

# Aesthetic Investigations

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The Paradox of Fact from Fiction. What Fiction Can and Can't Tell Us About the Real World.

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**Abstract:** Scholars and the educated public often assume that reading fiction is an important way to gain knowledge about the world. But it is far from clear how looking at a fictional world can give us any knowledge about the real world. The beliefs we pick up from fiction are not going to be justified in the same ways that most of our beliefs are. In this essay, I explore the main ways fiction can give us knowledge (in the traditional sense) and the main obstacles to its doing so.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons to carefully study works of fiction. Studying fiction might help teach people the craft of writing, provide citizens with a shared heritage, or inspire people to do great deeds. It is also commonly assumed that studying fiction is a central way of learning important things about the world. This is one of the reasons why *1984* is not only read for fun, but also assigned in high schools. It is why numerous colleges require their engineering students to take courses where they will read *Wuthering Heights*. Among humanities scholars, one will find widespread agreement with the statement once made by the great literary critic George Steiner:

‘Molière and Stendhal would always have more to teach us about human thought and character than all the cognitive scientists there ever have been or ever will be.’<sup>1</sup>

Yet, however fervently people advocate the idea that fiction is an important teacher of abstract or concrete facts about the world, there is something strange about this notion. Works of fiction are the products of people’s creative imaginations. They are usually written to entertain people. Nothing requires either the concrete specific facts or abstract general principles that are true of a fictional world to be the same as those of the real world. Despite Steiner’s idea that fiction can tell us more than scientists will ever be able to, it’s not particularly clear *how it is even possible* for fiction to tell us *anything at all* about the real world.

In philosophical discussions about literature there has been a great deal written about what’s been termed ‘the paradox of fiction’: How is it that we can be *emotionally moved* by characters that we know are not real? But an important related problem might be called ‘the paradox of fact from fiction’: How can an invented fictional world give us knowledge about the real one? This is an issue that Plato worried about quite a lot. I do not believe his concerns have been answered. Indeed, literary critics and teachers of literature often seem remarkably *unconcerned* about this prima facie difficulty. Highly detailed discussions of what this or that novel teaches us often proceed completely independently of any considerations of *how* a fictional world can say anything at all about a factual one. As Gregory Currie observes,

‘There is a puzzling mismatch between the strength of opinion on this topic and the state of the evidence. In fact, I suspect it is worse than that; advocates of the view that literature educates and civilizes don’t overrate the evidence – they don’t even think that evidence comes into it.’<sup>2</sup>

It would be very nice if we could confidently assume that fiction, which produces pleasure, can also produce knowledge. But, given the prima facie paradox regarding how things in an imaginary world can tell us what is true in our world, we cannot just assume this. In this essay, then, I want to carefully examine whether and how looking at fictional worlds could give us knowledge about the actual world. I will proceed as follows: I will start by talking about what I mean by acquiring knowledge. I’ll then talk about why I think it’s prima facie difficult to get knowledge about the world from fiction. There is an enormous amount of different types of knowledge we might pick up from reading fiction. One might gain knowledge of how to read faster. One might learn about various idiosyncrasies an author has. One might learn that Sherlock Holmes, in the story, lives on Baker street. These are not the kinds of knowledge about the world that I am talking about in this essay. Here, I am talking about things a reader might be lead to think are true *about our world*

(e.g. ‘all people are created equal,’ ‘guilt is worse than physical pain’) on the basis of seeing similar things being portrayed as true in the fictional world. I’ll then discuss whether or not there might be ways for fiction to overcome this *prima facie* difficulty. After looking at these issues, we’ll hopefully have a clearer idea about what kind of knowledge fiction can and can’t give us about the real world, and about what we should say about the paradox of fact from fiction.

## I. WHAT DO I MEAN BY GETTING *KNOWLEDGE* FROM FICTION?

The question I am focusing on here is whether fiction can give us knowledge about the real world, in something close to the traditional sense of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The traditional sense of knowledge is simple and straightforward, and has been around in the West since ancient times. To know something is to have a justified true belief about it. Since we are talking about the kinds of knowledge we could potentially gain from fiction, it’s appropriate to think about beliefs broadly here. Beliefs might take the form of expressible sentences, but they might also be pictures, maps, or imaginings of phenomenal feelings. Now maps or pictures aren’t strictly the sort of things that can be true or false, but we can still ask if these things can give us knowledge in something quite close to the traditional sense by asking if the state of affairs they depict is *actually the case* in the world. While the underlying idea of knowledge being described here is simple and intuitive, it can actually be quite awkward to *describe* how it applies to certain mental representations. The unit of knowledge traditionally discussed in epistemology is the sentence or proposition. But many people (including myself) are skeptical that mental representations usually take the form of anything like sentences in the head.

