

Justification from Fictional Narratives

CHARLES REPP

1. Introduction

Many people claim that we can gain knowledge from reading novels and other forms of narrative fiction. In a trivial sense, this claim seems uncontroversial. There is no doubt that reading *Pride and Prejudice* can teach me, for example, what the novel is about or give me some insight into the character of Regency English. This is because a novel, like any other text, constitutes direct evidence for propositions about its own content and language. But it is widely questioned whether such a work could ever give us knowledge of any of the general propositions it expresses about the world outside the text, for it is commonly held that fictional narratives do not have the resources to justify such propositions, however true they may be. As one adherent to this view says, “If we find that stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep attractive men and women apart, we find the evidence for this truth about the great world in the great world. The fiction does not and cannot provide the evidence.”¹

Various theories have been offered in response to this “no-justification” argument. In this paper, I assess one popular theory that has been defended by Noël Carroll and David Davies, among others. Carroll and Davies attempt to explain how fictional narratives like novels can supply justification by comparing them to thought experiments. I argue that there is something both helpful and unhelpful about this thought experiment analogy (the TE analogy). On the one hand, I claim, the TE analogy fails to capture some of the distinctive ways in which long fictional narratives like novels can justify their themes, that is, the propositions they manifest at the most general or “global” level. In particular, I claim, it overlooks two factors that play an important justificatory role at this level: one, the coherence of a theme in relation to the other themes and subthematic propositions manifested in the

Charles Repp is currently a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Toronto. His research explores a variety of issues at the intersection between aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology.

narrative and two, the intellectual character manifested by the author of the narrative. On the other hand, the TE analogy offers a plausible model for understanding how long fictional narratives can justify propositions manifested at the “local” level, that is, the level of small-scale units of action and dialogue, which turns out to be important for understanding how the two kinds of justification provided at the macro level ultimately get epistemic traction. Thus, I argue, the TE analogy fails to tell the whole story of how fictional narratives like novels justify their themes, though it does tell an important part.

Apart from defending this assessment of the TE analogy, this paper also aims to clear up several confusions surrounding the no-justification argument itself. One issue particularly in need of clarification is the specific type(s) of text to which the argument applies. While there is no doubt that a work like *Pride and Prejudice* falls within its scope, there seems to be some confusion as to why. Is *Pride and Prejudice* unable to provide justification for its claims because it is a novel, a fiction, a narrative, a literary work, or what?

This question is the main focus of the first section below (section 2). In the three subsequent sections, I develop my assessment of the TE analogy—first, presenting the case for it (section 3); next, exposing its limitations (section 4); and finally, suggesting how it might contribute to a more nuanced account of how fictional narratives provide justification (section 5).

2. The No-Justification Argument

The no-justification argument (NJA) is often presented as an argument about literature or even art in general.² A typical way of putting it is that literature cannot be a source of justification for propositions because it is “barren of systematic argument or evidence.”³ What has generally escaped notice is that there are, in fact, two arguments here, each having a distinct target and neither posing a problem for literature as such. I call these the “no-evidence” argument and “no-argument” argument.

2.1. No-Evidence Argument

The no-evidence argument focuses on the type of evidence literary works can present for propositions. According to this argument, literature may suggest but never confirm claims about the actual world because, unlike scientific studies, which offer real empirical data in support of their hypotheses, literary works offer only reports of imaginary people and events.⁴ The no-evidence argument points to a problem with literature qua fiction, at least in a nontechnical sense of this term. That is, the problem arises for literary works only insofar as the particular subject matter they describe is “made up” or “invented.” As to whether literary discourse is fictional in any more theoretical sense of being intended to function in some special way or

to invite some special type of response, the no-evidence argument seems indifferent. Defending fictional literature against the no-evidence argument, therefore, does not require refuting any particular theory about the nature of fiction, such as the view that fictional discourse is nonassertorial. At the same time, however, it requires more than just citing examples of literature that deal with actual people and events since these would not count as fictions in the relevant sense.

2.2. *No-Argument Argument*

Whereas the no-evidence argument notes the lack of empirical evidence supplied by literature, contrasting it in this respect with science, the no-argument argument observes the general absence in literature of any substantive or rigorous argumentation, contrasting it in this respect with philosophy.⁵ Here, again, the problem is not with literary works qua literary. Nor this time is it with literary works qua fictions, despite what some have suggested.⁶ Rather, the concern raised by the no-argument argument appears to be a concern about the narrative aspect of literature. For it would seem that the reason many literary works fail to supply arguments for their themes is that they are stories, which consist almost by definition of sequences of causally or temporally connected events rather than sequences of logically connected premises. Of course, some narratives do present arguments, which may be voiced by a character (for example, Ivan's eloquent statement of the problem of evil in *The Brothers Karamazov*) or by the author or narrator (for example, Tolstoy's arguments against the "great man" theory of history in *War and Peace*). However, pointing to such arguments is not likely to impress the no-justification skeptic, who is likely to insist in every case that they are merely adventitious to the fictional narratives (qua narratives) that contain them.

The NJA combines the no-evidence and no-argument arguments into one. It says that fictions are unable to supply empirical evidence for propositions, that narratives are unable to supply arguments for propositions, and, therefore, that fictional narratives are unable to supply justification for propositions. To repeat, the conclusion of the NJA is not a claim about literature per se, let alone art in general. Nevertheless, it is true that many literary works will be subject to the argument insofar as many literary works are narrative fictions. Moreover, there are good reasons one might want to focus on literary forms of narrative fiction, particularly if one is interested in whether part of the value of literary works as such lies in their ability to give us propositional knowledge or justification. For the NJA claims that no fictional narratives (and *a fortiori* no literary ones) have this ability. Thus, if sound, it suggests that this ability is often irrelevant to literary value. An interest in this evaluative question explains why many discussions of the NJA—including this one—focus on novels, since novels are in many instances both literary works and fictional narratives.

