



Bortolini's Bellah and Bellah's Bortolini: A Reading of an Ethical Biography

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Abstract

An ethical biography entails assessing four major elements, the narrated author, the narrating author, the text and the reader. In each instance of engagement, fidelity to the truth of the other is essential. It is at these interpretive moments that ethics becomes an issue in terms of interpretative awareness, faithfulness and the impact on the interpreters. Is it inevitable in an ethical biography that personal transformations will occur? Using theoretical work on the genre of biography by Frédéric Regard, the author illustrates Regard's theories by applying Bortolini's *A Joyfully Serious Man (AJSM)*. To accomplish this, he takes a personal approach. Personal in how he gives evidence of Bortolini's journey with the writing of *AJSM*. Personal, in how he appreciates Bortolini's ability to write about Bellah's life as grist for Bellah's theoretical work. Personal in how his reading of the biography affected him. The author seeks to portray biography as a complex scholarly art that advances ideas and the human project itself.

Keywords Academic biography · Memoir · Interpretive sociology · Sociology of religion · Ethics

Yale sociologist Philip Gorski in his review of Matteo Bortolini's *A Joyfully Serious Man, (AJSM)*¹ remarks that *Intellectual* biographies are not “the most promising of genres.” They become “books about books.” Further, Gorski states, to write about the “inner lives” of academics is difficult for, unlike “politicians and celebrities,” they are less documented. However, Gorski concludes that Robert Bellah “makes an excellent subject for a biography,” given Bortolini's access to Bellah's diaries, private letters and dozens of interviews with Bellah's students, colleagues, family, and Bellah himself. In fourteen years of research, Bortolini got to know Bellah. Bryan Turner in his review of *AJSM*² suggests that “Bortolini's uniquely sensitive portrait of Bellah is as much *memoir* as biography.”

¹ Phillip S. Gorski, “Robert Bellah's Search for Unity,” *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2022.

² Bryan S Turner, “Book Review,” *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 1–4.

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In this article I suggest that we have much more than just a good biography with which we can engage, enjoy and learn about Bellah. I maintain a lasting importance of *AJSM* is its ability to give us an experience of an ethical relationship between the *Narrated author* (Bellah) and the *Narrating author* (Bortolini). This makes it an “ethical biography.” This ethical experience is extended to the self-aware and sensitive *Reader* of the biography. Thus, it makes the genre of a biography more than just storytelling and analysis, which it needs to be, but also having transformative implications for the Narrating Author and the Reader. For this article I largely explore my experience of transformation to *AJSM* as an ethical biography. However, I also suggest that other Readers are “invited” to this possibility of transformation. I want to draw attention to the possibility of transformation for any hypothetical “Reader” of an ethical biography.

I am taking my inspiration for this article from Sorbonne literature Professor Frédéric Regard’s work in his *Cambridge Quarterly* article, “The Ethics of Biographical Reading: A Pragmatic Approach.”³ Besides Bellah, Bortolini and the Reader, Regard adds a fourth element in literary biographies, the *text*. Through the creation of the Text the fidelity to interpreting another person, the impact on the author of the biography and the Reader is transmitted. “Fidelity” to the Narrated Author (Bellah) is what Regard suggests will create a set of relations that can be, or *should* be, ethical. His primary concern is to “argue that biographical writing engages the ethical stance of the interpreter.”⁴ The Reader becomes an “interpreter” of both authors and thus extends the primary ethical relationship between Bellah and Bortolini. Regard’s conception of ethics is borrowed from Alain Badiou. According to Regard, Badiou “calls ‘truth’ an event (événement), the occurrence of which effectuates a new mode of being, ‘ethics’ the work of fidelity to this truth, and ‘subjectivity’ the locus of such work.”⁵ What is Regard suggesting with this simplified version of Badiou’s complex work? In the case of a biography a moral obligation and challenge emerge in the event of interpreting the life and work of an author. Regard acknowledges that “subjectivity” is the means and the reality with which the biographer must endeavor to be faithful to the narrated author.

Again, taking guidance from Regard’s conceptual frame, Regard borrows from Badiou, stating that “biographical writing always takes the form of a dialogic exchange; it is produced through an intersubjective operation, through a ‘composition of subjectivities.’” For Regard, “subjectivity is effectuated when the self is forced to encounter a singular truth, which always happens to the subject.” What then holds for the Narrated Author (A2) and the Narrating author (A1) is not binary, one over against the other. For Regard, “what has emerged is an ‘ethical’ dialectic—a dialectic with no *telos*, no point of arrival and reconciliation—between self and

³ Frédéric Regard, “The Ethics of Biographical Reading: A Pragmatic Approach,” *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No 4 2000. It is significant that this article was sent to me by Bortolini with the note that he knew I would find it suggestive.

⁴ Regard, 396.

⁵ Regard, 396.

other, *ego* and *alter*.”⁶ For Regard this is the first of four ethical moments in the life of a biography, beginning with the Narrated and Narrating authors. In this dialectic he states there is a “perfect coincidence of ethics and aesthetics”:

“access to the ‘self’ of the narrated author (A2) is guaranteed by the other author’s work of interpretation. There is no distinguishing between the first and second. Both A1 and A2 come into existence simultaneously, in a pragmatic structure where *ego* and *alter* constitute each other.”⁷

In this first set of relationships, Regard concludes there is “no original author in biographical writing: each author is ‘authorized’ by the other.” He then points us to the next ethical moment, “both the authors are effects of the biographical text.” And of course, Regard will introduce the Reader to this set of ethical events. As a Reader we want to assume that the Narrating Author (A1) seeks to be true to the truth of the Narrated Author (A2).

