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Fate or Agency? Comparing Narrative Scheme and Practical Inference

DARIO COMPAGNO*

Titolo italiano: Fato o agentività? Un confronto tra lo schema narrativo e l'inferenza pratica.

English abstract: This paper argues for some essential differences between action and narration. These differences become evident if we compare two well-known descriptive models: the *Practical Inference* (developed by E. Anscombe and G. von Wright to understand everyday actions) and the *Narrative Scheme* (formulated by A.J. Greimas for explaining narrated actions). The first is grounded on the *agents'* intentions and their possibility to do *otherwise*, that is granted by the language games in which agents operate. The second dissolves the *actors'* intentions into a comprehensive necessitated structure, in which there are no alternative possibilities of action, and what matters the most is the organisation of the whole. These are the reasons why the Narrative Scheme is not suited to explain everyday action, as well as the Practical Inference does not bring about a satisfactory understanding of narratives. Agents are personally responsible for their actions. Whenever we observe someone acting, we attribute a certain intention to that person. Instead, the interpreter of a narrative perceives an “immanence filter”, and cannot attribute personal responsibility for action to each actor. Actors only seem to act, but they are actually directed by another instance taking decisions for them — an *author*. The author, the instance that is responsible for everything that happens in a story, has been underestimated by contemporary semiotics, whereas its role is fundamental to understand and describe texts as intentional products. Texts have a double dimension: they are holistic systems turning characters' intentions and chance into author's choices; at the same time they are also communicative tools effectively used in our world of actions. The paper concludes by arguing for the need to use *both* the Narrative Scheme and the Practical Inference to describe text production, because each of the two models gives a necessary and irreducible perspective on the author.

English key-words: author; agent; destiny; narrative scheme; practical inference.

Post hoc, ergo propter hoc – a good motto for Destiny, of which narrative all things considered is no more than the “language”.

(Roland Barthes, Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives)

Can men serve a “destiny” which is not definable in terms of their own intentional aims?

(Georg H. von Wright, Explanation and Understanding)

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1. Introduction: Narration is not Action

There are some irreducible differences between the two concepts of *action* and *narration*, as developed respectively by Wittgenstein's Philosophy and Structural Semiotics. Starting from Aristotle's *Poetics*, narration (in the sense of "something narrated; an account, story or narrative", and not in that of "act of narrating") has usually been modeled out of action, but this does not mean that action and narration are the same thing. Both a commonsensical and a theoretically grounded idea of narration, presuppose an organising figure above the chain of narrated actions and events. This figure — traditionally called the *author* — is on the contrary necessarily absent in the understanding of everyday actions, the grammar of which is rooted on the possibility for the agent to do *otherwise*. Whenever we really act, there is no one choosing for us.

Paul Ricoeur (1984) clearly differentiated action and narration. Action is intimately linked with its agent's *intentions* at the moment of conducting it. The analytical comprehension of action promoted by Elisabeth Anscombe and Georg von Wright, following Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas, is built on the relevance of intentions in the everyday understanding and in the more formal description of human activity. An action is an event related to a person "in a particular way". This "particular way" sees *agents* as "bringing about" some intentional effects. On the contrary, for Ricoeur it is the whole set of effects produced by an event that pertains to narration. If we tell the story of a man, not only his intentions, but all the effects he managed to cause, both planned or reached by serendipity, constitute the narrated action. *Characters* (*actors*, in greimassian terminology, which we will adopt from now on) are parts of a holistic process, net of coincidences in which real chance and individual intentions play no role. As Ricoeur showed, the concept of narration in this sense can be applied both to stories and to factual narratives. So *action becomes narration* whenever it is explained by putting it inside larger systems.

This greater picture structuring what the actors do, needs a global instance of decision: there is *no narration conceivable without author*. *Either* agents are seen under the description of their possibilities and *choices*, *or* they have no real intention and there is no responsibility

that can be ultimately re-conducted to them. But then, in this second case, there has to be a bearer of responsibility for the whole, an instance taking choices for the “paper people” — because narratives are human products, and unlike plants or other natural objects, they do not develop spontaneously. Achilles did not die by chance, nor because of natural causes; he died because the Iliad’s author chose so.

