

Narrative Knowledge: Knowing through Storytelling

This paper deals with the issue of storytelling or narrative as a special form of reasoning. I will suggest a form of narrative reasoning that illuminates a narrative grammar, which will ultimately lead me to describe a form of narrative knowledge. Traditional forms of knowledge (knowing how and knowing that) are not sufficient to cover a third kind of knowledge (knowing what it is like) in the way that storytelling can. I will argue that this latter form of knowledge is under-recognized as an essential ingredient to our humanity.

Introduction

People love to tell stories. When something scary, or funny, or out of the ordinary happens, we cannot wait to tell others about it. If it was *really* funny etc. we tell the story repeatedly, embellishing as we see fit, shortening or lengthening as the circumstances prescribe. When people are bad storytellers we tend not to pay as close attention to their stories; our minds drift, and we hope for a swift conclusion. We tend not to remember those stories as well as the ones that were carefully constructed and skillfully delivered. Storytelling is one of our primary forms of communication with other people. What I will argue in this paper is that reading, telling, and hearing well-constructed narratives are not just an idle pastime that we have created for entertainment purposes or even as a mere means of communication. Rather, I want to argue that there are epistemological benefits to reading, hearing, and telling well-constructed narratives. In particular, by practicing narrative reasoning we develop this skill, in a similar way that by practicing discursive reasoning we develop discursive reasoning skills. In turn, we develop an enhanced reasoning ability that arises from *narrative reasoning* and *narrative meaning construction*. I argue that narrative reasoning helps us to empathize with other people, become better citizens, increase our intelligence, and develop a coherent and healthy sense of personal identity. Ultimately, I argue that those who are able to develop the capacity to reason narratively will be able to have a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience.

Defining Narrative

To begin, I will go into some detail about what I mean when I talk about narratives, since the reasoning skills that will ultimately come from engaging with them will be related to their inherent meaning and structure. Noël Carroll outlines a theory of narrative that I will use for working purposes.¹ In his description, he outlines not a clear set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but a networked notion of what he calls the “narrative connection.”² This connection is like a set of family resemblances that can connect together a number of the important features of what narratives are generally understood to be. To begin with, Carroll argues that narrative discourse is comprised of more than one event and/or states of affairs that are connected, are about a unified subject, and are represented as being perspicuously ordered in time (the ordering must be at least retrievable if not implicitly obvious). A narrative is not merely a list or series of events or states of affairs, but there must be some sort of sequence of events, where the sequence minimally implies a temporal ordering. An annal might be something that is temporally ordered and will likely have more than two events or states of affairs, and for this reason it might be put into a category of “story form.” The primary principle of organization of an annal is, however, *merely* a temporal list of events. It cannot count as a full-fledged narrative, since it may be a temporal list of events that has no unified subject.

For example,

A: “The Space shuttle Challenger explodes in 1988, the Berlin wall comes down in 1989, there was a massacre at Srebrenica, Bosnia in 1995.”

B: “The Space Shuttle Columbia blows up upon reentry to Earth; the Space Shuttle Challenger explodes upon take off.”

A is a temporally ordered list of events and is an annal, while B is not because in B there is no temporal sequence. B does have some characteristics of a story form however, namely a seemingly unified subject and some possible connection between the events. B contains none of the elements of a recognizable narrative except for a unified subject (space shuttle disasters).

A chronicle might also fall into the category of story form. A chronicle includes more than one event and/or state of affairs, has a temporal order and a unified subject (a subject being either a topic or a character). Carroll defines a chronicle as a “discursive representation that (temporally, but noncausally) connects at least two events in the career of a unified subject such that a reliable temporal ordering is retrievable from it (and/or from the context of the enunciation).”³ To develop B into a chronicle, we could say “the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up upon take off in 1986; the Space Shuttle Columbia blew up upon reentry in 2003.” This has a unified subject (space shuttle disasters) and a perspicuous temporal order but it is not a full-fledged narrative because it does not display a connection between events other than a temporal ordering of the events that it recounts.

