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Terms of Perfection

Arthur P. Bochner

*In this essay, I attempt to think with the story Michael Hyde tells in *Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human*. Viewing the drive for perfection from the perspective of narrative, I focus on the question of how the language game of perfection might lead in the direction of other ways of understanding ourselves, our writing practices, and the unity of our lives. I question the appropriateness of conventions of rhetorical scholarship that inhibit communication scholars from enacting more personal expressions of rhetorical competence, which could give greater urgency to burning issues at the heart of what it can mean to be human. Arguing that the drive for perfection is a condition that evolves from life rather than prior to it, I call attention to the pragmatic question of what we can make of ourselves in communicative acts of narrative self-creation that make us who we are. In the spirit of the kind of openness to otherness advanced by Hyde, I conclude by offering a counternarrative to medical science's conception of life as an end in itself. Medical science should serve human needs not determine them.*

Keywords: Narrative; Death and dying; Rhetorical competence; Biotechnology; Autoethnography

Bobbling a cocktail napkin on which notes had been scribbled, Kenneth Burke stood to propose a toast to Gregory Bateson (Wilder-Mott & Weakland, 1981). You could hear a pin drop as we sat in hushed anticipation—a hundred or more of us—waiting for Burke to begin.

“Forgive me for retreating to my room during the conference,” Burke apologized. “I’ve known about Gregory Bateson for a long time, but this was my first opportunity to read his book. Once I started I couldn’t put it down.”

Pausing briefly, Burke unfolded and stretched the napkin. “I’ve written a poem,” he continued, gesturing with the wrinkled napkin. “It goes like this: *Before I came to Asilomar, I’d never heard of a double-bind. Now I see them everywhere.*”

Today, some 32 years later, Burke’s short poem comes to mind as I am reading Michael Hyde’s *Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human*, a book grounded on

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the premise that “we (humans) are metaphysical creatures fated to pursue perfection” (Hyde, 2010, p. 247). I knew that Burke had proposed a “principle of perfection” hidden in the nature of symbolic systems (Burke, 1969). Occasionally, I had used Burke’s biting phrase “rotten with perfection” when discussing the paradoxical qualities of language and communication. But I had never seriously pondered the profundity of perfection’s potential to turn rotten.

Could new questions or insights be opened by viewing human life as a whole through the lens of perfection? Certainly, I had long recognized the pathologies of perfection in the anorexic’s determination not to eat (Lock, Epston, & Maisel, 2004), and the obsessive compulsive’s repetitive and exacting behaviors, but putting on the spectacles of perfection fashioned by Hyde (2010), I could begin to see through the veil covering less obvious displays of the technologies of perfection.

Now I see perfection turned foul everywhere—in the desire to perfect weapons of modern warfare that can strike with surgical precision, concealing the injuries and deaths they cause behind the illusion of benign activity (Scarry, 1985); in the perfecting of barbaric techniques of torture and intimidation reframed as “enhanced interrogation techniques” to obscure their cruelty and harshness, leaving the impression of accordance with international law (Cole, 2009); in the development of cosmetic surgeries that offer the perfect look as a cure for discontent, transforming ordinary human unhappiness, once considered our common lot as human beings, into a treatable disorder (Conrad, 2007); in the contrivance of new childhood “diseases” rooted in the canard of “chemical imbalance,” creating a huge market for the unscrupulous development and distribution of designer drugs that prey on the gullibility and good intentions of parents longing for more perfect children (Breggin, 2008; Rosemond & Ravenel, 2008); and in transhumanist genetics’ adventurous quest to delay mortality indefinitely, transforming science fiction into science fact via the development of “enhancement technologies” capable of restoring memory, altering personality, and producing stronger, leaner, quicker, and more virile or sensual bodies (Kaiser, Kurath, Maasen & Rehmann-Sutter, 2010; Rothman & Rothman, 2004).

But if the drive for perfection can turn hideous, so can imperfection, and Hyde judiciously warns that “being rotten with imperfection is not a good way to be” either (Hyde, 2010, p. 256). Hence, we human beings face the pragmatic challenge of figuring out how to dwell securely in the space between the rottenness of perfection and the rottenness of imperfection. Recognizing that any humanly constructed account of perfection will likely be imperfect, Hyde presents a balanced account of perfection that shows the “benefits and the burdens” of how we humans “come to terms with perfection: a state of being that is life-fulfilling and life-threatening, and that can be conceptualized and called into question by rhetorical means” (Hyde, 2010, p. 4). Thus, *Perfection* is not so much a book *about* rhetoric, nor is it principally an analysis of the rhetoric of perfection, though both of these concerns are addressed in the text. Instead, Hyde primarily uses rhetoric as an ethical practice to illuminate, probe, and call the workings of perfection into question. The book is Hyde’s rhetorical means of coming to terms with perfection.

If perfection looms this large in our lives, then we must learn *how* to come to terms with it. For Hyde, coming to terms with perfection admits “a ‘showing forth’ of humanity at its best” (p. 256), an ethical, life-giving acknowledgement of otherness, a primary way of being that is hopeful and open to the breathtaking and complex presence of the otherness of humanness (p. 278), and a recognition of our cosmologically and ontologically “complete incompleteness” and “significant insignificance.”

