (1981:25) adds that the "change in [Ricoeur's] method [from phenomenology to a hermeneutic phenomenology] is closely connected to a displacement of the initial object of investigation." In this way, then, hermeneutics subverts phenomenology: Ricoeur moves from a description of the subject (the subject's experiences of the world and the subject's projects), to a description of the self *starting from* the ways (action and language) through which the self is expressed and manifested in the cultural world.

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<sup>152</sup> 'Dasein' (being-there) is Heidegger's specific concept that refers to the unique kind of being that is human; a being who cares about or is concerned with its own being (Heidegger [1927] 1985:64-8). Wheeler (2018: paragraph 9) writes that Dasein is "the inherently social [human] being who already operates with a pre-theoretical grasp of the a priori structures that make possible particular modes of Being...."

<sup>153</sup> However, note that the hermeneutic graft on phenomenology in no way translates for Ricoeur into an abandonment of the reflexive affiliation of his anthropology. The recognition of this filiation clearly delineates Ricoeur from Heidegger, whose programme is anti-reflexive and the opposite of a philosophy of the subject (Michel 2006:47). In addition, both the objectification of the subject practiced by the human sciences (through cultural artefacts, language, and action) and the reflexive reference to a philosophy of consciousness are fully assumed by Ricoeur, although critically. Both are rejected by Heidegger (Michel 2006:48).



Recall that Ricoeur (1966:5) writes in *Freedom and Nature* that the voluntary takes precedence in our understanding of a person, because one understands oneself first as an ‘I’ that wills. Compare this to what Ricoeur (1992:18) writes in the introduction of *Oneself as Another* where Ricoeur makes explicit reference to his transition from the subject (the world as understood from the point of view of the ‘I’) to the self (whom one approaches through its works in the world): “To say *self* is not to say *I*. The *I* is posited – or is deposed. The *self* is implied reflexively in the operations, the analysis of which precedes the return toward this self.” In other words, although one understands Ricoeur’s subject in *Freedom and Nature* in conjunction with its projects in the world, one does so starting from the subject, from the subject’s experience of these objects. Ricoeur completely turns the order of investigation onto its head with his hermeneutic phenomenology: Ricoeur starts from action and works his way back to the self who acts. Although the agent and action are inextricably connected *throughout* Ricoeur’s action theories, the difference or subversion arises regarding the methodological<sup>154</sup> trajectory that Ricoeur chooses to follow to approach this action-agent nexus.

Next, I will look at the continuous relationship – as opposed to an interruption – between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Not only will one see that phenomenology and hermeneutics are intricately connected, but also that this connection serves as a connection between Ricoeur’s different action theories.

As a starting point, I have written, following Depraz (2018:208), that Ricoeur’s earlier phenomenological action theory calls for a hermeneutics (since a first person phenomenology lacks methodological rigour), and, in turn, that Ricoeur’s later hermeneutic phenomenological action theory *builds on* his earlier action theory. To return to the analogy of the graft, one can say that the phenomenological tree calls for a graft, since it does not produce fruit on its own, and that a hermeneutics calls for a hardened phenomenological tree in order to sustain it (the hermeneutical fruit tree is not hardy enough to grow on its own).

In short, a hermeneutics is always already implicitly called for by a phenomenological method, and in order to interpret action, one has to assume that there is a world of experience. One also notes, then, that the above interruption or tension between phenomenology and hermeneutics (where hermeneutics subverts phenomenology’s tendency towards an idealistic notion of the self, by introducing a critical and objective element into an understanding of the

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<sup>154</sup> However, despite the *methodological* subversion or shift in Ricoeur’s work, on the substantive level Ricoeur remains loyal to the primary position of the desire of being and acting over and above that of the representation of being or acting (Michel 2006:34-5).

self), can be interpreted as a continuity, similar to the way that Ricoeur conceives of the narrative.<sup>155</sup>

This same argument might count as an argument for the fact that one should not discard Ricoeur's earlier phenomenological action theory and 'replace' it with his hermeneutic phenomenological action theory. However, the counter-argument can still be made that Ricoeur's later hermeneutic phenomenology takes account of phenomenology, and therefore still renders his earlier eidetic phenomenology, which ignores a hermeneutics, obsolete. The obstacle on my way to speaking of Ricoeur's action theory as a whole, therefore lies with proving that the phenomenological action theory, as found in *Freedom and Nature* in particular, is still relevant.

I will now look at arguments for why the phenomenological action theory as found in *Freedom and Nature* should not be discarded. One of the first arguments that I will consider is that of Don Ihde (1971), who holds that, based on Ricoeur's ([1969] 1991:26) claim that "*phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics*", and that "*phenomenology cannot constitute itself without a hermeneutical presupposition*", one should be able to unearth a latent hermeneutics in *Freedom and Nature*.

Ihde (1971:6-7, 16, 27) argues that *Freedom and Nature* contains a hermeneutic phenomenology, because (1) Ricoeur already brings phenomenology into conversation with the human sciences (such as "empirical psychology, psychoanalysis and biology") in order to 'test' phenomenology; (2) and, in *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur makes it clear that the self cannot posit itself as a first truth, because the self is not immediately "transparent to itself" (Ricoeur 1966:375). Since the willing subject must interpret itself in relation to its body and the world in order to will, in other words, the subject is reflexive<sup>156</sup> and is constantly appropriating and interpreting signs (its body, capacities, and projects in the world) (Michel 2006:48-50; Ricoeur 1966:13), one may at least speak of a "quasi-hermeneutic methodology"<sup>157</sup> (Pirovolakis 2018:137) or a "form of hermeneutics" (Amalric 2018:52) in

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<sup>155</sup> Recall that the narrative makes of contingencies, necessities. By incorporating seemingly abrupt events into a story, these same events are seen in a new light; namely as necessary to advance the storyline.

<sup>156</sup> Ricoeur (1974c:222) himself writes: "Or, to use other words, which are not Nabert's but which his work encourages: reflection, because it is not an intuition of the self by the self, can be, and must be, a hermeneutics." It can therefore be confirmed that, if the hermeneutical project is already present in the first steps of Paul Ricoeur's reflective anthropology, this project will only find its successful expression once the actual 'grafting' of the hermeneutical tradition on phenomenology has been performed.

<sup>157</sup> Different from Ihde, Pirovolakis (2018:140) cautions that one must not be too hasty to call this a full or developed hermeneutics. Depraz (2018:195-6) does not speak of a quasi-hermeneutics or a full hermeneutics, but instead makes another helpful distinction: in Ricoeur's work one finds a hermeneutics that is "immanent to

*Freedom and Nature*. (3) Furthermore, the very term ‘phenomenology’ shows its affiliation with language, and thus interpretation: ‘phenomenology’ is the “*logos of phainomena*” (Ricoeur 1966:16-17; 1967a:66). (4) Finally, Ihde (1971:91) argues that the phenomenological method that Ricoeur employs in *Freedom and Nature* is additionally a kind of hermeneutics or interpretation, since Ricoeur ascribes to a method of interpretation, namely bracketing the fault and Transcendence. One can thus speak of an “implicit hermeneutics” present in Ricoeur’s early action theory (Bourgeois 1975), or assume a softer position by ascribing to Pirovolakis’s (2018) claim that there is only a “quasi-hermeneutics” present in *Freedom and Nature*.<sup>158</sup> This allows us to retrospectively understand that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic graft – even though it subverts Husserl’s phenomenology – does not lead to an abandonment of Ricoeur’s first phenomenological works (Michel 2006:48-9).

A second reason not to discard Ricoeur’s earlier action theory, is that *Freedom and Nature*, due to its narrow focus, offers us insights into human action that one would not have arrived at had one only consulted Ricoeur’s later action theories. One can think of *Freedom and Nature* as a work in which Ricoeur delineates action on the level of *potentiality* or of essences, as opposed to *Oneself as Another* where Ricoeur describes action as being empirically *actualized* by a capable person in her day to day life (Ricoeur 1966:3). The “*fundamental possibilities*” of human willing that Ricoeur (1966:3) outlines in *Freedom and Nature* therefore serve as a “guiding thread to the human maze” (Ricoeur 1966:3). This guiding thread provides one with a type of foundation from whence to understand action (even though the fault, Transcendence and other persons are analytically bracketed). Without this guiding thread (action considered as essential possibility), Ricoeur’s subsequent accounts of action – as found in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*, would seem rather presumptuous, even unsubstantiated. For example, the self that Ricoeur describes in *Oneself as Another* is clearly able to act freely: yet, it is precisely in *Freedom and Nature* where Ricoeur (1966:32)

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perception and corporeal consciousness”, and a hermeneutics of the text (and one may add, the symbol and the narrative). Michel (2006:163) states this slightly differently: Michel holds that hermeneutics as such is *not* absent from Ricoeur’s early works, but that these works are not yet framed in a *general theory* of interpretation.

<sup>158</sup> Another, very implicit way in which Ricoeur’s *Freedom and Nature* can be understood as a hermeneutics, is if one makes the argument that Ricoeur’s action theory in *Freedom and Nature* follows the path of English analytic philosophy, where one interprets ordinary language in order to garner insight into action or “reality and of the one who speaks about [action or] this reality” (Ricoeur 1967b:18). Ricoeur (1966:6) writes in *Freedom and Nature* that the first step towards understanding the relationship between the voluntary and the involuntary is to identify the “most natural *articulations* of willing.” In other words, it is as if Ricoeur (1971a:87-8, 93) tacitly admits, in his early action theory, that symbols (and eventually language as the ultimate symbolic system), and ordinary language are intricately connected to action. *Freedom and Nature* is – to an extent – an exploration of the ordinary language used to describe everyday action. By examining everyday terms such as ‘purpose,’ ‘will,’ ‘motive,’ ‘project,’ and so on, Ricoeur describes the everyday structure or the grammar of action.

spells out the motives, capacities, and limits of this human freedom. Also recall that Ricoeur takes on the tedious task of rehabilitating the body in relation to the Cogito. Ricoeur (1966:31) writes, “I need *first of all* to learn to think of my body as myself, that is to say, as reciprocal with the willing which I am”, before advancing to those aspects of action that are initially bracketed (emphasis mine).

Consequently, one can also say that due to Ricoeur’s more abstract rendering of action in *Freedom and Nature*, one can focus on those aspects of action that are traditionally considered ‘internal’ to the self, such as one’s habits, emotions, the effort to move, deciding, acquiescing to constraints imposed by one’s body and one’s unconscious, and so forth. Ricoeur therefore draws our attention to the internal struggle or tension present in each action in *Freedom and Nature*. Although Ricoeur builds on<sup>159</sup> this internal struggle<sup>160</sup> in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*, it is with his earlier action theory that one is afforded a detailed description of the abovementioned aspects of human willing. Investigating action in abstraction, free from the contingencies of action as it is realised day to day, thus affords one a unique perspective on action (which his other action theories do not contain), and is additionally a necessary step on the way towards a more comprehensive account of action (Ricoeur 1966:30).

However, even though the above argument (that Ricoeur offers us insights about human action in *Freedom and Nature* that are merely assumed or perhaps neglected by his later action theories), might be convincing, the objection can still be made that the earlier action theory is reductionist<sup>161</sup> due to its idealistic<sup>162</sup> underpinnings (in the form of the isolated Cogito) and limited scope (Ricoeur 2015:1). Ricoeur (1966:3) himself writes in the introduction of *Freedom and Nature* that “...the fundamental structures of the voluntary and the involuntary [...] acquire

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<sup>159</sup> Yet also moves beyond, since Ricoeur lifts the brackets on the fault and the (love of the) other; subsequently delineating action theories that stress the necessity of the relationship between the self and the other in the form of language, and the second and third person.

<sup>160</sup> In *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur continues the theme of internal struggle by introducing a more moral element into it: in the former work, Ricoeur has an essay on imagination which explores how imagination allows us to feel affected by others’ stories (history) and this consequently shapes and informs our actions; in the latter, Ricoeur details how difficult it can be to act in the right way, practice practical wisdom, or live the good life when faced with moral dilemmas.

<sup>161</sup> If one were to follow Ricoeur’s action theory as outlined in *Freedom and Nature* one would be unable to provide an account of complacency. This is because Ricoeur brackets the fault or human fallibility in *Freedom and Nature*. Bracketing the fault implies that Ricoeur (1966:3-4) only focusses on the essences of human willing and therefore the “full significance” of what it means to be human is not yet obtained.

<sup>162</sup> However, Ricoeur never fully assumes a subjective idealist position (Michel 2018:29-31).

their full significance only when the abstraction which enables us to elaborate them is removed.”

I will therefore additionally argue that Ricoeur’s earlier action theory can be rehabilitated by, or made sense of, in terms of his later hermeneutical insights. This argument rests on the presupposition that one should assign more weight to Ricoeur’s later, and thus more mature work, namely his hermeneutic phenomenological account of action; and less weight to Ricoeur’s earlier action theory as found in *Freedom and Nature* (even though its content is the guiding thread). Ultimately, Ricoeur’s (1966:31) later works on action “surpass” his earlier work done on the “foundations of subjectivity” as willing. In other words, by performing a backwards reading – with the later Ricoeurian precepts in mind – one can perhaps assimilate Ricoeur’s earlier action theory into his later action theory. One way to perform this assimilation is to follow, what Joél Schmidt (2012) calls Ricoeur’s recapitulative pattern.

### ***The Recapitulative Pattern in Ricoeur’s Work***

Schmidt (2012:38-9) argues that there is a deeply sedimented recapitulative pattern in Ricoeur’s work: Ricoeur seems to, almost too generously, take account of those aspects that are “outdated, primitive, and even regressive in our collective and personal humanity” in his work. That is to say, Ricoeur seems to be deeply convicted that one cannot merely sweep the regressive aspects of being human and acting under the carpet when we aim towards progressive ideals (Schmidt 2012:38). Ricoeur therefore takes a detour through “what is basic and even base in the human constitution”, and argues that by returning to our roots, to a restoration of what is fundamental in our natures and what we might have forgotten, one can be emancipated from it and move towards progression (Schmidt 2012:38, 40, 45).

Schmidt (2012:41) provides the following example:

“Ricoeur argued for the necessity of healing what is negative in utopia with what is positive in ideology and vice versa. By their excentricity utopias tend to abstract so fully from what is that they provide no indication of how to move from the ‘here’ of the current state of affairs to the ‘elsewhere’ of the projected perfection. To this pathology of utopia the positive integrating function of ideology can serve as a healing tonic. Here too we have an example of a dynamic in which the progressive only attains its liberating aims, paradoxically, by drawing upon that which appears to be regressive.”

Other examples of this recapitulative pattern in Ricoeur’s work is his return to myths surrounding evil (produced in another time and context than today) in order to arrive at truths about evil that are still relevant to us currently (Schmidt 2012:14); and, in *Oneself as Another*,

Ricoeur returns to and takes into consideration more regressive notions of the self (especially self-love), before moving on to more progressive notions of the self, such as attestation, self-esteem, and self-respect (Schmidt 2012:45). Schmidt (2012:41) writes of Ricoeur's style that it is "creative return, repetition with a surplus".

One can consequently advance the claim that this recapitulative pattern can be described when one looks at Ricoeur's action theory as a whole. Following the trajectory of Ricoeur's action theory that stretches from *Freedom and Nature* to *Oneself as Another*, one notices that Ricoeur first returns to the most basic ways in which one can conceptualize the experience of the human will in isolation and abstraction in *Freedom and Nature*, before progressing towards an understanding of the human will (in the later action theories) that entails an empiric, hermeneutic and an intersubjective turn. In other words, through an eidetic phenomenology Ricoeur returns to an essentialist simplification or even a 'universalizing' of the 'will' (regression); and only after this passage through the regressive does Ricoeur move towards a more plural and complex (progressive) account of action.

What primary or primal insights does Ricoeur glean about human freedom and action through this regressive<sup>163</sup> move? Perhaps we can turn to Sebastian Purcell for some guidance. Purcell (2010:14) writes that "it is precisely by attending to eidetic features that one will be able to break up some of the dogmas" entrenched in the philosophical and hermeneutical traditions in which one is situated. That is to say, some conceptions and ways of understanding have become so embedded in our body of knowledge that we no longer question them. By *using* eidetic reduction, and temporarily ignoring that which the eidetic phenomenologist places in parenthesis, one might arrive at core insights subsumed under layers of complexity and diversity. However, Purcell (2010:15, 33) writes that "if the eidetic is taken to be 'foundational' in the sense that all phenomena of a certain kind must exhibit certain features, it cannot be foundational in a Cartesian sense, since there are other domains, such as the ampliative [features that are invariant and contingent], that address features of phenomena that the eidetic cannot, and which are often times more interesting."

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<sup>163</sup> Purcell (2010:33) writes that some critics negatively view eidetic phenomenology as a way to "shut[...] down thought" and "hem in what will always exceed [its set] boundaries". Purcell (2010:33) instead advocates that eidetic phenomenology is just another field of research (just like all the other fields of research), that "may yield fruitful results despite its corrigibility." "Thus one cannot hope to address what is most important simply by addressing the eidetic, and this shatters the Cartesian epistemic dream of finding one solid point on which to build a philosophic edifice. Instead the new home for eidetic phenomenology is to be found only in the strategic uses to which it is put" (Purcell 2010:33-4).

Ricoeur seems to acknowledge the above understanding and use of the eidetic approach from the start of his project of the will. It was – from the moment that Ricoeur initiated his project of the philosophy of the will – Ricoeur’s (1966:20-34) intention to return to that which he had bracketed out in *Freedom and Nature*, namely evil, Transcendence, and the actual realisation of action in everyday life. Moreover, Ricoeur states that he is aware, after having written *Freedom and Nature*, of a gap that emerges between “the essential structures of volitional consciousness [...] and the historical or empirical condition of the human will...” (Ricoeur and Thompson 1981:33). This is a gap which Ricoeur – as we have seen – goes on to address in his subsequent works. In addition, Ricoeur respects the Husserlian spirit which maintains that the phenomenological programme is limited to the appearance of things, to their manifestations. As such, phenomenology cannot claim, as a phenomenal journey, to be the whole of philosophy and even less to encompass its other (Dosse 2008:561). Ricoeur (1986:159) writes: “phenomenology can be founded only by what limits it. In which case it would not be philosophy but only its ‘threshold’.”

One can thus draw the conclusion that Ricoeur acknowledges the limits of phenomenology and that he uses the phenomenological method only to arrive at the most fundamental structures of the will. These identified fundamental structures form the threshold of Ricoeur’s philosophy of action. In Ricoeur’s investigation into the most essential structures of the will, Ricoeur manages to “delve beneath” the “dualism of subject and object, of freedom and nature” and arrive at the *primary* or basic insight that the subjective is inextricably connected to the objective, and *vice versa* (Thompson 1981:4-5). It is thus only by passing through regression, by returning to this primary truth at the heart of willing, that Ricoeur can proceed towards a more progressive understanding of the acting self in all its complexity and contingency.

Ricoeur thus uses eidetic phenomenology to delve beneath the two often opposed – and held to be mutually exclusive – hermeneutics of explanation and understanding. It is only by returning to the phenomenological insight that the objective and the subjective are inextricably connected,<sup>164</sup> or that willing is “... already entailed in a full understanding of the involuntary”,

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<sup>164</sup> Related to this is Ricoeur’s phenomenological ‘discovery’, so to speak, of the subject that is inherently (even ontologically) torn: the subject is always in a state of flux, of tension between the voluntary and the involuntary, between willing and the body, between a vitalism and a rationalism – yet, despite this brokenness, one can still speak of a subject. Ricoeur, because he ascribes to the tensive subject, is thus situated between two schools of interpretation, namely the modern school where the subject is master of meaning and transparent to itself (such as the Cartesian tradition or subjective idealism), and the anti-modern tradition whose proponents (such as Nietzsche) argue that there is no subject (Michel 2006:26-28).

that Ricoeur (1966:4) is inspired to formulate a hermeneutic phenomenology in which explanation and understanding of the agent stand in a complementary and dialectical relationship to each other. Thompson (1981:25) writes appositely: “[p]henomenology may remain the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics, but it is above all hermeneutics whose presuppositions must be examined.”

More specifically, without first understanding that the person *wills*, that the person has *intentionality*<sup>165</sup> (as described in detail *Freedom and Nature*), one cannot understand the agent who can *attest* to his or her ability to act, and who is ultimately capable of realising acting, and taking responsibility for his or her actions (as described in *Oneself as Another*). Put differently, volitional and affective acts are constituents of action in a more original sense than action on the representative level. The domain of representation, of reason, and of objectifying acts, stays subordinated to the desire of being and to the effort to exist and to act as set out in *Freedom and Nature* (Michel 2006:34-5). In addition, one can thus say that underneath Ricoeur’s distinction of the ethical and the moral as described in *Oneself as Another*, one finds an original intentionality of being-in-the-world – a vitalist thrust – which will be primary and unshaped by the moral (Dosse 2008:630). In other words, on the anthropological level, there is first an experience of freedom (as discussed in *Freedom and Nature*), and then only making sense of oneself as an ethical and moral agent. In other words, only by acknowledging what is basic or regressive to human action (intentionality and an experience of freedom), can one start to speak of more progressive notions of human action, such as imputing action to oneself, or the ethical and moral agent.

So much for the assimilation of Ricoeur’s earlier action theory into his later action theory, following a recapitulative pattern where one first has to return to what is basic, in order to arrive at complexity or what is progressive. There are, of course, various other examples of this backwards reading of Ricoeur’s work, but it is not part of the scope of this thesis to describe them all here. In this section I merely aimed to show that Ricoeur’s early action theory in *Freedom and Nature* is a necessary component (perhaps even a detour, despite the fact that it

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<sup>165</sup> Ricoeur holds that one cannot ignore intentionality, or intention to (do something), even though it tends to be a very subjective notion (when only the subject knows of his or her intentions to do something). One must maintain some aspects of intentionality if one “wish[es] to give a complete account of embodied intention having a concrete spatio-temporal dimension” (Zielinska 2010:616). Ricoeur thus later goes on to rehabilitate intentionality with the notion of attestation. Attestation enables Ricoeur “to set criteria of correctness (for intentions) that might be known only by the person who has them [...]. This specific notion of attestation (involving the notions of sincerity, lying, illusion, and so on) allows for an inner and reflexive side of intention, with no commitment to the Cartesian conception of the self” (Zielinska 2010:616).



historically precedes *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*) in Ricoeur's action theory as a whole.

### ***...Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Phenomenology Continued***

Above I have written that in *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur is able to focus on aspects of human willing that are neglected or even omitted in his later action theories. Although the above section included some of these neglected aspects of action, I now wish to look at a few additional ones. One of these dimensions of human action that Ricoeur is able to address in detail in *Freedom and Nature* is that of emotion and affects. René Thun (2010:52) points out that the hermeneutics of the self as sketched out in *Oneself as Another* tends to be rather cognitive, while neglecting the affective aspects of the person. Thun (2010:51) adds that “[t]here seems to be a hermeneutics of emotions or affects in [*Freedom and Nature*], since affects or feelings give us something to understand.” If one therefore reads *Oneself as Another* together with *Freedom and Nature*, emotions will be reintegrated into the more cognitive notion of narrative identity. This reintegration of the affective dimension into narrative identity is crucial, because emotions serve as markers of what one values, since emotion “presupposes a more or less implicit motivation which precedes and sustains it” (Ricoeur 1966:250-1). The affective dimension of narrative identity thus “...belongs to the practical synthesis where we are not just acting but evaluating another's and our own actions” (Thun 2010:51).<sup>166</sup>

Put differently, if I look at my emotions I can discover some of my motives (what I value) for acting, or desiring something, and so come to know something about myself, about my narrative identity. In turn, by knowing myself better, I can improve upon or re-narrate my (moral) character. There is thus a dialogical interaction between my affects and consciousness. For example, if I am angry that my friend unexpectedly shows up for coffee while I am gardening on a Saturday, it might be that I am selfish, or that I am perhaps inhospitable or unfriendly. My anger reveals the kind of person that I have become: while I might act pleasantly towards my friend upon the intrusion, my anger alerts me to the fact that I might have moral flaws, or at least that there is a discrepancy between the person I am (unsocial and inhospitable) and the person I wish to be (congenial and hospitable). Anger, in this case, is thus an “affective

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<sup>166</sup> Ricoeur, however, does make brief mention of affects when he describes practical wisdom: Ricoeur (1992:274-5) writes that one must think of the autonomous self as also being constituted by “receptiveness, passivity, and ... powerlessness.” The autonomous self is not self-sufficient and purely rational: it was shown that the self is “affected by the very law it gives itself”, that it is affection for others (their humanity, or capacity for reason) that drives the self towards respect for them, and, finally, that the autonomous self can be radically affected by the tendency to do evil (Ricoeur 1992:275).

perspective on [my] own ethical identity, which comprises actions, opinions, habits,” and so on (Thun 2010:5). The affective dimension as outlined *Freedom and Nature* should thus form part of the more cognitive hermeneutic process of the self delineated in Ricoeur’s later action theories, since it brings one closer to a more comprehensive process and understanding of narrative identity.

Moreover, emotions, as the way one is oriented to the world, acts as “affective mediation of the other” (Thun 2010:52). The emotions that I feel in relation to other persons – or perhaps rather the emotions through which I experience other persons (such as shame, anger, apprehension, disdain, tenderness, joy, and so on) – might alert me to the moral evaluations I hold of them or of myself (Thun 2010:51). If I feel shame, for example, it might be, amongst many possible things, that I have wronged the second or third person other. If I feel joy at the other, it *might* be that I stand in a good moral relationship to the other person, since I feel no guilt or because I feel they have not wronged me. (The same kinds of conclusions can be said of others’ affective reactions to me). Emotion, as a mediation of the other, and as standing in a dialogical relationship to the other, can thus be said to correspond to the narrative process centred on a dialectic between the self and the other in which I construct my moral identity (Thun 2010:52).

However, as we will see with cases of complacent action where the agent *feels* self-satisfaction despite doing the wrong thing, even in the presence of the other, one cannot solely depend on emotions to alert one to one’s moral position. As such, although it is helpful to remind ourselves of the role that emotions can potentially play in determining a person’s moral status or identity, one should not over-emphasize the value of emotions in determining one’s moral or ethical status and identity. Rather, one should come to the modest conclusion that narrative identity is not only constructed cognitively, but also through feedback from the affective dimension. “This suggests that affect and cognition are equally constitutive for our moral practice. Since [emotion] and [narrative identity – which is always moral in nature] presuppose a practice of giving and receiving reasons, they seem to be the result of cultural cooperation” (Thun 2010:52).

Another element of action that Ricoeur emphasizes in *Freedom and Nature*, and that is not discussed in detail in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*, is decision, and specifically decision as prereflexive act or as practical intentionality. In his later, hermeneutical action theories, Ricoeur focuses on the fact that the self and action is mediated through

symbols, text, and narrative. However, in *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur (1966:46) draws our attention to the strangeness of decision: during some decisions the subject forgets itself or is unaware of itself: “[e]ven if I do not think of myself as *the one* who makes up *his* mind at that moment, though I do not stress the ‘It is I who...’ of the verb of decision, I involve myself in the project, I impute to myself the action which is to be done.” Put differently, one always posits oneself in every decision or action, even if one is not explicitly aware of this reference to oneself in every act. Michel (2018:136) calls this the “paradox of decision”:

“The more the subject disappears behind the projection of its action, and the more it commits to it, the more it will be capable in retrospect of a reflexive recovery and of imputing the decision explicitly to itself. And greatest forgetting of the ego-subject at the moment of decision is the precondition for the greatest involvement of the subject at the moment of retrospection. The more the subject is implicit at the moment when it projects an action, the more it becomes explicit to itself afterward. Forgetting oneself, without ceasing to be present to oneself, does not derive, in this case, from a moral injunction in which Ricoeur might be echoing the guidance of the Gospels or the ethics of Levinas. It is a purely phenomenological description of ‘deciding’ as a form of intentional consciousness that operates through ‘empty signification’.”

One can thus add that *Freedom and Nature*, as a phenomenological account of action, reminds us of how we experience ourselves (as contemporaneous with action), and of how most of our actions are executed on a day-to-day basis. Subjects seldom think through every action that they execute, whether it is before, during, or after the act. This dimension of the person and action is downplayed or even neglected in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*: in these accounts of action, action is mostly described as being interpreted, thought through, incorporated into a narrative, made sense of. If one were to read *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another* without *Freedom and Nature*, one would be inclined to think of action as always being cognitively mediated (as always having been thought through by the subject, prior, during, or after the action is committed). And this is simply not true. Although all of the agent’s acts are intentional (Ricoeur 1966:42-3; 1992:67), the agent is not always explicitly aware of making definite decisions at the time of executing her actions (Ricoeur 1966:41, 209). Acting is *not* always first representing an image of one’s acting body to oneself, and then demanding the body to move (Ricoeur 1966:208). Action is rather “an aspect of thought in a broader sense” and a “kind of intentional relation to things and to the world” (Ricoeur 1966:207).

As such, the action theory in *Freedom and Nature* is a necessary complement to the action theories as found in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*. Each of the action

theories would indeed be reductionist without the other. In addition, although *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another* contain valuable philosophical insights (such as how the agent is able to introduce change into the world through action, how the agent's actions are both caused and motivated since the agent is both a subject and a body, how imagination makes action possible, how the text serves as a good paradigm for understanding action, and how action is facilitated by second and third person others, and so forth), they do not contain an account of how an agent experiences action from day to day (the agent hardly ever thinks in these abstract terms – such as thinking how the other enables action – when acting from day to day).

In turn, in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur tempers or rehabilitates the willing and acting cogito from *Freedom and Nature* which is constantly tempted to posit itself as a first truth<sup>167</sup> (Ricoeur 1974a:102). *Oneself as Another* is therefore normative, not only in the sense that Ricoeur explicitly outlines a 'little ethics' in this work, but also because it serves as a reminder that the agent is not alone: that his or her actions are profoundly connected to others.<sup>168</sup>

In conclusion, for a comprehensive understanding of the agent and action, the willing cogito of *Freedom and Nature* should be read in conjunction with the cogito that is enlarged and enriched in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*, by being “recaptured in the mirror of its objects, of its works, and finally, of its acts” (Ricoeur 1974a:102). A phenomenology of action thus reveals the rootedness of “human existence in a world which is the field of its *praxis*” (Ricoeur 1967a:70-1), while hermeneutics makes it possible to act, and to interpret this self who acts, because “[r]eflection is blind intuition if it is not mediated by what Dilthey called the expressions in which life objectifies itself” (Ricoeur 1974a:102).

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<sup>167</sup> Regarding complacent action, it might be helpful to keep in mind that the self often experiences itself as first truth and as the sole originator of its own actions, while neglecting to remember how the other makes possible, and is influenced by, the self's actions. Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*, by providing an account of action that strongly emphasizes the other, reminds us that our actions are not isolated: to be complacent is not a private matter; it affects others in both surface-level and profound ways. Perhaps if agents understood their actions more in the light of Ricoeur's action theory in *Oneself as Another*, and less according to the action theory found in *Freedom and Nature*, they would act less complacently. One can perhaps say, along with the Greeks, that one should 'know thyself'; for, by coming to know oneself as agent, one realises one's responsibility towards oneself and others to not act complacently.

<sup>168</sup> In *From Text to Action*, although Ricoeur does not provide a description of morality or ethics, Ricoeur does mention how narrative, and historical narratives affect us through the imagination: in other words, one can imagine what it must be like to be another and thus be affected by their stories. Taking the other and the other's narrative into consideration via imagination already introduces an ethical element into the action theory outlined in *From Text to Action*.

However, by no means should one think that Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology is a perfectly worked out accomplishment, nor should one hold on to the illusion that Ricoeur's earlier and later works form a coherent whole. Instead, there is still a lot to fathom and decipher regarding the relation between phenomenology and hermeneutics, and the earlier and later action theory, spanning across Ricoeur's works (Geniusas 2015:239).

In line with the theme of this section, one can at least say that the progression from a phenomenology to a hermeneutic phenomenology increasingly fragments the self-sufficiency of the subject or self. From *Freedom and Nature* to *Oneself as Another* one finds the themes of lived otherness: the involuntary which includes the body, the unconscious; otherness inherent in the subjective dialectic (the war waged within oneself regarding ethical and moral actions, and even the inherent battle to narrate who one is, or the *idem-ipse* [sameness-selfhood] dialectic), to otherness in the form of interpersonal and institutional others (Busacchi 2010:29). In short, as one follows Ricoeur's trajectory from the subject to the acting self, one discovers that Ricoeur's conception of subjectivity – although always reflexive – becomes less and less substantial (Michel 2006:48-50). Neither the phenomenological subject nor the hermeneutic self is self-sufficient in the sense of knowing itself directly, or being undetermined by otherness or the objective world. Next, I will look at another element or theme that hints at the fragmentation or decentering of the self, namely passivity within action.

### ***The Subject as Both Active and Passive***

Ricoeur (1966:447; 1992:274-5) continually stresses that the cogito is both active and passive: the subject or the acting self is also constituted by “receptiveness, passivity, and ... powerlessness.” In *Freedom and Nature* one sees that while the cogito decides on a project, it also accepts motives for its decision. Similarly, within movement, the subject has to consent to the limits of its body. Finally, the subject has to consent to absolute necessities such as “an existence which is not chosen, with its constriction, its shadows, [and] its contingency”; this consent is a kind of choice that the subject makes (Ricoeur 1966:484). That is to say, to act is to accept reasons for acting, to move is to make use of one's capacities, to consent is to consent to absolute necessities.

In *From Text to Action* too, one finds that the self has to act in a world and the present that already 'is' and is on-going, drawing on existing language and narrative tropes in order to make sense of itself and to act. In other words, even though we can shape and make history through our actions, actions always have unintended consequences and is executed in *given*

situations and historical contexts (Ricoeur 1991:219-220). We therefore have the *initiative* to act, but we are also *affected* by our own and others' actions or histories. We are thus both agents and sufferers (Ricoeur 1991:221).

Additionally, in *Oneself as Another*, the hermeneutics of the capable human being calls for the other in terms of interpersonal and institutional relationships. This implies both that the self can only act because it is within a community of others, but also that other agents' actions affect and constrain the self's actions. It further implies that the capable agent comes up against moral impasses where she is divided between her responsibility and her vulnerability. As such, the capable human being is once again shown to be both an acting and suffering being.

In sum, the phenomenology of the will and the hermeneutics of the capable man are connected through this thread of the agent as someone who is both active and passive, who both undergoes and chooses existence, who acts and is subjected to action, who initiates and receives, who gives and receives reasons for action, and who is both powerful and powerless (Abel and Porée 2007:36; Ricoeur 1966:164). The subject or the self is both a capable agent because of what is other, yet is also rendered passive, powerless, and receptive in relation to the other. This vulnerability or fragility of being human prevents us from being caught up in ourselves, as solipsistic and self-sufficient Cartesian Cogitos. The other, whether it is our bodies, our unconscious, character, the world we were born into, or other persons, constantly decentres the subject or the self. Such dependency on the other might sometimes be rejected by consciousness (as when one detests the limits of one's body, or when one is frustrated with existing narrative tropes, or when one's despises that one is so dependent on other human beings), yet this dependency on what is other also allows one to act: to make changes in the world, to have meaningful interactions, to live a good life. Such is the paradox, or the wonderful mystery of being human and acting in the world.

### ***The Continuous, yet Changing Theme of Explanation and Understanding***

Since the subject or the agent is paradoxical in this manner, one finds that equally paradoxical language is used by people in everyday life to describe action and the subject or the self. Sometimes one uses language that is reminiscent of the natural sciences (for example, the thunderclap *caused* him to jump); yet, one could also have used language that emphasises the agency of the subject (he jumped because he got a fright). I have explored this duality in detail when I outlined Ricoeur's discussion of the aporia between explanation and understanding in *From Text to Action*. Recall that Ricoeur leads us to the insight that

explanation and understanding are in a dialectical relationship: we both explain and understand human subjects and their actions. Yet, there is always a tension between the two poles of understanding and explanation.

In *Freedom and Nature*, this interdependence and conflict between explanation and understanding reflects the mutual interdependence and conflict between the involuntary and the voluntary. The Ricoeurian cogito is internally torn because it is both a subject and a body. Freedom, expressed by reflexive philosophy, is in dialogue with nature, expressed by the natural sciences: both genres have the human as their subject, but they use different language to describe the subject (Dosse 2008:198). Expressed differently, the cogito is in a tensive position between phenomenology and existentialism. The philosophy of the subject appears to us as a living tension between an objectivity elaborated by a phenomenology in dialogue with the natural sciences and psychology, and the sense of my embodied existence elaborated by an existentialism (Dosse 2008:196-7). With the introduction of hermeneutics (relative to the selected texts, namely *Freedom and Nature*, *From Text to Action*, and *Oneself as Another*) in *From Text to Action*, we have seen that it is possible to talk about the subject or the self in language that is both explanatory (objective), and in language that describes action in more subjective or ‘lived-perspective’ manner.

Finally, recall that the self in *From Text to Action* has to explain his or her actions in a way that is understandable not only to herself, but to others. As such, one is led to the theme of explanation and understanding as it appears in *Oneself as Another*. Explaining one’s actions in an understandable manner implies second and third person others: the second person is directly implied in the sense that there must be someone to whom one’s actions are meaningful (action can, of course also be meaningful to third persons), while the third person is implied in the fact that one uses language to objectify or explain one’s actions. We have seen the necessity of other agents clearly in chapter three of this thesis: without a community, a symbolic system such as language cannot arise. There would be no meaningful (in other words, explicable and understandable) action without others. Finally, in *Oneself as Another*, we have seen that the explanation and understanding of one’s actions are central to one’s self-esteem and self-respect. One’s actions must be *meaningful* to others in order for these actions to bring about change in the world. If others do not see one’s action as making sense, it will be difficult – if not impossible – for one to see one’s own action as meaningful, since these actions will have no impact in the world. Put differently, if other agents do not esteem my actions as worthy, or do not respect my actions as good, I will not be able to esteem and respect my own actions (and

myself) as worthy or good. As such, the agent's actions are constrained or influenced – objectively – by other agents. In sum, Ricoeur's action theory entails a constant engagement with objectivity, as can be seen in the continuous theme of explanation and understanding (Davidson 2018:8).

Yet, the differences within this continuous theme must be emphasized as well. Each successive work on action deepens the way in which objectivity or explanation is central to the understanding of action and the subject or self. This does not mean that Ricoeur, at the end of this trajectory, comes to favour explanation (the objective moment or aspect) at the cost of understanding.<sup>169</sup> Instead, in each of the three action theories Ricoeur highlights different ways in which objectivity 'feeds into', so to speak, the moment of subjective understanding. Ricoeur stresses the objectivity of "*the object world*" in relation to the subject in *Freedom and Nature* (where he tests the reflexivity of the subject through the empirical sciences and psychology), while in later works (using an explicit hermeneutic phenomenology) the self's understanding is shown to be additionally tempered by the objectivity of the language world (culture) (Ihde 1971:98; Michel 2006:28). It is this very turn to language which introduces the objective other (person) into the explanatory side of the explanation-understanding dialectic. In *Oneself as Another* we see that the other (the second and third person) shapes what counts as understandable and explicable action. While *Freedom and Nature* contains the germ that understanding stands in a dialectical relationship with explanation, we only see the culmination of this insight in *Oneself as Another*. The subject thus becomes more mediate and indirect; increasingly able to reflect on itself in a critical way.

### ***Conclusion on the Broken, Fragmented or Decentred Self***

Above we have seen that Ricoeur's subject (and later, self) is broken or paradoxical (as being both a body and a cogito, as being both active and passive, as being both initiative and receptivity, both understandable and explicable, both sameness and selfhood, both powerful and suffering in relation to other persons, and finally only becomes itself through assimilating the otherness that constitutes it). This is the synchronic aspect. However, throughout Ricoeur's successive works that touch upon action theory, we have seen an increase of this brokenness and reflexivity: with each succeeding work, we have seen how the subject or self is increasingly

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<sup>169</sup> However, recall that *Freedom and Nature* is methodologically indeed more in favour of understanding at the cost of explanation. However, this methodological stance is not due to *Freedom and Nature*'s position in Ricoeur's overall action theory; instead it is due to Ricoeur (1966:4) presupposition that description is preferred over explanation, since explanation is moving "...from the complex to the simple".



fragmented and decentred, and consequently (almost paradoxically) becomes more self-aware or self-reflexive. The subject or self increasingly comes to reflect on itself in a critical way through its actions, symbols, language and other cultural artefacts, and is therefore better able and capable to act. The actualization of freedom, the guiding thread of practical philosophy, can only be thought of in a discourse that overcomes antinomy through mediation (Ricoeur 2015:5).

Thus, writes Ricoeur (2015:6), the philosophy of the will is essentially a philosophy of transitions, passages, dissociations, constantly being surmounted and maintained: the will is the dialectic par excellence. Yet, a dialectic does not imply that the structures of understanding the human will is entirely open-ended. The willing or acting self is also closed in through its finiteness, its situated nature (that decentres it), and torn in the drama of existence (Michel 2006:32). Ricoeur's (2015:6) philosophy of the will and of action therefore has an open-close structure: it is closure through knowledge and openness through hope. The irony or paradox is that as the subject, and finally, the self are increasingly shattered or fragmented through objectifying or analytic detours (closings-off), the more detailed and augmented the notion of action becomes (hope increases) (Ricoeur 1992:19).

#### **4.3. The Intersubjective Turn: The Subject Becomes a Capable Subject**

Above, by following the theme of the broken or decentred self, we have seen the progression from the eidetics of the will, where Ricoeur describes willing in correlation with what is willed (and which presupposes the abstract bracketing of the fault, Transcendence and love), to an empirics of the will when Ricoeur lifts the aforementioned triple parenthesis in order to make a detour through the symbolism of evil and non-philosophical resources (such as the myth, the fullness of language, the text, and so on) on his way towards an understanding of the self (Abel 2006: paragraph 3). Now, although I have touched upon this dimension briefly, I will move on to the dimension of the intersubjective, or 'love' as Ricoeur (1966:31-2) calls it in *Freedom and Nature*: the "relation of a will to a will, when it is not one of imitation, commandment, solidarity, affective fusion, or social cohesion, but a friendly creation from within." This dimension of the self is critical to explore in more depth, because without this intersubjective turn, there is no 'capable subject' and therefore no complacent action (Ricoeur 2000:1-4).

In other words, I will now look at how the subject from *Freedom and Nature* gradually develops into the capable agent who acts, as described in *Oneself as Another*. In the process, I

will highlight what stays the same across the three accounts of action that I have chosen to focus on, and also how Ricoeur's action theory changes pertaining to the notion of the 'self', and ultimately how this affects our understanding of action. The argument that will form the backbone of this discussion is Michel's (2006:73) contention that Ricoeur's work has undergone a decisive intersubjective turn in *Oneself as Another*, but that this turn should not be read as a rupture in relation to Ricoeur's earlier work.

A continuist reading of Ricoeur's action theory that spans across *Freedom and Nature* to *Oneself as Another* may be structured along the following statement: the intersubjective turn in Ricoeur's work is an integral part of the long detour through which the human subject can reclaim its existence (as agent). In the previous section one has seen how the subject becomes increasingly fragmented through its detours through otherness; yet at the same the subject gains or benefits from these fragmentations through otherness, since the notion of the subject becomes richer and more extended with each detour. The intersubjective turn in Ricoeur's work is one of these detours that enables the subject to become an agent.

Why is this so? Let us briefly return to the trajectory of the subject on the way to becoming an agent or a self. In *Freedom and Nature* one encounters the isolated subject who is on its quest to make sense of, or appropriate the 'signs' of its existence; or who participates<sup>170</sup> in its existence through a "sign-learning process" (Ricoeur 1966:13-14). Ricoeur (1966:125, 280, 343) only obliquely refers to other persons in his mentions of history as a context for one's decisions, when discussing motives (since one has to explain/motivate one's actions to others) (Ricoeur 1966:72-3), and when he explicitly writes about bracketing the other person, since intersubjectivity ("[I]ove of beings among themselves") borders too closely on Transcendence<sup>171</sup> (Ricoeur 1966:31-3).

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<sup>170</sup> "The act of Cogito is not a pure act of self-positing: it lives on what it receives and in a dialogue with the conditions in which it is itself rooted. The act of myself is as the same time participation" (Ricoeur 1966:18).

<sup>171</sup> In other words, the other person is part of the poetics of the will: that dimension of action which concerns the mystery of creation (productive imagination) (Ricoeur 1966:30). Ricoeur (1966:32) adds: "[I] admit readily that the problem of the other is not really raised [in *Freedom and Nature*], since the other becomes truly 'thou' when he is no longer a motive or an obstacle for my decision but when he begets me in my very decision, inspires me in the heart of my freedom, and exercises on me an effect which is in some way seminal, akin to creative action." Ricoeur (1966:30) brackets this dimension in *Freedom and Nature* because "...the inspiration of being in the heart of [the] self" is too "concrete" (empirical), yet mysterious, and therefore demands a "change of method" (other than phenomenology). Ricoeur (1966:30) writes: "In order to prepare an understanding of this highest mystery [poetics of the will or Transcendence] we need first of all to strive at length to understand freedom as a *rule* over motives, powers, and even over the necessity built into its very heart." As such, Ricoeur already admits, as early as *Freedom and Nature*, that the other person profoundly constitutes action.

These signs of existence that the subject appropriates are its body (Ricoeur (1966:13) writes that the relation between the Cogito and the object-body is “formed in a sign-learning process”), the unconscious, character (at this stage of Ricoeur’s work), biological life, and its projects or its works of action objectified ‘outside’ of itself. As such, the subject in *Freedom and Nature* understands itself as an incarnate cogito with certain capacities to decide and to act, and hence it already understands itself in relation to the world. In other words, Ricoeur’s subject in *Freedom and Nature* is reflexive *before* the intersubjective turn in Ricoeur’s work,<sup>172</sup> even though the earlier notion of reflexivity is underdeveloped in terms of not exploring *how* the subject makes sense of itself (Michel 2006:48-50; Ricoeur 1966:46). Amalric (2018:38) substantiates the aforementioned: “In my view, the main aim of *Freedom and Nature* is to pass from the abstract point of view of an eidetics of the will to the concrete point of view of the lived experience of our incarnate will, and this passage itself already falls within the scope of a reflexive philosophy of the act.” The fact that Ricoeur’s early subject is reflexive is important, since such a self is in search of itself, and therefore allows for otherness and the other; the sovereign and self-sufficient self is closed in upon itself and the other has no place in relation to it (Michel 2006:73).

The subject’s reflexivity is increased, however, with the introduction of the other person. While the subject appropriates signs in *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur shows us a new kind of conquest of the self that unfolds around texts, and particularly narratives. In other words, while Ricoeur reflects the subject in “*the object world*” (nature and psychology) in *Freedom and Nature*, in *From Text to Action* (and later works) the subject is reflected in the language world or cultural expression (Ihde 1971:98). And “[a] language world is already a subjective (an intersubjective) world” (Ihde 1971:98). This is because language, in use, is discourse. Discourse indicates the presence of other subjects in two ways: (1) one does not discourse with oneself, one is in dialogue with another person, and (2) discourse implies that one is using a language that was developed by a historical community of agents.

Besides reflexivity, yet closely connected to it, imagination is another notion that connects Ricoeur’s earlier action theory to his later action theory in which narrative is central. In *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur (1966:95-6) points out how we use imagination to both “adapt to our bodies” and to “adapt the body to the world” in order to find the best solutions to our

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<sup>172</sup> Davidson and Michel (2010:6) write that Ricoeur demonstrates his adherence to an interpretative understanding of the self “long before the official ‘grafting’ of hermeneutics onto phenomenology”. This can be seen clearly if one looks at Ricoeur’s work on French reflexive philosophy, and in particular, Ricoeur’s constant influence by Jean Nabert (Davidson and Michel 2010:6).

desires, needs<sup>173</sup> and projects<sup>174</sup> (Dierckxsens 2018:222-3). In *From Text to Action* Ricoeur (1991:171, 174) describes imagination as semantic innovation, because “images are spoken before they are seen”. Recall that semantic innovation entails using language metaphorically, or finding similarity between two hitherto disparate “semantic fields” – a “sudden glimpse of a new predicative pertinence...” (Ricoeur 1991:171-173). These metaphorical utterances (the “deviant usage of predicates in the framework of the sentence as a whole”), lead to the “extension of meaning”, and hence opens up new ways of being and acting (Ricoeur 1991:172). Moreover, semantic innovation always *refers* to something else, and hence its creativity is not limited to the field of semantics only, but also encompasses the sphere of action (Ricoeur 1991:174). In both *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action* then, imagination entails new ways – not only of seeing the world – but also of being or acting in the world (Ricoeur 1991:174).

