Understanding Narratives and Narrative Understanding

1. BEGINNING

Understanding narratives requires an appreciation of the distinct understanding that narratives supply of the events they are about. Storytelling might not be present in all cultures and at all times, but it is widespread. Stories are told in conversations, in myths, in dances, in movies, in criminal trials, in local and international news programs, in sports commentaries, in sermons, and in lectures in philosophy, anthropology, and biology. They are told as anecdotes, as jokes, as evidence, as histories, and as biographies and autobiographies.

The ubiquity of stories and storytelling suggests that storytelling fulfills important social functions. Two of these are basic. In telling stories about what happened, both how it happened and how it is significant are explained. Storytelling fulfills more than these two epistemological functions, but they are essential. Every story fulfills them to some degree, and narratives fulfill them to a high degree. They do this because they have conclusions.

In “Narrative Explanation” David Velleman begins as I do from the premise that narratives involve a distinctive understanding of the events they are about. The key to this understanding lies in the nature of storytelling and stories. Velleman claims that “what makes a story” is a “particular way of organizing events into an intelligible whole.” He says, “The distinctiveness of narrative understanding is inseparable from its form” because there is “some explanatory force peculiar to the narrative form itself.” His conception of narrative form is traditional. A narrative has a tripartite structure with a beginning, a middle, and an end, which is a conclusion.

I agree that there is an intimate connection between the distinctiveness of narrative understanding and the distinctiveness of narrative structure. However, I will argue for a conception of narrative conclusion that is different from Velleman’s and thus for a conception of the intimate connection between narrative conclusion and narrative understanding that is different from his. In other words, I disagree with his positive account of narrative understanding. My strongest argument will be the production of an alternative that accommodates his intuitions and meets objections to his account.

Narratives conclude because in a narrative each event preceding the last contributes to the explanation, or to the evaluation, or to both explanation and evaluation, of that last. In other words, a narrative fulfills both basic storytelling functions in a highly coherent way. The inclusion of each event and the way in which it is represented either explain how the last event in the temporal succession came about (how it happened) or supply reasons for an evaluation of it (how it is significant), or both. Narratives are functionally coherent representations of sequences of events.

If narrative coherence is understood in this way, then some narratives do not organize events into intelligible, because coherent, wholes. Because a narrative is a functionally coherent representation of a succession of events, it is an intelligible whole. However, a representation of events can be such an intelligible whole without representing events as an intelligible whole. Typically, a narrative employment does represent events as an intelligible whole and sometimes the events represented in it do constitute an intelligible whole, but neither is necessary. Narrating enables events to be
understood, but not necessarily understood as intelligible wholes.

The difference between traditional proposals and mine can be expressed as a difference in narrative criteria.

The Traditional Criterion: A representation of a temporal succession of events is a narrative if, and only if, it represents that succession as an intelligible whole.

The Suggested Alternative Criterion: A representation of a temporal succession of events is a narrative if, and only if, it is an intelligible whole and it is an intelligible whole to the extent that the inclusion of each event and the way that it is represented can be explained by their contribution to the explanation or evaluation of the last event, or to both the explanation and evaluation of the last event.

Before I say more, I need to clarify the terminology I am using. ‘Story’ and ‘narrative’ are ambiguous terms. Sometimes a narrative is a narration or storytelling, sometimes it is the product of such an act, and sometimes it is the succession of events represented by such an act. Following Paul Ricoeur, I will use the terms ‘emplotting’ for the first, ‘emplotment’ for the second, and ‘plot’ for the third.4

II. MIDDLE

“My Day”

I got up early because the sun was shining and while I was having breakfast my sister rang. I had only just put the phone down when Mary came to the door and invited me to go with her to the vegetable market. We needed vegetables and so I went with her. There I had a lovely surprise because I met Peter whom I haven’t seen for a long time. I asked after his family and he said that he and Jill are both well and that all the children have jobs overseas. When I came home I made dinner and then I watched TV until I fell asleep on the sofa.

These words lend themselves to being used to produce an emplotment. Their meaning and their order make it easy to use them to represent the events they are about as a temporal succession.5 I got up and then while I was having breakfast my sister rang and then Mary came to the door and then I went with her to the vegetable market and so on.