There are a number of possible ways around this. One way is to argue that conceptualizing various sorts of mental states in terms of propositional attitudes *is* up to the task. On this view, even *knowing how* is just a sub-species of knowing-that propositions.<sup>4</sup> Another way to do it is to parse concern about truth as a concern about whether the state of affairs depicted is *actually the case* somewhere. Another (highly awkward) way to express the epistemic issue here is looking at whether it is true that *the belief that the state of affairs being represented is the case* (and looking at whether we have evidence that it is). And what if a work of fiction gets us to imagine a protagonist’s phenomenal state in a way that can’t be expressed in words. Couldn’t we come to know in this manner that some people feel this way in these situations? Perhaps we could. The question, in any given case, is: *do* we know this? In the way I’m advocating that we apply traditional epistemic questions here, inexpressibility is no obstacle to looking at this. Even if the inner phenomenal state we are talking about is an inexpressible one, we can still ask whether

this phenomenal state of affairs being imaged is really like phenomenal states in such situations in the world. And we can ask what the evidence is that they are. It's also, at any rate, implausible to think we can't express what such states are like. We describe our complex visual perceptual beliefs all the time in ways that can be true or false. And novels themselves, after all, are just strings of sentences describing complex states of affairs. For the sake of convenience and simplicity, in the rest of this essay, I will speak of these matters in terms of beliefs being true and justified.

The other requirement for knowledge, and the one that will be our main focus, is that, to give us knowledge, a belief must be *justified*. Traditionally, that means that a *person must have evidence* that the belief is true. In the expansive view of belief we are taking here, this traditional requirement translates to having evidence that the state of affairs being represented is actually the case (and true if expressed in propositional form). It is highly likely that readers will form various beliefs about what things in the world are like as they read fiction. Indeed, there is much psychological evidence that, surprisingly, readers are often *even more likely* to pick up beliefs about the world if they think that what they read is mere fiction, and they 'let their guard down' regarding what beliefs allow to form.<sup>5</sup> But unless they have some *evidence* that the things they believe are truly the case, the fiction has only increased the number of *possibly true/possibly false* beliefs they have about the world – not their *knowledge* of it.

Now some of the beliefs that we may acquire in the course of our lives will not be justified without a great deal of additional accompanying evidence. A new idea, say, about Napoleon's love life is not knowledge unless and until we get evidence that it's true. But many ordinary beliefs can come to us *pre-justified* in the very course of acquiring them. Many of our beliefs come from our sensory perceptions. For most perceptual beliefs, there is no question of their being justified. If I see Mr. Brown smoking a cigar, I am justified in believing that he sometimes smokes cigars. Many of our other beliefs come from the testimony (sometimes expert testimony) of others. Most of these beliefs are justified as well. If someone tells me Mr. Brown sometimes smokes cigars, I am generally justified in believing this, unless I have a good reason to believe otherwise. It is certainly possible to be wrong about beliefs formed in these ways, but we are still justified in holding them. Many ordinary beliefs we come to have, of course, are not automatically justified. Seeing a Venezuelan boy be rude to his mother might prompt the belief that Venezuelan boys are rude to their mothers. This belief would be unjustified. Note that a similar inference from a *fictional* case would be similarly unjustified. There are also, no doubt, many kinds of cases where the beliefs we form on the basis of testimony are unjustified. Note that here, too, some of the features that make beliefs acquired from certain types of testimony unjustified are likely to make beliefs acquired from *fiction* in a similar manner *even more* unjustified.

The beliefs we pick up from fiction are not like ordinary justified beliefs. Fictional stories are depictions of events whose details did not necessarily happen. And some fiction has things happen in stories that *cannot* happen in our world – or perhaps even in *any* world.<sup>6</sup> After reading Heller’s *Catch-22*, we might easily come away with the concrete beliefs about the Italian Front in WWII or with abstract philosophical beliefs about the immorality of war in general. But we don’t, without more information, have a justification for thinking these beliefs are true. The fictional world that prompted these beliefs might be a lot like our world – or it might not be. Without being clear on whether it is or isn’t, the beliefs we come to hold about our world as a result of looking at that fictional world are not yet justified. Unless this situation is rectified, we haven’t gained knowledge about these things from this story.

Note that one has this problem with beliefs picked up from fiction, *irrespective of the contents* of these beliefs. The beliefs might be abstract philosophical ideas about the corruption unleashed by unchecked ambition that one might pick up from *Macbeth*. Or the beliefs might be rich detailed sets of ideas about what it’s like to live a certain kind of life, as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* gives us about African Americans living in the post-Reconstruction American South. Whatever beliefs they are, if they are formed on the basis of what one has been led by authors to *imagine*, they are not straightforwardly justified in the ways that beliefs formed by direct perception of or direct testimony about the real world are. Neither does it matter what general *form* these beliefs take. They could be stateable as propositions. They might be in the form of a kind of mental spatial map of what is where. But if we are speaking of *any kind of representation* of the world, then we can ask whether one has sufficient justifications for having those beliefs. Representations formed on the basis of fictional depictions need special justification. Even ‘how-to’ beliefs one might pick up from fiction shouldn’t count as justified, unless one can rationally be confident that those actions would really produce those results in our world. One might feel like one knows how to successfully interrogate a suspect after reading a police novel, but that doesn’t mean one really does. We are just not justified in the beliefs we pick up from reading a work of fiction in the ways that we are justified in believing many of the other ideas we come to pick up in the course of living our lives. Nor are these ideas justified by having the kind of evidence that scholars in the humanities or sciences require for the claims they are interested in about the actual world. Something else is needed.

