THE NARRATIVE PARADIGM:
ANOTHER STORY

Barbara Warnick

In 1984, Walter R. Fisher proposed a new paradigm that emphasized and
explored narrative used rhetorically. Arguing that the philosophical ground for
this narrative paradigm was ontological, Fisher claimed that it subsumed rather than
denied what had preceded it. Given the extent to which experienced and neophyte
critics have sought to apply it, the narrative paradigm has undoubtedly been
influential. Critics are drawn to the paradigm because it focuses on how the
intratextual reality of an account is shaped by its emplotment of characters and
events. Such close study of a rhetorical text's narrative features enables critics to
uncover, discuss, and assess implicit values embedded in the text.

While critics have hastened to apply the paradigm, theorists have been skeptical.
In a recent special issue of the Journal of Communication devoted to storytelling and
narrativity in communication research, certain authors sought to refine or critique
the paradigm. John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit made a significant
distinction between the poetic, dialectical, and rhetorical functions of narrative,
arguing that since the purposes of each function were unique, the criteria used to
assess them must also be distinct. Michael Calvin McGee and John S. Nelson
expressed dissatisfaction with Fisher's tendency to polarize traditional rationality
and the narrative approach. They noted that in this regard, as well as in others,
"Fisher's notion of a narrative paradigm is unduly loose and problematical."

I wish to add my own to this small chorus of voices expressing reservations about
the paradigm as originally articulated. Specifically, I will argue that the narrative
paradigm lacks what Fisher calls "narrative probability," by which I take him to
mean internal coherence ("Narration," 8 and "Elaboration," 349). I believe that the
presence of contradictory claims and equivocal statements in Fisher's initial presen-
tation of the paradigm are likely to cause difficulties for those who seek to apply it to
the critical assessment of texts. Furthermore, I wish to demonstrate that when one
observes Fisher the critic at work to understand what Fisher the theorist intended
when he proposed the model, the problems resulting from the absence of narrative
probability are not resolved.

The issues on which Fisher appears to take contradictory positions arise in
response to the following three questions:

1. What is the status of traditional rationality in rhetorical criticism using the
   narrative paradigm?
2. What is to be the locus for critical assessment?
3. How are the claims produced by critics using the narrative paradigm to be
   warranted?

The present essay will describe the problematic nature of Fisher's position on these
issues. All three of them relate to "narrative rationality," the concept that lies at the
core of the paradigm. Precisely delineating this concept will facilitate later discussion of internal contradictions and problems in the paradigm as a whole.

**Narrative Rationality: The Core of the Paradigm**

Throughout his writings on the topic, Fisher has consistently pointed to narrative rationality as the concept that makes the narrative paradigm unique and affords an advance over prior theories. In his elaboration of the model in 1985, for example, he claimed that "where the narrative paradigm goes beyond these theories [attributions theory, balance theory, constructivism, social convergence theory, reinforcement theory, social exchange theory, and symbolic interactionism] is in providing a 'logic' for assessing stories, for determining whether or not one should adhere to the stories one is encouraged to endorse or accept" ("Elaboration," 348). He continued in the same article to insist that "the only way to determine whether or not a story is a mask for ulterior motives is to test it against the principles of [narrative rationality]" (364). He concluded that narrative rationality is what enables the narrative paradigm to lead to "a critique, a determination of whether or not ... discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world" (351).

What criteria for assessing messages are suggested by narrative rationality? In elaborating his paradigm, Fisher explained what the concept entailed. Noting that narrative rationality is comprised of two subparts—narrative probability and narrative fidelity—he proceeded to describe each:

Narrative probability ... concerns the question of whether or not a story coheres or "hangs together," whether or not the story is free of contradictions.

