Recombinant Identities: Biometrics and Narrative Bioethics

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Abstract In recent years, there has been a growing interest in finding stronger means of securitising identity against the various risks presented by the mobile globalised world. Biometric technology has featured quite prominently on the policy and security agenda of many countries. It is being promoted as the solution du jour for protecting and managing the uniqueness of identity in order to combat identity theft and fraud, crime and terrorism, illegal work and employment, and to efficiently govern various domains and services including asylum, immigration and social welfare. In this paper, I shall interrogate the ways in which biometrics is about the uniqueness of identity and what kind of identity biometrics is concerned with. I argue that in posing such questions at the outset, we can start delimiting the distinctive bioethical stakes of biometrics beyond the all-too-familiar concerns of privacy, data protection and the like. I take cue mostly from Cavarero's Arendt-inspired distinction between the "what" and the "who" elements of a person, and from Ricoeur's distinction between the "idem" and "ipse" versions of identity. By engaging with these philosophical distinctions and concepts, and with particular reference to the example of asylum policy, I seek to examine and emphasise an important ethical issue pertaining to the practice of biometric identification. This issue relates mainly to the paradigmatic shift from the biographical story (which for so long has been the means by which an asylum application is assessed) to bio-digital samples (that are now the basis for managing and controlling the identities of asylum applicants). The purging of identity from its narrative dimension lies at the core of biometric technology's overzealous aspiration to accuracy, precision and objectivity, and raises one of the most pressing bioethical questions vis-à-vis the realm of identification.

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Who are you? *Tu quis es*. That is an abyssal question.

Schmitt 1950

Identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by "another identity" (a foreign identity) or by an "erasing of identities" (a depersonalisation).

Balibar 1995, 186

Introduction

Historically, and whether at the micro (individual) or macro (societal) level, the notion of identity has often

been bound up with that of conflict or crisis. Contemporary articulations and practices of identity are no exception. They are increasingly being marked by what Anthony Giddens (1991) refers to as "ontological insecurity"; that is, a deep sense of anxiety and uncertainty about the question of 'who someone is' in relation to oneself and to others, be they other individuals or institutions. Rightly or wrongly, out of convenience or out of paranoia, identity is now routinely being problematised in terms of *risk*, or more specifically, as being *at* risk; the risk of fraud, the risk of crime, the risk of terrorism, the risk of illegal immigration, the risk of illegal working, and so on. And within the current policy debates and discussions, with regard to the myriad of security challenges and the difficulties of managing and administering social services, the age-old question of "who is who?" continues to occupy centre stage, not only because of its highly political relevance, especially to issues relating to the much-contested domain of membership and the attribution of rights and obligations, but also because of its inherent and irreducible ambiguity, which poses a challenge to the ongoing and enduring attempts to find a definitive and fixed answer to it. As a response to such challenges, various techniques and technologies have been mobilised with the aim to protect and manage the uniqueness of identity. Among the most notable of these techniques is the securitisation of identity through biometric technology.

Biometrics, which is literally the *measurement of life*, refers to the technology of measuring, analysing and processing the digital representations of unique biological data and behavioural traits such as fingerprints, eye retinas, irises, voice and facial patterns, body odours, hand geometry, etc. It can be used in two ways: *identification/recognition* in order to determine who the person is, through one-to-many comparison, and *verification/authentication* in order to determine whether the person is who he claims to be, through one-to-one comparison (Mordini and Petrini 2007, 5). The emergence of biometrics as a "popular candidate" (Lyon 2003, 667) for identification and authentication systems is mainly due to its ability to automate the process of linking bodies to identities, to distribute biological and behavioural data across computer networks and databases, to be adapted to different uses and purposes, and to (allegedly) provide more accurate, reliable, and tamper-proof means of

verifying identity. Like other (traditional) identification systems, the procedure of biometric identification consists of four stages: *enrolment* (digital representations of unique biological features are captured through a sensor device, and then processed through an algorithmic operation to produce a template), *storage* (the produced template is stored on a database or/and on a chipcard), *acquisition* (as with the enrolment stage, a biometric image is captured and transformed through similar algorithmic procedures into a *live template*), and *matching* (the live template is compared to the stored template to establish whether the person is known to the system, in the case of database, or whether the live biometric capture corresponds to the one on the card, in the case of chipcard) (European Commission 2005a, 35). It is worth mentioning here that the principle of biometrics is not new, but has its roots in various earlier technologies which also sought to bind the body to identity for the purpose of identification. Examples of such technologies can be found in the developments that took place during the nineteenth century. Anthropometry and fingerprinting, for instance, are some of the main techniques that were adopted then. The initial rationale behind these technologies was to create a criminal history by which the state could distinguish between first-time offenders and "recidivists", and respond to the challenges posed by the increasing migration of individuals and the rapid urbanisation of cities (Cole 2003, 2–3). Both of these technologies relied on the body as a means of personal identification (through various mechanisms, such as "measurement", photographing, documentation, and classification) and on storage systems for archiving and retrieving information about identity.

In recent years, and particularly following the events of September 11 and other attacks, biometric technology has witnessed a massive growth and a rapid proliferation within many areas of society. Its application, which was traditionally reserved for particular practices such as criminal investigations, is now covering a broad array of spaces and functions, ranging from border control and asylum regulation to the management of social services and medical records. Unsurprisingly, this expansion in scale and deployment has triggered a host of concerns over the potential ethical implications of biometric technology. The majority of these concerns, however, remain largely framed within the normative discourses of privacy, liberty and data protection, leaving aside

other issues which are by no means less pertinent to the political and ethical analysis of the use of biometrics as a means of identification and identity verification.

In this paper, I shall address one specific aspect of the "bioethics of biometrics", an aspect that—despite its fundamental relevance, and with a few exceptions (van der Ploeg 1999a; Aas 2006; Ceyhan, 2008; Lyon 2008)—has not yet managed to secure the space it deserves within the academic literature on biometrics and its implications. This aspect relates mainly to the relatively basic and commonplace, but also highly problematic and notoriously intricate, question "who are you?" which, in my view, constitutes an interesting backdrop against which one may start delineating the distinctive bioethical characteristics of biometrics beyond the familiar trope of privacy and the like. For it encapsulates the ontological and epistemological challenges of uniqueness and identity that biometric technology aspires to respond to and manage. Inevitably, addressing such a question in relation to biometrics requires us to inquire, first and foremost, into the ways in which biometrics is *about* the uniqueness of identity and into the *kind* of identity biometrics is concerned with. One way into this inquiry is to be found in the question of *identity itself*.

The Identity in Question

> Everyone's unique. Let us keep it that way.
> UK Home Office 2008

In a sense, and at least at the systematic and structural level, recent attempts to securitise identity through biometric technology seem to have, as one of their main tasks, the *simplification* of the meaning and function of identity. They are underpinned by scientific discourses and practices that tend to convert the subjective, and in many ways, profound dimensions of identity into hyper-empirical and objective programmatic Boolean operations of true/false, positive/negative. Their overarching aim is to purify, so to speak, the articulations of identity from ambivalence and instability while rendering them immune to the problems associated with "human fallibility" (Gates 2005, 38), which technically and for so long, had made the process of identification by and through human agents/subjects a rather inefficient and unreliable enterprise. Doubtless, however, and despite such

attempts, identity continues to be a highly contextual, elusive, malleable, ubiquitous, and indeed, complex concept. Therefore, it does not lend itself easily to definition nor does it remain unchangeable. As such, any discussion about identity and its securitisation needs to be at grips with some of the variations in the meaning of identity itself.

"Controversies about personal identity are as old as Western philosophy, not to cite Buddhism and Hinduism" (Mordini and Ottolini 2007, 51), and defining who someone is has always been a major preoccupation of metaphysics. Nevertheless, the majority of philosophical discourses remain, as Arendt and others argue, "unable to determine in words the individual *uniqueness* of a human being" (Kottman 2000, vii) inasmuch as this uniqueness "retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression" (Arendt in ibid.). In other words, who someone *is* escapes the confines of language and the boundaries of definitions, challenging any attempt to complete linguistic appropriation. For this reason, "the moment we want to say *who* someone is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is" (ibid.); for example, his qualities and attributes which qualify him as an individual, a citizen, a member—"as if the task were simply to fill in the content of […] personhood" (Butler 2005, 31). Or, as (Caplan and Torpey, 2001, 3) suggest, in the context of identity documentation, "the question '*who* is this person?' leaches constantly into the question '*what* kind of a person is this?'" (my italics) This collapse of the "who" into the "what" within the philosophical discourses of personhood and identity, as well as within the practices of identification, indicates their inherent limitations in capturing the ambiguity of identity and the complexity of the lived experience. It is also indicative of "the extent to which traditional philosophy and politics respond to universals, rather than to unique persons and their interaction" (Kottman 2000, ix).

As a response to these limitations, various efforts have been devoted to developing more nuanced and inclusive accounts that take into consideration the ambivalent and double-sided character of identity without conflating the what and the who aspects. In *Relating Narratives* (2000), Adriana Cavarero, for instance, provides an interesting take on the question of identity by foregrounding the importance of the notion of "narration," which, according to her,

enables the disclosure and preservation of the unique-ness of each life. Inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt (1958), Cavarero locates the what element of identity within the realm of philosophy, and the who aspect within the realm of biography. She perceives the relation between the two as that of:

> [a] confrontation between two discursive registers that manifest opposite characteristics. One, that of philosophy, has the form of a definitory knowledge that regards the universality of Man. The other, that of narration, has the form of a biographical knowledge that regards the unrepeat-able identity of someone (Cavarero 2000, 13).

