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Is There Such a Thing as Literary Cognition?

Gilbert Plumer

Abstract
I question whether the case for 'literary cognitivism' has generally been successfully made. As it is usually construed, the thesis is easy to satisfy illegitimately because dependence on fictionality is not built in as a requirement. The thesis of literary cognitivism should say: 'literary fiction can be a source of knowledge in a way that depends crucially on its being fictional' (Green's phrasing). After questioning whether nonpropositional cognitivist views (e.g., Nussbaum's) meet this neglected standard, I argue that if fictional narratives can impart propositional knowledge in virtue of their fictionality, it would be largely via a suppositional framework. Yet in many cases, such as Huxley's *Brave New World*, the key literary supposition could simply be an epistemic possibility ('suppose *X*, which for all we know, occurs sometime'), not counterfactual supposition, that is, distinctively fictional supposition. The best general case for literary cognitivism may be the limited one that literary fiction can alert us to nonactual metaphysical possibilities that may be important for understanding actuality. Yet even here, seemingly possible fictions are often impossible.

Keywords
cognitive value of literature, fictionality, impossible fictions, narrativity, propositional and nonpropositional knowledge, suppositional reasoning

1 DEPENDENCE ON FICTIONALITY

Has the case for 'literary cognitivism' generally been successfully made? Taking a fresh approach, I will argue that the case is not compelling in general. The picture is mixed. In the first instance, the problem is that the thesis is usually construed so vacuously that it would be hard not to satisfy. In the introduction to what is perhaps the most comprehensive survey of literary cognitivist and anti-cognitivist views to date, Mikkonen (2013, pp. 3 & 11; cf., e.g., Gibson, 2006, p. 439; Davies, 2016, p. 377; Harold, 2016, ch. 33; Kajtár, 2016, p. 330) says

> 'I shall use the terms *fiction* and *literary work* interchangeably…Basically, *cognitivism* asserts that literary works may afford significant knowledge,'

in other words, fictional literature can have cognitive value. Yet one need only consider the science in science fiction, the history in historical novels, or an 'encyclopedic narrative'[1] such as Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* for this thesis to look trivial, even given that disentangling the science, history, or other fact from the fiction of course might be a challenge (Friend, 2014 discusses how this challenge might be met; cf. Holliday, 2017).

Attuned to this feebleness problem with the thesis, some have proposed fixes. For instance, Egan (2016, p. 141; cf. Zamir, 2002, p. 322ff.) says: 'A robust cognitivism about literary fiction has to show not just that literature can be a source of knowledge; it has to show that the distinctively *literary* features of literature generate knowledge.' Although this formulation is an improvement, one would have to identify distinctively literary features and show how they can generate knowledge (which is not Egan's purpose). Moreover, there is little agreement on how to fix the thesis. At least one philosopher might reverse the dependence relationship of cognitive value on literary features: 'literary cognitivism, the view that a work's literary-aesthetic merits can depend on its epistemic merits' (Repp, 2017, p. 59). For our purposes, this formulation could just be question-begging for literary works with acknowledged aesthetic merit.

A modification that would give the thesis of literary cognitivism relatively more substance could be borrowed from McGregor's (2016, p. 328) definition of

> '*narrative cognitivism*': the proposition that 'narrative representations can provide knowledge in virtue of their narrativity.'

This does not simply propose that narratives can be a source of knowledge; rather, it ties their providing knowledge to their essence, i.e., their narrativity. To the extent that narrativity is constitutive of literary fiction, such knowledge would be distinctively literary cognition, as opposed to some other form of cognition on the order of mathematical or perceptual cognition. McGregor (pp. 331-332) thinks that the primary way that narratives can satisfy his definition is by providing '*lucid phenomenological knowledge*,' that is, knowing what having a particular experience is like by the 'reproduction' in us of that experience. An example McGregor cites is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo deeply loves Rosaline as the play opens, but forgets about her as the play proceeds. Concomitantly, the audience forgets about her. Lucid phenomenological knowledge is provided of what forgetting someone who is important is like, not by 'empathy but by structuring the representation so that the experience is acted by the actors and re-enacted by the audience.'