Narrative fidelity concerns the "truth qualities" of the story, the degree to which it accords with the logic of good reasons: the soundness of its reasoning and the value of its values. To test soundness, one may, when relevant, employ standards from formal or informal logic. Thus, one must be attentive to facts, particular patterns of inference and implicature, and issues—conceived of as the traditional questions.... However, the narrative paradigm envisions reasons as being expressed by elements of human communication that are not always clear-cut inferential or implicative forms. Any individuated form of human communication may constitute a "good reason" if it is taken as a "warrant for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered" by that communication ("Elaboration," 349-50).

Fisher then explained his standards for judging good reasons grounded in values ("Good Reasons," 376-84). The procedure implied in the passage just cited can be schematized in the following way:

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  Narrative Rationality
    /       \
   /         \\  
Narrative Probability (Coherence)  Does the story hang together?
                                 /        \
                                 /          \  
Logic of Reasons (Soundness of reason according to standards of formal and informal logic)
                        /           \
                        /             \\  
Narrative Fidelity (Correspondence)  Is the plot free of contradictions?
                                   /         \
                                   /          \  
Logic of Good Reasons (Relevance, consistency, etc of values)
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As the tree diagram makes clear, narrative rationality is comprised of three major components—internal coherence, sound reasoning, and the "logic of good reasons." The coherence criterion has to do with whether plot developments conform to the expectations of auditors or readers and whether emplotment is free of contradiction. Are the actions and words of characters appropriate to the kinds of characters they are? Do events seem to be the natural outcome of their causes? The next component, the "logic of reasons," has to do with the text's reference to events, conditions, and relations outside itself "in the world." For example: Do the text's statements accurately represent the facts? Have all relevant facts been included and not distorted? Is the reasoning sound according to logical standards? Have all significant arguments been included? Have the "real" issues been identified and dealt with? ("Good Reasons," 379)

The first two parts of the model are part of standard critical theory. The notion of coherence has been with us at least since Aristotle's Poetics and has frequently been used to judge accounts. And application of traditional rational standards to persuasive discourse is a convention of rhetorical criticism. Where Fisher aspires to break new ground is in the "logic of good reasons" he first proposed in 1978. This method locates the implicit values in a message and determines their appropriateness, effects, validation in personal and consensual experience, and status with regard to other values. Fisher concludes that the purpose of the logic of good reasons is "to offer a scheme to generate a sense of what is good as well as what is reasonable, ... to insure that people are conscious of the values they adhere to and would promote in rhetorical transactions, and to inform their consciousness without dictating what they should believe" ("Good Reasons," 383). Whether the logic of good reasons as applied by Fisher fulfills this purpose remains to be seen.

The Status of Narrative Rationality in the Narrative Paradigm

The first, and perhaps the most troublesome, anomaly in the narrative paradigm concerns the role of traditional rationality in critical assessment. Fisher's attitude toward what he has called the "logic of reasons" or the "rational world paradigm" has changed over time and remains ambiguous. In 1978, Fisher identified the logic of reasons with the traditional tests of rationality: whether claims made correspond to actual facts, whether all relevant facts are considered, whether patterns of reasoning used in a text correspond to the standards of formal and informal logic, and whether arguments have been distorted ("Good Reasons," 379). He expressed an interest at that time in incorporating "critical considerations of values into such logical schemes" (377). Fisher seemed to feel that the logic of reasons and the logic of good reasons could exist alongside each other, that neither one was to be preferred.

More recently, in 1984, Fisher's attitude toward rationality has become decidedly less friendly and more ambivalent. He has argued that rational standards for examining texts have limited usefulness when compared with the standards of narrative rationality, and he concluded that one is justified in asking whether narrative rationality is "a more beneficial way to conceive and to articulate the structures of everyday argument" ("Narration," 5). Why does he believe this is so? Whereas traditional rationality "is only relevant in specialized fields," narrative rationality is universally relevant (10). Whereas the rational paradigm has many requirements—knowing how to reason, acquiring knowledge and information,
adhering to values of rationality—anyone can tell, understand, appreciate, and judge stories (8). Whereas traditional rationality is prescriptive and normative, narrative rationality is descriptive (9). Clearly, Fisher has attempted to establish a hierarchy in which narrativity is to be more highly valued than traditional rationality because it is more universal, more comprehensible, and more widely useful.6

