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Coherence, Literary and Epistemic

ABSTRACT

Coherence is a term of art in both epistemology and literary criticism, and in both contexts judgments of coherence carry evaluative significance. However, whereas the epistemic use of the term picks out a property of belief sets, the literary use can pick out properties of various elements of a literary work, including its plot, characters, and style. For this reason, some have claimed that literary critics are not concerned with the same concept of coherence as epistemologists. In this article I argue against this claim. Although various nonepistemic notions of coherence figure in literary criticism, the epistemic concept has a mirror image in the literary-critical concept of thematic coherence. Moreover, evidence from literary criticism suggests that thematic coherence can be valuable from a literary-evaluative standpoint because it can be valuable from an epistemic standpoint, in particular by enhancing the credibility of a work's themes or author. My analysis of the notion of thematic coherence thus provides novel support for literary cognitivism, the view that a work's literary-aesthetic merits can depend on its epistemic merits.

I. INTRODUCTION

Coherence is a term of art in both epistemology and literary criticism. In both contexts, judgments of coherence typically carry evaluative significance: to attribute a high degree of coherence is typically to give epistemic or literary-aesthetic praise. However, whereas the epistemic use of the term picks out a property of belief sets, the literary use can pick out properties of various elements of a literary work, including its plot, characters, and style. For this reason, Susan Haack (2004) has suggested that literary critics are not concerned with the same concept of coherence as epistemologists. In this article I argue against this view. Although various nonepistemic notions of coherence figure in literary criticism, the epistemic concept of coherence has a mirror image in the literary-critical concept of thematic coherence, which corresponds to epistemic coherence with respect to both the types of objects over which it is defined and the relations among those objects in which it consists. Nor is this merely a coincidence. Rather, evidence from literary criticism suggests

that thematic coherence can be important from a literary-evaluative standpoint because it can affect epistemically significant features of a work, such as the credibility of its themes or author. Examining the notion of thematic coherence thus reveals support for literary cognitivism, the view that a work's literary-aesthetic merits can depend on its epistemic merits. While many philosophers have recently defended this view on other grounds, this article offers something new in its attempt to show that aesthetic and epistemic value converge in the literary-critical concept of thematic coherence.

My discussion is divided into four main sections. Section II focuses on epistemic coherence, describing one classic account of it and the importance assigned to it by three major theories of knowledge and justification. In Section III, I introduce the concept of thematic coherence and draw on two extended examples of literary criticism to show that this concept maps, descriptively and normatively, onto the concept of epistemic coherence. In Section IV, I address several doubts about whether this evidence actually provides support for literary cognitivism.

II. EPISTEMIC COHERENCE

Epistemologists typically use the term *coherence* to denote a certain type of relation among the propositional contents of a person's beliefs. This relation is intuitively understood to be a matter of how tightly these belief-contents "harmonize" or "fit together" with one another.¹

A more precise account of this notion has been offered by Laurence Bonjour (1985, 1988). On Bonjour's account, coherence is a combined measure of the strength and number of three different types of connections among an agent's beliefs: logico-deductive, inductive-explanatory, and probabilistic. The first group includes logical consistency as well as relations of logical entailment. Although consistency is not a necessary condition of coherence, according to Bonjour, a set of beliefs will tend to be more coherent the more internally consistent it is and likewise the more valid deductive inferences that can be drawn among its constituent beliefs. Coherence for Bonjour is also enhanced by relations of inductive support, broadly construed as relations between evidence and conclusion in any nondeductive form of inference. Induction in this sense includes those modes of reasoning sometimes called "conduction" and "abduction." Thirdly, Bonjour thinks, the coherence of a belief set depends on its probabilistic consistency. Probabilistic consistency applies to degrees of belief or confidence. It requires that one's degree of belief or confidence always be proportioned to the probability of the belief as given by the laws of probability. According to Bonjour, this type of inconsistency detracts from a belief system's coherence in proportion to the disparity between the probability the subject assigns to the belief and that which the laws of probability assign to it.

Many epistemologists think that coherence, either by itself or in combination with other factors, can contribute positively to the epistemic status of the beliefs over which it obtains. Three otherwise disparate approaches in epistemology share this idea. According to one view, known as coherentism, how well an agent's beliefs cohere with one other another is the main condition determining whether his or her beliefs are justified.² A second view, foundationalism, maintains that some "basic" beliefs have justification that does not derive from their inferential relations with any of the agent's other beliefs. However, even on the

strongest versions of foundationalism, nonbasic beliefs are justified only insofar as they cohere with basic beliefs, and some weaker versions of foundationalism grant that coherence among nonbasic beliefs can increase their warrant.³ A third theory, known as virtue epistemology, looks to the properties of the believer rather than the properties of a belief (for example, its logical relation to other beliefs) in assessing its epistemic status. More specifically, virtue epistemologists focus on the cognitive faculties and dispositions that give rise to beliefs and that make up the believer's intellectual character. The basic thought is that there are certain cognitive abilities and traits—for example, openness to new ideas, courage and perseverance in pursuing the truth, and humility concerning the extent of one's knowledge—that generally make for more reliable or responsible cognizers and that only beliefs that arise from these cognitive "virtues" can count as apt or credit-worthy. For virtue epistemologists, the coherence of a person's beliefs does not directly bear on their warrant. However, it might nonetheless be important insofar as it reveals something about the believer's intellectual character. A lack of coherence among a person's beliefs might indicate, for example, that the person is intellectually cowardly, hypocritical, or careless, thereby providing a reason not to credit his or her beliefs. Although these theories hardly exhaust the range of available views in epistemology, their general agreement about the importance of coherence is remarkable given what an otherwise diverse bunch they are.