If we are asking how we can get knowledge of the real world from fiction, what we need to focus on is how we can get justificatory evidence for the beliefs we pick up from fiction, in a way that’s different from the ways we usually form many of our beliefs. As far as I can see, there are just two families of ways one can come to have any sort of justified true belief from

fiction. If one is justified in believing the idea one has picked up from reading a work of fiction, that justification has to come from either outside the fiction or from inside it. If it comes from outside, the learning must come from what I call a ‘fiction suggests – real world attests’ process. If the justification comes from things that we learn from the fictional world itself, then we need to take additional steps to ensure that the fictional world sufficiently resembles our world, such that when we learn from it, we are learning about a world much like our own. I call this type of learning a ‘resemblance-shortcut’ process. Let’s discuss these now.

## II. GETTING JUSTIFIED BELIEFS FROM FICTION: FICTION SUGGESTS – REAL WORLD ATTESTS

In what I’ll call the ‘fiction suggests – real world attests’ family, none of the *justification* for this belief comes from the *structure of the fictional world* giving the reader a reason to think the actual world is a certain way. Here, while the new *supposition* about what the world might be like is indeed triggered by the fiction, the *justification* for thinking the world that way is entirely *independent* of the fiction. For example, *Caleb’s Crossing* is a novel by Geraldine Brooks about the life of Caleb Cheeshahteumuck, the first Native American to graduate from Harvard. Having read the novel, I now believe that in Colonial New England, fighting between settlers and Native Americans caused the destruction of many towns; that Harvard originally had an ‘Indian School’ attached to it, and that the Puritans often drank small beer for breakfast. But if I now know (rather than just believe) these things, I didn’t come to know them upon completing the novel. I came to know them when, after the novel whetted my curiosity, I looked up various things that experts had written about these details. I came to know these things via 1) the novel creating a number of suppositions, and 2) my then coming to find many were true through evidence from outside of the text. Very different sorts of things about the world can be learned this way. Novels can lead people to form suppositions about everything from the nature of free will, to the causes of divorce, to the best way to cure deer hides. This sort of process could tell us about what has happened in the past or what could possibly happen in the future. We probably *won’t* form beliefs or hypotheses about what actual people named Jim and Huck did on the Mississippi before the Civil War, given we are well aware that they are fictional (though doing so certainly isn’t impossible). But many other suppositions we may happen to form – about particular events *resembling* these (about particular enslaved people who ran away in 1850) or about the properties of more abstract *types* of people and events (American enslaved people, moral conversions) – will be candidates for things we come to know through this supposition and verification process.

Let's call processes whereby we justify the beliefs picked up from fiction on the basis of evidence from outside of the fiction *extra-textual confirmation*. There are different kinds of extra-textual confirmation processes. One big subfamily could be called *active* extra-textual confirmation. These are processes where one does specific activities *with the aim* of finding out if certain claims are true. Suppose one reads in Oscar Wilde's story 'The Fisherman and his Soul' of Tartars drinking mare's milk, and so forms a supposition that mare's milk can be harvested and be a good form of nutrition for a group. One could actively independently confirm this by milking and drinking the milk of the horses at a local farm. Or one could inductively reason that it's likely that mare's milk could serve as a source of nutrition, given how often cow's or goat's milk is a staple where cows and goats are raised, and how many of the world's peoples keep herds of horses. Or one could consult a trustworthy expert on dairy practices throughout the world to see if mare's milk is used anywhere. For abstract philosophical conclusions one might pick up from this story, e.g. regarding of the primacy of romantic love over other values, one could look at philosophical literature on arguments for and against the importance of romantic love, or one could construct one's own arguments. This sort of fiction-reading, supposition forming, and active extra-textual confirmation process is one way that one could come to have knowledge about the world on the basis of reading fiction.

Another subfamily could be called *passive* extra-textual confirmation. Here, the same sort of justifying evidence comes to the agent as in active verification. But with passive verification, the agent doesn't go out of her way to *seek out* the evidence. An example of passive verification would be a person reading about mare's milk in fiction, then later happening to see someone milking a horse on a farm or on a TV special. The reader might hear an anthropology professor mention it in a lecture. She could even have a stream of consciousness meandering about shepherds, cows, and goats that leads to the thought that herded horses should be able to be used as a source of milk. She might then remember the supposition she had after reading 'The Fisherman and His Soul' and note how the plausible conclusion of her meanderings now confirms that supposition. Even though she gained the evidence passively, it's still evidence that the claim is true. And if it is indeed true, the person now has a new justified true belief – new knowledge about mare's milk – from an idea she first picked up from fiction.

