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Reproductive Technologies of the Self: Michel Foucault and Meta-Narrative-Ethics

Daniel M. Goldstein[1]

This paper presents a direction for narrative ethics based on ethical ideas found in the works of Michel Foucault. Narrative ethics is understood here at the meta-level of cultural discourse to see how the moral subject is constituted by the discursive practices that structure the contemporary debate on reproductive technologies. At this level it becomes meta-narrative-ethics. After a theoretical discussion, this paper uses two literary narratives representing the polarized views in the debate to show how the moral subject may be compelled to relate to its self. Ethics is redefined as Foucauldian rapport à soi, and ethical analysis, at this meta-level, shows how the moral self is intimately connected to cultural discourse.

KEY WORDS: Foucault; Foucauldian ethics; meta-ethics; narrative; the self.

INTRODUCTION

Narrative ethics concerns a population of dispersed events. These words, not "narrative ethics" but that which it concerns, are the words of Michel Foucault (1995, p. 27). He uses these words to show that certain unities like "the book" or "the oeuvre" or even "science" and "literature" must be problematized. They are not "the tranquil locus on the basis of which other questions may be posed" (1995, p. 26), and it is important to recognize that these unities themselves pose a whole cluster of questions. This is part of his effort "to rid ourselves of a whole mass of notions" (1995, p. 21) that lead to an understanding of the process of theorizing as a continuous whole, a unity whose totality provides comfort for a subject that needs guarantees that there is a continuous history in which it plays an integral part. Foucault asks us to theorize differently about those unities that are so important for the modern subject.

[1]Address correspondence to Daniel M. Goldstein, Ph.D., 390 Front Street, Weymouth, MA 02188; e-mail: daniel.goldstein@mcp.edu, dgoldstein@mountida.edu.

Narrative ethics as understood here asks a similar question. It problematizes the unity that is contemporary ethics. Although narrative ethics has been variously presented as a way of illuminating illness or of approaching the relationship of physician and patient, concentrating on the stories that are exchanged between them, or as an integral part of medical education, these micro-level themes will not be the focus here (Brody, 1987; Frank 1995; Hunter, 1991). In what follows, the meta-level of cultural narrativity will be given primacy and the influence that certain narratives have on the moral subject's understanding of him or herself takes center stage. How the moral being cares for itself is my main question.[2]

This paper is about thinking differently in ethics and bioethics. I will incorporate ideas found in the works of Foucault to deepen ethical questioning beyond the interminable "assertion versus counter-assertion" that is typical of modern ethics (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 8). I will use the debate on reproductive technologies to illuminate the discursive practice of contemporary bioethics.

My focus combines the bioethical narrative with metaethics, and, just as metaethics concerns the significance of moral language or narrative, meta-narrative-ethics (with two hyphens to provide a continuity through the three terms) concerns the significance of an ethical narrative, not in and of itself, but for a subject. It asks the question: What meaning does an ethical narrative present for the subject in terms of its self-understanding? An important basic assumption of my adaptation of Foucault is that when a subject engages a narrative the subject is transformed by that narrative. I call the narrative's ability to transform its ontological narrativity.

This paper consists of three sections. First I present a selective and necessarily rudimentary presentation of Foucauldian theorizing with a discussion on how it may apply to bioethics. Second, I portray the self of meta-narrative-ethics through Foucault's idea of the statement and the space it creates for a subject. Third, I discuss the debate on reproductive technologies using two literary narratives in terms of what was presented in the first two sections. I conclude with some directions for the future of bioethics.