In addition, then, to the multiple states of affairs and/or sequence of events, a unified subject, and a perspicuously temporal order, what is it that makes a collection a narrative? Some sort of causation is most often suggested as the necessary condition that consistently links the changes in states of affairs together in a way that would make narratives consistently identifiable as narratives. Carroll argues, however, that it is not a simplistic view of direct or necessary causation that is the link needed to do this work. Causation, he says, is “too strong a relation to hypothesize as the relevant connection operative in all narrative linkages.”⁴ If causation were the singular necessary relation that unifies narrative structure, then earlier events in narratives would always necessarily causally

entail later events. Since this is not the case in all narratives (and perhaps not even most narratives, Carroll suggests), this cannot be the link that makes these groups of events or states of affairs narratives, no matter how unified the subject or temporally sequenced the events are.

Carroll explains that most “narratives are not strings of causal entailments; instead, the earlier events in a sequence of events *underdetermine* later events.”⁵ What seems to be the case is that an earlier event can be a cause that is necessary to a sufficient condition but is not necessary itself. These conditions are what J. L. Mackie calls INUS conditions:

Insufficient, but Necessary parts of a condition that is itself *Unnecessary* but is *Sufficient* for an effect of an event.⁶ That is, an earlier event in a narrative connection is at least a causally necessary condition or ingredient for bringing about later events. In a more strictly causally necessary model, earlier events in a narrative would necessitate the latter events. Carroll explains “on the causal input model, the earlier event plus some causal input necessitates the succeeding event . . . [but] the narrative relation is often weaker than that of necessitation or causal entailment.”⁷ Thus INUS conditions can function as the linchpin that holds the narrative connection together, but those conditions are much less causally strict than the directly necessary causal relations. Carroll illustrates INUS conditions in the following example:

C: “The thief enters the bank to rob it, but subsequently, as he exits, he is apprehended by the police.”⁸

This is a narrative, but the first event does not necessitate the second event. Although robbing the bank is causally *relevant* to being apprehended by the police, it is not *entailed* by it. Robbing the bank is, however, a necessary part of the sufficient cause of the police apprehension, but it is not necessary in and of itself.

If it can be argued that narratives involve changes in the career of a unified subject, then that change needs to be more than just coincidental; it needs to adhere to a causal or semi-causal process. The earlier events must be *at least* causally necessary insofar as they are sufficient or jointly sufficient for later events. Carroll explains that “the earlier events fall into the causal network that gives rise to the later events where the weakest, but perhaps most frequent, way of figuring in that causal network is as a causally necessary condition (or a contribution thereto) for the causation of later events.”⁹ The earlier event must, at minimum be *causally relevant* to the later event though it need not be directly causal. What Carroll takes here to be causally relevant, I want to broaden to just what is explanatory. That there is a thief who enters the bank to rob it *explains* the fact that the police later apprehended him. Further, many of the earlier events may not even be causally relevant, but only *contributions* to a causally necessary condition. For definitional purposes here, the necessary, direct, causal connection needs to be bracketed, qualified, and minimized potentially only to explanatory features.

If the elements in a narrative connection bear no sort of causal relation to each other, then they can seem to be more of an order of coincidence than of a narrative. For example,

D: the king died and then the queen died.

E: the king died and then the queen died, of grief.

D is merely a chronicle because there is no causal or underdetermined identifiable underlying cause or explanation from the first event to the second event. It is not clear to a reader, nor can it really be discerned, what the relationship is between the two events although they seem to have a unified subject and there is an implied temporal order. E, on the other hand,

is a narrative because the relationship between the two (unified, temporally ordered) events is made clear.