There is also a third subfamily of extra-textual confirmation in between active and passive which one might call *background knowledge* extra-textual confirmation. In background knowledge extra-textual confirmation, memories of general or particular things are elicited by a situation in the fiction, and those memories can be used to help indicate that one can justifiably believe in the existence of the situation described. Reading about the Tartars drinking mare's milk might remind one of a farm family one once knew, who, come

to think about it, did some morning milking, but had no cows or goats. The memories of this family – whose activities weren't really fully noticed or comprehended until the mare's milk passage called attention to it – helps justify the fiction-induced supposition that some people might well nourish themselves with mare's milk. Or reading that passage about mare's milk might remind someone that horses are large mammals, that every kind of large mammal can produce large amounts milk for its young, and therefore, by statistical syllogism, horses are capable of supplying milk for people. This isn't quite active verification, since one need not go out of one's way to look for evidence that a claim is true. Nor is it passive verification since one doesn't just happen upon the evidence. Here the supposition induced by the fiction itself automatically elicits stored information from associative memory, and such information can start producing inferences. Such memories and inferences can be used to justify suppositions that fiction can induce.

How likely is it that readers will learn from fiction via processes of extra-textual confirmation? When people go out of their way to do *active* verification, it's very likely. It's especially likely when they use especially reliable processes like consulting well-regarded experts. This kind of verification of ideas picked up from fiction certainly sometimes happens with especially intellectually curious readers. Unfortunately, there's little evidence that most ordinary consumers of fiction spend more than the tiniest fraction of the myriad of hours they spend reading or watching and thinking about fiction attempting to actively confirm suppositions.

When we engage in extra-textual confirmation via background knowledge, we can also learn from fiction. But that isn't as likely to happen as one might think. We won't, for example, genuinely be learning something new if the fiction elicits a memory that simply *confirms* a supposition. If we already knew there were X's that have Y's, and pull that information from memory – then the fiction isn't teaching us something we didn't already know. We do learn when we elicit something like *pieces* of a heretofore-unknown claim or the premises leading to it, and then bring them together. But for learning this way to happen, a number of circumstances must be in place. We need to be reading about things in fiction that we happen to have lots of information about in our memories (e.g. when a person knows lots of information about 19th Century whaling and reads *Moby Dick*). The fiction has to be structured in such a way, and one's memory has to be structured in such a way, that the fiction actually elicits the information-pieces. And one's inferential structure has to be such that it puts the information together in a way that produces a new conclusion. Only if all those conditions are met can background information verify that something you read about in fiction is actually the case. One should note that some types of suppositions require much more background knowledge than others to confirm. One might provide some evidence that something *could potentially* happen somewhere

by showing how it could happen in a fictional world. But it takes much more background information to show that it's physically possible in our world, given its laws or given certain circumstances. It takes still more to show that such a state has actually existed somewhere.

What about passive extra-textual confirmation? There is no doubt that people are sometimes lucky enough to happen to come upon information that confirms a belief that they first picked up from fiction. The problem is that the evidence that happens to confirm the suppositions we've picked up from fiction, gives us information that would be provided *whether or not we had ever gotten the suppositions from the fiction*. Active confirmation has us going out and collecting information we would never have gathered, had the fiction not made us curious about it. Such justifying information gives knowledge we never would have had were it not for the fiction. But passive confirmation has justifying information coming our way *with or without* first reading the fiction. While seeing the idea beforehand in fiction may prime us to pay more attention to it or remember it better if it's dramatic, we can't clearly say that such new information is really a matter of fiction teaching us something we wouldn't have otherwise known about the world.

It appears, then, that one of the ways we can learn about the real world from fiction is when fiction gives us some suppositions about the world and we later, independently of the fiction itself, get evidence of their truth. But if we do this without actively seeking out reliable evidence, we might or might not happen upon the requisite justification of these suppositions. And if we do happen upon it, we gain no more information about the world than the evidence itself gives us, so we don't really learn about the world. In reading fiction, we spend a lot of time taking in ideas which may or may not be true, all the while running a considerable risk that we will acquire numerous false beliefs about the actual world. If one were to spend that time reading experts, making direct observations, or even just talking to friends, it seems we would likely learn far more (without nearly as much risk of coming to have false beliefs).

### III. GETTING JUSTIFIED BELIEFS FROM FICTION: RESEMBLANCE SHORTCUTS

Are there other ways of getting knowledge of the world from fiction besides various forms of extra-textual confirmation? Well, we could know that certain things about our world are likely to be the case if we 'saw' that certain things were true in the fictional world, and we had good reasons to think that such things in our own world were the same as, or very similar to, those in the fictional world. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Inspector Javert achieves his lifelong goal of recapturing Jean Valjean, but he finds it gives him no peace. If things in the real world work like they do in the fictional world, perhaps you should warn your uncle who is an obsessed-with-an-escaped-

suspect policeman that capturing that suspect is not the thing most likely to make his life better. Maybe your son who thinks constantly about being a professional soccer player would be better off not putting all his eggs in one basket.