FOUCAULDIAN THEORIZING

Truth, power and the subject are all key terms in the works of Michel Foucault. But to fully appreciate his theorizing, these terms have to be questioned and their

[2]François Ewald (1996, p. 24) writes that *souci de soi* or care of the self is a decisive category of Foucauldian ethics. As the title of Foucault's last work, *The Care of the Self* was directed at understanding how the self in the ancient world cared for itself and Foucault wanted to extend this concept through the whole history of philosophy to show how it applies to our present. His planned but never finished fourth volume of the history of sexuality was to show how caring for the self had changed from the ancient world to the Christian centuries when caring for the self involved its renunciation. My Ph.D. research into narrative ethics looks with much greater detail into how the contemporary world suggests we care for ourselves. This paper is a short synopsis of my dissertation and shows the modest beginnings of my theory of meta-narrative-ethics.

horizons have to be enlarged. Truth, power and the subject all have traditional definitions that must be rethought in understanding the work of Foucault. These three terms also represent three different periods in the theorizing of Foucault.[3] His concern with truth reflects his earlier works, power was the central element of his middle works and the subject was crucial in his final period. It is important to note that all of these elements are present at all stages of the Foucauldian œuvre, and it is only a matter of emphasis that distinguishes one stage of Foucault's thought from another.

Truth is the first term that has particular meaning. Foucault refers to "truth games" and means a set of rules by which truth is produced. It is a set of procedures "that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing" (1997b, p. 297). Truth is not "out-there" as something that corresponds or coheres with an objective reality, but is bound up with procedures and principles. This is much different from what we normally understand as truth. A game of truth is different from the obligation of truth, the latter of which arises with the realist perspective where an objective proof for that truth is theoretically possible.[4] This leads to what has been called "a domination of truth" signifying an inflexible relationship to questions of truth, and has become, Foucault suggests, the question around which western culture has come to revolve. Truth for Foucault is more flexible than the realist conception of truth intimates. It isn't, Foucault writes, "the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint" (1984, p. 72). He continues:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish false and true statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (1984, p. 73)

The statement is an essential element in Foucault's understanding of knowledge and it is by means of the statement that discourse is organized and redistributed throughout society.[5] Truth is presented through the organization of statements.

[3]For a detailed discussion of these three phases see Davidson (1986) and Deleuze (1995 [1988]), who presents one of the most comprehensive discussions of the Foucauldian *œuvre.*

[4]If this objective proof is said to exist then there is an obligation (at least for the realist) to that truth. Foucault does not engage the language of the epistemological debate of the analytic tradition that champions either realism or antirealism. It is included here to help the reader with the Foucauldian conception of truth by providing a contrast.

[5]The heart of Foucault's method in the first or "archaeological" phase of his theorizing revolves around the description of statements. Statements make up discursive formations and are unique events in the Foucauldian scheme. A statement is a group of sequences of signs, sometimes called a "verbal performance," which can be assigned particular modalities of existence. Statements are not sentences—which are the objects of grammatical analysis—neither are they propositions—which are the objects for logical analysis. Words, sentences, or propositions must be broken open to extract the statements from them. This breaking up is what I am calling here narrative analysis.

Truth is intimately tied to power, the second term in Foucault's theorizing scheme. Truth is not outside power or lacking in power, an assumption that is made with our usual understanding of the term. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault articulates rules for studying power but does not present a new theory of power; rather, he presents a new perspective on the problems of power in modernity (Davidson, 1986, p. 225). Power is not primarily repressive but has positive effects. It is not simply the result of legislative force and social structures but has its own specificity. It is not a homogenous domination of one group over another but is rather a net-like organization that circulates. Power, says Foucault, "must be understood in the first instance as a multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (1990, p. 92). Rather than a repressive negative force, power is redefined in Foucault as a positive network of relations. Analyzing power then is to look at a strategically complex situation, and not to see it as power over something. Foucault does not deny that oppression occurs but he calls these the terminal effects of power and are not his primary concern. Power does not prevent discourse, it produces it (Foucault, 1984, p. 61).

The third idea is that of subjectivity. The Foucauldian subject is not a Cartesian cogito. The subject is not something given nor a substance, but is rather constituted through discursive practices found circulating through culture.[6] An a priori theory of the subject is rejected. In a 1984 interview, the same year of his death, Foucault discusses his understanding of the subject when he describes his work as he saw it at that (final) stage:

> I am now interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, [although] these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group (1997b, p. 291).