Put differently, in *Freedom and Nature* one finds that during the sign-learning (or interpreting) process (and later, the symbol-interpreting process), the subject is applying this method – called ‘schematism’ – when it tries out certain ideas or possibilities of action in a ‘*what if I do...?*’ exercise (Ricoeur 1966: 1991:173-4). In *From Text to Action*, by introducing the text (which consists of sentences, and ultimately a plot), Ricoeur elaborates on this process of imagination. Ricoeur ([1983] 1984:ix) writes that it is the function of the sentence to “...save the new pertinence of the ‘odd’ predication threatened by the literal incongruity of the attribution. With narrative, the semantic innovation lies in the inventing of another work of synthesis—a plot. By means of the plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action. It is this synthesis of the heterogeneous...,” characteristic of narrative, that is comparable with semantic or predicative innovation, and ultimately with the process of imagination on the level of the subject considered by itself (attributing future actions to oneself in a ‘what-if?’ exercise), as in *Freedom and Nature*. Narrative thus enables the subject to make better sense of its actions and of itself.

However, by introducing the text and the narrative as ways for the subject to understand itself and to act, Ricoeur breaks away from his earlier quasi-hermeneutics or quasi-reflexivity

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<sup>173</sup> Ricoeur (1966:95-6) writes that the imagination provides an image to the “blind experience of need”: “...if knowledge of the object and of the means is not available to clarify the lack, the need remains a vaguely oriented distress.”

<sup>174</sup> Ricoeur (1966:138) describes the process of hesitation as “a perplexed willing seeking to orient itself.” In this process of indecision, one is “...lost among confused motives” and therefore tries out certain projects in a conditional mode through one’s imagination (Ricoeur 1966:139-142).

in a dramatic way.<sup>175</sup> While the sign (or symbol)-learning process described in Ricoeur's philosophy of the will is a two-way expression that the subject can seemingly exercise while uprooted from its historical condition,<sup>176</sup> the narrative demands a more complex hermeneutics centred around refiguration (Michel 2006:66). The narrative, and other cultural expressions, call for an extension of the reflexive method by a hermeneutic, or an interpretative method (Ricoeur 2015:2).

In *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur shows us that the subject understands itself from a position that lies at the intersection of the subject's 'horizon of expectation' and its 'past personal experiences'. This position arises from a narrative understanding of action and of oneself. Put differently, narrative entails a meeting-point between innovation (telling a new story) and existing knowledge of the world (its intelligible structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character), and therefore implies a subject that shapes and makes history, but is in turn affected by history or the past (Michel 2006:82). Therefore, narrative presents itself as a new challenge, because it refers – from the start – to a hermeneutics of historical consciousness (Michel 2006:66).

In *From Text to Action*, with the introduction of the narrative and history, one thus finds that Ricoeur's subject becomes more realistic, more of an agent who is able to bring about change in the world (while being affected by the world). A person who might be able to act complacently, in other words. However, while one can argue that others are omnipresent as creators and transmitters of traditions, symbols, languages, cultural works and narratives, there is still no explicit or direct reference to other persons. The subject does not come face-to-face with other persons in these earlier accounts of action; instead the other is still in the background as an anonymous existence (Michel 2006:72).

It is only with *Oneself as Another* that Ricoeur explicitly introduces the face-to-face and institutional other who inspires action in the heart of the subject. While Ricoeur's earlier

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<sup>175</sup> Yet, typical of the diachronic-synchronic undulations in Ricoeur's work, one can also say that Ricoeur's reflexive phenomenology and his hermeneutics are in a dialectical relationship. On the one hand, reflection (as described in *Freedom and Nature*) is rid of its abstraction and its illusion of immediacy and transparency due the long detour imposed on it by the interpretation of symbols, textual works, and cultural monuments (Ricoeur 2015:2). Thus hermeneutics ensured the passage from abstract reflection to concrete reflection (Ricoeur 2015:3). On the other hand, the semantic analysis of symbols, texts and narratives is removed from the temptation of a pure language game, insofar as semantic analysis is anchored in a broader self-understanding that is rooted in phenomenology (Ricoeur 2015:3). Following the progression of Ricoeur's work, one can say that the understanding of texts (etc.) and the self, connects or maintains the continuity between Ricoeur's phenomenological reflexive method and his hermeneutics (Ricoeur 2015:3).

<sup>176</sup> Michel (2016:367-8) writes that Ricoeur replaces his metaphysical paradigm (*Freedom and Nature*) with a historical paradigm (*From Text to Action*).

action theories are built around a reflexive subject, which implies that the subject interprets or understands itself through the mediation of signs and so forth, in *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur introduces intersubjectivity as a mediation of the subject and action. Michel (2006:75) writes that here, the Ricoeurian cogito leaves behind the paradoxical solitude where it understood itself primarily in the reflecting mirror of the world as text. As such, with this intersubjective turn, Ricoeur's subject is not only increasingly decentred, but is also fully removed from its solitary and ahistorical position where it constantly returns to itself in a reflexive loop. In addition, Michel (2006:76) writes that a semantic shift takes place in *Oneself as Another*: Ricoeur moves away from the word 'subject' and rather uses the word 'self'. This is significant, because by referring to the 'self' Ricoeur (1992:1-2) denotes that the human being is reflexive; in addition, 'self' removes the temptation of privileging the first person singular in an account of action (which is typical of a subjective idealistic philosophy) (Michel 2006:76, 79).

The subject becomes a capable agent through the mediation of the other, because, as Ricoeur (1992:40-1) writes in *Oneself as Another*, it is only in the context of *interaction* (these interactions can take the form of dialogue, interweaving narratives, being held/holding responsible, and so forth) that notions such as 'I' and 'you' make any sense. If one cannot 'first' identify oneself as a person (as an 'I') who can speak, act, narrate, and impute actions to oneself, then one will be unable to actualize or realise actions, partake in dialogue, narrate, or take responsibility for one's actions. Self-designation as an agent and interaction are thus in a dialectical relationship. In such a way then, the other is constitutive of the capable agent, and ultimately of action.<sup>177</sup> As Ricoeur (1999:49) puts it: "someone addressing someone else is the difference between effective speech and a simple logical proposition." Framing this in terms of action, one can say that someone interacting with someone else (within an implied society or community) is the difference between action and a mere empirical fact or an event. In this sense, all the abilities of the subject, as Ricoeur delineates them in *Freedom and Nature* and

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<sup>177</sup> In addition, recall that in chapter two of this thesis I have shown that, according to Ricoeur, for action to count as action, one must have reasons for acting. These reasons must have the characteristic of 'generality'. In other words, in order for the action to be *meaningful*, the reasons for the action must belong to a general class of motives. A reason for action makes it possible to explain the action, where 'explain' means placing a singular action into a class of actions that have a more general characteristic (Michel 2006:249). In other words, action is that which not only has a meaning for the individual, but also for other agents. By taking an intersubjective turn, Ricoeur further prevents his account of action from becoming subjectivist (as Husserl's phenomenology might be without the contribution of the social sciences) (Michel 2006:250). Action is social insofar as, by virtue of the meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or the acting individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of other individuals and by this means is influenced in its actualization (Michel 2006:250).

*From Text to Action*, are only ‘potentialities’ as long as they have not been mediated by interpersonal relations and institutional structures.

Finally, Ricoeur (1992:116-9) crowns the conceptual unfolding of personal identity through intersubjectivity by unveiling two further components of reflexive identity, namely *idem*- and *ipse*-identity.<sup>178</sup> Above we have seen that imagination, as reflexive narrating process, enables the subject to make sense of itself in relation to the world and in relation to history, and thus enables it to bring about change in the world. In *Oneself as Another*, imagination reaches an even profounder level: the self can now make sense of itself in a more holistic manner by constructing a narrative identity around both sameness (*idem*-identity) and selfhood (*ipse*-identity), or concordance and discordance. On the one hand, through narrative one is able to distinguish oneself from other people and things. Narrative helps one to think of oneself as continuous, as a character, as a type of stability over time (*idem*-identity) (Ricoeur 2000:3). On the other hand, narrative also allows for change in terms of one’s identity: one can make sense of one’s changing character or tie one’s disparate and unique actions together through narrative (*ipse*-identity).

More specifically, Ricoeur defines *ipse*-identity in terms of an ethics of promise: the promise entails other persons, since a promise is a word given to *another*. This does not mean that other persons are absent from *idem*-identity: the other assuredly enters into the constitution of the same self since narration of oneself is entangled with others’ narratives, and since the character traits that one acquires entails that other people recognize one as being ‘such’ or ‘such’ a character (Michel 2006:94). However, *ipse* is different, since it contributes an *ethical* mediation of others in the heart of the self. Therefore, in addition to an intersubjective foundation of the self, Ricoeur adds an ethical foundation. The capable subject is ultimately a moral subject. I will look at how this ethical dimension unfolds across Ricoeur’s action theories, in the next section.

In conclusion, the most pertinent and synchronic element that spans across *Freedom and Nature* to *Oneself as Another*, is reflexivity. Ricoeur consistently rejects *both* the philosophical position of a self-positing and immediately transparent consciousness or self-determined ego, *and* Ricoeur rejects the complete obliteration or elimination of the subject. In

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<sup>178</sup> As such, the hermeneutics of the self in *Oneself as Another* is found at the crossing of a double dialectic between *idem* and *ipse*, and between *ipseity* (selfhood) and alterity (such as the other person) that are found in the interior of a journey in which the notion of ‘person’ is ramified through each of the four levels of the person (speaking, acting, narrating, imputing) by Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* (Dosse 2008:535).

more positive terms, Ricoeur holds that “the self can be constructed through a long and patient interpretation of what does not belong to it, of what it will perhaps never be able to possess [sic] entirely, of an outside that can be in itself, and of a strangeness in the form of the other or the stranger” (Davidson and Michel 2010:7). We thus see that Ricoeur’s reflexive philosophy rests on the demand of a conquest of the subject through a sign-learning process (as opposed to a psychologized subject who knows itself intuitively and immediately); and it is finally with hermeneutics that Ricoeur is afforded a method of investigation that makes of the constitution of the self a problem of understanding of the self, using the interpretation of ‘signs objectified in the world’ (Michel 2006:46). In the introduction of *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur (1992:17) writes: “...long loops of analysis are characteristic of the indirect style of a hermeneutics of the self, in stark contrast to the demand for immediacy belonging to the cogito.”

In addition, the related synchronic theme of imagination stands out. Across Ricoeur’s works that capture his action theory, one repeatedly discovers that there is no meaningful action without imagination. Imagination – whether in a more ‘direct’ or unmediated manner where one adapts one’s body to the world, or in the mediated form of narrative – structures or shapes our projects, allows for comparison and evaluation of motives, and finally allows us to impute our actions to ourselves (Ricoeur 1991:177-8).

However, and here I touch upon a very general diachronic element found across his action theories, Ricoeur’s intersubjective turn does not leave his earlier anthropology intact: in *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur’s action theory is still very subject-centred despite the fact that the subject is decentred and reflexive, and despite the fact that Ricoeur acknowledges the presence and even constitutive role of other agents in relation to the subject; in *Oneself as Another* one has an action theory where the other profoundly constitutes the self and which paradoxically leads to a more capable subject. Within *Oneself as Another* the self and its other are never separated; however, Ricoeur (1992:18) writes that this dialectic between the self and the other will “take on its fullest development only in the studies in the areas of ethics and morality.” Therefore, “the notion of a capable subject reaches its highest significance” only on the level of the ethical and the moral (Ricoeur 2000:4). Next, I will hence look at the moral and ethical self.



#### 4.4. The Self Becomes Interwoven in Narrative and Becomes an Ethical and Moral Self

This section is devoted to tracing the moral and ethical subject from Ricoeur's earlier to his later action theory. In doing so, I will once again identify the synchronic and diachronic elements that span Ricoeur's action theory considered as a whole.

I will argue that the subject in Ricoeur's earlier action theories, as described in *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action*, cannot be considered ethical or moral in nature. It is only with the above-described intersubjective turn that the subject truly becomes the kind of being to whom one can ascribe predicates such as 'good' and 'bad,' 'right' and 'wrong' (in the ethical and moral senses of these words).

However, one can argue, along with Graves (2018:231) that, since *Freedom and Nature* "...already entails reference to values and norms [recall that to want to do a project, one must value this project, and that Ricoeur obliquely refers to societal norms that might constrain one from the outside...], the seeds for a normative account of agency were already sown in *Freedom and Nature*."<sup>179</sup> Yet, one must be very careful to maintain that these mentions of values and norms are mere *seeds*<sup>180</sup> and not yet a full moral or ethical theory of agency. Ricoeur (1966:21) writes in the introduction of *Freedom and Nature* that

“[i]n this work we shall never speak of the law, but of *values* which motivate it. [...] The will is fundamentally the ability to receive and approve values. But the willing-value nexus remains an abstraction and does not introduce us to concrete moral reality.”

Ultimately, the willing-value nexus which Ricoeur (1966:21) describes in *Freedom and Nature* "...provides only a basis for the possibility of a principle of a morality in general.”

However, this basis is extremely important. This is because "...only a pure description of the voluntary and the involuntary apart from the fault can reveal the fault as a fall, as loss,

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<sup>179</sup> Additionally, Graves (2018:245 [endnote 5]) makes the argument that Ricoeur was on the cusp of developing a "normative and interpersonal (rather than causal or metaphysical) basis of responsibility, but was prevented by his phenomenological methodology from carrying out the project." Graves quotes the following passage from Ricoeur (1966:81-2) to support his argument: "If, in effect, I assume charge of things and beings for which I respond, it is to the extent to which I feel charged with them, that is, to which I receive responsibility for them. [...] In terms of this orientation by a legitimizing value I can be not only responsible for..., but also responsible to; for value [...] is the suprapersonal bond of a group of men to which I dedicate myself. [...] The possibility of a principle of judgment passed on my action, of blame and approbation, in a word, of sanction, is imbedded in this legitimization of my responsibility.”

<sup>180</sup> Blackburn (2002:125) provides a helpful description of the scale that ranges from values (preferences) to ethics proper: "at the bottom we start with pure preferences. Rising up we come to preferences that we prefer others to share. Rising further we come to preferences that we 'demand' of others; that is, if they do not share them we find ourselves averse or in opposition to them. Here, according to me, we begin to enter the territory of ethics.”

as absurdity—in brief, set up the contrast which would bring out its full negative force” (Ricoeur 1966:27). Again, recall that the fault is not an absence of freedom, the fault does not reduce one to a kind of animal state (Ricoeur 1966:29). Instead, the “fault happens to freedom[...]. *It is I who* make [sic] myself a slave: I *impose* on myself the fault which *deprives* me of control over myself” (Ricoeur 1966:26). As such, it is necessary to describe the will in an amoral/non-moral way (exactly what Ricoeur sets out to do in *Freedom and Nature*), before one can start to think about an ethical (or unethical) and moral (or immoral) subject (Michel 2006:13).

*From Text to Action* is similar to *Freedom and Nature*, to the extent that – in it – Ricoeur does not yet describe an ethical and moral subject. However, the fact that Ricoeur describes the subject as a historical being who uses narrative to conceive of and make changes in the world, hints at a more ethical subject. Because the subject now narratively understands itself as making and being affected by history (bringing about change in a given world), it can make the inference – through imagination – that it both affects and is affected by others. As such, the possibility exists to wrong and be wronged by others, which in turn calls for ethical or moral deliberation by the subject.

Although *From Text to Action* does not contain a description of the ethical subject, one can perhaps say (and here I digress) that the action theory in *From Text to Action* is *itself* prescriptive. Ricoeur seems to *prescribe* the kind of narrative that makes sense (provides concordance) of non-sense (discordance) through emplotment (based on the Aristotelian model of *muthos*) (Michel 2006:89-90). In other words, Ricoeur favours the kind of narrative that is able to ‘refigure’ events or acts carried out by actors by redescribing these event or actions through the “logic of story-telling” (Borisenkova 2010:93): the story “‘grasps together’ the details of action into the unity of the plot” (Ricoeur 1984:76). However, Michel (2006:88) asks the following question: how does one tell a story in a concordant manner when one has no knowledge of the temporal order of the relevant events, and the events do not want fall into place within an intelligible order? A similar objection, raised by Borisenkova (2010:96) is that Ricoeur’s notion of the narrative is inadequate to make sense of modern forms of communication, such as photos, snippets of information or videos shared on social media, news, online forums, private messaging or telephone calls between individuals, and so forth, because these fragmented forms of communication do not necessarily follow the classical sequence of a plot. Finally, other narrative forms – especially dating from the twentieth and twenty-first century, such as novels by Virginia Woolf, Gabriel García Márquez, and Haruki

Murakami – question Ricoeur’s notion of the narrative by their very existence (Michel 2006:85).

Although Ricoeur (1984:73) integrates all the narrative forms in his paradigm of emplotment by insisting on the concordance-discordance dialectic of narrative, Ricoeur (1984:68) still worries about the “death of the narrative” and thus admits the possibility, no longer of a simple deviation, but that of a schism, with Aristotelian *muthos* (Michel 2006:89). Michel (2006:89-90) adds that one can understand Ricoeur’s fear about the decline of narrative within an ethico-political framework: without a concordant narrative identity, the ethical and political subject falls by the wayside. In other words, the ethical and the political subject whom one can hold responsible, presupposes the notion of a coherent personal identity. As such, Ricoeur’s search for concordance within personal identity and action in the world (through the narrative), is strongly informed by his goal to preserve individual responsibility and to maintain the hope of a peaceful and meaningful living-together in a community (Michel 2006:90). This is why Michel (2006:90) holds that Ricoeur’s defence of the classical narrative model is more prescriptive (a narrative ethics) than descriptive (a narrative theory in general).<sup>181</sup>

Yet, it is only in *Oneself as Another* that Ricoeur explicitly develops an ethics or a morality of the subject which he calls his little ethics. Above, we have seen that the *ipse*-aspect of personal identity introduces a moral dimension into action, because *ipseity* is acting in such a way that is consistent with the promises or commitments that one has made to others. In other words, the other depends on me. Ricoeur’s earlier action theory in *Freedom and Nature*, centred on the existential conquest of oneself, therefore gives way to an action theory where one puts the other before oneself. Ricoeur thus passes from an existential anthropology to a moral anthropology (Michel 2006:96-7).

However, this shift is not as drastic as it might appear at first blush. Although Ricoeur argues that the self should become more decentred by the other, he does not push this position to its limits (Michel 2006:97). In fact, Ricoeur still retains an existentialist structure in *Oneself as Another*, since keeping a promise means *maintaining* oneself. In other words, the self is not abolished by having been brought into a relationship with the other. ‘Maintaining the self’ is not just for the sake of the self, but an ethical undertaking *for* the other.

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<sup>181</sup> Hence, Michel (2006:90) adds that from a descriptive point of view, Ricoeur cannot really claim that his narrative theory encompasses all kinds of narratives: not all narratives are governed by the principle of discordance-concordance and narrative closure.

Furthermore, pertaining to the relationship between Ricoeur's earlier and later action theories, it is important to note that Ricoeur does not just 'add on' moral and ethical dimensions to his earlier conception of the subject (Michel 2006:299). Instead, from the outset, Ricoeur's subject implies an ethical dimension: not only is the subject in *Freedom and Nature* a being who values certain motives and project, but, by its very being it is susceptible to evil. In addition, we have seen how Ricoeur gradually lifts the initial parentheses that hemmed in his phenomenological studies, in order to reveal a subject on the empirical level who was intertwined with others in the structures of discourse, action, and narrative all along. Put differently, dialogical relations and institutional structures do not add to the ethical and moral constitution of the self in the first person: they are merely and *unfolding* of the moral and ethical self (Michel 2006:301). Thus, it is all the more apt to speak of *Freedom and Nature* as containing the seeds of a moral or ethical description of the self and action.

In conclusion, we have seen that personal identity, in general, and ethical or moral identity, in particular, cannot be articulated if one only considers the subject by itself (Michel 2006:301). Although Ricoeur's subject from *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action* is a *potentially* ethical and moral subject, the subject only obtains an ethical identity when Ricoeur consider the self in relation to the 'you' and the 'he/she/it', as in *Oneself as Another*. The moment that the self is able to think of itself as a person (with an identity constructed around sameness and *ipseity*), it can finally start to esteem and respect itself as a certain kind of person who does good or who does the right thing. "We ourselves are worthy of esteem or respect insofar as we are capable of esteeming as good or bad, or as declaring permitted or forbidden, the actions either of others or of ourselves" (Ricoeur 2000:4).

One therefore attains a fuller understanding of the agent's freedom to act only when the subject is also an ethical or moral subject. Ricoeur (1992:18) writes "[t]he *autonomy* of the self [...] appear[s] then to be tightly bound up with *solicitude* for one's neighbour and with *justice* for each individual." One can thus say of Ricoeur's action theory as a whole, that Ricoeur's reflections on ethics and morality come to crown the unfolding of personal identity (Michel 2006:299). The ethical or moral subject is truly a capable subject (Ricoeur 2000:4). In turn, the capable subject is the kind of person who is able to act (or not act) complacently.

#### 4.5. Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this chapter was to show how one can think Ricoeur's action theories (as described respectively in *Freedom and Nature*, *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*) together, while still respecting the differences between these theories. This approach results in a tensive action theory, and thus reflects Ricoeur's philosophy that is characterized by aporias and paradoxes. While Michel (2006) argues that Ricoeur's philosophy ultimately escapes rigid dichotomies because of the 'non-totalizable' nature of human action, the practical field also has its coherence based on the analogical unity of action, in which language plays a fundamental role (as organon, instrument of thought, of the philosophy of action and the earlier philosophy of the will) (Lacour 2016:203).

To recapitulate, in the first section I looked at how Ricoeur's subject is broken, fragmented and decentred by otherness: from more intrinsic otherness such as the body, and the radical otherness that is associated with being a self (the unconscious, life, and to an extent, character), to more external otherness, such as Transcendence, and other persons. Yet, with each successive detour through 'otherness' in which the subject relinquishes itself, the subject paradoxically gains more mastery over itself (although this mastery will never be complete). Otherness thus extends the subject; it enables the subject to act in the world, to become an agent, whether directly (such as the body that facilitates movement), or through mediation (such as language, texts, narratives) or enabling mediation in the first place (other persons who make it possible for the subject to use language, to narrate, to interact). This is then one of the synchronic elements in Ricoeur's action theory. The other common themes in Ricoeur's action theory are closely connected to the first, namely: the self as both active and passive, and explanation and understanding of the subject and its action.

While exploring the aforementioned synchronic element in Ricoeur's work, I also explored the diachronic elements that exist between his action theories. The first of these is a reversal of order in terms of understanding the subject. In *Freedom and Nature*, self-understanding originates in the subject; in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*, this order is reversed and self-understanding proceeds from cultural 'objects' outside of the subject (such as symbols, language, the text, narrative). Second, Ricoeur's phenomenology becomes a hermeneutic phenomenology: however, one can read this shift both in terms of continuity and disruption (for example, Ricoeur's hermeneutics *contributes something new* in that it *extends* the ways in which the subject interprets itself). Third, Ricoeur's respective action theories each

have their own focus or unique contributions to his action theory considered as whole. Fourth, Ricoeur's subject gradually changes across the action theories considered: the subject becomes *increasingly* reflexive and thus decentered, and in the process, it becomes a more capable (to act) self.

In the second section, my focus was more on the diachronic aspect of Ricoeur's subject in relation to other persons. Ricoeur's action theory, considered as a whole, has a clear intersubjective turn. In *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action*, other persons are merely background figures who seemingly have very little to do with the subject and its ability to act. In contrast, in *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur shows how the second and third person others are constitutive of the subject and action. However, this drastic turn in Ricoeur's work can also be read in a synchronic manner: the intersubjective turn in Ricoeur's work is merely one of the many detours through which the human subject has to pass in order to reclaim its existence (as agent). In other words, reflexivity (and by implication imagination) is another continuous theme in Ricoeur's action theory.

In the third section, a diachronic reading of Ricoeur's action theory in terms of morality or ethics clearly reveals that Ricoeur's earlier action theories (*Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action*) do not contain descriptions of the ethical or moral subject, as opposed to the later action theory (*Oneself as Another*) which contains a description of the moral and ethical subject and action. A synchronic reading reveals, however, that the seeds for a moral or ethical theory are already sown in these earlier action theories (these 'seeds' are references to values and norms in *Freedom and Nature*, and the subject's ability to imagine himself, via narrative, as affecting and being affected by other agents, in *From Text to Action*).

Finally, one can perhaps argue that the notion of the 'capable man' is a kind of high point or a synthesis of all Ricoeur's action theories. However, this synthesis or central notion of Ricoeur's philosophy is a journey which can be considered dialectical, under the banner of a Hegelian approach where each passage in the dialectic is never completely lost, abandoned, forgotten or overcome. In this sense, one can say that Ricoeur's philosophy of the person is not found in his conception of the 'capable man,' but within the path that leads to this conception (Busacchi 2010:22).

Along with Ricoeur (Ricoeur and Thompson 1981:32) I therefore wish to conclude that what connects each of action theory "...to its predecessors seems [...] to be less the steady

development of a unique project, than the acknowledgement of a residue left over by the previous work, a residue which gives rise in turn to a new challenge.”

## Chapter 5

### Anthony Giddens's Action Theory

“I think that one of the things that’s most important about being an agent is that to be a human agent is to be capable of making a difference to the world and to realise that capability as an on-going part of daily life” (Giddens in an interview with Bleicher and Featherstone 1982:68).

#### 5.1. Introduction

Many of us might think of complacency primarily in terms of the individual agent. That is to say, when one thinks of complacency, one thinks of an individual or a person being complacent. The various examples of complacency in chapter one certainly seem to confirm this intuition: it seems almost natural to speak predominantly of the individual who is complacent about this or that matter. On the other hand, the very word ‘complacency’ suggests to us through its etymology that others are involved. The Latin prefix ‘cum-’ means, amongst other things, ‘together with’, and there is thus reason to believe that we should think of complacency rather as a group phenomenon.

Bonhoeffer (1953:18) writes of folly (*dummheit*) – which arguably includes the vice of complacency – that it is a sociological (rather than a psychological) problem. Folly, as that which leaves people “self-complacent” (self-satisfied) and prejudiced against any reasons which might convince them of their folly, is more prevalent amongst those who are sociable, than in those who are solitary and unsociable (Bonhoeffer 1953:18). Bonhoeffer (1953:19) holds that folly flourishes in groups, since it deprives people of their “independent judgement.” Similarly, Tocqueville (1835:III, 718) writes of democratic societies that its citizens rely heavily on the opinion of the majority (to the detriment of individual judgement), which results in spiritual and intellectual oppression by the majority.<sup>182</sup> Consequently, what Tocqueville (1835:IV, 1150) “...dread[s] most for the generations to come is not great revolutions, but apathy”.

These thinkers thus think of vices similar to complacency as group or institutional manifestations. In addition, it is relatively easy to come up with our own examples of groups of people who were or are complacent. One can perhaps speak of some of the Germans during the Nazi-era as being complacent (not excluding other possible vices or related, such as ignorance or resignation) about the terrors executed by their Nationalist Socialist party. Or perhaps one can say that some South Africans were complacent about Apartheid. Today we

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<sup>182</sup> What Tocqueville (1835:II,410) calls the “tyranny of the majority”.



can talk about people, in the collective sense, as being complacent about things such as climate change and the increasing wealth gap between the rich and the poor. Whatever the case may be, it emerges clear that complacency can be thought of as a group-phenomenon. Such group behaviour can further be thought of as endorsed or authorised by social institutions.

However, the realisation that complacency can also be thought of as a group or institutional phenomenon does not exclude the possibility of still thinking of complacency as something which the individual does. When discussing Ricoeur's action theory, we have already come across this relation: one can make sense of action (and thus complacent action) as something executed by an individual, but also as something which is constituted through personal interactions and institutional others (or systems). Although we have briefly looked at action as institutional or intersubjective phenomenon under the banner of Ricoeur's action theory, the current chapter will provide an even more in-depth clarification of action (and thus complacency) on the institutional or group level.

To describe action, and eventually complacency on the institutional or social level, I will consult sociologist Anthony Giddens's work. Although Giddens works and draws on sociological problems, his work is not exclusively sociological. 'Sociology', according to Giddens (1984:xvii; 1993:17), refers to "a branch of social science which focuses particularly upon the 'advanced' or modern societies" which were brought about by industrialization and technological influences. Instead, Giddens (1984:xvi-ii) claims that his work falls under what he calls 'social theory': social theory, according to Giddens, touches upon issues that are relevant to all social sciences, and thus overlaps with philosophy. These issues include the "nature of human action and the acting self; [...] how interaction should be conceptualized and its relation to institutions; and [...] the practical connotations of social analysis" (Giddens 1979:xvii).

Furthermore, Giddens's work is pertinent because in it, Giddens does not give preference to either structure (society, institutions, and the group) or individual agency<sup>183</sup> (Stones 2005:4). In other words, Giddens (1984:xx-i) transcends the dualism of subject/object (or micro-/macro sociology) through what he calls 'structuration theory'<sup>184</sup> and the notion of

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<sup>183</sup> From chapter one: Kawall's (2006) account of complacency is reminiscent of placing too much emphasis on the active, unconstrained agent at the expense of the constraining influence of structure, while Doan's (2014:639) account of human action is characteristic of the tendency to place too much emphasis on structure and external power at the expense of the agent.

<sup>184</sup> Structuration theory is a response to orthodox social theories from the 1960s which held that structure is fixed and determines agents' lives. Instead of this fixed view of structure, Giddens's structuration theory holds that society consists of dynamic processes and that supposedly fixed structures in society are constantly being changed

‘duality of structure’ which is central to structuration. The notion ‘duality of structure’ denotes that structure does not merely constrain agents’ action, but also “enables” action (Giddens 1993:2). That is to say, through social practices that happen in space and time, agents constitute society, while in turn those actors are constituted by the society of which they are part (Giddens 1993:27). Thus, Giddens (1984:2) can write that:

“The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered in space and time.”

One should therefore not speak of structures of society as made up of individual actors, but rather as being “...continually recreated by [the actors] via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors” (Giddens 1984:2). In other words, societies do not depend on the act of particular individuals, yet if all the agents of that society disappeared, then so would that society (Giddens 1984:24). These actions, moreover, are “rationalized conduct ordered reflexively by [knowledgeable] human agents” (Giddens 1993:viii). By reflexivity, Giddens (1984:xvi) means to convey that human conduct is active and self-aware, as opposed to being forced or due to constraining structures “...that actors neither control nor comprehend.” However, reflexivity should not merely be limited to denoting ‘self-consciousness’ (such as the Cartesian cogito or the subject from rational action theory), but should also be taken to mean the ability of an agent – closely tied to habits and the body – to monitor ongoing social life on a more prereflexive<sup>185</sup> level (Giddens 1984:3). Without this reflexive characteristic of agents, practices can no longer continue, but – again Giddens (1984:3) reminds us of the duality of structure – without the recursiveness of social practices, the agent cannot act reflexively. However, more about the duality of structure, later.

As a final point regarding the use of Giddens’s work, my research concerning Giddens’s action theory entails that I will primarily concern myself with Giddens’s work between 1976 and 1986. Before 1976, Giddens analysed nineteenth-century social theory (Loyal 2003:5); this era’s work is not applicable to my research. After 1986, Giddens focused on modernity studies and politics, the former on which I will only touch briefly at the end of this chapter. Giddens’s modernity studies can be thought together with Giddens’s action theory, since action is

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by actors (Joas and Knöbl 2009:288). The theory of structuration is thus specifically meant to address the lack of action theory in social science (Giddens 1979:2).

<sup>185</sup> Giddens’s notion of prereflexivity is a form of reflexivity, however strange this might sound. Prereflexive action, or what Giddens calls practical consciousness, is the casual mastery of day-to-day action: in other words, I do not think to myself as I brush my hair, ‘move your arm up and now brush down, move your arm up and now brush down... (repeat),’ instead I brush my hair. Neither do I, when I walk, think: ‘right foot forward, left foot forward, right foot forward, left foot forward.’ I just walk.

informed by the kind of society in which it is carried out. Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, I will primarily focus on three of Giddens's works, namely, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979), and *The Constitution of Society* (1984), and in addition, I will complement these action theoretical works with a brief overview of Giddens's work on modernity, based on his works, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), and *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991). In Giddens's action theoretical works, Giddens develops the notion of structuration theory in opposition to social theory's traditionally static notion of a fixed or deterministic structure in society. In addition, I will draw on the work of Rob Stones, a Giddensian scholar: in Stones's book, *Structuration Theory* (2005), Stones clarifies and expounds upon underdeveloped concepts within structuration theory and thus fortifies Giddens's work. Hence, I will critique and supplement Giddens's work throughout with Stones's insights.

In the first of these works then, namely *New Rules of Sociological Method*, Giddens's (1993:2) focus is on "questions of agency, structure and social transformation...." Therefore, not only is action central to this work, but also how action relates to social theory. Giddens (1993:5) argues that many sociologists "...have failed to recognize that social theory, no matter how 'macro' its concerns, demands a sophisticated understanding of agency and the agent just as much as it does an account of the complexities of society." In the second work, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, Giddens further fleshes out the notion of the agent (via his stratification model of personality) who socially interacts in *time and space*. The spatiotemporal dimension of acting receives special attention in this work, where time is described, following Heidegger, as "the 'becoming of the possible'" (Giddens 1979:4). In *The Constitution of Society* (1984) Giddens provides a more in-depth account of his structuration theory. However, Giddens (1993:1-2) writes that this account does not "supplant" the theory of structuration that was provided in *New Rules to Sociological Method*.

Finally, in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), Giddens discusses what he calls 'radicalised,' 'high,' or 'late' modernity. Giddens (1990:46) argues that late modernity is a continuation of modernity and is characterized by (1) a lack of a solid foundation of knowledge accompanied by the fact that all knowledge is constantly being questioned and critiqued; (2) the absence of the belief in 'progress', namely that history progresses and will eventually reach an apex; (3) and new social and political movements (such as the ecological movement, or the 'black lives matter' movement) that take precedence over traditional social or political agendas. By

discussing the kind of society in which we (arguably still) act, Giddens opens the door<sup>186</sup> towards the possibility of understanding how modernity and late modernity informed and informs complacent action. Recall that, in chapter one, I have said that complacency is a modern, and particularly, a late-modern phenomenon. As such, when I interpret complacency from an action theoretical perspective in chapter six of this thesis, it might in addition prove enlightening to look at the kind of society (namely a modern to late modern society) in which complacent action not only arose (in a sense), but also plays out. since action is informed by the kind of society in which it is carried out.

The outline of the chapter is as follows: in section two I will provide a brief account of Giddens's theory of the (1) human agent along with an explication (2) "of the conditions and consequences of action". Then, in section three, I will (3) connect the agent and action with a detailed account of 'structure'; structure being present in both the conditions and consequences of action (Giddens 1979:49). According to Giddens (1979:49) an exploration and understanding of each of the three aforementioned components is necessary in order to connect human action with structural explanation. Next, I will look at Giddens's ideas surround social change and social stagnation, with the aim of determining what keeps in place or dislodges complacent structures or practices. Finally, I will incorporate a summary of Giddens's views on late modernity in order to see how this type of society informs (complacent) action. As such, a detailed account of the theory of structuration will emerge as I clarify these concepts throughout this chapter.

## **5.2. Giddens's Theory of the Agent and Action**

In this section I will first give a brief account of Giddens's conception of the agent. That is to say I will summarize Giddens's stratification model of the agent, then move on to the stratification model of personality, and finally conclude with what constrains and enables the agent. Yet, an account of the agent can only be taken so far, since just like Ricoeur, Giddens (1993:5) writes that action is central to the human subject: "To speak of an individual is to speak not just of a 'subject', but also of an agent; the idea of action [...] is thus inevitably a central one." Therefore, this section will focus not only on the agent, but also on Giddens's action theory, and how action relates to the agent.

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<sup>186</sup> I say 'open a door', because Giddens's work on modernity is first, a bit dated (although it has aged well) and second, constitutes merely a slither of the research that is available on modernity or late modernity. More about this later.

As was mentioned in the introductory section, the agent is reflexive and therefore chronically monitors his or her actions (and the actions of others) in day-to-day living. In other words, the agent understands (*versteh*) what she is doing and this understanding enables action; it does not require a skilled social scientist to help the agent understand what she is doing (Giddens 1993:58-9). Thus, both “lay actors” and social scientists use the same resources to make sense of human action: Giddens (1993:86) calls this the “double hermeneutic.” In addition, Giddens (1984:51) writes that the “‘I’ is an essential feature of the reflexive monitoring of action but should be identified neither with the agent nor with the self.” ‘Agent’ refers to the human subject in total, who is situated “within the corporeal time-space of the living organism” (Giddens 1984:51). The ‘self’ is “the agent as characterized by the agent”, because the self is the sum of recalling past experiences in order to continue acting, “whereby the agent reflexively characterizes ‘what’ is at the origin of his or her action” (Giddens 1984:49, 51).

In addition to being reflexive, the agent is purposive:<sup>187</sup> if someone were to ask the agent why it is that he or she is doing something, the agent will be able to recount the reasons for his or her actions (Giddens 1984:3-5). This is because purposive action implies a “*continual successful ‘monitoring’ by the actor of her or his own activity*” (Giddens 1993:83, 89; 1979:40). This habitual purposive monitoring is to a large extent “pre-reflective”, but does not prevent the agent from discursively formulating why she is doing what she has been doing; she can recount her action by bracketing the flow or *durée* of her activity in order to focus her attention on a “conceptually segmented” part of action (Giddens 1993:89; 1984:73).

This phenomenon of cutting “conceptually into the flow of action” in order to identify reasons for acting is known as rationalization<sup>188</sup> (Giddens 1993:89-90). In fact, the continual reflexive monitoring of action by the agent depends on this rationalization (Giddens 1984:3). When Giddens (1984:5) speaks of the ‘rationalization’ of action, he means “...that actors [...] routinely and for the most part without fuss – maintain a continuing ‘theoretical understanding’

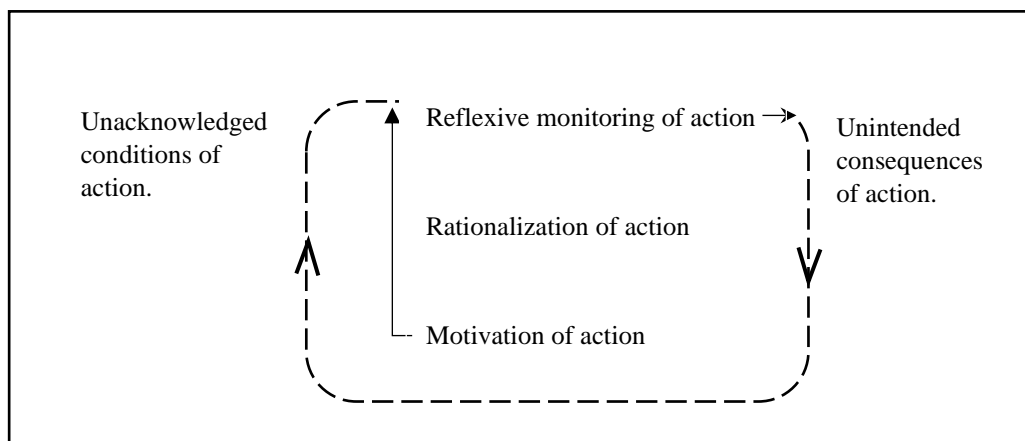
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<sup>187</sup> Giddens makes a distinction between purposeful and purposive actions. It is explained succinctly by one of Giddens’s commentators: “[n]ot all action is ‘purposeful’ [or intentional], in the sense of being guided by clear purposes which the agent has in mind; but much action is ‘purposive’, in the sense that it is *monitored* by actors who continually survey what they are doing, how others react to what they are doing, and the circumstances in which they are doing it” (Thompson 1989:312). Following this, Giddens (1993:80-1,164, 1984:9) writes that there can be unintentional or purposeless actions, and thus “[a]gency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing these things in the first place....” (Giddens (1993:82) uses ‘intention’ and ‘purpose’ interchangeably).

<sup>188</sup> Rationalization, however, should not be confused with how we often understand the term: namely, as giving false justifications for some past event (Giddens 1993:121).

of the grounds of their activity.” In order for an agent to be able to rationalize his or her actions, the agent must do so within “the accepted parameters of common sense” (Giddens 1993:91). Giddens (1993:95-6) calls these common-sense parameters “taken-for-granted *mutual knowledge*”: agents who share the same cultural space have command of this mutual knowledge. Language – as mediator of social activity, thus plays an important role in the formation of meaningful social worlds: “generating descriptions of social conduct” is in essence a hermeneutic task, and thus Giddens (1993:viii, 25, 163; 1984:xvi, 3) writes that structuration theory has a hermeneutic basis.

Giddens (1984:3) brings the aforementioned characteristics of the agent together in his stratification model of the acting self, which “...involves treating the reflexive monitoring, rationalization and motivation of action as embedded sets of processes.” Giddens (1984:5) provides the following figure to illustrate the stratification model of the agent:



In the above figure, we have already discussed reflexivity and the rationalization of action. Underlying these, is motive. Motive precedes the rationalization (the “grounds of action”) and reflexive monitoring of action, since it provides the desires or wants which initiate or prompt action (Giddens 1984:6; 1991:63). However, motive differs from the rationalization and reflexive monitoring of action, because motive is not “as directly bound up with the continuity of action as are its reflexive monitoring or rationalization” (Giddens 1984:6). Yet, motive is “processual”, since not each action has a corresponding motive (Giddens 1984:50; 1991:63-4). Motives “are mediated by the social relations which individuals sustain in the routine practices of their daily lives” (50). What is more, while agents can easily identify intentions in, and provide reasons for, their actions, they are mostly unable to identify and connect motives to an action (Giddens 1984:6). This is because most of our motives are obscure to us. That is to say, motives can be unconscious.

Many social theories include an account of the unconscious. However, the unconscious is often juxtaposed with the conscious, which results in the establishment of a conscious/unconscious dualism. Giddens wishes to transcend this dualism by introducing what he calls the ‘stratification model of personality’. The ‘stratification model of personality’ holds that the self is constituted by three sets of relations, namely “[1] the unconscious, [2] practical consciousness, [3] and discursive consciousness” (Giddens 1979:2). In short, the unconscious<sup>189</sup> is that which is cognitively repressed or appears in consciousness in a distorted form, practical consciousness<sup>190</sup> is that which the agent can do by making use of tacit or habitual knowledge (which the agent might not be able to express in scientific, propositional forms), and discursive consciousness is that which can be verbalized by the agent (Giddens 1993:59; 1984:4-5). While the line between practical and discursive consciousness is often blurred, the same cannot be said of their relation to the unconscious (Giddens 1984:7). The unconscious represses knowledge, and is thus completely removed from discursive and practical consciousness.

The unconscious has another repercussion than that of an agent not being able to identify the motives for his or her actions. Returning to the figure above, Giddens (1984:8) points out that although the “*durée* of day-to-day life occurs as a flow of intentional action”, actions have unintended consequences. Unintended consequences can be brought about because there was an unrecognized motive within the agent’s actions, or by accident, or due to an aggregate of many agents’ intentional acts (Giddens 1984:9-10). These unintended consequences (following the dashed line in the above figure)<sup>191</sup> in turn create unacknowledged conditions of action (Giddens 1984:27). Unacknowledged conditions of action are thus part of what agents draw on to act, and therefore become part of established social practices (Giddens 1984:13).

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<sup>189</sup> Giddens (1984:5) does not subscribe completely to the Freudian definition of the unconscious, since such a definition makes the unconscious out as something which dictates the agent’s behaviour from the shadows. Such an understanding of the unconscious demotes the agent to someone who cannot reflexively exercise control over her behaviour. Instead, Giddens (1979:58) holds that one can only understand the unconscious relative to the conscious, where the conscious refers to the “...reflexive monitoring and rationalisation of conduct, grounded in practical consciousness.” In comparison, the unconscious is that which eludes an agent’s self-understanding: the agent cannot recall certain memories or past experiences and incorporate these into discursive consciousness and reflexive monitoring of his or her behaviour (Giddens 1979:59; 1984:49).

<sup>190</sup> More specifically, practical consciousness is what “...agents know about what they do, and why they do it”, or alternately, practical consciousness is the ability to recall certain practical knowledge or experiences during the carrying out of actions (Giddens 1984:xxiii, 49).

<sup>191</sup> It is strange that Giddens speaks of unintended consequences of action, but never mentions *intended consequences* of action (Wolff 2014:107). We will see the implications of this absence, later, in chapter six.

Furthermore, the agent is constrained by a variety of factors such as the natural world and the body (time-space, known as material constraints), power relations (sanctions) present in every social interaction, and the context in which action happens, such as unacknowledged conditions of action, and more encompassing, structuring properties of systems (structural constraint) (Giddens 1984:174-6). This means that the agent, positioned in time-space and positioned relationally towards others, has to act and interact *continuously* from the locus that is his or her body, within specific contexts: the aforementioned shape the agent's action (Giddens 1984:3-4, 83). ('Context' denotes "'strips' of time-space within which gatherings take place" (Giddens 1984:71)). However, these constraints are also enablers: because of the abovementioned supposed 'constraints', the agent is *able* to intervene in the "malleable object-world" to change it (Giddens 1979:55-6). This, in turn, implies "that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others" (Giddens 1984:14). Power, as transformative capacity, is therefore "...logically prior to subjectivity, to the constitution of the reflexive monitoring of conduct" (Giddens 1984:15).

This power, or ability to act, is reflected in Giddens's (1993:81) more formal definition of action: action or agency is "*the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world.*" Moreover, the notion of action necessarily entails that "a person 'could have acted otherwise' and ... that the world as constituted by a stream of events-in-process independent of the agent does not hold out a predetermined future" (Giddens 1993:81). Moreover, when talking about action, one should not distinguish between action and movement<sup>192</sup> as some philosophers of action do (Giddens 1993:79-80. 1984:66). This is because the "*person, the acting self*" is that "unit of reference" by which action (including movement) should be understood or interpreted (Giddens 1993:80). For example, a hand waving (which would typically be described by philosophers of action as a 'movement') can be interpreted as a greeting. On the contrary, Giddens wants us to distinguish between action and acts. "Action [or agency] is a continuous flow of 'lived-through experience'", while acts are segments or parts of action as identified by an observer or reflexively by the acting agent herself (Giddens 1993:81). Moreover, action is not an aggregate or a "combination of 'acts'" (Giddens 1984:3). Philosophers of action tend to focus solely on acts (called 'basic actions' by them), leading to an incorrect definition of action as a "series of

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<sup>192</sup> It is further incorrect to assume that 'action' and 'movement' (as mechanical) are two "*equally correct ... [but distinct] modes of describing behaviour*" (Giddens 1993:79-80).



discrete acts combined together”, instead of acknowledging that action is a “continuous flow of conduct” (Giddens 1979:55).

Finally, for Giddens, as for Ricoeur, defining action is crucial in order to assign responsibility. When a person supposedly has control over her actions, we respond differently than when a person simply did not have any control over what happened (Giddens 1993:78). However, Giddens admits that some, if not most, cases of action are ambiguous. Later, we will see just how ambiguous actions can be when I look at cases of complacent action. Besides the ambiguity of action, Giddens (1993:78) warns that dishonesty can creep in: actors can avoid responsibility or even claim credit for something they did not intend. It thus becomes increasingly difficult to evaluate action (and eventually complacent action).<sup>193</sup>

In sum, Giddens (1984:21-22) writes that agents are not “cultural dupes”, wholly determined by their contexts – instead agents are purposeful, extremely knowledgeable and highly skilled in navigating and manipulating their social worlds (through practical consciousness), and as such produce and reproduce social interactions with relative ease from day-to-day. That is to say, agents’ knowledgeability is essential to the constitution of society, and not “incidental” to it (Giddens 1984:26). Yet, of course, it must again be stressed that while agents are enabled by elements such as time-space, social structures, and other agents (in the forms of power relations), they are simultaneously also constrained by these very elements. As such, agents are not cultural or structural dupes, but neither is society a “plastic creation” of agents (Giddens 1984:26).

