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Inference and Interpretation: Problems for Narrative as Testimony

by

Victoria Louise Isett

Under the Direction of Juan Piñeros Glasscock, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that when an agent uses a narrative (i.e., a story) to communicate something to her hearer, she cannot be said to be giving testimony as it is traditionally understood in epistemology. Instead, many of the beliefs the hearer takes up on the basis of the speaker's story will be derived by inferences and interpretations the hearer must make on her own. If the authorship of the relevant beliefs does not belong to the speaker, then those beliefs are not ones transmitted via testimony. Thus, narratives are not forms of genuine testimony. However, I argue that this is not a reason to ignore the possible epistemic richness of storytelling. I conclude by encouraging my audience to take seriously the need for narrative to be granted an epistemology of its own.

INDEX WORDS: Narrative, Epistemology, Philosophy of Language, Testimony, Belief, Inference, Interpretation.

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by

Victoria Louise Isett

Committee Chair: Juan Piñeros Glasscock

Committee: Daniel Weiskopf

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2024

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family, friends, and pets—past, present, and future.

I am so lucky to be so loved.

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A world of thanks to Juan, whose patience, encouragement, and help during this project I could not have done without. Further thanks to the rest of the faculty and staff at Georgia State University, especially to Dan Weiskopf, Eddy Nahmias, Suzie Love, and Christie Hartley. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to the philosophers who inspire me most and made this all possible: Amy Flowerree, Joel Velasco, Walter Schaller, Howard Curzer, Jack Romp, Ben Schultz, Bridget Berdit, and Lucas Heimgartner. Lastly, special mention must be made of my parents, Cheri and Carl, and to a select few of my siblings—Joanie, Boo, and Nick. My body does not have enough time on this earth to properly thank y'all for putting up with me over the last two years.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of my paper is primarily an exploratory one. I would like to discuss how narratives work as a way of giving knowledge to a hearer, with special attention paid to the role of the hearer in her truth-aiming belief formation. When epistemologists focus on the transference of knowledge from a speaker to a hearer, what we are focusing on is *testimony*. The importance of testimony in our day-to-day lives is important; when things go right in a testimonial exchange, the hearer can come to gain knowledge solely on the say-so of a trusted speaker. However, it is traditionally thought that what grounds a hearer's justification in forming a potentially knowledge-constituting belief is that the speaker a) represents the contents of that belief as true, and b) commits herself to the truthfulness of those contents in a way recognizable to the hearer (Fricker 2006, 2012; Benton and van Elswyk 2020; Marsili & Green 2021). Thus, the problem for narratives working in the role of testimony is this: much of the content appropriately identified by a hearer of a narrative is not content that the speaker has straightforwardly asserted.

In this thesis, I argue that while narratives are made up of a series of individual claims made by the speaker, there are necessary interpretive inferences the hearer must make in order to give proper uptake to what the speaker intends to communicate. Further, these inferences are not additional content that can be stripped away and disposed of after the narrative has been comprehended, leaving only the objective content of the story to be cleanly picked out and believed on the speaker's say-so. Rather, it is a package deal. To believe a story is not just to believe that the events in the story actually happened and that their descriptive contents are accurately depicted, but to believe that the events and their descriptive content relate to each other in a specific way and that, together, mean something beyond what has been explicitly stated by the speaker. Thus, if narratives are way a speaker can give testimony, and narratives require the hearer to make

interpretive inferences in order to give full uptake, then whatever the hearer appropriately comes to believe via inference should also be epistemically evaluable as testimony. But precisely because the contents of those beliefs are not straightforwardly asserted by the speaker, it is not clear how the hearer could be justified in those beliefs along the epistemic dimensions of testimony. I argue that if we attempt to understand narratives as testimony, three puzzles arise for how it is a hearer can come to gain knowledge on the basis of a speaker's story.

First, because the content is not straightforwardly asserted to the hearer, it is unclear how the speaker can meet the conditions for testimony as stated above. Specifically, it is unclear how she can publicly commit herself to the truthfulness of the contents of the hearer's inferred beliefs. Second, if the overall meaning of the story is indeterminate, or there are multiple sets of interpretive inferences the hearer needs to make in order to gain comprehension, then it is unclear how she can be sure she has made the right inferences or gleaned the appropriate meaning. And, finally, if the hearer is the author of the content of her inferred beliefs, and the speaker cannot take responsibility for them, then it is hard to see how knowledge potentially gained via narrative can be appropriately called testimony. My ultimate conclusion is that narratives cannot meet the epistemic standards typically thought necessary for knowledge gained via testimony, and thus should not be considered as a form of testimony.