A problem for today semiotics is that the concept of author, as fundamental bearer of responsibility for narration, has been underestimated and confined. For this reason, also the difference between *agents* and *actors* has been narcotized. We will argue for the possibility to grasp the full potential of two main alternative models of action and narration — the *Practical Inference (PI)* and the *Narrative Scheme (NS)* — by showing their distinctions and by combining them *later* into one coherent model, through the reconciliation of semiotic theory with the concept of *author* itself. Umberto Eco (1979) has already undertaken this path with his Model Author, a strategic and ultimately intentional instance; we will try to develop this idea further.

2. The Practical Inference Scheme

If Algirdas J. Greimas built a general model of narration that is widely accepted in the present-day semiotic community, there is no canonical model of action within the analytical community. This is because different approaches to the description of action have been proposed, each focusing on elements that cannot be ‘translated’ into analogous concepts in alternative views. For example, *intention* is one key concept in almost every theory of action, but different models attribute to this term very different meanings (for example considering it or not a mental ‘private’ dimension of existence). Here, we will focus *only* on the way in which, extending Wittgenstein’s (1953) perspective, Anscombe (1957) and von Wright (1971) have conceived a theory of action. Anscombe suggested to look at Aristotle’s *practical reasoning* to build a model for action descriptions, called *Practical Inference* scheme. We will present this model, which is grounded on what we will refer to as ‘public intentions’. Later on, we will compare this scheme to Greimas’s one.

In describing actions, we need to start from an observable physical modification of the world, that we will assign, in a non-generic way, to a person or *agent*. The agent is the one who answers the question “who is producing that modification?”, as long as this question presupposes a particular kind of answer, based on a grounding intention. There is *no action without intentions* ‘behind’ it; any unintentional physical modification produced by a human body is just a reaction or response. Many limit cases have been analysed by Anscombe and von Wright, but this proposition holds true for the general case.

An intention is something that has to do with some effects that the agent wants to obtain by acting. But action itself *cannot* be conceived as being an effect caused by the intention. The “basic action” immediately performed by the agent is the so-called *result* of action, through which the agent wants to produce some effects by further means of causal connections. To make an example, if I *want* to turn on the lights in a room (*intention*), I will push a certain button with my finger — and this pushing is the *result* of my action — so to activate a chain of mechanical and electrical *effects* ultimately turning on a bulb or a neon. Usually we refer to this whole as the *action* of turning the lights on. So, according to this view, intentions are not an isolable element in some causal chains, but exist only as long as an action is identified as such. We could say that intentions exist only *for someone* who interprets behaviour as action, with an “intentional stance”.

Intended effects cannot be ‘wishes’ without any reasonable chance to be caused by action. Anscombe wrote that an intention is properly defined between these two extremes: the effects that will still not be achieved by acting; and the effects that would happen anyway even without acting¹. In very simple terms, action description has to be *reasonable*. It is understood in this way by its agent, and by other people who share her *culture* (and so share the application of the term ‘reasonable’ in the specific context).

Von Wright (1971, p. 96) wrote that a Practical Inference is a teleological explanation turned upside-down. The PI has the form of an extended syllogism: its *conclusion* is an *action* — or, more precisely, a

¹ “‘But Q won’t happen, even if you do P’, or ‘but it will happen whether you do P or not’ is, in some way, to contradict the intention.” (Anscombe 1957, § 36).

disposition to act; but this ‘disposition’ has to be taken seriously. If the PI is correct, the agent will actually perform the action expressed in the conclusion. The *first premise* of the PI is the *intention* to do something, and our model should produce the best possible way for the agent (according to his or her knowledge) to obtain that intended effect. The *other premises* express the *cultural knowledge* that we have of the ‘language games’ in which action takes place. It is important to note that these cultural premises are what allows one to give a description including the *alternative possibilities* necessary for realising a real *choice*. There are *no alternatives without a language game* enabling one to “see” and describe them. Culture is what ‘thickens’ experience and gives freedom to agents.