As such, Cavarero differentiates between the biographical or "narratable self", which is marked by and formed through the experience of storytelling, and the traditional "subject" as known throughout the metaphysics of subjectivity, with its accompanying concepts of individuality, agency, control, and so on. Whereas the latter is continuously caught up within the philosophical persistence of "capturing the uni-versal in the trap of definition", the former emerges out of the revelation of "the finite and its fragile uniqueness" through the delicate art of narration (ibid., 3). And, through narration, the self is consti-tutively and continuously *exposed* to others. This exposure, according to Cavarero, is precisely what reveals the singularity and "whoness" of a person, and makes the social and political life possible. The uniqueness of personal identity, in this sense, is not that which can be derived from a *universal* substance (being *a* human for example) or reduced to the *particular* "whatness" of the person (having this or that attribute or belonging to this or that category) (see also Agamben 1993). It is rather of a totally *expositive*, *exhibitive* and *relational* character so much so that "*who* each one is, is revealed to others when he or she acts in their presence in an interactive theatre where each is, at the same time, *actor and spectator*" (ibid., 20–22) (see also Nancy 2000, especially his discussion on the notion of "co-appearance"). Hence, even the act of telling one's *own* story is very much dependent on the existence of *necessary others*. In advancing such an argument, Cavarero is not only challenging the supposed sealed interiority of the subject which characterises the individualist doctrine, but also the autonomy of traditional *auto*biography whereby the self turns itself

into an "other" in order to tell his own story. This other, for Cavarero, is merely "the fantasmatic product of a doubling, the supplement of an absence, the parody of a relation" (ibid., 84). In contrast, Cavarero's other is "really *an* other" whose existence and presence are necessary for recognising and designating the uniqueness of the self:

> …in the uniqueness of the *who* there is no homage to the self-centered and titanic subject of romanticism. The *who* does not project or pity herself, and neither does she envelop herself within her interiority. The *who* is simply exposed; or, better, finds herself always already exposed to another, and consists in this reciprocal exposition (ibid., 89).

Another useful place, where different concepts of identity are delineated, can be found in the work of Marya Schechtman (1990). Schechtman draws a distinction between the *question of reidentification*, as known in psychological-continuity theories and which involves the elucidation of "the necessary and sufficient conditions for saying that a person at time t_1 is the same person as a person at time t_2", and the *question of self-knowledge*, which refers to the set of beliefs and experiences that are expressive of *who* the person is (Schechtman 1990, 71). So, while the first question is concerned with the notion of "sameness" over time and space, the second question looks at the "uniqueness" of the person. This distinction is demonstrated by Schechtman in the following way:

> The question "Who am I?" might be asked by an amnesia victim or by a confused adolescent, and requires a different answer in each of these contexts. In the former case, the questioner is asking which history her life is a continuation of [(reidentification)], and, in the latter, the ques-tioner presumably knows her history but is asking which of the beliefs, values, and desires that she seems to have are truly her own, expressive of who she is [(self-knowledge)] (ibid., 71).

Like Cavarero, but through a different vocabulary, Schechtman argues that contemporary (analytical) philosophical accounts on identity have been predom-inantly focused on the question of reidentification, disregarding the component of self-knowledge, which, she believes, is an integral part of one's coherent

self-conception and sense of personal identity. She also suggests that the dead-end encountered by psychological-continuity theorists *vis-à-vis* identity is largely due to the conflation of these two questions (ibid., 72) (just as the conflation of the *what* and the *who* aspects of identity is what marks the irremediable limitations of philosophical discourses of identity). In this sense, Schechtman emphasises the importance of attending to the question of self-knowledge when addressing the issue of identity. However, and unlike Cavarero's narratable self, which attempts to break away from the metaphysics of subjectivity, Schechtman's articulation of identity as self-knowledge seems to be confined within this very metaphysics. As such, Schechtman's approach, as opposed to Cavarero's, pays little attention to the importance of the notions of exposure and otherness in contributing to the *process* of self-knowledge.

At this point, one might even raise the objection that the clear-cut differentiation between reidentification and self-knowledge is not as pure and absolute as it may seem; and that trying to maintain a sharp demarcation line between these concepts runs the risk of resuscitating some undesirable forms of dualism. For, in a concrete sense, such concepts constantly leak into each other, not least because of the ways in which the experiences of *embodiment* and the practical *performance* of identity in everyday life remain a matter of continuous *contamination*, given their socio-cultural and political embeddedness. Van der Ploeg (1999a, 40) raises a similar argument while framing Schechtman's two concepts of identity in terms of the difference between a third person perspective (entailed in the concept of reidentification) and a first person perspective (involved in the question of self-knowledge). She asserts that the absolutisation of this difference is underlined by the unwarranted assumption that "there is something like an authentic, true self to which the subject has an exclusive, epistemologically privileged access. This ignores the social and cultural dimension in identity formation of even the most 'private' self." (ibid., 40) And it is precisely this assumption that Cavarero's approach attempts to overcome through the constitutive inclusion of the other in the process of narration—or put otherwise, through the intertwining and fusion of different person perspectives. Atkins explains a similar interrelation in the following way: who a person is is the named subject of a practical and conceptual complex of

first-, second-and third-person perspectives which structure and unify a life grasped as it is lived' (Atkins 2004, 347). Correlatively, even Cavarero's distinction between the who and the what aspects of a person is not to be regarded as a sharply dichotomous one: who someone "is" is surely affected, to some degree, by what she is—even when this what element remains indifferent to the bewildering whoness and uniqueness of the person. In other words, while the *story* and the *attributes*, the who and the what, are by no means the *same*, they do, however, interact *beyond* a binary or mutually exclusive relation. For example, being assigned the identity of a refugee belongs to the sphere of the what, i.e. an institutional identity *attribution* which (dis)qualifies the person as belonging to a certain category. What follows from this attribution will have a bearing on the life experience of the person, on her story, and hence on her whoness, while *narrating* one's life as that of a refugee will also inevitably affect the kind of attributions and status the person receives (especially in terms of rights, access, obligations, etc.)—and one may also argue that the "story of the refugee" would not come into being in the first place were it not for the existence of that bounded category of the citizen (which constitutes one of the contents of the what). In such a context, the two formulations remain inextricably intertwined. They are both interwoven into the fabric of identity and happen within a seemingly recursive movement which contributes to the mutual transformation of the two and the forming of a continuum between what and who.

Nevertheless, and for the sake of analysis, maintaining a distinction (at least a relative and contingent one) between the question of reidentification and the question of self-knowledge, between the question of who and the question of what in relation to the notion of identity, may help us turn the puzzling problematic of who someone is into an (ethical) opportunity for understanding what sort of identity biometrics is concerned with mostly, or as van der Ploeg (1999a, 39) puts it, "in what sense 'identity' is at stake in biometric identification techniques."

Reconfiguring Identity Through Biometric Technology

Traditionally, and as far as the process of identification is concerned, there are three major sets of
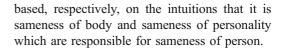
characteristics that are used to identify and describe a person:

- *What* she is (face, voice, etc.)
- *What* she knows and uses to identify herself (name, address, social security number, etc.)
- *What* she has that provides for recognition of her identity (passport, token, etc.) (Carblanc 2009, 12, my emphasis).

There is a clear sense in which the *remediation*[1] of these three vectors of identity through the introduction of biometric technology retains a fundamental interest in the *what* element of a person, be it in terms of the use of physical attributes (what one *is*) or the convergence of indexical data (what one *knows*) and biocentric data[2] into biometric documents of identification (what one *has*). So in this respect, one might be tempted to argue that the relationship between biometrics and identity takes, or rather *maintains*, a narrow dimension *vis-à-vis* the question of "who someone is", to the extent that it is based upon the reduction of the person to her *whatness*. Similarly, it can also be argued that biometrics is primarily concerned with the question of reidentification in which notions such as continuity, coherence and sameness are of utmost importance. Schechtman (1990, 71) explains that:

The primary contenders for a criterion of personal identity have been the bodily criterion and the psychological criterion, which are

based, respectively, on the intuitions that it is sameness of body and sameness of personality which are responsible for sameness of person.

"Sameness of body", as it were, conceives the body itself as a *constant*, able to guarantee a certain degree of continuity, stability and permanency across time and space. This type of sameness is precisely what biometric technology is interested in—at least in the technical sense. "Sameness of personality", on the other hand, involves, to a large extent, the precarious and difficult *achievement* of a coherent personality that is itself very much reliant on the continuity and coherence of *subjective* experience. And, as Mordini and Ottolini (2007, 51) point out, "[t]he problem arises when we try to understand whether the subjective experience of this coherent personality corresponds to any real object or is just a useful figment." In this regard, biometrics appears as a means of circumventing this "problem" by finding recourse in the body itself and turning it into a stabiliser of identity, and by shifting the question of identity from the domain of narrative (the story of who someone is) to that of templates (digital samples of one's biological data).