Furthermore, Fisher in his 1984 essay closely identified traditional rationality with one of its lesser forms—the technical rationality possessed by experts who seek to close off discussion and exclude the public from making decisions on issues of social and moral concern. After providing an example of how this occurred in regard to the nuclear freeze issue, Fisher concluded: “The presence of ‘experts’ in public moral arguments makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the public of ‘untrained thinkers’ to win an argument or even judge them well—given, again, the rational world paradigm” (“Narration,” 12).

Fisher’s efforts to argue for the superiority of narrative rationality give rise to at least three major problems. The first is that he has identified the rational paradigm with only one form of it—that which employs technical expertise to further the “will to power” of an elite minority of technical experts. But Fisher does not establish how pervasive or successful this particular variant of rationality is. One suspects that he may be attacking a straw man. This appears to be McGee and Nelson’s conclusion when they observe:

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 determination of public policy rests far more on politicians manipulating technical experts than the other way around.7

McGee and Nelson here indicate that Fisher’s concern about the undue influence of technical rationality may be unfounded, and they allude to the many other forms of influence operative in contemporary society.

A second problem resulting from Fisher’s indictment of traditional rationality arose almost immediately from his efforts to qualify his criticisms of it. In 1984, he issued the following disclaimer: “One may get the impression that the conception of rationality I have presented leads to a denial of logic. It does, but only as logic is conceived so that persons are considered irrational beings” (“Narration,” 16). Evidently recognizing that most logic on the contrary presumes the rationality of persons, Fisher in 1985 explicitly reincorporated the logic of reasons into his narrative rationality model, as we have seen (“Elaboration,” 349-50). But he continued to equivocate on the issue of its relevance and usefulness in assessing texts: “To test soundness, one may, when relevant, employ standards from formal or informal logic. . . . However, the narrative paradigm envisions reasons as being expressed by elements of human communication that are not always clear-cut inferential or implicative forms” (350).

Such qualifications leave decidedly unanswered such questions as: How does the critic determine when tests of logical soundness are relevant? When inferences and
Implicative forms are implicit rather than clear-cut, should they be examined or ignored? What criteria are to be used to determine when the tests of coherence and good reasons should override tests of rationality? Also remaining unanswered is the significant question of the extent to which Fisher’s explicit criticisms of rationality in 1984 are applicable to narrative rationality in 1985, when the traditional logic of reasons has been reincorporated. It would seem that anyone wishing to apply the tests of narrative rationality with traditional rationality reincorporated would have to possess the special training, knowledge, and information that the rational world paradigm requires and that presumably bars the general public from participating in decision making on many issues.

The third and most serious problem of his rationality indictment results from Fisher’s efforts to argue that narrativity is more comprehensible and accessible to the public and is therefore to be valued over rationality. Fisher has claimed that “one does not have to be taught narrative probability and narrative fidelity; one culturally acquires them through a universal faculty and experience” (“Narration,” 15). Because the capability for using narrative rationality is universal, “the ‘people’ do judge stories that are told for and about them and . . . they have a rational capacity to make such judgments” (9). Fisher has argued that “narrative rationality is not an account of the ‘laws of thought’ and it is not normative in the sense that one must reason according to prescribed rules of calculation or inference making” (9). Noting that the capacity for narrative rationality lies within everyone, Fisher has concluded that “the people have a natural tendency to prefer the true and the just” (9). Because we are all storytellers, we are all competent to judge the stories we hear.

