

# The Use of Narrative in Public Philosophy

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**ABSTRACT:** For the past two years on my podcast, *Hi-Phi Nation*, I have been experimenting with using storytelling to increase audience and engagement with contemporary academic philosophy. I offer this paper as a motivation and guide for philosophers interested in how to use storytelling to increase audience engagement in public-facing work. The key is to use the narrative structure to tie a philosophical issue to a character whose changes in fortune over time arise because of a conflict in philosophical ideas, the resolution of which requires the examination of those ideas.

**KEYWORDS:** public philosophy, engagement, storytelling, academic writing

## I. The Problem of Public Engagement in Philosophy

**WHEN THE WRITER MICHAEL LEWIS** decided to write about the life and works of psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky for what eventually became *The Undoing Project*, he had to dive into specialized academic writing. Here's what he said about the genre:

The readers of academic papers, in the mind's eye of their authors, are at best skeptical, and more commonly hostile. The writers of these papers aren't trying to engage their readers, much less give them pleasure. They're trying to survive them. (Lewis 2016)

Unfortunately, Lewis's characterization of academic philosophy could not be truer today, at least philosophy in the tradition in which I have been trained. In true Socratic spirit, we socialize today's philosophers to think and speak by way of, and in response to, *objections*. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. The inability of our academic work to engage those who are not our academic peers is, one

might argue, a small price to pay for producing work that passes the highest standards of epistemic scrutiny.

Yet good academic philosophy does not necessarily make good public philosophy. When writing with the public in mind, our primary aim is less to justify than to educate, entertain, or advocate for social change. The work is also not targeted toward a community of peers with expert knowledge, but a varied group including children, casual hobbyists, and people who never went to college. It is no wonder that our skills and standards for quality academic work train us poorly for work in the public sphere.

Some academics-turned-successful-popular-writers, like Steven Pinker, believe the problem is with academic writing (Pinker 2014): we need to reduce jargon; we need to simplify word choice and syntax. In effect, we need to write as we teach our freshmen to. Pinker is to a large extent right. In fact, bad writing is as much a problem for our peer-facing work as it is with our public-facing work. But Pinker overlooks a key distinction—the central problem is that academic writing is engineered for epistemic justification, not audience engagement. Fix the writing all you want, but you end up with a form of communication that taps into only one particular aspect of human thinking, an aspect that only a small segment of the world's population—academics—are disposed to enjoy and are disposed to do particularly well.

## II. The Appeal of Narrative

The type of writing that has the most impact—whether popularizing math, science, or even business or finance—is narrative, not argumentative. And the narrative is not just a hook or instrument for generating interest in the argument; it does not disappear once the serious argumentative work begins. The narrative provides the structure: the argument serves to advance the story rather than vice versa. The claim that people prefer narrative over argument needs no further evidence than comparing the sales figures of *The Da Vinci Code* and Da Vinci's *Notebooks*, or the time humans spend gossiping rather than experimenting, or the number of people who prefer spending an evening watching blockbuster films rather than CSPAN.

That people prefer narrative is no surprise to anyone who has paid attention to cognitive science in the last forty years (or for that matter, human life of the last 10,000). Nisbett and Ross showed experimentally what many people know from experience, that a single colorful anecdote can outweigh or undermine even the most perfect, meticulously collected data about a phenomenon (Nisbett and Ross 1980). All the statistics in the world about the safety of a Ford, for example, pale in comparison to that vivid anecdote your cousin tells you about that one Ford that spontaneously combusted and killed a whole family. Pervading the world of business management, marketing, and all matters of capitalist-engineering are books, consultants, videos, and theories about crafting the narrative about a

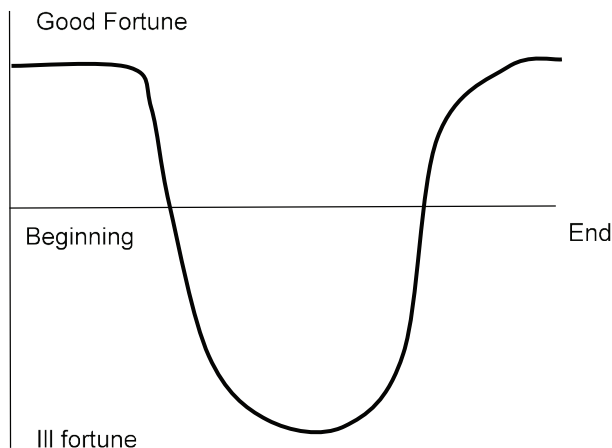
firm or product. Advertisers and professional propagandists seeking public support for wars, industries, politicians, or political movements do not present the best epistemic justification for a position. They find the right story. For better or worse, humans are far more creatures of story than creatures of argument.

