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Trudy Govier

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# Truth and Storytelling: Some Hidden Arguments

TRUDY GOVIER

3207 – Canmore Road N.W.  
Calgary, Canada  
T2M 4J8  
govier@shaw.ca

**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the relationship between narrative and argument in the context of ‘telling our stories’, a common aspect of processes of political reconciliation. Truth commissions and informal workshops often emphasize the telling of stories as a means of providing a sense of the experiences of persons affected by political conflict. Such stories, or narratives, may provide a powerful tool in reconciliation processes, given that they provide a basis for acknowledgement, understanding and empathy. However the power of narrative in such contexts does not eliminate the need for the exploration and evaluation of arguments for contested claims, and there is likely to be a tension between empathetic and critical elements in this regard.

**KEY WORDS:** argument, narrative, storytelling, testimony, credibility, reconciliation, history, coherence, consistency

Narratives, or stories, do not immediately present themselves as arguments. If understood as arguments, especially as arguments for general conclusions, stories would seem to exemplify various fallacies and questionable moves. Hasty generalization, partisan or ‘my side’ bias, false cause, and improper appeals to authority (the authority of experience) come immediately to mind. If there were to be such a thing as a narrative argument, what would be its defining characteristics? Would narrative arguments amount to a different type of argument, a type to be added to deductive, inductive, analogical and conductive arguments, to be explored by logicians and epistemologists? Assuming provisionally that they do exist, how can narrative arguments be evaluated? If cast into argumentative form, would most narrative arguments then amount to anecdotal arguments? Jerome Bruner (1986) argues that there is such a thing as narrative arguments, that in such arguments, the reader or listener is left to infer the writer’s position, and that the narratives – and, by implication, the arguments -- should be appraised by distinctive criteria of verisimilitude and coherence. Would the evaluative criteria for them more lenient than criteria of cogency that apply to other types of argument?

There are many deep questions about narrative, about the relationship between narrative and argument, and about the notion of narrative argument. Few of these questions can be explored in a short paper. But in the interests of providing background for this discussion, I will mention some of them. Alasdair MacIntyre has said that we all live out narrative in our lives, and understand ourselves in terms of narrative. But others such as Galen Strawson have contested these claims. Do people understand their own lives in narrative terms? Should they do so? Galen Strawson maintains that it is not helpful psychologically, ethically, or cognitively, to think that people experience their lives in a narrative fashion. This notion, he says, closes down important avenues of thought, and can distort understanding and even distress people who do not regard their lives in terms of narrative. In addition, since people often smooth out their stories, taking narrative too seriously may lead us miss errors of memory and interpretation.

What is the relationship between narrative and argument? Is there such a thing as narrative rationality? If it exists, is narrative rationality superior to argumentative rationality -- as some have contended? Given its potential for meaning and memorability and its avoidance of expert roles, could narrative replace argument, with beneficial effects for human understanding and harmony? Fisher claims that a narrative rationality serves the interest of moral dialogue between human beings, providing an opportunity for persons of differing perspectives communicate effectively with each other and respond to stories they are told (Fisher, 1987; Schneider and Caswell, 2004).

An *argument* is an attempt to rationally persuade someone that some claim, the conclusion, is true or acceptable. One who puts forward an argument is typically attempting to persuade by putting forth reasons or evidence, which are stated in premise claims. An arguer states premises that he or she believes to be true or rationally acceptable, and puts forward those premises in speech or in writing, seeking by these reasons to persuade an audience that the conclusion claim is true. Typically the arguer and the audience are different persons; there are, however, contexts in which an arguer may be putting forward reasons in an attempt to persuade himself or herself of some claim. Arguments may also be used as tools of inquiry, when people are exploring what justification could be offered for certain claims. A *narrative* is a chronicle of events arranged in a time sequences, offering some sort of meaning. 'Narrative orders, deepens, and enhances both memory and meaning, and narrative surfaces in almost all human communication' (Papke and McManus, 1999). According to Bruner (1999) a narrative is, of course, based on a selection of facts; it might even be claimed that (in a broad sense of 'narrative') any selection of facts presupposes a narrative.

