

FICTION WRITING AS PHILOSOPHICAL METHODOLOGY

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Abstract. In this paper I argue for a novel philosophical methodology, *fiction writing*. Much has been made, in philosophy, of the relationship between fiction and thought experiments, but this literature focuses predominantly on completed pieces of fiction: Fully fledged and polished published pieces. In this paper I focus on how the *process* of writing fiction, especially speculative fiction such as science fiction and fantasy, not just the *outcomes* of this process, can be viewed as a distinctive philosophical methodology. This will be bound up in arguing for two claims: (1) The process of writing short speculative fiction is essentially a process of argumentation. (2) The distinctive benefit of writing fiction as opposed to writing analytic philosophy is that the starting points need not be justified. These two claims—which may seem like they are in tension with each other—will each serve to justify two overall conclusions about the writing of fiction—the very process whereby short stories or novels are created. The first is that this process is a *legitimate* philosophical methodology, sharing many relevant features with traditional analytical argument building and conceptual analysis. The second is that it is *distinctive* philosophical methodology, in that it can provide us with insights that would not be gained via other means.

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1. The aim of this paper

My aim in this paper is to argue that writing fiction constitutes a legitimate and distinctive methodology of philosophy, which should be accepted into the philosophical toolbox alongside other methodological tools such as conceptual analysis, argument building, standpoint epistemology, and intersectionality.

This aim comprises two separate conclusions that I will argue for:

1. The process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is a *legitimate* (modern) philosophical methodology, sharing many relevant features with traditional analytical argument building and conceptual analysis.
2. This process is a *distinctive* philosophical methodology, in that it can provide us with insights that would not be gained via other means.



I will reach these conclusions by demonstrating that (1) the process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is essentially a process of argumentation and (2) the distinctive benefits of writing fiction, as opposed to writing (traditional) analytic philosophy, is that (i) the starting points need not be justified and (ii) fiction incorporates affective aspects. While these two claims may seem like they are in tension with each other—what rational philosopher would be happy to argue from unjustified starting points?—we will show that this tension is only apparent, and that the interplay between argumentation and justification is what feeds into the affective power of fiction.

The plan of the paper is as follows: First, I set the stage against which I will construct my argument (§2). Then, I argue for the first conclusion in §3 and the second conclusion in §5, considering a potential objection in between, in §4. In §6, before concluding, I offer practical advice to the reader who wishes to start using this new methodology.

2. “Philosophical” fiction and the question of genre

Before I speak specifically about the process of writing fiction and how it can be understood to be a philosophical methodology, I need to address some broader issues concerning the relationship(s) between fiction and philosophy. In particular, I want to counter two potential concerns: One (in this section), the question whether what I will have to say about writing fiction applies to writing *any* fiction, or whether I must constrain my conclusion to a specific genre or type of fiction, for example, “philosophical fiction,” in order for it to be valid; the other (in §4), the objection that philosophers have *already* incorporated this methodology into their toolkit, in the form of thought experiments.

I am not going to argue that *all* fiction writing is philosophically useful—sometimes, one writes stories *purely* for fun—just in the same way that sometimes one indulges in philosophical thought and argumentation without expecting any new ideas or papers to come out of these indulgences. This means that I have to say something about what types of fiction writing *are* useful, so as to distinguish it from what is not.

So in true philosopher’s fashion, I’m going to begin this section by asking: “What is fiction?”—is it a well-defined category? In a sense, this is a question that only a philosopher would ask; amongst literature scholars and literary theorists, the question is either trivially true or obviously nonsensical. Amongst philosophers, however, this is taken as a genuine question, one which is standardly answered (cf. Currie 1990) “in terms of an invited response of imagining or make-believe” (Friend 2012, p.182), rooted in Gricean speech act theory. Friend, however, rejects this answer and

argues instead that fiction is a *genre*, and that classifying fiction as a genre allows us to better define what it is (Friend 2012). In answering the question “What is fiction?” this way, Friend allows us to usefully shift our focus from this question to another: “What is a genre?”

According to Friend, a genre is “a way of classifying representations that guides appreciation, so that knowledge of the classification plays a role in a work’s correct interpretation and evaluation” (Friend 2012, p.181). (This definition raises another important question—which we will note but not discuss further here—whether there is a single correct interpretation of a piece of work.) This classification “shapes our practices of understanding and evaluating particular works” (Friend 2012, p.179)—we judge fiction works according to different standards than we do nonfiction works, for example. Classification also influences our interpretation of a work “by specifying a contrast class against which the work’s properties stand out as being *standard*, *contra-standard*, or *variable*” (Friend 2012, p.188).¹

While membership in some genres is determined by necessary and sufficient conditions, Friend says that “the vast majority are determined by a variety of non-essential conditions, including contextual and historical conditions” (Friend 2012, p. 181), which include not only “features internal to the work. . . but also facts about the work’s origins, in particular the category in which the artist intended the work to be appreciated, or in which the artist’s contemporaries would have placed it” (Friend 2012, p. 187). These conditions are what govern our expectations for a work within that genre, which in turn determine the appropriate standards of evaluation for those works.

One consequence of this view is that the boundaries of genres are not fixed; because they are contextually-defined, they can change over time, and also within a time-slice. Another consequence is that this account of genre allows new genres to be born; we can talk about Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as being representing the birth of the genre of science fiction (Freedman 2002, p.254), and we can, conversely, argue that this accolade should instead be given to Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing World* (Köseoğlu 2021). Indeed, as Evnine argues, disagreement over the boundaries of a genre are part of how we can identify and conceptualise those boundaries, and indeed shed light on the nature of the genre itself (Evnine 2015).

