

Review of Narration as Argument, edited by Paula Olmos

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Review

Narration as Argument

Edited by Paula Olmos

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Abstract: This article reviews Paula Olmos's *Narration as Argument* collection (Springer 2017).

Résumé: Cet article est une critique de *Narration as Argument* (Springer 2017) de Paula Olmos.

Keywords: Narrative approach to arguments, narrative paradigm, literary cognitivism, war propaganda, thought experiments, documentary films, parables

1. Book review

Narration as Argument is a collection of essays edited by Paula Olmos and published in Springer's "Argumentation Library" series. Olmos is a lecturer in the departments of Linguistics, Modern Language, Logic and Philosophy of Science, Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Her research focuses on rhetoric, philosophy and classical studies, and contemporary theory of argumentation. In addition to publishing papers in journals such as *Informal Logic* and *Argumentation*, Olmos is the author of a monograph on the Spanish sixteenth-century philosopher Pedro Simón Abril, the

co-editor of three collections, and the sole editor of an additional book titled *Greek Science in the Long Run*.

Narration as Argument brings together scholars from eight different countries—including Norway, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Canada, Israel, UK, and USA—and academic fields as disparate as argumentation, literary studies, epistemology, and philosophy. Even before Walter Fisher’s 1984 article “Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument,” in which he proposed the narrative paradigm, there had been scholarship on narratives in arguments (e.g., Ochs and Burritt, 1973; Bennett, 1978). Fisher, however, shifted narration from being conceived of as a mode to a paradigm of communication, one which can greatly benefit argumentation. Since Fisher’s article, debate over narrative approaches to argument have proliferated within the academy. Over the past decade, scholars, including many featured in this collection, have debated the validity/value of narrative approaches to the study of argument in periodicals such as *Informal Logic*, *Philosophy and Literature*, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, and *Poetics*. On first blush, it may seem counterintuitive to view narratives as arguments and particularly so to consider an argument as a story. *Narration as Argument*, however, provides multiple case studies ranging from parables to war propaganda to essays written by practicing surgeons to make the study of narrative arguments seem less counterintuitive, and more routine and productive. In doing so, the collection illustrates how the narrative approach to argument “closes gaps” envisioned by Fisher and other skeptical scholars and adds “to the tools of the rhetorician and arguer and further captur[es] part of our experiences as argumentative beings” (p. 12).

Part I, titled “Narratives as Sources of Knowledge and Argument,” features essays by Christopher Tindale, Floris Bex and Trevor Bench-Capon, Mitchell Green, Gilbert Plumer, and Eduardo de Bustos. Here, the scholars engage with early critiques of narrative arguments largely stemming from scholars of argumentation theory. Part II, entitled “Argumentative Narratives in Context,” features essays written by Paul van den Hoven, Leona Toker, Adrien Frenay and Marion Carel, James Phelan, Paula Olmos, and Tone Kvernbekk and Ola Bøe-Hansen. Kvernbekk’s inclusion in the collection is particularly notable, as she

is cited throughout the collection as a key critic of the narrative approach. Her contribution is perhaps a representation of the maturation of the narrative approach to argument. In the second section, the authors explore concrete examples of narrative argument unfolding in contexts such as documentary films, memoirs, and scientific thought experiments.

The first essay of Part I—Chapter 2, “Narratives and the Concept of Argument”—has Tindale probing the validity of narrative arguments by dismantling the false dichotomy of “people as arguers” and people “as storytellers” (p. 12). Before dealing with the idea of narrative arguments, however, Tindale lays out the debate in the field of argumentation about narratives. He highlights the resistance put up by Kvernbekk, who believes that since narratives are constructed with hindsight, it prevents one from using “premises to take an audience to a conclusion” (p. 13), and Trudy Govier and Lowell Ayers, who question whether narratives “provide good reasons for what they advocate” (p. 14). Tindale refutes these claims through the invocation of Fisher’s narrative probability/coherence theory but states the larger issue is the lack of consensus in the field for how argument is understood. Rather than viewing argument as a product, Tindale urges readers to heed Aristotle’s insight in the *Rhetoric* and see arguments as dynamic, personalized by those engaged in them, and only “judged ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in light of consideration of the entire argumentative situation” (p. 25). He concludes his chapter with two short stories, one from Mencius and one from Barack Obama, to illustrate how narrative argument can address the concerns of critics when argument is viewed as dynamic rather than static.

