From Fictional Disagreements to Thought Experiments

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Abstract

In this paper, I present a conceptual connection between fictional disagreements and thought experiments. Fictional disagreements happen when two readers disagree about a fictional detail. The "great beetle debate" is a paradigmatic case. Nabokov once argued that Gregor Samsa, in *The Metamorphosis*, metamorphosed into a beetle. Yet many critics and readers imagine Gregor to be a big cockroach. Analysing a fictional disagreement is interesting because it exhibits the informational structure which is common to all fictions. First, it shows the distinction between the fictional foreground (what is expressed by the narrator) and background (what the reader automatically infers from the narration). Second, it shows how the fictional background is filled with the reader's representations of reality and other shared conventional representations. The fictional background is a sophisticated mixture of traceable fictional and non-fictional bits of information. I argue that one can use this complex informational structure to explain how it is possible to extract new information originating in fiction for non-fictional purposes. The possibility of "learning from fiction" has led to a long-standing philosophical debate. However, everyone agrees on the possibility of extracting fictional information: this corresponds to drawing a moral from a given fiction. This possibility is, I argue, analogous to performing a thought experiment. I show that thought experiments and fictional disagreements exploit the same informational structure. Instead of filling the fictional background, one informs one's non-fictional representations using the same informational channels in reverse direction.

Keywords: Truth in fiction, Fictional Disagreement, Learning from fiction, Philosophy of literature

1. Introduction

"Truth in fiction" has become a well-known problem for those who are interested in the semantics of fictional discourse, both literary theorists and philosophers.[1] However, philosophers have become interested in a notion of fictional truth which

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[1] In this article, I will focus on fictional texts, though everything I say should apply to other media as well.

is most of the time uninteresting for literary theorists. Indeed, philosophers have been puzzled by the fact that readers automatically infer trivial fictional truths which are not explicitly stated. In reading, say, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one automatically infers that Hamlet is a human being, that he has two lungs and a liver, though nothing is explicitly said about this. Consequently, virtually every philosopher of fiction agrees that the fictional truths well exceeds what is explicitly in the text.[2]

This led philosophers of fiction to distinguish between the fictional foreground and background. To use Walton 1990's terminology, the fictional foreground contains the *primary* fictional truths, which are derived from the fictional text only; while the fictional background contains the *secondary* fictional truths, which are derived using some primary truths. The primary fictional truths are not necessarily the propositions explicitly expressed in the text, for there can be unreliable narrators. When the narrator is reliable, though, the fictional foreground coincides with what is explicitly narrated.

There are several competing frameworks designed to model how the fictional foreground and background are constructed in the mind of the reader. Walton's influential account explains how the reader imagines the foreground using the notion of "props in games of make-believe", and how the background is filled by using general "principles of generation". The two mechanisms are nicely integrated into a single abstract model which is now widely taken as a basis for further investigation on the notion of fictional truth. My present contribution will be within this general framework.

In this paper, I discuss "fictional disagreements". *Fictional disagreements* are controversies about how to fill the background of a story. They typically happen when two readers disagree about some detail of a fiction. One paradigmatic fictional disagreement called the "great beetle debate" was recently unearthed in Friend 2011. On the basis of this case study, I will claim that thought experiments exploit the same information channels as those needed for fictional disagreements.

2. The Great Beetle Debate

2.1 Nabokov's Argument

From his arrival in the United States in 1940 until the success of *Lolita* in 1955, Vladimir Nabokov taught foreign literature at Cornell University. In a lecture posthumously published in Nabokov 1980, Nabokov offered an original literary interpretation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. He makes a great deal of what can be thought of as a fictional detail, speculating about the kind of insect Gregor Samsa has turned into.

Everyone agrees that Gregor has turned into an insect. This is not explicitly stated though.[3] Kafka gives only a vague description of Gregor's physical appearance after the metamorphosis. The most precise description of Gregor is to be found in the opening sentence of *The Metamorphosis*:

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[2] In D'Alessandro 2016, one can find a defence of "explicitism" about fictional truth. He is, to my knowledge, the only dissonant voice in the philosophical community.
[3] This is true of the original in German, though not always in the various English translations.

> One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin.[4]

The term "vermin" does not immediately indicate that Gregor is an insect, for this word can be used literally to denote other animals like rodents or metaphorically to denote despicable human beings.[5] However, given the fictional foreground, it is clear that Gregor has turned into an insect, for it is explicitly said that Gregor can walk on walls, and the food he eats also indicates that he is an insect.
     Nabokov then considers the question: what insect?

> Commentators say *cockroach*, which of course does not make sense. A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small. [...] he has a tremendous convex belly divided into segments and a hard rounded back suggestive of wing cases. [...] In the original German text the old charwoman calls him *Mistkafer*, a "dung beetle." It is obvious that the good woman is adding the epithet only to be friendly. He is not, technically, a dung beetle. He is merely a big beetle (Nabokov 1980: 258-59).

In fact, Nabokov has an entomological argument. The reader, in the opening scene of the story, is required to imagine that Gregor is stuck on his/its back. As it happens, cockroaches do not get stuck on their backs but beetles do. Here is Nabokov's argument made explicit:

- Gregor is stuck on his back in the opening scene of *The Metamorphosis*.
- Cockroaches do not get stuck when they are put on their back (because they are flat and have long legs).
- On the contrary, it is typical of beetles to get stuck on their back.
- Therefore, in *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor is a beetle (and not a cockroach).