### 5.3. Structure and Structuration Theory

Next, Giddens takes the above insights on action and situates these in his structuration theory. As was mentioned earlier, Giddens’s (1993:102-3) structuration theory is a response to social theories prevalent in the 1960s, such as functionalism<sup>194</sup> (as represented by Talcott

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<sup>193</sup> In a court of law, one is found guilty if it is determined that one ‘should have known’ better (Giddens 1993:78-9). In any case, in the daily context of living, we tend to equate agency with moral responsibility and the moral justifications provided for actions (Giddens 1993:79).

<sup>194</sup> Functionalism has five essential flaws: (i) reducing action to an internalization of given values (for example, actors have to fulfil certain societal needs or roles and seem to have no choice in the matter), (ii) social determinism and a teleological view of social systems (actors do not constitute social life through their own actions), (iii) diminishing the role of power in social interactions, while giving primacy to norms and values, (iv) neglecting to acknowledge that norms and social rules are negotiated and interpreted according to different interests, and (v) excluding temporality from social interactions and thus neglecting to give an account of social change (Giddens 1979:7; 1993:20, 26, 126).

Parsons and Émile Durkheim) and structuralism:<sup>195</sup> these social theories construe the agent as someone who is determined by things such as society's moral norms, or by discourse, and hence the agent in these theories are unskilled, uncreative, and incapable of self-reflexive monitoring. Moreover, functionalist and structuralist social theories provide inadequate accounts of how institutions and societies change, and exclude time from their social theories (Giddens 1979:62). Therefore, Giddens (1993:105-6) redefines Parsons's and Durkheim's deterministic and reified notion of 'social order', and holds that social order must instead be thought of as a sort of loose pattern, or as the opposite of chaos. Furthermore, Giddens (1993:108) concludes that "the production or constitution of society is a skilled accomplishment of its members, but one that does not take place under conditions that are either wholly intended or wholly comprehended by them." Social order is thus not a static state in which singular agents have to internalize the social values prescribed by society, but rather "shifting relations between the production and *reproduction* of social life by its constituent actors" (Giddens 1993:108).

Structuration theory refers to those "conditions governing the continuity or transmutation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of social systems" (Giddens 1984:25). Put differently, "structuration [...] refer[s] to the processes by which structures become organised into more permanent and enduring social institutions and social systems, such as capitalism, the state, etc." (Bagguley 2003:136). However, in order to fully understand Giddens's structuration theory, we must first take a quick look at Giddens's terminology. This is because Giddens uses terms such as 'structure', and 'system' in ways that depart from how these terms are usually employed by functionalists or structuralists. Additionally, Giddens (1984:17) adds that to understand social relations we must

"acknowledge both a syntagmatic dimension, the patterning of social relations in time-space involving the reproduction of situated practices, and a

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<sup>195</sup> Just like functionalism, structuralism also depicts social reproduction as mechanical, thus robbing agents of their agency (Giddens 1993:128). More precisely (i) structuralism de-centres the subject and does not account for practical consciousness in social reproduction (Giddens 1979:24); (ii) structuralist theories thus stress the importance of the (social and linguistic) system, at the cost of its constituent parts or actors (Giddens 1979:9); (iii) in relation to this, Giddens (1979:4) does not agree with the structuralist notion that *society* can be compared to a language. Language is rather an "integral element" of *social practices*, since what is done – the constitution and reproduction of social practices – underlies, or is the limit of language (Giddens 1979:4, 39); and lastly (iv), structuralism artificially separates diachrony from synchrony in social analysis, and then is unable to reconcile the two ontologically (Giddens 1979:9, 17-18). For example, structuralists would maintain that one can study "something at a particular moment alone, without referring to its development over time", thus leading to a formal conceptual divide that cannot be abridged (Dickie-Clark 1986:168). In short, though, Giddens's problem with "the antihumanist structuralists" is that they contend that the agent is merely "constructed by discourses" (Kilminster 1991:103).

paradigmatic dimension, involving a virtual order of ‘modes of structuring’ recursively implicated in such reproduction.”

### ‘Society’

To begin with, Giddens (1984:xxvi, 163) uses the notion of ‘society’ in such a way that it denotes two things: (1) “a bounded system” and (2) “social association in general.” Later, when Giddens (1990:63-4) discusses society in relation to modernity, he prefers the latter conception over the former. However, broadly speaking, ‘society’ should be understood as something diverse, contextual (connected to certain locales<sup>196</sup>), and historical (Giddens 1993:8; 1984:163). Society is thus “ordered across time and space” (Giddens 1990:64). A society, however, is not a cohesive entity that exists as one totalizing order. Rather, one society consists of many totalizing orders or institutions, implying that society can exist as “groups in relations of power and various levels of conflict” (Giddens 1993:8, 111). In sum, “societal totalities are found only within the context of *intersocietal systems* distributed along *time-space edges*” (Giddens 1984:164). That is to say, a society is both a social system and is constituted by the meeting of various social systems (which might be internal to the specific society, or stretch outside it), where ‘time-space edges’ are those connections and differences in power between the various societal types constituting an intersocietal system (Giddens 1984:164).

It follows then that societies are not always easy to demarcate: it is difficult to identify “easily specifiable boundaries”, and in addition, the degree of integration varies from society to society (Giddens 1984:xxvi-xxvii). Nor should ‘integration’ be confused with social cohesion. Instead, ‘integration’ is defined by Giddens (1979:76, 1984:28) as ‘systemness’; or more generally speaking, as the “regularised ties, interchanges, or *reciprocity of practices* between either actors or collectivities.” ‘Reciprocity of practices’ further denotes “regularised relations of relative autonomy and dependence [that is to say, power relations] between the parties concerned” (Giddens 1979:76). Following from this, Giddens identifies two types of integration: social and system integration. The former refers to the reciprocal relations between actors “*on the level of face-to-face interaction*” (co-presence), while the latter refers to the reciprocal relations “with those who are physically absent in time or space” (Giddens 1979:76-7; 1984:28).

However, as was mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Giddens does not give precedence to either social or system integration (traditionally associated with micro- and

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<sup>196</sup> ‘Locales’ denote those spaces that “provide the *settings* of interaction” (Giddens 1984:118).

macro-sociological analysis, respectively). Instead, Giddens (1984:xxvi) holds that social and system integration are connected in institutionalized practices. But more about this later. In conclusion, Giddens (1984:164) writes of societies that they are “social systems which ‘stand out’ in bas-relief from a background of a range of other systemic relationships in which they are embedded.” Which brings us to the next term to be defined. Closely connected to, but not be confused with, the notion of ‘society’ is the notion of ‘social system.’

### **‘System’**

The term ‘system’ is often used interchangeably with that of ‘collectivities.’ ‘Systems’ are structured totalities and “...are patterned in time as well as space, through continuities of social reproduction” (Giddens 1979:64). Systems or collectivities therefore “exhibit” structural properties, but do not consist of structures, nor are systems “structures in themselves” (Giddens 1979:66; 1984:17). In short, systems are “[r]eproduced relations between actors or collectivities[, that are] organised as regular social practices” (Giddens 1984:25, 83). Thus, one can say that social systems exist spatiotemporally, and are formed through social practices (Giddens 1979:73). However, social systems “rarely ever have the sort of internal unity which may be found in physical and biological systems” (Giddens 1984:377). Moreover, social systems “are organized hierarchically and laterally within societal totalities” (Giddens 1984:170). When a social scientist does a structural analysis of a group, one speaks of the scientist as examining the structuration of the social *systems* in that group (Giddens 1979:64).

Within a system, moreover, one can speak of various levels of interaction. To do so, however, Giddens (1979:80) argues that we should make a methodological distinction<sup>197</sup> between “*institutional analysis* and the analysis of *strategic conduct*.” Analysis of strategic conduct involves that the social scientist only takes into consideration how *agents* draw on rules and resources (namely, structural elements) in their daily interaction in the process of constituting social systems (Giddens 1979:80). The social scientist can thus focus on examining in detail how actors use “...discursive and practical consciousness in social encounters” (Giddens 1979:80). Institutional analysis, alternately, entails the bracketing of strategic conduct, and hence the social scientist can treat “rules and resources as chronically reproduced

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<sup>197</sup> A methodological distinction, since it does not reflect reality. The distinction merely aids understanding by allowing the social scientist to approach the “study of system properties” in two ways (Giddens 1979:80). Moreover, this distinction reflects the ‘duality of structure.’

features of social systems”, leaving the social scientist free to explore institutions, history, and structural transformation (Giddens 1979:80).

### ***‘Structure’***

This leads us to the next term, namely ‘structure.’ ‘Structure’ in structuration theory must first of all not be confused with ‘structure’ as defined and used in functionalism or structuralism (Giddens 1993:127). Structure, within the theory of structuration, is delineated by Giddens (1993:7; 1984:170) as follows: structure is a property of “social systems or collectivities”, and arise largely due to “regularized practices” that are entrenched in time and space. In other words, structure should be thought of as the repetition of behaviour that takes place in continuous social life (Giddens 1979:62). Because structure is based on regularized practices or a “*patterning of interaction*”, as found between agents and groups, it is often associated with institutions (Giddens 1979:62; 1993:8). However, these ‘clusters’ of social practices are not always clearly demarcated from one another and as such, structures (and systems) are mutable (Giddens 1984:165).

In order to illustrate the relation between regularized ‘social practices’ and ‘structure’, Giddens (1993:125-6) draws on language. Giddens (1993:109) does not use language as an analogy in his work; rather, language is itself a “social form ... [which] exemplifies some aspects ... of social life as a whole”, and can therefore elucidate how it, as structure, differs from speech situations, that are social practices or interactions. Language (syntax and grammar), or structure, is “an abstract ‘property’ of a community of speakers, and as such is: (1) virtual and exists out of time and space, while speech (or interaction/ social practice) takes place in time and is situated; (2) language or structure is not subject/agent-bound, while speech or social interaction depends on an agent; and finally (3) language or structure is not “an intended product of any one subject” and is not oriented to the other, while speech is directed towards another (Giddens 1993:125-6). Moreover, since agents are knowledgeable, they are able to – by the use of language – change language itself (Storper 1985:39).

Therefore, social practices are situated temporally, spatially, and paradigmatically (“invoking structure which is present only in its instantiation” (Giddens 1979:54)) and are agent(s)-bound, while structure has a “virtual existence” and hence does not exist in time and

space,<sup>198</sup> except as instantiations and in its “co-ordination as memory traces”, does not depend on subjects, and lends form to social practices (Giddens 1993:126; 1979:63-4; 1984:17, 25).

To put it differently, structure is ‘virtual’, because social systems (as repeated social practices) “do not have ‘structures’ but rather exhibit ‘structural properties’” (Giddens 1984:17). Yet another way of understanding why social systems are stretched across time and space, while structure is virtual<sup>199</sup> (non-spatiotemporal), is to note that “each structure is unique to each moment, and alters as that moment is replaced by a new one” (Carlstein 1981:13). For example, in any social encounter, an agent draws on background knowledge in order to act appropriately. However, the agent’s entire background knowledge is not manifest or present in the moment of (inter-)action: instead the background knowledge remains virtual, while a unique, although typical – to the extent that the agent draws on structural patterns –, action is produced during the social encounter, drawing on the background knowledge (Stones 2005:23-4). (Yet, one can, in a way, speak of the ‘knowledge’ being ‘present’ that action, since it informs and constitutes that action (Stones 2005:55)). As a result, no two moments are the same: structure does not keep on existing (spatiotemporally) from one moment to the next. Although structure binds together time and space, structure’s ever-changing nature prevents it from existing as the same thing through time and space.

Finally, Giddens (1979:64, 66) writes that structure only exists as “structuring properties”, where structuring properties are rules and resources that bind together “time and space in social systems”. These structuring properties (rules and resources) enable, sustain, and lend “‘systemic’ form” to recognizable social practices which exist across various time-space settings (Giddens 1984:17). Therefore one can say that structure is “rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction” (Giddens 1984:xxxii, 24). With regards to

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<sup>198</sup> Giddens (1993:127) writes elsewhere that “*A structure can be described ‘out of time’, but its ‘functioning’ cannot.*” To be even clearer, Giddens (1993:134) adds that: “To say that structure exists ‘out of time and space’ is only to claim that it cannot be treated as the situated doings of concrete subjects, which it both serves to constitute and is constituted by; not, of course, that it has no internal history.”

<sup>199</sup> One will often see that Giddens’s structuration theory is critiqued for being too ambiguous (Gane 1983:208; Bertilsson 1984:54; McLennan 1984:320,322). In this instance “[f]ew commentators are happy with the virtuality of structure” (Bryant and Jary 1997a:311). To begin with, some claim that the very notion of ‘virtuality of structure’ is vague and confusing (Craib 1986:68-9; McLennan 1984:323). Yet, some, such as Cohen (1986:368) defend Giddens and argue that the virtuality of structure makes sense, since, “[u]nlike biological organisms, the cessation of the practices by which a social system is reproduced leaves no structural residuum that can be interpreted without recourse to those practices.” Similarly, Manicas (1980:10) writes that, unlike natural structures, social structures cannot exist outside of “agents’ *conceptions* of what they are doing.” The fact that structures exist in memory traces does not make social structures any less real: structures “have real effects, [...] they constrain, limit and enable actions” (Manicas 1980:10).

societies, one can further speak of ‘structural principles’: these are “deeply embedded structural properties, implicated in the reproduction of societal totalities” (Giddens 1984:xxvii, 17).

### **‘Rules’ and ‘Resources’**

Of ‘rules’, along with ‘resources’, Giddens (1979:68, 104) writes that they are the “structural properties of social systems” and are therefore transformational. There are two kinds of rules: “rules of social life” refer to the skills that agents use to bring about or reproduce social practices, while “formulated rules” refer to those types of rules that one would typically find in a game or a system of law and that are codified or made verbally explicit (one might commonly refer to these formulated rules as regulations) (Giddens 1984:21; Jones and Karsten 2008:131). However, all rules are both “media and outcome” in the reproduction of social systems, and therefore rules (and resources, [see next paragraph]) exist in conjunction with social practices (Giddens 1979:65, 104). Therefore, one should not think of social rules as one thinks of game rules, nor as being applied to singular acts, rather social rules are knowledge of how to ‘go on’ in society (Giddens 1979:67, 1984:18).<sup>200</sup>

Giddens (1979:67) provides the example of a child who can speak a language: in speaking that language, the child knows the rules of the language, yet may not be able to articulate the formal rules of that language. Thus, agents have practical consciousness of rules: they know how to ‘go on’ by using these rules, but cannot necessarily state these rules explicitly. Finally, rules have two aspects, namely “normative elements [regulative] and codes of signification [constituting meaning]” (Giddens 1979:66-7; 1984:xxxix).

Furthermore, rules cannot be understood without resources (Giddens 1984:18). This is because resources actualize the transformative power of rules. Just like there are two kinds of rules, there are two kinds of resources: authoritative resources are those “capabilities which generate command over *persons*”, while allocative resources are those “capabilities which generate command over *objects* or other material phenomena” (Giddens 1979:100). Resources are therefore the “material levers” of “all transformations of empirical contents, including those involved in the operation of codes and norms” (Giddens 1979:104). Because resources are the

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<sup>200</sup> Stones (2005:67) argues that one should replace Giddens’s ‘rules’ with the notion of ‘schemas’, since ‘rules’ are not clearly defined by Giddens and consequently introduces confusion. Stones (2005:67), drawing on William H. Sewell Jr, argues that ‘schema’ is a more apt term because it is “more flexible and encompassing” than that of ‘rule’ which is overly rigid or restrictive about what counts as meaningful action. In other words, ‘schema’ encompasses more possibilities of meaningful action: it is defined as knowledge of ‘how to go on’ in various social situations, and this knowledge itself can be slightly altered in each moment of its application (Stones 2005:68). However, in this thesis, I will still continue to refer to rules or schemas as ‘rules.’

material media used to transform empirical reality, Giddens (1979:69, 91-2; 1984:16) argues that resources are closely tied up with power. Recall that power is defined as “the *transformative capacity* of human action”, and just like rules, is a capability and “...not a description of a state of affairs” (Giddens 1993:117; 1979:68). More specifically power is “...a property of interaction, and... the capability to secure outcomes where the realisation of these outcomes depends upon the agency of *others*”<sup>201</sup> (Giddens 1993:118).

Consequently, some critique Giddens for *claiming* (earlier) that structure is wholly virtual (Carlstein 1981:15; Poole 2009:586). Instead, from the abovementioned, it seems as if structure also has a material existence (Archer 1982:461; Storper 1985:40, 49). In addition, even though most resources are interpreted in terms of power-relations and codes and norms, some resources, argues Archer (1982:461), are completely physiological and impose themselves on us from the outside. Storper (1985:49) adds to this, saying that structure, in the form of rules, also include the material or empirical, since rules are derived “from patterns of interaction.” Poole (2009:585-6) raises another interesting question regarding the virtuality of structure which only exists in instantiations thereof or in *memory traces*: might memory traces not also include material memory aids?

It is Stones (2005:18) who points out that Giddens sometimes wavers between two positions: on the one hand, Giddens writes that resources are the ‘material levers’ used to change the world empirically, and on the other, Giddens insists that structure, including resources, are virtual. Stones (2005:18) ultimately argues that it would be wiser for Giddens to adopt the former definition of resources since it is the stronger and more coherent position to assume (especially if one considers Giddens’s notion of power as allocative and authoritative). Thus, one should consider rules and resources as consisting of immaterial aspects, such as knowledgeability and memory traces, *and* as consisting of “inanimate material”, such as objects that the agent will make use of when acting (Stones 2005:22). What makes these rules and resources virtual, is that they are “latent capabilities” until the moment that an agent uses them to act – only then does the virtual become actual (Stones 2005:22).

Following from this, Stones (2005:71-72) amends Giddens’s structuration theory by identifying four ‘moments’ of structures within the “structuration cycle”:

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<sup>201</sup> Giddens (1979:6) also adds of power that ideology (when certain groups frame their individual interests as universal) is one source of domination: ideology shapes how well agents are able to discursively formulate the circumstances of their action.



1. structure exists as “external, latent or potential, material and ideational conditions of action”. These structures might either be under an agent’s direct control (even though they are external), or they might depend on the “compliance of others”;
2. structures then exist virtually as internal to the agent, but as “*generalizable stocks*” that consists of “schemas [rules] and skills” that can be transposed into any situation in order for the agent to ‘go on’;
3. structure, still virtual and internal to the agent, then exists as “*conjuncturally specific* knowledge of the norms, interpretative schemes and power resources of the relevant agents within context”;
4. and, at the last moment, structures exist as “the medium of the exercise of power at the point of interaction.”

By laying out each of the four moments of structuration, Stones (2005:72) wishes, in part, to demonstrate that resources might exist externally (such as people, or things), but they also have a virtual, or “internal, hermeneutic basis”. That is to say, the agent does not mechanically interact with resources; instead, agents’ interactions with resources are “informed by a relationship between these external things and an agent’s conjuncturally specific perception or knowledge of these” (Stones 2005:72).

In addition to showing that resources can be both virtual and material, Stones (2005:73) also points out that authoritative power (having command over people) and allocative power (having command over things) are interdependent. In other words, to act, an agent does not only need to grasp or internalise that she can use certain resources in certain ways, but she also has to ascertain whether other agents are not barring her way to these resources. Material resources are not mere things, ‘standing around’, ready to be used – material resources are always embedded in a context consisting of norms, interpretative schemes, and power, as shaped and wielded by other agents (Stones 2005:73).

In conclusion, one can thus say of rules *and* resources that “rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction” (Giddens 1984:19). This is known as the ‘duality of structure’.

### ***‘Duality of Structure’***

By now the reader is probably more or less aware of what the ‘duality of structure’ is. However, this concept cannot be stressed enough, since the ‘duality of structure’ is what sets structuration theory apart from other social theories (Stones 2005:4). The ‘duality of structure’ addresses the following shortcomings present in other traditional sociological approaches: on the one hand, social theories such as interpretative social theories and action theories are

“strong on action, but weak on structure”, and on the other hand, orthodox Marxist, functionalist and structuralist thought place too much emphasis on external powers and structures of “large-scale social organization” (Giddens 1993:4). Orthodox Marxists, functionalists or structuralists are thus ‘strong on structure..., weak on action’, which renders the agent “inert and inept” (Giddens 1993:4; 1979:2, 50).

‘Duality of structure’ transcends these dualisms (voluntarism/determinism, subject/object, conscious/unconscious) through deconstructing each constituent of the dualisms, and positing social practices and practical consciousness together as the abridgement between these dualisms (Giddens 1979:4; 1993:4-5). Stones (2005:4) comments that phenomenology, hermeneutics, and practices lie at the heart of the duality of structure and are thus “at the very heart of both structures and agents themselves.” Therefore, social practices carried out by agents shape and remake structures, while agents contain social structures “in the guise of particular forms of phenomenological and hermeneutic inheritance” (Stones 2005:4).

In Giddens’s (1984:25) own words: when we analyse the structuration of social systems, we investigate “...the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction.” The duality of structure is implied in this argument. That is to say, structure and agency are not separately constituted (a dualism), but are mutually dependent on each other (a duality) (Giddens 1984:25). The duality of structure is that “structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices” (Giddens 1979:5). The interdependence of moment and totality<sup>202</sup> are therefore made manifest in social reproduction (Giddens 1979:71). In sum, ‘duality of structure’ can be formulated as:

“...the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: [where] structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and ‘exists’ in the generating moments of this constitution “(Giddens 1979:5).

Or, stated somewhat differently: “social structure is both constituted *by* human agency and yet is at the same time the very *medium* of this constitution” (Giddens 1993:128-9). Stones

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<sup>202</sup> Giddens (1979:71) writes that the “importance of this relation of moment and totality for social theory cannot be exaggerated, since it involves a dialectic of presence and absence which ties the most minor or trivial forms of social action to structural properties of the overall society (and logically, to the development of humankind as a whole).” Or, as articulated by Carlstein (1981:7) structure is “a relation between the past as a totality and the new moment of generation in which structure is perpetuated and modified as the result of human agency.”

(2005:16) writes that the duality can be thought of as the combination of “the subjective and the objective *within* [the] conceptualisation of structure, and also *within* [the] conception of the agent.”

Based on the aforementioned, a historically situated agent should not be conflated with collectivities or social systems, even though both are logically dependent on, or presuppose one another (Giddens 1993:6; 1979:53). Moreover, social reproduction occurs within<sup>203</sup> time and space: more specifically, at the time and place of human interaction. These “*time-space relations inherent in the constitution of all social interaction*” also underscore the “interdependence of action and structure” (Giddens 1979:3). Therefore, Giddens (1993:163) writes, the social world (as opposed to the natural world) should be understood “... as a skilled accomplishment of active human subjects.” Finally, because social systems are made up of social practices, social practices (through the duality of structure) are “‘the points of articulation’ between [individual] actors and structures” (Giddens 1979:117). Put differently, agents draw on rules and resources (structured properties) to produce social practices, while the practices in turn reconstitute rules and resources (structured properties) (Giddens 1979:71; 1984:xxiii).

In order to explain how agents produce and reproduce society or structures of interaction, Giddens (1993:109) once again draws on language for an example (again not in an analogous way). Just as (1) agents ‘master’ language as a skill, (2) use language as a medium of communication, (3) and just as language has “structural properties” (grammar, syntax) which are used by agents (even though language-users cannot always expressly articulate these structural properties), so also do agents: (1) master acts or social practices needed for social interaction, (2) use social practices to convey meaning, (3) and know how to draw on social practices in order to reproduce structures (without necessarily being able to formulate how exactly social practices constitute structures) (Giddens 1993:109-10).

However, some, such as Archer (1982:458) and Mouzelis (1989:200), argue that one must maintain the use of analytical dualisms, and thereby reject the usefulness of Giddens’s notion of duality. Archer adds that ‘duality’ really offers no valuable contribution to sociological study. Archer’s position is further echoed by Gregson (1986:71), Kilminster (1991:131), Mouzelis (1989:201), and Smith (1983:3), who all argue that Giddens’s

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<sup>203</sup> The word ‘within’ is perhaps misleading, since time and space are not ‘containers’ of experience, but rather the “modes in which objects and events ‘are’ or ‘happen’” (Giddens 1979:54).

philosophical or analytic distinctions (the dualities) do not easily translate into empirical research.<sup>204</sup>

A rejoinder to the aforementioned objections might be that Giddens's methodological bracketing is the solution (for example, bracketing institutional analysis so that one can focus on strategic action or social practices). However, according to Archer (1982:466-7), Craib (1986:70), Gregson (1986:75-6), and Stones (2005:43) this specific methodological bracketing just reintroduces the original dualism of structure and agency that Giddens wanted to get rid of in the first place. Stones (2005:120), although he is not opposed to methodological bracketing as such, specifically argues that Giddens's methodological bracketing combination, namely, 'agent's conduct analysis' and 'institutional analysis', is flawed.

Stones (2005:120) instead suggests the combination of 'agent *conduct* analysis' and 'agent *context* analysis', thus replacing 'institutional analysis'. The reason for dropping institutional analysis, is because when one brackets 'agent's conduct analysis' in order to perform an institutional analysis (looking at how institutions reproduce rules and resources by *themselves*), one is in effect discarding all that is central to structuration theory, namely the duality of structure and the centrality of the agent as reflexive and skilful (Stones 2005:120-1).

However, agent *conduct* analysis is still useful, since it focusses on the agent's knowledgeability: how the agent reflexively monitors her conduct, how the agent hierarchizes her motives, desires, and purposes, and how, through reflexive and prereflexive procedures, she draws on structures during her behaviour (Stones 200:121-2). On the other hand, Stones (2005:122) posits agent's *context* analysis as a contrast, because it draws the researcher's attention to the agent's knowledgeability, but also leads us "outwards into the social nexus of interdependencies, rights and obligations, asymmetries of power and the social conditions and consequences of action."

That is to say, agent's context analysis allows the researcher to focus on the social circumstances of the agent: whether these circumstances allow or limit action, how the agent interacts strategically with this range of options, and how and to what extent these circumstances act as causal influences on the agent's behaviour (all while keeping in mind that

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<sup>204</sup> However, contrary to these authors, there are many examples of how Giddens's action theory, based on dualities, are applied empirically. Not only does Stones (2005) provide us with several examples, but other authors such as Jörg Sydow (2014), Alexander (1998), Orlikowski (1992; 2000), and Jones and Karsten (2008) illustrate how Giddens's structuration theory helps us in the analysis of organizations, interorganizational networks, and information systems research, amongst other things.

the agent approaches her circumstances with a certain hermeneutical perspective) (Stones 2005:122).

However, Archer (1982:467) argues that the need for methodological bracketing is, in fact, proving her point that analytical dualisms are helpful, especially in practice. Gregson (1986:76) agrees and states that “duality [therefore] remains more a statement of intent than conclusively shown.” However, once again Stones argues that one can rescue Giddens’s notion of duality within empirical research. Stones (2005:52) writes that the reason why Archer wants to dispel the duality is because she conceives of social reality as existing of a dualism between external “material and cultural conditions”, and “action itself” (Stones 2005:52). More importantly, the former and the latter need to be understood apart, since Archer (1995:150) argues that for an agent to act, the structures *already* need to be in existence and in place so that the agent can draw on them. In turn, the action’s outcome then *afterwards* produces the the structure.

Therefore, the charge that Archer makes against structuration theory (based on the false assumption that Giddens is saying that structures *only* exist in their instantiation) is that it completely excludes any possibility of taking into account the temporality of the relationship between agency and structure. Although Stones (2005:53-4) agrees that structuration theory says too little about “the sequence of relations between structure and agency”, Stones ultimately disagrees with Archer’s critique and argues that such a reading of structuration theory is unsympathetic, since the duality of structure makes reference to agents drawing on structure, where structure is both *medium and outcome* of action. That is to say, within structuration theory:

“it is still clear that for an agent to be able to draw on the internal structures – that is, on their internal perceptions of the external condition – of domination, legitimation and signification [...] then these structures must either pre-exist the moment in which the agent draws upon them or, at the very least, exist at the moment the agent draws upon them” (Stones 2005:54).

As we have seen earlier, Stones shows how this is so, by delineating the four moments of structure within the structuration cycle, above. Carlstein (1981:7) agrees with Stones and writes that “structure [is] a relation between the past as totality and the new moment of generation” in which structure is produced or reproduced through human action. Thus the “past as a totality [...] forms an input into the structuration done in the succeeding moment added to the past” (Carlstein 1981:7).

### ***The Three Dimensions of Social Interaction***

Finally, the above-described production of social practices or interaction has three components: “the constitution of meaning, morality and relations of power” (Giddens 1993:165). However, one may only study these three components of social practices after bracketing, or placing an *epoché* upon the reflexive monitoring of action (Giddens 1984:30). In addition, Giddens (1993:110) only makes an analytic distinction between these three elements, since “...in social life itself they are subtly yet tightly interwoven.” Social interaction thus consists of these three components of social interaction, which can then be analysed structurally as signification, legitimation, and domination (Giddens 1993:125; 1984:30).

The first of the elements of social practices, namely the production of meaningful interaction, entails that agents creatively and actively negotiate about “meaningfulness” in interaction (which involves power-struggles and the normative sanctioning of meaning) (Giddens 1979:82-3; 1984:28-9; 1993:110-1). The aforementioned interactions come to constitute or reconstitute mutual knowledge; that is, “taken-for-granted ‘knowledge’ which actors assume others possess, if they are ‘competent’ members of society, and which is drawn upon to sustain communication in interaction” (Giddens 1993:113). Mutual knowledge is, in turn, used “...in the form of interpretative schemes” (Giddens 1993:113). These interpretative schemes frame (and are sustained by) interactions, and therefore provide helpful cues as to how one is to understand an agent’s utterances (Giddens 1993:113). For example, when I am watching a comedian, I know it is appropriate (and perhaps expected of me) to laugh. Yet, again Giddens (1993:113) stresses that mutual knowledge – which informs interpretative schemes – are “constantly actualized, displayed, and modified by members of society in the course of their interaction.” Finally, during interaction, actors draw on spatiotemporal features, of their surroundings (that is to say, context) to constitute and communicate meaning (Giddens 1984:29, 71)

The second element of social practices is the constitution of morality. Moral social interaction is both meaningful and a “set of relations of power” (Giddens 1993:114). Within the sphere of meaning, agents can negotiate what counts as transgressions, and the interpretation of the ‘transgression’ can in turn affect what type of sanction the agent will be subject to (Giddens 1993:115). In the sphere of power, one can argue that different world views entail different norms, or that there exists different “understandings of ‘common’ norms” (Giddens 1993:115-6). Finally, Giddens (1993:114) adds that moral “...norms are both

*constraining and enabling.*” That is to say, one is obliged to respect others’ rights, but at the same time one can claim certain rights for oneself. However, during the production of moral interaction, one is dependent upon the responses of others in order to sediment a normative practice (Giddens 1993:114). That is to say, “...normative elements of social systems are contingent claims which have to be sustained and ‘made to count’ through the effective mobilization of sanctions in the contexts of actual encounters” (Giddens 1984:30).

The third aspect of social interaction is the constitution of the relations of power. As was indicated previously, every action necessarily involves power, since action is the transformative capacity to “make a difference” (Giddens 1984:14-5). In addition, power relations involve both “autonomy and dependency ‘in both directions’” (Giddens 1979:149; 1984:14). That is to say, even if I am in a subordinate position towards a superior, I can still exercise power by influencing my superior: Giddens (1984:16) calls this the “*dialectic of control* in social systems.” As such, power relations are reciprocal. Agents can use authority, threats, or force (amongst other things) as resources to control or guide the behaviour of others (Giddens 1993:119). Yet, according to Giddens (1993:119-20), what is more important than how an agent can exercise power, is how power is related to the “production of meaning in interaction”: in short, during the production of meaning frames, the involved agents will have different levels of power, leading to an imbalanced “*mediation of practical activities*”. Finally, the notion of power is contingent to the notion of conflict, since not all exercises of power involve conflict (Giddens 1993:116, 118).

Giddens (1993:129; 1979:81-2) provides the following table which represents the duality of structure in social interaction, by portraying the above-discussed dimensions that are involved in the constitution of social practices:

INTERACTION	Communication	Power	Morality/ Sanction
(MODALITY)	Interpretative scheme <sup>205</sup>	Facility	Norm <sup>206</sup>
STRUCTURE	Signification	Domination	Legitimation

<sup>205</sup> Interpretative schemes are “the modes of typification incorporated within actors’ stocks of knowledge, applied reflexively in the sustaining of communication” (Giddens 1984:29). These stocks of knowledge are the same used to formulate accounts of, or reasons for, actions (Giddens 1984:29).

<sup>206</sup> Norms, writes Giddens (1979:86) “... may be treated as the actualisation of *rights* and the enactment of *obligations*.”

Modalities (or modes of reproduction of structure) are those means that mediate between the “knowledgeable capacities of agents” and “structural features” during social interaction; “the concepts on the first line refer to properties of interaction [or social practices], while those on the third line are characterizations of structure” (Giddens 1993:129, 1984:28). For example, when an agent exerts power in a social interaction, she draws upon the relevant modality of structuration, namely facilities (such as “an order of domination”) that are available to her and which allows her to exert her power over another agent’s behaviour and consequently shape outcomes as she wishes (Giddens 1993:129). As such, social practices such as a specific order of domination is reproduced or reconstituted (Giddens 1993:129). (However, there is no such a thing as a ‘pure’ interaction consisting only of power; as mentioned earlier, this only serves as an analytic example, since the agent also draws on the other two modalities of structuration, namely interpretative schemes and normative elements in her interaction with others). Put less concretely, the agent uses modalities of reproduction (where the agent and structure come together) in order to create social interaction, which at the same time reproducing “...the structural components of systems of interaction” (Giddens 1979:81). Although one can analyse these modalities separately, Giddens (1993:130. 1984:28-9) writes that agents draw on these three modalities as an “integrated set” in order to produce and reproduce social practices. As such, the distinctions between the three are merely methodological.

Furthermore, each of the above dimensions of structuration can be analysed systematically as follows: (1) structures of *signification* according to semantic rules or modes of coding, (2) structures of *domination* according to resources (which include those of authority or allocation), (3) and structures of *legitimation* according to “modes of normative *regulation*” (Giddens 1979:97; 1990:130). In addition, Giddens (1979:103) reminds us again that these aspects of structure make possible the mediations or transformations of social systems through their very instantiations. For example, with regards to signification, signs (a mode of coding) are both the medium and result of moments of communication in social interactions (Giddens 1984:31). However, the most elementary mediation which structural features bring about, is that between time and space through actors who are present as “‘vehicles’<sup>207</sup> that ‘carry’ social

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<sup>207</sup> These vehicles can be agents that face each other physically or who are co-present, where ‘co-present’ denotes that agents are situationally present through their bodies and oriented towards other agents (Giddens 1984:64-5). Or, these vehicles can be agents that are separated by time and/or place, and who interact through media such as letters, cell-phones, social media, etc.



interchange[s] across spatial and temporal gaps”; in other words, actors bind together time and space in a moment of social reproduction (Giddens 1979:103).

Moreover, as with the three modalities, Giddens (1984:31) stresses that the distinction between signification, domination, and legitimation is merely analytical and not substantive. These three characterizations of structure are inextricably connected: signification, as “fundamentally structured in and through language”, expresses “*aspects of domination; and the codes that are involved in signification have normative force*” (Giddens 1979:106-7). With regards to domination, “[a]uthorisation and allocation are only mobilised in conjunction with signifying and normative elements; and finally, legitimation necessarily involves signification as well as playing a major part in co-ordinating forms of domination” (Giddens 1979:107).

Based on the above elucidation of the duality of structure, one can now understand how longer lasting forms of social cohesion arise, such as the institution. Institutions are standardised behaviour that is chronically reconstituted in time and space through rules and resources, in different contexts (Giddens 1979:96; 1984:xxxii, 375). However, Wolff (2014:116) writes that Giddens could have defined institutions more explicitly. It seems as if Giddens makes ‘institutions’ out as practices, and thus as a kind of system; yet, simultaneously, Giddens speaks of institutions as chronically reconstituted rules and resources, making it a kind of structure (Wolff 2014:116). Wolff (2014:115-6) consequently suggests that an institution is both system and structure: virtual structures become actualized in the form of (properties of) systems. As such, social and system integration connect in institutions. With regards to institutional analysis, Giddens (1979:110) writes that this can only be successfully executed when the social scientist identifies those instances where passing regularised social practices (moment) intersects with “deeply sedimented time-space relations” (totality), in the constitution and reconstitution of institutions.

Giddens (1979:110) further holds that the “totality/moment relation” is harmonious with his understanding of society as a “variety of different ‘layers’ ... of relations of autonomy and dependence between collectivities”. Such an understanding of society as “groups in tension” stands in contrast to the incorrect notion that society is constituted of parts (and that one can subsequently understand society by studying its individual ‘constituent’ agents) (Giddens 1979:110-1; 1984:36). That is to say, both society and routine activities enter “into the constitution of the other, as they both do into the constitution of the acting self” (Giddens 1984:36). Since structure both enables and constrains action, structure “...forms ‘personality’

and ‘society’ simultaneously – but in neither case exhaustively: because of the significance of unintended consequences of action, and because of unacknowledged conditions of action” (Giddens 1979:70). Giddens’s notion of structure thus allows for radical social changes, since structure allows for human autonomy (informed by the past and future) (Giddens 1979:70-1, 84).

Following this, Stones (2005:56), drawing on Mouzelis, introduces a continuum that helps us to think about how agents draw on structures. Stones (2005:56) suggests that on one end of the continuum, we think of structure and agency as so intertwined as to be indistinguishable – as when agents perform habitual, routine actions about which they do not need to think twice. Here the agent draws on internal structures in such a way that the agent herself would be hard pressed to tell structure and agency apart. Stones (2005:57) calls this extreme of the continuum “taken-for-granted duality”. On the other end of the continuum, which Stones (2005:57) calls “critical duality”, agents are critically aware of how they draw on internal structures in their actions.

Stones (2005:76) writes that the “reason [...] for differentiating between different kinds of duality within the agent, [...] is in order to distinguish between different kinds of duality within particular agents in substantive, *in-situ*, cases. Regarding complacency then, one would have to determine how the agent in question is engaging with structures: are they taking their structures for granted, or are they critically engaged with their social structures and trying to change it? (Agents who act complacently in a routine way without questioning their structures are perhaps more blameworthy than their counterparts who are also acting complacently, but who are trying to change structures that encourage complacency).

In addition, Stones (2005:50-1) suggests that Giddens’s conception of structures as norms, interpretative schemes, and power should be framed or inserted “within a more broadly conceived notion of social structures”. Practically, structuration theory needs other theories and their conceptions of structure to act as context or framing devices. In other words, it is helpful to situate a structuration case study within a bigger structure, such as certain historical periods, geographical spaces, or social movements (Stones 2005:6). Stones (2005:6) quotes Allan Pred to substantiate this notion: a mix of structuration theory and the traditional conception of structure brings together the fact that people shape social structures and places, not necessarily in conditions of their making, but in already existing social and spatial conditions which enable and constrain action. It is for this reason, amongst others, that I will briefly look at Giddens’s

ideas of modernity at the end of this chapter. In order to understand complacent action (and since action is partly constituted by social conditions), one has to look at the broader historical context in which complacent action and structures are enacted.

Giddens (1993:131-3) concludes by remarking that when we speak of ‘structure’ or ‘structuration’, we are speaking objectively of those systems of production and reproduction of social practices, and *not reifying* structures by describing these as “relations of interaction which ‘compose’ organizations or collectivities”. Reification of social structures, that is to say, making social structures out as having the “same fixity as that presumed in laws of nature”, results in the notion of incompetent, puppet actors and is therefore closely connected to idealism in social theory (Giddens 1993:132; 1984:180). “The dissolution of reification is evidently tied to the possibility of the (cognitive) realisation by actors that structures are their own products; and to the (practical) recovery of their control over them” (Giddens 1993:132). Giddens’s structuration theory does indeed offer a liberating and emboldening view of human action. However, Giddens (1993:132) draws our attention to the fact that just because agents are aware of the “conditions of human social life”, it does not necessarily lead to “the achievement of control.”

#### **5.4. Social Change and Routinisation: Dislodging or Maintaining Complacency**

Structuration theory is therefore that which explains the “conditions which govern the continuity and dissolution of structures or types of structure” (in other words, the “reproduction of practices”) (Giddens 1993:127-8). In this section the focus will specifically be on how Giddens explains social change and social stagnation, or routinisation. By exploring the notions of ‘routinisation’ and ‘social change,’ one might gain some insights regarding the possibilities of complacent action or structures. That is to say, via Giddens we might gain some understanding as to what ‘causes,’ so to speak, complacent social practices or structures to become dislodged (change) or to persist (routinisation).

Crucial to understanding social change is the realisation that social action is spatiotemporal. While spatiotemporality is mentioned throughout the aforementioned sections, and in addition, might sound obvious and is indeed recognized by many social theorists, Giddens (1979:198, 202) argues that this insight has been incorrectly formulated to mean that time implies social change, while social stability is associated with timelessness, and that time and space are merely environments in which action can take place. In other words, social theories such as structuralism uphold a dualism of statics/dynamics, or synchrony/diachrony.

To counter this, Giddens (1979:198-9) writes that there simply is no (stable) social activity that is timeless: all action is temporal and ‘synchrony’ or “‘stability’ means continuity over time”. In addition to time, place is essential to executing action: “temporality [...] makes no sense without concepts of spatial presence and absence” (Carlstein 1981:9). Giddens (1979:207) writes of place, or locale, that it is spatial parameter and physical environment “mobilised as part of the interaction.” As was mentioned earlier, agents draw on their settings and context to communicate or interact in certain ways with others (and in this process also reconstitute their own settings) (Giddens 1984:71, 363).

I would like to highlight a few further implications of the fact that interaction is spatiotemporal. These implications are especially relevant to understanding complacency. First, since interaction happens in time-space, the social scientist cannot take a mere ‘snapshot’ of society and try to analyse it in search of static social patterns (Giddens 1979:202). Instead, “*any patterns of interaction that exist are situated in time*” and a phenomenon such as complacency must therefore be studied temporally (and not as a static abstraction, as I have done in chapter one) (Giddens 1979:202).

Second, interaction takes place between spatial beings in locales (what Giddens (1984:xxiv) calls ‘positioning’): either face-to-face, or, with the help of technology, with an agent or agents who are physically and/or temporally absent (Giddens 1979:203). In small communities, “...there is only short distance in time-space separations” (co-presence), while larger communities would be characterised by larger time-space separation or distancing (Giddens 1979:207). Variations in time-space separation between societies translate into different conditions of social reproduction for each society (Giddens 1979:215). (Later, within the section on modernity, we will delve into the detail of how time and space become separated during modernity, and how this affects action and structure).

Third, the conception of interaction or positioning as spatiotemporal allows us to recognize that life consists of “a series of intersecting time-space paths” (Giddens 1984:365). Recognizing that social reproduction is reconstituted through time-space paths, leads us to the important insight that routinization is the cornerstone of social institutions (Giddens 1984:365).

Routine action is taken for granted in the sense of being cognitively established (yet “not necessarily consciously, in the sense of ‘discursive availability’”), and therefore

constitutes social interaction that is unproblematic or taken-for-granted<sup>208</sup> (Giddens 1979:218-9). Agents thus draw on structures in a non-critical way: as was said above, this is known as ‘taken-for-granted duality.’ That is to say, routine is that which is done, day-to-day, and therefore routine action is hardly ever based on specific motives that are discursively established before an action was executed (Giddens 1984:xxiii). Furthermore, routine is “carried primarily in practical consciousness”, and therefore Giddens (1979:219; 1984:xxiii) writes that “...in routinized social circumstances, actors are rarely able, nor do they feel the need, in response to the inquiries they make of one another in the course of social activity, to supply reasons for behaviour that conforms to convention.”

Moreover, routine provides ontological security to an agent, since the agent knows he or she can rely on “conventions (codes of signification and forms of normative regulation) via which, in the duality of structure, the reproduction of social life is effected” (Giddens 1979:219). That is to say, the agent can exercise bodily control and autonomy within predictable routines (Giddens 1984:64). Ontological security is further tied to routinization in the sense that routine is fundamental to the continuity of the agent’s personality (Giddens 1984:60). The agent comes to know him- or herself through routine activities “through which the body passes and which the agent produces and reproduces” (Giddens 1984:60). Not only is routine integral to continuity of personality, it is also integral to the reproduction, and thus maintenance, of the institutions of society. Through routine encounters, social interactions are bound to social reproduction and hence to the endurance of institutions (Giddens 1984:72). Later, when I look Giddens’s description of ontological security (and the lack thereof) in late modernity, we will see just how important ontological security is to maintain a sense of self and for the agent to be able go about her day-to-day interactions.

Finally, routine is “strongest when it is sanctioned, or sanctified, by tradition” (Giddens 1979:219). Routine that is based on day-to-day living and which is “anchored in the ‘deep’ traditions of ‘reversible time’, is the single most important source of ontological security” (Giddens 1981:37). However, as we will see later when I discuss Giddens’s notion of

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<sup>208</sup> It is interesting to note that in the aviation industry, complacency is associated with routine check-ups of aircrafts. That is to say, complacency appears when aircraft maintenance crew members, pilots, and air traffic controllers become over-familiarized with their repetitive check-up routines, and they start to perform their tasks in an almost robotic manner; this, while “a dangerous condition was [in fact] developing that led to an accident” (Parasuraman and Manzey 2010:381-2; TP14175E 2003:2). Regarding aviation, others such as Wiener (1981:119), define complacency as “a psychological state characterized by a low index of suspicion.” A low index of suspicion is especially fostered by circumstances where agents work with automated systems that are constantly reliable, rather than with automation that is variably reliable (Parasuraman and Manzey 2010:384).

modernity, in late modern societies routines tend to be stripped of the traditional. That is to say, actions in late modern societies tend to lack “moral meaning; they become matters of habit or of ‘dull economic compulsion’” (Giddens 1981:11). As a result, a sense of ontological fragility creeps in: people in late modern societies no longer find as much ontological security in their day-to-day routines (Giddens 1981:11). But more about this later.

Since routinized action is associated with social continuity, Giddens (1979:219) next suggests that to understand social change, one must look at conditions or ‘critical situations’ that dislocate routinization. However, while it might be helpful to investigate these dislocating factors (such as natural disasters, wars, large-scale immigration and so forth), it is important to remember that change is already inherent in the continuous reproduction (which is necessarily also production) of interaction or social practices. Giddens (1979:108) writes that “...the seed of change is there in every act which contributes towards the reproduction of any ‘ordered’ form of social life.” It is ultimately with this subtle kind of change that I am concerned when investigating complacent action (and how difficult or easy it is – from day to day – to alter one’s complacent action).

In other words: “*Change ...is thus inherent in all moments of social production*” (Giddens 1979:114). Consequently, every moment of social reproduction affects the totality and thus modifies structure (Giddens 1979:210). Yet, while the aforementioned fact might be true, one has to always keep in mind the persistence of routines. There is thus a tension between change and stability within social institutions. That is to say, even though “systems [normally] routinize action, [...] they do not prevent the exercise of agency or the unintended effects of purposive action from generating system and structure changes” (Storper 1985:37). A good example is the use of language: through its use by agents, some words are changed, some words are added, and so on, until the language gradually changes in its totality. Routine should thus not be confused with absolute social stability; routine can facilitate change, although in many cases such change will be hard won (Giddens 1984:87).

## **5.5. Socio-Historical Context: Late Modernity**

### ***Introduction and Background***

In this section I will summarize Giddens’s insights on late modernity, in the pursuit of delineating how societies of late modernity inform action. In other words, Giddens’s modernity studies can be thought together with his action theory, since – as we have seen explained above

– society, as a social system with certain structural characteristics, is deeply interconnected with everyday practices or interactions.