In Chapter 3, “Arguing with Stories,” Bex and Bench-Capon focus on case-based reasoning in law to illustrate how narratives can be deployed in arguments if they are similar to previously encountered stories. Their main claim is that stories are frequently used to present arguments from analogy. To illustrate, they consider the fable “The Ant and the Grasshopper” as well as the story of the Good Samaritan to emphasize how the intention of the narrator influences how a story should be interpreted. Some may think Bex and Bench-Capon’s analysis suffers from their lack of engagement with critiques of the narra-

tive paradigm. Barbara Warnick (1987) wrote that the emphasis on ontology in narrative arguments gives every person a different idea of what narrative fidelity and probability would be. Bex and Bench-Capon touch on this briefly by stating “stories illustrate various cultural norms” (p. 31) and “an audience will identify more with a character who is in a similar situation or who has a similar worldview” (p. 39), but both statements are descriptive, with no explanations as to how narrative arguments could transcend an ontological critique. That said, the essay makes a powerful point in its conclusion that the truthfulness of the narrative is not an issue. Rather, as they say, “the power of an argument based on a story comes from the aptness and plausibility of the story” (p. 43).

A central tenet in Chapter 4, “Narrative Fiction as a Source of Knowledge” by Green, is “we do well to avoid myopia about what counts as knowledge” (p. 51). Green defends the idea of literary cognitivism: “literary fiction can be a source of knowledge in a way that depends crucially on its being fictional” (p. 48). Literary fiction—a term that Green could have defined more clearly as his use of the term vacillates between the classist-infused definition from the field of literature and the more general notion of any written fiction—is a source of knowledge, as it poses situations that provide readers with opportunities for thought experiments: For example, how would they respond in an apocalypse similar to McCarthy’s *The Road*? What would be different if our genders changed on a regular basis as in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*? Green posits that literary narrative fiction needs to be compelling in order to create these thought experiments and “pose good questions” for readers. In order to be compelling, the narrative must progress “in a way that seems inexorable or at least highly plausible, from a starting point that is consistent with what we believe to be true of human psychology” (p. 57). This, again, alludes to Fisher’s narrative fidelity and probability, only Green positions his discussion through the framework of Plumer’s transcendental model of internal and external coherence. In closing, Green reemphasizes the aspect of fictionality as important to argument saying, “a work of literary fiction might elucidate our commitments, and thereby make knowledge available in a way that depends crucially on its fictionality” (p. 60).

Chapter 5, “Analogy, Supposition, and Transcendentality in Narrative Argument” by Plumer, comes into conflict with Green’s chapter. Still focusing on literary cognitivism, Plumer proposes that rather than narrative arguments being analogical, they are actually suppositional. After engaging in a similar discussion to Green on narratives as analogy, Plumer explains his transcendental argument of narrative believability. As Green lampoons the second premise of this model only a chapter before (pp. 57-58), the model carries less weight. In his transcendental argument, however, Plumer bolsters a claim Green made without truly explicating: that is, the importance of fictionality. “Believability with respect to fictional stories is quite a different thing than it is with respect to nonfictional stories” as fictional stories *have* to be believable (p. 77). The axiom “truth is stranger than fiction” is one Plumer implicitly invokes in his defense of literary cognitivism. Plumer’s supposition argument contends “it may be best to drop the thought experiment model” (a model which Green used extensively) and instead “see a narrative as proposing an explanation of a compelling supposition” (p. 78). It is important to note that Plumer’s essay is the first of the collection to open the scope of narratives beyond fables and novels, applying them to plays and films as well. Having Green and Plumer’s chapters back-to-back provides two different perspectives from which to view the narrative approach to argument, both framed through literary cognitivism. This increases the likelihood that skeptics will find at least one angle with which they agree.