A narrative must represent events as a temporal succession, but temporal order is not sufficient. Before a representation of a temporal succession of events is an emplotment, it must fulfill both epistemological functions of storytelling to some extent. First, it must represent some events as events occurring because others have occurred. In an emplotment some events occurred and so (this is how) others did. Second, it must represent some events as, for example, reasonable responses to preceding events, unforeseen and tragic results of them, good in some respects and bad in others, based on a misunderstanding, or justice done. An emplotment must supply reasons for evaluative judgments of the events it represents. In an emplotment some events occurred and so (that is why) those occurring afterward are reasonable responses, tragic results, ambivalent consequences, just deserts, or events about which some other kind of evaluation can (appropriately) be made.

The meaning and order of the words constituting the text of “My Day” makes it easy to represent some of the events they are about as occurring because others did and as having value because others have. For example, the storyteller’s need for vegetables explains her acceptance of Mary’s invitation because it both supplies a reason for judging that acceptance to be a reasonable thing for her to do and explains its occurrence. She accepted the invitation because she needed vegetables. The storyteller needed vegetables and so seizing an opportunity to buy them was reasonable. She needed vegetables and so she accepted the invitation. Her need is both her reason for her acceptance (why it occurred) and the explanation of its occurrence (how it occurred). Relative to her need, her acceptance of the invitation was reasonable and occurred because it was reasonable, relative to that need.

For another example, the storyteller’s acquisition of information about Peter and his family is explained by her meeting him. The storyteller discovered what was happening to Peter and his family because she met him. She met him and so (that is how) she found out what was happening to him. Finally, the shining of the sun both supplies a reason for an evaluative judgment of the early rising and explains its occurrence. Because the sun was shining, staying in bed was not attractive to the storyteller, and she got up early because that was
the more attractive option. It was a reasonable thing for her to do.

However, the last event is not represented as the outcome of those preceding it, and no evaluations follow from its relation to any of them. Falling asleep on the sofa in front of the television is not explained by the events preceding it, and they do not supply reasons for an evaluative judgment of it. The last event is not a narrative conclusion. The text of “My Day” lends itself to the production of an emplotment but not to the production of a narrative emplotment.

In the rest of this discussion I use the name of a poem or short story as shorthand for the clumsy description “the emplotment to which the words of ‘My Day’ (for example) lend themselves,” wherever sense permits this. Moreover, I use the name as shorthand for a definite description, ‘the emplotment,’ although it is common, even usual, for texts to lend themselves to the production of more than one emplotment. I have tried to pick examples about which readers will agree, in that they will produce emplotments with the features I describe. The best evidence for the claim that a text lends itself to the production of a specific emplotment is its being used to produce one for which its (the text’s) features supply reasons. Consider the following three narratives:

“The Owl and the Pussy-cat”

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
The Owl looked up to the stars above,
And sang to a small guitar,
“O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are,
You are,
You are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!”

Pussy said to the Owl, “You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!
O let us be married! Too long we have tarried:
But what will we do for a ring?”

They sailed away, for a year and a day,
To the land where the Bong-tree grows
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood
With a ring at the end of his nose,
His nose,
His nose,
With a ring at the end of his nose.

“How Piggy are you willing to sell for one shilling
Your ring?” Said the Piggy, “I will.”

So they took it away and were married next day
By the Turkey who lives on the hill,
They dined on mince and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon.
The moon,
The moon,
They danced by the light of the moon.

“Little Jack Horner”

Little Jack Horner sat in a corner
Eating a Christmas pie.
He put in his thumb
And pulled out a plum
And said, “What a good boy am I!”

“The Story of Mesopotamia”

Vast stretches of the rich and productive landscape of early Mesopotamia are now unfarmable desert.

. . . Paradoxically, it seems that the rapid rise of centralized political control within Ur III society contributed to the era of declining agricultural productivity and environmental damage. Centralized control of the once independent city-states was a logical objective for the Ur III rulers. It gave them access to larger pools of workers, military conscripts, trade goods, and agricultural produce. And significantly, it helped to maximise the production of food and other goods.

Some of this increased productivity was achieved through increased specialization, but most resulted from the centralized management of the construction and maintenance of the growing irrigation network that fed the Mesopotamian fields and the allocation of water within it. It was, therefore, a logical decision for Ur III rulers to try to extend the area served by irrigation and to increase the capacity of the existing canal system to carry water to the fields. But the very decisions that brought short-term increases in production—as evidenced by the high population density and the great construction projects of the Ur III period—seem to have rapidly undermined the region’s agricultural base.