How does Regard’s notion of the dialectic between the two authors play out in Bortolini’s *AJSM*? I will provide evidence that Bortolini has written an ethical biography that illustrates how Bellah and Bortolini have become subjects of each other. I will conclude, like the “sorcerer’s apprentice,” that *AJSM* continues to expand its ethical force to the Reader through a new relationship to each author. It is a tall order for the writer of a biography to have this kind of goal in writing a biography, especially when not all authors have the textured and complex life of somebody like Bellah. It will remain an open question if Bortolini’s Bellah and Bellah’s impact on Bortolini has this impact on any Reader.

I can only state the impact of reading *AJSM* had on me and explore why I think Bortolini has created an ethical biography. I do not have evidence of how others less familiar with Bellah or Bortolini have been impacted. Of course, this is and will be difficult to discern by virtue of the fact that many Readers will not express their personal encounter with a biography, especially in public reviews. Nor for most of our academic journals is it welcomed, for self-revelation is not the norm in the academic world. This raises the question of how different is ethical biographical writing and reading from good sociological analysis when some may argue that “writing and reading sociology—which, of course, is also by and about human subjects whose experiences and lives the narrator has a duty to be ‘faithful’ to? What, then, is the difference between these different scholarly/cultural forms?” My answer to this question is: There is no difference. Biographies just make this need for fidelity more obvious. Remember Regard is also trying to rehabilitate biography from its second-class status as an academic genre. We may be beyond the need for this defense today with so many important biographies being written and when regular sociological analyses are becoming more personal. The two books worth noting are Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* and Robert Wuthnow’s *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in*

⁶ Regard, 404.

⁷ Regard, 405–406.

Small-Town America. In each case the author endeavors to engage the subject with faithfulness and self-reflection.⁸

Bellah, also gives us a different model of sociological writing by his many autobiographical introductions to his books and most poignantly by how Bellah understood his *magnum opus*, *Religion and in Human Evolution* (RIHE), which he called his “autobiography of the human race.”⁹ A question might be raised at this point whether it is Regard’s notion of an ethical biography that drives Bortolini’s work or whether it is just an author like Bellah who lends himself to the kind of reflection Regard is suggesting. Of course, Bellah is perhaps an easy case. Could a less laudable subject lead to the kind of reflection that drives ethical engagement? The *Nation* magazine review in March 2023 by Adam Hochschild of two J. Edgar Hoover biographies gave me an answer. Here Hochschild is in role of the Reader as he is reviewing these books. Hochschild, though not in depth, raises, through self-reflection the important questions: Why and how did the American people help create Hoover? Can we learn through ethical reflection to avoid being complicit again? This type of ethical engagement is available to us if we are at least self-reflective in our interpretations.

My first piece of evidence of how well Bortolini “understood” Bellah is when Bortolini comments on Bellah’s past personal introductions to many of his works. He confirms what others have indicated, how Bellah’s own story and *RIHE* were intertwined. “*Religion* was both his autobiography and the autobiography of the human race—as if the subjective and the objective spirit could be brought together in a single frame...*Bob* was the book, and the book was *Bob*.”¹⁰ Or as Bortolini has stated elsewhere, “Bellah was what he preached and preached what he was.”¹¹

My experience with reading *AJSM* has the benefit of being a student, colleague and friend of Bellah. I also had correspondence with Bortolini about my relationship with Bellah, providing stories and documents that I thought would be helpful for writing about Bellah. So as the Reader of *AJSM* I was motivated. I was motivated to learn more about Bellah. I was motivated to see how the “young brilliant Italian sociologist,” as he was often referred to by many others and at least one of Bellah’s co-authors¹² was going to write Bellah’s story. This was especially true when I knew that Bellah had endorsed Bortolini as his biographer with the observation that it was an “advantage for the work that Matteo wants to do that he is an Italian, educated in a system quite different from ours. It gives him a distance and lack of prejudice.”¹³

⁸ Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in their own Land, Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, New York, The New Press, 2016. Robert Wuthnow, *The Left Behind, Decline and Rage in Small-Town America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018..

⁹ Matthew Rose, “The Civil Theology of Robert Bellah: A Socialist who insisted that democracy needs religion,” *Commonweal*, July 29, 2023.

¹⁰ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 337.

¹¹ Matteo Bortolini, “Introduction: On Being a Scholar and An Intellectual.” p. 15 (Kindle edition) In Mateo Bortolini, ed. *The Anthem Companion to Robert N. Bellah*, London and New York: Anthem Press, 2019.

¹² Memorial Session, “Remembering Robert N. Bellah,” American Academy of Religion, Annual Meeting, Baltimore, November 24, 2013.

¹³ Bortolini, *AJSM* 322–323.

However, it is not surprising that after fourteen years of work on *AJSM* the distance between Bellah and Bortolini became close intellectually.

When evaluating the genre of biographies today it is important to understand the theoretical and historic backdrop to Regard's article. He is writing a defense of biographies as an important genre of scholarship, seeking to rescue it from being viewed as a second-class scholarly activity. To do this he addressed the so-called "death of the author" discussion when interpretations of another scholar's life and work were often seen to be "voyeurism" or to be epistemologically impossible given a certain a theory of knowledge in literary criticism. He initially relies on Foucault's notion of how we "authorize" ourselves and other authors in our interpretations. According to Regard, Foucault was "interested the mode of production of authority: the author was not dead...what was at stake were the rules of formation of what he now called the 'author-concept'."¹⁴

Regard's "author-concept" relies on Paul Ricoeur, "the self positions itself as a recognizable identity that remains true to itself, and to which consequently the other's narrative must also be true." Regard illustrates how the debate about the "new biography" championed by Virginia Woolf had similar issues about interpretation. In that case it was not the death of the author but the "end of life's transparency."¹⁵ Regard ends up with his catch phrase: "Be it the narrated or narrating author's, identity is not therefore a truth that has degenerated into fiction, but fiction that aspires to the condition of truth."¹⁶

Perhaps Regard's argument is simple, though developed through a grand architecture of complex philosophical and epistemological concepts. In my paraphrase: we are humans and humans have a history. We are aware that we cannot completely "know" another person. In fact, we are profoundly aware we cannot completely know ourselves. Should this truncate every thoughtful interpretation that incorporates all the interpretive tools available to us as well as our own self-knowledge? We have no choice; we are concrete historical beings.

