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Homo Narrans

Narrative Reason in Public Argument

by Michael Calvin McGee and John S. Nelson

Confronting the political dimensions of the theory of narrative helps dispel the false dichotomy between narrativity and rationality and puts narration on the side of truth in public argument by calling upon the moral resources of the culture.

Writer Ursula Le Guin says that "in the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood" (33, p. 99). Philosopher Stanley Cavell says that "the wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason" (15, p. 20). How do reason, story, and community relate? How should good discussion on public issues proceed these days? And how should good communities be structured?

Rhetorician Walter Fisher (21) urges public pursuit of a new paradigm of narrative discourse in societies that esteem science and technology. Fisher’s argument attracts attention as a clear attempt to address these questions from a communication point of view. He makes three claims. (a) There are at least two separate paradigms of human communication—the rational and the narrational. (b) Experts need the rational paradigm to conduct or account for their special fields of argument (including disciplines of science), but experts and the rational paradigm pervert “public moral argument.” (c) The narrative paradigm has no necessary place in special fields, but publics need it to conduct or account for good moral argument about major decisions of the day.

Fisher’s aims are admirable, and he is right to tie them to renewal of narrative rhetoric. We also share Fisher’s commitment to communities who reason through stories. But we disagree with his deliberate contrast of reason to narrative, especially in public argument. Hence we advance

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alternatives to his formalist antimony between rational and narrational argument, his implicit history of rhetoric and politics, and his misleading portrait of the place of experts in public affairs.

From rhetoricians we draw inspiration for going beyond the formalism of narrative conceived as a mode of presentation once reason has done its work—or when reason is overcome by the desire for entertainment. We prefer a functional view of narrative conceived as a moment of argument intrinsic to reason and practiced especially, but not exclusively, in politics. From rhetoricians in their guise as political theorists, we find ways of escaping the formalism of reason portrayed only as a technique of representation intended to secure truth or consistency. In consequence, we emphasize that reason is performed in a moment of revelation, in our experience of being or quality.

Fisher resists rationalism in public argument but accepts it in technical fields. Similarly, he celebrates narrative in debates of morality and politics but ignores it in discussions among experts. Technical arguments in special fields do differ from moral and political arguments in public media, but the difference neither is nor should be primarily between Fisher’s rationality and narrativity. There is some historical sense in distinguishing paradigms of rationality and narrativity, but they neither do nor ought to parallel Fisher’s contrast between elitism and democratism (21, p. 9). Experts and technical reasoning are challenging our modes of moral and political argument, but it is not true that experts have dominated public discourse and decisions (as Fisher says), nor would we be wise to cast them in the role of sage (as Fisher proposes). We identify difficulties with Fisher’s argument in order to pay it the compliment of careful consideration in its own terms; for even when Fisher errs, his insights may be turned toward enhancing narrative reason in public argument. We share the desire to have “experts and lay persons meet on common ground” (21, p. 13) through storied arguments about public issues. To show nonetheless that there may be better ways to conceive the ground, let us first note the attractions of Fisher’s account.

Why is the notion of identifying a shift to a narrative paradigm so appealing and what are the political advantages of labeling it thus?

Thomas Kuhn (30, 31) has inspired many people to search the horizon for history-making shifts in perspective that will mark out the next new age of science or some other practice (1, 2, 18, 19, 25, 49). In part, the motivation is a will to be important: we can contribute to knowledge that guides those who come after us. Yet there is also the simpler desire to avoid ennui. To live when nothing extraordinary happens is a dull prospect; but to be alive when great change is in the air—in an Age of
Revolutions, perhaps, or during a Paradigm Shift—why, the very idea stirs the blood and makes intellectual labor seem more exciting!

The rhetoric of paradigms advances a distinctive set of interests. Belief in the cosmic significance of historical shifts in perspective implies a science with political tensions. There are always some who roll along naively dans le mouvement and others who act predestined to swim against the tide. These general attitudes promote polarization and, in consequence, a political rhetoric. Thinkers who accept paradigm change evoke images of lemmings, while thinkers who resist the inevitable invite comparisons to Sisyphus.