Contrary to Fisher’s observation, the “people” do not always prefer the “true and just” view. Perhaps the most salient counterexample to this claim is the success of Nazi propaganda in persuading the German people that the source of evil in the world was the Jewish race. In Mein Kampf, the Aryan race was depicted as original, pure, self-sacrificing, and the source of all great art, culture, invention, and true achievement in the world. Aryan efforts to advance civilization were undermined by the schemes of the “Prince of Evil,” the international Jew who was involved in a worldwide conspiracy to live parasitically among Aryans, intermingling with them and sapping the strength of their ethnic purity. The German masses were to be wooed by a dominating male of great vision who would win them from the evil seduction of the Jew and restore the German race to the international dominance to which it was suited and entitled.8

A narrative such as Hitler’s is invidiously persuasive precisely because of its narrativity. By discounting the economic factors resulting from the war and emphasizing race, by providing a convenient and easily recognizable scapegoat, and by promising rebirth of the national destiny, Hitler struck a responsive chord in an alienated, disunified, and despairing people.9 The narrative of Mein Kampf provided a unified explanation for conditions and facts which the German people could not reconcile in the absence of the narrative it offered. Furthermore, it is precisely because of the ambiguity and implicitness of its claims that narrative can be used to account for seeming discrepancies. As Kenneth Burke observed, if those skeptical of Hitler’s account pointed out the existence of Jewish workers not conforming to his stereotype, his response would be “that is one more indication of the cunning with which the Jewish plot is being engineered.” Or if one noted presumably Jewish traits
among Aryans, the response would be: "Very well. That is proof that the Aryan has been 'seduced' by the Jew." The narrative in Mein Kampf provides a convenient mode for responding to any questions or issues that those who are not "true believers" might want to raise.

The ambiguous and equivocal role of traditional rationality in the narrative paradigm therefore invites confusion on the part of critics who seek to apply it to the critical assessment of texts. Confusion may result from failure to understand that, in attacking rationality, Fisher really attacks only one subform of it—technical rationality—without acknowledging other forms, such as practical reasoning and moral argument, which may be more pervasive in our culture. Confusion may further result from Fisher's attempt to cast aspersions upon a concept which he later reincorporates into his model without indicating when or how it is to be relevant or applicable in assessing texts. And, finally, judicious, careful assessment of texts may be undermined by Fisher's insistence upon the "people's" ability to judge texts on narrativity alone. While Fisher has acknowledged that the people can be wrong, he has been silent on the question of how they can avoid being deluded, given the absence of traditional rationality ("Narration," 9).

**Narrative Rationality and the Locus of Assessment**

We have seen that Fisher promises a logic for assessing stories while at the same time expressing doubt as to whether traditional logical standards are always relevant or reliable. We might conclude, then, that one of the other two components of narrative rationality—narrative probability or the logic of good reasons—might provide the means for textual assessment promised by Fisher. The remainder of this essay will show that (1) narrative probability, taken alone, is inadequate for the criticism of rhetorical discourse; (2) the locus for critical assessment in the logic of good reasons is unclear; and (3) examples of the narrative paradigm at work in Fisher's own criticism do not resolve the ambiguities about how narrative rationality works.

Narrative probability is concerned with the internal coherence of a text. The critic concerned with narrative probability would ask whether the temporal and spatial relationships among the characters and events of a narrative coalesce to form an organic whole. George Campbell in his Philosophy of Rhetoric described textual coherence in the following way: "When a number of ideas relating to any fact or event are successively introduced into my mind by a speaker; if the train he deduceth coincide with the general current of my experience; if nothing in it thwart those conclusions and anticipations which are become habitual to me, my mind accompanieth him with facility, glides along from one idea to the other, and admits the whole with pleasure." While narrative probability as Campbell described it is appropriate for judging aesthetic and poetic discourse, it is inadequate for the judgment of narratives used rhetorically. There are two reasons for this. First, Fisher has promised a criterion for choosing between competing narratives, and narrative probability cannot enable us to make a choice when two or more narratives are equally coherent. Taken alone, narrative probability does not enable us to decide whether Darwin's Origin of the Species or the Genesis account of creation should be accepted. Based on the
immanent facts of these texts alone, both accounts are equally coherent. Second, internal coherence cannot be the sole criterion because of the very features of discourse that make it rhetorical. This point has been excellently made by Lucaites and Condit, who have observed that the primary goal of a rhetorical narrative is to advocate something beyond itself: "The claim supported by a rhetorical narrative must be articulated outside of the narration. Dialectical and poetic narratives must portray a logically or aesthetically complete vision, creating a whole world or a whole truth. Rhetorical narratives can never achieve such independence or completeness, for they speak of part of a whole and changing world."15 Unlike other forms of criticism, rhetorical criticism must consider the text's relation to its audience and its context. The criteria suggested by narrative probability may expose internal contradiction and inconsistency in a text, but they cannot function as the sole means for selecting one narrative over equally coherent competing narratives or assessing the text's adequacy as the response to a rhetorical situation.16

