Reasoning Through Narrative

AK Flowerree, Texas Tech University, Spring 2022

“Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.” (Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*, misattributed to GK Chesterton)

## Introduction

My topic for today is reasoning through narrative. A narrative is a diachronic, information-rich story that contains persons, objects, and at least one event. When we reason through narrative, the narrative guides us to draw conclusions about our world. We reason through narrative to make sense of the world. We use narrative to settle what to do, to make predictions, to guide normative expectations, and to ground which reactive attitudes we think are appropriate in a situation. Narratives explain, justify, and provide understanding. Narratives play a ubiquitous role in human reasoning. And yet, narratives do not seem up to the task. Narratives are often unmoored representations (either because they are do not purport to refer to the actual world, or because they are grossly oversimplified, or because are known to be literally false). At first glance, reasoning through narrative does not seem like it could possibly be good reasoning.

Against this, I will argue that narratives guide our reasoning by shaping our grasp of modal space: what is possible, probable, plausible, permissible, required, and relevant. Narratives are good guides to reasoning when they guide us to accurate judgments about modal space. I call this the modal model of narrative. In this paper, I develop an account of how narratives function in reasoning, as well as an account of when reasoning through narrative counts as *good* reasoning. I conclude by applying the Modal Model to two topics, political disagreement and conspiratorial thinking.

Note: I am particularly focused on ordinary, everyday reasoning. There is a question about the use of narrative for scientific reasoning, or the way narratives can (just in themselves) provide epistemic benefit. I mention these two other questions to set off how they are orthogonal to my question for today, but they will become relevant later.

## Part I. Some Observations on Reasoning Through Narrative

Imagine with me that I’m talking with a discouraged graduate student.

GRADUATE STUDENT

I’m going to tell you a story, one you’ve no doubt heard. Once upon a time, there was a fierce dragon. He terrorized the whole land, scorching crops with his fiery breath. He attacked cities so that everyone was afraid to go out. Commerce shut down. Food production halted. Life could not continue. He took hostages, including a fair princess. No one would fight the dragon. The king promised that whoever slayed the dragon and rescued the princess would be heir to the throne. And so George stepped forward, he took his sword, and he agreed to slay the dragon. As he went into the valley, facing almost certain death, summoning his courage, strength, and wisdom, he resolved not to run until the dragon was dead. Late into the fight, he was exhausted, disoriented, scorched and covered in blood. But he grit his teeth and kept fighting. At long last, he emerged with the severed head of the dragon. He rescued the princess, and became king of the land.

And then I lean in, to tell the graduate student, “You are George; your dissertation is the dragon.” I hand the student back their copy of *What We Owe Each Other* and say, “Go slay the dragon.” And the graduate student straightens up, takes the sword of Scanlon, and marches forth, ready to finish the dissertation, and claim his life back.

In this example, I am asking the graduate (and you) to reason through narrative.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is something that the graduate student (and you) does effortlessly. The graduate student drew at least some of these inferences:

1. I must be courageous, strong, and wise.
2. I must not quit, even though I am weary.
3. Once I finish this dissertation, I will have my life back.

There are other inferences that the graduate student does not draw.

1. I must find armor
2. The task is to behead the dissertation.
3. If I complete the task, I get to marry a princess and become a ruler.

How is the graduate student (and you, the observer) able to successfully complete this reasoning? You are not George. The grad student is not George. There is no George. This story is a fairy tale. It does not even purport to describe reality. There are no dragons, and it is a rare person who would get excited about marrying a stranger and running a mediaeval village. And yet, despite the fact that I’ve painted an unappealing fantasy prize, the grad student is able – let’s suppose – to reason to conclusions that guide and even inspire his actions. But how is it that something that is not remotely about you, or reality, can lead to reasoning that results in practical reasoning and commitment to action?

This is the first thing an account of reasoning through narrative must explain: **how is it that narrative can play a role in reasoning, one that leads to judgments, beliefs, practical commitments, even though nothing in the narrative purports to be about a matter of fact**?

But, I can already imagine, some of you think I have not done well to offer this narrative to my student, because it reifies gendered and sexist views about the role of women. We should not think that a beautiful princess is equated with a post-doctoral future. That is demeaning to the woman in this story, and perpetuates the stereotype that women are not characters, but objects or rewards. And so while my pep talk might have worked wonders, it is a morally objectionable piece of reasoning because the standing in of a postdoctoral future for a woman is demeaning to women. This leads to another conclusion: even when narratives do not purport to be about anything factual, we can still reject them on moral grounds. This too is a reaction that calls out for some explanation.

