Narratives and Analogies: Homage to Miss Marple

TONE KVERNBEKK
University of Oslo
tone.kvernbekk@iped.uio.no

ABSTRACT: I explore the relation between narratives and analogies by discussing Miss Marple's analogical reasoning. She compares target to source and constructs an analogy, which inevitably solves the problem at hand. In order to bring out the relevant similarities between the cases she tells stories of the target and matches them to known information about the source. I use the example of Uncle Henry to trace out and examine her thought processes.

KEYWORDS: analogy, contextual knowledge, deductive argument, inductive argument, Miss Marple, narrative, similarity, source, target, type

1. INTRODUCTION

Miss Jane Marple is a beloved fictional character appearing in many of Agatha Christie's books and short stories. She is generally depicted as an elderly, mild-mannered, white-haired spinster who lives in a tiny village called St. Mary Mead. She is also a cunning sleuth who occasionally solves crimes not even the Scotland Yard can solve. In her village she knows everybody and everything. She is a keen observer and a shrewd reasoner.

It is no accident that Miss Marple is frequently discussed by people who write about analogical reasoning. She typically evaluates actions and judges the probability of outcomes on the basis of an analogy between a target and a source. Unlike the rest of us who reason in the same way, she is invariably correct. Her analogies are formed in close and intricate interplay with narratives about source (which are known) and developing narratives about target; an interplay that amounts to identifying and evaluating the similarities between the two cases, ending up in a conclusion about the target. In this paper I shall trace out in some detail the relationship between narratives, similarities and analogies; to arrive at a view of how the analogy is developed and how the narratives help to justify it. The role of *type* will be especially looked into, since human types occupy a prominent place in Miss Marple's reasoning. Her credo, in so far as she can be said to have one, is most famously expressed in the novel *Murder at the Vicarage* (1977): Human nature is the same everywhere, and not to be trusted.

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My story of choice for this little foray is, however, not *Murder at the Vicarage* but a short story called *Strange Jest*, from the book *Miss Marple's Last Cases* (1979). This is a simple story but serves nonetheless to bring out certain features of the relationship between narratives and analogies. In its bare bones, the story is as follows:

Two young people, Edward and Charmian, ask Miss Marple to help them solve a problem: their Uncle Mathew had promised to leave his considerable fortune to them, but upon his death he seems to have left practically nothing. They think he converted his money into gold and buried it; they have looked for it "all over" and found nothing. Miss Marple comes with them to Uncle Mathew's house, looks around house and garden, reads his letters and documents, ponders a while and then says "... I [do] believe I know what sort of man your Uncle Mathew was. Rather like my own Uncle Henry, I think" (p.37). And then she proceeds to tell little narratives about Uncle Henry; a bachelor with a fondness for jokes and puns, suspicious nature, inclination to tease young nieces and nephews, who hid his money in the library and not in his safe, etc.

Guided by her memories of Uncle Henry, Miss Marple reasons about Uncle Mathew, and in the end he is found to have converted his money into a highly valuable collection of rare stamps hidden in a secret drawer in an escritoire. The envelopes with the stamps contain love letters to Uncle Mathew that he himself had faked, and Miss Marple concludes: "Your uncle was really a very simple man. He had to have his little joke, that was all" (p.42). In the very last paragraph of the story Edward fully grasps the role that Uncle Henry has played in recovering Uncle Mathew's fortune, and the story closes with a toast to Uncle Henry.

We thus have our analogy: the two uncles, Henry and Mathew. Henry is the source, Mathew is the target. The question is how the inference from one to the other happens and how it is justified.