The people of Ur III appear to have caused their own ultimate downfall through the salinization of their soils. Salinization occurs when salt accumulates near the surface of the soil. In this case, salt from the sedimentary rocks in the mountains was carried by rivers and deposited on the Mesopotamian fields during natural flooding or planned irrigation. In southern Mesopotamia, the natural water table comes to within roughly 2 meters (6 feet) of the surface. Excessive irrigation carries the water table up to within 50 centimeters (18 inches) of the surface. In waterlogged situations, the salt is then carried to the surface, where it kills most plants.
These three texts lend themselves to the production of narrative emplotments. Each emplotment is coherent because in it the events preceding the last are events that bring it about and supply reasons for evaluating it. They satisfy my narrative criterion.

The three texts also satisfy some interpretations of the traditional narrative criterion in which an emplotment is a narrative if, and only if, it represents a succession of events as an intelligible whole. They satisfy interpretations of the traditional narrative criterion that follow Aristotle’s suggestion in his Poetics that a sequence of events is organized as an intelligible whole if it is represented as “one action” (line 1450). “The Owl and the Pussy-cat” satisfies this version of the intelligible whole criterion because its events are represented as parts of a course of purposeful action and they constitute such a course of action. “The Story of Mesopotamia” represents a sequence as a development or a transformation “from one state of affairs to its opposite,” one action according to Aristotle. Other narratives represent events as journeys, quests, pilgrimages, reversals of fortune, conflicts and their resolutions, and so on. “Little Jack Horner” fits this version of the intelligible whole criterion only if representing events as a series of actions and a response counts as representing them as one action.

The three texts also satisfy interpretations of the traditional criterion that follow from a different way of understanding an intelligible whole, which is also to be found in Poetics. Aristotle writes,

Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle and end. A beginning is that which is not necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something else itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed plot (mythos), therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described.8

Here Aristotle appears to be saying that a succession of events is represented as an intelligible whole if it is represented as an unbroken explanatory chain and, thus, as an explanatory whole. He is claiming that in a “well-constructed” emplotment the occurrence of each event after the first is made probable or inevitable by the occurrence of those preceding it. If a narrative is a well-constructed emplotment, then in a narrative each event after the first is a necessary or probable consequence of those preceding it.

This cannot be correct. If it were correct, “The Owl and the Pussy-cat” is not a narrative. In the emplotment to which its words lend themselves, the events do not constitute an unbroken causal chain in which one event occurs and so another and so another and so on. The Owl sang to the Pussy-cat and so proposed marriage to her. She liked him and his song and so she accepted his proposal and so they needed a ring. And then they met a Pig. who was wearing one and so they negotiated the purchase of the ring. There is no suggestion that the meeting with the Piggy-wig in the wood was anything other than a lucky chance. Although this event is crucial to the emplotment, it does not follow as a matter of necessity or probability from those that preceded it.

In contemporary philosophical discourse about narrative there are several accounts in which the distinctiveness and coherence of narratives depend upon representing events as explanatory wholes. The accounts are similar in that they identify the distinctiveness of narrative with the fulfillment of the first storytelling function, but they differ in that different relations fulfill the function. I focus on the account offered by Noël Carroll in “On the Narrative Connection.” I argue that it presupposes relations enabling the fulfillment of the second storytelling function and, thus, the second function must also be recognized as essential to narrative and to the distinctiveness of the understanding it offers.

Although Carroll argues that only causal relations make narrative emplotments distinctive and that only causal significance is essential to that distinctiveness, he does not think that causal relations are all exactly the same. There are at least three related alternatives.

Sometimes the occurrence of one event causally necessitates or entails another. “Earlier events in the discursive string supply sufficient grounds, all things being equal, for the occurrence of the later event.”9 For example, putting one’s fingers in a pie stuffed full of plums might be causally sufficient for, and thus causally entail, the discovery of a plum. However, this causal relation is too strong to be universal. Little Jack Horner’s discovery of the plum is not causally sufficient for his response.
Other conditions are also required. For example, he had to perceive the plum to be a sign of his virtue.

Sometimes causal connections between events where one does not causally entail the other can be understood as William Dray suggests. Sometimes one event or state of affairs that is not causally sufficient on its own for the occurrence of a succeeding event can be joined with another and, together with it, constitute a causally sufficient condition for the succeeding event. For example, the Owl and the Pussy-cat’s need for a ring is not causally sufficient for their meeting with the pig in the wood and neither is it a state of affairs that makes the occurrence of that meeting more likely to occur. However, their need for a ring and their finding a Pig wearing one are causal inputs that jointly constitute a causally sufficient condition for trying to buy the Pig’s ring.