Even if the case for narrative cognitivism can be successfully made, literary cognitivism, as an adequately substantial thesis, still would not be established. For the thesis of narrative cognitivism applies to both nonfictional and fictional narratives

[1]Coining the term and characterizing the genre, Mendelson says (1976, p. 1269): 'Encyclopedic narratives all attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge…they necessarily make extensive use of synecdoche. No encyclopedic narrative can describe the whole range of physical science, so examples from one or two sciences serve to represent the whole scientific sector of human knowledge.'

(McGregor, p. 328). While the question of whether narratives can provide knowledge in virtue of their narrativity is important, the critical parallel question in considering literary cognitivism is whether literary fictions can provide knowledge in virtue of their distinctive essential feature, i.e., their fictionality. Literary cognitivists and anti-cognitivists are all concerned with fictional literature because, tautologically, there is no question that nonfictional literary works (e.g., in history or biography) may yield knowledge. So although one might take literary cognitivism to be a type of narrative cognitivism, the proposed dependence on fictionality seems required to make literary cognitivism a substantive thesis appropriate to fiction, as at least one philosopher appears to grasp. Consider Green's definition (2010, p. 352; 2016, p. 286; 2017, p. 48; cf. his 2019, sec. IV; quoted approvingly by Maioli, 2014, p. 625):

> '*Literary Cognitivism* [LC]: Literary fiction can be a source of knowledge in a way that depends crucially on its being fictional.'

This will be our basic definition in considering whether the case for literary cognitivism has generally been successfully made. It prevents the literary cognitivist from claiming success 'on the cheap'–such as by, what is most common, restricting the domain to fictional literary narratives, yet only attempting to show that they can provide knowledge in virtue of their narrativity or some other quality (literary or not) applicable to nonfiction. Their fictionality cannot be a mere accidental property as far as establishing their cognitive potential is concerned.[2]

Let us briefly consider the four philosophically fraught concepts in LC, viz., literature, fiction, knowledge, and dependence. Taking dependence first, there is a possible ambiguity. As Green says in a footnote, LC 'is to be distinguished from a thesis that implies LC but also asserts that the knowledge literary fiction provides is not available through any other means such as journalism, memoir, or research in social psychology,' a thesis that might be called '*literary cognitive uniqueness*' (2016, p. 286n4). Let us label this thesis 'LCU'. While Green advocates LC, not LCU, notice that given that LCU implies LC, if an argument for LCU is undermined, then of course a possible avenue of support for LC is also undermined. Although the notion of dependence is clear enough in LCU as the usual idea of *cannot exist without*, a problem is that the more moderate notion of dependence in LC as distinct from that in LCU is not clear. Green never directly addresses this question. I propose that an adequate fleshing out of the idea of dependence in LC is that in the path or route to knowledge from the fictional work, the work's fictionality is integral (not necessarily that there is no other path to the knowledge, as per LCU). It is because or partly because of its fictionality that the work yields knowledge.

Regarding the concept of literature, although in the opening quotation we saw Mikkonen say that he is using 'the terms *fiction* and *literary work* interchangeably,' he does so simply for brevity. As opposed to fiction on the order of 'bodice rippers', pulp fiction, and the like, it is generally held (Mikkonen included) that literary fiction is more

[2]I count metalevel/reflexive apparent satisfactions of LC as also claiming success 'on the cheap'; for example, suppose it were contended that engaging with literary fiction helps the most in understanding creativity and its methods, such as imaginativeness and selection of 'facts', that are necessary for writing fiction.

nuanced; it has a greater richness and complexity of such things as character development, plot, or fine description, and also somehow shows insight into human affairs. How it might show or facilitate such insight is the central question of literary cognitivism.