In a previous interview, Foucault states the idea in stronger terms: "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (1997a, p. 262).

With these essential terms, Foucault presents a novel way of theorizing the discourses that constitute the human situation. His concern has been to understand how truth games are set up, how they are connected with power relations and how this leads us to constitute our own subjectivity. Meta-narrative-ethics promotes this Foucauldian idea in the realm of bioethical narratives. So what then is this subjectivity?

[6]Foucault defines discursive practice as "a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function" (1995 [1972], p. 117).

THE SELF OF META-NARRATIVE-ETHICS

In fiction, characters are sometimes created to represent polarized views, either to further a plot or to moralize a conclusion expressing a specific point of view. When we read stories we relate to characters (or we do not), and as we enter into the act of reading, we are transformed (Montello, 1995, p. 118). By placing ourselves in the reading, we stake out a position and contribute to the construction of who we are and who we think we would like to be. This construction involves an implicit acceptance of the moral relationship that one has with one's self; there is a certain rapport à soi that is learned by engaging a narrative and it develops as the way a moral subject acts upon its self. The potential that a narrative has to construct subjectivity is called its ontological narrativity.

In nonfiction narratives, the same constitution of subjectivity occurs, though not necessarily through the action of characters. Subtler processes occur with the discursive practices that circulate and these require careful attention. Meta-narrative-ethics allows us to pay attention to bioethical discourse and to discern the ontological narrativity therein: how they suggest ways of relating to the self.

Foucauldian theorizing presents us with tools to use for this kind of ethical analysis. Like Foucault I am not searching for unities or uninterrupted continuities. I am not seeking to define narrative ethics once and for all. To seek this kind of definitive understanding is to suggest to a subject that wants guarantees, certainties, and promises, all in an effort to preserve the sovereignty of a self. This is not the subject of Foucauldian theorizing nor is it the subject of meta-narrative-ethics. What is at issue is how discourse leads us to think about the human subject, either our own subjectivity or that of others around us. By being attuned to how language constructs our selves, we may be more attuned to those times when it constructs it in injurious and noninclusive ways.

We must look deep into language to see how narratives influence our thinking about moral subjectivity. I am not looking at these narratives for behaviors to emulate. I am looking to see how power produces knowledge through discourse. I am looking to see how the reproductive self may be created in narratives of the reproductive technology debate.

The moral subject envisioned here is not a discovered subject. It is not a static element found in the depths of our being. It is a process, a continual re-creation of who we are, of which only part is our doing. We are storytellers and story-listeners and we sustain our ideas of the self by accepting or rejecting certain narratives presented to us during the course of our lives.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault takes a thematic break from his studies of psychiatry, clinical medicine and the human sciences to present a methodological overview of what he was trying to accomplish in these previous works. These works did not, for all intents and purposes, address the subject. They

were primarily concerned with the production of knowledge. Foucault writes that he "wanted not to exclude the problem of the subject, but to define the positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse" (1995, p. 200). He attempts to make up for this exclusion in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and in particular, in his discussion of the statement.

A statement, says Foucault, is that which enables a group of signs to exist (1995, p. 88); it is "a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space" (1995, p. 87). Each statement will have special characteristics that give the statement its enunciative function. Foucault calls these the correlate, the associated domain, the material existence and the place of the subject.[7] The first three characteristics create the space that is then occupied by the subject when it engages the narrative from which the statement comes. These four characteristics are part of Foucault's archaeological method used to understand the production of knowledge. He mentions the subject in this methodological work, but only in terms of an empty space waiting to be occupied. It is only in his later works that the positive constitution of the subject is discussed.

Using the Foucauldian concept of the statement, with its characteristics, and combining it with his ethical insights—how the self is in a relationship with itself—a method of ethical analysis called meta-narrative-ethics can be developed. This method is used to take a snap shot of a narrative to investigate the space it may be creating for the (reading) subject to occupy. By using this method of analysis, narratives can be illuminated in terms of how they construct subjectivity.

