

Gregory Currie

Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories.

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In this engaging and clearly written book, Gregory Currie sets out to provide an account of narratives and of the role of point of view and character in narrative. Although narratives may be either fictional or non-fictional, Currie concentrates primarily on the case of narrative fiction, on the grounds both that the vast majority of fictions are told by means of narratives, and that fictional narratives often deploy particularly advanced resources for the portrayal of point of view and character.

Currie argues that narratives are representational artifacts that function, due to their makers' intentions, to tell stories. A narrative conveys many aspects of the story it tells implicitly, rather than explicitly. To identify this story, Currie claims, we must pragmatically infer its creator's communicative intentions from its linguistic meaning and the context of its creation.

Narratives, on Currie's view, are distinguished from other representational artifacts by their contents. They represent sustained temporal, causal and thematic relationships between particulars, with an emphasis on relations between agents. Although we commonly conceive of narrative as a categorical concept, Currie claims that it is instead gradational, and that context determines the degree to which a representation's content must possess the features above in order that we recognize it as a narrative.

These two features of narratives: their status as representational artifacts and their contents, correspond to different perspectives. The external perspective construes narratives as intentionally fashioned representations, whereas the internal perspective construes them as providing access to matters of fact. From the external perspective, fictional characters are figments of authors' imaginations, whereas from the internal perspective, they are people who command our interest as such. Currie argues that our awareness, from an external perspective, of such factors as an author's intentions and of the genre and medium constraints within which she was working influence our expectations, from the internal perspective, about how events in the story might pan out. Currie therefore denies that our identification of narrative possibilities from the internal perspective mirrors our assessment of actual possibilities. We can identify some situation as a possible or even likely outcome of a story (although it would be most unlikely for an identical actual situation to have an analogous outcome) simply because we recognize that the author is drawing our attention to that situation.

In addition to telling stories, narratives may express certain points of view on the stories they recount by representing events as they appear to a narrator who is either internal or external to the story. Currie argues that the expression of point of view has the

effect of shaping our emotional response to a narrative's story content: it guides our attention to certain aspects of that story in a way that is likely to result in our imitating the very evaluative attitudes and emotional responses that characterize the most authoritative point of view expressed by the narrative. He suggests that the phenomenon of imaginative resistance is due to a failure to adopt the emotional responses characteristic of the point of view from which the story is framed.

Currie investigates the role of such devices as free indirect discourse in enabling narratives to express points of view other than those of the author and/or narrator. In free indirect discourse, he claims, the author or narrator deliberately imitates the style of speech or thought that is characteristic of a character and thereby expresses her point of view.

The points of view that a work expresses need not always be sincere. Currie argues that the narrative point of view may be ironic. While it is communicative, he argues that ironic representation does not involve saying one thing and meaning another, but rather involves expressing an attitude towards something that one does not have, by pretending to have the attitude in question. Narration from an ironic point of view involves, not merely the use of representational irony, but narration which expresses a sustained commitment to the use of ironic devices. Currie employs and illustrates these claims regarding narration and point of view with a chapter in which he offers an interpretation of Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

The final two chapters address, respectively, the notion of character as it pertains to narrative, and as it pertains to actual people. Character is important to narrative, Currie argues, both because narratives represent character as playing an important causal role in the stories they tell, such that character attributions enhance the coherence of a narrative, and because narratives are often intentionally shaped to impart information that forms a rational basis for inferences about character traits.

Given the importance of character to narrative, Currie considers what the implications for the value of narrative would be if people did not in fact have fixed character traits. He argues that, even if this were so, character would nonetheless play a valuable role in narrative as a device for making salient the relations between such psychologically real factors as motivational choices, conflicts and dilemmas.

My main reservation about Currie's views about narrative concerns the feasibility of applying a communicative model of representational content to narrative fiction. Currie states in the preface that he had initially wanted to embed his account of narrative in a comprehensive theory of communication, but ended up rejecting this ambition partly because he did not think it would be much help in clarifying the particular aspects of narrative on which he wished to focus. Consequently, he does not address either the nature of the mechanisms of communication that operate in narrative or how communication operates in fictional narrative. However, there are two important respects in which narrative fiction differs from the ordinary conversational exchanges with reference to which communicative accounts of meaning are developed. Firstly, as Currie

acknowledges (97), narratives differ from conversations in being one-way communicative devices, rather than conversational exchanges. It is therefore difficult to see how appeal to either Grice's conversational maxims or the maxim of relevance postulated by relevance theorists such as Sperber and Wilson could explain our ability to identify the communicative intentions with which a narrative was produced—and thus to identify its content—from its linguistic meaning and the context of its production. However, in the absence of a plausible account of our ability to identify those intentions, there is inadequate evidence to justify Currie's claim that narratives are intentional artifacts whose content depends on their makers' intentions.

This is not to deny that it may be possible to provide some account of our ability to identify the communicative intentions with which narratives are produced. After all, some of Grice's maxims, specifically the maxims of quality and of manner, do not make reference to a context of conversational exchange and it may be that appeal to these alone may explain our ability to identify the communicative intentions with which narratives are produced. However, Currie would need to show that this is the case before he can assume that the interpretation of narratives involves pragmatic inference to authors' intentions. Moreover, there is independent reason for doubting that the interpretation of narrative fiction involves appeal to these two maxims. The second difference between conversations and narrative fiction is that the latter is unconstrained by the norms of truth-telling to which Grice's maxim of quality explicitly appeals. We do not require of the authors of fictional narratives that they tell us only what they believe to be true and for which they have adequate evidence. When their utterances fail to meet this requirement, therefore, we do not assign alternative meanings to them in order to bring them back into line with this requirement. It is therefore not possible to explain how the representational content of a narrative fiction differs from its explicit content by appeal to this maxim. While I am sympathetic to the project of providing a communicative account of narrative, therefore, I think the success of such a project depends on satisfactorily solving these foundational issues.

It is also a shame that Currie does not say anything about how the views he presents in this book relate to his previously published views on related issues. Some of what he says here directly contradicts views he expresses in earlier work. For example, in this book, he denies that all narratives have internal narrators (narrators who are identifiable as people from the internal perspective). However, according to the account of narrative content he defends in *The Nature of Fiction*, what's true in a work of fiction is a matter of what it's reasonable to infer that the work's internal narrator believes. While there is nothing wrong with changing one's mind, it would have been helpful for those interested in Currie's broader position if he had both acknowledged that he had done so and provided some indication of why. For all this, *Narratives and Narrators* is an enjoyable book, with valuable insights to offer into both the relation between the external and internal perspectives and the expression of point of view.

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