Hyde contends that a rhetoric of perfection shows up in many cases of public debate over controversial issues, especially those instances grounded in disputed metaphysical foundations. These clashes often revolve around questions of moral perfection and what it is good to believe and to do. This is the place where science meets religion, resulting in predictably oppositional and closed-minded points of view. In pain-staking detail, Hyde reveals the workings of these competing rhetorics of perfection in the arduous public debate over the meaning of a compassionate end of life for Terri Schiavo, and the less emotional, but equally partisan, public conversation about the promise and peril of re-engineering ourselves through biotechnology. He urges us to think of the opportunities to debate these crucial issues as “a gift” and to resist the temptation to construe one or the other side as insincere. Yet sincerity is not the ground on which disputed metaphysical claims can be settled, and Hyde convincingly displays the ways in which these conflicts inevitably slide into “pathologies of closed-mindedness,” becoming rotten with perfection. To his credit, Hyde refuses to capitulate to extremists on either side. He calls for more public debate over contested terms such as “human dignity” and “giftedness of life,” appealing repeatedly to an openness to otherness, a commitment to an ethical rhetorical stance that appears to offer the only hope to reach a common ground in the face of disputed metaphysical foundations (pp. 239–240).

One of the most important issues provoked by *Perfection* is the question of whether we can afford to place the future of mortality and the phenomenology of death and dying in the hands of a medical science unrestrained by questions of virtue. Can medical science be trusted? In three different books, Hyde (2001, 2006, 2010) has unceasingly pressed the case for the importance and necessity of answering “the call of conscience.” But does medical science have a conscience? If it doesn’t—and there is ample evidence to warrant concern—then we are in a world of trouble (Breggin, 2001, 2008). What we do know is that medical science as a human practice is not devoid of temptation, confusion, or corruption. It is an industry and an institution knotted to other industries with powerful profit-motives such as drug and insurance companies who pay for research and benefit from its results (Cosgrove, Krinsky, Vijaraghavan, & Schneider, 2006).

At the heart of the debate over biotechnology and the meaning of a compassionate end of life is the question, “what it is good to want?” Does the thrill of a scientific adventure unmitigated by moral questions justify a flagrant disregard for the potentially dangerous and predictably unanticipated consequences of what amounts to a quest for immortality, which Becker (1973) called the “flight from mortality.” Under what authority can we place unquestioned faith in the capacity of science to conquer illness and disability? Is bondage to biotechnology preferable to the captivity

of illness and disability? Should medical science and biotechnology ultimately control the answers to the question of what it means to live a good life and to die? I am grateful to Hyde for bringing these questions into clearer focus.

The communication theorist in me sees these as questions tied to the narrative order of life. “Now we see that this sense of the good,” writes Taylor (1989):

has to be woven into my life as an unfolding story. But this is to state another condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a *narrative* . . . that our lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going. (p. 47)

In this essay, I want to engage with Hyde’s *Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human* from the perspective of narrative. My intention is not so much to talk “about” as to talk “with” the story of perfection that he tells. I am indebted to the medical sociologist, Frank (1995), for the distinction between “talking about” and “talking with” stories. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, he construed thinking *with* stories as an ethical practice that involves an attempt to achieve resonance with the other; it is a reflexive practice in which one attempts to live in the story, reflecting on what one becomes in the process of taking in the story and trying to use it, “allowing the story to lead in certain directions” (p. 160). For example, resonating with Hyde’s reasoned discussion of the two sides of the biotechnical debate, each with its own lack of openness to the other, I am led in the direction of trying to open up the narrative foreclosure (Freeman, 2010) promoted by the close-mindedness of both sides. More recently, Frank (2004, pp. 6–7) specified the distinctly reflexive quality of “thinking with,” describing the process as an activity akin to “letting the stories analyze us . . . allowing us to notice what attracts us to them, and what we resist about them.” Thus, thinking with Hyde encourages me to try to come to terms with my resistance to the discourse of metaphysics and the divine, while also granting me an opportunity to exploit my attraction to the question of how the language game of perfection might possibly lead in the direction of other ways of understanding ourselves and the unity of our lives. It is my hope that “thinking with” can function as a dialogic embodiment of the openness to the other to which Hyde aspires, an answer to the call for an acknowledgement of otherness.

Perfecting Rhetorical Scholarship

Perfection is a heavy and erudite book that tested my staying power. I found the work it required of me highly rewarding in the end, but I could not help thinking most readers would not make it through. Though the topic is fascinating and compelling, the writing is dense, demanding, and strenuous. As I lumbered through the book, I kept asking myself, *why do we write this way?*

In the academic world, the stakes are high. Our careers depend largely on our rhetorical competence. Publish or perish! The rewards for writing are plentiful and the punishment for not writing can be harsh. But we do not normally think of ourselves as writers. We call ourselves researchers, theorists, or scholars. And we do

not normally teach writing in our graduate curriculum. Given how crucially our careers depend on whether we learn to craft our research texts successfully, doesn't this seem odd? Without much, if any, explicit instruction, we must learn to conform to the conventions of writing that are taken for granted by our discipline. In the domain of scholarship, our success is largely determined by how competently we master and conform to these practices.

