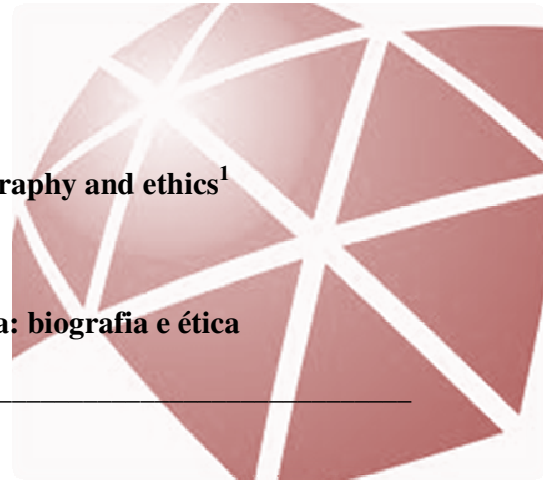


**When the historian peeks through the keyhole: biography and ethics<sup>1</sup>**

**Quando o historiador espia pelo buraco da fechadura: biografia e ética**



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**Abstract:** The article discusses the relationships and tensions between ethics and biographical narrative, especially in the field of historical knowledge, and was divided into three parts: the first exposes the conception of ethics that guides the subsequent analysis; the second addresses the ethical motivation that lies in the heart of the biography itself from its origins, namely to establish a moral discourse about man and society; and, finally proposes a discussion on the ethics of the biographer historian, not only in relation to their biographees, but also with regard to the principles of his discipline.

**Keywords:** biography; ethics; history.

**Resumo:** O artigo aborda as relações e tensões entre ética e narrativa biográfica, sobretudo no campo do conhecimento histórico, e foi dividido em três partes: na primeira, é exposta a concepção de ética, que guiará a análise subsequente; na segunda, aborda-se a motivação ética que está no cerne da própria biografia desde as suas origens, qual seja, a de estabelecer um discurso moral sobre o homem e a sociedade; por fim, propõe-se uma discussão sobre a ética do historiador biógrafo, tanto em relação a seus biografados quanto no que diz respeito aos princípios de sua disciplina.

**Palavras-chave:** biografia; ética; história.

In a wonderful book titled “The Silent Woman“, the American journalist Janet Malcolm investigates the biographies and biographers of the poet Sylvia Plath in order to reflect on the limits of the biographical genre. When trying to understand the success of this type of narrative, the author writes:

The transgressive nature of biography is rarely acknowledged, but it is the only explanation for biography’s status as a popular genre. The reader’s amazing tolerance (which he would extend to no novel written half as badly as most biographies) makes sense only when seen as a kind of collusion between him and the biographer in an excitingly forbidden undertaking: tiptoeing down the corridor together to stand in front of the bedroom door and try to peep through the keyhole. (MALCOLM, 1995, p. 17).

Later on, Malcolm adds:

As a burglar should not pause to discuss with his accomplice the rights and wrongs of burglary while jimmying the lock, so a biographer ought not to introduce doubts about the legitimacy of the biographical enterprise. (MALCOLM, 1995, p. 17).

These words have been haunting my career as a researcher, since I devoted myself, several years ago, to investigating individual pathways and to building historical biographies. Such works are standing in a broader movement that, as from the 1980s, rehabilitated, on a new footing, historiographical perspectives that were stigmatized as “minor“, “outdated“, “traditional“, “positivist“, among other hardly honorable epithets, in particular the political history, the narrative history, and the biography. The historian Jacques Le Goff warns against these so-called “returns“:

These returns are misconceptions. If each of them can be accepted by the new history and proponents of the new history often gave them as example, it is because each of these historical genres (or almost) returns with completely revamped problematics. (LE GOFF, 1990, p. 7-8).

When writing the words I quoted earlier, Malcolm was not specifically referring to the biographies written by historians. However, I believe that the issues raised by her must not be absent from the horizon of History professionals devoted to cross home, library and archives building corridors; stop in front of processes, letters, photographs, diaries, journals and interviewees; and spy through the keyhole to try to glimpse multiple facets of their biographees through these traces. Hence, I must quote another excerpt from “The Silent Woman” that certainly calls into question the respectability of the motivations that lead us – historians and non-historians – to undertake a biography:

The voyeurism and busybodyism that impel writers and readers of biography alike are obscured by an apparatus of scholarship designed to give the enterprise an appearance of banklike blandness and solidity. The biographer is portrayed almost as a kind of benefactor. He is seen as sacrificing years of his life to his task, tirelessly sitting in archives and libraries and patiently conducting interviews with witnesses. There is no length he will not go to, and the more his book reflects his industry the more the reader believes that he is having an elevating literary experience rather than simply listening to backstairs gossip and reading other people's mail. (MALCOLM, 1995, p. 17).

Confirmed voyeur and busybody, protected and constrained by the rules of the “apparatus of scholarship”, I seek in this article to briefly depart from the condition of professional burglar in order to reflect on right and wrong, and, eventually, on ethics, present in the act of “stealing” the lives of others. Ultimately, my purpose is to address the relationships and tensions between ethics and biographical

narrative, especially in the field of historical knowledge. To this end, I selected a few of the many questions raised by these issues and I organized the text into three parts. In the first part, which is very short, I present the concept of ethics that guides my considerations. Although this topic is on the agenda of Western thought at least since Classical Greece, nowadays it is somewhat worn out due to its misuse (or vulgar use) by media, politicians, public opinion, among other social agents. What follows is the ethical motivation that lies at the heart of the biography itself from its origins; that is, establishing a moral discourse about man and society. It seems to me that, despite the numerous transformations the genre has gone through, this motivation is still structuring this type of narrative. Finally, I discuss the ethics of biographers and historians, regarding their biographees as well as their principles of discipline.

