

Can literary fiction be suppositional reasoning?

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Suppositional reasoning can seem spooky. Suppositional reasoners allegedly (e.g.) “extract knowledge from the sheer workings of their own minds” (Rosa), even where the knowledge is synthetic a posteriori. Can literary fiction pull such a rabbit out of its hat? Where P is a work’s fictional “premise,” some hold that some works reason declaratively (supposing P, Q), imperatively (supposing P, do Q), or interrogatively (supposing P, Q?). True, I will argue, although only with much qualification.

KEYWORDS: argument in fiction, didacticism, literary cognitivism, premise-based reasoning, suppositional reasoning, thought experiments

1. INTRODUCTION

Some come close to claiming that literary fiction can be suppositional reasoning. For instance, Green (2010, p. 360) says that Huxley’s *Brave New World* “can plausibly be construed as taking the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*,” which he states as follows:

- 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.

Comparatively speaking, suppositional reasoning is a puzzling orphan child in argument studies and epistemology. Authors noting the

inattention range at least from Fisher thirty years ago (1989, p. 401ff.) to Rosa (2019, p. 157; cf., e.g., Green, 2000, p. 377 and Dogramaci, 2016, p. 889). On the other hand, suppositional reasoning is well-established in formal logic, particularly as conditional proof, the core idea of which is: ‘Suppose p . It follows that q [1 and 2 in the *reductio* above]. Therefore, if p then q ’. But even this evokes a vexed question, viz., the extent to which a piece of suppositional reasoning can be analyzed in terms of a conditional and vice versa. For instance, statements of the form ‘if p then q ’ have truth-values, whereas statements of the form ‘supposing p , q ’ may appear to lack truth-values. Barnett (2006, esp. pp. 535-536) argues that such (compound) suppositional statements are true if p and q are each true, false if p is true and q is false, yet in contrast to (e.g.) the material conditional, in the two cases where p is false, the statement cannot be evaluated because evaluating it would amount to determining “*whether* [q] while supposing not just *that* [p] but also *that it is not the case that* [p].” On this suppositional understanding of the conditional, the so-called paradoxes of material implication disappear and a door is open to logics alternative to classical logic.

In fact, suppositional reasoning can seem downright spooky, and it may be no accident that deriving *knowledge* from *fiction* can seem equally spooky. Suppositional reasoners allegedly “extract knowledge from the sheer workings of their own minds” (Rosa, p. 157), even where the knowledge is synthetic a posteriori (Balcerak Jackson & Balcerak Jackson, 2013). The idea is that reasoning itself—in the form of suppositional reasoning—might be a source of knowledge distinct from reasoning understood as the means of transmitting knowledge from premises to conclusion. An example Rosa gives (pp. 156-157, 170; the Balcerak Jacksons cite a similar case, pp. 116, 120) of putatively “a priori” knowledge is: ‘Suppose that Lucy is a feminist philosopher. It follows that some feminists are philosophers. Therefore, if Lucy is a feminist philosopher, then some feminists are philosophers.’ (One does wonder about the extent to which the appearance of the proper name ‘Lucy’ here undermines the a priori claim, but never mind.) In order to reason in this way, one need not have any justification that Lucy is a feminist philosopher (nor any justification that some feminists are philosophers); indeed, one might believe that she is not, and have justification that she is not, but be supposing that she is ‘for the sake of argument’. Thus, here it cannot be that knowledge or justification is transmitted from premises to conclusion, in contrast to beliefs arrived at by nonsuppositional reasoning, wherein the premises are taken or asserted to be true.

Can suppositional reasoning be a source of less trivial-seeming knowledge? The Balcerak Jacksons (p. 120) propose a non a priori case:

A human-cannonball has sustained an injury in his profession and wants to prevent a reoccurrence. He asks himself, "*if the stage lighting rigs had been a bit higher, would I have landed in the net?*" In his imagination he visually models the scenario with the rigs higher, and finds that he safely lands in the net, not on the rigs again. He concludes with an affirmative answer to his question.