Finally, Nabokov famously drew how he imagines Gregor to be (see Figure 1).[6]

2.2 Debating Nabokov's Argument

Despite Nabokov's asserting tone, his argument can be questioned. First, one might wonder whether there is a fact of the matter (so to speak) about the ultimate nature of Gregor's insecthood. After all, Kafka himself did not commit on any

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[4] This is Joachim Neugroschel's translation (Kafka 1915: 90). Here is the Kafka's original wording in German: "Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt."

[5] As in: "The vermin who looted houses after the hurricane" (Merriam-Webster online).

[6] Nabokov was a semi-professional lepidopterist. Yet, Nabokov's argument should be made more precise to achieve a natural science standard of rigour. Indeed, entomologists distinguish between about 4,000 species of cockroaches and more that 250,000 beetle species (see Capinera 2008: 437, 938). Many cockroaches species do not match Nabokov's description at all, like the Oriental (*Blatta orientalis*) or the Florida woods (*Eurycotis floridana*) cockroach. Nabokov's argument is plausible only if one he meant to talk about German (*Blatella germanica*) or American cockroach (*Periplaneta americana*). (See figure 70 of Capinera 2008 reproduced at the end of this paper for photographs of these cockroach species.) As for what Nabokov had in mind when he says "beetle", given his drawings, it corresponds to a familiar species of the Scarabaeidae, probably something like the common brown beetle. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to make this point.

specific kind of insect. And it seems uncontroversial that the answer to such a question has no bearing over the comprehension of the story. So why not leave Gregor's insecthood undetermined? One reader would imagine him/it as a big cockroach, another as a beetle, a third as a bedbug, etc. Nabokov's argument, so the objection goes, is idle.[7]
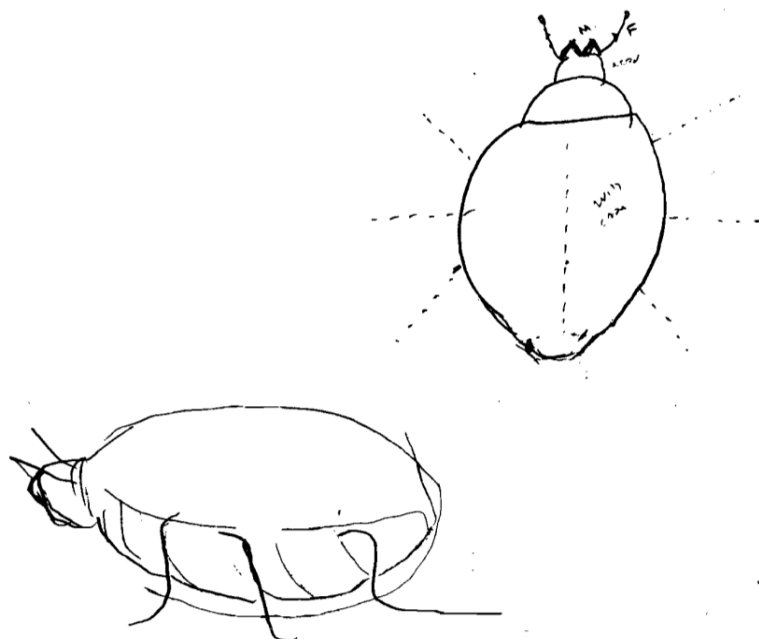

Figure 1: Nabokov's hand-drawing of Gregor (Nabokov 1980: 259)

From a literary viewpoint, this questioning the very relevance of Nabokov's question can be used to reject his literary interpretation of Kafka's story, which is essentially grounded in this detail. However, from a philosophical viewpoint, there is no reason to think that Gregor's insecthood is indeterminate in his world, even though we shall never know. Indeed, when it comes to fictional background, one should distinguish between a descriptive and a normative claim. One thing is what readers do in fact imagine, another is what they should imagine on the basis of a correct reading of the text. Fictional truth, by definition, is on the normative side. A proposition is fictionally true iff there is a *prescription* to imagine it (Walton 1990: 39). So Nabokov argument makes sense even if he was the only reader on earth to care about this bit of fictional truth.

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[7] Actually, it can be argued that Kafka remained *purposefully* vague on this point since he wrote to his publishing house, talking about the cover of his book: "The insect itself is not to be drawn. It is not even to be seen from a distance". His wish was fulfilled in the original edition of 1915. Nowadays, however, it is not so rare to see a pictorial representation of Gregor on the front page...

That being said, it is indeed useful to distinguish between several kinds of prescriptions to imagine, so as to have a finer-grained view of fictional truth as in Friend 2017b:

> Although prescriptions to imagine are sometimes associated with mandates, we need not imagine everything that is fictional. If we want to understand a work, some kinds of imagining are required. One could not grasp the basic plot of *Gulliver's Travels* without imagining Gulliver travelling to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, and so forth. A fuller appreciation demands recognizing how mistaken Gulliver is about himself (something children often miss). Still, even a fuller appreciation does not require imagining that Gulliver has internal organs, though it is surely fictional that he does. It is helpful to distinguish these obligations. I will say that a work *mandates* imagining that P if failure to imagine that P would mean falling below a minimum threshold for comprehension. A work *prescribes* imagining that P if we should imagine that P to have a fuller appreciation of the story. Finally, a work *invites* imagining that P on the following condition: if the question arises and we must choose between imagining that P and imagining that not-P, we are required to imagine the former. What is fictional in a work is what the work invites imagining. Although we need never imagine that Gulliver has internal organs, if the question came up it would be absurd to deny that he does (Friend 2017b: 2).

That Gregor fictionally is a beetle (assuming he is) is clearly not a mandate. Nabokov claims it is a prescription but most readers, I think, would rather take it as an invitation. The first objection points to this debate.