However, I do understand the dangers of introducing the life of an author as if we can then make facile judgements about their scholarly ideas or dismiss them because of *ad hominem* arguments. Reductionism or projecting our own prejudices abound. Yet in the hands of a skilled biographer¹⁷ such as Bortolini, Bellah can be, must be presented complete with "warts and all." The warts attest to his humanity. But more than that, the so-called warts when offered in deep reflection, give us insights to his ideas. This has been demonstrated as true about Bellah and his attempt to live his ideas and have his ideas inform his life. Bortolini's Bellah is

¹⁴ Regard, 401.

¹⁵ Regard, 403–404.

¹⁶ See Matteo Bortolini, "In Search of a Schema in a Joyfully Serious Life, Robert Bellah, The Cold War, Psychoanalysis and Intimate Experimentations," A Rejoinder to the *Civic Sociology on A Joyfully Serious Man in Civic Sociology*. Here Bortolini explains his multi layered approach to interpretation as a focus on "plurality and process rather than on identity and essence."

¹⁷ See Bortolini's description of the conceptual framework with which he worked in the following article he wrote for the History of Sociology and Social Thought Section, ASA, July 2022, No. 34, "A Sociologist Can Write on Anything' or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Biography."

a quintessential example of the need-to-know Bellah through paradox, contradictions, successes, failures and “new articulations.”¹⁸ The long-term value of *AJSM* may be this portrayal of Bellah’s humanity, which will inform and perhaps help any Reader be transformed, as I have been.

It is the response to Bellah’s *magnum opus RIHE* by Doug Mitchell that I argue removes any doubt that Bellah’s writings and how Bortolini narrates Bellah can be transformative. Mitchell is a long-time friend and sharer of the pain of having lost a child to an early death, just as Bellah lost two of his daughters. Mitchell was also assumed to be the future editor of *RIHE* at the University of Chicago Press. Due to disagreements surrounding Bellah’s focus on the negative influence of Aristotle’s splitting theory and ethics, of which Mitchell accused Bellah of intellectual dishonesty, Bellah severed ties with Mitchell as his editor. However, when Mitchell read the published version of *RIHE* by Harvard University Press, Mitchell was able to call it a “very distinguished thing.” He went on to say: reading it was a “transformative journey.” As Bortolini quotes Mitchell: “Freedom is the achievement of your inquiry...and, as the reader realizes the potential in himself that your narrative adumbrates..., freedom is achieved by the reader.”¹⁹

Similarly, as Mitchell was personally affected directly by Bellah’s *REIHE*, “an autobiography,” I am inspired and edified by Bortolini’s Bellah in *AJSM*. It is astute in terms of Bellah’s *oeuvre*, placing it in the social science of the time, and especially his focus on our religious nature. But more than this, it is revealing by sensitively addressing Bellah’s private life and his struggles with and embracing his sexuality with integrity. What Bortolini delivers is how Bellah’s life and work become one. Regardless of one’s view of his ideas, from civil religion and religious evolution to symbolic realism and ethical individualism, one had to find Bellah’s life inspiring by his humanness and his attempt to find ways for his work to inform his life and his life to inform his work. This is Bortolini’s Bellah. This conforms to my Bellah as well, but now with renewed conviction on my own transformative journey, inspired by reading *AJSM*.

In this dialectic between Bortolini and Bellah in the act of writing *AJSM*, it is relevant to inquire about the impact on Bortolini after fourteen years of research. What I discerned early in my correspondence with Bortolini during the last phases of his manuscript, particularly in his efforts to write his “Preface,” led me to believe that what was emerging was a significant impact on Bortolini. What I call “Bellah’s Bortolini.” Having the privilege of reading drafts of Bortolini’s book I often commented in detail and sent my observations to him. I am reminded of my early judgment of Bortolini’s Bellah and Bellah’s Bortolini. Here is what I wrote in response to what was probably the pen-ultimate “Preface” to the book. I quote this to show that I am not engaged in revisionism in my current assessment of *AJSM*.

First, Bellah’s Bortolini:

¹⁸ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 213.

¹⁹ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 335.

“Matteo, I was very emotionally moved by your Preface...As one who thought he knew Bellah, both as an intellectual and as a person, by my personal knowledge and through [drafts] of your biography, I can relate, grasp and appreciate Bob more and sense that in your creation of the book it has become a visceral experience of channeling Bob himself...I believe those who decide to read the book will likely have a foundation of knowledge about Bob and will also be moved in a similar way...I was moved by both the way you tell the story of Bob and even more so by your personal experience with the writing, learning, and living with the whole project. [Your book] is more than a ‘professional’ achievement...I felt as if you did ‘channel’ Bellah in the “Preface.” This channeling both allows you to be generous with Bob’s life and work and, like Bob, to be brutally honest in your observations. I believe this is showing the greatest respect for Bob. It also illustrates something noble and true about you...

