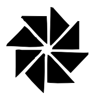

A Brief History of Stories

Roger Shattuck

The English language offers a useful expression: "to come to terms with . . ."—with an idea, with a problem, or with a person. It means loosely that in a discussion or an encounter, one settles on a small number of words that will serve as the basis of the exchange, as a common ground of meaning. Without shared terms, a discussion falls easily into incoherence.

I should like to propose a parallel expression not in the language, but which may serve us in the context of *medical humanities* (a term I still hear as something of an oxymoron). I propose the expression "to come to *stories* . . ." in reference to the background of ancient and modern stories against which we can enhance and deepen our understanding of bioethics. A recent book of mine, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*, undertakes to assemble a "history of stories" on a topic that led me directly into the subjects of bioethics, the shortcomings of the Human Genome Project, and the moral dimensions of genetic research.[1] The present talk, first cousin to the book *Forbidden Knowledge*, will sift, inventory, and evaluate a number of familiar stories. Unfortunately, many of them are known to us in incomplete form and are therefore misunderstood and misapplied.

For the sake of simplicity I shall arrange a score of stories into three clusters.

The first cluster contains the multiple narratives from Genesis of Adam and Eve, which we tend to treat as a single story. It provides the foundational myth for the three dominant and ancient religions of the book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Adam and Eve story answers our questions about origins, about theodicy, and about mortality. And the story entails two profound ambiguities or contradictions. At least in the Christian version, the Fall of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the Garden of Eden are transformed by the Redemption into "the Fortunate Fall." Without the Fall, there is no opportunity for Redemption. Secondly, and closer to the field of bioethics, the condemnation of the original man and woman to die because of their

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disobedience coincided with the discovery of sexual reproduction. In his stunning book *The Logic of Life*, François Jacob makes the point that the evolution of sexual reproduction (meiosis) out of cell division (mitosis) entails something new: the eventual death of the parent organisms.[2] In its alignment of sex and death in one episode, the Adam and Eve story displays its inexhaustible and very up-to-date significance. That's why it forms a cluster all to itself.

The second cluster of stories contains a whole team of legendary heroes performing their exploits of knowledge and discovery. Yet almost all these stories are in some way tainted. The hero does not always triumph and often complicates the human lives he wishes to favor. Prometheus, discoverer of fire, which he gives to man, also brought down on our heads all the woes released from Pandora's jar. He ended up chained to a rock. Daedalus, a great inventor and engineer, lost his own son Icarus to the dangers of flying, which Daedalus had devised to save them both. Daedalus cursed his talents and died badly.

The only untainted story in this group belongs to the poor fisherman in *Thousand and One Nights*. He catches a sealed bottle in the sea and unwittingly releases the malevolent genie it contains. When told only to this point, the story serves as a parable condemning destructive forms of scientific research and forbidden knowledge in general. But that truncated version distorts the meaning of the tale. For in the full version the poor fisherman is wily enough to lure the genie back into the bottle by flattery, recaps it, subdues and trains the genie, and then can use it for gainful and beneficial purposes. The story of the poor fisherman rebuts the stories of Prometheus and Daedalus.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* relates at great length how, helped by Virgil and then by Beatrice, Dante/Pilgrim explores the three zones of Creation forbidden to mortals. In Paradise Peter Damian finally reprimands Dante for his presumption in undertaking these travels. But in effect the book as a whole endorses Dante's curiosity about matters beyond our mortal ken. Indirectly *The Divine Comedy* helped to usher in the surge of old and new knowledge we call the Renaissance. At about the same time, the poet Petrarch climbed Mount Ventoux in southern France. His famous letter about the expedition informs us that he did it for no good reason, just to see what was up there, out of curiosity. The moral of his tale, unlike Dante's, is that we should shun the temptations of the outward world and turn inward to tend to our soul's health. These several stories circle around the theme of hubris. They lend stature and prestige to their heroes even when they end tragically.

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Stories in the third cluster that I have sifted out of world literature are more modern and have a different ring to them. The first is another compound like the story of Adam and Eve. But here the elements combined are treated almost as if they formed separate stories rather than variations on one. I call them the three Fs. Early Renaissance versions of the Faust legend in puppet plays and in Marlowe depict a learned doctor who sells his soul to the Devil in return for twenty-four years of magic fulfillment of all his desires. Faust then is hurled into the jaws of Hell—with horrendous stage effects. Crowds loved it.

Goethe later borrowed from Lessing a modernized version of Faust. He sells nothing; instead he makes a wager with Mephisto and improbably wins it. Instead of going to Hell for his selfishness and ambition, Faust is wafted up to Heaven for his constant "striving." The third F, and a far more direct response to Goethe's *Faust* than is usually acknowledged, carries the name *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley sees to it that this third Faust is sent back to Hell, in the form of a hideous death in the Arctic. And the novel leaves no doubt that the evil motivation driving Dr. Frankenstein/Faust and many other destructive heroes of the mind is not the desire for pure knowledge but the desire for fame. Little Mary Shelley knocks the great Goethe right out of the ring.

