

2009

Narrativity and knowledge

Paisley Nathan LIVINGSTON
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.ln.edu.hk/sw_master



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Livingston, P. (2009). Narrativity and knowledge. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67(1), 25-36. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6245.2008.01332.x

This Journal article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lingnan Staff Publication at Digital Commons @ Lingnan University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Lingnan University.

Narrativity and Knowledge

PAISLEY LIVINGSTON

Department of Philosophy Lingnan University Tuen Mun, Hong Kong

The ever-expanding literature on narrative reveals a striking divergence of claims about the epistemic valence of narrative. One such claim is the oft-stated idea that narratives or stories generate both “hot” (motivated) and “cold” (purely cognitive) epistemic irrationality. A familiar, rival claim is that narrative has an exclusive capacity to embody or convey important types of knowledge. Such contrasting contentions are not typically presented as statements about the accidents or effects of particular narratives; the ambition, rather, has been to identify a strong link between a single, positive or negative epistemic valence and narrativity, or the traits in virtue of which some discourse, utterance, or series of thoughts is aptly classified as a narrative or story. In this essay I contend that arguments in this vein are dubious. Not only are contentions about the specificity of narrative tenuous and controversial, but even if they were not, there are serious problems with the postulated connections between narrativity and the epistemic merits or demerits of narratives. These difficulties are identified in a critical discussion of prominent examples from the literature. My conclusion is not that there is nothing worth saying about relations between narratives and various epistemic desiderata, but that one prevalent theoretical ambition in this area ought to be renounced in favor of more viable avenues of inquiry.

Section I quickly surveys salient claims about the link between narrativity and the epistemic value of narratives. In Section II, I highlight the striking divergence of ideas about narrativity in the literature and underscore the difficulty of justifying an appeal to any one of them in an argument about narrative’s epistemic value. With this background in place, in Section III, I take a closer look at some influential examples of arguments concerning the epistemic dangers of narrative and present an argument against all strong claims in this area. In Section IV, I discuss examples in which the epistemic benefits of narrative are ex-tolled on what I assess as inadequate grounds. I conclude with a summary and comments about implications for future research.

i. narrative pro and con

The putative epistemic merits or demerits of narratives or stories are sometimes linked to a claim intentionally made by the storyteller.¹ More often, the claim concerns features of story contents that exemplify or tend to be conducive of some type of epistemic item, such as knowledge or its contradictories, justified or unjustified belief, epistemic rationality or irrationality, and truth or falsehood. Briefly, then, salient contentions in the literature include the idea that narratives or

stories tend, by virtue of their narrativity, to be:

- (1) pseudo-explanatory: narratives embody or encourage the fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc;²
- (2) pseudo-justificatory: the persuasive appeal of stories is disproportionate to their real evidential support or reliability (narrative generates “cold” irrationality as a result of availability, salience, and confirmation biases);³
- (3) misleading: stories encourage the error of pars pro toto;⁴
- (4) seductive: a story’s narrativity is likely to lead to “hot” irrationality through its strong or even “irresistible” emotional appeal, which is obtained at the price of cognitive shortcomings;⁵
- (5) proleptic or “prophetic”: narrators provide a retrospective account of events, deceptively presented from an anticipatory perspective;⁶
- (6) empirically unsound by virtue of selectivity or closure;⁷
- (7) empirically misleading by virtue of an overemphasis on agency, or on agents’ responsibility or freedom.⁸

On the other side of the issue are those who argue that narratives, by virtue of their narrativity, tend to be:

- (8) sound because of a correspondence with patterns of lived experience (such as temporality) or by virtue of descriptions of particular cases that are instructive counter examples to bad theories or analytic generalizations;⁹
- (9) a basic mode of thought and way of ordering experience that is efficient, modular, memorable, and engaging;¹⁰
- (10) antidogmatic by virtue of “context-sensitivity and negotiability”;¹¹
- (11) crucial to psychology and related fields because the self or person has an essentially narrative form, or because the self-concept requires storytelling;¹²
- (12) potentially instructive because they represent general possibilities for human lives;¹³
- (13) the embodiment or expression of an otherwise ineffable wisdom.¹⁴

It is possible that the strikingly divergent generalizations about the epistemic value of narrative derive from applications of a single conception of narrative, but it seems more likely that the theoretical divergence stems from differences in the examples and ideas that different authors associate with the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘narrativity.’ And indeed, the literature presents a cacophonous array of definitions and contested elucidations of the latter. In the next section I offer a selective overview of different proposals concerning the constitutive features of narrative.

ii. rival definitions of narrativity and narrative

On the assumption that utterances, films, pictures, thoughts, and works in verbal and other media can be narratives, the question is what makes some of these representations narratives while others are not. Another way of framing the issue is to say that narrativity is a scalar concept, and that the key question is which factors contribute to a representation's having some degree of narrativity.¹⁵ Consider, for a start, the following proposed definitions of 'narrative':

(1) "the representation of at least one event, one change in a state of affairs"¹⁶

(2) "the representation of a causally related series of events"¹⁷

(3) "a species of discourse in which an entity, usually a person, is viewed as ...a planning mechanism, attempting to achieve some goal, generally in the face of some obstacle, and working out and working through the steps of a changing plan to achieve the goal. Since plans are constructed out of our beliefs of what causes and enables what, narrative presents a purported causal structure of a complex of events."¹⁸

While these citations clearly illustrate three prominent types of positions on the topic, it is important to observe that there is room for significantly different definitions of 'narrativity' within each of these types. Given fundamental disagreements over the metaphysics of events, proponents of definitions of type (1) may end up disagreeing significantly over which discourses are narratives, and why. In some cases, proponents of a fairly minimal, event-based definition of 'narrative' could end up disagreeing over the necessity of additional coherence requirements involving temporality and unified reference.

