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An error concerning noses

We identify a strategy for getting beliefs from fiction via three assumptions: (1) a certain causal generality holds in the fiction, and does so because (2) causal generalities in fiction are (with noted exceptions) carried over from what the author takes to be fact; (3) the author is reliable on this topic, so what the author takes to be fact is fact. We do not question (2). While (3) will, in particular cases, be doubtful, the strategy is vulnerable more generally to the worry that what looks like a causal generality may be instead an authorial intervention of a kind from which no causal connection can be inferred; in such cases (1) turns out to be false though it may seem at first sight to be true. In consequence we have extra reason for being careful in forming beliefs based on fictions.

Eden Warwick's book, *Nasology, or hints towards a classification of noses*, appeared in 1848. Its thesis, that a person's character can be read from the shape of their nose, was supported by examples taken from, among other things, *Oliver Twist*. Dickens' "correct observation and delineation of character" gave us the "hawk-nose" of Fagin, the "fine Greek nose" of Oliver, the snub nose of the Artful Dodger, and so on.¹

Warwick was as wrong as one could be in thinking there is a connection between nose and character. Our concern is only briefly and towards the end with that error and its sinister associations. It is mostly with the idea that a theory can find support in fictional cases. We say this need be no error. True, if Warwick thought that Fagin, Oliver and the Dodger were confirmatory instances of his thesis he was mistaken, for there are no such people; they and their nonexistent noses are not evidence for anything and fictional stories

¹ Warwick 1848, p.176. There are, by modern standards, some unpleasant views expressed in the book.

about imaginary objects obeying Newton's laws don't add to the confirmation of Newtonian mechanics.²

Warwick may not have been offering Fagin, Oliver and the Dodger as evidence. He could be understood instead as appealing to the sagacity of Dickens, well known, he says, for his "correct observation and delineation of character". His argument would in that case be that *Oliver Twist* shows that Dickens thought there was a connection between noses and character, and this provides a reason to believe that there is such a connection.

We need not think of Dickens as testifying, in some unusually indirect way, to this connection. He may have had no interest in communicating anything about noses to his audience in writing *Oliver Twist*. It might be instead that his belief in the connection (assuming he had such a belief) was merely *manifested* in the way he told his story, as Dickens' belief that London is subject to fogs is manifested in the way he writes *Bleak House*. One does not have to assume that Dickens is telling us that London is subject to fogs in order to conclude, on reading the fog-bound opening of that novel, that Dickens believed that it is subject to fogs. And beliefs that are merely manifested can be as compelling and rational sources of our own convictions as beliefs clearly attested to. Your friend's belief that something dangerous is chasing the two of you is manifested in his suddenly running away, and you may well come immediately to share that belief and run away yourself, though you realise that your friend never meant to communicate anything to you through his running.

Why would we think that Dickens did believe in the connection between nose and character? Here's a suggestion; in its turn it suggests a way that fictions justify change of belief. Dickens places, we'll assume, such an emphasis in his novel on the noses of his

² There is a lively debate about whether fictional characters exist. If they do they are not people. Everyone agrees that there are not and never were any such people as Fagin, Oliver and the Dodger.

characters as to suggest a connection between their noses and their psychological, social and moral traits.³ The effect of this is to make the world of the story one in which there is such a connection.⁴ Now the default understanding for causal generalities in fiction is that they reflect what is true, or assumed to be true, of the real world.⁵ Certain genres, the supernatural tale for example, institute systematic violations of that default. But works like *Oliver Twist*, presumed to be realistic in intent, will be assumed to follow what the author takes to be patterns of actual causation.⁶ A competent reader who perceives the connection between nose and character to be part of the causal background for *Oliver Twist* will then assume that this is intended as carry-over from the real world and hence as something Dickens believed in. If the reader has a degree of confidence in Dickens' judgement on this question then she has a reason to believe in such a connection.