It seems to me that a necessary condition for a work to be a piece of fictional literature is that at least some of what is depicted is not supposed to be true, and indeed, some is not true (cf., e.g., Goodman, 1978, p. 124). This condition is not sufficient because it is satisfied, for instance, by lies. False but sincere legal testimony is not a counterexample because although it is 'fiction', it is not literary fiction. As Friend argues (2017), it will not do simply to say that literary fiction does not refer to the real world or is an 'invitation to imagine', because something like 'the *Reality Assumption*: the assumption that everything that is (really) true is also fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work' (p. 29) is indisputable, and practically all narrative discourse invites one to imagine or form a mental representation of its content (p. 31). For instance, anyone who reads Shackleton's vivid work of nonfiction *South*, which recounts his failed attempt to make a land crossing of the entire Antarctic continent, 'without imagining the terrible odyssey that unfolded after his ship was crushed by ice has simply not engaged properly with the story' (Friend, 2012, p. 183). Recognizing this, the common view that works of fiction distinctively invite one to imagine draws a contrast in authorial intention with respect to belief: The author of nonfictional narration intends the auditor to imagine the content and also to believe it to be true, whereas the author of fiction generally only intends the auditor to imagine the content to be true. After all, the author of nonfiction generally aims not to fabricate its content, whereas the author of fiction aims largely to fabricate it. As I said, in fictional literature at least some of what is depicted is not supposed to be true.

But could it turn out that 'accidentally' all of it is true, yet the work still be fictional, contrary to the necessary condition I favour? Among others, Currie (1990, pp. 9, 45, 48) and Friend (2012, p. 190) think so. It seems to me that for extended works, this view is a product of being philosophically smitten by creatively *invented* and astronomically unlikely examples. From the point of view of common sense, such examples, if not entirely idle, could always be *better* described as something other than fiction, such as *prescience* (if future oriented) or a *fluke*, not to mention *nonfiction*. Here is Currie summarizing (p. 45) his often-cited though imaginary example (p. 9): the author of 'our true historical novel [the use of this term could be regarded as question-begging]…followed known historical events, and filled in the gaps in our knowledge with incidents of his own invention. That his descriptions of these incidents are true is just an accident.' The amount of this 'filling in the gaps' makes a difference. The less filling there is, the more likely such a work would always be regarded as nonfiction (as plain history, in Currie's case); the more filling there is, the more likely the work would be regarded as a fluke rather than fiction. Certainly, any *actual* narrative offered as fiction would not easily be accepted as fiction if every sentence in it is known to be true. Apparent incompleteness may cause one to take a dim view of the 'semantic' theory of fiction, but the correctness of the necessary condition I favour would hardly mean that the semantic theory is the whole story. While for such reasons I think that fiction is necessarily counterfactual in the indicated sense, it would take another paper or more to fully defend the view. Besides, it may be enough for my purposes if it is at least allowed,

as Friend concludes, 'there can be no doubt that the inclusion of [false] made-up content is a particularly significant standard feature of fiction' (2012, p. 191; cf. 190).

I believe LC could just as well be phrased as 'Literary fiction can be a source of knowledge or understanding…' My arguments, suitably cast, would still go through. What are called 'neo-cognitivists' emphasize understanding, as opposed to knowledge as traditionally construed, i.e., propositional knowledge (e.g., Gibson, 2008, pp. 585-586 and 2009, sections IV-VI; Mikkonen, 2015, *passim*). I will take up this distinction at the beginning of the next section; my main point for now is that in general, neither literary cognitivists nor neo-cognitivists have explicitly tried to meet the standard of dependence on fictionality set by LC. This is evidenced, for example, by recent surveys of cognitivist positions (e.g., Gibson, 2008; Mikkonen, 2013; Harold, 2016). However, sometimes cognitivists do appear to suspect that there is a need for a reckoning by such a (LC/LCU) standard. For instance, Gibson (2003, p. 235), speaking of *Othello*, says 'we need precisely his fiction, this Moor of Venice who offers us the story "of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplex'd in the extreme".' Yet that is as far as he gets. Elgin (2007) is better than most, but it is not until the penultimate paragraph of her paper that she most clearly considers the question. She asks (p. 53) 'why should we think that reading fiction *in particular* has any epistemic utility?' Yet in her answer LCU is not satisfied in that certain psychological studies could yield the same kinds of insights she cites (e.g., 'Lear's treatment by his daughters sensitizes us to the dangers of taking extravagant expressions of emotion for the real thing'), not to mention, be based on empirical evidence. And whether LC is satisfied seems to be determined by whether the key suppositions involved are genuinely counterfactual, as we will see. Often they are not, as I think is illustrated by Orwell's *1984* (discussed by Elgin, pp. 50-51), which supposes an extremely totalitarian state.

