

Book Reviews

Rafe McGregor, Narrative Justice, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, 232 pp.

Rafe McGregor's *Narrative Justice* presents an exciting development within the field of aesthetics. While offering an effort of great theoretical and practical significance—that of defending an account of narrative cognitivism—its principal aim is to show that there is still a place for the humanities within education, and especially in practical use. McGregor's central thesis is that engagement with narratives has the capacity to improve the narrative sensibility of readers, which can lead to a decrease in criminal inhumanity—that is, in short, the methodology he refers to as narrative justice. If successful, his theory could provide the humanities and (especially) literature the means to resist neoliberal quantification, as it would demonstrate the value of humanities in terms of concrete individual and public gain. It is my impression that McGregor was to a very large degree successful in laying out a strong case for this endeavor and tackling possible criticism with great success.

It is important to mention the context within which this book is situated. Never before have the humanities faced such strong criticism from those trying to reduce most of the human activities to monetary profit. This is amplified especially by the COVID-19 outbreak which forces various governments to revisit their financial policies and to introduce measures like budget cuts to combat the potential threat of another financial recession. Within higher education and academia, the prospects are especially grim for the humanities, which are more likely to get their funding suspended than their colleagues working within the STEM area. Keeping this in mind, there has rarely been as much pressure on the humanities to defend themselves as there is now. An urgent need is present to contribute to the justification of the humanities if they are to have any future within higher education and academia. McGregor did just that by providing us with a theory that explains how engagements with narratives, both fictional and nonfictional, can have a valuable transformative impact on the audience and potentially reduce instances of harmful behavior.

However, McGregor is not alone in trying to situate the humanities, in this case the study of literature, within the context of neoliberal market/profit oriented society. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak's theory of global aesthetic education and Sarah E. Worth's theory of narrative education stand out as the two most compelling contemporary alternatives to Mc-

Gregor's narrative justice thesis. While he agrees with most of what Spivak and Worth argue, McGregor finds shortcomings with both theories, rejecting them in favor of his own. However, a common core of the three authors is that they all argue for a conception of aesthetic education. The idea was developed by Friedrich Schiller, who argued that political harmony could only be achieved via the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility. However, McGregor puts his spin on this thesis via his account of the criminal inhumanity. He sees this as one of the crucial factors contributing to the increase or decrease of political harmony. The category of criminal inhumanity relates to serious crimes committed by a state or non-state actor against a civilian population, government or public for ideological reasons. With the emergence of various terrorist groups in the last three decades and subsequent terrorist attacks in cities around the world, there is a pressing need to combat terrorism in its modern form. The developments in the 21st century indicate that traditional hard power approaches that employ force as a tool of coercion have largely failed to pacify or eliminate terrorist hotspots in the Middle East—the armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and countless others serve as a grim testament. This fact has given rise to soft power approaches that employ rhetoric as a tool of persuasion, rather than force. McGregor's thesis is situated firmly within this approach, drawing heavily on the insights delivered by the narrative turn in the sciences—most important of which is that narratives enable the acquisition of large portions of knowledge. In my view, part of the importance of the narrative justice thesis lies in the fact that it offers a theoretical framework that can be applied in practice to combat one of the most pressing global issues that our society has been struggling against for a prolonged period of time. As such, it has the potential to highlight one of the ways in which philosophy can indeed provide a positive impact on the world.

A central aspect of the book is the relation between narrative representation and ethical value. As McGregor argues, "The engagement with a narrative representation qua narrative representation is incomplete without ethical evaluation." (54). This line of thinking is designed to support the deflationary account of the ethical value of narrative representation. The idea behind this is that there is a necessary relation between narrative representation and ethical value, but not between narrative representation and moral value. Within the context of narrative justice, the term *ethical* refers to the opposition between something being moral and something being amoral, while the meaning of *moral* is linked to moral as opposed to immoral. McGregor claims that the essential value of narrative representation is restricted to the former, i.e., the ethical sphere. He maintains that the moral of the story may be virtuous, vicious or somewhere in between. Once established, the relation between narratives and ethics serves as a backbone for the further development of the main thesis of narrative justice.