A second more radical objection consists in denying that Nabokov's argument is correct. Supposing that it is valid, it must be an enthymeme. The hidden premise is that cockroaches and beetles behave in a similar fashion in the real world and in Gregor's world. In other word, real entomological facts carry over into the background of *The Metamorphosis*. It is not clear that one should accept this premise. Questioning this premise will put us at the center of long-standing debates in the philosophy of fiction about the so-called "reality principle".

The reality principle is a particularly efficient way of filling the fictional background of a story as remarked in Walton 1990:

> The basic strategy which the Reality Principle attempts to codify is that of *making fictional worlds as much like the real one as the core of primary fictional truths permits*. It is because people in the real world have blood in their veins, births, and backsides that fictional characters are presumed to possess these attributes (Walton 1990: 145).

Although virtually every philosopher of fiction agrees with "the basic strategy", the specifics of this principle are much debated.[8] If one wants to apply a reality principle so as to get the premise Nabokov needs, one would say something like: Since it is true that cockroaches do not get stuck on their back (and beetles do), it must be true in *The Metamorphosis* that cockroaches do not get stuck on their back (and beetles do).

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[8] See Lewis 1978 for an interpretation of it within a possible-world semantic framework. See Everett 2013: 23 for a discussion of two principles called "Incorporation" and "Reality". See Friend 2017b for a criticism of the reality principle and a defence of her "reality assumption".

However, there are several cases in which the reality principle must give way. First and foremost, what is imported to fill the fictional background must be compatible with the fictional foreground. For instance, that Gregor as turned into a monstrous insect is a primary truth. So any real fact incompatible with such a metamorphosis should not be imported into Gregor's world, on the pain of inconsistency. However, selecting the relevant real facts to be imported in Gregor's world is not an easy task. For instance, how much entomology should one bring in a world where humans can turn into insects the size of a big dog? (Gregor's size can be derived from the fact that he opens the door standing on his/its back legs.) Actually, there are good reasons not to bring too much. Indeed, as shown in (Haldane 1926: 3), an enormous insect would have difficulty breathing if we follow entomology to the letter. Consequently, contrary to what Nabokov thought, it is debatable whether one can use the reality principle to derive the hidden premise.

There are two other cases in which the reality principle must give way (they will be interesting later on). One is when it is not reality but ideology that is used to fill the fictional background.[9] In some cases indeed, what the author and readers commonly believe is more relevant than reality itself. For instance, if a story originates in a community where it is commonly believed that the earth is flat, then it is widely acknowledged that in the fiction the earth is flat, even if the fictional foreground does not require it. The other case is when the reader is expected to fill the fictional background using some prior knowledge of shared conventions. For instance, there is a convention according to which dragons breath fire. So if there is a dragon in a story, one automatically infers that this dragon breaths fire even though it may not be explicitly said so. Since there is no dragon in reality, this fictional truth cannot come from using a reality principle.

2.3 Truth in Fiction and Interpretations

It is important to emphasise that a fictional disagreement is a disagreement about the interpretation of a fiction in a very specific sense of "interpretation". In (Friend 2017a: 388), three kinds of interpretative activities are carefully distinguished. One is *elucidation*: it consists in making explicit what is merely implicit in the fiction. The second is *explication*: it consists in "ascertaining the meanings and connotations of words, or passages" of a fiction. The third is *thematic interpretation*: it consists in "identifying the themes and theses in the work as a whole".[10]

Here is the precise definition of *elucidation* in (Friend 2017a: 388-89):

> To elucidate a work is to determine what is going on in the storyworld, what is "true in the story"—or as I prefer, *storified*—where this is not specified by the explicit text and may even contradict it (as with unreliable narrators).

Given what Friend later says, we can distinguish between "trivial" and "substantive" elucidations. *Trivial* elucidation is a case where what is elucidated has no bearing upon other kinds of interpretative activities. For instance, elucidating the blood type of Hamlet is trivial in this sense. (Literary critics are usually not interested in trivial elucidation, although philosophers love it.) *Substantive* elucidation, by contrast, is a case where what is elucidated has crucial consequences which

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[9] Such cases motivate the shift from (Analysis 1) to (Analysis 2) in Lewis 1978.
[10] Friend's terminology is adapted from Beardsley 1958.

feed into the other interpretative activities. For instance, elucidating whether Hamlet is mentally ill is substantial in this sense. (Philosophers tend to avoid these complicated cases, whereas literary critics look for them.)

In practice, substantive elucidations touching upon crucial aspects of a narrative can hardly be distinguished from the other kinds of interpretation, as noted in Friend 2017a:

> Many puzzling works demand efforts at elucidation. Anyone who fails to wonder who Godot is and why Vladimir and Estragon awaits him, or who is unperturbed by Bartleby's intransigence has simply not engaged with the relevant works (Friend 2017a: 389).
> [Footnote: As these cases indicate, elucidation cannot always sharply be distinguished from other dimensions of interpretation or criticism.]

In such cases, the substantive elucidation is very likely to be controversy-ridden. For instance, two literary critics can disagree on whether Godot fictionally is God, and this would surely affect the thematic interpretation of Beckett's play. However, there is no reason to think that disagreements over an elucidation happen only when it is substantive. Some fictional disagreements focus on trivial elucidations. Two readers can passionately disagree on Hamlet's eye-color and this would not affect the other kinds of interpretation.

