

Episode: *Ethics Talk: Why Comics Should Be in Ethics Journals*

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[cheery theme music]

TIM HOFF: Welcome to *Ethics Talk*, the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics* podcast on ethics in health and health care. I'm your host, Tim Hoff.

When the arts are integrated into health professions education, many people might expect that art to be so called high art, so not, for example, art that would appear on the cartoonish, brightly colored page of the comics section of the Sunday newspaper, right? The reality, however, is that comics have long been used to explore serious content in health care: patients' illness experiences, clinicians struggling to communicate with patients about fraught topics like death, sex, and all of the troubles that human beings have just because they have bodies, even how health care intersects with social issues like racism and public policy.

On this episode of *Ethics Talk*, we'll be talking with Michaela Chan, a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She's interested in how visual and narrative content work together in comics in ways uniquely suited to explore ethical and aesthetic dimensions of colonialism, climate change, and that ask what is life? Michela is also a former Art of Medicine intern with *The Journal*. Michaela, good to talk to you. Good to have you back. Thanks for being on the podcast. [music fades out]

MICHAELA CHAN: Thank you, Tim. It's good to be here.

HOFF: So, to begin with, tell us about yourself and about your creative work.

CHAN: Yeah. So, when I think about this question, I think first to my family, and I think that has a lot to do with my interest in understanding how people make decisions.

HOFF: Mm.

CHAN: And my family is a big source of influence. And so, picking apart how I make choices, I think it's fair to my reader, my audience, to sort of tell them where I'm coming from, which is Rochester, New York, where I lived until I moved to Chicago last year to attend SAIC.

CHAN: My family is big.

CHAN: I'm the fifth sibling, and maybe because I was the fifth sibling, it felt like my upbringing was pretty hands off.

HOFF: Hmm.

CHAN: Strangely, it was also very stimulating and engaging and supportive. All those things continue to this day. Maybe I'm still being brought up by them, [laughs] even though I'm halfway across the country.

HOFF: Mm.

CHAN: Yeah. So, my dad is an emergency room physician, and my mom is a family doctor. Or, as I used to say when I was a kid, she is a check-up doctor.

BOTH: [laugh]

CHAN: And if anyone knows any family docs, they know that their work follows them home. They're on call.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

CHAN: And sort of as a kid, I just, like their work was...their work was present when they were present. My dad, my dad is from Hong Kong. We grew up visiting New York City's Manhattan, mostly Chinatown. And my dad would always say that school was where I was supposed to learn how to learn.

HOFF: Mm.

CHAN: So, that's also fairly hands off!

HOFF: [chuckles]

CHAN: It's like, well—

HOFF: You figure it out.

CHAN: —you know, do whatever. Yeah, figure it out. Like, learn something. So, I studied biology as an undergrad. And maybe somewhere in my mind I was like, oh, I'll be a doctor because none of my siblings had done it. So, I was like, oh, well, one of us ought to go into medicine, I guess. [laughs]

But my junior year of college was 2015 to 2016, and I was living in a gentrifying neighborhood next to the university. Trump was the Republican nominee, and I was very confused about whether or not I'm white. That summer, I was a camp counselor and became fast friends with another person whose mom is white, and we sort of were figuring out what that meant to us. And so, I took my undergraduate studies and sort of made a left turn and applied for a Take 5 scholarship in American Race Relations.

HOFF: Mm.

CHAN: This is a program that the University of Rochester has to do another year of undergraduate study in a program of your design. So, I took some history courses, English courses, religion, anthropology, studio art. And yeah, I started to understand how storytelling was super powerful.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

CHAN: At the end of the Take 5 year, people were invited to make a poster about what they had learned in their scholarship year, but you could also be artistic about it. So, I printed out two flags—a flag of the United States and a flag of China—and wrote on the face of those flags, “The winner writes the narrative. The narrative writes the winner until, until, until, until.”

HOFF: Mm.

CHAN: Mm. So, this question was about me, [laughs] and I realize I didn’t really talk about my work, but I make comics!

BOTH: [laugh]

HOFF: Sure. So, let’s talk about that. So, your bio mentions that your comics are about colonialism, climate change, and ask the question, what is life? Since that’s how you choose to represent your work, what does that mean?

CHAN: I mean it in the sense that scientists don’t often agree on what life is or how that question can be made useful to us. So, for example, scientists might say that life needs to be a set of chemical reactions, or life needs to undergo Darwinian evolution by reproduction. Or some scientists might say that life is just a system that organizes information. And that definition gets really interesting because a system that organizes information, well, what is information? It’s anything that reduces uncertainty.