Truth seems at risk in the competition, and may be in some cases; but political interests are always present. One story of science puts it in the paradoxical position of subverting beliefs but then becoming a false God. When it stopped trying to accept revealed religion and began to preach abstracted empiricism, science destroyed one kind of reason to create another and fabricated a true faith to root out an older one. Of course, stories can be told with different presumptions of villainy and senses of falseness. A second account has Anti-Science masquerading as Humanism to promote nostalgia for archaic values and practices, and to invent political tensions when the world would otherwise have been swept by a progressive spirit of change (53, pp. 71–111). Then there is a third sense of falseness: the betrayed lover’s neurotic fear of being out of control. Thus the new not only produces change but also conjures crises that threaten the comfort of all old formulas: witness Carlyle’s fear of technology, the sheer cynicism of many Marxists, and the confused desperation of Creationists.
The focus of political conflict is less important than the fact of it. Whatever the origin, conflict dictates that politics will be prominent, either in rolling with the flow or in struggling against it. With the tide, thinkers take heart from the notion that whatever they do as a group is probably right. Against the tide, thinkers find encouragement in the idea that a new paradigm can save them from present ideology, nostalgic serendipity, and fear of what goes bump in the future. The advantage, of course, appears always to lie with proclamations of radical change, because the very possibility of shifty paradigms makes an otherwise orderly and comfortable world feel contradicted, disrespected, perhaps even senile (40, pp. 95–97).

There are three kinds of politics involved in paradigm shifts, as Fisher’s recent campaign to name the human species homo narrans reminds us. First, there is the chatter of a “constitutional convention,” as scholars from an impressive array of human sciences gather around the campfire to consider that the human mind may strive to swap stories rather than mirror nature. Three recent conferences on narrative, interpretation, and rhetoric have been attended by scholars from each human science who share some of Fisher’s enthusiasms (38, 39, 46). If they are to be taken seriously, these academics must be politically successful in constituting a community of discourse analysts and theorists.

Second, once constituted, the community must deal with academic politics specific to fields, in literary studies especially. For instance, even Fredric Jameson, while pretending to larger political objectives, comes in the end to use narrative as a defense for canonical theories of literature. After the assertion that “narrative is a specific mode of thinking the world, which has its own logic and which is irreducible to other types of cognition,” he offers the subversive innuendo that “much of what passes for conceptual or scientific writing is itself secretly narrative in character”—as if there is a virgin blush to lose by telling stories or an advantage to be gained from tarnishing the public image of science. The advantage, of course, is a political apology for literary study: “If...narrative is one of the basic categorical forms...under which synchronic and analytic thinking is itself subsumed and put in perspective,” Jameson continues, “we no longer have to be defensive about the role of culture and the importance of its study and analysis” (29, p. 72).

Third, academic politics, even of the Marxist persuasion, is tame beside the general politics that Fisher’s statement of the case supposes. A shifting paradigm sends shock waves through the whole political economy, even to problems of national defense. Fisher claims that science makes it impossible for a moral criticism of foreign policy, such as Jonathan Schell’s The Fate of the Earth (54), to be effective. People who celebrated the book, he observes, were not experts on nuclear
energy and foreign policy. They could respond to the book’s moral impulse, but they, no more than Schell, could speak with “authority.” Fisher complains that the opponents of Schell’s tale monopolize authority because they are the “purveyors of ideological, bureaucratic, or technical arguments.” Writers who base their arguments in “political ‘truth’” peddle ideology, bureaucrats have “administrative sanction” from the Reagan government, and technicians have “subject matter expertise” (21, p. 11). Because we typically defer to them on technical matters, experts have come to expect pliable audiences, and they therefore display imperious attitudes toward such as Schell:

The tactics are... obvious: juxtapose Schell’s reasoning with what is right-headed, what is approved by the administration, or what is “realistic.” Insofar as there is merit in these “arguments,” it lies not in the way they foreclose dialogue but in their narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Yet, this is not their intended appeal or effect. The effects are to discredit Schell as an arguer and to dismiss his argument as unfounded. Public moral argument is thus overwhelmed by privileged argument. Put another way, it... [makes] the dispute one for “experts” alone to consider (21, p. 12).