Academic life involves reading, observing, thinking, and *writing*. We learn to conduct research and write monographs by reading and studying the work of our predecessors and mentors (Rose, 1993). Thus, the norms of what will count as legitimate research and publishable writing are carefully controlled by our disciplines through instrumental contacts with peers, professors, articles, monographs, and books. Methods of gathering and accumulating documentation are formulated within the constraints of accepted practices of inquiry and methodology, and sanctioned modes of representation. Regardless of the subject matter, these conventionalized practices confine inquiry to a limited range of researchable experiences represented in a narrow domain of recognizable texts (Rose, 1993). We are groomed to engage in certain types of research experiences and compose texts that satisfy the expectations of our discipline's norms. If our professional socialization takes, we learn to write effectively in the largely standardized genres that are accepted as legitimate in our discipline (Rose, 1993). In short, what we learn is a great deal of conformity (Krieger, 1991). As Rose (1990) points out, "If you write a nonconforming text, then the rewards of the discipline may be withheld because the book does not read as a legitimated contribution to knowledge" (p. 14). Although human experience may be abundantly diverse, the accepted canons of representing or expressing it within our disciplines are highly conventionalized and monolithic.

By the time I had finished reading *Perfection*, I was persuaded that the desire for perfection is a critically important part of life with which each of us must deal. The argument was careful, the historical detail meticulous, and the analysis of cases thorough and intellectually compelling. Yet, I could not get over the nagging feeling that something was missing. My head had been turned and twisted, but my heart had not skipped a beat. I did not feel the severe threat in my gut that a menacing metaphysical drive would likely impose. What had I missed? Why hadn't this book evoked more feeling? I went searching for an answer to what was keeping me from feeling a more personal connection to this text. I suspected the answer would have something to do with what was between us—between the text and me.

Hyde convinced me that the drive for perfection is not merely academic. Yet his book on the drive for perfection rarely steps outside the confining and safe academic space of the genre of conventional rhetorical scholarship. The conventions that regulate rhetorical scholarship do not normally encourage the kind of personal connection between text and reader that I was seeking. But if the drive for perfection is something more than merely academic, then submission to these conventional standards runs the risk of losing a desirable connection beyond the purely academic. I am guilty of wanting a more perfect text, one that extends the borders of legitimate scholarship on matters of practical and emotional importance to human well-being.

Would it be fair to impose a qualitatively different standard on a book claiming to deal with metaphysically driven longings on which human fulfillment and/or survival may depend? To what call of conscience should a writer appeal in such cases?

I propose a reflexive ideal of conscience applicable to authors as well as readers. When we write about deeply personal and moral issues, such as openness to otherness, we ought to be bound by the very call of conscience Hyde (2001, 2006, 2010) so poignantly calls us to in his many insightful writings on this topic. We should answer the call, saying, "Here I am." Admittedly, in applying this yardstick, we would be holding rhetorical and communication scholarship on personal, interpersonal, and public discourse to a higher standard of rhetorical eloquence than works in moral philosophy, to take one example. Audrey Lorde (1984) provides an evocative example of what I have in mind when she writes, "Because I am a woman, because I am Black, because I am Lesbian, because I am myself a Black woman warrior poet, doing my work come to ask you, are you doing yours?" (pp. 41–42).

Lorde is issuing a call of conscience. She's asking, "Are you doing your work? Where art thou?" She goes on to say that she is afraid, because hers is an act of self-revelation fraught with the danger of vulnerability introduced when what has been silenced is put into language (Lorde, 1984). Her daughter answers the call, acknowledging the gift of Lorde's revelation. "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent," she insists, "because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you do not speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside" (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). Lorde's question and her daughter's response tell us who they are and what work they are doing. They make their work *personally* important, exalting difference, responsibility, and openness to otherness by showing their faces. You do not need to be Black, a lesbian, or a poet to appreciate the force of the question, "who am I and what work am I doing here?" Lorde and her daughter show the kind of openness to otherness that vulnerable writing implies, attempting to form a personal connection between author and audience, which is rare in academic prose.

I have a confession to make. I love writers who write about their own personal experiences and who seek to form a relationship with me as a reader (e.g., Tompkins, 1987). This is how authors show their faces in the constrained medium of academic writing. How can I answer the call to respond to an author's otherness, as one beating heart to another, if I am denied access to what makes the author distinctively other? Is it too much to ask for a noninterchangeable, nonsubstitutable author?

When I raised this issue at a panel on *Perfection* at the 2010 NCA Convention, I was told by a couple of senior rhetorical scholars (both males) that *Perfection* was an unusually personal text. I could not help thinking that this reaction was a commentary on the boundaries of proper (and legitimate) rhetorical scholarship. *Is this "as good as it gets"?*

I am seeking something that is rarely, if ever, delivered in rhetorical scholarship—what Tompkins calls communion with the author's "circle of existence" (1987, p. 170). Why would I want such a thing? Is it a good thing to want? The phenomenological

anthropologist Jackson (1989) tells us why. He claims that “our understanding of others can only proceed from within our own experience, and this experience involves our own personalities and histories as much as our field research” (p. 17). I imagine some scholars of rhetoric would point out that rhetoric centers mainly on texts not people. But the claim that perfection is an essential metaphysical desire can only be a claim about texts if one sees a person principally as a text.