We could be justified in forming beliefs this way if we have good reasons for thinking that the relevant things in our world are really like those in the fictional world. If we could be confident of this likeness, we would not need extra-textual confirmation of the suppositions we get from fiction. Do we ever have good reasons for thinking that our world is like the fictional one?

### Analogy

One way we might learn about the world from fiction is through straightforward analogical reasoning. A standard way of reasoning by analogy about anything is to start with the observation that some familiar sample item and a lesser-known target each have a set of properties (call them  $wxy$ ) in common. We know that the sample also has some other property (call it  $Z$ ) that has some (unspecified) lawful connection with properties  $wxy$ . We don't think there are significant differences that would make the target item different in the relevant respects. So it stands to reason that the target will have property  $Z$ , too.

Regarding fiction, we might reason by analogy to come to know things about the world like this: Jumpa Lahiri's book *The Lowlands* contains a detailed fictional account of radicalism in India during the 1970s. When one compares the activities happening in Lahiri's account with the historical record, they seem to match remarkably well. So we have good reason to think that the sample, Lahiri's fictional Indian political radicals, and the target, actual Indian political dissidents, are very similar in many ways. Straightforward analogical reasoning gives us reasons to believe they must be similar in other ways. Lahiri's book implies it was not unusual for Indian police to summarily execute political dissidents. Given that the reality and the fiction were similar in other ways, it stands to reason that they are similar in this way, too. Perhaps we should thereby conclude that police did sometimes perform summary execution of political dissidents in India during the 1970s.

Note that with this sort of analogical reasoning, the fiction itself helps tell us that the belief we pick up from the fiction is justified. The fiction does this by giving us detail after detail indicating that the world of the fiction is indeed very much like the real world. The more the fiction gives us evidence that it is like the real world, the more we will be justified in thinking that other features that are there in the fictional world will also be there in the real world. The features might be very concrete, like what people tended to eat for breakfast in particular regions and times, or they can be highly abstract, like what type of courage certain sorts of people display. Similarities regarding either sort tell us that it's likely that there are further similarities, enabling what we learn about one world to tell us what is probably there in the other.

But there are things that make it difficult to use analogical reasoning to draw justified conclusions about the real world from fiction. For analogical reason to work, the two situations we are looking at really need to be a lot alike. Just as importantly, we have to *know* the situations are a lot alike. Both conditions are difficult to meet when we are comparing fictional and real worlds. To begin with, between almost any two mildly complex situations there are numerous differences as well as similarities. Differences make any analogy weaker. The number of differences existing between even any two *actual* situations is so great that Alex Rosenberg (2011), in an interesting book chapter titled ‘History Debunked’, argues that almost no historical situation can really give us much information about what to expect from analogous situations. And the differences between any given real situation and an analogous *fictional* situation are likely to be at least equally great. Indeed, there are many reasons they are likely to be greater. The real world is infinitesimally detailed. Fictional worlds are lightly sketched by the authors (with details filled in by the readers’ ideas and imaginations). They are created to be entertaining and exciting. In police shows, minute bits of evidence routinely lead to capturing (and convicting) criminals. In the real world, it’s often extremely difficult to find useful evidence from a crime scene. Reading *Black Beauty*, it’s easy to come away with the idea that it is morally wrong for human beings to own horses. But that might be because in that fictional world – where horses reason like humans – such ownership likely *is* morally wrong. But it’s not clear our world is like the fictional one in that respect.<sup>7</sup>

Even if our world were quite like the fictional world, in order for us to successfully reason analogically to reach conclusions about the real world on the basis of situations in the fictional world, we need to *know* that the worlds are sufficiently similar. That’s often a difficult epistemic condition to meet. First, it’s often hard to know what exactly is and isn’t there in the fictional world (including possible differences from real-world situations) on the basis of the minimal verbiage provided by authors. More problematic, however, is that we seldom know enough about the *real-world counterpart* to the fictional situation to know how similar it is, or whether it contains numerous dissimilarities. Are Lahiri’s fictional clandestine Indian radicals really like the ones who existed then? To know, I would have to know a lot about India in the 1970s. Are Brooks’s Wampanoag really like the historical people of the 17th Century? If the fictional ones took hallucinogens, does that mean the real Wampanoag did? I’ve discussed Brook’s case earlier in the context of extra-textual confirmation because nothing in my background knowledge could tell me whether the fictionalized Wampanoag were similar enough to the real Wampanoag for me to be able to use this similarity as a basis for a warranted *analogical* inference. I do not know enough about the actual Wampanoag. This is our typical situation when reading fiction. We might sometimes read about situations that we already do know a lot about. But the more we know, the less new there is for the fiction to tell us about.

We typically learn more when we get information about *exotic* realms that we know relatively little about. But the more exotic the world we are reading about is, the less we know about its real-world counterpart, and the harder it is to tell if the two are really highly analogous.

