The Cognitive Value of Fiction: Two Models

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RESUMEN

Un buen número de controversias actuales incluyen cuestiones sobre el valor cognitivo de la ficción. En cada uno de esos contextos encontramos un cierto escepticismo sobre lo que podría llamarse la "tesis fuerte": que podemos alcanzar determinado conocimiento proposicional no-trivial a partir de la ficción en virtud del contenido narrativo de esta.

Presento dos maneras en las que las ficciones pueden proporcionarnos (y a menudo lo proporcionan de forma efectiva) conocimiento proposicional precisamente de ese modo. Defiendo que esos modelos ayudar a dar una respuesta a gran parte del escepticismo que se ha mencionado. Concluyo considerando algunas implicaciones de todo el proyecto y algunas objeciones al mismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *valor cognitivo de la ficción, aprender de la ficción, Aristóteles.*

ABSTRACT

A number of current controversies involve questions about the cognitive value of fiction. In each of these contexts, we find skepticism about what might be called the "strong thesis," that we can non-trivially gain determinate propositional knowledge from fictions by virtue of their narrative contents.

I offer two ways in which fictions can (and often do) provide us with propositional knowledge in just this way. I make the case that these models help answer much of the skepticism mentioned above. I conclude by considering a number of implications of and objections to the entire project.

KEYWORDS: *Cognitive Value of Fiction, Learning from Fiction, Aristotle.*

A number of recent and current controversies involve questions about the cognitive value of fiction. Such questions are most central to debates over the possibility of learning from fiction, but they are also important when considering the ethical value of fiction, the capacity of film to do (or be) philosophy, and the prospects for genuine pictorial argumentation.

In each of these contexts, we find skepticism about what we might call the "strong thesis": that we can non-trivially gain determinate propositional knowledge[1] from fictions by virtue of their narrative contents.[2] So persuasive have argument against the strong thesis been, that there has been something of a retreat from it even among would-be non-skeptics.[3]

There are two main sources of skepticism. The first is that narrative art cannot provide propositional knowledge because it provides neither empirical evidence nor argument. The second is that correctly interpreting narrative art requires already believing or at least being aware of the claim it (allegedly) makes.

There are a few ways in which the strong thesis may be true, but trivial. First, when we watch or read a faithful docu-drama, we may learn about the actual events depicted in the narrative – though without prior knowledge of those events we might not be able to know what is historically accurate and not. Still, we might be able to glean *some* historical knowledge just from the dramatization. But if the strong thesis is to be interesting, it has got to apply to the depiction of purely fictional events. We can also learn about the fiction itself that it depicts certain things or that does so with certain techniques. And we can learn something about its role in the art history into which it figures. But these things are obvious and the strong thesis is controversial, worth arguing about. If the strong thesis is true, then we learn something about the world from the fiction, and not just something about the fiction itself.

In order for the strong thesis to be both true and interesting, there must be some way for narratives to bridge the unfathomably large ontological gap between the fictional and the real, some way for us to come to believe something true from something false. Put this way, skepticism about the strong thesis seems well-motivated, and retreat from it only prudent. But there are two ways that narratives *can* bridge that gap, two ways for audiences to come to justifiably or reliably believe something true by virtue of being presented with something fictional. Let's call these the "state-of-character model" and the "alethic model."

I. THE STATE-OF-CHARACTER MODEL

The first way in which fictions can have genuine cognitive value in the sense demanded by the strong thesis relies on fiction-makers' (hereafter "authors") ability to create characters like us in certain key respects

and to allow the events of their stories to unfold from just those characteristics. This is not an easy thing to do, and is a mark of distinction in fiction. It provides, in fact, a well-known critical criterion, one at least as old as Aristotle's *Poetics*.

