

## Fact, Fiction and Fantasy

This paper argues that all knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge – knowledge of necessity and possibility. From Ursula Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed*, for example, I learnt that an anarchist utopia is possible. From Edwin Abbot’s novel *Flatland*, I learnt that a fourth spatial dimension is possible. And from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, I learnt that necessarily, all revolutions of a certain type end in dictatorship. But I could not learn from fiction alone that there is an anarchist utopia, that there is a fourth spatial dimension, or that there was a revolution of that type.

The conclusion that all knowledge from fiction is merely modal knowledge is not intuitive, but I am persuaded by the following argument:

- (1) All knowledge from fiction is from imagination
- (2) All knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge
- (3) So, all knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge

From *The Dispossessed*, for example, I learnt only of the anarchist utopia I imagined, and from imagining that utopia, I learnt only that it is possible.

Four clarifications. Firstly, the argument’s premises and conclusion are strictly speaking true even if there is no knowledge from fiction or imagination. But I will argue that the premises and conclusion are non-vacuously true: some knowledge from fiction is from imagination, some knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge, and some knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge (Stokes 2007 also argues for these theses). I learnt from *The Dispossessed*, for example, by imagining an anarchist utopia, that an anarchist utopia is possible.

Second, from modal knowledge, in combination with knowledge of actuality, one can derive further knowledge of actuality. From *Animal Farm*, for example, I learnt that necessarily, all revolutions of a certain type end in dictatorship. But I already knew that the Russian Revolution was a revolution of that type, and so I was able to infer that the Russian Revolution had in fact ended in dictatorship. So when I say that all knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge, I mean that all knowledge from fiction *alone* is modal knowledge.

Third, there is a trivial sense in which one can learn about actuality from fiction, since fiction is a part of actuality. From reading *Animal Farm*, for example, I learnt to speed read, and that despite its efficiency, speed reading is less enjoyable

than ordinary reading. Likewise, there is a trivial sense in which one can learn about actuality from imagination, since imaginings are a part of actuality too. Because I'm imagining dinner, for example, I know that I am hungry. It's difficult to make this distinction precise, but these examples are not knowledge from fiction or imagination in the relevant sense.

Fourth, I need poetic license to use simple and familiar examples. It is almost twenty years since I read *The Dispossessed*, *Flatland* and *Animal Farm*, and even if I accurately remember what I learnt from them, their lessons cannot be summarized as easily as I am making out. And I knew of the possibility of an anarchist utopia before I read *The Dispossessed*, and that the Russian Revolution ended in dictatorship before I read *Animal Farm*. What is important for this essay is not what is learnt from any particular fiction, but what kinds of knowledge can be learnt from fiction in general.

The first section argues for the first premise, that all knowledge from fiction is from imagination. The second section argues for the premise that all knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge. And the third section discusses the conclusion, that all knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge. Throughout, I will focus on examples from speculative fiction – as much as I enjoyed the realism of *Anna Karenina*, *In Search of Lost Time* or *Ulysses*, for example, there is at least as much to learn from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Alice in Wonderland*, or *1984*.

## 1. All knowledge from fiction is from imagination

The first premise, that all knowledge from fiction is from imagination, is motivated by analyses of fiction in terms of imagination. In particular, I have in mind the Gricean analysis, according to which a fiction is (roughly) an utterance intended to induce an audience to imagine something, by means of recognition of that intention (see Currie 1990). *The Dispossessed*, *Flatland* and *Animal Farm*, for example, are fictions because their authors intended us to imagine an anarchist utopia, various dimensional dystopias, and a revolution amongst farm animals respectively.

Gricean analyses characterize different kinds of representation via the different effects they are intended to achieve – whereas assertions, for example, are utterances intended to induce beliefs, commands are utterances intended to induce action (see Grice 1989 for details). Because according to the Gricean analysis imagination is a characteristic feature of fiction, it supports the thesis that knowledge

from fiction is from imagination, because knowledge acquired from imagining what the author intends is knowledge which is acquired in a way characteristic of fiction.