Parenthetically, however, it is not that the body is absent from the second notion of sameness, i.e. sameness of personality and its relation to subjective experience. Quite the contrary. The body, as we learnt through the different strands of phenomenology and the extensive feminist literature (and indeed through our own personal experiences), is an integral part of one's experience and awareness of being-in-the-world. But there remains a crucial difference in terms of the ways in which the body itself is perceived in both sameness of body and sameness of personality. At risk of oversimplifying, we can postulate that in the first model of sameness, the body has the status of an *object* amenable to abstraction, measurement, digitisation, storage, distribution, etc. The relationship between identity and the body in this instance is of an *external* order. That is to say, the person is regarded as *having* a body that remains more or less the same throughout life and *upon* which many activities can be exercised (biometric identification for instance). Whereas in the second model of sameness, the body is regarded as a subject *through* which the world is lived and experience is made possible. Atkins (2000, 337) argues, in phenomenological terms, that "there

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[1] I borrow this term from Bolter and Grusin (1999) for whom "a medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real" (ibid., 65). They also place the *body* within this dual process of remediation, suggesting that the body can function as a medium while being the subject of mediation. Although the authors do not address the technology of biometrics as such, I regard their overall formulation as a case in point *vis-à-vis* biometrics. For as mentioned earlier, biometric technology does refashion and thereby *remediate* its predecessors, i.e. prior technologies of identification (anthropometry and fingerprinting for instance), while, at the same time, rendering the body as both the *medium* (the means by which measurement is performed) and the "mediated" (the object of measurement), i.e. the *remediated*.

[2] In his discussion about the implications of biometric technology, Alterman distinguishes between two sets of data; *biocentric* data (i.e., biometric data) and *indexical* data (i.e., social security number, driver's license number, etc.). While the former is centred on the "body", the latter, on the other hand, has no "internal relation to an embodied person; it possesses no property that is tied to our psychological or physical conception of self" (Alterman 2003, 144).

can be a lived *world* only because *my body* is itself part of the world which it experiences."

The latter model has much resonance with what Paul Ricoeur (1992) refers to as *ipseity*. Ricoeur situates the notion of identity within the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*; *sameness* and *selfhood*. Idem-identity involves something similar to that which is implied by the notion of sameness of body, particularly in its consideration of the body as a constant entity that can be compared to other entities outside time variants. It corresponds to "the notion of identification, understood in the sense of reidentification of the same, which makes cognition recognition: the same thing twice, *n* times" (Ricoeur 1992, 116; see also Ceyhan 2008, 116). In so doing, idem-identity assumes some principle of "uninterrupted continuity and permanence in time" (ibid., 117). It can take the form of *numerical* identity, which indicates oneness and unity as opposed to plurality and diversity (e.g., passport or ID card number), or *qualitative* identity, which stands for extreme resemblance and interchangeability (e.g., x and y wearing identical clothes) (ibid., 116, 122). For Ricoeur, this version of identity, which takes as its premise the sameness of body and the cardinal notion of reidentification, inevitably results in the increased concealment of selfhood. "And this will be the case as long as the characteristics related to possessive pronouns and adjectives ("my," "mine") have not been connected to the explicit problematic of the self" (Ricoeur 1992, 33). That is to say, as long as the relation of body to identity remains contained within and reduced to an external order of ownership, i.e. *having* a body.

Ipse-identity, on the other hand, is about selfhood and involves the biographic, embodied, temporal, and narrative dimension of who someone is. Rather than being an emblem of constancy or a datum of sameness, the body, in ipse-identity, is regarded as an *attestation* to selfhood itself; as "the most overwhelming testimony in favor of the irreducibility of selfhood to sameness" (ibid., 128). Much like Cavarero, Ricoeur acknowledges the vital importance of otherness and the constitutive role of relationality to the formation and (narrative) formulation of ipseity. He also lodges similar complaints against "cogito philosophies" and metaphysical discourses of identity in terms of their substitution of the question of who for the question of what and the ensuing eclipsing of the question of selfhood and its uniqueness. To this

end, Ricoeur regards the self-attesting dimension of ipseity as a means of protecting the question of who from such a misleading substitution. He writes: "[i]t is self-attestation that, at every level—linguistic, praxic, narrative, and prescriptive—will preserve the question "who?" from being replaced by the questions "what?" or "why?" Conversely, at the center of the aporia, only the persistence of the question "who?"—in a way laid bare for lack of response—will reveal itself to be the impregnable refuge of attestation" (ibid., 23). In this sense, then, attestation, in all its polysemic and polymorphous forms, including those of narrativity and embodiment, is very much reliant on whoness for its own actualisation and subsistence, just as the question of who remains dependent on attestation for its own revelation and survival. This binding kinship between the two is precisely where the ethical plane unfolds, according to Ricoeur.

From all the above considerations emerges a series of intricate questions, questions that cannot be side-stepped if we are to understand the relationship between biometrics and identity—especially if we assume the phenomenological inseparability of body and identity: where does the *biometric body* stand here? Does it merely belong to the realms of the what and the idem, or does it straddle both the who *and* the what; the idem *and* the ipse? Is it merely an object of abstraction, comparison, matching, and reidentification, or does it gesture towards a less reductionist and a more complex vision?

To be sure, the (re)turn to the body for the establishment of identity in biometric technology seems almost like an ironic twist *vis-à-vis* Cartesian dualism. For while the Cartesian imaginary is underlined by the (erroneous) belief that consciousness is detached from the body, that the body has little relevance to identity, and that it is an impediment to objectivity, biometric technology, on the other hand, lays claim to the idea that identity can "objectively" be determined through the body and in ways that are somewhat independent of consciousness.

En ce XXIe siècle, le corps prend sa revanche. C'est à lui que l'époque moderne confie la tâche de livrer l'identité de la personne, de dire qui est qui et qui, par conséquent, a le droit d'entrer.

[In this 21st century, the body takes its revenge. It is in the body that the contemporary epoch entrusts the task of delivering personal identity,

to say who is who and who, as a result, has the right to access.] (my translation)[3]

One may quibble here about whether this reversal of status is truly a revenge. In a slight sense, it is, insofar as "biometrics gives the body unprecedented relevance over the mind" (Aas 2006, 154). "I think therefore I am" becomes "I am I" (Lash in ibid., 155), or rather, "I am that"[4] (*that* name; *that* fingerprint; *that* hand pattern; *that* face scan; etc.), where "I" is heavily reliant on "that" and "that" is heavily reliant on the body and its algorithmic representations to assert the person's (official) identity. And, instead of being relegated to the status of the "container of the soul" as in Cartesian dualism, the body is now being treated as the forensic dust of identity, as the crystal ball through which the astrologists of identity seek to predict potential risk and future dangerousness. The body, as such, is increasingly regarded as "a source of instant 'truth'" (Aas 2006, 154) encapsulated in the expression "the body does not lie", a catchphrase that has so conveniently been marketed by biometrics industry. But this instant truth is merely a truth *about* the body *qua* body-data. It is a truth that excludes the *tale* of the body, that is to say, its narrative and biographical dimension, without which a person can hardly maintain a sense of whoness and (temporal) coherence.

In fact, the entire philosophy of biometric technology is based upon an epistemic suspicion towards the story. It is based upon the belief that "the mind is deceiving while the body is 'truthful'" (ibid.). For this reason, when the biometric body speaks, it speaks in a language that silences the biographical story of the person whose body is ordered to speak. It therefore occludes the echo of whoness while merely revealing the trace of whatness. As Aas (2006, 154) explains:

A talking individual, who owns the body, is in fact seen as unnecessary and, even more importantly, insufficient for identification. Now only the body can talk in the required ways, through the unambiguous and cryptic language of codes and algorithms. When a body provides

the password, a world of information opens. Databases begin to talk. On the other hand, when the individual talks, the words are only met with suspicion.

So in this respect, although biometrics seems to be reversing the internal order of Cartesian dualism by giving supremacy to the body over the mind, it is still sustaining, to some extent, a similar dualism between the two by doing just that. If Cartesian dualism, as we know it, has a tendency to disregard the fact that mind requires body, biometric dualism has a tendency to disregard the fact that body requires mind. According to Mordini and Ottolini (2007, 54), "[b]ody requires mind, not in the trivial sense that you need a neurological system to animate the body, but in the profound sense that the very structure of our body is communicational […] We do not just need words. We are words made flesh." In this regard, biometrics can be considered as yet another instance whereby the unity of mind and body is negated. And although biometric technology recognises the fact that bodies are indeed biographies, it hardly offers an outlet for *listening* to those biographies. For the knowledge it produces is not based on "mutual communication," but on "one-way observation. It is clearly knowledge marked by a power relation" (Aas 2006, 153).

Furthermore, this reversal of status does not necessarily amount to the body's escape from the status of the object. For although biometric technology places bodies centre stage, these bodies are "already defined merely in terms of their sameness to other data" (Lyon 2008, 507). As mentioned earlier, establishing sameness of body is a paramount preoccupation of biometric technology. And to fulfil this task, the body is turned into an informational object, a readable text (or rather *palimpsest*) for statistical (re)measurements and data storage. At the same time, however, it should be borne in mind that biometrics is *not* simply about *verifying* a pre-given or pre-registered identity by measuring the sameness of body (one-to-one match). If that were the case, biometrics would then be "an innocent technological practice that only in a rather trivial sense is concerned with personal identity" (van der Ploeg 1999a, 40). Rather, biometrics is also about *identifying* and *distinguishing* one person from another, not just in a technical sense (one-to-many match), but in a much broader way wherein technology itself becomes

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[3] And here, we should stress again that the use of the body in the domain of identity/identification is not unique to the twenty-first century nor to biometric technology.