### ***1. Ethical, Ethics***

As I said before, the discussion on ethics is a cornerstone of Western philosophy. I have no intention of synthesizing this whole trajectory of reflections and discussions, nor do I think such movement is necessary to the purposes of this article. In this first part, I seek only to briefly explain the understanding of ethics that will delimit my afterthoughts. To this end, I make use of the entry “Ethics” written by Paul Ricoeur for the “Dictionary of Ethics and Moral Philosophy” whose suggestive subtitle is “From the Moral to the Ethical and to Ethics”. (RICOEUR, 2003, p. 591-595, from where all the quotes from section 1 were taken, unless otherwise stated).

Ricoeur begins by noting that “[...] specialists in moral philosophy do not agree on how to apportion the meanings of the two terms morality and ethics”. Seeking to orientate himself as regards to this difficulty, he proposes taking the concept of morality as the basic term, assigning a double function to it: “[...] that of designating, on one hand, the region of norms; in other words, of principles about what is permitted and what is prohibited; and, on the other, the feeling of obligation associated with the subjective aspect of the relation of a subject to such norms”. It is in relation to this hard core that he determines the use of the term ethics, considering it a concept that is split in two: “one branch designating the upstream of standards – I shall speak of an anterior ethic – and the other branch designating the downstream side – which I will call posterior ethics”; the anterior ethic “pointing to the rootedness of norms in life and desire”, the posterior ones “aimed at inserting standards into concrete situations”. Thus, morals would be a “*transition structure* that guide the transference of fundamental ethics toward applied ethics, which gives them visibility and legibility in terms of *praxis*”. Therefore, Ricoeur argues that it is not by chance that

[...] we sometimes designate ethics as a meta-ethic, a second-degree reflection on standards, and other times as positive practices that invite us to use the term in the plural and to accompany it with a qualifying adjective, as when we speak of medical ethics, legal ethics, business ethics, and so on. Surprisingly, this sometimes abusive and purely rhetorical use of the term “ethics” to designate regional ethics does not succeed in abolishing the noble sense of the term, reserved for what we can call a fundamental ethic as that of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or Spinoza's *Ethics*.

Despite adopting, in this article, the split concept of ethics proposed by Ricoeur – between fundamental ethics and specific ethics –, I clarify that I do not attach to the first any transcendence, any ahistorical, or transhistorical meaning, any universal vocation. Quite conversely, my training as a historian departs me from foundationalism or ethical naturalism and approaches me to ethical historicism, which means that

[...] the justification of our beliefs is not a matter of adapting our speeches or statements to the nature of things; to elementary data of spirit or feeling; to logical rules of reason, or to internal requirements of the structure of language: it is a matter of social practice or conversational context. (COSTA, 1992, p. 275).

During the following reflections, I will deal with the two meanings of the term ethics. First, I will discuss the biography as ethical discourse that aimed, since its emergence – due to the respect, admiration, devotion, enthusiasm, or indignation caused – at convincing the moral subjects to “do their duty”, to “do good”, by making the norms the foundation of life and desire (always remembering, though, that “duty” and “good” are historical attributes, defined in games of power specific to each historical period and social group). Next, I will discuss the biographer's ethics, a specific type of ethics, which requires the insertion of norms in concrete situations. For example: when a biographer “reveals” facts and facets that, for various reasons, had hitherto been hidden by the biographee or his descendants, is he fulfilling his duty and doing good? This has become a “hot” issue as from the controversy surrounding the “Procure saber” movement, which coalesced, on one hand, actual or potential biographees who defended the right to privacy and, therefore, the prohibition of unauthorized biographies and, secondly, biographers (especially journalists) and publishers that, in contrast, advocated the right of free speech as the basis for the right to biographize freely. Here, I will add a complementary thesis of Ricoeur: “[...] the only way to take possession of what precedes the norms intended by the anterior ethic is to make their contents appear on the plane of practical wisdom, which is that of the posterior ethics”. More precisely, I will try to show that no specific posterior ethics, including the ethics

of the biographer and historian, is self-sufficient, because their configuration must refer to fundamental ethics, anterior, rooted in the practice and tradition of a specific period of time and social group.

## ***2. The biographical narrative as ethical discourse: teaching to do good***

François Dosse (2005, p. 133) points out that, for a long time, from ancient to modern times, the biographical genre, essentially, had an identification function: “It served as a speech on virtues, an edifying moral model to educate and convey the dominant values to future generations”. Moreover, the author continues, saying that this is an ancient genre spread around the notion of *bioi* (bios), which refers not only to the fact of retracing “life”, but also as a “way of life”. In Ancient Greece, this notion emerges from a philosophical knowledge and relates to morality. Therefore, it is a genre that belongs to the sphere of judgment.