As I have mentioned earlier, I will consult two of Giddens’s works for this section, namely *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991). From time to time, I will supplement Giddens’s work on modernity with a thinker who lies very close to him intellectually, namely Ulrich Beck<sup>209</sup> (*Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* ([1986] 1992)). In addition, I will provide a few cursory remarks on more recent research on modernity. However, this section on modernity from Giddens’s perspective is, as I have said in the introduction of this chapter, merely opening the door onto the field of modernity studies (and what this field might contribute to understanding complacency). This section is thus a kind of signpost: it points the way towards an area of research that is beyond the scope of this thesis. If I were to make sense of complacency in an in-depth manner via modernity studies, I would need to write a whole new thesis. As such, I acknowledge the very limited nature of this section.

Yet, this section – in its limited capacity – will yield some valuable insights about complacent action as a late modern phenomenon. Recall that in chapter one of this thesis I have argued that complacency is a phenomenon that came into prominence in late modernity. However, different from Giddens (and Beck<sup>210</sup>) who seems to imply that late modernity emerged in the mid- to late twentieth century, I have said that I use the term to refer to the period stretching from about 1880 until today. In addition, I did not say anything further about late modernity, nor did I look at why complacency emerged the way it did (in both language and in action) *due*, in part, to the changes being wrought in society by the transition from modernity to late modernity.

Let me first address the discrepancy between my and Giddens’s timelines of late modernity. Different from Giddens (1990:174-5) who has identified particular characteristics of ‘late modernity’ based on examining the socio-historical landscape of Western societies and institutions coming into contact with the rest of the world, I have merely used the term ‘late-modern’ to act as foil to the term ‘early modern’. I used these two terms in order to distinguish between the early modern usage of the word ‘complacency’ (as connoting something positive),

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<sup>209</sup> Beck and Giddens have in common the idea of ‘reflexive modernization’; however, each understands it differently (Beck, Giddens, and Lash [1994] 1997:vi). Other common themes shared between Giddens and Beck are detraditionalization (meaning that traditions are scrutinized and not taken for granted), ecology or nature that is thoroughly penetrated and reshaped by human social life, risk, and globalization (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1997:vi-viii).

<sup>210</sup> Beck (1992:11, 20) thinks that late modernity started tip-toeing into existence during the 1970s.

and the late-modern understanding of the word ‘complacency’ as we understand it today (as connoting something negative). In other words, the starting date that I have assigned to late modernity simply has to do with the time when the word ‘complacency’ took on its negative connotation; societal changes and influences involved in this meaning-shift are merely implied. On the other hand (yet not completely removed from the event of the meaning-shift of ‘complacency’), Giddens’s notions of late modernity and when late modernity more or less came to the fore, are informed by an explicit socio-historical examination of societies at large. One can consequently say that the way I use the term ‘late modern’ in chapter one is not yet sensitive to the socio-historical intricacies that underlie the term, and that an explicit exposition of modernity, and in particular, late modernity, such as Giddens offers, will supplement this lack in my earlier use of the term.

Hence, from now on when I refer to late modernity, I do so following the Giddensian timeline. Subsequently I will say that ‘complacency’ took on its negative connotation (in conjunction with the way the phenomenon complacency as we know it today, came to be acted out and articulated) during the time when modernity was subtly morphing into late modernity. This negative connotation of ‘complacency’ and complacent action persists into late modernity, up until today. Below I will argue that we are still in the era of late modernity. As such, Giddens’s account of modernity and late modernity, in addition to providing one with a guideline on how to understand how society might have influenced the way the word ‘complacency’ came to be understood as something negative and the way in which the phenomenon complacency came to be understood and articulated, also provides us with ways to think about complacent action as it happening today. However, in line with the purposes of my thesis, I will only focus on the latter.

The layout of this section is as follows: first, I will look at the characteristics of what Giddens calls ‘late’ modernity, ‘radicalised’ modernity or ‘high’ modernity. Second, in order to understand what is meant with radicalised, late, or high modernity, one has to come to grips with the dynamism of modernity: in other words, that inherent characteristic of modernity to constantly overhaul itself, to modify itself through reflection (Giddens 1990) or critique (Beck 1992). In turn, the dynamism of modernity is linked to three of its characteristics, namely time-space distanciation, disembedding mechanisms, and reflexivity. Third and fourth, I look at the institutional dimensions and the global nature of modernity, supported by the three aforementioned characteristics of modernity. Fifth, I look at the central roles of risk and trust



in late modernity, and sixth, I look at the effects that modernity has on the self (or more accurately, the interrelations between late modernity and the self).

### ***Radicalised, High, or Late Modernity***

Giddens (1990:46-8; 1991:1) argues that ‘radicalised,’ ‘high,’ or ‘late’ modernity is a continuation of modernity<sup>211</sup> and is characterized by (1) doubt, or a lack of a solid foundation of knowledge,<sup>212</sup> accompanied by the fact that all knowledge, traditions, and customs are constantly being questioned, critiqued and revised; (2) a scepticism towards progress and the notion that we are heading towards better things; (3) and new social and political movements (such as the ecological movement, or the ‘black lives matter’ movement), that arise in response to the dangers or perceived risks particular to late modernity and that take precedence over traditional social or political agendas. In addition, (4) late modernity is characterized by an “increasing interconnection between the two ‘extremes’ of extensionality and intensionality” [sic]: globalising influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other” (1991:1). Finally, (5) modernity is characterized by unprecedented change, both in terms of “*scope*” and “*pace*”, that alter both global social organisation and personal day-to-day interactions (Beck 1992:154; Giddens 1990:4-6; 1991:16). Giddens (1990:16-7) calls this turbulent characteristic of late modernity the “dynamism” of modernity, which I will describe in more detail below.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Giddens chooses to speak about late modernity, and arguably the current age, as being part of modernity, even though it has become popular to refer to this age as ‘post-modern’. Ulrich Beck (Beck, Giddens, and Lash [1994] 1997:3) also speaks of the “radicalization of modernity” and argues that this radical form of modernity was latent in modernity itself. That is to say, we are now in the late stages of modernity, where modernity has replaced the transcendental “sureties of tradition and habit” with reason or rational knowledge (Giddens 1991:2). Since rational knowledge has no transcendental foundation, it is always open to critique from both lay persons and experts; hence the turbulent nature of both modernity and late modernity (Giddens 1991:3). If, however, it appears as if we are in a ‘different’ age, it is because we are entering into an age “in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before” (Giddens 1990:3).

<sup>212</sup> Giddens (1990:46-7) points out that the lack of epistemological foundations does not mean that we cannot obtain “systematic knowledge of human action or trends of social development”. We can still do so without these foundations. Rather, what the lack of foundations means is that we constantly revise old knowledge by subjecting it to new knowledge, yet we cannot make the absolute statement that the novel knowledge is better than the previous knowledge (Giddens 1990:47). A lack of epistemological foundations thus implies a lack of external criteria according to which we can value or judge our knowledge.

<sup>213</sup> Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative, Volume 3* ([1985] 1990), also makes an implicit distinction between – to use Giddensian terms – modernity and late modernity. Ricoeur ([1985] 1990:210-213) writes that at the end of the twentieth century, there seems to be a shift from the philosophy of the Enlightenment (which characterizes modernity), to a disillusionment with Enlightenment philosophy (what Giddens would call ‘late modernity’). Consider that modern Enlightenment philosophers – broadly speaking – hold that (1) we are living in a “new time” or “new epoch” which opens up unto “new times”, (2) that these new times hold in store only progress and a bettering of the human condition while tradition withers, and (3) that history is something to be mastered (implying a mastery over our actions); versus the disillusionment at the end of the twentieth century with: (i) the concept that we are living in a new, or special time, (ii) progress (or that “better days” lie ahead), and (iii) with the notion that we can master history or the future (this disillusionment stems from the acknowledgement that action has “unintended results”, “takes place in circumstances that it has not produced”, and “our expectations [of

Finally, by referring to ‘late modernity’, rather than ‘postmodernity’ to describe the late twentieth century (and arguably the early twenty-first century), Giddens is not denying that there is something like ‘post-modernism.’ However, Giddens (1990:45-6) argues that this term rather refers to an “*aesthetic reflection upon modernity*” or “styles or movements within literature, painting, the plastic arts, and architecture”, than an era that follows after modernity. If we were truly living in a post-modern age, we would live in an era in which we have surpassed or moved beyond modern institutions, such as the nation-state, or military powers (Giddens 1990:46). Post-modernity should present us with a “new and distinct type of social order”, and we have clearly not reached such a new order (Giddens 1990:46). Based on this demarcation and the abovementioned characteristics of late modernity, one can infer that we are still, in this current age (and almost thirty years after Giddens has published his works on modernity), part of the distinct mode of “social life or organisation” described as ‘late modernity’ (Giddens 1990:1).

### ***The Dynamic Nature of Modernity***

Let us now delve into one of the characteristics of modernity that probably has the most comprehensive and extensive consequences for the late modern agent, namely the dynamism of modernity. According to Giddens (1990:16-7), there are three reasons why late modernity is so dynamic. The first source of this dynamism is the increasing *separation of time and space*: one no longer needs to be in the same place<sup>214</sup> as another person to communicate or interact

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what our future should be like] change in largely unforeseeable ways”) (Ricoeur [1985] 1990: 210-13). From this one can see that both Ricoeur and Giddens hold that the late twentieth century is characterised by disillusionment with the notion that we are living in a new time that will usher in progress. However, different from Ricoeur’s point (1) or (i), Giddens (1990:50) seems to imply that modernity and late modernity is a ‘new time’ in the sense that agents living in these kinds of societies have a stronger sense of history (they are more aware of their place in ‘history’, and thus more aware of themselves) and can thus assume a critical position towards all preceding societies and their traditions, customs, and norms. Regarding Ricoeur’s point (3) or (iii) in comparison with Giddens: both authors admit that action takes place in given circumstances and have unintended consequences. However, Giddens (1991:77), in his modernity studies, writes that agents in late modern societies have a sense of “personal time”: time that is used for self-development and “which have only remote connections with external temporal orders” (Giddens 1991:77). The future is seen as something to be controlled by active intervention – as far as is humanly possible – in order to shape one’s life narrative (Giddens 1991:77). Ricoeur thus differs from Giddens on this point, since Ricoeur holds that agents of the late twentieth century do not hold this view; instead they are disillusioned with the notion of mastering themselves and the future. Finally, as an addition to the abovementioned three points, Ricoeur ([1985] 1990:212) seems to agree with Giddens’s notion of the ‘dynamism’ of modernity when Ricoeur writes that the end of the twentieth century is known for its “acceleration in historical mutations.”

<sup>214</sup> Giddens (1990:19) makes a distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’: Place refers to the material setting or locale, while space refers to that which is “‘independent’ of any particular place or region” (denoted by things such as maps) and which can be substituted by different spatial units. Thus, when one speaks with another person (via a telephone, for example) who is in another location than oneself, both people are in the same space, but not in the same place.

with them (think of online communication, or smartphones<sup>215</sup>); nor is it necessary to be in a specific place to have an understanding of time and hence to draw up a time-table, designate certain hours of the day as working or recreational hours, or make an appointment with someone that is not necessarily living in one's area or locale (the 24-hour clock and the global system of time keeping or time zones has standardized time throughout the world) (Giddens 1991:17-8). Due to time-space distancing, there are thus a myriad of new ways to recombine time and space, and thus to organize society and interact with other agents (Giddens 1991:19). In addition, the emptying of time and space (from place) allows the global and the local to be connected more directly.

The second reason for modernity's dynamic nature are *disembedding mechanisms*: due to time-space distancing, certain social systems and interactions that were constrained by, or embedded in, physical settings in more traditional societies, can now be disembedded (or lifted out of local contexts) and carried out in "indefinite spans of time-space" (Giddens 1990:18, 21). One does not need to be present in the same place at the same time to interact with someone. Abstract systems, namely symbolic tokens<sup>216</sup> (such as money, text messages, or online posts) and expert systems<sup>217</sup> (technical expertise or specialised knowledge) facilitate the disembedding and the transitory re-embedding of social interactions (Giddens 1990:22, 27, 79-80). These abstract systems "bracket time and space through ... technical knowledge which have validity independent of the practitioners and clients who make use of them" (Giddens 1991:18). However, agents also need to trust in these abstract systems in order for these systems to work (Giddens 1990:26). Trust<sup>218</sup> in symbolic tokens or expert systems is based on the faith in the correct and proper working of these tokens and systems, and not on faith in *expert* others'

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<sup>215</sup> Agger (2011:120), highlights how smartphones, in particular, blur the boundaries between "public and private, communal and individual, day and night, work and leisure, [and] space and time." See also Kalmus, Masso, Opermann, and Täht (2018) for an empirical study on how smartphones allow for time-space distancing.

<sup>216</sup> Symbolic tokens are "media of interchange which ["have standard value" and] can be 'passed around'" irrespective of the groups or agents who make use of them at different points in time (Giddens 1990:22; 1991:18).

<sup>217</sup> In modernity and late modernity, we continuously rely on these expert systems: from driving one's car, to sitting in one's office, or eating a meal, one tacitly and unremittingly relies on expert systems (such as engineering, architecture, building, town planning, horticulture, farming, and so forth). Giddens (1990:27-8) writes that we have a kind of "faith" in these expert systems, since we cannot possibly master all expert knowledge.

<sup>218</sup> Trust, according to Giddens (1990:26-7, 29; 1991:18-9), is more than just "weak inductive knowledge" where one uses the past to guess what the future holds in store (although it sometimes assumes this form); trust is rather a kind of confidence, faith, or belief (in some thing, person, or principle) that goes beyond rational reasons. Giddens (1990:33) writes that "[a]ll trust is in a certain sense blind trust!" Moreover, trust is often carried out on the level of practical consciousness. We make countless decisions throughout the day that entail that we trust, have faith in, abstract systems. In other words, on a daily continuous basis, trusting is very rarely a calculative decision or a "conscious act of commitment" (Giddens 1990:90; 1991:19).

moral integrity (Giddens 1990:33-4). “[T]he nature of modern institutions is [thus] deeply bound up with the mechanisms of trust in abstract systems” (Giddens 1990:83).

The third reason for modernity’s dynamic nature, is modernity’s reflexivity. As we have seen earlier when we looked at Giddens’s action theory, reflexivity is that ability of agents to continuously monitor their actions: “[a]ll human beings routinely ‘keep in touch’ with the grounds of what they do as an integral element of doing it” (Giddens 1990:36). However, the reflexive monitoring of action – although necessary for modernity – is not the same as that which Giddens calls the reflexivity of modernity. The reflexivity of modernity refers to the fact that social interactions and interactions with nature are chronically being revised or rethought as new information comes to light (Giddens 1991:20-1).<sup>219</sup> In other words, late modernity is characterized by agents with a strong sense of self-awareness (and thus a strong awareness of their relation to the world, history, and nature). Since late modern agents are increasingly reflexive in this manner, social practices, and by extension social systems, are constantly changing. This is partly why tradition no longer carries the weight it used to in late modern societies. If remnants of tradition survive in modern society, it is because these traditions have been put to the test by an influx of other knowledge. Reflexivity thus permeates the reproduction of systems: “thought and action are constantly refracted back upon one another” (Giddens 1990:38). In short,

“[the] reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character” (Giddens 1990:38).

Giddens (1990:38-9) thus concludes that even though human beings act reflexively in all kinds of societies (people tend to modify their social practices as new information comes to the light regarding these social practices), modernity is unique in its extreme revision and constant modification of *all* facets of human life. This has led some to mistakenly remark that moderns are infatuated with what is new; what they are in fact noticing is the encompassing

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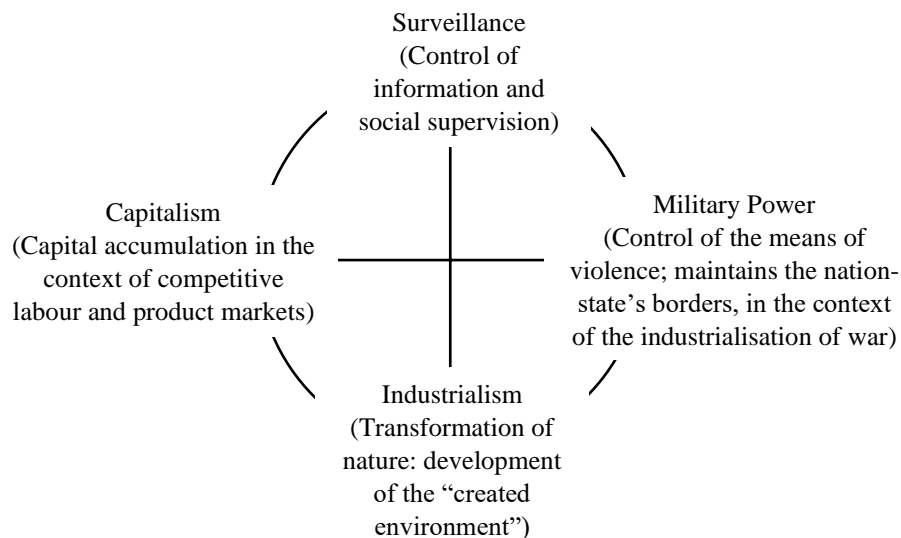
<sup>219</sup> However, different from Giddens, Beck (Beck *et al.* 1997:5) writes that ‘reflexive’ in ‘reflexive modernization’ does not mean ‘reflection’, “but (first) self-confrontation.” In other words, “[r]eflexive modernization’ means the possibility of a creative (self-)destruction for an entire epoch: that of industrial society. The ‘subject’ of this creative destruction is not the revolution, not the crises, but the victory of Western modernization” (Beck *et al.* 1997:2). That is to say, modernization is so ‘successful’, that it brings about its own destruction, through constant reinvention and self-critique: new forms of modernity constantly arise because of this inherent dynamism of modern society. Moreover, reflexive modernization denotes that modernity eats away at its own foundations: for example, industrialism is dependent on natural resources (which are rapidly declining because of rapid progress ushered in by modernity), and the nuclear family where one parent stays home (usually the wife) while the other works (usually the husband), (which is also being overthrown through modernist movements, such as feminism).

reflexivity of modernity (Giddens 1990:39). As Giddens says, we even think about the way we think! Next, I will look at the institutional dimensions of modernity in order to further determine in what kind of world complacent action plays out.

### ***The Four Institutional Dimensions that Constitute Modernity and Globalisation***

“Modernity ... is *multidimensional on the level of institutions*” (Giddens 1990:12). That is to say, even though modernity is sometimes equated with “the industrialised world”<sup>220</sup> in general, modernity cannot be exhaustively characterised by only one kind of institution, such as capitalism or industrialism (Giddens 1991:15). To do so would be reductionist. Giddens (1990:55) instead proposes that there are four distinct “organisational clusters” or dimensions comprising the institutions of modernity. These are (1) capitalism, (2) industrialism, (3) surveillance, and (4) military power. These institutional dimensions are inextricably interconnected and further rely on the above three sources of the dynamism of modernity.

Giddens (1990:59) provides the following figure that illustrates the interchange between these four institutional dimensions of modernity:



<sup>220</sup> Beck (1992) does not provide such a systematic demarcation of the several institutional dimensions of modernity. Moreover, in contrast to Giddens who argues that these institutional dimensions of modernity are continued in late modernity, Beck (1992:20, 30) argues that they are gradually being overcome or destroyed by late modernity. Beck (1992:20) explicitly writes that we are shifting from an industrial society, or a “wealth-distributing society”, to a risk-society (therefore, contrasting the dimensions of capitalism and industrialism with risk-society). Another example is when Beck (1992:47-51) discusses how ecological disasters and the existence of nuclear weapons calls for a radical change in the constitution of traditional political (the surveillance dimension) and military institutions. In other words, political bodies as they are currently, cannot properly manage – through policy-making and enforcement of policies – the dangers and challenges of risk society. As such, Beck (1992:49) writes: “...can intangible, universal afflictions be organized politically at all? Is ‘everyone’ capable of being a political subject? Is this not jumping much too casually from the global nature of the dangers to the commonality of political will and action?”

Eisenstadt (2000:1-2, 14-15), however, critiques Giddens and argues that these “basic institutional installations” of modernity have not taken “over in all modernizing and modern societies”: instead, when “the cultural program of modernity” that originated in modern Europe came into contact with other types of societies with different “cultural premises, traditions, and historical experiences”, several new kinds of modernities with different “institutional and ideological patterns” arose (and still arise).

Modernity, which, “from its beginnings [is] beset by internal antinomies and contradictions,” in particular the antinomy between pluralism and universalism, allows for several “unique expressions” of modernity (Eisenstadt 2000:2, 7). For, example, on the side of pluralism, one finds identity politics and cultural politics (such as feminist or ecological movements), and on the side of universalism, one encounters today and in history several forms of communism, fascism/national-socialism, fundamentalism, and nationalism (Eisenstadt 2000:8, 17-19). These are all still expressions of modernity, since they express what Giddens would call the ‘doubt’ and reflexivity of modernity: they critique or protest against modernity and thus closely resemble “Jacobin revolutionary movements”, they claim that they want to transform both “man and ... society” through “conscious human action”, and they want to “establish a new social order [...] that transcends any specific place” (Eisenstadt 2000:9, 19-21). Thus, although one might think these forms of modernity are anti-modern (and some indeed explicitly state they are anti-modern, such as Islamic fundamentalist regimes), they still define themselves in terms of modernity, and their very existence is facilitated by modernity (for example, the reflexivity of modernity allows for critique of modernity and allows for the existence of various and competing knowledge-claims, time-space distancing and disembedded mechanism allow these anti-modern societies or movements to have a global reach, these movements all “took place [and are taking place] within the specific confines of the modern political era” and the Enlightenment framework, and so forth) (Eisenstadt 2000:9-11, 19-22).

Eisenstadt (2000:1) thus argues that one should not speak of ‘modernity’ as if it is one homogenous thing, but rather of ‘multiple modernities’. For this reason, Eisenstadt (2000:2) writes that “[t]he idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world – indeed to explain the history of modernity – is to see it as a story of

continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs.”<sup>221</sup> It is ironic that Giddens, who formulated the notion of structuration where the agent and society is continually being constituted and reconstituted through interaction, falls into the trap of reifying and homogenizing the notion of modernity in the manner critiqued by Eisenstadt.<sup>222</sup>

However, Giddens’s outline of the above four institutional dimensions might be correct if one qualifies these institutional dimensions, in line with Eisenstadt’s (2000:24) argument, as being the dimensions of the *European* model of modernity. That is to say, the European model of modernity, which is the origin and earliest form of modernity, can be characterised by capitalism, industrialism, surveillance, and military power. These four institutional dimensions may or may not appear in other models of modernity.

In fact, this qualification of the four institutional dimension of modernity as European, fits in with Giddens’s (1990:63; 1991:21) argument that the above four institutional dimensions, facilitated by, and in a dialectical relationship with, the three sources of the dynamism of society, contributed and still contribute to the “expansionist, coruscating nature of modern social life in its encounters with traditionally established practices”, namely its globalising characteristic. That is to say, Giddens is describing those institutional characteristics of European modernity which account for its globalising nature. As Eisenstadt

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<sup>221</sup> David Attwell, in his book *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African History* ([2005] 2006), outlines the intricate and complex ways in which South Africans, and in particular black South African writers, have engaged with modernity and established “themselves as modern subjects” (2006:3-4). In general, Attwell (2006:2, 4) writes that South Africa’s “aggressive” modernization, brought about by colonialization, started with the “industrialisation of the mining industry in the 1880s.” This industrialism, combined with

“administrative centralisation (based on models of colonial control over frontier conditions earlier in the century) created the conditions for the emergence of a pan-ethnic, non-racial movement for decolonisation (in the discourse of the African National Congress [ANC], the ‘national democratic revolution’) in predominantly urban and polylingual environments. Far from being the natural expression of residual, primordial ethnic loyalties, apartheid itself was a quixotic attempt by the National Party to put this process of social confluence into reverse, essentially an attempt to police intimacy (nowhere was this more apparent than in its absurd laws attempting to regulate sexual contact between the races). In the long run, the ANC was able to capitalise on this aggressive modernity, by harnessing its centripetal forces and using them against the white minority rule that had tried unsuccessfully to balkanise the country. Even in its most gentlemanly phase, when it was ruled by a patrician group of missionary converts, the ANC was always in possession of a code of modernity that would eventually be triumphant.”

Attwell (2006:6-7), in line with what Eisenstadt writes about modernity as constant constitution and reconstitution, also adds that South Africans are still trying to make sense of modernity in relation to the country’s history and the “country’s political, social and cultural priorities.”

<sup>222</sup> Hassan (2010:452-4), in an article on how “African modernity operate(s) in global contexts” also writes that one should speak of the “plurality of modernity”. If one downplays this plurality of modernity by reifying and homogenizing ‘modernity’ as Giddens does, “the dominant history of Western [modernity and] modernism leaves out [and ignores] the massive infusions of non-Western [...] cultures into the [...] heartland” of modernity (Hassan 2010:452). Thus, writes, Delanty (2007:3070), “[r]ather than dispensing with modernity, [...] postcolonialism ha[s] given a new significance to the idea of modernity which now lies at the center of many debates in sociology and other related disciplines in the social and human sciences.”

(2000:14) writes, European modernity reached the rest of the world through “military and economic imperialism and colonialism [and currently globalisation], effected through superior economic, military, and communication technologies.”

Globalisation is ultimately the stretching of social interactions and societies<sup>223</sup> over larger zones of time and space across the world, so that the local (social interactions of co-presence) and the global connect and influence each other in a dialectical and an unprecedented manner (Giddens 1990:64; 1991:22). As an example of the dialectic between the local and the global, let us look at the following case. South Africa’s western coast is the only region on earth where Rooibos grows. Multiple and repeated attempts have been made to grow the plant in similar climate zones or in greenhouses, but these have all failed. The reason why horticulturalists have been trying to cultivate and grow Rooibos elsewhere, is because climate change is threatening the delicate and unique symbiosis between the micro-organisms found in a specific region of South Africa’s western coast, and the Rooibos plant. Should this symbiosis be damaged due to climate change, Rooibos will not grow and the rest of the world will no longer have rooibos or red bush tea, derived from the leaves of this plant. Although the consequence is not particularly catastrophic (those who have acquired a taste for rooibos tea might disagree), it is a good case of how the global and the local interact in a dialectical manner. The global, in the form of climate change, might destroy a locally grown plant. In turn, this local catastrophe will sink a global million-dollar industry and additionally alter global ‘tea culture,’ so to speak.

Globalisation, for Giddens (1990:66) is thus more than just the “international coordination of [nation-]states.” Although one can speak of globalisation in this way, it is only one dimension (and the first dimension identified by Giddens) of globalisation. It is important to realise *why* we can speak of nation-states as global actors. Giddens (1990:66-7,73; 1991:15) argues that we can refer to states as ‘acting’ due to the high level of internal organisational power at their disposal and due to the fact that nation-states reflexively organize, conduct and recognize themselves as nation-states by following “coordinated policies and plans on a geopolitical scale” (as manifested in the notion of ‘international relations’).

In addition, Giddens (1990:67) writes that there are various social interactions that traverse the divisions between nation-states. The world is connected not primarily through its

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<sup>223</sup> Giddens (1990:6; 1991:15) writes that when sociologists use the word ‘society’, they are often actually referring to nation-states; such is the extent to which interconnected nation-states (within a global context) are considered part of modernity.



political centres, but rather through economic power. Following Immanuel Wallerstein, Giddens (1990:68) calls this global integration of commerce and manufacturing the “world capitalist economy.” The world capitalist economy is the second dimension of globalisation, and allows transnational corporations or businesses to exert their influence globally (Giddens 1990:69-70).

However, even though transnational firms are able to influence politics all over the globe, their power is checked by the nation-states’ control over the means of violence within specific territories (Giddens 1990:70-1). Thus, nation-states are still the “principal ‘actors’ within the global political order, [while] corporations are the dominant agents within the world economy” (Giddens 1990:71). The world military order is the third dimension of globalisation. Even though states control the means of violence within their own territories, states can enter into military alliances with other states which then simultaneously increase and limit their power (Giddens 1990:74). The global nature of military power also changes the nature of war. War can now be truly global in scale, as shown by the Second World War in particular (Giddens 1990:75). In addition, nuclear weapons held by many nation-states could have global consequences if they were ever used.

Finally, the fourth dimension of globalisation is closely connected with industrialisation, namely the global division of labour (Giddens 1990:75). That is to say, the division of labour is no longer just a local affair, but also a global one. This can be seen if one looks at the emergence of new industrial countries, and the simultaneous “deindustrialisation of some regions in the developed countries” (Giddens 1990:76). The global division of labour also brings about stronger ties of interconnectedness between nation-states, due to the fact that individual states are no longer internally self-sufficient regarding the production and selling of commodities. In addition to the distribution of labour, industrialism also distributes technology, altering not only the production of commodities but the way that human beings live their daily lives and interact with nature (Giddens 1990:76). Such interactions can, in turn, have global consequences, such as climate change. The pinnacle of industrialism is, however, the spreading of technologies of communication (Giddens 1990:77). Mass media, facilitated by these technologies, ultimately bring about the globalisation of culture: “the global extension of the institutions of modernity would be impossible were it not for the pooling of knowledge which is represented by the ‘news’” (Giddens 1990:77-8).

### ***Modernity as a Risk (and Trust) Culture***

Next, I will explore Giddens's notion of 'risk culture'. Risk is closely associated with, and must be understood in conjunction with, trust (Giddens 1990:3). Regarding trust, earlier I have pointed out that trust is central to modernity, because modernity is characterised by large tracts of time-space distanciation. Agents therefore have to trust abstract systems. However, although agents trust in abstract systems, there is also a growing sense or awareness of the fact that experts do not know everything, and that we have unleashed abstract systems, technology, and so forth, that have consequences (especially when interacting with each other) which we can no longer wholly predict or control (Giddens 1990:125). (For example, we did not foresee that social media would lead to loneliness and depression<sup>224</sup>). This non-omniscience or ignorance on the part of the lay agent and expert alike, calls not only for trust, but also evokes feelings of caution, scepticism, and insecurity in agents (Giddens 1990:89). That is to say, agents living in modernity have an understanding and an awareness of 'risk' surrounding their actions and the unforeseeable and unintended effects that their actions might have.

Risk<sup>225</sup> is therefore a distinctly modern notion<sup>226</sup> which correlates with the realisation that *our own* actions might bring about widespread unwanted and unintended consequences (Giddens 1990:30-2). While Giddens (1991:3) argues that modernity is a culture of risk, this does not mean that living in modern or late modern society is riskier than living in a pre-modern society; rather, when Giddens refers to 'risk culture' he means to convey that in times of modernity both lay actors and experts organise their lives around, or in consideration of, a multitude of risks. In other words, agents are continuously thinking about the future and how to mitigate potential global<sup>227</sup> risks, such as (1) the dangers brought about due to the reflexivity

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<sup>224</sup> See Primack, Karim, Shensa, Bowman, Knight, and Sidani (2019); O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, and the COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA (2011); and Caplan (2007).

<sup>225</sup> Giddens (1990:34) distinguishes risk from danger, but argues that risk does assume danger. If I take risks, there is a *danger* that I will not achieve my desired results (Giddens 1990:34-5).

<sup>226</sup> The word 'risk' was not used in pre-modernity; this does not mean, however, that people did not have an understanding that things could go wrong or that life is a 'risky business', so to speak (Giddens 1990:30-1).

<sup>227</sup> In late modernity, risk is global in its *intensity*, since all of humanity is potentially affected by serious risks and dangers such as nuclear war, climate change, and the "collapse of the global economic exchange" (Giddens 1990:124-5). Moreover, Giddens (1990:125-6) agrees with Beck (1992:13) that risks are global and overcome all sorts of divides (such as class). However, different from Beck, Giddens (1990:126) is quick to point out that currently risks are "differentially distributed between the privileged and the underprivileged." In fact, the way risks are distributed (those who can afford nutritious food or health care, or live in the suburbs where the air is cleaner) is to an extent what is "actually meant by 'privilege' and 'underprivilege'" (Giddens 1990:126).

of modernity<sup>228</sup> (such as harm to nature<sup>229</sup> or harmful side-effects brought about by technology), (2) human violence in the form of a global military order and weapons that can potentially eradicate all of humanity, (3) and existential meaninglessness or dread (Giddens 1990:102, 106-11; 1991:3).

These late modern environments of risk are caused and sustained by the three dynamic mechanisms of modernity, namely the separation of time and space, disembedding mechanisms, and institutional reflexivity. Moreover, “[the] chronic entry of knowledge into the circumstances of action it analyses or describes [what Giddens earlier called the double hermeneutic] creates a set of uncertainties to add to the circular and fallible character of post-traditional claims to knowledge”, thus further contributing to modernity’s risk culture (Giddens 1991:28). Closely connected to this is the fact that contingent risks are increasing around the globe and are progressively affecting more and more people (Giddens 1990:124). These disembedded risks can no longer be traced back to specific individuals or groups who can be held responsible for them; they are thus impossible to control from a local standpoint (Giddens 1990:126, 131). For example, the local government cannot magically procure water for its citizens if and when a global water crisis appears due to climate change.

To moderate or manage these risks, agents purposefully seek out and build relationships of trust with other agents; in other words, not only do agents place their trust in abstract systems, they also trust in personal relations that they have purposely sought out (Giddens 1990:102). In addition, agents reflexively plan their futures based on expert advice and new knowledge revealed by these experts (Giddens 1990:102). Late modern agents therefore become more concerned with the future in the sense that they routinely contemplate counterfactuals (Giddens 1990:50; 1991:29). In short, risk culture, or what Ulrich Beck calls ‘risk society’<sup>230</sup> “... means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action,

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<sup>228</sup> We deliberately form and sustain “*institutionalised risk environments*” such as investment-markets, (or the arms race) which could potentially affect millions in a detrimental way (Giddens 1990:124-5, 129). In other words, modernity not only creates unintended risks, but also intended risks (Giddens 1990:128).

<sup>229</sup> The irony is that Enlightenment thinkers thought that we would gain more control over nature or the physical environment through reason: although we have mastered some areas of nature through “sociologically organised knowledge” and industrialism (Beck calls this the socialisation of nature), we have, through the reflexive use of reason, also created more possibilities for risk, by unleashing uncontrollable ecological disasters such as climate change, the extinction of several animal species, and irreversible pollution (Giddens 1990:110, 124; 1991:28-9).

<sup>230</sup> Beck (1992:10-11, 20; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1997:3) writes that we *are moving* from an industrial society to risk society. Beck (1997:5) thus defines risk society as a “developmental phase of modern society in which the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection in industrial society.” Put differently, “[t]he gain in power from techno-economic ‘progress’ is being increasingly overshadowed by the production of risks” (Beck 1992:13). As a consequence, in risk society, one cannot choose to stop or opt out of the processes and side effects of modernization while most people and

positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence” (Giddens 1991:28).

This is not to say that pre-modern eras were more (or perhaps less) “comforting and psychologically snug” than the modern social era (Giddens 1990:105; 1991:32). There were various risks in the tradition-oriented pre-modern world that caused anxiety and insecurity. However, Giddens (1990:105) does believe that ontological insecurity is more prevalent in modernity than in *most* cases of pre-modern societies. Next, I will discuss ontological insecurity, and why it is so prevalent in late modern society.

### ***Ontological (In)security***

Giddens (1990:112-3, 120) writes that although trust in abstract systems (Giddens calls this “nonpersonalised trust”) offers a lot of day-to-day<sup>231</sup> security (knowing that one can switch on a light and it will work, or turn the tap and one will have water, or get into one’s car and drive off), having trust in abstract systems is simply not as “psychologically rewarding” as having trust in another person.<sup>232</sup> This is because ontological security is not based solely on the “continuity of things or events” (as provided by abstract systems) (Giddens 1990:114). Instead, ontological security is sustained or ingrained by a mutual giving and receiving of trust: “faith in the integrity of another is a prime source of a feeling of integrity and authenticity of the self” (Giddens 1990:114).

Trust in people helps us trust in the external world and helps us maintain a stable sense of self-identity (Giddens 1990:97; 1991:51). Every time we are reassured by the “reliability and integrity” of other agents in our routine interactions and social rituals with them, our feelings of ontological security become more ingrained and deep-seated: this ingrained

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institutions keep on ascribing to the modern notion of ‘progress’ (based on manipulating ecological resources) (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1997:5-6).

<sup>231</sup> Recall from Giddens’s action theory that ontological security has its origins in the unconscious, but is then experienced or felt in an unthinking way during one’s daily actions: one is sure on the level of practical consciousness, rather than on the level of discursive consciousness, of oneself and one’s surroundings (Giddens 1990:92; 1991:36-8). In other words: “To be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, ‘answers’ to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses” (Giddens 1991:47). Furthermore, recall that ontological security is closely connected to routine. By following daily routines, a person feels that he or she can *count on* the world to be stable or predictable, but also that also that she or he is *someone* that other agents *count on* to follow and adhere to daily routines (or not upset the fragile social fabric of day-to-day living). This sense of predictability is crucial for the psychological security of agents (Giddens 1990:98).

<sup>232</sup> Abstract systems can, of course, simulate a mutual trusting relationship via access points. But this kind of trust still remains a simulacrum, because the expert representing the abstract system remains just that: a *representative* of the system, and not the system itself. Trusting in abstract systems thus remains impersonal and one-sided (Giddens 1990:114-5).

assuredness is tied in with all the experiences we have of our everyday social and physical circumstances (Giddens 1990:98; 1991:51). However, if our routine experiences are thrown into disarray – which can happen easily if the involved agents do not conduct themselves in the appropriate, trustworthy and customary ways – then anxiety, unease and apprehension edge into our experience of the world (Giddens 1990:98). Giddens (1990:98; 1991:36-7) points us to the experiments<sup>233</sup> that Harold Garfinkel conducted surrounding trust:

“These experiments provide graphic illustration of the emotionally disturbing impact of disregarding even apparently inconsequential features of ordinary talk. The result is a suspension of trust in the other as a reliable, competent agent, and a flooding-in of existential anxiety that takes the form of feelings of hurt, puzzlement, and betrayal, together with suspicion and hostility.”

From the above one can deduce that “[r]ituals of trust and tact in day-to-day [modern] life [performed on the level of practical consciousness]... are much more than merely ways of protecting one’s own self-esteem and that of others (or, when used in particular ways, of attacking or undermining self-esteem)”, they sustain a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991:47, 66). In other words, ontological security is dependent on the mutual giving and receiving of trust, particularly on the interpersonal level,<sup>234</sup> and not just dependent on routines or the stability of abstract systems. (Ricoeur’s notion of the friend or solicitude particularly comes to mind here).

This is not to say that one should oppose abstract systems in a binary manner with interpersonal interactions or relationships (as we have clearly seen from Giddens’s more action theoretical works), just that the abstract systems of late modernity have dialectically interacted

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<sup>233</sup> Other examples of the social disarray caused by unorthodox social behaviour can be seen in popular culture if one looks at the mind games or tricks of the illusionist and mentalist Derren Brown. One of Brown’s staples is to say to an unwelcome person accosting him that “the wall outside my house isn’t 4 feet [1.2 metres] tall.” This titbit of random information (which also does not make much sense) stuns the receiver so that he or she does not know how to respond next. Brown claims that this sentence once got him out of brawl with another person, and that one can use any sentence to confuse one’s assailant, as long as it’s out of context (Selby 2014).

<sup>234</sup> Giddens (1990:94; 1991:38) writes, following Erik Erikson, that this trust is established (or not established) in early life, in relation to one’s primary caretaker. In infancy the child develops trust in others and in itself through learning that the primary caretaker will always return to take care of him or her, in conjunction with learning that the caretaker expects and demands certain consistent behaviour from him or her (Giddens 1990:94-5). The aforementioned, situated in a meaningful social framework established by routine, leads the child to realise that she is ‘right with the world’/accords with the world, and thus that she is reliable, stable, ‘herself,’ someone whom others can count on and will expect things from. With this developed trust comes ontological security: the agent develops “stable self-identity” and sees herself as someone whom others can come to trust, while simultaneously trusting others as being reliable or constant (Giddens 1990:94). Self-identity is thus intimately linked to the “appraisals of others” (Giddens 1991:38). Moreover, it becomes clear that trust “implies a *mutuality* of experience” (Giddens 1990:95). Thus, it follows that if a caretaker neglects the child, the child will view the world as volatile and unreliable. Trust and ontological security will not develop properly and such a person might experience objects and other people as unreal, and perhaps be “be unable to maintain a clear sense of continuity of self-identity” (Giddens 1990:95; 1991:43).

with social interactions in such a manner that it is difficult for the late modern agent to form friendships (Giddens 1990:120). Since friendship is not particularly encouraged by institutions (think of disembedding mechanisms that do away with the need [although not necessarily the desire] for co-presence), the agent has to purposefully seek out and “work at” friendships, and therefore, work at trust (Giddens 1990:121). Forming a friendship, moreover, requires that one reveals or expresses oneself, which in turn, encourages that one knows oneself (Giddens 1990:121-2; 1991:6). Risk culture, in an unexpected way, thus encourages introspection and self-reflexivity<sup>235</sup> (Giddens 1990:122).

### ***Modernity and the (Complacent) Self***

Finally, I will look at the way in which modernity affects the agent. Above we have seen that “[m]odern institutions differ from preceding forms of social order in respect of their dynamism, the degree to which they undercut traditional habits and customs, and their global impact. However, these are not only extensional transformations: modernity radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience” (Giddens 1991:1) In other words, even though modernity is “understood on an institutional level [...] the transmutations introduced by modern institutions interlace in a direct way with individual life and therefore with the self” (while day-to-day interactions, in turn, also shape and maintain modern institutions and systems) (Giddens 1991:1). Thus, by extension, this section shows how modernity shapes or informs complacent action.

First, the agent is very dependent on the abstract systems of modernity and cannot easily escape or “opt out” of the kind of world created by these abstract systems (Giddens 1990:84). The (complacent) agent will find it very hard, if not impossible to escape modernity’s institutions. On a fundamental level modernity is truly global in nature: no one escapes the looming threats of climate change or a potential nuclear war. On a more everyday level, it

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<sup>235</sup> Lay actors continually draw on expert knowledge to discover and improve themselves: self-identity is built up from exercise regimes, diets, consumer goods, self-help books, life-coaches, psychiatrists, and so forth (Giddens 1990:122-3). As such, it is evident that the modern world is characterised by a dialectical relationship between the local (day-to-day experiences of intimacy and trust) and the global (systems and trends); between the self as a “*reflexive project*” and the reflexivity of modernity (and all the opportunities, skills, and knowledge it affords via abstract systems); and between self-discovery and self-disclosure (Giddens 1990:114, 123-4). It is therefore clear that modern institutions influence and constitute the self, but the self in turn also shapes these institutions of modernity (Giddens 1991:2). As we have seen with Giddens’s action theory, the self is not a passive entity, but an active agent who draws upon social structures to act and who “contribute[s] to and directly promote[s] social influences that are global in their consequences and implications (Giddens 1991:2).

would be almost impossible to ignore abstract systems such as money, health care systems, infrastructure, transnational corporations, the global division of labour, and so forth.

Second, because agents are aware that they live in a world that is beyond their full comprehension and control, they tend to adopt a pragmatic attitude towards abstract systems (Giddens 1990:2-3, 90; 1991:22-3). This means that lay agents “bargain with modernity”, so to speak: the trust they have in abstract systems might thus be tinged with a mix of scepticism, awe, optimism, and scorn (Giddens 1990:90). This array of attitudes that lay agents have towards abstract systems are clearly visible today: one need only look at the various social movements and trends that have sprung up recently, such as the anti-vaccination movement, the GMO/anti-GMO debate, the flat-earth society, strains of scientism, and so forth. In sum, even though agents’ trust in abstract systems develops implicitly as they go about their daily actions, this does not mean that agents passively accept or resort to trusting abstract systems (Giddens 1990:90). Thus, although the complacent agent cannot ‘opt out of modernity’, he or she can adopt a critical stance towards the systems and institutions of modernity. (Recall Stones’s (2005:57) continuum of the possible attitudes that agents can adopt towards structures, with “taken-for-granted duality” on the one hand, and ‘critical duality’ on the other hand).

Third, in the process of ‘bargaining’ with modernity, the (complacent) agent simultaneously forms his or her identity. “[T]he self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made” (Giddens 1991:3). However, due to the pluralism created by the interconnection between the local and the global, the agent is faced with an overwhelming array of options of ‘living’ (Giddens calls these lifestyle<sup>236</sup> options), and these options just keep on expanding (while other lifestyle options become limited). Modern institutions thus offer the agent an overwhelming array of options in terms of deciding which lifestyle or narrative to adopt (which includes taking account of risks) in the pursuit of forming

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<sup>236</sup> One should not confuse ‘lifestyle’ here with the way it is often portrayed to us by adverts or mass media “promoting commodified consumption” (Giddens 1991:5). Adopting a lifestyle is not something that only the wealthy is able to do (although it is true that one’s social class or lack of funds might prevent one from adopting certain lifestyles); rather, ‘lifestyle’ includes those courses of action that can be taken under circumstances of material or social constraint (Giddens 1991:5-6). However, Lash (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1997:119-21) critiques Giddens on this point, arguing that Giddens does not adequately acknowledge to what extent class and race may impact the reflexive project of self. This might be because Giddens’s (and Beck’s) conception of self-reflexivity within the project of constructing a biographical narrative is too cognitive, downplaying emotions and the unconscious (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1997:111). In addition, Schäfer (2010:2) argues that the “spatial dimension of risk” and constructing a life narrative is often overlooked. Schäfer (2010:8-13) compares East and West German youths and finds that the East German youths from rural areas, in particular, have a more pessimistic outlook on their lives, due spatial limitations. Other authors who also argue that Giddens downplays the unequal opportunities that different people have regarding lifestyles options in late modernity, include Evans (2002), Lehmann (2004), and Furlong and Cartmel (2007).

the agent's identity (Giddens 1991:5). Because of this overwhelming array of options, the agent tends to become increasingly self-aware (since self-awareness is understanding oneself in relation to the world in which one finds oneself). "The lifespan, rather than events in the outside world, becomes the dominant 'foreground figure' in the *Gestalt* sense"<sup>237</sup> (Giddens 1991:75-6). Thus, the self-reflexive characteristic of high modernity is more than just the "generic reflexive monitoring of action" as found on the level of practical consciousness, it is a more deliberate form of self-observation (Giddens 1991:76).

Finally, the moral component of this process of self-construction is denoted by the term 'authenticity' (Giddens 1991:78). To be authentic is to be "true to oneself", to 'live up to' one's overall goals: and thus, to feel worthy and have self-respect (Giddens 1991:66, 79). The primary way in which the self in modernity therefore evaluates itself, is in terms of an *internal coherence* (Giddens 1991:80). This is particularly interesting if one thinks of complacent action. It could be that actors of late modernity value, so to speak, 'external' reality less than they value their own self-sufficient internal consistency. In other words, people who act complacently might wish to achieve internal coherency (over and above measuring up to external standards of what counts as action that is good enough or consistent with that which they care about), and so purposefully evaluate their action in such a way as to favour themselves or to think of themselves as authentic. This could indeed be one of several motives. I will return to this question in my last chapter and reframe it in terms of Ricoeur's little ethics.

In addition, if an agent is unable to sustain a coherent narrative, he or she feels shame.<sup>238</sup> Giddens (1991:65) writes: "[s]hame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a

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<sup>237</sup> Bagguley (2003) argues that Giddens's structuration theory and modernity theory are at odds with each other, due to this new emphasis on the self in self-reflexivity. In other words, Bagguley (2003) holds that while structuration theory assumes a *duality* between agent and structure, Giddens's theory on modernity favours the agent over and above structure, and thus assumes an agent-structure *dualism*. Earlier, in conversation with Archer and Mouzelis, I have addressed the allegations that Giddens still makes use of dualisms in his theory: much of what I have written in that context, can be used in this context to differ with Bagguley's assertion. To that I would like to add that Bagguley forgets that for the agent to interpret himself or make sense of himself as a project in a conscious way, the agent always does so in tandem with understanding the world (lifestyle options, risks, etc.). As such, the relationship of duality is maintained, even though the self is more deliberately aware of himself. Giddens (1990:124) explicitly writes in his theory on modernity that the modern agent is not just a narcissist who seeks self-fulfilment over and against the external world. Instead, the modern self is also someone who engages with the world through active and "*positive appropriation*" of the knowledge, skills, and opportunities that abstract systems provide. It is therefore clear that modern institutions influence and constitute the self, but the self in turn also shapes these institutions of modernity (Giddens 1991:2).