Several key terms in the NJA are open to some interpretation. Let me say now a few words about how I will understand them.

2.3. *Justification*

The NJA implicitly assumes that one cannot be justified in accepting a proposition unless one has evidence or arguments for that proposition. The argument thus seems to assume an “internalist” notion of justification—that is, one according to which a belief that *p* can only be justified by other beliefs or internal states that provide inferential bases for *p*. Some epistemologists think that the very concept of justification is such that the only candidate analyses are internalist ones. But I take it that what the NJA wants to conclude is that fictional narratives are incapable of providing justification not only in this internal sense but in a broader sense as well. That is, as I understand it, the NJA is supposed to prove that a fictional narrative can do nothing to make a proposition any more worthy of acceptance, any more reasonable or appropriate to hold, than it already is. It is, thus, in this broader sense, roughly synonymous with Alvin Plantinga’s warrant or positive epistemic status, that I will use the term *justification* in what follows.

2.4. *Supply*

The conclusion of the NJA as I have formulated it is that fictional narratives cannot supply justification for propositions. What is the relevant sense of *supply* here? The difficulty in answering this question is that *supply* in this context does not admit of any straightforward causal interpretation. That is, it will not do to say that a text supplies justification for *p* just in case a reader forms a justified belief that *p* as a result of reading it, for even the most brilliantly argued philosophical treatise or extensively researched scientific report could fail to meet this condition—if, for instance, the reader failed to grasp the arguments or correctly interpret the evidence for *p*. Yet it is precisely in contrast to these types of texts that the NJA claims fictional narratives are unable to supply justification. Moreover, it seems that even the most inane piece of gibberish could, under the right conditions, satisfy the condition—if the reader, for instance, had a strange form of dyslexia whereby he somehow experienced the text as meaningful and informative. The text in this event could be said to supply justification on a causal construal of *supply* but would hardly seem to deserve such credit.

The problem with the simple causal interpretation is that it makes success in supplying justification depend too much on the mind of the reader and not enough on the nature of the text itself. It seems impossible to avoid all reference to the mind of the reader, since justification must be supplied *to* something, after all, and it is generally thought that the only sorts of things that can be bearers of justification are mental states. However, to screen out the effect of unskilled or psychologically abnormal readers, it seems that

the conditions on supplying justification must include some constraint on the reader's response to the text. More specifically, it seems that a fictional narrative's ability to supply justification ought to be measured not by what effect it has on just anyone, but by what effect it has on a suitably sensitive and informed reader, one who comes equipped with a minimum of relevant skills and background knowledge and reacts to the text in accordance with the appropriate interpretive and epistemic norms.

I take it that literary critics and scholars are the exemplars of this type of reader, if anyone is. Accordingly, my method in what follows, particularly in section 4, will place significant weight on how these "expert" readers respond to the propositions manifested in fictional narratives. If justification can be gotten from narrative fictions, these readers would seem to be the ones most likely to get it, and their responses would seem to offer the best clues as to how exactly the process works.

2.5. Propositions

The propositions manifested through fictional narratives (FNs) can vary in numerous respects. For example, although every proposition manifested in an FN may be plausibly ascribed to the author or some author construct (we can bracket for now the question of who exactly this author is⁷), not all of them need be believed by the author. The propositions manifested in an FN can be the objects of various attitudes of the author, affective and conative as well as cognitive. Likewise, not all propositions manifested through FNs have the same illocutionary force. Some seem to have the force of assertions, but FNs can often "contemplate" or "entertain" or "explore" propositions without asserting them.

Most important to note here, however, is that not all propositions manifested in FNs are equal in importance. *Middlemarch* implies both that there is something noble about the passionate idealism of people like Dorothea and Lydgate, even if the world is such that their high aspirations are rarely realized, and that, in nineteenth-century British society, a person's property was customarily distributed after his death according to a written will. However, the former proposition clearly stands out as more central to the novel. The most central propositions in an FN are commonly referred to as its themes.⁸ Variation in terms of thematicity cuts across the two other variations mentioned above.

If one understands the NJA as categorically denying that any type of proposition could ever be justified by an FN and one merely wishes to refute the argument, then one can safely ignore the difference between thematic and nonthematic propositions. In that case, all one needs is a story about how FNs can justify *any* type of proposition they manifest—which type makes no difference. This is certainly one way of approaching the NJA. However, I take it this would be an unsatisfying approach for the majority

of those interested in the debate, particularly, again, for those of us who are interested in it for what it implies about literary evaluation. For if there are any propositions for which it matters, from a literary evaluative standpoint, whether a work provides justification, the most likely candidates would seem to be those propositions to which the work as a whole seeks to give expression—its themes. So a response to the NJA that explained only how FNs can justify nonthematic propositions would provide little support to those of us who think that justification is important from a literary evaluative standpoint. It would hardly redeem FNs from a purely epistemic standpoint, either, since, as the example from *Middlemarch* suggests, nonthematic propositions tend to be much less interesting than thematic ones. There are, thus, various reasons to be unsatisfied with an answer to the NJA that fails to explain how FNs can justify their themes.

With these points in mind, let us turn now to the TE analogy.

