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### Commentary on: Justin Ross Morris' "Narrative, intersectionality and argumentative discourse"

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# Commentary on: Justin R. Morris's "Narrative, intersectionality and argumentative discourse"

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J.R. Morris's paper is intended as a philosophical reflection on how to possibly address in a most appropriate and favourable way the issue of acknowledging and assessing the argumentative characteristics of narrative discourse. It does not get to the point of providing a personal theoretical account of narrative argument as such or how it actually works nor is it its intention. It tackles instead certain preliminary problems and explicit caveats regarding the interest for argumentation theorists to involve in such a kind of research. As I am now deeply interested in this issue, as my own paper in this conference (unambiguously entitled "Narration as argument") indicates, I have found Morris's work especially appealing. It has also helped me to take a look at certain problems of the theoretical framework in which we may be able to think about narrative argumentation which I had myself somewhat overlooked. I must finally admit that I openly sympathize with his "use-based" approach and his empirical and contextual concerns regarding the study of the practices of arguing. I am, consequently, a rather already persuaded reader and commentator, especially as regards his overall conclusion about the intrinsic interest, value and virtues (as opposed to weaknesses and risks) of narrative argument. However, let me point out certain issues which I think could be better clarified in his paper.

Morris starts commenting on the pitfalls of excessively narrow and too theoretical or abstract definitions of discursive categories such as "narrative", suggesting instead that we embrace a more empirical, "use-based" approach, following Wittgenstein's maxim regarding the study of language: "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use". As I'm not very fond myself neither of analytic definitions nor of philosophical theories based on them, I again concede the general point. I would suggest, nonetheless, that, instead of referring this topic to the old and all-embracing discussions about "nominalism" (as Morris does in note 1), he could make use of the ideas of a very interesting Uruguayan philosopher from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Carlos Vaz Ferreira, who is now precisely being vindicated by some people working in argumentation theory (Vega Reñón 2008); Spanish speaking people, I admit, as he is not yet translated into English. My comment is, therefore, just a suggestion for further reading not the mention of any obvious omission. In his *Lógica viva* (2008 [1910]), Vaz Ferreira develops a theory about "paralogisms" (as he calls them) as risky habits of reasoning, some of which are not precisely typical of uneducated people but just the opposite. In this respect,

he talks about the risks of “false precision” and especially about the opposition between “thinking (and reasoning, and arguing) within a system” vs. “thinking with ideas to take into account” (“Pensar por sistemas, y pensar por ideas para tener en cuenta”, pp. 130-151). The argumentative interests of Vaz Ferreira may help us focus the wider issue of the philosophical problems of definitions within our own field and topics of interest.

In this same sense, Morris’s use of the literature on narratology which exposes its own problems about the definition of its subject matter, “narrative”, may have somehow blurred for him (or so it seems in certain paragraphs) what I see as “our own” definitional problem. To make myself clear, my intuition is that the problems Govier and Ayers (2012) get into while trying to assess narrative arguments are not exactly due to their definition of narration (as Morris claims) but primarily to their narrow definition of argument and their treatment of narration under such an argumentative theoretical paradigm.

Now Morris claims that by analyzing “narratives in use” we will be able to capture the dynamic characteristics of this kind of discourse “as an activity and not as a static product” (again a point I fully endorse). However, the paper does not make clear to me whether Morris’s aim is to consider, in a flexible, open and empirically relevant way, what narrative is or becomes in such uses or to find out in which cases it has a particularly argumentative import. I like very much his quotation from Klapproth (2004, p. 10) suggesting that what is “*narratable* might vary widely from one culture to another”, but I think that in argumentation studies we should go a step further and look for argumentatively relevant uses of narration.