Carroll says that this kind of causal entailment is like the first in that it is also too strong to be universal. Consider the story “The Forest Fire”:

The forest fire occurred because Paul was angry and did not stamp out all the embers when he left the camp.

The combination of Paul’s anger and his failure to stamp out the embers does not causally entail the forest fire or any other event in this story.

The last causal connection identified by Carroll is one in which “the earlier event in a narrative connection is at least a necessary or indispensable contribution to a sufficient, though nonnecessary, condition for the occurrence of the relevant later event in the narrative complex (or, in other words, it is, at least, what John Mackie calls an INUS condition).”

Carroll expresses the INUS connection as a counterfactual conditional: “If the army at that time had not been withdrawing it would not have fallen into disarray.” “If Paul had not been angry, he would have stamped out the embers. If he had stamped out all the embers, the forest fire would not have occurred.” “If the Owl and the Pussy-cat had not been engaged, then they would not have bought the Pig’s ring. If they had not bought the ring, they would not have been married next day.” Expressing INUS connections in this way suggests that his interpretation of them is very like, if not identical to, David Lewis’s counterfactual account of causal relations. In “Narrative Representation of Causes,” Gregory Currie also borrows the Lewis analysis. He says that “a sense of narrative connectedness” presupposes relations between events in which later events would not have occurred if earlier events had not.

It is often the case that counterfactual relations of this kind hold between events in narratives. Often a counterfactual is implied when one event occurred and so (this is how) another occurred. For example, in “The Story of Mesopotamia” if the inhabitants had not irrigated the land they would not have produced a surplus and would not have built gigantic monuments. They irrigated the land and so (that is how) they produced a surplus and were able to build huge monuments.

However, like the other two causal connections recognized by Carroll, this kind does not hold between the storyteller’s feelings and the attack that followed his pausing for lunch in the story “The Traveler’s Tale”:

We set out the next morning for Burgos and made good time despite the fact that we continued the discussion we started yesterday. I was fascinated by his point of view and charmed by his wit. Just before we reached Burgos we paused for lunch. He was just opening some wine when we were attacked by ruffians, who were intent to rob us of our possessions and our lives. There were four of them and only two of us and they were well armed. Three of them dispatched my companion and turned to help the fourth from whom I was defending myself. Everything seemed to be lost when two men on horseback came round the corner and in a matter of minutes they had disabled two of the robbers. The other two fled. And so, it was all over for them and I was saved, but I had lost my companion.

In this tale the discussion and the storyteller’s pleasure in her companion’s wit and charm do not causally entail the robbers’ attack, and there is no event or state of affairs that combines with them to causally entail the attack or any subsequent events. Moreover, even if the storyteller had not been enjoying her companion’s wit, the robbers would have attacked the travelers. If the discussion and the storyteller’s feelings are to be included in this narrative it is not because they are causally connected to any of the subsequent events.

Velleman offers another example of this kind. The two deaths in the following story are not
connected by an INUS condition or by either of the other causal connections previously discussed.

“The Story of Mitys”

The statue of Mitys at Argos killed the author of Mitys’ death by falling down on him when a looker-on at a public spectacle.14

If this text lends itself to the production of a narrative emplotment, it does not do so because the murder of Mitys is connected to the death of his murderer by any of the causal connections that Carroll recognizes. I agree with Velleman’s intuitions that “The Story of Mitys” is a narrative, even though the death of the murderer is not counterfactually dependent on his murder of Mitys, nor causally entailed by it, nor causally entailed by it and another causal input. Like “The Traveler’s Tale,” “The Story of Mitys” cannot be accommodated by any account of narrative distinctiveness in which that distinctiveness depends solely on the first function of storytelling.

Here is another example.

“Stones in Her Pocket”

My grandfather was the coroner at Lewes, East Sussex, and he was an amateur geologist. He had a glass case with specimens of fossilized raptor bones, and shellfish from Cambrian seas. A Tyrannosaurus tooth was the prize. But in the bottom drawer of his desk was a folded flour sack with a collection of rather nondescript rocks which he only showed to special family and friends, and then only when he had been coaxed into an introspective mood by good conversation and perhaps a little port. They were the stones that Virginia Woolf had used to fill her pockets.15

In this story the exhibiting of the fossils has no explanatory bearing on the exhibiting of the stones that Virginia had in her pocket. If the grandfather exhibited no fossils he would still have shown some privileged people the stones Virginia had in her pocket. The exhibiting of the fossils is not an INUS condition for the exhibiting of the stones used by Virginia Woolf, and the exhibiting of the latter is made neither probable nor necessary by the exhibiting of the fossils. The exhibiting of Virginia’s stones is not connected to the exhibiting of the fossils by any relation that explains the occurrence of either. The inclusion of the exhibition of the fossils in the narrative does not contribute to its fulfillment of the first storytelling function.