Another approach to genre is given by Evnine, who is interested in establishing science fiction as a genre. He identifies two possibilities for what a genre could be, neither of which neatly maps onto Friend’s definition of genre: (1) genres as regions of conceptual space and (2) genres as historical particulars or traditions, (Evnine 2015, pp.1, 4). He rejects the former account as “dominant but inadequate” (Evnine 2015, p.1) in favor of the latter. Of these two approaches, I take it that Evnine would classify Friend’s under the first, as he says that “the driving idea behind the approach is that genres are *principally* ways of classifying works” (Evnine 2015, p.2). Despite

this, it is clear that Friend's approach takes historical issues seriously, and thus shares some features with Evnine's second possibility. The reason for this disparity is that Evnine's account of the classification approach to genre focuses on the properties that works have that "serve to delineate a region of conceptual space" (Evnine 2015, p.4). Importantly, these properties are things that *can be possessed by* works, and hence contextual issues, which Friend includes in her classification-approach, are excluded on Evnine's account.

Given this way of thinking about fiction and genre, let us reconsider the question "What is *philosophical* fiction?" Some people, when given this term, might think of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* or Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Others might point towards novels written by philosophers, such as Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, or Iris Murdoch's novels. These are books that are often also called "literary" and taught in literature classes in secondary school and at university, and which overtly express a philosophical theory, and consciously take themselves to be about or to involve philosophy. From this we see that the question of whether a piece of fiction is "philosophical" is related to the question whether it is "literary," and this pushes us back towards broader questions about genre.

An alternative way in which fiction can be *philosophical* is if it deals with philosophical *topics*, such as personal identity, time-travel, moral and ethical norms, the nature of civilisation, immortality and the nature of the soul, etc. Such works could be viewed as philosophical even if they are not written by philosophers, overtly express a philosophical viewpoint, or are generally classified as "literary." Fiction addressing these sorts of questions and topics is often found instead under another umbrella category, that of "speculative fiction," a label that encompasses, among other things, science fiction and fantasy.²

Ultimately, I am not going to argue for some principled distinction of fiction into "philosophical" and "non-philosophical," because such a distinction wouldn't serve any purpose in my argument: What I have to say about writing fiction can be borne out in *any* type of fiction writing. What is more interesting than whether some specific piece of writing falls within one genre or another is what we learn through the process of classification. The classification-effect that Friend identifies propagates downwards: Within fiction we may find it valuable to distinguish science fiction and fantasy (SFF) from other types of fiction *precisely* because the ways in which we evaluate and interact with SFF differs from how we might with other types of fiction. Since writing fiction forces one to address the question of genre (one of the first questions an author faces when they out themselves as an author is, "Oh, what genre do you write?"), writing itself contributes to this epistemological undertaking.

Nevertheless, some types of fiction are more amenable to allowing this practice

to flourish, with speculative fiction being among the most amenable. As a result, I will focus on writing *speculative* fiction in what follows, as it will allow me to best illustrate and justify my position.

3. The first conclusion

The first conclusion I will argue for is that the process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is a *legitimate* (modern) philosophical methodology. I will demonstrate this by showing that the process of writing short speculative fiction is essentially a process of *argumentation*.³ That is, the construction of a suitably satisfying plot is nothing more than the construction of an argument or system of argumentation, from the author to the reader. This parallels the way in which we often structure and write traditional analytic philosophy papers and journal articles, where the system of argumentation or argument structure of the paper is more than just the presentation of premises from which conclusions can be deduced, but rather, it is a back-and-forth structure, of argument and counterargument—that is, of proponent and opponent, of working towards a goal and being driven back from that goal.

Traditional analytic philosophy papers typically exhibit an argumentation structure or system of argumentation involving a variety of steps, including: (1) setting out the problem and motivating it; (2) advancing arguments towards the target conclusion; (3) dealing with objections that take you away from the conclusion; (4) and, finally and ideally, reaching the target conclusion, using only “allowed” means. (What these “allowed” means are, we’ll come back to below.) A good short story involves that same structure. It begins with (1) introducing the characters and putting them in a position where they need to reach a resolution to something, and is followed by (2) the protagonists taking action towards the resolution, (3) the antagonists taking action to prevent the protagonists from reaching the resolution, and finally (4) the story reaching a resolution (even if not the one originally aimed at!), using only “allowed” means. (Same caveat about “allowed means” here!)

Thus we can already see that at least at a high level, there are structural parallels between how philosophy papers are organised and how stories are plotted. But I want to show that there are parallels that run deeper than structure; they can be found in method and in production. Where do you start a philosophy paper? It starts with some sort of idea, often something that is, at root, some sort of “what if?” question. This same tactic, of asking “what if?” is the root of pretty much every speculative fiction story, and when the “what if?”s are philosophical in nature, the starting points for both the philosophy paper and the fiction story are exactly the same. Imagine a future in which much of our memory (our preferences, our communication patterns) is stored externally, and that free wifi is universal, ubiquitous, and access to it is on a

par with access to food and water. If you buy into theories of extended minds, or how our minds are integrated with our smart phones, you can ask: What happens if you move to a place that doesn't have this access anymore? How do you interact with the world? What do you do when all your "ordinary" means of communication are cut off? What happens if you need an actual plotted map rather than looking up Google maps? Nothing about the questions themselves *requires* that they be answered in a particular way: When we ask them, we are entirely free to decide whether to answer them through a theoretical paper or through a short story.

These ideas—the "what if?"s—are all starting points. Once a starting point for a story is identified, characters are needed. Early on in a story it must be clear who the protagonist is, why their story or their argument is important, and what their favored outcome or conclusion is. Knowing these things allows both the reader *and the writer* to understand the motivation for any action or event in the story. Here again we see parallels with the typical philosophical paper, with an introduction which states the problem, something about why the reader should care about the problem, and the conclusion you are trying to go for. Hence in both cases, you always start off with an idea of what the problem is, why the reader should care, and what the conclusion is. (Though, one difference between writing a philosophy paper as opposed to a story is that once you've written the paper, you generally go back to your introduction and make sure it matches up with what you have actually done. In a story, you don't do that because you don't want to give away the answer at the beginning. But you do need to give away *some* information as to what the characters are trying to do and where the story might be going, even if we don't ultimately get there!)

