

# Philosophical Papers

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*Postscripts to*  
 “Truth in Fiction”

A. MAKE-BELIEVE TELLING, MAKE-BELIEVE LEARNING

The storyteller purports—normally, if not invariably—to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge. I take the actual telling of the story, in effect, as part of the story itself; or in other words, I subsume the pretended truth of the story under the pretence of truthful telling. Thus I dodge Kripke’s objection that the story might come true by accident, yet be as fictional as ever. For the part about the deeds of Holmes might come true by accident, but not the part about the historical origins of the stories we were told.

I thought this an artificial dodge to meet a technical difficulty. But Kendall Walton’s papers on fiction<sup>1</sup> have persuaded me, first, that it is not at all artificial; and second, that the storyteller’s pretence of truth and knowledge is only the tip of the iceberg. There is a cooperative game of make-believe, governed by conventional understandings, with players in (at least) two roles. The storytellers pretend to pass on historical information to their audience; the audience pretends to learn from their words, and to respond accordingly.

Attention to this broader game of make-believe ties up some of the loose ends. The audience may make-believelly learn their history from several different storytellers. They make-believelly do what real students of history really do: they combine information from several sources. Consider the worlds where all our accumulated make-believe learning about the doings of dragons is honest history: in the closest of these, Sculch the dragon breathes fire. (Or better, some where he does are closer than any where he doesn’t.) It doesn’t matter how much about fire-breathing we get from the tale of Sculch, how much from other stories in the same game. Likewise, take the worlds where we learn the true history of famous mysteries partly from Conan Doyle and Christie, and partly from the newspapers. (The fact that we really do trust the newspapers need not stop us from putting them to use in this game.) In the closest of these worlds, arguably, Holmes could have solved the A.B.C. murders sooner than Poirot, and he would not have needed tapes to get the goods on Nixon.

<sup>1</sup>In particular, his “On Fearing Fictions,” *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 5–27, and others cited therein.

## B. IMPOSSIBLE FICTIONS

An inconsistent fiction is not to be treated directly, else everything comes out true in it indiscriminately. But where we have an inconsistent fiction, there also we have several consistent fictions that may be extracted from it. (Perhaps not in the very hardest cases—but I think those cases are *meant* to defy our efforts to figure out what's true in the story.) I spoke of the consistent corrections of the original fiction. But perhaps it will be enough to consider *fragments*: corrections by deletion, with nothing written in to replace the deleted bits.

Perhaps we should take the maximal consistent fragments, obtained by deleting the bare minimum that will give us consistency. But I think it might be better to respect the salient divisions of the story into parts, even if that means taking less-than-maximal consistent fragments. I believe that Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity*<sup>2</sup> falls into inconsistency by changing its conception of time travel part way through. If so, perhaps the book less its final chapters would make a salient consistent fragment, even if we leave out scattered bits from the final chapters that could consistently have been left in.

Be that as it may, what do we do with our several consistent fragments (or corrections) when we have them? See what is true in each according to my analysis of non-vacuous truth in fiction (in whichever version seems called for). Then what?

I suggested this *method of intersection*:  $\phi$  is true in the original fiction iff  $\phi$  is true in every fragment. Now I would favor instead this *method of union*:  $\phi$  is true in the original fiction iff  $\phi$  is true in some fragment. (Not that we need choose once and for all—we can have both methods, distinguishing two senses of truth in inconsistent fiction.)

Intersection is the conservative method. Even if the fiction was inconsistent, what's true in it will still comprise a consistent theory, fully closed under implication. (I mean, to speak redundantly, *classical* implication.) But we pay a price: some of what's explicit in the fiction gets lost. That price now seems to me too high.

The method of union gives us all the truth in inconsistent fiction that the method of intersection does, and more besides. What's explicit will not get lost, for presumably it will be true in its own fragment. But we lose consistency and we lose closure under implication. Suppose two fragments disagree:  $\phi$  is true in one, not- $\phi$  in the other. Then  $\phi$  and not- $\phi$  both are true in the fiction as a whole. But their inconsistent conjunction is not, though they jointly imply it. Likewise many other things are not true in the fiction, though every one of them is implied jointly by two premisses both true in the fiction.

All this is as it should be. If we deny that contradictory pairs are true in inconsistent fiction, we deny its distinctive peculiarity. Then we must not close under

<sup>2</sup>(New York: Fawcett, 1955).

implication, on pain of obliterating the distinction between what's true in the story and what isn't. We should not even close under the most obvious and uncontroversial sort of implication: the inference from conjuncts to conjunction. (Here is where the relevantists go wrong, seduced by their hope that truth in inconsistent fiction might after all be closed under some relation that might colorably bear the name of implication.) It is true in the Holmes stories that Watson was wounded in the shoulder; it is true in the stories that he was wounded in the leg. It is simply not true in the stories that he was wounded in the shoulder and the leg both—he had only *one* wound, despite the discrepancy over its location.<sup>3</sup>

### C. FICTION IN THE SERVICE OF TRUTH

There are some who value fiction mostly as a means for the discovery of truth, or for the communication of truth. "Truth in Fiction" had nothing to say about fiction as a means to truth. But the topics can indeed be connected.

