

Fraser, "Narrative Skepticism"

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Knowledge and its Limits and its Limits

I. Narrative Optimism and Pessimism

Optimism: (1) convey hard-to-express truths;
(2) reconcile character of experience with cognition¹; and
(3) pierce political ideology.²
→ Analogy: color sample.

¹ (?) Manifest vs scientific images?

² "Sometimes the distinctions that matter politically are ones that our shared language cannot make"

Pessimism: (1) distort subject-matters and obscure self-understanding³;
(2) rely on faulty explanatory models (anthropomorphizing?)
(3) Reinforce political ideology and status quo.

³ "Stories can be traps"

- Tamar Shapiro, circa 2018

Narratives as a cultural communication technology; help us process, story, and convey information.

"I pledge allegiance, to the flag..."

"Responsibility towards History releases one from responsibility towards human beings" - Albert Camus

II. Connections to debates we've been having?

Q: What do people think?

Vague connection: externalism and hijacking

The meaning of our language and thoughts are determined by our environments.

The things we have our best epistemic grip on are external, not sense-data: We start (epistemologically) "in the middle"—we have a better grip on chairs and knowledge and fairness than on Cartesian posits.

Non-ideal epistemology: What if the shaping of thought and knowledge done by our environments is *pernicious*?

Our reliance on categories, concepts, habits of mind, patterns of salience can be shaped in good and bad ways.

→ Sally: cultural techne and ideology

→ Siegel: perceptual hijacking

→ Hughes: epistemic feedback loops

Subtle (deep??) connection: *epistemic asymmetries*.

Williamson good/bad case. Lasonen-Aarnio variant.

Salow: could use these asymmetries to bias our inquiries.

Objection: if you know you're going to do that, should correct for it.

TW: you're being too internalist.

Reply: this doesn't work for agents with limited attention.

Questions (= subject matters) as partitions.

Normal (unbiased) Bayes updating: condition on true cell of partition.

Fair coin, double-toss.

→ Always answering the same question; fixed beforehand.

Idea: We can't specify full question beforehand; need to do it post hoc. Narratives (etc.) shape which questions you ask. If correlated with what happens, leads to *selective sensitivities*.

Polder: aggro and/or insightful

- $Q_a =$ Is it aggressive?
- $Q_i =$ is it insightful?

Crossing these, there are 4 possible options.

Suppose in each comment he's 50%-likely to be aggressive, 50%-likely to be insightful, and the two are independent. Suppose both fans and critics both start out with priors that match these trends:

$$C = \begin{pmatrix} A \neg I & AI & \neg AI & \neg A \neg I \\ 0.25 & 0.25 & 0.25 & 0.25 \end{pmatrix}$$

- **Critics:** When his comments are aggressive, critics always ask Q_a , noticing that they're aggressive. When his comments are not-aggressive, they always ask Q_i —noticing whether they're insightful or not.

$$C^+ = \begin{pmatrix} & A \neg I & AI & \neg AI & \neg A \neg I \\ A \neg I & 0.5 & 0.5 & 0 & 0 \\ AI & 0.5 & 0.5 & 0 & 0 \\ \neg AI & 0 & 0.5 & 0.5 & 0 \\ \neg A \neg I & 0.5 & 0 & 0 & 0.5 \end{pmatrix}$$

Biased toward A : if A , jump to 100%-confident; if $\neg A$, stay at 50%.

Upshot(?): If narratives can shape our patterns of attention, they can shape our epistemic asymmetries.

Fraserian Challenge(?): Is this a *distinctive* danger of narratives?

III. What's a narrative?

Method of minimal pairs. Use them to find markers of narratives.

- (1) In 1714, Louis XIV was King of France
- (2) In 1715, the king of France died.

Latter more narrative-y, so narratives are typically about *events*.

- (3) In 1715, the king of France died. He reigned the longest of any sovereign.
- (4) In 1715, the king of France died. Later that year, Peter II of Russia was born.
- (5) In 1715, the king of France died. He was succeeded by his great-grandson.

Narratives typically about temporally sequenced events that are causally integrated.

- (6) The queen sneezed. The noise startled her dog.
- (7) The queen shouted "Fido!". Her dog looked up at her.

Possible answers: $\{A, \neg A\}$

Possible answers: $\{I, \neg I\}$

$(A \neg I \quad AI \quad \neg AI \quad \neg A \neg I)$

Believe an aggro-narrative

So:

If $A \neg I$ or AI , condition on A , so $C^+(A) = 1$.

If $\neg AI$, condition on I , so $C^+(A) = 0.5$.

If $\neg A \neg I$, condition on $\neg I$, so $C^+(A) = 0.5$.

