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Two Epistemic Issues for a Narrative Argument Structure

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The transcendental approach to understanding narrative argument derives from the idea that for any believable fictional narrative, we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true of human nature in order for the narrative to be believable? I address two key issues: whether only realistic or realist fictional narratives are believable, and how could it be established that we have an intuitive, mostly veridical grasp of human nature that grounds believability?

KEYWORDS: believability, cognitive value of literature, mindreading, narrative argument, psychological competence, realism

1. INTRODUCTION

In approximately the past decade, argumentation studies have become increasingly concerned with how fictional narratives, taken as wholes, may be argumentative. Since argument can provide the justification needed for knowledge, this question concerns the cognitive value of fictional literature. Nevertheless, both traditional aestheticians and argumentation theorists have tended to neglect this connection; there tends to be a narrow focus by these researchers on only one of these elements: the possibilities for knowledge or the possibilities for argument, respectively. I will try to help broaden the focus here. Three recent approaches to considering how fictional narratives may be argumentative understand narratives to exhibit the structure of suppositional, analogical, or a kind of transcendental argument. For example, Green (2010, p. 360) sees Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* as an "implicit" *reductio ad absurdum*, where the supposition is that society

is “organized along the lines dictated by hedonistic utilitarianism”. Rodden (2008) proposes that there is an “enthymematic...analogy between our world and the world of [George Orwell’s novel] *1984*” (pp. 167-169); it is an “argument against political tyranny and totalitarianism” (p. 156). This paper will be concerned with two key epistemic issues that arise for the transcendental approach, the approach that I have been developing since my paper for the 2010 ISSA conference (Plumer, 2011a; 2011b; 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; and 2017).

The basics of the transcendental approach are as follows: Being believable is a central necessary condition for an extended fictional narrative to be good. It is always reasonable to ask about such a narrative—is it successful ‘make-believe’? Yet for any believable fiction we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true of human nature in order for the fiction to be believable? Whatever these are, generally we can, subject to a proviso, infer that they are in fact true of human nature. The proviso is that we have an intuitive, mostly veridical grasp of human nature that grounds this believability. So for any extended fictional narrative that is given in experience as believable, a transcendental argument is generated with this pattern:

(A) This is believable.

(B) This is believable only if such and such principles are true of human nature.

(C) Therefore, such and such principles are true of human nature.

The idea is that in virtue of *being* believable (not claiming to be believable), an extended fiction makes an argument telling us something about the real world of human psychology, action, and society. As a possible illustration, consider Nussbaum (1990, pp. 139-140) on Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl* (I inserted the steps of the transcendental argument following indications in Nussbaum’s text):

The claim that (C) 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 (A) 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 (B) a persuasive argument that these features hold of human life in general.

The Nussbaum quotation illustrates what is not all that uncommon: a vague, undeveloped recognition of a transcendental structure of narrative argument.

(A)-(C) constitute a schematic *meta*-level representation of the transcendental argument of a believable fictional narrative, which, at the object level, is only indirectly expressed or embodied by the narrative. Still, the reader or critic can summarize how the argument proceeds at the object level, including stating true generalizations about human nature, as Nussbaum takes herself to be articulating with respect to *The Golden Bowl*. She summarizes the argument she discerns in her reflective experience of believability.

The (A)-(C) argument schema raises many questions, but two important ones are, first, whether only realistic or realist fictional narratives are believable, and, second, how could it be shown that we have an intuitive, mostly veridical grasp of human nature—which would ground believability? The remainder of this paper will address these two issues.

2. BELIEVABILITY AND REALISM

The experience of a fictional narrative's believability of course involves believing that its event complex, in some sense, *could* have been true. As Aristotle said, "the poet's job is not to tell what has happened but the kind of things that *can* happen" (*Poetics*, 1451a 36–38). So how realistic must fictional possibilities be? I contend that believability and realism are distinct notions with respect to fictional narratives. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, wherein Gregor Samsa wakes up and lives as a huge *Ungeziefer*, is not realistic or realist; nor are stories of time travel or any number of 'shock-and-awe' action films. Yet such narratives can be believable because, in conformity to the norms of the genre at hand, we bracket or suspend certain things that we know in order to give the work a fair chance in the imagination. We are willing to bracket if a worthwhile purpose may be achieved, although we bracket primarily with respect to physical rather than human nature. Imaginative resistance or failure is encountered when the work as a whole narrates an incoherent sequence of events, or violates our shared fundamental assumptions about human nature. Then it is not believable.