At this point the path divides—either “The Story of Mitys” does not lend itself to the production of a narrative emplotment, or it does but explanatory relations are irrelevant, or, third, it does but not only because it represents events as connected by relations from which an explanation of the occurrence of the last event follows. Either the grandfather’s exhibition of the fossils is not a proper part of the emplotment to which the words of “Stones in her Pocket” lend themselves, or it is because explanatory relations are irrelevant, or it is but not because it represents the exhibiting of the fossils as standing in a causal relation to the exhibiting of Virginia’s stones. Carroll takes the first path, Velleman takes the second, and I am advocating the third. I deal with Velleman’s option first, Carroll’s second, and my own last.

Velleman suggests that the distinctiveness of narratives and narrative understanding is to be found in a connection between narratives and emotions. Narratives show how events feel, not how they happen. Narratives offer emotional understanding of the events represented. “A narrative means something to an audience in emotional terms.”16

Narratives show how events feel because narratives and emotions have the same structure. Narrative structure is tripartite, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, which is a conclusion. Emotions have a similar structure. They also have a tripartite form whose last stage or conclusion is a resolution. The excellence exemplified by a good story or narrative—its “excellence at a particular way of organizing events into an intelligible whole”—lies in its organizing them into a whole that makes emotional sense because the whole has a structure analogous to that of an emotion.

“The sequence of events completes an emotional cadence” because the emotion aroused by the events constituting the beginning is developed in response to those constituting the middle and resolved by those constituting the end.17 This is how the last event in a narrative is a conclusion. A “stretch of discourse” can qualify as a story (telling) “by reliably producing in the audience some emotional resolution, of which laughter is just one example.”18

Counterexamples to Velleman’s proposal are to be found in the sample texts included in this
article. A reader's contempt for Little Jack Horner might be aroused in response to his putting his fingers in the pie he was eating and increased by the way in which he perceived the significance of discovering a plum in it, rather than resolved by it. Laughter at the remark is contemptuous laughter which expresses, but need not dispel, the contempt. A reader of "The Story of Mesopotamia" might feel increasing dismay for which, again, the outcome provides no resolution. Often the conclusion of a story arouses contempt, anger, sadness, or fear rather than dispelling emotions aroused in response to earlier events.

Moreover, many narratives have outcomes that arouse ambivalent emotions. The outcome of "The Traveler's Tale" is good in some respects and bad in others. It would be appropriate to feel a mixture of sadness and gladness about it. It might be true that the courses of emotions and narratives have analogous tripartite structures. Nevertheless, "how events feel," the sequence of emotions experienced as responses to narrative representations, need not have a tripartite form whose last stage is a resolution.

Although I do not think that Velleman's suggestion works, it is spiritually kin to that I am offering because there are close connections between making evaluative sense of events and making emotional sense of them. Before I explain these I will present an argument whose conclusion is that Carroll's account of "the narrative connection" presupposes relations that are not obviously causal and that supply reasons for evaluative judgments.

Carroll discusses and rejects one putative example of narrative that might be perceived to be similar to "The Tale of Mitys," "Aristarchus hypothesized the heliocentric theory thereby anticipating Copernicus' discovery by many centuries." He says,

Yet if there is no line of influence stretching from Aristarchus' discovery to Copernicus', I, at least, find it strained to think that this is a narrative. It is an interesting series of events. Indeed, mention of the second event in this series retrospectively reveals something of the significance of the earlier event, and, as we shall see, retrospective significance is a frequently recurring feature of narrative. However, where the events bear no sort of causal relation to each other, they seem more of the order of coincidence than of narrative, at least if you agree that narrative involves changes in the career of a unified subject, where change is a function of causal processes.19

This is not an argument so much as an appeal to intuitions. My intuitions about this example are similar to his, but my reasons differ. This example is unlike "The Tale of Mitys" in a crucial way. "Mitys" contains two little causal sequences, the first of which does not explain the occurrence of the second, but does supply a reason for an evaluative judgment of it. The killing of Mitys does not explain how his murderer died, but the killing supplies a reason for evaluating the death of his murderer as a case of poetic justice. It is a case of poetic justice because there is no causal connection between the two deaths. It is a case of poetic justice because he was killed by a statue of his victim. In Carroll's putative story, the first event (Aristarchus' discovery) neither explains the occurrence of the second (Copernicus' discovery) nor supplies a reason for an evaluative judgment of it.