This third cluster of stories tends to pass a harsher judgment than the second on the bold figures who stop at nothing in their exploration of human possibilities and the conquest of nature. In Jules Verne's path-breaking science fiction of the late nineteenth century, the mysterious and embittered Oriental, Captain Nemo, appears in more than one book as both enemy and benefactor of mankind. Some critics have seen him as following an almost religious calling. Yet Captain Nemo declares in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*: "I am not what you call a civilised man! I have done with society entirely, for reasons which I alone have the right of appreciating. I do not therefore obey its laws, and I desire you never to allude to them before me again!"[3] Is this a moral hero? A fiend? Merely a lost soul?

Dr. Jekyll pushes his personality-altering drug experiments on himself to the extreme of unleashing homicidal impulses he cannot control. His evil genie will not go back into the bottle. Stevenson's remarkable parable of 1886, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, looks both backward to *Frankenstein* and forward to an even more intensely scientific narrative, H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). Banished from London because of his surgical experiments on animals, Dr. Moreau flees to a Pacific island to carry on his work of transforming animals by vivisection into near-humans. He considers

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himself as much a creative artist as a scientist. His entire fanatic undertaking anticipates the wilder ambitions of eugenics and of modern genetic engineering.

Something significant has transpired in this third cluster of works compared to those in the second cluster. Captain Nemo, Dr. Jekyll, and Dr. Moreau are more obsessed and more specifically scientific than their ancient predecessors. All of them become modern outlaws whose stories we now read as cautionary tales about the excesses and the temptations of scientific research. With the possible exception of Captain Nemo in his submarine, they have become our enemies. They seek the secrets of nature not out of wonderment and respect but in order to achieve glory and power. Over the centuries literary works have become increasingly skeptical in their attitude toward knowledge without limits and scientific research. Heroes like Prometheus have given way to villains like Dr. Moreau.

In this broad survey, this "coming to stories" about bioethics, I have passed right over the key figure in the development of scientific inquiry as an institution: Francis Bacon. In the early seventeenth century, Bacon produced a series of programmatic books with weighty titles: *The Advancement of Learning*, *The Great Instauration*, and *The New Organon*. He tried to persuade his antiscientific and religious contemporaries that new knowledge about nature would be redemptive and could unwrite the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve. For Bacon, the purpose of learning was "to restore man to a perfect and original condition" and "to expel the serpent's venom."[4] Even Bacon's unfinished *The New Atlantis* describes a utopia in which important decisions are made at Solomon's House, essentially an official scientific think tank.

But Bacon also wrote some stories—or rather retold them from classic sources. In *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1610) he published a three-page parable titled "The Sphinx." The opening sentence sets the tone: "Sphinx, says the story, was a monster . . . ."[5] Bacon summarizes the fable with almost no mention of Oedipus and then gives us his unexpected interpretation.

> The fable [of Sphinx] is an elegant and a wise one, invented apparently in allusion to Science; especially in its application to practical life. Science, being the wonder of the ignorant and unskilful, may be not absurdly called a monster. . . . Again Sphinx proposes to men a variety of hard questions and riddles which she received from the Muses. . . . when they pass from the Muses to Sphinx, that is from

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> contemplation to practice, whereby there is necessity for present action, choice, and decision, then they begin to be painful and cruel . . . [6]

How can this be? If Sphinx is a monster, then Science too is a monster. But unlike all our earlier stories, Science appears here not as a heroic or villainous individual but as an institution. And that institution, like the Sphinx, appears as cruel, destructive, and monstrous. This ancient and modernized parable demands our full attention for several reasons. It connects science *as an institution* to one of the most ferocious of ancient myths. It embodies the modern dilemma of what I call the slippery slope between pure research (the Muses' contemplative questions) and applied research (the Sphinx's practical questions). And it expresses skepticism about science as a vocation in the voice of one of the greatest champions of science in the modern era.[7] Is "The Sphinx" a playful tale in which Bacon is merely toying with pieces of an old legend? Or does his new version reveal a hidden and somewhat ominous space in his mind where he contemplates the consequences of his own powerful writings? There is no problem of translation. We are reading the very words he wrote four hundred years ago in English. Though nearly eliminated from the literature curriculum, Bacon remains very much with us in bioethics.

* * *

It should be clear by now that, in our approach to problems in biology and in medicine, I believe stories furnish us ethical perspectives and methods of comparative analysis fully as valuable as those of philosophy and the social sciences. Medicine as a discipline recognizes the pertinence of stories and welcomes them in the form of case histories. What then does a story have that is missing in ideas and discursive argument?

Stories contain two irreplaceable elements that guarantee their link to life as we live it rather than to life as we think about it abstractly. They contain human beings as their principal protagonists, not ideas. And they contain a sense of time, of the dimension in which people grow and change and strive. Ideas have been abstracted out of experience so as to exclude time and attain permanence. But even the greatest champion of ideas, Plato, filled his dialogues with tales of Gods and mortals and monsters. He grasped their pertinence. Stories and case

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histories depict the complexity of the human condition and oblige us to think concretely about questions that cannot be approached adequately by discursive reason alone.

NOTES

1. Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).
2. François Jacob, *The Logic of Life: A History of Heredity*, trans. Betty E. Spillman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 308-10.
3. *The Annotated Jules Verne: Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870), ed. Walter James Miller (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 62.
4. Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration* (1620), Prooemium and Preface.
5. Francis Bacon, "The Sphinx," from *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1610), quoted in Shattuck, 179.
6. Ibid.
7. In *Forbidden Knowledge*, I discuss Bacon's tale at some length and reproduce it in full in Appendix III.

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