Nabokov's critical genius consists in grounding a thematic interpretation on a case of elucidation which is *prima facie* not substantial. Despite his ingenious rhetoric, I suggested that the great beetle debate might very well be trivial. If that is the case, then the great beetle debate gets stuck at the level of elucidation.

3. Conditions of Possibility of Fictional Debates

I can now generalise: a *fictional disagreement* is a disagreement about the (possibly trivial) elucidation of a background fictional truth. Note that two readers can also disagree on how to fill the fictional foreground, for example in the case of a subtle unreliable narration. These do not count as fictional disagreements in my sense, though. I will thus set aside such cases to focus on the fictional background.

In this section, I claim that fictional disagreements come with a necessary condition, namely that there are open information channels. I will first explain what I mean by "information channel". I will then show that my claim makes adequate empirical predictions for when there is no available information channel, there can be no fictional disagreement.

3.1 General Picture of the Information Flow in the Fictional Background

In order to fill the fictional background, the reader first needs a fictional foreground, which I will take as a given. Moreover, we have seen that they need some information coming from the outside of the fiction, and a general mechanism to combine this outside information with the fictional foreground.

Let us now focus on the needed outside information. It must be one of two things: either it originates in reality or it does not. When I say that some information originates in reality, I mean the reader's representation of reality, be it knowledge or belief. For expository purposes, I will call this information originating in one's (accurate or not) representation of reality "factual". The fictional

background can thus be filled with facts. I say that the facts are imported into the fictional background through an information channel which links the fictional world and the real world.

If the outside information is not factual, then it is fictional. For instance, when one fills the background of a dragon story with "this dragon breaths fire", one imports information from genre conventions which originate in some seminal fiction (or perhaps in myths). However, one can also use "local conventions", so to speak. For instance, a leitmotiv in movies or opera is like a convention operating at the level of the fiction itself: each time you hear a tune, you are expected to fill the background with "such character is around". So the outside fictional information can either come from a different fiction or from the fiction itself. For expository purposes, I will call both kind of information "conventional". The fictional background can thus be filled with conventions. I say that the conventions are imported into the fictional background through an information channel which links the fictional world to another fictional world or to itself.

My picture is not very controversial, since it is a tidying up of the mainstream view as, for instance, described in Lewis 1978:

> I have said that truth in fiction is the joint product of two sources: the explicit content of the fiction, and a background consisting either of the facts about our world (Analysis 1) or of the beliefs overt in the community of origin (Analysis 2). Perhaps there is a third source which also contributes: carry-over from other truth in fiction. There are two cases: intra-fictional and inter-fictional (Lewis 1978: 45).

(Analysis 1) corresponds to a factual channel linking the fictional background to the reader's knowledge, while (Analysis 2) links it to the reader's beliefs about reality. "Intra-fictional" corresponds to a conventional channel linking the fictional background to the fiction itself, while "inter-fictional" corresponds to a link to a different fiction.

My claim is that fictional disagreements are controversies about how much an information channel should be open, hence they presuppose that the relevant informational channel is open. In the great beetle debate, the relevant information channel is factual. The debate boils down to whether one should or should not open an information channel so as to fill the fictional background with fine-grained entomological facts, as Nabokov suggest we should.

My claim entails that where there is no information channel available, there can be no fictional disagreement. I think this prediction is empirically accurate, as I will presently show.

3.2 Fictional Background of *The Nose*

In 1836, Gogol published *The Nose*. The main character of the short story is the Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov who, one morning, wakes up to find his nose missing. He becomes literally nose-less. Alarmed, looking for his nose all around the city of St Petersburg, Major Kovalyov runs into his nose in the street, dressed in the uniform of a higher-ranking official than himself. Suddenly, the nose enters a church. Stunned Major Kovalyov follows him in. Inside the church, the two characters exchange a few words. Finally, the nose sends Kovalyov packing using his higher-ranking authority. Major Kovalyov then tries to start legal proceedings against his nose without success. The story unfolds with other interesting twists and turns.

Let us focus on a detail of the story. One of the fictional event is the follow
ng: nose-less Major Kovalyov is walking in the street and runs into his nose walk-
ing in the same street, dressed in the uniform of a high-ranking official. So the
reader is explicitly asked to imagine the Nose *walking* down a street. But how
would it do that? Does the Nose have legs? There are good reasons to think that
it does not have legs, because it is a nose: but at the same time, if it is *walking* down
a street, it probably has legs. I suspect there are different natural ways of getting
around this difficulty, now I have raised the question: one would imagine the
Nose, dressed, levitating ahead; or one would imagine a big nose bumping for-
ward; or even a nose with long thin legs walking like a crane; or a very human-
like creature whose face consists only of a nose.[11] There are probably other ways
of realising this invitation to imagine the Nose walking down the street.

Gogol's *Nose* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* are actually very similar but they
crucially differ in that there can be no "great nose debate". First, most readers
enjoy the works without a clue: if the questions did not arise, these elucidations
would have remained in the background where they belong.

Second, both fictional events are just as impossible and implausible as can
be. One may have the feeling that the two fictional events differ in their plausibility
or possibility. But it is an irrational feeling. Both turning into a monstrous insect
or losing one's nose while sleeping are impossible, implausible events. So any the-
ory of plausibility or possibility which makes a significant difference between
Gregor's fate and Kovalyov's lot will be deeply counter-intuitive to say the least.