<sup>238</sup> "Shame depends on feelings of personal insufficiency, and these can comprise a basic element of an individual's psychological make-up from an early age. Shame should be understood in relation to the integrity of the self, while guilt derives from feelings of wrongdoing" (Giddens 1991:65).



coherent biography.” Moreover, maintaining a coherent and worthy narrative is not only necessary to protect one’s own self-identity, but also necessary to maintain one’s trust in other persons and the reliability of the object-world (Giddens 1991:66). “[B]ecause of the intrinsic relations between the coherence of the self, its relations to others, and the sense of ontological security more generally [when] central elements of self-identity are threatened, [for example, when another person indicates to the agent in question that “her assumptions about others’ views of her is false”] other aspects of the ‘reality’ of the world may [also] be endangered” (Giddens 1991:66). If I cannot trust my own evaluations of that which is most intimate to me, namely myself, how can I trust my evaluations of the world?

However, (and this is the fourth way in which modern institutions affect the self), modern institutions tend to shield or isolate agents from experiences which raise potentially disturbing existential questions (Giddens 1991:149). Giddens (1991:8) calls this the sequestration of experience. Modern institutions tend to form “internally referential system[s]” that exclude external criteria (for example, techno-scientific institutions generally exclude moral matters from both their subject matter and from their criteria for something to count as falling within the techno-scientific realm), and as such, exclude factors such as ethics, original nature, psychological and terminal illness, criminality, and sexuality (Giddens 1991:144, 244). Agents of late modernity’s narratives might thus become haunted by meaninglessness: although agents have gained technical mastery over themselves through modern institutions (such as how to live longer or have a certain mindset), they will find modern institutions lacking when they want answers about the meaningful and the moral life<sup>239</sup> (Giddens 1991:9). Therefore, even though the late modern agent is encouraged to actualise herself and become ‘authentic’, this authenticity is “morally stunted” and unable to provide a “full and satisfying

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<sup>239</sup> However, Giddens (1991:9) notes that it seems as if moral issues cannot so easily be repressed, since certain lifestyle choices and movements still have moral issues as their centre. In fact, these morality-orientated movements or lifestyle choices might even be a counter-reaction to modernity’s instrumental mode of operating. As such, these lifestyle choices call for political engagement: Giddens (1991:9) calls this ‘life politics’ and argues that life politics “emerges from the shadow which ‘emancipatory politics’ has cast.” Although emancipatory politics is a necessary predecessor to life politics, and is, in fact, still desperately needed in a world where social schisms and oppression exist, life politics adds an extra element by drawing our attention to “moral dilemmas” and the “existential issues which modernity has institutionally excluded” (Giddens 1991:9). However, Smith (2002:43) writes that Giddens is too optimistic about viewing late modernity as a time of possible “moral renewal.” Instead, writes Smith (2002:43, 46), “rights talk has come to colonize moral thinking”, where ‘rights talk’ is the modern practice of invoking “*rights* in the governance and mediation of human affairs.” Rights, as “legal and moral imperatives” (that is to say, duties), are “arguably culpable in ordering, constraining and blunting moral thinking” or deliberation on the part of the agent (Smith 2002:46-8). Agents, by invoking rights, forget how to deal with moral ambivalence and ambiguity. Smith (2002:48) writes that for “Giddens, morality involves a willingness to grapple with uncertainty and to live with the anxiety that this entails. The nature of morality that invites a concern with intimacy, meaning and the *disorder* of human affairs must necessarily fall outside modernity’s ordering passion for rights.”

existence” (Giddens 1991:9). The sequestration of experience might thus be one of many reasons for why late modern agents act complacently.

Fifth, although modern institutions and systems make it more challenging to form meaningful relationships with others, Giddens (1991:26-7) argues that these modern institutions and systems also unite us; especially when we face global challenges such as climate change. “[L]ate modernity produces a situation in which humankind in some respects becomes a ‘we’, facing problems and opportunities where there are no ‘others’” (Giddens 1991:27). As such, the agent living in late modernity not only finds herself in interpersonal and more immediate institutional relationships with others, but she also has to have a global view of humanity’s destiny. On the one hand, such a global view of humanity might inspire the complacent agent to act less complacently, to place herself in service of others and humanity, and thus to live a better life; on the other hand, it might leave the agent feeling overwhelmed or resigned, thus exacerbating complacent action in some cases.

Sixth, and lastly, a sense of dread and existential anxiety, due to the risky and runaway character of modern institutions, continually impinges on ontological security. Giddens ultimately concludes that the modern agent finds him- or herself in an uncomfortable position between ontological security and existential anxiety. On the one hand, modern social institutions offer us a secure and incalculable array of options of being and living, which during the “local practicalities of day-to-day life”, distracts us from consciously thinking about the colossal and counterfactual risks of late modernity (Giddens 1990:133). On the other hand, modernity brings about an array of risks, many of which we cannot fully comprehend yet; but when thought about, is accompanied by a sense of dread and existential anxiety (Giddens 1990:133). Thus, even though our world – both natural and social – seems to be conquered by reflexive knowledge (that is to say, knowledge characterized by a strong sense of self-awareness and the ability to make sense of natural and social life in relation to ourselves), we are by no means in control of the world (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1997:vii). For this reason, Giddens (1990:139) compares modernity to riding a juggernaut: “a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder.”

To conclude, Giddens (1990:7) holds that modernity has two sides to it. On the one hand, modern social institutions offer us a secure and incalculable array of options of being and living. On the other hand, modernity brings about excessive bureaucracy, damage to the

natural environment, the possibility of totalitarian rule due to the concentration of political, ideological, and military power afforded by the nation-state, and an increase in military power in the form of the “industrialisation of war”, nuclear weapons (today one might add militarised/weaponized drones) (Giddens 1990:8-9), nuclear power, “*pluralized underemployment*” (where people are increasingly doing part-time or contract-work, but at the cost of not receiving benefits or long-term security), damage to the health of human beings, and threats that we are not even yet able to calculate (Beck 1992:13, 29, 140-9). I will show how late modernity might contribute to or shape complacent action in more detail, in the next chapter.

## 5.6. Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this chapter was to show how human action and interaction is connected to institutions, in order to make better sense of cases of complacent action where complacency appears to be carried out or facilitated by groups, institutions or societies. To describe action, (and eventually, complacent action) on the institutional or social level, I have consulted Anthony Giddens’s work.

In this chapter, I have specifically focussed on Giddens’s notion of the ‘duality of structure’ within his structuration theory, as that which describes the intricate connection between agents and social structures. Dickie-Clark (1986:160) and Thompson (1989:311) write that even though there are quite a number of critiques against structuration theory, these critiques tend to find fault with the minor or finer points of structuration, while ignoring the importance and practical relevance of the “main thrust of the theory”. Structuration theory has something profound and distinctive to offer in the form of ‘duality of structure,’ because “it places phenomenology, hermeneutics and practices at the heart of the interrelationships and interdependencies” between agency and structure (Stones 2005:4).

That is to say, within each agent, there are social structures in the “forms of phenomenological and hermeneutical inheritance”, and within structures, there are agents and their “past practices” (Stones 2005:4). Therefore, Stones (2005:5) writes that structuration theory has “a ‘structural-hermeneutical’ core in its characterisation and understanding of social processes, practices and relations.” Giddens thus provides us with a way of understanding how social structures constrain and enable agency, but also how the agent maintains and changes social structures. As such, Giddens does not over-emphasize either the structure or the agent.

As a result, one obtains an account of action where the agent is neither wholly free, nor wholly determined (by social structures). Put differently, agents are not cultural or structural dupes, but neither is society a “plastic creation” of agents, because “the production or constitution of society is a skilled accomplishment of its members, but one that does not take place under conditions that are either wholly intended or wholly comprehended by them.” (Giddens 1984:26; 1993:108). Consequently, different from Kawall and Doan who, in chapter one, represent the two extreme positions of complacency as the full responsibility of the agent, or complacency as being wholly due to institutions, one is able to understand complacent action as something which is both a ‘result of,’ so to speak, the agent *and* society.

In addition to this crucial insight, Giddens also emphasizes the continuous nature of action, as opposed to describing action as compartmentalized, or as an aggregate of acts or basic actions. In Giddens’s (1984:3) words: “Human action occurs as a *durée*, a continuous flow of conduct.” Closely connected to understanding action as a continuous flow, is the continuous reflexive monitoring of action by the agent. That is to say, the agent is aware of herself as acting while acting, and is able to adapt her actions as she goes about her daily life. Within the flow of action, agents thus monitor their actions and so become aware of goals, which they can then further modify in conjunction with their actions. As such, action is not as linear as one might think: goals do not necessarily precede action, but often only become apparent within the flow of action.

Moreover, we have seen that when Giddens refers to the ‘reflexivity’ of the agent, he also incorporates prereflexivity within this notion. Prereflexive action, or what Giddens calls practical consciousness, is the casual mastery of day-to-day action which is closely connected to the body and to routine; this kind of action does *not* entail keeping one’s action consciously in mind while executing it. As such, one can assume that action is not a purely rational process. Continuous action is instead an interchange between conscious action (executed on the level of discursive consciousness) and preconscious or prereflexive action (executed on the level of practical consciousness).

Finally, Giddens’s structuration theory can be understood together with Giddens’s work on modernity, since action is informed by the kind of society in which it is carried out. Modern institutions, systems, and structures constrain and enable action and the agent in the specific ways I have highlighted in the previous section (while also being constituted and reconstituted by agents). By discussing late modernity, and thus the kind of society in which we act, I have

said that Giddens opens the door towards the possibility of understanding how modernity and late modernity informed and informs complacent action. When I interpret complacency from an action theoretical perspective in chapter six of this thesis, I will thus take into account the kind of society (namely a modern to late modern society) in which complacent action not only took shape, but also plays out.

## Chapter 6

### Complacency: Moving into Complexity

“It’s not that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidence. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses they have bought for money.

It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, “Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.” And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, “Treblinka – 100% human stearate.” Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this?

Yet I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?

J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (2004:114-5).

“[Complacency, like many vices] is not an all-or-nothing matter [...] it is a graded moral notion” (Lepora and Goodin 2013:130).

### 6.1. Introduction

The above quote from J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) captures the sentiment of this chapter. As the reader knows, in the first chapter I have described complacency as something which is morally reprehensible. In addition, I have made complacency out as a phenomenon which is brought about through a cognitive process or an incorrect ‘pattern of thought’, which then culminates in certain actions. However, after having examined the selected works of both Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens on action, one suspects that complacent action will probably be more complex than initially described. It is exactly to this complexity that the above excerpt from *Elizabeth Costello* starts to allude.

The narrator clearly makes the moral judgment that consuming meat is wrong, yet admits that she sees only kindness in the eyes of those of who do so. In other words, the family (‘you’, ‘Norma’, and ‘the kids’) that the narrator refers to is guilty of some wrong, yet they seem to mean well. Perhaps they know that eating meat is morally questionable, but, for example, keep on eating meat because they do not wish to inconvenience others around them who will continue serving them meat, and expect to be served meat in return. The aforementioned could be one example of many (morally redemptive) reasons for why the family chooses to continue eating meat. Even if the family in question is ignorant rather than complacent, one would have to determine whether it is wilful ignorance, or ‘innocent’

ignorance, so to speak. What emerges from the excerpt, however, is that there is more to people's actions than just being plain wrong. This, of course, does not mean that one cannot judge people's actions as being 'right' or 'wrong', but it does mean that arriving at this judgement is perhaps a more complicated process. The fact that the narrator questions her own sanity (and thus certainty) regarding the family's behaviour, attests to this.

Furthermore, but perhaps not directly demonstrated by the above passage, human action is more enigmatic than we often think or speak of it. To address my own working definition of complacency as provided in chapter one: there is more to people's actions (and thus complacency) than just a linear cognitive process which subsequently translates into action. Ricoeur (1966:207-9) makes this clear when he says that action is rather "an original dimension of the cogito", or what he calls "practical intentionality", or when Giddens (1984:49) writes that many of our actions are carried on the level of practical consciousness. In other words, thought does not always precede actions; instead, some actions are as initial as thought. What this – and other action theoretical insights – mean for complacency will be teased out in the rest of this chapter.

Consequently, the focus of this chapter is to develop a more complex, nuanced, and holistic understanding of complacency as action, based on the action theories of Ricoeur and Giddens. That is to say, instead of discussing (complacent) action as something which can be sub-divided into reason, motives, and intentions, and which is separate "...from the [reflexive agent, the] body, its mediations with the surrounding world and the coherence of an acting self" (Giddens 1979:2, 54; 1984:3), I wish to develop an understanding of complacent action which takes account of the reflexive agent *in* the action, the temporality and spatiality (context or situation) of action as continuous, the other agents involved in the action, the constraints surrounding action, the motives for the action, and so on. In order to achieve this, I will first examine how Ricoeur's philosophical account of action can be contrasted, augmented and critiqued by Giddens's more sociological account of action, and *vice versa*. In the course of examining how their respective work might be improved by each other, I will arrive at an amalgamated or synthesized action theory.

Using this synthesized action theory as a foundation, I will be able to identify those elements of action that are specific to complacent action. Next, I will re-examine and re-interpret my working analytical definition of complacency from an action theoretical perspective (based on the synthesized Ricoeurian-Giddensian action theory). I will then use a

few case studies to illustrate what complacent action looks like as it plays out according to the specific action-pattern that is complacency. In concurrence with Ricoeur's narrative theory, it is interesting to note that it takes a story (or a more complex example, if you will) to capture the nuances of human action and normative evaluation surrounding action.

## 6.2. The Synthesis: The Capable Human with Paradoxical Freedom Meets Structuration

### 6.2.1. Introduction

In this section, my aim is to synthesize the (above-discussed) action theories of Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens, in order that I may obtain a coherent and enriched action theory through which to interpret complacent action. In this synthetization I will treat Giddens's modernity studies as a continuation – and thus as part of – Giddens's action theory. I will make sense of these two authors' action theories relative to each other as follows: first, I will highlight the common elements between Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories. Ernst Wolff (2014:112), who carries out a similar reconciliation<sup>240</sup> between Ricoeur and Giddens in his article, “Ricoeur et Giddens: l'herméneutique de l'homme capable et la théorie de structuration”, writes that it is necessary to see whether the two theories are compatible at the foundational level, before trying to merge them.<sup>241</sup> Second, in a two-pronged approach, I will point out the shortcomings in Ricoeur and Giddens's respective action theories (in addition to those shortcomings I have already mentioned in chapters three to five), and suggest how the two authors' action theories may complement the other, or supplement the other's shortcomings. Through this approach, I

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<sup>240</sup> Different from this project, Wolff (2014:105) limits his investigation to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the capable man, as found in *Oneself as Another*, and to Giddens's action theory (thus excluding Giddens's work on modernity entirely). Moreover, since Wolff does not include Ricoeur's earlier work on action (particularly as found in *Freedom and Nature*) within his systemization of Ricoeur and Giddens's thought on social action, it is sometimes the case that Wolff critiques Ricoeur's action theory from the 'outside', so to speak, via Giddens; this, while in many instances Ricoeur's earlier work on action could have fulfilled the same (critiquing) purpose. In addition, Wolff incorporates Giddens's work into a Ricoeurian framework, while I aim to synchronize the two authors' action theories, despite their differences. In other words, Wolff does not focus on the shortcomings in Giddens's action theory, only on Ricoeur's action theory's shortcomings. I will point out the shortcomings in both authors' work, and show how they might supplement each other's shortcomings. Finally, Wolff (2014:105) specifically focuses on *social action*. That is to say, Wolff is primarily interested in the relationship between the agent and the institution, or the agent and social systems, in both authors' work. While this is a crucial aspect in both Giddens and Ricoeur's action theories, I wish to compare and synthesize other components of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories as well. Wolff (2014:105) himself admits that his synthetization of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories is just one step towards filling the gap left by the lack of work on the systemization of Ricoeur and Giddens's thought.

<sup>241</sup> I make use of Wolff's (2014:105) article extensively, since there are no other systematic comparisons of Giddens's work with that of Ricoeur's (and that, most importantly, has a particular focus on their action theories). Moreover, Wolff provides a solid foundation on how to think Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories together, by pointing out the key ideas that each of these authors have in common with each other.



will thus sketch out how to think Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories together, with the ultimate goal of understanding complacency from an action theoretical perspective.

A few observations before I start this process: while I will argue that Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories share strong foundational similarities, the two authors have very different vocabularies when they discuss action. The different terms that Giddens and Ricoeur use to discuss action, should not, however, deter one from seeing the resemblances between their action theories. Yet, one should simultaneously remain sensitive to the reasons for the particular terms that these authors choose to employ: besides the fact that Ricoeur and Giddens have different backgrounds (philosophy and sociology) that inform their terminologies and theories, the use of a specific term often implies other parts of, or even the author's entire action theory as a whole. Thus, when one compares specific and similar elements from Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories with each other, one constantly has to keep in mind that these elements form part of a whole theory. This is admittedly more complicated when it concerns Ricoeur's work on action.

Since Ricoeur's 'action theory' is comprised of action theories based on three different works from different periods in Ricoeur's career, my systemization of Giddens and Ricoeur's action theories already contains, so to speak, a systemization (although a very tentative one). Therefore, not only does one need to think of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories together, but one also has to think earlier Ricoeurian action theory and later Ricoeurian action theory together *within* this broader systemization. However, as I have shown in chapter four, it is possible to read Ricoeur's work as a whole. As I progress then, in my synthezation of Giddens and Ricoeur's work, I will refer to Ricoeur's action theory as a whole, but point out those areas that might be exceptions to this unifying treatment.

Finally, in the process of making sense of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories together in a systematic manner, I will not repeat or restate all the details of their action theories in this section. This section will only be a general outline of how to think of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories together. These details or particulars of their action theories will, however, not be lost or forgotten: in the next section (section 6.3), as I interpret complacency via the combined Ricoeurian-Giddensian action theory, I will retrieve and draw on these details where appropriate. Yet, it still remains impossible to reiterate every single particular of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories in section 6.3. Thus, even if I have chosen to highlight certain details of their action theories in chapters three to five, and these details are then not raised

again explicitly in this chapter, it is most likely because elucidating these details enabled one to understand Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories in the first place. In addition, often it is necessary to explain a detail or an aspect of their action theories, just to clarify what that aspect is, so that one can ultimately say that complacent action does *not* manifest itself as this or that aspect of action. With that being said, I will start to expound the action theory through which I will make sense of complacency, below.

## **6.2.2. Laying foundations: The Basis of An Action Theory through which to Understand Complacency**

### *Duality and Dialectic*

In general, Ricoeur and Giddens are both philosophers of the dialectic, to use Ricoeurian language; or philosophers of duality, to use Giddensian language. For example, while Ricoeur places the voluntary and the involuntary, explanation and understanding, text and action, discordance and concordance, universalism and contextualism, self and other, sameness and selfhood in dialectical relationships, Giddens places determinism and voluntarism, subject and object, the conscious and the unconscious, structure and agency, moment and totality, in relationships of duality. As such, both authors attempt to bring dichotomous standpoints into conversation with each other.

These dialectics and dualities further overlap and reflect each other. For example, Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity seems to reflect the duality of structure, in the sense that narrative is a dialectic between discordance and concordance, or events and the plot. Similarly, the duality of structure, where agency and structure are mutually dependent on each other, is a dialectic between moment and totality. In other words, during social practices or interactions "the most minor or trivial forms of social action [are tied] to structural properties of the overall society (and logically, to the development of mankind as a whole)" (Giddens 1979:71). Or, as articulated by Carlstein (1981:7) structure is "a relation between the past as a totality and the new moment of generation in which structure is perpetuated and modified as the result of human agency." Just as in the act of narration, the events are connected to the plot, *and* the general literary genre is connected to the unique configuration in the moment of narrating,<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Ricoeur, in his comparison of action to the text, holds that text, as a work of discourse "...is produced in accordance with a series of rules which define its literary genre, and which transform discourse into a poem, a novel, a play. At the same time as a work belongs to a genre, so too it has a unique configuration which defines its individual style. The production of discourse as a work is thus displayed in its composition, its genre and its style" (Thompson 1981:13).

just so, in social interactions or practices, moment and totality are connected. The duality of structure is that “structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices” (Giddens 1979:5). Perhaps one can say that the dialectic of narrative is that narrative is both the medium and the outcome of actions (or events in the plot). Narrative, just like structure, enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices (in the sense that narrative provides one with a kind of framework according to which one can understand oneself and execute one’s actions), and ‘exists’ in the generating moments of this constitution (Giddens 1979:5). However, and here I anticipate a point I will raise later (courtesy of Wolff (2014)), Ricoeur’s notion of action seems more sedimented (as captured by the notion of narrative), while Giddens’s understanding of action, tied to structure, is more continuous.

Finally, Ricoeur seems to describe Giddens’s notion of structuration when one looks at how both of these authors explain how language (what Giddens calls one form of social structure) is used in discourse (an example of social practice or interaction, according to Giddens). Both Ricoeur (1991:145; 2016:181) and Giddens (1993:125-6) agree that language is (1) virtual and exists out of time and space, while discourse (or interaction/social practice) takes place in time and is situated; both hold that (2) language or structure is not agent-bound, while discourse or social interaction is always carried out by an agent in relation to another; (3) language or structure is not the product of one agent, instead language or structure is established at a social and public level, and it is during discourse or social interaction that language or structure helps the agent to discourse (act) meaningfully in a way that other agents understand. (4) Finally, since agents are knowledgeable, they are able to – by the use of language (structure) – change language (structure) itself (Giddens 1993:109; Ricoeur 2016:182).

An action theory of complacency will thus be characterised by duality or dialectic; the most foundational dualities or dialectics from these two authors being that (1) it is neither wholly the agent nor wholly nature which determines action, but both in a dialectic relationship, and (2) it is neither wholly the agent nor wholly institutions/society/social systems/structures which determine(s) action, but the two in a relationship of duality.

### ***The Centrality of Action Linked with Responsibility***

Besides the pattern of a dialectic or a duality in both of these authors’ works, the most foundational similarity that Giddens and Ricoeur share is the centrality of action and an understanding of the agent in their thought: in other words, both thinkers acknowledge that action reveals human reality or what it means to be a person (Ricoeur 1967a:61; Giddens

1993:5). Connected to this, both Giddens (1979:55-6; 1993:81) and Ricoeur (1991:135) have a conception of the agent as being able to bring about change in the world. That is to say, an agent is able to choose otherwise, and is thus free and is responsible for his or her actions, despite various constraints on his or her actions.<sup>243</sup>

Yet, both Giddens and Ricoeur's views on action are more nuanced than these initial few postulates. Both admit that most action is ambiguous when it comes to assigning responsibility (and, in the case of Ricoeur, how difficult it can be to decide to do the right thing), since action is simultaneously passivity and activity, receptivity and initiative (to use Ricoeurian language). That is to say, to act is to interact through a body, in the world, drawing on history and structures, with other agents. The agent is not self-sufficient and purely rational.

Besides the ambiguity of action, agents who provide false or distorted accounts of their action further complicate the process of holding someone responsible for their actions. Giddens (1993:78) is thoroughly aware that dishonesty can creep in: actors can avoid responsibility or even claim credit for something they did not intend. Moreover, when Giddens (1991:66) writes of the late modern agent, it appears that such an agent might choose to maintain a "[self]justified and unitary" biographical narrative, over and against the truth of 'external' reality. Ricoeur also takes cognizance of this aspect of assigning responsibility when he discusses his narrative theory and that it sometimes diverges from life: stories we tell about our lives/life are subject to discourse in which lies, justifications, and concealments (cover-ups) have taken a hold. In short, both authors help us realise how difficult it is to evaluate action, and eventually, complacent action.

In short, an action theory of complacency will enable one to attribute responsibility to an agent who acts complacently (since Ricoeur and Giddens hold that the agent is free to be able to do otherwise, despite constraints that constitute the agent's actions), *yet* at the same time, due to the complexity of action (and all the accompanying constraints – yet simultaneously enablers – of action), this responsibility assigned to the agent can be thought of

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<sup>243</sup> For example, Giddens (1993:78) writes that one is responsible for some wrong if one should have known otherwise/better. In addition, for an even stronger emphasis, see Giddens (1984:175): "Sanctions only very rarely take the shape of compulsion which those who experience them are wholly incapable of resisting, and even this can happen only for a brief moment, as when one person is physically rendered helpless by another or others. All other sanctions, *no matter how oppressive and comprehensive* they may be, demand some kind of *acquiescence* from those subject to them [...]. Even the threat of death carries no weight unless it is the case that the individual so threatened in some way values life." Similarly, Ricoeur (1966:187) writes that "[e]ven in the demission of my freedom, I still grasp myself as the act of my non-act, as active demission, because I know that I am determined by nothing as act. Even in the worst bondage I know that I can look at another thing...."

as more, or less, blameworthy. In other words, although the complacent agent is *responsible* for his or her complacent action, some cases of complacent action will be more or less morally *blameworthy* than others. In fact, in some cases of complacent action the agent might be responsible for her complacent action, but one would hardly be able to blame them for it (see case three, (Joe) in section 6.4.3. of this chapter, below). In such extreme cases, one might hold them responsible for their actions – in the sense that they are the originators of their actions – but, one cannot blame them (since they are not at fault).

### ***Reflexivity, Prereflexivity, and Hermeneutics***

In addition, both Giddens (1979:38-40) and Ricoeur (1992:112) posit a self-reflexive subject that is neither absolute nor an illusion: Giddens writes of the *decentring* of the subject where subjects have “effective though incomplete knowledge of themselves” (some agents will, of course, have more self-understanding than others, but no agent can know him or herself exhaustively) (Dickie-Clark 1986:168), while Ricoeur also speaks of the decentred subject who *attests* to the fact of its own existence or being, where this attestation is a kind of knowledge that lies between dogmatic certitude and crippling uncertainty.

Closely connected to this, is the fact that the agent only knows him- or herself and how to act through interpretation. Agency “is not a given characteristic of the human individual, but derives from the acquisition of an ontological understanding of external reality and personal identity. The autonomy which human beings acquire derives from their capacity to expand the range of mediated experience: to be familiar with properties of objects and events outside immediate settings of sensory involvement”, writes Giddens (1991:47). Both Giddens (1984:3) and Ricoeur’s action theories thus have hermeneutic-phenomenological bases.<sup>244</sup> Moreover, in both thinkers’ work, the philosopher or social scientist uses the same resources (namely

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<sup>244</sup> A qualification can be added here: Ricoeur, as was seen in chapter three, did not have an explicitly hermeneutic approach in his earlier work, namely *Freedom and Nature*. However, as was pointed out, there was an underlying or a quasi-presence of hermeneutics, especially since Ricoeur (1966:375) acknowledges that the self is not immediately “transparent to itself” and therefore has to obtain an understanding of itself through a sign-learning process. In addition, I have posited that Ricoeur’s later action theory, which has an explicit hermeneutic, does not entirely supplant the work done in *Freedom and Nature*. Instead, *Freedom and Nature* supplements the later work by providing us with an account of the fundamental possibilities of human action (the structures of willing), and by reminding us of the fact the subject is not only (mediately) reflexive (as primarily described in *Oneself as Another*), but also immediately reflexive (what Ricoeur (1966:58) calls “pre-reflexive [self-] imputation”). However, the insights from *Freedom and Nature* must be filtered through the new phenomenological attitude which is grafted within the hermeneutic circle: namely, attestation. Attestation is that hermeneutically informed phenomenological attitude which has “suspended the ‘first naïveté’ of immediacy” (Ihde 1971:100). As such, one can say that *Freedom and Nature* is incorporated into, and now part of, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology.

interpretation) as lay actors to make sense of human action (Ricoeur 1991:71). Giddens (1993:86) refers to this as the “double hermeneutic.”

Both thinkers also describe agents’ action as purposive (Giddens 1993:82; 1984:3-5, 8) or intentional (Ricoeur 1966:42-3; 1992:67). Ricoeur (1966:41, 209) writes that even though a person is not always explicitly (or mediately) aware of making definite decisions at the time of effecting her actions, she has and is making decisions as she acts, since “acting is an original dimension of the cogito.” “The essential criterion for the subject to be involved in a decision, is that he or she should be able to recognize a project (implicit or explicit) after the event”, and not necessarily before or during the event (Michel 2018:132). Put differently, consciousness or the cogito is not just thinking (removed from action, such as the Cartesian Cogito), but rather, consciousness also has a dimension that is acting, where the agent is so entrenched in her action that she is not – before or during the action – representing an *image* of her body-as-acting to herself (Ricoeur 1966:208). Ricoeur (1966:207-8) calls this “practical intentionality.” In other words, some (perhaps most) actions do not entail that one represents an image to oneself as acting, and then acting. Michel (2018) uses an excellent example of shifting gears: while driving I do not think that I should shift gears, and then do so, I just do so; this is action as an original dimension of the cogito. This kind of action or aspect of the subject, is prereflexive; it is the ‘I’ that acts, and not yet the self.<sup>245</sup> This is why Ricoeur (1966:207) writes that action is “an aspect of [...consciousness] in a broader sense” (in other words, intentionality), and thus a “kind of intentional relation to things and to the world.” Interestingly enough, this prereflexive (or immediate reflexive) aspect of action and the agent only features in Ricoeur’s earlier work, *Freedom and Nature*. Ricoeur seems to downplay this aspect of action in his subsequent works that I have perused, by focussing almost exclusively on action that is reflexively mediated, thought through, and narrated. In fact, even though prereflexivity is a kind of reflexivity, Ricoeur does not provide an explanation of the relationship between prereflexivity (or immediate reflexivity) and mediate reflexivity. Indeed, there even appears to be a divide or a line between these two kinds of reflexivity.

Giddens (1993: 83, 89; 1979:2) also has an understanding of prereflexive action, and it is perhaps best captured in his notion “purposive action” (not necessarily ‘purposeful’<sup>246</sup>).

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<sup>245</sup> Recall the following quote by Ricoeur (1992:18): “To say *self* is not to say *I*. The *I* is posited – or is deposed. The *self* is implied reflexively in the operations, the analysis of which precedes the return toward this self.”

<sup>246</sup> Recall that Giddens makes a distinction between purposive and purposeful action. The former refers to a “process”, “a routine characteristic of human conduct”, where one continuously monitors one’s own actions (Giddens 1984:4). The latter term, ‘purposeful,’ is associated more with analytical philosophy’s use of it:

Purposive action is a “*continual successful ‘monitoring’ by the actor of her or his own activity; it is indicative of a casual mastery of the course of day-to-day events that actors normally take for granted*” (Giddens 1993:83, 89). The agent is thus reflexively, yet prereflexively,<sup>247</sup> aware of why she is acting while acting in day-to-day living. This knowledge that the agent has of her actions in her surroundings of everyday life, is situated in practical consciousness. Simply put, practical consciousness is made up of things which the agent tacitly knows about carrying on in social contexts and is closely connected to knowing how to do things through the body; moreover, practical consciousness is experienced as continuous, as ‘I’ who acts, and not yet as a ‘self’ who acts (it is only on the level of discursive consciousness that the subject starts reflecting on her project or act, and thus herself as a self who has acted) (Giddens 1984:51, 58). That is to say, the ‘I’ has no *image*, while the ‘self’ does, since the self “is the agent as characterized by the agent” (Giddens 1984:51). This habitual purposive monitoring is to a large extent “pre-reflective”, but does not prevent the agent from discursively formulating why she has done what she has been doing; she can recount her action by bracketing the flow or *durée* of her activity in order to focus her attention on a “conceptually segmented” part of her action (Giddens 1993:89; 1984:73).

Giddens, if one recalls, makes the distinction between practical consciousness, and discursive consciousness, where discursive consciousness is the ability to express actions in words. (Ricoeur (1991:189) calls action that one can recount to others ‘meaningful action’).<sup>248</sup> The ‘self’ is thus on the level of discursive consciousness and (mediate) reflexivity, while the ‘I’ is on the level of practical consciousness and prereflexivity (immediate reflexivity). This acting ‘I’, as Ricoeur would say, is an original dimension of the cogito. In sum, Ricoeur’s ‘consciousness as acting’ or the prereflexive subject (the subject that is in-decision, in the midst of action and that has not yet mediately expressed or thought her action), is similar to Giddens’s

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intentions, aims, and purposes are often examined in abstraction by extracting these acts from the continuous flow of action. Thus, one can talk of someone having a specific purpose when wanting to do something (which can also result in unintended consequences), while not all *purposive* action necessarily entails that the agent has a discursively formulated purpose in mind. That is to say, “most day-to-day activities are not directly motivated” (Giddens 1984:49).

<sup>247</sup> Giddens, just like Ricoeur (when one’s considers Ricoeur’s action theory as a whole), has a very comprehensive conception of ‘reflexivity.’ Giddens (1984:3) writes that reflexivity should not merely be limited to denoting ‘self-consciousness’, but should also be taken to mean the ability of an agent to monitor ongoing social life. In other words, what is sometimes referred to throughout this thesis as ‘prereflexivity,’ ‘abstract reflexivity,’ or ‘immediate reflexivity’ is encompassed (paradoxical as it might sound) within both Giddens and Ricoeur’s understandings of reflexivity. This is because prereflexivity entails self-imputation: even though I shift my gears in a way that not self-conscious, it is still ‘I’ who do so.

<sup>248</sup> Both authors, however, assert that one cannot exhaustively describe action: action sometimes escapes words due to its fullness or temporality (Ricoeur 1966:205; Giddens 1979:40).

agent who is acting purposively at the level of practical consciousness (also a prereflexive knowing how to act or to go on), and who will be able to describe his or her actions if queried (Stones 200:121-2). However, Giddens (1984:7) – different from Ricoeur – clearly writes that the line between practical and discursive consciousness (or the line between prereflexivity and mediate reflexivity) is often blurred during action.

An action theory of complacency, then, assumes that the agent is reflexive in the broad sense of the term. In other words, the agent makes sense of, or interprets herself in relation to the world, and is able to act due to the fact that she understands herself and the world she acts in. Action is thus reflexively mediated, yet there are two kinds of reflexivity, namely prereflexive reflexivity and reflexivity. In the former case, the agent acts without representing an image to herself as acting, she is an I-in-action (in other words, the agent does not consciously or explicitly think through the action, or of herself doing the action, before or during execution of the action; she casually – to use Giddens’s word, carries out her action in her day-to-day life). Thus, not all action is “preceded by clear goals” (Joas and Knöbl 2009:291). The agent is able to act in this prereflexive manner because the agent tacitly knows how to ‘go on’ in society and certain contexts, and has learnt how to do things unreflectingly through the body, through habits (Ricoeur 1966:280) and routines (Giddens 1979:218-9). In addition, in late modern societies, agents have to trust in abstract systems, on the level of practical consciousness or on the prereflexive level, in order to go about their daily action (Giddens 1990:33-4, 83). The majority of action happens prereflexively, or on the level of practical consciousness. In the case of reflexivity, the agent thinks through, narrates, or describes the action, and in the process thinks of herself as a ‘self’ who has done (or perhaps is busy carrying out) the action. Finally, an action theory of complacency will adopt Giddens’s description of the relationship between prereflexive reflexivity and reflexivity, namely that the line between them are often blurred during action. That is to say, within the continuous process of action, the agent might switch between prereflexive self-control and moments of deliberately conscious reflection on her action.

### ***Spatiotemporality: The Body in the World***

Above we have thus seen that both Giddens and Ricoeur hold that action is not completely consciously controlled: a lot of our actions happen in routine or habitual ways, closely connected to the body. Giddens and Ricoeur’s action theories thus take into account the spatiotemporal dimension of the agent, by acknowledging the subject-body as the locus



from which one interacts with the world or one's surroundings (Ricoeur 1966; Giddens 1984:3-4, 83).

However, Giddens's emphasis on the spatiotemporality of action is more pronounced, and his ideas on what it means when one says that (social) action is spatiotemporal, is spelt out in greater detail. Although Ricoeur has a more clarified conception of time (see *Time and Narrative*, volumes I-III, and Ricoeur's essay "Initiative" in *From Text to Action*), Ricoeur's exploration of space is very limited (Collington 2001:224-225). It also seems as if Ricoeur's attention to the spatiotemporality of action has diminished along with his more concentrated focus on a hermeneutical interpretation of action (as text and narrative).<sup>249</sup> This is probably because Ricoeur (1991:150) holds that one can only investigate meaningful action "...under the condition of a kind of objectification that is equivalent to the fixation of discourse by writing." This 'fixation' of action leads to a more static or embedded notion of action, at the cost of understanding action as continuous and space-bound. I will return to the issue of Ricoeur's 'embedded' notion of action, later.

Giddens (1984:29, 71), however, describes how agents interact with one another through drawing on their spatiotemporal surroundings. More specifically, agents draw on rules and resources – namely structural properties – during social interactions or social practices. These rules and resources enable, sustain, and lend "'systemic' form" to recognizable social practices which exist across various time-space settings (Giddens 1984:17). As the reader will recall, rules (or 'schemas', as Stones (2005:67) calls it) refer to that knowledge the agent has of how to 'go on' in society, while resources act as material levers of rules. Resources can either be allocative (command over material things) or authoritative (command over persons). Both rules and resources have (virtual and) physical aspects, and thus express the spatiotemporality of human interaction. Later on, it will also be illustrated how Giddens'

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<sup>249</sup> Consider, for example, how Ricoeur describes action in his earlier work, as opposed to in his later work. In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur writes that action escapes words: it is "*present and full*", it is an event which creates something new in the world, something actual, and something which is present in the very "*forward movement of existence itself*" [emphasis mine] (Ricoeur 1966:205). Ricoeur spends more time exploring the prereflexive aspect of action (action that is not yet mediated by language, text, or narrative). Then, in *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur (1991:135-6) starts to speak of action as "initiating" a closed system of action: within this closed system which consists of an "initial state, internal alternatives, and terminal states" one can now situate action. In other words, action is analogous to text. As such, Ricoeur's description of actions becomes more fixed and loses its continuous spontaneity. This process is complete, as Wolff (2014) indicates so clearly, when Ricoeur (1992:152) undertakes a "revision in the very concept of action" in *Oneself as Another* in his endeavor to make sense of actions as *couched* in people's narratives.

exposition of spatiotemporality furthers our understanding of how institutions can exist beyond individual actors (Wolff 2014:118).

However, when Giddens discusses late modernity, he reveals that a separation of time from place, and space from place, can be brought about through technology and disembedding mechanisms (symbolic tokens and expert systems). The 24-hour clock and communication devices enable us to interact with others without being in the same locale or place as our interlocutors; likewise, symbolic tokens such as money, and expert systems, in the form of specialised knowledge, connects us with, and allows us to interact with other agents around the globe in direct and indirect ways. Yet, this does not mean that action is no longer spatiotemporal;<sup>250</sup> merely that there is a myriad of new ways to recombine time and space, and thus innumerable new ways to interact with (more) others. Additionally, due to the way time and space is organised in modernity, the reach of modern institutions is global. This implies that agents cannot ‘opt out’ of these modern institutions: in this subtle way, then, action is also informed by spatiotemporal factors.

Moreover, according to Giddens (1984:60) spatiotemporality is tied up with “ontological security”. Ontological security refers to the prereflexive way that the body passes through established time-space paths, interacting with abstract systems, which form routines that are vital both to the continuity of the agent’s personality and to the continued reproduction of institutions (and ultimately, society)<sup>251</sup> (Giddens 1984:50, 60). With Giddens’s modernity studies we have also seen that ontological security is connected to trusting other persons encountered *within routines*. As the body goes through its habitual motions in these routine encounters or time-space paths with other agents, social interactions are bound to social reproduction (and hence to the endurance of institutions) (Giddens 1984:72). Giddens thus explains, via his spatiotemporal account of routine action, how self-constancy (Ricoeurian *ipseity*) and habitual interpretation constitute identity, and why self-constancy (in the form of keeping one’s promises to others, or being reliable in everyday encounters [keeping one’s

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<sup>250</sup> Trusting in abstract systems – which the modern agent has to do – thus leaves agents open to “psychological vulnerability” (Giddens 1990:113). This vulnerability should be taken into account when one considers agents who are acting complacently. The late-modern agent finds herself under a heavy burden in the form of the associated risks of society, all while forging an identity in circumstances that are constantly being overthrown and changed due to the dynamic nature of modernity. Yet, while the “disembedding mechanisms intrude into the heart of self-identity; [...] they do not ‘empty out’ the self any more than they simply remove prior supports [such as a firm belief in traditions, religious cosmologies, kinship relations, and the local community] on which self-identity was based” in more pre-modern societies (Giddens 1991:148-9).

<sup>251</sup> Since ontological security is a kind of trust that the world is as it seems to be, Giddens is in fact expressing a phenomenology.

promises to oneself]) is necessary to constitute and maintain agency and institutions. Identity and institutions are thus intertwined in a profound way.

On the other hand, we have also seen that late modernity brings about a lot of risks due to its spatiotemporal ‘arrangements.’ This kind of society, where agents are confronted by numerous risks and forced to be more dependent on abstract systems, brings about more ontological insecurity. The ontologically insecure agent will struggle to act, since she is forced to be more conscious or reflexive about her action. That is to say, instead of being able to casually go about her day on the level of practical consciousness or in a prereflexive way (in other words, being ontologically secure), she is insecure and will thus have to make more conscious or reflexive decisions as she goes about her day. Moreover, since the agent spends more time in decision or deciding (recall Ricoeur’s (1966:65) discussion on in-decision, where he writes that to act freely – the decision has been made – is to act without anxiety), she will feel more anxious. Giddens corroborates this by writing that if our routine experiences are thrown into disarray – which can happen easily if the involved agents do not conduct themselves in the appropriate, trustworthy and customary ways – then anxiety, unease and apprehension enters into our actions.

An action theory of complacency will thus take into account the spatiotemporal dimension of action connected to the body, the physical world or contexts in which action plays out, and the way that time and space is organized in societies. Pertaining to the latter, we have seen that risks (brought about by the way in which time and space are separated, disembedded, and re-embedded into new contexts in modern societies) compel agents to increasingly move into the level discursive consciousness (reflexivity, in-decision, and thus anxiety), as opposed to carrying out most of their actions on the level of practical consciousness (without anxiety, since most decisions have been made or established through habits or routines). Giddens’s elucidation of the spatiotemporality of action thus complements that of Ricoeur’s in a synthesized action theory based on the two thinkers’ work.

### ***Power***

The next thing which both Ricoeur and Giddens regard as central to their conceptions of social action, is power. To begin with, Ricoeur (1966:54-5) and Giddens (1993:81) both have a basic definition of power (in terms of action) as that capacity or ability which an agent has to introduce change into the world, or to obtain desired results. Ricoeur (1992:220) specifically refers to this ability as ‘power-to-do.’ In addition, on the social and political level,

both Ricoeur and Giddens maintain that power-relations<sup>252</sup> are present in every interaction, on both the interpersonal (social integrational) and institutional (system integrational) levels. Since the power to execute an action does not happen in the kind of world where the agent is all by herself, having the power to do something always implies that one influences others to some degree, whether on purpose or inadvertently. Either one exerts direct influence on the face-to-face other, or one reproduces or changes structures, which then influences third person others. This, of course, also implies that the second and third person others exert power over the agent in question, and that the agent can draw on structures of domination (interwoven with structures of legitimation and signification) to exercise her power to do something.

In addition, both Ricoeur (1992:219) and Giddens (1993:59) recognize that there are varying degrees of social and political power:<sup>253</sup> whether it is top-down authoritarian power (which might border on violence in its extreme form), or whether it is mere conversation where some have more *influence* than others, because some “participants may bring unequal resources” to the conversation or the interaction. Both authors also hold that even if one finds oneself in the role of sufferer, or the traditionally weaker role, one can still exercise power. While Giddens (1984:16) is more adamant that one can exercise power over one’s superior to varying degrees, Ricoeur (1992:157) takes a softer position and instead says that the role of sufferer (or the one who omits to act, or endures the other’s power over them) entails “...keeping oneself, willingly or not, under the power of the other’s action...” Yet, what remains the same is that both authors admit through their conceptions of social and political power that power is both enabling and constraining (Giddens 1984:174-6; Ricoeur 1992:145).

Thus far, while both Ricoeur and Giddens recognize that one both has the power or capacity to act and that one can exert power over people (Ricoeur refers to the latter as ‘power-over’ others, while Giddens calls it having authoritative resources), it is Giddens (1993:116) who draws our attention to the more material aspect of power by referring to allocative resources as the power one has over objects, and as the means used to exercise power. In the previous section we have already seen this unique contribution of Giddens to (a joint) action

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<sup>252</sup> I will pay some attention to Ricoeur’s political (via Arendt) notion of “power-in-common” later.

<sup>253</sup> Here, once again, Ricoeur’s action theory in *Freedom and Nature* is the exception. In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur does not include the other (the second and third person) in his notion of power. In other words, in his earlier action theory Ricoeur does not realise that one needs another to actualize one’s capability or power to act. However, if one considers Ricoeur’s action theory as a whole (in other words, the various action theories found in Ricoeur’s various works that I have considered, are read as supplementing each other), this statement is not an issue.

theory based on the two thinkers' work, where I have pointed out that Giddens's account of 'space' and 'place' in the spatiotemporal dimension of action is more complete than that of Ricoeur's. Wolff (2013; 2014:118) confirms this and writes that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the capable man neglects to account for the material means and technical skills involved in action. In addition, Stones (2005:73) – in his strengthening of Giddens's insights – helps us to realise that power over material objects (allocative power) are in an interdependent relationship with authoritative power (having command over people). Material resources are not mere things, 'standing around', ready to be used – material resources are always embedded in a context consisting of norms, interpretative schemes, and power, as shaped and wielded by other agents.

However, in defence of Ricoeur, in *Freedom and Nature* Ricoeur does make mention – in a very general way – of the material means and capacities of acting. Ricoeur (1966:54-5) writes that the power or capacity to act is determined, in part, by the possibilities that the world allows and by one's capacities (such as one's habits, one's body, or one's personality). Yet, as Wolff (2013:51) rightly points out, this account of means of acting is still far too vague, because Ricoeur does not speak of the mediums of acting – such as transport or communication technologies (to mention two of Giddens's examples) – nor of specific institutional forms of acting, nor of the varying degrees to which an agent is able to act because of these institutional forms and mediums. In this regard, Giddens' action theory is more complete and should hence supplement Ricoeur's action theory.

An action theory of complacency will therefore take account of the various dimensions of power: power as that capacity and ability to act; power-relations (with both interpersonal or institutional others) as both enabling and constraining the agent and action; and power as having control over material means, where control over material means are both constrained by existing power-structures *and* enables one to act and exercise power over others.

### ***Morality, Ethics, and Normative Regulation***

However, relations of power in social interactions is part of a triad. Recall that Giddens (1993:165) holds that social practice or interaction has three dimensions: "the constitution of meaning, morality and relations of power." These three dimensions of social interaction is merely an analytic distinction; it is therefore necessary to speak of meaning and morality in conjunction with power (Giddens 1993:110). I will not now address the dimension of meaning or signification (since I have obliquely addressed it earlier when I discussed Ricoeur and

Giddens's explanation of how structure, and language as a kind of structure, allows the agent to execute meaningful action and discourse). However, for clarity's sake I will state here that both Giddens (1984:29) and Ricoeur (2016:179) agree that 'interpretative schemes' (Giddens's terminology) or 'general classes' (of motives, dispositions, feelings, or maxims, in Ricoeur's terms) are "the modes of typification incorporated within actors' stocks of knowledge, applied reflexively in the sustaining of communication" (Giddens 1984:29). These stocks of knowledge are the same used to formulate accounts of, or reasons for, actions (Giddens 1984:29; Ricoeur 1991:134).