By writing *The Dispossessed*, for example, Le Guin intended us to imagine, by means of recognition of her intention, an anarchist utopia. By imagining the anarchist utopia, I learnt that an anarchist utopia is possible. So from *The Dispossessed* I learnt that an anarchist utopia is possible. Moreover, I learnt this not just incidentally, in the way that I learnt speed reading from *Animal Farm*, but from the features characteristic of its being fiction – the fact that the author intended me to imagine an anarchist utopia, by means of recognition of her intention.

The Gricean analysis is not the only theory of fiction in terms of imagination which supports this thesis. Kendall Walton, for example, rejects the Gricean analysis because he is opposed to its intentionalism. But he still accepts that fiction is a prescription to imagine, and so could still agree that some knowledge from fiction is from imagination (Walton 1990, 87-8). *The Dispossessed*, for example, is still, according to Walton, a prescription to imagine an anarchist utopia, and so when I did so, I still learnt that an anarchist utopia is possible in a way which was not merely incidental to the fiction, but characteristic of it.

Although the analysis of fiction in terms of imagination supports the thesis that knowledge from fiction is from imagination, it does not *entail* the premise that all knowledge from fiction is from imagination – it's perfectly compatible with the analysis that some knowledge from fiction is from imagination but other knowledge from fiction is from other sources. But in the rest of this section I will argue that there are no other cases of learning from fiction in the relevant sense – in every other case, the fictional character of a work is incidental to how one learns from it.

The most straightforward suggestion is that one may learn from fiction, but not from imagination, via testimony (see, for example, Gaut 2007, 143-144; Friend 2007). From Bryan Johnson's autobiographical novel in interior monologue *The Unfortunates*, for example, I learnt about Johnson's thoughts on the death of his friend from cancer. I learnt this not from imagination, which could only have told me about what Johnson's thoughts might have been, but from Johnson's testimony. If I learnt this from fiction in the relevant sense, then not all knowledge from fiction is from imagination.

According to Gregory Currie, autobiographical novels like Johnson's are not fiction at all. He advocates a version of the Gricean analysis according to which "... a

work is fiction iff (a) it is the product of a fictive intent and (b) if the work is true, then it is at most accidentally true” (Currie 1990, 46). So although Johnson composed *The Unfortunates* with fictive intent – he intended us to imagine his interior monologue by means of recognition of his intention – *The Unfortunates* is not fiction, because it is not accidentally true – as an autobiographical novel, it’s true on purpose.

By “at most accidentally true” Currie means both that the work is true and that if what the work is about had been different, the work would have been different in a corresponding way (Currie 1990, 47). The truth of *The Unfortunates*, for example, is not accidental according to Currie because if Johnson’s interior monologue on the day the novel was set had been different, the novel would have reported the different interior monologue Johnson would have had. So testimonial novels such as *The Unfortunates*, according to Currie, are not fictions.

Currie concedes that this analysis of non-accidental truth “... will probably need a lot of refinement” (Currie 1990, 46). But the counterfactual in the analysis is drawn from epistemology, where a similar counterfactual condition is required as a necessary condition for knowledge, in order to explicate the sense in which in order for one to know that some proposition is true, one’s belief in that proposition must be non-accidentally true. The exact formulation of this counterfactual condition in the analysis of knowledge is equally in need of refinement.

But whatever refinements are required to the analysis of knowledge in order to ensure that for a belief to be knowledge it cannot be accidentally true could also be incorporated into Currie’s analysis of what it is for a work to be non-accidentally true. So if being non-accidentally true is a necessary condition of knowledge, whereas being accidentally true is a necessary condition of fiction, then no belief formed by believing fiction is knowledge. Currie’s analysis entails there is no knowledge from testimonial fiction, since it entails that there is no such thing as testimonial fiction.