The PI has one last element: the *effects* of action that are not intended, but that are still taken into consideration by the agent. The agent may know that her action will produce some ‘side effects’, and even if these effects are not strictly-speaking intentional, they are *further premises* for choosing how to act. If I know that by opening the window I will cool my room, but I will also let a fastidious fly come in, this second effect contributes to the description of my action (even if it is not at all intended). With the PI we are describing what motivates action from the agent’s point of view. So, conversely, the farthest effects obtained by action, if inconceivable by the agent at the moment of acting, are not contemplated (we will see that the Narrative Scheme focuses instead on those farthest effects).

So action presupposes an intention, understandable against the background of some cultural premises. These constraints to what an action is, give rise to a very minimalistic general model of action, the Practical Inference. The following is an unconventional way of representing the PI, but it is homologous to the more traditional (syllogistic) representations of it:

Action: Intention – Premises – Result – Effects

There is a formal correspondence between this way of representing the PI and the Narrative Scheme. However, this correspondence will help us to highlight many important differences between the two models and their two objects. We conclude this brief presentation of the PI

by remarking that the intentions grounding it are not something “in the head” (Anscombe wrote that intentions are by no means mental processes, 1957, § 27), but something that is ‘seen’ *at the same time* that an action is recognized as such. For example, moving a finger is not an action without wondering (thanks to the cultural background common to agent and interpreter of the action) *why* it is moved. And if I can say that someone is turning the lights on, attributing meaning to a behaviour, *then* I also have, *at the same time*, some understanding of the action’s intention. It should be clear that this way of conceiving intentions has not much to do with Roland Barthes’s authorial intention ‘in the head’, or with Umberto Eco’s (1990) *intentio auctoris*. Wittgenstein’s ‘public intention’ is much closer to Eco’s *intentio operis*. They are actually the same thing, if we consider texts as results of action. Intention is always *operi*, in the ablative case: realised *by means of* text. Of course, in Wittgenstein’s perspective there would then be no room for any private *intentio auctoris*, because every intention exists *only* when it is realised by means of action.

3. The Canonical Narrative Scheme

Narration produces what we could call an ‘immanence filter’: the fact that, in interpreting a text, we cannot attribute responsibility for their choices to the text’s actors. It is not Mersault who chose to shoot — someone else chose for him. In fiction, there is a distance between those who *seem* to act in the fictional world (the actors), and those who *really* make choices for the actors (the author).

Greimas (1984, 1987) developed a general model for describing narration, somehow generalising Aristotle’s idea that a narrative is the presentation of one main action. The *Narrative Scheme* consists of four formal elements that can be thought both as (paradigmatic) abstract components defining any possible narrated action, or as (syntagmatic) sequential steps of an action’s actual narration. This is the usual representation of the model:

***Narration:* Manipulation – Competence – Performance – Sanction**

Any narrated action requires a *motivation*, the *means* to bring it to the end, the realisation of a physical or other *activity*, and the recognition of some *effects*. It is important to remark that each of these components is (at least implicitly) *narrated*: communicated to the reader. What interests us the most, are the peculiarities of this model differentiating it from the former model of action (the Practical Inference). These peculiarities are motivated by the specificity of narration, and this is also the reason why this model cannot be properly used (as it is) to understand non-narrated action.

The elements of the NS can be analyzed through six relational *actants*: Sender/Receiver, Subject/Object and Helper/Opponent. So in the Manipulation phase, the Sender attributes a task to the Receiver (which is also the Subject, *hero* of the story); Competence regards the preparation of the Subject for completing the task, thanks to the Helper; in Performance, the Subject defeats the Opponent and completes the task, obtaining the Object; Sanction is the conclusion, in which the Sender recognizes the success of the Subject. The simplest example instantiates each actant into a different mean of communication, into a different *actor*. The Sender could be a great king, the Receiver and Subject a mighty knight, the Helper a magical sword, the Opponent an evil dragon, the Object a kidnapped princess. What the actantial perspective highlights, is that we need to look *for the whole*, attributing a relational role to the elements of the narrative, without focusing on its apparent constituents (the actors). Let us now compare each NS phase with the corresponding element of the PI.

