

# The Transcendental Argument of the Novel

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## **Abstract:**

Can fictional narration yield knowledge in a way that depends crucially on its being fictional? This is the hard question of literary cognitivism. It is unexceptional that knowledge can be gained from fictional literature in ways that are not dependent on its fictionality (e.g., the science in science fiction). Sometimes fictional narratives are taken to exhibit the structure of suppositional argument, sometimes analogical argument. Of course, neither structure is unique to narratives. The thesis of literary cognitivism would be supported if some novels exhibit a cogent and special argument structure restricted to fictional narratives. I contend that this is the case for a kind of transcendental argument. The reason is the inclusion and pattern of occurrence of the predicate 'believable' in the schema. Believability with respect to fictional stories is quite a different thing than it is with respect to nonfictional stories or anything else.

**Keywords:** literary cognitivism, transcendentalism, believability, human nature, mindreading, truth in fiction

## **1. Introduction**

Attending to a peculiar divergence, Warner (1979: 186) provides a striking description of the reception of Samuel Richardson's groundbreaking novel *Clarissa*:

When the completed novel is delivered to the public and readers *still* persist in asserting a misguided understanding of the novel, a new tone of irritation enters Richardson's correspondence. At best, these readers are guilty of flagrant inattention to the novel's design; at worst, an immoral admiration for Lovelace. Richardson meets this challenge to his art by carrying out significant changes in the body of *Clarissa*. These modifications come in two waves. In April 1749, six months after releasing the final installment of the first edition, Richardson publishes a second edition that includes footnotes and a long index summary of the novel, placed at the beginning of the text. Over the next two years, serious "errors" of reading continue, so in the Spring of 1751 Richardson publishes a third edition that weaves two hundred pages of additional material into the text.

Similarly, Palmer (1973: 8) says that *Clarissa* is "a novel in which the central character [whom he regards as Lovelace] breaks the bonds of control of the author and reveals unconscious impulses which Richardson 'did not understand himself'." As we might say using commonplace categories, 'the character took on a life of its own' or even 'the story wrote itself'.

For this phenomenon of divergence to be possible, there have to be at least two levels of meaning or message of a work—that intended by the author and that conveyed or implicated by the text. This fact itself is wholly unremarkable, as when we fail to say what we mean. But it seems to become remarkable if in the case of fiction the reason for

the divergence is that some stories are *transcendental arguments* that are indirectly made by the text. Meaning at this level would transcend or override meaning at other levels, sometimes to the author's frustration and out of the author's control. Meaning at this level would help to explain the curious persuasive force much extended fiction can have, notably, the novel. And, since argument can provide the justification needed for knowledge, meaning at this level would help to substantiate a persistent belief that has recently come under renewed attack, viz., that novels can teach us about human nature apart from any didacticism or polemics they contain.

My thesis is that some novels are indeed indirect, transcendental arguments in that such a novel holistically embodies a transcendental argument.

My focus is on novels rather than other forms of fictional narration such as short stories, plays, and films because the novel is generally regarded as the height of fictional narrative art. Nonetheless, I do not see anything essential in focusing on novels in the attempt to discern argument in virtue of fictional narration, with the one caveat that the story must be substantial enough to be more than a mere caricature of a story, as might appear in an advertisement or parable. However, it is essential that the narration be fictional—that it not be, for example, history. This is not because history, biography, etc. need be any less *vivid* than fictional narration (the chain of thought is not: 'vivid, therefore persuasive, therefore an argument'). Rather, it is because there is a huge theoretical obstacle standing in the way of regarding a nonfictional narration as an argument: by definition, the point of nonfictional narration involves veracity—sticking to the facts, telling what happened—so there is no theoretical room for the creativity that is needed to construct an argument by inventing what happens. No doubt Aristotle meant something like this when he famously said 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).

Moreover, ultimately we are interested in good arguments and the knowledge they engender. We are interested in the possible cognitive value of literature and the thesis of literary cognitivism, which Green (2010: 352) casts as the thesis that “literary fiction can be a source of knowledge in a way that depends crucially on its being fictional.” Again by definition, there is no question that nonfictional narration may yield knowledge. But can fictional narration yield knowledge, and do so at least partly *in virtue of* its being fictional? This is the hard question. It is unremarkable or even trivial that knowledge can be gained from fictional literature in ways that are not dependent on its fictionality, for example, the science in science fiction, the history in historical novels, or the meta-level knowledge that the author wrote such and such (though disentangling the science, history, etc. may of course be a challenge—see, e.g., Friend 2014). Hard questions lead to avoidance behavior. So although Green argues that literature has cognitive value, it seems he never explains the meaning of the dependence relation he invokes. Instead, the dependence question morphs (353-354) into the puzzle that the novelist “is under no obligation to tell the truth, so why should we expect to get any from her novels?,” which is just a variation of the old saw—how can there be truth in fiction?

