

# Argumentation and Reasoned Action

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## Argumentatively Evil Storytelling

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What can make storytelling “evil” in the sense that the storytelling leads to accepting a view for no good reason, thus allowing ill-reasoned action? I mean the storytelling can be argumentatively evil, not trivially that (e.g.) the overt speeches of characters can include bad arguments. My thesis is that for fictional narratives, the shorter the narrative, the greater the potential for argumentative evil. In other argumentative contexts, length generally appears to make no comparable difference.

KEYWORDS: advertisements, anecdotal arguments, believability, fables, narrative argument, parables, thought experiments, transcendental argument, truth in fiction

### 1. INTRODUCTION

What can make storytelling “evil” in the sense that the storytelling leads to accepting a view or message for no good reason, thus allowing ill-reasoned action? The general idea that storytelling can have pernicious effects on practical reasoning goes back, of course, at least as far as Plato. My point is that the storytelling can be argumentatively evil, not trivially that (e.g.) the overt speeches of characters can include bad arguments. The storytelling can be argumentatively evil in that it purveys false premises, or purveys reasoning that is formally or informally fallacious. The main thesis of this paper is that there is an aspect involving the very form of fictional narratives, namely, their length, that can distinctively allow a narrative to be evil in the sense indicated. As a rule, the shorter the fictional narrative, the greater the potential for argumentative evil. Here, the notion of length is to be understood such that it is generally a proxy for more abstract features such as how complex and nuanced the piece is. In argumentative contexts other than those involving fictional narrative, length generally

appears to make no comparable difference. This feature would put fictional narrative arguments in a special class beyond what is determined by obvious features, such as the definitional fact that they in some way(s) collapse two of the four traditional types of discourse: exposition, description, narration, and argument. The nonobvious features that distinguish this class have been a source of puzzlement and inquiry (e.g., Schultz, 1979; Plumer, 2011; Govier & Ayers, 2012).

## 2. SHORT FICTIONS

If you place the various major kinds of fictional narratives on a length continuum, on one end you get advertisements and jokes that include a brief fabricated story, as well as short fables and parables; novels lie at the other end, with short stories, films, and plays somewhere more toward the middle. Storytelling poems can lie anywhere on the continuum, but they seem assimilable to other kinds of fictional narratives with respect to argumentative potential. However, narrative “thought experiments” appear to be in a class by themselves, as we will see.

A piece anywhere on the continuum is a “story” in the minimalist sense of being a perspectival or selective depiction of at least two temporally-related events in a further nonlogical (e.g., causal) relationship (adapted from Lamarque, 2004; cf., e.g., Walton, 2012, pp. 191 & 199). A piece anywhere on the continuum is fictional in that at least some of what is depicted is not supposed to be true. A piece anywhere on the continuum can have affective and persuasive force. So, what distinguishes pieces on the short end of the stick, so to speak (other than their word count)?

One feature that such ads, jokes, fables, and parables have in common is that they have a point or message, seemingly by definition, and so are in that (possibly weak) way argumentative. Indeed, it is hard to see what their *raison d’être* would be without a point or message, in contrast to longer fictional narratives, which instead typically have substantial plot and character development, and fine descriptions (“word paintings”) of the natural or artificial world. Ads try to influence you to buy or do something. To “get” a joke is to grasp its point. There is a bit of contention about this regarding fables and parables, but it only concerns whether the point or message has to be implicit. For example, Govier & Ayers appear to be inclined to accept the view that in the western tradition, “a fable comes with ‘the moral of the story’ stated right there, whereas...a parable must have an *implicit* message” (2012, p. 173). In contrast, Hunt maintains, “both historically and conceptually, that explicitly stating the point of a story is not necessary to a story’s

being a fable" (2009, p. 381). However, it does seem that longer fictional narratives need not have a point, whether implicit or explicit—consider the recent U.S. television series *Lost* and perhaps James Joyce's *Ulysses*—and even that they are less *literary* if they do have a point or moralize (cf. Hunt, p. 382). "A novel or theater piece need not reach a conclusion or even seem to approach one" (Velleman, 2003, p. 10). Currie (2010, pp. 34-35) offers a kind of explanation of this difference. He says that if you are distinguishing narrative from something on the order of mathematical physics, no doubt parables and the like count as narratives. But if you have in mind something on the order of a short story or novel, you might distinguish narratives from parables and the like, because the latter "have generalizing tendencies that do not fit well with the particularizing, sequential aspirations of narrative."