But now I want to shift the narrative framework completely.

DORM ROOM

When I was in college in the American south (a while ago, it turns out) nearly every woman had a St George and the Dragon poster on their wall. Beautiful princess, hands tied, St George approaches holding only the severed head of a dragon.[[2]](#footnote-2) The dorm resident’s thought was “I am the princess.”

From this framing of the narrative, the dorm resident was primed to draw a number of conclusions:

1. I am weak and helpless, awaiting rescue
2. When my handsome, strong knight arrives, he will free me so we can go off and live a happy life.
3. My role will be to marry my rescuer and submit to his rule in our community and our marriage.

And she is not primed to draw conclusions like

1. I am being arbitrarily restrained from doing things I would otherwise enjoy
2. I have no choice in who I marry because my father promised me to whoever slays the dragon
3. My family is in harm’s way

**The second point to draw out is that narratives are flexible, and can provide different frameworks for reasoning.** The grad student interpretation of this narrative did not rely crucially on anything gendered. If the princess had been an especially desirable chocolate cake and George had been Georgi, it would not have changed the inferences the grad student draws. But DORM ROOM is gendered. The *princess* is awaiting a handsome, *male* rescuer.[[3]](#footnote-3) For her, the story bolsters her judgment that she is to be rescued, and she is the reward to her protector and rescuer. So a single narrative can frame different reasoning. I will speak now of a *narrative* as a general story, and a *narrative frame* as a particular version of that story that primes particular inferences.

**The third thing that calls out for explanation: some reasoning through narrative seems to result in unobjectionable conclusions, and some results in objectionable conclusions**.[[4]](#footnote-4) GRAD STUDENT leads to inferences that seem worthy of acceptance. DORM ROOM does not. Or at least, DORM ROOM is worse. But, given our first call for explanation, this is the same narrative, equally non-factual. So what accounts for the difference?

So far, reasoning through narrative has led to predictive and normative conclusions.

1. I must not quit, even though I am weary (normative)
2. Once I finish this dissertation, I will have my life back (predictive)

And

1. When my handsome, strong knight arrives, he will free me so we can go off and live a happy life. (predictive)
2. My role will be to marry my rescuer and submit to his rule in our community and our marriage. (normative)

**This is the fourth thing that calls for explanation**: **narratives generate normative and predictive judgments about the actual world.** We might ask how a story that does not purport to be about the actual world could generate such judgments.

**The final point that I wish to make is that reasoning through narrative seems to be a fundamental mode of human reasoning.** Psychologists bemoan and pundits giggle, but in the end, people are mostly moved by a good story, rather than a cogent argument or an extensive dataset. Human beings struggle to reason through statistical models. They struggle to respond to data, even when the conclusions are clearly laid out. But if given a compelling story – even a just so story with no argument! – human beings endorse the conclusion. In his 2021 book, Michael Lewis writes about how Carter Mecher attempted to convince epidemiologists in 2007 that social distancing would be an effective way to slow the spread of airborne disease. He reported that it wasn’t the data that convinced the epidemiologists but asking them to engage in narrative reasoning about whether they would put their children at risk with the disease floating in the air. According to Lewis, the exercise shifted the judgment.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We find narrative reasoning at the heart of partisan national attempts to understand and respond to galvanizing events. In the wake of the George Floyd murder, protestors from around the globe protested police violence against black Americans. They were not protesting one instance of police brutality. They were protesting a particularly egregious instance that supported a narrative that policing in America is systematically racist. Counter protesters soon arrived. They agreed the George Floyd killing was disproportionate and unjust, but refused to see it as emblematic of a bigger problem because they accepted a narrative according to which George Floyd’s treatment was an aberration from how the system works. This example bolsters my third point, which is that we do not think all reasoning that goes through narrative is equally worthy of belief. (there’s a lot more to say about what distinguishes these two cases, and the role that evidence might play in making one narrative better than the other, but for the moment, I’ll just leave those subtleties for q&a).

Philosophical reasoning itself also makes use of narrative. A pervasive model of discovering truths about conceivability and possibility involves reasoning through narratives. When Mary excites the black and white room, or when the Chinese room spits out a sentence, or when our radically different counterpart utters “gavagai!”, these narratives are supposed to tell us something about what is possible, or plausible, or impossible, or implausible. It tests the limits of our concepts, and depending on your metaphysics, tells us how to cut nature at its joints.

Psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that humans possess two distinct modes of reasoning: what he calls logico-scientific reasoning[[6]](#footnote-6), and narrative reasoning. Logico-scientific reasoning is the stuff we try to inculcate in the philosophy classroom. It is deductive or inductive inference. It is syllogistic. It is discursive. And then there is narrative cognition. Narrative cognition involves an imaginative exercise, through a story, that brings understanding. Bruner suggests that narrative reasoning is not reducible to logico-scientific reasoning, and it is an ineliminable component to human reasoning.

While some recent work in personal identity, philosophy of science, and aesthetics have attempted to show how stories and narrative contribute to our understanding, it has not been the focus of mainstream theories of reasoning in philosophy.[[7]](#footnote-7) I find this somewhat surprising because narrative psychology has been around for 50 years, and the interest in empirically grounded theories of non-ideal reasoning has grown in recent years. This paper is an attempt to remedy that gap. The question I focus on today is to give an account of how it is we can reason through narrative, and when such reasoning can be good reasoning.

## Part II. The Modal Model Account of Narrative

So far, I have identified five important features that an account of reasoning through narrative must explain:

1. How is it that narrative can play a role in reasoning, one that leads to judgments, beliefs, and practical commitments, even though nothing in the narrative purports to be about a matter of fact?
2. How is it that narratives can be flexible and prime vastly different sets of inferences, while also stably guiding inferences within a narrative framework?
3. How is it that some instances of reasoning through narrative result in better judgments than other instances?
4. How is it that reasoning through narrative leads to predictions about the world, and normative conclusions about the way the world *should* be?
5. How (or why) is reasoning through narrative seems to be a fundamental mode of human reasoning?

As I said at the outset, “reasoning through narrative” involves using a story to helps us make sense of something. Narratives involve persons, places, events. They involve, at minimum, an event, a change from one state to another. As a result, narratives have a temporality built into their very nature. This puts them at odds with purely discursive reasoning (as anyone who’s tried to teach the material conditional to logic students knows, the merely logical conditional need not include any temporality). Narratives are representational (if not propositional). They represent their patients as good, bad, possible, permissible, impermissible, necessary, contingent – in short, a narrative is a story that illuminates modal relations between its patients.[[8]](#footnote-8) When we reason through narrative, we apply a modal framework to a particular person, object, or event in our experience in order to better understand it.

The first question I posed is how it is that a narrative can lead us to conclude things about the actual world even though it does not purport to be about the actual world. We can expand this problem by asking how it is that we can reason with one of the premises “I am George”, when we know this is not true. It cannot be treated as mere supposition, since we somehow reach a conclusion without discharging the supposition. So how can I reason to an unconditional conclusion, through something I do not take to be representing as true, with a premise I know to be false?

Here is what I propose. I propose we should begin by looking at the *function* a narratives plays in reasoning. Narratives provide rich relational informational structures. They can be disambiguated a myriad of ways, into different narrative frames. The frames will highlight *which* modal sentences the narrative uses, and whether they take bound variables or proper names for their items. The narrative frame can highlight any number of modal claims, and one narrative can be disambiguated into many frames (consider, in the parable of the prodigal son, is the father a proper name or a bound variable?). The modal structures represented in the narrative frames *emerges* from the narrative. This captures one of the key representational components of narratives. Narratives are not literal, atomic claims meant to be taken in conjunction. They are a content rich structures that must given a narrative frame and an interpretation in order to have a truth value. It would be a mistake to try to evaluate the truth of a narrative by giving each claim within it a truth value. That is not its function. Inferences from narrative are not straightforward inferences from a set of propositions. Instead, narratives guide reasoning by illuminating what is possible, plausible, probably, required, forbidden, implausible, improbably, impossible for the object being reasoned about.

What determines the narrative frame? How is it that GRAD STUDENT and DORM ROOM have such different narrative frames? Social scripts and schemas, background assumptions, interpersonal cues and determine the particular narrative frame being used by the reasoned.