2. A NOTE ON NARRATIVE

The term "narrative" derives from the Latin *narrare*, which means "telling", and *gnarus*, which means "having knowledge of something". Storytelling is a universal human trait, found in all cultures. All languages, Jerome Bruner (2002) argues, mark essential narrative elements such as actor, action, object, narrator, plot, audience, beginnings and endings. One of the most influential definitions of narrative comes from Paul Ricoeur (1984): A narrative is a grasping together of such diverse elements as characters, plots, actions and events into a meaningful, coherent whole marked by a beginning, a middle and an ending. The process of "grasping together" is done by a
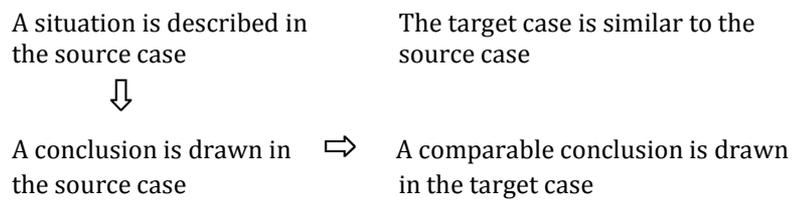
narrator and is known as emplotment or narrative configuration; that is, finding a plot, an organizing principle, which allows the pieces of the narrative to fall into place in relation to each other. Narratives thus tell of events that unfold and develop, with a view to temporality and causal connections between events and actions.

However, the term has become rather elusive. In the past 40 years or so there has been an explosion of research that is dubbed "narrative" and as a result the term has taken on a variety of meanings. It can refer to folk tales, life histories, ideologies, over-arching research paradigms, lies, interview excepts and historical accounts. Riessman and Speedy (2007) argue that the term has come to mean anything and everything; specificity has been lost with popularization. And indeed, for the purposes of this paper a broader notion of narrative is needed. Miss Marple's narratives about Uncle Henry are not about unfolding sequences of actions and events. I turn to Douglas Walton (2012), who also relies on a broader notion of narrative and argues that a wide variety of relations should be allowed besides causal relations. So what kind of relations could that be? In the case of uncles Henry and Mathew I suggest that relations between motives, characteristics, actions on the one hand and type on the other are the ones we should focus on – that is where the analogy is located, so to speak. Such relations are not temporal or causal, but could perhaps be characterized as constitutive or classificatory – the properties and actions in question serve to constitute the type and knowledge of type helps to identify and interpret actions and properties. The narratives Miss Marple tells revolve around the relations of type and actions and their assumed coherence. Louis Mink (1978) says that narrative is an irreducible way of making the flux of experience comprehensible to ourselves and others, and this does seem to be an apt description of Miss Marple's narratives.

3. ANALOGICAL REASONING

If "narrative" is an elusive term, it may have found its match in "analogy". John Stuart Mill said of "analogy" that "There is no word, however, which is used more loosely, or in a greater variety of senses, than Analogy" (1981, p.554). Mill's complaint notwithstanding, there seems to be much agreement about the basic understanding of analogies: we reason from an assumed likeness between a case of interest and one or more other cases to some further similarity (Hitchcock 2017, p.201). The case of interest is the *target*; the case we reason from is the *source.* Paul Bartha (2013, p.5) puts it slightly differently. Formally, he says, an analogy between source and target is a

one-to-one mapping between objects, properties, relations and functions in the source case and those in the target case. His basic understanding is like Hitchcock's: we specify an analogy by indicating the most significant similarities – and sometimes differences. This basic understanding can be cashed out in different ways, and different models are available. A simple structure of an analogical argument is provided by Walton (2012, p.193):

A situation is described in the source case	The target case is similar to the source case
$\Downarrow$	
A conclusion is drawn in the source case $\Rightarrow$	A comparable conclusion is drawn in the target case

Walton argues that we identify similarity by showing how source and target share a story scheme, and that similarities appear as soon as we move up the ladder of abstraction to variables and agents rather than particulars. The aim of the argument is to get the respondent to accept the same (or comparable) conclusion in the target case, and the main persuasive reasons are found in the similarities between source and target.