Second, Bortolini’s Bellah:

...I like your more nuanced approach to [describing Bellah] : “At the heart of Bellah’s life stood a friction between resting and going, safety and adventure, study and poetry. Instead of constantly moving between the two extremes of his existential pendulum, he spent a disproportionate amount of time on the one position and then, with a willful and impetuous move, decided he was ready to swing.” As you further say so eloquently, “But and herein lay his secret, at that point study and poetry became one, and could never be separated again. What [Wallace] Stevens saw as two as necessary but autonomous poles, Bellah reunited in one single practice. One in which resting and going became indistinguishable.”²⁰

The portion about Stevens and poetry remained in Bortolini’s published book. What was lost in the final version of the “Preface” was this statement and what it alluded to: “This book contains more than a story...I sometimes break the sequential time of narrative by introducing compact images in which I advance insights that are wholly mine. While none of the facts I recount are wanting in *fidelity* [Italics Added] the connections and the reveries of which I write are poetic transfigurations of episodes distant in time.”²¹ What was clear to me at this early reading of his “Preface” was his focus on “fidelity” to Bellah’s “truth.” This is an essential ingredient of an ethical biography according to Regard. In addition, we begin to see, again according to Regard, how Bortolini and Bellah come into “existence simultaneously” through interpretation. There is no “binary, one over against the other.” Again, I admit much of what I will be suggesting is “informed speculation” driven by my own personal relations with both Bortolini and Bellah. However, there is value in exploring the greater generalizability of my perspective as a way to engage others in this conversation.

²⁰ Email exchange between Stelmach and Bortolini, April 7, 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

Channeling Bellah and “Bellah’s Bortolini?”

What further “evidence” is there of Bortolini’s moral stance to write a faithful interpretation of Bellah as best as he could? I suggest he created his own “author-concept,” perhaps following Regard, “a fiction that aspires to the condition of truth.” I think there is evidence that points to Bortolini at least “channeling” Bellah. I describe four examples that make this point, beyond the “Preface” itself: *First*, in a careful reading of *AJSM* one can discern the influence of Bellah on Bortolini, especially the last three chapters of *AJSM*, which Bortolini has acknowledged. *Second*, Bortolini’s published personal “Epilogue” to the book. *Third*, in Bortolini’s recent review of a book on civil religion, which he gives his best characterization of Bellah’s epistemic stance in life. And *fourth*, perhaps most significant to me, though this maybe a projection²² of my view of Bellah’s Bortolini, are the answers he gave to questions at the Roundtable on *AJSM* at the American Academy of Religion last November 2022 in Denver, Colorado. After discussing these examples, I will describe how I, the Reader, has been affected. This is the final element of how an ethical biography continues to spread its demand for fidelity to others. Thus, from my standpoint, this is why *AJSM* will continue to be of interest for a long time to come.

A Few Distinctions Are Important Before Detailing the Evidence

Throughout the writing process, while Bellah was still alive, Bortolini recounts how “only once” did Bellah ask him to “take away something from a paper” of his. But “never,” according to Bortolini, did Bellah ask him “to change anything or revise some view [he] had written in a paper.” Further, in Bortolini’s rejoinder to a group of scholars commenting on *AJSM* in *Civic Sociology*, Bortolini wrote that Bellah never questioned his “interpretations, even when he disagreed entirely with what [he] wrote.”²³ Bellah was confident in Bortolini as a scholar and as an honest interpreter. This confidence gave Bortolini independence to interpret Bellah with intellectual freedom.²⁴

Next, what do I mean by “channeling Bellah.” I realize this can mean two things. First, it means that Bortolini understood Bellah’s work and life in a profoundly deep way. Thus, he was able to see the world through Bellah’s eyes, *metaphorically*, “walking in Bellah’s shoes” and *actually* at times. In a poignant recounting, Bortolini talks about taking time to visit Bellah’s former home in Canada when Bellah was studying at McGill University and also of living in Bellah’s house in Berkeley after Bellah died, organizing his papers. These are examples of visceral experiences that helped Bortolini gain insight and empathy for Bellah’s work and life project.

²² After much reflection on the writing of this article, I realize that I need to examine my need to read into Bortolini’s Bellah and Bellah’s Bortolini the possibility that I have projected much of my own relationship to Bellah. That is, where at times I am not sure this is my idea or Bellah’s idea.

²³ Bortolini, “In Search of a Schema in a Joyfully Serious Life.”

²⁴ Email, April 7, 2020.

Second, and here I may be on less solid ground, yet it is a position that needs to be explored, “channeling Bellah” suggests that Bortolini’s profound encounter with and appreciation of Bellah changed Bortolini. In what way?

The First Item of Evidence, Writing the Last Chapter of *AJSM*

In an answer to the question, “How did the writing of the *AJSM* have an effect and influence your work? Did it change you?” Bortolini acknowledged that he “identified with Bellah, a lot,” particularly in writing his last Chapter, “Nothing is Ever Lost.” In his own words: “What you read in the last chapter, about *Religion in Human Evolution (RIHE)* is much what I’ve [Bortolini] tried to accomplish with my book. I did not want to tell a straight story. No life is straight. A lot of things and particulars are meaningless, and it is good for them to be. Contradictions and paradoxes are everywhere, dead ends, moments of bliss, breakthroughs and breakdowns. Trying to box everything in a single, straight theory is a mistake. You have to tell stories and stories are ambiguous, and they leave so much to interpretation.”²⁵ It is clear by this statement that the impact on Bortolini is in terms of Bellah’s “intellectual attitude” and “pluralistic method.” Bortolini is also clear that the impact was less on the specific content of Bellah’s ideas. Yet, I have wondered if in fact some of Bortolini’s own ideas were also changed. One has to look to other articles by Bortolini, such as the rejoinder for the *Civic Sociology* symposium to get a sense of how Bellah and Bortolini differed. This current symposium may provide a vehicle for further discernment about these differences. My goal in this article is to highlight evidence of Bortolini’s channeling of Bellah in terms of both meanings of the concept of “channeling” as clarified above. First, Bortolini’s ability to incorporate Bellah’s scholarly attitude and pluralistic method.²⁶ Second, I am interested in ways that Bortolini may have been fundamentally changed both as a person and a scholar. I am aware that some of what I offer is conjecture, but again I hope “informed conjecture.” Of course, Bortolini may be the only person to answer this question.