Third, both stories require imagining that a supernatural event occurred in a
world where the "laws of reality" are as we experience them otherwise (as such,
both are *fantastic* stories as defined, *inter alia*, in Todorov 1970). Indeed, in Ko-
valyov's world, everything seems to be normal except for a nose on the loose. For
instance, when Kovalyov tries to start legal procedures against his nose, the office
clerk follows the same procedures as in reality and since there is no possibility of
charging one's body part in reality, he cannot follow on from Kovalyov's demand.
This prompts an incident in the office, since Kovalyov insists and gets angry at the
office clerk.

Consequently, the two stories can systematically be compared, as in Erlich
1956:

> Clearly, Gogol's nonsense narrative lacks the quality of an existential disaster.
> Yet it shares with the grimmer story of Kafka the discrepancy between its "re-
> alistic" mode of presentation and the utterly incredible central event (Erlich
> 1956: 102).

The relevant natural science for the studying of walks and gaits is a branch
of anatomy called functional anatomy. Functional anatomy studies the relation-
ship between anatomy and movement, thus establishing facts about the con-
straints of the skeleton on possible movements, how the muscles of the body are
to cooperate to produce a given movement, how the balance of the body coincides

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[11] There are numerous illustrations and adaptations of Gogol's story for visual media. I
noticed that this last option is very widespread (see for instance Alexandre Alexeieff's and
Claire Parker's animated film from 1963). But the imagination of illustrators knows little
limit, as a quick search on the internet reveals!

with movement, etc.[12] Unfortunately, functional anatomy says nothing about individual organs. A nose is not in any straightforward sense a possible object of functional anatomy.

Now, suppose there is a real natural science whose object of study is the walk, or rather the way of locomotion, of organs separated from the body. Let us call this science *schismatic functional anatomy*. This natural science would describe the way livers move on their own when separated from their body of origin, the locomotion of lungs, single arms, brains and pairs of eyes, and so on. Naturally, schismatic functional anatomy would have something to say about the walks of noses; the different walks available for separated noses would probably depend on their size: snub noses do not move in the same way as big noses do; probably it would depend on the species they are separated from: dog noses tend to be quadruped whereas human noses tend to be bipeds (these are only statistical facts); and many other factors. As in all natural sciences, controversies and discoveries are part and parcel of the positive knowledge it delivers; the history of schismatic functional anatomy is also quite a thing, since most of the scientists were born Russian, a coincidence which is still an open area of research.

If schismatic functional anatomy were a natural science, one could open a factual information channel and construct an argument, analogous to Nabokov's, to fill the fictional background of the Nose's walk. So there would be a "great Nose debate" just like there is a great beetle debate. However, schismatic functional anatomy is, as far as I know, merely a pseudo-natural science; hence, this is merely a pseudo-"great Nose debate".

In the same manner, one can find no conventional information channel available to fill the fictional background of the Nose's walk. Indeed, I have never heard of a convention which specifies how noses progress when severed from their body of origin.

This completes what can be thought of as a *reductio* argument. Suppose, there can be a fictional disagreement about the way the Nose walks analogous to the great beetle debate. Then, schismatic functional anatomy would be a natural science. But schismatic functional anatomy is manifestly not a natural science. Hence, there is no fictional disagreement. There can be no fictional disagreement where there is no available informational channel.

4. From Fictional Disagreements to Thought Experiments

It is not clear that the expression "thought experiment" denotes a unified set of phenomena as is shown in Stuart, Fehige and Brown 2017.[13] However, virtually everyone acknowledges that thought experiments and fictions share characteristic features (see Davies 2007 for a detailed analysis of this claim); many even argue that they are essentially similar (in particular, see Elgin 2007).

From the philosophy of fiction viewpoint, the putting together thought experiments and fiction serves a precise purpose in a now longstanding debate between cognitivism and anti-cognitivism. One of the main arguments in favour of the cognitive value of fictions is built on this widely accepted closeness between

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[12] This is a very difficult and fascinating natural science which is currently challenged in its results by the advance in robotics. Making robots which can walk is a surprisingly difficult task; especially if one wants to design robots which can walk *like human beings*.
[13] See also Gendler 2016: 25 for an insightful tripartite view on thought experiments.

fictions and thought experiments (Davies 2017: 512, premise (2)). The basic idea is that if thought experiments have cognitive value, then so have fictions. Anti-cognitivists usually try to find principled reasons to distinguish literary fictions from thought experiments when it comes to cognitive value (see for instance Lamarque and Olsen 1994, arguing at length that fictional "truth" is not a kind of truth). Interestingly, both cognitivists and anti-cognitivists agree on the fact that some information originating in fiction can travel out of the fiction. What they disagree about is the cognitive value of such information: cognitivists argue that it can be knowledge under suitable conditions, while anti-cognitivists deny this.

In this section, my aim is to discuss this phenomenon both cognitivists and anti-cognitivists agree upon and I intend to remain neutral on whether the information extracted from a fiction can qualify as knowledge or not.[14] Very often, people justify their claims about "moral, psychological and social" facts by quoting relevant fictions (Carroll 2002: 3). I will leave aside the question whether people *should* avoid doing this if they want to be rational.

I think I should emphasise the scope and the limit of the phenomenon I aim to analyse. It consists in taking up a "crucial question unanswered" raised in Searle 1975, namely that:

> serious (i.e., nonfictional) speech acts can be conveyed by fictional texts, even though the conveyed speech act is not represented in the text. Almost any important work of fiction conveys a "message" or "messages" which are conveyed by the text but are not in the text. [...] Literary critics have explained on an ad hoc and particularistic basis how the author conveys a serious speech act through the performance of the pretended speech acts which constitute the work of fiction, but there is as yet no general theory of the mechanisms by which such serious illocutionary intentions are conveyed by pretended illocutions (Searle 1975: 332).