Walton's scheme amounts to an inductive argument by analogy. Bruce Waller describes the structure of such arguments slightly differently (2001, p.202):

1. *D* has characteristics *e, f, g* and *h*.
2. *E* also has characteristics *e, f, g* and *h*.
3. *D* also has characteristic *k*.
4. Having characteristic *e, f, g* and *h* is relevant to having characteristic *k*.
5. Therefore, *E* will probably also have characteristic *k*.

In our case the similarities (*e, f, g, h, k*) used to link source to target are easily identified. Uncle Henry is the source case; fond of jokes and puns, suspicious, inclined to tease young family members, not keeping his money in the safe but in the library. Uncle Mathew is the target case, and he is found to have the same traits and behave in similar ways. The question is whether he too has characteristic *k* and hid his money in some unorthodox place. The argument as it stands is predictive in nature; it is inductive, probabilistic and fallible. Uncle Mathew may have characteristic *k* or he may not.

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2.1 The reasoning steps

Definitions of analogy and models of analogical structure both tend to portray a chronology in the reasoning: we begin with the source and then move to the target. This is often not the case in actual reasoning, however, and it is not how Miss Marple reasons. For she does not begin with a source case. When she arrives at Uncle Mathew's house she has no source case; she has a target case. The source case emerges *after* she has collected information about Uncle Mathew from Edward and Charmian's little narratives about him; for example that he grew more and more suspicious as he grew older and did not trust anybody ["'Very wise of him,' said Miss Marple, 'The depravity of human nature is unbelievable'" (p.33)], that he thought the only safe thing was to convert money into solid bullion and bury it, and that before he died he tapped his eye, winked at them and told them that they would be all right. After a thorough tour of the premises, the house and the garden, Miss Marple sifts through Uncle Mathew's private papers. It is then, when she digests all the information, that the source case emerges. The source case is established because of its perceived similarities to the target. But once it is established, the source takes the "lead", as it were, and target probabilities are judged on similarities to the source and the reasoning proceeds roughly as portrayed by Walton and Waller (and many others). We should not wonder why it falls so easy to identify similarities between source and target – they are already established and the reason why the source is picked. The source is thus in a fundamental way dependent on the target. I shall argue subsequently that the path between source and target is nowhere near as linear as the analogy models indicate, and that we need to look closely at this path to understand what role narrative plays.

In passing, it is eminently unclear how the source comes up in the first place. "I fly off on a tangent," Miss Marple says, as a comment to her own chatty reminiscences of Uncle Henry. "But one thing does remind one of another" (p.36). Evidently "remind one of" indicates a hypothesis about a possible source. The *what* and *how* are hard to say. Neither Miss Marple nor Agatha Christie tells us.

2.2 From source to target: one-to-one mapping

It is generally claimed that Miss Marple is too dependent on intuition in her judgments and predictions about target cases. Earl Bargainnier (1980), author of a much-cited book about Agatha Christie's detective fiction, takes issue with this claim. Intuition is not guesswork, he says (p.74). Rather it is a knowledge reservoir with a firm foundation in

analogical reasoning. In *Murder at the Vicarage* Miss Marple herself describes this reservoir and how she developed it:

> One begins to class people, quite definitely, as though they were birds or flowers, group so and so, genus this, species that. [...] I have always wondered whether, if some day a really big mystery came along, I should be able to do the same thing. I mean – just solve it correctly. [...] in fact, the only way is to compare people with other people you have known or come across. You'd be surprised if you knew how very few distinct types there are in all (1977, p.216).

This is a method of classification and comparison, Bargainnier says, it does not qualify as (mere) intuition. It is a process of observing repeated patterns of action and finding similarities between externally different circumstances. Thus, Mr. Harbottle, Mrs. Carruthers, Nurse Ellerton, Mrs. Pusey's nephew and other inhabitants of St. Mary Mead provide Miss Marple with models for comparing, evaluating and predicting actions, character traits and possible outcomes.