Before developing some of these ideas further, let us put some illustrations on the table. Here is an example of an ad (from television):

**Copy and gist from:** *Think small. The story of those Vehicle ads*, by Frank Rowsome, Jr., 1970, pg. 116-7. The company name is changed here. Visual description more or less by: Shazam (Suzanne).

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[Dark snowy early morning in country, view is of outdoors through the front windshield of a car. The car's headlights illuminate the falling snow, and the drifts of it, along the untracked, winding, uphill way, and you can see, in passing, snow laden pine and fir branches, bent under the weight of the snow. The only sound throughout: the purring of the car's engine. This trip takes some time.]

[Then the headlights hit and pass a...building, the driver turning the car by it. The car gets parked: the headlights are turned off. A big door of the building soon opens and a powerful snowplow rolls past our view as the ANNOUNCER begins.]

ANNOUNCER

Have you ever wondered how the man who drives the snowplow drives *to* the snowplow? This one drives a Vehicle. So you can stop wondering.

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Note: This commercial was so popular in Florida and Southern California that some stations played it over and over again due to audience requests.

(<http://reocities.com/tvtranscripts/comm/commcar.htm>; accessed on 9 Feb. 2015). Here is an example of a fable (from Aesop):

The Eagle and the Arrow

An Eagle was soaring through the air when suddenly it heard the whizz of an Arrow, and felt itself wounded to death. Slowly it fluttered down to the earth, with its life-blood pouring out of it. Looking down upon the Arrow with which it had been pierced, it found that the shaft of the Arrow had been feathered with one of its own plumes. "Alas!" it cried, as it died, "we often give our enemies the means for our own destruction."

(<http://www.aesopfables.com/cgi/aesop1.cgi?1&TheEagleandtheArrow2>; accessed on 15 Feb. 2015). And finally, a Ramakrishna parable:

WHAT YOU ARE AFTER, IS WITHIN YOURSELF

A MAN wanted a smoke. He went to a neighbour's house to light his charcoal. It was the dead of night and the household was asleep. After he had knocked a great deal, someone came down to open the door. At sight of the man he asked, "Hello! What's the matter?" The man replied, "Can't you guess? You know how fond I am of smoking. I have come here to light my charcoal." The neighbour said, "Ha! Ha! You are a fine man indeed! You took the trouble to come and do all this knocking at the door! Why, you have a lighted lantern in your hand!"

What a man seeks is very near him. Still he wanders about from place to place.

(p. 350 of a PDF book, *Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna*, at: <http://www.archive.org/details/TalesAndParablesOfSriRamakrishna>; accessed on 9 Feb. 2015.)

Velleman (2003) develops the minimalist sense of a story or narrative mentioned above in such a way that it leads to one explanation of how storytelling can be argumentatively evil. As a necessary condition for being a story, he adds: "reliably producing in the audience some emotional resolution" (p. 7, cf. 17). Some examples he gives of such resolution are anxiety relieved, hope dashed, and laughter (for jokes) (p. 7). He uses this theoretical addition to good effect (pp. 3-4) to explain how Aristotle's case of Mity's at Argos can be regarded as a story, even though the relationship between the events is not causal. Mity's was murdered. Later, while attending a "public spectacle," Mity's' murderer was killed when a statue of Mity's happened to fall down on him (*Poetics* 9.1452). Aristotle struggled to elucidate how this case

could be a story; Velleman proposes that it is notably because “the sequence of events completes an emotional cadence in the audience” of “indignation gratified.” Velleman argues that the trouble is that through experiencing a story’s emotional resolution, events become understandable to an audience not through assimilation to “familiar patterns of *how things happen*, but rather to familiar patterns of *how things feel*” (p. 19). The latter, subjective understanding can easily give us a false sense of objective understanding, so skepticism about what a story claims or about its message might be mistakenly dispelled. Hence, “telling a story is often a means to being believed for no good reason” (p. 22), thereby introducing argumentative evil.