Among others (such as Carroll 2002, Swirski 2007, and Mikkonen 2013), Green takes some fictional narratives to exhibit the form of suppositional argument (or conditional or indirect proof). For example, he 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” (360). Alternatively, some take certain fictional narratives to exhibit the structure of analogical argument (e.g., Rodden 2008, Hunt 2009, Olmos 2014, and Warner 2016). For instance, Rodden proposes that there is an “enthymematic...analogy between our world and the world of [George Orwell’s novel] *1984*” (167-169); it is an “argument against political tyranny and totalitarianism” (156). In neither case is the form or scheme a distinctive argument structure applicable only to fictional narratives, nor is there any prospect of tweaking either structure to satisfy this description in a way that is not *ad hoc*. Yet the thesis of literary cognitivism would be supported if some narratives exhibit a cogent and special argument structure restricted to fictional narratives. For then, arguments so-structured could provide knowledge “in a way that depends crucially” and essentially on their embodiment in fictional literature. My contention is that this is the case for a kind of transcendental argument.

Two senses that the term ‘narrative argument’ might have should be distinguished:

(i) an argument overtly offered by a story

(ii) an argument that the narrative as a whole expresses in a form or structure possibly unique to narratives

This distinction roughly corresponds to Mikkonen’s (2013) between (i) philosophy *in* literature, and (ii) philosophy *through* literature. The (i)/(ii) distinction seems particularly useful for extended fictional narratives on the order of novels, plays, and films. The possibility indicated by (i) is the relatively uninteresting, more superficial level. The extent to which a story explicitly offers an argument or arguments is the measure of how didactic or polemical the narrative is. In extreme cases, certain characters overstate arguments to the point that they transparently become mouthpieces for the author (as in the novels of Ayn Rand). Arguments offered by stories in sense (i) can have any standard or nonstandard form or scheme (e.g., the *ad hominem*s against socialists in Rand’s novels). Moreover, arguments offered by stories in sense (i) can be about any topic whatsoever; for example, consider the argument establishing the theoretical possibility in terms of orbital mechanics of sending the spaceship *Hermes* back to rescue a crew member stranded on Mars in Andy Weir’s *The Martian* (2014: 236-238).

In contrast, since fictional narratives are all primarily or ultimately about human psychology, action, and society, the subject matter of any fictional narrative argument exhibiting a structure in sense (ii) will fall under the same general category. In terms of subject matter, the primary elements and connective of a narrative inherently are events and causality, not propositions and their logical relations. This means that any argument at level (ii) would have to be *indirectly* expressed. Insofar as a philosopher touches on the possibility of (ii), there is unanimity about this indirectness (e.g., Hunt 2009: 379-381; Green 2010: 351; Mikkonen 2013: *passim*; Lamarque 2014: 122, 138-139). However, the reasons given tend to be rather shallow and are variations of the idea that were “the omitted” material<sup>1</sup> “present, the argument would lose its rhetorical or dramatic force,”

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<sup>1</sup>Mikkonen says “conclusion” here (not my ‘material’), but *conclusion* is not really the point, since the overall argument must be indirect. For instance, the level-(ii) argument of Leo Tolstoy’s

and of the idea that “stating the omitted proposition may be seen as an artistic vice, for it makes the work look like a moral tale rather than a work of art” (Mikkonen: 89). Certainly, the work’s literary status (in the sense applied to fiction) would be called into question if its argument at level (ii) were somehow directly expressed by the work itself. The piece might be impossible to distinguish from a work of philosophy built around an elaborate ‘thought experiment’, for instance. But I think the deeper reason is that a fictional narrative cannot be an overt argument any more than, analogously, there could be logical relations between events. Instead, ‘real’ relations obtain between events, as can be seen in any attempt to define ‘narrative’ or ‘story’, which in a minimalist sense is a perspectival or selective depiction of at least two temporally-related events in a further nonlogical (especially, causal) relationship (adapted from Lamarque 2004). Any deviation from such depiction in a narrative is digressive.

The same result arises from a different perspective. It is commonly said that, fundamentally, fictional narratives are ‘invitations to imagine’, in contrast to ‘invitations to believe’ such as scientific, historical, and journalistic discourses. In keeping with this purpose, these discourses typically and distinctively marshal evidence and argument in a direct fashion, unlike fictional narratives.

## 2. Transcendentality

Consider the continuum of fictional narrative, with storytelling advertisements and short parables and fables on one end, novels at the other end, and short stories, films, and plays somewhere more toward the middle. If you move in the direction from ads to novels, an interesting feature of the continuum of fictional narrative is that—not immediately but somewhere early on—*believability* becomes a central criterion of assessment. Is the piece successful “make-believe”? This is always a reasonable question to ask about a novel. No doubt the distinctive power and sweep of the novel is its unrivaled potentiality for intricate plot and associated character development. But for any believable plot/character development complex, we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true about the real world (of human psychology, action, and society) in order for the fictional complex to be believable? Because this also always seems a reasonable question to ask, and because it can be an unanalyzed datum or given that a novel is indeed believable, the following transcendental argument scheme is generated:

- (1) This is believable.
- (2) This is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world (of human psychology, action, and society).
- (3) Therefore, such and such principles operate in the real world.