In *The Metamorphosis* there are exquisite short descriptions of what it is like for Gregor to become a huge cockroach (though not what it is like for a cockroach to be a cockroach). Kafka gives just enough detail to establish Gregor's altered physical state; otherwise, the story is about

his thoroughly human mental life and what his transformation reveals about his family and co-workers.

While the purpose of this alteration of physical reality in a narrative may be disputable, in other cases it can be entirely straightforward. For instance, given human lifespans, our interacting in person with any civilization residing in another part of the galaxy would not be possible without supposing the ability to travel faster than the speed of light. Without the fictional invention of something like ‘warp drive’, what we can learn through narrative about life and ourselves from such possible encounters would be foreclosed.

Some of my discussion here of the question of realism is pretty standard fare. For example, Green (2010, p. 356) says:

Magical realism (exemplified in the works of...Toni Morrison, and Salman Rushdie) permits violations of laws of human physiology. Science fiction permits violation of current technological limitations. However, that does not mean that such literature is sheer fantasy. Even in these genres the author must adhere to a plausible human psychology.

However, we should ask—why “must”? I think this is a question for which the standard view has no clear answer. My answer is that otherwise there is no prospect of believability. Furthermore, this is not a genre-specific question, that is, regardless of genre, there is otherwise no prospect of believability.

3. INTIMATIONS OF REALITY

How could it be shown that we have an intuitive, mostly veridical grasp of human nature—that our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature are generally true? This would ground believability, that is, ground it in reality, making the (A)-(C) argument in any given believable fictional narrative probabilistically *sound* (having the form of *modus ponens*, it is of course valid).

One approach that seems to have promise regarding this question is Wittgenstein’s idea that we share a “form of life” that is critical to making us the kind of creatures we are; we understand each other, but “if a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (a famed remark in his *Philosophical Investigations*). Wittgenstein’s notion of a form of life has long been the subject of scholarship. Yet one view elegantly attempts to meld the major competing interpretations into four levels: “(1) a biological level from which (2) unique human activities like pretending, grieving, etc. are then expressed in (3) various cultural styles that in turn

have their formal ground in a (4) general socio-linguistic framework” (Gier, 1980, p. 245). This picture indicates that whatever intuitive grasp we have of human nature is shared, at least allows that it is mostly veridical, and points to an explanation—that would appeal to cultural and socio-linguistic practices—both of how that grasp could become reflective knowledge as well as of how it could sometimes become distorted or lost.

In some respects similarly, Nagel argues in a seminal paper (1974) that because after all we are human, we know *what it is like* to be human in a way we do not know *what it is like* to have a different nature, such as a bat’s. The phrase ‘what it is like’ here refers to a “species-specific viewpoint” (p. 445); it does not mean “‘what (in our experience) it resembles’, but rather ‘how it is for the subject himself’” (p. 440n6). So, what we do not know is “what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat” (p. 439). Nagel’s claim has much immediate appeal; the phrase ‘what is it like (to)’ has become a philosophical trope. The claim could be construed as more or less amounting to the claim that we (humans) share a basic intuitive grasp of human nature that is mostly veridical—an unmediated grasp that we do not have of the nature of any other species. However, Nagel’s notion of what it is like for an organism of a certain species to be that organism expressly has to do only with conscious experience (p. 436), e.g., grieving, perceiving through echolocation, etc.

Nagel’s notion of what it is like to be human could be broadened to include distinctive apprehensions not clearly belonging to conscious experience, such as recognition of other minds or of one’s own mortality. But perhaps the most relevant broadening would be to include basic human psychological competence, for it is this that has been most questioned in recent attacks on the persistent belief that fictional narratives can teach us about human nature apart from any didacticism or polemics they contain. Leading the opposition is Currie, who says (2012, p. 30):

And could [Samuel] Johnson have been rationally confident that Shakespeare has shown how human nature acts in real exigencies, when he, Johnson, carried out no surveys, no carefully structured experiments, to find out whether it really was so?...[T]he last 50 years of psychological investigation has shown how often we are wrong about our own motives and actions, and those of others, and how little penetrating intellect and common sense can help us overcome our ignorance.