Velleman’s theory appears to apply nicely to the examples quoted above. Certainly, at least curiosity satisfied plays a role in the vivid “Vehicle” commercial by the time the announcer’s voiceover is reached and suggests a generalization. The Aesop fable closes with an explanation/generalization that is a surprise ending to a life-and-death tale. The Ramakrishna parable involves a breathtaking generalization leap, as well as some humor. However, it is not at all clear that the theory applies to longer literary genres where the piece does not have a succinct point, message, moral, or conclusion—for these are what pack the punch or drive the “emotional resolution.” One may of course engage emotionally with the meaning of a piece of substantial literature such as a play or novel, but to the extent that its meaning is complex or nuanced, it is unlikely that there will be any definitive—let alone global—emotional resolution (hence there may be a sequel that simply continues the story). About such genres Velleman says “they tend to be described as genres of narrative by extension” (p. 17; cf. 10), but it is more plausible to hold that as a theory of all narrative, his theory overreaches. If anything, it is the shortest genres that are narratives by extension, as Currie suggests above. So, I think we see here one way in which shorter narratives have a greater potential for argumentative evil than longer ones.

In his discussion, Velleman does not distinguish between fictional and nonfictional narration, but on his own theory you would think that the potential for argumentative evil is less for nonfictional narration since by definition it aims at veracity or telling *how things actually happened*. The proper purpose of any nonfictional narrative argument is to be sound in the respect of having true premises, in contrast to the generalizing ad, fable, and parable fictions quoted above, for example.

### 3. BELIEVABILITY

On the continuum of fictional narrative, if you move in the direction from ads to novels, an interesting feature seems to be that—not immediately but somewhere fairly early on—*believability* becomes a central criterion of assessment. Is the piece successful “make-believe”? This question hardly pertains to shorter fictional narratives; it is not really the “game” in play or an appropriate standard to apply. Rather, such narratives aim at being charming or arresting, and especially at being moving through the emotional resolution packed by their point or message. But whatever they aim at, it seems that the question of believability must be bracketed or suspended for shorter fictional narratives essentially because there is *too little room* provided in such a piece to adequately test out the hypothesis that it is believable.

I don’t mean “believability” in the sense that artifices of magic such as talking animals or objects, as are common in fables, would preclude it. For short genres, these are established conventions of expedience and other purposes (see Olmos, 2014); there is no presumption that the author should even acknowledge deviations from accepted science, let alone try to explain or invent any underlying physics. In contrast, there is this presumption for extended science fiction or fantasy narratives, and if they do not conform to our most fundamental shared assumptions about physical reality, their believability in the intended sense is indeed called into question (a possible example is H. P. Lovecraft’s novella *The Call of Cthulhu*). More generally, believability seems to be determined mostly by what can be called the “internal” and “external” coherence of the event complex of an extended fictional narrative. I take Schultz (1979, p. 233) to be succinctly explicating internal coherence where he says: “the events must be *motivated* in terms of one another...either one event is a causal (or otherwise probable) consequence of another; or some event’s happening provides a character with a reason or motive for making another event happen” (cf., e.g., Cebik, 1971, p. 16). The narrative is not believable if in it things keep happening for no apparent reason or in a way that is inadequately connected with the other events in the narrative. Certainly, this applies to some degree to William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, for example. Such “real” connections of efficient, final, and material causes (using Aristotle’s terminology), and any probabilistic counterparts, are required. You could not construct a coherent novel or play from a random series of events or even from bolts of cosmic justice, like the *one* we saw in the pithy Mity’s story.

But even if the events of a narrative are fully connected, the narrative may still not be believable because those connections do not



cohere well with our widely shared basic assumptions about how human psychology and society not only actually, but necessarily work. This is the main component of external coherence. The believability of an extended fictional narrative requires that its plot, characters, and fine description be developed in ways that generally conform to our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature (Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* seems to fully recognize this requirement in its intentional violation of it<sup>1</sup>), and secondarily, about physical nature (as noted).