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*Anna Karenina* is indirect, but the novel’s opening sentence is widely regarded as its philosophical conclusion: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Here, the level-(ii) conclusion happens to *coincide* with a level-(i) statement. See section 2 below.

The believability premise, (1), of this level-(ii) argument is a proposition about the novel; it is not a self-referential claim made by the novel (although in deviant cases such as parts of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* the novel explicitly, if ironically, claims about itself that it is believable<sup>2</sup>). If (1) were an implicit or explicit claim made by the novel, the question of whether this claim itself is believable would arise, and so on into an unpleasant regress. The idea is that in virtue of *being* believable (not claiming to be believable), a novel makes an argument telling us something about the real world. (2) expresses the specific inference license that allows a novel to embody an argument; it is not something that any novelist necessarily intends or even is aware of. (3) is the conclusion. It indicates which principles or generalizations operate in the real world, which is primarily of human nature given the subject matter of novels. For illustration, consider Nussbaum (1990: 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 (3) 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 (1) 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 (2) a persuasive argument that these features hold of human life in general.

We may take Nussbaum to be alleging that *The Golden Bowl*'s plot/character development is believable, and the quotation illustrates what is not all that uncommon: a vague, undeveloped recognition of the transcendental structure of the argument of a novel. Here is another example: Rodden (2008: 155) says "in more didactic novels such as George Orwell's *1984*, we are often aware of a presence arranging and evaluating ideas and characters in building a convincing argument." I am trying to shed some light on how *characters* can be 'arranged' into an argument (which refers to level (ii))—not, trivially, how (e.g.) the speeches of characters sometimes overtly state arguments (which refers to level (i)).

These considerations mean that (1)-(3) constitute a schematic *meta*-level representation of the transcendental argument of a believable novel, which, at the object level, is only indirectly expressed or embodied by the novel. Still, the reader or critic can summarize how the argument proceeds at the object level, as we may understand Nussbaum on *The Golden Bowl*. She summarizes the argument she discerns in her reflective experience of believability. In the meta-level formulation of (2) and (3), I use 'real world' to help indicate transcendentalism; and given the subject matter of novels, its referent is primarily human nature. The operant principles mentioned in (2) and (3) at least include true generalizations about human nature, as Nussbaum takes herself to be articulating with respect to *The Golden Bowl*.

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<sup>2</sup>For example: "As truth distinguishes our writings from those of idle romances which are filled with monsters, the productions, not of nature, but of distempered brains..." (1<sup>st</sup> para. of Ch. I, Book IV); "Examine your heart, my good reader, and resolve whether you do believe these matters with me. If you do, you may now proceed to their exemplification in the following pages: if you do not, you have, I assure you, already read more than you have understood..." (last para. of Ch. I, Book VI).

The Rodden quotation calls for the distinction between two senses that the term ‘narrative argument’ might have to be applied and explored at this point. There are cases and cases. *1984* is a fairly, but I would not say extremely, didactic novel. Classifying based on a recent compendium of argument schemes, I think the argument offered by this story (‘narrative argument’ in sense (i)) is an “argument from negative consequences” (Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008: 100ff., 332) against modern totalitarianism. One can see this in the characters’ speeches. Yet because the novel’s particular plot/character development complex is believable, the novel indirectly expresses an argument with a different structure (‘narrative argument’ in sense (ii))—a transcendental argument more or less to this same effect—that modern totalitarianism violates human nature (in that, notably, it stifles human flourishing and autonomy). The key point is that it is not as if the conclusion (3) of the transcendental argument becomes more explicit the more didactic the novel is, as might be surmised from the Rodden quotation. Rather, (i) and (ii) are two different levels of argument. In *1984* the two levels coincide, as they also do, for example, in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, an extended criticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British legal system. But there is no necessity in such concurrence.