To be clear, the sorts of narratives I am interested in here are ones in which a speaker takes herself to be relaying a series of true events that converge on some overall meaning. It is also important to note that I do not take myself to be arguing that narratives lack real epistemic value. I believe narrative discourse of the sort I am interested in is often an invaluable source of knowledge for a hearer. But while much of what is communicated in these sorts of narratives is straightforwardly asserted, and thus perhaps subject to the norms and practices typical of

testimony, I believe it would be a mistake to assume that these two ways of communicating work to provide knowledge to a hearer in the same way. I believe that if building an epistemology of narratives is of any interest (and I think it should be), then we ought to give special attention to narratives as occupying an epistemic category of their own.

2 NARRATIVES AND HOLISTIC COMPREHENSION

It is best to begin by comparing texts with a narrative structure alongside texts that can be easily identified as testimonial utterances. Consider the following straightforward assertion:

(1) I am grieving the loss of my pet.

Any competent hearer should be able to understand a simple statement like (1). However, they may lack what feels like a robust or heightened sense of understanding one might gain from a narrative telling, such as:

(2) I took Alma to the emergency veterinarian on Friday, but when I went to pick her up the next morning, the vet came out with a look on her face that I knew meant Alma hadn't made it through the night. I started crying right there in the waiting room.¹

Both texts should get the hearer to attend to the speaker's grief, yet it is clear that (2) is informationally richer than (1), which may be why the understanding of the speaker's grief we gain from the narrative seems more tangible. The straightforward assertion tells us the speaker is grieving, but our understanding of that grief is fairly flat. The narrative gives us more: we get that she's grieving as well as some insight into the particular, subjective dimensions of her personal grief. But the narrative text does not actually *say* anything about the speaker's grief. As for what the text says, there is plenty of immediately available content we can pick out. For instance, there are the events (e.g., taking Alma to the emergency veterinarian), the presupposed and implied contents that make up the descriptive content of those events (e.g., that Alma is a pet, that normal veterinarian office hours were inaccessible/inappropriate, etc.), and though not explicit in the text, there are some obvious implicit causal connections that tie events together (e.g., that the reason

¹ Because there is a whole field dedicated to pinning down just what narratives are, I will not attempt to give a reductive definition of narrative here. But for our purposes, a narrative can be any sequence of events that the speaker relays (ideally, truthfully) as being related to one another. That said, I do not believe this is a paradigmatic case of a narrative, that I have exhibited all the possible storytelling devices narratologists identify, nor even that it is a *good* story (aesthetically speaking). Still, it is an example of a story we can plausibly imagine someone uttering sincerely, and I take that to be good enough to use for evaluating narrative as a form of testimony.

Alma required medical attention was the eventual cause of her death, that the vet's facial expression bared a meaning easily recognizable to the speaker, which then cued the speaker's emotional response, etc.). However, we do not seem to get the narrative connections just by explicating the content immediately available in the text—that is, we do not get what the story *means*.

To get what the story means, the hearer must somehow organize the content of the narrative into a cohesive whole, perhaps by engaging in what Louis Mink calls a *configurational mode of comprehension* (Mink, 1970, p. 551). For Mink, narrative comprehension is only gained by looking at the story *totum simul*—from a God's eye perspective—which allows the listener to “see” the story as a holistic chunk of time by understanding its events as “connected by a network of overlapping descriptions” (p. 556), configuring the story into a map-like representation:

...the end is connected with the promise of the beginning as well as the beginning with the promise of the end, and the necessity of the backward references cancels out, so to speak, the contingency of the forward references. To comprehend temporal succession means to think of it in both directions at once, and then time is no longer the river which bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey. (p. 554-555)

Mink's holistic comprehension of narrative is similar to how Elisabeth Camp understands metaphorical comprehension as analogous to *gestalt* perceptions, where the visual information is organized into a specific picture given the demands of the perspective through which the viewer attends to the input (2015, p. 51). Perspectives are not the content of a narrative or metaphor themselves, but rather an open-ended disposition to organize information in a certain way, such that a determined structure comes into view (2019, p. 31). What prompts a hearer to take up one perspective rather than another are the framing

devices, the conceptual tools employed in the text, that dictate how the contents are to be shaped by thinking about them in terms of each other (2019, p. 27). For example, if I say to you, “Sarah is such a drama queen,” you apply the frame *drama queen* to the subject *Sarah*, thereby organizing what you know of Sarah to bring to the forefront any of her features consistent with that frame. Similarly, the descriptive features of events in a narrative work to frame each other, thereby bringing out some features as more or less salient and prominent. The emergent “whole” of the narrative is like the gestalt image; it is the determined organization of the encoded information, where some features are fixed as critical to one’s understanding of the story, others rendered irrelevant and attenuated. When Mink says we comprehend narratives as “networks of overlapping descriptions,” this is plausibly the sort of content organization he had in mind.²