Of course, the believability of an extended fictional narrative does not involve believing that its event complex *is* true; rather, it involves believing that the event complex *could* have been true in a strong sense of “could”—much stronger, for example, than that of mere logical possibility. The possibilities that the narrative evokes, if it is to be believable, must be grounded in “real” event relations and in basic perceived facts of human nature. And as the narrative progresses in developing a theme(s), the possibilities evoked must be salient in that they are thematically relevant. But the shorter the fictional narrative, the closer the possibilities come to being mere logical possibilities. In the shortest, there is almost no plot or character development, or fine description. So there is no way to tell if the narrative is significantly internally or externally coherent.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that generally, believability is experienced by the audience as a simple, unanalyzed datum or measure of the narrative, continuously updated as the audience progresses through the work and imaginatively engages with it. And, as Aristotle said about judging the

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<sup>1</sup>Consider this description of the novel: “...an ironic fantasy of Oxford undergraduate life a 100 or so years ago. The characters’ speech and motives are absurd in about equal measure, but one would be missing the point to hold this against the work. For the author is plainly not seeking psychological verisimilitude...The interest of the work is essentially that of a *tour de force*: how long can the author retain our interest while so consciously eschewing psychological plausibility?” (Currie, 2012, p. 29 & n. 7).

<sup>2</sup>Being believable does not mean that something is on its way to being believed, for that path is never taken for something you know to be fiction. With respect to fictional stories, internal and external coherence constitute more or less all there is to believability; with respect to nonfictional stories, belief may be the only thing there is to believability (possibility is logically implied by actuality). Hence, it is problematic to analyze “believability” (“credibility,” “plausibility”) indifferently as it pertains to these two story domains, as do Fisher (1987) and Olmos (2013; 2015).

happiness of a person, you do not know for sure about believability until you reach the narrative's end.

Just as we can always ask about an extended fictional narrative—is it successful “make-believe”?—it seems we can ask about any believable plot/character development complex—what principles or generalizations would have to operate in the real world (of human psychology, action, and society), as we conceive it, in order for the fictional complex to be believable? With this question, a *transcendental* argument scheme is generated that is “ambitious” (vs. “modest”—see Stern, 2007) if we presume that our fundamental shared conceptions of human nature are generally true:

(1) This story is believable.

(2) This story is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world (of human psychology, action, and society).

(3) Therefore, such and such principles operate in the real world.

I have argued elsewhere (2015), on both philosophical and empirical grounds, that our fundamental shared conceptions of human nature are generally true. Let me just summarize the philosophical reasons here. No doubt in certain cases I may find a work of extended fictional narration believable, whereas you do not. But it seems that there is no wholesale relativity of believability because there is such a thing as human nature, which we all share and to which we have significant introspective or “privileged” access, or at least psychological attunement.<sup>3</sup> The believable narrative taps into and relies on these facts, bringing operant principles to the fore—which allows it to function as a perfectly effective psychological “trigger” (cf. Gaiman, 2015, p. xiii). If this general idea were not true, then it would be pretty inexplicable that there is widespread agreement about which novels are good novels, for example. Being believable is a central necessary condition for an extended fictional narrative to be good. So in the transcendental argument, the leap from the inner to outer worlds is limited and facilitated. The leap is from our psychological experience of believability of the narrative to the real world of human psychology, action, and society—which is the primary subject matter of all extended fictional

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<sup>3</sup>A recent influential article on introspection (Schwitzgebel, 2008) poses little threat to my points here concerning human nature and its operant principles, because the focus of the article is on the untrustworthiness of introspection of immediate conscious experience. Differences among readers in the perceived believability of a novel may be largely attributable to relatively extraneous factors, such as the setting of the novel. For example, if I could get past the fantastic details of Tolkein's trilogy, I think I could better appreciate these novels as implicating truths of human nature.

narratives. This subject matter is basically human nature, I take it. The inner and outer worlds of the narrative argument are significantly the same; it is not as if the worlds are distinct as, for example, thought and a brain in a vat, as in Putnam's memorable transcendental argument (1981, Ch. 1). And, as Nagel (1979, Ch. 12) forcefully argued, because after all we are human, we know *what it is like* to be human in a way we do not know *what it is like* to have a different nature, such as a bat's (and perceive the world primarily through echolocation, be capable of flying, etc.). Such philosophical considerations indicate that the principles evoked in the narrative argument resonate in believability largely because they are *true* of human nature.