I said that in "The Traveler's Tale" the discussion and the storyteller's fascination with her companion do not contribute to the explanatory aspect of the narrative. However, they do contribute to its evaluative aspect. They supply reasons for an evaluative judgment of the death of that companion—as a loss of something valued by the storyteller, for example. If the second function of storytelling is recognized, then "The Tale of Mitys" is a narrative, and the discussion and the storyteller's feelings about her companion are included as proper parts of the narrative to which "The Traveler's Tale" lends itself.

These claims do not just rest upon my intuitions. As well as being intelligible, because functional wholes themselves, emplotments—which are the contents of narrative understanding, which satisfy the traditional criterion of narrative, and which, as a consequence, organize the events they are about into intelligible wholes with conclusions—require a greater range of relations than the range recognized by Carroll. These relations are required for the occurrence of one event to be counterfactually dependent upon the occurrence of a preceding event and thus, for the occurrence of a preceding event to be causally necessary for the occurrence of a succeeding event. The relations are not obviously causal or, at least, not relations of efficient causality. They supply reasons for evaluative judgments. If it is the case that sometimes
the counterfactual dependence of one event upon another presupposes relations that support evaluative judgments, then in these cases at least, causal significance is not the only significance necessary to narrative emplotments. Evaluative significance is also necessary.

“The Owl and the Pussy-cat” offers some good examples. In the emplotment to which the words of this text lend themselves, two kinds of not obviously causal connection are crucial because they are crucial for the counterfactual dependence of some events on others. The first are constitutive relations. Constitutive relations are not all of one kind and probably need to be understood as a family of relations. The Pussy-cat’s response to the Owl’s song would not have occurred if the song had not constituted a proposal of marriage. If she had not accepted his proposal they would not have become engaged and they would not have needed a ring. As a consequence of her acceptance of the proposal, the lovers are engaged to be married and, as a consequence of that, they need a ring. These consequences depend upon constitutive relations, but support counterfactuals. They became engaged to be married because accepting a proposal of marriage constitutes becoming engaged, and they needed a ring because the gift of a ring is a necessary part of the sequences of actions constituting a marriage ceremony. If the Pussy-cat had not accepted the proposal, the lovers would not have been engaged; if they had not been engaged, they would not have needed a ring; and if they had not needed a ring, they would not have bought one from the Piggy-wig.

Constitutive relations are not obviously causal if only because they do not entail temporal relations between the events they relate. The Owl’s proposal did not occur after he had sung his song. It was done when the song was done. Their need for a ring did not happen after their engagement, but with it. The difference between causal and constitutive relations is often marked by the preposition used. In singing his song the Owl proposed to the Pussy-cat. By singing it he obtained her consent to marry him. Constitutive relations depend upon conventions, social rules, and norms, not causal laws or laws of nature.

Rationalizing relations are the second kind of not obviously causal relation that supports counterfactuals and is essential to “The Owl and the Pussy-cat” and many other emplotments. Rationalizing relations are presupposed whenever events in a narrative are actions done for their agents’ reasons. Rationalizing relations hold between behavior and a conscious agent’s intentional states. In other words, they hold between an agent’s actions and his or her beliefs, purposes, perceptions, and preferences. Psychological states of these kinds have content because they are about the world in which an agent lives and acts. Intentional states are action guiding just because they have content. In their content, objects, people, events, and states of affairs are represented as things having significance identified in terms of the reasons they supply for emotional and behavioral responses to them. Whenever the events in an emplotment are actions done for their agents’ reasons, rationalizing relations, between the actions and the way in which things appear to their agents, are required.

For example, although we are not told the Owl’s reasons explicitly we can supply them. The Owl serenaded the Pussy-cat because he perceived marriage to her to be desirable, recognized that he needed her consent to be married to him, and thought that his song was an appropriate means to that end. Its appropriateness depends not only on its effectiveness, but also on its conformity to the norms governing courtship in his culture, unlike other means such as abducting her or threatening her with violence. If the Owl’s serenade had not been reasonable relative to these or some other set of purposes, perceptions, and beliefs, he would not have sung it.