III. THEMATIC COHERENCE

How does the concept of coherence explicated by Bonjour relate to the kind of coherence that literary critics talk about? In what is, to my knowledge, the only other recent philosophical discussion of this question, Susan Haack observes that a variety of coherence-related concepts feature in literary-critical discourse, most of which bear only a family resemblance to the epistemic concept. According to Haack, discussions about the coherence of a literary work tend to focus, rather, on "the consistent or inconsistent behavior of its characters, the congruence or incongruence of its themes, or the unity or disunity of its mode of presentation or its language" (Haack 2004, 173).

For Haack, it seems, none of these various coherence concepts tracks logical or inferential relations among propositional attitudes. The consistency of a character's actions, says Haack, is a matter of the character's "behaving in the same way in similar circumstances" (171). Although she is less explicit about what she means by the "unity" of a work's "mode of presentation" or the "congruence" of its "themes," I take it what Haack has in mind can be illustrated by two criticisms of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* found in Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*. One is that the novel fails to maintain a consistent point of view. Whereas in some scenes "the predominant point of view is simply [Tolstoy's] own, that of the independent story-teller," says Lubbock (1957, 38), in others the story is narrated through the minds of its main characters. The failure here might be generally characterized as a lack of uniformity or sameness in a feature of the novel's style or narrative technique. I presume this kind of sameness is what Haack means by "unity" of "mode of presentation." Lubbock also complains that Tolstoy's novel oscillates between two irreducible subjects: one, the "drama of youth and age," about "the processional march of the generations, always changing, always renewed," and the other, the "drama of war and peace," about a particular episode in the history of a particular nation (28–29). Here the issue is the sameness or uniformity of the general subject matter of the novel, which is what Haack seems to mean when she speaks of the "congruity" of a work's "themes." An example Haack gives seems to confirm this reading.

In *Daniel Deronda*, there is a satisfying congruity of intertwined narratives, unified by Eliot's theme of the Power of Ignorance: Deronda, originally unaware of his origins, and no less prejudiced against Jews than those around him, discovers that he is Jewish himself, and explores what that means to him; Gwendolen Harleth, too blithely and self-confidently ignorant to realize how ignorant she really is, makes a disastrous marriage in a desperate effort to save herself when her family faces financial ruin. Here "congruous" means something like "illustrating the same theme." (2004, 173)

For Haack, then, the coherence concepts that are typically in play in literary criticism have to do with sameness—not logical or inferential connections—with respect to actions, stylistic features, or general subjects—not propositional

attitudes. None of these concepts, therefore, is the same as epistemic coherence.

Haack is right that several nonepistemic notions of coherence have currency in the literary context. One might add to her list coherence between the "sound" and "sense" of a work's language, which Alexander Pope famously calls for in his "Essay on Criticism."⁴ However, Haack's concern to distinguish these various concepts leads her to ignore a type of literary coherence that does resemble epistemic coherence. This type of coherence has to do with a work's themes, not in the sense of its subjects but in the sense of the general propositions it embodies. Such propositions, sometimes referred to as "thematic statements" or "theses," can address various subjects, including morality, politics, society, religion, and psychology, and can be expressed in various ways—sometimes through explicit authorial commentary, but perhaps more often through the thoughts and dialogue of the characters or the events of the story.⁵ A defining characteristic of themes in this sense is that they pertain to extrafictional reality; statements that pertain merely to fictional elements of a work do not properly count as thematic. For example, while it may be argued that one theme of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is that conscience is not always a good guide to right action, it may not properly be said that a theme of the novel is that Huck betrays his conscience. Literary works typically contain many nonthematic propositions about extrafictional reality, too. Take, for example, the proposition that the Mississippi River flows south or that not all Christians are compassionate. Neither of these propositions counts as a theme of *Huckleberry Finn*, although both are world directed. Such propositions are what I will call subthemes.⁶

On account of their world directedness, the themes and subthemes of a work are naturally thought of as objects of propositional attitudes held by the author. This idea is compatible with different views about the identity of the author. One might identify the author with the historical writer or, alternatively, with some author "construct," who is merely "postulated" by the reader or "implied," "apparent," or "manifested" in the work.⁷ This idea also leaves open to interpretation the precise attitude an author takes toward his or her themes. Although being a thematic proposition seems to require being endorsed to some degree by the author, it might

not make sense in all cases to regard the author's attitude toward a theme as belief. In some cases, for example, it might make more sense to regard it as some kind of implicit attitude, like that which Tamar Gendler (2008) terms "alief."