The third and last component of narrative rationality is the logic of good reasons, first introduced by Fisher in 1978. While narrative coherence and rationality have been traditionally used as critical tools, the logic of good reasons is an innovation. The logic of good reasons can perhaps best be understood if we consider the critical questions that it asks about a text:

1. What are the implicit and explicit values embedded in a message?
2. Are the values appropriate to the nature of the decision that the message bears upon?
3. What would be the effects of adhering to the values in regard to one's concept of oneself, to one's behavior, to one's relationships with others and society, and to the process of rhetorical transaction?
4. Are the values confirmed or validated in one's personal experience, in the lives or statements of others whom one admires and respects, and/or in a conception of the best audience that one can conceive?
5. Even if a prima facie case exists or a burden of proof has been established, are the values the message offers those that, in the estimation of the critic, constitute the ideal basis for human conduct? ("Good Reasons," 379-80)

In terms of the audiences or individuals potentially responding to a message, there are three loci for critical response implied in these questions—the universal audience, the particular audience, and the critic.

In the fourth question, Fisher alluded to "values confirmed [by] others whom one admires and respects" and to "a conception of the best audience one can conceive" ("Good Reasons," 380). He seemed to have had in mind here something very similar to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's universal audience—recipients who are believed to be reasonable, competent, and representative of "the whole of mankind, or at least, of all normal, adult persons."17 Using such a construct as a critical criterion implies that a text's message must be evaluated by an ideal standard of some sort. Acceptance of a text's message by a universal audience means that the truths expressed in the text have a timeless validity, independent of the self interest of particular audiences and of local and historical contingencies.18

But Fisher has explicitly insisted upon the importance of individual, context dependent values in human choice-making. The only universal values he has accepted are those that make argumentation possible—"some degree of trust, a willingness to participate in the process, a belief in the desirability of the interaction, and an interest in . . . the attainment and/or advancement of some truth" ("Good
Reasons," 382). Aside from these, Fisher believes that values are context specific and arise only in particular decisional situations. He concluded that "because . . . humans are not identical one with another, because they are free choice makers . . . they are not likely to be bound by 'perfect' constructs—except of their own making" (383). The introduction of a "best audience" in Fisher's fourth question and of an "ideal basis for human conduct" in the fifth seem to imply that universal standards are available to the critic, but his explicit rejection of them in individual choice-making situations leaves the status of such standards very uncertain.

The logic of good reasons also urges someone to assess a text by considering the effects of adhering to its values "in regard to one's concept of oneself, to one's behavior, to one's relationships with others and society." In urging consideration of the effects of values on one's experiences and the situation, Fisher seems to be considering the impact of discourse on a particular audience—a society, a public, or an individual. In fact, Fisher has claimed that a value should be accepted if "it makes a pragmatic difference in one's life and in one's community" ("Good Reasons," 381). Furthermore, he has argued that the only way to bridge the gap between incommensurate value systems is "by telling stories that do not negate the self conceptions people hold of themselves" ("Narration," 14).