The context of the Greek city - with its emphasis on collective identity of citizens - was not conducive to the flourishing of the genre, which gained momentum in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and protruded mainly in Hellenistic and Roman times. It is worth mentioning that the biography and the historical genre were born at the same time. However, it gradually – particularly with Thucydides – took separate paths, since practitioners of biography were not interested in completely breaking ties with the imaginary, because, from their point of view, expressing the life lesson embodied in it was more important than revealing the “truth” about the character portrayed. According to Dosse (2005, p. 136), biographers' ingenuity was widely requested and corresponded to the horizon of readers' expectations. For this reason, biography was considered a more popular genre than history; and, was often perceived as less vulgar by historians of ancient times.

In order not to have a long discussion about ancient biographies, the example of “Parallel Lives” written by Plutarch, born around 45 A.D., is a clear indication that this is so. In this work, the author elaborates biographical pairs, comparing the merits and flaws of a Greek and a Roman hero. This famous sentence: “For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives” belongs to him, contributing to driving a wedge between these genres, which is, to this day, the subject of interpretive controversy. (see, for example, SILVA, 2006).

The leitmotif of the plutarchean narrative is not the evolution of the hero's character throughout his life, but rather the way in which his virtues are put to the test in compared contexts. Seen in these terms, the uniqueness of the individual pathway stands out less and examples of the effectiveness of a virtue or the extent of the disaster that may result from this or that vice stand out more. Thus, still

according to Dosse (2005, p. 143), Plutarch's Lives are neither panegyrics nor praises; vices and virtues are able to live in the same characters. In his biographies, he relies on the contrast between vices and virtues to better emphasize this last dimension.

After being somewhat forgotten over the medieval period, Plutarch's work was rediscovered during the Renaissance and has had great acceptance in modern and contemporary times, among writers as well as historians, inspiring new biographical models. (HARTOG, 2001; BURKE, 1997).

But first, a narrative genre close to biography was also born from a perspective that can be called ethics, in the finest sense of the term, that is, as a basis from which norms and types of relationships established with subjects emerge: hagiography, namely, the writing of saints' lives. According to Michel de Certeau (1982, p. 272), the difference between biography and hagiography is that the first one expresses an evolution in time of the individual's potentialities, while the second postulates that everything is given at source. The author continues: "The combination of acts, places, and themes indicates a specific structure that does not refer primarily 'to what happened', as History does, but 'to what is exemplary'", that is, to behaviors that deserve to be imitated by those who aspire to be enlightened. Although they deal with the miraculous and the wonderful, guided by a logic that is not of this world, hagiographies seek practical purposes, indicating exemplary behaviors, defining what is permitted and what is prohibited, while establishing (or at least trying to establish) an obligation in relation to compliance with the norms, in the subjectivity of the parishioners.

During the Renaissance, ancient biographies, Plutarch's in particular, were recovered; however, the role of possible biographees were broadened to include women, artists, and even individuals from other cultures. The notion of exemplarity continues guiding biographical writing; nevertheless, in the words of Peter Burke, "[...] a tension, to say the least, between the idea of the individual as an example and the idea of the individual as unique" is increasingly manifesting itself. This tension will characterize the biographical genre throughout the modern period, condensing itself into the hero figure. According to Dosse (2005, p. 164), this reference settles in the heart of the historical discourse and becomes the mainspring of novelistic intrigue. On one hand, in line with the movement of individualization that permeates Western societies, modern biographies emphasize the unique qualities of the hero, including his ability to transgress social norms in favor of ideas that will only take place in the future. On the other hand, they show how this hero embodies values and collective qualities of a small group (nobility, for example, in the case of chivalric biographies), of the Nation, or even of all Humanity. In the words of Dosse (2005, p. 168):

Due to their ability to take ownership of collective values and to embody them in a unique way, the lives of individuals hold a meaning that goes beyond the mere personal equation to acquire a lasting glory in the eyes of another individual, for his recognition.

The figure of the hero suffers a crisis throughout the eighteenth century. In the name of reason, his semi-divine character is contested by the Enlightenment. Warrior values embodied by the heroes are progressively considered superseded by a society that aspires to peace. Voltaire proposes to replace the hero by the Great Man. Nonetheless, the tension between individuality and exemplarity still persists. The writing of the lives of these “Great Men” emphasizes their personal merits, accessible to “ordinary mortals”; however, it simultaneously evokes transcendent values to be shown to the society, such as humanity and moderation in the use of responsibilities, among others. (DOSSE, 2005, p. 182).

The nineteenth century was characterized by a major debate concerning the role of the individual in history – we might as well be saying that this debate had strong ethical implications, which obviously affected the paths of the biographical genre. Sabina Loriga identifies multiple biographic figures in the historical production of this period: the “pathological man” of Jacob Burckhardt, whose narrative function prevents any notion of progress; the “particle-man” of Hippolyte Taine, who approaches the concrete man and contributes to a multiple vision of reality; and the “hero” of Carlyle, who, according to the author, is disembodied and depersonalized and does not oppose to the spirit of classical German philosophy: “Carlyle gathered in heroism – she says – the scattered elements that Hegel had subjected to law”. (LORIGA, 1998, p. 237).

In any case, contrary to what the simplistic criticism of Lucien Febvre of the “historicizing history” preaches, the history of the nineteenth-century, which gradually gained disciplinary configuration and its own institutional locations, did not consider the biography as its main pillars and preferred to invest in depersonalized and/or collective entities when indicating the subjects and formulating the causal nexus of its narratives: the Nation, the State, the People, the Environment, the Race. In this scenario, the biography was accepted as an accessory genre, usually practiced by dilettantes; however, fundamental to the establishment of civic and patriotic pedagogy of developing nations. In this context, we find the ethical dimension of the biographical discourse. For example, in his famous textbook “Petit Lavisse”, the French historian, Ernest Lavisse

[...] does not hesitate to take liberties with the truth pact that underpins the historical discourse and that is highly claimed by the methodical school it represents. He truly advocates the need of the myth, the legend, in order to best glorify some heroes amenable to identification, engaged in forming a nation. (DOSSE, 2005, p. 196).