Perspectives, when thought of this way, solve the problem of how to stabilize the relevant content, keeping the descriptions of the events in a narrative contained within a whole such that the narrative can be made sense of. By comprehending the story holistically, we can make certain interpretive connections between events, or what I call *relational interpretations*. Unlike the presupposed and more directly implied content discussed above, which are necessary for the asserted events and their causal relationships to be made sense of, relational interpretations are inferences the hearer makes that she feels are necessary to give the story its narrative coherence. Again, Mink gives a nice illustration of what I’m attempting to draw out of narrative comprehension:

... a letter I burn may be understood not only as an oxidizing substance, but as a link with an old friend. It may have relieved a misunderstanding, raised a question, or changed my plans at a crucial moment. As a letter, it belongs to a kind of story, a narrative of events which would be unintelligible without reference to it. But to explain this, I would not construct a theory of letters or of friendships but would, rather, show how it belongs to a particular configuration of events like a part to a jigsaw puzzle, (1970, p. 551).

² For more on how we ought to comprehend narratives holistically, see Fraser 2021, Velleman 2003, and White 1980.

One of the salient interpretations prompted by the framing in (2) is what the cause of the speaker's shift in emotional state must be. By making the emotional response explicit in the story, the hearer frames the events in the story as ones that should cohere with descriptive features conceptually associated with that emotional response, such as "sadness," "shock," or "grief." Now, instead of it being the event of suddenly realizing Alma has died as cued by the vet, it was *Alma's Death* that caused the speaker to cry. Alma's death is now the thematic narrative thread holding the events of the story together, and we needn't work up a theory of emotions, commitments to pets, or of loss or grief to get there.

These interpretive inferences the hearer makes are, I think, an essential part of what it means to "get" a narrative. Further, the semantic content of the text and its organization—the descriptions of events and their structure—constrain the way a narrative is meant to be understood. The text dictates what inferences the hearer can or cannot make and what interpretations she would be allowed to give to the story. This means that were the hearer to relay information about the speaker to a third party by alluding to the narrative's most salient meaning, it would have to be congruent with the shape and structure of the speaker's narrative taken as a whole. For example, if someone were to later inquire about the speaker's wellbeing, it would be wrong for the hearer to respond by saying, "She's doing great!" Thus, any general interpretation we would give to the story would also need to be consistent—one possible interpretation being: *the speaker is grieving the loss of her pet.*

3 PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY OF INFERRED CONTENT

The hearer's inferences are thus bound: there are more or less correct inferences the hearer ought to make, perhaps even exactly determinate inferences, and they are not made independently of the speaker. The content and structure of the text the speaker provides will dictate what information the hearer attends to and how she is meant to attend to it. But as it is relevant to testimony, whatever contents the hearer infers from the speaker's narrative would need to stand in the right sort of relationship with the speaker for the beliefs formed to be justified. With that in mind, there are necessary social components testimony. First, the speaker must have an intended audience. Second, that audience must be able to recognize the speaker as intending to represent the uttered content as true. These social components are what grounds the hearer's justification for trusting what the speaker says, such that any belief formed on the basis of the speaker's utterance may be properly knowledge-constituting. They do so by committing the speaker to the truthfulness of what she intends her hearer to believe, meaning that the hearer has room to complain were the contents of that belief turned out to be false.

Elizabeth Fricker most notably advocates for the view that a speaker cannot give testimony without fully committing herself to the truthfulness of her utterance in a way recognized by her audience. Further, she claims that only explicit speech acts with straightforwardly asserted content can bind the speaker in the way necessary for her to potentially gain knowledge. She writes:

“The overt and undeniable taking responsibility for the truth of what [the speaker] puts forward as true in an explicit speech act of telling is an essential part of what gives acts of testifying their epistemic force, as a source of belief and knowledge” (Fricker, 2012, p. 63).

That a speaker's utterance should be explicitly asserted in order to ground the hearer's justification is intuitive for two reasons. First, by *asserting* the content—rather than merely *opining* or *conjecturing*—the speaker thereby takes responsibility for the belief the hearer forms on the basis of her assertion. The hearer can hold the speaker accountable and complain if the asserted

content turns out false. Second, by taking responsibility for the truthfulness of the asserted content, it is taken for granted that the speaker also genuinely believes the content of her assertion. Something would be wrong if a hearer was unconcerned with whether the source of her belief—the speaker—did not herself believe the thing she asserted. So far it seems that the belief being supplied to the hearer via assertion is rather important.

Fricker takes these two consequences of assertion to be evidence for the knowledge-norm of assertion (p.62), which also helps us identify why Moorean conjunctions such as, “it’s raining, but I don’t believe it’s raining” appear to clash; the speaker violates the norm that presupposes her belief in the asserted content.³ Because Moorean conjunctions prompt a clash when the first half of the sentence is asserted, others have found that we can test the assertoric force of some uttered content by amending a clause stating the speaker’s disbelief in some part of the utterance. For example, Paula Keller has used Moorean conjunctions to show that presupposed contents can have the assertoric force necessary to bind the speaker to the truthfulness of those contents. Take the following utterance to a friend, “Sorry I’m late. I had to pick up my sister from the airport, but I don’t believe I have a sister.” There is a clash between what the speaker represents herself as believing (i.e., having a sister) and what she explicitly avows (Keller, 2019, p.12). If the hearer can hold the speaker accountable for anything presupposed in the speaker’s utterance, then the hearer has good reason to take up those contents as potentially knowledge-constituting beliefs.