One good way to increase public engagement with philosophy, then, is to engineer our public work using the power of narrative. This isn't easy, ethically or practically. Narrative derives much of its power because it bypasses our better epistemic faculties, something that philosophy, and the academy generally, is supposed to correct, not exploit. Moreover, narrative storytelling and philosophy make for strange companions: storytelling does not usually have a thesis. When it does ("The lesson of this story is . . ."), stating it explicitly is often highly distasteful. Storytelling entails creating narrative suspense, hiding key elements for a later reveal. Engineering a story requires aesthetic decisions that may increase rather than decrease clarity and understanding.

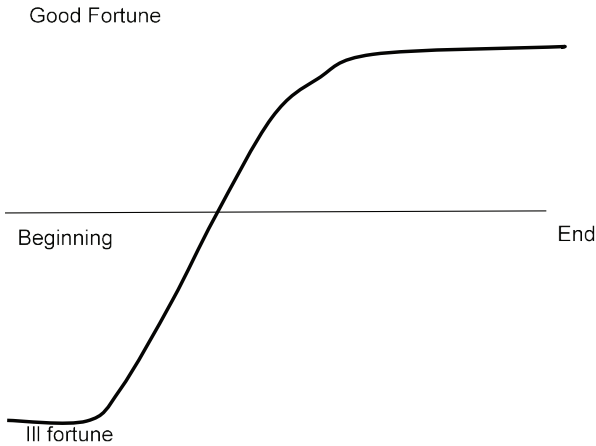
These challenges for those writing popular science or philosophy are not insurmountable. There are ways to integrate narrative elements into philosophical productions such as writing, talks, videos, and audio. This integration is what I will focus on in the remaining sections.

### III. The Structure of Narrative

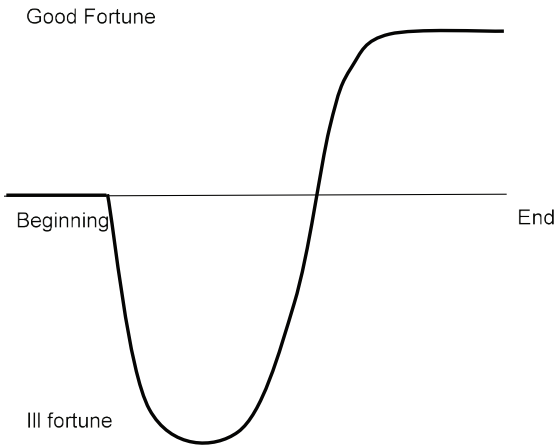
The author Kurt Vonnegut famously claimed to capture the shape of many famous stories in literary history in a single model (Vonnegut 2005). There are only two dimensions to a story: time on the x-axis, and a protagonist's fortune from bad to good on the y-axis. In other words, stories are about changes in fortune over time. One story schema might begin with a protagonist enjoying good fortune who then loses it in some sort of tragedy, and must fight to regain what she has lost (the story of Job, the story of Steve Jobs). Here's how this story would be shaped:



Here’s another example: a most ill-fortuned soul living in the harshest of conditions climbs out of misery—thanks to magic, marvel or merit—and finds good fortune, living happily ever after (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*).



Finally, Pixar claims that almost all of their blockbuster animated films follow a person leading a boring, mundane, formulaic life who, after a chance encounter, experiences adventures of fortune and misfortune, leading to some kind of revelation (*Wall-E*, *Up*, *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*).



Vonnegut’s models may not be universal, but they are representative. The fact that so many stories can fit into such a simple model suggests that human responsiveness to stories is predictable. The cognitive scientist Jim Davies identifies

the power of stories as rooted in our cognitive dispositions—we naturally enjoy thinking about the mental lives of those just like us who face challenges to their social positions (Davies 2014). These dispositions explain our attraction to gossip, jokes, and even religion.