Rationalizing relations are not obviously causal. Like constitutive relations they do not order events temporally. In addition, they essentially involve an evaluation or an appraisal. If causal relations are natural or “real” relations they do not imply evaluation. If causal laws are laws of nature, they do not include an evaluation as a component. Whether rationalizing relations are causal or not, they are present either explicitly or implicitly in emplotments whenever the story is about the actions of conscious agents and they support counterfactuals about the occurrence of these events.

If this argument is sound, then constitutive and rationalizing relations are either presupposed by causal relations or they are causal relations if entailing a counterfactual conditional is sufficient for a relation to be causal. Both constitutive and rationalizing relations between events or states of affairs supply reasons for evaluative judgments of subsequent events. For example, someone who
believes the Owl was right to think that his song constituted a proposal of marriage and an appropriate way to gain the Pussy-cat's consent has a reason to judge that their engagement is a valid contract. Therefore, supplying reasons for evaluative judgments of events is as basic a storytelling function as explaining their occurrence.

Earlier I said that my position and Velleman's were akin. They are closely connected despite the fact that an emplotment making evaluative sense of what happened does not necessarily make emotional sense of it as well. Their kinship follows from the role played by evaluative judgments in contemporary theoretical approaches to emotions.

I will finish with a brief explanation of two representative contemporary theories and a demonstration of the way in which my suggestions about narrative understanding connect to them. In cognitive theories, evaluative beliefs or judgments are essential components of every psychological complex constituting an emotion. Noël Carroll has argued for this kind of theory. The connection between cognitive theories of emotions and my account of narrative understanding is obvious. If emplotting involves supplying reasons that support evaluative judgments and these judgments are made by someone who emplots, then the reader is in a psychological state of a kind that is necessary, if not sufficient, for being in an emotional state of a specific kind. If the reader of "The Story of Mesopotamia" makes the judgment that the long-term outcome is a tragic waste, then he is in a psychological state of a kind essential to dismay. Moreover, if the reader is dismayed, then he has made a judgment of this kind. This is important because reasons for evaluative judgments typically fail to entail the judgments they support.

Most of those who accept a cognitive theory emphasize causal relations between the elements of an emotional state and between emotional states and the behavior expressing them at the expense of rationalizing and constitutive relations. This might be because causal laws should not involve evaluations and because attempts to construct nontautological generalizations connecting psychological states and the occurrence of actions for which they supply reasons have failed.

Jenefer Robinson provides a good example of the second kind of approach. In *Deeper Than Reason*, she argues that the core of an emotion is a perception (an affective appraisal) and physiological changes that that perception initiates and that are sometimes felt. If not checked or redirected, the physiological changes issue in behavior, which expresses the appraisal because how the object of the perception appears significant is identified through the behavior it causes. This perception and the bodily changes it causes are necessary for a response to be emotional. "An emotional response is a response set off by a noncognitive affective appraisal which sets off physiological changes that register the event in a bodily way and get the agent ready to respond appropriately." They are also sufficient even though an "emotional response isn't just a physiological response caused by an affective appraisal. Even in the most primitive cases, the fast automatic appraisal gives way immediately to a cognitive appraisal that monitors the affective appraisal and modifies subsequent behavior and physiological responses."24

Perceiving a pie to be yummy is to have made an affective appraisal of it. Seeing a moving shadow as scary is to have made an affective appraisal of it. Seeing a rotting apple as yucky is to make an affective appraisal of it. These perceptions require the object (person, event, or state of affairs) of the appraisal to appear to be connected to the subject whose perception it is by a relation implying that the object matters to her. Emotions occur when and only when their objects matter to those who have them. How something matters to someone is identified by the behavior expressing the affective appraisal. Why something matters follows from how it is perceived to be connected to the subject having the emotion. This means that how what happened matters to someone is constituted by the behavioral responses that express its significance to her and why what happened matters to someone is identified by relations between herself, or hers, on the one hand, and the characters and events in the emplotment, on the other. For example, consider the relations between her likes, dislikes, interests, purposes, desires, abilities, and capacities or those of hers (her family, tribe, community, nation, or state), on the one hand, and the characters and events in the story, on the other.

In addition, if someone has emplotted what happened, then her reasons for her affective appraisals can, and often do, include her reasons for evaluative judgments of the events she has emploted. If, as a consequence of emploting events, someone has reasons for evaluative judgments of
them, then she has reasons for affective appraisals of them, provided that she made the required connections between them and herself, or hers. Moreover, as a further consequence, she has reasons for those behavioral responses that express the appraisals.