In the final chapter of Part I, “Parables: Crossroads Between the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor and Argumentation Theory,” Bustos treads similar ground as the preceding chapters. Each author in Part I discusses parables, some even extensively, and Bustos engages with similar literature as the others, including Govier and Ayers (2012) and Walton (2014). After so much discussion of parables in argument, some readers may find aspects of this essay feel redundant. The places where Bustos sheds new light are in looking at the contrast between conventional parables and open-texture parables, where “there is a break with the conventional components of the underlying metaphor” (p. 93). Bustos’s primary examples are the Prodigal Son for the former and Franz Kafka’s “My destination” for the latter. Although presented as a lengthy digression, Bustos’s interpretation of Kafka’s parable

eventually takes shape to detail the *emic* dimension of arguments, in which the knowledge and experience of the speaker and audience need to be considered. The final section sheds prescriptive light on invoking parabolic metaphors in argument—particularly noting how the argument scheme will function as an amended version of argument from analogy only if the speaker establishes the relevance of the parable to the situation prior to its introduction.

Part II begins with Chapter 7, “Narrative and Pragmatic Arguments: Ivens’ *The Four Million*” by Van den Hoven, and it is a particularly interesting way to discuss narrative arguments, as it deals with a documentary film. After Green and Plumer deal extensively with fictional narratives and literary cognitivism, Van den Hoven focuses on a genre that is typically viewed as nonfiction, though Ivens’s film is more of a “narrative region between fiction and non-interventionist ‘spontaneous’ shooting” and “halfway between Hollywood and newsreel” (p. 114). Prior to examining how the film presents Ivens’s argument, Van den Hoven provides a distinction between storytelling arguments and pragmatic arguments. To do so, he examines the five-part narrative scheme, developed from the work of Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell. Pragmatic arguments, however, only have a two-part structure where one indicates a desirable action then “propagates an action or advises against an action” (p. 107). Turning to *The 400 Million*, Van den Hoven discusses the editing choices, the plot structure, and when text is spoken versus when it is written to detail the ways that the storytelling and pragmatic arguments intermingle to create a powerful message urging the Western World to come to China’s aid. He concludes with “the way the narrative constructs causality appeals to abductive reasoning” and “the pragmatic argument appeals foremost to (quasi-)deductive reasoning” (p. 118). Van den Hoven’s analysis is fascinating as he shifts between argumentation, literary, film, and rhetorical theories. This chapter is a useful addition to the scholarship on the narrating functions within documentaries, like that of Bill Nichols (1991) and Grant and Sloiniowski (1998).

Toker, in Chapter 8, “The Sample Convention, or, When Fictionalized Narratives Can Double as Historical Testimony,” continues blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction narrative arguments

through the discussion of Gulag stories written by Demidov, Shalamov, and Solzhenitsyn. The majority of the article deals with the distinction between the “sample convention” and the “as if convention” as well as the “phantasmatic pact” and the “autobiographical pact.” The narratives by Gulag authors are told in first-person, yet they are not meant to be wholly autobiographical, which would imply nonfictional status. Rather, Toker suggests there is a “phantasmatic pact,” where “the protagonist is not to be identified with the individual in the ‘author line’ but is a phantasm placed in that individual’s autobiographical space” (p. 125). The “as if convention” implies either “the ascription of recognizable actions, thoughts, and features to non-documented, non-documentable subjects or ... the ascription of non-documented, or non-documentable actions, thoughts, or features to recognizable historical personages” (p. 126). The “sample convention,” on the other hand, “presents the plot events as basically iterative, serial, a synecdoche for the way things used to happen” (p. 131). Toker spends 14 of the 16 pages of this essay examining the various short stories, novellas, and novels by the various authors to explicate the differences between these conventions, but the connection to argument only comes in the final two and a half pages. The argument made is a strong one—the sample convention allows for a more enthymematic argument—but for some readers, the conclusion may feel rushed. Rather than placing the argument in a wider context, Toker keeps the enthymematic arguments focused on Stalin’s, then Putin’s, Russia, limiting the applicability of the case study. With more space devoted to the final section, Toker’s case would feel like less of a literary analysis and more suited for this collection.