For narrative as a form of testimony, being able to hold the speaker accountable for presupposed content looks promising; not only can the explicitly asserted events in the story be

³ See Williamson (2000, p. 243) for his defense of the knowledge-norm of assertion. Williamson’s knowledge-first program gets us speaker belief in the following way: if knowing *p* entails believing *p*, then a speaker *representing* herself as knowing *p* implicitly represents her as *believing p*. Further, I follow Keith DeRose’s (1991) use of “clash” to describe why Moorean paradoxes are troubling; it is not because they express a genuine contradiction, but because they express an inconsistency in what one believes/knows and what one has represented themselves to believe/know (p. 598).

taken up as beliefs, but also any readily available information in the story. Think back to our example narrative (2): if the speaker told her story and added to it either “but I don’t believe Alma is a pet,” or “but I don’t believe Alma required medical attention,” there would be a clash in what the speaker has represented as true and what she claims to believe.⁴ This means that for the constitutive parts that make up a story, the hearer can avail herself of the speaker’s commitment to their truthfulness and hold the speaker accountable if those contents turn out to be false. Anything straightforwardly represented in the text—either by assertion, presupposition, or implicature—can be taken as testimony.

However, because narratives must be comprehended holistically, which necessitates the hearer to make certain interpretive inferences in order to have proper uptake, the content of those inferences must be attributable to the speaker as well. Thus, if the inferred contents carry tacit assertoric force by being prompted and constrained by the story, appending to the story a sentence containing the speaker’s disbelief in those inferences should prompt a similar clash as above. Here are two attempts:

- (3) I took Alma to the emergency veterinarian on Friday, but when I went to pick her up the next morning, the vet came out with a look on her face that I knew meant Alma hadn’t made it through the night. I started crying right there in the waiting room, but I don’t believe it was Alma’s death that made me cry.
- (4) I took Alma to the emergency veterinarian on Friday, but when I went to pick her up the next morning, the vet came out with a look on her face that I knew meant Alma hadn’t made it through the night. I started crying right there in the waiting room, but I don’t believe the loss is cause for bereavement.

When comprehending (2) we automatically presume Alma’s death—not the look on the veterinarian’s face—caused the speaker to cry. Yet, the overall narrative given in (3) is still

⁴ For both the presupposed and implicit content, I think that the speaker could plausibly append either utterance to her story and it still would be felicitous, but only insofar as the narrative discourse has not concluded. If the story is meant to be over, either utterance would undermine the narrative’s comprehensibility.

coherent despite one of our earlier relational interpretations having been negated by the speaker. Similarly, for (4), the negation of a general takeaway meaning a hearer might plausibly infer is not necessarily inconsistent. It is easy to imagine the speaker holding this sort of psychological tension between the emotional state she represents being in in the narrative and the emotional state she avows to be in. Thus, if the speaker has plausible deniability for any of the hearer's inferences, the hearer loses the grounds for justification necessary for any beliefs informed by her interpretive inferences to be properly knowledge-constituting.

An objection here would be that (3) and (4) are now different narratives than what was originally presented in (2); the additional information changes the configuration, so it is not the case we would have made those original inferences in the first place. True. However, the point of (3) and (4) is meant to show that the speaker *could* deny some of the inferences a hearer makes, either about a relationship between elements of the story or its overall interpretive meaning. We can leave the structure of (2) alone, make those inferences, then later have the speaker reject whatever we have inferred. The point is that insofar as Moorean conjunctions can be used to track what the speaker tacitly commits herself to, it does not seem to be the case that we can hold her accountable for the truthfulness of our inferred beliefs. There is nothing in her story that necessary implies or presupposes the content of those inferences, thus there is nothing in the speaker's narrative that gives the inferred content the assertoric force necessary to be taken as testimony.⁵

⁵ The speaker could, of course, commit herself to our interpretive inferences through reflective endorsement, but that would be a separate linguistic and social act.

4 NOT ALL NARRATIVES

It should be acknowledged that my concerns about assertoric force and plausible deniability may not apply to all stories. In many of our day-to-day narrative exchanges, we have no problem gaining full, or at least approximate, understanding of what our interlocutor is hoping to communicate. For example, take this narrative told to me by a fellow graduate student:

- (5) I went to the antique bookstore yesterday and ended up impulsively buying a 1940's edition set of Aristotle's complete works.