One take on this situation is that LC is a thesis that is inappropriately strict or too hard to satisfy (and LCU even harder). Of course, this seems false to me, given my preceding (and following) arguments. The other take is that there has been a lot of question-begging or evasion going on.

2 THE NONPROPOSITIONAL

Let us, as is common, divide those who advocate that fictional literature can have cognitive value into two main groups, according to whether the knowledge or understanding in question is propositional (knowing-that) or putatively nonpropositional (knowing-how, knowing 'what it is like', conceptualization, etc.).[3] Mikkonen (2013, pp. 9-10) gives the following summary of nonpropositional views:

> Cognitivists in the non-propositional camp maintain that literary works may educate emotionally, train one's ethical understanding, call into question moral views, cultivate or stimulate imaginative skills and/or cognitive skills, 'enhance' or 'enrich' the reader's knowledge, 'deepen' or 'clarify' her understanding of things she already knows, 'fulfil' her knowledge or help her 'acknowledge' things, give significance to things, provide her knowledge of what it is like to be in a certain situation, that is, offer her a 'virtual

[3]Of course, this is a disputed distinction. For instance, Stanley & Williamson (2001, p. 444) conclude that 'all knowing-how is knowing-that'; Stecker (2019, ch. 6) says 'a conception is just a proposition, or a set of them, of which we are aware.'

> experience', often of situations she could not, or would not like to, encounter in her real life, and so on.

From these–admittedly minimal–descriptions it is questionable whether such approaches satisfy LC, let alone LCU. But let us consider a representative example in some detail. Nussbaum (1995, pp. 5 & 34) says:

> literary works typically invite readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences…The reader's emotions and imagination are highly active as a result…reading a novel like this one [Dickens' *Hard Times*] makes us acknowledge the equal humanity of members of social classes other than our own, makes us acknowledge workers as deliberating subjects with complex loves and aspirations and a rich inner world.

So according to Nussbaum, reading novels can stimulate the sympathetic imagination and engender compassion; that is what they contribute that is supposedly special in making us recognize such things as the equal humanity of others, thereby giving us a certain kind of ethical knowledge or understanding. Yet is there any dependence of such enlightenment on fictionality? Regarding LCU, it seems that there is nothing that precludes a suitably written historical, biographical, or other expressly nonfictional narrative from doing what Nussbaum describes here. Regarding LC, let us presume that Dickens' *Hard Times* and (e.g.) Ellison's *Invisible Man* are rightly classified as works of fictional literature and that just as Ellison gives us phenomenal knowledge of what it is like to experience systematic racial oppression, Dickens' descriptions of the experiences of his Stephen Blackpool character give us phenomenal knowledge of the life of a factory worker during the Industrial Revolution. However, both novels are to some extent autobiographical (Dickens worked in a factory in his youth) or biographical, and whatever this extent is, it does not appear to affect their capacity to impart phenomenal knowledge. So how could this knowledge arise because or partly because of fictionality, that is, how could fictionality be integral to the explanation of the way the knowledge comes about? It seems that it could not.

In point of fact, Nussbaum agrees in a qualified way that LCU is not satisfied by her view. She allows 'some biographies and histories' into the honoured fold 'so long as these are written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion' (1990, p. 46) and 'arouse the relevant forms of imaginative activity' (1995, p. 5), etc., in the manner of the best fiction, i.e., literary fiction. Still, Nussbaum comes close to claiming LCU. She raises the question, quoting a character in a Henry James novel, why not look to 'poor dear old life' (1990, p. 45) for the proper material for such moral enlightenment? Nussbaum's primary answer is that life in general is not sufficiently wide or deep (p. 47). 'We have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial.' Moreover, she claims that

> in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly–whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived.

The question she raises here about fiction versus nonfiction appears to set up an equivocation. We might take the question about looking to 'poor dear old life' to ask–why not look to *collective* human experience as embodied in the range of nonfictional literature? Nussbaum's answer contrasts the experience of the typical *individual* to the range offered by fictional literature, and of course an individual's experience is not wide or deep enough.