Before moving on we make three brief comments on the idea of reasons to believe. First, the reason in question here is *pro tanto*; the reader may have reasons for disbelieving in the connection, and they might outweigh the reason for believing it. In what follows reasons are

³ We don't find the extreme emphasis on noses in the novel that Warwick claims for it but for the sake of the argument we'll assume his reading is correct. From now on, to avoid a confusion between "character in the story" and "character trait" we'll use "person in the story" when we mean character in the first sense.

⁴ In the literature on imaginative resistance there is a suggestion of limits to the author's say so when it comes to what is true in the story they write; someone uncomfortable with the idea of a nose/character connection on moral grounds might argue that this is something the author *can't* make true in the story. However, the most convincing cases of limits to the author's say-so seem rather different from this. See Weatherson 2004, where this "alethic" version of the puzzle of imaginative resistance is identified and diagnosed; the diagnosis would not apply to the noses/character case.

⁵ On what has been called "importation" from the real world into stories see Gendler 2010: 197-200.

⁶ We focus here on causal generalisations but the same thing applies to many other kinds of cases, among them arithmetical truths and relationships, matters of local custom, the architecture of notable landmarks.

always *pro tanto* reasons. Secondly, they may depend on false and indeed unreasonable beliefs; the author might be unreliable and the reader's confidence in her reliability unfounded. Nonetheless there is a sense in which the reader still has a (*pro tanto*) reason to believe in the connection; judging there to be such a connection would be rational in the light of her other beliefs. Finally, instead of speaking of reasons to believe a propositions it might be better to speak of reasons to raise one's credence in the proposition; reasons that speak in favour of a proposition don't always speak so strongly that they shift us from non-belief to belief. But in this discussion it won't hurt to ignore this and speak simply of belief.

Our second comment raises an important issue. It is sometimes not sensible to place reliance on the opinions of other. You would be wrong to trust the views of the present authors on the future of the economy; our opinions are not worth listening to. Many will treat Dickens' views on noses in the same way, feeling that in this area credibility requires expertise that Dickens probably did not have. In that case Warwick's error was to assume too quickly that successful writers have insight into far from evident facts about character. He would not have been the first person to make that mistake.

But it's possible that Warwick made a mistake prior to this one, a mistake which, if he had noticed it, would have made redundant any consideration of Dickens' reliability. Dickens' story-telling activity does not *have* to be taken as establishing that, in the world of the story, noses are a guide to character. It may be true that the effect of Dickens' narrative construction is to make readers expect that persons in the story with certain kinds of noses will have certain kinds of characters and vice versa. But this does not require readers to acknowledge it as true in the stories that noses and character are thus connected. In a detective story of the conventional kind readers expect that it will not be the most likely suspect who has committed the crime. In the real world things are different: a detective who

thought the evidence against someone was a reason for regarding them as innocent would not be long in employment. Is the world of the detective story generally one where the connection between evidence and guilt (a causal connection if ever there was one) is violated? We say not.⁷ If the world of the story were one where likely suspects are almost never guilty, why doesn't the detective know that surprising fact? What would the world have to be like, epistemically and metaphysically, for that to be true? Anyway, detective stories often reassure us that the story's world is evidentially just like the real world:

The next people we eliminate are the Duchess and Mr Clay. They were on the front stage in full view of the audience, and yards and yards from the rear stage. In a story, of course, it would *have* to be one of these two... (Inness 1937, p.217).

Still, competent readers of the genre understand that they should be wary about assuming the guilt of the likely suspect. They are wary, not because they think the world of the story is epistemically odd, but because they realise that this is a story where the author has certain story-telling intentions which are very likely incompatible with it being true in that story that the obvious suspect is guilty. The same holds for other cases, including ones where the connection between events, if there was one, would be conventional rather than causal. It may be, in some loose sense, a convention of western movies of an earlier era that bad people wear black hats, but this is a convention of the genre and not of the worlds that stories within that genre describe. We are not expected to think that the persons of the plot are conforming to the convention: If you are bad, wear a black hat.