Fisher wants a “narrative paradigm” of reasoning so that we can reconceive the role of the expert: “Experts are storytellers and the audience is not a group of observers, but are active participants in the meaning-formation of the stories” (21, p. 13). On this view, counselors of state, professional administrators, and nuclear physicists should be brought down from high platforms of public authority to storytellers amidst the people, where their business is disseminating knowledge as social lore or public wisdom.

In the mindset opposed by Fisher and Jameson, to suggest that current theories of narrative possess political motivations would ordinarily be to condemn them. To the contrary, our purpose is to confront the political dimensions, recognizing them as inescapable parts of intellectual growth and social change. At issue is the competence of the politics involved. When narrative is promoted as the paradigm of human judgment, when it is made to stand over and against science or expertise, three tests arise. First, to justify cultural criticism and literary study, the theory must stand constructively on its own merits. Little accomplishment stems from a narrative paradigm if it merely inverts the established logic and rhetoric of science. Second, to subvert orthodoxy, the theory must stand effectively against its opposition. Little effect arises from a supposed paradigm shift if it causes only those who already peddle discourse theories to feel the quake. Third, to inform practical wisdom and judgment, the theory must stand powerfully enough to generate successful policy. Little good comes from a moral argument if it fails to
support expedient ends that carry through to actual practices. To renew narrative, the theory must make better sense of what we say and do, must compel opponents to take better notice of the issues, and must work to produce better policies.

The second and third issues are highly important, and we touch on them in several ways. But here we concentrate on the first: how does narrative contribute to constructing truths? We argue that Fisher’s notion of a narrative paradigm is unduly loose and problematical, especially in stark contrast to a “traditional” paradigm of “technical” rationality. We attempt to improve on his work by posing a more specific conception of narrative related more harmoniously to actual and desirable rationalities of argument about public policy.

What are the reigning notions of narrative and how do they relate to conceptions of truth?

Kenneth Burke would state the case “logologically”: there are many distinct usages of “narrative,” but few place it on the side of truth. The presumption is that narrative has more to do with hiding sins than with revealing truths. We have to ask about “the real” story or “God’s-spell” to pull narrative into the territory of truth. “Gospel” depends on the ethos of the storyteller, and “real” stories become so by rational critique of something taken to be inherently misleading. As a matter of political competence, therefore, we must settle the connection of truth and narrative if we want to lead away from scientism and toward discourse theory. Ideologists of science claim a monopoly on truth, and they reject without qualification anything that acquiesces to the status of fiction or fails to distinguish storytelling within or about science from telling stories when caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

Fisher’s conception of “real fictions” responds properly to this problem by tying narrative to rhetoric (20). To get rhetoric on the side of truth takes far less than the claim of gospel or even the recognition of rhetoric as epistemic, for rhetoric retains an inherent interest in the real. Even in caricature, rhetoric misleads only when manipulating proof to serve its interest; and it suborns proof predictably, in the direction of its interest. Thus rhetoric retains a presumption of reality, calling attention to the ethos—the interest—of its maker and typically also to the interest of its audience. We usually have enough information to judge it “persuasive” or “convincing,” putting it on the side of truth for reasons that originate in the rhetorical situation. This seems to be part of Fisher’s point in invoking his previous work on the rhetoric of good reasons.