3. The TE Analogy

The TE analogy seeks to answer the NJA by claiming that fictional narratives can work like thought experiments (TEs)—hypothetical scenarios commonly used to purchase intuitive support for claims in philosophy and other fields. Many TEs, of course, *are* FNs in the sense that they ask us to imagine some counterfactual sequence of events. More controversially, however, the TE analogy asserts a comparison between TEs and longer FNs such as novels. Since there is a general presumption that TEs are capable of justifying theories, the TE analogy is seen by many philosophers as a promising way of explaining how longer FNs can justify their themes. Both Noël Carroll and David Davies have defended versions of the TE analogy.⁹

3.1. *Carroll*

Carroll argues specifically for an analogy between FNs and what he calls “philosophical” or “analytical” TEs, meaning those that are aimed at revealing conceptual rather than empirical truths.¹⁰ A classic example from epistemology, which has been subject to countless variations since Edmund Gettier first presented it, runs as follows. Imagine Smith and Jones have both applied for a job. Jones has strong evidence that Smith will get the job (the boss told Jones so) and that Smith has ten coins in his pocket (Jones counted them), on which basis Jones infers that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Now imagine that Jones is right, not because Smith will get the job but because Jones himself will get the job and unbeknown to himself Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Jones’s belief that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket thus seems to be justified and true, but is it knowledge? For many people, the intuitive answer is “no.” Gettier’s thought experiment is, thus, widely taken to be a refutation of the justified true belief account of knowledge.

Carroll points out several similarities between philosophical TEs like this and FNs like novels. One is that they can both be made to do the same kind of cognitive work. For example, just like Gettier's cases, some FNs are designed to reveal counterexamples to universal claims. Such is the case, Carroll claims, with Graham Greene's novella *The Third Man*. In Greene's story, set in post-WWII Vienna, American Rollo Martins helps the police capture his best friend Harry Lime when Martins discovers that Lime has been selling corrupted penicillin to Allied hospitals. By portraying Rollo's actions as just, Carroll claims, the story provides a counterexample to the view E. M. Forster avows in *Two Cheers for Democracy* that loyalty to one's friends is more valuable than loyalty to any cause.

FNs can also function like philosophical TEs, Carroll says, by helping to clarify conceptual criteria. Carroll attributes this function to a thought experiment of Arthur Danto's, which calls on us to imagine a series of visually indiscernible paintings, each with a different causal history, and invites us to reflect on which ones count as artworks and why. Carroll goes on to argue that E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End* does something similar for the concept of virtue. The novel revolves around two families, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, representing two different sets of virtues—one geared toward aesthetic appreciation and the cultivation of "personal relations," the other toward excellence in the practical spheres of business, politics, and war. Over the course of the novel, the two families collide with and influence each other in various ways, with the result that the characters come to embody various mixtures of the two sets of virtues. In the end, Carroll thinks, the novel invites us to compare these various mixtures in order to reach a clearer conception of what makes a person virtuous, much as Danto's thought experiment invites us to compare the various paintings in order to get clearer about what makes an object a work of art.

For Carroll, the analogy between FNs and philosophical TEs lies not just in the type of cognitive goods they yield, however, but also, and more importantly, in the way they secure these goods. Like many philosophers, Carroll thinks that philosophical TEs can lead us to new justified beliefs by calling forth unarticulated forms of knowledge we already possess, which get expressed through our intuitive responses to the fictional scenarios they describe. On this view, the explanation for why Gettier's TE gives us reason to reject the "justified-true-belief" (JTB) account is that the intuitions it elicits ("this is a case of justified true belief but not knowledge") reflect some understanding we already have regarding the concept of knowledge (and justification, truth, and so forth). Carroll thinks that a similar story can be told about FNs like *Howards End*. That is, we come to the novel already equipped with some intuitive knowledge about the concept of virtue, which gets mobilized in the process of evaluating the various candidates for virtue presented in the novel and gives warrant to the propositions we ultimately come to embrace as a result of this process.

3.2. *Davies*

While Carroll compares FNs only to philosophical TEs, Davies extends the analogy to scientific TEs as well—that is, those concerned with empirical questions.¹¹ A famous example from the history of physics is Galileo's cannonball. To show that all bodies fall at the same speed regardless of their weight, Galileo asks his readers in the *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* to imagine tying a lightweight musket ball to a heavy cannonball and letting the coupled balls drop. According to Aristotle's view, which holds that lighter objects fall more slowly than heavier objects, the musket ball, being lighter and therefore slower, will retard the speed of the cannonball. But this results in an absurdity, for if the cannonball joined to a musket ball falls less rapidly than the cannonball alone, then the heavier object falls less rapidly than the lighter object. Aristotle's view is, thus, shown to be untenable.

Drawing support from recent work in the philosophy of science, Davies suggests that such scientific TEs may warrant empirical claims in basically the same way as Carroll thinks philosophical TEs warrant conceptual claims—only Davies's suggestion is that, in the case of scientific TEs, the tacit knowledge that grounds our intuitive responses is empirical rather than conceptual.¹² This paves the way for an analogous explanation of how it is possible to acquire justified empirical beliefs from FNs—for example, how we can “learn about the dynamics of complex human relationships through reading Henry James, or about the rhythms of lived experience through reading Virginia Woolf.” In Davies's words, the explanation is that our responses to such fictional narratives mobilize unarticulated cognitive resources based in experience. The fiction is able to elicit such responses because it makes manifest constant patterns underlying the complexity of actual experience—this is reflected in our feeling that the novel has indeed revealed such patterns to us; and this feeling is to be trusted because it reflects the operation of such unarticulated cognitive resources in our reading.¹³

Both Carroll's and Davies's accounts line up nicely in one respect with literary critical practice. That is, it is common and generally regarded as appropriate for critics to appeal explicitly to certain kinds of intuitions or feelings in responding to the themes of FNs. These intuitions typically take the form of judgments about whether some element of the narrative (for example, a specific plot or character development) is “realistic” or “plausible” or “convincing,” and they can often underwrite judgments about the acceptability of the narrative's themes. In response to *The Third Man*, for instance, a literary critic would be within his rights to say that it just seems intuitively implausible that a man like Martins would be good friends with a man like Lime in the first place, and, on the basis of this intuition, the critic might be skeptical about the story's theme (as Carroll interprets it).