But to have a story, something has to happen. No one wants to read a paper which presents a view that everyone already agrees with and which doesn't address any potential objections or roadblocks. It would be a very boring paper. Similarly, a story needs to be more than just characters doing things—that is a vignette, not a story. There needs to be something unexpected, uncertain, extraordinary, complicated, problematic: Something, that is, to create *plot*.

There is a (sometimes useful) distinction between character-driven stories and plot-driven stories. Plot-driven stories that are badly written can be easily identified because they are the stories where plot happens *for plot's sake*. For example, one character will say something and the other character will respond in a very combative way, or contradictory manner. Tempers will flare and you read this and you think, "oh, this is happening so that there is drama or conflict." Though plot will often involve drama, it is more than *just* drama. If the characters are just responding in a particular way to *generate* plot via generating drama, then this becomes obvious and frustrating for the reader. This is where the idea of "plot as argument" comes to the fore: For this not to be the case, the plot has to be rooted in the characters, their motivations, and the tensions that exist between them. Every time an event happens in a story it

should be possible to give an answer to the questions “what is the motivation?”, “why is this happening?”, “why is this character acting in a particular way?” For instance, perhaps the character is someone who habitually has a quick temper; perhaps another character said something which violates a very closely held belief the character has. These reasons would make a temper-driven reaction reasonable, and consistent with what the reader already knows. It isn’t just some barrier thrown up to cause trouble for the protagonist. Similarly, the purpose of the villain or antagonist in the story needs to be more than just to be villainous. It can’t be that: “Oh, this character *does* have a motivation; his motivation is that he is the villain.” You may have heard it said that every villain is the hero of his own story. What this means is that a good story won’t have people whose motivations are only out of meanness or evil.

Every action or event in a story, then, is a sort of argument, because for every action, you can ask “why did the character do this?”, to which the answer will be to give an argument that shows that given the character’s motivations, desires, and intended goals, the action or event that has occurred is *rational*, that it makes sense, that is aligned with the premises that have been laid out earlier in the story. In a good story, the action has to be the natural conclusion of all the reasons that a particular character has. Each character has some final goal or conclusion that they are working towards, something that they want, which provides the motivations that justify their actions. Hence, each character, having their own distinct motivations and desires, has their own goal that they are working towards. Each character is building their own argument throughout the course of the story. The motivations, desires, and goals—these are the premises, all the material that a character has to justify the actions that they take.

The relation then between protagonists and antagonists is simply going to be the relationship between arguments pro and arguments contra. Antagonists are antagonists precisely because the conclusion that their argument leads to contradicts the conclusions that the protagonists are arguing for. They can’t both be true at the same time, something has to give, so the resolution of the story is whichever one of the conclusions you end up getting to. The story is a catastrophe if the antagonist’s argument is the one that wins out, or succeeds. It’s a eucatastrophe (Carpenter and Tolkien 1975, p.100) if the positive result is proven, if the protagonists can overcome every counterargument or objection that the antagonists put forward.

If we take this argumentative approach to plot seriously, then from a high-level perspective, we can see that for any system of argumentation there corresponds a short story plot and to every (good) short philosophical story there is an argument structure. You can take any good argumentative philosophical paper and turn it into a story—I do not necessarily mean a *fiction* story, but rather that you can turn the papers that you are writing for journals into an adventure. You can get your readers engaged with your process—in the same way you get your readers engaged with your

characters. Conversely, the same ways that you can lose your reader's engagement in a journal article's argument are ways in which you can lose your reader's faith in your characters and story. Thus it is valuable to look at what types of argumentative structures are successful and those which are not—that is, the “allowed means” I spoke of above.

We are all conscious of the fact that there are certain legitimate ways that the argumentative structure of a philosophical paper can be constructed; but articulating what those ways are is often very hard. It is much easier to articulate ways in which the argumentative structure of a paper can go wrong. What is interesting is that there is substantial overlap in the ways in which a paper can go wrong and ways in which a story can fail. So let us look at what makes a paper or a story go bad or wrong. Some of the ways are obvious: If the argumentation is invalid or fallacies are introduced, the conclusion cannot be established. When the premises are inconsistent, anything can be deduced, and nothing that happens will be on stable epistemic footings.

More interesting are the flaws which don't necessarily undermine individual arguments, but undermine the argumentative structure itself. One of these is when the initial motivations and basic principles are not outlined in advance, but are introduced with either ad-hoc or post-hoc justifications. A well-crafted philosophy paper will set out its key players and desiderata at the beginning, rather than introducing them ad hoc or post hoc. So too a good story will introduce its key players and motivations and goals at the beginning. To give two very blunt examples: Just as one does would not spring David Lewis's modal realist metaphysics upon the reader as the solution to a problem without first having primed the reader to expect his introduction at some crucial point, so too one does not spring Gandalf upon the reader at the moment that he needs to defeat the Balrog, but sends him along with the Fellowship from the start. The key players—characters, theories, background world-building principles, fundamental starting points—all need to be articulated and motivated *before* they are needed.

Failure to do this not only leaves the reader, of either the paper or the story, dissatisfied, but also can lead the author to fall into the trap of stereotypes and Mary Sues. The term “Mary Sue” is used for any idealised character (sometimes an idealised version of the author themselves), who has all the skills, knowledge, and connections necessary to solve all the problems she faces, regardless of how realistic it might be for all of these features to manifest in a single character, or in the background context of the story.⁴ A hyperbolic example of a Mary Sue character would be the daughter of a king who, saddened that he didn't have a son, taught his child traditionally male-only sword-fighting skills, whose mother the queen happened to be a foreigner and ensured that her child was literate in the languages of the land their kingdom is at war with, and who just happened to have been born with the blessing of a fairy godmother so that she is the first in generations to be able to practice magic. For

some, “Mary Sue” is a “pejorative term used by writers and readers of fanfiction to describe protagonists who are believed to be thinly disguised versions of the fan fic author’s idealised self” (Collins 2018, n.p.). Others, though, argue that Mary Sues allow us to “re-imagine our cultural landscape, granting agency to those denied it in the popular mythology” (Chandler and Sunder 2007, p.597). Whether a Mary Sue can be deployed effectively or not is closely linked to the ways in which the character inhabits certain tropes or certain stereotypes.