Here, I wish to address the dimension of morality, and how Ricoeur and Giddens compare regarding this aspect of social interaction. Giddens (1993:125; 1984:30) writes that one can structurally analyse the dimension of morality as legitimation, where structures of legitimation can in turn be analytically broken down into "modes of normative regulation" (Giddens 1979:97; 1993:130). Agents draw on norms<sup>254</sup> or normative regulations (these are modes of reproduction where the agent and structure come together), in order to create moral interactions,<sup>255</sup> while at the same time reproducing "the structural components [in this case, legitimation] of systems of interaction" (Giddens 1979:81). As such, Giddens (1979:86) writes that norms "may be treated as the actualisation of *rights* and the enactment of *obligations*." Finally, Giddens (1993:114) adds that "...norms are both *constraining* and *enabling*." Since Giddens (1979:86) writes that moral interactions are facilitated by norms (as mode of reproduction of structure, where the structure in this case is legitimation), being constrained and enabled by norms, implies that one is often obliged to respect others' rights (one has duties), but at the same time one can claim certain rights for oneself (duties to be performed in relation to oneself). However, during the production of moral interaction, one is dependent upon the responses of others in order to sediment a normative practice<sup>256</sup> (Giddens 1993:114).

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<sup>254</sup> Giddens seems to shorten 'normative regulation' into the notion 'norms', which might lead to confusion. That is to say, Giddens's notion of 'norms', contrary to how the term is ordinarily understood, has a distinctly moral and legal connotation to it.

<sup>255</sup> Remember the other two dimensions of social interactions that are inextricably part of moral interactions. Moral social interaction is both meaningful and a "set of relations of power" (Giddens 1993:114). Within the sphere of meaning, agents can negotiate what counts as transgressions, and the interpretation of the 'transgression' can in turn affect what type of sanction the agent will be subject to (Giddens 1993:115). In the sphere of power, one can argue that different world views entail different norms, or that there exists different "understandings of 'common' norms" (Giddens 1993:115-6).

<sup>256</sup> Regarding a richer understanding of how norms, as modes of regulation, shape an agent's action, it is helpful to draw on Ricoeur's description of ethical and moral action. It is difficult to esteem one's projects or actions (and by implication oneself) as worthy and respectable, if others do not do so as well. In other words, one can theoretically attest that one's action is worthy, but it is impossible to speak of something as "worthy" without an intersubjective agreement about what is worthy or good. One can therefore only esteem a specific action as worthy

That is to say, “...normative elements of social systems are contingent claims which have to be sustained and ‘made to count’ through the effective mobilization of sanctions in the contexts of actual encounters” (Giddens 1984:30).

Finally, Giddens (1979:219) writes that the normative regulations that are the strongest are those that are supported by tradition. In other words, Giddens (1981:11) implies that action in late modern societies are stripped from “moral meaning”, since tradition holds a less foundational position in these societies. In addition, we have seen that late modern institutions sequester moral experience, and that agents who reflexively construct their identities or biographical narratives in these societal circumstances consequently end up with only ‘authenticity’ as their moral compass. That is to say, the authenticity or integrity of the self is “*internally referential*: the only significant connecting thread is the life trajectory as such” (Giddens 1991:80). Life experiences are connected to a “narrative of self-development” in the pursuit of creating a “personal belief system by means of which the individual acknowledges that ‘his first loyalty is to himself.’ The key reference points are set ‘from the inside’, in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his life history” (Giddens 1991:80). Thus, not only are agents encouraged to assign more importance to ‘finding themselves’ than to more external moral and existential matters, agents are also inundated by – and thus preoccupied with – the multitude of options they have available to draw on in the process of building or shaping their own authentic selves. “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity” (Giddens 1991:70).

However, even though late modern structures and institutions both enable and constrain action in the abovementioned ways, and thus “...form[...] ‘personality’ and ‘society’ simultaneously” it does not do so exhaustively (Giddens 1979:70). Social structures cannot constitute personality and society exhaustively, “because of the significance of unintended consequences of action, and because of unacknowledged conditions of action” (Giddens 1979:70). As such, even though modern institutions sequester morality and offer a multitude of lifestyle options through its abstract systems (which tend to distract agents from moral and existential questions), agents are able to move beyond or outside of these institutional constraints and forge “coherent, yet continuously revised,” identities that are morally informed (and these agents will consequently be able to better grapple with moral issues during action)

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if one thinks or esteems it good or worthy for *another* to also execute that action. In this way then, does Ricoeur supplement Giddens’s notion of norms or morals becoming established or sedimented.

(Giddens 1991:5, 12). In addition, since agents routinely and continuously create and recreate structures of society, they might be able to eventually change these structures of late modernity that tend to shunt morality to the side (on which they might eventually draw to act morally). Giddens therefore provides us with a detailed description of *how* norms or normative regulations (which determine whether an action will be deemed moral or immoral) arise, *and* how late modernity's abstract systems contribute to the constitution of the moral (or perhaps rather amoral or immoral) agent, and by implication moral action.

On the other hand, Ricoeur provides us with an account of identity that counters Giddens's non-moral and perhaps even immoral construal of late modern identity; in addition, Ricoeur provides us with an account of morality that is more prescriptive (as opposed to Giddens's more descriptive version). I will first look at Ricoeur's notion of identity that (prescriptively) challenges Giddens's notion of modern identity construction. Recall that Ricoeur argues that the self constructs his or her narrative identity around sameness (*idem*-identity) and selfhood (*ipse*-identity). That is to say, within in one's life narrative, one thinks of oneself as continuous, as a character, as a type of stability over time (*idem*-identity), but also as changing (*ipse*-identity): one can thus make sense of one's changing character or tie one's disparate and unique actions together through narrative. In the current context, I am interested in *ipseity*. Ricoeur defines *ipse*-identity in terms of an ethics of promise: the promise entails other persons, since a promise is a word given to *another*. Keeping one's promises are often done despite oneself (despite the *idem*-part of identity). Understanding oneself as *ipseity* (together with *idem*-identity) thus contributes an *ethical* mediation of others in the heart of the self. Therefore, Ricoeur adds an ethical foundation to the notion of the self, closely connected to other agents. And it is this aspect that Giddens claims is largely absent from the process of honing an identity in late modernity. Although Giddens concedes, in more general way, that others are indeed part of one's identity, he does not assume a prescriptive tone, as Ricoeur seems to do here. In other words, one can argue that, according to Giddens, agents – even late modern agents – have the agency to keep promises to others (despite the sequestration of moral experience). Yet, whether late modern agents will *interpret themselves* in this more ethical manner, as having to keep promises to others in order to construct a narrative identity, is another matter. That is to say, Ricoeur seems to prescribe, rather than describe, this more moral dimension of construing an identity.



Moreover, contrary to Giddens's descriptive account of morality, Ricoeur's (1992:258; 1999:46-7) account of morality, although detailed, sensitive to the plurality-universality aporia (namely that "...the public good [normative regulations] cannot be decided in a scientific or dogmatic matter", even though they have a kind of 'universal' character, or at least appearance), and ascribing to the notion that the distribution of shares entails the distribution of rights and duties, assumes a more prescriptive tone. In other words, while Giddens describes how norms are formed and shaped through social interactions in conjunction with structures of signification and domination, Ricoeur (1992:171-2) seems to *both* describe how normative regulations are formed through an interplay between the individual and society<sup>257</sup> and posit, and thus prescribe, certain normative regulations (namely the three formulations of Kant's categorical imperative, supplemented and based on a teleological ethics; and ultimately, practical wisdom where one is primarily guided by ethics while betraying the moral rule to the least extent possible). While these posited or prescribed normative regulations are undeniably socio-historical,<sup>258</sup> Ricoeur's selection of them (from amongst other possible normative regulations or moral-ethical frameworks), is what makes Ricoeur's account of morality prescriptive.

My action theory of complacency will consequently allow for consideration of the moral milieu in which the agent finds him or herself (in other words, the way in which normative regulations came to be constituted through the duality of structure and agency, and how these normative regulations – or lack thereof, in the case of late modernity – in turn constitute the agent and his or her actions), and how this works in acting complacently. In addition, via Ricoeur's more prescriptive ethico-moral theory, I will be able to evaluate cases of complacent action as more or less morally blameworthy. That is to say, cases where the agent does not consider the other within the formulation of her narrative is more morally blameworthy, while instances where the other – and keeping promises to the other – is central

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<sup>257</sup> Ricoeur holds that because of the quasi-immemorial origin of normative regulations, one might be tempted to hypostatize these normative regulations as Platonic essences or perhaps as values inherent in nature. In contrast to ethical substantialism, Ricoeur's position is undeniably socio-historical: Ricoeur (1991:176) argues that even though values appear to us as already always given, we must not make them quasi-objects, endowed with a specific transcendence; instead, what is held as 'good' is not based on the immutable order of things, but on a sedimented history of social practices (Michel 2006:303-4, 307).

<sup>258</sup> With Ricoeur, moral language is always already situated in an ethical tradition (Ricoeur never claims an ahistorical point of view). Michel (2006:407) holds that Ricoeur aspires, from the very heart of beliefs rooted in tradition, to identify 'normative invariants' strong enough to be able to found virtually any kind of living-together. For Ricoeur, one of these normative invariants is the Golden Rule, which does not take the form of an ahistorical principle, but manifests itself as a trans-historical normative regulation, and thus as a concrete universal (Michel 2006:407).

to the agent in question's narrative identity, is morally likely to be less blameworthy. In addition, one can use Ricoeur's notion of practical wisdom (where one is primarily guided by ethics while betraying the moral rule to the least extent possible) to determine, amongst other things, whether certain cases of complacent action are more or less morally blameworthy.

### ***Explanation and Understanding; Rationalization***

Next, an action theory of complacency, as I have said above, acknowledges that human beings are part of both the realms of subjectivity and objectivity. It is necessary to explore the empirical side of such a statement and to see whether Ricoeur and Giddens are compatible on this level too. While Ricoeur writes that human beings *explain* their actions in a way that is *understandable* to other human beings, Giddens's speaks of 'rationalization.' Both authors' notions rest on the premise that human action is meaningful. According to Ricoeur (1991:129-134), human reasons for acting include both causes (typically associated with causal explanation, expressed as 'my thirst caused me to drink the water') and motives (typically associated with understanding, expressed as 'since I was thirsty, I drank water'). As was shown in chapter three, it was found that it is more helpful to think of human reasons-for-doing in terms of desires or wants. In other words, desire is both the cause (explanation) and reason (understanding) for one's actions.

Similarly, the concept of rationalization, as Giddens defines it, is not rationalization in the sense of providing one hundred percent rational reasons, nor one hundred percent causal explanations for one's actions. In language reminiscent of that of Ricoeur, Giddens (1979:57) writes that one should try to '*explain*' why one acts like one does by providing *reasons*. Recall that when Giddens (1984:5) speaks of the rationalization of action, he means "...that actors [...] routinely and for the most part without fuss – maintain a continuing 'theoretical understanding' of the grounds of their activity." As early as *New Rules for Sociological Method*, Giddens (1993:85) already asserts that "[t]he frames of meaning whereby we make sense of events are never purely 'descriptive' [associated with understanding], but are closely interwoven with more thorough-going explanatory schemes, and the one cannot be cleanly prised loose from the other." Rationalization encapsulates both explanation and description/understanding, since one has a continuous understanding of one's actions based on practical knowledge, and is therefore able to explain one's actions in a way that is meaningful to other agents. As such, an action theory of complacency will allow one to understand complacent action as something that one can both describe/understand *and* explain, where

desire can then be seen as that which both *causes* our actions, but is also the *reason* for our actions.

### **Motives**

In addition to the fact that desires are motives for our actions, both Ricoeur and Giddens (1984:6) admit that *not* all our desires, and thus motives, are wholly transparent to us. Thus, even though an agent can rationalize or explain why she acts the way she does in a way that is comprehensible to others, she is not always aware of all her motives which underlie her actions. Giddens (1984:6-7) explicitly speaks of the unconscious with regards to motives: some motives or desires are cognitively repressed (that is to say, these motives cannot be expressed discursively). Similarly, Ricoeur (1966:342) holds the unconscious is a source of motives and that there is, consequently, no such a thing as a purely conscious and voluntary choice. As such, both Ricoeur (1991: 220) and Giddens realise that actions have unintended consequences,<sup>259</sup> and that one acts in situations that one did not create.

To the unconscious as a source of motives, Ricoeur (1966:85, 122) adds the body as another source of involuntary motives (in the form of habits, bodily needs, and the body as “affective medium of all values”<sup>260</sup> (Ricoeur 1966:122)). History too, is similar to an involuntary motive, since one does not choose to have a history. Thus, just as one sometimes acts due, in part, to the unconscious and is in turn affected by the effects of one’s own and others’ unconsciously motivated acts, one acts through the body, and in history, while also

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<sup>259</sup> Ricoeur does not only arrive at the insight that action has unintended consequences through the unconscious, Ricoeur also comes to this realisation by comparing the text to action. Ricoeur (1991:153) writes:

“In the same way that a text is detached from its author, an action is detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own. This autonomization of human action constitutes the *social* dimension of action. An action is a social phenomenon not only because it is done by several agents in such a way that the role of each of them cannot be distinguished from the role of the others, but also because our deeds escape us and have effects we did not intend.”

<sup>260</sup> In the chapter on Ricoeur’s action theory considered as a whole, I showed the importance of emotion in an action theory: our emotions reveal what we value through the body, and can therefore help us (in conjunction with our cognitive capacities) to determine our moral position in relation to some matter. Here, I briefly want to connect emotion to social theory. (I won’t say anything about habits and the body in relation to society here, since these aspects and how they relate to the agent and society are made explicit by Giddens: think for example, how routine time-space paths reconstitutes social reproduction, which in turn, sediments social institutions). In short, a sociological account of action must include emotions or affects, because it is through affects that society penetrates the individual (Ricoeur 1966:125-9). In more Giddensian terms, it is through emotions that structure becomes internalized in the agent. An agent will not draw on structures that he or she does not value. In other words, structures must affect agents before agents will draw on them in order to act. For example, when writing about late modernity, Giddens (1990:125) holds that the general public is well aware of the dangers and risks that confront modernity. In fact, they might be so aware of the dangers of, for example, nuclear war and climate change, that they become bored of hearing of these risks: a kind of numbing effect hence takes place (Giddens 1990:127-8). Giddens uses the word ‘numbness’ here, denoting that agents do not *feel affected*. As Ricoeur (1966:122) writes: “no motive can incline me if it does not *impress my sensibility*”.

being affected by the body and history. Since Giddens (1993:92, 134) posits that motives are “wants [both agent- and externally-generated] which prompt action” through the production of interests, he also implicitly recognizes the role of the body as a source of motives. Yet, while Ricoeur’s exposition of involuntary motives is the richer of the two due to Ricoeur’s thorough account of the body as source of involuntary motives, Giddens provides a more comprehensive account of how motives are influenced by history and society. That is to say, Giddens (1984:50) describes in more detail how motives are “mediated by the social relations which individuals sustain in the routine practices of their daily lives.” Both accounts of motive thus supplement each other to form a fuller picture. An action theory of complacency will thus draw on both our author’s accounts of motives for a more comprehensive account of what motivates complacent action.

### ***Constraint and Enablement, or Passivity and Activity***

Earlier I have written that Ricoeur and Giddens both uphold an agent who is knowledgeable and extremely skilled at monitoring his or her daily interactions, and thus has the ability to reclaim freedom, or choose otherwise, even if this means that the agent consents to his or her constraints. Next, I would thus briefly like to look at the two thinkers’ ideas surrounding constraint. However, when discussing constraint, or what Ricoeur would call suffering or passivity in the heart of activity, one always has to keep in mind that constraints also enable agents to act.

First, for both Giddens and Ricoeur,<sup>261</sup> human action only becomes meaningful within “social contexts which enable, but also constrain it” (Ricoeur 1991:203-5; Ballantyne 2007:147-8). That is to say, the other provides a context in which I (inter-)act, the other implies that there are passive parties within interaction, the other, through actualizing or embodying certain avenues of action can limit or open options of meaningful action for me, the other forms traditions and sets standards of excellence which influence my life plans, and the other creates uncertainty which prevents me from being completely in control of my life plans (Wolff 2014:111). As such, the abovementioned factors limit autonomous action. Although Ricoeur

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<sup>261</sup> Once again, note that Ricoeur did not explore how the other enables one to actualize one’s action in his earlier action theory as found in *Freedom and Nature* and *From Text to Action*. However, since I have suggested that the earlier action theories should be incorporated into the later theory as found in *Oneself as Another*, and I have highlighted the unique contributions that the earlier action theories make to Ricoeur’s action theory considered as a whole, the Ricoeurian-Giddensian action theory should also include Ricoeur’s earlier fascinating insights, such as how the body and the unconscious both facilitate and constrain action, and how action considered as text helps one to realise that one is constrained or affected by the world and history, but that it simultaneously enables one to act.

realises that action cannot be actualized without the other (in his later action theory), Wolff (2014:112) argues that Ricoeur's theory of social action is underdeveloped in terms of theorizing constraints in social interaction. This is something which Giddens' theory of structuration will, of course, supplement in an action theory of complacency.

Giddens insists that unintentional consequences, as well as long-lasting social structures, may exert an effect of constraint on the action of the actors, but this constraint is always accompanied by facilitation (enablement of action) (Wolff 2014:115). This is what Giddens refers to as the 'duality of structure': while agents reconstitute social structures through their social practices, these very social structures (thus rules and resources) both enable and constrain their actions while they do so. This constraint-enablement is present all the way from the level of the body of the individual actor, to the level of interaction with social systems (Giddens 1984:172-3; Wolff 2014:115).

Besides constraints inherent in the social nature of action (that is, structural constraints), Giddens (1984:174-6) also argues that factors such as the natural world and the body (time-space, known as material constraints), and power relations (sanctions) constrain the actor. I have discussed these constraints above. Yet, once again, these constraints are also enablers, since one's material existence and one's capacity (power) enables one to make changes in the world. As Wolff (2014:118) writes, Giddens demonstrates that these constraints on action, informs, rather than imposes on, one's way of acting. Ricoeur's action theory largely accords with the aforementioned, but provides a much more detailed exposition of constraints inherent in human nature.

Because of the kind of beings that we are – both bodies (nature) and subjects – we are constrained by organic needs, emotions, habits, character, the unconscious, and the fact of life. Yet, by laying hold of these constraints and making it part of one's freedom, these components also make possible our action in the world (Ricoeur 1966:446). Freedom thus complements nature by taking it in or including it in its sphere. Ricoeur thus also recognizes that constraints enable action. As a result of Ricoeur's more 'interior' notion of constraint, Ricoeur's (1966:447) agent is characterized by a tension in his or her very being: a person is both action and passivity. In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur writes that the subject experiences its brokenness, tension, passivity, or suffering as 'effort.' In many ways, the passivity, tension, or constraint in the very core of action spills over into the moral dimension of action: that is to say, the capable agent will often find itself in situations where he or she does not know how to

act (ethically), due to various social, physical, historical and normative constraints. Giddens (1979:161) perhaps also acknowledges this existential fault line or tension in the person: “human society expresses a contradictory form...” because “human beings exist in a contradictory relation to nature[: ...] they are in and of nature, as corporeal beings existing in material environments; and yet at the same time they are set off against nature, [...] irreducible to physical objects or events.”

An action theory of complacency thus acknowledges the deep-seated and inherent constraints or passivity in the heart of action or activity. In sum, the agent is someone who is both active and passive, who both undergoes and chooses existence, who acts and is subjected to action, who initiates and receives, who gives and receives reasons for action, who both exerts influence or power over other agents and is subject to the influence or power of other agents, and who both constitutes and is constituted by structures, social systems and institutions.

### ***Action as Ongoing Flow; Action as Embedded in Narrative***

Next, I will focus on a dissimilarity between Ricoeur and Giddens, which will then branch out into another disparity between the two thinkers. In the end, I will show that Giddens’s account of continuous action and Ricoeur’s more static and teleological notion of action complement each other. As one might have noticed, the language that the two thinkers use to describe action or interaction, differs. Giddens (1984:6) understands and describes action as continuous, while Ricoeur’s notion of action is more segmented and static (although not wholly without a conception of continuity). Thus, on the one hand, Giddens (1984:8) refers to action as a duration, (“*durée*”) or an ongoing “flow of intentional action.” More specifically, Giddens (1993:81) formally defines action or agency as “*the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world.*” On the other hand, Ricoeur’s eventual<sup>262</sup> conception of action is characterised by “embeddedness”, as Wolff (2014:114) describes it. This embeddedness is largely due to Ricoeur’s narrative conception of action, as described in *Oneself as Another* (anticipated in *From Text to Action* where Ricoeur wants us to read action as text), which calls for an understanding of one’s life as a whole, and consequently for an understanding of life as constituted by a “connection [...] of incidents, of facts” or “units of praxis” or “systems” (Ricoeur 1991:136; 1992:152-3).

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<sup>262</sup> I say ‘eventual’ here, because Ricoeur’s initial description of action was not as embedded (yet still very static, in many respects) as his later descriptions of action. This increasing embeddedness came with Ricoeur’s explicit hermeneutical turn (in relation to the three Ricoeurian texts that I have consulted during this thesis).

Thus, Wolff (2014:110) writes that these “units of praxis” (Ricoeur 1992:153), which range from basic actions to actions in view of some larger goal, from “partial actions” to “total actions” (that is to say, to practices), and then to life plans and the narrative unity of a life which is aimed at the good life, all form part of Ricoeur’s teleological vision of action. Wolff (2014:110-1) argues that a teleological view of action (not to be confused with Ricoeur’s ethical aim, which is also teleological) is inadequate, since it only partially and inaccurately represents real interactions between people: a teleological approach to action does not account for cases where people’s actions are largely made up of ‘partial’ actions which never flow into total actions (practices), and hence into a ‘life plan’; it cannot incorporate the enduring/suffering aspects of action (since according to the teleological view, suffering and enduring are rather seen as consequences of action); it cannot account for people who have sunk into despair or who have lost all direction; and finally it cannot account for the way children do things. It thus appears that Giddens’s understanding of action as continuous might be the more accurate representation of reality between the two authors.

As such, Wolff (2014:111) identifies the need to go beyond Ricoeur’s teleological schema of action (not teleology as found in the ethical aim). Yet, Wolff (2014:111) also adds that Ricoeur provides for some flexibility in his construal of action as teleological. First, Ricoeur makes (1992:158) it clear that “the practical field is not constituted from the ground up, starting from the simplest and moving to more elaborate constructions; rather it is formed in accordance with a twofold movement of ascending complexification starting from basic actions and from practices, and of descending specification starting from the vague and mobile horizon of ideals and projects in light of which a human life apprehends itself in its oneness.” Moreover, throughout Ricoeur’s work, he vacillates between a view of one’s life as a “plan,” and life as “uncertainty.” As early as *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur (1966:63) writes of projects and the ‘intention-to’ do something, while simultaneously being aware that these projects might be interrupted, or might not be realised (Ricoeur 1992:81-2). Wolff (2014:111) consequently writes: to act, therefore, is not for Ricoeur to add an isolated act to another and yet another, just as one piles Lego cubes on top of each other; it is to be caught up in the heart of the hermeneutic tension between the whole and the parts. In such a way then, Ricoeur concurs with Giddens (1979:55) that action is not an aggregate of acts.

However, Giddens takes this further by stressing that action is a *continuous*, lived-through experience, and as such, it is not composed of ‘basic actions’ or ‘acts’<sup>263</sup> (or in Ricoeurian terms, ‘practices’ or ‘life plans’) (Giddens 1993:81; 1984:51).<sup>264</sup> Action should therefore be understood only from the unit of reference that is the agent.<sup>265</sup> One only starts to speak of ‘acts’ when one discursively refers to one’s action, and this requires that one has to conceptually cut into the stream of action and reflexively abstract segments of action. However, it does seem as if Giddens’s notion of action as a continuous lived through experience entails or allows for a teleological element, even though Giddens never explicitly speaks about ‘intended consequences’ or anticipated consequences (as opposed to unintended consequences), in his action theory (Wolff 2014:107). (In fact, one might argue that Giddens’s account of action is lacking in this respect: his agents, with the exception of his late modern agents, hardly seem to have future goals and seem to live in the moment.<sup>266</sup> Surely this cannot be accurate: Giddens ought to have realised that agents at all time periods have goals or tasks that they wish to complete in their day-to-day lives.) Recall that for Giddens, action implies that the agent has practical knowledge of what she is doing, and is therefore prereflexively monitoring her action as she is going along on the level of practical consciousness. However, one’s actions are often interrupted, and then one has to pause and ‘find one’s way’ again. Hence, why one speaks of ‘monitoring’ these actions (Wolff 2014:113). This is further evident when one considers that Giddens views the line between prereflexive and reflexive action, or practical and discursive consciousness, as being blurred during action. That is to say, within

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<sup>263</sup> Ricoeur, in *Freedom and Nature*, had the same view as Giddens of action. Ricoeur did not want to distinguish between action and units of praxis from the point of view of the agent. Ricoeur (1966:209-210) writes in his earlier action theory that to describe a fulfilment of a project as a movement, or a sum of movements, is to be an outside observer regarding the body as a mere object.

<sup>264</sup> Giddens’s critique of Ricoeur in many ways echoes the Quérian critique of Ricoeur’s model of the text as a way to understand action, as we have seen in chapter three.

<sup>265</sup> This notion seems to echo Ricoeur’s method in *Oneself as Another*: Ricoeur argues that in order to understand action, one must ask ‘who?’ (is acting, etc.) instead of ‘what?’ (is action) and ‘why?’ (does it count as action). However, Ricoeur does not reach the same conclusion as Giddens, namely that action is continuous and that one cannot really draw a distinction between action and units of praxis.

<sup>266</sup> In the context of Giddens’s discussion on modernity, Giddens speaks of late modern agents as *increasingly* planning their futures based on expert advice, and as *increasingly* constructing internally coherent life narratives or biographies. Yet, this qualification that Giddens makes to agents and action (as being ‘increasingly’ teleological), is rather strange, since *against what* does Giddens measure this ‘increase’ in teleological attitude? That is to say, from Giddens’s action theory one receives the impression that agents – and thus agents that lived in other social circumstances than that of modernity – seemingly do not plan for the future and do not have any goals that they wish to achieve with their daily actions. How can one thus increase a behaviour or an aspect of action, if it was not there to begin with? It is strange that Giddens’s conception of action in relation to teleological moments within the action, is divided in such an incongruous manner. Giddens should have acknowledged in his action theory that *all agents* have goals: it is highly impossible that only modern agents plan ahead and have goals.



the continuous process of action, the agent might switch between prereflexive self-control and moments of deliberately conscious reflection on her action.

We have come across this insight in *Freedom and Nature* as well. Ricoeur (1966:215) made us aware of the fact that action is an original dimension of the cogito, and as such the capable body is seldom an object of reflection. It is only when we encounter obstacles to our action or when we have to make conscious decisions, that we focus our attention on the action itself (as opposed to experience ourselves as ‘I who act’). In other words, sometimes during our continuous and prereflexive action, it is required that a “strategic” judgement be made in order to reorient the action (Wolff 2014:113). This is then where the Ricoeurian teleological element comes in: through these interruptions, purposeful or teleological action gradually enters the course of action as modifications of the continuous flow of action (Wolff 2014:113). In other words, as I act, I can adjust my action based on aims or purposes. By thinking Ricoeur and Giddens’s notions of ‘action’ together, one therefore obtains an action theory which is no longer entirely teleologically organized (as with Ricoeur) (Wolff 2014:113), nor an action theory where the agent does not seem to have any aims (as with Giddens) but which allows for the fact that continuous action can be partially modified in order to achieve goals or accomplish tasks.

However, to return briefly to Ricoeur’s schema of teleological action: there is another factor which complicates our understanding of teleological action, namely that the “descending specification” of the teleological aim is far too vague and remains in the background of one’s life (Wolff 2014:112). Most people do not, when becoming self-conscious, sit down one day and say to themselves: ‘this will be my life’s aim, once and for all,’ and then go on to write out a detailed script of how their lives should progress in light of this aim. Most of us are, first of all, uncertain about what our aim or *telos* should be, and even if we do identify it, might modify it in the course of our lives. This uncertainty, combined with our power-in-common (our inherent wish to live together in peace with others) that is forgotten, makes one wonder how it is possible for stable social action and institutions to exist within the Ricoeurian framework of action.

Wolff (2014:118) argues that Giddens’s notion of ‘routine’ might help us towards understanding what stabilizes life, despite the absence of a secure and an immutable life plan (which have just seen, is seldom the case for most agents). However, Wolff (2014:118) argues that Giddens’ notion of ‘routine’ is still too unspecified, and hence draws on Marc Breviglieri’s

(2006) further exposition of the term: routine both refers to (1) mechanical-like gestures which are accomplished through habit, (2) and a sequence of actions which are aimed at a result inscribed in a technical procedure. It is the first sense of routine which complements Ricoeur's notion of teleological action, since it is defined in a non-teleological way (Wolff 2014:118).

In other words, it is routine, understood as trust or a reliance on one's habitual bodily movements in set environments, which "is vital to the psychological mechanisms whereby a sense of trust or ontological security is sustained in the daily activities of social life" and "in the continuity of the object-world and in the fabric of social activity" (Giddens 1984:xxiii, 60). With regards to this, Giddens (1984:xxiii-iv) writes: "I think [...] the apparently minor conventions of daily social life are of essential significance in curbing the sources of unconscious tension that would otherwise preoccupy most of our waking lives." That is to say, one cannot constantly focus on one's life goals (and thus constantly think in a teleological way). Instead, most action is characterised by the ability to fall back on routinized action which is only monitored lightly.<sup>267</sup> Such routinization allows for stable social interactions and institutions (although routines, of course, always allow for change through the duality of structure). Yet, recall that I have earlier discussed how late modernity, precisely because ontological security is often threatened, have more dynamic institutions that are constantly being questioned and thus changed. As such, the late modern agent's life is purportedly more unstable.

From the above one can then infer that complacent action should be understood as continuous, but as also being partially modifiable by the agent, in order to achieve goals or accomplish tasks. In addition, even though action is continuous and is not governed by an overarching, secure and immutable life plan, one can make sense of the stability of social interaction and institutions through the notion of 'routinization'. Routinization is understood as trust or a reliance on one's habitual bodily movements in set environments, which allows one to trust others in social interactions and believe in the continuity of the object-world and social institutions. I have added that this trust is somewhat corroded in modern societies. Complacent

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<sup>267</sup> From within Ricoeur's own body of work, one could perhaps also have drawn the same conclusion. In *Freedom and Nature*, as was shown, Ricoeur (1966:286-9) explicitly speaks of habit as that which is learnt and which then becomes "second nature" in the sense that one's "reflexive knowing and willing" withdraws, but which also entails that one is able to innovate and improvise depending on the circumstance in which the habitual actions are exercised. Habit is thus something one can fall back on, and is a "subserving capacity" used in everyday action. In addition, Ricoeur's emphasis on promise-keeping, and its relation to sameness in identity and to being constant so that others can count on you, might also help us to understand how it is that we can count on the continuity of the social world.

action will thus, for the most part, be executed in routines, as mechanical-like gestures that play out through habits. This makes sense, especially if one recalls the antonyms that I have provided for complacency in chapter one of this thesis: concern; discontentment; discomfort; disgruntlement; displeasure; pain; disapprobation; not what one expected; disappointment; soreness; irritation; uneasiness; disquiet; worry; strain; stress; tension; restlessness; unrest; agitation (*Rogert's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* 2002)). These antonyms all indicate ontological *insecurity*: a challenge to routine complacent action. Perhaps then, late modernity might challenge agents' routine complacent action. Or, late modernity might have the opposite effect: agents might feel so ontologically insecure that they try to at least maintain coherent self-narratives or identities, in the process acting complacently.

### ***The Institution***

Finally, I will compare Ricoeur and Giddens' ideas of the institution with the aim of providing a notion of institution fit for an action theory of complacency. One finds that their notions of institution largely overlap. Both Ricoeur (in his later action theory) and Giddens stress that the nature of action is inherently social, since one only understands oneself and what one is doing when one is able to understand (and can describe) the other and what the other does, and the other way around (Giddens 1984:43; 1993:25). Giddens (1993:25) adds, "reflexivity, as the distinctive property of the human species, is intimately and integrally dependent upon the social character of language." Ricoeur (1999:48, 2000:5) also explicitly announces that speaking "is the first condition of personhood" and that the self cannot realise his or her actions without the facilitation of others (both face-to-face, interpersonal others, and others that the self only encounters indirectly via institutions).

Moreover, Ricoeur (1991:220; 1992:200), like Giddens, holds that there is a "false debate over the relation between the individual and society." The individual and society are interdependent, in the sense that each supports the other. Moreover, Ricoeur (1992:200) argues that the interdependent relation between the individual and society is evident when one understands institutions as a distribution of shares. In addition, Ricoeur (1992:200) also wants to avoid the reification of social structures, since this would imply that agents' action will be set in stone. As Giddens (1993:132) writes: "The dissolution of reification is evidently tied to the possibility of the (cognitive) realisation by actors that structures are their own products; and to the (practical) recovery of their control over them" (Giddens 1993:132).

Let us now look at Ricoeur's (1991:194) formulation of the institution:

“By ‘institution,’ we are to understand here the structure of living together as this belongs to a historical community – people, nation, region, and so forth – a structure irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet bound up with these in a remarkable sense which the notion of distribution will permit us to clarify. What fundamentally characterizes the idea of institution is the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules.”

Wolff (2014:106) identifies five traits in the above definition: (1) institutions are structures; (2) these structures are not imposed from the outside, but are organic structures of “living together”; (3) historical communities or institutions are constituted by interpersonal interactions, yet cannot be *reduced* to these interpersonal relations; (4) it appears as if it is the “common mores” or ethos that constitute “structures”, mentioned above; (5) and, the term “participation” would be the appropriate term to denote the co-ordination between actors who share common mores and the historical communities in which they practice them.

Next, Wolff (2014:107) identifies three themes in Ricoeur’s further exposition of the above definition of institution. These themes are ‘power-in-common’ (following Arendt), participating in institutions and the distribution of shares, and the pair ‘forgetting’ and ‘authority’. These themes were all discussed in chapter three of this thesis, but here is a quick recapitulation of each. The first of these, namely power-in-common, is the mutual desire that people have to live and act together (Ricoeur 1992:197). Wolff (2014:107) writes that Ricoeur uses this notion because it (i) extends the power of I-can to the social and political spheres, (ii) and it denotes that institutions consist of intersubjective relations.

Following this, Ricoeur introduces the notion of distribution as that which describes how people can live together in institutions. In other words, living together, or participating in society, is expressed through the distribution of “rights and duties, obligations, advantages, responsibilities and honours” (Ricoeur 1999:47). As Wolff (2017:108) puts it: members of a society “take part” or “share” in the institutions and society from which they receive their shares through “distribution” by the institutions (Ricoeur 1992:107). Wolff (2017:108) says this further qualification of the institution is significant, since it highlights that institutions are the distributors of shares or roles, and the regulators of the rules of distribution. This further qualification therefore emphasises the more organizational aspect of the institution.

Lastly, regarding the pair ‘forgetting’ and ‘authority’, Ricoeur (1992:197) writes that people’s original desire to live and act together has been *forgotten*. Instead we think that in order to live together, we need a guiding and ruling institution to preside over us – brought about through a social contract. That is to say, people have forgotten that it is they who

constitute a society, and thus it is they (not tradition, nor the institution itself) who lend authority to institutions (Wolff 2014:109). In other words, if this desire to live together were to disappear, the legitimacy of the institution would disappear.

From the above three themes, Wolff (2014:109-110) notices that there is, what he calls, an “institutional paradox.” That is to say, authoritative institutions are constituted by the power-in-common of subjects, *despite* the fact that the two aspects of power-in-common (see (i) and (ii) above) remain operational while forgotten. Or, in other words: *on the one hand, institutions can exist at the expense or despite of individuals and, on the other hand, the effectiveness of institutions nevertheless remains indispensable in terms of making individuals capable of living fully with others* (Wolff 2014:110). However, this understanding of the institution does not explain the *mode of existence* of the institution. In other words, *why* are institutions as Ricoeur describes them, how does it work? This is where Giddens comes to the aid of Ricoeur.

Giddens might be able to explain to us how – in Ricoeur’s notion of the institution – the institution’s existence is something else and more than the cumulative effect of interacting actors (Wolff 2014:109). The two aspects of structure, namely rules and resources, are the keys to understanding this characteristic of the institution. If rules and resources are both integral to structure, this implies that context (as constrained and enabled by allocative resources) and means of acting are integrated in action (Wolff 2014:119). Thus structures, even without the co-presence of actors can extend spatially and temporally through communication technologies and transport (Giddens 1979:207; Wolff 2014:119). Allocative resources of structures are thus moved around and so, in turn, have an empowering effect on some complexes of practices within stable or integrated societies. These communities therefore have an autonomous character due to the spatiotemporal distancing of structure: thus, writes Wolff (2014:119), these communities start to resemble text, according to the analogy proposed by Ricoeur. We now begin to see how Giddens’ understanding of structures as rules *and resources* clarifies Ricoeur’s view of institutions: because allocative resources are part of structures which extend spatiotemporally, we can now come to understand how institutions are objectified and are able to support ‘power-in-common’ and contribute to the actions of individuals (Wolff 2014:119).

Above, I showed that Giddens’s theory of action as continuous complements Ricoeur’s teleological notion of action. After having considered Ricoeur’s views on the institution, I now wish to show how Giddens helps us to move beyond Ricoeur’s teleological schema of social action (Wolff 2014:117). Wolff (2014:117) writes that one must first determine whether the

part of the theory (from Giddens) which we will “implant” into Ricoeur’s theory (namely Giddens’s understanding of social action), will be able to do nearly the same work as that which it replaces, or at least supplements (Ricoeur’s understanding of social action). As an answer to this concern, Wolff (2014:117-8) writes that Ricoeur’s use of the Rawlsian model of distribution/participation of rights and duties in society has a close proximity to Giddens’ model of continuous action and the duality of structure.

In other words, social action according to Giddens (1984:14) entails that “unintended consequences are regularly ‘distributed’ as a by-product of regularized behaviour reflexively sustained as such by its participants.” Wolff (2014:118) writes that the duality of structure, as described in this citation, accounts for the ‘mechanism’ of participation and distribution which functions between the agents and their institutions. As such, Ricoeur’s (à la Rawls) understanding of institutions can be complemented by the theory of the duality of structure. An action theory of complacency will hence incorporate this synthetization, and will therefore be able to better account for non-teleological and non-praxical aspects of action, and will be able to explain how institutions endure across time and beyond the immediate presence of agents.

### **6.2.3. Summary**

Below, by way of conclusion, I provide a short summary of the above synthesized action theory in list form.

- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency is characterised by dualities or dialectics; the most foundational dualities or dialectics being that (1) it is neither wholly the agent nor wholly nature which determines action, but both in a dialectic relationship, and (2) it is neither wholly the agent nor wholly institutions/society/social systems/structures which determine(s) action, but the two in a relationship of duality.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency allows one to assign responsibility to an agent for his or her complacent actions, yet will simultaneously allow one to designate some cases of complacent action as more or less morally blameworthy than others.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency further ascribes to the notion that the agent is neither absolute (in the thralls of a delusion that he or she is absolutely in control of her actions) nor an illusion (crippled with doubt to such an extent that the agent cannot act); instead, the agent knows, on the level of practical attestation, that he or she is able to act.

- Moreover, agents know themselves and how to act through interpretation of the world.
- Since agents know how to act through self-interpretation, identity – in both the Ricoeurian sense of ‘who acts?’, and the Giddensian sense of self-representation and the ontological security that goes along with this representation – is central to action. An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency thus allows one to make sense of the profound connection between action and identity.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency further assumes that the agent is reflexive in the broad sense of the term: the agent can act both reflexively and prereflexively, and during action might switch between prereflexive self-control and moments of deliberately conscious reflection on his or her action. This implies that decisions or goals do not necessarily precede action. Instead, most decisions are made while the agent is acting on the prereflexive level.
- In the case of reflexivity, the agent thinks through, narrates, or describes the action, and in the process thinks of herself as a ‘self’ who has done (or perhaps is busy carrying out) the action.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency further acknowledges the central role of the body in action. Agents are able to act prereflexively, because they have learnt how to tacitly ‘go on’ in society and certain contexts, via habits or routines formed through the body.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency takes account of the spatiotemporal dimension of complacent action.
- Power is a key concept in the action theory with a view to elucidate complacency: power-relations between agents both enable and constrain action; power also includes control over material means to act, where control over material means is both constrained by existing power-structures *and* enables one to act and exercise power over others.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency includes guiding principles on what counts as ethical and moral action, in the form of Ricoeur’s little ethics and explanation of practical wisdom (where ethics precedes and underlies morality, but where one betrays the moral rule as little as possible). In addition, Ricoeur thus provides a guiding principle through his notion of practical wisdom on how to distinguish between more and less morally blameworthy instances of complacency. This is not to say that an action theory is an ethics, but just that action theory helps us to think about action as ethical or moral.

- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency will allow one to understand complacent action as something that one can both describe/understand *and* explain, where desire is that which both *causes* our actions, but is also the *reason* for our actions.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency makes space for various motives for action: unconscious motives, motives arising from the body, and socio-historical motives.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency acknowledges the deep-seated and inherent constraints or passivity in the heart of action or activity. In sum, the agent is someone who is both active and passive, who both undergoes and chooses existence, who acts and is subjected to action, who initiates and receives, who gives and receives reasons for action, who both exerts influence or power over other agents and is subject to the influence or power of other agents, and who both constitutes and is constituted by structures, social systems and institutions.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency holds that action is a continuous lived-through experience, but through the course of this continuous action, goals and aims will emerge to accompany and direct the action. Action as a continuous lived-through experience thus allows for smaller teleological modifications along the course of continuous action: this implies that complacent action might sometimes be guided by goals or aims beforehand, but that complacent action might also happen in conjunction with aims, or that complacent action might inspire certain goals or aims to arise. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that not all action is teleological or goal-inspired.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency allows one to make sense of the stability of social life through the Giddensian notion of routine: habitual bodily movements in certain time-space paths followed in everyday social life, provide one with a sense of ontological security or stability.
- An action theory with a view to elucidate complacency explains how institutions exist and extend beyond their constituting agents: institutions exist across time-space distances through allocative resources like communication technologies and transport. As such, action theory allows one to understand how institutions can become objectified and can support the actions of individuals.
- Lastly, an action theory with a view to elucidate complacency allows one to explain, through the notion ‘duality of structure’ how shares are distributed to agents through



societies. Participating agents (in institutions) sustain certain structures; these structures then ‘distribute’ intended and unintended consequences.

Next, I will bring these action theoretical guidelines to bear on complacent action.

### **6.3. An Action Theoretical Account of Complacency**

#### **6.3.1. Introduction**

The current section will be devoted to outlining an action theory of complacency based on the above integration of Ricoeur and Giddens’s action theories. Or, in other words, to describe complacent action following the above insights. The goal is thus to describe what action looks like when it takes on the characteristics – identified in chapter one – of complacency. Different aspects of complacent action will thus emerge, and one will consequently be able to discern different cases of complacent action based on how these aspects vary. In addition, an action theory of complacency will help<sup>268</sup> us to morally or ethically evaluate different cases of complacent action, and determine each case’s blameworthiness.

This section will look as follows: first, I will give a very short account of how complacent action emerges (different from other forms of action) out of the continuous flow of day-to-day action, and then disappears again. That is to say, I will focus on those elements of action that make complacent action unique amongst other actions. Such a description of the specificity of complacent action cannot, however, progress very far without also entering into dialogue with my working definition of complacency that I have provided in chapter one. This is because one cannot speak of complacent action without first presupposing what complacency or complacent action is. Put differently, one cannot work out an action theory of complacency without some analytical guidance (as I have shown in detail in chapter two of this thesis). As such, the second part of this section will be dedicated to a detailed *action theoretical* redescription or reinterpretation of each of the constituents of my working analytical definition of complacency. By bringing action theory and my working definition into a dialectical relationship, I will ultimately be providing an action theory of complacency.

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<sup>268</sup> An action theory merely aids an ethical or moral assessment of action; action theory is not an ethics in itself.

### 6.3.2. The Action Theoretic Specificity of Complacent Action/The Necessary Elements to Describe Complacency as Action

At the end of section 6.2., in summary form, I have clearly delineated the foundational components for an action theory of complacency. I have shown that in order to understand complacency as action, it is necessary to have a conception of action as continuous or ongoing, where the agent is central to action: the agent is moreover embodied, self-reflexive, acts purposively or intentionally, brings about change in the (natural and social) world through his or her actions and is simultaneously constrained or affected by the (natural and social) world and the body in which he or she lives, and can account or provide reasons for his or her actions discursively; moreover, this agent acts within a social context, amongst interpersonal and institutional others, and his or her actions can consequently be interpreted as being ethical or moral. This is a very condensed synopsis of an already condensed summary of action, but I want to state it here as a reminder and as background to a description of those elements of action that are specific to complacent action.

Let us now look at the action theoretic specificity of complacent action. I am going to suppose an agent who acts continuously, constantly and reflexively monitoring and adjusting her action as she goes about her daily life. As she acts, she becomes aware of many things in the world. Becoming aware can be conceptually identified by me, as a bystander or investigator of her continuous action, as an act. But for the agent in question, this awareness happens as part of her ongoing action, mostly on a prereflexive level. While awareness is *done* by the agent as part of her ongoing action, there is also a passive element to this awareness or attention to things in the world, as Ricoeur would describe it. The agent does not choose the world into which she was born into, although she may choose how to interact with the given world, to an extent. She can choose to focus on certain elements of her world and so become more or less aware of them. For example, the agent might be born into a world that is filled with billboards and social media platforms, but also with dog parks and nature reserves. Although the agent did not choose for these things to be there, she can choose to what extent she pays attention to these things (while keeping in mind that billboards and social media are socially designed in such a way to capture and keep more of her attention with them), consequently shaping her awareness of certain matters. In addition, the agent might seek out new things to become aware of; but in most cases this ‘seeking out’ will also be constrained or enabled by prior knowledge of the world. Furthermore, just because an agent is intently aware of something at one moment during her action, does not imply that she maintains the same level of awareness throughout

her day-to-day action. There might be moments that an agent is more (mediately) reflexively aware of something, in the sense that she deliberately thinks of something (the object of awareness) or she might think of herself as being aware of something: for example, thinking of herself as a climate change activist, which reveals that she is thinking of herself as explicitly aware of climate change, or just focussing on climate change itself in a deliberate and conscious manner. On the other hand, there might be times that the agent is aware of the same thing at a more prereflexive level, in the sense that she goes about her actions – informed by this awareness – in an almost unthinking way. Her awareness of climate change is not always explicitly and consciously kept in mind (for how else would she be able to go about her life and other conceptually identifiable acts?). Instead, for the most part her awareness of things fades to the background and forms part of her practical consciousness. Awareness is a foundational action-component of complacent action, since complacent action rests on the premise that the agent must be aware about that which she is complacent about.

Next, as the agent goes about her life, acting on an ongoing basis, with her awareness of things sometimes foremost in her mind, sometimes moving to the back of her mind, she might find herself caring about some of these things that she is aware of. One might think that those things that she cares about will often be foremost in her mind and therefore she will act out her care – in the ongoing flow of action – on the level of discursive consciousness; but this is not necessarily so. A lot of things that she cares about are cared for on the level of practical consciousness, and she might only be vaguely aware of these things throughout her action. For example, on the one hand, she cares about trivial things such as dental health and hygiene, expressed in daily practices of care such as brushing her teeth and showering; on the other hand, she might care about more morally weighty matters such as climate change, expressed in practices of care, such as gradually replacing plastic products with more eco-friendly products, or re-using things, or consuming less things. Caring (itself action) is thus interwoven with her daily continuous action, sometimes assuming a more deliberate form, mostly assuming a more prereflexive form. Being aware of something, and then also caring for that something are prerequisites for complacent action.

However, (conceptually identifiable) acts that contradict the agent's (conceptually identifiable) acts of care (about some matter), also form part of complacent action. That is to say, complacent action is specifically characterized by conceptually identifiable or isolated acts that contradict each other in relation to a specific matter. The agent cares about something (her caring acts demonstrate this), yet she executes acts that often contradict this care and caring

acts about something. This contradiction within complacent action is not what is the most puzzling aspect of – or, does not lie at the heart of – complacent action. One often sees that one acts in non-caring ways towards that (or even those) that one cares deeply about. The crux of complacent action lies in the wrongful evaluation of these non-conforming (to the matter that one cares about) acts. I will discuss this in detail in the next paragraph.