Nussbaum may have any dependence relation backwards. She writes as if nonfictional narratives can meet her cognitive standards only insofar as they are like what she sees as the best fictional narratives (per above). Skilleas (2006) considers examples such as Primo Levi's vivid first-hand account of enduring a Nazi concentration camp in *If This is a Man,* and argues that they may foster greater 'identification and sympathy in the reader' (p. 273) largely because they are not fiction.

3 THE PROPOSITIONAL AND SUPPOSITIONAL

In general, fictional narrative can be regarded as making a supposition (commonly called a 'premise') and seeing what would, or could very well, follow. For instance, Andy Weir's *The Martian* considers what would happen if a (resourceful) astronaut was mistakenly left for dead on Mars by his companions, and had to single-handedly engineer the conditions of his long-term survival for any hope of rescue. These are primarily 'real' and probabilistic (mostly causal) consequences imagined by the author, but with critical interpretation, there may be a transition to more logical or conceptual–hence, argumentative–consequences. So, for instance, one can see a fictional narrative, as a whole, as engaged in suppositional reasoning by generalizing from a supposed example,[4] constructing a supposed counterexample to a generalization,[5] or working out the negative implications of a supposition in the manner of a loose *reductio ad absurdum*, as Green (2010, p. 360) understands Huxley's *Brave New World*–the supposition being that society is 'organized along the lines dictated by hedonistic utilitarianism.'

It seems that if fictional narratives can satisfy LC in imparting propositional knowledge, it would be largely via this suppositional framework, given that the key supposition in the reasoning is fictional. In the *Brave New World* case, assuming that the argument is good, the knowledge that would be imparted is not only the conditional knowledge that if society is organized along the lines dictated by hedonistic utilitarianism, such and such negative consequences ensue, but also the *reductio*'s conclusion that 'hedonistic utilitarianism is an incorrect theory of how to achieve happiness' (Green 2010, p. 360).

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[4]As Nussbaum (1990, pp. 139-140) understands Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*: 'The claim that our loves and commitments are so related that infidelity and failure of response are more or less inevitable features even of the best examples of loving is a claim for which a philosophical text would have a hard time mounting direct argument. It is only when, as here, we study the loves and attentions of a finely responsive mind such as Maggie's, through all the contingent complexities of a tangled human life, that...we have something like a persuasive argument that these features hold of human life in general.'

[5]As Carroll (2002, p. 10) takes Graham Greene's *The Third Man,* where the generalization is 'when loyalty to a friend conflicts with loyalty to a cause, one ought to choose in favor of the friend.'

Normally, the notion of literary suppositional structure is expressed by literary cognitivists in the idea that many works of fictional literature can reasonably be regarded as 'thought experiments'. This model is potentially distracting. Elgin (2007, esp. p. 48), among many others, argues that since in science thought experiments can yield knowledge, the same can be true of fictional literature. Of course, though, to the extent that the scientific thought experiment could be or have been a *real* experiment, there is no dependence (in the sense of *cannot exist without*) of the experiment's result on fictionality–something that is evident in the favourite scientific thought experiment cited: Galileo's refutation of the Aristotelian view that the heavier the object, the faster it falls. Furthermore, there are severe disanalogies to contend with; for example, there is an inverse relationship between parameters of evaluation. Factors that make a thought experiment good (e.g., straightforwardness and precision, convincingness) tend to make a story bad (lack of nuance and subtlety, didacticism), and vice versa (cf. Egan 2016, p. 147).

Thus, let us return to the unadulterated suppositional reasoning framework. As previously explained, I take fictionality to involve counterfactuality. Now a proposition may be 'counterfactual' in only the weak temporal sense that the event described occurs in neither the present nor the past in the actual world. We must allow counterfactual suppositions in this weak sense to be fictions; otherwise, for example, we might have to reclassify key suppositions of works of science fiction after developments in science and technology, such as Verne's 1865 novel *From the Earth to the Moon*. Nevertheless, we can still hold that the 'premises' of literary fictions that are paradigmatically or most clearly counterfactual are those that are metaphysical counterfactual possibilities, that is, they obtain in merely possible worlds–not obtaining ever in the actual world.

