



Book Review

Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories, by Gregory Currie

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non tends to trump fundamental objections. Fodor's remarks on the epistemology of perceptual belief, mentioned above, may serve as an example. The approach tends to result in unsatisfyingly glib and superficial responses to other philosophers.

This book works better as a clear exposition of Fodor's current views than as polemic. It contains little detailed engagement with alternative views, and few attempts to provide compelling arguments against them. It clarifies the author's position, but will not convince sceptics.

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Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories, by Gregory Currie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 237 xx + 237 pp.

Gregory Currie's new book, *Narratives & Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories*, discusses a concept which has not received sufficient attention from the community of analytic philosophers, namely, the concept of 'narrative'. How is it possible to characterise such a concept, avoiding the use of unhelpful technicalities or, worse, the dominant ideologies underlying much current literary analysis? Which instruments can the philosopher introduce or exploit in order to clarify the intricate network of concepts around this notion, many of which mesh with the study of fiction? More ambitiously, what is the significance human beings give to their being imaginatively engaged with narratives? What is, finally, the role and function of narrators in the societies to which they belong and about which they narrate? If in this bunch of questions I have tried to summarise some of the most pressing issues dealt with in the book, what remains to be seen is how Currie intends to answer them and whether he succeeds in this demanding task.

The book is articulated into four main directions of investigation: (i) an account of the intentional and representational properties determining what a narrative is; (ii) a pragmatic framework where the nature and presence of an implied author in narratives are discussed and where the differences between narrative texts and forms con-

veyed by different media, be they static pictures as in photography or dynamic ones as in cinema, may be spelt out; (iii) a set of hypotheses concerning those evolutionary aspects that have supposedly determined the emergence of narrative in modern society and the ways human beings have refined their experience of themselves and of their community in relation to the diffusion of narrative forms; (iv) finally, and most important, an account of what Currie considers the most essential feature of a narrative, i.e., its *expressive* power. In what follows, I will mostly focus on (i) and (ii), where I think the view Currie pushes forward is not without problems. I will say something on (iv), the part in which I think Currie obtains the most interesting results. I will leave (iii) aside, given the highly hypothetical nature of those remarks (and, in fact, Currie has opted for leaving them in appendices to some chapters).

As anticipated, the first line of investigation undertaken by Currie is a defence of the claim that narratives are *intentional-communicative artefacts*, that is to say, artefacts whose function is not only that of encoding certain story-like representations, but also to communicate the intentions of their makers as substantiated in a narrative shape. Currie extends this view over the first three chapters, with the important corollary of the last two, in which he defends the psychological notion of 'character' *in* narrative (not to be confused with the more basic notion of characters *of* a narrative).

Chapter I develops the idea of narratives as representational bodies (*corpora* in Lewis's terms) showing some rich internal organization. The stress is, however, put on the activity itself of making a narrative rather than on the content of what is encoded by a given artefact. Against the opinion of some philosophers – most notably, Walton (*Mimesis as Make-believe*, Harvard (1990): Harvard University Press) – the fact that two different artefacts encode the same piece of information does not suffice for both to be successful narratives. In fact, in order for a narrative to be successful, it must enable an audience to know 'the artefactual function of that narrative' (p. 6). To know whether a certain narrative instantiates its artefactual function properly, an audience has to infer, using pragmatic inference, the story content the author intends to communicate. Assessment of truth is therefore at most redundant on Currie's account of narrative, and for that matter of fiction as well (see Currie, *The Nature of Fiction*, New York (1990): Cambridge University Press). What really counts is

whether a statement or a set of statements is part of a narrative, and this can only be assessed through pragmatic inference (see below).

However, it is still legitimate to ask whether an appeal to intentions makes a complete job here. We certainly have narratives (*Odyssey*, *El Cantar del Mio Cid*, and others) where it is no longer possible to trace the original author's intentions – if not the author herself –, since these stories were handed down by use and as pieces of folkloristic knowledge (at least in certain phases of their historical transmission, when orality was predominant). Perhaps, it was not in the intention of the creator of a certain body of information to make it function as a narrative, but this would not seem to prevent a future audience from reading it as such. Further, appealing to the author's intentions seems only to overburden the reader's *immediate* experience of a narrative, and the fact that Currie particularly appeals to these to discuss examples where we need to interpret some author's obvious mistakes (see p. 10), seems to confirm my suspicion that his general claim is defended on a thin ground constituted by some innocuous exceptions.