The way this method is to be applied is to first choose a statement that is representative of the narrative. From this statement, the second step is to discern the important modalities mentioned above. The third and final step is to then determine the way all of these together suggest an ethical space for the subject to enter to become an ethical self.

I turn now to the debate on reproductive technologies to show how this method of meta-narrative-ethics can allow us to see how certain narratives create who we are.

[7] Foucault describes four conditions that a series of linguistic elements or a group of signs must fulfill in order to be regarded as a statement. These are the modalities of a statement, or, as called by Deleuze "different realms of space that encircle any statement" (1995 [1988], p. 4). For my project of meta-narrative-ethics two of these modalities are most important: the correlate and the associated domain. The third characteristic, the statement's materiality, is implied in the selection of statement and the fourth, the space of the subject is that which I am trying to find, what I call ontological narrativity. The correlate is the space around a statement that creates "referentiality"—the statement's relationship to the objects, subjects, and concepts to which it refers, in short, its meaning (1995 [1972], p. 91). The space of the associated domain creates "associativity"—the rules of formation of the statement based on the role it plays among other statements, in short, its expanse (1995 [1972], p. 99).

THE REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY DEBATE

I have chosen two literary narratives to represent the polarized debate on reproductive technologies as it existed in its middle period, when, as Jose Van Dyck states, "feminist voices galvanized the discussion" (1995, p. 87). The works to be considered here are first, the short story entitled "The Virgin and the Petri Dish" by Richard Selzer (1982), a physician-writer, and second, the poem "Crib Colours Fade" by Cait Featherstone (1991), a poet. By showing how each narrative presents statements that contribute to the constitution of ethical subjectivity, this method will reveal each narrative's ontological narrativity. I begin with Selzer's poetic account of the miraculousness of creation.

"The Virgin and the Petri Dish" is a narrative recounting of procreation and technology, and is a beautiful rendition of the holiness of the subject. It portrays interventions into human reproduction as valuable medical therapies. Although some ethical misgivings are acknowledged, in vitro fertilization is depicted as an acceptable method of circumventing infertility.

Selzer presents a religious domain through which to understand and appreciate human reproduction. His poetic portrayal of conception and birth shows a spiritual event, a miracle that emulates the Creation itself. If we are concerned that intrusions into reproduction encroach upon the holiness of the event, we are assured that "rather queer conceptions" have taken place long before technology made assisted reproduction possible. Selzer is referring here to the births and conceptions of the children of Zeus. By depicting the conception of gods, our apprehensions about our own bizarre beginnings through seemingly "unnatural" events should be alleviated. Writes Selzer,

> Zeus descended upon Danaè in the form a shower of golden rain, during which drizzle, Danaè conceived. The son she bore was named Perseus, who, as everyone knows, went on to slay monsters and rescue beautiful maidens. Not only Perseus, but Venus, of the sea foam born, and Athena, sprung full-grown from the brow of Zeus, were the products of rather queer conceptions. (1982, p. 158)

Selzer continues with a description of the Annunciation of Mary and consequent virgin birth of Jesus. He depicts the archangel Gabriel whispering into Mary's ear: "For lo, thou shalt conceive and bear a son." He stirs our imaginations by referring to the many artistic renditions of this event captured by pen and by paint throughout the millennia; the golden rays of light, the vase of lilies, the "ecstasy upon the face of the girl." The status of interventions into human reproduction is raised by the focus on the extraordinary conceptions leading to the birth of gods.