It is common for defenders of cognitivist approaches to fiction to look to the *Poetics* for inspiration, and the resources there are plenty.[4] Naturally enough, we've collectively paid quite a bit of attention to the "thinking" of a tragedy, the leading idea, that which is expressible in propositional form and generalizable beyond the particular actions depicted. [*Poetics* 1450b] Through its thinking, a fiction is alleged to be able to assert universal propositions. That a fiction can "think" in this way, however, is just what the anti-cognitivist wants to deny. To see *how* a fiction can have such cognitive value even when the claims in question are not spoken outright in dialogue or stated in the narration, we ought to look to another of Aristotle's parts of tragedy.

I have in mind specifically the "states of character," or the nature of people out of which the story (ideally, anyway) unfolds. [*Poetics* 1454a-b] Aristotle thinks the makers of tragedy ought to make their characters "solidly reliable," "fitting," "lifelike" and "consistent." These four things together mean two things crucially important for the state-of-character model. First, when characters in a fiction (Aristotle's concern was with tragedy, but we can extend the picture a bit) are fitting to the sort of person they are and lifelike, then they will be like us in certain relevant respects. Second, when they are reliable and consistent, then it is possible for the events of the story to result from the actions that result directly from these states of character. When these states are imitations of the sorts of people we actually are, then the events of the story – being the effects, ultimately, of those sorts of person – can tell us something about ourselves. Something has gone wrong, Aristotle thinks, when the events of stories do not result from the sorts of people imitated in them. He famously gives the examples of Medea being saved by Helios (the effect carried off by a crane) and the convenient intervention of the gods in the *Iliad*. When a fiction is done well, however, actions and all of their consequences result from states of character and those states of character are our own.

Now, of course, this is not the way of the actual world. We win lotteries, contract diseases, meet our soul-mates and lose them, usually by happenstance. Almost never do these events result solely from our states of character. This is precisely why it sometimes seems that fiction is a better teacher than life. The actual world is our first and most consistent

teacher, and of course we must learn to deal with its arbitrariness and unpredictability. But the richest and most rewarding fictions present the kinds of control that everyday experience lacks outside of the laboratory, where the difficulty of such control necessitates relatively small-scale incremental results. The world of the fiction is entirely controlled, and can be quite large. I do not mean, of course, to suggest that the knowledge we gain from fictions in this way is as secure or certain as what we gain from the natural sciences. But when the skilled artist is able (or to the extent that a skilled artist is able) to (a) model key traits of actual-world people in their characters and (b) successfully allow the events of the fiction to develop directly from those traits, we are able to learn something about people in the actual world. On the state-of-character model, then, we are entitled to "bridge the gap" between the world of the fiction and our world (in an epistemically relevant way) when the characters of the fiction are sufficiently like us in certain critical ways. The way that the events of the story unfold from the nature of those characters on the other hand, is thus very unlike the unfolding of events in our world.

When a story "unfolds" from certain states of character, the actions of fictional characters who have (and exemplify) those states will more or less consistently result from those states. So, for instance, Jay Gatsby's wounded obsessiveness informs his overly-elaborate plans and his execution of them, while Daisy Buchanan's careless self-centeredness informs all of her responses. But also the central events of the story must be driven by the actions that in turn result from the states of character in question. So the two murders at the end of *The Great Gatsby* result from these actions rather than mere twists of fate or actions that are not attributable to the central and relevant states of character. When these patterns are followed, we learn something about the relevant states of character we ourselves have. We might learn from *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, that obsession with status can be mistaken for romantic obsession, and that we are capable of doing awful things to ourselves and others when in the grip of such obsessions.

Two factors complicate this picture beyond what the *Gatsby* example might suggest. First, the states of character in question may be quite a bit more psychologically complex. And second, those states may well change dramatically over the course of a fiction. Just recognizing when a character has traits like our own, and *then* recognizing that the character's actions result from those traits, and *then* recognizing that the story is adequately driven by those actions is not easy. It is so difficult, in fact, that it may seem unlikely that we could recognize all of these things without al-

ready knowing what we're supposed to learn – that is, some fact about ourselves insofar as we have these traits as well. And so perhaps there is no *learning* after all.

The window of opportunity here between banality and opacity is admittedly pretty small. And if banality and opacity are the fiction-maker's Scylla and Charybdis, many authors crash headlong into one or the other. But there is room between them, and again, it may be just our best fictions that navigate the course.