One possible result of mismatch of levels (i) and (ii) is borderline coherence, as perhaps is exhibited by Mary Wollstonecraft’s unfinished *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*. In this novel at level (ii) the subjugated main character repeatedly falls victim to romantic delusions and patriarchal oppression uncovered at level (i) by the book’s polemics. Another possible result of mismatch of levels (i) and (ii) is irony. Consider Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, where the main characters’ love and wrongful suffering implies approval of their very adultery that contravenes the morals didactically preached. On the other hand, in minimally didactic novels (like those of the modernists Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner) there is little or no level (i) argument, which may make such novels more literary, as indicated earlier. Of course if the novel was not believable, there would be no level (ii) argument either. But perhaps the most interesting and telling kind of case is exemplified by the one with which we began, namely, Richardson’s *Clarissa*. Simplifying dramatically, the level (i) argument voiced especially by Clarissa and her best friend Anna Howe is that being a libertine like Lovelace is bad. Yet this message is belied by the believability of the novel’s actual plot/character development complex, particularly the fact that Clarissa runs off with Lovelace anyway. The overall message is steadfastly mixed. Try as he might through successive revisions, Richardson cannot make the level (ii) argument go away and the story be essentially the same.

### 3. Believability and Knowledge

What is believability? Finding a novel believable, I do not engage in a “willing suspension of disbelief” in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s celebrated phrase, if through the double negative that means I *believe* the novel or am on the way to believing it, for this route is never taken for something known to be fiction. Believability with respect to fictional narration is quite a different thing than it is with respect to nonfictional narration or anything else.<sup>3</sup> With respect to the latter, belief may be the only thing there is to

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<sup>3</sup>Hence, it is problematic to analyze “believability” (“credibility,” “plausibility”) indifferently as it pertains to these two narrative domains, as Fisher (1987) does for instance. Furthermore,

believability; since possibility is logically implied by actuality, that someone at some time believes a certain proposition means that it is believable. This is an objective fact, not a subjective judgment. With respect to fictional narration, I want to propose that what can be called the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ coherence of a narrative’s event complex constitute essentially all there is to the work’s believability, objectively speaking. Aspects defining our (subjective) *experience* of a fictional narrative’s believability constitute a further question, one that will be addressed as we proceed.

I take Schultz (1979: 233) to succinctly explicate internal coherence; he says: “the events must be *motivated* in terms of one another...either one event is a causal (or otherwise probable) consequence of another; or some event’s happening provides a character with a reason or motive for making another event happen.” ‘Real’ connections of efficient, final, and material causes (using Aristotle’s terminology), and any probabilistic counterparts, are required. As the novel progresses in developing a theme or themes, the possibilities evoked must be salient in that they are thematically relevant. The novel is not believable if in it things keep happening for no apparent reason or in a way that is inadequately connected with the other events in the novel. Notoriously, this applies to some degree to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, for example, and is perhaps the *raison d’être* of Dadaism.

Yet even if the events of a novel are fully connected, the novel may still not be believable because those connections do not cohere well with our widely shared basic assumptions about the essential functioning of human psychology and society—how they not only actually, but necessarily work. This is the main component of external coherence. The believability of a novel requires that its plot, characters, and fine descriptions be developed in ways that generally conform to our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature. A work such as Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson* seems fully to recognize this requirement in its intentional violation of it.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, not only can psychological characterization be overwrought, it can also be ‘underwrought’ by trafficking in stereotypes rather than individuals, typically accompanied by formulaic plot development, as is common in pulp fiction, ‘bodice rippers’, etc. In either case, believability can break down, in which case no argument gets off the ground.

It seems that generally, believability is experienced by the reader as a simple, unanalyzed measure of the novel, continuously updated as one progresses through the novel and imaginatively engages with it. And, as Aristotle said about judging the

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making these distinctions addresses the ‘paradox of fiction’, i.e., how can it be that we have what appear to be genuine emotional responses to what we know is a fictional narrative? Experiencing a fictional narrative as believable allows responding to it with a full range of emotions, such as (adapting a stock example) being horrified by the events depicted in a horror film. Yet because we don’t believe them, we don’t flee the theater.

<sup>4</sup>Consider this description of the novel: “...an ironic fantasy of Oxford undergraduate life a 100 or so years ago. The characters’ speech and motives are absurd in about equal measure, but one would be missing the point to hold this against the work. For the author is plainly not seeking psychological verisimilitude...The interest of the work is essentially that of a *tour de force*: how long can the author retain our interest while so consciously eschewing psychological plausibility?” (Currie 2012: 29 & n. 7).

happiness of a person, you do not know for sure about believability until you reach the novel's end. The experience of a novel's believability is one thing, but determining which specific truths of human nature are implicated may be quite another and may lie in the province of literary criticism. The experience of believability might prompt one to reflect on what truths about human nature are implicated. But there is no necessity in this. The novel's transcendental argument is there, in the work itself as a whole, whether or not anybody notices.

The big picture, as I see it, is this: In encountering a novel, we already have a basic intuitive grasp of human nature and the principles that govern it. Although 'grasp' here may already suggest it, I will argue (give 'external' justification) in section 5 that this grasp is mostly veridical. The novel may evoke these principles or generalizations concerning human nature in its storytelling, which makes the novel believable if it is otherwise coherent. Through the reflective or critical work of progressing through the believable novel and perceiving what survives or dominates in the various situations and conflicts,<sup>5</sup> fundamental assumptions held by the reader about human nature can become *internally justified* true beliefs (if they are not already justified for the reader otherwise). That is the key cognitive transformation that the transcendental argument of the novel facilitates, viz., the transformation of intuitive knowledge to reflective or self-conscious knowledge. For in the reflective experience of believability, the reader attempts to identify the conditions of the possibility of the believability that he or she experiences.