I think the other thing that’s interesting to me about the question, what is life, is that it kind of is a question that reverberates into bigger structures like communities and how communities interact with each other. And also, can life be a lineage?

HOFF: Hmm. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

CHAN: So, when I think about the proposal that life can be a lineage, I also want to think about life, units of life that are smaller than the organism. So, for example, a cell is a unit of life, and a cell, as we know from animal experiments that harvest cells and grow them in incubators, can live independently of the organism and live after the organism is gone, incinerated or whatever. So, when I think about life being a lineage, I also think about how a cell can be a life, but a cell is also part of this bigger life called an organism. So, when I think about life being a lineage, I think about lineages being part of, I guess many, many lineages, which is what forms communities and societies and civilizations. I think there’s a lot of commonality between how lives try to survive at a cellular level and sort of at a person-to-person level and a civilization-to-civilization level.

HOFF: As we’ve talked about over the course of your internship, and in fact, you brought this up in your response to the first question, much of your work questions how people fill health information gaps, how they gather health information, and how they determine the value of that information, that is, how they use that information to make decisions. Why is that a topic that health professionals can learn about in a comic rather than just by reading an article, for example?

CHAN: So, I think a comic immediately disrupts your expectations when you’re opening a scientific journal. I think people who open up a web page, and they’re expecting a discourse like an academic discourse on a topic, they expect a block of text. So, a comic has this sort of head start in terms of piquing interest. Another thing that a comic has that

prose doesn't is this ability to show bodies and objects in space. I think a lot of medical ethics that people are considering have to do with the structures that define patient/provider relationships. What does it mean that an exam table has a gutter to the left and right of it, when normally, something that's like a bed might be all the way up against the wall? What does it mean that an exam room is tiny? I think a comic lets you see the space. But unlike a moving picture, a film, you can take as much time as you want to meditate on what that spatial arrangement means.

HOFF: So, do you consider when you approach comics—and as we'll talk about a little bit later, your comics are not without prose, without words, or even sometimes poetry—but you approach them primarily as a visual medium. Would that be true?

CHAN: I think that the approach always depends on the idea. I think the thing that's consistent about how these comics start is I encounter something in the world, and maybe that encounter provides the bridge between some other thoughts I've had in my head. And there's an idea, and the way that that idea gets shown outside my head, the way that that happens successfully has to do with how I'll begin a comic. So, maybe the idea makes sense if it's somewhat imprecise, and then maybe its first iteration is as poetry. Sometimes the comic or the idea is irrepressible, and it's very expressive, and that's when it comes out as, like, a little song to sing.

HOFF: Mm.

CHAN: Mm. And then I've been finding lately, as I've been doing more journalism at SAIC, a lot of these ideas, after having the idea, I just have to research. I just have to get online and open a book and figure out what other people are saying before I know how to write about something. Yeah.

HOFF: Right. Mmhmm. So, it sounds like you don't really consider comics or really anything you do as its own sort of siloed practice. It sounds like an idea could turn into a song. It could turn into a comic. It could turn into a piece of graphic journalism, which is a phrase that I only heard for the first time looking through some of your more recent work for the SAIC newspaper.

CHAN: Mmhmm.

HOFF: The question that comes up is, what does one form of expression add to another? So, for example, when you're doing both graphic representation and journalism or comics and ethical inquiry, how do you balance the trade-offs, which I imagine are inevitable due to space constraints or legibility between mediums, and find which part of the visual is necessary and which part of the narrative is necessary, for example?

CHAN: Yeah. Yeah. So, I won't claim to have the best answer because I think I'm growing in public. That's a phrase I learned recently that pertains to people who publish regularly as they're learning how to do something.

HOFF: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

CHAN: So, I'm learning how to do graphic journalism. And I think the piece you're referring to is *Germany Canceled Nuclear Energy*.

HOFF: Yeah, yep.

CHAN: Is that right? Yeah. So, with that piece, I thought that presenting it in a graphics journalism form would work because in that story, there are opportunities to show a bar graph. So, that's already a diagram that you'll have. But a bar graph doesn't really capture human suffering in the way that an illustration does. And I think I have to say that capturing human suffering is somewhat necessary in a story like the consequences for changing energy policy and also the consequences of the fossil fuel dependency that we've maintained for many decades. I think comics, much like a photo, a photo essay or a photojournalism work, sort of show the human side of things. Mm, but it also is matched so well already to a pictorial representation of the data, namely a bar graph. Yeah.