[4] Thanks to Nikolas Rose for this formulation.

actively involved in creating and establishing identities. Homi Bhabha (1994, 64) reminds us that:

> the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilled prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image.

Balibar (1995, 187), in fact, goes to the extent to suggest that:

> In reality there are no identities, only identifications: either with the institution itself, or with other subjects by the intermediary of the institution. Or, if one prefers, identities are only the ideal goal of processes of identification, their point of honor, of certainty or uncertainty of their consciousness, thus their imaginary referent.

This, to be sure, is true of the case of biometric identification. At first glance, and partially at least, Balibar's proposition, that there is no identity; only identification, seems to reverberate closely with the biometric project. For the latter appears to be, more often than not, driven by the quest for identification/authentication rather than identity itself (see also Muller 2004). Not that the *ideal* of identity completely evaporates in the midst of biometric processes. Rather, identity and identification seem to be implicated in a relationship of interdependency wherein identification functions as a process of construction through which forms (or images, to use Bhabha's term) of identity come into being (the production of the refugee identity, for example)., while the (re)establishment of identity remains as that which provides the impetus and justification for the raison d'être of identification techniques. At this point, and by way of illustrating the above arguments, I would like to invoke a couple of examples, namely the European Eurodac project and the UK biometric Application Registration Cards (ARC).

Eurodac project is a European Union initiative aimed at facilitating the implementation of the 1990 Dublin Convention concerning the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for the examination of an asylum application (European Union 2006). The Convention was established in the context of developing a common and *harmonised* European asylum system. It is governed by the "authorisation principle" (Hurwitz 1999, 648), which lays down the

rule that the State of first entry would be the one and the *only* Member State who has total jurisdiction in and responsibility for the asylum application. The Eurodac project was proposed in 1997 and went live in 2003 as a response to the problem of determining applicants' prior stay in other Member States, with the view to provide a solution to the phenomenon of so-called "asylum shopping" (van der Ploeg 1999b, 298; Koslowski 2003, 9).

Underlying the Eurodac project is a supranational cybernetic network: an EU-wide database which is "the first common Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) within the European Union" (European Commission 2005b). It contains the digital fingerprints of every person over the age of 14 who is claiming asylum in one of the EU countries (ibid.). Prior to assigning any given asylum application to a caseworker, the applicant's fingerprints are taken and matched against other digitised fingerprints that are stored on the central database. The purpose of this biometric process is to establish whether an applicant has already tried claiming asylum at another border crossing. If a match is found, the applicant will then be subject to deportation to the country of the first application if not to the third country of origin.

In October 2001, and part of the overhaul in asylum and immigration policy, the UK Home Office announced the introduction of Applicant Registration Cards (ARCs) for individuals claiming asylum in the UK (Johnston 2001). The ARC, also known as "asylum smart ID card", is a biometric identity card containing the personal details of the asylum applicant (name, date of birth, photograph, etc.) and a memory chip with his/her fingerprints (prior to the introduction of ARCs, applicants for asylum were issued with a Standard Acknowledgement Letter [SAL], a paper-based document of identification. Given its format, it is claimed [Home Office 2002, 54] that the SAL has been easily susceptible to forgery and counterfeiting). The aim of introducing ARCs is to provide a more reliable and tamper-proof means of identification by fixing the identity of the asylum seeker to his/her body in order to prevent the occurrences of double-dipping (claiming benefits under multiple identities) and the *abuse* of the welfare system. The ARC must be presented in a number of situations and everyday transactions, including the reporting procedure, claiming support at the Post Office, accessing health care, etc. Those who refuse to

comply—by not carrying the ARC—are automatically disqualified from state support and might be subject to detention. The ARC is thus part of the overall strategies of tightening control over the provision of social services and benefits to asylum seekers, and ensuring that they do not "disappear from the system."

What the above two examples indicate, is precisely *how* biometric procedures contribute to the *establishment* of identity rather than merely the *verification* of a pre-given one, that is to say, how biometrics is "not merely descriptive, but *constitutive* of identity" (van der Ploeg 2009, 88). In the case of the Eurodac programme, biometric technology is used as a means of scanning bodies for signs and proofs of illegality, falsehood and "irregular existence" within the territory. It is used to determine the boundary between the *genuine* and the *bogus*, between the *legitimate* and the *illegitimate*, between the *credible* and the *fabricated*, and to distinguish the *polis* from "what does not 'properly' belong to it" (Zylinska 2004, 526). In fact, what lies at the heart of such procedures is the institutional and governmental will to *bypass* other more organic methods of verifying identity (including the story that is told by the applicant, language analysis, psychological assessment, etc.) insofar as these methods are perceived as contingent and insufficient: "If a person shows up with nothing with them but the clothes they wear and the story they offer, it would, of course, be a golden solution to be able to *produce* from the person's body an identity" (van der Ploeg 1999b, 300, emphasis added). The following snapshot is a case in point:

> Bango carries no passport, shouts "asylum!", and claims to come from Sierra Leone. The immigration service interrogates him and lets him take a "Sierra Leone exam." Which ethnic group lives in the North-East? What is the name of the largest shopping street in Freetown? Bango fails his exam, the immigration service rejects his application for asylum. He appeals and keeps claiming to come from Sierra Leone. This, like coming from Angola or Afghanistan, would entitle him to a temporary residence permit. The judge does not believe his story (in ibid., 297).

Moreover, in the case of Applicant Registration Cards, and to appropriate van der Ploeg's (1999b, 296) argument, "the bodies of cardholders will become inscribed with their identities as [asylum seekers… and] implicated in the distribution of benefits, services, and rights." Rose (1999, 240) argues that within contemporary forms of control, there are certain strategies that "seek to incorporate the excluded […] and to re-attach them to the circuits of civility" and others that "accept the inexorability of exclusion of certain individuals […] and seek to manage this population." Applicant Registration Cards can be seen to be executing precisely, and concurrently, these very functions. For not only do they constitute, and indeed institute, the condition for gaining access to social services *as* an asylum seeker (inclusion within the nexus of sociality), but also demarcate the latter as an alien, a non-citizen, multiplying "the possible loci of [inclusive] exclusion" (ibid., 243). The function of ARCs as a *re-attaching agent* is at once a function of attachment as well as detachment, a function of inclusion as well as exclusion: through his/her ARC, the asylum seeker is connected (precariously that is) to the order of civility only to be reminded that s/he does not belong to it, s/he is allowed to *perform* a certain form of inclusion only to *endure* another sense of exclusion. This double function of asylum smart ID cards is hence reminiscent of the fact that, in the domain of asylum management, the question of identification becomes a matter of *knowledge production* à la Foucault.

In these examples, we can therefore observe how identity comes into being through the paraphernalia of technical procedures such as those of biometric technology. It "becomes that which results from these efforts" (van der Ploeg 1999b, 300); an identity that is at once "independent" of the story of the person, and yet "undeniably belonging to that person" (ibid.). Circling back to the issue of the biometric body, we may suggest that in certain contexts, as in the problem field of asylum, the body becomes more than a mere object of measurement and scanning, but a subject *par excellence* from which identity emerges—at times, against the will and beyond the choice of the person. Through biometric identification, the *raw* instant truth that is distilled from the body during the procedure of enrolment is processed further and turned into a *refined* truth. This refined truth forms the basis for processes of profiling, sorting and categorisation. It also tells a story, the story about "how many times an individual has crossed a border or attempted to enter a country illegally, about an

individual's DNA profile […] how old he or she really is" (Aas 2006, 153). Ostensibly, however, this story hardly relates to "personal knowledge about people and the *causes* of their actions" (ibid., my italics) insofar as it is a story told from the *one-dimensional* perspective of the machine/the operator. It excludes ipseity. This constitutes perhaps both the failure and the dream of biometrics: failure to/dream of access(ing) the nexus of the whoness of the person where intentions, actions, beliefs, values, experiences, and, indeed, *resistance* reside.

This is especially the case *vis-à-vis* the deployment of biometrics as a technology of *pre-emption* and *risk profiling* not only in the domain of asylum and immigration but within the overarching fields of securitisation and surveillance as a whole. What lies at the heart of biometric profiling mechanisms is the technostalgic dream of monitoring the future by revising the past and redefining the present (Gates 2005). Systems such as Eurodac and the Schengen Information System are epitomes of these pre-emptive techniques of control in that not only do they store and monitor data relating to asylum and visa applications, but also construct predictive profiles, patterns of actions, and maps of behavioural comparison and dispositions with the aim to obstruct the flux of movement of those who are likely to become potential or repeat offenders (the common rule in the Schengen visa system is that if an individual has overstayed her visa in one Member State, it is unlikely that she will be granted access again to the EU area for a period of five years. The same principle is applied to cases of deportation, which can extend to a ten-year ban period). The optimisation of such techniques of control relies on the governing of identity by means of capturing the singularity of the body insofar as the latter is regarded as a way of outwitting the mind of those who might have dubious intentions (bogus asylum claims, multiple asylum applications, use of fake travel documents, etc.) and managing their movement at a distance.