But I disagree with Currie that no fiction is non-accidentally true. Testimonial novels such as *The Unfortunates* should be considered both factual and fictional, since both are intended to induce the reader to believe their content, by means of recognition of intention, but also intended to induce the reader to imagine their content, by means of recognition of intention. Dropping clause (b) in Currie’s analysis and allowing the categories of fact and fiction to overlap would both simplify the analysis, and keep it closer to its initial Gricean impetus (see Stock 2011 for a similar point).

Moreover, even if Currie's condition (b) were accepted, it would not rule out learning from a *roman à clef* based on true events, but in which some names and other particulars have been changed so that it is not true. If the reader can know or guess how the names or other particulars have been changed, then the reader can learn from the *roman à clef* facts about actuality, without learning from imagination. But condition (b) would not entail that the *roman à clef* is not fiction, since the *roman à clef*, not being true at all, is not accidentally true.

So condition (b) cannot be used to rule out learning from fiction via testimony. But learning from fiction via testimony is not learning from fiction in the relevant sense. Consider, for example, David Brink's decision, after the censorship of his Afrikaans novel *Looking on Darkness*, to publish subsequently in English (Novitz 1995, 199). By doing so, Brink made his subsequent novels assertions. As Novitz writes "He wanted each of his English novels to stand as a rebuke to a Government that, despite its pretensions, was effectively destroying Afrikaans culture" (Novitz 1995, 199).

But although some Afrikaners may have learnt from Brink's English novels that the Government was effectively destroying Afrikaans culture, it is clear that they were not learning from fiction in the relevant sense – Brink could have communicated the same, for example, if he had switched from writing history in Afrikaans to writing history in English, rather than fiction. The statement made by Brink by switching to English for his later novels is not something learned from fiction, because it is not to do with its fictional characteristics (Novitz 1995, 200).

The case of the *roman à clef* based on true events, but in which names and other particulars have been changed is similar – the author intends the reader to imagine what is true in the fiction, but also intends the reader to form beliefs about the events upon which the novel is based. But by forming beliefs about the events upon which the novel is based, the reader is not learning from fiction in the relevant sense, since the reader could have learnt the same even if the work was not fiction – if the names were merely omitted rather than changed, for example.

The case of a *roman à clef* in which the readers are not intended by the author to figure out how the novel is based on real events, but in which the reader nevertheless does figure it out, is even more clearly not learning from fiction in the relevant sense. In this case, the existence of the *roman à clef* is merely evidence about the real events, in the same way that the shortness of children's novels, for example,

is evidence of the short attention span of children. Even if it were not fiction, because the events on which it's based were obscured in another way, it would be evidence of the same kind.

In the case of testimonial novels like *The Unfortunates*, what is asserted is the same as what is fictional – what the audience is intended to believe is the same as what they are intended to imagine. Nevertheless, just as what is asserted by Brink's English novels isn't learnt from fiction in the relevant sense, what is asserted by testimonial novels such as *The Unfortunates* is not learnt from the fiction in the relevant sense – we don't learn about Johnson's day from the characteristic features of *The Unfortunates* as a fiction, but from its characteristic features as an assertion.

It might be objected that factual novels like *The Unfortunates* are importantly different from Brink's English novels, because what is asserted by the former is their fictional content, whereas what is asserted by the latter is not related to their content – the implication of Brink's writing in English would have been the same, even if the content of the novel had been different. This suggests that we learn from fiction in the relevant sense if and only if we learn from considering – whether through imagining, believing or merely entertaining – the content of the fiction (Novitz 1995, 200).

But this suggestion draws the distinction between learning from fiction in the relevant sense and learning from fiction in a trivial sense in the wrong place. From *Flatland*, for example, I learnt not just that it is possible for there to be a fourth spatial dimension, but also something about sexism in Victorian society. I learnt this by entertaining the content of the novel, which suffers from sexist presuppositions. But I did not learn it from the fiction in the relevant sense – I learnt it by using the novel as an artifact from which to draw conclusions about Victorian society.