In a slightly narrower and more specific sense of 'narrative', a narrative is constituted by a sequence of events told so as to amount to a story. There is a sequence, direction, or meaning for these events. When a person tells his or her own story, the chronicle tells 'what happened to me'. Rod Hart (1990) provides a more specific account; according to him, a narrative has a time line on which events are detailed, in a schematized and somewhat primitive and simple form. The idea is that a narrative is a chronicled sequence of events interpreted as 'going somewhere'; the story has a 'point' – direction and an ending. By these definitions, which are fairly standard, it seems clear that an argument as such is not a narrative and a narrative as such is not an argument. Personally, I find the idea (suggested by some) that *all arguments could be recast as narratives* quite implausible. However, I will not pause to argue this point here, since it is not essential for the purposes of this exploration. It is a distinct question of whether *all narratives are arguments*. I see no reason to grant that claim either. A story, as such, does not typically appear as an argument, in standard sense in which an argument is comprised of premises offering justificatory reasons and a conclusion that is regarded as supported by them. To represent a story as an argument would take considerable re-casting. Like other re-casting, it would be justifiable only if there were good reasons for it. And I see none in the case.

The narrower claim that *some narratives amount to arguments* is more plausible, and of some interest. Are *some* narratives arguments? Or, more specifically, can some narratives plausibly and defensibly be *recast* as arguments?

My interest in questions about narrative and argument has arisen in part from my general interest in argument and especially the issues about the interpretation and evaluation of various arguments and types of arguments. It arises too from another strong interest of mine, my interest in reconciliation and the politics of peace. By 'reconciliation', I refer to the building or rebuilding of relationships in the aftermath of intense political conflict, conflict usually

characterized by physical violence and resulting in serious harms to many affected people. Apart from the general moral importance of perpetrators and societies acknowledging wrongdoing and victims receiving some form of recognition and redress, there is in favour of reconciliation a powerful practical argument. Sustainable reconstruction of societies requires serious attention to relationships between and among groups and individuals affected by a conflict. If attitudes of resentment and hatred persist, there is a serious risk that violence will resume and whatever has been rebuilt will be destroyed. Reconciliation is needed for sustainability, if nothing else.

Prominent among processes of reconciliation are truth commissions and informal workshops. Within both, a highly prominent approach is that of *storytelling*. Within truth commission processes, people tell their stories to a body of commissioners and to a broader public. This element of truth commission processes has been prominent in such places as South Africa, Sierra Leone, Peru, and East Timor. The idea of '*telling our stories*' is also fundamental to workshop approaches which are smaller, often sponsored by nongovernmental organizations, and more localized than truth commissions.

There are many points in favour of 'telling our stories' as an approach to reconciliation. A fundamental idea of the approach is that during conflict, those regarded as enemies are generally misunderstood and that by hearing the stories of those who were 'others', people can gain a sense of how it felt to experience the conflict from another perspective. In the narrative testimony of others, participants can hear voices that they did not hear before. As a result they can begin to feel sympathy and empathy for these others from whom they were separated during the conflict. There will be common themes in many stories and these themes will provide a basis for better relationships. In particular, suffering is likely to be something shared by all parties. In defense of narrative, some have argued that it avoids the privileging of *experts*, persons who are in a position to claim special authority and employ complex concepts and statistics that will not be understandable by ordinary people. One does not have to be an expert, only a human being in the wrong place at the wrong time, to have lived through the events of a violent conflict and have experiences to share. By narrating those experiences in the form of 'my story', participants can vividly communicate their experience and suffering to others, who will be able to understand and get a sense of how the world felt and looked to them.

Stories told are often vivid, moving, and highly memorable. Through them, people can gain valuable understanding of the suffering and experience of others. In this way, they may broaden their understanding, hearing voices they have not heard before. Those testifying will benefit from acknowledgement of their status as persons and citizens and recognition by former enemies that their voices are heard and their experiences count. In the case of South Africa, for example, black people who testified before the TRC had been marginalized, under apartheid, to the point where there was an official pretense that they did not exist at all.

In the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, there is a distinction made between different kinds of truth. These are said to be:

- Forensic truth
- Social truth
- Healing truth
- Narrative truth

Despite my admiration for the South African TRC, as a philosopher I find myself slightly skeptical about this framework for understanding truth in the context of reconciliation. The framework has been cited with approval in the work of other truth commissions, as is recently illustrated in the case of Sierra Leone.

As I understand it, the framework of different truths is supposed to work as follows. *Forensic truth* is factual truth. Statements of the type ‘four bodies were uncovered on January 7, 1995’ or ‘village X had four hundred inhabitants prior to the entry of rebel forces’ would be examples of forensic truth. *Social truth* is that of claims concerning which there has been social dialogue and debate; social truth has been negotiated between various members of a community or communities. In the South African context, an example of a social truth might be ‘The apartheid system unfairly denied educational opportunities to black Africans and persons of colour.’ As for *healing truth*, an example might be a statement of acknowledgement (for instance ‘these things should not have happened; you should not have been treated in this way’) offered by someone whose acknowledgement would count – typically a respected person in a position of some institutional authority, or the perpetrator or his or her representative.