Definitions of type (2) divide into incompatible subtypes as a result of divergent assumptions about causation. Two extremes here are William Labov's assertion that the "construction" of narrative requires "a personal theory of causality" and the contrasting assumption that narrativity is linked to whatever a correct metaphysics would single out as causation.¹⁹ Insofar as the latter metaphysics would be distinct from what various, incompatible personal theories of causation might identify as causal relations in or outside narrative, the assumption that narrativity is strongly correlated with causation does not in itself yield a satisfactory response to the question of the specificity of narrative representations. This is different from saying that it is logically possible that there are narrativity-enhancing relations that are not causal ones.²⁰ My point, rather, is that the advocate of a causal account of narrativity must either shoulder the burden of constructing and defending a successful metaphysics of causation or attempt to show that there is a prevalent or even universal "folk theory" of causation that can be used to indicate the (scalar) difference between narrative and non-narrative representations. An advocate of the latter approach needs to take up the objection that in fact the "folk" concept of causation is only the most threadbare truism

embracing a gaggle of divergent intuitions about what sorts of processes and relations should be counted as causal. It could, of course, turn out that the folk truism regarding causation would be compatible with the successful metaphysics of causation, yet expert opinion remains strongly divided on this issue.²¹

In the literature on causation, there is in any case significant agreement around the idea that the attempt to identify a logical form of causal reasoning (be it common to both scientific theory and everyday thinking or not) has not been successful and is unlikely to be viable. A case in point is the so-called INUS condition, or the idea that a cause is an insufficient but non-redundant part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition. More succinctly, the key thought here is that a cause is a necessary component of a condition sufficient to the effect.²² Various philosophers have remarked that conditions of logical necessity and sufficiency cannot yield an adequate explication of causal thinking. As Judea Pearl puts this idea, logical accounts cannot succeed because they fail to make a syntactic distinction between formulas that identify stable mechanisms and those that describe merely circumstantial conditions.²³ One clear indication of this problem involves contra-position, an elementary form of logical equivalence that is not mirrored by causal implications: “A causes B” does not imply “not B causes not A.” It remains to be seen whether sophisticated contemporary models of causation could be recruited to provide a revamped, causal analysis of narrativity.

In the sort of definition exemplified by (3), narrativity entails the representation not merely of events, but of those events constituted by sequences of purposeful action. In many versions of this condition, the actions constitutive of a story must be undertaken by one or more agents, and it is the structure of these agents’ strivings that gives the narrative its requisite unity and closure. A significant variation within this type of concept of narrative has to do with whether the purposive activities or plans are represented as unfolding in a routine manner. Such cases are sometimes contrasted to “genuine” stories, where something else, such as a complication, has to happen. Jerry R. Hobbs’s above-cited clause, “generally in the face of some obstacle,” acknowledges this sort of desideratum, yet does not make it essential to stories per se, perhaps because he deems this a constraint on good or interesting stories. And indeed, the expression “dull story describing routine problem-solving behavior” would not generally be thought oxymoronic. Many other theorists insist, however, that the representation of routine or “canonical” problem-solving activities cannot make a story.²⁴ David Herman, for example, proposes a scalar concept of narrativity in which the ratio of stereotypical to non-stereotypic behavior and events is a factor to be included along with temporal and causal organization. In other words, his hypothesis is that narrativity increases with a greater number and diversity of experiential repertoires accompanied by deviations from stereotypical expectations.²⁵ This move has the consequence of making degrees of narrativity relative to a context, since what is stereotypical in one setting is unexpected in another. Gregory Currie, who also advocates a scalar idea of narrativity (based on reason-based

relations between particular events), similarly adverts to context-relative “thresholds” of narrativity, such that a discourse may be evaluated as highly narrative in one context of evaluation yet less so in another. There are significantly different formulations of this kind of condition in the literature, and it is not clear whether any of them captures an essential requirement of narrativity, as opposed to a context-relative valence, such as entertainment or a type of relevance.

While the preceding paragraphs should suffice to establish that expert elucidations of ‘narrativity’ and ‘narration’ diverge massively, it may be worth pointing out that other significant points of divergence pertain to the necessity of (a) an implicit or explicit teller or presenter of the events or actions and (b) an implicit “narratee” or figure to whom the narrative is addressed. Although some theorists think narrative entails a narrator, others have explicitly contradicted this idea, partly because they find no evidence of an omnipresent narrative voice or presenter in many radio plays, narrative paintings, and movies. Assumptions about the necessity of a narrator or addressee can be conjoined with any of the other content-related conditions I have just surveyed, the result being quite a variety of logically distinct proposals for the nature of narrativity. Gerald Prince, for example, articulates a definition in which narrative is the representation of real or fictive events by one or more narrators to one or more narratees or addressees.²⁶