Does this mean that, as far as transcendentalism goes, we cannot learn anything *new* from fictional literature? Yes, if by 'learn' we mean attaining knowledge of something previously unknown at any level, which sounds like scientific discovery, and of course the constraints and methods of literature are not those of science. No, if by 'learn' we mean the transition from intuitive to reflective knowledge, including (e.g.) coming to realize or understand what you previously only suspected. Counting such transition as learning has a long history, beginning at least with Plato's postulation of *anamnesis* (learning by 'recollection') in the *Meno*.

No doubt novels often can be seen as an author's project to *illustrate* principles or generalizations that the author takes to govern or describe human psychology, action, and society. How does such illustration differ from a believable novel embodying a transcendental argument? In the first place, irrespective of anyone's intention, the believability of a novel guarantees that for the most part it illustrates psychosocial principles or generalizations that are in fact operative, given that our fundamental assumptions about human nature are generally true (as will be argued in section 5). Second, as indicated earlier, my basic idea is that in virtue of *being* believable, a believable novel indirectly makes an argument telling us something about human nature. This is not mere illustration because being believable carries implications—implications that in the reflective experience of believability, the reader or critic attempts to identify.

Is there circularity here? I have said that internal and external coherence constitute essentially all there is to a novel's believability, and that external coherence is general conformity to our fundamental assumptions about human nature, that is, assumptions that concern the principles that govern human psychology, action, and society. If we accordingly expand (1) in the (1)-(3) argument, we get:

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<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Fisher & Filloy on this sort of process (1982, esp.: 347-348, 360).



(1') This is believable, that is, it is internally coherent and evokes such and such principles that we assume operate in the real world.

(2) This is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world (of human psychology, action, and society).

(3) Therefore, such and such principles operate in the real world.

Without the phrase “we assume” in (1'), clearly this argument would be circular, since the conclusion would then merely restate a clause in the first premise. But it is not circular with “we assume” in (1'). Although I will argue in section 5 that our fundamental assumptions about human nature are generally true, if that is correct, all it shows is that the (1)-(3) argument (in any given believable novel) is probabilistically *sound*, particularly with respect to premise (2), not that it is circular. As for any argument, justification external to (1)-(3) that supports an element of (1)-(3) does not alter the *content* of (1)-(3).

This discussion of circularity is somewhat artificial in that (1)-(3), recall, constitute a schematic meta-level representation of the transcendental argument of a believable novel. In determining the object-level argument in the reflective experience of believability, one considers (in the manner of Nussbaum on *The Golden Bowl*) the implications of the believability one experiences, not any analysis of the concept of believability. Believability generally seems to be experienced as an unanalyzed measure, the sheer *fact* of which has implications. From this perspective, there is not even a whiff of circularity. Indeed, my particular analysis of the concept of believability could be wrong and (1)-(3) still be a correct representation.

#### **4. Believability and Realism**

The experience of a novel's believability of course involves believing that its event complex, in some sense, *could* have been true. Aristotle famously said that “the poet's job is not to tell what has happened but the kind of things that *can* happen, i.e., the kind of events that are possible according to probability or necessity” (*Poetics*, 1451a 36–39). So while nonfictional narration (history, biography, etc.) aims at veracity, fictional narration aims at verisimilitude or depicting events and characters “according to probability or necessity,” which I would explain as determined principally by internal and external coherence. Thus, the question arises—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 (a nonliteral way we might understand Coleridge's “willing suspension of disbelief”). 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). For example, when he awakes transformed, he is lying on his back in bed: “He would have needed arms and hands to prop himself up, instead of which he had only the many little legs that continually waved every which way and which he could not control at all” (1915: 10). Looking out of the window of his room, “he now saw things just a short distance away becoming dimmer each day; he could no longer make out the hospital opposite, whose sight he used to curse for having seen it all too often” (27). 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 coworkers.

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. And assuming that the science in this science fiction is otherwise altered only as necessary, it is difficult to see how we could learn about such matters in any other way.

Some of my discussion here of the question of realism is pretty standard fare. For example, Hospers (1958: 52) says:

The succession of events we read of in *Don Quixote*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Alice in Wonderland* is such as never would occur in life, even though the main characters are all recognizable human beings with human frailties, human loves and hates and jealousies. The events, it would seem, can be about anything the writer pleases as long as they do not violate a fundamental truth to human character.

And Green (2010: 256):

Magical realism (exemplified in the works of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Gunter Grass, Mikhail Bulgakov, 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.

