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Commentary on: Paula Olmos' "Narration as argument"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle reminds us that the human being is not only a rational animal, but also a story-telling animal. And those stories (represented through the dramas of the *Poetics*) must have a certain structure and an internal logic, following by means of what is necessary or probable. Narratives that violate such principles, that are improbable or otherwise "irrational;" will not have the appropriate effect on an audience. Audiences will not learn from them (always a concern in Aristotle's practical works), and they certainly will not be persuaded by them.

This plea for narrative probability is reinforced by Paula Olmos' scholarly journey, tracing the tensions between narration and argumentation, from the early place of *narratio* in the parts of speeches to the parallels with the informal logician's treatment of explanation, and current debates over fiction versus non-fiction. Along the way she highlights the importance of the pragmatic context, which leads her to reject the fiction/non-fiction distinction and establishes the need for an argumentative theory of narrative *probabilitas* that serves the demands of modern theories of argumentation. There is much to explore in her detailed analysis; I will focus on just a few points related to the veracity of factual discourse and the plausibility of narratives.

2. CONCEPTS OF NARRATION

The early accounts of the *narratio* are understood in terms of a setting out of the facts. This certainly differs from the fictive telling of a story that tries to draw an audience in through some lesson learned or an illustrated claim. Each of these very different uses of narration, though, indicates the kinds of barriers that have been erected by argumentation theorists to prevent the treatment of narratives as arguments or at least to police the situation with strict conditions that would have to be met before the narrative qualifies. Essentially, these conditions reduce to demands that narratives fit the structure of arguments in order to qualify. That is, they must have a claim and supporting premises. This fits the definition provided by Kvernbekk, for example, in her paper "Narratives as informal arguments" (2003) and what Govier and Ayers (2012) describe as the "core" of an argument. Of course, in identifying a core, they also suggest that there are non-core elements, and this they provide in a footnote: emotional indicators, counter-considerations, and also

jokes or illustrative anecdotes (2012, p. 166n.9). In fact, a fuller exploration of that footnote, were we to have time for it, might well find a case for the narrative in the argument. But as long as the core criterion dominates in accounts such as those of Kvernbekk and Govier & Ayers, then the analyst can demand of the text, ‘what are the premises?’, and in the absence of a suitable response, reject the candidate. In a sense, the problem is similar to the treatment of images as arguments. The difference, of course, lies in the discourse-basis of the narrative and the different genres involved. But this just serves to identify the frustration experienced when trying to account for narratives in terms of the genre of argumentation. Because if we do identify the premises and the claim they support, then we have indeed an argument. But what is left of the narrative? It has been absorbed in the argument (one genre consumed by the other.) Or, more to the point, what is left that is of importance for the narrative to contribute in evaluating the strength of the discourse? What much of this suggests is that whether narratives can work as arguments will depend very much on how we construe ‘argument’.

In this light, the observed parallels with the treatment of explanations are indeed useful. Informal logicians do evaluate these pragmatically, in terms of the end that a discourse attempts to achieve.¹ Like arguments, explanations offer reasons, and so a better appreciation of the “space of reasons” may reveal the ways in which statements operate as reasons in relation to an end at which a speaker or writer aims. This may not tell us what kinds of reasons narrative statements provide, but at least the parallel serves not to dismiss narratives out of hand.

Likewise, the ideas drawn from Agricola are particularly useful insofar as he is the source of a compelling account of how plausible expositions with persuasive ends fit into the wider scope of argumentative discourse (rather than the restrictive structures of informal arguments). This points to a common persuasive end for a range of discourse types—arguments, explanations, narratives—and ways in which they are unified by that end. In a sense, this suggests that the attempt to see narratives as arguments (as if arguments occupied a higher position on a hierarchy, and other discourse types aspired to reach such heights) is mistaken. Instead, both arguments and narratives (and explanations, and images) can operate argumentatively insofar as they aim to persuade. (There may be other aims, but we can restrict our attention to one for the present.) What matters, then, is the *probabilitas*, credibility or plausibility involved.