All of these basic types of theses about the requisite content of a story or narrative are dependent on views about how the content of a discourse, utterance, or thought gets determined, and some dis-agreements over that difficult topic have implications for accounts of narrativity. Many theorists of narrative think a discourse’s content, and thus its narrativity, depends on various contextual factors, including modes of reception, interpretation, or processing, the storyteller’s goals or intentions, or some relational property, such as tellability, which depends on the attitudes of both the producers and receivers of utterances.²⁷

It is important to note that the widespread divergence I am limning here concerns not only attempts to articulate explicit, necessary, and jointly sufficient defining conditions (in keeping with a “classical” notion of concepts), but also a basic failure to agree over the classification of a range of concrete instances, as well as divergence over the reasons subtending such classifications. Some theorists assert that a detailed description of the history of a glacier is an instance of narrative, but for others this is a perfect example of a discourse that is not a narrative or that has a zero or very low degree of narrativity (at least across a wide range of contexts of comparison). Recourse to a prototype theory of concepts has been recommended, but is not a viable solution. It seems helpful to observe that all reasonable parties agree that “The Fox and the Crow,” *Middlemarch*, and *Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948) are all narratives, but which of their myriad shared features or similarities make this the case? Here is where disagreement is rife, and this disagreement over what makes uncontroversial instances of narrative paradigmatic extends to disagreements over the

category's very boundaries. In a context where interpretative speculation over these issues has yielded such disparate proposals, an appeal to empirical results would seem salutary. Yet controlled investigations into subjects' responses founder because reports and intuitions diverge, and a measurable property of narrativity has yet to be isolated.²⁸

To summarize only some of the major points of divergence surveyed above, several schematic, incompatible clusters of definitions, and corresponding concepts of narrativity, may be identified as follows:

Narrativity is constituted by (or increases with) the representation of (1) events (2) as temporally ordered, (3) as causally related, (4) as unified (for ex-ample, as involving the same substance or topic), and as (5) actions where (6) the agent(s) encounters and contends with nonroutine obstacles to the realization of his or her goals.

The conjunction of each of these conditions with the requirement of a narrator or presenter, narratee, or both yields additional definitional clusters (within each of which there can be significant divergence).

Given such an abundance of divergent definitional claims and contrasting intuitions about particular cases, we may safely conclude that 'narrative' and kindred terms in other languages (such as 'xu shi,' 'récit,' 'storia,' 'Erzählung,' 'fortælling') remain deeply ambiguous. On what grounds, then, could we identify any one of these competing characterizations as the correct account of the essence of narrative? Perhaps a breakthrough will some-day be made, and it will be discovered which in-variant natural kind is labeled by the term 'narrative,' but given the current state of the art, arguments in which one of the several senses of 'narrative' or 'narrativity' gets put to any important use should shoulder the burden of justifying this exclusive usage. On this point bald assertion and unacknowledged stipulation are all too pervasive in the literature, and this author recommends an at least provisional agnosticism.

One conclusion that might be drawn at this point is that the literature on narrative and knowledge sampled in Section I is largely, if not entirely, a matter of equivocation, and that there can be no substantive disagreement or agreement. Yet this is not quite right. Many claims in this area can be fairly assessed by focusing on the arguments given for a link between a favored notion of narrativity and the candidate epistemic effects. In such cases, an appeal to truisms and relatively uncontroversial assumptions can allow us to show that this link has not been sufficiently established, and this even if the stipulation of the meaning of 'narrativity' were granted.

As a detailed engagement with the enormous literature on narrative and knowledge would re-

quire a lengthy tome, I shall restrict myself hereto a critical discussion of a few important examples, my goal being to illustrate and develop some general points concerning key argumentative and evidentiary problems.

iii. narrativity and the vices of “good stories”

As I have already indicated, one problem with contentions along the lines of (1)–(13) above is that the concepts of narrativity on which they are based remain insufficiently motivated by the evidence; another problem is that in many instances, the claim would not follow even if the stipulation were granted, because the epistemic content and consequences of the discourses or representations in question are not uniquely determined by the stipulated, narrativity-constitutive features. I shall begin to illustrate this line of thought with reference to the influential critique of narrative as a source of “cold” epistemic irrationality advanced by Robyn M. Dawes in a chapter of *Everyday Irrationality* ironically entitled “Good Stories.”²⁹

Dawes allows that creating stories is a “highly intelligent and creative act” (p. 125), but maintains that stories are a source of bias and error. What makes good stories good is precisely what makes them a source of epistemic vice: “We are all affected by storytelling, and it is nearly impossible to ignore a good story. Storytelling provides a strong availability bias” (p. 114). Dawes illustrates this general point with a number of persuasive examples, including psychoanalytic accounts that purport to explain autism in terms of maternal rejection and Hitler's fascism in terms of his sexual disorder. In his remarks on the fallacies of the sorts of narrative explanations proffered by psychoanalysts, Dawes draws upon Donald P. Spence's discussion of a special sort of “narrative truth.”³⁰ This is Spence's misleading name for the illusory impression that an important experience from one's past has been remembered and interpreted correctly. This sort of impression, Spence surmises, depends on such factors as the interpretative statement's continuity, closure, and aesthetic quality. “Narrative truth,” Spence writes, “is what we have in mind when we say that such and such is a good story, that a given explanation carries conviction, that one solution to a mystery must be true” (p. 31), the problem being, however, that memory is selective and often highly misleading. Although narrative truth works well in a clinical setting, it must be contrasted to “historical,” and more generally, to “theoretical” truth if psychological theory is to be more than metaphor (p. 33). The phenomenon of narrative truth, Spence proposes, is the unfortunate product of the literary tradition's influence on psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Pursuing Spence's theme of the deceptive quality of a good story, Dawes writes what reads like a more specific proposal regarding the features constitutive of a highly misleading narrativity:

The structure of a story is that it consists of a single sequence of events, often linked with a set

of hypothesized causal influences. Even if the communicator of the story attempts to provide evidence for these influences, they often remain intrinsically hypothetical; for example, we cannot observe directly the internal state of someone to verify a statement about a conscious motive. Considering the single sequence of evidence and possible explanations as hypotheses, we immediately see a problem with the use of stories as illustrative, even if we eschew the implication that they demonstrate or prove anything. (p. 112)

Dawes bases his negative assessment of “good stories” on the idea that stories have a structure that tends to make them fall short of his favored explanatory and evidentiary criteria. All a storyteller can do, qua storyteller, is describe particular events and optionally float unverifiable conjectures as to their causal relations, whereas genuine explanations justify a hypothesis about types of events and their correlations by means of statistical evidence. On the one hand, then, we find unsupported claims about particular events, and on the other, well-tested contrasts between what tends to happen, what did happen, and what could have happened.

Questions can be raised about Dawes's idea about what constitutes the structure of a story. For example, it is often contended that a bare conjunction of descriptions of particular events bearing no interesting relations to each other does not a narrative make—and this is a point on which many of the otherwise competing definitions converge. Also, the emphasis on particularity cannot be squared with prevalent intuitions about the story category. Aesop's fables are normally considered stories, and although there is a sense in which these narratives describe particular actions performed by particular animals, there is no genuine emphasis on particularities in these allegorical tales. Dawes does not, in any case, provide convincing grounds for his apparent assumption that the only necessary story elements are its descriptions of particular events or actions. According to some theorists of narrative, relations between descriptions of particular events and a narrator's implicit or explicit general points about this sort of event are one of the key narrative modes of discursive integration.³¹

Setting aside various issues surrounding Dawes's assumptions about the nature of narrativity, we may independently ask whether Dawes's claims about “the structure of a story” can support his larger argument. Assume, for the sake of the argument, that it is correct to hold that the key to what makes a story a story is the representation of particular events or actions.³² Unless other conditions are imposed, it would follow that ‘story’ covers any number of trivial and perfectly innocuous utterances, such as “Dawes published a book in 2001.” It also covers incompatible claims, such as “Dawes published an article instead of a book in 2001.” Dawes's story structure is found in utterances that make no causal or other explanatory claims, as well as ones that make patently ridiculous causal claims that are anything but compelling or epistemically seductive. So it hardly seems like Dawes has successfully isolated an important source of bias.

Such a quick and easy refutation, however, probably fails to do justice to Dawes's thinking. Perhaps his key insight is simply that there is a fairly strong positive correlation between hearing stories and buying into unwarranted explanations (which is why he writes that it is "nearly impossible" to ignore a good story). Yet even this idea can be reasonably questioned. If it were true that what makes a story a story is the representation of a single sequence of events, it may still be expected that actual utterances that tell stories usually incorporate other kinds of elements as well, and it is dubious to think the overall meaning and impact of such utterances are determined by their story component alone. But once we let in other components, the correlation fades, and talk of the bias in good stories becomes dubious.

Consider in this regard a passage from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a work widely recognized as an instance of narrative fiction. At one point in the novel, the attentive reader will have gathered that it is true in the fiction that Rosamond entertains a romantic passion for Will Ladislaw, and that Rosamond is aware that her husband Lydgate's financial difficulties may require them to move to London, which is something she ardently desires. Sitting at home in a state of languid melancholy and suspense, Rosamond entertains thoughts about a mysterious link between two events that are the objects of her hopes, namely, Ladislaw's hoped-for visit and some new urgency for the removal to London. The narrative continues:

She felt assured that the coming would be a potent cause of the going, without at all seeing how. This way of establishing sequences is too common to be fairly regarded as a peculiar folly in Rosamond. And it is precisely this sort of sequence which causes the greatest shock when it is sundered: for to see how an effect may be produced is often to see possible missings and checks; but to see nothing except the desirable cause, and close upon it the desirable effect, rids us of doubt and makes our minds strongly intuitive. That was the process going on in poor Rosamond.³³

Eliot's narration moves rather smoothly back and forth between remarks of a general nature and descriptions of a particular, imagined case—Rosamond's state of mind and her spurious, wishful causal hypothesis about a link between two desired events. The narrator tells us that Rosamond's fallacious manner of thinking is by no means particular to her; we are invited to contrast this common "folly" to another, more accurate sort of causal thinking in which one sees how an effect may be produced by considering possible "missings and checks." In other words, Eliot's story includes the story running in Rosamond's mind—precisely the sort of deluded affair Dawes castigates—as well as a narrator's intelligent commentary on it, a commentary that anticipates recent critiques of defective reasoning by over 100 years.