There are distinct forms of narratives, but today I want to focus on just one: the archetypal narrative. The archetypal narrative presents a particular instance (or generalized fable) that is the paradigmatic exemplar for any other object of the same type. This is how a compelling story can be repurposed to shape our understanding of other events. It’s not that one boy cried wolf, but that anyone who is repeatedly untrustworthy will be left to be eaten by a wolf (or equivalent).

Once the narrative has been translated into schematic modal sentences, we still cannot evaluate those statements for a truth value until we have given them an interpretation. An interpretation is formed by substituting salient objects from the discourse in for bound variables. This generates modal statements that can be evaluated as true/false. And so an interpretation of a narrative that represents *X must be done* when it is in fact true that *X must be done* is representing a truth.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Here is how I am understanding this: a narrative is a rich relational informational structure. It can be given a narrative frame, or a schematic representation (bound variables and perhaps names) that lay out various modal relations, deontic, epistemic, and metaphysical. The narrative can then be given an interpretation when its schematic sentences are filled with objects from the discourse (“you are George, your dissertation is the dragon”).

As I mentioned above, sometimes narratives contain bound variables, and sometimes they also contain names. As a result, narratives can be *referential* or *non-referential*. Referential narratives lay claim to persons, objects, events, as proper names. Historical narratives purport to be actual, even if their narrative explanations go beyond known facts. The narrative of Braveheart, for a historian, is bound by certain facts that are known about William Wallace. By contrast, non-referential narratives do not reference existing persons, objects, and events. Sometimes it is vague whether the narrative is referential or non-referential. The narrative of Braveheart, as portrayed by Mel Gibson, is not bound by the facts that are known about William Wallace. But there is an element of Braveheart that is referential to William Wallace, sort of. It just doesn’t really care about the facts about William Wallace. In that sense, it might be “about” him, but only as a fantasy about a real person, not as laying claim to explaining realistic features of him. But some narratives are completely non-referential, like George and the Dragon, or the boy who cried wolf.

So, I am suggesting, a narrative is a representation of modal space. But it cannot have a truth value until we give it an interpretation. This means that a narrative is not something we can *believe*, at least not until it has an interpretation, or a range of interpretations. Instead, I think we should view narratives as representational aides. They frame the modal space. They make certain features of a situation salient, and reduce others to background noise. They tell us what is good, bad, desirable, undesirable, and using them we are able to reason to conclusions about our own situation.

As a representational aide, or tool of reasoning, narratives aren’t proper objects of belief. But once a narrative frame is given an interpretation, they are truth evaluable, and they could be believed. Rather than talking about believing a narrative, we should talk about *accepting* a narrative.

An agent accepts a narrative frame just in case they are disposed to use it in their reasoning (by filling variables of the narrative frame with objects from the discourse and drawing certain inferences that make use of those odal possibilities) for some rang of contexts C1 … Cn .

Someone could accept a narrative without using it in *every* piece of reasoning. But often, our narrative frames become stable, so that we revert to the narrative in particular circumstances without any effort. This aids our reasoning for assessing the credibility of women asserting sexual assault, or for men who abuse their power, or for those who virtue signal online.

What we’ve said so far is enough to answer the second question: narratives are flexible because they can be shaped into different narrative frames. But once the narrative frame is set, it primes a stable set of inferences, given an interpretation.

This also raises the third question. What makes some reasoning through narrative good and some less good? What we’ve said so far makes a narrative frame something like a scientific theory. A narrative frame helps us make sense of the world. It directs our inferences. It is a guide to prediction and normative expectation. It tells us which alternatives are relevant. It helps us navigate the world. But if narrative frames are to be evaluated as a scientific theories, then they are bad scientific theories. They do not answer to empirical constraints or theoretical virtues. They are not refined and critique by institutions of scientific knowledge. Narratives are spun by advertisers who want to sell deodorant, or pundits who want to downplay a politician’s betrayal. If pundits, Instagram influencers, and Heather Cox Richardson can all give us narratives, we must be able to distinguish between them.

As I said at the outset, narratives are unmoored representations. They cannot have truth values until they are given narrative frames and interpretations. As a result, typical tools for epistemic evaluation do not straightforwardly apply to them. But – I think – we don’t think all reasoning through narrative is on a par. So how can we distinguish?

What we need is an epistemology of narrative. Here is what I propose[[10]](#footnote-10)

If the modal representation is accurate, then we will can the interpretation of the narrative *correct* or *true[[11]](#footnote-11)*

If S is disposed to draw mostly accurate conclusions by reasoning through the narrative, then we can say the narrative is *reliable*. In this case, S is defeasibly justified in her conclusions.