Biometrics in this context functions according to a logic of mistrust and suspicion whereby the foreign other is often regarded as a dubious other by default until proven otherwise through biometric identification. Paradoxically, it remains the ultimate dream of biometric control to be able to access that which it attempts to outwit and remove from the equation, that is, the mind and with it the purposes, motivations, intentions, and so on that lie behind actions (whether actual or potential); this in an attempt to fulfil its security aspirations of a "total knowledge" paradigm which can then be converted into a more fine-grained and target-oriented knowledge to reduce future uncertainties into calculable and manageable programmes of pre-emption. Yet such a dream of total control remains merely "the utopia of the perfectly governed city", to borrow Foucault's (1975, 198) phrase. For one thing, in reducing singularity and uniqueness to sameness, biometrics merely manages to gain a partial and narrow view on identity, which, despite all technical efforts, can never render the unknown absolutely known or the unidentifiable totally identifiable. Additionally, and to use Hayter's (2000, 152) apt metaphor, any form of control or closure is "like a dam: when one hole is blocked, another one appears somewhere else." As argued elsewhere (Ajana 2006, 261), acts of clandestine migration are strong illustrations of this metaphor insofar they expose the intrinsic porousness of borders and the unavoidable limitations of technology. They are, in fact, pure manifestations of singularity in that they resist the confines of technical identification, force open the shields of territorial containment and refuse to succumb to the hindering of circulation imposed by (over)developed countries. They are a valid attestation that the world is a place made out of relations and exposures where "there has to be a *clinamen* [;] an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other" (Nancy 1991, 3). In the culture of suspicion and distrust that governs and underpins the field of securitisation and biometric identification, there is hardly a space for this logic of *clinamen* to the extent that the figure of the nation-state (despite its putative erosion) is often imagined as an autonomous, self-sufficient entity whose exposure is merely that which relates to exteriority in terms of neoliberal principles and advanced capitalist criteria. With regard to immigration and asylum policy in the UK, this modality of governing translates into various business-driven schemes such as the "Highly Skilled Migrant Programme" and "Sector Based Scheme" as well as the phenomenon of "cherry picking of refugees on grounds of skills and potential for assimilation rather than need for protection" (Yuval-Davies *et al.* 2005, 518).

Against these rationalities of thinking and governing, clandestine migration stands as a strong form of

resistance, as the vanguard of self-asserting mobility rights, and therefore, as an indicator of the inescapable failure of biometrics to be *totally* in control of movement. This, however, should not give one a reason to romanticise or fetishise such a form of migration. For precarious mobility is less about intentional choice and more about despair, hardship, and the legitimate need for protection. More importantly, it is a reminder and a testimony of the symbolic and material violence embedded within the current biopolitics of immigration, which, in exposing some populations to life-threatening experiences, ends up producing death through policy and rendering the border as "the exemplary theatre for staging the spectacle of the 'illegal alien' that the law produces" (De Genova in Amoore 2006, 34). Whilst this violence is not necessarily the intention or the objective of the neoliberal style of managing movement, it is nevertheless a by-product, if not even a constitutive element, of the dual modality of *governing through freedom* and *governing through mistrust*, which produces *caesuras* within the population-body (Foucault 2003, [1976]) by dividing it into various categories that are amenable to different treatment and uneven regulation—the most obvious one being the division between the "responsible citizen" and the "abject other" (both of which subsume further sub-divisions and fragmentations). As van Munster (2005, 5−6) argues, "the prosperity of society as a whole […] involves the abjection of those that are considered self-abasing. [I]n the rationality of advanced liberalism, illegality is understood as a deliberate life choice, which in turn is seen as expressing irresponsibility and dishonesty on the part of the undocumented immigrant. [W]hereas humanitarian discourse generally represents the behaviour of illegal immigrants as acts of despair, discourses of advanced liberalism construct illegality as the irresponsible conduct of autonomy." What remains at issue, then, is the notion of freedom (and by extension the notion of equality as well), exercise of which (at the border) has become a matter of privilege and flexibility for some and an uncanny and deadly experience for others. "Who pays the cost of freedom for the mobility of others?" (Salter in Sparke 2006: 169) is thus a highly important and urgent question for which an entire ethico-politics, based on hospitality (Derrida), responsibility (Levinas), openness (Nancy), and justice (Ricoeur), needs to be devised and ultimately mobilised.

Deleuze (1992) is undoubtedly right in suggesting that in control society, individuals are turned into "dividuals"; bits and numbers scattered around databases and identified by their pins, profiles, credit scoring, etc., rather than their subjectivities (see also Rose 1999, 234). Aas (2006, 155) makes a similar argument in the following way: "[t]echnological systems no longer address persons as 'whole persons' with a coherent, situated self and a biography, but rather make decisions on the bases of singular signs, such as a fingerprint." This *dividuation* has, indeed, much resonance with biometric technology. In fact, biometrics goes a step further. It facilitates the reassembling of those bodily bits in a movement that can be imagined as electronic suturing whereby identities are stitched up or designed from scratch in order to imbue those profiles with a life of their own (a life that might even negate, wipe out, or at least, momentarily override the *lived life* of the person under scrutiny, as it is often the case with asylum seekers). And through this movement, resubjectification can take place and individuality can (re)emerge again, producing what might be called a *recombinant identity*. It is a quasi-artificial, but by no means disembodied, identity generated through the combining of various data and whose actualisation and institutionalisation certainly interfere with and affect the life course and the personal "story-to-come." Some aspects of this notion of recombinant identity resemble Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) notion of "data doubles" by which they refer to the process of breaking down and abstracting the body into a series of data. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the two. Whereas data doubles mainly designate a "decorporealised body" and an "abstract" type of individuality that is comprised of "pure virtuality" and "pure information" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 611–614), recombinant identity connotes mainly the "actuality" of re-individuation; that is to say, the terminal point at which data recombine into an identity in the *concrete*, *corporeal* and *material* sense. And, never, at any stage, does the notion of recombinant identity consider the body as *purely* virtual, decorporealised, disembodied or immaterial.

For these reasons, one might justly express a reluctance towards the suggestion that biometrics is merely about the what aspect of the person, or that it is simply concerned with the idem element of identity.

For, although biometric technology does not seem to be making much attempt to access whoness and ipseity (or perhaps *cannot* do so—see Hazelton 2008), it does, nevertheless, flirt with them, and at times, forcibly so. Not so much in terms of its identificatory *objectives* which remain fixated on what can be distilled from bodily particularities, and even less so in terms of the *specificity* of its technical procedures (assuming here Heidegger's (1977) proposition that "the essence of technology is nothing technological"). But certainly in terms of its wide-reaching *outcomes*, and especially, in terms of the way in which it ends up partaking of processes and practices that *impose* certain recombinant identities and thereby affect the embodied existence of the person. This is particularly true of marginalised groups, such as asylum seekers, whose life stories are continuously being shaped by their Sisyphean interactions with bureaucratic institutions and the forms of whatness that are often imposed upon them as a result of such interactions. As Bauman (2004, 13) rightly argues:

> 'Identities' float in the air, some of one's own choice but others inflated and launched by those around, and one needs to be constantly on the alert to defend the first against the second; there is a heightened likelihood of misunderstanding, and the outcome of the negotiation forever hangs in the balance.

Here, indeed, lies in the (bio)ethical challenge of biometric technology. The challenge to defend ipse-identity, that self-attesting dimension of who someone is, from institutional impositions—especially when those who "inflate" and "launch" enforced forms of identity are chiefly the politicians, policy makers, technical experts, industry representatives, and other *administrators without responsibility*, to put it in Arendtian terms, who, in the name of security and public interest, gather together to *decide* which identities are worthy of the name and which identities are disposable, implausible, if not even exterminatable. In this sense, the challenge is certainly that of making room, no matter how small and humble it is, for narrative, for self-attestation, for ipseity, for stories, in order to *interrupt* the *substantialist* formulations of identity and their accompanying myth of communal *essence* and foundational *origins* (Nancy

1991).[5] It is the challenge of replacing the "at distance" of the technological[6] with the "up close" (see also the introduction in Nelson 1997) of the personal, of "listening" to the body instead of "reading" off the body, and of confronting the technicist and stodgy zeal for sameness with the delicate and affective touch of whoness.

Narrative Bioethics of Biometrics

Doubtless, the dissolving of the question of who into the question of what, of which Arendt, Cavarero, Ricoeur, et al. speak, has had a profound and significant impact on the field of ethics itself. More specifically, it has certainly been instrumental to the inauguration and upholding of the universalistic and foundational principles upon which the mainstream styles of ethics have been calibrated, and in defining *in advance* what *counts* and *qualifies* as an ethical issue in the first place. This is so inasmuch as the focus on the what instead of the who, on the abstract *universality* of Man instead of the fleshy and situated *singularity* of the person, has led to the foregrounding of rational, meta-theoretical, top-down and rights-based forms of ethics, and thereby disregarding contextual, situational and emotive approaches (see Haimes 2002 and Hedgecoe 2004). Of course, the reductionist principalism and utilitarianism of mainstream ethics has not remained unchallenged. In fact, the last few decades have witnessed burgeoning attempts, within various fields and disciplines, to rethink ethics beyond the narrow contours of moral theory and outside the abstract ambit of generic

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[5] Interestingly, for Jean-Luc Nancy, one way of *interrupting* such substantialist discourses (for example, citizenship, individuality, community) is through *literature* and *writing* which bring to the fore the singularity of each and everyone, and resist forms of identitarianism and fusion (be they political, national, societal, or otherwise). And, Ricoeur (1992, 115) describes literature as "a vast laboratory […] through which narrativity serves as a propaedeutic to ethics."