Thus, Carroll's narrative connection obtains when:

1. the discourse represents at least two events and/or states of affairs
2. in a globally forward-looking manner
3. concerning the career of at least one unified subject
4. where the temporal relations between the events and/or states of affairs are perspicuously ordered, and
5. where the earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events and/or states of affairs (or are contributions thereto).¹⁰

Further, narrative explanation does not focus only on how one event is produced or effected by another, but on the more subtle transition from beginning to end in terms of explanation and plot construction. Plot is the structure through which events are connected to a narrative. A narrative, or story,¹¹ is constructed of events only to the extent to which the plot crafts events into a narrative. Events are gathered together and it is the plot that makes the events stand out beyond what they would be in an annal or chronicle. Plot combines two important aspects: chronological and non-chronological. The chronological aspect of plot characterizes the events of the narrative and shows the reader how the events follow a particular timeline. The non-chronological aspect of the plot connects the events together in such a way that no matter how temporally diverse the events actually are, they can be seen to form a coherent whole. Plot structures how and in what order the reader becomes aware of what happens in the story. Although the same set of events can be told in a different order or with a different plot, there must be some consistently identifiable transformations that can serve as a basis for the narrative so that it can be handled in different meaning preserving sequences. The other part of the non-chronological dimension of plot is that of the human motivations found developed through the story. One of the main reasons we read narratives, or perhaps one of the main motivations to continue once we are in it, is to

see how human motivations are played out in the context of the story. Although this is not going to fit neatly into anything that even resembles necessary and sufficient conditions of what a narrative might look like, it does seem to be one of the main incentives we have for reading stories.

With what I have laid out thus far, I want to be clear that I am neither positing a theory of narrative nor am I dictating a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as a narrative. What I do want to do is gesture toward what seem to be some of the overarching components of which might make up a “logic” of narrative. I do not take causation to be the necessary or sufficient condition that makes something a narrative. By explicating Carroll’s conditions for a narrative connection (especially the INUS conditions) in conjunction with plot and explanatory reasons, I am hoping to show how a wide array of narratives can be used as the basis for what I hope to show in what follows. I also want to make clear that the kinds of narratives I am attempting to include here vary from the traditional, to the non-linear (or with interruptions of sequence like with the stories of Italo Calvino), to the oral storytelling traditions that come from long ago.

Narrative Reasoning

There are two general models from which most of our reasoning is generated: discursive¹² and narrative. Discursive reasoning relies on logical, direct arguments, while narrative reasoning depends on the narrative aspects of a story to order a certain experience. Discursive reasoning, “passing from premises to conclusions; proceeding by reasoning or argument”¹³ is here meant to include inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning. What I am trying to capture in this term is the ideal of a formal system of description and/or explanation. It is not merely linear, syllogistic reasoning systems. Narrative psychologist

Jerome Bruner explains his version of this kind of reasoning as one that “employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized, and related one to the other to form a system.”¹⁴ The imaginative application of discursive reasoning leads to “the ability to see possible formal connections before one is able to prove them in any formal way” while the imaginative application of the narrative “leads instead to good stories, gripping drama, [and] believable (though not necessarily ‘true’) historical accounts.”¹⁵ Discursive reasoning is exemplified by the logical argument:

F: “Socrates is a man, all men are mortal, therefore, Socrates is mortal.” Although there could be stories told about Socrates’ mortality (as in fact, there are several) F has no real narrative structure. A narrative about Socrates would look something more like this:

G: “there was a man called Socrates, who, because of his suggestion that people needed to question the folkways of knowledge in ways they had never done before, was tried as a heretic, condemned as guilty, and made to drink hemlock.”