Seeing that various scenarios in fictional worlds seem very like those in the actual world invites us to reason analogically. Schoolyard bullying in a work of fiction might seem so similar to incidents of playground bullying we have witnessed in actual playgrounds that we naturally come to think that the two situations must be alike in additional ways. If the bully in the fiction bullies out of a deep sense of insecurity, then it is easy to think this is true of today's typical schoolyard bullies (even though lots of evidence indicates that it is not). Analogical reasoning comes naturally to us, and when the conditions for a good analogy are met, we can use such reasoning to make good justified inferences. It is possible for fiction to teach us things through analogical reasoning. But if we want to come to good conclusions this way, we need to be cognizant of how hard it is for comparisons of real and fictional worlds to meet these conditions.

### **Author Trustworthiness**

One way we might be able to get around the problem of knowing if the real and the fictional world were similar is if we knew that authors would ensure that the two worlds are sufficiently alike. If and when writers of fiction could be trusted to create fictional worlds that were quite like the actual world in certain respects, then we could reliably infer things about the actual world when we saw them in the fictional world.

But it's hard to be in a position to rationally have such trust. In order to hold readers' interest, authors are continually under pressure to make the people and situations they describe in fiction more striking, interesting, and dramatic than real ones. Authors may add many features to fictional situations not typically found in similar real world situations so that their fiction grabs our attention. They have to subtract many more features. And even if authors are *trying hard* to create realistic worlds, having an accurate, detailed, comprehensive knowledge of the real world is no easy matter. And fiction writers are not required by anyone to have the level of knowledge and expertise about any particular realm that social and natural scientists do. So Conan Doyle could write a Sherlock Holmes story in which the villain is a snake trained to follow whistles – without having to check if this is possible. (It isn't.) George Bernard Shaw could write *Pygmalion* assuming a psychological fact about opposites attracting. (They don't – ask the researchers at dating site companies who make matches for a living.) A novelist who creates a gripping story about a paranoid schizophrenic might or might not know things that a typical psychologist treating schizophrenics does. And we certainly can't just trust that novelists are creating worlds that have the

same moral truths as ours on the basis of knowledge they have gotten from philosophers and other moral experts. There is little agreement on the moral values of our world among moral experts.

It is also the case that if we want to use authorial trustworthiness as a shortcut for knowing that the world of the fiction resembles our world, we need to know *when* an author is likely to be trustworthy – and this is difficult to know. A writer’s disposition to depict a world that is like the actual one can run the full gamut. She can be utterly obsessed with historical or psychological accuracy or totally indifferent. And even an obsessed writer might make him or herself into a leading expert on a topic or prove to be a poor student altogether. A writer who is strikingly accurate in one realm might be utterly indifferent to accuracy in another.<sup>8</sup> How accurate a writer tends to be about a given realm is not information most casual readers carry around in their heads. Now, our knowledge of how accurate writers are might be helped by our knowledge of their track record in this realm. But our knowledge of their track record depends on our own knowledge of a given realm, which may or may not be extensive. Meanwhile, nothing requires authors to stick to certain genre conventions or continue their own past habits. William Kennedy, for example, is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of a series of books about fictional events in Albany, New York over the past several centuries. As a frequent visitor to Albany, I’ve found these books to be a marvelous guide to the history and geography of the region. I’ve often lugged the books around to help figure out which historical marvel once stood where a strip mall now stands. I’ve worked hard to corroborate what’s in the book with historical sources. I once had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Kennedy at a book signing and at the question and answer session I asked him what he thought it was and wasn’t permissible to alter in fiction. ‘In fiction,’ he told me, ‘you can change anything.’<sup>9</sup>

If we do have good information that a given author can be trusted to create fictional worlds that are much like the real world, this enables us to infer things about the real world from acquaintance with a fictional one. We see, however, that it is difficult to get sufficient information about authorial trustworthiness to enable us to learn facts from fiction this way.

When thinking about author trustworthiness, it’s easy for a different sense of justification to come to mind. Justification in the traditional (and I think the ordinary) sense of the term involves a person being aware that they have evidence that a belief is true. But in recent years, a number of epistemologists have endorsed a more lenient conception of justification called *reliabilism*. On a reliabilist conception of justification, a person can have a justified belief merely if it’s formed by a reliable process. What’s more, that person doesn’t have to know that the belief was formed this way in order for it to be justified. This essay is about whether we can get knowledge (justified true beliefs) from fiction in the sense of justification in the traditional sense. But let me say

something here about the challenges for getting a reliabilist justification from fiction. Anytime that a reader picks up a belief from fiction that happens to be true, that belief was formed by a process that, in this case, produced a true belief. But this is not sufficient to say that this belief was formed by a reliable process. A reliable process is one that this person and/or other people can use again and again to reliably produce true beliefs of this sort. The challenge for reliabilists here is to specify which process this is. The very general ‘reading fiction’, of course, is not a reliable process for producing true beliefs about a subject. A particular reader reading a particular claim by a particular author in particular circumstances, on the other hand, might well always lead to a true belief. But that isn’t the kind of general reliable process we are after here either. If one is to claim that a belief picked up from fiction was justified because it was formed by a reliable process, reliabilists need to specify which general level is the right one here. Note that this is a challenge that reliabilist epistemologists don’t clearly know how to meet in any field. This is known as ‘the generality problem’ for reliabilism. In an influential article, Conee and Feldman argue that it’s a problem that is unlikely to be solved.<sup>10</sup> (Reliabilists will and should, of course, continue to try.) And the generality problem is just one of many prominent challenges to reliabilism.<sup>11</sup>