Like so many of us, Hyde surrenders voluntarily to the conventions of legitimate academic prose, a standardized form of insulated rhetorical discourse so rotten with perfection that it cuts off and subjugates the authentic impulse to form a relationship with readers. Under the influence of Kant’s appeal to the moral obligation of scholastic precision, Hyde (2010, p. 17) resists the temptation to enact other, more personal, ways of being rhetorically competent on the page such as vulnerable observation (Behar, 1996) or autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis 2009; Frentz, 2008). By refusing to invite readers into communion with his own lived experience, he misses a golden opportunity to give greater urgency to the burning issues so close to his heart.

I have little doubt that the metaphysics of perfection is personal to Hyde; it may not be exclusively personal, but it’s not just something happening outside his circle of existence; it’s in his heart and courses through his veins. Why doesn’t he choose to express its personal meanings and consequences more openly? Tompkins (1987) suggests one possible reason when she warns:

You can’t talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work; you have to pretend that it’s epistemology or ontology, or phenomenology, or metaphysics, something ‘more exalted’ than merely the personal, something separate and separated from what’s happening inside your heart or your personal life, something that potentially could embarrass or humiliate you in the presence of your colleagues. (p. 169)

On the whole, rhetorical and phenomenological scholarship is confined mainly to what LeGuin (1986) refers to as “the father tongue,” a high-minded mode of expression that seeks and embraces objectivity. Spoken from above, the father tongue runs the risk of distancing the writer from the reader, creating a gap or space between self and other. What is missing from rhetorical scholarship is “the mother tongue” (LeGuin, 1986), a binding form of subjective and conversational expression that seeks and covets “a turning together,” a relationship between author and reader. Voiced in a language of emotions and personal experience, the mother tongue exposes rather than protects the speaker through a medium that can bring author and reader closer together. The absence of a mother tongue in rhetorical scholarship reflects the conventions of disembodied writing that extol the virtue of objectivity. As LeGuin (1989) notes, “People crave objectivity because to be subjective is to be embodied, to be a body, vulnerable, violable” (p. 151). The real discourse of reason, she claims, is a wedding of the father to mother tongue, which produces “a native tongue.” When this fusion of voices occurs, which is rare indeed, it’s a beautiful thing (Eastman, 2007). Rushing (2006), for example, used the native tongue as a mode for expressing the possibilities of understanding—feeling and telling her life as a feminist

rhetorician. She showed that it was possible for a rhetorician to write from the source of her own experience, revealing that the subject matter of the field in which she worked was not discontinuous from her life. Regrettably, it was the last published work of her life.

Coming to Terms with Postmetaphysical Perfection

“The question of human being—of what it is to be human—has a long and tired history,” writes Steven David Ross (1989, p. 14). Rorty (1989) referred to this itch to theorize an essential human nature as a “metaphysical urge” (pp. 96–97). The history of philosophy, religion, and psychology is saturated with well-intentioned efforts to get to the bottom of humanity. If nothing else, the longing for an answer to this question testifies to the wisdom of Heidegger’s (1953) observation that we are the being who calls being into question. Though we can’t seem to resist the question, eventually we find every answer incomplete, contradictory, or insufficient (Ross, 1989). Looking over the whole weary history of this endeavor, Ross (1989) acknowledged “the often fascinating and illuminating treatment of certain facets of our humanity” but pointed out that “none of the proposals has been able to withstand careful criticism” (p. 14).

Consider the following small sample of responses to the question of an essential human nature: Whereas Aristotle (1955) emphasized the rationality and reasonableness of human action, Freud (1941) took an interest in human unreasonableness, first theorizing a principle of pleasure at the root of the human condition and later identifying an essential death instinct beyond pleasure (Freud, 2010); Nietzsche (2009) thought the drive for complete mastery over all things—the will to power—was the essence of human being; Frankl (1959) conceived self-transcendence—“man’s search for meaning”—as the core of human nature; recognizing that human life is finite, Heidegger (1953) construed “being” as essentially temporal and the world of being as a “with-world,” a being-with-others, whether those others are physically present or not; in the theological anthropology advanced by Tillich (1952), human beings lose their grip on essence after the *fall from grace*, becoming estranged from themselves—lost, anxious, and directed toward *ultimate meaning*. Other writers have highlighted the human capacity for reason and metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the necessity of caring and loving (Frank, 2010; Frankfurt, 2006), and the denial of death (Becker, 1973) as essential to what it means to be human. The most obvious conclusion one can reach about all this essentializing is the one reached by Ross (1989): The essence of human being is inexhaustible.

But even in the face of our boundless complexity, we can’t withstand the temptation to scratch the itch. Hyde finds this urge irresistible. Construing perfection as a metaphysical drive, he boldly asserts that “we are fated to pursue perfection . . . (it) is essential to our well-being.” Resting his case largely on foundational metaphysical and ontological commitments to “essential facts of life” and “first causes” of our metaphysical tendencies, Hyde uses scriptures to tie heart and conscience to perfection implying, after Augustine’s *Confessions* (1991), that coming to terms with perfection is akin to coming to terms with God.