So in order to learn from fiction in the relevant sense, it is not sufficient to learn from entertaining the content of the fiction – one must also learn from it in a way which is characteristic of fiction. But it is imagination which is characteristic of fiction. So to learn from fiction in the relevant sense, one must learn from imagination. This is what I did when I learnt from *Flatland* of the possibility of a fourth spatial dimension, but not when I learnt from *Flatland* of the pervasive sexism of Victorian society. It follows that all knowledge from fiction, in the relevant sense, is from imagination.

The case of allegorical novels like *Animal Farm* is different. *Animal Farm* is a fiction, because its readers are intended to imagine a revolution amongst farm animals

by means of recognition of Orwell's intention. But *Animal Farm* is also an assertion, since though its readers are not intended to believe there was a revolution amongst farm animals, they are also intended to believe that revolutions of a certain type inevitably end in dictatorship, and that since the Russian revolution was a revolution of that type, the Russian revolution inevitably ended in dictatorship.

*Animal Farm's* assertions do not seem to be incidental to its fictional character in the way that Brink's English novels assertions are to theirs – they are a part of the main point of the novel. Likewise, *Animal Farm* is not merely a *roman à clef* in which Stalin is represented by Napoleon and Trotsky is represented by Snowball, but the fictional nature of which is merely a veneer. So it'd be wrong to argue that, although *Animal Farm* is both an assertion and a fiction, when we learn from its assertions we are not learning from fiction in the relevant sense.

On the face of it, the imagination is not involved in *Animal Farm's* assertions about Russia. Rather, *Animal Farm* works by an argument from analogy. Because of various similarities between the revolution on the farm and the real revolution in Russia – such as the obvious correspondence between Snowball and Trotsky and Napoleon and Stalin, for example – we infer various further similarities – such as that just as the revolution on the farm has ended in dictatorship, the revolution in Russia has ended in a dictatorship.

But what justifies proceeding from the known similarities between the animal revolution and the real revolution to this further similarity? If Orwell had changed the ending, for example, so that Napoleon governed as an enlightened philosopher king and the animals lived happily ever after, why couldn't we conclude that Stalin governed as an enlightened philosopher king and Russians lived happily ever after? The answer is that given the already known similarities between the animal revolution and the Russian Revolution, it is impossible, or very improbable, for the story to end in any other way.

I will argue in the next section that the reader can learn from *Animal Farm* that it is impossible for the story to end in any other way, because the reader cannot imagine the story ending in any other way. And if the reader already knows the novel is similar to the Russian Revolution in the respects which necessitate its ending, then the reader can infer that the end of the Russian Revolution was necessitated in the same way. So although learning from *Animal Farm* is learning from fiction in the relevant sense, it is also a case of learning from the imagination.

In general, allegorical novels work by exploiting similarities between events in the novel and corresponding events in actuality. But to proceed from known similarities between the novel and actuality to further similarities between the novel and actuality, there must be a necessary or probable connection between the known similarities and the further similarities. That necessary or probable connection, I will argue in the next section, can be learnt from fiction in the relevant sense, but only because it can be learnt from imagination.

## 2. All knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge

The premise that all knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge is motivated by the maxim that imaginability is a guide to possibility. I know that a golden mountain is possible, for example, because I have imagined a golden mountain. After reading *The Dispossessed* I knew that an anarchist utopia is possible, because I had imagined an anarchist utopia. And after reading *Flatland* I knew that a fourth spatial dimension is possible because I had imagined a fourth spatial dimension. In general, after reading fiction, one may learn that what one has imagined is possible.

Three clarifications. First, I am not taking any stand here about how reliable a guide imaginability is to possibility. It may be that imaginability of a suitably idealized kind entails possibility (Chalmers 2002). Alternatively, it may be that imaginability of any kind is merely defeasible evidence for possibility. But in either case, imaginability is indispensable as a guide to possibility (Yablo 1993). For the purposes of this essay, the important point is that however imaginability guides our beliefs about possibility, it may operate in the same way through fiction.

