Book Reviews


In a series of essays published during the past several years, Professor Fisher has sought to demonstrate why and how narration is "the foundational, conceptual configuration" (or "paradigm") of all forms of human communication. These essays were informed by his earlier work on the "logic of good reasons." *Human Communication as Narration* reiterates much of this research; however, it also displays Fisher's praiseworthy efforts to refine, revise, and extend eight of his previous essays and to integrate them into a coherent and comprehensive rendering of his book's topic.

The book is divided into four parts. In Part I (chapters 1–2), Fisher provides an impressive examination of how prevailing theories of human communication and logic—from classical times to the present—have tended to obscure the narrative foundation of human experience by privileging the special and formal reasoning of technical discourse over the more value-laden motivations of rhetorical and poetic discourse. This tendency, Fisher argues, encourages the viewpoint that the intellectual and cognitive content of these latter discursive practices should be consigned to the irrational and thus placed "within a somehow subhuman frame of behavior" (p. 20). Fisher readily acknowledges here and throughout his book how the contributions of various rhetorical and argumentation theorists and philosophers have helped to correct this biased judgment and how, in turn, this has influenced his thought. But Fisher finds it necessary to take his case for narration beyond these contributions. In so doing, he directs his investigation, in Part II (chapters 3–4) and Part III (chapters 5–6), towards ontology and nominates the metaphor of *Homo narrans* as being the best suited to represent "the essential nature of human beings" (p. 62).

Abiding by his use of the *Homo narrans* metaphor, Fisher ar-

gues that people are basically storytellers and that this capacity defines "the generic form of all symbol composition" (p. 63). Any attempt, for example, to construct an argumentative proof, to formalize a discourse in accordance with the technical precepts of the "rational-world paradigm," is, for Fisher, but an extension of the "narrative rationality" at work in one's effort to tell a certain kind of story. The logical standards of such rationality are probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability). Probability is reflected in a story's internal consistency, its consistency with other stories that are deemed important by a given audience, and the way in which its characters (both the narrator and involved actors) behave in a trustworthy manner. Fidelity shows itself in terms of "the logic of good reasons," a logic that draws its power from the fact that "Humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as they are reasoning animals" (p. 105). The fidelity of a story, then, is determined by how well its values provide warrants (good reasons) for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by the rhetoric of the discourse in question. For Fisher, this specific assessment turns on considerations of fact, relevance, consequence, consistency, and transcendent issues (i.e., Does the story "ring true" to the ways in which we would like to live our lives?).

Up to this point, Fisher's goal has been to provide his readers with an expanded notion of rationality based on an ontological appreciation of humans as storytellers. In approaching this goal with great care and insight, he teaches us much about the crucial role played by rhetoric in the constitution of knowledge, truth, and reality. Two excellent philosophical texts that complement Fisher's approach and lend credence to his enthusiasm for the rhetorical workings of narrative, are Calvin Schrag's Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) and David Carr's Time, Narrative, and History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Fisher mentions Schrag but omits any reference to Carr. Perhaps this omission is due to Carr's limited treatment of rhetoric. Schrag, on the other hand, pays much greater attention to the topic, but he tends to restrict this attention to philosophical exegesis. Fisher's project is not so restricted. In Part IV (chapters 7-9), he takes his findings on narrative rationality and converts them into a "workable logic" so as to illustrate their applicability in interpreting and assessing human communication. The test cases here include the political discourse of Ronald Reagan, the aesthetic discourse of Death of a
Salesman and The Great Gatsby, and the philosophical discourse of Socrates and Callicles in Plato’s Gorgias.

Suffice it to say that the stories Fisher tells about these cases serve his purpose well: the logic of narrative rationality, of probability and fidelity, is clearly demonstrated to be a driving force in each case, and these demonstrations provide revealing accounts of their separate topics. Yet, amidst these rewards for the reader lies what I take to be a problem with Fisher’s stance on narration. This problem announces itself most clearly in the first case study. Here, Fisher confronts a paradox associated with the success of Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric: Not only does this rhetoric defy the logical precepts of the rational-world paradigm, it also “fails the tests of the narrative paradigm insofar as the tests of fidelity to fact, soundness of argumentative form, and relevance are applied” (p. 145). Fisher, however, is able to resolve this paradox by showing how the “Great Communicator’s” successful rhetoric is made possible by its adherence to the logical standard of narrative probability. That is, “Reagan’s appeal . . . derives not only from his superior performance, but also . . . from the consistency of his story with the [‘heroic’] story of America, from the coherence of his character, and the compatibility of his image with that of his constituency” (p. 156).

The case being made here for the primacy and utility of the narrative paradigm draws support from the fact that the paradigm brings into focus various “matters left unattended by the rational-world paradigm” (p. 156). So be it. We now have a better understanding of how Reagan has deluded us. Can this delusion be remedied and possibly prevented from happening again by our turning to the teachings of the rational-world paradigm? It seems so, and Fisher admits as much. This admission is consistent with Fisher’s assertion that his narrative paradigm defines a “universal logic” that encompasses the prescriptive, discursive practices of the rational-world paradigm (p. 194). The turn to this paradigm—when dealing, for example, with Reagan and others who would fail the tests of fidelity—should thus be seen as a judicious (if not moral) attempt to construct and tell a better and more “truthful” story. But Fisher seems to disqualify this option. For he argues earlier in his book that such an option does not further the “egalitarian” motives of his narrative paradigm; rather, it caters to the authority and technical rationality of “experts” who tend to use their argumentative competence as a way of inhibiting the public’s
involvement in matters of social and political concern (pp. 66, 69-73). To equate the rational-world paradigm with this view of expertise certainly undermines the option at issue here. The problem, however, is that the equation also undermines Fisher's assertion that the discursive practices associated with the rational-world paradigm are also elements of his narrative paradigm.

Despite this problem, Professor Fisher's expert account of his topic marks a substantial contribution to the literatures of philosophy and rhetoric. He tells a far-reaching and inspiring story, one that should be listened to carefully by anyone interested in understanding and advancing the life of Homo narrans.

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James L. Kinneavy of the University of Texas at Austin is well known to students of rhetoric as author of A Theory of Discourse and Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition. In this new book he boldly enters the arena in which is fought out the meaning of a central feature of Christian thought—and with considerable success. I am quoted on the dust jacket as saying "Kinneavy's hypothesis of an origin of the Christian concept of faith in classical rhetoric seems to me systematically supported and clearly delimited... What he has done is to render it possible and a stronger possibility than any competing hypothesis." For an advertising blurb the quotation may seem restrained, but this is in fact exactly what Kinneavy himself claims for his work. I wrote the statement over three years ago when the Oxford University Press asked me to evaluate the manuscript. Its importance was immediately evident, and I strongly recommended publication, with some revisions. As I read the published volume now, I feel I can reiterate my first reaction and provide some amplification. An unfortunate result of the delay in the publication of the book is that the survey of "re-