The specific connections between narrative and rhetoric can make a great difference, however, and Fisher has yet to address the many
possibilities. Take only the obvious contrast that depends on which takes priority in explanations. If narrative comes first, the eighteenth-century German game of metaphysics gets reenacted. Narrative plays ontology to rhetoric’s epistemology, producing Jameson’s position that narrative is an ideological form that sets human (class) interestedness on a particular and pretty much unalterable course (27, 28). If rhetoric comes first, the roles are largely reversed. Narrative becomes a procedure or step along rhetoric’s path to practical action, generating Fisher’s position that narrative is a moral form that structures the world so as to bracket most of its complexities while humans deal with some particular—presumably pressing—issue. Here Fisher’s dichotomy between the rational and the narrational produces more problems than it solves. These range from perplexities of terminology to perversities of history.

An example of the former is Fisher’s decision to portray “technical rationality” as “traditional rationality.” Yet Fisher relies on the usual caricature of “technical rationality” as the unremitting foe of traditions and traditionalism. This contrast is a creature of the cult of scientific expertise supposedly opposed by Fisher. Moreover, it portrays traditions as sets of stories and traditionalism as the embrace of past narratives at the expense of present reasons and future techniques. To read the arguments of Alasdair MacIntyre (36) about the interdependence of stories, institutions, and traditions—the very arguments that inspire Fisher—is to recognize the rhetorical incoherence of Fisher’s account.

Such troubles with terms point to more fateful mistakes. Fisher defends his labels by contending that the cult of technique has become our sole paradigm of rationality, so that it is now traditional. But for whom? Might the storied arguments of Schell and many like him testify against the purported hegemony of technical rationality? Fisher despairs of their narrative reasons being taken seriously. But by whom? Fisher emphasizes their dismissal by technical experts such as Edward Teller. Yet Fisher concedes that citizens continue to address public issues in narrative terms. Moreover, historians and political scientists repeatedly find that the determination of public policy rests far more on politicians manipulating technical experts than the other way around. Finally, as Fisher sometimes intimates, the greater problem may be that specialists fail to convey their expert perspectives either to citizens or to politicians—because experts lack the rhetorical awareness and skill needed for recounting narratives, and because members of the public lack the rhetorical awareness and skill needed for testing narratives against one another.

To pit a paradigm of narrativity against one of rationality is to repeat the error of the rationalists. What we need is to dispel the dichotomy: to understand and improve the place of narrative in rationality and of
reasoning in storytelling. But Fisher reinforces the dichotomy. He merely privileges public narrativity at the expense of expert rationality, and he ignores the considerable resources apparent in the history of rhetoric for deconstructing this perverse opposition.

Let us reunite narrativity and rationality by inventing our own rhetorical story of Adam Smith and Quintillian in conversation.

These two noble curmudgeons of the rhetorical tradition project one possible conception of narratives within actual rationalities. Curiously, the first and last points of the conversation concern different senses of "translation." Ironically, notions of narrative reasoning got lost in the rhetorical tradition because of a mistranslation associated with the mindset of modern science and its humanist ally in rationalism, neoclassical philology. Constructive conceptions of narrativity can be recreated by treating it as the techne of translation, similar to the status of the syllogism in the scientific method. To identify the first problem of translation, we begin with Smith.

In the ordered world of the eighteenth century, when the dreams and stories of modern science were being formulated by some of the more inventive minds in the history of civilization, everything from peasants to problems had a particular place in discourse. Somewhat after the fashion of Aristotle, whom they otherwise repudiated, the moderns assumed that the ancient art of rhetoric could serve truth but not produce it. They stipulated that the production of truth is the business of philosophers and scientists, who approach problems with attitudes and techniques contrasting with those of rhetoricians. Nonetheless, enlightenment ideals of rationality embraced various notions of narrativity. This becomes most obvious in the nineteenth-century turn to history evident in Hegel and Marx—and pressed by Smith's compatriot, Hume. But it appears forcefully enough in Smith himself.