But, you say, this is just an ordinary 'thought experiment'. That is right, yet part of the aim of philosophers like Rosa and the Balcerak Jacksons is to argue that it is quite mundane for reasoning alone to be a source of knowledge or justification. Now many contend that at least some works of fictional literature constitute a class of thought experiments (e.g., Carroll, 2002; Elgin, 2007; Swirski, 2007; Mikkonen, 2013; Green, 2010, 2016, 2017). Be that as it may (next section), if works of fictional literature can holistically exhibit reasoning, our question is whether that reasoning can significantly, not purely, be suppositional reasoning. It does not matter for our purposes should their conclusions be based on premise-beliefs as well as suppositions.

2. THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS AND LITERARY FICTION

Tooming (2018, pp. 685-692) distinguishes between "mere supposition," presumably as in Green's statement above of Huxley's *reductio*, and supposition that requires mental imagery that "matches" the supposed propositions(s), presumably as in the human cannonball example. A critical question is whether cases like the latter actually involve reasoning at all, as opposed to something on the order of imaginative engagement. Could imagination function like perception here in giving immediate prima facie justification for believing that things would be/are the way they appear to be in imagination/perception? If even these cases do not involve reasoning, it might be less clear how works of fictional literature could. For one thing, these works are regarded, in their essence, as 'invitations to imagine' (vs. believe). The Balcerak Jacksons plausibly argue (pp. 115-122) that the human cannonball kind of case exhibits two 'hallmarks of reasoning'. The first is that there is a "content gap" to bridge between the first and final mental states in the thought experiment. Following Williamson (2007, ch. 5), they propose that "we evaluate a counterfactual conditional by 'developing' its antecedent in certain ways via mental simulation, and then check to see if the consequent is true in the simulation" (p. 121). In contrast, there is ordinarily no content gap to cross in having a perception with a certain content and "forming a belief with the same content" (p. 119), e.g., that there is a red circle. Second, it is appropriate to subject the transitions that bridge the gap to "epistemic appraisal and criticism" (p. 122). It is typically a propos to

ask a thought experimenter to give reasons or justification for the proposed result, whereas it is normally otiose to ask one to give justification for a perceptual judgement (e.g., that we are approaching a log in the middle of the road) other than it looks that way.

As opposed to fiction on the order of 'bodice rippers', pulp fiction, and the like, it is generally held that *literary* fiction is more nuanced; it has a greater richness and complexity of character development, plot, fine description, etc., and also somehow shows insight into human affairs. Is such insight achieved by holistically exhibiting suppositional reasoning? That is our question, so our focus is on literary fiction. Now certainly, the reasoning in thought experiments, if anything, would be suppositional in nature. But there are problems with regarding a work of fictional literature as a thought experiment. For example, within science the epistemic value of thought experiments is regarded as second best (or worse) to real experiments, but there could be no counterpart to this within literary fiction. Moreover, there is an inverse relationship between parameters of evaluation. Factors that make a thought experiment good (e.g., straightforwardness and precision) tend to make a story bad (lack of nuance and subtlety), and vice versa. Egan mentions this (2016, p. 147), and that in contrast to a literary fiction, "the purpose of a thought experiment is *exhausted* in making or contributing to an argument"; its aesthetic qualities are basically irrelevant, as is indicated by the fact that once "we remember how a thought experiment runs, we have no reason to reread it" (pp. 142-143). For instance, the power and cogency of a good philosophical thought experiment may derive from its being a close analogical argument, not from any embedded fictional narrative being *believable* like a novel, play, or short story; consider, e.g., Thompson's (1971) celebrated, though hardly believable, thought experiment involving a famous violinist plugged into your body for life support. This points toward perhaps the most important difference for our purposes: indirectness is not a distinctive feature of thought experiments, but it is for any global argument in a work of literary fiction.