Middlemarch and many other examples challenge the simple thesis that story structure alone

determines the overall meaning of a work. The relevant point here is not only that a narrative can be made insightful by adding a narrator's intelligent commentary on particular events, thereby offsetting the bad effects of narrativity. Instead, there can be a reversal of valence, such that elements that in one context might indeed function as a misleading emphasis on a particular case can in another context make a positive contribution to an utterance's epistemic value. In some cases, it is the description of particular events that insightfully challenges the bad generalizations proffered by a narrator (an example being Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*).

Unless 'narrativity' or 'the story structure' are rather implausibly stipulated to cover all of the meaningful features or contents of utterances (or thoughts) classified as narratives, it can be shown that, whatever scalar property or cluster of properties the term 'narrativity' is taken to name, this item underdetermines the meaning of particular stories or narrative utterances. This is the case because, given any such stipulation of narrativity, we can easily find or formulate two or more different utterances that satisfy this condition equally well, but which have strikingly incompatible meanings; similarly, two utterances expressing the same ideas can have strikingly different degrees of narrativity. Assuming that, with the exception of strictly analytic sentences, meaning does not determine truth, it follows that the narrativity of a narrative utterance does not univocally determine its truth value (and truth or truth-conducivity are closely related to most, if not all, other properly epistemic desiderata). Now it is a truism that even a convincing story may fail in fact to convince some audience. So the epistemic effects of narratives are underdetermined by their narrativity in two ways: first in the determination of content and second in content's influence on uptake and perlocutionary effects. This truism-based narrativity underdetermination thesis is strictly incompatible with all strong theses about narrativity's logical link to some epistemic valence, but it also has important implications for weaker, probabilistic theses, as it casts doubt on the wisdom of trying to measure a correlation between good and bad epistemic effects and a single variable named 'narrativity,' especially in a context where the very identification of that variable remains problematic.

In a context where there is deep controversy over the nature of stories, it is fair to ask whether Dawes's assertions about the "structure" and consequences of stories live up to the high epistemic standards that Dawes elsewhere advocates. Dawes does not refer to any statistics yielded by a successful experimental metaphysics of stories (as there is none), and one may plausibly conjecture that he is simply reporting on some of his intuitions, which were likely to have been influenced by his well-warranted impatience with the egregiously misleading accounts that figure in his illustrative anecdotes. A worthwhile lesson in Dawes's work is that often people would do well to recognize their own ignorance on topics about which there are no good statistical data.³⁴ Yet he does not say why this insight should not be applied to the question of the structure and overall impact of stories. If stories that include casual conjectures based on a few anecdotes are unreliable,

why would such stories about stories-in-general be any less so?

I turn now to a fairly recent philosophical conjecture about narrativity and its epistemic dangers. J. David Velleman adopts the Aristotelian idea that the specificity of muthos resides in a particular way of organizing events into an intelligible whole, yet he also finds inspiration in Peter Brook's notion that the organization in question is at bottom an affective one.³⁵ The essential narrative connective is neither causal nor temporal; instead, it is emotive. Narrativity, then, is a matter of a discourse's capacity reliably to initiate and resolve an "emotional cadence," an obvious example being the feelings of fearful expectation and eventual relief occasioned by a cliff-hanger. The sorts of understanding and explanation to which narrative is prone amount to the observer's knowledge of how he or she feels about the narrated events. Yet herein resides an epistemic flaw. Velleman agrees with Noël Carroll that Hayden V. White has erred in suggesting that a selective and unified retrospective reorganization of past events is narrative's endemic error.³⁶ The problem, instead, is that having "sorted out its feelings toward events, the audience mistakenly feels that it has sorted out the events themselves" (p. 20). Emotional closure, which narratives by nature provide, is not the same as intellectual closure, which many narratives do not offer. This, Velleman comments, is the "kernel of truth in the midst of White's confusions" (p. 20). One practical lesson to be drawn is that philosophers of law should mitigate their celebration of the role of narrative in legal argumentation, and it would follow that a similar moral could be applied to psychologists, historians, and those who are enthusiastic about the philosophical merits of literary narratives.

Velleman does not say just what sort of claim he wants to make with regard to the proposed conditions on narrativity. He may not have intended his remarks to be taken as an attempt to provide a straightforward analysis, but assessing them as such may still be instructive. The way to test such a proposal would, then, be to ask whether some nonnarrative discourses arouse and resolve emotions or whether there are instances of narrativity that do not reliably do so.

Questions raised by some of the proposal's conditions make it difficult to assess. How are we to understand the idea of a discourse's reliability at giving rise to an emotional cadence? Reliability for whom and under what conditions? If a film leaves some audiences cold, consistently gives rise to derisive laughter among others, but reliably stirs up pity, fear, and like emotions among naive spectators, does it have narrativity? If we are tempted to respond by listing those features of the narrative that ground the appropriate responses and give the utterance its reliability, we are sent looking for the elements of form or content constitutive of narrativity, such as causal or probabilistic connections between the represented events, which is precisely the sort of approach Velleman's affect theory was meant to supersede.