Therefore, even in modern times, the impulse to do good – in this case, what converges towards the good of the Nation – does not waive a sacred dimension, crystallized in the actions of national heroes (and throughout ritualization involving its manufacture: pantheons, celebrations, eulogies, etc.) and plays an essential role in the formation of the moral subject of the contemporary age.

I outlined so far, on a very general level, a trajectory of the biographical genre, with its distance and proximity in relation to History, in order to demonstrate that since its emergence in Ancient times and in spite of the transformations experienced over time and the differences existing among the authors who practiced it, it was configured around an ethical motivation: to make, through the example of biographed characters, a second degree reflection on the norms; to introduce and reinforce the boundaries of what is permitted and what is prohibited; and, most importantly, to constitute a subject who is forced or at least prone to do his duty, to do good, according to the dominant meanings assigned to such terms during each period of time and in each society.

This secular motivation of the biographical genre – that permeates narratives of varied styles – is related to a specific and long lasting regime of historicity: the *historia magistra vitae*, meaning history is life's teacher, according to which it is the past that elucidates the future, offering a repertoire of examples and counterexamples to be imitated or avoided. This form of relationship with time, according to François Hartog (1997, p. 9-10), rests on the idea that the future does not repeat the past and never goes beyond it, moving within the same circle with the a same set of rules, the same order, and the same men sharing the same human nature.

This regime of historicity emerged in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and was dissolved, at least as an explanatory principle and heuristic hegemonic instrument, between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (the period referred to earlier, when outlining a brief history of the biographical genre). From there, the modern regime of historicity, dominated by the point of view of the future, gained strength. In the words of Hartog (1997, p. 9):

This future that clarifies the past history, this point of view and this *telos* that give it a meaning acquired successively, with the garments of science, the image of the Nation, the People, the Republic or the Proletariat. If there is still a lesson in history, it comes, so to speak, from the future and not from the past. It is in a future that will be different from the past [...].

The major philosophic currents of the History of the nineteenth century settled in the perspective of evolution and progress as Positivism and Marxism express this futuristic regime to perfection. However, after the two world wars and especially from the 1960s, in the face of the disbelief in past



models and collective projects for the future, the modern regime gave way to another way of apprehending time: “In shaping our individual relationship with time, we passed from futurism to presentism: to a present that is its own horizon. With no future and no past, or generating, almost on a daily basis, the past and the future that we need every day”. (HARTOG, 1997, p. 13).

The answer, neither immediate nor direct, of historiography to this change was to search for temporalities of the notion of exemplarity that pay tribute neither to the perspective of progress, such as Braudel's “long term”, Le Roy Ladurie's “immobile history”, and Jacques le Goff's “history of mentalities” and “historic anthropology”, nor to the “history of the present time” practiced by many contemporary researchers.

Hartog (1997, p. 15) emphasizes that, since the mid-1970s, fissures in this presentist regime of historicity manifested themselves with increasing intensity:

[...] this present [...] proves to be uneasy. It would like to be its own point of view about itself, and it discovers the impossibility of doing so. At the breaking point, it is incapable of filling the gap it opened between the field of experience and the horizon of expectation.

The contemporary emphasis on subjects of memory, heritage, and celebration – all referring to the terrain of identity – would be one of the clearest symptoms of the failures of presentism.

I decided to explore in more detail the notion of the regime of historicity – which, according to Hartog himself, its most important disseminator should not be made absolute; nonetheless, taken as a heuristic tool – in order to reflect on the ethical impulse that historically sets the biographical narratives.

It is worth saying that a regime of historicity never exists in pure form. The notion helps us, above all, to apprehend the dominant forms of relationships with time that men settled in different historical periods. Thus, during the hegemony of the regime of pastist historicity, such as *historia magistra*, biographies had, despite their stylistic differences and ideological content, an explicitly ethical character constituting reflections on values and norms and participating in the “molding” of moral subjects able to transfer fundamental ethics to specific ethics, such as the ethics of the warrior, of the ruler, of the parishioner, of the citizen, etc. Later, with the advent of the futuristic regime – underpinned by the notion of progress, and of the presentist regime – allegedly encapsulated in an eternal “now”, the biographical dimension lost ground in key historiographical currents in favor of collective incarnations – such as Marx's “class”, Comte's “spirit of Positivism”, or Michelet's “people” –, and was later subsumed by major socioeconomic and demographic structures and by long duration and average duration processes. François Simiand's attack on the “individual idol,” the advent of structuralism, and Pierre Bourdieu's

“biographical illusion” characterized the criticism of the biography as a historical genre at different times during the twentieth century. Nevertheless, biographies continued to be produced and consumed voraciously in other spheres of enunciation of the historical discourse by amateur historians, journalists, writers, filmmakers, etc. It is difficult to specify the reasons for the success of the genre, despite the contempt shown by academics. As Janet Malcolm said in the quotation at the beginning of this article, voyeurism, desire, something wicked in observing in minute detail the privacy of others, especially the “famous” ones is certainly one of the reasons. Nonetheless, can we completely dismiss the desire to find role models, identity references to be followed, closer and concrete examples to be imitated, especially in the face of disillusionment brought by certain exhaustion of modernist utopias?