Of immediate concern at present is the fourth notion, that of *narrative truth*. It strikes me that this conception stands in need of analysis. Many questions arise. What is narrative truth? Does narrative true emerge from stories, chronicles of events given a meaning by those who have experienced them? Are narrative truths about how *events* were cognitively and emotionally interpreted by the storyteller? Are they truths about the storyteller himself or herself? While one can appreciate the potential of telling stories in terms of the empathy and understanding that may result when people listen to them, the notion of ‘narrative truth’ seems somewhat problematic. Is the narrative truth *the* truth of the story, and understood as a conjunction of a series of propositional truths about events and feelings? Or is it a more cohesive emergent sort of truth, one that can be grasped when we understand how the storyteller experienced the things described and how he or she fits them together? Does a person’s experienced truth reduce to that old bugbear of introductory philosophy instructors – something that is ‘true for me’, where the ‘me’ in this case is the person telling the story? What is ‘true for me’ is what *I believe to be true*. But that leaves open the question: are these claims that I believe and am telling to you claims that are true? Or are they probably true? Or at least plausible?

In such processes as truth commission hearings, a person tells his or her story in the sense of recounting to others what happened to him or her during the conflict. Typically the story will be a personal chronicle of experience, set in the context of larger events. The narrative here is, in effect, the person’s testimony about what he or she experienced, with the most significant elements emphasized and a direction or meaning imposed on the events. In the aftermath of oppression or intense political conflict, the context of that experience often includes grievous forms of violence such as the widespread destruction of property, intimidation, beating, rape, abduction, amputation, torture, and killing. Whether the story is by victim, a perpetrator, or someone who has played both these roles, it is likely to be disturbing and emotionally charged.

When a person who has undergone suffering is telling his or her story, when that person’s voice is being heard and especially when he or she is a member of a previously oppressed group, it may seem a matter of respect and even plain human decency simply to accept what she says. To challenge such claims may seem to violate etiquette or, worse yet, norms of decency. For example, if someone is telling how she was gang-raped at a young age and bore a child as a result, a listener would feel dreadfully insensitive were she to question the tale – for instance by making an issue of where the rapes occurred, whether the perpetrators of sexual assault were members of one rebel group or another, or whether the person knew (somehow) who was the father of her child. Not only would such interruptions be felt as grossly insensitive, they might seem to undercut the *acknowledgement* that testifying offers to victims.

But this particular problem about stories and narrative has a straightforward theoretical solution – even though it may pose awkward challenges in practice. What is needed is to distinguish between respect on the one hand and agreement on the other. People may be acknowledged and respected in cases where they are not, with respect to every claim made, believed. To listen with attention and, in that regard, acknowledge the existence of a person and the fact that this person does have a perspective on the world and a story to tell does not require assenting to every claim within the story.

Though this distinction seems to me to be sane and defensible, it may be difficult to implement in some contexts where people are recounting dramatic stories of personal suffering. In such contexts, it may be difficult to respond with this distinction between acknowledgement and assent in mind. In the dynamic of many contexts of ‘storytelling’ there is likely to be an inhibition of questioning in the interests of acknowledgement and respect.

If hundreds, even thousands, of people affected by a political conflict tell their stories, do these stories establish an equivalent number of *narrative truths*? If all these narrative truths were to be, somehow, added together, would they provide a reliable history of the conflict within which the events occurred and the effects were felt by these persons? Would the compilation of stories contribute to a general history of the conflict? If so, how?

We might think of all the personal stories as pieces in a gigantic mosaic that is being assembled in processes of reconciliation. In this conception, each small piece of the mosaic would contribute a tiny, but vivid, part of the whole. Although this image has considerable appeal, in the end it is somewhat simplistic. The conception of the mosaic does not accommodate the fact that the some roles -- and by implication some stories -- will be more important for the history of the conflict than others. If we follow the metaphor of the mosaic, we might think of enlarging some pieces before fitting them into the whole. Another problem is that some stories may contain errors due to failures of memory, miscommunication, questionable interpretation, or downright dishonesty. Furthermore, the mosaic conception neglects to consider the fact that in their interpretations and assumptions, some stories may contradict others. A compilation of personal stories will provide constitute a coherent history of events unless there has been considerable energetic editing by energetic and reliable persons. Such processes are not merely additive. The persons who do this work are known as historians; for them personal stories will be one resource among many.