I believe the last chapter of *AJSM*, “Nothing is Ever Lost,” is a *tour de force* in understanding Bellah’s *magnum opus* in the context of Bellah’s long history of discussing religion and evolution. It should be the starting point for anyone wanting to read and understand *RIHE*. In a revealing passage that illustrates Bortolini’s Bellah, this is a Bellah that is consonant with what Bortolini wrote above, he states:

“What reviewers would later call Bellah’s eclecticism was in fact a plural (and pluralistic) framework designed to tackle a number of intricate problems without reducing their ambivalence—to reflect upon contradictions through contradiction. In this sense, the absence of a univocal demarcation of key concepts like ‘religion’ and the ‘axial age’ was the outcome of a conscious, principled

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ I would like to explore this question in further conversations with Bortolini. What is the relationship between being informed by someone’s method and attitude and their specific substantive ideas. It is hard to imagine in my case being informed by Bellah’s vision that this does not translate to following him on his view of evolution and the axial age, for example.

choice: both objects were so elusive, so diverse, so unstable that a definitional straitjacket would have destroyed the whole enterprise and, probably, the objects themselves.”²⁷

It is understandable that at times to faithfully explain Bellah, Bortolini had to become Bellah. This could also create a state of empathy or at least sympathy for what Bellah was trying to accomplish. At times it almost feels as if there is a merging of the Narrated Author and the Narrating Author, a dynamic suggested by Regard. Of course, there are other times that it was clear that Bortolini was skeptical of Bellah’s positions. A case in point was in a recent lecture in Walla Walla Washington. Bortolini “argued that Bellah’s method/attitude can be risky because it is most clear when one-sided positions became debated and discussed, while the most ambiguous and ambivalent are too difficult to criticize.” Bortolini was also aware “that from other points of view ambivalence/ambiguity on [Bellah’s] part is interpreted as just ‘bad sociology.’” My assumption is that Bortolini is still on Bellah’s side here, yet not without his own ambivalence.²⁸

However, for me the most significant illustration of how well Bortolini has captured Bellah is in the last chapter of *AJSM*, summarizing Bellah’s axial age cases. This is in a long paragraph. After Bortolini suggests Bellah’s treatment of the axial cases is an example of “post-post-modern singularity” he states²⁹:

...if the four cases were so different that they could not be seen ‘as versions of a single breakthrough’ any general definition became a mere placeholder...’ in our quest to understand what makes the axial age axial...we need to look, surely, at the emergence of theory wherever it arises, but we must also look at the possible transformations of older cultural forms into new configurations, and social consequences of such transformations.’³⁰

Bortolini, follows this quote of Bellah with a long paragraph with his version of Bellah’s cases. He begins with: “the search thus moved to locating what *I* [Italics Added] would call each case’s ‘axial shade.’” Bortolini presents his view of “the shade” for each of the cases, Israel, Greece, China and India. Bortolini is faithful to Bellah’s position. But perhaps more can be said. Has Bortolini internalized Bellah’s pluralistic view and epistemic orientation to understand that the axial age was “so elusive, so diverse, so unstable that a definitional straitjacket” would have obscured the reality of how a theoretic breakthrough might have occurred? If so, this might be a substantive point of agreement.

Bortolini’s treatment of Bellah’s notion of “religion” was also addressed with profound insight and perhaps sympathy. I will treat this below for it directly relates to my role as the Reader of *AJSM*. At this point my evidence, beyond what Bortolini

²⁷ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 339.

²⁸ See Bortolini’s chapter, “Introduction: On Being a Scholar and an Intellectual” It is this chapter that suggests that Bellah’s legacy will not be his various ideas but his vocation as a particular kind of intellectual and scholar. This of course is the Bellah who Bortolini agrees with and had an impact on him.

²⁹ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 342.

³⁰ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 342.

himself acknowledged, can still be seen as conjecture and interpretation. Yet, it is precisely this interpretation that allows the Reader to delve into a new understanding of Bortolini and Bellah in order to scrutinize one's own views and be transformed by an ethical biography.

The Second Item of Evidence, Bortolini's Epilogue

As has been noted by other reviewers in Bortolini's "Epilogue: The Joy of Serious Life," we see a significant moment when Bortolini enters the book in a personal way. Joan Scott, of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, in her review of *AJSM* also focuses on the "Epilogue":

Bortolini's comments in the epilogue on his choice of a title for the book explain well what we have come to learn in the previous pages: this was a man for whom the pursuit of ideas—hard thought, playfully engaged—constituted a joyful pursuit. The seeming irony of the juxtaposition of "joyful" and "serious" was not, in Bellah's case, the least bit ironic.³¹

In the "Epilogue" Bortolini also recounts recommending a book for Bellah to read and narrates a time when they were together in Heidelberg on Bellah's last trip to Europe. What do we make of this presence of Bortolini in the biography?

I offer two observations. First, the recommending of a book to Bellah meant that he knew Bellah well and was well attuned to Bellah's efforts to write a sequel to *RIHE* about modernity and evolution. It was a "bull's eye" recommendation: Peter Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life*,³² had a profound impact on Bellah. In an email to his *Habits of the Heart* co-authors, Richard Madsen, Bill Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton he wrote that "It descended" on him "like tongues of fire." He said it took him "nearly an hour to recover." He "just sat there overcome." It was not unusual for Bellah to exhibit dramatic responses to ideas and the world around him. Phil Gorski put it this way: "If Bellah preferred to swim against the current, he could also be moved by waves of the moment...he was a man of passionate—and sometime passing—enthusiasms."³³

But maybe this book was more. It was a book that Bellah read just weeks before his heart surgery. It had such poignancy that in a draft of the "Introduction" to a forthcoming book by his *Habits* co-authors they open with this same story.³⁴ Bortolini had captured Bellah's state of mind with this book. Sloterdijk like Bellah had come to the conclusion that modernity had reached a point of self-destruction if we did not change. Sloterdijk's message was also about a hope and passion that even in such an intractable situation we in fact could change.