Particularly since the late 1980s, the biography has progressively yet again occupied a prominent place in the historiographical scenario, especially in the key of “modal biography”. From this perspective, as pointed out by Dosse (2005, p. 213), “a particularity becomes a general entry, revealing to the reader the average behavior of social categories at a given moment”. Such understanding does not question the assumptions of structuralist and totalizing narratives; though, refines its perspective, allowing the embodiment of collective movements in individual pathways. More recently, however, this “modal” view slowly began to share space with another, which Sabina Loriga (1998, p 249) calls “coral” and that “[...] conceives particularity as an element of tension: the mission of the individual is not to reveal the essence of humanity; to the contrary, he must remain unique and fragmented”. The author adds:

Only then, through different individual movements, it is possible to break the apparent heterogeneity (for instance, the institution, the community, or the social group) and reveal the conflicts that governed the formation and building of cultural practices: I think not only of inertia and regulatory inefficiency, but also of inconsistencies that exist between different norms, and the way in which individuals, whether they “make” history or not, shape and change the relations of power. (LORIGA, 1998, p. 248-249).

The interests of historians in biographizing “outsiders”, those who deviate from the average, is symptomatic of this desire to “[...] better reflect the balance between the specificity of personal destiny and the whole social system”. Even those who veer towards the “Great Men”; thus, configured by successive layers of memory, in my opinion, seek to apprehend them in their “humanity” as agents that establish projects socially and historically defined as fields of possibilities.

I believe that, given the “failures of presentism” diagnosed by Hartog, when the memory or, better yet, memories become central subjects of contemporary, cultural, political, social, and historiographical debates, biographies - particularly those produced by historians - quickly reassume

their character of ethical reflection; though, not necessarily from the perspective of history as life's teacher. To me, this happens for at least three reasons.

First of all, because of what is conventionally called “duty of memory”, an ethical and political imperative through which different groups, generally victims of various forms of oppression, bring to the public arena their demands for representation of the past. Without entering into details regarding complicated relationships between memory and history or of the risks that these memorial aspirations present to the cohesion and peaceful coexistence of societies, it seems to me that many of the historical biographies produced in recent years express, directly or indirectly, a desire to reproduce memories and identity references by extending the pantheon of biographees, giving time and voice, “flesh and blood” to multiple actors that had no room in unifying national histories. This is the case, for example, of several studies of oral history centered on the figure of the witness, the one who saw, heard and above all suffered, and who can now reveal – in some cases, without much mediation – what has been forgotten or silenced.

The historical biographies recently published also restate another issue with profound ethical implications: the degree of possible freedom of individuals. In a well-known passage, the Italian historian Giovanni Levi (1996, p. 179-180) writes:

It seems to me [...] that we should inquire more about the true extent of the freedom of choice. This freedom is certainly not absolute; culturally and socially determined, limited, patiently conquered, it remains, nevertheless, a conscious freedom left to the actors by the interstices inherent to general systems of norms. [...] As I see it, this is why the biography is the ideal field to verify the interstitial character - and most importantly - of the freedom enjoyed by agents, and to observe the concrete functioning of normative systems, which are never free of contradictions.

This perspective has inspired numerous biographical works, such as the classic “The Cheese and the Worms” by Carlo Ginzburg or several recent studies that seek to highlight the spaces of autonomy of slaves and women in societies characterized by rigid (and even brutal) forms of manor and patriarchal domination. Perhaps the interest in the interstices of freedom in various historical periods – and we could wonder whether this notion sometimes assumes a universalist and transhistorical character – expresses the human condition in contemporary times, beset by massification and by social control made possible by new technologies, “à la 1984” by Orwell. Does the miller Menocchio, true contemporary hero, not comfort us for having the courage to go against the mainstream thinking of his time, for having individualized himself? Anyway, the ethical implication of this reflection “on the true extent of the freedom of choice” in the past is undeniable. After all, as stated previously, the anterior ethics, the one

Ricoeur speaks about, points to the embeddedness of norms in desire; thus, implying the ability of the individual to assert himself as a subject. As the philosopher put it: “Morality does not require anything other than a subject capable of attesting himself in attesting the norm that attests him as a subject”. (RICOEUR, 2003, p. 592).

The biographies produced by historians in recent decades also point to other ethical reflections, closely related to the anterior one: the one concerning individual responsibility. After all, if the individual is not merely a product of his environment, a puppet of impersonal forces that go beyond him, or an incarnation of collective values (as in traditional biographies), but also a concrete subject, endowed with degrees of freedom, he can also be responsible, at least in part, for his acts. That is what Ricoeur (2003, p. 591) means when he talks about the intimate relationship between imputability and the ability to attest oneself as an agent.

With this said, the discussions on the issues raised by Isaiah Berlin (2002, p. 163) in his beautiful essay written in 1953 on historical inevitability are valuable. In that book, the Latvian thinker criticized “two powerful doctrines” which, in his opinion, are fully disseminated in contemporary thought: Relativism and Determinism. The proponents of Determinism assign “[...] the ultimate responsibility for what happens to acts or behaviors of impersonal, 'transpersonal' or 'supra-personal entities or 'forces', whose evolution is identified with human history”. From that point of view,

The explanation is, in a sense, that the weight of responsibility of all human action is transferred (sometimes with a barely concealed relief) to the broad backs of vast impersonal forces – institutions, or historical trends – better made to bear such burdens than a feeble, thinking, reed-like man. (BERLIN, 2002, p. 189-190).