Without denying that such intuitions can play a crucial role in justifying some propositions in FNs, I am going to argue in the next section that

they play a much less direct and exclusive role than the TE analogy suggests when it comes to thematic propositions. By focusing primarily on this role, I will argue, Carroll and Davies overlook the important contribution that coherence among an FN's manifested propositions and the intellectual character of its manifested author can make to the justification of its themes. First, however, I will consider a separate pair of objections that have been raised against the TE analogy by Joshua Landy.

4. Problems (and Nonproblems) for the TE Analogy

Landy claims that there are two key problems for the TE analogy.¹⁴ The first is that, whereas TEs "hew with obsessive tenacity to the way in which events (are taken to) unfold in the real world," FNs tend to "add in such elements as drama and surprise," giving their endings "an appropriateness . . . rarely met with in real life." The second is that TEs, in contrast to FNs, "tend . . . to be as general as possible, dispensing with details."¹⁵ Let us begin with the first alleged disanalogy.

4.1. Realism

It is, of course, true that many types of FNs do distort reality for dramatic purposes—for instance, Hollywood movies. As Daniel Jacobson observes, "the ubiquitous happy endings of Hollywood movies . . . do not arise because filmmakers, or audiences, think life is like that. The first rule of Hollywood screenwriting is: Make the audience want something very badly, and then give it to them. And we do not always want the terrible truth."¹⁶ However, many types of FNs, including works of social and psychological realism, do aim to mirror reality. Moreover, many philosophical TEs ask us to imagine things that do not or could not occur in the real world, such as teleportations, brain rejuvenations, body swaps, zombies, and magic memory-erasing pills. Landy, thus, seems mistaken to think that FNs are generally less true to reality than TEs. How they compare in this respect all seems to depend on what type of FNs and what type of TEs we choose to focus on.

Suppose Landy were not mistaken about this, however—would it follow that FNs cannot justify some hypotheses the same way TEs do? Landy seems to think so, and his reasoning seems to be that, if FNs are less realistic than TEs, the intuitions they elicit cannot be as reliable. Let us grant that, if an FN distorts a certain aspect of reality, then the intuitions it elicits in regard to that aspect will not be trustworthy. In that case, we should be wary of some of the feelings that Hollywood movies inspire toward romantic love, since love is, in certain respects, often portrayed unrealistically in such movies. However, many types of fictional narratives are unrealistic in some respects but realistic in others. Indeed, this is true even of Hollywood love stories, which sometimes offer very realistic portrayals of the problems that can complicate

romances and marriages, even if they tend to suggest that these problems are more easily resolvable than they really are. Moreover, it may not be necessary for an FN to be realistic at all to elicit sound intuitions about conceptual matters. To elicit sound intuitions about the concept of love, for example, it may be enough to depict a case of love that is merely possible.

It would appear that Landy's first objection fails to hit its target, then, not only because it is based on a false disanalogy but because, even if it were not, FNs might still warrant many types of propositions in the same way TEs do.

4.2. *Detail*

Landy's second objection seems more promising, at least insofar as it is based on a real difference between FNs and TEs. FNs such as novels do, undeniably, tend to be richer in detail than TEs. But again it is unclear just how this difference is supposed to prevent FNs from justifying some claims in the same way as TEs.

The fact that FNs are more detailed would not seem to make the intuitions they elicit any less trustworthy. On the contrary, in fact, it might be thought that TEs can skew our intuitions on some issues precisely because they tend to be so vague and that more detailed stories might therefore help us think more clearly on these issues. Daniel Dennett has suggested that this is true particularly when it comes to thinking about the relation between causal determinism and moral responsibility.¹⁷ To see how a person may be held morally responsible for actions that are causally determined, Dennett thinks, we need to appreciate how complex the causes of our actions can be, and for that, we need examples that can unpack these causes in full and intricate detail. By nature, TEs are too schematic and course-grained to do this, Dennett thinks. Hence, he argues, they are systematically biased against theories such as compatibilism that require complex and nuanced explanations of phenomena. Dennett leaves it open to infer that FNs like novels, on account of their greater detail, might be less biased against such theories.

Perhaps Landy's thought is that the greater detail of FNs indicates a difference in terms of the function they are designed to serve. This thought has been expressed by Roy Sorensen, who takes the greater detail of FNs to reflect, in particular, their authors' greater concern with entertaining their audience. But it does not follow that FNs cannot also be concerned with making theoretical points. Indeed, it is arguable that many TEs aim in some degree to be entertaining even as their primary goal is to establish serious theoretical points. More strongly, it might be questioned whether the greater detail in FNs is always theoretically irrelevant. As Dennett suggests, there may be certain theories like compatibilism that can be adequately appreciated only through richly detailed stories. If so, then sometimes the greater detail of FNs might actually subserve theoretical aims.