A problem arises for satisfying the fictionality requirement of LC if the supposition could simply be an epistemic possibility ('suppose *X*, which for all we know, occurs sometime'), not counterfactual supposition. It is disputable whether *Brave New World*'s supposition that society is 'organized along the lines dictated by hedonistic utilitarianism' is actually true of a society somewhere, or at some time was true. The point is, one cannot say that a work imparts knowledge (partly) because of its fictionality *qua* counterfactuality if in key respects its counterfactuality is not evident.

One might respond that whether a literary fiction's supposition is counterfactual may vary with how specifically it is formulated. *Brave New World*'s supposition could be cast as including (e.g.) that there are no visible signs of aging in the World State, Soma is the state-distributed hedonistic drug, there are biweekly and state-required orgies, hatcheries produce human embryos–all in contrast to natural processes outside the World State in Savage Reservation in New Mexico. Probably not all of this is needed to make the supposition a metaphysical counterfactual, let alone a temporal one. Determining the right level of generality is no doubt an important and difficult question, perhaps even intractable. However, it may be that the more the focus is on *particulars* that make a supposition a nonactual possibility, the less likely it is that knowledge or understanding pertaining to the actual world could be gained. Otherwise, Green's formulating the entire *reductio* he sees in Huxley's work in fully general terms[6] would appear to be otiose.[7]

[6]2010, p. 360:

In the strictest *reductio* arguments, the supposition, e.g., that arbitrary *N* is the largest integer, is shown by the argument to be necessarily false, and the knowledge that there can be no largest integer transparently depends on the counterfactuality of the supposition because the supposition leads to a contradiction (there are alternative paths to this knowledge, so this is not dependence in the sense of *cannot exist without*). In fictional literature, the closest comparable cases that could satisfy LC may fall into genres such as those of historical fiction, science fiction, magical realism, and supernaturalism. As a representative example of the latter, Green (2017, pp. 57-58) considers Stoker's vampire novel *Dracula*, which supposes that its main protagonists, who are 'quite rational people,' are 'faced with empirical evidence undermining…naturalism.' If this story showed, as Green seems to suggest, that 'commitment to rationality does not by itself guarantee a commitment to naturalism,' then the story would provide *that knowledge* in virtue of the story's counterfactuality. (Green would say LCU is not at issue since as an alternate route to that possible knowledge, he cites Cleanthes' arguments in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.)

However, this sort of case raises the issue of 'impossible fictions,' that is, ones that involve a systemic logical or metaphysical (not merely a physical) impossibility, and whether, as such, they can have cognitive value.[8] Certainly, the key supposition of an *im*possible fiction is presumably not a metaphysical counterfactual possibility, and accordingly is not paradigmatically the 'premise' of a literary fiction. It might be contended that *Dracula* is an impossible fiction on such conceptual grounds as that a commitment to naturalism is a condition of the possibility of the scientific method, broadly construed, which in turn defines rationality. Still, engendering a reader's principled response to the basic claim that the novel makes, be it rejection as here, or affirmation, allows that the suppositional reasoning the novel exhibits has some cognitive value, at least as aiding understanding, if not knowledge.

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1 Suppose a society were organized along the lines dictated by hedonistic utilitarianism.
2 In such a world, people would lack freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and the ability to cultivate the capacities for critical reflection on their surroundings.
3 Therefore, in such a world, life would be intolerable to all but those who have lost the capacity for the activities mentioned in premise (2).
4 Therefore, such a world would be unacceptable.
5 Therefore, hedonistic utilitarianism is an incorrect theory of how to achieve happiness.

[7]This calls to mind Aristotle's famous dictum in the *Poetics* that 'poetry is a more serious and philosophical business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars' (1451b 5–9).

[8]Although Nolan (2015), for example, can be regarded as arguing that impossible fictions can have cognitive value, Bourne & Bourne (2018) argue that the fictions he considers are not really impossible.

The supposition or premise of an historical fiction *qua* speculative or alternative history is a past-looking counterfactual, for instance, the premise of Robert Harris' 1992 novel *Fatherland* is that the year is 1964, and Germany won World War II in Europe and is at uneasy peace with the United States, the other nuclear superpower. Given a knowledgeable author, such fictional narratives may offer a good case for LC insofar as they embody a variation of an approach to doing history that 'is, at the very root, the idea of conjecturing on what did not happen, or what might have happened, in order to understand what did happen' (Black & MacRaild, 2007, p. 125). After all, causality is largely a counterfactual notion. LCU is not satisfied, though, since counterfactual reasoning in the discipline of history itself is an alternative to the speculations of literary historical fiction, which in theory is second best because history furnishes the facts and epistemic standards.