The proponents of Relativism oppose to the belief in moral principles “the resignation or the irony of those who saw many worlds crumble, many ideals become eccentric or ridiculous over time”. (BERLIN, 2002, p. 216). In both doctrines, Berlin emphasizes there is “a desire to give up our responsibility”. Nonetheless, he says:

Those who care about human affairs are committed to the use of moral categories and concepts embodied and expressed by normal language. Chemists, linguists, logicians, even sociologists with strong quantitative trends, when using morally neutral technical terms, can avoid these concepts. However, historians cannot do such a thing. They do not need – certainly are not required – to moralize nor can avoid the use of normal language with its associations and “embedded” moral categories. Trying to avoid such use means adopting another moral perspective rather than shirking from either one. (BERLIN, 2002, p. 224).

In the conclusion of the text, the author points out that both Determinism and Relativism do not face – and here he agrees with Levi – “the human responsibility, the existence of a limited area, however real, of human freedom”. (BERLIN, 2002, p. 225).

Here, I tried to demonstrate that the biography through History turned out to be a narrative with profound ethical motivations, involving core reflections on norms, values, freedom, and responsibility. Therefore, I believe that historians who currently dedicated themselves to this genre have no choice but to take into account this dimension of the biographical practice. As in writing, “graphing” a life is an “act with moral significance” that leaves often deep impressions on the biographer, the biographee, and on those who, when reading the lives of others, also want to build their own biographies.

### ***3. Specific ethics of historians and biographers in the contemporary world***

In this third part of the article, I reflect on the ethics of the contemporary historian and biographer, regarded here as one of the applied ethics Ricoeur talks about. In other words, as one of the specific ethics that gives visibility and legitimacy at the level of *praxis* to fundamental ethics, for which transition is guided by morals of a specific society and period of time. Hence, the considerations made here do not aspire to universal validity, since they solely concern the problems and tensions that are specific to our times.

Ethics are always incarnated in human relationships and they concern ways of living in society. In the case of historical biographies, which seek to say something about the real life of certain concrete characters (and here I will not get into the controversy raised by the terms “real” and “concrete”), I believe it is appropriate to begin with the ethics that should guide the relationships between biographers and biographees (or their representatives).

This subject, every now and again, is highlighted in the media. For example, in 1995, soccer idol Garrincha's ten daughters entered in court with a request to search and seizure the biography of their father who died in 1983, written by journalist Ruy Castro, claiming they were not consulted nor authorized its publication. They claimed copyrights over the work, because they considered themselves, as heirs, owners of the athlete's image rights. The book was withdrawn from circulation for a year and only returned to bookstores at the end of 1996. The legal battle dragged on for a decade and ended when the daughters of the former forward player entered into an agreement with the book's publisher (Companhia das Letras). This case exemplifies Malcolm's ironic assertion (1995, p 18.): Relatives are the

biographer's natural enemies; they are like the hostile tribes an explorer encounters and must ruthlessly subdue to claim his territory”.

If the biographee is still living, the situation is further complicated. In 2007, the singer Roberto Carlos and his lawyers, who had already canceled the release of a biography written by his former butler in 1979, were able to come to an agreement with Editora Planeta, which certainly feared the consequences of a prolonged lawsuit, to recall the biographical book “Roberto Carlos em detalhes” (“Roberto Carlos in detail”), written by the journalist Paulo César de Araújo.

In both cases, Garrincha and Roberto Carlos are public figures whose personal and professional glories and tragedies are widely known. Furthermore, in those books, the authors praise their biographees and seek to reinforce the “true” character of their narratives during the extensive research they conducted: Castro claims to have interviewed 500 people and Araújo about 200. Nevertheless, the episodes reveal the “knife edge” on which the biographers balance on. The right of publicity or the right of freedom of expression, both under the Constitution of Brazil - which one should prevail? As a rule, in the United States public figures can be freely biographed as long as the texts about their lives do not contain lies or personal insults. In Brazil, the decision to recall or release biographies, like so many other judicial decisions, depends on very personal interpretations of the law made by judges.

On the other hand, authorized biographies are subject to another type of criticism that affects their credibility. For example, “Veja” magazine published a review of the book *O Brasil do Possível*, written by the French journalist Brigitte Hersant Leoni in 1997 on the former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The review, significantly entitled “Com um ar oficial” (“An Official Perspective”), read: “*O Brasil do Possível* seems to be an official biography, with the advantages and disadvantages of the genre: on one hand, the writer could approach often aloof sources and, on the other hand, she accepted, naively and uncritically, what they told her”. (PETRY, 1997, p. 34).

When commenting on the biography of Sylvia Plath, written by Anne Steevenson, which counted on the strong contribution of the poet's husband, Ted Hughes, Malcolm (1995, p. 19) writes: “Anne Steevenson apparently had not subdued the natives, but had been captured by them and subjected to God knows what tortures. The book she had finally staggered back to civilization with was repudiated as a piece of worthless native propaganda, rather than the 'truthful' and 'objective' work it should have been”.