4. Comparing Practical Inference and Narrative Scheme

4.1. Manipulation VS Intention

Manipulation is the most important phase of the NS — and it is formally comparable with Intention in the PI. The choice of the term “manipulation” is not casual at all: in narratives, the hero simply *obeys* the Sender. The hero has to be conceived both as Subject (of action) and Receiver (of the Sender’s command). *As* Subject, s/he is “acting” without ever wondering why; *as* Receiver, s/he is driven to action by

the Sender's will. Hero's action is effectively *caused* by the Sender. According to von Wright's (1971) terminology, the NS provides a *quasi-teleological* explanation of narrated action (that is, a causal explanation looking like a teleological one).

The hero *could not say no* to the Sender: otherwise there would be no story. The story that we are reading depends on the successful Manipulation of the hero. This is the reason why Greimas suggested to look for the four steps of the model *backwards*, from the end of the narrative towards its beginning. Only in this way we can be sure of having found the correct Manipulation at the beginning of narration: going backwards, there has to be a Manipulation, and this Manipulation is always successful. Let us imagine a knight refusing the king's command, because he fears the dragon. We would make a mistake in saying that Manipulation has failed. Instead, we need to look for the *effective* Sender of the narrative: *fear*. In Greimas's scheme there are no afterthoughts. The hero is by no means choosing to obey the Sender. There is always one effective cause of her action, a modal *necessitation* of action, and the hero *must* act in a certain way.

In some stories the hero happens to be also the Sender of her own action, whenever it is the hero who *wants* to act in a certain way. For example, if there is no king and the knight fights the dragon because he loves the princess. In such cases, the same actor instantiates Sender, Receiver and Subject. But still this does not sum up to a 'full' agent's will. As Greimas has shown, the will of a self-manipulating hero is *still split* into two actants: Sender and Receiver. Even if the actor instantiating them is the same one, the two actants remain distinct. In narratives, that hero who wants to do something, is actually giving himself a *command*, in a meaningful sense of the expression. This command has to be analysed into the actant giving it, and the actant receiving it — and this is not enough to say that the hero is making choices. In our example of the knight in love, the Sender of the narrative would be *love*, driving the knight to act. *Narrated action is specifically unintentional*.

On the other hand, everyday actions analysed with the Practical Inference are focused on the agent's intention — the fact that s/he *wants* to do something. This will is authentic, and cannot be conceived as an order that the agent gives to him or herself, nor it can be avoided. We

can look for reasons and psychological drives, but intention is what has to be reached if we want to grasp the core of action. In everyday action descriptions, there are *no sufficient causes*, and agents' will cannot be split into Sender and Receiver. Greimas' NS is a successful way to *eliminate intentions* in descriptions; but for this very reason it is not appropriate for analysing actions.

4.2. Competence vs Premises

Narrative analysis *could* investigate the hero's 'choice', and above all the fundamental question: "Will the hero accept the Sender's order?" There are semiotic models (most notably Eco's one) dealing with *progressive determination* in reading, going *towards* the end of the narrative. But we need to be extremely careful: whenever we ask questions about the hero's apparent 'choices', we are not (as it may seem) talking about the hero's will. In fact the hero is a 'paper person', an actor, who does not have any effective will. What are we talking about, then? There are two alternative correct answers to this question.

The first is that we are talking about the hero's *destiny*. Very concisely, narrated action is necessitated because the hero has *no will* and in the text world there is *no chance*. Will and chance are what would turn a deterministic world into a world permitting free choices. So it is correct to say that in narratives an effective fate exists. We could substitute *salva veritate* the question "Will the hero accept the Sender's order?", with the alternative question: "Is the hero *fated* to accept the Sender's order?" This happens because analyzing a story *backwards*, there are no alternative possibilities in it. We are always analyzing a whole, in which everything — and especially the hero's action — serves a greater purpose. So we never wonder if the hero is able to change the story's course, but simply what the story's course is.

We can also read stories *forwards*. And this is related with the second correct description that we can give of heroes' 'choices'. Whenever, while reading, we wonder about alternative possibilities of action and of story development, we are actually wondering about *which choices the author has taken*. The hero has no will, and the author is the person in charge. It would be non-sense to ask what Pinocchio prefers; while it is perfectly sensed to ask what Collodi has chosen.