Failure to set up the story properly from the start can also result in the over-reliance on these tropes or stereotypes, in the form of characters whose explanation for their actions is not rooted in their personal and intrinsic motivations, but rather because they fill a particular role in the story. Tropes, stereotypes, and stock characters are not intrinsically problematic—fairy tales are built from an arsenal of stock character types in an incredibly effective way, and tropes are so appealing because they give the readers familiar structures that allow them to shape their expectations in a predictable way. Indeed, the use of tropes can sometimes *provide* the relevant motivation for a character, such as when one combines, for instance, the “enemies to lovers” and the “there’s only one bed!” tropes—though using these tropes effectively is a difficult task. Philosophy papers don’t suffer so much from stereotyping or trope-reliance because they do not generally have characters to be stereotyped or placed into tropes, but we can see analogues of both these fictional flaws in the fallacies of straw men (stereotyping a view into a caricature that no longer represents any view actually held by someone) and lack of charity (failure to put in the relevant amount of imagination into understanding the complexities of someone’s story).

Having established the fundamental principle of plot as argument, we have provided evidence for the claim that fiction writing can be understood as a philosophical methodology, that is, as a means of exploring philosophical ideas and concerns. I still need to establish it as a *legitimate* methodology, that is, it will open us to new avenues of exploration and lead us to genuine understanding. My basic argument for this is the fact that we use *exactly* the same process to work out the consequences of our philosophical ideas in nonfiction as we do in fiction. I have sketched an approach to writing fiction that is rooted in posing a “what if?” question and then following the consequences of this. But this just *is* at least one means of pursuing philosophical inquiry, one which dates back to Aristotle. My favorite articulation of this methodology is due to an anonymous 13th-century author, who begins his treatise on *positio impossibilis*⁵ thus:

Just as we say that something possible must be conceded in order to see what follows from it, similarly we have it from Aristotle that something impossible must be conceded in order to see what happens then. (Anonymous 2001, p.217)

So if we are willing to accept this as legitimate philosophical methodology when it results in a philosophical treatise, we should accept it as a legitimate philosophical methodology when it results in a fictional story.

4. An initial objection

At this point, we must address an elephant in the room, namely, the objection that I'm not saying anything new, that the methodology of fiction just *is* a well established philosophical methodology—the methodology of thought experiments. On this objection, all fiction is but a thought experiment, and hence writing fiction is nothing different from writing a thought experiment: The same process results in the same (type of) output, and hence there is nothing distinctive about fiction. Such a view—that equates fiction with thought experiments—is espoused by Elgin (2014), who argues that “works of fiction are thought experiments” and that they can “advance understanding of the world in the same way that (other) thought experiments do” (Elgin 2014, p.221).⁶

The literature in support of the conclusion that fiction is merely thought experiment focuses predominantly on completed pieces of fiction—fully fledged and polished published pieces. I have argued elsewhere (Fontanive and Uckelman 2024+) against this thought-experiment conception of fiction, as being far too reductive; if those arguments are successful then they are sufficient to undermine this objection. But even if those arguments are not successful and we do end up equating fiction with thought experiments, we don't have to accept that the *processes* via which we construct fictions or thought experiments are the same. Consequently, in the present paper I will consider some specific arguments against equating my proposed methodology with the methodology of thought experiments, focusing on six key ways in which thought experiments and fiction fundamentally diverge in their constitutive and constructive processes. (Of course, we do not deny that *some* fictional or literary stories *can be used* as thought experiments, or (stronger) were *intended* to be read as thought experiments—Carroll offers *The Third Man* as an example of such a story (Carroll 2002). But there is no *need* for this to be the case for us to access the epistemological benefits of writing fiction.)

First, the goals in constructing thought experiments versus constructing fiction differ. Häggqvist argues that in thought experiments, the focus is on the deductive consequences of the experimental set up. He provides a formal model of what goes on when we construct a thought experiment. First, we consider a false, but possible, counterfactual scenario, $\Diamond C$. Then we identify a theory to be tested, T , and a statement, W , which would be false in the counterfactual scenario, but which the theory T would have us committed to were the counterfactual scenario true. That is,

according to Häggqvist, all thought experiments can be reconstructed, symbolically, according to this general deductive form (Häggqvist 2009, p.63):

$$\begin{array}{l} \diamond C \\ T \supset (C \square \rightarrow W) \\ C \square \rightarrow \neg W \\ \hline \neg T \end{array}$$

This is a valid argument form on standard Lewis semantics for counterfactuals. Häggqvist argues that not only does this schema reconstruct the argumentative form of thought experiments, but it also provides an explanation for the narrative structure that thought experiments often say, in which

First, a counterfactual scenario presented as (in some sense) possible is offered for contemplation; then the thesis under attack is held to be connected to a certain consequence in that scenario; whereupon the non-emergence of that consequence in that scenario is asserted. (Häggqvist 2009, p.63)

We are not disputing that thought experiments can, in some sense, tell stories (in fact, we rather like Norton's claim that "thought experiments in science are merely picturesque argumentation" (Norton 2004, p.1139)—what is at issue is that the way in which they tell stories is too narrow and restrictive to encompass all stories. Häggqvist's model, which requires us to derive, according to deductive methods, a formal contradiction, makes this explicit. This template is wholly inadequate as a model of fiction, as the goal of fiction is not to derive a contradiction in our background theory! It is entirely possible to work out the consequences of an initial background theory, via fictional methods, *without* ending up in inconsistency.