3. DIDACTICISM AND INDIRECTNESS

If a work of literary fiction has a global argument, why should it be indirect? The answer is that otherwise the work would be didactic, which is a distinctive fault for fictional literature. However, given that the term has a negative connotation, didacticism is a flaw to some degree no matter where it appears, and this can lead to confusion. Consider Repp's view. He says (2012, pp. 271, 283):

Works of literature that are too overtly instructive are commonly faulted for being didactic...if we [as literary cognitivists] value literature for the instruction it affords, why would we ever object to overt instruction?...I propose the following answer: overt instruction can arouse suspicion of intellectual vices in the author, such as intellectual arrogance, dogmatism, and prejudice, which can make the lessons the author seeks to convey less rationally acceptable... Didacticism on my view is just as objectionable in works of computational biology and cinematic history as in literary fictions because it is primarily an epistemic rather than aesthetic fault.

Repp tries to assimilate didacticism in literary fiction with didacticism in nonfiction (whether literary or not) as manifesting the same epistemic flaw. But although works of nonfiction such as computational biology and cinematic history could be didactically flawed because they are marked by arrogance, dogmatism, or prejudice, they could not be “*too overtly instructive*” any more than an instruction manual could. After all, being instructive is their express purpose and *raison d’être*. By definition, works of nonfiction aim at achieving veracity and conveying it; they attempt to stick to the facts or tell what actually happened.

In contrast, fictional works, broadly speaking, at most aim at verisimilitude. Repp is right that literary fictions are didactic if they are “*too overtly instructive*,” yet he does not appear to see why. Trite as it may be to be reminded, fictional literature’s significant cognitive value, if any, is conveyed by *showing* insight into human affairs via the character descriptions, narration of events, etc., not by *telling* it—which would make the work didactic. As this truism suggests, *none* of this showing need be intentional or “*lessons the author seeks to convey*” (*pace* Repp and others, e.g., Gibson, 2009, sec. II; see my 2017, p. 152ff.) Repp (p. 274) says that a literary fiction’s cognitive value can depend “on the extent to which it provides ‘warrant’ or legitimate grounds for accepting the lesson.” But he has the wrong model. Literary fiction is not science, yet he tries to assimilate the two. Compare Swirski (2007, p. 4), who claims that “historical novels transmit knowledge of history much in the same manner that historians transmit it.” If this were so, then there would not be the following sharp asymmetry: For all we know without history, anything in an historical novel could be invented. History is needed to arbitrate, yet historical novels do not arbitrate history.

From these considerations, we see that literary fiction cannot *be* suppositional reasoning, or any kind of reasoning, in a straightforward way; if it were, it would be didactic ‘overt instruction’, which undermines its status as literary fiction and makes it akin to philosophy or science. Thus, the global argument, if any, in a work of literary fiction would have to be somehow uncovered. No doubt fictional narrative

generally makes a supposition (commonly called a ‘premise’) and determines what would, or could very well, follow. For instance, Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* considers what would happen if a group of English schoolboys were stranded on a deserted jungle island and had to fend for themselves and remake society. But these are primarily ‘real’ and probabilistic (mostly causal) consequences imagined by the author; generally, it is only with critical interpretation¹ that there is a transition to more logical or conceptual—hence, argumentative—consequences. This means that if certain works of fictional literature holistically exhibit suppositional reasoning and thereby can constitute a source of knowledge (if the reasoning is good), they do so indirectly within the context of critical interpretation and all the vagaries that can bring. Egan (2016, p. 147) pushes such a point, contending that “we may be able to extract an argument against Stalinism from *Animal Farm*, but...our argumentative criticism of *Animal Farm* would at best target claims we have come to entertain because we read *Animal Farm*, not *Animal Farm* itself.”