Claims about how events begin and end, causation, agency, responsibility, and the broader historical framework are likely to differ between different sides of the conflict. In the conflict in Northern Ireland, Unionists understood themselves to be preserving their essentially Protestant community as a part of Britain, in a context of terrorist attacks by the Catholic I.R.A. and a demography shifting so as to favour Catholics. Nationalists understood themselves to be fighting in favour of full electoral civil rights for Catholics, preferably in the context of a unified Irish state, and against discrimination and oppression. In South Africa, black activists saw themselves as liberation forces, following upon anti-colonial movements in other parts of Africa, and fighting against an apartheid state that had sought to legitimate cruel forms of discrimination, forms deemed by the United Nations General Assembly to constitute a *crime against humanity*. White policemen and military forces believed themselves to be defending, against terrorists and communists, a proud culture and civilization built in a distant outpost by brave European settlers, in many cases their own hard-working ancestors.

Examples could, of course, be multiplied, but the general point should be clear. In political conflicts, opposed groups frequently have different and incompatible narratives. As a

corollary of this basic fact, it is only to be expected that many individual stories will be set in the framework of those narratives and will presuppose or imply interpretive and causal claims that are central to them. In the aftermath of conflict, many personal stories will seem -- and many will actually be -- irreconcilable in the sense that they will contain or entail contradictions when juxtaposed. Given such contradictions, the conviction that 'telling stories' will move people in the direction of reconciliation begins to seem somewhat over-confident, to say the least. The empathetic and humanizing elements of stories are useful as tools for understanding and, potentially, reconciliation. However, problems arise when stories are incompatible or seem implausible, because the introduction of critical questioning is likely to jeopardize these aspects of storytelling processes. People are likely to become attached to their narrative as an account of their personal experience, which they do not wish to have challenged by others.

What are the *facts* relevant to the *events* in the story? (It would seem that so-called forensic truth and so-called narrative truth stand connected in the sense that at least some of the time, purportedly narrative truth presupposes the forensic truth of a factual claim.) Processes of storytelling cannot, in the end, avoid challenges about the facts, if different stories presuppose or imply different factual claims. Contrast:

- 'Many soldiers came to our village.' – 'A few soldiers came to our village.'
- 'Missionaries in the residential schools treated the children kindly, taught them English, and helped to train them for good jobs.' – 'In the residential school children were physically and sexually abused.'
- 'Children were abducted into the rebel forces.' – 'Youth joined with the rebels in the struggle.'
- 'Due to moral norms, women in Muslim societies are unwilling to testify about rape.' – 'Thousands of Muslim women testified about rapes committed against them by soldiers.'
- 'We had no choice but to execute these people because they were spies.' - 'Suspected collaborators were tortured and killed without trial.'

The point should be clear. Different people have different stories and within their stories are claims that are contestable and contested by others. In short, narratives do not cohere. Were they all to be accepted from personal testimony as matters of respect and acknowledgement, in the sense that acceptance meant accepting as true, the resultant historical mosaic would have incoherent elements. Thus, if one's goal is to construct a coherent and plausible history, the possibility of analyzing and evaluating stories will have to be taken seriously. At some stage, some person or group will have to detach problematic claims from personal narratives and make them the subjects of investigation. A need for some critical scrutiny is apparent here. Such scrutiny would be mandatory in a court of law, likely in an administrative hearing, and, I suspect, likely in the deliberations of a truth commission that had reached the stage of writing a final report. In this sense, it will not make sense for the commitment to *narrative truth* to be absolute. Obviously, at truth commission proceedings and in the context of writing reports, there will be no such commitment. Given that there is not, the notion of a special category of truth called 'narrative truth' is somewhat misleading.

David Kaplan notes that narratives presuppose issues of truth and normativity. In legal contexts, he says, a narrative needs to fit into a context and how well it does so will depend on its facts, the related precedents, and the background of norms. He notes that even determining what is going to count as a fact may involve significant interpretive moves, and one must reasons for preferring one interpretation over another. In other words, narrative will not replace argument

but will expose a need for it and will remain ‘the critical agency operating at the heart of convictions’. (Kaplan, 2001) He says, ‘Narration requires argumentation to redeem its validity claims to truth and normativity, given the insufficiency in a model of narrative coherence.’

When claims integral to personal stories have to be compared, contrasted, and evaluated for their credibility, one has entered the domain of reasoning and argument -- gathering and assessing empirical evidence and judging interpretive claims for their ideological content and interpretive credibility. That is to say, one has left the realm of *narrative* as such and arrived at a context where *argument* and *critical evaluation* will be necessary and appropriate.