Drawing a moral is indeed a very familiar phenomenon, and in some cases, like with fables or satirical stories, the reader is actually expected to do so. In such cases, it is widely acknowledged that fictions function as thought experiments.

One might question the analogy between the moral drawing activity and thought experiments, despite a consensus among philosophers of fiction. For instance, thought experiments seem to be conceptually linked to the notion of *possibility* in a way fictions are not.[15] Taking Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment as a paradigmatic example: one can reject Putnam's defence of semantic externalism using this thought experiment on the ground that Putnam's story is *impossible* for physico-chemical reasons. By contrast, the fact that a fiction describes an impossible situation does not seem to preclude one to draw some moral. In this sense, at least, thought experiments can be thought of as distinct from fictions. However, my aim is to show that the informational structure which is necessary for drawing a moral is also necessary for thought experiments. I will show that the informational channels automatically deployed to fill the fictional background can be used in reverse direction, so to speak, in order to extract some fictional information. Consequently, I hope to shed interesting new light merely on the conditions of possibility of thought experiments, not on their argumentative

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[14] For the record, I am attracted to the cognitivism of Novitz 1987. His two-stage model of how one can learn from fiction is somewhat close to what I will present below.

[15] Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

efficiency. This can be seen as a limit beyond which the analogy between thought experiments and the moral drawing activity falters.

4.1 Fictional Background as a Mixture

Fictional disagreements show without a doubt that every fictional background is inter-connected with relevant representations of reality as well as other available fictional representations we may have. Developing on a striking geological metaphor, Proust thus talks about the "historical substratum" which constitutes the fictional background of Balzac's novels in his essay entitled *Sur la lecture*.

However, we have also seen that the fictional background cannot consist only of this substratum coming from the outside. In other words, factual and conventional information is combined with what I shall call "free imagination". How much free imagination there is depends on how much and how many informational channels are open. In the case of Gregor's metamorphosis, according to Nabokov, there is not much free imagination at play, for there is an informational channel originating in entomology which fills almost all of the detail of Gregor's physical appearance. In the case of Kovalyov's nose, however, the reader is free to imagine the Nose's physical appearance. A fictional background should thus be thought of as a sophisticated mixture of free imagination, factual and conventional information. The possible mixtures are primarily constrained by the fictional foreground.

Importantly, a fictional detail is "free" only relative to an informational channel. As such, some parts of the fictional background can be free relative to one informational channel and not relative to another. To illustrate this point, let us focus on *The Nose* again. Relative to functional anatomy, the reader should freely imagine the Nose. However, it seems clear that the fictional background of *The Nose* should not be freely imagined relative to, say, gravitational physics. Indeed, physical things are clearly weighty in Gogol's story. Since the Nose is a physical thing, it is subject to gravitation in Kovalyov's world. Consequently, if the Nose was to stumble while walking, it would fall down; if it was to climb up some steep stairs, it would not do it effortlessly; etc. The Nose is thus free relative to functional anatomy, but not relative to gravitational physics.

4.2 Reversal of the Direction of Fit

Using an informational channel to fill the fictional background is using it one way. To borrow Anscombe's famous notion, we can say that filling the fictional background has a direction of fit which goes from outside to inside the fiction. Once the informational channel is open and has been used, I suggest that we can use it the other way by simply reversing the direction of fit. Given that the fictional foreground is dynamic upon reading a story, the fictional background has to be accordingly updated. Consequently, reversing the direction of fit *at the end of the story* can convey some new information. Doing this corresponds to drawing the moral of a story.

By reading a fiction, the reader updates the foreground with fresh semantic information. This new information may or may not force the reader to substantially update the background by opening some new information channels. At the end of this repeated process, when the story ends, the reader has in mind a fictional background and some open informational channel. One can use the already open channels in the other direction by holding fixed the fictional background

and by asking oneself what are the facts or conventions which would have produced the fixed background in the first place. Since the background is a mixture containing free imagination, the information travelling back from the fiction in this manner is necessarily new.

Once the information has travelled outside the fiction, the reader would treat the information as they would some information coming from a non-fictional source. That is, they would first ponder it to decide whether it should be accepted, and then make the modifications to fit this new information into their cognitive system if necessary. Here, the plausibility of the information coming from the fiction, as well as the trust one can place in the author of the fiction would clearly play a crucial role. As such, the nature of the informational channel first deployed is important. Consequently, the more "realistic" or naturalistic the fictional background, the more reliable will the information retrieved be labelled. Here, "realistic" should also be understood relative to an information channel. Some situation will be "realistic" according to an informational channel (i.e. against some factual or conventional background) and not "realistic" according to another one. It is thus a term of art which measures how much an informational channel is open. The more "realistic", the less free imagination is required to fill the background; the less "realistic", the freer the reader is to imagine the fictional background.

To illustrate this mechanism thanks to which one extracts fictional information, it is useful to first give a ludicrous example where some information is retrieved from a fiction but it does not get inserted into the reader's knowledge. In the foreground of *The Nose*, many things are mandated to be imagined. For instance, the story mandates imagining the Nose fully dressed, with a hat, walking and talking. The reader should freely imagine this in the process of reading. Once the reading is finished, the reader has a representation of the Nose in mind. They can retrieve some new information by using the informational channel about walking creatures. Indeed, since the reader had to imagine Kovalyov walking down a street, they must have deployed a relevant informational channel to fill the background with a walking human. Now, the reader can thus update one's "knowledge" of how noses walk as if it was not freely imagined but the result of some factual information. If the reader imagined a biped nose, they would thus have some new information about independent human noses, namely that they are bipeds. Of course, calling this bit of information which originates in *The Nose* "knowledge" is very weird, for it contradicts a very robust facts about walking creatures, namely that they are organised bodies of organs and never individual organs. In other words, the reliability of this information about walking noses is zero, but this bit of information is both new and originating in the fiction.