This objection is connected to the next one, which is that "the function of a great many philosophical thought experiments is to raise counterexamples to universal claims" (Carroll 2002, p.9). That is, their function is primarily negative: They are a way of showing that certain universal claims are *not true*. On the contrary, the knowledge that is gained through writing fictions is *positive* and *particular*: It gives a way to see how certain universal claims or facts impinge upon the lives of individuals, and the consequences that this has.

Objections three through five are all interrelated, and are brought together in the sixth. The third is that thought experiments are often far more removed from reality than fiction. Consider the endless variations on the traditional trolley problem, such as the one in Figure 1.⁷ While the example in this image takes the typical trolley problem set up to the extreme for humoristic purposes, it is precisely because it is poking fun at the numerous and innumerable ways in which thought experiments are crafted without any attention to whether these situations could actually plausibly occur that it is so funny. When we construct ever and increasingly elaborate trolley problems,

Sisyphus is rolling a boulder towards the Grand Hilbert Hotel. The hotel has an infinite number of rooms, but they are all full, so they may not be able to accommodate him or his boulder.

If you choose to divert him, his boulder will destroy the Ship of Theseus. But the ship has had all of its constituent parts replaced, so it may not actually be the same ship.

Is Sisyphus happy?

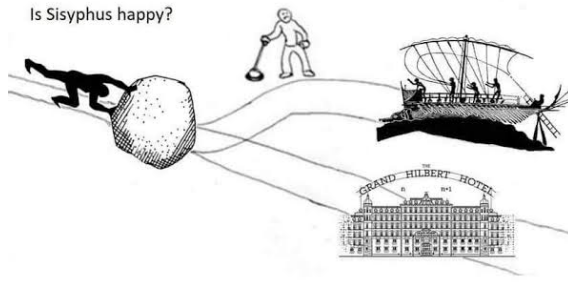


Figure 1: An unrealistic trolley problem

we do so without any attempt to justify whether these situations could ever occur or provide any motivation for considering them—neither realism nor believability are important. When we write stories, however, creating situations that are believable, even when wildly fantastical, is of utmost importance. The fact that we *could* turn this particular thought experiment into a story shows how the two diverge.

Which brings us to the fourth objection, that thought experiments often lack positive aesthetic qualities. A good story is often good not merely because it has believable characters, a compelling plot, and a realistic setting, but because the prose in which it is written is particularly beautiful and well-crafted. We never judge the success of a thought experiment on the basis of the quality of its prose! Consequently, the process of developing a thought experiment lacks a specific creative dimension that is integral to writing fiction.

Fifth, thought experiments also lack some of the features of fiction that are often considered *central* to successful story-telling. Thought experiments in general do not care about *character*. Character development in thought experiments is almost entirely absent, meaning there is no sensible way of speaking about a character *arc* or a character *journey*. Some thought experiments, such as Black's "two spheres" thought experiment (Black 1952), don't even have characters, in the sense of anything in the story which is performing actions *with agency*. When thought experiments do have characters in them, the characters are often stereotyped and trope-like, inserted into the story to play a certain role or trope. While, as noted above, some genres of fiction, such as fairy tales, are built around stock character tropes, the characters in thought

experiments take this to an extreme that is not found in non-thought experiment fiction.

Finally, and intimately connected with the previous three objections in the sense that they are all facets of this objection, is that thought experiments generally display limited interest in the *affective* side of narrative, the parts of a story which move us, which cause us to weep, or laugh, or throw a book across the room (*The Crying of Lot 49*, I am looking at you); at best, they may try to be rhetorically persuasive, but only for argumentative purposes. Furthermore, it is not just that thought experiments tend to lack these aspects, but that when these aspects *are* present in thought experiments, their presence can detract from the utility of the thought experiment as a thought experiment. Those thought experiments, such as the Sisyphus example above, which do make us laugh, do so for the same reasons that cause them to fail to be useful as thought experiments!

These affective aspects—the parts of the story that are individual, particular, that make us laugh or cry or rage, that make us respond to the beauty inherent in them—are part of what justifies our second conclusion, to which we turn now.

5. The second conclusion

The second conclusion is that this process of fiction writing is a *distinctive* philosophical methodology, that is, it can provide us with insights that would not be gained via other means. (I will remain agnostic on whether this is for *a priori* or *a posteriori* reasons; that is, whether we *could not have* discovered these insights via other means or whether we simply *wouldn't have*.) This is because writing is fundamentally a process of discovery. But what do we discover when we write, and how? In this section, I will highlight four different ways in which the process of writing fiction can serve as an epistemological tool, to show the distinctive benefits of writing fiction as opposed to writing analytic philosophy.

The first centers on the idea of fictions as models. When we write a story, particularly speculative fiction stories rooted in realities that are fundamentally distinct from our own, we are constructing a model of what that reality would look like, in a robust and fully-fleshed out form. As Herman argues, stories and narrative provide us with “a strategy for creating mental representations of the world” (Herman 2002, p.5)—that is, a *model* of the world. Herman uses this fact to argue for narratology as a central component of cognitive science, because of the close connection between argument and narrative in how we navigate the world.

For instance, we can theorize about the veil of ignorance, but it isn't until we attempt to articulate what a world built according to those practices would actually look like that we are forced to engage with the practicalities of such a veil. This is

the second way that writing fiction can be an epistemological tool. Once we have a model, we can use it to draw out the deductive consequences of adopting certain philosophical positions—in this respect, one of the epistemological functions of fiction writing is similar to that of creating thought experiments, it's just that we don't necessarily do it in order to find inconsistencies in the original position!