It is unclear to me how Bargainnier actually understands Mr. Harbottle and the others, besides saving Miss Marple from accusations of excessive use of intuition. We seem to be moving at the individual level. These people are particular individuals and the intimation seems to be that Miss Marple constructs analogies between known sources and unknown targets on a one-to-one basis, just like the use of Uncle Henry as a source case suggests, and in agreement with Bartha's definition of analogy as a one-to-one mapping. Uncle Henry is most definitely an individual, and the narratives she tells about him concern his individual traits, actions and habits. On the face of it this looks like Walton and Waller's inductive analogical argument schemes: the analogy is (seemingly) established directly by similarities between source and target. This makes the analogy particularistic, probabilistic and similarity-based, and we are asked to accept conclusions about Uncle Mathew in virtue of his similarities to Uncle Henry. The narratives about Uncle Henry are found to match those about Uncle Mathew, and the only thing the narratives seem to contribute is to express and communicate the similarities between the two uncles. On this interpretation, however, the analogy becomes quite wobbly. There are several problems here. Remember that we are after one particular trait here – I follow Waller and call it k – namely the hiding of money in unorthodox places. We know Uncle Henry did it and that k thus belongs together with his other traits and actions, but we do not yet know this of Uncle Mathew. And here is the problem with one-to-one mappings: we cannot infer from one source case only that our queried property k actually belongs together with e, f, g and h or whether it is a random event. A large number of sources would have served to increase the probability of the

conclusion that the target possesses *k*, but we have only one source. Miss Marple makes a virtue out of having lived in St. Mary Mead all her life, and that would evidently limit not only the number of possible source cases she has available to her, but also the number of instantiations needed to form a type in the first place. Second, such an approach also demands attention to any *dissimilarities* between the two cases, as both Bartha (drawing on Keynes and Hesse) and Hitchcock point out. Miss Marple, however, does not look for dissimilarities, she reasons on the basis of the similarities.

2.3 From source to target: the role of type

While Miss Marple may seem to indulge in a one-to-one mapping based on similarity alone, this is not what she in fact is doing. By her own admission she classifies people and appeals to *types* in her reasoning. Bargainnier's description is ambiguous because he mentions the individual source cases found in the books in the context of discussing Miss Marple's classification practices, thus inviting the interpretation that each individual source case is a type. But no individual is a type in his or her own right. We would be better off understanding Mrs. Carruthers, Mrs. Pusey's nephew and the others as *prototypes* – the most representative instances of a certain type.

Recall that clause 4 in Waller's proposed structure for analogical arguments states that having characteristic *e, f, g* and *h* is relevant to having characteristic *k*. The requirement of relevance is a common response to the weakness of mere similarity as a basis for analogical reasoning; the identified similarities must be relevant to *k* if projection of *k* from source to target is to be justified. But what does it mean to say that *e, f, g* and *h* are relevant to *k*? And how do we judge that a relevance relationship is strong enough so that relevant similarities outweigh relevant dissimilarities, in analogies where dissimilarities are included? Usually, Hitchcock points out, this relevance is cashed out in terms of causality. But that will do not in our case; Uncle Henry's characteristics and inclinations are not causally related to his hiding his money inside books in the library. Instead it seems fruitful to follow Hitchcock and view the relevance as constitutive:

> … the predictor properties [*e, f, g, h*] constitute, partly or fully, the queried property [*k*], which is supervenient on these properties (and perhaps some others). Such a relationship appears in cases of legal, moral or philosophical reasoning by analogy where the conclusion is an evaluation, deontic statement, or classification of the target case (Hitchcock, 2017, p.208).

This is a good approximation to what I think Miss Marple is doing, and what she – albeit rather vaguely – takes herself to be doing, and also what Bargainnier hints at but never explicates. She tells narratives about *e, f, g* and *h* to classify the target case as a certain type. The type must be understood as supervening on these characteristics, and the characteristics are kept together by the type.