There is an identifiable line of argument in F that G lacks. There is, however, in G an identifiable narrative structure that allows the reader to follow the events in the narrative and to understand how the conclusion (that Socrates is put to death) logically follows, and even sufficiently entails what came before. There is no logical conclusion in the second example that can be proven from what comes before, but there is an identifiable narrative structure that can be pointed to. Although making the suggestion that people question the folkways of knowledge does not necessarily entail death by hemlock, it is easily discernable in this short narrative that this is the sufficient cause of the outcome of the story. If we go back to the example from C (“The thief enters the bank to rob it, but subsequently, as he exits, he is apprehended by the police.”) it is clear here too how discursive reasoning can be abstracted (and I do not want to suggest that discursive reasoning invokes only syllogisms or syllogism-

like kinds of arguments). Although the thief entering the bank neither necessitates being apprehended by the police, nor does being apprehended by the police causally entail a bank robber, it is clear to the reader that being apprehended by the police is causally relevant and more to the point, explanatory, to robbing a bank and readers are not confused about the relationship of the events.

Discursive and narrative reasoning both have different operating principles and both have their own criteria for success. They differ fundamentally, however, in the ways in which they go about verification. Bruner goes so far as to assert that “a good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds”¹⁶ even though both are used as ways of communicating information and of convincing others. He explains that the discursive “verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical truth”¹⁷ while the narrative “establishes not truth but verisimilitude” and lifelikeness. Both can be used as a means to convince others, but what they convince of is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth while narrative convinces of its lifelikeness and believability. Truth often comes in as a distant second to well-constructed and well-executed stories. Narrative lines of reasoning do not generally prove anything, but they do show how something might have come to be the case. There are certain causal or underdetermined causal linkages within a narrative that readers should be able to discern that are not so easily identifiable or linear as what is found in discursive reasoning. We regularly utilize both narrative and discursive reasoning in order to organize and make sense of our worlds and our experience. We explain our lived experiences in terms of plots, and more often than not, those plot structures produce the most sensible statements and explanations of our experience and beliefs. Both are legitimate and rational ways of understanding and ordering

our experience of the world, but both produce cognition by different means which correspond with the inherent structure of their own logic.

The way that causation is construed in the way narratives are defined and/or identified is extremely important since this is one of the main factors (if not *the* main factor of any real significance) that differentiates narrative structure and discursive structure. If narrative structure were merely based on direct necessary and simple causation, then narrative reasoning and narrative meaning construction would look a lot more like discursive reasoning than it in fact does. Thus it is important to note the differences between the ways that causation could be construed in the different kinds of reasonings.

Although these two modes of understanding are complimentary, it is important to note that they are neither *reducible* nor *translatable* to one another. It seems dubious, and worse, futile, to attempt to either reduce or translate from one to the other since they are, at base, fundamentally different kinds of reasoning. This is not to say, moreover, that stories cannot exemplify both the narrative and discursive structures. Many Sherlock Holmes mysteries, for example, are presented in the form of a narrative, but what motivates the reader in this case is not the narrative aspects of the novel (although that may be a part of it) as much as the discursive and clues that one has to follow in order to figure out the mystery. Ultimately, Holmes relies most heavily on abductive reasoning, carefully couched in plot.¹⁸ Although it is also true that both discursive and narrative reasoning can exist in a single text, that does not mean that they cannot be clearly differentiated.

Further, it is clear that we get better at discursive reasoning with practice. This would seem to be the underlying assumption of much of the philosophy we teach, especially of critical thinking and logic courses. The explicit expectation in these classes is for students to learn to identify various valid and invalid logical inferences. Students are taught these

inferences with the hope and expectation that they will be able to identify the same inferences in their own reasoning and the reasoning of others, whether it be in a philosophical treatise, arguments of their own making, or of the opinions section of the newspaper. In teaching students even basic logical rules like Aristotle's Barbara, modus tollens, and modus ponens, students are often able to apply these logical inferences to their own (and their friends') reasoning processes. The formalization of logical structure, formal reasoning, and the identification of logical fallacies are an essential part of the development of reasoning capabilities. My argument relies on the assumption that the process that occurs when we practice narrative reasoning parallels that of discursive reasoning. If such reasoning processes behave consistently (as we have every reason to assume they would) then with practice we should get better at narratively reasoning in similar ways as we do with discursive reasoning.