As we've seen, storytelling ads and jokes, and short fables and parables, may be charming or arresting. But this affective appeal especially allows them also to be seductive and possibly misleading since they have a point or message. One can be seduced into accepting the message for no good reason and acting on it, for instance, buying a "Vehicle" even though you live in Florida. My key point is that such perniciousness does not apply to longer fictional narratives that are believable, insofar as believability implicates truths of human nature, even though longer fictional narratives in some ways have as much or more affective appeal. Only fictional narratives that are believable exhibit (indirectly, and as wholes) the distinctive narrative argument form outlined above. This form is not only valid but is in a certain way probabilistically sound. (1)-(3) constitute a schematic meta-level representation of the (transcendental) argument of a believable story, which, at the object level, is only indirectly expressed by the story. At the object level, given that premise (1) is true and that our fundamental shared conceptions of human nature are generally true, the conclusion (3) is unlikely to be mistaken. However, at the interpretive meta-level, perhaps especially where the literary critic attempts to directly state which specific truths of human nature are implicated (i.e., flesh out premise (2)), no doubt errors may be committed. Nevertheless, this interpretive enterprise is worth pursuing, for it articulates, insofar as it is successful, the narrative's contribution to human knowledge. Through the transcendental argument and the "work" of progressing through the narrative, true assumptions or conceptions held by the audience about human nature become *justified* true beliefs.

Thus, as compared to shorter fictional narratives, longer ones that are believable have less potential for argumentative evil in the respect that their believability generates a good transcendental argument. This is not to deny that there are other respects in which extended fictional narratives, whether believable or not, may be evil. Some of these respects have nothing to do with argument, and some

arise because the overt speeches of characters include bad arguments—which, recall, is not a concern of this paper. Consider the novels of The Marquis de Sade or Ayn Rand. But it is not my intention that my believability *cum* transcendental-argument theory be immune to possible counterexample. Take, for instance, the 1940 Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süß* or even perhaps Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*. Both succeeded in turning large numbers against certain classes of people (Jews and small-town businessmen, respectively). A case strong enough to raise questions can be made that these works are believable. Yet there are possible answers. One is that their objectionable stances themselves (anti-Semitism, anti-small-town businessmen) are far too specific to be fundamental principles of human nature, and another is that there is no guarantee that fundamental principles of human nature will be pretty (e.g., if we have an innate proclivity to violence). My theory (if correct) would show that a believable narrative must be right about most of the principles it depends on, but it does not preclude that the aim of the narrative nevertheless could be to lead people to false and harmful conclusions about whole classes of people, albeit conclusions that do not rise to the level of principles. Perhaps a more intractable kind of criticism would be constituted by an accumulation of putative empirical counterexamples to my subsidiary thesis that our basic shared conceptions of human nature are generally true, though I have addressed this issue elsewhere (2015).

In any case, some of the preceding ideas have been delightfully, although less formally, expressed by Doody (2009, pp. 155-157). It is worth giving her some room:

Fiction knows that fable packs the punch, has the charge it wants. At the same time, the prose fiction novel knows that the fable lacks what the Novel always wants to offer—full characterization and length... “This is all you need to know, for my point,” says the philosopher, brusquely finishing his fable so he can get on with the job. “Wait, wait,” cries the Novel. “This is the job! I want to know more and I don’t care so much about your point. For your point might not be true if we knew more. Let us test it by *amplificatio*.”...No parable is safe...We know the story of the Prodigal Son... “But,” says the Novel, “that’s a great story, but I want to know more. What was the father like? Was there something about him that made the second son want to leave? Suppose the first son’s jealousy had existed for a long time, not just at the homecoming. Suppose that son had turned the father against his brother, so the brother lit out and sought affection among the prostitutes?” And so Henry Fielding writes the whole story anew in *Tom*

*Jones*, the story of the wronged Prodigious Son and the father who must in the end seek forgiveness.

#### 4. OTHER (IL)LOGIC OF SHORT FICTIONS

In contrast to believable fictions, storytelling ads, jokes, fables, and parables, to the extent that they are argumentative, do not exhibit a distinctive narrative argument form, but rather exhibit standard forms such as argument from analogy and inductive generalization. At least partly because of the heavy reliance of such arguments on affective appeal when expressed by such fictional narratives, unsurprisingly, Govier & Ayers (2012, p. 188) found that these “arguments are rarely cogent,” and (echoing Velleman) “the form and interest of the story will often distract us from attempting any task of logical assessment.” For example, they point out that the parable above, *What You are After*, is *Within Yourself*, taken as an argument, involves “hastily generalizing from the highly specific situation of a man wandering about in the dark, with a lighted lantern, to a universal human quest” (p. 178). Not to mention, let us not forget, the single instance on which the generalization is based is *fictional*.