Clearly the drive for perfection occupies a large space in most of our lives, and Hyde's incisive depiction of moral public argument as conflicting visions of perfecting human life offers extraordinary insight into what may be necessary to find common ground and prevent perfection's propensity to rot. But is the desire for perfection noncontingent? Is it a fateful, unconditioned reality beyond human influence? By construing the craving for perfection as a fateful (not a chance or contingent) production, Hyde makes perfection into a divine creation founded on a reality beyond our own. Consequently, he turns away from, or chooses to ignore, the ways in which culture, socialization, politics, and distinctly human history have contributed to the production of a drive for perfection. He suggests that we can intervene into the workings of perfection—we can come to terms with it—but as a metaphysically driven universal human condition, perfection must be a permanent, ahistorical, context of human life. Eastern philosophers likely would quibble with a metaphysics of perfection. For example, Coombs (2005) claims that Daoists “abandon this striving [for perfection], because humans cannot improve upon the universe's balance and harmony . . . It [the drive for perfection] does not describe the Daoist” (p. 139).

I have a second confession to make. I prefer Rorty's ironist to Hyde's metaphysician (Rorty, 1989). The ironist, according to Rorty, “is trying to get out from under inherited contingencies and make his own contingencies, get out from under an old vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own” (p. 97). The metaphysician asks, what is my nature? The ironist asks, what can I make of myself? As Rorty observed, “We are much less inclined than our ancestors were to take ‘theories of human nature’ seriously, much less inclined to take ontology or history as a guide to life. We have come to see that the only lesson of either history or anthropology is our extraordinary malleability” (Voparil & Bernstein, 2010, p. 353). The ironist does not feel at home in a space that appeals to transcultural qualities as a foundation for ethics.

I'm not convinced that the drive for perfection needs to be construed as metaphysical in order to make the case for the kind of “openness to otherness” that Hyde so passionately defends as the appropriate ethical stance for coming to terms with perfection. What makes perfection constitutive of what it means to be human? Is the drive for perfection really the cause of our being what we are? Or is the rhetoric of perfection simply one of Nietzsche's mobile “army of metaphors” (Rorty, 1989)? Burke (1969) himself warned that any vocabulary one selects as a reflection of reality may turn out to function as a deflection of reality. The vocabulary of perfection is not immune from that possibility.

I think of the drive for perfection, not unlike *being* itself, as a condition that evolves *from life* not prior to it. As a product rather than a cause of being, the question of perfection belongs to the realm of concrete questions about communication, culture, and social relations that are open to interrogation. Dwelling in the metaphysical space preferred by Hyde leads me in a different direction, one in which I don't need to go to defend an ethic of openness to otherness. My fear is that by dwelling on the metaphysical core of humanity, the question of whether human nature is divine, and whether we are fated to be one or another kind of creature, our attention will be diverted from facing up to the hard pragmatic question of what we can make of

ourselves, how we can “heighten the sense of a shared moral identity that brings us together in a moral community” (Rorty, 1998, p. 171).

Hyde and I want to end up in the same place, a dwelling where public argument doesn’t dissolve into a rotting perfectionism, where otherness is genuinely acknowledged, and where the differing meanings of the same moral terms can be contested in the spirit of a desire to find common ground. Hyde thinks we may be able to get there by amplifying our appreciation for our lived condition as metaphysical and theological beings, fixing our attention on openness to God’s presence in our lives. I share Hyde’s concern for how communication connections between opponents get severed when one voice attempts to drown out and dominate all other voices. We have witnessed the workings of this close-mindedness in recent public debates over universal health care and women’s reproductive rights. I’m unconvinced, however, that we can get closer to a common ground—something quite different from a middle ground—by centering on the metaphysics of humanity’s divine existence. I suppose this makes me a metaphysically flawed individual. But I don’t see the distinction between the metaphysician and the ironist as an issue to be resolved; it’s merely a difference to be coped with (Rorty, 1982).

Certainly, openness to otherness is better than close-mindedness most of the time. But even Hyde is close-minded on issues like evolution (p. 249). Openness cannot purge the conflicts I feel when I find myself in the middle of a difficult moral dilemma; it cannot diminish the claim upon me of the choice I do not make (MacIntyre, 1984). Moreover, there are times when I can’t help myself. I feel outraged about injustices I see in the world. I want to shout that it’s wrong for our government to spend trillions of dollars on weapons while children starve and unemployment escalates; that it’s wrong for millions of people to be sleeping in the street, in garbage dumps, or back alleys; and it’s wrong to have to witness the destruction of wetlands, and forests, while we pursue industrial progress that destroys thousands of species each year. Frankly, I’m not open on these issues.

Assuming the standpoint of the ironist, I favor a concrete “anthropology of perfection” that engulfs me in questions of what history, culture, and communication are making of me, how my beliefs and desires have been historically and socially conditioned, and within what stories my life, and the life in the communities in which I dwell, are embedded. Among the many beneficial ways of construing *human being*, the one most attractive to me as a communication scholar is relational being, which posits that human being is social being—“everything that is in the mind is first in the social world” (Gergen, 2010, p. xviii; Vygotsky, 1978). One of those stories undoubtedly revolves around the desire for perfection. I feel the strain of that story’s moral as I sit here coping with the blank screen staring at me, waiting patiently for my words, which never fully satisfy.

In short, I think of the burdens and benefits of the vocabulary of perfection and imperfection advanced by Hyde as an exemplar of what Dennett (1991) called “a center of narrative gravity” (pp. 426–427). Perfection is one of the stories that make us who we are. For some of us, it becomes a standpoint of suffering, grief, and trauma with which we must come to terms. For others among us, *perfection-isms* fade

into the background, giving way to other standpoints closer to the lived necessities of the life they are living, which may be a life not given (or with no time) to question the workings of perfection.