Setting these questions about a discourse's reliability aside, additional objections and possible

counterexamples can be mentioned:

1. Even when a narrative has successfully been designed to stir up specific emotions, it need not resolve the climactic feeling or affect, but may instead be designed to leave the members of the audience in a state of intense arousal, such as feelings of political indignation or anger.
2. Some narratives, and good ones too, are not designed to arouse affect, but are meant to have a predominantly if not exclusively cognitive or intellectual impact. The interest of Aesop's fables is their shrewd revelation of common foibles, and not any marked emotional response to the allegorical figures, about whom we are emotionally indifferent; a similar point holds with regard to various cerebral fictions by Jorge Luis Borges.
3. A standard notation of the moves in a particular chess game would not usually be taken as a narrative, but it could have a marked emotional cadence for chess cognoscenti.

Were Velleman's notion of narrativity nonetheless granted, would the epistemic verdict ring true? Is narrativity, thus conceived, "at least conducive" to the error of mistaking subjective for objective understanding (pp. 20–21)? Doubts could be sounded by challenging the thought that narrativity tends to guide and arouse affect at the cost of genuine understanding. If appropriate affective response is what is at stake, correct uptake or recognition of at least some of the basic elements of the narrative's contents is an uncontroversial desideratum, and such uptake requires surprisingly complex inferences involving the features of the utterance, relevant conventions, contextual factors, and the intentions of the utterer(s) or maker(s). Whether such uptake entails other, serious epistemic shortcomings, such as being deeply persuaded by a sentimental movie's simplistic message, is not likely to be determined uniquely by the observer's emotive response. Even the observer's recognition of the property of narrativity (as identified by Velleman) has no tendency to yield a single epistemic valence. In some cases, when an utterance's emotive appeal is obvious, this is taken as a welcomed rhetorical quality, but in others, knowledge that the discourse reliably occasions an emotional cadence makes it less persuasive.

In sum, it is far from clear that we have any good reason to conjecture that there is a strong correlation between narrativity, items uncontroversially identified as narratives, emotionally provocative discourse, and epistemically misleading discourse. It would be interesting to learn whether any solid empirical evidence about such a correlation, assessed in relation to relevant contrast cases, can be discovered, but so far this is *Zukunftsmusik*.

iv. the praise of narrative

I turn now to a brief discussion of two examples of authors arguing for a strong correlation between narrative and epistemic virtue. Among the more conspicuous advocates of narrative in

Anglo-American philosophy is Alasdair MacIntyre, whose insistence on the entanglement of all meaningful action and identity in a web of stories recalls Wilhelm Schapp's 1953 phenomenological exploration of the same theme.³⁷ (Schapp's book represents an important but underacknowledged precedent in this vein.) MacIntyre assails both Jean-Paul Sartre and analytic philosophers for adopting an ahistorical perspective on action: "Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions" (p. 194). The narrative genre is essential because human actions and conversations are at bottom "enacted narratives," which is taken as entailing that the adequate mode of representing such realities is narrative. MacIntyre extends this claim to personal identity: John Locke, David Hume, and contemporary analytic philosophers fail to elucidate the conditions of personal identity because they overlook a crucial "background," and "[t]hat background is provided by the concept of a story and of that kind of unity of character which a story requires" (p. 202).

MacIntyre offers little in the way of explicit elucidations or descriptions of the crucial narrative concept, or concepts, overlooked by the empiricist tradition he assaults. It is apparent that he agrees with Aristotle that a story or muthos must be unified and have a beginning, a middle, and an end; the key elements of a story would seem to be the intelligible actions of some characters, where these actions are "constrained by the actions of others and by the social settings presupposed" (p. 200). And in addition to being the agents of intelligible or meaningful actions, the characters in the story must be accountable to each other for what they do. MacIntyre adds that the unity of a human life is "the unity of a narrative quest" (p. 203), and his remarks about the medieval idea of a quest indicate that he means a large-scale search for an at least partly unknown end, namely, self-knowledge and the good life, where the latter turns out to be a life spent in a quest for the good life for human beings.

Drawing these elements together in the sort of analysis or definition that MacIntyre would no doubt find prone to the very analytic error he was out to contest, it would seem that the concepts subtending his claims about the virtue of narrative run as follows:

A discourse is a narrative just in case it conveys a story, where a story is a unified sequence of actions having a beginning, a middle, and an end, and where the actions are intelligible and performed by at least one accountable agent whose life takes the form of a unified quest for the good life.

MacIntyre writes as though he were reporting on the one true idea or concept of story (and on the one type of unified character required by that concept), yet he does not mention rival proposals or say why his definition of narrative is correct. Yet even if one were to grant that MacIntyre's ideas about the nature of narrative successfully recapitulated the one true concept of story and hence

narrativity, it would not follow, or even stand as a plausible empirical surmise, that all or even most of the utterances falling beneath that rubric possess any epistemic value by virtue of their possession of that property. Many narratives are fictions and so are neither intended nor plausibly understood as informing us about anyone's actual, lifelong quest for the good life. Other narratives, while so intended or understood, could turn out to be seriously misleading. With regard to the weaker claim that narrative is only necessary (and not sufficient) to certain kinds of insights or knowledge, there are still serious objections. There are narratives that happen to instruct or inform us in ways owing little to their narrativity—and this given MacIntyre's proposed elucidation. Presumably, advocates of MacIntyre's claims about narrative in *After Virtue* need not be committed to the dubious idea that this philosophical work is a narrative. It is unlikely to be demonstrated that no nonnarrative statements (again given MacIntyre's definition) about significant human affairs can ever be counted as worthwhile contributions to knowledge or rational belief.