Similarly, the conclusion in *The Eagle and the Arrow* that “we often give our enemies the means for our own destruction,” taking the fable as an argument, is an unjustified leap, although it is more guarded. Understood as an argument, the fable seems best understood as an argument from analogy. Certainly, the source and target domains are distinct but parallel<sup>4</sup>—the fabulous world of talking and reasoning animals, and the human world, respectively. The use of an eagle in particular, might allude to a human type or stereotype (a smart and successful but overly trusting “high-flyer”) particularly subject to such a plight. The case seems to fit Hunt’s (2009) analysis of fabulous arguments from analogy: they have a “first case/principle/second case” structure, where the principle is in Peircean fashion “abducted” from the first case (the eagle’s plight)—the principle “is supported to the extent that it is a good explanation of the first case.” The second case, however, is deduced from the principle (p. 373); it is how readers apply the principle “to guide their own moral conduct or persuade others” (p. 379)—as one might think, “I better be careful or there is a real chance that I could inadvertently help my rivals by...”

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<sup>4</sup>For the importance in drawing an analogy of having two such domains and not merely a similarity relationship, see Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958, p. 502), Beardsley (1975, p. 111), and Olmos (2014).

Literally and technically, such analyses indicating the specific illogic of short fictions appear to be correct. However, it must be acknowledged that audiences often take these fictions to be merely suggestive, and not dispositive, of their generalizations or explanations. In other words, audiences often do not take them to be arguments. It nevertheless remains that when they are understood as arguments, their potential for argumentative evil is generally greater than for believable fictions. And this potential is perhaps greatest for children and mentally challenged adults.

## 5. NARRATIVE THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Thought experiments are designed to yield insight. There are many kinds of thought experiments. In perhaps the simplest of taxonomies, Popper (1959, p. 443) identifies three uses of “imaginary experiments”; they may be used to illustrate, support, or undermine a theory (what he calls their “heuristic...apologetic...critical” uses). Thought experiments are all fictional in that a hypothetical or counterfactual situation is visualized or somehow imagined in experience. However, in many thought experiments, storytelling or narrative is not prominent; they are not especially perspectival and “particularizing, sequential” depictions of events. Scientific thought experiments are characteristically in this way non-narrative, for example, Galileo’s famous Pisa-type one where he disproves the Aristotelian view that the heavier the object, the faster it falls. On the other hand, narrative thought experiments, like all fictional narratives, are ultimately about human psychology, action, and society.

How do narrative thought experiments otherwise compare to other fictional narratives? Again, length appears to play a critical role in allowing a cogent argument, but in a different way. The most successful narrative thought experiments appear to present an extended and relevant point-by-point analogue of whatever problem is at issue. Thomson’s violinist in her paper “A Defense of Abortion” (1971) is paradigmatic. Walton (2012, p. 199) presents a convenient summary of her core source and target “stories”:

1. Person finds himself attached to famous violinist.
2. Person had no choice about this arrangement.
3. Having violinist attached is an encumbrance to person.
4. Having violinist attached will hinder person’s daily activities.
5. Violinist will die if removed from person.

6. Violinist can only survive if attached to person for nine months.
7. Person can make a choice about removing violinist...

1. Woman who has been raped finds herself pregnant.
2. Woman had no choice about becoming pregnant.
3. Being pregnant is an encumbrance to woman.
4. Being pregnant will hinder woman's daily activities.
5. Fetus will die if removed from woman.
6. Fetus can only survive if carried to term of approximately nine months.
7. Woman can make a choice about removing fetus.

Thomson develops this analogy in different directions during the course of her paper, exhibiting its plasticity and depth. Indeed, the power and cogency of her essay derives from its being a good analogical argument, but not from any embedded fictional narrative being *believable* like a novel, play, or short story. As with other such thought experiments, her violinist story is weak on both external and internal coherence, and it would be astonishing if it were even intended to be believable. As Peijnenburg & Atkins say, these are “outlandish stories,” even “grotesque”; “ones like Jackson, Searle and Putnam do not eschew the most bizarre accounts of zombies, swapped brains, exact *Doppelgänger*, and famous violinists who are plugged into another body” (2003, p. 305). Walton too, allows that Thomson's violinist's story is only “something that could conceivably happen” (2012, p. 200).