Closely connected to the constituting parts (awareness and concern) of complacent action, is thus the evaluation of one's actions as being caring toward that which one is aware of *and* concerned with. In other words, as the agent goes about her life within the flux of action, she is constantly making evaluations about aspects of her action (and thus about herself). These evaluations – as part of continuous action – can be more deliberate and on the level of discursive consciousness (the agent interrupts, so to speak, the flow of action in order to think of, discuss, narrate, or provide reasons for her action within an evaluation to herself or to others), or evaluation might take place on the prereflexive level (in the sense that to decide to do something is simultaneously to evaluate one's decision as being good, worthy, or valuable). Put differently, the agent is constantly evaluating her action in the sense of *choosing* to perform certain acts, and she is able to evaluate her action after having executed her action, or when asked to do so by other persons. Evaluation, as an action-constituent of complacent action, is however, carried out wrongly by the agent. That is to say, the agent commits a certain mistake during evaluation (whether it is on-going evaluative acts, or the act of more deliberate thinking about, and evaluating her action in hindsight).

This mistake is to evaluate all her (conceptually identifiable) acts as being in line with, or congruous with what she cares about, while some of her acts are clearly incongruous with what she cares about. The mistake that the agent makes during evaluation is, moreover, due to her own fault. These evaluative faults could include negligence or not seeking out information or insight on what might constitute a correct evaluation, deliberate avoidance of information that will enable her to act out or make more correct evaluations, or deliberately distorting information (so that she might be able to evaluate herself as acting in line with what she cares about and her otherwise caring actions about the matter she cares about). And, once again, since these faults are part of the action that is evaluation, and part of the more general ongoing action of the agent: these faults might be executed in ongoing action, or can be enacted in moments of deliberate reflection on action. These incorrect evaluations that happen due to the fault or irresponsibility of the agent, are what is truly perplexing about complacent action.

Finally, within this continuous flow of action with its specifically complacent characteristics, the agent is acting self-satisfied. It is very apt to say that she is *acting* self-satisfied, and not just that she *is* self-satisfied (in the sense of only having a pleasant or unperturbed *feeling* about herself and her action). That is to say, the very act of wrongly evaluating all one's actions as being correct pertaining to some matter Z (despite the fact that some of one's acts<sup>269</sup> surrounding matter Z contradict the acts of caring<sup>270</sup> for matter Z) is also an act of self-satisfaction. Either the agent feels so self-satisfied that this feeling spills over into self-satisfying action (namely executing wrong evaluations in order to maintain this self-satisfaction), or the agent feels self-satisfaction while reflecting on her action in hindsight (implying that self-satisfaction as action-component, facilitates or feeds into maintaining complacent action with its perplexing wrongful evaluation mechanism, and the continuous carrying-out thereof by the agent).

So much for the action-theoretic specificity of complacent action. If I have only provided a very cursory account of complacent action, this is because I can only proceed so far without the guidance of an explicitly stated analytical definition of complacent action.<sup>271</sup> It is only in the next subsection, where I will bring my working analytical definition of complacency into dialogue with action theory, that I will be able to go into more specific details of complacent action.

### 6.3.3. An Action Theory of Complacency

Recall that chapter one of this thesis is a linguistic analysis of the term 'complacency' and that this analysis leads to a technical, precise, and clarified conceptual understanding of complacency. In line with what I have mentioned earlier, in the conclusion of chapter two, this more rigorous and exact analytical definition of complacency needs to be complemented by a description of complacency that draws our attention to the fullness, mystery, and complexity of complacent action. As such, my analysis of complacency in chapter one will be brought into a dialectic with the action theory that I have outlined above, in what I will call my action theory of complacency.

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<sup>269</sup> By referring here to acts instead of action, I am, of course, speaking conceptually and wish to isolate certain components within ongoing action.

<sup>270</sup> Where caring presupposes awareness.

<sup>271</sup> As things are, I have already had to presuppose what complacency is, in order to arrive at the action-constituents of complacent action in section 6.3.2.

Therefore, on the one hand, I will enrich my more critical and analytical working definition of complacency by bringing it into dialogue with the above hermeneutical and structuration-based action theory (hermeneutics and structuration remind one of the many cultural heritages, traditions, metamorphoses, and active traditions that inform and keep on informing complacency). Analysis of a concept such as complacency will never be a once-and-for-all established thing: analysis must always be ‘fed’ by what it finds. On the other hand, I will bring action theory into dialogue with my working analytical definition of complacency in order to be able to identify the action theoretic specificity of complacent action. Without analysis to guide an action theoretical approach to some phenomenon, one ends up *only* describing action in general.

Action theoretical description and analysis hence go together as a pair: complacency or complacent action is not a given ‘object’ and thus needs to be understood progressively through a mutual interchange between action and analysis. Perhaps one can follow Ricoeur (1967c:348) when he speaks of creative interpretation that is “faithful to the impulsion, to the gift of meaning from the symbol [in this case, the fullness and complexity of experiencing and understanding complacent action], and faithful also to the philosopher’s oath to seek understanding [the more rigorous practice of analysis as applied to complacent action].”

By way of method, I will first state my working definition of complacency, and then proceed to use my working definition as both a springboard and a conversational partner to my action theory (based on Ricoeur and Giddens’s combined action theories, and the above subsection’s outline of the specificity of complacent action). With ‘springboard’ I mean to convey that I will structure this subsection’s discussion around the components of my working definition of complacency. In other words, each constituent part of my working definition will act as a departure point and as subject-matter for my action theoretical discussion of complacency. Stated otherwise, I will redescribe or reinterpret each of the constituent parts of my working definition of complacency through action theory. By doing so, I will obtain an action theoretical description of complacency. I thus put on my action theoretical glasses and look at my working definition of complacency again: the whole definition is then framed in terms of action.

Hence, my working analytical definition of complacency, as formulated in chapter one:

Complacency about some moral or amoral wrong, entails that one (a person or group) be aware of and concerned with this wrong, and evaluate themselves as performing the relevant and correct actions to oppose the moral or amoral

wrong. However, this evaluation of one's performance pertaining to the known (a)moral wrong, is made in an epistemically irresponsible way. The aforementioned requirements and the accompanying epistemic process result in inappropriate or deleterious actions with regards to the abovementioned wrong. Moreover, complacency is accompanied by an excess of (self-) satisfaction.

### ***The Individual or the Group as Agent***

To begin with, let us focus on the notion that *a person or a group* can be guilty of complacent action. From the above action theories, we have seen that while a person can be considered as acting complacently about some matter, it is perhaps incorrect to say that a group can act complacently. This is because groups are constituted by individual persons. Thus, when I say “we” are, or “a group” is acting complacently, I mean to say that each person in the group is acting complacently. One can, however, treat a corporate entity as an agent, and in this sense a ‘group’ can be guilty of acting complacently. But, in the case of the corporate entity, the corporation is guilty, while its members are innocent. Young (2007:179), quoting Larry May (1993), writes that this is known as *collective* responsibility. People within a group or a society only *share* responsibility when they participate in structures which maintain structural injustices (Young 2007:175, 179). In other words, each individual in a group of persons is partially<sup>272</sup> responsible for the outcomes of these structural processes.<sup>273</sup>

In more Giddensian language, one can thus say that agents, by reproducing certain structures (and systems) which lend themselves to fostering complacent action, are partially responsible for these ‘complacency-promoting’ structures. However, agents do not share responsibility for structural injustice in the sense of orchestrating or intending these structural injustices; that is to say, they are not to blame (Young 2007:171-2). As Giddens and Ricoeur say, many structures are unintended consequences of the agents involved (by accident, or due to the involved agents’ unconscious motives, or due to an aggregate of acts). In addition, one often inherits structures or history that is not of one’s own making, or that are simply unacknowledged conditions of action. It would thus be unfair to blame an agent for complacent

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<sup>272</sup> Young (2007:179) adds that “the specific part that each plays in producing the outcome cannot be isolated and identified, however, and thus the responsibility is shared.” Structural injustice can further only be remedied through collective action.

<sup>273</sup> However, in late modernity, assigning responsibility is increasingly difficult. As Giddens has rightly pointed out, society can no longer be thought of as a bounded system with neat edges. Globalisation and the dynamic nature of modernity (due to time-space distancing, disembedding mechanisms, and the reflexivity of modernity), which amplify unintended and unwanted consequences of corporate entities and agents’ action, further complicate the process of assigning responsibility (and blame).

action that is sustained or done by a group. Instead, the agent would only be partially responsible if she contributed to structures of complacent (inter-)action.

We have just seen whether one can hold an agent *responsible* for group or institutional actions, or not. The interdependence of the individual and structure consequently raises the issue of to what extent an agent is to *blame* for complacent actions that are also sustained by groups. In order to determine this, one would have to conduct, in Giddensian terms, an agent *conduct* analysis, and an agent *context* analysis (Giddens modified by Stones (2005:121-2)).

One would consequently have to ask the following questions within agent conduct analysis: how knowledgeable was the agent about the structure(s) she drew on? How much initiative did the agent have while acting complacently in this way? One would also have to determine how the agent drew on (potentially complacent) social structures: did she draw on those structures in a more routine, unthinking way, so that she eventually struggled to tell internal structure and her agency apart? Stones (2005:57) calls this end of the spectrum “taken-for-granted duality”. Or, on the other extreme of the spectrum, namely ‘critical duality,’ was the agent more critically aware of the way in which she drew on the structures that she had internalized? Or finally, was it a mix between the two attitudes; did the agent fluctuate between the two extremes? Finally, were the consequences of the agent’s action intentional or unintentional? Next, one would have to inquire into the agent’s values: how does the agent hierarchize her motives, desires, and purposes?

Within agent context analysis one would have to ask to what extent the agent was constrained by the group (whether directly by other second person others, or ‘indirectly’ by institutional others)? In other words, what are the power-relations within the group? Are there any asymmetrical power-relations present within the group? What kind of rights or duties did the relevant agent have within in this group? What are the agent’s social conditions (income, level of education, social status, and so forth)? What are the known and unacknowledged conditions of the agent’s action? How does the agent interpret her external circumstances? (With agent context analysis, it is always important to keep in mind that because social circumstances and norms incline without compelling, the subject can evaluate these forces reflexively and act accordingly<sup>274</sup>). The answers to these questions will determine whether one

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<sup>274</sup> However, always keep in mind that the tragic dimension, in the Ricoeurian sense, lurks in the background: it is often the case that there are conflicts between the agent’s desires and social norms; or conflicts between social imperatives and other higher values. It is never as simple as the agent coolly evaluating societal norms from a detached distance.



should speak of either a person or a group as acting complacently (of course, by referring to either, one is not discounting the fact that the agent and group are interdependent).

Moreover, as a result, answering these questions would also determine how blameworthy an agent's complacent action is. Throughout this section, one will see how pertinent Ricoeur's (prescriptive) description of moral and ethical action is. Ricoeur was wise enough to discern that most, if not all action is tainted with a tragic element; in other words, most action lies in morally grey areas, and therefore teleological ethics should form the basis of a prescriptive account. Kant's deontological account of morality is too morally black and white, wrong and right. Ricoeur's understanding of Aristotelian ethics, and ultimately practical wisdom, helps us to explore the nuances of action in terms of classifying it as wrong or right. Of course, the deontological moment is necessary to prevent a relativist distortion of ethics, but ethics' primary position enables us to think of action in terms of moral gradations.

### ***Awareness and Concern as Action-Components of Complacent Action***

Second, let us focus on my working definition's clause that *in order for an action to be considered as complacent, one must be aware of, and concerned with, the wrong in question* (plus all the other requirements in order for an action to be deemed complacent). To begin with, there will be different degrees of awareness (of the wrong) and concern (about the wrong) in each case of complacent action. However, in order for action to count as complacent action, at least some awareness *and* concern must be present in the person or group<sup>275</sup> (meaning that 'no awareness and no concern' or 'awareness and no concern' do not count as cases of complacent action).

Awareness and concern might be informed by things such as the subject's cognitive abilities, interpretive skills or hermeneutic framework, the conditions – both acknowledged and unacknowledged – of the action that is awareness or becoming aware, the agent's interpretations of these conditions of the action of awareness, the time available to her to take in new information and ruminate on it, her physical environment (such as allocative resources that technically facilitate or mediate the action of awareness, such as billboards, newsletters, computers, and so forth), her personality or character, her body (some bodily impediments or idiosyncrasies might prevent or enable the agent from becoming aware of something), second-person and third-person others (her friends, family, acquaintances, and institutional others

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<sup>275</sup> With all the other requirements of complacency also being met.

might draw her attention to certain matters or constitute her hermeneutic framework in such a way that she will be more attuned to certain matters), her unconscious, her emotions, habits and routines, her capacity to act and her cognizance of this capacity of *being able* to act (Ricoeur 1966:65) (interpreting herself as being able or not being able to know and to care), her identity (in other words, the story or narrative she tells about herself as being able to act), the kind of society in which she lives (often described by a group's narrative of this society, such as Giddens's account of late modernity amongst other accounts; yet society might have many unacknowledged elements that might not be captured by these group narratives), social structures (rules and resources that consist of both immaterial and material aspects) which the agent can draw on to know of and care about certain matters, and the dimensions of these structures, namely power relations, norms,<sup>276</sup> and interpretative schemas present in her society throughout social interactions (such as a market driven society which tells one to care about certain things as opposed to others, or one's approving or disapproving peers, or a lack of ways to express or think about the concern in question). Finally, all the aforementioned influences (which can act both as constraints and enablers) will be present throughout the other aspects of complacent action.

Next, I will briefly point out a few ways in which late modernity (according to Giddens) influences or shapes awareness of, or concern for, some matter. I will begin with awareness. Late modern institutions and systems, because of their global nature (connecting the local and the global), allow agents to become aware of matters far beyond their immediate spatiotemporal contexts. Yet, because of this global nature of modernity, agents might be so inundated by information, and specifically scientific knowledge (as things to become aware of) that they do not develop in-depth awareness of matters. That is why today, people often speak of *raising awareness* about some or other matter. Most people are aware of, for example, climate change, mental health issues, sexual harassment in the working place, (and so forth), yet social and political groups that care about these matters have to constantly 'educate' the public around these matters, because there still seems to be a lack of thorough awareness. In

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<sup>276</sup> Regarding a richer understanding of how norms, as modes of regulation, shape an agent's action, it is helpful to draw on Ricoeur's description of ethical and moral action. It is difficult to esteem one's projects or concerns (and by implication oneself) as worthy and respectable, if others do not do so as well. In other words, one can theoretically attest that one's concern or action is worthy, but it is impossible to speak of something as "worthy" without an intersubjective agreement about what is worthy or good. One can therefore only esteem something as 'knowledge-worthy' or 'care-worthy' if one thinks or esteems it good or worthy for *another* to know and care about that something.

turn, a lack of adequate or in-depth awareness often leads to a lack of concern for the relevant matter.

Moreover, since modernity is characterised by doubt or a critical attitude towards all knowledge, awareness and concern for something is based on a very precarious foundation. Since knowledge is not seen as absolute, the agent's concern for some matter might be tinged with scepticism. For example, the agent might think to himself that: 'one moment they say the world will undergo catastrophic changes due to climate change in 2020, the next moment they say that we are doomed in 2050!'. This sceptical attitude that some agents from late modernity might foster (due to the conflicting information available on some matters, because of modernity's reflexive nature), affects their ability to care. It is difficult to be concerned about something if you are not wholly convinced that it warrants concern. Yet, I must again highlight that agents are not wholly determined by their societies, and so, late modern agents are capable of becoming adequately aware of, and develop strong concerns for matters that they care about.

### ***Evaluation of Action***

Third, in my working definition I state that complacency entails that ...*agents evaluate themselves as performing the relevant and correct actions to oppose the abovementioned moral or amoral wrong...* (with all the other requirements for one to act complacently, also being met). Ricoeur (1966:73-4) writes that the consciousness concerned with evaluating a project is a moral consciousness, and no longer a 'willing' consciousness who projects a project. In other words, during evaluation, Ricoeur holds that the agent is no longer consciousness as acting, or the agent acting prereflexively (or in Giddensian terms, acting purposively on the level of practical consciousness). Narrative (identity), with the aid of imagination, further enables one to 'objectify' one's actions and life, helping one to interpret and evaluate one's actions (and oneself) across time (Ricoeur 1991:178). Ricoeur holds that evaluation can be done in hindsight, such as when one interprets one's life as a narrative, but also before making a decision, in the hesitation that precedes a decision.<sup>277</sup> In addition, Ricoeur seems to imply that hesitation encourages responsible<sup>278</sup> decisions, since one becomes more aware of oneself as the author of one's actions (or, one's attention is drawn to the self-reflexivity of action).

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<sup>277</sup> Once again, one detects the binary or dualistic relationship in Ricoeur's work between prereflexive and reflexive consciousness (what Giddens would call practical and discursive consciousness). This is very different from Giddens's account where these two forms of consciousness are interconnected in subtle ways, even blurred, during the continuous action of the agent.

<sup>278</sup> Again, recall that I make a distinction between responsibility and blameworthiness. For example, while the agent might be aware of his or her own responsibility (that is to say, viewing themselves as the origin or the source

Evaluation of one's actions, however, is also an ongoing process. Ricoeur's account of evaluation might give one the wrong impression that evaluation happens solely in segments before or after performing an action. While it is true that one can evaluate one's actions in hindsight, and even that others will be able to evaluate one's actions as outside spectators, this is not the full version of evaluation. To supplement this segmented and partial account of evaluation, we turn to Giddens. Giddens's notion of 'rationalization of action' can be construed as an account of evaluation as an ongoing action. That is to say, rationalization of action implies that agents have the capacity of "keeping in touch' with the grounds of what they do, as they do it, such that if asked by others, they can supply reasons for their activities" (Giddens 1984:376). During the continuous process of (inter-)acting, the agent is constantly ordering her concerns or purposes (in other words, what she values) into a 'hierarchy of purposes,' while drawing on her structural contexts. Hence, one should also think of evaluation as continuously being interwoven with complacent action, even as the action is happening, in addition to thinking of evaluation as only happening after the action has taken place.

Thinking of evaluation as always being completely separate or apart from action is further unwarranted if one considers that action (in this instance evaluation) is not just a cognitive process. Hence, evaluation might be simultaneous with deleterious or inappropriate actions performed in relation to the matter in question. Wrong evaluation is already an action that is deleterious to the matter in question, *and* by acting in obvious discord with one's care about some matter, one is already embodying or actualizing what one values (Ricoeur 1966:43-4). "Thus the embodiment of values in the world is not an external *addition* to their pure legitimacy [sic], but rather an internal part of it" (Ricoeur 1966:202).

Put differently, *most* of one's evaluations will then happen in the flow of day-to-day life, and not necessarily as moments that are 'set apart' from action. Even if one deliberately sets apart time to evaluate one's actions, these evaluations will still take place *in time as actions*. Yet, one must still keep in mind what Ricoeur writes about (evaluative) decisions: decision or evaluation is both part of a process (it completes deliberation) and it introduces a kind of break into the flow of action. In other words, evaluation is informed by motives and reasons, but it is also initiative. As such, one is not merely carried along by the flow of day-to-day action, but one also moulds one's daily actions through evaluative choices. However, in the case of

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of the action) due to hesitation, hesitation will not necessarily lead to less blameworthy decisions or actions. In fact, while the agent hesitates, she or he might just take the time to convince her- or himself that the decision she or he is about to make, is morally justified.

complacent action, since evaluation is so entangled with the incorrect actions (performed in relation to the matter of concern), it is perhaps incorrect to want to speak of ‘specific moments’ in which an agent makes evaluations. Instead, evaluations happen in an on-going manner, often more prereflexively than reflexively.

### ***The Irresponsibility of Complacent Action***

Fourth, this evaluation of one’s performance pertaining to the known moral or amoral wrong *is made in an epistemically*<sup>279</sup> *irresponsible way*. In order to define ‘irresponsible’ one can look at Ricoeur’s (1992:165-6) notion of ‘responsibility’: the responsible person is a person who is both accountable for his or her actions (the same person), and who remains constant, on whom others can count. Irresponsibility would thus entail a certain disregard for others and for external measures of conduct. I have, in chapter one and in the previous subsection, already pointed out the various ways in which this irresponsibility might manifest itself (deceiving oneself, being wilfully ignorant, negligence, and so forth).<sup>280</sup>

Furthermore, the reasons and the narrative that an agent provides for thinking that her actions are opposing the moral or amoral wrong that she cares about, might reveal in what way and to what extent she is epistemically irresponsible. However, this account or narrative will always be incomplete in the sense that agents’ actions are often motivated in part by the body and/or the unconscious, and in the sense that agents act in conditions that they cannot yet describe, or that are not acknowledged by them. Ricoeur (1966:342) writes that there exists no such a thing as a purely voluntary and conscious choice motivated by a “total motivation”.

In addition, during the epistemically irresponsible self-evaluation of her actions, the agent is continuously acting. Above, I have clearly shown how such evaluation happens in the day-to-day flow of action. In other words, since consciousness and action are so intertwined (intentionality is action; action is a type of consciousness or intentionality), it is a lot more difficult than initially (in chapter one) thought to extract intentionality-action networks that

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<sup>279</sup> Based on my previous discussion of evaluation as action, it follows that *epistemic* irresponsibility is not only cognitive, but is also deeply interconnected with action.

<sup>280</sup> In addition, during the epistemically irresponsible self-evaluation of her actions, the agent might act along ways that are closely connected to complacent action (as I have described in chapter one), such as apathy, weakness of will, resignation, acquiescence, and so on. In other words, the agent might justify her inadequate actions in relation to the wrong in question by, for example, arguing that ‘there is only so much one can do’ (hence, her epistemic irresponsibility takes the form of unjustified resignation or acquiescence). One can thus never exhaustively gauge a person’s ways of acting in an epistemically irresponsible way: there are too many action-intentionality combinations.

constitute epistemic irresponsibility. The various ways in which an agent can make irresponsible evaluations about his or her action, are almost endless.

In addition, one must also keep in mind that the above blameworthy and incorrect evaluation that partly constitutes complacent action is not just an individual evaluation done in isolation. On the one hand, the agent evaluates herself differently depending on the persons that surround her: interpersonal others or friends, and institutional others will influence the way she thinks of herself: they might challenge her assumptions, and thus evaluations, of herself, or they might affirm her evaluations of herself (perhaps ostensibly through their own actions, perhaps even by telling her directly that they approve or disapprove of her actions). In addition, when the agent is in a face-to-face interaction with another agent or agents (what Giddens calls co-presence), she might evaluate herself and her actions differently than from those times when she is physically removed from other persons in time and space.<sup>281</sup> The agent's evaluations of herself are thus not always the same across all circumstances. Different circumstances (in this case, interpersonal and institutional others that are either co-present or that are spatiotemporally removed from – yet still connected to – the agent through technical and institutional mediums) evoke different evaluative actions.

On the other hand, when an agent incorrectly and irresponsibly evaluates her actions, she is directly and indirectly influencing or impacting second- or third-person others by betraying the other's trust. On the level of the second person, one can argue that when a complacent person cares about a matter, but irresponsibly evaluates her actions as indeed being 'caring' in relation to this matter, so to speak (while not acting in a sufficiently caring way), she betrays the trust of the other. There seems to be a disjunction in the agent in question's action, so that others cannot trust what she says, how she acts, the narratives she tells about her life, and what she deems as good or obligatory. In addition, the complacent agent betrays the third person other by betraying the institution of language (or semantic rules or modes), and modes of regulation. By not 'keeping her promises' or by not being constant (being someone another can count on), the complacent person slowly chips away at the trust that others have in language, norms, and orders of domination.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> People often behave differently when they know they are being watched (Ernest-Jones, Nettle, and Bateson 2011). Moreover, and although anecdotal, consider how it is often easier to tell someone that one does not want to attend their social gathering via text message (considerable time-space separation), less easy say 'no' when they phone you and ask you, (less time-space separation), and finally, really difficult to say 'no' when they ask you in person (co-presence) (that is, if one wants to decline their invitation!).

<sup>282</sup> Recall that Ricoeur (2000:7) provides the example of a promise as that which illustrates the "intersubjective character of responsibility" on the level of the second and third person. We need to keep our promises, and thus

In other words, let us suppose I encounter a person who cares about the welfare of all animals (let us further suppose I know about his care about animals since he has expressed this care verbally and in ‘care acts’, such as taking very good care of his pets and volunteering at animal shelters), yet the person in question eats meat while knowing that animals are mostly treated inhumanely before and during their slaughter. As an outsider observing this person’s behaviour, I find it jarring. I want to believe that he cares about animals, but his actions seem to have some internal conflict. He cares about animals, yet he does not. What is most perplexing or disturbing, however, is his evaluation of all his actions as being caring towards animals. Such a discord in the person’s actions, made more distressing by his evaluation of his own actions as being in accord with what he cares about, might result in distrust (or a type of ontological insecurity) in those around him,<sup>283</sup> yet, might ironically result in more ontological security for the agent in question (since he sees his narrative or actions as coherent).

As another agent interacting with the agent in question, however, I cannot trust what this person says, since we might not share the same interpretative schemes, and I hence do not know exactly what he means when he says he cares about animals. My interaction with this person will also be strained, since I cannot trust his actions. The stories that this person tells about himself I cannot believe either, nor can I trust his sense of what counts as good or bad (or what is the norm), since he is not *consistent*, he lacks integrity.<sup>284</sup> In Giddensian language,

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serve institutions, since by making a promise we are implicating the other, either as “beneficiary, as witness, as judge”, and ultimately, “as the one who, in counting on me, on my capacity to keep my word, calls me to responsibility, renders me responsible” (Ricoeur 2000:7). Thus, to break a promise is to betray not only the other person to whom one has promised, but also a potential witness to this promise, the institution of language, and by extension, a social pact held by members of the community (Ricoeur 1992:266). Since institutions or political society enable human agency, it is in the interest of human beings to serve these institutions (Ricoeur 1992:254-5). One can extend this thought to the rest of the world that the subject inhabits. My body and the world sustain me, it is thus in my interest to act in their interest.

<sup>283</sup> Because ontological security is not based solely on the “continuity of things or events” (as provided by abstract systems) (Giddens 1990:114). Instead, ontological security is sustained or ingrained by a mutual giving and receiving of trust: “faith in the integrity of another is a prime source of a feeling of integrity and authenticity of the self” (Giddens 1990:114).

<sup>284</sup> One might argue that the complacent person may be surrounded by other complacent people, and that consequently, their shared complacency is mutually comforting and supports social structures; further implying that they mutually contribute to each other’s ontological security. Yet, I argue that this would only work if all the agents in a society are complacent about the *exact same thing in the exact same way*. And this, I argue, is so impossible in reality, that it does not warrant much consideration. Consider, for example, the above case of being complacent about the humane treatment of animals: agents would only be able to mutually contribute to each other’s ontological security if, (1) *every single person* is complacent about the humane treatment of animals, and (2) if every single person is complacent about this matter in the same way: let us say, all of the agents are kind towards their pets *and* eats meat that can be traced back to inhumane abattoirs (while all of them think of themselves as acting humanely towards animals). This is highly unlikely. Even if everyone is complacent about treating animals humanely, there might be agents whose complacency is expressed in different ways, for example neglecting their pets, or consuming products that can be directly linked to the destruction of certain animals’ habitats, and so forth. In reality, there will always be someone who challenges other agents regarding their

the person in question is not sustaining social structures through his practices. In fact, through his complacent practices, he is radically questioning and destabilizing structures of signification, domination, and legitimation. The person acting complacently thus thwarts ontological security: I will both be uncertain of how to act around this person, and I will become uncertain about certain interpretative schemes, orders of domination, and norms (and thus structures, systems, and eventually, institutions). Complacent action therefore has the unintended (by the agent) consequence that it breaks down or gradually changes social structures; it appears to dissolve trust and ontological security in society. This destabilization unintentionally brought about by complacent action might lead other agents to grasp at more ontological security, who might, in turn, act complacently in the search for ontological security.<sup>285</sup> Interestingly enough, another unintended consequence of complacency might bring about the exact opposite effect. If one sees other persons acting complacently, it is like a mirror: one sees oneself as another, to use Ricoeurian terms, and so is confronted with one's own complacency. This might prompt one to act less complacently.

Returning once more to the above agent who acts complacently surrounding animal cruelty, one can perhaps also argue that due to the lack of self-constancy in his life (expressed or embodied through his speaking, acting, narratives, and imputations), the person in question seems to be divided in himself; he does not maintain himself as constant, and so breaks a kind of promise to himself. In other words, he identifies or interprets (*ipseity*) himself as someone who cares about animals, yet seems to stray away from this identification or interpretation (perhaps because of his personality informed habits, namely *idem*-identity). There is thus a discord between *idem*-identity and *ipseity*. The agent seems to be unable to act despite himself and cannot follow through on his promises. However, irresponsibly insisting that there is *no* discord between sameness and selfhood: this is what characterises complacent action in particular (and what makes complacent action so unsettling). The complacent person imposes a false unity on his life through narrative, in the process not upholding institutions such as language or moral norms. This narrative is thus self-serving (what Kant calls self-love, or being excessively kind towards oneself), since the agent does not want to act consistently (due to

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complacent action, either by being complacent about something else, or by being complacent about the same matter, but in a different way.

<sup>285</sup> Recall that Giddens writes that modern institutions corrode ontological security due to modernity's volatile and dynamic nature. Similarly, if one sees that another person acts complacency, and if the destabilizing or jarring effects on one's routine and on one's ontological security that I have described truly follows on witnessing others act complacency, then one might argue that agents might feel so ontologically insecure that they will try to at least maintain coherent self-narratives or identities, in the process sometimes acting complacently themselves.



whatever reasons or motives).<sup>286</sup> However, another unintentional consequence of acting complacently, is that a person can consequently also not trust others.<sup>287</sup> Since the person acts in a self-serving way by ignoring moral obligations and betraying solicitude (seek the good of the other), why would the other seek the good for him? By acting complacently, one relativizes and betrays social structures and institutions that normally provide one with ontological security and the means to act. One carves away at one's own ontological security in the quest for ontological security.

It is for this reason that one can say with Versfeld (1985:15) that tending to nature<sup>288</sup> is tending to the self or to persons (“*natuurbewaring is persoonsbewaring*”); or in more ecological terms: the conservation of nature is the conservation of people. Or, as Wendell Berry (1969::20) writes, “...what is good for the world will be good for us.” It is wrong to think that what is good for us is good for the world. It is for this very reason that Ricoeur (1992:274) writes that tragic action arises when one reverses Kant’s “order of priority” in which autonomy (oneself) is given a superior and independent status in comparison with the “plurality of persons” (the second person) and the “plane of institutions” (the third person). To prevent this, to practice practical wisdom, one must instead think of the autonomous self as also being constituted by “receptiveness, passivity, and ... powerlessness” (Ricoeur 1992:274-5). The self contains “otherness”,<sup>289</sup> and is so joined to, “...and [is] dependent on, the rule of justice and

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<sup>286</sup> Agents who act complacently probably value some things (perhaps comfort, ease, pleasure, or feeling good or satisfied) more than the (disconcerting) truth about their actions. However, this a mere general conjecture. The reasons for why persons act complacently are probably as numerous as there are people and cannot all be explicated.

<sup>287</sup> Recall that Ricoeur links self-esteem and self-respect to interpersonal and institutional others. One cannot esteem, respect, or view as worthy that which one does not esteem, respect, or see as worthy in oneself.

<sup>288</sup> Recall Beck and Giddens’s (1991:144) arguments that nature has been socialized or brought under human control through the “application of humanly organised principles of science and technology”. Versfeld (1985:11) also holds that there is no longer a non-human natural environment. If one takes care of one’s social and (socialized) natural world, one is in fact taking care of oneself. We are starting to see to just what extent this is true as we realise that we are digging our own graves through mass consumption and the exploitation of natural resources.

<sup>289</sup> The other is something or someone that we will never fully understand, yet recall that Ricoeur (1995:55-6) argues that coming to understand (both inherent and external) otherness within ourselves is a lifelong task. This is not merely an arbitrary task that Ricoeur assigns to us: one must know oneself (and thus the otherness in oneself) in order to esteem oneself as good, or evaluate oneself as doing the right thing. One cannot esteem or evaluate what one does not know, and yet “who fully knows him- or herself?” (Versfeld [1968] 2008:115). Ricoeur’s task thus becomes prescriptive: one must get to know and live with the otherness in oneself, so that one can come to esteem and respect the other as one esteems and respects oneself. The person who does not know (and is thus able to esteem and respect) herself, cannot know (and thus esteem and respect) the second and third person other (Versfeld [1968] 2008:115). Perhaps one can go so far as to say that Ricoeur’s project of describing human action is a guide towards getting to know yourself: from the way the person is described in *Freedom and Nature* (the otherness inherent in being a subject-body), all the way to the self, described in *Oneself as Another* (interconnected with second and third person others). This project takes on a prescriptive quality if considered in this way. Again the Greeks come to mind: *know thyself*... as being part nature, part human, as a being with paradoxical freedom, as someone who is capable to act, and as an other amongst others.

the rule of reciprocity” (Ricoeur 1992:275-6). The self is joined to its community and environment in profound ways: everything you do to the environment, you do yourself; everything you do in the community of other persons, influences the environment; and when there is discord within a person (between *idem* and *ipse*), discord arises in the natural and social environment (Versfeld 1985:11-12). In order to make responsible<sup>290</sup> decisions and evaluations, autonomy or the self must therefore be placed at the end of moral reflection (Ricoeur 1992:274).

Framed in terms of Giddens’s modernity studies, it could be the case that the late modern agent is so hyper-reflexive or self-aware, that he or she places him or herself at the ‘start’ of (moral) reflection. In other words, people who act complacently might wish to achieve internal coherency, authenticity,<sup>291</sup> or ontological security (over and above measuring up to external standards of what counts as action that is good enough or consistent with that which they care about), and so purposefully evaluate their action in such a way as to favour themselves or to think of themselves as authentic. Put differently, the agent evaluates himself as *not* being complacent in order to achieve and maintain a coherent narrative, even if this means smoothing over glaring contradictions within himself or in his own actions.

In addition, modernity – due to the interconnection between the local and the global – offers an overwhelming array of options of living and being, and so distracts the agent from moral matters. As Giddens (1991:5) writes, “[r]eflexively organised life-planning, which normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity.” Thus, not only are agents encouraged to assign more importance to ‘finding themselves’ than to moral and existential matters, they are also inundated by – and thus preoccupied with – the multitude of options they

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<sup>290</sup> Ricoeur, in dialogue with Abel (2012b) states that he thinks of responsibility in the following way (I paraphrase from the original French quote): “I [that is, Ricoeur] would like to draw my answer from an observation I made earlier about the promise, in which I said that three things were connected: to maintain oneself (to coincide with oneself [even as early as *Freedom and Nature* where the two selves have to coincide in order to act, namely the one who decides and the one in the project]), to take into account the expectation of the other, and respect the institution of language. In general, I would say that this is the very structure of ethics: it is what joins together self-esteem, care for the other and the just institution in the act of living with the other. This is the ethics common to all men. This is where I come to the notion of responsibility. I believe that responsibility adds a fourth dimension to what I just said about self-esteem, caring and justice: the concern for fragility. I discovered this mainly in the Jewish-American philosopher Hans Jonas’s book, *The Imperative for Responsibility [Das Prinzip Verantwortung]*: man is essentially responsible for what is fragile at all levels, both in creation and in society.”

<sup>291</sup> Recall that Giddens (1991:80) writes that the agent of high modernity connects life experiences to a “narrative of self-development” in the pursuit of creating a “personal belief system by means of which the individual acknowledges that ‘his first loyalty is to himself.’ The key reference points are set ‘from the inside’, in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his life history.” This is in opposition to what Ricoeur prescribes.

have available to draw on in the process of building or shaping their own authentic selves. “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity” (Giddens 1991:70).

Therefore, following Giddens’s insights on constructing an identity in late modernity, one can argue that maintaining a coherent narrative in order to feel that one is true to oneself or one’s goals – which Giddens claims is more prevalent or more important in late modernity – might act as one of many motives for why people act complacently. As such, one can also say that one of the unintended consequences of modernity is the increase of complacent action. Here, I will cautiously venture to say that this late modern tendency of agents to want to achieve authenticity through constructing internally coherent narratives that eschew external standards or measures – due to the dizzying amounts of information, lifestyle options, and overwhelming risks inherent in modernity – might correlate with the fact that complacency rose to prominence in modernity and continues to be prevalent in late modernity. In other words, even though complacent action has always existed in some form or the other, one can argue that modernity has amplified, increased, or intensified complacent action in a way that was unseen before modernity.

So much for the intriguing element of complacent action that is making an epistemically irresponsible evaluation of oneself and one’s actions.

### ***Inconsistent Action***

Fifth, in my working definition of complacency I have written that the aforementioned requirements and the accompanying epistemic process results in *inappropriate or deleterious actions with regards to the abovementioned wrong*. However, as said above, one can no longer think of complacent action as a process where actions follow thoughts. Instead, complacent action is a complex network of thoughts (or intentions) and actions. In some cases, it will indeed be the case that a person carefully thinks about how she will act, before acting. However, this thinking process is in itself an act. The agent *stalls* in order to work out how she might perhaps rephrase or reinterpret her actions so as to seem that these actions oppose the moral wrong that she cares about. Or she *hesitates* and culpably convinces herself of her benevolence or effort or hard work in relation to the wrong she cares about. Complacent action is not a linear process (as my working analytical definition of complacency might suggest). Thought interweaves with actions, actions with thoughts: who knows which informs the other first, and which sustains which within continuous action? It is near impossible to unravel. One can, for narrative’s sake

perhaps tell the story of the complacent agent in such a processual way. But Giddens has drawn our attention to the lived experience of (inter-)action, and it is by no means a neatly embedded reality as Ricoeur's account of action tends to suggest.

In short, complacent action is not a simple epistemic process which results in actions. That one cannot 'cure' or 'fix' complacent action through thinking (a better epistemic process) or more and better knowledge (characteristic of late modernity), attests to this. Complacent action is human, and to be human is to be capable of action; it is an original dimension of the cogito. Complacent action will thus have to be understood as being both consciousness (which entails prereflexive and reflexive, or practical and discursive consciousness) and action from its conception.

### ***Self-Satisfaction as Action-Component of Continuous Complacent Action***

Sixth, I hold in my working definition of complacency that *'moreover (and sometimes as a consequence), complacency is accompanied by an excess of (self) satisfaction.'* Self-satisfaction, I still maintain, is not necessarily a consequence of the above 'requirements' in my working definition of complacency. That is to say, excessive self-satisfaction does not follow on knowing and caring (about the wrong), evaluating (oneself as acting in such a way that one is opposing the wrong), and finally acting (in such a way that one is indeed *not* opposing the wrong). In fact, self-satisfaction, as part of the complex network of thoughts and actions, might be present in the foreground at different moments of the continual action that is complacent action. At other times, one's excessive self-satisfaction might recede into the background. Sometimes, the complacent person is pleasantly and explicitly aware of her supposedly good and appropriate actions. At other times, self-satisfaction is a vague feeling of contentment, or of not being disturbed. Self-satisfaction, in other words, flits forwards and backwards in the continual action that is characterised by complacency. Self-satisfaction seems to sustain and encourage complacent action (who does not wish to feel satisfied?), but also seems to be a kind of by-product of culpably believing one's actions are good enough. In sum, self-satisfaction is difficult to pin down as either being a foreground or a background, a provocative or consequential component in complacent action.

In conclusion, I wish to provide some general remarks about complacent action based on the insights of Giddens and Ricoeur that I have not yet mentioned in the above discussion of complacency as action. To begin with, complacent action is inextricably connected to the self: if one constantly acts complacently, one will eventually be described as 'complacent.' In

addition, complacent action is reflexive: the agent knows he or she is acting in a meaningful way and that he or she is bringing about some change in the world.<sup>292</sup> Since the agent is self-reflexive and action is so connected to the self, one will be held responsible for one's complacent actions. Even if the agent's motives are good (in both the normative and prescriptive sense) for acting complacently, the agents will still be held responsible, although not necessarily blamed, for complacent actions.<sup>293</sup>

In addition, Giddens and Ricoeur show us that the agent who acts complacently has various constraints on her actions. These constraints have their origins in the body, the psyche (such as the unconscious), one's history or the time and space one was born into, other people, and social structures, technical mediations or resources, and institutions. Thus, Ricoeur writes (and Giddens agrees) that the agent has paradoxical freedom: the involuntary (or constraints) paradoxically also enable voluntary action. Ricoeur and Giddens thus provide us with the fundamental possibilities of human action: human action, and thus complacent action, is not determined, but nor is it an unrealistic, wholly unimpeded freedom. Thus, while evaluating complacent action, one must keep in mind that all agents act within certain constraints that also act as enablers, and that one can consequently not *blame* constraints for complacent action, nor can one blame persons for what constrains them. One might, at best, morally judge the complacent agent's ways of interacting or dealing with these constraints and using them for voluntary action.

Based on the above action theoretical insights, one can further make distinctions between morally worse and better cases of complacency. That is to say, there are instances of complacency that are more morally blameworthy than others. In some cases, the agent will be able to give morally justifiable reasons for her actions (although she would still be guilty of, and responsible for acting complacently). That is to say, sometimes an agent needs to act complacently in order to achieve some good, or in order to just 'get by' and cope with all the

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<sup>292</sup> Understanding these actions and the self is further an indirect understanding that "proceeds from the interpretation of signs given outside [the agent] in culture and history and from the appropriation of the meaning of these signs" (Ricoeur 1971b:xv).

<sup>293</sup> When evaluating an agent's action from the 'outside', as I am forced to do throughout the thesis, and especially when I look at case studies later, Ricoeur's model of the text or narrative is more helpful than Giddens's understanding of action as continuous. This is because, as Ricoeur has shown in *From Text to Action*: "[b]y subordinating the subjective intentions of the author [of the action] to the objective meaning of the text [or action], the theory [of interpretation] effects an initial displacement of the primacy of the subject" (Thompson 1981:18). This is not to say that the self and its motives should be dismissed entirely; only that the self assumes a "more modest role" and that the agent's intention in performing a certain act is one consideration amongst many when interpreting an act (Thompson 1981:18). The agent's intention in no way determines the interpretation of an act. However, Giddens's model of action as day-to-day continuation is still more accurate or true to reality.

demands on her time and attention. However, this good or ‘getting by’ is achieved in spite of the fact of complacency’s wrongness. Finally, based on Giddens’s description of late modernity, it is clear that most agents live demanding lives that are so complexly interwoven with the lives of others, that it would be hard, if not impossible, to unravel it all and examine each thread of it, and consequently assign blame.

The agent further acts through a continuous monitoring of her actions, and can do so because she has become skilled at navigating routine actions from day to day. Acting is thus a dimension of consciousness called practical consciousness. Of course, the agent is able to discuss her action, and this knowledge of how to express her actions is called discursive consciousness. But before discursive consciousness “...there is a pre-predicative [or prereflexive] consciousness of self which is enough to hold the intention of [one’s] projects in readiness for reflection” (Ricoeur 1951:5). Thus, the agent who acts complacently is able to give some account of why she is doing so, although this account will never be exhaustive.

Finally, complacent action can only be actualized through other agents. Ricoeur speaks of second and third persons who enable action: speaking, acting, narrating and imputing only makes sense in the presence of the other and with the help of third person others via institutions and technical means. Similarly, Giddens argues through the notion of the ‘duality of structure’ that an agent is able to act because she draws on social structures (virtual patterns of behaviour), which then also constrain her. Social structures are reproduced and sustained by agents through the repetition of social interactions or practices, while social structure, in turn, mediates social interactions or practices. In the case of complacent action, there are thus social structures on which agents can draw to act complacently, and by acting complacently, agents maintain and reproduce these structures of complacent action. As such, ‘knowing how to act complacently’ becomes part of the rules or schemas of a society (based on intimate knowledge of the normative elements and codes of signification surrounding complacent action), and complacent action becomes a resource in society (in the sense that complacent action is one of the ways in which one can generate command or power over persons and objects).

Moreover, through the spatiotemporal repetition of social practices one develops a sense of ontological security. To have ontological security is to trust that the world is as it appears to be, and that one can trust other agents to act in certain ways, and that one can consequently act in it in a meaningful way. Ontological security, due to the trust that it inspires, leads to routine action (or established practices), and as result is tied to the maintenance of

institutions and personality. As I have mentioned above, without this trust or ontological security, it is difficult to speak, or to act, or to narrate and impute actions in a confident manner. If social systems and structures are broken down, then institutions are also weakened. One's relationship with the third person and second person other thus deteriorates due to complacent action. Yet, I have also mentioned that seeking out ontological security could be a motive (amongst other motives) for acting complacently. In other words, agents who act complacently might sacrifice normative judgement for the sake of maintaining ontological security (that is, a coherent life narrative).

Besides the fact that complacent action deteriorates one's relationship with interpersonal and institutional others, complacent action might also be exacerbated due to the way in which one interacts with others. I have already shown, in the section on evaluation above, how co-presence and time-space distancing affects complacent action. However, now I wish to briefly highlight how complacent action that happens in interactions of co-presence, and complacent interactions that are spatiotemporally mediated through technical means and institutions, affects other agents. Consider that in late modernity, the notion of 'neighbour' (that is, agents that are closely affected by, and affects one's actions) is no longer limited to those persons who share the same locale or time with the agent in question. Instead, through technical and institutional mediation, the agent now has many 'neighbours.' That is, the agent, through his or her complacent action, is now able to affect many more people due to technology and modern institutions. However, what is particularly disconcerting is that spatiotemporal separation of the agent from other agents and their plights through technical and institutional mediation, tends to make agents more 'callous.' It is easier to act complacently in relation to some wrong when one is not face-to-face with another agent (who might be negatively affected by this wrong). Let us suppose one is complacent in relation to climate change, and that there are agents – in other parts of the world – that are being more severely affected by climate change than one is affected in one's part of the world. One might see visual footage, or read news reports about these other parts of the world and the agents that are suffering due to climate change, but these mediated interactions with other agents will – in most cases<sup>294</sup> – not affect one as strongly, as if one were to be co-present, or face-to-face with these agents. Technological and institutionally mediated interactions with other agents often shelter the complacent agent from the consequences of her actions. Although the agent might see or hear of the damage of

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<sup>294</sup> Unless the agent has strong personal ties with persons living in these affected areas: either due to strong relationships, or due to strong associations with certain parts of the world or certain groups of people.

her action through technological devices, facilitated by institutions, her day-to-day routine remains unaffected; she does not feel the consequences in her own body, in her own bones. As such, complacent action, and its reach and negative effects on others, will often be exacerbated by technical and institutional mediations of interaction.

In conclusion, Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories combined have thus revealed that my working definition of complacency is too focussed on the conceptual schema of complacency (formal requirements, causes, causal links, circumstances, etc.) that qualifies which aggregate of acts counts as complacency, while excluding the reflexive self who is inextricably tied to action (Ballantyne 2007:128). By including the agent as the reference point from which one understands complacent action, my initial working definition makes way for a richer account of complacency. In addition, my working definition of complacency is too linear and causally-structured (one act or thought process *leads to* or *causes* another); by reinterpreting complacency as action, one clearly finds that complacent action is neither such a linear process, nor can one separate thoughts and actions within ongoing complacent action in such a simplified way. Complacent action is therefore now understood as something which is continuously monitored by a reflexive agent, who is bound by time, space, and various other constraints (internally and other generated). In other words, by answering the question '*who acts complacently?*', one arrives at a thoroughly human, and thus more realistic, understanding of complacent action.

#### **6.4. Complacent Action: The Incapable Man Caught up in Structures and Systems?**

Above, I have provided a brief account of some of the complexities involved in complacent action. I have demarcated what an agent is *capable* of doing, when an agent be considered *responsible* for her complacent actions, how *motives* stand in relation to action, how much *freedom* an agent has when she acts (or, in other words, what *constraints* are present in action, and how these constraints that impede or enable an agent's action might vary to different degrees), what the agent's relation is to others and to social structures and institutions, and how the other influences and enables action. However, these complexities are still mostly on the level of theory. In order to gain an even fuller understanding of complacent action, one needs to look at particular examples of complacency through the above outlined action theory of complacency. In other words, in the pursuit of incorporating both the dense ontological reality of complacent action and the objective rigour of studying it (as captured by an analytical



definition of complacency), consulting examples contributes to the aspect of studying complacent action as ‘dense ontological reality’.