Various elements drive the moments when a person's fortune changes in a story. *This American Life* founder and host Ira Glass identifies characters, action, conflicts, and stakes as the central features of good stories (Abel 2015). Sometimes a sheer attractiveness of a character's persona can drive a story forward, whether it is the storyteller, protagonist, or villain. More often, though, mere action is enough to keep a listener riveted. In one early episode of *This American Life*, Ira Glass tells the story of Brett, a man standing on a subway platform watching well-dressed, ordinary-looking stranger approach other waiting passengers by saying to each of them, "You're out" or "You're in." Nothing else is happening. There is no threat or reward. The man simply walks around passing inexplicable judgment on others. Brett grows nervous when the stranger approaches him. He can't make heads or tails of why some of the other waiting passengers make the cut while others don't. A woman in her fifties is in, for example, as is a boy with baggy shorts, but a man wearing a cardigan is out. Brett desperately doesn't want to be out. Finally, the stranger comes up to Brett . . .

Glass uses this example to show that nothing particularly exciting or important needs to happen for a listener to be curious about what comes next. Suspense in storytelling generates what cognitive scientists call "need to know"—the human desire to settle ambiguity and uncertainty. Humans grow curious about a narrative once it is begun and its conclusion is withheld, even if the information it reveals is not independently valuable to the listener. For example, the listener does not have any independent stake in whether Brett is "out" or "in." Brett has a stake in what happens next, but we care about what happens next simply by because the information is withheld. We have so much of a stake that we'll wait through a thirty-second commercial for the answer.

It turns out Brett was "in." He felt so relieved.

These features of storytelling offer us a guide. The human mind is disposed to engage with the narrative form, and stays with a story of a character undergoing a series of oscillations in fortune until there is an ending or resolution. How might we harness this disposition for public philosophy? We have to connect philosophy to a character. We need to find a way for philosophy to contribute to the character's change in fortune over time. We need to use the action in a story to manufacture a "need to know," giving the listener a stake in a philosophical question. And we need philosophical considerations to be essential to the resolution of the story.

On the first season of *Hi-Phi Nation*, I featured the story of Larycia Hawkins, a professor at Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian college in Illinois. A week before final exams in December, Karly, a student whom Larycia advised,

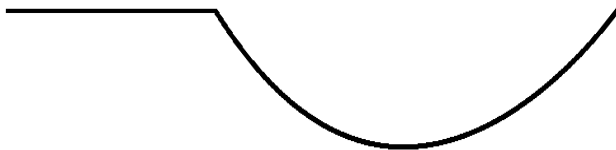
decided that she and other Wheaton students would wear hijabs publicly to call attention to the Syrian refugee crisis. Upon Karly's request, Larycia decided that she too would wear the hijab during Advent. She posted a Facebook message containing a picture of herself wearing the hijab, followed by a message of unity stating that Christians and Muslims worship the same god. A few days later, Larycia was suspended from her job.

Another example: in 2006, Panera Bread Company sued White City Shopping LP for a breach of contract. White City Shopping LP is the owner of a strip mall in suburban Massachusetts. It entered into a ten-year leasing agreement with Panera in 2001. The lease contained a "non-compete" clause, according to which White City was prohibited from leasing another space in the plaza to an establishment that primarily sells sandwiches. In the fall of 2006, White City executed a lease agreement with the Mexican food chain Qdoba in the same plaza. Panera's lawsuit claimed that White City was in violation of the lease agreement on the grounds that tacos, burritos, and quesadillas count as sandwiches. The subsequent civil case required the judge to entertain arguments and affidavits on the category of "sandwiches" and yield a verdict.<sup>1</sup>

Both of these stories focus on conflicts that cause misfortune for one of the involved parties. The conflict arises precisely because particular stakeholders in the story make contentious philosophical assumptions. In the first case, stakeholders assume that different religions cannot make reference to the same deity with their words and thoughts. In the second case, stakeholders assume that there is a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that determine membership in the class of "sandwiches." These are two particularly technical philosophical questions that the stories have the potential to enliven. A final feature of these two examples is that the answer to the philosophical question has repercussions for either someone's life or public policy. Any combination of these features can be evoked to create a good story for a piece of public philosophy.

#### **IV. Weaving Stories with Philosophy**

The next step after determining the right story—for the podcast or essay—is engineering the narrative. A very straightforward use of the story in a public-facing piece has the following structure:



The horizontal line represents the story told in chronological order to completion, and the curve represents an exploration, even a defended opinion, about the philosophical issues that the story raises. Shortly after Larycia was suspended, many articles appeared in the popular press using this very structure: first the story was told, followed by a discussion of the issue in the form of an argument. That is, the writer offered a thesis, arguments, and responses to objections. Essentially, the writer simply concatenated the story with the philosophy.