Openness to Otherness

Thinking with Hyde, I take *Perfection* personally, take it to heart. I want to answer his compassionate call for “openness to otherness.” I want to say, “Here I am!” Flooded by memories of times when I (or those close to me) felt “too far down to fall,” I question whether I was fully present. Was I heard? Did I do the right things? The past stirs within me.

I am reminded of Carol Gifford, a Ph.D. student at Temple University, who summoned me to her bedside two days before she died from breast cancer to make a modest request. She asked me to finish her dissertation for her so that other women and men would understand what the experience of breast cancer can mean to a marriage and a family. I remember Jennifer Pickman, a twenty-eight year old graduate student at USF—too young to die—suffering from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. On the eve of her death, she asked Carolyn and me, her co-mentors, to stay the night with her. Slipping into a coma from which she would not recover, she invited me to recite the Mourners Kaddish in Hebrew at her funeral.

Our good friend, Jim Sperry, also comes to mind. We considered him family, though the privacy laws under which hospitals operate didn’t see it that way. Lying motionless for a week in the hospital, abandoned by his nuclear family, he counted on the two of us, his two best friends, to find a way to turn off the respirator so he could die peacefully after suffering a catastrophic brain stem stroke.

An image of my mother surfaces, one I’ll never forget. I see her holding on after a stroke that left her speechless and completely dependent, fading away for three weeks, until I finally mustered the courage to whisper in her ear that this was no way to live. “It is time to let go,” I said to her, a sharp pain surging through my heart. She died the next morning (see Bochner, 2002).

These encounters, most of which took place years ago, still take my breath away. In these moments, I felt as if I was being called to reach for a higher part of myself. I had no practice and no theoretical formulation to guide me. All I had was the gift given by the Other, an opening for me to see and feel what is there in the world. Hyde is correct to depict these as occasions on which we come to terms with what we mean by “a good life” and “a good death.” In those moments, however, I wasn’t aware that I had a choice. These were situations calling for unconditional responsibility. Responding to what was other than myself, I became “attentively present” (Freeman, 2011). Were these moments of connection to an ultimate source of meaning? Flooded by sensations of terror and awe, I felt as if I was dwelling in a sublime space of connection.

Then I think of the cell phone calls from the people in the World Trade Center and on the hijacked planes, who knew they were about to die (Veale, 2001). “I love you, take care of the children.” “Darling, the building was hit with something. I don’t know if I’m going to get out. But I love you very much. Bye.” “I’m on the plane and it’s

hijacked and it doesn't look good. I just want you to know that I love you and I hope to see you again . . . Know that I love you and no matter what, I'll see you again." "I love you a thousand times over and over and over again. I love Emmy (too) . . . Whatever decisions you make in your life, I need you to be happy, and I will respect any decisions that you make." "I love you, Mommy, goodbye." Were these calls divinely inspired? Do we need to underwrite the meanings they conveyed by reference to God?

Hyde (2010, p. 157) speaks only once in *Perfection* about love. He says, "The call of conscience, a love of life, and salvation all function together in the ontological workings of human being." The book includes a chapter on reason, one on beauty, and another on God, but there is no chapter on love. Of course, the rabbi in Hyde that is struggling to get out leaves no doubt on these pages about the importance of loving God and the beauty of God's creations. But the humane and ontologically robust meanings of love exceed the meanings ordinarily captured in the phrase a "love for life." As the philosopher Frankfurt (2006) observes in yet another take on the essence of human nature, "rationality and the capacity of love are the most powerfully emblematic and distinctive and most highly prized features of human nature. The former guides us most authoritatively in the use of our minds, while the latter provides us with the most compelling motivation in our personal and social conduct" (p. 64). At times we "accede to the irresistible demands of logic; at other times to the captivating necessities of love" (p. 64). How sure can we be that what brought out the best in Melvin, the unremarkable hero of *As Good as it Gets*, was a metaphysical desire for perfection and not love?

Coming to Terms with Mortality: Openness to the Otherness of Death

Ever since reading Becker's *The Denial of Death*, I've been haunted by the existential paradox he defines, the same one Hyde recognizes by acknowledging the place of God and the demands of the body in our lives:

Man [sic] is freed by an inner symbolic self and bound by a finite body . . . literally split in two, he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and have to live with. (Becker, 1973, p. 26)

In the face of this tragic condition, Hyde finds liberation in holiness and in his unwavering faith that there is a grand design, a larger purpose to life. But there is no escape from the paradox. Regardless of how one chooses to cope with this abject circumstance, there will always be the whisper of another possible truth lurking in the background, the one so eloquently expressed by Becker, "that human life may not be more than a meaningless interlude in a vicious drama of flesh and bones that we call evolution; that the Creator may not care any more for the destiny of man or the self-perpetuation of individual men than he cared for the dinosaurs or the Tasmanians" (p. 187).

How unreasonable can it get? I've already alluded to the ways in which love complements reason as a source of dignity and guidance in one's life, but neither love

nor reason can do one's bidding for immortality. That's why Rank (1936) called the love relationship "a religious problem." Eventually reason must confront the unreasonableness of death. Death is Other to reason, according to Bauman (1992)—an Other to which we are not open. Death offends reason and modernity's way of coping with mortality was to flush it "into the sewer of oblivion" (p. 131). The myth is that we can defeat death by bringing all of our technological tools, all the miracles that modern medicine has to offer, to conquer death (Nuyen, 1995). But Bauman (1992) warns that medicine cannot deliver on this promise; it can only divert "the attention from the idleness of the promise through an ever more dazzling display of staggering surgeries, wonder drugs and awe-inspiring high-tech installations" (p. 143).