If the interpretation of the narrative is true and all the conclusions that S is disposed to draw are true*,* then her reasoning is *safe*, and constitutes knowledge.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We can now give a rough characterization of what it is for a narrative frame to be a *false* narrative. It can’t be strictly speaking false until it’s been given an interpretation. But we could imagine that someone accepts a narrative and the range of situations in which they are disposed to reason through it leads them to false conclusions. The result is that it leads them astray. And this is what we call a false narrative. It is a misleading representation of modal space, when applied to a range of situations.

With this in hand, we can now say the difference between the partisan narratives of police brutality against black Americans. If the narrative tends to produce incorrect judgments across the range of cases it is used, then we can say it is a false narrative.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This leaves (IV) and (V). (IV) asks us how we could draw conclusions about the actual world based on reasoning through narrative. Let me motivate the problem. There is a common assumption that in order for one’s reasoning to justify the conclusion, there must be some epistemic constraint on premises.[[14]](#footnote-14) Narrative frames, as I have set them out here, cannot play this role because they are not truth evaluable. Until we have an interpretation, we cannot say whether it meets the epistemic constraint. And so reasoning through narrative seems to violate a basic constraint on reasoning. But why does this matter? The thought is that a narrative is an arbitrarily selected just so story, and that another story could have easily been picked which would have generated a different conclusion. There is no constraint one which narratives one might use. And so what entitles one to believe (or judge, or act on) the output of reasoning through narrative?

I have said above that an epistemology of narrative could help us settle whether a narrative frame is reliable within a particular context. But this may not be something the reasoner knows about. How could she justify her reasoning to herself or someone else? The thought is that the narrative is a tool, like a calculator or a surveyor’s tool, or an astrolabe. If it is reliable, then it grounds one’s judgments. But one can use it without knowing its precise accuracy. Since it is a tool, not a premise, it doesn’t violate the epistemic constraint on reasoning.

But this account does show that reasoning through narrative is fragile. Narratives can clash, and we may have no good reason to prefer one to another. In the case of social narratives about how police treat black Americans, or how trauma victims respond under duress, we can look to academic research. But it can also be that the truth is hard to find amidst the noise, and we are left without pursuasive narratives.

The final point was to explain *why* reasoning through narrative is such a ubiquitous form of human reasoning. The first claim seems to be one for psychology: it is just how our brains are wired. Even advanced statisticians make use of narratives to explain their views to others. If you submit an NSF grant proposal, you will be asked to write a narrative.

But on this account, a narrative is a compact, powerful way of communicating complex, nuanced modal claims. The fairy tale is true, not because it tells us dragons exist, but because it tells us *dragons can be beaten*. And narratives manage to convey this information in simple, easily graspable terms.[[15]](#footnote-15) What would be the alternative for finite, social creatures with time constraints? A narrative allows us to simply communicate complex information. Narratives are easily transmitted and shared. Most of the kinds of claims that narratives support *couldn’t* be empirically grounded, either because it is about modal dispositions, or because it is about moral permissibility, or it is about what one’s current situation warrants.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, I have been suggesting narratives to be informationally rich representational lenses that guide our reasoning. How do we select them? How do we pick which contexts to apply them?

Our reasons for this are deeply social and pragmatic. Communities are knit together through shared narratives. Narratives illuminate values and create the conditions for a shared way of life. We often don’t pick our narratives, we find ourselves slotted into a role. They shape what we take to be possible, desirable, prudent, required, and necessary. They ground at least some of our reactive attitudes.

But why should we think that these narratives are good guides to modal space? On a practical level, in a community of shared narrative, they are a good guide to modal space because they ground everyone’s reasoning, so they help us coordinate action and unify understanding of actions and events.

But even if they help coordination, they also stifle, closing off possibilities, condemning actions and ways of being that should not be condemned. Narratives tend to support those in power, since the narratives have regulated expectations of what we may expect from each other, and these expectations led to the power structures we have. So as guides to reasoning, they will only be as good as the community they reflect.

And so when narratives clash, it is an opportunity to implore into these deeper questions themselves.

 To do science, epistemology, moral theorizing, prudential reasoning. Narratives are a tool, but only a tool into these deeper things. They can help, they can harm our quest for knowledge. We can reason coherently through them, but we do not escape the question of whether they are *good* guides to understanding.