An extreme manifestation of “biographical officialism” was reported in 2008: the Spanish company *Memorália* used to offer the service of biographies on demand for those who aspired to have their lives put in words, including personal secrets and illustrations. One of the company's partners said: “It is a type of home-based journalism, but with the consent of the character”.<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly aggressive discussions on the subject came to light last year. On one side, we could hear the voices of real or potential biographees, or their representatives, many of them taking part of the “Procure saber” movement and advocating the right to privacy (under the Federal Constitution of Brazil), fighting for the right to have their lives shielded from the curiosity of others and to receive part of the profits made from sales on publications of their personal lives and careers. On the other side, biographers, or their representatives, were claiming another constitutional right - the right to freedom of expression and were claiming that the current rules referred to in Article 20 of the Brazilian Civil Code, which requires the prior consent of the biographee or his/her relatives when writing/publishing biographical narratives, was unconstitutional and resembled the censorship practiced in the years of civil-military dictatorship. Such discussion was motivated by a Direct Lawsuit of Unconstitutionality presented by the National Association of Book Publishers (ANEL) before the Supreme Federal Court in Brazil, relating to this article.

Other than the discussion of constitutional rights, major economic interests were obviously involved in the controversy on behalf of biographees and their heirs and biographers, editors, and media. Some discussions also focused on the role of the Judicial Branch regarding the subject. For those who advocate for the freedom of publication, possible ethical violations should be resolved *a posteriori*, if the biographee or his representatives feel offended with the published work (as in almost every country belonging to the Western world). For those who advocate for prior approval, it would be unlikely to succeed in Brazil, where, as we know, Justice is slow and costly.

In these clashes, those who defended the unconstitutionality of Article 20 of the Brazilian Civil Code are mostly journalists that, in Brazil and in several other countries, are the main producers of biographies, which generally turn to celebrities from various areas (arts, politics, sports, etc.), aiming to reveal - based on thorough researches – not only secrets, great or minor sins, but also, in some cases, heroic gestures that could reveal that the person was “ahead of his/her time”. Anyway, many of the rules that also prevail in a newsroom are valid in this area: the imperative of communicability, the desire to “catch” the reader’s attention, to reveal something yet unknown or even to expose a “scoop”. Many of these books are based on laborious investigation processes, which crowning moment is reached when receiving the “the true story of so-and-so” or “the definitive biography of so-and-so” labels. From this point of view, the so-called “authorized” biography is obviously *a priori* discredited since authorization would create insurmountable restrictions in order for the “truth” to be revealed (see Leoni's book on Fernando Henrique Cardoso).

I am personally against any form of prior censorship and in favor of the freedom of research and publication of biographical texts, but I also agree with the idea that the biographer's work must be guided by ethical principles that aim to protect the biographee against material and symbolic losses.

Unlike journalists, historians do not carry out their researches only to unveil secrets, but also to historically explain their biographees' personal and professional trajectories, to analyze them based on their projects and fields of possibility. They are also aware that historical explanations, although settled on rigorous research of evidence of the past, are provisional and contextual; and, therefore, one cannot speak of “true story” or “definitive biography”. Anyway, their starting point, their methods, and their commitments are quite different from those of journalist biographers. This does not mean that their jobs are more or less important, it only means they are different since they are produced in different social places.

I would also emphasize that, more and more, the present is also the time of historians (and not only of social scientists and journalists), which affects the production of biographies, that is, many History professionals are focusing on the trajectories of current characters, many of them still alive, which firmly brings us to the existing debate between proponents and opponents of prior authorization of biographies.

Therefore, I repeat, for us, historians, it is essential to work with total freedom in our research studies and in preparing our narratives. For that reason, in principle, we cannot tolerate prior research and interpretation constraints. After all, many biographical works produced in our area have been shown to be valuable to better understand certain historical facets and problems that would hardly be known if based on other approaches.

However, we also know that our work can be used for various purposes, including to adversely affect certain people. Therefore, I reiterate that, besides defending the purpose of prior restrictions, our work must be based on ethical principles, such as respect for biographees. In this case, it is worth repeating that biographies must be written by professional historians who do not try to reveal hidden secrets, but who historically understand the trajectories of certain characters, in order to comprehend, for example, the functioning of certain social mechanisms and regulatory systems; the plurality that exists in groups and institutions normally seen as homogeneous; the discursive and non-discursive construction of individuals; the degrees of freedom available to people in different historical periods; among other issues.

In other words, for the historian, in general, and for the biographer and historian, in particular, there are no significant facts that need to be revealed, “no matter whom they may hurt”, but there are



events that become historical if they help us solve our research problems. Thus, from the point of view of academic and historical research, for example, the sexual habits of a given character are not material to be included in a biography, unless we are questioning the moral standards of the groups he was taking part in.

Which are the ethical principles that could help us in evaluating these cases? For journalists, these ethical principles would be the establishment of the “truth” and the right to inform, considering that authorized biographies have an almost inevitable inclination to lie and/or omit. Nevertheless, does the revelation, against the biographee's will – although “true”, bring any benefit to the community or only to the biographer who thus obtains material and symbolic gains? If so, are possible benefits justified at the expense of material and symbolic evils inflicted upon the biographee or his memory when such private information is made public? Nowadays, the voyeur desire to reveal other's and one's own intimacy (as in the case of *Memorália's* characters) is certainly related to what Richard Sennett (1988, p 19.) called “the fall of public man” some years ago. For the author:

The public problem of contemporary society is two-fold: behavior and issues that are impersonal do not arouse much passion; the behavior and the issues begin to arouse passion when people treat them, falsely, as though they were matters of personality.