There is little need for any unpacking of this narrative. We may even be tempted to say that it does not count as a story—it is simply an assertion about an event. However, there is certainly narrativity given to it by the figurative use of ‘impulsively,’ which prompts the audience to infer what mood the speaker (let’s call him Jack) must have been in when he made his purchase.⁶ We know he does not mean that he literally made the purchase without *any* prior conscious deliberation, so we must infer that he means he did so in a liberated, carefree way; that he was moved by desire, unencumbered by the usual financial prudence his paltry graduate stipend necessitates. Now, even if those are not the exact words he would use to characterize his experience, it is a safe bet to assume he meant something in that general sentimental domain. Thus, we can safely form the belief *Jack, in a liberated and carefree way, bought a set of Aristotle's complete works*. I would even think forming the belief *Jack impulsively bought a set of Aristotle's complete works* is safe insofar as ‘impulsively’ has the same general meaning in both his story and my belief. Thus, it looks like (5) is both narrative and testimony: it has genuine assertoric force, meaning we can hold the speaker accountable for the truthfulness of the belief formed. For

⁶ See Abbott, H. Porter (2021) on how events may get their narrativity. He shows that we can shift a series of events from being series of assertions to a narrative by giving them moods and settings. For example, we can add narrativity to “She ate lunch. Then she drove home,” by adding, “Broodingly, she ate lunch. Then she drove home” (p.25).

instance, we can complain if it was later revealed that he bought Aristotle's complete works but only after intense deliberation and meticulous budgeting.

However, while narratives like (5) can be taken as assertions, and therefore as testimony, things get fuzzier the more complex the story becomes. Suppose we add to the story:

(6) I went to the antique bookstore yesterday and ended up impulsively buying a 1940's edition set of Aristotle's complete works. Right after the clerk handed me the receipt, I got a call from my insurance company saying they won't cover my tailbone surgery.

It is tempting to say that (6) has a straightforward interpretation, something along the lines of the speaker feeling as though he was being cosmically penalized for his imprudence, and perhaps he should now return the books to cover the cost of his surgery. But the point of his story may have nothing to do with the cost of the books at all. After all, the \$100 or so he spent on the books would hardly make a dent in an out-of-pocket cost for surgery in the United States. His story may instead suggest that his good mood from buying the books was cut short by bad news, with no appeal to him feeling like there was some type of karmic intervention at play. Or, perhaps, he still felt as though he was being punished by the universe, but not because he spent the money, but because he believes he's not allowed to be happy, and that is what his story is meant to convey. The belabored point here is that insofar as there are competing inferences the audience could plausibly make, either about the relationship between events or about the meaning of the story as a whole, the problems I identified in the previous sections remain legitimate problems for taking narratives as testimony.

5 INTERPRETIVE AUTHORITY AND CAUSAL SOURCEHOOD

So far, I have argued that narratives fail to act as testimony because the speaker can plausibly deny whatever the hearer infers. However, one move to evade this problem would be to reject the claim that beliefs formed via testimony are justified only if the speaker takes explicit responsibility for their being true. We can simply get rid of the condition that the hearer must recognize the speaker's intentions. We can instead say that any beliefs the hearer forms on the basis of the speaker's utterance are ones the speaker is ultimately responsible for. By bypassing the speaker's intentions, we can keep narrative as a form of testimony, but without the hearer being limited to beliefs only of what the speaker manifestly intends to communicate.

This solution would supposedly work in the following way. Because the inferences the hearer makes are constrained by what the structure and content of the narrative allow, we can keep the speaker as the *causal source* of the hearer's inferred belief. Then, insofar as the hearer only makes the most plausible inferences given the constraints of the story, she should be justified in forming the relevant beliefs. The problem, however, is that plausible deniability is still a formidable defeater. The speaker can still disavow whatever she has not straightforwardly communicated, and that possibility is enough to undermine the hearer's grounds for justification. As it is relevant to testimony, bypassing the speaker's intentions only gets us the speaker as the ultimate source of the hearer's inferred beliefs. We get the relationship right, but the speaker lacks solid justification insofar as the speaker can plausibly deny whatever it is the hearer infers. Thus, we need more to get this solution off the ground. In order to keep narratives as testimony, we need some mechanism entirely independent of the speaker's commitment that justifies the hearer's belief in the face of plausible deniability.