Here are several representative examples of the kind of research results that Currie mentions: One allegation is that folk psychology, like the novel

for example, believes in character and character explanations, and that makes us prone to error, as when we “infer good Character from attractive appearance”. Experiments suggest that small changes in circumstances can make a big difference in our behaviour, contrary to the supposition of character. Of seminarians on their way to “give a short talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan”, one group was told there was “no hurry”, and the rest that they were “slightly late”. On the way, “a confederate faked a collapse”. Compared to those in the no-hurry group, the others were a great deal more likely to ignore and even step over the collapsed person (Currie, 2010, pp. 202-203). We also tend to be “more persuaded” by a message if it has a pleasurable accompaniment such as speaker attractiveness or if it is expressed in a rhyme, for instance, “a stitch in time saves nine”. These are two irrelevant factors that studies indicate contribute to “a feeling for truth” (Currie, 2016, pp. 304-305).

But no matter how many such results are cited, it still looks like a failure to see the forest for the trees. Judging by biological measures such as population and adaptability to different environments, *Homo sapiens* is an extremely and uniquely successful social species. It is hard to see how this success would be possible if Currie were right that “our insight into the mind generally is very limited” (2010, p. 201). Our fundamental, shared assumptions about human nature allow us to function and flourish, and this is evidence of their (at least approximate) truth, in much the same way that the spectacular success of the physical sciences in their predictive power and technological applications (‘they work’) is evidence of their (at least approximate) truth.

I contend that humans are basically psychologically competent. If this claim is understood as making the relatively modest point that humans almost universally have a set of cognitive capacities with a common developmental profile that generally makes us good at ‘mindreading’, it would be hard to find a psychologist or philosopher who disagrees. Mindreading includes the capacities to predict human behaviour and to offer explanations of it by attributing mental states such as perceptions, beliefs, desires, and fears. There are two principal theories (each with a number of variants) that seek to explain how mindreading is achieved. As its name suggests, the ‘theory-theory’ holds that we naturally possess a theory of mind or reservoir of systematized mental information that is accessed and applied in mindreading. The other theory is that of mental simulation. The idea here is that one mindreads by automatically internalizing another’s mental state (as through sympathetic emotion) or more intentionally by putting oneself in the place of the other (or oneself in a supposed situation) and ‘just’ seeing what one would do, believe, infer, decide, fear, etc. in those

circumstances. What I would like to urge is that either one of these two theories (or a hybrid of them), if true, supports my presupposition that we share a significant set of fundamental assumptions about human nature. It is just that these assumptions are more conceptual for theory-theory and intuitive for simulation theory. The two theories differ in the box they postulate that yields the same mindreading outputs given the inputs. It is not as if simulation theory has eliminated the box, and stimulus and response is all there is (in the manner of old-fashioned behaviourism).

I think that the fact that we are generally good at mindreading supports the proposition that our basic shared assumptions about human nature are generally true. An opposing view is eliminative materialism, which holds that “our common-sense conception of psychological phenomena [“folk psychology”] constitutes a radically false theory”, according to Paul Churchland (1981, p. 67), who is perhaps its strongest champion. However, even he says that folk psychology “is a central part of our current *lebenswelt*, and serves as the principal vehicle of our interpersonal commerce” (p. 76). For Churchland, the operative word here is “current”, for he thinks that folk psychology is likely to be eventually replaced by some form of “neuroscience”. He describes a series of three increasingly far-fetched “scenarios” whereby this replacement might occur. Considering only the first scenario and ignoring details, we still read “being projections of that inner reality, such [folk psychological] sentences do carry significant information regarding it and are thus fit to function as elements in a communication system”, although “they reflect but a narrow part of the reality projected” (pp. 82-83). Is this representative of the fate of eliminative materialism? It is hard to see it as not allowing substantial truth to folk psychology, which is more or less all anyone claims anyway.

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