As economists tend to forget, the patron intellect of the dismal but basic science predicated it on his political Theory of Moral Sentiments. As political theorists tend to forget, Smith spent several years lecturing on "rhetoric and belles lettres." Most of these lectures concern narration, and we can guess why from the following passage:

Every discourse proposes either barely to relate some fact or to prove some proposition. The first is the kind of discourse called a narrative one; the latter is the foundation of two sorts of discourses, the didactic and the rhetorical. The former proposes to put before us the arguments on both sides of the question in their true light, giving each its proper degree of influence, and has it in view to persuade no further than the arguments themselves appear convincing. The
rhetorical, again, endeavours by all means to persuade us, and for this purpose it magnifies all the arguments on the one side, and diminishes or conceals those that might be brought on the side contrary to that which it is designed that we should favour (55, p. 58).

As Richard Rorty argues, the commitment that makes Western philosophy into modern science is the prejudice that “Nature” is the ultimate arbiter of all “facts”—that human understanding is a Mirror of Nature (51). As Herbert Marcuse contended, this is a commitment to: Reason = Truth = Reality (37, p. 123). Notice how clearly this theme surfaces in Smith’s appropriation of rhetoric. Like Descartes and Pascal before him, Smith privileged the discourse that relates facts in as clear and precise a way as possible. The closer we get to the fictive, what might be said to persuade at any cost, the further we get from the truths that ought to ground our beliefs and actions.

This should give us pause about the nature of homo narrans. Smith’s early declaration of a “narrative paradigm” funds the movement toward scientism that Fisher’s latter-day declaration of a “narrative paradigm” means to subvert. In fact, the spirit of appropriation is no more revolutionary for Fisher than it was for Smith. Without misrepresenting the classical tradition, Smith could read it to privilege narrative; but, he says, “It is rather reverence for antiquity than any great regard for the beauty or usefulness of the thing itself which makes me mention the ancient divisions of rhetoric” (55, p. 59). The ancients were not authorities on the subject of discourse; still, Smith saw good politics in making connections wherever possible, because he wanted to displace a paradigm that approached life with Ciceronian subtlety and Christian relentlessness.

As Walter Benjamin argues, translation is an exercise in theft. We must acknowledge our intellectual climates, so the task becomes not only to find equivalent syntactic usages between two languages but also to locate equivalent cultural forms. And since cultures change historically, translation must occur even in the same language. A translation made at one moment in history must be made again and again as the times change (3, pp. 69–82).

For purposes of the conversation between Smith and Quintilian, a key case of translation involves the current understanding of Roman rhetoric.

Philologists and their predecessors have seen themselves as guardians of the Greco-Roman tradition. They have argued incessantly about what Plato or Cicero really meant by a particular statement. Within the Zeitgeist of scientism, these preservers of antiquity acculturated Roman
rhetoric to environs ill equipped to fathom it. As a result, Quintilian’s
"Narratio est aut tota pro nobis aut tota pro adversaris aut mixta ex
utrisque” is rendered as “The statement will be either wholly in our
favour or wholly in that of our opponent or a mixture of both” (50, pp. 33–
36, 68–69). Scholarly notation of the “liberty” taken does not compen-
sate for the transformation of narratio into statement—and even state-
ment of fact in other places.

Consider this sense of narrativity. The translator puns on “fact” and
plays with the ambiguity of “statement.” When you go to court, you tell a
story (narratio) that you purport to be true: you “make a statement,” as
we sometimes say. “Truth” in such situations depends on an individual’s
ethos and perspective: it is understood as a subjective, relative
affirmation. This is the context of Quintilian’s claims about narratio. But
a statement is also a proposition, a declarative sentence about a state of
affairs: it asserts an objective, even absolute reality. In the second sense,
particularly in climates of scientism, statements are supposed to “mirror
nature.” Their “truth” depends on their correspondence to “the facts,”
“the real things and their relationships,” independent of their represent-
ation in any story. Quintilian discussed these matters in great detail in
another part of his work—presumably because framing, defending, and
attacking propositions is a separate stage in forensic argument. Narratio
is a “statement of facts,” but the facts are not independent of the story
that structures them. To emphasize “statement” rather than “story” is to
adapt to a culture that discovers rather than makes truths. Adam Smith’s
understanding of narratio reduces stories to the sentences that comprise
them.