Let's consider some of William Faulkner's novels and short stories collectively as a candidate for such success. The unfolding narratives across generations of Mississippi families introduce us to characters who are variously brilliant, damaged, horrific and dangerous in just the ways that actual people are. And the stories that Faulkner tells – especially *Sartoris, Light in August, The Sound and the Fury,* and *A Rose for Emily* – unfold as consequences of those character traits. A reader may see all this from the stories and not know before reading them that the lasting effects of past social traumas are as inescapable as those of an individual's past psychological traumas. In Faulkner's south the central traumas are slavery and the Civil War, but the lesson is general. After reading these stories, the reader may know this central (what is sometimes called "thematic") claim is true, not because of the persuasive effects of the prose and its style but because he knows that the characters are like us and that the events of the stories evolved out of these traits that we share. This way he is able to learn something new about the nature of these characteristics.[5]

Another question about the state-of-character model concerns the source of our resulting knowledge. Various cognitivist accounts will place the pedagogical burden on different parties to the experience of fiction. One view has it that we learn from the *author*, either by way of a claim implicitly made via the fiction or by assumption of such an implication. Paul Taylor helpfully calls this a "conduit" view and distinguishes it from his own – also derived from the *Poetics* – account whereby we learn by attending to our experiences of fictions. So, for instance, we may learn something about our own interests and sympathies by noticing the kinds of characters with whom we sympathize or identify [Taylor (2003)].

The conduit view, as Taylor correctly notices, is insufficient as a cognitivist theory because on it we do not – or at least do not need to – learn from the narrative content of a fiction per se. On such views, the role of the fiction itself is limited to establishing the authority of the author on the subjects in question.

Regarding the experiential view, while I do not doubt that we can learn something about ourselves from our reactions to narratives, I'm not sure that such an account does sufficient justice to the kinds of claims that the cognitivist view is meant to vindicate and the anti-cognitivist view is meant to reform. Specifically, to take one of Taylor's examples, "*Anna Karenina* does not offer a mere conjecture about how dangerous it can be to fall in love" [Taylor (2003), p.265]. Now if two people luckily unexposed to the dangers of romantic love read *Anna Karenina* and one learns that it can be extremely dangerous to fall in love and the other does not, it seems to me that the second reader has missed something about the novel, not that he's failed to understand his own experience of the novel. The first reader would have plenty (God knows) in the novel itself to point to in order to help midwife the other's understanding. If she wanted to point to her own experience she could, but that would only be helpful if they had relevantly similar experiences (i.e. attachments, sympathies etc.). Let's say he identified strongly with Karenin, Anna's husband. She would not need to dissuade him of that odd attachment or ask him to re-evaluate it in order to show him what the novel teaches. She could instead rely solely on the characters and events of the novel itself. The facts that we are as susceptible to (and powerless against) overwhelming passion as Anna and Vronsky coupled and that their respective tragedies result from those characteristics, teach us something about ourselves. The second reader could see that while maintaining his identification with Karenin.

It may be remarked here that the second reader in this scenario has not learned from *Anna Karenina* so much as he has learned from the interpretation provided by the first reader. Fair enough, but this was only necessary in his case. The first reader, after all, learned directly from the novel.

On the state-of-character model, our teacher is the story and its characters. The author need not have the knowledge that we gain. She only needs to have created characters like us in some relevant respect and told a story that unfolds from those characteristics. She could, in the end, learn the same thing we do from the story she tells.

II. The Alethic Model

There need be even less circumstantial (or contingent) similarity between the world of the fiction and our world on the alethic model. Instead, what they must share is membership in a plausibly-bounded set of

worlds. The world of the fiction must be *accessible* to our world given an argument intended by the fiction's author. The alethic model provides (in a sense it *is*) an argument form shared by many such fictions. Most fundamentally, fictions present us with possibilities that are sufficient for some claim that is true everywhere if it is true anywhere.[6]

On the alethic model, fictions work as arguments in much the same way as the philosopher's thought experiment.[7] If we can learn from a purely fictional thought experiment, then we can learn from purely fictional works of art.