Barring some other explanation, then, it is hard to see how the greater detail of FNs hinders their ability to justify some propositions in the same way

TEs do. I will now argue, however, that the greater detail of FNs, while not preventing them from providing the same form of justification as TEs do, enables them to provide two other forms as well, which can end up playing a more prominent role in the process by which long fictional narratives like novels justify propositions, particularly thematic ones.

4.3. Coherence

First of all, the greater detail of FNs like novels, combined with their characteristically greater length, complexity, and so forth, means that they typically manifest a much larger body of beliefs and other propositional attitudes than do TEs, which, in turn, means that the coherence of this body of beliefs normally takes on much greater epistemic significance in FNs than in TEs.

Consider *Howards End* again. I take it that one of the main themes of *Howards End* is that there is more to virtue than the exclusive devotion to “personal relations” and artistic pleasures exhibited in the novel by the Schlegels, especially Helen Schlegel. Incidentally, many critics identify Helen’s outlook with the moral philosophy of G. E. Moore.¹⁸ In his *Principia Ethica*, influential with the Bloomsbury set to which Forster belonged, Moore famously claims that “the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects”—a statement that might as well have been uttered by Helen Schlegel herself.¹⁹ Forster’s novel may thus be read partly as an attempt to refute a (then) popular philosophical thesis. This much agrees with Carroll’s view of the novel as a kind of TE, though, on the reading I am suggesting, it would be a TE more along the lines of Gettier’s than Danto’s.

But now notice that the way *Howards End* supports this anti-Moorean theme is not simply by eliciting intuitions in its favor (though some intuitions are involved, on which more in section 5), but by getting us to reflect consciously on the coherence of the theme in relation to numerous other propositions manifested in the story. Some of these other propositions are also themselves major themes of the novel. Like most novels, *Howards End* contains not just one but multiple themes. Besides the anti-Moorean theme, which is bound up with the novel’s suggestion that the best character is one that combines Schlegel and Wilcox virtues, there is also, for instance, the idea (which is really many ideas) that the health of society (that is, English society of the early twentieth century) requires some kind of reconciliation between culture and industry, rich and poor, urban and rural, and future and past. The famous epigraph of the novel, “Only connect,” invites us to reflect on one way in which all these themes hang together, and the extent to which they are unified under this (or any other) idea strengthens each of them.

The novel also invites us to reflect on the coherence between the anti-Moorean theme and a number of what we might call subthematic propositions—that is propositions manifested in a story that serve to shed light on

the meaning or reasoning behind a theme but are not quite general or central enough to count as themes themselves. Several subthematic propositions related to the anti-Moorean theme occur explicitly in the novel as thoughts in Margaret Schlegel's head, as she reflects on her growing "interest that verged into liking" for the Wilcoxes:

She desired to protect them, and often felt that they could protect her, excelling where she was deficient. Once past the rocks of emotion, they knew so well what to do, whom to send for; their hands were on all the ropes, they had grit, as well as grittiness, and she valued grit enormously. They led a life that she could not attain to—the outer life of "telegrams and anger." . . . To Margaret this life was to remain a real force. She could not despise it, as Helen and Tibby [Helen and Margaret's brother] affected to do. It fostered such virtues as neatness, decision, and obedience, virtues of the second rank, no doubt, but they have formed our civilization. They form character, too; Margaret could not doubt it: they keep the soul from becoming sloppy. How dare Schlegels despise Wilcoxes, when it takes all sorts to make a world?²⁰

There are many distinct propositions expressed in this passage that give content and support to the anti-Moorean theme: that a Moorean soul is deficient in certain respects; that it lacks neatness, decision, and obedience; that these virtues have formed our civilization; that they keep the soul from becoming sloppy, and so forth. Together with the more general theme, these claims form a bundle of propositions that are meant to explain and reinforce one another. And, again, how well they do so is important to how reasonable it is to buy the anti-Moorean theme.

We could even go a level deeper, taking each of these subthematic propositions and situating it within a more extended network of supporting propositions implicit in the novel. Take, for example, the claim that Wilcox virtues "keep the soul from becoming sloppy," a line that echoes an earlier passage in which Margaret wonders aloud whether "personal relations lead to sloppiness in the end."²¹ Later in the novel, a friend of the Schlegels, Leonard Bast, loses his job and faces the threat of severe poverty. Full of concern and pity for Bast but not knowing what to do once past the "rocks of emotion"—or perhaps failing to get past the rocks at all—Helen ends up sleeping with him one night, unintentionally ruining his marriage and becoming pregnant with his child. The incident recapitulates Helen's impulsive and immediately regretted night of passion with Paul Wilcox that sets the novel going. The two incidents suggest a number of beliefs about the specific dangers to which a Moorean soul like Helen Schlegel is prone, which are designed to bolster the contention that "personal relations lead to sloppiness" and, by extension, the more general anti-Moorean theme. The more coherent this whole bundle of propositions is, the more justification the novel gives us for the anti-Moorean theme.

4.4. Intellectual Character

The greater detail of FNs enables a second form of justification distinct from that which TEs provide in that it typically gives us greater insight into the intellectual character of the author, which can provide further grounds on which to judge the themes of a fictional narrative as more or less creditable.

FNs can expose various excellences and deficiencies in the minds of their creators.

Good FNs generally manifest highly developed imaginative, observational, and linguistic skills, although different writers can manifest these skills to different degrees. Different writers can also manifest different degrees of intellectual virtues, such as open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual courage, patience, humility, and maturity, among others—as well as their opposite vices (dogmatism, prejudice, intellectual complacency, cowardice, hastiness, arrogance, immaturity). In general, the more intellectual virtue an author displays, the more appropriate it is to trust what she tells.