We who would recognize homo narrans share important aspects of
Smith’s position. We should not use the views of Smith or Quintilian as
authoritative support. Antiquity matters because we can appropriate it,
competently or not, to political ends. The political aim of arguments like
Fisher’s must be to explain how narrativity and truth need one another.
Fisher and others do this at one level by showing that moral truths
depend on the narratives that educate children. And as MacIntyre makes
clear, tradition can be invoked to put storytelling on the side of truth.
While this may be enough for those who respect history, people
conditioned by scientism want general claims and categories rather than
historical narrative and particulars. Edwin Boring says that “science can
actually...lift itself by its own boot straps” (4, p. 79), and Samuel Becker
maintains that a major issue in communication studies is “whether
rhetoric is to be a cumulative or an evolutionary (perhaps revolutionary)
discipline” (2, p. 5). For positive political reasons, narrative must be put
on the side of truth by a persuasive account surpassing such historical
facts as the repetition in many places of a particular story of liberty.

For this purpose, we can imitate Smith to reconstruct from Quintilian
a conception of narrativity intertwined with rationality. The striking
feature of Quintilian’s *narratio* is its emphasis on the subjectivity of the truths at stake:

*The [narration] of facts consists in the persuasive exposition of that which either has been done, or is supposed to have been done. . . . [It] is a speech instructing the audience as to the nature of the case in dispute. Most writers, more especially of the Isocratean school, hold that it should be lucid, brief, and plausible (50, pp. 31, 66–67).*

*The [narration] of fact will be credible, if in the first place we take care to say nothing contrary to nature, secondly if we assign reasons and motives for the facts on which the inquiry turns. . . and if we make the characters of the actors in keeping with the facts we desire to be believed (50, pp. 52, 78–79).*

This accents *narratio*, not “facts.” The story is supposed to persuade: it *alleges* facts, and it aims no higher than *plausibility*. Tests apply not to the facts of the case but to their narration. Credibility is the issue, not facticity; and the mirror we hold is not to “Nature” as an objective environment but to the correspondence between *character* and fact.

The usual interpretation, of course, is that Quintilian addressed mere opinion and sheer manipulation. He did, but the key is what the narrator manipulates and why. Emphasizing those who decide the case, Quintilian wondered how the correspondence of character and fact contributes to good judgment: this manipulates *people*. But emphasizing the materials of decision, Quintilian targeted the *circumstance* that requires judgment. In Donald Bryant’s familiar phrase, the function of rhetoric is to adapt ideas to people and people to ideas (8). We can modify that slightly through the model of translation: particular cases that require moral judgment must be translated into the cultural patterns of those charged to judge. The vehicle of translation is *narratio*, a story that structures facts according to the expectations of native speakers in a culture (23, 52).

The experience of Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests that translation models are full of traps: he eventually abandoned them to play with rhetoric (22, pp. 83–88). The trouble is how to regard the object of translation. If narratives are forms or mirrors for cultural commitments, then they may privilege oppressive patterns of judgment. Stories about the right way to deal with an old and trusted slave, for example, may enjoy supporting precedents in Anglo-American traditions. Their morals may even be noble, if slavery is the starting point. As Jürgen Habermas argued in response to Gadamer’s initial model of translation, it does not permit effective criticism of tradition; nor does it account for positive changes in culture (24).

Neither translations nor narratives, however, need be forms or mirrors in this sense. Narratives need not be a category of discourse. Nor
need they conceive cultural patterns as genres of custom and habit. Instead, they may treat cultures as *sets of procedures* formalized by repetition: what Ortega called "usages" (48, pp. 176–191). Skill in a native is marked by *savior faire*: knowing what and how to "do right" in a multiplicity of common and recurring situations. Then if particular circumstances should be translated into cultural patterns or vice versa, the narrative must reproduce the sense of *proceeding*. Viewed more functionally than formally, narratives—even simple stories of "then . . . and then . . . and then"—have a power to communicate procedure that escapes the propositions of Fisher's scientists.

