“Who You Talkin’ About?” Parallel Truthiness Concerns Between Autobiography and Biography in Bioethics

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“Who You Talkin’ About?” Parallel Truthiness Concerns Between Autobiography and Biography in Bioethics

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If Walker’s (2012) theory of narrative self-understanding is correct—that it includes both selecting events and interpreting them in juxtaposition to each other, and this necessarily compromises but not completely erases a narrative’s overall truth—it urges looking again at normative ethical discourse and its claims to truth, especially when it relies upon self-narratives or narratives about others. Take Jewish bioethical discourse as an example in which practical arguments about what people should do are based upon readings of classical texts. Many of those texts are law, to be sure; but many are also stories—some about the author, though most are about others. It is these narratives that modern bioethicists often read with selectivity and interpretation similar to Walker’s theory that betrays the bioethicists’ agendas and ulterior motives. This suggests that modern (Jewish) bioethical discourse is doubly skewed from reality and any claims to truth therein warrant double scrutiny.

There are at least two ways to put flesh on the analogy between self-narratives and ethical discourse: first, by looking at what these genres do, and second, at their claims to truth.

Walker proposes that self-narratives do three things simultaneously. First, they articulate a person’s ways of experiencing the world, which, through time, change because of new experiences and reinterpretations of those experiences in light of each other. In this way self-narratives also shape an individual’s character to the degree they nourish particular self-conceptions. And finally, since they frame and constrain self-images they perform decisions about behavior: They perform or are enacted, as Walker says. In this way self-narratives constitute an individual’s very being.

Ethical arguments also do these three things: They articulate certain ways of experiencing the world insofar as they identify and explicate the morally problematic; they shape character insofar as they model idealized ways of navigating moral conundrums that others should emulate; and they perform in and through others’ enactment of their prescriptions. As such, they too constitute the communities and individuals who produce and consume them.

In regard to claims to truth, Walker demonstrates that self-narratives merit suspicion for two primary reasons. They are inherently selective and by definition are interpretative of what they select. Any self-narrative requires identifying certain events—and only certain elements or facets of those events—to highlight in one’s narrative, for it is impossible for most of us to remember absolutely everything about every moment (of course, Aleksander Luria’s [1968] mnemonist, S., is a prominent exception). This selection process requires skipping over or skewing other events and elements. Narratives not only stitch piecemeal details and events together, they imbue them with meaning in that very juxtaposition. Such interpenetrating interpretation is never static. Rather, it is an iterative process, much like the ongoing dialectic between ethics and religion that Lenn Goodman (2008) calls chimneying. By bounding between opposing faces of seemingly discrete events, individuals cleave them together in novel ways much like climbers ascending edifices and crevices along new tracks. As each ascent is unique, so too is every self-narrative different from its previous incarnation.

But we must wonder whether any ascending self-story is true, since some steps are missing and new approaches and angles are used. The precariousness of such stories leads John Hardwig (1997) to be skeptical of self-narrative’s veracity. He asserts that every autobiography is riddled with epistemological black holes into which critical elements comprising a person’s self-narrative get sucked. Ignorance, innocent mistakes, self-deception, and lies pockmark any and every self-narrative irrespective of a person’s consciousness of them. Because these errors mar self-narratives, it would be dangerous to rely exclusively on autobiographies when forging norms, such as prescribing treatment plans to a real patient in one’s clinic or to an imagined audience of one’s bioethical tract.

Similar skepticism can be levied, and rightfully so, at biographies. Such narratives about others are limited by the reach of research, vulnerable to authorial bias, and complicated by the politics of the age in which they are written. In some cases, what is claimed about an individual may be more legend than fact. This is certainly true in regard to biographical material found in classic rabbinic texts, texts that modern Jewish bioethicists plumb for normative guidance and upon which they ground their prescriptive conclusions. The inaccuracy of Talmudic biographical information is

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indisputable because of their late provenance, brevity, and intention; according to Stemberger (1996), theirs is a “reduced reliability.” Thus, bioethical discourse reliant upon either dubious autobiography or fanciful biography is doubly suspect.