⁷ There are exceptions, as with the highly self conscious detective stories of Edmund Crispin which occasionally suggest that the world of the fiction is a fictional world not merely in actuality but according to the story itself.

With this in mind we should consider the possibility that the world of *Oliver Twist* is not a world in which nose and character are causally connected. Perhaps Dickens manifests an intention, in writing the way he does, to make it so that people in his story with certain characters will have certain kinds of noses and visa versa, without this having any implications for nose and character being causally connected in the world of the story. Just to have a label for this sort of intention-based connection, let's say that in this story the connection between nose and character is *symbolic* rather than causal.

Only if the nose case were causal would Warwick have a reason for taking *Oliver Twist* as support for his view of noses and character. For only then would he be entitled to the conclusion that Dickens believed in the holding of such a connection in the real world. Challenged, Warwick might have justified his conclusion with the following argument, where C specifies a connection between nose and character:

(D) Dickens presents C as holding in the world of the story; the world of the story mirrors what he takes to be the causal regularities of the real world; Dickens is in this respect reliable; so C.

If the nose case is symbolic and not causal, the first premise is false and the inference can't get started.

(D) may have a false initial premise, but plenty of inferences structurally similar to it are not deficient in this way and may warrant their conclusions. You wonder whether arsenic is a poison and note that, in a story, the victim dies of arsenic poisoning. It would take special circumstances to persuade us that this was a symbolic case. And absent special circumstances, it's reasonable also to assume that this is carry over from what the author takes to be the real world; if it were not, readers in the know would start assuming that the police had made a mistake which would then, by the lights of detective story conventions, mislead them (the readers) unfairly. It's also reasonable to assume that writers of detective stories themselves know what is

widely known about the operations of poisons. It would add to a reader's rational conviction a bit if the author in question had established a track-record of reliability on questions of this kind, but that's not essential. Knowing nothing about the author it still may be reasonable for me to start from the presumption of reliability as long as I am receptive to evidence contradicting that assumption, should any emerge.

We don't claim that in these more favourable cases the result is always knowledge. When the stranger tells me there is a gas station round the next corner I may not acquire knowledge from what is said, but I do acquire a reasonable belief and a rational basis for low-stakes action. If that is all the detective story gives me concerning poisons it does a decent job of doxastic improvement.

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Catherine Elgin suggested an objection to our symbolic construal of the guilty-seeming-parties-are-innocent case; the objection might generalise to other examples. She says we can reconcile the expectation that an unlikely person will have committed the crime with the assumption that the world of the story is, like the real world, one in which likely suspects are usually guilty, without going outside the world of the story and in particular without invoking authorial intention. Assume instead that the story is being told to us by its narrator partly because its surprising features makes it a story worth telling. After all, when someone goes to the trouble of conveying to us their recent experience we assume they are doing so partly because there is something interesting about that experience.

Such reasoning accounts, we grant, for certain patterns of expectation in stories. *North by Northwest* begins with an uneventful taxi ride to a hotel bar, but viewers by this time expect something interesting and unusual to occur. That is not because they assume the world of the story to be one where such journeys are often followed by interesting and unusual events but because they think the story, to be worth

telling, must have some such event occur pretty soon. Other cases, including the noses in *Oliver Twist*, don't fit that pattern very comfortably. Take stories in which the persons in the plot have names indicative of their most salient traits, as with Mr Mortcloak the undertaker in *Guy Mannering*, the charitable Cheerybles in *Nicholas Nickelby* and Trollop's Quiverfulls, with their many children? We are not to suppose that the world of any of these stories is one in which there is a causal connection between name and character. Is the teller of the tale understood to be telling the story partly because of the unusualness of the names of some of the persons in the plot? That seems unlikely. There are, after all, so many other reasons for telling the stories involving these persons, and the naming policy seems rather obviously a way of signalling authorial intervention. It seem to us similarly unlikely that readers are expected to understand that a reason the teller of *Oliver Twist* is telling us his tale is the statistically surprising correlation between the noses and the characters of the people the teller knows about.