For the thesis of narrative justice to be at all convincing, a theory of narrative cognitivism has to be established. If we argue that narrative representations provide us with a certain kind of knowledge, we have to provide a framework which enables knowledge to be transmitted. McGregor's aim thus is to defend the theory of narrative cognitivism, according to which narrative representations provide knowledge in virtue of their narrativity,

regardless of their truth value. He insists on two criteria for narrative cognitivism: the epistemic criterion (that the narrative representation provides knowledge) and the narrativity criterion (that the narrative representation provides knowledge in virtue of its narrativity). How is knowledge passed on to the reader? The idea is that the reader undergoes a kind of virtual experience while engaging with a narrative representation. To capture this mechanism, McGregor employs the term *phenomenological knowledge* (PK): “the realization of what a particular lived experience is like” (75). For the purposes of the narrative justice thesis the knowledge provided by exemplary narratives via *lucid phenomenological knowledge* (LPK) is of special interest. LPK is the “realisation of what a particular lived experience is like by means of the reproduction of a particular experience of a particular character for the audience who adopt the standard mode of engagement to the narrative representation” (76), i.e., that mode which is prescribed by the author. On McGregor’s view, LPK meets the epistemic and narrativity criteria for narrative cognitivism.

To defend narrative cognitivism, McGregor considers a possible criticism issued at the narrativity criterion, namely lyric poetry. Poetry can be invoked by the critics so as to show that LPK is provided in virtue of the aesthetic properties, not in virtue of narrativity. This is of course a considerable burden for McGregor, since most of the discussion in literary aesthetics focuses on the question of aesthetic properties and their role in art’s capacity to advance knowledge. McGregor undermines the objection by pointing to a narrative representation that, he claims, lacks aesthetic properties but provides us with LPK nonetheless. The example he uses is that of Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me*, a documentary that intends to show the negative health impacts of eating too much fast food. It lacks aesthetic properties, but, McGregor claims, is able to provide LPK by means of reproducing Spurlock’s disgust towards fast food in the audience. While there are arguments that try to show the aesthetic properties of a documentary like *Super Size Me*, I think McGregor’s defense in this instance is convincing. Thus, regardless of the problem of the nature of aesthetic properties, we can agree with McGregor that that is not the crucial issue when it comes to narratives providing knowledge.

At this point an argument for narrative justice can be laid out:

- (a) The cultivation of narrative sensibility can develop ethical understanding
- (b) Criminal inhumanity is a category of crime that is justified by ethical principles
- (c) Theories have crime reduction potential in virtue of explanation (i.e., developing understanding of the causes of crime)
- (d) Therefore, the cultivation of narrative sensibility has the potential to reduce criminal inhumanity.

In the last chapter of the book, McGregor demonstrates how narrative justice might work in practice. Specifically, he shows how a pair of exemplary narratives can be employed to reduce criminal inhumanity by undermining extremist recruitment strategies. The application of the narrative justice thesis should result in the realisation that the Muslim fundamentalist and white supremacist conceptions of victimhood are identical and therefore

the victim master narrative on which both of the ideologies are based comes out to be false. One line of reasoning employed in this chapter states that if the groups are opposed to one another (which they obviously are), they should tell different stories. As it turns out, both groups are telling the same story, which then leaves only two options: either the groups are not actually in opposition, or both stories are false. Judging by their ideology both groups are clearly in opposition which leads us to the conclusion that both of their stories must be false. By performing a comparative analysis of two texts coming from groups that belong to each extremist ideology, Ajit Maan reveals that they present two instantiations of the same master narrative:

- (i) In the beginning, our people lived in utopia
- (ii) Then others arrived and took over
- (iii) This brings us to the present, where we have two choices
- (iv) We can either do nothing, in which case the situation will remain as it is now, or we can expel these others and restore the utopia in such a way that it is never threatened again

We can see that both texts share the same narrative form and the same conception of victimhood; McGregor calls this core conception *deliverance*. This line of reasoning enables us to conclude that the concepts of White genocide and Crusader are two instantiations of deliverance.