One might, then, try to claim that we can get knowledge from fiction via a reliabilist justification that the reader may be unaware of. But for this to work: a) reliabilism must be a correct view of knowledge, b) a general solution to the generality problem must be found, c) the generality problem must be specifically solved for the domain for fiction – specifying which type of fiction-reading process (e.g. certain authors at certain times) are the reliable ones. It is possible that these things can be shown. Even then, one must be clear to claim that the knowledge gained is not what people have been calling knowledge in the traditional sense.

### Necessary truths

A final shortcut we may use to know that aspects of the world resemble the fictional world is if we can know that *all* worlds must be like the fictional world in these aspects – if we can know that the fiction is depicting a necessary truth. We might see a set of circumstances *abc* in the fictional world and note that it is a *necessary truth* that property *X* must be present there, too. If properties *X* and *abc* are necessarily connected, that means that if we have *abc* in our world, then we must also have *X*, just as they were necessarily connected in the fictional world. Indeed, for *necessary truths* about *abc*, *all* possible worlds with *abc* will have these properties. If all possible worlds must be like the worlds in the fiction in this respect, then we automatically know that *our* world must be like it in this respect. Suppose in a work of fiction, two armies were attacking a building like the Pentagon in Washington. If this work happened to lead us to notice that, in that world, pentagon-shaped buildings

have an odd number of sides, we now also know that in *all* worlds, including our own, where there are pentagon-shaped buildings, there are buildings that have an odd number of sides.

It's not implausible that we could recognize heretofore unknown necessary truths when looking at fiction. Indeed, a standard way that philosophers try to demonstrate conceptually necessary truths to people is by giving them *fictional vignettes* such as Gettier cases or trolley problems, and inviting them to see that, in these cases, and in all relevant similar cases, properties *X* and *abc* have a certain type of necessary connection. In the standard trolley problem, we are told to imagine a fictional situation in which a person pushes a large man off a footbridge to stop a runaway train from killing five innocent people.<sup>12</sup> We are invited to examine our intuitions about this situation to see what heretofore unknown properties of the situation would be entailed by the existence of that scenario. Philosophers typically claim that fully envisioning the fictional situation enables most people to intuitively see that the nature of morality is such that killing one person to save many others is necessarily wrong. This is presumably true no matter what kind of world we are talking about. If short fictional vignettes can teach us about necessary truths, why shouldn't more elaborate works of fiction be able to? Perhaps, reading *Huck Finn*, we intuitively come to realize that slavery is necessarily a moral evil in all worlds, even in worlds where it has long been legal. Philosopher Noel Carroll argues that recognizing necessary truths this way is precisely how fiction teaches us important lessons.<sup>13</sup>

But there are many problems with assuming that fiction can teach us about the world this way. In a very influential paper, Willard Quine argued that there were no entirely analytic truths. Our justifications for believing any claim always require some empirical information gleaned from examining the world. Claims that were once thought to be necessary truths like 'a whale is a big fish' have turned out not only to be not analytically true, but also not true at all. If there are no analytic truths to be found *by any methods*, then there are no analytic truths to be found by contemplating fictional examples. Now Quine's arguments might or might not be right. But we can't simply assume that Quineans are wrong and that there are analytic truths, true in all possible worlds and knowable without any examination of the world. But that's what we must assume if we think we need only look at the goings-on of a single fictional world to learn an analytic truth. We can't unproblematically assume that fiction can tell us about analytic truths, without first specifying why we think that decades of arguments by Quinean naturalists concluding that there aren't any analytic truths are wrong.

Another problem with thinking that we can use fictional cases to tell us what must (or can't) be true in all possible worlds is that such a strategy assumes that we can use what can and can't be *conceived* as a guide to what is and isn't *possible*. Some philosophers believe that we can do this.<sup>14</sup> But many other philosophers argue that conceivability is something epistemic,

while possibility is metaphysical. What is and isn't conceivable by us (through fiction or any other means) is not a reliable guide to what's possible.<sup>15</sup> Here, too, to assume we can unproblematically move from what fiction tells us is conceivable to what we know is true in all possible worlds is to assume that this philosophical dispute has been settled, without showing why the 'conceivability = possibility' side must be right.