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We have emphasised the difference between symbolic and casual interpretations of the connections a story represents, and the different implications of those interpretations for change in belief. That is just a start; further investigation quickly throws up some complications. It may not be easy to tell which kind of interpretation applies in a given case, and in a case like *Oliver Twist* we may want to invoke combinations and hybrids. Also, the question of authorial motivation—did Dickens believe in a causal connection, or did he instead intend the relationship symbolically?—may come apart from the question how best to interpret the story. Warwick's interest is in the first question and not the second so he could live with an interpretation that gave noses purely symbolic significance, insisting only (though we might not agree with him) on the reliability of Dickens' opinion as to the (now interpretively discounted) causal connection.

And a decision on that issue might be unavailable because we can't decide which category the *Oliver Twist* case was intended to belong to, whether it belongs to their intersection, whether there are elements of both categories at work with one or both not fully exemplified, or whether category membership in this case is indeterminate because of lack of determinacy in Dickens' own motivation.

Nor will the kinds of reasoning that tell in favour of a symbolic or a causal interpretation be invariant across cases. Perhaps character-indicating names and noses invite different treatments. After all, names are conventional items and noses are not, making it easier and more natural to see the second as causally embedded in the story's world than it is to see the first in that way. And even if the role of the nose/character connection is predominantly to be seen in symbolic terms, it may be that the desired effect on an audience—heightening approval/disapproval of certain persons in the plot—works only because readers really believe in, or give some credence to, or at least gravitate towards the idea that nose and character are connected in reality—something many of Dickens' intended readers and indeed some more recent ones probably did. In that case the symbolic import of the connection would be supported by at least the shadow of causation. Nor will an assurance that the connection is wholly symbolic automatically neutralise concerns about the work's encouragement to readers to “export” potentially harmful generalities like this one from fictions to the world; work on heuristics and biases suggests that people's beliefs are influenced by vivid though unrepresentative instances that easily come to mind (Volvos are dangerous; I saw one in an accident yesterday), and that this is so even when the instance is explicitly fictional.⁸ This connection might

⁸ As Kahneman and Tversky assumed in early work on biases and heuristics (1973). For confirmation see Green & Brock 2000: subjects show increased confidence in the idea that psychiatric patients present a danger to the public as a result of hearing a story about the crime of an unrestrained psychiatric patient; the effect was not mitigated by subjects being told that the story is fictional.

be mitigated by a lively awareness of the causal/symbolic distinction and a conviction that the case in hand lies on the symbolic side of the dichotomy but all the evidence suggests that once an idea gets into our heads it is hard to dislodge. But the difficulties, described above, of deciding such cases, together with a presumably widespread unawareness of or lack of interest in the distinction itself makes for pessimism about the degree of mitigation we can expect. Perhaps all we can ask is that those who want to argue from what is true in a fiction to what is true keep the distinction clearly in mind.

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Conclusion

Common experience as well as experimental evidence shows that people's beliefs are affected by their engagements with fictions. They are affected not merely by exposure to those occasionally didactic passages where assertions are made, but by way of descriptions of manifestly imaginary characters and events. What is less clear is whether and in what circumstances such changes in belief shift their bearers towards reliable belief and away from error. On the face of it, fictions are rather perilous epistemic environments, where authors regularly say things which are not true, where the overlap between what is fictional and what is true must often be guessed at, where authors show signs, often ambiguous ones, of believing propositions without being clearly committed to them and without our having any reasons to treat those beliefs as reliable.

To all this we add a further uncertainty: much of what we take ourselves to be learning from fiction gains doxastic traction because we take it that something is true according to the story, and the best explanation for it being true according to the story is that the author believes it to be true. We have seen that such inferences need to be treated with care, because what appears to be a truth-according-to-the-story may be in fact the result of a direct authorial intervention

which supports no inference as to what is the case in the world of the story.

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