There are lots of ways in which a story can reveal the intellectual character of its teller. In *Howards End*, the narrator (commonly identified with Forster) offers frequent observations about everything from the influence a person's physical appearance can have on her character (chap. 4), to the ripples that love between two people can cause in the social waters that surround them (chap. 20), to the tendency of women, in contrast to men, to be attracted to others out of pity for their unworthiness (chap. 32). Most of these observations do not express or bear directly on the novel's themes. But evidence for various intellectual qualities (for example, psychological acumen, analytical intelligence, and stereotyped thinking) might be found in both the content of these reflections and the manner in which they are presented, and, in light of these qualities, it may be more or less reasonable to accept some as the novel's themes.

Of course, on close enough examination, one might find evidence of the author's intellectual character in a TE, too. But, generally, TEs do not offer us the kind of prolonged exposure to the author's mind necessary to discern stable character traits. Furthermore, the highly impersonal style in which most professional philosophy and science today is written, while well suited for conveying certain cognitive virtues such as clarity and logical rigor, tends to give only a very narrow picture of the author's intellectual character. As Arthur Danto says, speaking of the classic fifteen-page journal article that has become the "canonical literary format" in the current age of our profession, "If, under the constraints of blind review, we black out name and institutional affiliation, there will be no internal evidence of authorial presence, but only a unit of pure philosophy, to the presentation of which the author will have sacrificed all identity."²² For both these reasons, it seems unlikely that that author's intellectual character plays a significant justificatory role in TEs.

But why think it actually plays any justificatory role in FNs? Sure, one might say—FNs can give us a more robust sense of the author's intellectual character. But where is the evidence that this sense makes any legitimate contribution to the justification of themes in FNs? A similar question might be asked about coherence. That is, while granting that much greater levels of coherence are possible in FNs, given the much greater number of propositions they manifest, one might still wonder whether such coherence figures appropriately in our epistemic evaluations of a FN's themes.

My answer to each of these questions has two parts. The first involves an appeal to the practices of literary critics.

4.5. *Coherence and Intellectual Character in Literary Criticism*

As I mentioned earlier, I take it that the question of whether the themes in an FN can be justified on the basis of given set of factors is one of whether these factors play a role in persuading a certain sort of reader, one who comes to the text with the necessary skills, background knowledge, and normative framework for properly understanding and evaluating the text. And I take it that literary critics are generally paradigmatic of this sort of reader. So in answering the question of whether themes in an FN can be justified on the basis of the author's intellectual character or their coherence with other propositions in the work, I take it to be highly relevant that literary critics place considerable weight on such factors when assessing how persuasive a theme is.

When one looks at the critical literature on *Howards End*—to stick with our example—one finds many discussions about the coherence of the beliefs or other propositional attitudes it manifests, commonly supporting conclusions about the novel's success or failure in "proving" or "demonstrating" or "making its case" for some of its themes. A typical instance comes from Barbara Rosencrance, who interprets the novel as an "exhortation to human relations," but argues that this exhortation "must ultimately be regarded as unsuccessful" because of the inconsistency between it and the novel's "striking sense of recoil from humanity."²³ Says Rosencrance, "Forster too often substitutes preachiness for the integrated imagery of a coherent position."²⁴ In support of a more positive assessment of the novel's suasive success, David Shusterman notes that the novel "represents the completest expression [in Forster's work] of a unified . . . outlook toward living in the society of human beings."²⁵

One also finds many critics explaining the persuasive force of *Howards End* (or its shortage thereof) in terms of intellectual qualities Forster manifests in the novel. With some of Forster's earlier novels, says Lionel Trilling, "we can sometimes feel that their assumptions have been right but rather too easy." But *Howards End* "develops to the full the themes and attitudes of the early

books and . . . justifies these attitudes by connecting them with a more mature sense of responsibility." Trilling thinks this more mature responsibility is evident in Forster's more honest attempt in *Howards End* to confront some of the difficulties with the themes of his earlier works.²⁶ Another critic, George Thomson, sees a parallel between Forster's novel and Forster's famous description in the novel of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. "Beethoven chose to make all right in the end," Forster tells us, speaking of the final movement of the symphony. "He blew with his mouth for the second time, and again the goblins were scattered. . . . But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things." Thomson claims that Forster's novel, despite ending happily, also recognizes "bravely" that "the goblins were there" and "could return" and that Forster has, therefore, "earned our confidence."²⁷

But perhaps one might wonder how relevant the evidence of literary critical practice is to a question that is, after all, epistemological. Literary critics may be good at understanding what FNs are about and appreciating their literary power, but this, it might be thought, is not the same as appreciating their epistemic power. If we want evidence that FNs actually have the power to justify beliefs via the coherence or intellectual virtue they manifest, we should look at what epistemologists say, one might argue, not literary critics. To address this worry, I turn now to the second part of my response, which consists in briefly noting the wide range of current epistemological theories that agree in thinking that coherence and/or intellectual virtue can play a part in the justification of beliefs.

4.6. Coherence and Intellectual Character in Epistemology

Many philosophers, including Ernest Sosa, John Greco, and Linda Zagzebski, hold that the justification of a belief depends on the intellectual character of the believer.²⁸ According to these so-called virtue epistemologists, one's beliefs are warranted only if they arise from the exercise of intellectual virtues. If you are sympathetic to this view, then you might think that the justification of a story's themes can be affected by the intellectual character of the storyteller insofar as this determines whether the storyteller is justified in accepting the themes herself. But even if you reject virtue epistemology, you can still think that the intellectual character an author conveys is relevant to assessing the justification of a story's themes. So the idea that the justification of the themes of an FN is tied to the intellectual character of the storyteller makes sense on a wide range of analyses of knowledge and justification.