³¹ Joan Scott, "Comments on Matteo Bortolini's A Joyfully Serious Man: The Life of Robert Bellah," *Civic Sociology*, <https://doi.org/10.1525/cs.2022.35736>.

³² Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Antropotechnics*, translated by Weiland Hoban, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

³³ Gorski, 154.

³⁴ See Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton, in forthcoming, *Challenging Modernity* (tentative title), New York: Columbia University Press.

Also, in the “Epilogue” is Bortolini’s account of his visit to Heidelberg with Bellah indicating a very personal and respectful relationship to Bellah. This was where Max Weber taught. It was where Bellah’s mentor, Talcott Parsons studied. Bortolini gives the account of being on a tour of the University when the tour guide gave a summary of Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Bellah remained in respectful silence not giving a hint that “he had ever heard of Weber before.”³⁵ This response seems to impress Bortolini, capturing something special about his understanding of Bellah. What was it?

This story perhaps is given more meaning in the context of a previous event on the same trip to Heidelberg. In view of an old “house where Max Weber used to live and Talcott Parsons had talked with his widow, Marianne about translating *The Protestant Ethic*,” Bellah stated that he was “just three hands from Weber.” Bortolini asked what he meant. Bellah said, “it means that my hand has shaken Talcott’s hand, which had shaken Marianne’s hand who had obviously shaken Max Weber’s. That makes me three hands from Weber.” Bortolini “laughed, reaching out for Bellah’s hand, ‘now I am four hands from uncle Max.’”³⁶

The Third Item of Evidence, Channeling Bellah’s Epistemic Stance

This illustration of “channeling Bellah” comes from a recent review Bortolini wrote on the book edited by R. H. Williams, R. Haberski Jr. and P Goff, *Civil Religion, Religion and the American Nation in the Twenty-First Century*. It is here that Bortolini provides a defense of sorts for why Bellah’s treatment of slavery and genocide may have been “far from satisfactory,” especially when judged by “critical whiteness theory.” Bortolini judged Bellah’s position not to be tied to a “loyalty to civil religion” rather in Bortolini’s words:

...it was the outcome of a carefully (if perhaps inadequately) constructed *epistemic stance* [Italics Added], and not the result of bad faith, sloppiness, or hidden political agendas. As I made clear in *A Joyfully Serious Man*, the Berkeley sociologist was rather conscious of his own position as a white bourgeois man long before adopting his trademark “symbolic realism.” In the 1970s, as he drew closer to German hermeneutics, Bellah pointed out that every interpretation starts from an irredeemably situated position, one that is strongly influenced by unseen and unmediated traditions. The hermeneutic circle, in his understanding, consisted precisely in bringing to light these deep symbolic foundations and subject them to a critique that, however, could never be “fully enlightening,” since there is no direct, unmediated access to reality “as it is.” This kind of “social psychoanalysis” (as Bellah’s former student Jeffrey C. Alexander would later call it) would help in illuminating our shared reality without thinking that our “social unconscious”—that is, our individual and collective rootedness and partiality—could ever be fully superseded. In this

³⁵ Bortolini, *AJSM* 360–361.

³⁶ Bortolini, *AJSM* 350.

sense, not only was Bellah aware of his own positioning, but he was also ready to embrace the limits entailed by his situatedness.³⁷

I reproduce this response in its entirety for I believe this treatment of Bellah's *epistemic* viewpoint is an important perspective to also understand Bellah. Bortolini can represent Bellah so well because he has mastered, "being Bellah," or at least he was being deeply faithful to Bellah. This is a clear example of Bortolini's agreement with Bellah's intellectual attitude.

The Fourth Item of Evidence, Bortolini at the Bellah Roundtable

The final illustration is an event at which I witnessed Bortolini channeling Bellah was the Roundtable on *AJSM* at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting in Denver, November 2022 that included, Mark Juergensmeyer, Phil Gorski, Anna Sun and Jeff Alexander, each a close colleague of Bellah or a former student. As the Presider who helped organize the panel, at one point I suggested that Bortolini's answers to the panel's questions were sounding very Bellah-like. I do not remember the specific question he was answering, but he did not refute my observation. This reminded me of a private conversation with Bortolini in which he articulated a similar version of his understanding of Bellah's epistemic stance, similar to what he wrote in the above review of the civil religion book. To summarize a long conversation: we are bound by our evolutionary location, both biologically and culturally yet we have the reflexive capabilities to gain some type of perspective, or transcendence, on our situatedness. This can be accomplished by the resources given us through second order thinking, symbols, narrative and rituals. Yet we do not have the ability to be totally outside our given inheritance. Certainly, critique and observation are not enough, we have to participate in the givenness for responsible action. Again, we have no choice. We cannot live outside the cave, we live and work inside the cave, with some momentary insights that we hope that can also come from responsible action in the cave.

This perspective was the freedom that Doug Mitchell found in the reading of Bellah. It is the freedom I find in reading of *AJSM*, especially in regard to religion.

The Ethics of the "Reader" for Any Biography?

I end this article on the final element of Regard's notion of ethics in biographic reading. This is when the Reader reacts to how the Text brings one into contact with both authors, Narrating and Narrated. This was my primary motivation to read the biography. A biography does not end with the authors or the Text. It implicates the Reader in the ethical drama. What does the new contact with and understanding of Bellah and Bortolini mean to me the Reader; how am I transformed?

³⁷ Matteo Bortolini, *Book Review of Civil Religion Today* by R. H. Williams and R. Haberski, New York: New York University Press, 2021 *Journal of Contemporary Religion*.