Considering narratives *forwards*, we could rewrite the question “Will the hero accept the Sender’s order?”, in this way: “Has the *author chosen* that the hero will accept the Sender’s command?”

A narrative, in Greimas’ model, does not present any possible alternative in its development. For Eco’s approach, instead, what matters are the alternative choices that shaped the story. But these choices have to be re-conducted to the author’s strategy — because it is only the author who actually makes choices in a narrative. Narrated action cannot be described as we would do with a real agent. We must either focus on the story’s *fate*, or on the *fate’s author*.

These are the reasons why Competence in the NS is always *logically incomplete*. Heroes can act if and only if they act. The hero’s acting does not imply that s/he could have acted differently, or could have refrained from acting. Greimas’s model implies that the hero *could not do otherwise*. Competence is just a step that will necessarily bring to one determined Performance. The use of the verb “to be able to” in the NS is not the current one, meaning: “*I may act, and I may not*”. The narrative “be able to” is perfectly compatible with manipulation: “*I have to, so I can*”.

Instead, agents have a *logically complete* competence: they can act and they can refrain from acting, or they can act differently. The everyday use of “to be able to” is that of *optional* realisation. This (the existence of alternative possibilities) is the first philosophical requirement for having free will. Also, actions produce effects because we think that if there were no actions, those effects would not have existed. This (the effective intentional determination of one possibility among many) is the second philosophical requirement for having free will. And an effective theory of action requires to account for free will.

4.3. Performance VS Result

We are arguing that narration turns action into another thing. In everyday life, intentions are really linked to agents. There is no ‘immanence filter’: whoever answers the question “who did that?”, is the agent, *tout court*. In narratives, instead, to say that the actor acted in a certain way is a ‘shallow’ description, needed only to account for the fictional world’s appearance. This description is incomplete if not

complemented by another answer, regarding who actively *makes* that act *happen* — the author. But if we described also everyday actions as if there was an author, a puppet–master turning agents into actors, they would not be actions anymore.

We have seen that *action* is something that an agent: 1) wants to do; 2) can do and can refrain from doing; 3) ultimately does. *Narrated action* instead is something that the hero: 1) has to do; 2) can do but cannot refrain from doing; 3) ultimately does. For the NS, before Performance there is a *linear* sequence of necessitated presuppositions. For the PI, before action there is a *space* of alternative possibilities. It is clear, then, that only if analyzed through the PI, action is grounded on *choice*: effective determination of some paths in a modal structure (von Wright 1971, pp. 98–99; Eco 1988). To which extent is narrated action still action, if such a fundamental trait is missing in narratives? We would like to remark again that, taking intentions into account, we do *not* undertake a biography or psychology of the agent, but we just aim for a teleological description of human behavior. Intentions are elements of public descriptions, and not a ‘private reality’.

4.4. Sanction VS Effects

The Effects in the PI are only those taken into consideration by the agent. In the NS, instead, Sanction regards the effects of the hero’s action as they are recognized by the Sender. It is important to highlight that Sanction has nothing to do with the hero’s intention or consciousness. Sanction is the end *of the narrative*, in which everything finds a place, and we finally see ‘why’ the Sender manipulated the hero. Sanction has to be drawn taking into account *all the effects* of Performance, and not only those effects ‘known’ to the hero. In (fictional or factual) narratives, the significance of actions and events depends on *their farthest consequences*.

Let us take for example the assassination of Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip. If we use the PI to understand this action, we should ask ourselves why Princip did so, which effects he aimed at, and more generally which potential side–effects he could have taken into consideration before acting. Princip, as agent, could not have a total knowledge of his present world, and furthermore he could not foresee (but

(but he could guess) the future development of it. Using the PI, we do not worry about the causes of action, but about the agent's reasons and choices.

Instead, if we use the NS, we put Princip's assassination into a story, including all the effects it had (until the story's end). Narration gives a role to the causes that brought Princip to act, and we instantiate a Sender *for the whole story*. Sanction would not regard just Princip's role. We shall not confuse Sanction with the Performance's immediate effects (the death of Franz Ferdinand). Sanction is *another step* that gives a comprehensive meaning to Performance, re-conducting it to the Sender, and showing the 'real reasons' of the story. In our example, Sanction would be the First World War. The NS permits us to see what there is in common between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*: History has to be told. But what is 'lost in narration' is the intentional ground of action. Princip as actor becomes simply the minion of a greater destiny.