HOFF: Mmhmm, mmhmm. In addition to the comics and the graphic narratives that you've done for the Journal, you've also done article illustrations, which, if listeners visit our site, those are the single images at the top of every page, but especially each article page. These kinds of images, I would imagine, require an even more lopsided tradeoff between the narrative aspect and the visual. And in fact, they often require you to leave the sort of text-based inquiry behind entirely. So, can you talk a little bit about the challenges of exploring ethical concepts in a purely visual medium like that, and why you think it's important to have good visuals in a health care ethics journal?

CHAN: Making the article illustrations was especially challenging when I wasn't sure how to take an abstract idea and make it visual. I guess when I make an illustration, the way I think about drawing is so embedded inside a sequence, inside a narrative that making a single image felt so difficult.

HOFF: Mmhmm. Right. It seems like that is a sort of an almost intrinsic part of your creative process. And that even in your single article illustrations, which folks will have a chance to see in August, is when a couple of those are coming out, you managed to integrate a little bit of narrative movement even in those. For example, there's one of a kite, which you can sort of clearly tell the story of this kite having been flown, and then it has come crashing to the ground. So, even in these single article illustrations, it seems like your inclination is to include some sort of narrative movement or story.

CHAN: Yes. Right, right. And I think the other thing that this floating image offers us is just something to remember in the way that a blob of text won't let you remember. I think there are, I think we all have these memories that revisit us of maybe like the sun coming through and hitting the rug of your childhood home.

HOFF: Mm.

CHAN: And we have that image in our head. And we don't know why, but it revisits us, and with it, are pulled along all these other associations. So, when I've been making the article images, I have had that in my mind, like, how can I make something that will let readers be able to recall this article?

HOFF: To wrap up here, what advice would you have for other artists who are interested in using their art, whatever it is—if it's comics, if it's illustrations, if it's sculpture or whatever—as a method of ethical inquiry?

CHAN: I think that the advice I give to other artists trying to accomplish what they do—and I'll address the specific ethical inquiry part next—but for artists generally trying to make work, I think a key thing to do is just make a lot of stuff. There's a couple of reasons that I

say that. One has to do with my work in a lab and being told over and over again by my supervisor, sort of as a condolence, but also as a like throw your hands up in the air in frustration that experiments fail 60 to 80% of the time in biology, in a biology lab. And [chuckles] I don't actually think about my studio as a biology lab, but in some ways, is that so inappropriate? [laughs]

HOFF: Sure. You're taking a thought and seeing if it works in the way that you think it did.

CHAN: Right, right. And doing that, and doing that a lot, because only some of the time will you get something that makes sense and is good. And I say that, and of course, the flip side to that is to embrace failure, to really open your arms to it because it ought to happen.

And then to address the ethical inquiry part of this question, philosophers often illustrate their inquiries with a metaphor, if not a parable. For example, Peter Singer has this thought experiment that he illustrates with this parable that is, if a child is drowning in a shallow pond, and you're right there, it makes a lot of sense to go over and pluck the child out. And it's not a lot of hassle for you. Maybe your jeans get a little wet, but that's not a big deal, especially when you save the drowning child. I think a lot of philosophy makes use of these very visual, character-driven plots to say what's going on. So, I think it's really natural for artists to use ideas in ethics to talk about the thing that interests them. [cheery music returns] Ethical inquiries are definitely fertile soil for artists to play around in.

HOFF: Michaela, thank you so much for your time today on the podcast and for all your work with us over the past couple of months with the Journal.

CHAN: Thank you, Tim, so much. It's been great working with you.

HOFF: That's all for this episode of *Ethics Talk*. Thanks to Michaela Chan for joining us. Music was by the Blue Dot Sessions. If you're interested in reading more about how comics can be used in health professions education, go check out our February 2018 issue, *Graphic Medicine and Health Care Ethics*. Be sure also to check out our current issue on arts-based health care research. You can find both of these issues, as well as all of our content, podcasts, CE opportunities, and more at our site, [JournalofEthics.org](http://JournalofEthics.org). Follow us on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/JournalofEthics) and [Facebook @JournalofEthics](https://facebook.com/JournalofEthics) and be sure to rate and review this podcast wherever you listen to it. We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.