Second, the role of imaginability as a guide to possibility is complicated by *a posteriori* necessity. It is imaginable, for example, that water is not hydrogen oxide, but because water is hydrogen oxide, and everything is necessarily itself, it's not possible that water is not hydrogen oxide. Likewise, if I read in a novel that water is not hydrogen oxide, and so come to imagine that water is not hydrogen oxide, I can't learn from that novel that water is possibly not hydrogen oxide. I'll ignore *a posteriori* necessity here, but I believe a two-dimensionalism solution to this problem (see, for example, Chalmers 2002).

Third, if all fiction is imaginable, and all imaginabilities are possibilities, then all fiction is possible (Matravers 2014, 118). But some fiction – such as Ted Chiang's



*Division by Zero*, Greg Egan's *Luminous* and Graham Priest's *Sylvan's Box* – is, or purports to be, impossible. Either such fictions are not imaginable, though the Gricean analysis entails they are intended to be so, or they are imaginable but impossible, although the maxim entails that imaginability is at least defeasible evidence for their possibility, or they are in fact possible. I intend to take up this problem elsewhere.

In the most straightforward case, one learns from reading a fiction by imagining what that fiction represents, and thereby learning that what it represents is possible. In the case in which I learn from *The Dispossessed* that an anarchist utopia is possible, for example, I do so by imaging in detail an anarchist utopia, and thereby learning that that utopia is possible. But in less straightforward cases, one may learn from fiction what is necessary, what would be, what might be, and what is probable. I will discuss each case in turn.

Just as imaginability is a guide to what is possible, unimaginability is a guide to what is impossible. I believe square circles are impossible, for example, because I have tried to imagine a square circle, but cannot. It might be thought one cannot learn about impossibility from fiction in this way, since successful fiction enables one to imagine what it represents, but to learn that something is impossible, one has to fail to imagine that thing. Yet being unable to imagine what a work of fiction represents is usually a source of frustration, not knowledge.

But although in reading fiction, one imagines what the fiction represents, one also tries to imagine other possibilities compatible with the fiction's presuppositions. If a fiction is compelling, one may not succeed in imagining any alternative, and so learn that such an alternative is impossible. From a time-travel story about Tim's attempts to prevent his own birth, for example, I may learn that it is impossible for Tim to attempt to prevent his own birth, since I cannot imagine Tim succeeding in doing so, without also imagining Tim preventing himself from doing so.

Most fictions are contingent but, as Aristotle writes, "... the function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that would happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with necessity or probability" (Aristotle 1997, 16). In other words, although a work of fiction begins with a contingent premise, the story should evolve from there in a way which is necessary or probable. A story which begins, for example, with the extremely unlikely event of a revolution by farm animals, should continue in a way which is necessary or probable given that beginning.

If a story begins from a certain premise, and then unfolds from that premise in a way such that one cannot imagine it from unfolding otherwise, one may learn from that story that necessarily if the premise of a story is true, so is its conclusion. Because *Animal Farm*, for example, unfolds from its premise in a way in which dictatorship is the only imaginable conclusion to the novel, one may learn from reading *Animal Farm* that necessarily if a revolution of a certain type occurs – the premise of the novel – then that revolution will end in dictatorship – the conclusion.

In other words, from some fictions one may learn a strict conditional, in which the antecedent is illustrated by the premise and the consequent by the conclusion of the novel. And if one already knows that the antecedent of that conditional is true, one may infer the consequent. One may learn from *Animal Farm*, for example, that necessarily if a revolution is of a certain type, then it will end in dictatorship and then, because one already knows the Russian revolution was of that type, infer that the Russian revolution ended in dictatorship.

So far, I have had in mind metaphysical necessity and possibility. But whether a statement is physically necessary or possible depends on whether a strict conditional the antecedent of which is a statement of the physical laws, and the consequent is the statement in question, is true. So if one already knows the laws of physics, one can learn what is physically necessary or possible by learning the corresponding strict conditional from the fiction. Because physical theory is built into the premises of hard science fiction, for example, hard science fiction teaches what is physically possible.

Similar remarks apply to other restricted necessities and possibilities, such as the biological, economic, or social. From reading Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* or Mohsin Hamid's *How to get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, for example, one might learn that corruption in third world or developing nations is economically or sociologically necessary, since after imagining the economic and social assumptions built into their premises, one cannot imagine avoiding corruption, so one has reason to believe that avoiding corruption in those circumstances is impossible.