Below, I will posit two limit cases in order to illustrate the two extremes that complacent action might assume. On the one end of the extreme, I will try to present a case where a person’s actions will be considered complacent beyond reasonable doubt. Such an ideal case might never exist in reality, but will serve to strengthen our understanding of complacent action. On the other end of the extreme, I will investigate a case where a person’s behaviour is so that it skirts most of the boundaries set out in my action theory of complacency. In the middle of these two extremes, I will also explore a real-life example of complacent action.

#### **6.4.1. Limit Case One: A Climate Scientist Gets on a Plane**

Now, with the above in mind, let us imagine what the perfect case of complacent action would look like. I am going to use climate change as that wrong about which the (complacent) person in question knows and cares. That is to say, the person in question, let us call her Julia, knows about and is concerned about the wrongness of climate change: she knows that climate change is man-made, is real, and that warming of about four degrees Celsius would be catastrophic for the world, on economic, environmental, and social levels (Marshall 2014:chapter 37). Consequently, Julia is convinced that climate change is bad and that she ought to do something about it.

However, to qualify Julia’s knowledge and concern even further (in order to make this the ‘perfect’ case of complacent action – or as close as we can get), Julia would have to have extraordinary cognitive abilities and perfect knowledge of the above information regarding climate change. In other words, she would have astounding capabilities of interpreting complex information about climate change. Subsequently, she would also be able to make inferences about what climate change means for the planet and its people. As a result, she knows exactly how bad climate change is, and she is consequently able to adapt her concern about climate change based on these inferences. Moreover, Julia lives in the kind of world where it is easy to obtain information about climate change. In addition, she has the time to obtain and interpret this information, and she has the type of character disposed to knowing and caring about climate change. Finally, Julia comes into contact with information about climate change on a routine basis, and so it becomes a kind of habit of hers to know and to care about climate change. Perhaps one can conclude that Julia is a climate scientist.

In addition, let us suppose that Julia lives in the kind of society that encourages knowledge and concern about climate change. Thus, Julia lives in a society whose members acknowledge climate change as a real danger to humankind. Institutions are consequently structured in such a way as to allow and encourage people to reduce their carbon emissions. Perhaps Julia's society is the kind of social system (or an intersection of social systems) that has the kind of structural properties (rules or schemas, and resources) that allow for social practices that fight climate change. These structures (or structural properties of systems) are in turn upheld by the agents' social practices in Julia's society. Structures, or rules and resources, might include the necessary skills to act in an 'eco-friendly' manner, knowing how to act in such a manner that one does not transgress certain agreed-on norms regarding climate change, hermeneutic frames of how to use available resources, eco-friendly transport options, urban farming, supermarkets that are set up in such a way that food are not wasted and packaged in more eco-friendly ways, and so on. Julia is thus able to draw on these structures during social interactions or practices.

Moreover, let us further suppose that Julia lives in the kind of world where there are very few other concerns for her to care about. In colloquial terms, she has the 'mental space' to deal with the issue of climate change for which she cares. Julia therefore does not have the excuse that other cares and concerns are preventing her from paying due attention to climate change, nor can one say that she does not have the capacity and time to evaluate how her behaviour aligns with her concerns about climate change. In action theoretical language, one can say that the world affords Julia the possibility to carry out her projects regarding combatting climate change.

In addition to (and partly due to) living in the kind of society described above, Julia has the capacity to act in the sense that she has and is a (mostly) docile body, she has the kind of personality or outlook on the world which allows her to act capably, and she has developed certain habits which allow her to act in line with her concern about climate change (in turn, shaping her personality even further in the way of caring for climate change). That is to say, she is a capable agent who is free to act within the constraints inherent in human freedom, as outlined by Ricoeur. Her society may be further made up of the types of institutions or groups

that foster a sense of being “able to be capable” to act<sup>295</sup> (Breviglieri 2012; Ricoeur 1966:65), especially regarding climate change.

Now, let us look at the action that makes Julia complacent. Julia flies, biannually, with her family, to South Africa for holidays (let us suppose she currently lives in Never-Never Land, about 10 000 kilometres from South Africa, as the plane flies). Despite the fact that commercial jet planes emit large amounts of carbon dioxide and are consequently harmful to the environment (Environmental Protection Agency 2016), Julia culpably comes to the conclusion that her actions (flying regularly) do not really oppose her care about the wrong that is climate change.

Julia hastily<sup>296</sup> arrives at this conclusion by maintaining that she deserves to fly to South Africa for holidays, since her job as a climate scientist is very stressful<sup>297</sup> (it is true that climate scientists do feel a heavy burden due to their extent of in-depth knowledge about the problem), and by maintaining that the good of her job as climate scientist somehow ‘balances’ her holidays. She is not necessarily smug about her behaviour, but she is satisfied with her decision and she reasons that to fly – all things considered – does not really oppose her care for the wrong that is climate change. In fact, she chooses not to think of her holiday as a matter of right and wrong. She seems to compartmentalise her work and her ‘personal life.’ She is consequently quite contented about the whole matter. Her self-satisfaction thus, for the most part, assumes a background feeling of ease.

In other words, Julia makes an epistemically irresponsible or blameworthy judgement or evaluation about her actions. It is difficult to determine when exactly she makes this evaluation: did she, when buying airplane tickets (and all it implies), make the implicit evaluation of her actions as good? Or did she, in hindsight, after buying the tickets, construe a narrative in which her actions cohere? It would be more accurate to say that she evaluates and

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<sup>295</sup> One can thus say that Julia’s society is not structurally unjust. Structural injustice occurs when “social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as they enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities” (Young 2007:171). Since Julia lives in a structurally just society, she is given the opportunity to develop and exercise her capacities as an agent. This means that her society does not compel nor constrain her to adopt complacent behaviour, through rendering her an incapable subject.

<sup>296</sup> As Ricoeur (1966:65) writes: indecision is a state of anxiety. The longer Julia hovers between decisions, the longer she is a kind of divided, conditional mode, confronted by her motives and responsibilities. Let us suppose Julia did not want to be in this anxious and uncomfortable state for long, and hence made a hasty decision based on her emotions (the motive most evident or compelling in the moment of decision). These emotions are thus stronger than the emotion she feels when she reads or thinks about climate change.

<sup>297</sup> I am indebted to George Marshall’s (2014: chapter 37, paragraph 10) “informal social research project” for this real life excuse.

keeps on evaluating her actions in such a way as to remain at ease or self-satisfied. Her evaluation is thus a continuous process, and so she keeps on acting complacently. As we have seen above, Julia has reasons for why she evaluates her actions as not opposing the moral wrong that is climate change. These reasons reveal her desires: Julia acts as she does because of these desires, and because of these desires she acts as she does. Perhaps she places more emphasis on the latter, implying that she interprets her actions as being caused or compelled, rather than motivated.

In other words, Julia is perhaps irresponsible (in the form of acting complacently) because she does not reflexively regard herself as an agent pertaining to the matter in question. In the course of committing to her wrong actions, it might be that Julia does not esteem herself as the agent of her actions. That is to say, Julia abdicates her responsibility by viewing herself and behaving as helpless or an incapable person: she thus esteems herself as less than she is. *If* she were to articulate this attitude discursively,<sup>298</sup> she might think something along the lines of: ‘I really see no other way to manage my stress than to holiday in a far-off place, away from my current stressful surroundings; to suggest that I could do otherwise is cruel and unsympathetic!’ As such, Julia is not willing to impute ethical or moral actions to herself. For her, it is irrelevant whether this specific action (flying, despite caring for climate change) is good or bad, or permitted or forbidden, since she hardly had a choice in the matter (according to Julia, of course). Complacent action, in this case, can thus be thought of as a type unwillingness to impute certain actions to oneself,<sup>299</sup> or a kind of misuse of freedom. The complacent person does not want to see themselves as ‘the one who... (did x or y)’. Ricoeur call this the tragedy of the truth ([Ricoeur in dialogue with] Abel 2012b).

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<sup>298</sup> Julia might have other unconscious motives besides those she can articulate. In addition, even though I am representing Julia’s thoughts here in abstraction, one should not make the mistake of thinking that Julia necessarily first articulates these thoughts and then acts. In addition, Ricoeur (1966:207) reminds us that action is a kind of intentional thought – action is the way Julia relates to the world – and so Julia’s complacency is an intricate network of thoughts and actions.

<sup>299</sup> Ricoeur (1966:365, 375) writes that the way we understand ourselves (the stories we tell about ourselves) influences how we understand our capacity to act, and consequently what actions we view as blameworthy: it is tempting to “hypostatize” one’s character type or the unconscious, for example. Excuses such as ‘don’t blame me, that’s just the way I am’, or ‘oops, I can’t help it, I did that unconsciously!’ express this kind of thinking. Ricoeur (1966:349) refers to this as using the involuntary as “an alibi for fear and sloth, a pretext for non-being.” If one understands oneself as one truly is – that is, as an acting being – one is more ‘integrated’ and consequently knows that one’s actions are imputed to oneself. In other words, one is not, as with the Cartesian Cogito, a purely thinking I who’s actions are separate and therefore distanced from oneself. One can perhaps say that the complacent person illustrates this: the complacent is not integrated (or does not have integrity or wholeness) since her actions (and her satisfaction or contentedness with these actions) do not cohere with what she values.

However, even though Julia thinks she is ridding herself of responsibility in this manner (what Ricoeur and Giddens would perhaps call a distorted narrative about herself), she is unable to escape blameworthiness. This is because Julia remains an agent despite professing otherwise. It is still Julia who *esteems herself, who views herself* as helpless or incapable. As such, Julia cannot escape self-reflexive imputation of action in this manner. As Ricoeur (1966:6, 46) writes: the subject is inherently self-aware and asserts herself in every action, even though the subject does not stress that it is *she* who is making up *her* mind in the moment of decision. Similarly, Giddens writes that the agent is continuously monitoring, and thus aware of her activity on the level of practical consciousness. Moreover, even though Julia makes herself out as incapable, and thereby wishes to classify her actions as non-actions or as inaction, Giddens and Ricoeur remind us that one's inaction is still action: it is an acquiescence to (one's supposedly 'inactive' actions), or an active demission.

Another reason for Julia's complacency (reason being meant here as both reason and motive for the action) is Julia's desire to holiday in a different country. She might simply like travelling, and this desire to travel to another country, tainted by emotion, could be stronger than her desire to live a life in line with climate change. I have said that I wish to *approach* an example of complacency that is as 'pure' as possible. That is to say, an example where the agent is entirely<sup>300</sup> at fault for reaching the wrong conclusion that all her actions are appropriate with regards to the matter she cares about. However, if I were to exclude desire from Julia's actions, I think that we would no longer be talking about Julia the *human being*. Humans are, as Ricoeur explained, inherently pulled in many directions by their motives (and thus implicitly, by what they value), and by emotions and passions.

Self-respect (that is to say, a feeling of veneration for one's capability to tell apart wrong from right, through reason) is one of Julia's motives, while her inclination to do something pleasurable (in the form of travelling by air to a holiday destination) is perhaps another motive. In this instance, the latter trumps the former: Julia acquiesces to her emotions which tinge her autonomy with passivity<sup>301</sup> (Ricoeur 1966:312; 1992:215). She inappropriately consents to her nature, or uses the involuntary as an excuse. From an ethico-moral perspective (as worked out

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<sup>300</sup> I use 'entirely' here, knowing full well that an agent can never be entirely – in a transcendent way – responsible for some thing. In other words, Julia still experiences the limits which Ricoeur has described in his anthology of the capable man, such as the body, the fact of life, personality, and the unconscious. Moreover, as an agent she is also part of a society which will shape her actions.

<sup>301</sup> Ricoeur (1992:216) emphasizes that it "is a matter here of a misuse of (free) choice and not of the maleficence of desire...."

by Ricoeur), Julia's desire to fly to another country is a form of self-love, (excessive kindness or leniency towards herself) or what Kant calls *Selbstliebe*, and is thus blameworthy (Ricoeur 1992:215). Julia, in other words, considers herself first – she appeals to the “particularity of the case at hand” – at the cost of considering others and moral universalisms (Ross and Turner 2005:552). By reasoning as she does, Julia is able to “dogmatically resist moral criticism”, both from herself and potentially others (Ross and Turner 2005:552).

Self-love or the “penchant for evil”, is the “most ordinary perversion of self-esteem”, writes Ricoeur (1992:215). Recall that morality is linked to self-respect (just as the ethical aim is linked to esteeming oneself as a capable agent). A person who has self-respect is aware of her autonomy or her ability to determine what is wrong or right, and to act accordingly. More specifically, self-respect is “...the variant of self-esteem that has successfully passed the test of the criterion of universalization” (Ricoeur 1992:214-5). It is when self-esteem fails the test of universalization that it takes on the perverted form of self-love (Ricoeur 1992:215). Subsequently, one can say of Julia's case that if all human beings made use of air transport in their lifetimes, then climate change would worsen. Julia's actions therefore do not pass the moral test of universalization, nor do her actions further her idea of the good life (her care about climate change). Finally, Julia's situation can hardly pass as a moral dilemma, and due to her capacity as agent and her social circumstances, she could have done otherwise.

In addition, since there are very few exculpating factors (such as Julia's social environment, or a lack of knowledge, to name but two examples), Julia's complacent action is exceptionally blameworthy. In this perfect – and unrealistic – world that is Julia's, she does not have very good reasons for why she is acting complacently. Finally, Julia is held responsible as an individual person (as opposed to being partially responsible, as in instances of group complacency), even though she is part of a society (which will, even if it is a near perfect society, still have social structures on which Julia can draw creatively to act complacently).

#### **6.4.2. Real Life: When Swordfish Conservation Biologists Eat Swordfish**

Let us now return to the world we live in, where “real people are less free to ‘do otherwise’ than abstract agents” (Stones 2005:112). Giovanni Bearzi, in his article “When Swordfish Conservation Biologists Eat Swordfish” (2009), laments the fact that conservation biologists, after a long day's work, are able to sit down at a restaurant and order swordfish without any moral qualms. This is one of those cases where complacency and hypocrisy are closely connected. It seems like a case of hypocrisy because most outside observers would

know or assume that swordfish conservation biologists are supposed to *conserve*, and *not consume* swordfish in an indiscriminate way (that endangers the swordfish population). However, Bearzi himself reveals that there is more than hypocrisy going on here.

This is because swordfish conservation biologists do not seem to realise that they are doing something wrong, or more specifically, that their profession (or let us say, their social position<sup>302</sup>) is at odds with their behaviour. They sincerely seem to believe that they are *innocent* and see no conflict in their lives: they are therefore not trying to deceive other people, nor are they deceiving themselves.<sup>303</sup> Bearzi (2009:1) and Marshall (2014:chapter 37, paragraph 19) write that it is often as if conservation biologists and climate scientists (1) do not realise that people are looking at their behaviour as a level of trustworthiness of what they (conservationists and scientists) claim is true (just as one would look at “the racial prejudice of judges, the tax evasion by politicians, and the sexual behaviour of priests”), and (2) that conservation biologists and climate scientists fail to realise that they might be part of the problem (the problem being overfishing and climate change). In the previous section, I have written that complacency damages the self, interpersonal relationships, institutions, and thus ontological security: conservation biologists do just that by betraying others’ trust through their complacent actions.

Before we look at the reasons for why conservation biologists act complacently, let us first look at some of the action theoretical components of this case. To begin with, conservation biologists know and care about the wrong that is overfishing and environmental harm: they spend their time “condemning unsustainable fisheries or reporting high levels of toxic

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<sup>302</sup> Giddens (1984:84) defines social positions as “...social identity that carries with it a certain range (however diffusely specified) of prerogatives and obligations that an actor who is accorded that identity (or is an “incumbent” of that position) may activate or carry out: these prerogatives and obligations constitute the role prescriptions associated with that position.” These various social positions that each actor assumes can cause conflict (or tragedy) on the level of morality: Ricoeur (in dialogue with Abel 2012b), speaks of a plurality of commitments: we are beings with multiple commitments that force us to always negotiate in ourselves these multiple affiliations. If one looks at Giddens’s work on modernity, it seems as if modernity exacerbates the problem: in more traditional contexts in which “action and ontological frameworks” were more closed off by being clearly delineated, people arguably did not face as many moral dilemmas as today (Giddens 1991:48). (Yet, Giddens (1991:75) cautions us not to overstate this argument). “In medieval Europe, lineage, gender, social status and other attributes relevant to identity were all relatively fixed” and so people living in pre-modernity did not have the notions that we now have living in modernity, of having “unique characters” with “special potentialities” that might be explored and lived out (Giddens 1991:74). In other words, agents in pre-modern cultures did not have as much freedom as those living in modernity have regarding social interactions, identity (and the planning of counterfactual futures that this implies), and moral or ethical choices. As an agent in a pre-modern context, one’s social interactions (and the way one could plan one’s future and shape one’s identity) were limited by the tried-and-tested wisdom of the past, and due to the cosmological and ontological frameworks that provide firm moral principles and reasons for why the world is as it is (Giddens 1991:48).

<sup>303</sup> Recall that Szabados and Soifer (2004:257; 266) write that hypocrisy involves deceit or self-deceit.

contaminants in marine megafauna” (Bearzi 2009:1). By their very profession, conservation biologists have in-depth knowledge of the problem that is overfishing, and they probably have the necessary training, time, and resources to interpret this knowledge. Their awareness and concern for the conservation of swordfish is further a routine action: every day they are confronted with the issue and so their awareness and care become a type of habitual action that is only monitored lightly as they go on.<sup>304</sup>

However, since conservation biologists live in this world, they will probably experience that very few other people care as much about the conservation of swordfish as they do. In their research environments conservationists might find that the necessary structures for being aware and concerned about the conservation of swordfish are in place for them to draw on, but in the ‘outside’ world, in contact with the rest of society, these structures<sup>305</sup> are not in place. Moreover, since other persons do not find the conservation of swordfish as worthy as the conservationists do, conservationists’ concern for swordfish might not feel validated. Perhaps due to the lack of social support of swordfish conservation, conservationists might be unconsciously motivated not to care about swordfish, especially as they move outside of their research environments. It certainly is discouraging on a conscious level.

Next, conservation biologists culpably judge themselves as working hard to solve these environmental problems: they believe that through their research, they are doing what is necessary to address these wrongs. Yet, admits Bearzi (2009:1), even though conservation biologists ‘work hard’ at solving these problems through research, they do not “heed what [they] do [otherwise], buy, and consume.” And so it is that one finds a swordfish conservation biologist enjoying a “delicious fillet of Mediterranean Swordfish” without feeling conscious-stricken (or while feeling self-satisfied) (Bearzi 2009:1).

Bearzi (2009:1) writes that conservation biologists are able to act in this contradictory way because they “pretend [they] are the good guys and problems are created by bad guys elsewhere.” By adopting this narrative, conservation biologists are able to make their

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<sup>304</sup> The habitual way in which swordfish conservationist care about the conservation of these fish, might be another barrier to (re-)evaluating their concern and action regarding the preservation of swordfish. While habit involves some innovation and adaptation, it might stifle one’s imagination regarding other ways to preserve swordfish, and might make one desensitized to the problem that is the extinction of swordfish.

<sup>305</sup> For instance, the necessary resources to know and care about the conservation of swordfish might not be in place: there might not be any options to buy ethically sourced swordfish (allocative resources), or there might not be a ruling board or a government who prohibits overfishing and informs the public of the implications of overfishing (authoritative resources). Regarding rules or schemas of action, in society it is normatively acceptable to ‘go on’ in such a way that one eats swordfish, thus making it difficult to develop interpretative schemas to talk about and understand the issue that is overfishing.



discordant actions cohere. They are thus able to convince themselves that their actions do not contribute to the wrong that is overfishing: instead it is ‘someone else’ whose actions cause overfishing. Perhaps they reason and act in this way in order to remain at ease or self-satisfied regarding the issue of over-fishing. Or perhaps their self-satisfaction (thinking they are good people because they are conservation biologists) prompts their complacent actions. It is difficult to tell.

Moreover, conservationists feel that governments should take care of the problem, and hence that it is not the responsibility of the individual (scientist) to tackle issues like overfishing. According to Bearzi (2009:1) the argument is as follows: “If Mediterranean swordfish comes from unsustainable or illegal fisheries, why don’t *they* [our government and other institutions] stop those fisheries in the first place?” Another reason for biologists’ obviously inappropriate and harmful actions might be due to compartmentalisation: the moment that they sit down to eat, the fish is no longer “endangered wildlife”, but rather food (Bearzi 2009:1). Biologists thus re-interpret reality so that it fits in with their interpretations of themselves as caring about and acting against overfishing. Other reasons given are that biologists do not want to give up their comfortable middle-class lifestyles (in other words, consumptive habits), and the argument that ‘if I do not eat swordfish, someone else will’ (Bearzi 2009:2).<sup>306</sup>

Let us now look at the moral validity of the above reasons. When biologists say that the problem is created elsewhere, that the government should be responsible for controlling this problem, and that if ‘I don’t eat swordfish, someone else will’, they are hinting at the fact that they feel caught up in a problem too big for them to do anything about. In other words, one can say that resignation is at play here. The biologists do not feel like capable agents. Why might they feel this way? In Giddensian language (tempered by Stones), the agents in question might feel powerless against their *external* structures and consequently incorporate this powerless feeling into their knowledge-processes or internal structures. Swordfish conservation biologists thus experience their external influences as “*irresistible causal influences*” (Stones 2005:111). Moreover, it appears as if conservationists draw on social structures (for example, knowledge

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<sup>306</sup> Here, the element of justice comes to the fore: how should social negatives or responsibilities be distributed? (Beck, Giddens and Lash [1994] 1997:6). In other words, in the kind of world where swordfish might be caught in one location, and consumed in another part of the world, and where there are various national and corporate institutions with different and sometimes overlapping areas of jurisdiction, how does one distribute the responsibility of conserving swordfish? As Beck (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1997:7) writes, people “are being expected to live with a broad variety of different, mutually contradictory, global and personal risks.”

of how to ‘go on’ in such a way that one depends on the government or others to get things done, or viewing and ‘using’ the government as resource to get things done) in an uncritical way. Therefore, just as Julia interpreted herself as incapable of acting correctly, so also do conservationists interpret themselves as incapable agents.

Based on the fact that conservation biologists draw on structures in an uncritical way, and the fact that Bearzi chooses to speak of ‘conservation biologists,’ and not of ‘a conservation biologist,’ it appears as if conservation biologists are part of a group that acts complacently. In other words, conservation biologists share responsibility for this complacent behaviour because they all reflexively participate in and reproduce structures that sustain complacent action amongst conservation biologists. Each biologist is thus partially responsible for maintaining complacency-promoting structures, but one cannot hold a specific individual biologist responsible for orchestrating complacent action among conservation biologists. This case of complacent action thus lends itself more to speaking of a group who is complacent, than a specific individual (although, there will of course be unique actors involved who act complacently in their own unique way). Let us further look at some of the epistemically incorrect ways that swordfish conservationists evaluate their own (unsatisfactory) actions (pertaining to the wrong that is overfishing).

As was pointed out in chapter one, this incorrect evaluation of one’s power in relation to external structures might be a form of epistemic irresponsibility, which in turn might contribute to acting complacently. However, and as always, judging whether an agent is acting complacently is subject to other qualifications. For example, Stones (2005:112) points out that evaluating oneself as being helpless in the face of external structures is “most often not just a subjective misrecognition of external conditions. It is often, rather, a realistic enough appraisal of the independent external conditions and the matrix of sanctions and rewards they promise to flesh and blood agents with a depth of values and commitments.” However, as Ricoeur and Giddens pointed out to us, even though structures (and by implication, institutions) have a kind of independent existence which goes beyond its constituting agents, institutions and societies are recursively sustained by agents. Because institutions are structures of action, agents are capable of changing the systems and structures that constitute institutions, even if the change is painfully gradual and minimal. Through their excuses, the conservation biologists seem to suggest that they are completely independent from governments and institutions, and that they thus have no power to bring about change in the fishing industry. However, they do have power, or power-in-common, which sanctions the existence of institutions.

Conservation biologists, especially if they live under democratic systems, have the capacity to change institutions in such a way that it allows for ethical decision making. This does not mean that changing an institution or a society is an easy task. As Bearzi (2009:1) writes, in order (for example) to elect a representative who promotes sustainable choices, one must first “identify [one’s] own values and realise that alternative ways do exist.” However, this process of re-evaluating, in turn, is informed by the market-driven mass media. But, yet again, through agents’ power in common, they can make their individual decisions heard through their wallets. Here, it particularly comes to the fore that evaluation (of one’s actions and of one’s capabilities to act) is an ongoing process. It is never as simple as making a once-off evaluation of one’s actions as good enough: as the agents continuously move through life, they will have to evaluate their actions again and again. Complacent action is thus an ongoing action or choice (where making a decision is also acting), and thus there are many opportunities to take initiative and choose or act non-complacently. Conservation biologists, moreover, are arguably in a more powerful social position due to their knowledge (and accompanying authority). They can thus exert more influence by, for example, setting the example of how to live a more sustainable life.

I wish to return again to the above objection that others, such as the government, should be responsible for effecting change, but this time I would like to take another approach and emphasize an alternative aspect of this objection. Bearzi (2009:1) quotes biologist and fishery scientist Daniel Pauly who says: “I don’t want to have to check in the morning if my orange juice was pressed by underpaid migrant workers – I just can’t.” Whether Pauly “just can’t”, because he has no time to do so, or whether he simply cannot pay full attention to everything that he is doing, seems, on an intuitive level, like a legitimate reason.

Based on Giddens’s description of late modernity, it is clear that most of us live demanding lives that are so complexly interwoven with the lives of others, that it would be hard, if not impossible, to unravel it all and examine each thread of it. As I sit here, I would have to determine where the rug beneath my feet really came from, and who made it under what conditions, and who imported it; next, I would have to determine whether the desk I am sitting at is made out of wood from a sustainable forest, and then I would have to determine where each part of my laptop came from. Even if one had the time for this kind of examination, – because arguably one can *make* the time – other barriers exist: some information is hard to find, and if one found out that most of one’s products are unethical, it would require tremendous exertion and more time to find replacement products that are sustainably sourced. I would

perhaps have to give up using my laptop altogether, knowing that some parts *cannot* currently be sourced ethically. It is clear that such a task is impossible for a person acting on her own. In this sense, conservation biologists might be less blameworthy for their complacency, than if these impediments did not exist. However, as conservation biologists, they do have a lot of knowledge surrounding swordfish (they know that swordfish populations are decreasing to dangerously low levels that might lead to extinction), *and* they have the choice of eating other fish (different from the example of people who have almost no choice, if they want to use a laptop).

Finally, some biologists admit that they do not wish to give up their comfortable lifestyles. Again, from an action theoretical perspective, a person has different motives (such as the body which needs food, and the unconscious) and hence different things, or projects that he or she *values*. Giddens (1993:84) speaks of a hierarchy of purposes,<sup>307</sup> while Ricoeur (1966:146) refers to a hierarchy of values. Determining one's hierarchy of values is an infinite, ongoing process: in the moment of choosing to eat swordfish, or choosing to forfeit swordfish, one is confronted with "*evident goods*," writes Ricoeur (1966:146). Evident goods are present in one's "affective corporeal matrix" and is experienced "'in' a desire" (146). In other words, even if one (say the ethicist, or the judging observer) were to draw up a "balance sheet" with all the desires and needs involved in the biologist's choice, Ricoeur (1966:146) argues that for the biologist who is amidst the choice, certain values stand out clearly above the rest.

Phenomenologically, then, the option of eating a tasty swordfish right now is much more compelling than saving the abstract swordfish – out there – from extinction. However, even though Ricoeur draws our attention to the very human way of sorting out our values and making decisions, it does not absolve us and the conservation biologists from acting responsibly. One has the freedom and capacity to do otherwise, and since one has the capacity to act, one has power over others. In our current example, swordfish biologists have some sort of power over the environment, and by implication over other human beings. Having power over others introduces an ethical element into action. By not acting in an integrated way (complacent action divides the self), conservation biologists relativize and betray (not only

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<sup>307</sup> Stones (2005:101, 103) explains that the ordering one's concerns or purposes into a "hierarchy of purposes" with the aid of one's internal structures is closely tied to the rationalization of one's action. For example, drawing on one's general-dispositional internal structures, one might have certain aesthetic tastes that shape which type of projects or purposes one values; at the same time however, drawing on one's conjuncturally-specific internal structures, one might be faced with contexts that are more important or pressing than one's aesthetic tastes, causing one to value, for example, more pragmatic projects. This ordering process may not be completely coherent or logical, and can be more or less a critical process or a pre-reflective one (Stones 2005:103).

their own values, but also) social structures that could have been used by agents to conserve swordfish or only consume sustainably sourced fish. One can thus say that conservation biologists have – at least – some sort of duty not to eat swordfish.

In conclusion, the above case of swordfish conservation biologists eating swordfish draws our attention to some of the complexities involved in real life instances of complacent action. The conservation biologists in the example are guilty of complacent action, yet there are exculpating circumstances which make their complacent actions less blameworthy. These (in part) pardoning circumstances include the biologists' perception of their (lack of capacity), resignation (feeling overwhelmed because they evaluate themselves as not being able to do much), and evaluating themselves as being caught up in established structures and societal constraints (such as a society that encourages pleasure and instant satisfaction, at the cost of mindfulness and moral behaviour; along with governments that do not monitor fisheries). However, one must also keep in mind that some of these reflexive evaluations are in themselves complacent actions, and so we return once again to the conclusion that swordfish conservation biologists act complacently.

#### **6.4.3. Limit Case: The Average Joe Who “Does his Share”**

Let us now suppose an average Joe who cares about climate change for our final example. He is really going to have us question whether it is easy to label someone as complacent. Although Joe is an average person, it does not mean that he is not exceptional at something. Perhaps Joe is an excellent civil engineer, or a masterful chef, or a remarkable bonsai-grower. He could be a person like you or me; that is all I mean to say.

However, Joe is not a climate scientist. He perceives only vaguely the problem that is climate change. Here and there, in his busy life, he picks up bits and pieces about climate change. All that he could perhaps say for certain is that (a) climate change is bad, and that (b) he is concerned about it, and (c) that he consequently wishes to do something about it. And so Joe goes and does what he thinks might mitigate climate change: he recycles all his recyclables, uses re-usable shopping bags, and from his friend, Thelma, he's heard that one should buy one's own aluminium straw and a re-usable coffee cup for when one consumes take-away beverages at places like Starbucks. Joe likes gardening, so he plants a few trees as well. Later, he finds out that there's an eco-friendly search engine, which plants trees for every search you make. So, Joe reluctantly leaves Google and uses the eco-friendly search engine instead. Joe, reflecting on his actions, thinks he is doing quite enough regarding climate change and is also

rather satisfied with himself. This, while climate change is a wrong which demands much, much more action to be mitigated.

Moreover, Joe reaches the conclusion that his actions are satisfactory (in relation to the problem or wrong that is climate change) in an epistemically irresponsible way. Although Joe is not actively trying to avoid an honest appraisal of his actions regarding climate change (he does not avoid conversations or information about climate change, for example), Joe (as a limit case) is perhaps ‘sincerely’ ignorant. Jenni (2003:279) calls this an “unmotivated lack of focus”, or “simple inattention.” In this case, let us say that Joe simply misses certain information by chance, and that it never occurs to him to further investigate whether his actions are adequate to address climate change. In addition, Joe does not live in a society which directs his attention to what counts as adequate action in relation to climate change, nor has Joe been taught to assess to what one should and should not pay attention. Although not the worst, this is still blameworthy behaviour.<sup>308</sup> Joe should go beyond moral duty and find out what he can do more in terms acting against the wrong that is climate change, especially since he knows it is something which affects all human beings.

Standing back, this looks like a classic case of complacency: Joe cares about climate change and he thinks his actions are appropriate to address climate change (while his actions are not: they are greatly insufficient). Joe has arrived at the conclusion that his actions are adequate in an epistemically irresponsible way, and he also feels satisfied. As an onlooker, one might perhaps feel justified in condemning Joe’s actions as being complacent. His neighbour from across the street has been thinking the exact same thing: ‘Look at Joe,’ she thinks, ‘he supposedly cares about the environment, yet he drives around in his SUV and lives in an enormous house. Delivery trucks are constantly dropping off packages at his home too! He’s comfortably consuming more things as the world goes to waste. He’s so oblivious, he needs to do more! Ugh. He is being so complacent.’

However, at the same time, one might suspect that Joe is not really such a horrible or blameworthy person in terms of complacency. Let us consider some mitigating factors in Joe’s case. Let us start with Joe’s knowledge that climate change is bad. Joe might not know how

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<sup>308</sup> Joe, in addition to being inattentive or unfocused, is probably also morally negligent with regard to his behaviour. Recall Milo’s (1984:84) definition of negligence (mentioned in chapter one): moral negligence is “a culpable failure to take those precautions necessary to assure oneself, before acting, that what one proposes to do is not in violation of one’s moral principles.” (Whether it is fair to expect this of every person’s every act, is a matter which I will focus on in the rest of this case study. One can already intuit that to pause before every action is almost impossible in the kind of world that Joe, and most of us, live in; not to mention the interwoven and continuous nature of action which complicates evaluation of one’s actions in the flow of daily life.)

bad, ‘bad’ is. Since he is not a climate scientist (or perhaps a moral philosopher with an interest in the wrong that is climate change), Joe does not realise the vast and catastrophic implications of climate change. Now, one may object and argue that Joe should take the time to investigate the wrong that he supposedly “cares” about and then adjust his actions accordingly, and this is indeed so. However, let us look at some of the things that might prevent or discourage Joe from adequately knowing, caring, and acting in line with climate change.

Joe’s sincere ignorance about the inappropriateness of his actions might be due to the fact that he does not have time to do extra research about climate change, and he has other pressing concerns. Joe, like most of us, has many constraints on his time. He works nine hours a day, and more often than not, has to work overtime. He has a family with whom he likes to spend time. There are certain daily chores in and around his home that he has to complete, and he has other activities, like rock climbing, or hiking in the mountains, which he would also like to do. Even if Joe obtained the relevant information – let us say he realises that the food that he buys in grocery stores is transported via vehicles that make use of fossil fuels, and that these vehicles emit carbon dioxide, and hence are bad for the environment, can one reasonably expect of him to stop supporting grocery stores? I think most would agree that such a demand is perhaps unreasonable.

This would imply that Joe should grow his own food, and perhaps keep a cow in his own backyard (most people in Joe’s world do not even have the luxury of a backyard: they live in high rise buildings). The point is that Joe does not live in the kind of world that permits him to grow his own food: he perhaps does not have the time to learn how to grow and maintain a vegetable patch, or he simply does not have the allocative resources to do so (a big enough garden, for example). Finally, even if Joe were to grow his own food, he would have to process these foodstuffs (bake bread, make cereals, parse olive pips to make olive oil, and so on). Joe does not have the equipment nor time to do this.

In addition, Joe’s inappropriate actions might be due to a lack of interpretative skills. While Joe has knowledge and the necessary interpretative skills (and schemas that he can draw on) of how to ‘go on’ in his day-to-day life, he does not have specialised knowledge about climate change. Even if he were presented with ‘knowledge’ in the form of peer reviewed articles about climate change in respected journals such as *Nature*, he would simply not know how to interpret these articles. The information would almost be meaningless to him, and therefore would not have any purchase on his behaviour. Joe might choose to rely on articles

written for the general public, but then again he might not be certain that the information is reliable. There are lots of articles that purport that climate change is a myth. Although one might expect of Joe to research climate change since it is such a far-reaching wrong, one starts to see that ‘obtaining information’ or doing ‘research’ is not such a straightforward process.

Finally, some, such as Norgaard (2011:xix), draw our attention to the fact that the problem is not always a lack of information, but that people feel frustrated and powerless. Let us suppose that Joe feels powerless, but not in an overtly conscious way. This powerlessness is manifested in Joe’s habits and his routines. Joe has grown up in the kind of world where it is an imperative and definitely a goal to amass as many things as is possible. Joe thinks it is completely normal to buy a bigger house, a bigger car, more household appliances, and more luxury goods, the more money he earns. If he looks around him, it certainly seems to be the way things are done. His friend recently bought a second house, and Joe secretly wonders when he will be able to do the same. Over the years, as he drops of his children at school, he notices that the cars from which other schoolchildren descend grow more and more luxurious and flashy. And so Joe does the same. Social conventions should not be underestimated.<sup>309</sup> It takes a special conviction to act against the crowd or the ‘they.’ In fact, many feel that complacency is greatly helped along and sustained by the company one keeps or the society that one is part of (Jenni 2003:285; Doan 2014). Arendt (1977:126) writes that Eichmann, although responsible for transporting thousands of Jews to their death, thought he was working alongside “respectable people”.

Yet, some might argue that a person does not just helplessly internalize his or her society’s structures (of complacent action) in total. Instead, as Giddens shows us, agents can creatively and critically draw on these social structures in social practices, while then reshaping (even if it is just a little bit) these structures through their unique social practices. Thus one might argue that Joe, while not a fully free from societal constraints and all this entails (being subject to power relations, certain frames of interpretation, and sanctions by institutions or his

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<sup>309</sup> I recall a certain prank, executed in Japan, called the ‘100 people prank’. In this prank, one hundred people act together in order to fool or to prank one other random person. In one scenario, the hundred pranksters suddenly start running past the chosen individual (the prankee). The prankee has no idea why the others (the hundred) are running, but starts running, frantically, along with the group anyway. In another scenario, the hundred unobtrusively walks alongside the prankee until they are all walking around him – dispersed. Someone gives a signal, and the hundred pranksters all drop to the floor. The prankee does the same, even though he does not know why. Of course, situations like these are not absolutely representative of how social influence plays out. The prankees in both instances probably felt threatened and exposed while walking in public, and probably thought it wise to run or duck for cover even if they did not see the ‘danger’ that the others were running, or taking cover from.



peers), is not completely at their mercy either. Joe is able to improvise and draw on these structures until he gradually creates ‘new’ structures. However, this argument leans too much in favour of the agent’s initiative. Action is also passivity, and so to expect of one agent that he should change societal structures is to ask the impossible. Changing social structures might involve “...addressing corrupting social influences such as the deliberate hiding of abusive practices,<sup>310</sup> misleading advertising, the prevalence of obfuscating language, and widespread antipathy to moral reproach and discussion” (Jenni 2003:290).

In addition, we know that Giddens has made it clear that power is both enabling and constraining. Ricoeur also speaks of having to assume more active or passive roles based on power-relations. However, let us suppose Joe lives in a structurally unjust society, and that he happens to part of that category of persons who are systemically being deprived of the means of developing and exercising their capacities to act (especially regarding climate change) (Young 2007:171). Using Ricoeur’s language for a moment, it would seem as if Joe’s complacency might be an instance of submission: that is to say, Joe has had his power removed through structural injustices, and can thus merely acquiesce to the wills of those who are in power. Since those in power in Joe’s society are not concerned about climate change and about fostering environmentally friendly behaviour in others (let us suppose the powerful even oppose awareness of climate change), Joe’s power or capacity is drastically reduced. In this specific scenario, Joe’s complacency is less blameworthy (than if he were to act complacently due to his own omission or neglect of the correct action) (Ballantyne 2007:151).

Furthermore, Joe’s character might also thwart his actions. Although Ricoeur later argues that one can slowly shape one’s character, one’s character also pushes back, in a manner of speaking. It is one’s finite perspective on the world, and while one might be busy shaping one’s character, one’s character, in the meantime, induces one to act in one’s unique way. Joe is very laid back and, as some say, happy-go-lucky. He is not overly anxious about many things. He actually offends people on a regular basis without being aware of the fact. Kawall (2006:344) would perhaps call Joe “thick-headed”. Joe’s sincere inattentiveness might indeed partly be due to his personality. This, of course, does not exempt Joe from blame: Ricoeur

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<sup>310</sup> However, I would like to add, along with Giddens, that unintentional hiding of harmful practices might also occur. For example, Joe might become desensitized to climate change, due to mass media’s way of reporting on climate change. Media houses might unintentionally cause this desensitization by making climate change a regular feature in their publications, or by placing stories about climate change on the front page along with celebrity gossip (Bearzi 2009:1). Mass media might thus unintentionally lead Joe to believe that climate change warrants as much concern as some famous couple’s break-up.

constantly reminds us that one should wrest the voluntary from the involuntary (or from the semi-involuntary, in this instance).

In conclusion, despite all the obstacles that Joe has to face in order to act in line with what he cares about, Joe is still guilty of complacent action. It would, however, be absurd if one were to equate Joe's complacency with Julia's complacency. Joe's complacency is far less blameworthy than that of Julia's, since there are far more pardoning factors present in his case than in Julia's.

#### 6.4.4. Final Thoughts

At this point of the investigation into complacent action, it might seem as if we are only left with the option of infinitely enumerating and examining cases of complacent action. But this is not entirely true. The analytical definition of complacency which I have provided earlier introduces a certain order: it makes explicit a set of rules (or to use Giddens's term: structures) or an action-pattern that aid(s) us in knowing whether and when it would be appropriate to characterize certain actions as complacent action. However, the tie between the analytic definition of complacency (the essential prerequisites for action to count as complacent action) and the other contingent characteristics often found in cases of complacent action is not systematic: certain contingent aspects are absent from certain types of complacency, or they are common to several types of complacency, or even to all (Ricoeur 1977:76).

In sum, by looking at various cases of complacent action, I have found, such as in the case of Joe above, that complacent action is a necessary part of everyday life. We cannot act non-complacently about everything that we care about in our daily lives. We simply do not have the time, the necessary social structures, and sometimes the capability to do the right thing about everything that we know and care about. In a perfect world (perhaps similar to the world that Julia lives in), there would not be any *need* to act complacently. However, in this world right now, with all its demands and wrongs, one is almost compelled to act complacently, at least about some things.<sup>311</sup> So, until the world becomes the kind of world where there is no

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<sup>311</sup> By arguing that complacency is part of our present-day lives and thus a necessary evil, am I not arguing exactly like someone who is complacent? In other words, am I saying that we as human beings are actually okay, while, in fact, we are not? However, here is another interesting thing about complacency: by admitting that one is probably complacent (about X), one is no longer complacent (about X). This is because one recognizes one's shortcomings (regarding X), and hence cannot feel satisfied or at ease, nor is one being epistemically irresponsible in the moment of 'recognizing' one's own complacency. However, if one then does not change one's behaviour, one is probably guilty of another related vice, such as weakness of will or resignation. Even if it is ironic, we need to negotiate this irony or tension as we live, and hope and strive for the day where it is no longer necessary to be complacent. Jenni (2003:279) gives us some practical advice: "we should attend (at least) to apparent violations

need to act complacently, we can only hope, along with Ricoeur, for deliverance from this tensive state of existing. Hope does not reconcile the opposing elements in our world, but hope consoles us as we manoeuvre between the demands of our circumstances, nature and other people, and our wish to act autonomously in the pursuit of doing what is right.

## 6.5. Concluding Thoughts

The aim of this chapter was to arrive at an action theoretical account of complacency. To do so, I first integrated Ricoeur and Giddens's respective action theories. From this integration or synthesis, I was able to identify and summarize the foundational constituents of an action theory with a view to elucidate complacency.

Based on these foundational constituents, I was next able to delineate the specificity of complacent action. I found that complacent action is particularly characterised by the action-components or acts (considered conceptually) of (i) awareness and (ii) care or concern about some matter, (iii) in conjunction with acts that contradict the agent's acts of care about this same matter, (iv) where *both* the acts of care and the acts that contradict these acts of care (about some matter) are evaluated as being congruous or in line with what the agent cares about. These evaluative acts within the flow of complacent action are thus mistaken in the sense that acts that contradict the agent's care, do not align with that which the agent is (aware of and) concerned about. Moreover, these ongoing mistaken evaluations are due to the fault of the agent. The final action-constituent of complacent action is (iv) the act of self-satisfaction, where self-satisfaction 'causes' or maintains the aforementioned wrong evaluations of, and actions contradicting the agent's acts of care. In sum, within the heart of complacent action one finds directly opposing or contradicting actions (in relation to some matter), that are smoothed over (made to seem coherent) by the agent in question through his or her wrongful and irresponsible evaluations of her own actions (pertaining to some matter).

Next, I was able to bring the above action theory (based on an integration of Ricoeur and Giddens's action theories) into dialogue with my working analytical definition of complacency. By doing so, I was able to reinterpret and redescribe the analytical constituents of my working definition of complacency as action, or at least makes sense of these constituents within an action theoretical framework. By placing analysis and action theory in a dialectical

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of our moral values in which we are personally implicated, which we have power to affect, and to which we have been directed by clues that something is amiss."

relationship, I was able to obtain a description of complacent action that is both precise or specific, and rich and complex.

Finally, I have provided three case studies to illustrate the varied and complex ways that this pattern of complacent action might play out. These case studies also served to illustrate that not all cases of complacent action are equally blameworthy, and that in our day-to-day lives, most agents will have to act complacently about some matters. By looking at the way that the specific pattern of complacent action manifests in real life, one additionally finds that complacent action is both defined and undefined. Defined, because within each of the three cases of complacency, one is able to analytically identify those specific and common aspects or characteristics associated with complacent action. Undefined, because each instance of using the word ‘complacency’ and each instance of an agent ‘acting out’ complacent action, slightly departs from, and even alters, the supposed essential understanding of complacency.

To conclude, one can define and describe complacency as action, but this definition and description is an ongoing process, due to the nature of action. New ways of complacent action might arise or evolve, or the word ‘complacency’ might take on new nuances as it is being used in discourse and discussed. As such, the above dialectic between analysis and action is again confirmed: one might have a stable idea or definition of what complacent action is, but this idea or definition will always be informed by action. We can reflect on complacent action and narrate our understanding of complacent action, but we will not achieve a final vantage point from which to declare: “this is complacent action, once and for all!” To use Ricoeur’s words, making sense of human life and (complacent) action is something “unachieved” or “unfinished”; it is an ongoing judgement that one has to make amidst different cases of complacency in complex circumstances.

## Conclusion

Complacency is prevalent and intriguing social phenomenon to which philosophers, sociologist, and anthropologists have paid very little attention. It was thus the purpose of this thesis to fill this gap, this unexplored area of research, by illuminating complacency from an action theoretical perspective in order to make a direct contribution to the philosophical disciplines of ethics and action theory, and in order to make an indirect contribution to public discourse surrounding the matter of complacency.

In order to think of complacency as action, I first needed to analyse and disambiguate complacency as phenomenon: I thus posited a working analytical definition of complacency in chapter one. I then explored the connection between linguistic analysis and action theory in order to connect my working analytical definition of complacency with complacency considered as action in all its complexity and fullness. I then proceeded to delineate the action theories of Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens, in order that I might draw up an integrated action theory based on the systemization of their work. Based on this synthesized action theory, I identified several action theoretical components to serve as foundation to my action theory of complacency.

Finally, I was able to specify those action components, as part of the ongoing or continuous flow of daily action, that are specific to complacent action. I found that complacent action is characterized, predominantly, by directly opposing or contradicting actions (in relation to some matter), that are smoothed over (made to seem coherent) by the agent in question through his or her wrongful and irresponsible evaluations of her own actions (pertaining to some matter).

Next, I was able to bring my working analytical definition of complacency into dialogue with the Ricoeurian-Giddensian action theory and with the specific action-components of complacent action that I have identified, in order to arrive at an account of complacent action that incorporates both a technical, precise, and clarified understanding of complacent action and a description of complacent action as complex, rich, and mysterious. This action theoretical account of complacency, further illustrated by three case studies, revealed that while one can describe complacent action in precise terms (there are certain explicit and essential characteristics that are present in all cases of complacent action), complacent action escapes definition, in the sense that each instance of using the word ‘complacency’ and each instance of an agent ‘acting out’ complacent action, slightly departs from and even alters the supposed

essential understanding of complacency. As such I have said that our understanding of complacent action is an ongoing process; it is itself an action.

Through my research I have thus partly filled the gap (a lack of philosophical, sociological, and anthropological research on complacency) that existed in the fields of ethics and action theory.

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