There are reasons, though, to doubt both the antecedent and the implication in that last sentence. First, it may reasonably be argued that we do not learn from thought experiments. If we learn from philosophy at all, it is from explicit argument. Thought experiments are just particularly memorable supplements to those arguments, either as illustrations or intuition pumps. Plato does not merely present the Cave in the *Republic*. It is part of a larger conversation in which we find explicit statements of much if not all that is at work in the allegory. Second, even if we can learn directly from thought experiments, does this mean that we can similarly learn from novels, movies and plays? After all, the thought experiment is presented with persuasive, not aesthetic intention.

Considering the structure of a particular kind of argument present in both thought experiments and some fictional artworks can mollify both of these concerns. These arguments begin with a claim about a fictional world. Not everything depicted will be relevant to the argument, only that certain things are true of certain characters a, b, c…:

Fa & Ga & Fb… etc.

For simplicity's sake, let's just consider a case where the argument depends on the events surrounding a single character – no insurmountable complications arise with multiple characters or relational properties. What is important is that the fiction depict some specific things about someone or other. Let us further collect all the relevant properties of this person (animal, robot, town, or whatever) into set Δ. The relevant facts within the world of the fiction are that these things are true of someone (or of something, etc.):

$\exists x \Delta x$

And the depiction is a claim to their possibility. So this is our first premise:

P1: $\Diamond \exists x \Delta x$

The second premise goes beyond both our world and the world of the fiction, and says that in any accessible world, if something has the relevant properties, then some further proposition A is true at that world. A bit more formally:

P2: $\Box \, \forall x(\Delta x \rightarrow A)$

The plausibility of this second premise will depend on many things both inside and outside the fiction. As a result, it may be that it is relatively rare for fictions to successfully make arguments of this kind.

The third premise is what (so to speak) brings the argument "home" to our world and really allows us to learn something actual from fictions. What is required is that the proposition A be the kind of thing that is true everywhere (i.e. in all possibilities) if it is true in anywhere, i.e.:

(3) $\Diamond \, A \rightarrow \Box A$

From these three premises we can validly (at least in any logic with a reflexive accessibility relation) conclude that A is true in our world:

(c) A

So, when we are presented with a fiction that is (whatever else it is) the presentation of an argument with this form, whenever its premises are acceptable, we can genuinely learn something, namely A. When A has moral significance, for instance, then artworks that present these arguments (at least when they do it well) can provide genuine new moral knowledge.

I should say right away that accepting the utility of this model will not force anyone to accept any strange ontology about fictional worlds. No one is claiming that fictional worlds are always possible worlds. Some fictional worlds are *im*possible, and fictional worlds are not, to borrow Nicholas Wolterstorff's phrase, "maximally comprehensive" [Wolterstorff (1980) pp.131-134] – not all states of affairs are either required or prohibited by them. One minimal requirement, then, is that some fictions are treated as depicting accessible possible worlds for the purpose of certain arguments. They will need to in fact be possible (i.e. they will need to be free of contradiction or other absurdity) for such arguments to work out, but that we can decide on a case-by-case basis. Also, we need not articu-

late every true proposition at such a world any more than we need to do so for any modal argument to be useful to us.

Let us see first how this model operates in a thought experiment. Let's use David Lewis's famous creatures in "Mad Pain and Martian Pain." We are introduced to a "madman" whose neural activity is just like ours when we're in pain, but this activity is neither caused by the things that cause us pain nor does it manifest in behavior at all like our pain behavior. Then we have a "Martian" who enters into a particular physical state under just the conditions that typically bring about pain for us, and that physical state is attended by behaviors just like our own pain behavior. Any theory of mind, Lewis thinks, needs to be able to account for the fact that both the madman and the Martian are (in one genuine and relevant sense or another) *in pain* just like we can be. [Lewis (1991)] Pure versions of physicalism can't adequately account for Martian pain and their counterpart functionalist accounts can't account for mad pain. We needn't get into Lewis's preferred theory, but suffice to say this argument provides a basis for preferring it so long as it can account for both.