Doing this is absurd, for the right response to Gogol's story is not that of drawing a moral about a super-natural event. As Roman Jakobson puts it, *The Nose* should be interpreted as a "realised oxymoron" for there is something utterly absurd in the fact that the Nose has nothing to do with a *real* nose. "Such is Gogol's 'Nose' which Kovalyov recognises as a nose even though it shrugs its shoulders, wears full uniform and so on." (Cited in Shukman 1989).

By contrast, take La Fontaine's first fable, inspired by Aesope, *The Grasshopper and the Ant* which is clearly an invitation to draw some moral. The foreground of this fable features two talking insects. Of course, the reader is expected to freely

imagine that insects can talk.[16] As the story goes, the reader is to imagine that a spendthrift singing Grasshopper unsuccessfully begs for food a stingy summer-worker Ant. Let us hold fixed the fictional background as the reader has freely imagined it. The fictional background is such that an informational channel originating in folk-psychology had to be open. Indeed, the two fictional characters have an explicitly human-like psychology. When the reading is done, the reader can use this channel in the other direction to answer the question: what kind of psychological facts would make the resulting fictional background as close to the facts as possible? One moral of the story is thus: stingy people do not lend what they earned. Probably this piece of information matches many of the reader's experiences with stingy people. Moreover, La Fontaine enjoys a very high reputation when it comes to folk psychology. Consequently, if asked whether stingy people tend to share what they earned in reality, the reader would probably feel confident in saying "no", and quoting La Fontaine's fable, even though they know that it is fiction.

Let me emphasise again how fictions differ from thought experiments when it comes to *possibility*. Fables about talking insects invite us to imagine impossible situations in some intuitive sense. This could be thought of as a problem, were one using La Fontaine's fable as a thought experiment in the course of an argument. Indeed, one would simply dismiss the story as a relevant piece of information for any kind of argument. However, this does not affect the drawing a moral from the story, because the fictional information one is expected to extract from the fable is travelling a particular information channel, i.e. a channel linking the fable with the reader's folk psychology representations. The moral drawn is not about ants and grasshoppers. It is about the usual subjects of folk psychology, i.e. ordinary folks. Informational channels are thus used to bring out bits of information, abstracted away from other parts of the story. Just like they are used to fill the fictional background with originally disconnected bits of information.[17]

5. Conclusions

One can see how easy it is to use a fiction as a thought experiment to inform our non-fictional representations. I showed how this extracting a moral exploits the same mechanisms as the filling of the fictional background. In a sense, it is as if fiction was made for it!

According to the present picture, the pressing question is not: how come we can learn from fiction? But: how come we usually do not? The answer to this question, I suggested, should be the same as for non-fictional source of information.[18] Consequently, coherence with already accepted knowledge or beliefs as well as the reliability of the source are expected to be central. How "realistic" the fictional background, or rather how much the reader is expected to freely imagine

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[16] For there are no facts nor conventions about the detail of, say, phonatory devices of talking insects.

[17] Thanks to an anonymous referee to make me think of this special role of abstraction which is at play in the moral drawing activity.

[18] This reversal of how the problem is usually framed within the philosophy of fiction is, if I understand well, in keeping with some recent empirical results. I refer to some personal discussions with Stacie Friend who has ongoing work at the interface of philosophy and experimental psychology with Greg Currie and Heather Ferguson. See the details of the research project here.

such and such background element is also predicted to play an important role in my picture, since it greatly determines the kinds of informational channels which should be open to fill the background in the first place.

Interestingly, the results of the case study about fictional disagreements carry over to thought experiments. Informational channels must be in place: they are necessary conditions for such phenomena to happen. One can now see why thought experiments can benefit from being built on little narratives. Indeed, a fiction comes with a background and a fictional background automatically opens informational channels. A thought experiment can thus surreptitiously (or conspicuously) exploit these open channels to convey the information the reader is required to ponder. The rhetorical efficiency of thought experiments thus construed rests on the fact that everything happens in the background, i.e. automatically and probably mainly unconsciously.

I want to end with two side consequences of the claim I made. First, a consequence of my view is that each time some moral can be drawn, one can create a corresponding fictional disagreement. I think it is an empirically adequate prediction. Indeed, often, when one wants to question a moral drawn from a fiction, one starts a fictional disagreement. For instance, suppose one reader takes La Fontaine's fable to have another moral, namely that singers and artists are lazy, inconsequential people.[19] One way is to exhibit a real artist who is neither lazy nor inconsequential. Another is to deny that the story is "realistic" on this fact, i.e. to argue that the reader should freely imagine the Grasshopper's psychology, given a text analysis. One could thus argue that the Grasshopper's psychology in the fiction is really at odds with folk-psychology and it's the story which is "wrong". For instance, one might hold that real artists are proud; as a singer and artist, the Grasshopper should thus be proud; but the Grasshopper fictionally has no pride, for it begs for food. Consequently, one could start a disagreement whether the Grasshopper is a *genuine* artist or not, for if it was, it would be too proud to beg for food and it would happily die when the time comes.[20] One can see that this disagreement has an outside to inside direction of fit and aims at contradicting the moral according to which artists are lazy, inconsequential people.