Nussbaum on Narrative

Martha Nussbaum makes the argument that reading literature can help us to expand our study of ethics because we can practice expanding our moral imaginations by engaging in narratives. She argues that with literature, the conjunction of the form and the content together allows a particular style to emerge that can prompt us to reflect on our own moral situations in a significantly different way than we can with philosophical ethical treatises. She explains that "certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist."¹⁹ Her suggestion is that by adding good literature to our study of ethics, we should be able to produce a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding of ethical life.

Part of the basis of Nussbaum's claim is that the *style* of narrative is uniquely qualified to present what she calls a view of life. She explains that the "telling itself—the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life—all of this expresses a sense of life and value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, or life's relations and connections."²⁰ All of this, in addition to the notion that events are never experienced except through a human perspective, (although there may *ideally* be omniscient narrators, we can never experience narratives except through a particular perspective) adds to the fact that reading literature for Nussbaum helps us to experience the world more fully. Life is never presented straightforwardly but always through the lens of a speaker (whose lens(es) may be or are likely to be very different from ours). Nussbaum also argues that "literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life."²¹ Reading good literature then can make us more moral, the argument goes, since we can experience the world in ways that we cannot on our own through our own experience. For Nussbaum, narrative and literary imagining are not opposed to rational argument or discursive reasoning, but they can provide benefits that discursive reasoning on its own cannot provide.²²

Nussbaum makes an additional argument in *Poetic Justice* that reading good literature can help one to become a better citizen. By using the imagination in the ways that literature requires of us, we can imagine, practice imagining and get better at imagining the position of others. Unlike more social scientific or historical texts, literary narratives typically invite their readers to centrally imagine characters' experiences—experiences that are often very

different from their own. In the way that the text invites the reader to participate, it gives the sense of a number of different kinds of possibilities between the characters and the reader. Novels present themselves in ways that are necessarily perspectival. But it is not just that literary narratives present themselves this way. It is more to the point that literary narratives ask the reader to see a given state of affairs in a particular way over other, alternative ways. Nussbaum writes “the novel presents itself as a metaphor. See the world in this way, and not in that, it suggests. Look at things as if they were like this story, and not in other ways recommended by social science.”²³ By practicing doing this, we can learn how better to be “judicious spectators”²⁴—and in turn better citizens. The emotion of a judicious spectator must be, importantly, the emotion of a *spectator*, and not a *participant*. Nussbaum explains “this means not only that we must perform a reflective assessment of the situation to figure out whether the participants have understood it correctly and reacted reasonably; it means, as well, that we must omit that portion that derives from our own personal interest in our own well being.”²⁵ We imagine the lives of others that are presented through narrative form and by expanding the moral imagination we are better able to empathize with others and we can become better at public thinking. Nussbaum argues that this can make one a better juror, citizen, and public thinker.

The underlying assumption that Nussbaum uses here, which is the explicit notion that I want to defend, is that through engaging with well-constructed narratives (what Nussbaum focuses on specifically is “good literature” and my scope of narrative is purposefully much broader than that) our own way of reasoning is changed through the moral imagination; our reason is heightened and thereby influenced through the *structure* of what we read. Although it is not true that we automatically or even quickly begin to pick up the thinking patterns of the kinds of narratives we read, it is true that in certain ways our

reasoning abilities are influenced by the reasoning structures with which we engage. What Nussbaum focuses on is the form or the structure of literature, in addition to its inherently subjunctive nature. This structure is what she argues to be so different from the philosophical or discursive structure of other ethical treatises that might cover similar ground. Similarly, bad literature, says Nussbaum, can cause one to become morally corrupt. With the shift of focus that I want to provide, morally bad content will not be the corrupting influence cognitively (although it might be with another focus) as much as poorly told and poorly delivered stories. So while there is a long history of philosophical criticism about the potential moral corruption caused by literature, the corruption I might worry about is less dependent on the content of the story as much as it is on the form and the delivery. Thus while my distinction between discursive and narrative reasoning is played out in Nussbaum's work (which argues that narrative can make us more moral, within specific constraints) it does the same work for my argument which suggests that narratives can help us to be better able to reason.