Morris also engages in the topic about the supposedly marginal position of narrative arguments in comparison to “linear, logical, abstract forms of reasoning” (Rooney 2010, p. 218) that have been the privileged focus of mainstream argumentation theory. Narratives and narrative arguments have been, in this respect, related to certain genres of discourse belonging to underprivileged groups, as women, children, poor, undereducated, exotic people; i.e. everything that might be opposed to the male, white, western, ruling and dominant classes. To be able to analyze and assess narrative argumentation would, therefore, help us not to neglect these areas of discourse and discursive agents. It would help us liberate from a colonizing, imperialistic discursive focus. Towards the end of the paper Morris claims, consistently, that “narrative has the potential to equip marginalized individuals”. This may well be so, but I am not sure we should assume it without further discussion nor as so generalized a rule (a kind of one-size-fits-all rule), before we have relevant and contextualized empirical results; much less being precisely an idea belonging to the colonizing mainstream discourse that narrative is thus humbly situated within the space of reasons. I would rather challenge the very roots of this assumption, as narrative, I think, is much more intrinsic to all discursive practices and at all social and cultural levels as the interest in a good account of *narratio* of the ancient rhetoricians (not precisely talking to the underprivileged) may illustrate (Olmos 2012).

It is just a mirage, I think, to find anything intrinsically feminine or humble in narration. A mirage produced by a wrong self-image of the powerful discourses

claiming of themselves that they do not use such persuasive means while obviously doing it.

If there is, nevertheless, still room for certain approaches based on the idea that narrativity may be a discursive means that rather encourages communion *vs.* adversariality (and this could be so, I admit, in certain contexts), I think, in any case, that these aspects should not be part of our initial picture of narrative argument because we could be narrowing our lens too much. I would ask for a more neutral starting point in this respect. Gilbert's ideas on intersectionality (2007) could be very useful for it, and I was glad to find them here. Specially the "call for letting go of one-size-fits all approach to the analysis of argument". A broader approach to our way of defining argument and argumentation practices (as I suggested above) would allow us to make room for a more congenial account of narrative discourse, without assuming too much about what we will find in it.

In the last part of the paper, Morris comes to criticise Govier and Ayers' (2012) article on parables and narrative arguments; most especially their contention that offering arguments through narrations may have "more risks than benefits, from an epistemic point of view" (p. 188). Morris mentions their notion of good reason, something for which we should be attentive, and the way they talk about the "charm of the story" as capable of lowering our wits for logical assessment. In order to identify a suitable philosophical framework supporting such hygienic ideas Morris recurs to Fisher's (1987) reconstruction of the "rational-world paradigm" assuming that within such a rigid paradigm it is understandable that finally Govier and Ayers come to their conclusion. He also suggests that, when assessing narrative arguments, Govier and Ayers are probably just thinking about one among the possible arguing practices, in this case Walton's "persuasion dialogue" (and in a particularly rationalistic account of it). In order to attain a different conclusion, Morris seems to suggest, we just have to think in other kinds of settings, and he quotes Dal Cin, *et al's* (2004) assessment of the persuasive powers of narrative argumentation in certain context where it might work "under the radar".

Now for all my sympathies with a rhetorical approach to argumentation that would take into account "effectiveness" as an important parameter in argument analysis, I would not be willing to concede so much to logicians about the "under the radar" workings of narration, suggesting it, somehow, skips rationality. I would rather try to reconstruct an alternative account of what is rational or reasonable to take as a good reason. In this sense, rather than presenting Fisher's account of the traditional "rational-paradigm" which is, in fact, his target, Morris could have made use of his alternative proposal of a "narrative paradigm of human rationality". If we do so, we could aspire to an account that would defend narrative as a rational enough means to argument, providing good enough reasons in the adequate contexts; an endeavour for which we can count on the help of a long-standing tradition.

Morris's paper has helped me to situate my own interests in narrative arguments within a wider framework of philosophical assumptions and I am very grateful for it. I fully endorse his call for intersectional analysis and empirical research on argumentative practices. A use-based approach, I am sure, would help

us a lot in understanding what is happening in different argumentative settings; so let us stick to it and not assume too many of the thesis endorsed by those who have a very different approach.

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