Yet such simple narratives call to mind the generalizing of actual scientists, who acknowledge the narrativity of their reasoning by asking often for "the story of the phenomena" at issue. Contrary to Fisher's implications, this reminds us to populate the citadels of expertise with tellers of narratives—perhaps too seldom accessible to outsiders, but narratives nonetheless. Compatible with Fisher's intentions, this urges us to recognize the towers of technique as arenas of moral and political argument never elevated far above citizens or closed fully to multiple publics. Then the question becomes not when to reason narratively but how to relate and evaluate stories skillfully for different audiences.

In this respect, it is tempting to say that narratives possess a unique capacity to *communicate* procedure. Bare semiotics can *signify* procedure as a past, frozen fact, much as a photographic image "stops" a speeding car. But neither single words nor categorical claims can engage us in communities of procedure; for non-narrative words are static, and procedure disappears when interrupted even for a moment: think about the times your *savior faire* has come a day late (48, p. 247). Formal logics and mathematics can render procedures by categorizing values and relationships in time; but they do not yet achieve for us the narrative communication of human action.

*Quintilian's attitude toward narrative accommodates our culture's insistent ties between stories and practices.*

*Narratio* is a stage of discourse preparation. Not all cases require it: sometimes, he says, the advocate makes a summary claim and leaves the storytelling to opponents in less favored positions (50, pp. 4–5, 52–55). But when the case requires the moral and political resources of cultural commitments, there must be narration. Only narratives can explicate the proceedings to be judged. For Quintilian, the *narratio* is to moral reason what for Aristotle the syllogism is to dialectic and the enthymeme is to rhetoric: the structure of discourse uniquely able to communicate the ritual regularity of human moral habits.
MacIntyre argues that “we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality” (36, p. 2). If it is deeply embedded within cultural practices (44), one reason we are ignorant of morality is that we have redefined narratio to make it fit with modern ideas of truth. In the process, we have lost our capacity to communicate morally. If so, we can put narrative on the side of truth in a direct way that avoids the idea of a privileged tradition. Restoring narratio, translating it into our culture, we can re-present prized practices as well as the particular circumstances to be judged. This twist of Quintilian could increase the political competence of homo narrans to struggle against oppressive orthodoxies in and out of the academy.

Such narratio locates a kind of narrative within the rational paradigm, projecting a narrative reason in public argument. Accordingly, it undercuts Fisher’s contrast between two paradigms of public discourse. Yet it suggests other contrasts to capture some of what Fisher and MacIntyre intend in opposing modern rationality to narrative. Insofar as all the world is not a Quintilian courtroom, we may wonder what shape narratio takes in public matters of morality and politics more generally. Fisher’s mistake is to accept a modern epistemology of rationality as the single sufficient account for the diverse practices of rationality within fields of technical discourse (45, 46). Consequently, the need is less for a paradigm than for an epistemology of narrativity. Neither Fisher nor MacIntyre has attempted to meet this need. One obvious opposite to the modern epistemology of non-narrative rationality is the traditionally narrative epistemology of myth. Inspired partly by her portrait of the political mythmaker as translator (32), we finish this essay by evoking another epistemology needed by homo narrans, an epistemology best described in the tone and style of Ursula Le Guin’s storyteller at the campfire.

*How can an epistemology of myth be translated into modern narrative rationality?*

In the beginning was the word. And the word was with myth. And the word was myth (5; 6; 7, pp. 94–109). Before logos was mythos: for the Greeks, “a tale uttered by the mouth” (35, p. 141). Before the written word was the spoken word, oral and aural (47, pp. 1–77). Before the prosaic word was the poetic word, mused and musical (34, pp. 44–54). Before the science word was the story word, particular but explanatory (60).