Before answering this personal response, one might ask: how generalizable is Regard's focus on the inclusion of the Reader in the multiple moments of ethical engagement that arise in biographical reading? Though my article is a personal response to *AJSM*, I do want to suggest that biographies in general can and should have an impact on the Reader as Regard is suggesting. A reviewer of the biographies of two conservative Christian leaders in *Christianity Today* writes: "...any such project [as a biography] is a judgment—upon the subject most obviously, upon the biographer himself and any who were associated with the subject...to read such a [biography] is at some level to become involved in the judgment. The reader is invited to grapple with the questions raised by the subject's life." This observation might suggest that the Reader must have some knowledge or at least sensitivity to the subject of the Biography. However, I want to maintain that a Reader in general should be open, at least through self-reflection, to join in the interpretive process.

Before I became acquainted with Regard's article, I wrote some reviews of *AJSM* for local newspapers. My reviews had similar accolades for Bortolini's book as have been written by other reviewers. However, in each case I kept coming around to gratitude for two major features of the book. First, the fact that it was not just an intellectual biography but included the full life of Bellah, which I characterized as inspiring. The second was how the book forced me to look at myself. It was a mirror, but much more. It gave me a gaze on myself but with an imperative to take greater responsibility for my world.

On the first point, I took the lead from Zadie Smith when she wrote about what is good fiction. It must be "suspicious of any theory of the self that appeared to be largely founded on what can be seen with the human eye, that is, those parts of ourselves that are material, manifest, and clearly visible in a crowd. Fiction—at least the kind that was any good—was full of doubt, self-doubt above all."³⁸ I applied this to writing a biography. I realized that what Bortolini gave me met her standard. Also, in another of my early reviews a couple of years ago I wrote: "Perhaps, for some it might be easy to diminish Bellah's achievements when we are privy to what might be Bellah's 'warts and all.' Or better said by Zadie Smith, understanding the self beyond what is only the 'material, manifest and clearly visible in a crowd,' his public *persona*. Joan Scott, a colleague of Clifford Geertz at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study, in the Social Science section that Bellah was to occupy with Geertz, perhaps says it best when she wrote her review for the *Civic Sociology* symposium on *AJSM*:

What distinguishes this book for me is the way Bortolini has integrated the personal and the professional aspects of Bellah's life. The revelation in his diaries and letters of his suppressed and then actualized homosexual desire becomes an occasion neither for voyeuristic treatment (as some biographers might have done) nor for suppression (an alternative biographic strategy). Instead, Bortolini weaves the psychic hardships and desire that marked the

³⁸ Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," *New York Review of Books*, October 24, 2019.

man into the story of his scholarly career. Bellah's reading (in 1968) of Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body* helped him figure out how to make sense of and act upon his erotic longings, and it spurred "a great storm of creativity," at once personal and intellectual. Bortolini weaves the strands together effortlessly. Personal loss, friendship, love, and grief are neither afterthoughts nor drivers of this narrative of a life. Rather, we come to appreciate how the life and the mind worked together—sometimes in conflict, sometimes in sync. In a standard intellectual biography, life is often the background for thought. In this book, there is no distinction between them.³⁹

I believe, with a self-reflective view, we gain greater respect for Bellah through Bortolini's narrative. Because in doing so, we gain greater acceptance of ourselves and our own mistakes and challenges. I also want to believe that Bellah would have wanted his full story to be told. His two living daughters have agreed.

But this leads me to my final point of how the reading of *AJSM* can be, should be, transformative for the Reader. Again, reflecting on what I wrote before reading Regard's defense of biographies-cum-ethical, I wrote:

The reader is not just a distant consumer of the story. This biography allows the reader to be an active participant in the unfolding of the Bellah story. It can be a transformative experience where we learn about ourselves. The biography is a mirror. It is in the end an experience about our life and meaning. For the reader, Bellah's story illuminates our story. We have lived or have been aware of all the similar struggles in our own lives over the span of Bellah's [life] from the late 1920's through his death in 2013. But Bellah lives on through the gift of Bortolini's biography, challenging and restoring our sacred identities.⁴⁰

For me it was Bellah's approach to religion, or the practice of the religious life to be specific, that is most transformative about Bortolini's Bellah. Bortolini is able to bring to life the complex role of religion in Bellah's whole life and work.

Bortolini captures Bellah's reluctance to put religion in a "definition straitjacket." He reports Bellah quoting Nietzsche "you can't have a definition of something that is historical." He said that his definition "is not Geertz or Durkheim" but "his whole book [*RIHE*], all the cases."⁴¹ This is not an easy task to make Bellah's view of religion come alive in concrete terms. However, Bortolini in his faithful writing about Bellah, provides one of the best treatments of Bellah's meaning and role of religion in culture and religious practice. Paul Tillich provided Bellah the rational conceptualization of religion, allowing him to restore his faith, which Bellah articulated in "symbolic realism."⁴² Bortolini quite rightly emphasizes that for Bellah religion was more than a rational understanding. It had to be lived, practiced in community. Bellah refused to embrace a notion that all religions were the same. His pluralism

³⁹ Scott, "Comments on Matteo Bortolini's A Joyfully Serious Man."

⁴⁰ Harlan Stelmach, unpublished review for local Newspaper.

⁴¹ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 340.

