PHILIP ROTH’S PATRIMONY:
NARRATIVE AND ETHICS IN A CASE STUDY*

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ABSTRACT. I assess the ethical content of Philip Roth’s account of his father’s final years with, and death from, a tumor. I apply this to criticisms of the nature and content of case reports in medicine. I also draw some implications about modernism, postmodernism and narrative understandings.

Key words: ethics, empathy, physicians’ responsibility, delegating, case presentations, family, modernism, postmodernism, narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses ethical aspects of the final years of Herman Roth in the book Patrimony.¹ I treat the text as a case report² because I wish to track what typical case-presentations exclude as a basis for empathy and psycho-social concern,³ ⁴ weakening their pedagogic utility.⁵ I also make suggestions (hoping the reader can take them much further) about narrative⁶ as a mode of moral understanding in the wake of modernism and postmodernism.⁷

2. THE TEXT AND ITS STORY

Herman Roth died in a New Jersey hospital in October 1989. Patrimony is the story of his final years from the perspective of one of his two sons, the noted author Philip Roth. The book is a great source for exploring medical ethical and other moral issues. Moral aspects of the story depend on aspects of relationships, self-knowledge, fortitude, and knowledge of one’s loved ones as well as concern for consequences and respect for self-

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determination. The story shows much loving and caring but many moral quagmires, as well.

2.1. *The Onset of Herman's Symptoms*

While living at home in New Jersey in 1987, Herman Roth, a vital widower in his mid-eighties, lost nerve function on one side of his face. That side began to droop, effecting his appearance, speech and eating. Initially, these signs and symptoms were, without testing, dismissed by his physician as Bell's palsy. Both the physician and friends who had had Bell's palsy reassured Herman that it would reverse. Eventually he lost hearing on that side. A physician in Florida, where Herman was wintering, said that the hearing loss had nothing to do with the palsy; that the loss was just something that happened with age and he should count his blessings for his general good health.

Not long after returning to New Jersey, Herman requested treatment for cataracts that had been bothering him for much longer than the facial droop. The ophthalmologist would not operate without knowing the cause of the facial palsy. Studies disclosed a tumor that had been growing in his head for from five to ten years. The tumor was massive and neither chemotherapy nor radiation could serve to treat it. It was not a brain tumor, but it was going to crush nerves that controlled swallowing and other important functions. However, operations to remove or reduce it put Herman at high risk for great suffering.

Philip Roth shows little interest in the moral aspects of the physicians' relationships with his father, and his account contains no condemnation of the physicians' behavior. Philip's narrative discloses several important moral mistakes and failures of those physicians. Most of the physicians' mistakes and failings are all the more interesting and illuminating not just because of Philip's acceptance of their actions. Rather, Philip is much more of a culprit than anyone else. He is much more of a culprit than he seems to realize, though some of his admissions are frank and unabashed. Thus, although Philip's report focuses only a little on the doctors, it discloses many "morals of the story" for them.

One moral of the story will be that many of Philip's morally questionable acts were enabled by the doctors' failings. Another moral of the story (as per my first goal in the introduction) is in the implications of the physicians' giving empathy and psycho-social concerns short shrift. Re my second goal, Philip's book *shows* what one would think typical medical case reports could not: the importance and function of ethical notions such as patients' rights. For, without Philip's saying so, the story shows some