Writing fiction forces us to take our theories seriously, to see not only the general deductive consequences of them but also how these consequences impinge on individuals and result in individual effects. This is the dimension along which fiction is most powerful as an epistemological tool. When writing a story, we don't *just* work out the formal or deductive consequences of the start points, of the “what if?”s of taking on a particular position (philosophical or otherwise). We must *also* work out the ways in which this starting point, this background world would affect people, their lives, their relationships, their language, their practices, their culture. Writing fiction allows us a way to learn things that are not necessarily about *facts*. To write well, one must learn how to inhabit a character, to take on their stance or standpoint, to understand how they would respond and react in a given situation in a way that is self-consistent. If the story is rich enough, and the world the characters are operating in is complex enough, this exercise will involve learning how to inhabit characters that are radically different from oneself, a route to knowledge and understanding of these characters, their positions, and their lives that cannot be obtained simply by looking at the deductive consequences of particular philosophical views.

At the Principia conference in August 2023, Eleonora Orlando told the audience of her keynote talk that “fiction can give you a lot of information about reality,” and during the Q&A session Otávio Bueno pointed to historical fiction as a mode on which this can information conveyal can happen—when we read historical fiction, we often learn far more about the period in which the story is set than we would from reading a history textbook about the same period, even though the former is, purportedly *false* while the latter is, assumedly, *true*! What a paradox. Furthermore, by the very nature of fiction, whatever information is conveyed is conveyed in a *non-deductive* way. How? It is precisely through the *affective* parts of fiction: The parts of the story that cause us to respond to its beauty or its pathos, that bring us into emotional sympathy with (or revulsion for!) a character, that move us to laughter or to tears or to anger, all of which can only be created by an author who focuses on the lives of specific, individual people.

In sum, all the moral benefits of *reading* fiction also apply to *writing* it: In order for a reader to be able to learn something about how different choices and actions and axioms affect the ways in which people navigate their worlds, the writer must first know this themselves: And since these facts are neither obvious nor deductively deducible from the axioms themselves, the only way to discover these consequences is to go through the process of writing.

Writing fiction also allows us space to pursue ideas that are not yet in a state where they can be turned into rigorous philosophical theories. There are some things that can be said in fiction that cannot be said in nonfiction. Sometimes, these things that we can say in fiction that we can't say in nonfiction are things that cannot be taken as plausible starting points for rational argumentation. With philosophy papers, you *do* need some sort of support for your starting points and initial premises, or there will be no epistemological utility in the arguments contained therein. In fiction, by contrast, our starting points need not be justified—indeed, they needn't even be plausibly true! One of the brilliant things about writing fiction is that you can pick rather wild “what if?”s and you don't need to argue for them, you can just take them for granted and begin to build a world around them. After all, it's fiction! Who cares about truth!⁸ Part of the joy and freedom of fiction is that one can be as wildly implausible as one wants—time travel? Sure! Faster-than-light speed? Why not! It's clear to see the advantage this gives fiction writing over more mainstream philosophical writing: Taking certain things for granted, whether or not they are in fact true, is simply *easier*. In contrast, it can sometimes be a struggle for contemporary philosophy to even get started. One might have an idea that one wants to work out, but before the real work can begin, first one must articulate and justify their assumptions, and then justify the assumptions used to justify the assumptions, then justify *those* assumptions... The result is tedious and tiring (for both writer *and* reader!), I'm sure we have all read, and possibly even written, philosophy papers that struggle to even get started because they are constantly bogged down in a justification regress. Writing fiction allows one to completely circumvent this process and simply stipulate: The theory of direct reference is true. Possible worlds exist, and they are just like the actual world. We have counterparts. If we are allowed to take certain things for granted, this makes it *easier* to find out the consequences of these things—both deductive and affective.

At this point, a natural objection arises, namely: Why should we trust any of the “knowledge” that we gain through this process, if we are starting from avowedly false starting points? If the arguments that we use to draw out consequences from these starting points are not necessarily formal or deductive or general, but involve inhabiting particular standpoints of individuals? How does this process give us useful *philosophical* knowledge? What this objection is saying that pieces of fiction may not meet the standards of philosophical rigor⁹ necessary to be published in a mainstream analytic philosophy journal, to which we have two replies. The first is that even if we are allowed to start from unjustified or even demonstrably false starting points in our fiction, they *do* still need to be *motivated* (recall that we pointed out this fundamental distinction between fiction and thought experiments in the previous section). Even if the starting points are false, we can still learn interesting counterfactual information about the consequences of those false starting points. But not all of the starting points are necessarily false; sometimes, the fundamental set-up of a world may par-

allel the actual world, even if a few small principles have been tweaked or changed. Human nature remains human nature whether the world is actual or speculative, and what we learn about how humans respond and react to and are impacted by various positions is effective knowledge that we can transport back into “the real world.”

Second, producing a paper that meets those standards is not the only possible philosophical activity that we may want to engage in! Instead, fiction writing, especially short speculative fiction, can play the same sort of epistemological role that, for instance, diagrams do in the development of proofs of mathematical theorems (Löwe 2007): They provide a vehicle for the ideas to be germinated, developed, and brought to fruition, a sometimes *indispensable* epistemological role, even if the vehicle is entirely absent from the final product, in much the same way that the diagrams that were integral to the development of a proof are entirely absent from published mathematical logic papers. To sum up: Writing short speculative fiction can function as an epistemological tool by providing space for ideas to be germinated, developed, and brought to fruition. This process is valuable as for being a vehicle of knowledge even if the vehicle (the story) is entirely absent from the final product (the paper), just as the mathematical diagrams are often absent from published proof.

Finally, writing fiction also makes it easier to find your voice—what it is *you* believe in. As we pointed out, writing academic philosophy requires rigorous argumentation, reference to other authorities, justification and evidence, supported premises and clear inferences, and so forth. When you are freed from the constraints of academic journal writing, it is easier to be able to say what one really wants to say, rather than hedging, or prevaricating, or writing “philosophese”. When one has the freedom to simply *say* what they want to say, without immediately worrying about whether it can be justified, one can have eureka moments—moments when you go “oh! *that’s* what it is that I believe!” These are the moments in which we truly develop our own voices and nourish the seeds of our own, distinctive ideas.