A good way to consider the role of intentions in the understanding of narrative is, perhaps, to concentrate upon *when* a reader's attention to the author's intention is asked for. A reasonable answer seems to me that the reader's attention is required when the relevant question is how *good* a particular narrative is, or, in other words, what strategies the author is responsible for to render that narrative *effectively* successful in communicating her a story. A merit of this book is to persuasively show how a narrative may be successful not only in communicating a story, but also in communicating it *expressively*. We will discuss some application of this point later. On the other hand, Currie insists that intentions have a more central role, that of driving an audience to the explicit content of a story. According to Currie's definition:

'P is explicit content when we can find some statement or set of statements in the text, S, which meets two conditions: (1) S is naturally interpretable in such a way as to convey directly, rather than merely to implicate, the thought that P, and (2) an overall best interpretation of the text is one which treats S as reliable' (p.13).

For Currie, whatever does not fulfil these two conditions, may still be considered as part of the story content if it belongs to the class of

propositions entailed by the story. He further hypothesises that the class of propositions entailed by the story corresponds to the class of conversational implicatures. This would seem to offer a solution to the problem of inconsistent stories, stories according to which two propositions, say P and Q, hold, but where Q entails a further statement, say T, implicating not P. Presumably, T should then be treated as a cancellable implicature, avoiding in this way the inconsistency and offering, at the same time, a 'closure condition' for the story content. I am not sure – nor is Currie – how this hypothesis would effectively work though.

Finally, Currie thinks that all there is for his intentionalist account to be successful is the fact that pragmatic inference is omnipresent in narrative (pp. 25-26); for instance, even in the understanding of what critics usually call the 'implied author' of a narrative. The implied author is that imagined or constructed figure, not necessarily the narrator herself, in whose regard a work is (to be) interpreted. Now, Currie sets out the hypothesis of an identity between the implied author's intended meaning with what Levinson, in the context of a pragmatic theory of communication, has called 'achieved meaning', i.e., the meaning which an attentive hearer is able, and also expected, to infer from an utterance. However, even granting that the achieved meaning in a normal communicative setting is nothing but the 'reasonably expected communicative uptake', it seems problematic to apply this view to narrative discourse. First of all, the nature of meaning here at stake is not clear, nor is the nature of the achievement itself: is it what a reasonable reader has been able to infer? That seems to be too weak. Is it what the narrator or the novelist intend the reader to uptake? Or a combination of both? (for an attentive account of how all these possibilities are given see: Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, New Haven and London (1993): Yale University Press).

The structure of narrative is further investigated in Chapter II, where Currie's intent is to offer an account of what is a distinctive feature of most narratives, namely, their particular unity, which is often revealed by the presence of 'sustained temporal-causal relations between particulars, especially characters (p. 28)'. After having scrutinised different notions of causation which all, at the end, seem inconclusive to pin down the multiformity of narrative connections, Currie goes on, opposing Velleman's view according to which the very idea of causal connectedness is not essential to narrative dis-

course. For Velleman, we should get rid of this idea and instead make room for the idea of an 'emotional cadence' governing the structure of a story. To this, Currie replies that if Velleman's suggestion were on the right track, then it would be possible to count as narrative a mathematical proof or the like, since even for the structure of a deductive system one could experience an 'emotional resolution' of the kind already in effect with narrative. Of course, – Currie adds – we want to say something more exclusive about the representational properties of narrative. On the other hand, we should not be too anxious to ascribe precise borders to the notion of connectedness in narrative, since we are better off with the multifarious range of representations of dependencies that narratives present us with (p. 32).