5. Conclusion: Fate and its Author

We have shown the irreducible differences between Practical Inference and Narrative Scheme. Greimas's theory is adequate to explain narration, and for this very reason it is focused on something different than action, at least if we conceive action following Wittgenstein. Now we can expound further on the relationship between action and narration. What has to be avoided, is any consideration going against the specificities of action and narration as we have seen them so far. So it would be incorrect to look for an actional model for narratives, as if actors were agents, or to simply give narrative descriptions of real life actions, as if agents were actors. Ricoeur (1971) contrasted text world and world of actions, and then he wanted to reduce the second to the first, by 'writing down' action, removing intentions, and looking only for structural significance. We believe instead that *both* a teleological and a quasi-teleological model should be used (in a non generic way) in order to understand cultural production and social action.

Ricoeur and Eco have developed models taking into account both sides of the issue (narration and action). Both aim to understand the

role of the reader on the one hand, and the relationship between narrated actions and the world in which we live on the other. In this paper it is not possible to detail affinities and differences between the two thinkers, nor to adequately analyze any of the two theories. We can only raise a few questions. Do we attribute intentions to actors, even if we know that they do not have a will? Is this what helps us to 'identify' with the hero, that we see as a free person, with an open future? These and other questions regard the application of action theory to narratives, and textual interpretation as a 'forward looking' activity. On the other hand, do we see real actions as somehow part of determining structures and stories, when looking at them after they come about to an effective conclusion? Does historical interpretation find or introduce an (impersonal) 'authorial' figure behind events and social actions? These and other questions regard the application of narrative theory to real life, and everyday interpretation as a 'backward looking' activity.

A key to this matter lies in one last question, often 'repressed' by semiotics. Narration can be conceived as such, only because there is an *author* taking responsibility for everything in the text world, emptying agents of their intentions and turning them into actors. *Which scheme shall we use to describe this author? The Narrative Scheme, or the Practical Inference?* Here we can only suggest the sketch of an answer.

Greimas suggested that we should consider text production as a narrative Performance, and the text's *enunciator* (formal counterpart of the author), as its Sender. *From within the text world*, the author is an unintentional instance, the 'god' responsible for every detail in it. Destiny, of which narrative is the language (as Barthes wrote), is an *immanent necessity*, and the actors in it have no decision power whatsoever. This is perfectly explained by the Narrative Scheme, conveying narrated action's and its effects' responsibility towards the Sender. But this is one half of the truth. Destiny, fully examined, is an immanent necessity determined by a *transcendent choice*. An author has to make effective choices, in order for narratives to have a fate. This is actually very easy to see intuitively: it's Collodi's choice that finally turns Pinocchio into a child. Collodi could have chosen otherwise, and Collodi's will is the only effective factor responsible for Pinocchio's transmutation. Texts, *from within our world of actions*, are intentional products, and cannot be thought differently. Therefore, only the Practical Inference can de-

fine the intentional agent responsible for the text world. Explaining Collodi's production from an historical, structural perspective would be a further step and not a replacement of his intention — we would have to look for 'Collodi's author', for an instance turning Collodi into an actor. In fact, with the NS we can only 'displace' responsibility from the hero to the Sender. On the contrary, the PI attributes intentions *to the agent*, to the person performing action.

The author had been split by Barthes into *enunciation* and *intention*, and for him semiotics needed to consider only the first 'half' of it. Today, we suggest to reconsider the author by using *both* the NS and the PI. If we want to produce a solid interpretation of texts, these two 'halves' of the author need to be reconnected, without thinking that the second is 'private', or 'lost'. In fact, whenever we read something, we attribute to it an intentional nature, and to understand its meaning we need to formulate also a teleological explanation: "Why was this text produced?". To situate a text into a communicative environment is the only way to understand its sense effects. It seems to us that this idea can be found in Eco's works. The role of the reader is to find a specific author in front of herself, and this is not an immediate task; but it is not a task that can be avoided.

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