To illustrate this problem, we turn now to Jewish bioethics, where stories loom large. Some Orthodox Jewish bioethicists might balk at this claim, but they cannot deny that they too render normative decisions based on their readings of certain stories found in classical sources. Though I investigate the story of stories within Jewish bioethics elsewhere, I offer here but one example of how Jewish bioethicists chimney through a classic story to reach predetermined desired ends (Crane in press). The Babylonian Talmud records the story of Rabbi Chananya ben Teradyon (c. 2nd century CE) being burned at the stake by the Romans for teaching Torah in public—a capital crime in the eyes of that ancient regime (BT Avodah Zarah 18a). This story is universally invoked by Jewish bioethicists wrestling with the morally thorny issues of euthanasia.

According to the printed edition of the Talmud, the story goes as follows: Chananya is wrapped in the Torah scroll, tufts of wool are affixed to his chest, and he is mounted upon a pyre and lit aflame. His daughter wails about seeing him thus and he calms her by saying that the one who takes umbrage at the insult to the Torah will also take umbrage at the insult to him. His students ask what he sees, and he replies that he sees the parchment burning and the letters soaring. They encourage him to open his mouth, presumably so that he would asphyxiate faster. He responds, “It is better that the one who gave it [my life] takes it, and one may not injure oneself.” The executioner approaches him and offers to increase the flames and remove the wet tufts of wool from his chest if he, Chananya, will bring him into the World to Come. Chananya agrees to the plan, and the executioner asks him to swear by it, which he does. The executioner then removes the tufts of wool and increases the flames, as he promised, and then jumps into the fire himself. A heavenly voice declares that both Chananya and the executioner have been assigned to the World to Come. Rabbi Judah HaNasi, the greatest sage of his generation, tearfully laments that some acquire their eternal reward in one moment and others only after many years of piety.

Indubitably this is a story, and like any story it highlights certain elements and glosses over others. And its sequential recitation of these few features offers a particular interpretation of each of its elements, as well as an overarching attitude about the anxieties of intervening in another’s demise. It would be wrongheaded to assume that this story offers a comprehensive retelling of all that happened when Chananya was killed. Indeed, other stories with dramatically different details exist about his fiery end.

This story’s questionable verisimilitude goes unheeded by modern bioethicists, however. The vast majority sees do regarding euthanasia. For some, Chananya’s teaching to his students is an unambiguous principle that anything hastening death must be proscribed. Other bioethicists fixate on the executioner’s proposal to remove the tufts of wool, which they construe as permission to withdraw life-sustaining treatments from an otherwise medically futile patient. And a few hone in on the executioner’s plan to increase the flames: For them this obviously means that actively bringing about someone’s demise is palatable. That is, this single story apparently lends support for proscribing any euthanasia strategy, promoting passive euthanasia, and even endorsing active euthanasia—depending on who reads it and how.

To be sure, such selective readings of this story are as piecemeal as the story itself. And like the original story, by highlighting one or two bits of the story, bioethicists ascribe to it a particular interpretation that suits their pre-determined desired ends. And, lo, the textual tradition supports their position—whatever it might be—vis-à-vis euthanasia.

However convenient this strategy may be, it is doubly worrisome. At one level bioethicists model poor reading strategies insofar as they truncate the story, and many mute the tiny bits they invoke. Since the original story’s veracity is already questionable, their all too brief treatment of it further reduces its truth. And at a more disturbing level is when bioethicists insist that theirs is a complete and accurate reading of the textual tradition, and that whatever norm they propose reflects the totality of the tradition. This is an outright lie insofar as conflicting stories exist, and this story in particular countenances both ambiguity and ambivalence that preclude discerning a clear and unequivocal normative position on any aspect of euthanasia. All this suggests that modern bioethicists turning to narratives—whether autobiographies of living patients or biographies of ancient figures—should be doubly vigilant about how they hear-ken to them.

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