This brings us to a final point I wish to make, which is about the benefits of this new epistemological tool. As I said above, I don’t want to make the strong claim that writing fiction gives us ways of knowing things that *we couldn’t know any other way*—there’s no need for me to make such a strong (and probably false) claim, when it is sufficient to demonstrate that we can use this method to generate knowledge. As Carroll points out, “if philosophy conducted by thought experiments is an adequate source of knowledge and education, then so should literature be” (Carroll 2002, p.7).

6. How to be a writer

This brings us full circle, having reached the aims I outlined in the introduction. I have argued for two, intertwined conclusions:

1. The process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is a *legitimate* philosophical methodology.
2. The process is a *distinctive* philosophical methodology.

From these, descriptive, conclusions, one further conclusion follows, namely: You (yes, you) should try your hand at writing. To help you towards that end, I will close this paper with some brief, practical advice, aimed towards people who have either never attempted writing fiction before or who may have dabbled as an aspirational teenager or undergraduate but then at one point filed their notebooks away.

6.1. Start small

The first piece of advice is perhaps an obvious one: Just as you wouldn't recommend a philosopher just starting out on their career to aim for writing a philosophical magnum opus, but rather a journal article, or even a short expository essay, don't make your first attempt in writing fiction a novel. The beneficial features of the writing process that I have argued for in this paper can be found in writing *short* pieces as well as long pieces. Short stories often provide the perfect venue in which to capture a specific idea or work out a particular idea; and within short stories there is a genre even more useful for honing the skills of writing effective fiction prose: Flash fiction, typically defined to be stories of 1500 words or less.

Flash fiction is often divided into three categories: (1) Flash fiction: 500–1500 words, typically <1000; (2) Micro fiction: < 500 words; (3) Drabbles: exactly 100 words (not counting the title). Microfiction and drabbles have great utility in terms of providing useful practice and exercises: They provide challenging constraints within which to work, but are short enough that they do not take much time to draft, and if the result is not worthwhile, there is little concomitant angst over having wasted time or created rubbish.

When embarking on writing flash fiction, all of the standard advice (and there is much available out there; read it all, use what works for you and discard what doesn't; this goes for what I am about to say) applies, but the constraints imposed by the short word count provide extra challenges. Because there are so many fewer words, effective flash fiction *evokes* ideas, characters, scenes, feelings, rather than describing them. The word limitations also force you to not attempt too much—you simply do not have the space for many scenes or many characters. Instead, you must make every word count: Use strong, vivid vocabulary but don't over-rely on adjectives and adverbs. Good flash fiction will also leave many questions unanswered, letting the reader fill in the gaps. A crucial aspect of successful flash fiction is an element of surprise: A good ending will both satisfy *and* violate expectations.

Flash fiction differs from a vignette in that it is more than just a scene or an interaction which is described, it is an entire story, self-contained. One effective practice is to take the same prompt, and write many different stories from it, or the same story but from different perspectives. If the first attempt was written in past-tense, try writing the next in present. If one attempt is from the point of view of one character, what would the story be like from the point of view of another? Shift between different perspectives—first-person, third-person, omniscient, close. Certain combinations of perspective and tense will be easier than others; but don't be afraid to experiment! The goal here is not to produce thousands of successful stories, but to see how changing a single parameter changes how you write, and what kind of story gets to be told.

6.2. Think practically

Writing fiction, like any other craft, is a craft which can be taught and learned. Stories are constructed out of knowable and known building blocks, and a good way to begin is to familiarize yourself with these blocks, so that you can begin to experiment with different ways of putting them together.

There are two primary types of building blocks I will introduce in this section, drawing on the work of Kress (2021) and Buckell (2021). These are the different types of scenes that a story can have, and the different methods of exposition that can be used to convey information in these scenes.

Kress identifies seven different types of scenes that are typically found in fictional narratives, as well as two different things that can be meant by the instruction to “set the scene”: The first is what goes into the scene itself, as when a stage-director decides what furniture to place in a room or what color the rug is, or whether there are any plants. The second is, arguably, more important, because it involves the arrangement of the scenes with respect to each other: Change the order of scenes and you can substantially change the story (Kress 2021, p.23). Think of any speculative fiction story that plays with time, whether overtly through, e.g., time travel, or covertly, through memory loss or flashbacks: Rearrange the scenes in such stories into chronological order, and the result is apt to be very different.

The seven types of scenes that Kress identifies are: (1) opening, (2) dramatic, (3) exposition, (4) summary, (5) flashback, (6) climax, (7) denouement. Not every story will have every type of scene, and not all types of scenes have equal flexibility in where they can be placed with respect to other scenes—arguably, the opening scene *must* be first, or it won't be the opening scene, by definition; but this doesn't mean that the opening scene must be the *first* scene, in either a chronological or conceptual sense; sometimes the reader needs to be dumped *in media res* in order to pull them into the story. Similarly, the denouement generally must occur *after* the climax, or

it will not make any sense; but an interesting experimental task would be to see whether this general rule could have any exceptions: You never know until you try.

Some of the types of scenes that Kress identifies serve double purpose, in that they provide both a setting in which the story occurs *and* a means of exposition, that is, a way in which the author conveys information to the reader. Buckell identifies five primary methods of exposition (Buckell 2021): (1) flashback, (2) dialogue exposition, (3) narrator exposition, (4) exposition through character's internal voice, and (5) interacting with information—the first of which we have already seen in Kress's types of scenes!

As writers of nonfiction, philosophers are already familiar with some of these methods of exposition, primarily (3) narrator exposition, which is when the storyteller (or, paper author) tells the reader the information that they need to know. But the fifth mode of exposition, interacting with information, is also something that happens in journal articles—for instance, we can implicitly tell the reader that we are using possible worlds semantics for modal logic *by* using the semantics, without necessarily providing all the explicit definitions and theorems. One could also even argue that when we are quoting the works of earlier authors, we are providing “flashback” exposition! But exposition through dialogue—once a commonplace in the philosophical genre but now rather deprecated—and exposition through internal voice are forms of exposition that are probably less familiar. Exposition through dialogue is an extremely effective method for conveying information to the reader, but it must be used with care: Poorly implemented, this mode of exposition gives rise to the trope “As You Know, Bob,” when two characters tell each other things that by all counts *they* should already know, simply so that that *reader*, who doesn't know, can be clued in.

