

Learning from Fiction

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I began my Ph.D studies hoping to work with Dr. Haack in logic, but she didn't teach a logic class while I was there. She taught an epistemology class, and a Pragmatism class, and then one on philosophy of fiction. I may have known before I went to the school that she worked in philosophy of fiction, but it certainly wasn't part of my initial reason for wanting to work with her. How fortunate I was to find in Dr. Haack a fellow lover of good books, and someone whose other philosophical ideas created a valuable approach to the study of fiction!

Fiction is certainly not always the clearest way to convey truths; in fact, one might go so far as to say that the clearer, or, at least, the more baldly ideas are put in fiction, the more the fiction as a work of art suffers. But it is hard to beat fiction for memorability. So, even though one may be more able clearly to explain one's reasons for thinking something in, say, an essay or a letter, it may be a better choice to write a good story illustrating an idea if it is something one wants people to remember vividly.

Fictions can be a launching point for the discovery of truths (or new aspects of truths) about the real world. This is modeled beautifully by Dr. Haack in her paper "The Ideal of Intellectual Integrity, in Life and Literature."¹ In this essay, she has it before her to analyze certain aspects of epistemological character, with an emphasis on honesty and how it interacts with carefulness and diligence. There are a number of ways one might attempt such a task, but in this piece Dr. Haack draws examples from Ernest Pontifex's epistemological journey in *The Way of All Flesh*. Ernest isn't real, of course, but he is very interesting, and, with the aid of the narrator, his growth from a well-meaning but dogmatic parrot into an honest and introspective thinker is traced both clearly and memorably. What a fantastic picture to use as a starting point in investigating what it is to be intellectually honest, as a real person in the real world!

Certainly, some ideas communicated through fiction admit of truth in the real world—and they can be ideas about the real world. Here is an example of a true sentence that is communicated by a novel: Ernest Pontifex is a complex character that grows tremendously over the course of the novel. Why this is a true sentence is not at all complicated; to find out that it's true all one has to do is to read the book. But it's only a truth about a novel. Here's a much more interesting truth claim that is communicated by the same novel: Anyone espousing Victorian morals is likely to be a hypocrite. I don't know if that's true or not, and it's not my point here to go into the question. *The Way of All Flesh* certainly gestures in that direction, though, and it would be

a mistake to interpret the author as doing anything other than saying something about people *in the real world* who espouse Victorian morals. His domain of discourse, so to speak, should not be interpreted as being about only the fictional world that he created in the novel.

This raises an interesting question about justification: to what extent am I justified in believing a truth-claim about the real world that originates in a work of fiction?

One way to answer this is to say that because any truth-claims that occur in a fictional work are the result of the author's imagination and choice, and are technically only about the world of the fiction created by the author, the mere fact that a truth-candidate occurs in a fictional work lends no support at all to the truth of the claim. This is a possible way to approach it, that is almost correct, but not quite exactly right.

Here's another example, not quite like either of the two above: in a game show set within a television show², the host asks the contestant the name of Buchanan's vice president. She answers, "Breckinridge," and gets the question right. This example resembles the first in that the truth-claim in question is about a matter of fact that can be fairly easily verified, but is unlike the first example in that it occurs in the fiction, rather than being about the fiction.

Of course it is possible for a truth-claim like this one about Breckenridge, occurring within a fiction, to be an important causal factor in someone's coming to know it, but it is pretty clear that without further investigation, one would be unjustified in believing the claim, about the real world, just because one has found it in a fictional story. But context matters. I'd argue that there are cases in which occurrences like this do provide a little bit of evidence for the real-world truth of the relevant proposition—and the interesting thing about this is that it has as much to do with the context of occurrence in the fiction as it has to do with the content of the proposition. An off-the-top-of-my-head list of things that determine context in which a truth-candidate occurs is: who says it? Are they represented as being serious and undeceived, and reliable? Is the world of the fiction supposed to be like the real world in the relevant way(s)? What role is the proposition playing in the fiction? (i.e. does it seem to have been included to lend credibility to the story, or is it relied upon so heavily that it feels like it may have been made up to move the story along?)