Many personal narratives presuppose or imply descriptions and claims which would be questioned by other participants in reconciliation processes. As such, *these stories presuppose or imply claims that call for discussion, exploration, and argument in the sense that, in the aftermath of a serious political conflict, they will be contested by many persons and cannot and should not be taken for granted.* Although such claims rarely stand as conclusions in contexts when people are ‘telling their stories’, they could usefully do so. Such contestable matters will include the following:

- *Time frame* (when does the story begin; when should it begin, to give the relevant context for events?)

- *Political and ideological perspective* (What explanatory concepts are used? What norms are implied? How do these norms give meaning to the story?)

- *Setting of a personal narrative within a master narrative* (Is this a story of progress; of return to a more innocent age? Of defenders of freedom unseating a tyrant? Of civilized people bringing civilization to more primitive people? Of returning Jews who are fulfilling a Biblical prophecy and thus doing the will of God? Of people being evicted from their homeland? Of poor and oppressed people struggling to gain social justice? Of a preservation of social order? Of self-defence? Of rescue?)

- *Selection of facts and events* (These are some of the things that happened in this story as told; what other things happened that seemed not to be relevant to the tale?)

- *Credibility* of the storyteller in terms of honesty, accuracy, and fairness (What is the past record of this person, if any? How well can this person remember events? Is his or her testimony understandable? If there is translation, how likely is it to be accurate? Does this person have a highly partisan perspective?)

- *Use of emotionally negative, positive, or euphemistic language* (Are controversial changes called reforms? Are opposed agents deemed to be terrorists? Are acts of abuse given euphemistic labels?)

Given this list of assumptions and implications that may be integral to personal stories, it is clear that storytelling cannot not eliminate the need for argument. I would submit in addition that supposing it does so cannot not serve the cause of reconciliation. Certainly, it will not serve the cause of sustainable reconciliation, because problematic aspects of bias, causal judgments, and credibility will only surface later.

I submit that contrary to the suggestions of some, narrative cannot replace argument and truths that are, putatively, narrative truths can stand unexamined because they are integral to narratives of personal suffering. Narrative may offer a supplement to argument, a supplement that is valuable in many ways given the narratives illustrate differing perspectives and provide a basis for empathy. But storytelling does not avoid the need to scrutinize evidence and reasons because personal stories often state or assume claims that are contestable and contested. For a full inquiry and deeper understanding, those claims will need to be discussed and evaluated. The

evaluation will require the finding and weighing of relevant evidence and reasons, which is just to say that it will require argument.

Assuming that a participant in reconciliation processes is well-intentioned and honest, her story will show others how she has experienced the conflict, how she feels, what she went through, and what meaning she gives to these events. This story is a mosaic element in the history of the conflict, in the sense that it conveys the attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of this particular individual. We might say it conveys her experiences or, in the broad sense, 'her perceptions.' A history compounded of the perceptions of many relevantly placed persons is by no means unimportant. Given the centrality of such perceptions for constructing decent relationships between former enemies, I would even say that such attitudes are highly important; in some contexts attitudes and 'perceptions' are more important than events themselves.

Thus, even in a 'raw' and unscrutinized form, personal stories are highly significant for processes of reconciliation. I do not wish to argue against that idea and, indeed, it would be unreasonable to do so. Feelings, attitudes, and beliefs really matter here – whether based on flawed ideology, partial selection, and tendentious language or not.

The problem of 'narrative truth' arises if we suppose that from personal stories told, one can construct a consistent, coherent, and plausible account of historical events, as distinct from people's perceptions of them. Given that the presumptions of some stories will contradict the presumptions of others, no coherence can be reasonably expected from unanalyzed personal narratives. A general history may – and often should – include references to the beliefs, ideologies, and master narratives of engaged parties, in the sense of recognizing that those beliefs were held, those feelings were experienced, and those attitudes may persist and affect society in the aftermath of intense political conflict. But when it comes to events themselves, it will be necessary to *evaluate* competing assumptions and claims. At root, such evaluation will be of a logical and epistemic nature; it will require clarification, critical thinking, and the assessment of evidence and reasons. That is just to say that it will involve, in an integral role, the construction and critical assessment of argument. Storytelling is human, accessible, and interesting and it is a highly important tool in re-establishing human contact in the aftermath of a conflict. It can provide an important beginning in processes of reconciliation. But the fact of narrative divisions, omissions, memory lapses, and other possible flaws indicate that storytelling can be an important partial tool, and not more than that. While a powerful tool for acknowledgement and empathy, the popular notion of 'telling our stories' needs to be supplemented by attention to arguments for and against the claims that those stories contain. In this context as others, the power of narrative does not make it independent of argument.

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