## 6. ANECDOTAL AND OTHER NONFICTIONAL ARGUMENTS

Finally, rounding out the consideration of argumentatively evil storytelling and bringing the preceding into sharper focus are so-called “anecdotal arguments” and the possibilities they furnish, perhaps notably to politicians. Similarly to Johnson & Blair (2006, p. 70), Govier & Jansen (2011, p. 86) concluded that “anecdotal arguments are bound to be logically and dialectically inadequate if, as is usual, we define them as asking the audience to shift from acceptance of a *particular narrative* to a *general claim* about the world.” However, to the extent that the term ‘anecdote’ connotes that the narrative is nonfictional, such narratives differ from the kinds of narratives considered thus far. Unlike for extended pieces of storytelling such as plays and novels, the actual anecdote in an anecdotal argument cannot itself furnish any argument. This is because, by definition, the point of nonfictional narration (cf. history or biography) involves veracity—sticking to the facts, telling what happened—so there is no theoretical room for the creativity that

is needed to invent what happens and thereby construct an argument. Simard-Smith & Moldovan, for example, advance a view of “arguments as abstract objects” that “understands arguments to be objects that can be expressed in different points of space at the same time, and that are creations of human intellectual activity... We often make statements such as ‘Searle developed the Chinese room argument’” (2011, pp. 259, 248).

Not surprisingly then, the length of the anecdote embedded in an argument seems to make little or no difference to the cogency potential of the argument. Consider this case presented as an anecdote in Hillary Clinton’s speech at the 2008 US Democratic National Convention endorsing Barack Obama (cited by Oldenburg & Leff, 2009, p. 2):

I will always remember that single mother who had adopted two kids with autism. She didn’t have any health insurance; and she discovered that she had cancer. But she greeted me, her bald head painted with my name on it, and asked me to fight for health care for her and her children.

I do not see how the cogency of Clinton’s argument for rallying behind Obama could have been significantly affected one way or another if she had presented more or fewer details of the unfortunate woman’s situation (or presented more such incidents as anecdotes, which she in fact did). This is mainly because we would still not be told how representative the case(s) cited is, a question that an anecdotal argument in its usual form leaves unanswered.

So it appears that for anecdotal arguments, whatever difference length makes to the potential for argumentative evil, it is not comparable to the difference length makes for fictional narrative arguments. Anecdotal argument seems similar to (nonfictional) induction by enumeration on this score. No number of enumerated black crows identified by ordinary means will get you firmly to the conclusion that all crows are black, though a single perfectly representative one would. I think nonfictional arguments from analogy constitute an exception in that the best present an extended and relevant point-by-point comparison between things in distinct but parallel domains; if you shortchange this, there is no end to the potential for argumentative evil. On the other hand, for deductive arguments, there is simply no case at all to be made that length could make any difference to their validity or soundness.



## 7. CONCLUSION

In summary, it seems that there are reasons to hold that in fictional narrative the potential for argumentative evil is greatest if the approach taken is “hit and run,” so to speak, whereas in other argumentative contexts, length generally appears to make no comparable difference. This is a feature that distinguishes fictional narrative arguments.

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# Commentary on Plumer's Argumentatively Evil Storytelling

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In this paper, Gilbert Plumer continues, as has been his focus on other recent contributions, to explore certain aspects of narrative arguments. In this case, he is explicitly looking for assessment criteria and claims to have found one that applies to fiction narratives: the shorter the story, the less it will justify certain inferences based on it and therefore the greater the potential for an ill-founded argumentation to be presented through it.

As Plumer uses the term, “short” is, in fact, *short for* schematic, stylized and unrealistic (as in fables, classical and oriental, or ads) and explicitly opposed to the nuanced, complex and rich-in-detail weave and plot of (realistic) novels which are the adequate basis for the kind of argument scheme described by Plumer in his paper which he has presented and used in other contributions. Namely:

- (1) This story is believable.
- (2) This story is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world (of human psychology, action, and society).
- (3) Therefore, such and such principles operate in the real world.