The marvel of creation retains its divinity in the IVF clinic and the miracle of reproduction does not lose any of its miraculousness when moved from the heavens to the earth:

> What a far cry from the Annunciation is conception maneuvered in a dish. In the one, there is pure spirit, in the other, pure technique. In test-tube fertilization, no archangel, but a

> gynecologist in sterile regalia attends the woman; there is no scroll of words aloft at her ear, but a laparoscope to be thrust through the wall of her abdomen. Still, prayers accompany both occasions. In each, the hand of God is manifest. (1982, p. 159)

The tradition of Aesculapian authority[8] is invoked by the appeal to divine imaging and this invocation leads us to understand the human subject in very specific ways. First, the gynecologist is portrayed as doing God's work and the religious domain associated with it, and therefore informs this portrayal and serves to affirm the importance of the techniques of assisted procreation. Selzer's narrative shows the subjectification of the practitioner in terms of this tradition, who is led to consider him or herself in the role of beneficent technician. Second, the focus on techniques serves to efface the experience of the woman undergoing them. Except for a quick allusion to "thrusting laparoscopes" and silent knowing smiles, the woman subjected to the reproductive technologies is all but absent. The way she is subjected to these techniques and the process of becoming a subject are difficult to separate. The character of the woman is shown as understanding herself as an object of medical technologies and as making sacrifices for what is suggested to be an obligatory role. She cares for her reproductive self in ways stipulated by the correlate and the associated domain.

The questioning of medical authority is an important issue in other works by Dr. Selzer but here, the questions that are presented are cursory and fail to elicit any substantial challenge to the Aesculapian tradition. The epistemological prejudices of uncertainty and vulnerability that makes Selzer's other works so powerful is undermined in this narrative by his conclusion. In the end, asks Selzer, "what does it matter, if at the last, a huddled child awakens, stirs and moves from his world-within-a-world outward, towards companioned love and the sun?" (1982, p. 162).

The poet Cait Featherstone, seemingly in response to Selzer's rhetorical question, suggests that it does matter. The price to be paid for this "huddled child" is too high. Featherstone is concerned with "man-made women" being constructed by "man-made forces" in a world without love and refers to the women who have sought out the technological solution as "mother's day madonnas," as:

> (. . .) unexpected widows,
> mourning mothers who seek
> not the loss of children,
> paying a price to own
> a virgin child
> of captivity (. . . .) (1991, p. 84)

[8] Asclepius (Aesculapius for the Romans) was the Greek god of healing and the son of Apollo. He is considered as the "first physician" and was believed to have the ability to restore the dead to life. Aesculapian authority is the power invested in a physician simply by virtue of being a physician.

The medicalization of reproduction, an uncaring medical profession and the concomitant promise of hope (often unsatisfied) that comes with these technologies, all contribute to the domain in which Featherstone operates. This domain is associated with elements depicting the alienation of women, and she suggests that there are important alternatives that are glossed over when a technological fix is presented.

> I beseech you to beg not
> for the lives of the unconceived.
> I implore you
> to claim
> your own life. (1991, p. 86)

In Featherstone's view, the rationale that allows interventions into human reproduction promotes an instrumental view of children, suggesting that intrusions into human reproduction with the new technologies encourage a perspective that loses sight of the event of childbearing and childrearing in favor of successful technique. With this correlate or frame of reference, it becomes more important to have children than to cherish them, and as Featherstone alludes, this attitude may result in questionable lives for children:

> No thrones await these
> virgin children—
> only the naked ground
> and a pillow of dust. (1991, p. 84)

Another element of these two narratives that is revelatory of different domains is their respective use of the garden metaphor. This metaphor used to be common in discussions of assisted reproductive technologies, and it is a poignant example of the process of how a subject rethinks its self through a narrative. Selzer refers to the "song of songs" and Solomon's foretelling "of a closed and secret garden in which something special would grow" referring to Mary's pure womb in which the fetus Jesus would develop. He eloquently depicts women's cycles: "Like an enclosed garden in which the rarest of plants is to be grown, the womb has been raked clean of all weeds and debris, and made ready to receive the egg" (1982, p. 155). In Selzer's use of the garden metaphor, the subject of reproductive technologies is reduced to her womb and transformed into a garden, either awaiting the sowing of seeds or its tending by the medical profession.

