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Book Review

John A. Lynch. The Origins of Bioethics: Remembering When Medicine Went Wrong. Michigan State University Press. 2019. 228pp. ISBN 9781611863413

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Three examples of American medical research gone wrong are etched like cave paintings in Bioethics' creation story: the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis; the Willowbrook Hepatitis Study; and the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital Cancer Study. They stand as records of deep reckoning and John A Lynch's book revisits the former two while replacing the latter with the lesser known, yet equally unsettling, account of the Cincinnati Whole Body Radiation Study.

Chapters 1 and 2 prime readers for Lynch's later arguments about the formation and diminishment of collective memory of historical Bioethics cases. In Chapter 1, Lynch introduces the concept of *bioethical memory*, which he describes as a type of collective remembering shaped by the process of bearing witness to suffering and shared feelings of anger, disgust, and the uncanny. He then reveals the role institutions play in undermining bioethical memory, in that they often merely acknowledge the occurrence of a wrongful event while simultaneously obscuring their own involvement, a practice he terms *minimal remembrance*. Chapter 2 traces the history of medicine in the United States, focusing on benevolent paternalism, body usability, and the blurry distinction between clinical care and medical research as trends that facilitated unethical experimentation.

In Chapter 3, Lynch walks the reader through memorials for the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, making note of the racial tensions that not only led to violations of ethical research practices, but still underlie medicine as a whole. Where Lynch appreciates the Tuskegee site for its approach to public memorializing, Chapters 4 and 5 present an analysis of memorials whose purpose, he argues, is to foster minimal remembrance and meaningful forgetting. His second case describes the remembering of the Willowbrook Hepatitis Study, which continues to be overshadowed by monuments that attempt to appreciate, yet ultimately remain oblivious to, the disabled community that the institution served.

Finally, Lynch details the Cincinnati Whole Body Radiation Study, expressing disappointment at his own institution for its attempts to avoid and hide any form of remembrance at all.

By simply and powerfully placing us there, Lynch's exploration of the memories instantiated at museums and memorials is far more vivid than a statistic in a history book. With his careful and methodical style, he examines where Bioethics and public memory intersect. And he highlights the dynamics behind how the events, marked by their distinctly local flavours, led to searches for national meaning. Those "stories of medical research and its ethical failures", Lynch maintains, "tell medical researchers and bioethicists who they collectively were in order to reassure them that they are now different" (p.151). Yet what transpires is also a searing indictment of how conflicts of interest between demands to remember historical atrocities and the institutional investment in maintaining reputation can undermine this quest. As such, the book serves as a much-needed cautionary note on how the very civic, moral and cultural institutions commissioned to inform the public and educate future scholars can abuse their authorities by blinding us to their pitfalls. And indeed, Lynch's criticism is particularly pertinent since the relevance of Bioethics as a field of study is crucially predicated on bioethicists' knowledge of, and willingness to challenge, medical and research practices.

Whereas Lynch provides us with a significant and necessary piece of work, some criticism is called for. Although Bioethics as a discipline is young, ethical reflection of medicine is as old as medicine itself. Indeed, throughout history countless instances occurred where medicine went wrong – and, regrettably, it will continue to go wrong. As Lynch himself attests, "the history of medical research is unfortunately replete with […] ethical failings" (p.xvii). By focusing on three specific events, however, Lynch might be unwittingly perpetuating the same disservice to bioethical memory that he calls out throughout his book: that to ignore injustice is to sanction it. The book is therefore not quite about the history of Bioethics and when medicine went wrong, Rather, it is a commentary on how bioethical memories are formed and how institutions employ strategies of remembrance serving their own ends.

As Lynch suggests over and over again, the past and the future are intrinsically bound together for they both travel through the present. Aiming to illuminate the present by an account of origins, Lynch's book is nonetheless a timely and insightful addition: not only does its publication coincide with "The Principles of Biomedical Ethics"'s fortieth anniversary (Beauchamp and Childress 2019) – a classic in medical ethics – but also appears at a time when the field of Bioethics finds itself, once again, at a crossroads; facing the challenge to identify the way forward. Since its mid-20th century birth, Bioethics has matured into a complex and vibrant discipline, with movements toward even greater specialization. Alongside, science and technology have expanded the limits of the possible. While firmly rooted in the medical profession, ethical considerations in medicine today are likewise part of philosophical, social, theological, legal and even political inquiries (see Evans 2012). And some scholars argue that the questions bioethicists debated over the past decades should no longer fall into their purview alone. In an essay for Nature's series on how the past 150 years have shaped science, medical sociologist Sarah

Franklin (2019) recently concluded that, “most ethical science is the most sociable one, and […] scientific excellence depends on greater inclusivity. We are better together — we must all be ethicists now”.

Ultimately, Lynn’s book begs us to continue this conversation by offering a critical reflection on how narratives of the past give form to our ethical impulses. To quote Lynn once more, “public memory offers us narratives that shape our identities in part through the mobilization of public feeling (p.150). […] Forgetting and different modes of remembrance, [then], develop as a result of the interaction of existing identities and affective investments with the contents of a memory” (p.157). Lynch’s contribution thus presents an apt reminder that as the field of Bioethics ventures into the future, we ought to question how we re-collect and re-member the pieces of its past.

References:

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