There are also conventions or ways in which all fictional genres are not realistic. Hospers explains three: the invention of situations that unnaturally accelerate character

development, the exclusion of countless “humdrum and repetitive” details of life, and the exclusion of “countless interruptions in the causal sequence of events which...occur in actual life.” In such ways as these, literary art is a “distillation of life,” but is no less realist for it (54-55), nor, we should add, less believable.

Thus, believability and realism are distinct notions with respect to fictional narratives. They are also distinct notions with respect to other forms of art. For instance, representational painting or sculpture is realistic, but (so long as it is nonlinguistic) is neither believable nor unbelievable—the category does not apply—because it is nonpropositional. Propositions must be in play before the question of believability can even be considered, because propositions are not only the objects of simple belief, they are the objects of ‘make-belief’ and the modal belief that something could have been true.

A requirement for the believability of a narrative in any fictional genre seems to be that the author successfully depicts the characters as believing what is happening, which we may regard as an aspect of internal coherence. The reader’s taking believability cues from the characters (‘Do even they believe what is going on?’) seems analogous to watching flight attendants for signs the flight is going well or badly—a kind of ‘reality check’, as it were. A narrative may push the envelope regarding physical nature (a possible example is H. P. Lovecraft’s novella *The Call of Cthulhu*) to the point where neither we, nor the characters, nor the author really understand what is going on, and any kind of transference relationship relevant to believability between these three terms fails.

## 5. An Immodest Proposal

Transcendental arguments on the order, for example, of Davidson’s directed against skepticism about other minds (1991: 159-160), reason that since certain aspects of our experience or inner world are undeniable, the external world must have certain features, on the grounds that its having these features is a necessary condition of our experience being the way it is. In my representation, the argument discerned in the reflective experience of a novel’s believability, schematically stated as (1)-(3), is of this type. Stroud (1968) famously objected to such transcendental arguments that they are too “ambitious” (the terminology is Stern’s, 2007)—that the only condition and conclusion that could be licensed is the “modest” one that we must *think* or *conceive* of the external world as having certain features, not that it actually does. The objection as applied to the novel’s case is that it would be enough to allow our reflective experience of believability if having this experience implicated only that we *perceive* the real world (of human psychology, action, and society) as operating in accordance with certain principles.

As compared to the ambitious version, no doubt the modest version of the transcendental argument of the novel (if indeed any argument remains) would make the cognitive value of literature modest. But this is not my proposal. Some ambitious version of the argument would be justified if believability were properly grounded, and believability—specifically, its external coherence aspect—would be properly grounded if our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature are generally true. So how could it be shown that our assumptions, at this level, about human nature are mostly veridical? How could it be shown that this intuitive grasp is mostly shared?

One approach that seems to have promise regarding these questions 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*). Some hold that Wittgenstein’s notion of a form of life is perhaps the most important one in his later philosophy, so the notion has long been the subject of scholarship (e.g., the recent books: Hanfling 2002 and Kishik 2008). 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: 245). The human form of life, not shared with any other species, involves distinctive capacities, including linguistic self-reflection, and is ultimately based on a common human genome, physiology, physiognomy, and the like. 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.<sup>6</sup> The phrase ‘what it is like’ here refers to a “species-specific viewpoint” (445); it does not mean “‘what (in our experience) it *resembles*’, but rather ‘how it is for the subject himself’” (440n6). So, what we do not know is “what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat” (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 expressly has to do only with conscious experience (436). Some worry that no clear sense can be made of this notion—that there is nothing it is like to be a certain kind of creature (e.g., Tilghman 1991; Evnine 2008). Yet even these critics sometimes allow (reluctantly) that an acceptably precise account might be given.<sup>7</sup>

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

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<sup>6</sup>Interestingly, there is reason to believe Wittgenstein might have been the first to emphasize the connection between the English expression ‘what it is like (to)’ and conscious experience. He says in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology Vol. 1* (section 91), “I know what it is like [English] to see red, green, blue, yellow, I know what it’s like to feel sorrow, hope, fear, joy, affection.” See Stoljar (2016: 1161).

<sup>7</sup>Evnine can see “no decisive objection” to the following approach he develops: “Let  $\Phi$  range over the types of sensory modality had by an F (to see, to hear, and so forth). Let  $\Phi(x)$  range over the determinations of  $\Phi$  such that what it is like to  $\Phi(x)$  needs no further analysis (to see red, or to see scarlet, or to see scarlet having just seen green, or...). Then, from the what it is like to  $\Phi(x)$ , for given  $\Phi$  and various values of  $x$ , we extrapolate to what it is like to  $\Phi$ , for each  $\Phi$ . We then aggregate what it is like to  $\Phi$ , for each  $\Phi$  of an F’s sensory modalities, to arrive at what it is like to be an F” (198).

has been most questioned in the recent attacks on the persistent belief that novels can teach us about human nature apart from any didacticism or polemics they contain. Leading the opposition is Currie, who has made something of a cottage industry for himself questioning, as he likes to put it, ‘whether we learn about the mind from literature’. Currie’s writing on this topic includes pieces in the popular press (2011a; 2011b; 2013). Possibly his most insistent, though scholarly, articulation of his view is this (2012: 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. When Leavis says, rather grudgingly, that *Hard Times* does not give “a misleading representation of human nature” (Leavis 1948, p. 233) it is tempting to ask how he could possibly know something that not even the greatest psychologist would think of claiming: what human nature is.

