

Bob Pecoraro, SJ (Loyola University Chicago)

Abstract

The Portrait, the Lens and the Mirror: Finding the dignity of the of gang member through narrative ethics.

My research uses cultural signification, ethical reflection, and theological categories as lenses to discuss the problem of gang involvement. I use narrative theory, as presented by both Stanley Hauerwas and Paul Ricoeur, as a meta-ethic that incorporates culture, ethics, and theology. I explain the need to change the current cultural signification of “criminal” for gang members and why it is necessary to add hermeneutical analysis in order to do this. I propose solutions to gang involvement that involve structure and vision. I focus on Jobs for a Future/Homeboy Industries, a Los Angeles based program for men and women who were actively involved in the gang culture.

It is the belief of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur that narrative composition is anchored in our practical understanding. This allows for three levels of mimesis (imitation of action). The third level involves the intersection of the world of the narrative and the world of reality in such a way that we can benefit greatly from the study of narratives and their *muthos* (emplotment). It is the belief of the theologian Stanley Hauerwas that the narratives of the self, the world, and God are contingent narratives. My presentation will focus on sharing narratives of gang members I worked with during my time at Jobs for a Future/Homeboy Industries and the importance of developing an analogical imagination, in order to extrapolate ethical paradigms from these narratives. I will use a power point presentation of photos, songs, and text to further connect the audience’s world of reality to the gang members’ world of narrative.

As we were driving, the music of Linkin Park was coming through the speakers:

“Crawling in my skin
These wounds they will not heal
Fear is how I fall
Confusing what is real

There's something inside me that pulls beneath the surface
Consuming/confusing
This lack of self-control I fear is never ending
Controlling/I can't seem

To find myself again
My walls are closing in
(without a sense of confidence and I'm convinced that there's just too much pressure to take)
I've felt this way before
So insecure

Discomfort, endlessly has pulled itself upon me
Distracting/reacting
Against my will I stand beside my own reflection
It's haunting how I can't seem
To find myself again
My walls are closing in
(without a sense of confidence and I'm convinced that there's just too much pressure to take)
I've felt this way before
So insecure¹

“I listen to that song all the time.” Jose said. “I listen to it because it’s me, that’s how I feel all the time.”

I met Jose during my time at Jobs for a Future/Homeboy Industries (JFF). JFF is a Los Angeles-based gang intervention program run by Jesuit priest Greg Boyle. Jose was nineteen when we met and had just been released from jail. He had been incarcerated since he was fourteen. He was a member of Avenues, a gang in East Los Angeles, and came to JFF for a second chance. When I hear this song now it reminds me of Jose and his story, a story not so different from the majority of the men and women I encountered in my time at JFF.

We were on our way to Sears to buy clothes for Jose with a two hundred dollar gift card supplied to him by JFF’s New Image Program. Jose carefully compared prices

¹ Lyrics to “Crawling” written by Linkin Park

trying to make the most of the money he had to spend. At the end of the shopping trip he had purchased five shirts, three pairs of pants, and a pair of work boots that were on sale. The clothes replaced the baggy shirts and oversized pants that were signifiers to society of Jose's former gang affiliations. Jose was to meet me the next day at the office so that I could drive him to his new job at Homeboy Silk Screening.

As we were driving, Jose turned to me and said "I don't know if I can do this, Bob." "Why is that?" I replied. "I've been locked down for five years, since I was fourteen." He continued. "I grew up in there. You know? I lived by a buzzer all the time. I was told when to get up, when to eat, when to shower, and when to go to the bathroom. I wasn't anything in there and I don't know if I'm anything now."

I tried explaining to Jose that it was different now. I told him that no one forced him to come to JFF. He had made that decision on his own. I told him tomorrow would begin the rest of his life, a life he had chosen. With that, I dropped him off at his uncle's house where he was living.

The next morning Jose arrived at the office and I drove him to work. As we were driving, I complimented him on his new clothes and congratulated him for starting his new life. "Is it really a new life?" he said. I asked him what he meant. "After you dropped me off yesterday I went in the house with my new clothes and my uncle accused me of stealing them. Even after I showed him the receipt he still didn't believe me. He said that I would never change. He said I would always be a no good gangster." *Against his will he stood beside his own reflection. It's haunting how he can't seem to find himself again.*

Jose lasted a few weeks at the job. He fought with the boss and eventually stopped going to work. A few weeks later, I heard that he was arrested for robbery and was sent back to jail. He became exactly what his uncle and society reflected back to him. It was a reflection that Jose stood beside against his will. It was a reflection of a false self he did not want to be. Even so, Jose became that false self. He began to search for his true reflection, but wasn't secure enough to find it. Instead, he became the false self that society reflected back to him.