Counterfactuals are variably strict conditionals – a counterfactual conditional is true (roughly) if and only if in all the most similar possibilities to actuality in which its antecedent is true, its consequent is also true (Lewis 1986). 'If kangaroos had no tails, they would fall over', for example, is true since in all most similar possibilities to actuality in which kangaroos have no tails, they do fall over. So by imagining the most similar possibilities to actuality in which the antecedent is true, and failing to

imagine the consequent is false in any of those possibilities, one may learn a counterfactual.

From some alternate historical novels, for example, we learn what would have happened if the past had been different in a certain way. Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, for example, describes an alternate history in which Lindbergh was president of the United States in the second world war. If some parts of *The Plot Against America*, given that Lindbergh was president of the United States in the second world war, could not be imagined otherwise, then the reader could learn the counterfactual that if Lindbergh had been president, those parts of *The Plot Against America* would have happened.

As well as would-counterfactuals of the kind just described, there are also might-counterfactuals – a might-counterfactual is true (roughly) if and only if in *some* most similar possibility to actuality in which its antecedent is true, its consequent is true. 'If I buy a lottery ticket, then I might win', for example, is true since in one of the most similar possibilities in which I buy a lottery ticket, I buy the winning ticket, and so I do win. So by imagining one most similar possibility to actuality in which antecedent and consequent are both true, one may learn a might-counterfactual.

From most alternate historical novels, for example, we learn what might have happened if the past had been different in a certain way. From Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, for example, we learn about how the United States might have been different, had it lost the second world war, since we read about one of the most similar possibilities to actuality in which the United States lost the second world war. But we don't learn what *would* have happened if the United States lost the second world war, because we can imagine other equally similar possibilities.

Usually, we learn less from a novel than what would have happened – since few novels are compelling enough for us to be unable to imagine any other possibility – but more than what might have happened – since few novels are unconvincing enough to tell us what might have happened with extremely low probability. Most novels unfold from their premises in a way which is not necessary, but merely probable or, at the very least, not improbable. Nevertheless, by imagining what these novels describe, we learn a kind of modal knowledge, concerning the probability of possibilities they describe.

Some novels unfold from their premises in a way which is very improbable. The protagonist of Luke Rhinehart's novel *The Dice Man*, for example, makes

decisions by the role of a die, so each decision has a probability of less than one sixth, and the whole narrative has an overall probability far less than a sixth. Nevertheless, although the details of *The Dice Man* are not likely, the novel cannot be compelling if they are too unlikely. In general, although no novel has a high probability of being entirely true, a novel cannot be too improbable unless it is also unconvincing.

Berys Gaut has argued that counterfactuals of the kind I have been discussing are counterexamples to the thesis that all knowledge from imagination is merely modal knowledge. This thesis, according to Gaut, "...presupposes an over-simple distinction between the world and mere possibilities (counterfactual states of affairs). ... Statements about the world involve or imply claims about counterfactual conditionals, whose features can be explored through imagination. Hence one can learn about aspects of the world through imagination" (Gaut 2007, 147-148).

Gaut is right that counterfactual conditionals are both contingent and about actuality. Nevertheless, counterfactuals can be factored into a necessary part, which can be learnt from imagination, and a contingent part, which cannot be learnt from imagination. In order to learn a counterfactual using my imagination, I must try to imagine a possibility, sufficiently similar to actuality, in which the antecedent is true and the consequent false. The existence of the possibility is what I learn from imagination. But to know whether it is sufficiently similar to actuality, I must already know what actuality is like.

So the maxim that imaginability is a guide to possibility supports the thesis that some knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge. But it does not *entail* the premise that all knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge – it's perfectly compatible with the maxim that some knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge but other knowledge from imagination is not modal knowledge. In the rest of this section I will argue other cases of knowledge from imagination, in the relevant sense, are also cases of modal knowledge.