Of course my answer to Currie’s last point is that the *believability* of *Hard Times* has something to do with it. Currie’s view constitutes a challenge to my proposal that some ambitious version of the transcendental argument of a believable novel is justified, which would require that our fundamental assumptions about human nature are generally true. Needless to say, this is not the kind of issue that could be settled here (or, perhaps, ever settled), but there are responses to a Currie-type view worth considering.

Let us first step back from the possible detail of “surveys” and “carefully structured experiments” and take an overview. Judging by biological measures such as population and adaptability to different environments, *Homo sapiens* are an extremely and uniquely successful social species. (Indeed, we are so successful that in increasingly many ways we are victims of our own success: overpopulation, pollution, etc.) It is hard to see how this success would be possible if we were largely “wrong about our own motives and actions, and those of others” or in general about our notions of human nature, and if “penetrating intellect and common sense” were of little use in augmenting self- and social knowledge. Currie claims that “our insight into the mind generally is very limited” (2010: 201). Yet at some level or levels, we know ourselves and others and the operant psychological/sociological principles or generalizations well enough that our actions and interactions are mostly predictable, often dreadfully so. 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.

None of this is like a suspicious evolutionary argument about the origins of some specific creature feature. One may easily get tangled up in alternative possible explanations of particular adaptations. For example, at one point paleontologists thought that the regression relationship between the dorsal fin area and the body volume of the pelycosaur showed that this ‘sail’ fin was a temperature-regulating mechanism. Later, this explanation was more or less replaced by the behavioral explanation that the fin was used for sexual display (Gould 2007: 253). Of course it could have had both functions, or

neither. Our notions of human nature, as a whole, lie at an altogether different level. There is no alternative possible explanation of their existence and entrenchment other than that they have evolved in answer to millions of years of human needs.

My argument involves the claim 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 behavior and to offer explanations of it by attributing mental states such as perceptions, beliefs, desires, and fears. We have more psychological competence in some areas than in others, for instance, we are better at predicting the inferences (including nondeductive ones) of others than at attributing desires to them (Stich & Nichols 2003: 244-249). 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 behaviorism).

As indicated, I think that the fact that we are generally good at mindreading supports the proposition that our basic 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: 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” (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” (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.

So what are the kinds of psychological “surveys” and “carefully structured experiments” Currie uses to make his case that our notions of human nature are largely wrong, that “our insight into the mind generally is very limited”? Here are two

representative examples of such research results: the phenomenon that our imaginative predictions of the emotional effects on us of a possible future outcome are often wrong (2014b: 439; cf., e.g., Green 2010: 362), and the claim that we are subject to “the Fundamental Attribution Error, whereby people explain their own failings as due to circumstance and those of others as due to defects of character” (2014a: 45). The difficulty is that it is unclear how almost any amount of such evidence of detail would be equal to the task a Currie-type view assigns it. Compared to the reasons for believing that our notions of human nature, being on the whole reflective of reality, allow us to function and flourish, the kind of evidence of detail that Currie presents seems to be a case of not being able to see the forest for the trees.

A more general tendency of folk psychology that Currie & Jureidini discuss and that is important and indisputable is that we over-attribute and “overrate the powers of agency,” from assigning superlative abilities to “conspiratorial human agents” to “beliefs in ghosts, gods and monsters” to “the ancient and mediaeval prosecution and punishment of animals and even of statues” (2004: 409-410). I do not think that such a tendency is sufficient to undermine the big picture; it is, after all, an *extension* of a set of valuable cognitive capacities (mindreading). However, the fact that as civilization advances, this extension contracts, may be enough to refute Churchland’s contention that folk psychology has “not advanced sensibly in two or three thousand years” (1981: 74).

At a higher level, an analogical argument is deployed: “we have little grounds on which to trust our folk-psychological theories—any more than we these days trust folk physics, which has been shown to be substantially at odds with scientifically informed theories of the interaction of bodies” (Currie 2010: 201-202; cf., e.g., Churchland 1981: *passim*). Yet does this just confuse the general *vagueness* of folk psychology and folk physics with *falsity*, or is it trying to say what anyone should admit, that as you go from folk to scientific theories, the truths identified tend to become less approximate (where this trend is less clear or more plagued with historical exceptions in the “social” sciences)? Should we stay off the pyramids because the ancient Egyptians used folk physics? At perhaps a less exacting level than the pyramid builders, we are nearly always interacting with bodies in ways that could reasonably be said to involve our use only of folk physics, e.g., cooking dinner, driving a car, or playing baseball. Current theoretical physics should undermine our trust here not at all.