Given this “personalization” of the public world, which applied ethics could delimit the relationships between biographers and biographees? How is it possible to make a balance within the virtues and duties of public life and the virtues and duties of private life, which, in modern Western societies, have such different and often contradictory contents?

Maybe these complicated dilemmas can be solved more easily if we do not think of abstract biographers, but of biographers and historians. By this, I mean professional historians committed to the rules of the *métier*, which, unfortunately is not regulated in legal terms yet (and this could lead to the formulation of a code of ethics and a board of professional ethics), is guided by certain requirements, by explicit or implicit agreements about what is permitted and what is prohibited, what is adequate and what is inadequate, what is valued and what is stigmatized. We must keep in mind that these conventions are historically constituted as a result of diverse disputes and relations of power and, therefore, they are constantly changing.

In the context of historical knowledge, the area that has produced more reflections on ethics is oral history, due to its intrinsic characteristics. After all, its practitioners make researches on “living” human beings and then their projects are submitted to the ethics committees of universities and research funding agencies. However, besides this institutional aspect, such researchers, who sometimes also

produce biographies, can bring valuable contributions to biographers and historians in general. For example, they advocate the need to establish a pact with the biographee before conducting the research (or with his descendants, in the event of the biographee's death during the research). The pact must be guided by mutual respect, which undoubtedly involves agreements on the purposes and limits of the research.

Alessandro Portelli (1997, p. 13-4), one of the great exponents of oral history nowadays, when discussing about ethics, says: “In this case, ethical guidelines may represent not only a protection of the interviewee from the manipulation of the interviewer, but also a protection of the interviewer against the claims of the interviewee [...]”. Nevertheless, underlying this concern, there is a very subjective ethical principle: respect. The author says: “[...] I have a commitment with myself not to use the material from the interview in ways that may hurt or displease the person that gave it to me”. (PORTELLI, 1997, p. 13-4). We could certainly replace in this sentence the words “the material from the interview” by “the material researched to construct a biography”.

For many journalists - and for a part of the general public - this understanding inevitably leads to “officialism”, to lying or omitting on behalf of the biographee's protection. However, as I said, in the biographies produced by professional historians, understanding the historical meaning of the life being studied is more important than revealing unknown details or everything that was discovered about that specific character. In History, research problems with historical relevance, which can be solved by the methods of this discipline, guide the steps of the research and establish what must or must not be narrated - there is no difference in the case of the historical biography. Biographers and historians know they cannot “exhaust” the character, because in this field there is no “definitive” biography. They are interested in following a singular trajectory and, with it or through it, suggesting answers to questions that also interests their colleagues.

I wish to clarify that, for historians, in general, and for the biographer and historian, in particular, there are no significant facts that need to be revealed at all costs. Furthermore, what interests them is not really unusual. Their way of facing the truth is also – or should be – more sophisticated and tensioned than the one belonging to the common sense, limited to the immediately graspable factuality. These professionals know that, on one hand, all regimes of truth are historical, but, on the other hand, are committed to their archives and the methodologies and scientific criteria characteristic of their work (which are also historical).

Articulating these considerations with the reflection on ethics developed here, I quote again a passage from Portelli (1997, p. 15):

In this context, by commitment to honesty I mean personal respect for the people we work with and intellectual respect for the material we receive. By commitment to truth, I mean a utopian striving and urge to know “how things really are” balanced by openness to the many variants of “how things may be”. On one hand, the recognition of multiple narratives protects us from the totalitarian self-righteous belief that “science” makes us depositories of unique and unquestionable truths. On the other hand, the utopian striving for truth protects us from the irresponsible tenet that all stories are equivalent and interchangeable (and therefore ultimately irrelevant). That possible truths are infinite does not mean that they are all true in the same sense, and that there are no such things as falsehood, manipulation, and error.

Respect for the biographed character – in an effort to understand the character’s historicity and not portray him/her as a celebrity to be stripped bare – and respect for the historically constructed rules that characterize the historians work: it seems to me that these are the most important premises of these particular ethics, the ethics of the History professional who is dedicated to explore life's ups and downs. Nevertheless, returning to Ricoeur, specific ethics are always practical applications of fundamental ethics. Therefore, which ethics – “the upstream side of norms” – could guide our work?

At our present time – characterized simultaneously by the denial of equality and the disrespect for difference – the most fundamental ethical intention to inform the particular ethics maybe be the one that can articulate a triad in which the self, the near other, and the distant other are equally honored. Ricoeur (2003, p. 595) summarizes this in the following the formula: “to live well, with and for the others, in fair institutions”. As citizens and historians, we must transform this formula into a code of conduct and practical wisdom.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A first version of this article was delivered as a lecture at the XXV National Symposium on History - History and Ethics, held in Fortaleza in July 2009. Considerations on current controversy about biography were originally prepared at the request of the National Association of History - ANPUH-Brazil in 2013 and published on its website. Available on: [http://www.anpuh.org/informativo/view?ID\\_INFORMATIVO=4370](http://www.anpuh.org/informativo/view?ID_INFORMATIVO=4370). Accessed on: Feb. 26, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Available on: <http://estadao.com.br/noticias/artelazer,empresa-oferece-biografias-por-encomenda-na-espanha,279556,0.HTM>. Accessed on: Jul. 06, 2009.

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