Despite his reservations about the extent to which the future of what it means to be human should be ceded to science, Hyde (2010) falls prey to the Enlightenment's master narrative of progress. He thanks goodness for medical science, assigning a divine stature to its mission—"the way of science is arguably the way of God . . ." (p. 249). Pointing out that Terri Shiavo would not have lived as long as she did had it not been for "the wonders of medical technology" (p. 247), Hyde mourns the fact that medical technology had not yet advanced to the point that it could save her life. "But progress is in the works with the biotechnology revolution," he concludes hopefully, implying that science should work harder to find life-saving solutions to the end-of-life (p. 248).

Though Hyde typically shies away from taking sides in clashes between diverse moral standpoints, urging instead an unqualified openness to otherness, he seems positively enchanted by biotechnology's potential to save us from unnecessary suffering. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," he asks, "if medical science and technology had evolved to the point at which people like Terri Schiavo could be cured of their ailments?" (p. 241).

On the surface, the potential rewards of each of the technologies of perfection appear to outweigh the costs. In the case of enhancement technologies, for example, Rothman and Rothman (2004) embolden a romantic fantasy of a longer, more pleasurable life. "Yes, there will be risks," they acknowledge, "but just imagine the benefits of an extra seventy years of life" (p. 231).

I suppose one can always hope and dream. Hyde likely would say, "We are only in the beginning. We must remain open . . . in the name of perfection" (Hyde, 2010, p. 270). But imagining what could be true doesn't take us off the hook. This isn't the theatre. Here we're dealing with real lives and actual people; it's a place where fantasy can't plug the leak of reality. Sooner or later, facts have to be faced.

Here's what I know to be true: In America, the demand for high quality health care exceeds our capacity to pay for it (Field, 2007). The longer a person lives, the more it costs to keep the person alive. The tide of health care costs rise relentlessly, and other costs—emotional, spiritual, relational—climb as well. Nearly twenty years ago, Bauman (1992) warned that the development of advanced medical technologies was a stratification strategy sure to lead to limiting availability. In the U.S., that would mean the sole criterion of choice would become the capacity of patients to pay.

For many people today, medicine does not extend life; it merely prolongs the process of dying. And it's been that way for a long time. At age sixty-five, when I imagine another seventy years, what I see is not a beautiful sight, not for me; and certainly not for the people I love. Because we have a tacit cultural contract to keep death out of sight, most of us don't fully realize how slow, painful, wretched, and ugly dying in America can be *now*. Recently, the wife of a retired neonatologist suffering from acute renal failure published a letter to *The New York Times* (April 11, 2011) in which she quoted her husband's response to his three urologists who were arranging dialysis for him following his discharge from the hospital: "I am 87 years old. It is a waste of resources to provide me with dialysis three times a week. You will not be prolonging my life. You will be prolonging my dying. That is not the quality of life I choose."

How long would you like to have to hold on to your life by a thread? A hundred years ago, life expectancy was about 45; today it's about 75. But the numbers are misleading, since most of the increase is a result of sharp declines in childhood mortality and the development of antibiotics for treating bacterial infection. In 1912, only 13 cases of what we call Alzheimer's disease had been identified in print (Perry, Avila, Kinoshita, & Smith, 2006). At the time, nobody anticipated that extending life into one's mid-eighties would carry with it a 50/50 chance of becoming demented.

The term "technological enhancement" gives the impression that technological "advancements" can only enrich and make our lives better, that is, "more perfect." We don't approach science and technology as a moral question or with sufficient skepticism about the consequences of applying new technologies.

There is *a time to be born and a time to die* (Ecclesiastes 3:2). Isn't there? How can we trust that a long(er) life will be a life worth living? Will the medical scientists stick around to assume responsibility for the consequences of the longevity they will have made possible? To use one of Hyde's favorite questions, will scientists be ready to answer the call of conscience? "Here I am!" Can you imagine them saying that?

Whereas other critics (Hindle, 1985) have analyzed Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a haunting exemplar of the dangers of playing God with science and technology, Hyde (2010) sees the story as a poignant lesson in the ethics of acknowledgement, a failure of an individual scientist "to care for what something is as this something shows itself in how it exists" (p. 103). Science as a practice remains indubitably open to truth, but individual scientists may be roused by motives other than the search for truth and the industries of medical science apparently are not bound by the same ethical standards as the "disciplines" of science (Breggin, 2001, 2008). Insofar as science seeks objectivity, it distances itself from actual people, opting instead for modes of expressing an ahistorical human nature governed by "underlying structures," "invariant factors," or "determined patterns." Yet scientists are never free of human motives and emotions; and science as a practice can never guarantee that individual scientists will show the kind of openness and caring to others associated with an ethic of acknowledgement. Nor can science be expected to anticipate the consequences of applying scientific theory to real-world practices.