3. FACTS AND THE PLAUSIBILITY OF NARRATIVES

It is interesting to read of Zabarella’s dismissal of History because it conveys “the mere narration of facts” (p. 9). I think Olmos captures well what is wrong with such an interpretation, although it is worth emphasizing. Indeed, if the narration of facts is just an objective description about a state of affairs with which no one might disagree, then it would be hard to read such descriptions as in any way argumentative. But it is exactly when we are given competing descriptions (when

¹ Kvernbekk (2003) briefly discusses the status of narratives as explanations (p. 10).

we choose one newspaper over its competitor) that we expect a case to be conveyed through the narration of events. In argumentation theory we no longer think that “the facts speak for themselves,” as old funding grants used to suggest. The facts have no voice; it is the writer or speaker who gives them voice, and in so doing that writer or speaker takes a stand on the facts.

From the perspective of rhetorical argumentation, what is at stake relates to the choices involved: how will the “facts” of a case be presented? Which point should be stated first, and how will their order and arrangement effect their reception? A similar idea is now captured in the extended version of pragma-dialectics, with the introduction of rhetoric through strategic maneuvering. The arguer makes key selections about the topic from those available, including which of the available information will be included. Whenever “facts” are conveyed in a narrative, then, we look for the choices that have been made (of inclusion and exclusion) because those choices, and hence the narration that is constructed, are argumentative. This is, I believe, the point Olmos has in mind when she writes: “if the pragmatic criterion applies and these narratives are discursive means to make us decide about facts under discussion, their believability would be put forward just in order to defend their being good (the best available) portraits of reality” (p. 10). We might only consider adding two provisos to this: that the “if” is unnecessary, since the pragmatic criterion should always apply (there will always be rhetorical choices involved); and, secondly, even where the intention that is hinted at here is not conscious in the writer or speaker, we are still being given an interpretation of the facts. The very act of giving voice to facts in a narrative is an act of interpretation.

My second more general comment relates to the nature of plausibility, or credibility, to the narrative *probabilitas* that is being advocated and developed in the paper. Again, we are clearly operating in the rhetorical dimension, because plausibility is an audience concern. We might imagine a general sense of what is plausible, in the abstract, but the idea operates more coherently in smaller communities. Narration is, after all, a way of personalizing argumentation, creating a sense of communion between arguer and audience.

Yet still the concept of ‘plausibility’ must be given some content, and this is attempted in the paper. Various ideas contribute to the profile: “Believability” (the central element); “consistent with phenomena” and “free from contradiction” (these from Agricola); “characteristics which are accustomed to appear in real life” (from Cicero); the internal coherence of the events, and the external coherence with shared assumptions about behaviour (from Plumer); and some mix of veracity and verisimilitude issues from Olmos’ disagreement with Plumer. From such a set of non-exhaustive ideas we could then determine ways to evaluate narratives, beyond their “logic.”²

What seems most advocated here, in the paper in question, is the plausibility of narratives judged as “coherent wholes.” Now, such coherence can be internal or external, or both, and I suspect it is the dual aspect that is important. But the same

² Walter Fisher offers similar ideas in his narrative paradigm, (which is both argumentative and literary, 1987, p. 58) with his specific notions of narrative rationality (p. 66) and, most importantly, fidelity (p. 105ff).

kind of ideas are not common to both types of coherence. Internally, we can accept very different worlds if the ideas are consistent and non-contradictory, and explained in terms of themselves. Externally, we move centrally to the audience that judges, and here the narrative must fit their expectations of the world, their understanding of what can and cannot happen, what makes sense. But here the account needs to find ways to accommodate a clearly argumentative type of narrative popular with philosophers—the thought experiment or hypothetical case. I have in mind here someone like Judith Jarvis Thomson (1971) and her story of the hooked-up violinist (“It sounds plausible. But now let me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist” p. 48). The conceit requires the reader to put herself in a situation which is not plausible, and see what follows logically from there. It has internal coherence, but it does not fit with what we know about the external. And, yet, Thomson expects a conclusion to be drawn about the “real” world. Or more radically, there is Derek Parfit’s (1984) ‘teletransporter’ narrative, right out of an episode of *Star Trek*, by which he expects his audience to be persuaded about his account of personhood. (“I enter the Teletransporter. I have been to Mars before, but only by the old method...When I press the button, I shall lose consciousness, and then wake up at what seems a moment later” p. 191.) This kind of narration, with its clear argumentative intention, is a challenge for the plausibility account.

So perhaps the criteria are loose and apply differently to different kinds of narrative. Or perhaps narrative draws most of its argumentative power from its contributory nature, being given in addition to an argument (like Protagoras in the dialogue named after him, presenting his case first as a Great Myth, and then as a logical argument). What matters is that narratives not be included from having an important role in argumentation, broadly conceived, and that papers such as this continue to explore that role.

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