In general, literary fiction may alert us to nonactual metaphysical possibilities that may be important for understanding actuality. In a manner somewhat similar to counterfactual historical speculation, illumination might be shed on our actual nature by considering, for example, what life would be like among a people who regularly change genders, biologically and otherwise, as in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Here, though, there is no obvious discipline or science that furnishes an alternative to such literary speculation, hence LCU may be satisfied. But we must be careful. These people (the 'Gethenians') are not us (humans), and they may be *necessarily* not us, that is, have traits incompatible with human nature, in which case we cannot sensibly suppose for the sake of novel-writing or anything else that *we* regularly change genders. As Stecker says (2019, ch. 6), 'knowledge that something is possible can be profoundly uninteresting, but it can also be of great interest.' Overall, Stecker argues that 'the cognitive value of fiction in the context of the arts' lies in the fact that 'we acquire from such works new conceptions or hypotheses which we then can test in the actual world' (cf. Kivy 1997, p. 125ff.). This could be taken as conforming to what, as we have seen, may be the best general case for LC, i.e., that literary fiction can alert us to nonactual metaphysical possibilities that may be important for understanding actuality.

However, one can ascertain that the phrasing of this case for LC is not as vague as it might sound by considering how Stecker's view in fact diverges. He says 'one finds far too many…possibilities in literature for all of them to be true.' So he is concerned with the range of epistemic (or perhaps metaphysical) possibilities that the conceptions or hypotheses found in fiction represent–*of which actual facts are a proper subset*. The point of our testing such a possibility in the actual world is to determine whether it is a member of this proper subset. Thus, in company with virtually every other literary cognitivist or neo-cognitivist, Stecker is not attempting to meet the standard of dependence on fictionality set by LC.

Moreover, the capacity of literary fiction to provide knowledge or understanding in virtue of its fictionality could still be overestimated, even if it is circumscribed to making us aware of significant nonactual possibilities.[9] In a famous passage, Lewis (1983, p. 278) says:

[9]This is not to say that I think engendering awareness of significant nonactual possibilities is the only way LC or LCU might be satisfied. Elsewhere (Plumer, 2017) I argue that for any extended fictional narrative that is believable, we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true of human nature in order for the narrative to be believable?—and believability with

> Fiction might serve as a means for discovery of modal truth. I find it very hard to tell whether there could possibly be such a thing as a dignified beggar. If there could be, a story could prove it.

Lewis is offering support for LCU here, but would he really need a fictional story? If so, that may bespeak a rather sheltered life. I think I have encountered dignified beggars in various parts of the world. LCU implies LC, so if an argument for LCU is undermined, of course a possible avenue of support for LC is also undermined.

4 CONCLUSION

I have argued that the case for literary cognitivism has not generally been successfully made. The main reason is that the thesis is usually taken simply to say that literary fiction can be a source of knowledge, a thesis with which no one should disagree. To make the thesis substantial, a critical requirement is that the knowledge or understanding is provided significantly in virtue of the distinctive essential feature of literary fictions, that is, their fictionality. Partly for topic manageability, I make the common-sense assumption that fictionality involves counterfactuality, which paradigmatically is metaphysical but could be merely temporal counterfactuality.

We saw that it is questionable whether nonpropositional cognitivist views meet the requirement of dependence on fictionality. Propositional cognitivist views fare better if the key supposition of the work is clearly counterfactual; however, frequently it is not. The best general case for literary cognitivism may be the restricted one that literary fiction–in genres such as historical fiction, science fiction, and supernaturalism–can alert us to nonactual metaphysical possibilities that may be important for understanding actuality. Yet even here, seemingly possible fictions are often impossible.

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respect to fiction is quite a different thing than it is with respect to nonfiction. If a work of nonfiction is *believable*, it is *worthy of belief*, but the term cannot mean this with respect to fiction.

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