This last point invites two important considerations as to the evaluation of Currie's overall project. Both are somehow negative theses in relation to the original task of defining what a narrative is. The first point concerns the importance given by Currie to the concept itself of narrative. Notwithstanding the book's title, the notion of narrative is less interesting than one may have initially been led to think, or so does Currie claim. In fact, inspired by a point of Lamarque's, Currie claims that a general definition of narrative as the telling of events, possibly causally related, does not suffice to discriminate works of a rich narrative structure from simple utterances like 'He went to the shop to buy a packet of cigarettes'. Therefore, it would be better to consider the category of *narrativity* as the privileged object of study, given its being a more flexible tool that allows for the differentiation of threshold levels, with the top level occupied by what Currie calls 'exemplary narratives' (p. 35). These are narratives that have as their most significant mark a 'thematic unity', which, according to Currie, may be particular or general. When it is particular, the events are narrated under a specific focus constituted by some common thread or activity. Sometimes, in the absence of a particular thematic unity, there may be a more general one – e.g. moral, theoretical, religious, etc. –, which serves to close off the reader's experience of that narrative. Other times, we simply 'import' from our world bits of knowledge which may be important to form our responses to the narrative's having made salient certain possibilities in the story. However, a problem with this otherwise reasonable account is the widespread diffusion of noncanonical forms of narrativity in the post-modern panorama. It is sufficient to think about the

nonlinear narrative of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, or the constant plots' interruption which the stories narrated by Calvino in *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* undergo, or the proliferation of unrelated stories and surplus of information in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. What about, then, stories where the unity of the novel is invisible to the reader, and therefore is neither particular nor general, in Currie's analysis? I have in mind, in particular, Perec's novel *La Vie Mode de Emploi*, whose narrative structure is determined by an algorithm based on the so-called 'Knight's tour' problem. Besides, these narratives seem to pose a problem to Currie's analysis of narrative in terms of intentional-communicative artefact. The reader will remember that, according to Currie, a narrative is successful when it puts an audience in the condition of knowing its artefactual function. But these cases seem to go in the opposite direction: to block the reader from understanding the exact artefactual function their stories encode, or, said otherwise, they prevent her from having access, or full access, to the story content their authors intend to communicate. Should we say that these novels are unsuccessful? Not at all. Hence these novels pose interesting epistemological problems, and I am not sure Currie's analysis could deal with them. I leave it to the reader to work out a Currian reply, or to find out some alternative analysis.

The second point regards the authors' adoption of frameworks which somehow colour the narration of events and characters. What is a framework and how can we trace it in a story? There is a certain amount of frustration in Currie's wavering between two conceptions of framework, which do not seem to have much in common at first glance:

- (a) a framework as a preferred set of cognitive, evaluative, and emotional responses to the story;
- (b) a framework as a set of ideas an author may convey in her story, asking the reader to adopt it so as to make sense of the story-content.

Let's concentrate on point (b) first. In Chapter VI, a chapter devoted to the discussion of various forms of resistance to the narrative experience, Currie presents two cases that ask for some discussion here. According to him, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* are cases in which the authors would encourage their audiences to either naive or extravagant metaphysical ideas. These works should be blamed because they suggest 'their metaphysical

themes, without going to the trouble of showing how the metaphysics is integrated into the story—something, I suggest, that would be just impossible’ (pp. 119-20). In other words, these narratives are the expression of a ‘metaphysical anxiety’, which is the result of their letting the story-content be obscured by ideas external to it. Currie then proposes a criterion to distinguish between story-content and framework in terms of pragmatic features associated to either of them: while story-content is relatively stable and mandatory, frameworks in the sense indicated by (b) are instead optional and detachable (p. 120), since a reader may understand and enjoy the story without being committed to any further authorial idea about how to interpret it. However, Currie’s criterion of detachability does not apply easily to certain cases. Consider, for instance, how Pasolini creates a world of perversion in *Salò: or the 120 Days of Sodoma* by making it the case that the torturers were able thinkers imbued with a very gloomy metaphysics capable of justifying their atrocities. Is the framework expressed by the work detachable from its story-content? How would that be possible? And does Currie offer precise standards for detachability? What makes a framework detachable in one work, while not in another? Besides, as Genette warns us (*Narrative Discourse*, Ithaca, N.Y. and London (1980): Cornell University Press, pp. 159-60), Proust himself was aware that his ideas should not be taken too seriously, but only in the light of ‘the purely compositional aspect of the matter’ (Proust’s words).