At the end of the paper, Plumer explores other kinds of narratives, as “thought experiments” and “anecdotes”. The latter are non-fictional and are usually advanced as premises for an inductive-like “anecdotal argument”, based on the assumed veracity and actuality (not the believability) of the anecdote; and the former, claims Plumer, although fictions, are neither usually embedded in a kind of argument in which the believability of the story would really make any difference for its assessment (this point I think is just suggested and would need further exploration).

So, although one has to finish the paper to locate and put in order all these pieces, Plumer's position is, in my opinion finally clear. It seems he is contemplating only one possible argument scheme (the one he originally developed for novels in his 2011 paper: "Novels as arguments") for which he takes narrative fictions (leaving aside just philosophical thought experiments) would be candidate sources or basis. And he finds that such a scheme is only liable to yield sound arguments only in case the story involved has certain characteristics and actually aims at depicting, in a realistic manner, "the real world". This is not possible if the story is schematic, stylized and unrealistic, and the subsequent reconstructed argument remains ill-founded.

For me, the most valuable contribution of this paper is this attempt to start clarifying a complex panorama by introducing certain distinctions that may be useful for future works. Depending on our analytic aims, I agree that taking in account the fictive or factual character of the stories we use as part of our argumentative efforts might be important (and I therefore assume the criticism he makes to one of my contributions in his paper).

Nevertheless my own view about narrative arguments (which I have presented in other recent contributions: 2014, 2014b, 2015) is that narratives, in general (that is, fictive or factual), may be used to construe very different kinds of arguments and even, that one and the same particular story (a classical fable, for example) might be variously used as basis for construing arguments according to different argument schemes in different contexts (some examples in Olmos, 2014b). So we have to analyze and assess each real case as pertaining to its own argumentative aims in its own context.

Moreover, I find Plumer's kind of "transcendental argumentative scheme for fiction" a somewhat abstract model that probably works better for, let's say, the extraction of very general principles or usable warrants from acknowledged complex fictions than as a genuinely operational form of argument or inference scheme for concrete conclusions. In most real cases, it would be part of a more complex and, at the same time, more concrete argumentation (of a practical, evaluative or theoretical character) and in each case it would support our final conclusions in a somewhat receded way, i.e. as founding the backing of the warrants of our actually operative reasons. That is why, I think, it's called "transcendental": it mostly describes the "conditions of possibility" of the use of certain kinds of arguments than describe those arguments themselves.

In the particular case of the three examples offered by Plumer as support for his thesis (i.e.: the shorter the story, the greater the potential for argumentative evilness), Plumer assumes that they do not

offer good enough reasons to support the generalizations they seem to support. My point is that *it depends on what you are going to use those generalizations for* (they might be in need of further support, or not so much), for, in most cases, one's argumentation, most typically a practical one (taking in account that the theme of stories is usually human action), would be much more concrete and referenced to particular circumstances in which those generalizations would either appear as easily applicable or not.

The two fables, I think, do not even aim at "supporting" such generalizations (as even Plumer admits) but only try to "illustrate" and "explain" them (that is, their workings), or just "fix" them in the imagination. Both present and represent, in fact, ideas and warrants that are already assumed as rather *usable* (*prima facie* good enough) in our societies for advising certain behaviour or attitude: "what a man seeks is very near him", "we often give our enemies the means for our own destruction". These fables are just means to teach or recall them. That they are accepted by the interlocutor as supporting a certain conclusion will mainly depend on the circumstances expressed in, and the further objectives of, that particular conclusion. This is so because such warrants are more "(usefully) applicable or inapplicable" to particular cases than "true or false". In any case, the fables do not exactly try to show that they are simply "true".

In the case of the "Vehicle ad", I agree that it certainly creates an atmosphere, emotions, something to remember etc. but what argument it is supposed to support in a direct or receded manner is yet something rather open. So, in my opinion, it cannot be yet assessed as better or worst founded. Most ads merely support the "good name" of a brand, using different reasons and warrants (even their "good taste in publicity"). They might finally aim at advising a purchase, but the steps (argumentative steps) are yet too many. If we assume that this ad (through the story told in it) just shows and conveys the information that the makers of the car have thought about snow conditions and designed their vehicle for better facing them, and this encourages you to visit their store, with the memorable ad in your mind, to ask for more details, I see no evil in it.

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