Likewise, a wide range of theorists accept that the coherence of a set of beliefs can make a difference to their justification. Attempts to motivate this idea commonly appeal to examples in which agreement among the reports

of independent witnesses to some event lends credibility to each of their reports, even though the witnesses are individually unreliable.²⁹ Some so-called coherentists such as Laurence Bonjour and Keith Lehrer have thought that coherence is the main criterion of justification for our beliefs.³⁰ Although coherentism as a view about what justifies all our beliefs is less popular now than it was twenty-five years ago, it is still prevalent as a view of what justifies our moral beliefs, thanks to the continuing influence in moral epistemology of John Rawls's ideal of "reflective equilibrium."³¹ Moreover, many noncoherentists, while denying coherence the star role in justification, allow it a supporting part. Indeed, this is true of both of the two views often cast as the main alternatives to coherentism—foundationalism and virtue epistemology. For foundationalists, coherence between foundational and nonfoundational beliefs is crucial to the justification of the latter; while for many virtue epistemologists, coherence is essential to justification because it manifests or constitutes some intellectual virtue.

Before moving on, let me quickly recap the argument of this section. I began by arguing that FNs have the ability to justify some propositions the same way TEs do, despite Landy's claims that FNs are generally less realistic and more detailed than TEs. I went on to claim, however, that, when it comes to thematic propositions, the greater detail of FNs makes possible and more prominent two other forms of justification not generally available from TEs—first, by enabling FNs to present themes as part of a large body of propositions whose overall coherence can serve to justify the themes and, second, by making the intellectual character of the storyteller accessible to us as a potential grounds for accepting or rejecting a story's themes. The conclusion we have thus come to is that the TE analogy fails to do justice to the main ways in which long FNs like novels justify their themes.

If this is right, then, for reasons discussed in section 2, it follows that the TE analogy is inadequate as an answer to the NJA. However, this is not to say the TE analogy has no value. On the contrary, I will now argue that, when drawn at the right level, the analogy proves useful in answering a modified version of the NJA that I call the no-ultimate-justification argument. In the next section, I explain what this argument is and how the TE analogy helps to answer it, once again using *Howards End* to illustrate.

5. The No-Ultimate-Justification Argument

I have suggested that one way an FN can justify a theme is by manifesting a network of other propositions, both thematic and subthematic, within which this theme coherently fits. But this claim seems open to an obvious objection: why should the internal coherence of these propositions give us any reason to think that any of them is true? Anyone with a good imagination can make up a story that implies a highly coherent set of propositions, but that bears

little or no resemblance to the way things are in the actual world. So, in order for the coherence of a group of propositions manifested in a FN to justify any of its individual members, the objection goes, we would need to have some antecedent reason for thinking that at least some of these propositions are true of the actual world, and for that we would need to look beyond the FN.

A similar objection applies to my claim that FNs can justify themes by manifesting intellectually virtuous authors. The problem here is that whether we judge an author to have handled his subject in an intellectually fair-minded, brave, mature, or otherwise virtuous way typically depends on whether we think that he has grasped the truth, or at least some important truths, in regard to his subject. And, again, one might think, that can only be determined by reference to the facts of the matter, which lie outside the FN.

This objection is basically a reprise of the NJA, only now the argument is not that FNs offer *no* justification for their themes but that the justification that comes from within FNs must ultimately be grounded in justification that comes from without. Hence, we might call this the no-ultimate-justification argument (NUJA).

It may suffice to answer the NUJA simply to note that it applies equally to non-FNs such as philosophical texts. Just as coherence among the propositions manifested in an FN is warrant-increasing only if some of the propositions possess some degree of warrant on their own, so too an argument in a philosophical text justifies its conclusion only insofar as its premises are independently justified. This does not tempt us to say that philosophical texts cannot *really* provide justification for their claims, so why it should tempt us to say this about FNs?

Perhaps a more satisfying answer to the NUJA, however, can be given with the help of the TE analogy. We have seen that this analogy misrepresents the way in which long FNs like novels justify thematic propositions, that is, propositions that are manifested at the most general or “global” level, inasmuch as it suggests that intuitions play a much larger role at this level than they actually do. Yet it may accurately represent the way FNs justify propositions they manifest through individual scenes or incidents. For while intuitions do not seem to play a significant justificatory role at the global level, they do seem important at this “local” level. Applying the TE analogy at this local level would help to answer the NUJA in that it would provide an account of how some propositions manifested in an FN can be justified independently of their coherence or the intellectual character of the author, thus explaining how coherence *with* these propositions and intellectual virtue *evidenced by* them could, in turn, serve to justify themes.