We really have two arguments here. Let's just focus on the argument against pure physicalism. We can reconstruct it this way:

(1) It is possible that there's a Martian that has pain like ours without our neurology.

(2) In any condition containing both our pain and Martian pain, pain is not identical to a type of neural event.

(3) If pain not identical to a type of neural event in the Martian world (or any other particular world), then it is not identical to a type of neural event (in the relevant sense) anywhere.

Therefore,

(4) Our pain is not identical (in the relevant sense) to a type of neural event.[8]

Notice that we need premise (2) because otherwise Lewis is just telling a fun story, and we need premise (3) because otherwise we're just drawing a conclusion about this strange Martian-inhabited world.

To be sure, there may not be many claims that can satisfy A in claims like (2) *and* in claims like (3). Though this is just to say again that successful arguments of this kind are few and far between, and on that we can happily agree. Truly good arguments are at least as rare as truly

good fiction. Both together may be all the more rare, but for that no less worthy of consideration.

Lewis of course does, as philosophers typically do, provide some context, clarification and diagnosis for his thought experiment. But that does not mean that the thought experiment *could not* stand on its own or be adequately informative on its own. It is only a kindness that Lewis provides some interpretation. We have less kindness but no less argument from the Nietzsches and Wittgensteins of the world who present us with much less in the way of guidance through their thought experiments. And when those thought experiments are truly illuminating, we can learn from them.

So it looks like we can learn from fictional thought experiments. But we can similarly learn from fictional works of art only if they serve the same argumentative purpose, and that is not immediately clear. Consider, though, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and especially that moment on the raft when Huck is chastising himself for "stealing" Jim from his "owners." Huck is coming to terms with having done the wrong thing by the standards of his society. Crucially, Huck has internalized these standards, and his conflict is not between his own moral beliefs and socially prescribed morality but between the latter and his own moral sense or intuition, what Twain often calls "conscience." The audience is expected to conclude along with Huck that he has done what he should, even though it is the "wrong" thing. We are to conclude, then, that moral sense should supersede socially prescribed morality even in the absence of justification. The argument as presented to us works like this:

(1) It is possible that someone has all of the properties ascribed to Huck in the novel.

(2) In any condition in which someone has all of those properties, individual moral sense should supersede socially prescribed morality even in the absence of justification.

(3) If it is possible that individual moral sense should supersede socially prescribed morality even in the absence of justification, then it is necessary that individual moral sense should supersede socially prescribed morality even in the absence of justification.

Therefore,

(4) individual moral sense should supersede socially prescribed morality even in the absence of justification.

(1) is given in the narrative itself. Ascribing (2) to Twain does require a bit of inference and interpretation, but I don't think we're going out on a limb in this one. And (3) is justified by the nature of the claim in question: the priority of conscience over social moral norm is just the kind of thing that is true everywhere if it is true anywhere.

Now to be sure, this sort of argument does require that we accept as potential necessary truth quite a bit beyond mathematical and logical tautologies. And with this observation the specter of banality comes creeping in again. If we must know that the claim in question (the one that satisfies A in the schemata) is the sort of thing that is true everywhere if true anywhere, it may at first seem that we have to already know what we're supposed to learn. Notice, though, that we can recognize all sorts of things as being true everywhere if true anywhere without knowing that they are in fact true anywhere. I can recognize, for instance, that if it is possible that moral claims are not truth-functional then it is necessary that moral claims are not truth-functional.[9] And I can recognize that if morality provides actions with value from an external source anywhere, then it does so everywhere. It is for this reason that a storyteller can only make by declaration a story in which certain actions are perceived moral or not, but not (again by mere declaration) a story in which such actions actually *are* moral or not.