As the example of Mein Kampf has shown us, however, a text's appeal to the particular audience does not prevent self-delusion. A rhetorical narrative may "ring true" in the lives of particular audience members, may resonate with their own experience and that of those whom they admire, and nevertheless be a bad story. In fact, Fisher acknowledged that "no guarantee exists that one who uses narrative rationality will not adopt 'bad' stories, rationalizations. . . . Stories . . . satisfy the need for equilibrium and the demands of narrative probability and fidelity. . . . It may be, however, that another observer would think otherwise, that the involved person was rationalizing" ("Elaboration," 349; emphasis mine). Fisher's equivocation here leaves the impression that the search for a reliable criterion for the critical assessment of texts has led us into another cul-de-sac. The only remaining criterion is the judgment of the critic who is the one apparently qualified to decide whether "the values the message offers . . . constitute the ideal basis for human conduct" ("Good Reasons," 380).

**The Warranting of Critical Claims**

In 1978, Fisher promised to provide improved standards for the critical assessment of texts. Noting that "any evaluative system is circular" and that "evaluation inherently involves tautology," Fisher claimed that his aim would be "to increase the diameter of the circle that contains 'good reasons'" ("Good Reasons," 377). Fisher has attempted to expand the circle by including the "logic of good reasons," but this itself is an inveterately circular concept. Fisher has defined "good reasons" as "those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical" (378). In a note appended to the text, Fisher indicates that the use of the term "good" does not entail comparative judgment but "only signifies that whatever is taken as a basis for adopting a rhetorical message is inextricably bound to a value—to a conception of the 'good'" (378). So a "good reason" is a reason tied to a value, and a value is a conception of the "good" held by a particular individual. The logic of good reasons
does not provide us with a system for choosing between competing and incommensurate value systems. At bottom, when two transcendental values are in conflict, Fisher tells us, the “context determines which will be salient” (382).

Who or what determines the context for making a judgment? Fisher distrusts the rational standard because it can be used to close off the public from decision-making, and he rejects universal or ideal standards because decision-making is situational. By examining Fisher’s own work as a critic, we can discover the one remaining locus of assessment—the critic. The results of Fisher’s criticism indicate that it is indeed the critic who seems to have the license to determine the context within which certain values are to be preferred over others.

Fisher’s studies of narratives used rhetorically do not reveal value criteria external to the critic’s own value system. In recent studies employing the logic of good reasons and narrative rationality, Fisher has made explicit the values embedded in respective narratives and then employed his own value system to assess the worth and merit of those values. In a study of the values in Death of a Salesman and The Great Gatsby, Fisher and Richard A. Filloy concluded:

> To question whether the central conclusions of these works are reliable/desirable guides for one’s own life, we would say yes. We are reassured in this judgment because we believe that construction of a positive self-image, improvement in one’s behavior toward others and society, and enhancement of the process of rhetorical transaction are all fostered by the recognition that the materialistic myth of the American Dream can be a tragic delusion and that self knowledge and acceptance are higher values than conformity to unexamined standards (“Argument,” 361).

The authors went on to say that this message, which they have extracted from the text, “is confirmed in . . . the experiences of others, and in the pronouncements of spiritual leaders from all segments of society” (“Argument,” 361). They did not, however, provide any data to support such a confirmation, beyond their own personal judgment.

In a more recent study, Fisher has compared the narratives told by Callicles and Socrates in Plato’s Gorgias. He observed that “Callicles’ story celebrates hedonism, relativism, and power politics—the ‘survival of the fittest’—which are justified on the basis that this is the way nature itself dictates that things should be” (“Elaboration,” 360). Fisher indicted Callicles’ narrative because it “evades the values of truth, universal good, equality, harmony, order, communion, friendship, and a oneness with the Cosmos” (361). Fisher then concluded that Callicles’ narrative is “a rationalization for a power-oriented, hedonistic lifestyle” (363). No source beyond Fisher’s own judgment for the characterization and assessment of the values in Callicles’ narrative was given. In these instances of his criticism, Fisher appeared to view himself as some sort of representative of the people, equipped to choose the “true and just” view. The absence of rational analysis and of data about the values and reactions of the narrative’s audience leave us without criteria to judge the quality of the critic’s judgment.