In *Strange Jest* there is an intricate interweaving of concrete details and abstract type and we constantly move up and down the ladder of abstraction. With the introduction of the type – perhaps we could call it the *elderly bachelor who likes to joke* – two major things happen: the argument shifts from inductive to deductive, and the little narratives take on a new function. Miss Marple's analogical reasoning is not a matter of telling narratives about the target case and matching them to known narratives about the source case, as the one-to-one similarity mapping approach suggests. It is rather a matter of telling narratives about source and target to justify that they belong to the same *type*.

Let us tease out what is involved in the two shifts. We will begin by re-examining the structure of analogical arguments. Here is Trudy Govier's model of an *a priori* analogy (1989, p.144):

1. A has x, y, z.
2. B has x, y, z.
3. A is W.
4. All things which have x, y, z are W.
5. Therefore, B is W.

As we can see, the conclusion of this argument amounts to a classification of B as being of type W. Uncle Henry has characteristics x, y and z, and so does Uncle Mathew. It is already known that Uncle Henry is a representative of type W, bachelors who like to joke. All persons with those characteristics belong to that type, and therefore Uncle Mathew also belongs to it. The similarities or empirical features of the two cases still matter, of course, but we are no longer asked to accept conclusions about Uncle Mathew solely in virtue of his similarities to Uncle Henry, but in virtue of the two of them being the same kind of man.

Govier comments that with this structure to the argument, premises (1) and (3) become logically redundant. The conclusion (5) follows deductively from (2) and (4). The analogy has thus been recast to the degree that it disappears! But if the analogy disappears, then so does Miss Marple's reasoning and Edward will have no reason to be grateful to Uncle Henry. So we have to keep both source and target and yet somehow find room for the universal premise. Miss Marple's insistence on types brings a universal statement into her argument, as is

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shown in Govier's structure. And this is really universal – human nature is the same everywhere. But Miss Marple's argument by analogy stretches further than Govier's model. It goes from particular to abstract type to particular. She reasons from e, f, g and h to a classification. The characteristic k of the source case is established as being one of the constituent properties of the type, and can therefore be safely projected to the target. It follows *deductively* from the type that the target should possess k.

I think we here meet with a number of hidden premises in Miss Marple's reasoning. If her analogy is to work, the type she identifies must be assumed to be highly coherent, such that all constituent properties, characteristics and patterns of behavior are consistent with each other and belong intimately together. Also, she shares with most of us the intuitive idea that samples from the same population should be expected to be highly similar; the variability of the sample is small no matter how small the sample is (see Tversky and Kahneman (1982)). Furthermore, type is understood to determine behavior, so that when somebody is identified as belonging to a certain type we can safely predict her or his behavior – we can deduce it. People do not act out of character in Miss Marple's world.

The source is thus relevant to the target because they are of the same type. Uncles Henry and Mathew are the same kind of person. This fact is not established at the beginning of the story, but gradually as the storyline unfolds. That is to say, the narratives about Mathew and Henry go back and forth, as new details are added to spur the plot on. These little narratives develop together and serve to justify and confirm that source and target are right for each other. In *Strange Jest* we first hear about Mathew, then about Henry, then more information is divulged about Mathew, and to finally clinch the type identification Uncle Henry is brought back in the end of the story. In fact, the last little narrative about Uncle Henry is told after the case has been cracked and Uncle Mathew's fortune has been recovered. Here Miss Marple explicitly puts the two men into the same category: "'Ah,' said Miss Marple, 'that is what these old gentlemen who are fond of their joke never realize'" (p.44). And then follows the last narrative about Uncle Henry as final proof.

Every little narrative about Henry and Mathew that we are told reinforces the perception that they are of the same type. That is to say, the narratives establish and reinforce the connections between the characteristics, actions and antics of Henry and Mathew and the type they both represent. The narratives are thus essential to the analogy. Agatha Christie cunningly makes Miss Marple's narratives about Uncle Henry look like feeble chatter or happy random reminiscences, but of course they are anything but.