[6] Most of the current technological developments are geared towards this dimension of "at distance". Ironically, their performance is often measured and judged by how much distance they can flatten as well as how much distance they can guarantee and maintain. Some *touch devices* are in fact designed to eliminate touch. Notice, for instance, next time you board a London bus and *touch* your Oyster Travelcard, that there is no more need to address or even "look" at the bus driver. Just "scan and go", thus is the way!

principalism. This has particularly, but by no means exclusively, been the case *vis-à-vis* the fields of biomedicine and biotechnology whereby the interface between life/body and ethics is staged most explicitly. One notable example of such attempts has been the growing adoption of narrative approaches within the interdisciplinary realm of bioethics.

Narrative bioethics, as the name suggests, can be described as a form of ethics that takes the notion of narrative as both the ground and the object of ethical reflection and moral justification when addressing issues surrounding life and its technologies. Echoing Rita Charon, a physician and literary scholar, Arras (1997, 70) describes this ethics as "a mode of moral analysis that is attentive to and critically reflective about the narrative elements of our experience." The import of this ethical style into the biomedical and biotechnological field, for instance, has been productively used to challenge the authority of traditional medical ethics by bringing to the fore the complexities and nuances of patients' stories, and to enhance physicians' *responsiveness* towards their patients' suffering instead of taking refuge in the guise of professionalism, objectivity and medical detachment (Brody 1997; Montello 1997).

Much of the conceptual underpinning of narrative bioethics is informed by the work of hermeneutics, wherein a special emphasis is placed upon the importance of interpretation as an ethical activity and a means of moral evaluation. The practical advantage of hermeneutics, Stepnisky (2007, 198) explains, lies in the way in which it allows us to "understand the interpretive process that unfolds in the encounter between self and other." It also lies in its ability to provide a valuable means for countering, or at least complementing, those positions which "too quickly leave behind the problem of selfhood, and the more intimate forms of self-interpretation" (ibid., 199). Importantly, such a process of interpretation is by no means complete nor does it strive to achieve a stable meaning. Rather, it remains open to incessant reinterpretation and expandability. "This emphasis on the ongoing interpretability of things," according to Stepnisky, "should ease any fears that hermeneutics, despite its appeal to self-understanding, seeks a stable autonomous self" (ibid., 198).

At the methodological level, there are many ways in which narrative can be used to critically address the field of bioethics. Nelson (1997, x), for example, cites

five approaches of doing so: *reading* stories; *telling* stories; *comparing* stories; *literary analysis*; and *invoking* stories. In each of these methods, narrative is regarded as a heuristic device for cultivating ethical imagination and enriching the moral landscape. It is not the place here to discuss in great depth and detail the particularities, advantages and limitations of such techniques. Suffice, for the purpose of the present paper and within the limit of the remaining space, to say a preliminary word or two about how a narrative approach can help us rethink the bioethics of biometrics, specifically in relation to the case of asylum and along the lines of what has been discussed hitherto with regard to Cavarero's and Ricoeur's aforementioned arguments.

As stated at the outset, recent debates on the ethical implications of biometric technology have been largely dominated by rights-centric discourses and permeated with a series of blanket terms such as those of privacy, dignity, and liberty. They, therefore, remain implicated within the very same universalistic approaches to ethics, and confined to the very same reductionist definitions of identity in which the question of who is all too often diluted into the question of what. Given its strong engagement with the issue of whoness, one may hope that a narrative approach to bioethics can act as an antidote to practices, including those of biometric identification, that seek to *simplify* and *fix* the notion of identity and deprive selfhood of its story. This, however, should not be considered as a methodological bid to overtake mainstream approaches to the ethics of biometrics, nor as a means of erecting a divide between them. Instead, the inclusion of a narrative fibre into the principal dietary regimes of those approaches may help rendering them more mindful and, indeed, "bodyful" (after Megan Clinch) of the ethical force residing in the person's *petit récit* insofar as "[n] arrative provides us with a rich tapestry of fact, situation, and character on which our moral judgements operate" (Arras 1997, 82).

Returning to the issue of asylum, it is often argued that one major challenge facing immigration authorities and the like is the management of individuals who possess no documents of identity: "police officers are particularly frustrated over all the identityless asylum seekers of various ethnic origins which are totally out of control" (*Aftenposten* in Aas 2006, 147). This notion of "identityless asylum seekers," as

Aas explains, is underlined by the assumption that "identity is something detached from one's self" and that these asylum seekers "do not have the kind of identity required by state bureaucracy: a stable, objective, unambiguous and thing-like identity." In fact, this notion represents an instance of what Ricoeur (1992, 149) calls "man without properties" (appropriating the title of Robert Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities*) who "becomes ultimately nonidentifiable in a world [...] of qualities (or properties) without men." However, contra the anxiety-inducing formulations of immigration authorities, nonidentifiability and lack of properties (documents of identity in our case), in the Ricoeurian sense, are not necessarily tantamount to a source of frustration and threat. They rather represent "moments of extreme destitution" whereby "the empty response to the Question 'Who am I?' [i.e. 'I am *no one* for I possess no attributes, no papers'] refers not to nullity but to the nakedness of the question itself" (ibid., 166−7). They therefore constitute a remarkable opportunity for "exposing selfhood by taking away the support of sameness" (ibid., 149), although a painful one, given the circumstances that push one to seek asylum.

In this respect, whereas the practice of biometric identification covers up the nakedness of the question "who?" by giving it back the flimsy veil of sameness, a narrative bioethics seeks to maintain and perpetuate this state of nakedness by reintroducing the character of ipseity at the heart of identity. In so doing, this ethics places "the demand for recognition of the *ipse*" (ibid.: 96) while revealing the fact that "not only […] *who* appears to us is shown to be unique in corporeal form and sound of voice [elements that can be captured through biometric technology], but that this *who* also already comes to us perceptibly as a narratable self with a unique story" (Cavarero 2000, 34). As such, this ethics is primarily an ethics of *responsibility* towards the story. It is an ethics of listening and "suffering-with" (Ricoeur 1992, 190); an ethics of sympathy that is "distinct from simple pity, in which the self is secretly pleased to know it has been spared" (ibid., 191).

For Ricoeur, following the line of the Arendtian thesis, the question "who?" is inextricably linked to the notion of action, and action is precisely that which calls for narration as a means of saving itself from the abyss of oblivion and saving "the reciprocal exhibitions of the actors from the fragile actuality of the

present to which they belong" (Cavarero 2000, 26). To this notion of action, Ricoeur (1992, 18) also adds the notion of suffering, linking narrative identity and its ethical dimension to "the broader concept of the *acting and suffering* individual." As Marta (1997, 204) puts it: "[t]he 'one who acts' is also the 'one who suffers'—joy, pain, sorrow, triumph, defeat. The 'one who acts,' who suffers, bears the ethical and moral responsibility of his or her actions in relation to another and to others."

It goes without saying that fleeing prosecution and danger is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of acting and suffering[7]: "[t]o flee is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon," according to Deleuze (in Nyers 2004, 1069). Small wonder, then, the issue of asylum has become an "acid test" for both politics and ethics (Diken 2004, 83), and a strong reminder of the limitations that inhere to the institutionally imposed identity ascriptions. Seen from the vantage point of narrative bioethics, the identity of the person seeking asylum cannot be dissociated from her embodied experience nor can her singularity be extracted merely from the collection of body-data. Rather, the identity of the person becomes the identity of the story itself, an identity recounted and exposed in the presence of another, namely the immigration officer. This scene of exposition and narrativity constitutes the ethical plane of relationality upon which ipseity reveals itself, and with it, the role played by *feelings*. "For it is indeed feelings that are revealed in the self by the other's suffering, as well as by the moral injunction coming from the other, feelings spontaneously directed toward others" (Ricoeur 1992, 192).

Therefore, to replace the story with the template, to replace listening with scanning, is akin to amputating the possibility of "feeling with" (Marta 1997, 206) and castrating the opportunity of exposing selfhood and uniqueness. Moreover, not only does the paradigm of biometric identification trample upon the ipseity of the person seeking asylum[8] but also upon the ipseity of the person assuming the role of the immigration

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[7] Here, suffering is not to be understood solely in a negative sense, but as an entire spectrum of experiences and affects including those of resistance, defiance and transgression (of borders and interiority, for instance).

[8] I am intentionally using the phrase of "the person seeking asylum" instead of "asylum seeker" for the former denotes an "action" whereas the latter is merely an identity ascription.

officer. For it reduces her to the mere executor of a "power without narrative" (Simon in Aas 2006, 150) whom, even in the case of *giving* refuge to the other, falls short of taking account of the other's singularity and whoness precisely because of the absence of listening and feeling with. In so doing, biometric identification ends up segregating between the person "acting" as an immigration officer and the person seeking asylum, while confining each to the narrow and dichotomised roles of the giver of refuge (who is "able to act") and the seeker of asylum (whose capacity to act has been reduced to the sole and silent status of *receiving*).[9] This in turn takes solicitude and sympathy out of the encounter, leaving instead a sterile and simplistic, if not even patronising, sense of charity and benevolence. "In true sympathy," Ricoeur (1992, 191) writes:

> the self, whose power of acting is at the start greater than that of its other, finds itself affected by all that the suffering other offers to it in return. For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself. This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude, when unequal power finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity in exchange, which, in the hour of agony, finds refuge in the shared whisper of voices or the feeble embrace of clasped hands.