The idea of framework also comes in relation to point (a). When this is the case, we enter the realm of expressivity; the expressive features of a narrative work are as relevant to its evaluation as its representational ones (Chapter 3, pp. 51-2). The central chapters of the book are devoted to defending this position, and it must be said that Currie’s achievements are notable. Currie first well manages to show how the very pillars of a narrative structure, e.g., time, specificity, causation, can be altered by the *expressed authorial attitude to story content*. This entails that only when we take an *external* perspective on the author’s agency, are we able to make sense of those subtle modulations of time, causal idiosyncrasies, lack of specificity that a narrative may present us with. Further, if Currie is right on the previous point then we should also pay attention not to postulate ‘internal narrators’ in narratives unless necessary; it may be the case that their presence is not required after all, and that the author as a narrator is using some sophisticated pretence to make her presence

visible in the story so as to rhetorically emphasize certain key passages (Chapter 4). Finally, an analysis of various narrative forms also shows how an author systematically exploits expressive techniques, which all seem to be related by the fact that the author's *persona*, the narrator or some of the characters in the story may adopt or reject points of view that are represented in, or simply suggested by, narrative discourse and in so doing certain attitudes to such points of view are made manifest (I am simplifying the point here, since not always does a point of view constitute the target of a relevant attitude).

Chapters 5 and 7 are extremely interesting in this sense, providing both a theoretical framework and several reflections upon narrative strategies to express attitudes. Chapter 5 offers a detailed analysis of how the adoption of a certain framework is crucially related to our ability to acquire certain perspectives on the story. Such perspectives are the expressions of *points of view*, which the narrators or her characters may constantly have or come to adopt rapidly even in the course of a single sentence. Currie offers some valuable insight, both epistemological and psychological, into the significance of points of view in narrative: for instance, that points of view are just the kind of things that arise because of an agent's limitation to access, and act upon, the world. But such sort of limitations, instead of being an obstacle to the narrative experience, becomes a powerful instrument in the service of the narrator. The case of free indirect discourse (FID) is one such notable example in narrative. (FID) is that linguistic device which allows a narrator to report someone's speech or thought, creating an effect of vivid *mimicry* and opening in this way to the expression of a point of view. First, suppose a character X in a story says or thinks this:

(1) 'Tomorrow is Monday, Monday, the beginning of another school week!'

Now, ask yourself how a narrator could render this utterance in such a way as to convey the same piece of information, but in an expressive manner, exactly the manner typical of X as expressed by (1). The answer is by using (FID), which makes it possible for the narrator to shift the values of some indexicals while keeping others' values unaltered. So, in the narrator's voice (1) becomes

- (2) 'Tomorrow was Monday, Monday, the beginning of another school week!' (quot. from Philippe Schlenker, 'Context of Thought and Context of Utterance: A Note on Free Indirect Discourse and the Historical Present', *Mind & Language*, 19, 3, 2004, p. 280)

The shift has regarded only the tense, while the indexical 'Tomorrow' has remained unchanged (Schlenker defends the view that we need to allow for two contexts here, e.g., the context of utterance, which is fixed by the rules of grammar that determine the opportune shifts in reports, and the context of thought, which is flexible enough to track the intentions of the thinker). An analysis of this form of reporting in Austen's and James's narratives leads Currie to conclude that FID is the privileged mode of what he calls 'character-focused narration' (p. 143), where narrators try to imitate some of the characters' psychologies, thus professing some critical attitudes toward them. This also helps the reader to feel empathy or some sort of moral contagion for these characters, an experience which Currie considers as being crucial to our cognitive life in general.

I conclude by saying that this book has the indubitable merit of presenting original and stimulating ideas, which comes as no surprise given Currie's ability to master several fields with ease. In this sense, as the introduction states clearly, the book is addressed to a vast audience of readers. It will certainly help a fledgling discipline as philosophy of literature to grow. Hence, I think philosophers of literature will find the book of the most interest and value. Aestheticians as well as scholars and common readers will find Currie's examples taken from literature, cinema and photography highly entertaining and sometimes debatable. As an example, Currie's discussion in Chapter 9 of Hitchcock's *The Birds*: here Currie undertakes the challenge to defend one of the crucial points of the book: an interpretive minimalism that does not demand of an audience of a story more than the understanding, and enjoying, of its narrative structure. Thus the artificial sound of the birds in the movie would seem to serve Hitchcock's purpose of providing an overall ironic narration; ironic in making this artifice, as well as others, salient to the spectator. Although I am attracted by this view, its appeal is not immediate and, in fact, could be criticised as requiring a little of imagination to grasp it.

The book, as the subtitle suggests, is a philosophy of stories. Accordingly, the systematicity in the arguments at times gives way to a more readable approach.

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