Featherstone has a different take on the garden metaphor and attempts to re-personalize the womb. Her vision is less sympathetic to the profession in control of reproductive technologies and provides a less flattering view of Selzer's "gynecologist in sterile regalia":

> The men without skin want our skin:
> they pierce, excavate,
> turn us inside out

plough and till,
harvest and reap.
But we are not their gardens,
these are not their crops—
we will not feed their hunger. (1991, p. 85)

One of the themes that arises in Featherstone's poem is the idea that women are devalued by men and the medical establishment and that reproductive technologies serve only to compound this devaluation by supporting patriarchy.

The associated domain and the correlate from the statement that is the poem allows the reader to be concerned with the unique experiences of the subject as an example of political struggle. The characterization of a patriarchal medical profession is also rooted in this function of the statement. The associated domain of Featherstone's poem extends patriarchy into a menacing, corrupt and injurious social force bent on controlling the process of reproduction. Selzer's account is pro-interventionist, provided there is a family in which the "dishborn human" can grow and be loved. He does hint at some disquieting features of assisted reproductive technologies, namely, the slippery slope into ectogenesis, the unknown future self-understanding of the "dishborn" and certain insensitivities of the profession. The gynecologist in Selzer's narrative is a caricature who proclaims "there is no ethical problem here . . . it's all a matter of plumbing" (1982, p. 161). The miracle of a "huddled child," a "furled fetus," or "a mother's child unlike any other," is presented as being worth any potential ethical risk.

These narratives give us two distinct views of the value of interventions into human reproduction. Selzer's narrative inspires us to appreciate the complexities of human reproduction and the miracle of gaining control of this process. Featherstone's narrative serves as a warning about misogyny and the appropriation of reproductive powers. Thus, two distinct spaces for the subject are revealed in this comparison with the subjects promoted in each diametrically opposed. First, the ethical subjectivity of the physician is created differently in each of the narratives. The use of reproductive technologies likens the medical profession to gods in the eyes of Richard Selzer and to demons in those of Cait Featherstone. Second, the subjectivity of the patient is also presented differently. For Selzer, the subject of these technologies, in the minimal appearance that she makes, is smiling quietly to herself, agreeing with the wise proclamations of the narrator and acquiescing to traditional medical authority in spite of passing ethical concerns. Featherstone, on the other hand shows this subject at the mercy of oppressors and furnishes a veritable call to arms, depicting the dangers of submitting to an uncaring scientism.

Each discourse represents a voice narrating a relationship with technology. In one, a divine picture of helping anguished infertile couples with medical miracles is presented. In the other, a voice of fear and mistrust is sounded. Questions concerning the correctness of these views are not relevant here. Instead, the comparison is made to elucidate the important feature that different narratives promote

different understandings of the human subject. At issue is the kind of subjects we may become as a result of the discourses that circulate.

CONCLUSIONS

Meta-narrative-ethics is less a method that is applied to an ethical issue for specific answers than a way of probing the language that is used in ethical discourse. It allows us to look at contemporary discursive practices in a way that we may understand better the role of the subject in ethical discourse. Ethical analysis is understood here as discerning the way the human subject is constituted in ethical debate. Narrative bioethics is not primarily about finding the right answers to particularly difficult dilemmas. It is about subjectivity in the domain of medicine and other biological sciences. Meta-narrative-ethics allows us to address questions about how we think about human being in this domain and how we address the larger questions of human actors living, playing, working, and being with others. It shows us how, in the process of presenting ethical issues, we reform both our selves and the traditions from which we come. Every act of understanding and every encounter with a meaningful event informs our ethical investigations and meta-narrative-ethics serves to bring to light the connection between meaningful events and subjectivity.

Meta-narrative-ethics works to decipher the sources of those elements that direct our self-explorations and self-understandings. Ethical analysis which proceeds narratively allows us to posit various sources that may develop the subject in new and untried directions. The goal of my theory is to affect our ethical lives by deciphering those elements involved in the creation of ourselves. It will allow us to see that the work of art that is us, is not a purely haphazard creation.

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