

Narrative possibility and narrative explanation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 10 May 2017

Keywords:
Narrative explanation
Counterfactual explanation
Contingency
Branching time
Historical or narrative possibility
Historical or narrative counterfactuals
Sideshadowing
Disnarration
Virtual narratives

ABSTRACT

Narratives are about not only what actually happened, but also what might have. And narrative explanations make productive use of these unrealized possibilities. I discuss narrative explanation as a form of counterfactual, difference-making explanation, with a demanding qualification: the counterfactual conditions are historically or narratively (not merely logically or physically) possible. I consider these issues in connection with literary, historical and scientific narratives.

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To tell what has happened is to tell why it happened.

Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*

To tell what happened, in the context of what did not, is to tell why it happened.

1. Introduction

It is often argued that narratives are most appropriate for *describing what* happened. They are not appropriate for *explaining why* it happened precisely because they don't go beyond description, most famously or infamously because they don't (and given their descriptive function shouldn't) include lawlike generalizations about what *would* happen (or *would have* happened) *if*; they are, and should be, only about what *did*. In a previous paper (Beatty, 2016), I argued to the contrary that narratives are especially appropriate for describing what took place *in the context of what might have instead*. Here I focus on the explanatory and not just the descriptive character of narratives, and the role of what might have been. I'm concerned here with what was “narratively” or “historically” possible at a specific time and place, not just logically or physically possible, and how narratives make productive use of such real (very real) though unrealized possibilities.

I'll be using branching diagrams like Fig. 1 to analyze narrative structure and the structure of the world described and explained by narratives.¹ Here the occurrence of event A leaves open the possibility of either B1 or B2. The occurrence of B1 leaves open the possibility of either O1 or O2, and forecloses the possibility of B2 and along with it O3 and O4. A–B1–O2 is one possible history in this world, A–B2–O4 another. There are multiple possible histories in this world; only one can come to pass.

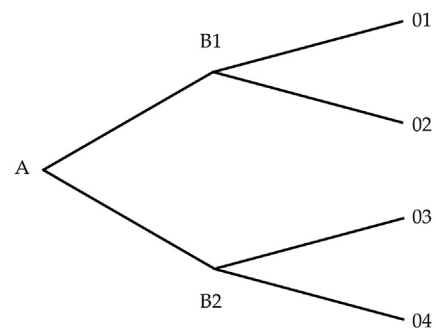


Fig. 1.

¹ See Nuel Belnap (2005) for an excellent introduction to the sort of “branching time logic” represented here. See also Belnap, Perloff, & Xu (2001) and Ohrstrom and Hasle (1995) and references therein. An excellent example of the application of this convention to evolutionary biology is Eric Desjardins (2011).

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My thesis is that the narrative A–B1–O2 *explains* O2 in the context of surrounding branches. Such a narrative is a causal explanation in the sense that it highlights *counterfactual difference-making events*. But it is a particular kind of counterfactual difference-making explanation that satisfies two conditions:

- 1) An alleged cause like B1 makes a counterfactual difference to the outcome. Had B1 not occurred, then O2 would not have occurred (check the diagram).
- 2) Counterfactual alternatives to alleged causes like B1 are historically or narratively possible. The particular events leading up to and including the occurrence of A left open the possibility of B2 as well as B1 (check the diagram). For the time being, I'll refer to such historically or narratively possible alternatives as *real possibilities*.

The unrealized histories A–B2–O3 and A–B2–O4 are relevant context. They communicate that B1 was not bound to occur at the time of A, B2 was also a real possibility, and that O2 would not have happened had B2 occurred instead.

2. Regret

If I made a mistake yesterday, I regret it, and I replay it, and I have to remind myself that yesterday is as unchangeable as the Conquest of Peru. For I still sense the other choices I might have made

Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*

I begin with regret because it's familiar—the stuff of so many stories that we tell ourselves and others.² Familiarity helps here, because regret stories do not merely describe what's going on in our lives, they also explain the situations we find ourselves in. If it can be seen how regret stories explain, then perhaps it will be easier to see how other sorts of stories, including historical and scientific narratives, explain as well. Clearly there are differences between regret narratives and, say, evolutionary narratives—for example, the culpability and remorse that the former involve! But the poignant features of regret narratives will hopefully motivate close attention to ways in which they help us make sense of things.