Although there are many creative solutions to prevent young men and women from joining gangs, the current solution for those involved in gangs, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, is suppression, which involves arrest and imprisonment. It is my contention that by adding hermeneutical analysis of the gang member to the already existing socio-economic and socio-political analysis, we can change the solutions for dealing with active gang members. This hermeneutical analysis stems from narrative theory and the narrative ethics of Stanley Hauerwas.

Hauerwas' narrative theory is defined in his book *The Peaceable Kingdom*. He begins by presenting ethical reflection as something that occurs relative to time and place. Ethics, therefore, requires an adjective qualifier in order to locate it socially and historically. For Hauerwas' purposes the adjective qualifier for ethics is "Christian".

For Hauerwas, Christian ethics reflects a particular people's history and this history requires the recognition that we are sinners, able to fall from grace, able to make mistakes. Christian ethics does not begin by emphasizing rules or principles, but by calling attention to a narrative that first tells of God's dealing with creation. On this model, God, an individual's life, and the universe are contingent realities, in the sense

that the narrative of any one can not be told apart from the other two. “Christian ethics is not first concerned with what we should and shouldn’t do. Rather, its first task is to help us rightly envision the world. It is formed by a very definite story with a determinative content.”

Part of recognizing the world as it is, for Hauerwas, is to see that all existence, and in particular the human self, is narratively formed and this narrative involves looking at both the past and the future. A story always begins in the middle when a narrative approach is used. This causes a move, in my opinion, from an act-based, deductive approach to a more inductive approach to ethics, whereby the understanding of the self as an agent becomes of central importance to Hauerwas.

For Hauerwas, to be self is to act in the world. He points to an interesting distinction between our agency as “be-ers” and our agency as “do-ers” made by Timothy O’Connell. As “be-ers”, we are subjects and as such we must necessarily stay the same. As “do-ers”, we are changeable. According to Hauerwas, by virtue of O’Connell’s argument we cannot be what we do (or do not do) –for if we are what we do, then we are not free. In order to be free we must always have an I that somehow stands behind what we do, an I not determined or affected by the things we do. It seems to me that if we focus on acts alone, our ethical reflection will not take into consideration an important part of our agency. It is primary for Hauerwas that the narrative essence of our existence be recognized.

Freedom, for Hauerwas, becomes the ability of an individual to see what he has done without illusion. Illusion is a consistent theme in Hauerwas’ literature. He believes that human beings often create narratives that are products of their own desire for security

rather than an accurate retelling of their particular history. They live out of this illusionary narrative and therefore, their ethical reflections are often fashioned on incomplete information. So, narrative theory, as Hauerwas envisions it, must take into consideration not only personal narrative, but the narrative of a community as well. It is the other person, in this view, that provides us with freedom.

The “other” allows a movement away from the particular story of an individual and places the individual in the context of a larger community. This allows the individual to test his narrative against the narratives of those around him in order to develop his character. This represents a less subjective approach to character development. Individuals do not create their character; rather, one’s character is a gift from the other which one learns to claim as one’s own by recognizing it as a result of the contingent narratives of self, God and the world. This makes it important to look at tradition and tradition’s ability to change. The challenge we are called to face in adopting narrative theory is the challenge of the other person as stranger.

Hauerwas sees the stranger and his story as a necessary challenge to a community’s predilection to become complacent with its interpretation of the contingent narratives of God, ourselves, and the world. The narrative of the stranger represents a narrative that is different from the safe, illusionary narrative with which a person or community has become comfortable. According to Hauerwas, the “other” is often committed to living out a community’s deceptions. Communities seem to be peaceable as long as no one disturbs their illusions. The response to the stranger is often a response that stems from the fear that a community may have to rethink a narrative it has come to embrace. According to Hauerwas, this makes even God a stranger to us since individuals

choose to live as if they are their own masters. To avoid this, communities must welcome both the stranger and God. This requires the ongoing process of being dispossessed of all that a community thinks secures its significance and safety.

The narratives of gang members in this presentation serve to represent the story of the stranger. They are meant to challenge an illusionary narrative that society has become comfortable with. The narratives in this presentation move through a progression that involves cultural signification, ethical reflection, and theological categories as hermeneutical lenses. These lenses bring together the gang member, the world, and God in the contingent manner of Hauerwas' narrative theory as it is applied in Christian ethics.