Works Cited

Carroll, Noël (2007). Narrative closure. *Philosophical Studies* 135 (1):1 - 15.

Fraser, Rachel (2021). Narrative testimony. *Philosophical Studies* 178 (12):4025-4052.

Hatchett, R. J., Mecher, C. E., & Lipsitch, M. (2007). Public health interventions and epidemic intensity during the 1918 influenza pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *104*(18), 7582–7587. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0610941104

Lewis, Michael. 2021. *The Premonition*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Morgan, Mary S. & Hajek, Kim M. (eds.) (2022). *Narrative Science: Reasoning, Representing and Knowing Since 1800*. Cambridge University Press.

Morgan, Mary S. & Wise, M. Norton (2017). Narrative science and narrative knowing. Introduction to special issue on narrative science. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 62:1-5.

Polkinghorne, Donald (1988). *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. State University of New York Press.

Rosa, Luis (2019). Knowledge Grounded on Pure Reasoning. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 100 (1):156-173.

Velleman, J. David (2003). Narrative explanation. *Philosophical Review* 112 (1):1-25.

Worth, Sarah E. (2008). Storytelling and narrative knowing: An examination of the epistemic benefits of well-told stories. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42 (3):pp. 42-56.

1. Even if it isn’t a great pep talk, for reasons I will address presently. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I used to wonder, how does the dragon tie up the princess? That level of dexterity is surprising. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I’ll spare you an explicit inference about the sword. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Or at least not all reasoning through narrative is equally bad, if you decide that none of it lives up to the high standards of Good Reasoning. More on this later. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lewis (2021). See Hatchett, Mecher, and Lipsitch (2007) for the data driven version. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Or what we philosophers typically just call *reasoning* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is not to say there hasn’t been excellent philosophical work done on narrative and what we can learn from it. One literature has explored the type of explanation narrative provides. Noel Carroll argues it illuminates causal relations. Beatty argues that part of how narratives do this is by making salient what else could have happened, by illuminating nearby possibilities that are ruled out. Velleman points out that not all narratives are about causality. Some are about emotional cadencing, which trains us how to feel. Rachel Frasier likewise argues that the function of a narrative is to generate understanding of our concepts, to see them put to use in novel contexts and expand our understanding of them. All of this work is important and helpful, but does not directly address my central question. I’m interested in reasoning *through* the narrative to a conclusion in this world. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This captures, with Carroll, causal relations, and with Velleman, the appropriate grounds for moral cadencing, and with Fraser, the way in which a narrative can help us understand the application of our concepts. What the narrative does is illuminate various types of modal relations, of which understanding, goodness and badness and appropriate emotional reactions, and understanding are merely subtypes [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There is an extra complication here for certain kind of humeans, insofar as accepting a narrative will shape ones affect such that it becomes true that one has reason to pursue those things. But this is a problem for setting the truth value, or quasi-truth value of the modal claim. This question can be taken up independently from the epistemic question addressed here, and I don’t think raises any special complications. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. And I am inspired by helpful discussions of suppositional reasoning with Luis Rosa. He defends and articulates a generative account of suppositional reasoning along these lines in Rosa (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A quasi-realist will likely appeal to correctness for deontic modals, rather than truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. One could have a justified belief from a false narrative, if ones epistemology allows that, provided the interpretation of the narrative is a false claim about modal space, but the agent is only disposed to draw a range of conclusions that are true. Imagine the narrative interpretation represents <a…n> things as epistemically possible. In fact, b is not epistemically possible. But the agent doesn’t care about B and isn’t disposed to draw any conclusions at all about b. We might say that her conclusions about a, c, d, e, … etc are justified. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While I think the evidence supports the George Floyd protestor narrative, it’s important to note that most people reason purely on the level of narrative and are not aware of actual frequencies, and would misjudge if asked. Indeed, there was no official public database of police killings of citizens until August 2020 when Trump signed an executive order to create one, and even now two years later it’s unclear whether it yet exists. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The thought is that the premise must be true, or justified, or knowledge, or reasonably believed, or well founded. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The *function* of the narrative frame is to represent a complex modal reality. But I am not committed to the stronger claim that what human reasoning *actually looks like* involves modal semantics. Instead, what I’m attempting to show is that reasoning through narrative helps us achieve complex modal reasoning, regardless of whether it is semantically isomorphic. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)