A.K. Flowerree has argued that though our general default should be to trust the claims of a sincere interlocutor about her internal states and beliefs, we may be permitted to reject what a speaker avows (or ignore what she disavows) insofar as we have good reason to believe she is in *bad faith*—if the speaker is sincerely mistaken about her own cognitive attitudes, motivations, or beliefs (Flowerree, 2019, p. 5). In a similar vein, Daniela Dover argues that specifically in cases where the discourse requires interpretation, the speaker implicitly abdicates sole authority over what are deemed appropriate inferences and interpretations of her story (Dover, 2021, p.201-204). Let us assume that Flowerree and Dover are right about what potential authority hearers may have in determining the speaker's intentions as well as the meaning of their utterances. If allowed such interpretive authority, the hearer is granted justification in her confidence that she has made the right inferences and formed the right beliefs, all without needing the speaker to make the contents of those inferences explicit. Further, if the hearer has good reason to suspect the speaker would be in bad faith were she to disavow the hearer's inference, then her possible disavowal should not sufficiently undermine the hearer's confidence in her interpretation. Now we have justification independent of the speaker's commitment.

I will now put this all together. I argued above for a view of testimony in which a speaker explicitly commits herself to what she says being true and does so by representing herself as believing it to be true. In this view, only straightforwardly asserted contents are ones which the speaker may properly commit herself to. Yet, if narrative comprehension requires that the hearer make certain inferences, and the speaker cannot appropriately commit herself to those inferences, then the hearer cannot take the narrative as genuine testimony. However, if the hearer needn't care whether the speaker shares the relevant belief or takes responsibility for whether it is true, then my argument fails. If a hearer has enough interpretive authority, then she can form a potentially

knowledge-constituting justified belief by the force of the speaker's narrative, all without the speaker needing to share that belief. Thus, narrative can maintain its status as testimony.

6 SPEAKER BYPASSING

In responding to this solution, it should first be noted that the kind of interpretive authority Dover claims hearers can have is only made available when they have an ethical motivation to be as interpretively sensitive as possible (Dover, p. 194). The hearer must really care about the speaker, her interests, and getting the interpretation correct. This assumes the hearer already has or is committed to gaining privileged epistemic access to the speaker. Similarly, for Flowerree, the kind of relationship needed for the hearer to know when the speaker is in bad faith assumes a privileged epistemic position. I have already addressed how the relationship and shared background knowledge may help the hearer make successful interpretations, and I conceded that some narratives may work to transfer knowledge the way that testimony is generally thought to. However, it is often the case that a speaker of a narrative does not share such a robust epistemic background with her audience, and so such a solution cannot be applied to narratives absolutely. Beyond its inadequacy for saving all narratives as testimony, there is another reason to resist a theory of testimony that bypasses the speaker's intentions. What makes testimony a unique source of knowledge is that we can come to know something on the say-so of the speaker, which means trusting that the speaker sincerely believes what she is asking us to believe. To illustrate this importance, consider the following case Elizabeth Anscombe gives, where the hearer forms a true belief, but not due to the hearer's trust in the speaker's sincerity:

For suppose I were convinced that B wished to deceive me, and would tell the opposite of what he believed, but that on the matter at hand B would be believing the opposite of the truth. By calculation on this, then, I believe what B says, on the strength of his saying it— but only in a comical sense can I be said to believe *him*. (Anscombe, 1979, p. 145)⁷

⁷ The example is attributed to Mary Geach.

Here, the hearer (Anscombe) has full uptake of the speaker's utterance. She comprehends the content and recognizes the speaker as intending to represent that content as true, yet she undoubtedly knows the speaker does not believe what he is saying. But though the belief formed is on "the strength of his saying it," Anscombe does not gain knowledge from speaker B due to his authority as a *teller*. She has come to form the belief independently of his authority. She comes to believe what he says not by his saying it but rather by her reasoning to it. Thus, it is not his *testimony* that convinces her but, in a sense, her rejection of it. Similarly for narrative telling, to bypass the speaker's sincerity, intention, or commitment to the truth of the hearer's inferences means bypassing the speaker entirely. The hearer would not be forming a belief on the say-so of the speaker but rather on the say-so of the narrative.

7 LUCKY INFERENCES AND INDETERMINACY OF UPTAKE

Another possible concern relates to the possibility of lucky inferences. In the example narrative (6), we saw that there be competing inferences, but also that the inferences made about the relationship between events can be false and the overall interpretive meaning be true. We could think the story is meant to convey the relationship between spending money carelessly and being cosmically punished, or about the relationship between being happy and being cosmically punished. Either way, we still get to the same broader point. However, the worry is that if the overall interpretive meaning of the story—in this case *being cosmically punished*—rests on the inferences we make about the relationship between events, then it looks like there is room for Gettier-ized beliefs. We can form the belief of what the story means more broadly by way of two different, equally plausible relational inferences about the specific events in the story. Our picking the one that actually corresponds to the speaker's intent is mere luck.

This worry may be mitigated in part by the relationship between the speaker and her audience. I mentioned earlier in the paper that we should consider whether privileged epistemic access, context, and features of the narrative itself could ground justification for the hearer's confidence that the inferences she makes are the right ones that will get her to a true, non-accidental belief. Part of what makes me justified in believing what I infer from (5) about my colleague is that I know him; I am familiar with his values, ways of speaking, lifestyle, and so on. Were he to change his story to (6), it is likely that I will pick the right way of getting to the overall belief that he feels as though the universe is acting against him. But tethering narrative as testimony to a condition that says that the speaker and hearer must share the right type of relationship will not work in every case.