This example of undermining inhumanity and others that feature in the book supports the claim that the comparative analysis of documentary and fictional narratives has the potential to reduce criminal inhumanity. As such, the method with which narrative justice could be applied in practice comes in the form of the careful selection, analysis and comparison of documentary and fictional narratives for the purposes of disclosure, demystification and deconstruction. McGregor built a strong theoretical framework that supports the thesis that criminal inhumanity can be reduced by narrative sensibility. I think that narrative justice can withstand most of the theoretical objections raised against it, but it might encounter difficulties in practical application. Before any theory of aesthetic education could hope to be implemented in practice or influence the creation of new state policies, it should be backed up by empirical data. However, McGregor is not optimistic on the possibility of such empirical support. He spends a considerable amount of time analyzing the current empirical research regarding the impact of different forms of art, including violent video games and pornography, on people, only to conclude that “the attempt to demonstrate a link between literature and empathy is thus far inconclusive” (120). McGregor thus agrees with Spivak that most if not all of the benefits of literature are unverifiable (126), but claims that there is a necessary relation between exemplary narratives and lucid phenomenological knowledge. However, this is a practical problem for any theory of aesthetic education: while the theory itself may be sound, its application, which should be its principal aim, faces obstacles that greatly hinder its implementation. Thus, the lack of supporting empirical evidence is one of McGregor’s most pressing challenges, but it is important to note that this is not a criticism of narrative

justice but rather a recognition of one of the difficulties the humanities will have to face. Surely we can expect interdisciplinary research of philosophy, literature, criminology, psychology and other fields of knowledge to be important with respect to meeting this difficulty and the pointers that McGregor provides in this book are much needed!

Narrative justice proves to be a project with the potential to answer two very important questions that have been raised in contemporary academia: (a) the question of how should one go about the defense of the humanities against the pressure coming from neoliberal quantification and (b) the question of which (if any) approach could be employed in order to combat the rising threat of extremist violence and terrorism that is present throughout the modern world. The central thesis of narrative justice that the cultivation of narrative sensibility could reduce criminal inhumanity has the potential to address both of these questions and therefore it has to be taken seriously. I think that McGregor demonstrates that the thesis of narrative justice holds against most of the criticism on the theoretical level. I identified one of the problems with it, namely difficulties involved in its application, and I argued that any theory belonging to the context of aesthetic education will face those issues. Thus, my claim should not serve as an objection to narrative justice per se, but rather highlight the enormous amount of work and empirical research that will have to be done before any step towards practical application can be undertaken. I conclude that narrative justice proves to be an important development within the wider context of philosophy and the humanities. I strongly recommend this book to everyone interested in ways in which narratives and ethics interact, and in the wider social context within which we run the risk of inhumanity.

MATIJA RAJTER

University of Rijeka, Rijeka, Croatia

Tiziana Andina, Petar Bojanić (eds.), Institutions in Action. The Nature and the Role of Institutions in the Real World, New York: Springer 2020, 150 pp.

Philosophy is a humbling profession. Even after 20 years of “dabbling” in it, I am often confronted with the Socratic “I know that I know nothing”, or at least its more moderate version “I wish that I knew more”. The same sentiment in me was also provoked by this book, as I went into the task of reading it with the preconception that I am familiar with what institutions are, only to be confronted with the different aspects on the subject that have once more proved that I was wrong in my hubris.

But, let us focus on the book. *Institutions in Action* by editors Tiziana Andina and Petar Bojanić is a part of the Springer’s series “Studies in the Philosophy of Sociality,” which main aim is to provide important contributions to the rapidly developing field of social ontology. As social ontology is the field of study that investigates correlation of nature with the social world, its focus is on various entities that appear in the world as a product