Dr. Haack's foundherentism has some explanatory value here. The important idea behind foundherentism is that, while some beliefs are more basic than others (especially ones that are closely tied to experience), it is possible in principle for every belief to lend support to any other belief with which it is consistent and to which it is relevant. And, importantly, all beliefs end up relying in part on sensory experience, so that there is always something more than only consistency with other beliefs to provide reason to believe. In this way, propositions that, for some believer, originate from a fiction, can both become justified for that believer, and can provide justification for other beliefs, despite their origin. In the Breckinridge example above, even if the viewer has no other knowledge about Buchanan's presidency, there are mechanisms by which she can come to have a bit of justification in believing the proposition stated by the character in the show. Within this particular show, the question occurs in a string of questions: The first laws of planetary motion were known as... Kepler's Laws. The scientific name of parrot fever is... psittacosis. The islets of Langerhans are in... the pancreas. Hannibal crossed the Alps in... the second Punic War. Suppose that at least some of these facts are previously known by the viewer (which isn't unlikely, necessarily). I think, in that case, the viewer's certainty in the truth of the unknown fact-candidates is raised by the truth of the known facts. To make it true in the fictional world that Breckinridge was what he was in the real world was still completely within the control of the writer. But, given our viewer's other knowledge, that the writer chose to use a fact from the real world as fact in the fiction is clear in some cases, and makes it more likely than not that when the status of a proposition in the fiction is unknown, that it will follow the same pattern as other similar propositions in the same fiction.

So this is a case where some beliefs can raise one's confidence in propositions—which can be completely unrelated to each other by topic, even—by being used together as truths in a fiction. The fact that they occur together makes it so that some of them can lend support to others; but there are more general beliefs about the fiction itself that make it so the viewer can even consider whether fictional facts may be also true of the real world. If the game show from this example had taken place in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*,

for example, the ability of some propositions true in the fiction to raise justification in believing other such propositions would be broken; *The Twilight Zone* often (always?) starts with the mundane, ordinary and realistic, and ends up in the absurd. But because this game show bit occurs in a series in which background historical accuracy is apparently highly valued and generally attempted, mutual support between propositions is possible. (Of course, one would still not be justified in going around claiming that they know anything about Buchanan's VP if this was her only source of information about it, even if she is an authority on both the pancreas and the Punic Wars.)

It is not at all complicated to come by additional evidence about Breckinridge's Vice Presidency, if one knows how to look, just as it is easy to find out about Kepler's Laws, psittacosis, the Islets of Langerhans, and Hannibal. The narrator of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* writes at one point, "Basalt is a brown rock of igneous origin." Jane Austen's novels all assume correct geography of England, including accurate travel times with the technology of the period. The novels of writers such as Tolstoy or Hugo often include lengthy digressions into matters of fact—the chapters about the Paris sewer system in *Les Misérables* being a notable case in point.³ That these things were and are true is uncomplicated and easy to verify, and while it is interesting to think about how these facts are at play in these various stories, and what role they have in helping the audience to imagine the story, it is not very interesting to think about whether or not they are true. Fact-claims on the order of "anyone espousing Victorian morals is likely to be a hypocrite," however, are interesting in that way. There is also a question of epistemology for these claims: to what extent is one justified in believing this sort of truth claim when, in a sense at least, a fiction offers these claims as truth?

I think such justification works exactly the same way for this more complicated kind of truth claim as it does for boring ones such as the one in the Breckinridge example: each individual member of the audience compares the fiction, including whatever implications and suggestions of truth that he has picked up on, with his experience of the real world, and if he finds that the fiction is generally consistent with what he knows of the world to the extent that he knows it, then he would be justified in tentatively accepting, as more likely than he might have otherwise accepted, the truth-claims the fiction makes regarding the world that is beyond his experience of it. As in the Breckinridge example, however, this tentative acceptance does not and cannot amount to knowledge; the stories that make these truth claims are not evidence for the truth of the claims. They rely on the audience's other beliefs about the real world for the epistemic impact that they do have.

Note, too, that the same fiction may lend justification to one person and not to another; someone who knows nothing of Kepler, psittacosis, the pancreas, or Hannibal can conclude nothing about Breckinridge from the story in the example above, because he cannot tell anything about the apparent intentions of the author in using apparent facts to make the story more realistic. And, of course, whatever small amount of justification one can have in believing a truth-claim that has originated, for a particular agent, in a work of fiction, is always fallible—precisely because the author is at liberty to make anything true in whatever fiction he creates—and so any truth-claim one comes across in fiction must be confirmed outside the fiction to count as anything approaching knowledge.