Fisher has promised that narrative rationality would get us beyond acceptance by virtue of consensus (“Narration,” 16), provide us with an alternative to situations in which judgments of value are expressions of mere personal feeling (“Narration,” 5), and inform our consciousness without dictating what we should believe (“Good Reasons,” 383). But Fisher seems to distrust the very external factors we might bring to bear to test the assessment claims of the critic. We are directed instead to the
immanent facts of the text itself (its narrative) and the judgment of the critic. What is disturbing about narrative rationality is that value choices are ultimately based on the critic's personal preference but in the interim masquerade as something else—an "objective" critical method that assures its consumers that a greater measure of "truth" will be attained than in other critical systems.

CONCLUSION

Because Fisher has taken equivocal or contradictory positions on issues that determine how narrative rationality is to be used to assess texts, the narrative rationality concept in his paradigm itself lacks narrative probability or coherence. First, Fisher is unclear about the status of traditional rationality in his model. In 1984, he disparaged traditional logic because of its presumed tendency to close off discussion and exclude the public from decision-making. In 1985, he reluctantly and provisionally readmitted traditional rationality into the narrative paradigm without indicating how or when it should be necessary in assessing texts.

Second, Fisher promises to get us beyond consensus as a criterion for judging the values in a text, but he nevertheless insists that the public can and should judge texts based on their narrative features alone. Fisher fails to deal with the question of how we can assure that the public will not choose bad stories based on self delusion or rationalization. While acknowledging that a coherent narrative with bad values may lead the public astray, Fisher continues to insist that narrative rationality somehow provides a guide for distinguishing the reliability, trustworthiness, and desirability of rhetorical narratives.

Third, Fisher promises to enlarge and expand the circle of critical evaluation without actually succeeding in doing so. The notion of "good reasons" is itself a circular concept, entailing only a notion of "the good" specific to a particular audience and context. Fisher seems to want to include standards of "the best audience one can conceive" and "the ideal basis for human conduct." But he immediately exiles the notion of ideality because, he says, values are context-dependent and particular to the decision and the rhetorical situation giving rise to discourse.

Fourth, deprived of the option of relying on the rational standard to judge texts and bereft of the notion of universal audience as a criterion, we have little left to judge the claims of the critic. Absence of internal coherence in a text's narrative may disqualify it, but its presence cannot assure value adequacy, since many seemingly coherent narratives advocate bad values. So, we must depend on the judgment of the critic which, in the applications demonstrated by Fisher as critic, is unsupported by data on public values, the effects of value adoption, or rational analysis. The choice-making exemplified by Fisher the critic seems arbitrary and personal.

There is one alternative to which we might have recourse here. That is, that narrative rationality is really a system of critical criteria that may be variously brought into play depending on the nature of the text to be assessed. In fact, Fisher intimates that this may be the case: "The criteria for the assessment of texts would certainly vary, as the form of good reasons varies in each of the forms of communication, but the principles of coherence and fidelity would apply to all" ("Elaboration," 356). In order to apply such a system, however, we would need to know the status of rationality within it, the external sources for value legitimation, the status of public judgment sans rationality, and how a critic's claims are to be
warranted. As long as the critical results of the narrative paradigm rely only on the immanent narrative of the text and the critic’s personal judgment, the claims made for the paradigm’s usefulness and applicability will continue to exceed its range and capability.

Notes

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5Aristotle The Poetics 1451a–1452a.


7McGee and Nelson, 145.

8This description of Mein Kampf’s narrative is adapted from Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’ ” in The Philosophy of Literary Form (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 191–220; and Randall L. Bytwerk, Julius Streicher (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 74–76.

9Burke discusses the persuasive effect of these appeals, 205.

10Burke, 194–95.


12For an excellent example of how a narrativity model can be used to analyze discursive texts, see Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1:175–230.


15Lucaites and Condit, 101.


17Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 30.

18Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 32.