## 6. Is Believability Relative?

There are reasons to think that there is not a wholesale or pernicious relativity of believability across readers. We have in effect just seen what may be the most compelling one—that our basic assumptions about human nature are mostly shared or held in common. The believability of a novel requires that its plot, characters, and fine descriptions be developed in ways that generally conform to these assumptions. This is principally what external coherence is. Moreover, to the extent that principles of reasoning are universal, the other aspect of believability, internal coherence, is unlikely to be a significant source of relativity.

Another avenue to the same conclusion arises from the existence of canons of great literature and even just good literature. If believability were fundamentally relative, it would be difficult to explain such widespread agreement about which novels are good

or great novels, since surely, being believable is typically a central necessary condition for an extended fictional narrative to be good.

This is not to deny that believability may *appear* to be relative. Yet differences among readers in the perceived believability of a novel may be largely attributable to essentially extraneous factors, such as the setting of the novel. For instance, if I could get past the fantastic details of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, I think I could better appreciate these novels as implicating truths of human nature. For some readers, Henry James' difficult late style is insurmountable. If the work is from another culture or era, we may have to partially bracket or suspend our own cultural norms while envisioning others, in order to give the work a fair chance in the imagination. We may do this with different degrees of success, sometimes with corresponding effects on our assessment of the work's believability. Another possible explanation of the appearance of relativity is that compared to the enormous range of human nature, any one novel might be able only to bespeak small parts; and a reader may find these parts mystifying or even insufferably boring for any number of idiosyncratic reasons. Thus, although a novel may be internally and externally coherent, and hence in fact (objectively) believable, some readers may not experience it as believable. Conversely, a novel that is not in fact believable, for example, due to its inadequate psychological characterization in the manner of pulp fiction, might be experienced by some readers as believable.

Moreover, it is no doubt possible for two different believable novels to be understood to have contrary 'conclusions', as some would take Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example. Does this mean that the import of believability is arbitrary or insignificant? Of course human nature cannot have formally contradictory properties, but it surely includes impulses and desires, and even adaptive mechanisms, that may conflict with one another. So a better explanation than impugning the import of believability is one that was just invoked: given the enormous range of human nature, any one novel might be able only to bespeak small parts.

Finally, being believable does not necessarily mean that a work will be ethical. Take, for instance, the 1940 Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süß* or perhaps even Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*. Both succeeded in turning large numbers against certain classes of people, i.e., Jews and small-town businessmen, respectively. A case strong enough to raise questions can be made that these works are (objectively) believable. In considering this, two points should be taken into account. One is that there is no guarantee that principles of human nature will be virtuous (e.g., if we have an innate proclivity to sadistic violence) unless some extreme form of sociobiological ethics is true. The other is that these objectionable stances themselves (anti-Semitism, anti-small-town businessmen) are too culture-bound to be principles of human nature. It is true that anti-Semitism could arise in a particular human "form of life" (using Wittgenstein's term) partly as a reflection of a principle concerning fear of difference. Similarly, *Babbitt's* stance could reflect basic human needs for variety, flourishing, and even adventure. But it is such general principles, not specific social practices, that can be tied to the common human genome, physiology, physiognomy, and the like. Analogously, the capacity for language belongs to human nature, not any particular language. My theory (if correct) would show that a believable fictional narrative must be reflective of reality about most of the basic psychosocial principles it depends on, but it does not preclude that the narrative could be harmful, for example, by propounding false conclusions about whole classes of people.



## 7. Conclusion

The transcendental argument of a novel, (1)-(3) preceding, is not only valid (having the form of *modus ponens*) but is, I have argued, probabilistically sound. At the object level of any novel, given that premise (1) is true and that our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature are generally true, the conclusion (3) is unlikely to be mistaken. However, in interpreting the object-level, perhaps especially where the literary critic attempts to directly state which specific truths of human nature are implicated (i.e., flesh out premise (2)), no doubt errors may be committed. Nevertheless, this interpretive enterprise is worth pursuing, for it articulates, insofar as it is successful, the novel's contribution to human knowledge.

This provides a way of substantiating the thesis of literary cognitivism. The transcendental argument scheme elucidates the dependence of knowledge on fictionality in that it is a distinctive structure applicable only to fictional narratives. The reason is the inclusion and pattern of occurrence of the predicate *believable* in the scheme. As we have seen, believability with respect to fictional stories is quite a different thing than it is with respect to nonfictional stories or anything else.<sup>8</sup>

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