To illustrate, let us return one last time to *Howards End*. I noted earlier the incident in the novel that results in Helen Schlegel’s becoming pregnant with Leonard Bast’s child. The incident is designed to support the novel’s anti-Moorean theme by suggesting one way in which the Schlegel virtues of

sympathy and imagination, untempered by the Wilcox virtues of neatness, decision, and obedience, can lead to a kind of moral “sloppiness.” In contrast to the way the novel as a whole provides support for the anti-Moorean theme, the way this particular incident “demonstrates” that Schlegel virtues lead to sloppiness relies heavily on our intuitions. More specifically, it relies on our intuitively granting that, under the circumstances described, a woman like Helen Schlegel might actually sleep with a man like Leonard Bast, that her doing so would count as a form of moral sloppiness, and that her being all Schlegel and no Wilcox, so to speak, would be the cause of this moral sloppiness. If these assumptions check out with our intuitive understanding of psychology, morality, and metaphysics, and this understanding is sound, then the incident justifies its point. The incident thus functions much like a TE, justifying a proposition (“here is a case of moral sloppiness caused by being all Schlegel and no Wilcox”; compare to “here is a case of justified true belief that is not a case of knowledge”) by testing it against empirical and conceptual knowledge the reader latently possesses. Once the proposition passes this test, it can play a role in justifying other propositions, including themes, by transmitting justification to other propositions that cohere with it and by reflecting intellectually virtuous qualities in the author that can give us reason to trust other things the author thinks.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that, when it comes to understanding how FNs can supply justification for their themes, it is not useful to try to construe them as wholes on the model of TEs. Unlike TEs, FNs such as novels justify their themes through a process that involves a good deal of conscious reflection. Moreover, this reflection focuses primarily on (a) the coherence of themes with the other propositions manifested in the work and (b) the intellectual character manifested by the author, factors that are not generally relevant to the epistemic success of TEs. However, at the level of individual scenes or incidents in an FN, the TE analogy is not only plausible but may also help explain how some propositions in FNs can be justified independently of their coherence or the author’s intellectual character, which seems necessary to explain how the justification that comes from coherence and the author’s intellectual character ultimately get their epistemic traction. A fully adequate account of how FNs supply justification thus calls for an appreciation of how they both compare and contrast with TEs.

Notes

1. Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Cognitive Triviality of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992): 191–200, at 196.

2. For example, see Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 404–5; Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 3–26; Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," 196.
3. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," 404.
4. For examples of this argument, see Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 429; Hilary Putnam, "Literature, Science and Reflection," in his *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1978), 83–96; John Hospers, *Understanding the Arts* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 267; Christopher New, *Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 120–21; Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," 196; Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," 404–5.
5. See, for example, Posner, 404–5; New, *Philosophy of Literature*, 120–21; Peter Lamarque and S. H. Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), chap. 13.
6. For example, New, *Philosophy of Literature*, 120–21.
7. Theorists disagree on this question. On one end of the spectrum are those who identify the author manifested in an FN with the real flesh-and-blood writer, for example, Robert Stecker, "Apparent, Implied, and Postulated Authors," in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. William Irwin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 129140. On the other end are those who treat the author as a purely fictional construct, like Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). In between lies, for example, Berys Gaut's notion of the manifested author as a persona of the real author; see *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 2. My argument in this paper is neutral between these various conceptions of the author.
8. Beardsley and some others following him use the term *thesis* for what I am calling "theme" (Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 403–4). *Thesis* suggests an asserted belief, however, so, for reasons just discussed, not all themes (in my sense) are aptly described as theses.
9. Defenses of this view can also be found in Edward A. Davenport, "Literature as Thought Experiment (On Aiding and Abetting the Muse)," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 13 (1983): 279–306; Catherin Z. Elgin, "The Laboratory of the Mind," in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, ed. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, Luca Poggi (New York: Routledge, 2007): 43–54; Eileen John, "Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 4 (1998): 331–48; and Peter Swirski, *Of Literature and Knowledge: Explorations in Narrative Thought Experiments, Evolution, and Game Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 44–45.
10. The following is based on Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 3–26.
11. The following is based on David Davies, *Aesthetics and Literature* (London: Continuum, 2007), chap. 8; and David Davies, "Thought Experiments and Fictional Narratives," *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (2007): 29–45.
12. In particular, Davies references Tamar Gendler, "Galileo and the Indispensability of Thought Experiments," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 49 (1998): 397–424; Nenad Miscevic, "Mental Models and Thought Experiments," *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 6 (1992): 215–26; and Nancy Nersessian, "In the Theoretician's Laboratory: Thought Experiments as Mental Modelling," in *PSA 1992*, vol. 2, ed. D. Hull, M. Fores and K. Okruhlik (East Lansing, MI: Philosophy of Science Association), 291–301.
13. Davies, *Aesthetics and Literature*, 160.
14. Joshua Landy, "A Nation of Madame Bovaries: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement through Fiction," in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 63–94.
15. *Ibid.*, 77.

16. Daniel Jacobson, "Sir Philip Sidney's Dilemma: On the Ethical Function of Narrative Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 4, (1996): 327–36, at 331.
17. Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 12, 17–18, 32–34.
18. See, e.g., David Sidersky, "The Uses of the Philosophy of G. E. Moore in the Works of E. M. Forster," *New Literary History* 38, no. 2 (2007): 245–71.
19. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903/1962), 188.
20. E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 76–77.
21. *Ibid.*, 22
22. Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature," in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, ed. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, and Luca Poggi (New York: Routledge, 2007), 123.
23. Barbara Rosencrance, "The Ambivalent Narrator of *Howards End*," in *Howards End: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong (New York: Norton, 1998), 413.
24. *Ibid.*, 412.
25. David Shusterman, *The Quest for Certitude in E. M. Forster's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 153.
26. Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 114–15, 117.
27. George Thomson, *The Fiction of E. M. Forster* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 198–99.
28. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007); John Greco, *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
29. The canonical version of this argument comes from C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), 346. It is recited with approval in Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 117; and in Catherine Z. Elgin, "Non-foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 156–67.
30. Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*.
31. See, for example, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory," in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 137–89.