Conclusion and Further Reflections

We began this paper by interrogating the ways in which biometrics is about identity and uniqueness in an attempt to uncover some of the bioethical stakes of biometric technology. This interrogation has led us straight into the quagmire of asking what identity is. Drawing upon the work of Cavarero, Schechtman, and Ricoeur, we explored some of the variations in the meaning of identity. Emphasis has been placed upon the distinction between the question "what?" and the question "who?" through which we examined the interplay between biometric technology and identity. Whilst, at first glance, biometrics may seem

to be mainly concerned with the what aspect of identity, we argued that the who dimension is inevitably implicated as well, especially in the context of asylum. Given the importance of narrative to the question of who and to the notion of uniqueness, we proposed a narrative approach as a means of navigating through the distinctive bioethical implications of biometric technology. Our discussion, while admittedly being preliminary in both scope and nature, has revealed that, paradoxically, in its pursuit of capturing the singularity of the person, biometrics only ends up obstructing the exposure of singularity precisely because of its amputation of narrative from the sphere of identity. Thus, a pressing bioethical task would be to seek to preserve the narrative dimension of identity, which, in the words of Cavarero (2000, 34), constitutes the "house of uniqueness."

Of course, a narrative approach to the bioethics of biometrics is not without its limitations. For one thing, such an approach cannot take us as far as to fully understand the ways in which identity, security and asylum emerge as *problem spaces* in the first place, or how biometric technology is activated as a *technique of governance* and an apparatus of normalisation. Another limitation lies in the fact that power dynamics as well as institutional contexts are not always factored into the narrative perspective on identity and its securitisation. For instance, the relationship between the immigration officer and the asylum seeker is by no means a neutral one. It is, rather, imbued with a specific kind of power and framed within a specific institutional context, both of which have an undeniable and considerable bearing on the mode of address and on the interlocutory scene within which the story is recounted. Put simply, the inquisitorial tone and the probing frame by which the immigration officer asks the question "who are you?" already set the stage for and the limits of what can be recounted about oneself during the process of seeking asylum. In more general terms, many of these issues have been famously taken up by Foucault, especially in his consideration of the notion of truth-telling and the formation of the self. The Foucauldian governmentality and subject-formation thesis, in this sense, can help us understand the discursive constructions of identity and the ways in which biometric technology straddles the domain of power and knowledge. This approach, however, remains limited in scope as well, precisely because of its lack of engagement with the

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[9] Jan Marta (1997, 206) also speaks of the notion of segregation when addressing some aspects of the physician–patient dynamics in relation to the issue of *informed consent*.

minutiae of personal experience and the narratable aspect of selfhood.

The encounter of the narrativity thesis with the Foucauldian theory of subject-constitution is also what animates some of the discussions in Butler's *Giving an account of oneself* (2005). Here Butler productively labours at the intersection between the different theories and philosophies of the self, providing another useful lens through which one can trace and juxtapose some of the above limitations. Central to her argument is the idea that the very possibility of narrating oneself is *dependent* on social norms and circumscribed by the structure of address involving others. What fellows from this fundamental and irreducible dependency, according to Butler, is the impossibility of giving a *full* account of oneself and providing a *definitive* life-story insofar as

> the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our "singular" stories are told (Butler 2005, 21),

As such, stories do not become *recognisable* stories by simply being told. They have to go through the sieve of many social and linguistic conventions to be deemed worthy of recognition (see also Ricoeur's thorough discussion [2005]). Nor is the "I" in a full and exclusive possession of its own story. So in addition to the fact that "narrating, like saying, calls for an ear, a power to hear, a reception" (Ricoeur 2005, 251) as well as exposure and co-appearance (Cavarero 2000), narrating is also irredeemably at the mercy of norms. And whether the story moves us to tears or cripples us with laughter, norms remain indifferent for they are impersonal and do not coincide with the temporality of one's life. "Discourse is not life; its time is not yours," according to Foucault (in Butler 2005, 36). By subscribing to this Foucauldian stance, Butler introduces an important caveat that challenges Cavarero's take on narrativity: to the extent that one's account is reliant on norms which happen to exceed oneself, any attempt to give a coherent, authoritative, and full-fledged story is bound to be *interrupted* by the time of the discourse, by that very language one deploys as a vehicle for giving an account of oneself. For Butler, this means

that singularity itself is subject(ed) to being contested by the temporality of norms.

While this is certainly a valid argument, one could, however, equally argue that the interruption brought about by language as well as the crisscrossing of the temporality of norms with the temporality of life only serve to *reaffirm* singularity, or more specifically, the plurality of singularity. For even if "I" has to substitute itself to norms in order to tell its story, the way it does so remains singular *through and through*. Each time is a different time and the way the story is told is a singular story in itself. Singularity does not evaporate with reiteration but only consolidates its unrepeatability and strengthens its resistance to being completely dissolved by/into norms. And whilst exposure is at once a singularising and collectivising experience (ibid., 34−35), this does not necessarily make singularity any less singular, but only yields a "singular plural" as Nancy (2000) puts it. So although norms permeate the very fibre of narrativity, submitting entirely to the Foucauldian position would unduly disavow the nitty-gritty processes by which one *uses* and *appropriates* the norms, leading to the foregrounding of an abstract universal subject instead and mutely accepting the icy indifference of norms. I agree though with Butler's view regarding the incomplete and non-definitive character of storytelling: "[t]he 'I' can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility" (Butler 2005, 37). Nor can it tell the story of its end, except in a speculative and fictitious manner. Completeness and definitiveness are but the necropolis of the story of the "I". Yet such views do not necessarily subordinate Cavarero's theory of storytelling to that of norms nor do they weaken its ethical purchase. Instead they solicit the helping hand of another ethics, one that can handle the necessary, but not-so-comfortable, intercourse between narrativity and norms. Before we say few words about this ethics, it is worth considering some of the consequences of Butler's postulations with regard to our previous discussions on the issues of asylum, biometrics, and narrativity.

In approaching these issues through the lens of Butler's arguments, the initial question that immediately surges to the forefront is: to what extent can the story of the asylum seeker *truly* capture her whoness and *fully* reveal her singularity? Clearly, the notion of context can hardly be avoided here. Giving an account of oneself for the *purpose* of gaining the
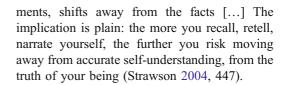
refugee status, and the protection it implies, "consists of speaking the lines that the institutional interpellation sets in place" (Frank 1997, 34). This entails the *selection* of facts, recollections and experiences that would qualify the story as a recognisable asylum story, and the use of a specific idiom that would allow the story to fulfil the manifold criteria required for obtaining asylum. Whether in terms of application forms or interviews (which often involve the presence of an interpreter complicating all the more the meditating structure, scene and mode of address), linguistic and institutional norms play a pivotal role. Depending on how they are used and in what circumstances, these norms can either enable or constrain storytelling, rendering the possibility of giving a coherent, consistent and reliable account a highly contingent enterprise. This is more so the case when the asylum applicant is summoned to undertake more than one interview or fill in more than one application form in order to establish the veracity and validity of her account. Added to that are the cases where the person, due to her history of torture and its debilitating effects on the first-person perspective, is unable to construct and articulate an integrated and meaningful life-story that can faithfully and accurately attest to that history and to her embodied ipseity in general: "[some] actual experiences may be too complex, too confusing, too provocative, too shameful, too private, or too common to convey without the help of a 'made story' of some kind or other" (Greenspan 2003, 109). In such contexts, the made story will inevitably be subject to changes, revisions, variations and reinterpretations, despite any attempt to make it otherwise; i.e. to turn it into a full-fledged account that is sealed with a permanent stamp of truth and accuracy. As Arthur Frank (in Brody 1997, 20) argues:

> The "same" story, retold on different occasions over a span of time, will be heard differently. The self actually engages in change and reformulation by retelling the "same" story. Thinking with stories thus demands that we attend carefully to how a story is *used* when it is told, how different meanings or shades of meaning are assigned to the story as a result.

Or again:

> It's well known that telling and retelling one's past leads to changes, smoothings, enhance-

ments, shifts away from the facts […] The implication is plain: the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being (Strawson 2004, 447).