A simple line-and-curve structure suffices with certain stories such as Larycia's, which dealt with a controversial issue in American public life, and contained inherent drama surrounding a specific philosophical question. But this structure will not always suffice, nor is it particularly artful. Julia Barton, an editor of *Revisionist History*, gave me notes on how I could improve the structure of the stories related in *Hi-Phi Nation* after its first season. To create maximal engagement, she suggested that I needed to weave the intellectual content more fully into the storytelling.

The key word here is "weave." A piece of public philosophy shouldn't be a piece of storytelling concatenated with a philosophy essay. Even one additional structural element will lead to a different form of engagement. Consider this structure:



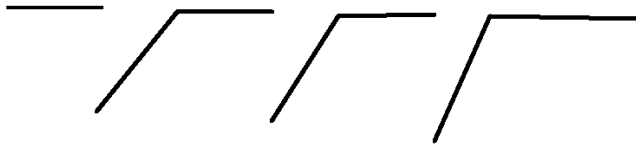
For example, in my episode on Larycia Hawkins, I ended the story when Larycia's fortunes were low without revealing the final outcome of the conflict. In the piece's curve, I talked about the history of the relationship between African-Americans and Islam, and then discussed the philosophical-theological history concerning the origins and reference of the terms for god in Christianity and Islam. When the academic discussion was over, the story revealed what happened to every character in the story—Larycia, Karly, and another colleague at Wheaton who was involved in the scandal. This simple and effective structure used the conflict of the story to raise the intellectual questions. It also exploited narrative suspense or "need to know" to hold listeners' attention so they would want to know about the intellectual issues the story raised and how these issues could help them understand what happens next.

It's important to notice that specialized academic writing in philosophy also follows a general schema corresponding to Vonnegut's structure for stories, and that a piece that fails to weave storytelling with intellectual content will simply

read and engage like a standard philosophy paper, i.e., an argument for a thesis. Instead, those creating narratives in any genre or medium should consider using the narrative elements of the story strategically to characterize, illustrate, and compel the listener to know the intellectual content, and use the argumentative elements strategically to advance, contextualize, and illuminate the story.

Alison Gopnik's "How an 18th Century Philosopher Helped Solve my Midlife Crisis," published in *the Atlantic*, is a paradigmatic case of successful weaving. The central story concerns Gopnik's life fell apart mid-life. After her divorce, she experienced a sexual identity crisis, uprooted her life by moving to another city, and could not motivate herself to continue the work she had received a large grant to complete. The central piece of academic investigation in the article focused on whether David Hume had ever read or interacted with work of the Buddha in the eighteenth century. The article concerned the case for the influence of Buddhist eliminativist metaphysics in Hume's philosophy, a topic of significant scholarly interest but not particularly compelling to the general public.

Gopnik structured her piece so that there was a single narrative thread throughout telling the personal story of her mid-life crisis. Also interspersed throughout was the historical and philosophical evidence of Hume's contact with Buddhist metaphysics. In the figure below, the horizontal segments represent Gopnik's mid-life story, and diagonal lines represent the historical and philosophical scholarship.



A key feature of this structure is that Gopnik's story cut off strategically to generate "need to know," first at the moment when Gopnik's life reached its most unfortunate moment. The historical and philosophical evidence was then reported orthogonally until a key piece of evidence indicating Buddhist influences on Hume intersected with Gopnik's own story. Then, Gopnik continued to report the development of her life story until another strategic moment—when she moved to a new city and found a new love. At that point, she re-invoked the academic argument. In the end, the reader encounters a piece about interweaving fortunes in which Gopnik's life-fortune becomes entangled with the truth or falsity of a rather pedantic historical and philosophical issue in which the reader now has a stake. As much as the reader is rooting for Gopnik, the reader is also rooting for the truth of Gopnik's thesis.