There's another aspect to this process that also makes any conclusions drawn in this manner susceptible to mistakes, although this aspect is not about the fictionality of the origin of beliefs. I think that this is a fallibility that any purported knowledge has—it is a fallibility that makes knowledge susceptible to skeptical worries, should those be raised. It isn't a flaw of foundherentism through which this susceptibility is introduced, either; I'd argue that any theory of knowledge that purports to be impervious to skeptical attacks is flawed because it is unrealistic. I follow Dr. Haack in thinking that human knowledge *is* fallible, and I think that a theory of knowledge ought to make it clear how and why that is, instead of trying to hang on to some absolute certainty in the face of skeptical attack. As Dr. Haack writes, a fallibilist does not need indubitability in order to be able to maintain that "some beliefs are better warranted than others, [and] some cognitive methods more reliable than others."⁴ And being able to prefer some reasoning over others without demanding absolute certainty reflects how people actually work; everyone that is both healthy and hon-

est has held beliefs at some time or other that they have since come to believe were incorrect, but this should not lead anyone to conclude that he is incapable of grasping the facts of the matter about anything. Indeed, a person's ability to identify and correct errors in his own reasoning should make him *more*, not less, certain of his remaining considered beliefs.

To my mind, the least fallible part of human knowledge is the part that is most directly attached to experience. Such knowledge is certainly fallible, but, on the whole, when the insides of their heads are not being messed with by drugs, disease, evil geniuses, or other tricksters, humans do a pretty good job of navigating the physical world. Humans are less good, I would argue, about sorting out exactly what they believe. It is impossible, for example, to have the entire set of one's beliefs in one's conscious mind at once. This creates the possibility for there to be contradictory beliefs in one mind, which may have been arrived at independently and reasonably. It also means that beliefs can be overlooked or ignored when it is convenient to do so.

Foundherentism is not coherentism; it admits much more easily of the rejection and elimination of beliefs that are found to be false without disturbing the whole belief set, because, like the strands in a spider's web, each belief is supported by each one of the other relevant beliefs; if one is bad and has to drop out, the others are still there. So the mere existence of a pair of contradictory beliefs does not have the same effect for the foundherentist as it does for the coherentist; on the coherentist framework, a contradictory belief pair casts the whole structure into doubt. Even a foundherentist, though, would have problems with a tendency of a knower to overlook or ignore (or, perish the thought, rewrite or create) beliefs. And this is as it should be: overlooking, ignoring, rewriting, or creating beliefs out of thin air, so to speak, makes it not just possible but likely that contradictions will be created—an abundance of them.

Because fiction can pull so firmly on the heartstrings, one might suspect that it is particularly liable to induce agents to commit some of these epistemic errors. I think this suspicion is right, in part—I think that fiction can make people want to believe propositions, and because fiction can feel like experiential evidence, it can give people enough of what looks like reasons to get them to actually believe said propositions. This is a strength of fiction, in fact; it can force a person to see things from a perspective that is not his own, and introduce to his mind ideas that he might otherwise never entertain. Fiction can, then, lead him to believe ideas that contradict some of his other preexisting beliefs. But, if he is introspective enough to notice these contradictions and resolve them, it can also lead him to believe that some of his prior beliefs were mistaken, which can be a good thing.

NOTES

1. In *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and its Place in Culture—Essays on Science, Religion, Law, Literature, and Life*, 2008.
2. *Remember WENN*, episode #12, “Popping the Question”
3. My personal taste in fiction runs perhaps a little more towards American television of a few decades back than Dr. Haack would prefer. An example pretty similar to the Breckenridge quiz show might be made out of the Parisian sewer system from *Les Misérables*; given the context and the author (his other writings, his tone, and the import of the novel), I think one is fairly justified in believing what *Les Misérables* describes about Parisian sewers. I don't know that this part of *Les Misérables* is even accurately called fiction.
4. “Fallibilism and Necessity”, *Synthese* 41, 1979, 58.