Storytelling, in this sense, seems to unfold on a continuously shifting ground and occupy a peculiar and paradoxical space wherein the self is partially concealed (from itself and from others) at the very moment of its own revelation, and narrative is that which testifies to the inability of bearing witness to one's own emergence and constitution rather than to the self-assured capacity to give a full account of oneself. It is as though hide-and-seek is the name of the game that permanently entertains the relationship between storytelling and the truth of one's being. Pitched in this way, one may be tempted to promptly dismiss narrativity as a method of conveying whoness and housing singularity. For how can a thesis that is too changeable, fluid, precarious, paradoxical and context-laden, possibly provide an anchoring point for the story of the self, let alone be used as a reliable means of thinking and doing ethics? However, to dismiss narrativity on these grounds would be too facile a conclusion. In fact, it seems to me that what is at issue here is not so much whoness and singularity per se, but the enduring epistemological and *technical* questions of truth and validity. The question is not whether storytelling is capable of revealing who one is, but whether this revelation is erupting out of the fountain of truth or emerging from the dungeons of fiction and confabulations. What if the story is not only a "made story" but also a "made-*up* story"? What if narrativity is but a futile act of sucking on the "honeycomb of memory" (Benjamin 1968) and risking the sting of the past without any promise or guarantee of finding a *valid* and *working* compass to guide one's decisions (moral or otherwise)?

By raising these questions, we are obviously coming full circle—a move that may well be perceived as a self-defeating detour, since it is in danger of reactivating the all-too-familiar epistemic doubt regarding the story and thereby leaving the room wide-open for biometrics to gain a firmer hold on the sphere of identity, to strengthen and capitalise on its truth claims to accuracy and validity. Nevertheless, admitting the limits of the narrativity thesis does not amount to a total defeat. It only emanates a

sense of humbleness (unlike the haughtiness of the biometric paradigm) *vis-à-vis* the general ability of truthfully capturing and divulging whoness and singularity. It is indeed this humbleness (something that Butler herself affirms in her critique of narrativity) that opens up rather than forecloses the horizon of *nonviolent* ethics and preserves rather than destroys the creative dimensions of the different person perspectives. It is this humbleness that makes us aware of "the fragility of all human communication—its inevitable limits and uncertainty because of its reliance on forms (and, I suppose, beings) that are themselves inherently limited and uncertain" (Greenspan 2003, 110). It is also this humbleness which reminds us that "[t]hinking with stories means that narrative ethics cannot offer people clear guidelines or principles for making decisions. Instead what is offered is permission to *allow the story to lead in certain directions*" (Frank in Brody 1997, 20–21). To be fixated on truth and validity is to lose sight of this (ethical) *opportunity*. It is to obstruct the story's lines of flight and to bring the *movement* of decision to a halt (hence the *immobilising* and *limbo-like* character of rigid asylum and immigration policies and technologies). It is not that truth is unimportant. But in the context of storytelling and narrative identity, truth and fiction are inextricably intertwined with no viable possibility of absolute disentanglement. Put simply, fiction is not necessarily devoid of truth nor is truth necessarily non-fictional. As Strawson (2004, 446) argues, "[w]hen Bernard Malamud claims that 'all biography is ultimately fiction', simply on the grounds that 'there is no life that can be captured wholly, as it was', there is no implication that it must also be ultimately untrue."

This sense of humbleness in narrativity does not only touch the question of truth, but extends to cover, in a related manner, the notions of definitiveness, completeness and fullness with regard to the life-story. As mentioned earlier, the possibility of giving a full, authoritative and definitive account of oneself is continuously interrupted by the temporality of norms. Death is the only plenitude, the real terminus of every life-story. Because "I" is *in* time, it is never *on* time. "I" is always missing an appointment by either being too *late* for the rendez-vous with its origin, or too *early* for the rendez-vous with its end. Its account is an amputated account made out of prosthetic and phantom narratives. Paradoxically, it is precisely this temporal belatedness or prematurity that injects the

"I" with the possibility of creating itself anew and devising its own stories. Were it not for this *décalage*, "I" would be capable of neither formation nor narration. In a way, then, before "I" can stand up with pride and say: "I know", it has to admit to itself that it does *not* know. Before "I" can stand up with poise and declare: "I can", it has to come to terms with the fact that it *cannot*. Before "I" can *stand up* at all, it has to tremble, lose balance and fall. The capacity of the "I" is, therefore, continuously haunted by its own incapacity. Its potency is constantly threatened by the shadow of its own impotency. Its transparency is often eclipsed by its own opacity. This translates, as we have seen so far and through Butler's critique, into a partial obscurity and a lack of completeness and definitiveness *vis-à-vis* the life-story, elements that beg for humbleness and fragility (rather than sovereignty and power) as ways of accounting and relating. From here transpire at least two conclusions, one of which has to do with the other ethics, while the second has a direct and practical bearing on the *everyday* life of the person seeking asylum.

As regards the latter, it concerns the ways in which the non-definitiveness of the story, while representing an intrinsic limitation within the narrativity thesis, may also represent an opportunity. This opportunity is nothing other than the opportunity of saving the story from becoming a snare. Were it not for this non-definitive character, the sealing and authoritative prospect of the "once and for all" of the story might turn narrative itself into a straightjacket restricting the ebbs and flows of what remains of one's lived life outside of and otherwise than that particular story. In the context of asylum, this becomes a crucial point, especially once the refugee status has been granted. Dwelling, in a definitive way, on the asylum/refugee story runs the risk of *totalising* identity and fossilising the person into the mode of being a refugee. This in turn can have many negative implications, not least in terms of hindering the process of genuine (rather than merely functional) inclusion and belonging into the host community, unwittingly encouraging a sense of a disabling and extended over-reliance on the story and on what comes out of it as a bundle of charitable, and in many ways superficial, benefits (for example, asylum vouchers, which unconstructively strengthen the "poor me" sentiment), and impeding the person's potential and attempt to reconstruct her life beyond

the asylum story and without having to carry indefinitely her refugee status as a badge of identification. There is certainly *more* to the "refugee" than her refugee story despite the fact that her singular refugee story is an integral *part* of who *and* what she is. That is not to say, however, that the story must be washed away with the detergent of *forgetting*. Forgetting, "that thief of time" as Ricoeur (2005, 118) refers to it, would be, in this case, akin to committing an act of blasphemy and betrayal towards the pain of the story. What is needed instead is an ethico-political approach, which extends beyond the mere provision of a safe haven to enable the person to develop and explore different ways of *relating* to and *remembering* the story so as to successfully *integrate* its pain into the fabric of her being instead of permanently *identifying* with it.

Undoubtedly, one might wonder, at this stage, if the narrative approach (with its qualities, challenges, and visions) towards asylum policy can be amenable to practical application. In a neoliberal culture that is predominantly concerned with security rather than solicitude, with control rather than trust, with power rather than equality, with self-interest rather than care for the other, such an approach may come across as being too theoretical, if not even too unrealistic to be precise. How could narrative ethics possibly pierce through the thick bubble of asylum policy, a policy that seems to be increasingly functioning under the spell of biometric solutions? How could its humbleness, fragility, and uncertainty possibly compete with the luring hi-tech veneer of biometrics and its haughty claims to accuracy, truth and objectivity? In their very specificity, these questions are also able to invoke something of a more general dimension, something to do with the hiatus between ethics and (technocratic) politics, which for so long has been the source of many aporias, conflicts and contradictions. While I do not have exact answers to such questions, I do feel however that, if it is to be feasible at all, narrative ethics has to be preceded by, and contribute to, a radical *transformation* at the level of the mental schema which currently governs the landscape of politics and its exclusionist policies of border management, asylum and immigration. Without the necessary shift from the death-producing politics of control (I am referring here to "the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion,

rejection, and so on" [Foucault 2003 [1976], 256], examples of which can be found in the tragic deaths that are still taking place in the Strait of Gibraltar and the US−Mexican border) to a responsible and accountable politics, the narrative approach itself might do more harm than good to the person seeking asylum. For it might risk turning into a *confessionary* apparatus instead of providing a space for solicitude and sympathy. Without this shift in the political imaginary, asking the policy-maker to give up biometric control in favour of narrative ethics would be like asking a vampire to give away her fangs to the dentist. Nevertheless, instead of resorting to cynicism, one can, as a starting point, intervene by demonstrating how such policies do not only fail but also worsen the situations they seek to remedy. It is a matter of heightening policy-makers' *awareness* that fighting against unwanted immigration and asylum with technology or otherwise only ends up producing an even more unmanageable chain of problems, such as people trafficking, death at the border, and exploitation. And this is perhaps the tragedy of contemporary forms of governance: the more problems they try to solve, the more problems they create. After all:

> Migrants and those who facilitate their migration resort to staggering feats of ingenuity, courage and endurance to assert their right to move and to flee […] The question is how much suffering will be imposed on innocent people, and how much racism will be stoked up […] before governments finally abandon the effort (Hayter 2000, 152).

From the concatenation of the above reflections, it is clear that, if taken as a standalone approach, narrative bioethics would not always be able to singlehandedly tackle the manifold challenges pertaining to the field of asylum and biometric identification. This limitation is, in fact, what calls for a well-rounded "coalitionist ethics" whose approach must be based on the cross-pollination and cross-fertilisation of different, albeit contradictory, theoretical and empirical perspectives and an appreciation of the distinct qualities of each. Butler's work on "responsibility", Derrida's take on the notions of "hospitality" and "cosmopolitanism", and Ricoeur's trinity of "self-esteem", "justice" and "care for the other", are but some of the examples that signpost many promising and interesting—though not always

converging—pathways for addressing what is ethically at stake in the current policies of asylum and immigration. But despite all its limitations, narrative will still remain "an indispensable and ubiquitous feature of the moral landscape" (Arras 1997, 68). So, for the time being, and in the context of this paper, let us be content with the conclusion that, the moral of the story is perhaps nothing other than *listening* to and *feeling* the story itself.

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