Recently, we've witnessed two examples of catastrophes that were never supposed to happen. In Japan, life-threatening explosions and a nuclear meltdown released

dangerous levels of radiation from nuclear power plants into the atmosphere following an earthquake and tsunami. In the Gulf of Mexico, 40 miles off the coast of Louisiana, a failure of a blow-out pipe to be properly sealed at the *Deepwater Horizon* BP drilling rig killed 13 workers, endangered sea life, and jeopardized the livelihood of thousands of coastal residents. These unanticipated disasters revealed the huge risk of systemic failures and the human and environmental catastrophes that can result. Predictably, these tragic events were followed immediately by a call for more and better scientific studies.

I take Hyde's plea for greater openness to otherness to carry with it the necessity of assuming greater responsibility for others: in Freeman's (2011) terms, recognizing the priority of the Other. Our lives and our deaths have consequences for others. As long as we continue to push the modernist narrative that problems of health and disease are "soluble in principle," we will continue to be impressed by medical science's determination to kill death whatever the cost. We will refuse to take *life* seriously. But narratives are compositions that can be erased. The meaning of one's life does not have to be reduced to survival.

I am arguing that we need to alter medical science's conception of life as an end in itself. As Callahan (1987) observed, science and medicine have become the last bastion of the Enlightenment dream of limitless human possibilities. Ironically, "we now suffer from the very means we have used to try to eliminate suffering" (Hauerwas, 1990, p. 108). We are not using science and medicine to serve our human needs, but rather to determine them by fostering the illusion that we can extend life indefinitely and for the greater good of humanity.

As Hyde (2010) suggests, we need to face the question of "how far we should allow science and technology to dictate the future of what it means to be human" (p. 128). To address this question honestly, with humility and openness, we have to confront our cultural premise that "death is a very unfortunate aspect of the human condition that should be avoided at all costs" (Hauerwas, 1990, p. 99). In my view, this moral presumption is the source of the human quest for perfection in all its glory and its rottenness. In *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Bauman (1992) describes how death became "an emphatic denial of everything that the brave new world of modernity stood for, and above all its arrogant promise of the indivisible sovereignty of reason" (p. 134). We are now witnessing the economic, moral, and political consequences of the strategy of applying all of technology's tools to the goal of defeating death. Instead of understanding aging and death as a moral and social responsibility, an event to be accepted as the normal course of things within the narrative framework of the unity of a given person's life, we have surrendered to the medical narrative. As a result, the machinery of medicine has been allowed to outstrip the spiritual resources of our society, creating technologies which Hauerwas (1990) bluntly observed "lack all sense of how life might properly end" (p. 123).

Hyde (2010) tells us in the last pages of *Perfection* that "life and death go hand and hand." This is an immensely important moral point of view, one which has little visible currency in our society. Most of us see no necessary connection between our lives and our deaths. As a result illness and death become our enemies; they become pointless and

meaningless, “only something to deny” (Hauerwas, 1990, p. 112). We have not created social practices that enable us to understand death as an extension of our ongoing life projects (Bochner, 2009). Medicine as a profession teaches doctors to delay endings. Our cultural commitment to develop technologies and medicines that prolong life as long as possible reinforces the canonical story that death is to be avoided or postponed as long as possible regardless of the circumstances. For the physician this storyline means every death is an untimely one, whereas for the mortally ill patient it means the end of life cannot be integrated coherently into a life narrative. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) argued that it was crucial for human beings to achieve a sense of a narrative unity and continuity to their lives, and that this achievement rested on an ability to comprehend one’s own death. In the canonical life narrative, however, most people end up experiencing illness as a breach, an interruption, or a rupture in their life story, while most doctors comprehend death as a defeat, a source of professional suffering, or a reminder of their own powerlessness in the face of their dreaded opponent, mortality—the enemy of medicine—as well as the fragility and uncertainty of their own health (Charon, 2006). If we aren’t encouraged to think of our lives in a narrative way, in terms of beginnings, middles, and endings, a story that comes to an end one day, then there is very little that anyone can do through the magic of science or technology to help us comprehend illness and death (Hauerwas, 1990). Indeed, death in America is rotten with imperfection. It breaks our spirit and drains our savings accounts, leaving us spiritually and materially bankrupt and depressed.

Bauman (1992) believes that we desperately need to deconstruct immortality. Becker (1973) initiated just such a project more than thirty-five years ago by situating the denial of death within the problem of human heroism in an effort to reveal ourselves to ourselves. But to figure out how death fits into life, it may be necessary to replace Becker’s “heroic man” with Bauman’s ethical person, a standpoint toward death akin to Levinas’s (1991) call for an obligation to “the face of the other.” In Bauman’s terms, we must be ready “to die for anOther,” putting the other’s survival above our own. This is what makes one’s life count, says Bauman (1992), “Through making myself for-the-other, I make myself for-myself, I pour meaning into my being-in-the-world.” (p. 202). “One who is ready to die for an other,” writes Nuyen (1995) “wishes to be completely human, that is, to be ethical not to be a hero” (p. 543). We have a long way to go and many obstacles to overcome to reach this ethical ideal of dying-for-anOther. But I believe this ideal offers a standard toward which we should strive. In the absence of a narrative that links birth to life to death we lack a common story that would make it possible to be with another when we (or they) die, to give the Other what he or she needs to hear from us, to answer the call, “Where art thou,” with the comforting and consoling acknowledgement, “Here I am.”

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