In sum, MacIntyre's brief in favor of narrative stumbles on the narrativity underdetermination thesis. In other words, his notion of narrativity is underargued and fails to rule out plausible counterexamples; it is also insufficiently linked to both the epistemic merits and demerits that many relatively uncontroversial instances of narrative display.

MacIntyre's assumptions about the features constitutive of narrativity are not shared by another philosopher—David Carr—who also strives to establish that the conditions of lived experience correspond to those of narrative. Carr resembles MacIntyre (and their common predecessor, Schapp) in asserting that “narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence” (p. 9). Although Carr joins MacIntyre in contesting antirealist theses, he disagrees with MacIntyre in rejecting the idea that the unity of narrative is to be found at the macro-level of an entire life story, where the Aristotelian constraints of beginning, end, and middle correspond to birth, death, and whatever happens in between. Literary and historical narrators can, unlike the authors of autobiographies, know and narrate the end of the central character's life story, yet such a perspective is not available to agents of ordinary experience. Even so, to be an agent or a subject of experience is constantly to attempt to “surmount time in exactly the way the story-teller does” (p. 62).

Carr bases his central claim about the adequacy of narrative to experience on Edmund Husserl's contention that all perceptual experience has a complex temporal structure involving retention and protention. Carr generalizes Husserl's claims about the spontaneously retrospective and prospective quality of temporal experience to larger-scale instances of deliberation, planning, and action. The retrospective and prospective relation that Carr has in mind is said to be a matter of sequences of events ordered more specifically in relations of suspension–resolution, departure–

return, means–end, and problem–solution. Narrativity is a “fundamental configurational relation,” namely, “that of beginning, middle, and end” taken as a strictly temporal ordering principle that obtains in all lived, human experience.

Whereas MacIntyre's implicit concept of narrative or story clearly excludes many cases that are likely to be thought to exhibit sufficient narrativity, Carr's exhibits the contrary tendency. For example, Erik Satie's piano compositions amply satisfy Carr's conditions on narrativity, but it is dubious that they ought therefore to be recognized as instances of narrative.

Were we to accept Carr's broad concept of narrativity, what would follow? Carr's stipulation does block the familiar antirealist contention that there are no actual story-like patterns in the world, and that storytellers must therefore selectively construct such patterns in their narratives and then misleadingly project them onto the past. Yet his definition does not lend any support to the idea that narratives tend to be deeply informative by virtue of their narrativity, since scores of false utterances and erroneous thoughts satisfy his conditions. Given Carr's definition, an utterance of “David Carr published a false definition of narrativity” would count as a narrative, but Carr and like-minded advocates of narrative would be ill advised to find this statement epistemically rewarding as a result.

v. conclusion

Although the enormous literature on narrative pullulates with strong conclusions about the epistemic valence of narrative per se, arguments and evidence that lend genuine support to these claims remain scarce. Two characteristic and decisive shortcomings are (1) a failure to justify the preferred thesis concerning the nature of narrativity and the corresponding definition of ‘narrative’ and (2) a failure to establish that items possessing narrativity, as defined, can reasonably be expected either invariably or frequently to give rise to the epistemic valence figuring in the overall argument's conclusion.

My point is not that it is impossible to say anything interesting about the contribution to knowledge or error made by particular works and utterances that are generally agreed to be instances of narrative. Representations of sequences of events, and of agents and their strivings, can be instructive or misleading in a variety of ways. They can serve to illustrate or to challenge a theory, and in some instances they may contribute to hypothesis formation. Yet until empirical evidence about narrativity's role in the overall nexus of consequences has somehow been provided, it is wisest to give up on generalizations about the functions stories are supposed to have by virtue of their narrativity; this in turn entails a shift to a more systematic attention to the actual effects of particular narratives and types of content. To mention one such avenue of inquiry,

ongoing empirical research into what David P. Phillips dubbed the “Werther effect” focuses on the question of whether certain kinds of content, such as a positively framed depiction of suicide, can influence the attitudes and behavior of persons pondering suicide.³⁸

To conclude with a paraphrase of Voltaire, doubt about the nature and intrinsic value of narrative may be a somewhat unpleasant state, but certainty on this topic is a ridiculous one.³⁹

Footnotes

1. A brief note on terminology: I follow prevalent usage in employing ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ interchangeably (although some authors stipulate that ‘story’ designates the content of a narrative discourse). Noël Carroll uses ‘narrative proper,’ ‘annal,’ and ‘chronicle’ to refer to distinct types of a larger category of discourse dubbed ‘story forms’ in his “On the Narrative Connection,” in *New Perspectives on Narrative*, ed. Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman (State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 21–41.
2. Roland Barthes, “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits,” *Communications* 8 (1966): 1–27.
3. Robyn M. Dawes, *Everyday Irrationality: How Pseudo-Scientists, Lunatics, and the Rest of Us Systematically Fail to Think Rationally* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001). Many of Dawes’s points about “good stories” are echoed in Michael A. Bishop and J. D. Trout’s *Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
4. This point is raised, but not endorsed, by Dan Lloyd in *Simple Minds* (MIT Press, 1989), p. 223.
5. J. David Velleman, “Narrative Explanation,” *Philosophical Review* 111 (2003): 1–25.
6. Barthes, “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits,” p. 12.
7. Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 1–24.
8. Gregory Currie and Jon Jureidini, “Narrative and Coherence,” *Mind and Language* 19 (2004): 409–427.
9. Wilhelm Schapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt: Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1953); Barbara Hardy, *Tellers and Listeners: The Narrative Imagination* (London: Athlone, 1975); Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Cornell University Press, 1987); David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indiana University Press, 1991).
10. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 11; David Herman, “Stories as a Tool for Thinking,” in *Narrative Theory and Cognitive Science*, ed. David Herman (Stanford: CSLI, 2003), pp. 163–194.
11. Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 1–21.
12. Theodore R. Sarbin, ed., *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New