The most straightforward suggestion is that knowledge from imagination which is not modal knowledge is available via introspection. Suppose I want to know what I would like to have for dinner. One way to answer this question is to imagine eating different dinners, and to conclude that I would like to have the dinner that I introspect that I imagine enjoying the most. In general, one can discover how one would act in various circumstances by imagining oneself in those circumstances, and concluding that one would do what one imagines oneself doing.

Likewise, suppose I want to know what someone else would like for dinner. One way to answer this question is to imagine what I would like to have for dinner if I were them or, in other words, to imagine being them eating different dinners, and then to conclude that they would like to have the dinner I imagine them enjoying the most. In general, one can learn how others would act in various circumstances by imagining that one is them in those circumstance. (For a more sophisticated version of this view see, for example, Currie 1995 and Currie 1998.)

But although these examples are from imagination, in the relevant sense, they're also examples of modal knowledge. If steak is a dinner I imagine enjoying, for example, then what I discover is the counterfactual that if I were to have steak for dinner, then I would enjoy dinner. In general, if to discover how one would act in a certain situation one imagines oneself in that situation, then what one discovers is a counterfactual which says how one would act, if one were in that situation, and the knowledge one acquires is modal knowledge, as it is for other counterfactuals.

Likewise, if steak is a dinner I imagine I would enjoy if I were you, for example, then what I discover is the counterfactual that if you were to have steak for dinner, then you would enjoy it. In general, if to discover how others would act in various circumstances one imagines how one would act in those circumstance if one were them, then what one discovers is a counterfactual which says how if they were in those circumstances, they would act. So although I discover what I would enjoy if I were you via introspection, what I learn from imagination in this case is still a counterfactual.

In order for me to come to know what you would like for dinner, by imagining what I would like to have for dinner if I were you, you and I must be similar in certain ways, or I must imagine being more similar to you (Gaut 2007, 149-150). If you are vegetarian, for example, then I should not imagine that I would enjoy steak for dinner if I were you. But if I imagine that if I were you, and I were vegetarian, then I would enjoy lentils for dinner, then as long as I am similar enough to you that what I imagine I would like if I were vegetarian is what you like, I can conclude that you would like lentils.

But what justifies me proceeding from the known similarities between you and I and the further similarities in these cases? Just as to proceed from known similarities between *Animal Farm* and the Russian Revolution to further similarities, there must be a (nomologically) necessary or probable connection between known similarities

and further similarities, to proceed from known similarities between me and you to further similarities about what we enjoy for dinner, there must be a (nomologically) necessary or probable connection between our known and further similarities.

### 3. All knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge

All knowledge from fiction is from imagination, and all knowledge from imagination is modal knowledge, so all knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge. All I can learn from *The Dispossessed*, for example, is what I learn by imagining an anarchist utopia, and all I can learn by imagining an anarchist utopia is that it is possible, so all I can learn from *The Dispossessed* is that an anarchist utopia is possible. Likewise, although I can learn from *Animal Farm* that revolutions of a certain kind inevitably end in dictatorship, I can't learn the Russian Revolution was a revolution of that kind.

But though all knowledge from fiction is modal knowledge, modal knowledge encompasses both knowledge of what is metaphysically necessary and possible, which includes knowledge of strict conditionals. From strict conditionals, in combination with knowledge of actuality, one can acquire further knowledge of actuality. And although counterfactuals are partly about actuality, they split into a necessary part – about which possibilities there are – and a contingent part – about which possibilities are the most similar to actuality – and their necessary part can be learnt from imagination.

So although modal knowledge is all that can be learnt from fiction, it does not follow that there is not a lot to be learnt from fiction. Speculative fiction in particular – including science fiction such as *The Dispossessed* or *Flatland*, fantasy fiction such as *Animal Farm* or *Alice in Wonderland*, and alternate history fiction such as *The Plot Against America* or *The Man in the High Castle* – is a source of modal knowledge – including of necessity, possibility, probability and counterfactuals. And even the most realistic fiction, like *The Unfortunates*, is a source of at most modal knowledge.

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