“Myth means the telling word. For the Greeks, to tell is to lay bare and make appear—both the appearance and that which has its essence in the appearance, the epiphany” (26, p. 157; 11; 12). Myths tell how and
what we know. Telling departs markedly from relating, in the same fashion that saying and hearing diverge from showing and seeing—that is, as sound is separate from sight. Whereas relating proceeds in terms of differences, telling proceeds in terms of counting (9; 10; 16; 17, pp. 57–125).

Hence mythic (or aural) epistemology need not be the same as conceptual (or visual) epistemology of the sort familiar from modern philosophy (14; 43, pp. 7–15). The key question of modern epistemology is how anyone could know anything (on the basis of the senses): that is, whether differences can be recognized and how the recognitions may be established. But the key question of mythic epistemology is how significant something is for us (on the basis of the images): that is, what significances should be recognized and why the recognitions may be admitted.

Modern epistemology deals in acknowledgments, demonstrations, and criteria (15, 45). Reality is given as objects to modern consciousness, which is meant to acknowledge them. Not to acknowledge them is to ignore them: ignorance is ignoring, a failure of acknowledgment. Knowing is spectating, and therefore knowledge is largely passive. But ignorance is more active: distorting rather than accepting or receiving reality, mobilizing bias and prejudice, leading astray. Here questions call for demonstrations: what is this, how is it known, where might we be misled? Accordingly, the demonstrations depend on criteria: how could this be known or mistaken, by anyone?

By contrast, mythic epistemology involves accountings, narrations, and comparisons. Tellers are those who count things. Myths tell what things count and how. Not to count is to remain insignificant: either through passivity or a failure of accounting. Moreover, to be unaccountable is to be irresponsible, unresponsive, inactive. Knowing is accounting or recounting; and as accountability, knowledge is distinctly active. Then questions call forth narrations: what is happening, how has it come to be, and whence will it go? Appropriately, the narrations depend on comparisons: what is this like or unlike and in what respects (41; 42, pp. 475–476)?

Myths take accounts and give accounts of our world. The elements of myths are the epistemological equivalents of money; the characters, events, settings, and symbols of myths are the coins of our consciousness: earned more than given. The order of myths is narrative order, and the order of stories is the sequentiality of counting. Myths recount characters, events, rhythms, settings, and symbols in order to structure their significance. The lessons of myths are the moral equivalents of money; the debts, gifts, guilts, interests, and prices of myths are the accounts of our consciousness: reckoned more than acknowledged (13,
pp. 3–31; 14, pp. 234–304; 56; 57; 58). Accounting for our world, myths tell its significance. Myths are the moral, narrational, poetical, and political presentation of reality and possibility.

At least politically, myths are symbolic stories of the whole (13; 43, pp. 2, 16). The whole may be the world, the community, the occurrence, the character, the environment, the situation, or the like. Of course, the pursuit of mythic argument as public moral argument is at least as old as the existence of publics. It would include the philosophy of Plato, the rhetoric of the Sophists, and perhaps even public talk on the part of Homeric Greeks. But the very character of mythic narration is to address community affairs from a popular standpoint—through friendly persuasion rather than authoritative declaration. Given the conception of morality common to MacIntyre and Fisher, it is such an epistemology of storytelling that a community requires in order to reintroduce morality effectively into public discourse.

In this respect, the signal feature of mythic argument is its overt insistence that emotion and imagination—as well as intellection—are not merely unavoidable but legitimate and valuable in public debate. By moving from a recovery of narratio to an exploration of mythic epistemology, we would enhance the prospects for making good on the desire to return legitimacy to moral storytelling as a prime part of public discussion. We would have better ways to tell our tales and better ways to judge them. Then we would learn how the wish and search for reason is the wish and search for community—a community where in the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood but many minds.

REFERENCES


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