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Jacqueline M. Davies, "Commentary on Kvrenbekk" (May 14, 2003). *OSSA Conference Archive*. Paper 66.
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Commentary on: T. Kvernbekk's "Narratives as Informal Arguments"

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Tone Kvernbekk asks whether narratives can be understood as arguments, and especially whether it is reasonable to suppose that they are the kind of arguments Matthew Keefer claims they are (Keefer 1996).

She points out a vexing problem for attempts to answer these questions, a problem that dogs most discussions of narrative, namely the diversity of accounts generated by theorists within the increasingly well populated but somewhat disorganized field of narrative reasoning. She also shows how the project of classifying narrative as argument is further complicated by the shifting categories of argument appearing in these discussions. It is bad enough that the concept of narrative is somewhat vague, but when determining whether narratives are arguments relies on the apparently overlapping categories of informal, rhetorical, practical, and transition arguments its hard to know how to proceed.

Kvernbekk proceeds mainly by considering whether the examples Keefer takes to be narratives fit accounts of practical and transition arguments. She takes a somewhat different strategy regarding the question of whether narratives might be informal arguments, a strategy necessitated by the vagueness of the concept of informal argumentation.

The examples in question, which Keefer takes to count as both narratives and arguments, are the excerpts of interview responses analysed in Deanna Kuhn's study of informal argumentation (Kuhn 1991).

The defining feature of practical arguments according to Keefer is that they issue in action or at least a disposition to act, since practical reasoning is "not primarily concerned with what is but with what one can or should do," (Kvernbekk, 4). Kvernbekk observes that the examples Keefer takes to be narrative seem to involve reasoning about what *is*, specifically about "causes, alternative causes, evidence for and against" this or that account of what is the case. Given that, it is hard to see why we should take these examples to be examples of practical reasoning.

She also notes that the examples in question were generated within a study in which the interviewer asked the subjects to reason about what is the case and how they know this. This latter point may account for why the subjects use the language of reasoning about causes and evidence for beliefs. But the appearance of this kind of language is not sufficient to demonstrate that what the subjects are doing, or at least what they mean to be doing, is reasoning about causes and evidence for beliefs, and so on. Attention to the socio-pragmatics of the interview situation may generate other explanations.

Indeed, Kvernbekk notes the importance of attending to the socio-pragmatic dimensions of speech, suggesting that Kuhn may be insufficiently attentive to them in her analysis of the subjects' responses. And, attention to socio-pragmatics may help in

building a more plausible case for the possibility that the subjects are engaged in practical reasoning after all.

Kvernbekk says that though the subjects employ personal experiences in their deliberations the subjects do not seem to be offering reasons for their acting in some way or another. She is right: it *is* hard to see any actions that the subjects might think it's their task to justify, given that the questions put to them are questions about causes and evidence for beliefs. I would like to suggest, though, that there is an action, in the interview situation that the subjects might feel called upon to justify, namely the speech action in which they are engaged. The difficult question however, is what kind of speech action exactly, are they engaged in.

In response to the difficulty of identifying informal arguments merely according to formal features, Kvernbekk focuses on the functional relationship between their premises and conclusions. Premises are supposed to justify accepting the conclusion. Thus we can call an argument a speech act of justification. She rejects the idea that a narrative could be an argument because the conclusion of a narrative is known ahead of time and thus it would make no sense to say that the motive for presenting any other element of the narrative could be to justify accepting the already accepted conclusion. Kvernbekk suggests, as an alternative, that the function of a narrative is explanatory.

Incidentally, I have some questions about what it means to identify the conclusion of a narrative, and to claim that it is already known. My questions arise out of a worry about the ambiguity between talk of conclusions of arguments and talk of narrative conclusions. However, I will bracket these questions for the time being, because I think that Kvernbekk is right to deny that a narrative or some part of a narrative is intended to justify a conclusion.

My reason for thinking this is that I don't believe we can identify anything in a narrative that could be reduced to a conclusion, at least not in the propositional form that is characteristic of argument conclusions. For a similar reason, in trying to determine just what sort of a speech act a narrative is, I am disinclined to classify it as explanation. While the bottom line of an explanation may be more complex than the conclusion of an argument, insofar as laying-out a whole theory can be a highly complex process, I don't think it is an open-ended process. Narratives by contrast are not just complex, they are characteristically interpretively open-ended. It's not that anything goes in the interpretation of narratives, but narratives cannot without violence be reduced to a finite set of propositions intended to represent the meaning of the narrative.

Perhaps what a narrative does, rather than making an argument, is to provide the resources out of which arguments could be constructed from a certain perspective or framework. A narrative generates a worldview, or at least a view of some issue or slice of life which contains a descriptive framework and simultaneously an evaluative perspective.

This is the sort of possibility that might motivate Keefer's resistance to the separation of evidence from the beliefs it evaluatively supports in narrative contexts. The beliefs supported in narrative arguments, however, are not best understood as argument conclusions. It would be better to consider them along the lines of the attitudes or evaluative commitments that play a role in motivating practical arguments. The worldview or orientation of a listener is changed when he follows the narrator to her conclusion. In consequence he has new resources available, in the form of a descriptive

and evaluative framework from which to address, that is to construct practical arguments about those features of the world revealed by the narrative.

Having offered this speculative suggestion about narratives that sound rather like arguments, I want to note how difficult I think it would be to test it using the short and decontextualized examples analyzed by Kuhn, Keefer and Kvernbekk in turn. I find it very difficult to recognize them as either arguments or narratives. However, I can understand the impulse to try and see them as having one form or another and can understand Keefer's frustration with Kuhn's identification of the interview subjects' responses as not very good arguments. His response reminds me of Carol Gilligan's response to Lawrence Kohlberg's classification of a significant sub-population of interview subjects as not very skilled reasoners.

Gilligan like Keefer recognizes and takes as significant the narrative quality of these responses. They both take it as a signal that something else might be going on, something other than what Keefer calls theoretical reasoning or what Gilligan calls justice reasoning, a kind of reasoning she often describes as deductive.

It is significant that Gilligan insists that the misclassified interview subjects are engaging in moral reasoning. As such, like the subjects who concern Keefer, they would be involved in a process that would better enable them to answer the question what should be done in this or that situation. And they would also be involved in an act of communicative rationality, a speech act that looks rather like an act of justification.

Perhaps, after all, narratives can contain a justificatory element distinct from the resources for argumentation that they may generate. This element, I think is the implicit justification for the change in worldview that successful narration brings about. Some narrators, I want to suggest, take their listeners by the hand and lead them with eyes wide open to the narrative conclusion. If the listener follows the narrator he will find himself resituated, with a new orientation, a new perspective on things. If there is something in this narrative journey that analogous to the persuasive power of an argument that is transparent, one that ought to be convincing to any reasonable listener, in comparison with coercive fallacious forms of argumentation, perhaps at least some narratives can be said to implicitly justify the change in their listeners than they attempt to bring about.

More needs to be said about the differences between the method by which an arguer can justify the change she wishes to affect in her listener, namely his acceptance of a conclusion, and the way in which a narrator could justify her efforts to reorient a listener. But both seem to assume that a reasonable listener can and should be changed in the relevant way. It is this sort of implicit appeal to reasonableness that I think Keefer may rightly be listening for in the misclassified interview responses. While I agree with Tone Kvernbekk that identifying narratives as arguments is a mistake, I do think that we will be better able to recognize the function of these speech acts, if like Keefer and Gilligan we listen for the resonance of reason in them.

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