For perspective, notice how the suppositional-reasoning approach differs from another possible argumentative approach to regarding fictional literature as a potential source of knowledge. Elsewhere I argue (most completely and recently in Plumer, 2017) that we have a basic intuitive grasp of human nature and the principles that govern it. A literary fiction may evoke these principles in its storytelling, which makes the narrative believable if it is otherwise coherent. So the believability of a fictional story implicates that there is truth there, which amounts to a transcendental argument, and for the appropriately reflective auditor, this contact with truth becomes knowledge.² Here, critical interpretation—and with it the possibility of error, of course—enters the picture in reflectively trying to determine *which* truths of human nature are implicated by the work’s believability, not *that* there are truths there. On the suppositional approach, critical interpretation is

¹My use of the term ‘critical interpretation’ more or less conforms to Gibson’s (2006, p. 444): “Rather than directed at the recovery of linguistic meaning, critical interpretation marks a process of articulating patterns of salience, value, and significance in the worlds literary works bring to view. That is, critical interpretation marks the moment of our engagement with the world of the work, and it has as its goal the attempt to bring to light what we find of consequence in this world.”

²This satisfies the thesis of Literary Cognitivism (LC)—shortly to be discussed in the next section below—because believability with 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.

necessary to display the suppositional reasoning, which then must be determined to be good reasoning, before any knowledge ensues. Conversely, for a believable fiction without critical interpretation, on the suppositional approach all you may relevantly know is the work's 'premise', whereas on the transcendental view you know that as well as that the psychosocial principles the work evokes are mostly true.

4. THE SUPPOSITIONAL REASONING MODEL

Green may be the most ardent proponent of the view that there is "literary fiction that conforms to our suppositional model," a model not presented merely in the guise of thought experimentation (2016, p. 293; see also his 2010, 2017, and forthcoming, sec. IV). Where P is a work's fictional 'premise', Green holds (2016, p. 289) that some works reason declaratively (supposing P, Q), imperatively (supposing P, do Q), or interrogatively (supposing P, Q?). Of course, premise-beliefs (see section 1 above) may enter the picture, and "it is normally appropriate to appeal to a body of background knowledge to aid our reasoning" (p. 290), so the suppositional reasoning need not be pure. Green sees conformity to the suppositional model as the primary way that the thesis of "literary cognitivism," as he construes it, is satisfied. He casts this thesis as

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

(2010, p. 352; 2016, p. 286; 2017, p. 48; quoted approvingly by Maioli 2014, p. 625). Literary cognitivists and anti-cognitivists are all concerned with fiction literature because, by definition, there is no question that nonfictional literature (e.g., an historical or bibliographical work) may yield knowledge. In LC Green tries to say what is special or distinctive about knowledge arising from fictional literature. However, Green never clearly spells out the idea of dependence in LC, although he distinguishes LC from the stronger thesis (he does not endorse) 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*" [LCU] (2016, p. 286n4). In LCU, the notion of dependence is the usual idea of *cannot exist without*. 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.

Green initially considers cases of suppositional reasoning or “suppositions for the sake of argument” in “everyday life” by way of preparing the ground for considering it in literary fiction. His first example (declarative) is: “Suppose we take the 3:17 train to Union Station. Then we can catch the 4:35 from there to the coast, getting there in time for the ferry unless there is some delay...” He claims that “suppositions such as the proposition that we take the 3:17 to Union Station are a species of fictions” (2016, p. 287). But this seems confused. The proposition that we take the 3:17 to Union Station could be a species of fiction only if we do not take that train. Now, before 3:17, all we know is that it is a future fact in the actual world or it is not. Before 3:17, it is a ‘counterfactual’ in only the weak temporal sense that it obtains in neither the present nor the past in the actual world. Yet the ‘premises’ of literary fictions are paradigmatically metaphysical counterfactual possibilities, that is, they obtain in merely possible worlds—not obtaining ever in the actual world.