- York: Praeger, 1986); Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Cornell University Press, 1996); Daniel Dennett, "Why Everyone Is a Novelist," *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept. 16–22 (1988): 1016–1022. For additional references, see <http://web.lemoyne.edu/~hevern/narpsych.html>.
13. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 5.
 14. Lloyd, *Simple Minds*, p. 237.
 15. Scalar concepts of narrativity are urged by David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 91–92 and by Gregory Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 309–316.
 16. Gerald Prince, "Remarks on Narrativity," in *Perspectives on Narratology: Papers from the Stockholm Symposium on Narratology*, ed. Claes Wahlin (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 95–106, at p. 95; a similar, minimalist construal of narrative figures in Peter Lamarque, "On Not Expecting Too Much from Narrative," *Mind and Language* 19 (2004): 393–408.
 17. Brian Richardson, *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (University of Delaware Press, 1997), p. 106. Compare Lloyd, *Simple Minds*, p. 225; Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection." More recently, Carroll suggests that the idea that the narrative connection is a causal one might be called "the common view." See his "Narrative Closure," *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 1–15, at p. 11.
 18. Jerry R. Hobbs, *Literature and Cognition* (Stanford: CSLI, 1990), p. 39. For a kindred analysis, see Robert Wilensky, *Planning and Understanding: A Computational Approach to Human Reasoning* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1983).
 19. William Labov, "Some Further Steps in Narrative Analysis," <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/sfs.html>.
 20. As does Gregory Currie in "Narrative Representation of Causes," at p. 313; Currie makes this point on the basis of what he characterizes as a persistent "illusion" in response to a possible counterexample.
 21. On this issue, see the papers in Huw Price and Richard Corry, eds., *Causation, Physics, and the Constitution of Reality: Russell's Republic Revisited* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007). Papers by authors who are somewhat optimistic about discovering a shared pattern of sophisticated scientific and folk causal thinking can be found in Alision Gopnik and Laura Schulz, eds., *Causal Learning: Psychology, Philosophy, and Computation* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
 22. John Leslie Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965): 261–264. Mackie buries the INUS condition in his chapter on a Millian "regularity" account in *The Cement of the Universe: A Study of Causation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), p. 62.
 23. Judea Pearl, *Causality: Models, Reasoning, and Inference* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 313–316.

24. Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 1–21, at p. 11.
25. David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 91–92.
26. That narrative entails a narrator is asserted by Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Cornell University Press, 1990); for denials, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 163–179; Paisley Livingston, "Narrative," in *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., ed. Dom Lopes and Berys Gaut (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 359–370; Andrew Kania, "Against the Ubiquity of Fictional Narrators," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 47–54. On narrators and narration in cinema, see George M. Wilson, "Le Grand Imagier Steps Out: The Primitive Basis of Film Narration," *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997): 295–318.
27. Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1982), p. 60; Thomas M. Leitch, *What Stories Are: Narrative Theory and Interpretation* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986); Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), p. 13.
28. For a summary of inconclusive and divergent attempts to develop a viable notion of an empirically measurable narrativity, see Kitty Klein, "Narrative Construction and Health," in *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. David Herman (Stanford: CSLI, 2004), pp. 56–84.
29. Dawes, *Everyday Irrationality*; Thomas Gilovich, who also ironizes about "good stories," targets only the biasing effects of secondhand information, his examples being urban myths and the misleading testimonials found in tabloids; see his *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 88–111.
30. Dawes, *Everyday Irrationality*, p. 129; Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1982).
31. Such as Meir Sternberg's insistence on a combination of "actional" and "communicative" elements in narrativity, in his "How Narrativity Makes a Difference," *Narrative* 9 (2001): 115–122.
32. A similar claim was made by W. E. Johnson, *Logic: Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1921), p. 166; the point is also emphasized by Currie and Jureidini, "Narrative and Coherence," pp. 415–416, and Lloyd, *Simple Minds*, pp. 219–234.
33. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Bert G. Hornack (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 475. For those who wish to consult a different edition, the passage appears in the first paragraph of chapter 77.
34. Robyn M. Dawes, *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), especially chap. 12, "The Value of Uncertainty."
35. Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," p. 14. Compare Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design*

and Intention in Narrative (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1984).

36. Noël Carroll, "Interpretation, History, and Narrative," *The Monist* 73 (1990): 134–166.
37. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
38. David P. Phillips, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1974): 240–254.
39. Thanks to Neven Sesardic for comments on a draft of this article. The work described in this article was partially supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. LU3401/06H). I am very grateful for this support.