Now what if we understand but don't agree with Lewis's Martian argument? The hard-nosed identity theorist, for instance, could simply deny that the Martian is in pain and chalk up intuitions to the contrary to a widespread misunderstanding of mental states. Similarly, there is nothing to prevent us from thinking Huck is wrong, that he acted rashly in the absence of some justification for flouting moral conventions. But all of this is just to say that these arguments may not be convincing, not that they are not arguments. And this objection does demonstrate that these arguments will not *always* be a source of justified belief, but not that they *can't*. Not everyone will think the second premise is justified. Sometimes it won't be. But just because a given method of justification is not always rhetorically successful and just because a given method of justification can be misused do not mean that it is not useful or cognitively valuable.

Another pressing objection concerns – once again – the *locus* of pedagogical value. Specifically, why isn't the alethic model dependent on a "conduit" view of fiction's cognitive value? After all, unlike the state-of-character model, this one does rely on some knowledge on the part of the author. Arguments come from people. But unlike conduit views, on

the alethic model the argumentative function of the fiction is not to demonstrate or establish the authority of the author. We need not appeal to the authority of the arguer when we have a sound argument. We can also, therefore, quickly respond to another ancient and perpetual objection to cognitivism:[10] it is no problem that the author lacks *special* knowledge qua author, since we are not relying on their station or status to validate these arguments or vindicate their claims.

One final objection specific to the alethic model may be that premise (2) confuses strict and material implication. This is essentially to say that (for instance) Twain may have claimed (or been entitled to claim) that in the world of the fiction he created, the condition of Huck is sufficient for the priority of individual conscience, but he did not or could not claim that such a condition would be sufficient for the priority of individual conscience in any case. However, it is just too odd to think that Twain wanted the conclusion about conscience and social morality to be only as local – that is, as fictional – as the world of his novel. It would impoverish our fictions and disempower our authors too much to think that what happens in their novels cannot speak to issues in the actual world.

III. FURTHER OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Two objections likely apply to both models. We might call these the "interpretation" and "aesthetic" objections.

The interpretation objection centers around a dilemma: either fiction is by its nature hopelessly vague on just the sorts of points that I claim it makes and therefore cannot be paraphrased and determinately interpreted, or it can be paraphrased and determinately interpreted – but then it is the interpretation that is providing knowledge and not the fiction itself.[11]

First, yes, fictions are vague about their lessons and arguments. But many are also vague about their primary depictive meanings as well. We do not want to say that they are therefore without meaning. And if fictions are often vague about what we are to learn from them they are in good company – if philosophy is good company. How much ink has been spilled not on evaluating Hegel, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein but just on coming to terms with what they are saying or what their central works are about?

This brings us to the other horn of the dilemma. No one save the aforementioned philosophers themselves could read their works and gain

knowledge without some interpretation and paraphrase. This is just part and parcel of reading (at least) some philosophy well. And surely this doesn't mean that we can't learn from philosophy but only from the paraphrases we provide ourselves.

Finally, the aesthetic objection says that providing analyses and interpretations of fictions like the ones I endorse here robs the works of their aesthetic value. Or at the very least, if there is something to learn from a given work of fiction a la the strong thesis, it is tangential to its fictionality, and we shouldn't be interested in such coincidences when we regard these works *as fictions*.

A lot depends here on what we mean by "aesthetic value" and "fictionality." And there does not seem to be a theory-neutral way of approaching either. I'd *like* to say that certain forms of fiction-making are better than others at depicting characters relevantly like us and stories that unfold from those relevant similarities, and that some authors choose certain forms in part so as to articulate the kinds of arguments that fit the alethic model. And so it is part of the aesthetic value of a work that it succeeds on one or both of these models. But perhaps "aesthetic" references our responses to the fictions rather than their strictly formal qualities. And to this I'd say that my experience of a fiction is qualitatively different and in fact enriched by my coming to learn something from it. Perhaps instead aesthetic appreciation requires disinterested satisfaction. In that case we should notice that the kind of knowledge gained is not necessarily – and in all likelihood very rarely – strictly practical. It is the kind of knowledge that is valued for its own sake and very much part of what we appreciate about a work aside from our particular individual interests.[12]

I expect, however, that this response will be unconvincing to the anti-cognitivist simply because she is going to have to be committed to a different notion of the aesthetic. This is true of fictionality as well. Of course I'd like to say that teaching is one of the capacities of fictions and therefore a possible function of fictionality. Both will be denied by the anti-cognitivist and the debate is no further along. Ultimately, it seems unlikely that either the objection or any response to it can be articulated without begging questions.