Imagination and Understanding

It is clear now, that there are (at least) two different kinds of reasoning skills that we use and can develop. Without going into great detail about what the imagination can do in conjunction with this, I will say that the imagination plays a very important role in narrative reasoning and narrative meaning construction. Narrative reasoning and the capacity to imagine are mutually dependent and both should begin to develop at an early age. Imagination can help to facilitate causal judgments about how things might have turned out differently. Historians use this kind of speculation, as do philosophers with our thought experiments. In a much more mundane sense, we do this in our everyday lives. This is, in

fact, how we can learn from our mistakes; we identify what when wrong and then imagine alternate ways things could have turned out and what we could have done or said differently to make those alternatives happen.

Utilizing our imaginations requires more than just discursive reasoning. Psychologist Paul Harris explains “there is a great deal of work showing that when adults listen to a narrative they build in their mind’s eye, so to speak, a mental image or a model of the situation that is being described and of the events that unfold. And it is that mental model that they retain over a long period of time rather than the particular words.”²⁶ We tend to keep the gist of the story,²⁷ in what Daniel Dennett might call the Cartesian Theater,²⁸ as opposed to any particular sentences that might constitute the story. Thus when called to tell the story, we can adapt as the circumstances prescribe. Badly told or badly constructed stories, on the other hand, are more difficult to construct in imagination than well-constructed stories. Badly told stories are ones that do not make even implicit causal connections, are difficult to follow, they go on too long before getting to a point or a punch line, have irrelevant details, or do not develop the motivations of the characters. Thus well-constructed stories facilitate a better use of the imaginative faculties. Harris argues that these mental models, constructed in the imagination, develop out of the early childhood engagement with narrative and pretend play. The capacity that children have to engage in make-believe early on is not something that they lose as adults. Rather, adults, although we unfortunately engage in much less *physical* pretend play than do children, use this capacity to imagine and narrate various kinds of possible situations and outcomes.

Harris cites an example that is helpful to understanding the development of the schema of discursive and narrative reasoning. He describes a study conducted by Sylvia Scribner,²⁹ which showed that in the absence of formal education, children and adults alike,

adopt an “empirical orientation” towards reasoning. That is, they use their own experience to “supplement, to distort or even to reject the premises supplied by the interviewer; they reason instead on the basis on their empirical experience.”³⁰ After two or three years of formal education they are able to adopt what might be called a “theoretical” or “syllogistic” approach to reasoning. With the discursive capacity to reason better developed, subjects were able to “focus on the claims encapsulated in the premise of the problem, even when those premises do not fit into their everyday experience and they confine their reasoning to what follows from these premises.”³¹ Although Harris ultimately argues that the discursive capacity is not something unusual or unnatural that can only be developed through formal schooling, it is important to note that this capacity to reason is significantly different from the more literal empirical stance.

According to Harris, encouraging a make-believe attitude helps to engage the analytic stance. For example, Harris conducted an experiment with 4 and 6 year olds where he began by telling the children something contradictory to what they knew, like “all fishes live in trees.” Then the children were given a second, minor, premise; “Tot is a fish.” The question thus posed to the children was “Does Tot live in the water?” An empirical approach to this question should prompt a “yes” answer, but an analytic approach, if the child accepts the initial premise which is counter to what they know, the logically correct answer is “no”. These hypotheticals were presented to each group of children in two different ways; as matter of fact, or with a make believe prompt like “lets pretend I’m on another planet” and the experimenter continued the hypothetical in dramatic, story-telling voice. Within both age groups, the make believe presentation prompted more logical replies than the matter-of-fact presentation. Harris’ conclusion to all of this is that counter to the common suggestion that narrative, fiction and/or make-believe scenarios generally constrict,

