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Can Unreliable Narration Be Analyzed in Terms of Testimony?

The idea that unreliable narration can be analyzed in terms of testimony is attractive for two reasons. Firstly, the very idea of unreliable narration seems to be informed by the concept of testimony. Secondly, the concept is quite rich and allows for interesting insights into unreliability. Despite these advantages, applying the concept of testimony to unreliable narration is problematic. It can be shown that in interpreting narrations with covert narrators it is not helpful to talk in terms of testimony, while the concept does not apply at all to narrations without fictional narrators. The applicability further depends on the content of knowledge at stake. I argue that no narrations involve testimony by a fictional narrator, but that some narrations authorize imagining a fictional narrator giving fictional testimony. A short consultation of epistemology reveals that in fictional testimony two kinds of warrant are relevant, one fictional itself, one real. Finally, I argue that neither is it possible to stick to our everyday concept of testimony in analyzing unreliable narration, nor can core cases of unreliable narration be completely conceptualized in terms of testimony.

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