In Chapter 9, “From Narrative Arguments to Arguments That Narrate,” Frenay and Carel approach narrative arguments from a different vantage point. Rather than taking an example and showing how the narrative structure enhances the argument, they look at narrative traits arising from argumentative features of a text. To do so, they focus on a pro-war propaganda article written by Maurice Barrès, a leader of the far-right League of Patriots, published in 1914. The article, “L’Aigle survole le Rossignol” (The Eagle Flies over the Nightingale), is included in its entirety in the chapter, both in its original form and an English translation, which greatly aids the reader in gaining context, as

Frenay and Carel drive down on specific semantic techniques. In examining Barrès's article, Frenay and Carel employ the semantics block theory (SBT), which "is a radical version of *argumentation dans la langue* (ADL) theory" (p. 151). While ADL claims that some words' linguistic meaning alludes to argumentation, SBT advances "that linguistic meaning is only made by argumentative entities" (p. 152). Frenay and Carel emphasize the importance of argumentative templates, presupposed contents, as well as the organizational pattern of SBT, where a content can be foregrounded, backgrounded, or excluded. Once SBT has been established, Frenay and Carel provide brief examples of meaning being foregrounded and backgrounded before diving into a 19-page SBT analysis of "L'Aigle survole le Rossignol." They demonstrate how the persuasive nature of the article foregrounds an account of oneself—calling on others to support the war—while the "narrative dealing with the young writers [who are fighting in the war] unfolds in the background," supporting their hypothesis that not only can narratives argue, but arguments can narrate as well (p. 174).

The most striking essay of Olmos's collection may be Chapter 10, "Narrative as Argument in Atul's Gawande's 'On Washing Hands' and 'Letting Go'" by Phelan. Phelan follows Tindale (Chapter 2) in engaging a similar set of narrative skeptics, but while Tindale focuses primarily on theoretical reasoning, Phelan analyzes two essays by Atul Gawande, a practicing surgeon and author, to make his points. The selected material by Gawande alone is powerful, with "On Washing Hands" concerning the difficulties associated with getting doctors to wash their hands and "Letting Go" following a specific example of a cancer patient ceasing treatments and "letting go." Phelan considers both, using the resultant analytical windfall to counter critiques by Kvernbekk and Govier and Ayers. Phelan begins by recommending a rhetorical approach to narrative, then redefining narrative from "a sequence of events told from a point of view" to "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (p. 178-179). Through discussing the consequences of a rhetorical approach, Phelan lists three components skillful "tellers" can use in crafting narrative arguments: (1) Mimetic, which grounds ideas in actual experiences to help audiences connect with both the ideas and situations; (2) Thematic, where tellers can either be

explicit or implicit with their themes, depending whether narratives are used *within* arguments or whether they *are* arguments; and (3) Synthetic, which deals with how characters and events within narratives are foregrounded. Phelan spends a longer time on the funnier and less complex “On Washing Hands,” but turns to “Letting Go” to explicitly show how Gawande’s narratives take “on the challenge of Kvernbekk and Govier and Ayers about hindsight effects and overgeneralizing from a single story” (p. 191). He concludes with a reiteration of his thesis: “a skillful author can, depending on his or her overall purposes, use narrative either as a mode of argument in itself or as a means of supporting arguments made through non-narrative means” (p. 192).