Meanwhile, in the past decade, the idea that we could uncover necessary truths by looking at fictional situations and consulting our intuitions about what seems necessarily entailed has been dealt a further blow by results in experimental philosophy. Many experimental philosophers have argued that research data shows that intuitions are not stable reliable indicators of necessary truths at all. These philosophers have claimed that intuitions about what must be true about scenarios described in philosophical vignettes are influenced by factors such as gender,<sup>16</sup> native language,<sup>17</sup> the order in which cases were presented,<sup>18</sup> the smells and cleanliness of the environment,<sup>19</sup> and even font size.<sup>20</sup> If intuitions about the cases examined are reliably tracking necessary characteristics that exist in all possible worlds, they shouldn't vary at all, and things like the type of font the scenario is described in certainly shouldn't influence them. If intuitions are as malleable as many X-phi practitioners claim, then our thoughts about what must or must not be the case in a situation described in a fictional vignette are not reliable guides as to what properties can and can't be counted on to be necessarily present. Now, recall that Noel Carroll has defended the use of looking at literature in order to understand necessary truths, believing that literature transmits ideas in essentially the same ways as philosophical thought experiments: 'If philosophy conducted by means of thought experiments is an adequate source of knowledge and education, then so should literature be.'<sup>21</sup> But that means, conversely, that if the vignette-examining and intuition-pumping methods of philosophy are an *unreliable* source of knowledge, then they are unreliable source via literary study as well.

The arguments of experimental philosophers, like those of Quine, have certainly been controversial. It could turn out that their findings are exaggerated or false. But if we want to argue that looking at literature is a good way to uncover necessary truths, what we cannot do is *ignore* these arguments. Showing that literature is a good source of knowledge via its ability to shed light on necessary truths, will require showing that the intuitions we get about the unseen properties (e.g. moral properties) of actions and characters in fictional worlds are reliable guides as to what's necessarily true in all worlds, rather than malleable indicators of various prejudices, as many experimental philosophers think they are.

Knowing that the world and fictional examples are similar because they share common necessary structures, does seem to be one way that fiction could potentially tell us about the world. But if the meaning of terms, what we can conceive, or what we can intuit about imaginary cases are not good

reliable guides to what is possible, looking at what must be true in a fictional world won't be a good way of coming to know things about the real world through fiction. Defenders of learning facts from fiction this way need to provide us with an account of how these problems can be overcome.

### CONCLUSIONS

It is widely assumed that we can learn either concrete or abstract philosophical facts about the world from reading fiction. But the question of just how we can do so is enormously neglected – especially among literary theorists. In this essay, I have tried to make clear exactly how works of fiction could give us justified true beliefs about the actual world. We can learn about the real world from a fictional one if we have good reasons for thinking that the fictional world strongly resembles the real world. This is possible in a number of ways. We can have good reasons for thinking there is a resemblance if the fiction has shown us necessary truths, but it is difficult to know that it has. Knowing that *authors* have created a fictional world that is similar to ours gives us another reason to believe our world is similar, but it is hard to know if they have. If we know, through direct comparison, that our world and the fictional world are similar in some ways, we can analogically infer that they are likely similar in other ways. But it is difficult to know if the two worlds are sufficiently similar. If readers want to feel like they have learned something from the fiction via the resemblance shortcut, they need to make sure they do the extra work needed to see if such similarities are there.

We can also gain knowledge about the real world through fiction if the fiction leads us to form certain suppositions about what the world is like, and then we do the extra work to gather evidence that such suppositions are indeed true of the actual world. There is no reason to think of such work as difficult. But it is usually work we neglect to undertake.

If we want to learn about the real world from fiction, it is not enough for fiction to give us interesting beliefs. If we want these beliefs to constitute knowledge, so that we can uncover facts from fiction, fiction alone is not enough.

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### NOTES

1. Quoted in Kitcher 2011, 250.
2. Currie 2013, 12.
3. I'll talk about whether and how we might be able to gain knowledge from fiction in another sense of knowledge in the Author Trustworthiness section.
4. See Stanley and Williamson 2001.
5. See Prentice and Gerrig 1999.
6. See Weatherson 2004.
7. See O'Neil 1986 for similar worries.
8. See Friend 2014.
9. The same worries arise if one tries to base justification on the reliability of certain *fictional genres* (rather than the reliability of authors). Just as an author can depart

- from his own usual practices, an author who usually follows the rules of a genre convention can easily decide to break them at certain times.
10. Conee and Feldman 1998.
  11. See Goldman 2015 for a good balanced discussion.
  12. See Thompson 1976.
  13. See Carroll 2002.
  14. Notably Chalmers 2002.
  15. See arguments by Yablo 1993, Hill and McLaughlin 2015, and Block and Stalnaker 1999.
  16. Friesdorf, Conway, and Gawronski 2015.
  17. Krist Vaesen and Bezooijen 2013.
  18. Sinnott-Armstrong 2008, Knobe and Samuels 2011.
  19. Schnall et al. 2008.
  20. Jonnathan Weinberg and Reuter 2012.
  21. Carroll 2002, 7.

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