In Kate Chopin's short story "Regret," Mlle ("Mamzelle") Aurélie has a transformative experience when caring for her absent neighbor's children:

It took her some days to become accustomed to the laughing, the crying, the chattering that echoed through the house and around it all day long. And it was not the first or the second night that she could sleep comfortably with little Elodie's hot, plump body pressed close against her, and the little one's warm breath beating her cheek like the fanning of a bird's wing.³

But she came to cherish the children's intrusion. The story tells us very little about Mlle Aurélie's life before this, except that she had once been proposed to, had declined, and was still unmarried at the age of fifty. At the end of the story, when the children return home, she grieves terribly, realizing that her opportunity to have a family is gone.

²If you're one of those people who has "no regrets," then (first, good luck with that, and second) this part of the paper may require more effort on your part.

³The whole story is too long to quote, but is really very short. It's widely available online, e.g., <http://www.katechopin.org/pdfs/Kate%20Chopin,%20Regret.pdf>.

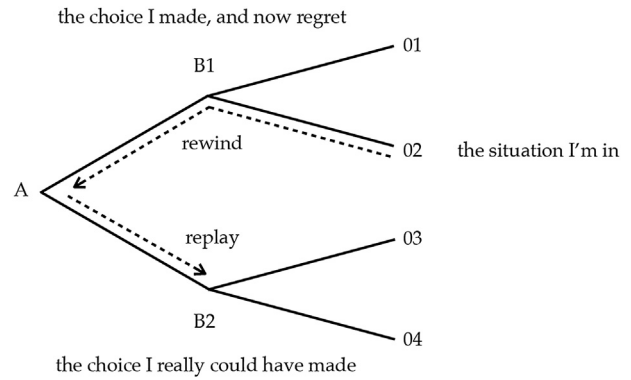


Fig. 2.

I want to emphasize two points about the structure of regret narratives. The first involves the (familiar) contingency of the events we regret, and the second involves the (familiar) bearing of the regretted events on the situations in which we find ourselves.

I don't like the situation I'm in, O2 (Fig. 2). How did I get here? I reflect back to the situation I was in earlier, B1. At that point I had two options, O1 and O2. I suppose O2 is as good, or better, than O1. But neither outcome is desirable. I rewind my life back past B1 to A and replay it in my mind, this time remembering that B2 was also an option at the time, and choosing it instead of B1. And from there I envision two different options open to me, O3 and O4, both much better than O1 or O2. I should've chosen B2 when I had the chance. I rewind and replay again. Maybe B2 wasn't really an option? Yes it was. But maybe B2 wouldn't have put me in a better position after all? Yes it would have. Sigh. I regret my choice of B1.

I keep reminding myself that B2 is no longer possible. It's difficult because I'm painfully aware that it was open to me. I should focus on my open future rather than dwelling on the closed past. But foreclosed possibilities like B2 are still relevant. Sure, it was B1 that got me into my current situation. But invoking B1 alone doesn't make sense of the outcome, which requires reference to B2 as well. I regret B1 because B2 would have led to a better result, and also because B2 was a real option at that point in my life. I don't regret choices I made when no other choices were available to me, or when the only choices available would have put me in the same situation as the choice I made.

"Regret is the prototypical counterfactual emotion . . ." (Lorini & Schwarzenruber, 2011, p. 817; Zeelenberg & Van Dijk, 2005, p. 148 use the very same "prototypical" terminology; the former source is more logical/philosophical while the latter is more psychological). Regret involves comparing what actually happened with what in fact did not. I would just add to this common understanding of regret that the contrary-to-fact condition in question—the choice not made—was nonetheless a very real possibility up to the moment when the regretted deed was done. The alternative should not be seen as simply contrary to fact; it was an undeniably real possibility at the time.

But what does this have to do with narratives? Surely narratives are about what happened—in this case, A, B1 and O2—and not what did not. What would B2, O3 and O4 be doing in a narrative leading up to O2? Would their presence pose a problem for the very idea of a regret narrative? More like the opposite. As I'll discuss shortly, there is a substantial and growing body of literature concerning the significance of unrealized possibilities and the important role they play in narratives. They may only be alluded to, rather than explicitly narrated. But even the allusion to them makes clear the significance of what did happen, in contrast to what might

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