Consider cases where it may not be appropriate to state explicitly some content, so the speaker may opt instead to give a narrative account, thereby allowing the hearer to make the inferences that will lead her to the intended content. A case given by Amia Srinivasan comes to mind:

RACIST DINNER TABLE: Nour, a young British woman of Arab descent, is invited to dinner at the home of a white friend from university. The host, Nour's friend's father, is polite and welcoming to Nour. He is generous with the food and wine, and asks Nour a series of questions about herself. Everyone laughs and talks amiably. As Nour comes away, however, she is unable to shake the conviction that her friend's father is racist against Arabs. But replaying the evening in her head, she finds it impossible to recover just what actions on the host's part could be thought to be racist, or what would justify her belief in the host's racism. If pressed, Nour would say she "just knows" that her host is racist. In fact the host *is* racist – he thinks of Arabs as inherently fanatical, dangerous, and backward – and as a result sent off subtle cues that Nour subconsciously registered and processed. It is this subconscious sensitivity that led to Nour's belief that her host is racist (Srinivasan, 2020, p. 395-396).

The point of Srinivasan's example is to prompt us to accept that Nour has knowledge that her host is racist despite having no internally accessible justification for the belief. If she's right, then we can use Nour as an example of someone who has knowledge, and thus should be able to assert her knowledge accordingly. She should be able to tell her friend, the daughter of the host, that her father is racist. However, we as speakers know that bluntly stating something like that to a friend may not result in their believing it. They may be biased against giving such a claim uptake. Suppose Nour is rational and sensitive to the possibility her friend might be hesitant to accept a harsh truth about her father, so instead chooses to relay the events of the evening as a story.⁸ In doing so, she hopes that her friend will make appropriate inferences about the relationships between the events, and eventually infer the true belief that the father is racist. Despite Nour

⁸ I don't think the friend's insensitivity is entirely unwarranted given the relationship, so it is not a case where she is being evidentially insensitive. Further she has no reason not to trust Nour about her assessments of racist behavior. We can bake into the story that the friend generally believes testimony regarding prejudicially-charged behavior.

picking the communicative option that will increase the chance of her friend's uptake, there are still ways the friend could have uptake in an accidental way, thereby undermining her true belief as potentially knowledge-constituting.

First, we accept that Nour's confidence in securing uptake is higher for giving a narrative than for stating the intended content outright. Still, the confidence that the narrative telling will get her interlocutor to attend to the right information in the story, so as to form the correct belief, may still be too low to count as an *intentional* telling. To illustrate, imagine two people playing catch in the dark. The person throwing the ball may have a general idea of where the catcher is, but not exact enough to confidently believe she will be successful in getting the ball to them. Best she can say is that she is *trying* to throw the ball to the catcher, or that she *hopes* the ball will be received by the catcher, but her confidence is too low to believe she will be successful. Worse, the catcher has terrible eyesight. Even if the catcher successfully receives the ball, there is too much luck involved for it to have been an intentional throw or a skillful catch. In telling her story, Nour would be communicating in the dark (so to speak) and the epistemic concern is this: if the speaker does not have high enough confidence in her audience giving uptake to the intended content, then even where there is successful uptake, it would be too accidental to satisfy safety conditions for knowledge-constituting beliefs.

Part of why Nour's confidence is low is that she's constrained by the events in the narrative, which lowers the chances of the friend making the right inferences. It is given in the set up that Nour does not have an obvious example of the father's behavior that would prompt her friend to think of the other events as racially charged microaggressions. She is unable to give any frame to the narrative that is not already in the narrative itself. That being said, the best outcome is that the friend picks up on Nour's discomfort, but there is nothing that guarantees the friend would think

of that discomfort in the way relevant to forming the right belief. Further, if Nour was correct in assuming it would guarantee failure of uptake, she cannot begin her story with, “Your father is racist,” nor “I want you to think of the following events in terms of race-based prejudice,” or even after telling the story ask the friend, “Doesn’t that all seem a bit racist to you?” Even if the friend somehow intuited the *racist* frame, that frame seems as arbitrary to pick out as either *sexual predator* or even *unnervingly friendly* frames would be. If her friend gets the right organization and relationship of the events, and thus forms the intended belief, it is too lucky to be justified.

Maybe this is a strawman. Nour simply relaying the events is not actually a narrative, so my argument is irrelevant. Because Nour does not supply an adequate frame through which the friend can configure the events in the story, she has failed to tell a narrative. Instead, the telling of the events is what Hayden White identifies as an annal or chronicle; the events recounted do not so much *conclude* as merely *terminate* (1980, p.9). There is no narrative thread that strings the events together beyond temporal succession. There is no frame, so there is no holistic comprehension, thus there is no overall meaning the friend can infer and take up as a belief. It is not that Nour has failed to give testimony by virtue of giving a narrative in place of a straightforward assertion, but that Nour has failed to tell a *story*.