But perhaps another sort of concern underwrites both the interpretation and aesthetic objections: that the state-of-character and alethic models encourage the wrong sort of approach to fictions. The worry may be that I miss something experientially valuable when I watch *The Shining* and see an argument about addiction and madness or when I read

Hamlet and get a lesson about procrastination aiding injustice. But learning these things is an important part of my experience of these works. *The Shining* is scary because violence and ghosts are scary, but it is *terrifying* because of what it forces us to conclude about ourselves and the fragility of our sanity. *Hamlet* becomes frustrating as Hamlet chooses increasingly convoluted machinations over direct action, but it is *heartbreaking* because we see that his reluctance and insecurity are like our own, and so their consequences tell us something unpleasant about ourselves.[13]

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NOTES

1 One regrettable omission from this and many other discussions of these issues is a lack of specificity about truth and knowledge. Space simply doesn't permit such considerations, which deserve treatments all of their own. For reasons that will have to wait until another day, I do believe what I say here is as compatible with a correspondence theory of truth as it is with a coherentist or deflationist theory. And it is as consistent with a classical theory of knowledge as it is a tracking or reliabilist theory. This is of course only a promissory note.

[2] This is not the only "strong" thesis available in these debates, and others have been proposed. This is just the one I mean to defend here.

[3] Please see Jukka Mikkonen's "On Studying the Cognitive Value of Literature" [Mikkonen, (2015)] for an indicative (and comparatively promising) retreat as well as a nice summary of the standard reasons for it. See also Noel Carroll's "Art and The Moral Realm" [Carroll (2010)] for the application of these issues to the question of moral and aesthetic value. To the extent that there are "standard" arguments against claims like the moral thesis, most of them can either be found in or have evolved from Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's extended case against the "Propositional Theory of Literary Truth" [Lamarque and Olsen (1994)]. I mean here to provide only the flavor, not anything like a complete account of the literature on these topics, which would take us much too far afield.

[4] See, for instance, Paul Taylor's "Sympathy and Insight in Aristotle's Poetics" [Taylor (2008)] and Berys Gaut's "Art and Knowledge" [Gaut (2003)].

[5] At the risk of making too much of my own case, this was entirely true of me when I began to read Faulkner for the first time.

⁶ For a specific use of what I'm calling here the "alethic model" see "An Argument (Many) Films Make" [Boardman (2015)].

⁷ There have been a number of attempts to validate cognitivist claims via just this sort of analogy, and a number of objections to those attempts. See, for instance, Carroll's "Philosophizing through the Moving Image: The Case of 'Serene Velocity'" [Carroll (2006)] and Thomas Wartenberg's "Beyond Mere Illustration: How Films Can Be Philosophy" [Wartenberg (2006)].

⁸ We must say "in the relevant sense" because Lewis's own solution to the problem relies on a kind of two-dimensional semantics, but we can happily avoid that complication here.

⁹ Assuming that we have genuine moral claims in all worlds.

¹⁰ This is, of course, as old as Plato's *Republic*, though we see it again and again at least as recently as Jerome Stolnitz's "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art" [Stolnitz (1992)].

¹¹ Two slightly different but indicative objections of this sort come from Stolniz [Stolnitz (1992)] and Paisley Livingston [Livingston (2006)].

¹² Carroll makes similar claims in "Art and the Moral Realm" [Carroll (2010)]

¹³ I am extremely grateful for criticisms, objections, and suggestions provided by Noël Carroll, Samantha Boardman, Ron Briggs, Orlando Betancor, the philosophy faculty and students at the City College of New York, and (especially) two anonymous reviewers at **teorema**.

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