Finally, I focused my claim on factual informational channels. However, given the general picture I presented, there is no reason to think that one could not export some fictional information so as to update or create conventions in the real world. I think this is a plausible fact, for it is clear that, say, conventions about dragons are ultimately grounded on seminal fictions (or maybe myths). Interestingly, genre conventions seem to be a very sophisticated phenomenon which ends up crystallising information coming from many different fictions into a grossly coherent body of information. In this sense, a genre convention can be thought of as non-fictional for it somehow acquires a sort of independence from its fiction(s) of origin. Borges wittingly emphasised this fact when he set about doing an encyclopedia of mythical creatures. In Borges 1967, he describes the "western dragon" as an entomologist would describe cockroaches and beetles:

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[19] There is no explicit moral for *The Grasshopper and the Ant* in La Fontaine's text, which is quite remarkable. So the moral I drew above should not be taken as exhaustive in any way.
[20] See for instance Suits 1978 for a nice interpretation of Aesope's fable along these lines.

A tall-standing, heavy serpent with claws and wings is perhaps the description that best fits the Dragon. It may be black, but it is essential that it also be shining; equally essential is that it belch forth fire and smoke. The above description refers, of course, to its present image; the Greeks seem to have applied the name Dragon to any considerable reptile (Borges 1967: 152).

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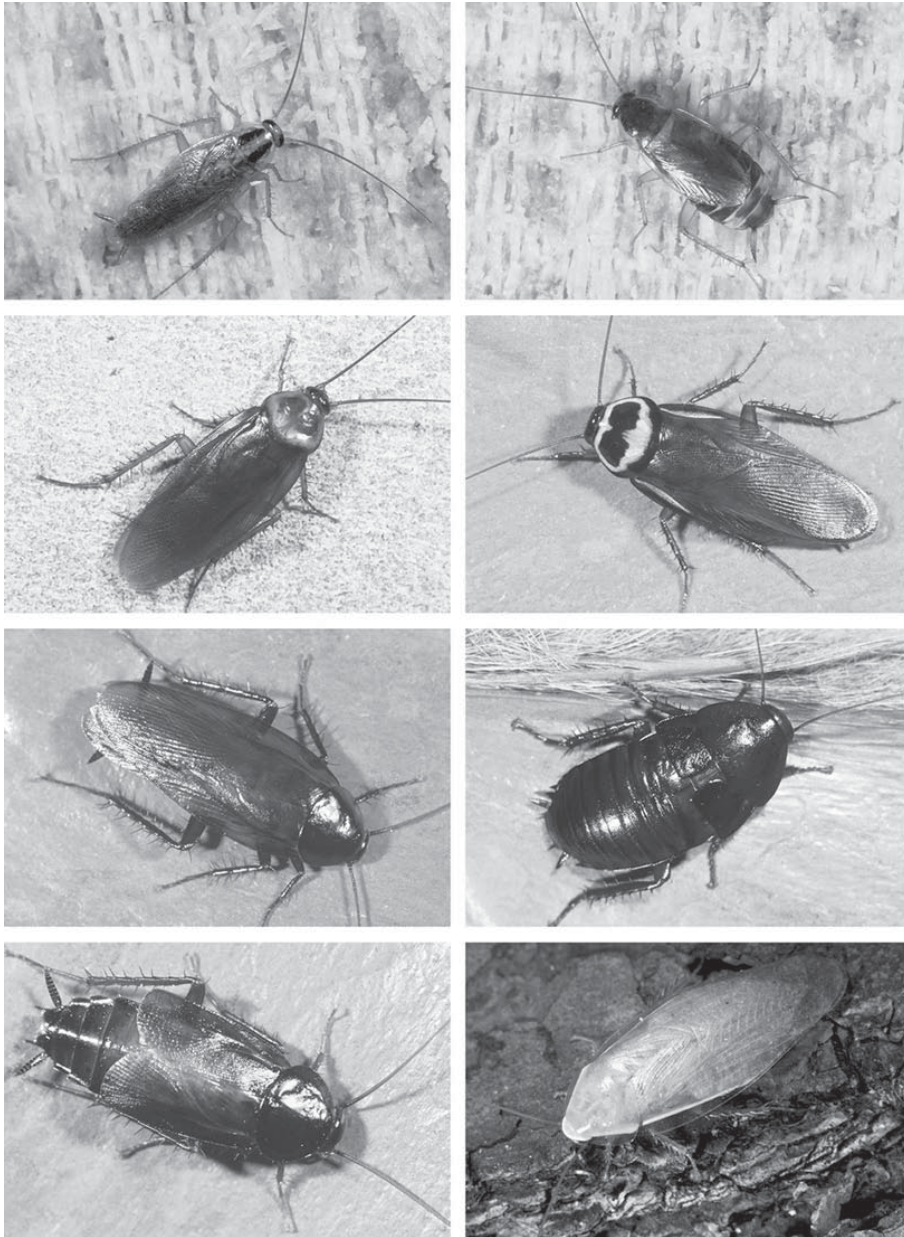
Cockroaches (Blattodea), Figure 70. Some common cockroaches: top left, German cockroach, *Blatella germanica*; top right, brown-banded cockroach, *Supella longipalpa*; second row left, American cockroach, *Periplaneta americana*; second row right, Australian cockroach, *Periplaneta australasiae*; third row left, smoky-brown cockroach, *Periplaneta fulginosa*; third row right, Florida woods cockroach, *Eurycotis floridana*; bottom left, Oriental cockroach, *Blatta orientalis*; bottom right, Cuban cockroach, *Panchlora nivea* (photos by J.L. Castner, University of Florida).