Editor Olmos’s Chapter 11, “On Thought Experiments and Other Narratives in Scientific Argument,” contends that thought experiments found in the sciences should be considered narratives, as they are similar to fables and parables. Through employing a narrative about a person riding in an elevator to illustrate why thought experiments are vital to science, Olmos details how an actual experiment on the equivalence of gravitational and inertial mass would be “morally, practically, and physically unfeasible” (p. 194). Olmos claims that “thought experiment *in itself* is not already (or not automatically) an argument. It cannot be in isolation” (p. 199). Rather, thought experiments *in context* “typically include, at some point, an explicit argument” (p. 200). Olmos then transitions to describing scientific experiments and the philosophy of science debate over Galileo’s inclined plane devices. While some readers may think Olmos gets a bit into the theoretical weeds, she makes the case that narrative material in scientific discourse, particularly that of the thought experiment, enables scientific findings to not only be more persuasive, but also more consumable for the public, evoking Fisher’s justification for moving away from the rational world paradigm. Olmos concludes by noting that narratives are far more common in science than most care to admit and “whenever science has to deal with particular situations or events ... narratives and narrative ways of giving reasons keep coming out, threatening simplistic and simply nomological paradigms of explanation and argument in science” (p. 210).

The final chapter in the collection, “How to Win Wars: The Role of the War Narrative,” is written by Kvernbekk and Bøe-Hansen. This

chapter begins with an evocative question: “One might think it is obvious in a military conflict who has won and who has lost. But is it?” (p. 215). This opening initially appears misleading, as Kvernbekk and Bøe-Hansen state that war narratives are not the story of a war after it is over; rather, they are presented before the war, as justification. Throughout the chapter, the authors show how war narratives can be created, how they must appeal to certain audiences, as well as how not meeting the goals initially laid out can cause erosion in public trust of the narrative. Kvernbekk and Bøe-Hansen focus on the rhetorical situation and the socio-cognitive domain. The socio-cognitive domain is vital to the discussion for two reasons: first, it connects to the opening question—as the socio-cognitive domain is where “wars are supposedly won” (p. 220)—and second, rhetorical situations require a context. Kvernbekk and Bøe-Hansen then turn to the idea of the audience, as the socio-cognitive domain relies on the facts and assumptions an audience is capable of accepting as true. As war narratives have larger scopes than the narratives previously discussed, their audiences are larger as well, consisting of domestic audiences, international audiences, and the audience found in the operations theater. How the war narratives are crafted will depend on which audience the narrator attempts to persuade. In the final sections of the chapter, after having established how war narratives are created, Kvernbekk and Bøe-Hansen turn to temporality to discuss the positive and negative feedback that can erode a narrative over time. They conclude by returning to their opening question and stating that if a war narrative sets an end-state that is not achieved in what the audience believes is an acceptable amount of time, the war is lost in the cognitive domain, even if most of the battles were won, like with the United States in the Vietnam War. Again, Kvernbekk’s inclusion is notable, as many authors in the collection engage with her criticism of the narrative approach to argument. As the theory of narrative arguments has evolved, one can see that Kvernbekk’s thinking has as well. She and Bøe-Hansen contribute an analysis of a valuable case study of the narrative approach to argument on a massive scale.

Overall, in *Narration as Argument*, Olmos brings together scholars from around the world to advance conversations about the concept of the narrative approach to argument. The collection features scholars,

such as Green and Plumer, clashing and authors building upon one another, as is the case for Olmos's essay which is a natural extension of those by Bustos and Bex and Bench-Capon. Often, the scholars write immersed in the jargon of their specific disciplines, but none are impenetrable to the outsider. The collection deftly blends scholarship from disparate fields and is well put together with clear prose and clearer justifications. With this volume, Olmos puts the debate over whether there is value in narrative approaches to arguments to bed. Even if the field of argumentation asks to keep a night light on in order to continue the debate, Olmos has enabled the field to move forward. With this collection in hand, students and professors alike will be able to follow the examples of the authors in the second half and apply narrative and argumentation theories in tandem to case studies from a variety of different sources, enriching the disciplines of argumentation, philosophy, literature, narratology, and more.

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