Most simply, there may be an understanding between the author and his readers to the effect that what is true in his fiction, on general questions if not on particulars, is not to depart from what he takes to be the truth. (Indeed, such an understanding might extend to particular matters as well. Imagine a scandalous political exposé, by an insider, with characters called "Nicksen," "Hague," "Wagoner," "Bondsman," . . .) Then the audience, if they know that the author is well informed, could learn the truth by figuring out what is true in his fictions. Further, the author might discover some truth in the course of trying to keep his side of the bargain.—Doubtless this is not quite what people have in mind when they speak of the cognitive value of literature! Let us find something a bit loftier for them to mean.

Fiction might serve as a means for discovery of modal truth. I find it very hard to tell whether there could possibly be such a thing as a dignified beggar. If there could be, a story could prove it. The author of a story in which it is true that there is a dignified beggar would both discover and demonstrate that there does exist such a possibility. An actor or a painter might accomplish the same. Here the fiction serves the same purpose as an example in philosophy, though it will not work unless the story of the dignified beggar is more fully worked out than our usual examples. Conversely, note that the philosophical example is just a concise bit of fiction.

More importantly, fiction can offer us contingent truths about this world. It cannot take the place of nonfictional evidence, to be sure. But sometimes evidence

<sup>3</sup>The method of union goes back to Stanisław Jaśkowski, "Propositional Calculus for Contradictory Deductive Systems," *Studia Logica* 24 (1969): 143–57, and has been revived in several recent discussions of how to tolerate inconsistency. See my "Logic for Equivocators," *Noûs* 16 (1982): 431–441, and works there cited.

is not lacking. We who have lived in the world for a while have plenty of evidence, but we may not have learned as much from it as we could have done. This evidence bears on a certain proposition. If only that proposition is formulated, straightway it will be apparent that we have very good evidence for it. If not, we will continue not to know it. Here, fiction can help us. If we are given a fiction such that the proposition is obviously true in it, we are led to ask: and is it also true *simpliciter*? And sometimes, when we have plenty of unappreciated evidence, to ask the question is to know the answer. Then the author of the fiction has made a discovery, and he gives his readers the means to make that same discovery for themselves.

Sometimes the proposition learned may be one that we could formulate, once we have it in mind, without reference to the fiction that drew our attention to it. Not so in general. Sometimes reference to a fiction is the only way we have, in practice if not in principle, to formulate the truths that the fiction has called to our attention. A schlemiel is someone such that what is true of him strikingly resembles what is true in a certain fiction of a certain character therein, Schlemiel by name. Temporarily or permanently, first for those who know the story and then for others (like myself) who don't, the word "schlemiel" is indispensable in stating various truths.

So fiction can indeed serve truth. But we must beware, for also it can spread error. (1) Whatever understandings to the contrary might prevail, what is true in an author's fiction might not be true, either because the author is mistaken or because he wishes to deceive those who rely on the supposed understanding. (2) Under the method of union, several things might be true together in a fiction, but not really compossible. Then the fiction might persuade us of a modal falsehood, leading us to believe in a possibility that doesn't really exist. (3) If we have plenty of misleading evidence stored up, there may well be falsehoods that need only be stated to be believed.

#### D. THE PUZZLE OF THE FLASH STOCKMAN

The singer sings this song.

I'm a stockman to my trade, and they call me Ugly Dave.  
 I'm old and grey and only got one eye.  
 In a yard I'm good, of course, but just put me on a horse,  
 And I'll go where lots of young-'uns daren't try.

The boasting gets ever steeper: riding, whipping, branding, shearing, . . . .

In fact, I'm duke of every blasted thing.

Plainly, this is fiction. What is true in it?

The answer should be that in the fiction a stockman called Ugly Dave tells a boastful pack of lies.<sup>4</sup> And that is indeed the answer we get if we take the closest worlds where the storyteller really is doing what he here pretends to be doing. For this is one of those exceptional cases, covered briefly in my footnote 7, in which the storyteller does not pretend to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge. The singer makes believe that he is Ugly Dave telling boastful lies.

There is a fiction in the fiction: Ugly Dave's lies are themselves a fiction, and his boasting is make-believe truth-telling. In the fiction in the fiction, he really is duke of everything. In the outer fiction he is not, but only claims to be. This iteration, in itself, is not a problem.

But there is a real problem nearby, and I have no solution to offer. Why doesn't the iteration collapse? When the singer pretends to be Ugly Dave pretending to tell the truth about himself, how does this differ from pretending to be Ugly Dave *really* telling the truth about himself? It must be the former, not the latter; else we should conclude that there is no inner fiction and that what is true in the outer fiction—now the only fiction—is that Ugly Dave is duke of everything and tells us so. That would be to miss the point entirely. We must distinguish pretending to pretend from really pretending. Intuitively it seems that we can make this distinction, but how is it to be analyzed?

<sup>4</sup>Or, at least, it is not true in the fiction that he is telling the truth. Even that would be enough to serve my purpose here. But it is simpler, and credible enough, to stick with the stronger answer.