Perhaps, but Nour could add narrativity to the story. Instead of saying something like, “while I was expounding the differences between Arabic and British culture, your dad handed me the peas,” she could say, “while I was expounding the differences between Arabic and British culture, your dad handed me the peas with an eerily pleasant smile.” Two things to note here. First, it still seems like the friend could organize the events in ways consistent with other explanations for Nour’s discomfort, but not with the guarantee her friend will track the story through the *racist* frame. The friend could still get the wrong meaning or get the right meaning in a lucky way.

Second, if we were to grant the friend the sort of interpretive authority discussed above, we grant her justification for believing any plausible interpretation, whether it is the one Nour intended or not.

8 RETHINKING NARRATIVES AS A UNIQUE EPISTEMIC RESOURCE

It is obvious that the relationship between speaker and hearer, the context, common ground, as well as the structure and content of the narrative all affect the chances of the hearer forming the right belief. However, I do not believe that fine-tuning a theory of narrative as testimony around those features is the best way to solve the problem. In any case where the narrative is itself meant to be doing the communicative work, the justification for the hearer's belief will be largely independent of the speaker. But the problems I've raised for narratives being a reliable epistemic resource are only problems when we assume that narratives are a subset of testimony. If we get away from the idea that narratives work as a way of directly communicating something to a hearer the way testimony is used to do, we may be in a better position to figure out what norms govern such a distinct type of communicative act. It is not that narratives are a bad form of testimony, but rather that they are not actually a form of testimony at all.

As we have already seen, narratives involve active engagement from the hearer; a hearer of a narrative must make connections and inferences between events and their descriptive content independent of what the speaker has straightforwardly asserted. Were she to fail to make such inferences, those events and their content would be unrecognizable as related to each other or constitutive of a singular, holistic meaning. Because justification lies with the hearer, my intuition is that any attempts to save narrative as a form of testimony will run into issues of bypassing the speaker's intentions. Doing so would be necessary for us to get us the epistemic relationship between the speaker and the hearer's belief necessary to be called testimony. This is because for even relatively mundane narratives, the exact way the speaker intends to have the story configured, as well as its overall meaning, is mostly unavailable to the hearer. The hearer of a narrative must

come to grasp the story on her own. For example, in cases (5) and (6), I do not so much use my trust in the speaker as I use my own reasons for assuming my interpretation is correct.

Remember that comprehending a narrative requires the hearer to take up a certain perspective, whereby the content is organized into an intelligible whole by which certain inferences are then made available. Because perspectives are not content themselves but are rather a way of organizing some set of content, the perspective acts as a tool for the hearer to pick out what she deems evidentially salient, which she then uses to inform her belief. Despite her inferences being constrained by the framing devices employed through the content and structure of the speaker's narrative, the authorship of the relevant belief does not belong to the speaker. Rather, the authorship belongs to the hearer as the interpreter of that story. Thus, when a speaker gives a narrative, she is not so much *telling* as she is *showing*. In giving a narrative, the speaker invites her hearer to walk through a series of events, giving cues about what should or should not be attended to. It is then the hearer's job to be sensitive to those cues and form the most plausible interpretation of what they, as a whole, mean.

The point of my discussion so far has not been to show that narratives are unreliable forms of testimony. Rather, I have argued that how a hearer is justified in a way relevant to gaining knowledge becomes dubious when we try to force narratives into the category of testimony. Further, my point has not been to suggest that narratives lack real epistemic value. I believe it is entirely possible to gain knowledge by comprehending a narrative. But until there is appropriate attention paid to narratives as their own distinct epistemic resource, we cannot fully investigate what type of knowledge narratives give a hearer and how they can be used by the speaker to give it.

9 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that when we attempt to categorize narratives as testimony, puzzles arise for how the hearer is justified in many of the beliefs the story prompts her to form. I showed that there is a problem with how the speaker can be held adequately responsible for the hearer's beliefs being true, which is a necessary condition for knowledge gained through testimony. Further, because the speaker's intentions cannot be made manifest in the narrative, there will usually be multiple candidate inferences the hearer must make, none of which can be given justification by norms typical of testimony. Lastly, I argued that it perhaps makes little sense to think of narratives as testimony, because narratives are a distinct way of 'showing' their contents to a hearer rather than by direct telling. But I maintain that it would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater if we conclude that my arguments in this paper merely serve to show that narratives are not valuable epistemic resources. Instead, I believe that more work needs to be done on the specific nature of narrative texts and how a hearer is justified in beliefs informed by them.

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