As with the different types of scenes, not all forms of exposition will be suitable for all stories; but one way to develop and hone your craft is to practice identifying different types of exposition, whether in your own writing or in reading, and experimenting with different ways of conveying the same information—for instance, by writing one draft of a story where the exposition happens via the narrator, and another draft where it is told by internal voice. The story will tell you which version is the right one.

6.3. Find your voice

The third piece of advice is to determine what kind of writer you are. Do you begin from a well-developed outline, that gets increasingly fleshed out as you draft? Or do you figure out what you want to write *through the process of writing*, beginning with no more than a vague idea, concept, word, phrase, or image, and building from there? In colloquial parlance, the former writers are the “planners” while the latter

are “pantsers”—flying by the seat of their pants.¹⁰ More often, people fall somewhere in between—sometimes planning, sometimes pantsing and making it up as they go. (These people are the “plantsers”).

While there is a strong tendency—especially in academic circles—to see planners as adopting the morally superior method of writing, it is important to stress that none of these approaches are objectively better than any other: They are only better (or worse) *for an individual writer*. This is why it is crucial for each person to find out for themselves what type of writer they are, because there isn’t any moral worth in trying to be the kind of writer you are not.

Another question to ask yourself is what you find most inspiring—are you “ideas-first” or “characters-first”? In an “ideas-first” developmental process, the grain of inspiration lies in a particular philosophical idea or theme, which can be turned into a story by placing characters into the context generated by this idea or theme and asking “What happens next?” On a characters-first approach, on the other hand, the starting point are individual characters, well-rounded individuals with hopes and desires and dreams and preferences, perhaps constructed along different philosophical lines; then the question becomes “What happens when these characters interact with each other?” Where are the contradictions and complications that arise from characters with fundamentally different world-views interacting with each other? As with planning vs. pantsing, neither of these ways is better than the other; both are fruitful ways of exploring the consequences of philosophical ideas, and indeed one can explore the same ideas in both of these ways, gaining different perspectives and different stories as outcomes.

Finally, experiment. Vary whether you write in past or present tense; vary whether your point of view is 1st, 2nd, or 3rd; play around with unreliable narrators. Change up the order of your scenes, practice different forms of exposition. When you begin to write, whatever you write, remember that *anything goes* in fiction. Not everything you write will be successful, but you won’t know what will be until you try it, and the more you practice, the better you will become. Experimenting with different ways of writing fiction will give you the freedom to find your own voice, to develop your own ideas and your own distinct way of presenting these ideas to the world.

7. Conclusion

Once upon a time there was a Philosopher, who lived in the realm of Philosophica. They spoke only Philosophese and only with other Philosophers, and never enjoyed themselves more than when building castles of ideas in the air, full of gossamer and thread of gold. Until one day the door to a castle they built opened and they stepped inside to find another land, beyond the realms of Philosophica, where none of the

people were Philosophers and none of them spoke Philosophese. At first the Philosopher was frightened to leave the castle, because they could not understand this new world nor anyone in it; but as they listened to the stories these new people told, they began to understand their words and a world beyond anything they had ever previously imagined. Then they too began to tell stories, new stories in new languages using new words, and new people listened to their new ideas and new tales.

And they all lived happily ever after.

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Notes

¹ These distinctions are taken from Walton (1970).

² Whether or not any of “speculative fiction,” “science fiction,” “fantasy,” or “science fiction and fantasy” themselves constitute some well-defined genre or category will not concern me here, though they are interesting questions (cf. Evine 2015, Terrone 2021).

³ I am not the first person to notice the parallel between argumentation and storytelling; Herman also argues that “stories both have a logic and are a logic in their own right” (Herman 2002, p.22).

⁴ The term's origin is the character Lieutenant Mary Sue in the Star Trek fanfic story *A Trekkie's Tale* by Paula Smith (1992).

⁵ *Positio impossibilis* is species of *positio*, a genre of formalised disputation developed in the 13th and 14th centuries for logical training (Dutilh Novaes and Uckelman 2016).

⁶ Dohrn argues that Carroll also takes on an Elgin-esque view (Dohrn 2016, p.187), but in fact Carroll espouses a weaker version of the relationship between fiction and thought experiments: “artistic and literary fictions, or parts thereof, [are] comparable to philosophical thought experiments, examples, and counterexamples” (Carroll 2002, p. 9).

⁷ In trying to trace the provenance of this image, the earliest occurrence on the internet that I could find is from November 17, 2021, in a Facebook post by Akwasi Mpanyinsem, <https://www.facebook.com/manie.gucci/posts/pfbid0r1oFqyWS3czzxfeLkmznUmi2QDBFTeaF7YJvXUnMqUJPGGN16gTjxgMfmHqSeSLI>. (Many thanks to Vicki Yorke-Edwards, whose excellent sleuthing turned up this occurrence, which was a few days earlier than the earliest I had found myself.) No source for the image is provided, and I have been unable to determine who the creator is, so I cannot provide a more full citation.

⁸ Yes, yes, we know this is an exaggeration. Truth—or rather, consistency and believability—*does* matter in not only speculative fiction but all fiction.

⁹ Whatever that may be...

¹⁰ These terms first developed in the context of National Novel Writing Month, wherein writers commit to writing a 50,000 word novel between November 1 and November 30. Some

people spend October writing up detailed plans, outlines, character sketches, scene notes, etc., so that when November 1 hits they can write according to those plans. Others do no preparation work, and simply begin writing and see where it takes them.

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