Average $C^+(A)$ is $0.5 \cdot 1 + 0.5 \cdot 0.5 = 75\%$

That shapes our patterns of distortion, disagreement, etc.

Narratives typically are about plan-integrated events, mapping goal structure.

Upshot: Typical narratives are about events, some of which are (a) temporally sequenced, (b) causally integrated, and (c) plan integrated.

IV. Narrative Skepticism

Narrative skeptic: Narratives are defective in virtue of their narrativity.

Narratives always leave something out, and are interest-relative.

Partiality R is a *partial* representation (about question/subject-matter Q) iff the answer to some possible question Q' (about Q) can't be extracted from R .

Most representations are partial (even about their subject-matters). But might narratives tend to *mask* their partiality?

R is *authoritative* (about Q) in context c iff any questions (about Q) to which R can't provide an answer aren't worth asking in c .

Example(?) of authoritative but partial: planting an evergreen. 'We could plant a beech.'; 'That's deciduous'.

Not sure here. That seems to use an expansive notion of subject-matter; why not just use QUD?

Perhaps should be formulated in terms of masking the potential need to switch QUDs? I added in the question formulation of subject-matters.

(?) R is *authoritative* in c iff it fully answers Q , and no further questions are worth asking in c .

Masked Partiality Argument:

P₁) All narratives are partial representations with respect to at least some of their subject-matters.

P₂) Narratives as such have a tendency to mask their partiality.

P₃) Representations which mask their partiality are defective.

C Narratives have a tendency to be defective

False Authority Argument:

P₁* Narratives often fail to be authoritative wrt their⁴ subject matters.

P₂* Narratives have a tendency to present themselves as authoritative wrt tot heir key subject matters.

P₃* Representations with falsely present themselves as authoritative wrt their key subject matters are defective.

Hence the tendency to anthropomorphize (?and conspiracize?)

This chapter: focus on fact that narratives are always partial or selective.

So are 'It's raining' and 'Shut the door'

Eg 'Was Polder's comment aggro and/or insightful?'

Eg Which suit is the card?

Gödelian incompleteness questions about unrestricted notion.

'Your assertion is by no means total with respect to the subject matter beech trees. There are all sorts of questions about beech trees one might ask to which the representation fails to provide an answer. (To which clade do they belong? To which parts of the world are they native?) But in this context, the only question worth asking about beech trees is whether they are deciduous or evergreen' (7)

? they always raise more Qs than they answer?

⁴ key?

C* Narratives tend to be defective.

Thinks (P₁) and (P₁*) are plausible. French revolution; narrative raises more Qs than it answers.

Why might (P₂) and (P₂*) be true? Trick of *narrative closure*.

Thinks (P₃) and (P₃*) are plausible.

Reply 1: Is the trick of narrative closure a problem with narratives or with *us*?

Reply 2: Many narratives *don't* provide narrative closure.

Variant, ideological-Bayes style:

Misdirected Attention Argument:

P₁** Narratives tend to direct attention toward questions that will support (or not-undermine) a desired conclusion.

P₂** Narratives tend to mask their tendency to do so.

P₃** Representations that surreptitiously direct attention toward questions that support a desired conclusion are defective.

C** Narrative tend to be defective.

Total Representation

Narratives often express a claim by *emplotment*.

→ (1) *R* essentially relies on narrative iff it expresses via emplotment

Emplotment is not discrete and decomposable

→ (2) Since emplotment isn't discrete, narratives are not decomposable

→ Emplotment is not a stable expressive unit

But *claim*: A representation *R* can be a total representation of the world (wrt *Q*?) only if *R* is made of expressive units that are stable and discrete.

If a world is such that there is some property *P* that two objects share, then a total representation of that world must have a way to ascribe that property by deploying a stable expressive unit. (21)

Analogy: orange/blue triangle and squares.

Worries:

- *If restricted to a question*, why can't we have a total representation without discrete, stable units?
- *If unrestricted to a question*, this seems too strong. Suppose there are countably many objects (eg numbers). Then there are uncountably-many properties (sets of objects). But there are only countably many sentences, so we can only express countably-many properties.

'Bayesianism is the truth. That's all you need to know.'

Is this a 'guns don't kill people, people kill people' argument?

You've seen Inception, surely.

Q: But still, might it be that narratives tend to, and such examples are interesting because they're counter-normative?

Contrast: defense attorney

French revolution as farce.

Unlike linguistic representation.
'Pink square object' vs. [drawing]

Saffron is a dog. So is Nutmeg. vs.
French revolution vs Spanish civil war as farce

'Which card is it?' 'That one'