There are two elements of this structure that work effectively. First, when a particular subject matter—such as the question of whether Hume could have



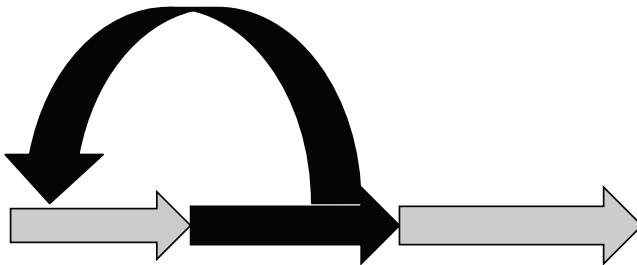
been influenced by the Buddha—feels too arcane, unengaging, or academic, making it into a story of one's fortunate and misfortunate hunt for the truth of that academic issue gives the reader a stake in the issue.<sup>2</sup>

The second element of Gopnik's structure that works well is that it weaves the story structure with the philosophical content. A central challenge in narratively-structured academic work, or academically-driven narrative work, is that it must satisfy competing promissory notes to the reader/listener: that the listener will learn something new, and that the story is going somewhere worth following. If the story goes on for too long, the listener is not learning anything new about philosophy, just listening to the story of a mid-life crisis. If the philosophy section goes on for too long, then the listener is hearing about a thesis she never really cared about in the first place.

Instead, Gopnik's structure integrates the peaks and valleys of the narrative structure (fortune and misfortune over time) with the peaks and valleys of the academic structure (epistemic position over time). For example, at the bottom of Gopnik's curve of misfortune, when she has lost everything during her mid-life crisis, she is still motivated by the question of Hume's interaction with Buddhist writings. The bottom of the fortune trough is simultaneously the bottom of the epistemic trough. At the top of Gopnik's curve, she meets her future husband, and they work together to uncover the final piece of evidence that proves decisive for her academic thesis.

## V. Alternative Structures for Artful Public Philosophy

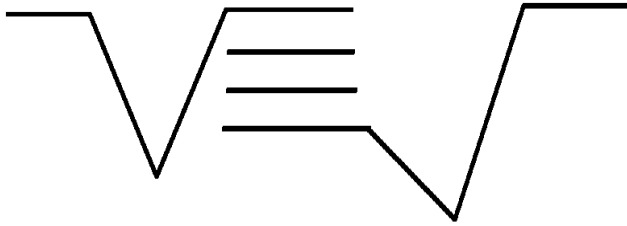
Let me end with a few more diagrams that have worked in my two seasons producing *Hi-Phi Nation*. These diagrams work for audio; some are variations of the wonderful diagrams for radio-reporters found at Transom.org.



Rob Rosenthal at Transom calls this the “e” structure, which works very well in radio reporting. The story begins in the middle (the black arrow), at a moment when a particular action or event is compelling, puzzling, and relevant to the intellectual issue that will be discussed. The piece then takes a turn, represented by the black curve, at which point the historical, philosophical, or other

intellectual issues are presented, giving the listener the intellectual and historical context that explains how the story began. The story then begins again back in time, and unfolds chronologically from that point to completion.

Finally, we have this intricate diagram:



The horizontal lines represent a story—in fact different stories, depending on vertical placement—and the diagonal lines represent the philosophy. This allows writers to exhibit the breadth and significance of a philosophical issue by showing how it intersects not just with one interesting story, but many. Take, for example, the story about Panera Bread’s lawsuit against White City Shopping Center. Once we reach the central dispute about whether burritos and tacos are sandwiches, we dive into philosophical questions about semantics and concepts, including the particular concepts of “sandwich” and “burrito.” We then rejoin the story and talk about the judge’s decision in the case, and about three other stories in legal history in which the same semantic issues arose, and judges or governments made conflicting judgments about matters of categorization. We then dive back into the philosophical issues about how to settle semantic and categorization issues, and how legal philosophers believe we should address such issues in law. We finally return to our original story, perhaps interviewing some customers about whether they think burritos are sandwiches.

These are hardly exhaustive schemes for integrating storytelling and philosophy. The most talented practitioners, including the pioneer of philosophy for children, Matthew Lipman, already knew intuitively what I have been trying to formalize in this paper. His books and curricula of philosophy for children exemplify well how much storytelling can encourage philosophical thinking in even the youngest children. I hope that some of the theory offered here will be useful for those seeking to engage in public-facing work.

## Endnotes

1. *White City v PR Restaurants*, No. 2006196313. Commonwealth of Massachusetts Superior Court. Worcester, SS Oct 31, 2006.

2. This is a common move in popular writing on scientific debates. The debates themselves are epistemological disputes, but the stories in popular writing or film adaptations are the social disputes involving the lives and careers of scientists and the struggle for power in scientific communities. This is even more popular in crime reporting. When so little is known of a crime that there is very little story, a reporter will make the story about herself. Now she is running into clues, then dead ends, then new clues, offering the changes in fortune over time that grips the reader. The “quest of the investigator” is a time-tested device.

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