rather than enhance epistemological performance, he has shown how setting up theoretical analytic scenarios—even when asked to imagine that fish live in trees, that there is a wardrobe with no back on it that leads to a magical world, or that there is a magical ring that can make one disappear—allows analytic reasoning to continue and to develop. Harris explains that even with a wide variety of make-believe cues given to the children, they all seem to converge in producing a similar psychological stance. Harris explains that this stance prompts “children to treat the problems as descriptions of an imaginary world; this imaginary world contains creatures and events that violate their everyday knowledge.”³² Thus unlike many theories which argue that make-believe (fiction or narrative) works counter to healthy reasoning because it enlists fanciful premises, Harris shows how it is, in fact, the case that these reasoning structures continue to function well in an epistemologically significant way.

I would like to take Harris’ argument one step further and suggest that not only do discursive reasoning processes remain intact, and can even be enhanced by engaging in narrative, but that the narrative ability to reason is engaged, and thereby enhanced, to an even greater degree by reading, hearing, and telling well-constructed narratives. Parallel to what Harris points out about the development of discursive reasoning from an analytic education, the development of the narrative reasoning ability emerges in a similar way. When we begin to learn to reason, it is not entirely discursive or empirical. *We learn through the structure of stories.* That is, we learn to reason through the reasoning provided to us through hearing and telling stories. By engaging with narratives, we practice using our narrative reason. The structure found within narratives helps us to imagine more broadly than we are called to with discursive thinking. Narrative comprehension or understanding is enhanced from engagement with narrative structure in the same way that discursive

understanding is enhanced from engagement and practice with discursive structure. This is significant because it tells us about our engagement with narrative generally, fiction more specifically and gives us insight into the role that the imagination plays in the world as we construct it. The way we construct our narratives (fictional and non-fictional) is importantly tied to the way we understand, order, and construct our own reality and our own personal identity. Whatever information might be available from a given sequence of events available *as a story* must be *turned into* a story. Thus even the creation of a narrative from a sequence of events requires the narrative capacity to reason. The more developed one's ability to narratively reason the more one can get out of stories. The better one is at constructing stories, the more intelligent one should be able to become—assuming intelligence is related to the ability to retrieve information readily and to find coherence where it does not obviously exist.

Thus engaging with well-constructed narratives helps us to be better reasoners in a general way; more general than the way Nussbaum argues, but for similar reasons. Reading fiction in particular can help with this skill perhaps even more readily than not engaging with it, as good stories from early on can help us to develop this capacity. Reading narrative fiction and experiencing life both involve people's performing actions in pursuit of goals and having various emotional reactions to events. Thus understanding how our different inferencing mechanisms work might help us to be able to develop these capacities further. The inferencing mechanisms that are used to make sense of the everyday world are the same ones utilized during the comprehension of narratives. There is no real justification to believe that readers (or moviegoers or game players etc.) would turn these inferencing mechanisms off while engaging with fictional narratives as the concern might go with some Platonists.

Conclusion

If it is legitimate to assume that there are (at least) two different kinds of reasoning methods (discursive and narrative) and that we can clearly be trained to think in the discursive mode, I think it can be legitimately argued that we can be and are trained to think in the narrative mode. It would seem also that it is just as important that we foster our narrative reasoning skills, since it is such a prevalent form of communication.

What I want to do with this argument, however, is say that the kind of reasoning skills that one can acquire from reading narratives could make one a better thinker, not just morally in the way that Nussbaum might argue, but more broadly. It might also be argued then, that the epistemological benefits of reading literature are significantly different from the epistemological benefits of engaging with other kinds of non-narrative art. The epistemological benefits of reading literature may in fact be greater than with other kinds of arts. That is, when the question “can we learn from art?” is raised, or more particularly, “*what* can we learn from art?” aestheticians have had trouble answering this since whatever it is that we seem to gain from art or literary narrative is non-propositional. We might be better prepared to answer this question now by saying that we gain narrative reasoning skills from reading literature. In turn, these reasoning skills add not to our storehouse of propositional knowledge necessarily, but to our storehouse of skills that make us more interesting and more empathetic human beings—the kinds of human beings who need narrative arts and good conversation, who are interested in other human beings, and who have knowledge that is more than just propositional.