She who emplots "The Traveler's Tale" has reasons for an evaluative judgment of the last event in the sequences emplotted, if she makes connections between preceding events that supply such reasons. In addition, she has reasons for an affective appraisal of that last event, if it is of a kind whose occurrence matters to her. For example, even if the reader of "The Traveler's Tale" did not feel sad about the death of the traveler's companion or happy about the saving of her life, these feelings would be appropriate if she judges that the first is a bad thing for the storyteller and her companion and that the second is a good thing for the storyteller and if the loss of one life and the saving of the other matter to her (the reader). For example, she might perceive them to be events of a kind that have happened, or could happen, to her or to someone she loves. If they matter as events so evaluated, then it would be appropriate for the first to sadden the reader and move her to tears and the other to delight her and move her to smile.

The other stories provide more examples. Even if the reader of "The Story of Mesopotamia" does not feel dismayed by the degradation of Ur's once fertile environment and its disastrous consequences for the inhabitants, it would be appropriate for him to feel this about them. It would be appropriate if he perceives relations between the irrigation and the destruction that supply supporting reasons for making that evaluative judgment about the long-term results of their irrigation and if the destruction of that environment by the people of Ur matters to him, because he sees the decisions made by the rulers of Ur as decisions of a kind being made now by him (us) and having similarly disastrous consequences for his (our) environment. Dismay is appropriate because these perceptions supply reasons that make it appropriate, because they supply reasons for behavioral expressions of dismay.

Moreover, when someone's evaluation of a narrative outcome is an evaluation of something that matters to her, or hers, it is often appropriate for her feelings about earlier events to be resolved. If a reader judges that the outcome of "The Tale of Mitys" is just (because it cancels out the harm done by the earlier murder) and justice matters to her, then it would be appropriate for her earlier indignation (felt because murder matters to her) to disappear.

III. CONCLUSIONS

If this account of narratives and narrative understanding is accepted, then it has at least the following theoretical consequences.

First, many emplotments are not narratives. Typically, those to which the texts of epics, soap operas, picaresque novels, anecdotes, and conversations lend themselves are not narratives, although they often include little narratives as parts of their whole. They do not represent all the events constituting their plot as a narrative, even when they do represent some component sequences of these events as narratives.

Second, the texts of many movies, dances, operas, plays, poems, novels, and comics do not just lend themselves to being used to produce narratives. They supply information about more characters and events than those to be included in the narrative and many details about those to be included in the narrative that are not relevant to it.

Third, it is usually the case that movies, dances, operas, plays, poems, novels, and comics do not provide all the information needed to produce a narrative emplotment, or, indeed, any emplotment. Typically, readers and watchers must supply some of the explanatory connections, some of the events to be included in explanations, some of the normative reasons, and many of the evaluations. It is to be expected that different readers and spectators will use the same text to produce different emplotments.

All the temporal relations and all but one of the explanatory relations in the narrative to which the words of "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" lend themselves have to be supplied by the reader. The only explicit explanatory connection holds between the purchase of the ring and the marriage—"And so they took it away and were married next day." Scattered temporal and explanatory relations were supplied by the text of "My Day," but others had to be supplied by the reader.

Finally, my account provides a reason for feeling that narrative emplotments are satisfactory.
The pleasure taken in narrative emplotments and their making is aesthetic pleasure. It is pleasure taken in producing a representation that is an intelligible whole. With the explanation and evaluation of the last event, a representation, unified by the functional order of its parts, is complete.

However, my account does not entail that narratives are satisfactory because they fulfill the basic storytelling functions well. The coherence of a narrative does not entail that its explanations are good, or that its evaluations are supported by good reasons or that the significance of its outcome is objective. Often the significance of an outcome is specific to a group or an individual and the reasons offered in support of the evaluation involved do not justify it. Often, narrative explanations are not very good judged by the standards of various discourses and traditions. Explaining how things happened is as important in historical narratives as their significance, but many historical narratives do not offer good explanations. The structure of a narrative emplotment has a functional design, but it might not be a good design if that requires the functions to be fulfilled well.

3. It has its source in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.
5. The default for reading temporal order from word order is that the event referred to by the first words in the word order is the event that occurred first. That is why ‘He rode off into the sunset and jumped on his horse’ is (mildly) amusing.
8. ‘Mythos’ is usually translated as ‘plot.’ Sometimes it corresponds to my term ‘emplotment’ and sometimes to my term ‘plot.’ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450b 26–33.
17. Ibid.
20. Usually the content of cognitive states, like beliefs, desires, and judgments, is understood to be a proposition. The content of a perceptual state is a configuration of objects.