⁴² For Tillich's influence on Bellah and Niebuhr, See Harlan Stelmach, "Toward A Constructive 'Religious Realism,' Robert Bellah and Reinhold Niebuhr" in Lon Weaver, ed. *Applied Christian Ethics, Foundations, Economics, Justice and Politics*, Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2014.

allowed him to see each historic religion as helping to shed light in different ways on the fundamental notion that “religion itself was true.”⁴³

What Tillich had done for Bellah, Bellah had provided for a whole generation of religious scholars and practitioners, a legitimacy in our pursuit of a religious self-understanding. Reading *AJSM* I better understood what was at times only an intuitive sense of Bellah’s view of religion and why it spoke to me. His approach often perplexed even his closest colleagues. One such event was when religious scholar Huston Smith in a public event pressed Bellah on his definition of religion. Bellah refused.⁴⁴

Bortolini’s Bellah and Bellah’s Bortolini challenged me to remember these episodes and refine my commitment to my religious self-understanding and my religious practice. It also informed how I looked at my scholarly work on religion. Bellah was clear that the *study* of religion, that is treating religion as a subject (or object), was an “anti-religious” stance. In his courses on religion, he made a point to say that “teaching about religion” was anti-religious. He said he had to “teach religion” before teaching his students *about* religion. This insight though simple on the surface is the product a whole architecture of concepts that grew out of Bellah’s life-long experience with respect to religion, avoiding one specific definition. According to Bortolini, Bellah wanted to understand “‘ what religion is and what religion does and then worry about its consequences for the world of daily life.’—as Max Weber would say, the definition would come at the end or maybe would not come at all.”⁴⁵

I return to Regard, and to me as the Reader in my relationship to Bellah (the Narrated Author—A2) and Bortolini (the Narrating Author—A1). According to Regard, the Reader reacts directly to both authors whose existence has been mediated by the Text. This relationship also “produces” the Reader through the interpretation of both authors. I the Reader find myself in a new place. Regard calls this an “interpellation that forces the reader to reconsider her own life.” This happens because the result of the relationship between the two authors produces a new interpretation of both in the biography. I the Reader encounter both Bellah and Bortolini in a new light. This forces me to “respond by a recontextualization of my own ‘truth.’” This new interpellation, according to Regard, “commands” me the Reader “to deploy a fidelity” from this new place. Hence this is an ethical moment for the Reader in my reading of *AJSM*. This moment redefines my concept of the author, in Foucault’s term, “authority.” According to Regard, it also has me redefining my “own concept of myself and setting me in motion.”⁴⁶ What does this mean? My new stance forces me “to be true to the other but also” to myself. In entering the result of who Bellah and Bortolini become in their dialectic, I have to reconsider how this new reality may change me.

⁴³ See Gorski, 154, for a succinct statement of Bellah’s view of religion.

⁴⁴ During a Dominican University of California gathering to discuss Bellah’s chapter on “Religion and Evolution” in manuscript form, circa 2009.

⁴⁵ Bortolini, *AJSM*, 339.

⁴⁶ Regard, 408.

I was aware of this change as I wrote the above passages. It was a struggle to remain focused on what the Text did to change Bellah and Bortolini without falling back on my previous view of both authors. The discipline forced me to refine my views on a number of key issues. First, it gave me greater appreciation for the epistemic stance attributed to both authors. How do I live in this situated reality? Second, it challenged my commitment to participate more fully in the life of my religious community. Third, and perhaps most relevant, it informed my efforts to create a permanent lectureship to honor Robert Bellah. A lectureship that could help promote a deeper understanding of Bellah for future generation of scholars of religion so they become greater participants on a path that will take them beyond Bellah and *AJSM* to new ideas. Of course, more can be said here but this is a start. I knew *AJSM* was more than just a story or just a presentation of grand ideas. It became imperative to engage at the level of ethics and fidelity to the truth that I experienced in reading the biography.

Generalizable to Life in General, “The Human Project”?

What more can we learn about this experience of ethical engagement with these two authors and Regard’s notion of an ethical biography? How does this relate to everyday life? How does it relate to other attempts to interpret with fidelity the lives of others?

To do this I go to popular culture to illustrate Rigard’s view of the ethics of reading a text, if you can call a review of a movie in the *New York Review of Books* “popular culture.” I think this popular illustration helps us understand how we in normal daily parlance might function with a more ethical approach to “interpreting” others and changing ourselves in everyday activities whether in personal relations, or scholarship in various fields.

Again, I look to Zadie Smith for help. In her review of the recent movie, *Tar*, Smith analyzes the main character from generational standpoints. As a self-aware Generation Xer Smith recognized characteristics in Tar the main character, who she also sees as a Gen Xer, that are not ethical. Tar uses other people for her own benefit, hence the title of the article, “The Instrumentalist.” What makes this an ethical review is that Smith recognizes that as she penetrates the difference between Gen Xers and Millennials, she begins to better understand herself. She recognizes herself in Tar. She recognizes how she has become an uncritical, self-satisfied Gen Xer. This review is more than an analytical understanding of the movie, its limitations and the character flaws of the main character. It becomes a vehicle for self-discovery. As cited above, Smith sees good fiction when it goes deep into the lives of us flawed human beings. In her review of *Tar*, she lives up to a better standard by turning the spotlight back on the reviewer, herself.⁴⁷

What better way to evaluate Bortolini’s Bellah and Bellah’s Bortolini importance to us than to engage in self-discovery. Both author’s give us this opportunity to do so. My hope is that *AJSM* will be able to continue to motivate us to delve deeply into the many issues that Bellah’s life has given us directly through his work and through his interpretation by Bortolini. However, what remains, for me is that readers, lay

and scholars, will see the gift that Bortolini has given us is an ethical biography which will generate a transformative experience, if we are willing to “pay attention” as Bellah would often say. Transformation assumes that we must change our lives.

One final question of generalizability might be asked: Does an interpreter need to have similar values to be able to join the ethical engagement of interpretation of others. Does the Reader have to have channeled Bellah to be able to be transformed by *A/SM*? Does the author of a biography have to deeply engage with their subject that they have an ethical awareness that transforms them, either because they are inspired or perhaps humbled by their own shortcomings?

I think not! But I hope so! Just as Zadie Smith suggests that there is good fiction and bad fiction. There will be good biographies and limited biographies. Readers will bring to their reading their own views, some, maybe many, will miss the invitation for personal impact. The value of a biography is that the invitation is much stronger than other academic writings. *A Joyfully Serious Man* offers this invitation.

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