At this point I would like to suggest four things about Miss Marple's analogical reasoning. First, the narratives about source and target are developed in tandem, throughout the entire story. Second, it is not sufficient to look at source and target only, because the narratives are informed by her theory of types and the type which comes to mind in the current case. Thus, narratives and type seem to be inextricably intertwined. Third, narratives, type and analogy are developed in tandem and mutually deepened throughout the entire story. It is not the case that the narratives are there first and the analogy is developed afterward – the steps in the reasoning are not linear but rather a bit messy. It is actually not clear what justifies what – it could be that narratives and analogy enter into a form of circular justification, via the type. Fourth, the hidden, implicit premises are generally dubious but make heavy-duty. And they do work – Miss Marple got it right this time too.

4. LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Miss Marple does not rely exclusively on the analogy of source and target to solve the mystery at hand. The use of types allows a lot of background knowledge to be brought into play, since you can bring everything you know about the type to bear on the target case. But in addition to that much knowledge about local context, old customs and idioms enters into the narratives. Single acts performed by the uncles are signs and their interpretation required knowledge. For example, Uncle Mathew taps his eye. This means nothing to Edward and Charmian but clearly suggests something to Miss Marple. Exactly what is revealed a little later, when they are examining Uncle Mathew's old-fashioned escritoire. Miss Marple thinks that a secret drawer is quite likely. All talk about gold bars is a blind, just like it was with Uncle Henry. A secret drawer is indeed discovered, and found to contain a cookery recipe for gammon and spinach and some old love letters. The letters were to Uncle Mathew from a female missionary named Betty Martin. Now, it takes *much* knowledge of old customs and sayings and British idioms to make sense of these things. But when correctly interpreted they serve to further justify the classification of Uncle Mathew as a joking old bachelor and thereby to reinforce the analogy to Uncle Henry – *and* give a definite clue as to the missing treasure. It turns out that *gammon and spinach* is an old British idiom meaning *nonsense*, from which it follows that the recipe can be ignored and that it therefore is the letters that are of importance. Edward and Charmian are completely in the dark so Miss Marple provides them with the explanation: an old British expression, "all my eye and Betty Martin"

which means that something is not quite true. Uncle Mathew's tapping of his eye becomes understandable in this context. He wrote the love letters to himself ("… and got a lot of fun out of writing them!" (p.43)). The envelopes are much older and upon examination are found to have rare, expensive stamps. Edward realizes that they easily could have burned the letters, and Miss Marple responds that old gentlemen who are fond of their joke never realize that risk. Uncle Henry, she tells them, once hid a five-pound note in a Christmas card to one of his nieces and wrote on the card that that was all he could manage that year; a card. The girl was annoyed and threw the card into the fire, and then he had to give her another five-pound note (p.44).

The clinching of type and analogy thus come at the very end of the story, with the narratives about Uncle Mathew's fake love letters and Uncle Henry's five-pound note, plus their shared failure to predict how other people might react to their antics.

5. CONCLUSION

The story of uncles Henry and Mathew is a sweet, innocent story, and yet the reasoning involved is more complex than one should have suspected. It is not entirely clear how we should understand the structure of Miss Marple's argument. One the one hand the whole story centers around the similarities between the two uncles; an intimated one-to-one mapping which makes the argument inductive and the projection of characteristic k more or less probable. On the other hand there is the universal principle in the form of the personality type, which makes the argument deductive, the projection of k certain, and the narratives about the source case irrelevant or redundant and thus destroys the analogy. I guess we shall have to live with this unresolved matter.

What is clear, though, is that there is an intimate interplay between narratives of the uncles, their ascription to a certain type, and the analogy which allows Miss Marple to make (correct) predictions about Uncle Mathew. All of them evolve together and influence each other. They do not enter into a clear sequence but develop gradually and mutually. The analogy is not finalized until the last paragraph of the story.

Strange Jest ends with a toast to Uncle Henry. In keeping with that, I propose to end this paper with a toast to Miss Marple.

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