¹ Noël Carroll. “On the Narrative Connection” in *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*. Ed. Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

² Ibid. 21.

³ Ibid. 25.

⁴ Ibid. 26.

⁵ Ibid. 26. My italics.

⁶ J.L. Mackie. “Causes and Conditions.” In Myles Brand (ed.) *The Nature of Causation*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976) 307-44.

⁷ Carroll, 29.

⁸ Ibid. 27.

⁹ Ibid. 32

¹⁰ Ibid. 32.

¹¹ I will use “narrative” and “story” interchangeably in this paper.

¹² Psychologists Donald Polkinghorne (*Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1988) and Jerome Bruner (*Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) both use the term “paradigmatic” (and Polkinghorne uses “logico-scientific” in addition) for what I will prefer to call discursive reasoning. Discursive captures the logical, direct aspect of reasoning more accurately, I think, than paradigmatic or logico-scientific, which for philosophical purposes do not capture the directness of the brand of reasoning in which I am interested.

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Second Online Edition, 1989. “Discursive.”

¹⁴ Jerome Bruner. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 12.

¹⁵ Ibid, 13.

¹⁶ Ibid, 11. I am not convinced that this psychologist means the same thing by “natural kinds” as philosophers do, but it is worth noting that they are very different in his characterization.

¹⁷ Ibid, 11.

¹⁸ This form of abductive reasoning is explained nicely by Edgar Alan Poe in the *Rue Morgue*.

¹⁹ Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 5.

²⁰ Ibid. 5.

²¹ Ibid. 48.

²² There is historically a concern about the moral implications of engaging emotionally with fiction (falsehoods) beginning with Plato. Martha Nussbaum expresses this concern in *Love's Knowledge*. She explains that “according to one version of the objection, emotions are unreliable and distracting because they have nothing to do with cognition at all. According to the second objection, they have a great deal to do with cognition, but they embody a view that is in fact false” (40). What I am suggesting here, however, is that by engaging emotionally with fiction, our cognitive skills will not be compromised so much as different reasoning skills (the narrative ones) will be enhanced.

²³ Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995)

²⁴ Nussbaum appeals to Adam Smith's notion of the judicious spectator to show how emotive identification with someone on trial (if you are a member of a jury) or a fictional

character (if you are a reader) is a superior position to take over an emotionally detached observer. She explains, “Sympathetic emotion that is tethered to the evidence, institutionally constrained in appropriate ways, and free from reference to one’s own situation appears to be not only acceptable but actually essential to public judgment. But it is this sort of emotion, the emotion of the judicious spectator, that literary works construct in their own readers, who learn what it is to have emotion, not for a ‘faceless undifferentiated man,’ but for the ‘uniquely individual human being’”(78).

²⁵ Ibid. 48.

²⁶ “*Who Needs Imagination?: An Interview with Professor Paul Harris.*” Harvard Graduate School of Education, March 1, 2002.

<<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/features/harris03012002.html>>

²⁷ See Roger Schank. *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990) for more on story gists and story skeletons.

²⁸ See Daniel Dennett. *Consciousness Explained*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991). Although Dennett actually argues against a Cartesian theater, the metaphor is a useful one.

²⁹ Sylvia Scribner. “Modes of thinking and ways of speaking: culture and logic reconsidered.” In P. N. Johnson-Laird and P. C. Wason (eds), *Thinking: Readings in Cognitive Science*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 483-500.

³⁰ Harris, Paul. *The Work of the Imagination*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 98.

³¹ Ibid. 99.

³² Ibid. 105.