Continuing with suppositional reasoning in “everyday life,” Green illustrates the directive structure of ‘supposing P, do Q’: “Imagine animated demonstrations of how to change an automobile’s oil filter...the animation, albeit fictional, shows how to do something” (2016, p. 288). Considered as showing how to engage in a *type* of activity, the animation had better not be fictional or else it would purvey falsehoods and misdirect. Considered as depicting a *token* of that activity type, it could be fictional and the dependence of the learning engendered conform to the idea of dependence in LC (though not in LCU of course, because a video of a real oil filter change could be used).

Turning to cases of literary fiction, in the directive vein Green interprets Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as “showing how to justify adultery to oneself” (2016, p. 293). I do not see a problem relevant to our concerns, given that the novel’s ‘premise’ is a metaphysical counterfactual, although his reading may be a little obtuse since Emma’s adultery ends in misery for pretty much all concerned. On the other hand, as we have seen (section 1), Green understands Huxley’s *Brave New World* (declaratively) as working out the negative implications of a supposition in the manner of a loose *reductio ad absurdum*. A problem arises in satisfying the dependence requirement in LC if the supposition could simply be an epistemic possibility (‘suppose X, which for all we know, occurs sometime’) or probabilistic (e.g., ‘suppose X, which could very well happen’), not metaphysical counterfactual supposition, that is, distinctively fictional 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 or probably will be true. The same applies (e.g.) to the supposition of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* that women become

extremely subjugated under a U.S. totalitarian theocracy, especially as concerns reproduction. 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.

It might be objected that whether a literary fiction's key 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. Determining the right level of generality is no doubt an important and difficult question, perhaps even intractable. Nevertheless, 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 would appear to be accidental.

Green regards Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* as having "an interrogative dimension" in that it compels "readers to ask themselves whether there are any epistemic situations in which rationality would oblige them to give up their naturalistic scruples and believe in the supernatural" (2016, p. 292). This kind of case raises two general concerns. First, even assuming that the question posed is a good one or "helps to build a framework in which an intellectual advance can be made" (Green 2017, p. 51), it seems that what would enhance our knowledge or make the advance is the *answer*. It is not clear that good suppositional reasoning in the interrogative form could support LC. Second, the example here raises the issue of *impossible fictions*, that is, ones that involve a logical or metaphysical (not merely a physical) impossibility. Rather than interrogatively, Green (2017, pp. 57-58) considers Stoker's *Dracula* declaratively, and takes it as similarly supposing that its main protagonists, who are "quite rational people," are "faced with empirical evidence undermining...naturalism." If this story showed, as Green appears to suggest, that "commitment to rationality does not by itself guarantee a commitment to naturalism," then the story would provide *that knowledge* partly because of the story's metaphysical 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, it seems that such a knowledge claim is disputable on logical grounds by making the appropriate conceptual connections between the scientific method, rationality, and naturalism (e.g., a commitment to

naturalism is a condition of the possibility of the scientific method, broadly construed, which in turn defines rationality). Taken as not involving such claims, *Dracula* could provide knowledge by considering nonactual metaphysical possibilities that are important for understanding actuality. At any rate, it is particularly hard to see how knowledge could be gained from impossible fictions.³

5. CONCLUSION

Our topic has been whether literary fiction can be suppositional reasoning. We have seen that the reasoning in thought experiments, if anything, would be suppositional in nature, and although it is often claimed that at least some works of fictional literature constitute a class of thought experiments, this claim is misleading. However, we have found that indirectly, within the context of judicious critical interpretation, works of fictional literature can holistically exhibit suppositional reasoning and thereby constitute a source of knowledge (if the reasoning is good) in a way that supports the thesis of Literary Cognitivism. Evident constraints on this include that the form of the suppositional reasoning needs to be declarative or imperative, and that the fictional 'premise' of the work needs to be a metaphysical counterfactual possibility, not merely a temporal counterfactual and not merely an epistemic possibility or probabilistic supposition.

So, yes, it is true that literary fiction can be suppositional reasoning, although only with significant qualification.

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³Although (e.g.) Nolan (2015) 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.

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