While all literary works arguably contain themes—an author must inevitably choose a subject, and this choice seems to imply, at a minimum, that this subject is worthy of attention—not all works invite thematic criticism, and not all critics are interested in such criticism even when the invitation presents itself. But when a thematically oriented critic meets a thematically rich work, one commonly finds comments regarding how well the work's themes and subthemes hang together. On occasion, one even finds an entire article or book devoted to critical discussion of this kind of coherence. Such occasions present rare opportunities to examine how critics assess thematic coherence and why they take these assessments to be relevant to literary value. In the following sections, I look at two such cases. Both suggest that literary critical assessments of thematic coherence can track the same types of relations among the same types of objects as assessments of epistemic coherence do on BonJour's account. Furthermore, they show that one reason thematic coherence has literary-evaluative significance for critics is that it can affect epistemically valuable features of a literary work, such as the credibility of its author or themes.

III.A. *Waldock on Paradise Lost*

The first case concerns Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a seventeenth-century English epic poem that promises to "justify the ways of God to man" through a retelling of the Biblical stories of Satan's fall from heaven, God's creation of Earth and man, and the Original Sin and punishment of Adam and Eve. Debate over the canonicity of *Paradise Lost* goes back to Addison and Johnson, but reached its highest pitch in the 1940s and 1950s, with such cultural heavyweights as F. R. Leavis, T. S. Eliot, and C. S. Lewis all entering the fray.⁸ In his book *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*, one of Milton's leading detractors, A. J. A. Waldock (1961), argues at length that the poem suffers from an incongruence between the themes its author explicitly asserts and those suggested implicitly in the way the story is

told—an incongruence, as Waldock says, between "commentary and presentation" (1961, 26).

Waldock points to three major instances. One is Milton's depiction of the Fall. According to Waldock, Milton portrays Adam's decision to eat the forbidden apple as motivated by an admirable love for Eve. But in so doing he forces us to doubt a basic premise of the poem: "that Adam is to be condemned" (56). The second instance is Milton's characterization of Satan, whom Milton explicitly describes as evil but implicitly portrays as admirable.

We hear about Satan's pride . . . we see something of his malice, we can perhaps deduce his folly, and we know that theoretically he and his mates are in misery. But what we are chiefly made to see and feel in the first two books are quite different things: fortitude in adversity, enormous endurance, a certain splendid recklessness, remarkable powers of rising to an occasion, extraordinary qualities of leadership (shown not least in his salutary taunts), and striking intelligence in meeting difficulties that are novel and could seem overwhelming. (77)

The third instance is Milton's characterization of God. Milton is explicitly committed to a belief in God's perfect goodness and knowledge, says Waldock. But the speeches that Milton has God give in the poem suggest "nervousness, insecurity, and doubt," as well as "flagrant disingenuousness and hypocrisy" (101, 103).

One natural way of framing Waldock's criticisms is in terms of logical consistency. It might be thought, that is, that in all three cases the problem is simply that Milton wants to assert both p and not- p at the same time—that Adam is to be blamed and that he is not to be blamed, that Satan is to be despised and not to be despised, and that God is to be revered and not to be revered. Indeed, Waldock recognizes these "logical difficulties" as one aspect of the problem (61). However, part of what makes these logical inconsistencies particularly troubling for Waldock is that in every case each member of the inconsistent pair of beliefs is bound up with a large body of other beliefs also implicit in the poem.

Take Milton's ambivalence in regard to Adam's guilt, for example. On the one hand, the assumption that Adam is guilty of a grave offense is central to Milton's project in *Paradise Lost* of justifying the ways of God to man in that it lies at the heart of the theological system from

which this problem arises and Milton's solution comes. Within this system, the belief that Adam is blameworthy is connected by relations of mutual support to myriad other beliefs—that Adam is related to God as creature to creator, that this relation obligates Adam to obey God, that man was created “sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (Milton 1993, 3.99), that such freedom is the source of man's dignity and a blessing bestowed on him out of God's goodness, and so on. Together these ideas are supposed to provide an explanation of why man is susceptible to sin and death. Thus, Waldock is hardly exaggerating when he says that “the whole of *Paradise Lost* rests on [the belief in Adam's blameworthiness]” (1961, 55). On the other hand, the belief that Adam has done no serious wrong by eating the apple, and perhaps even done right, seems to Waldock to be supported by a wealth of textual details. Added together, these details amount to a relatively coherent perspective on Adam, albeit one that is radically at odds with the first. Thus, in order to interpret Milton as definitely committed to either one of these two views of Adam, Waldock says, one “has to jettison at least half the text” (59). The logical contradictions, then, are just the tip of the iceberg, the superficial result of “deep underlying ambiguities in the theme” (42). Beneath the surface, Waldock suggests, there is a more radical disjointedness in Milton's belief set, consisting not so much in any strict logical inconsistencies as in a large-scale collapse of explanatory integration.

But there is even more to the problem than this. For in addition to both the logical and the inductive-explanatory aspects of the poem's incoherence, Waldock also observes a third aspect, which has to do with Milton's degree of confidence in the beliefs he expresses in the poem. As Waldock frequently observes, not all of Milton's doctrines are advanced with the same degree of conviction. In some cases, the ideas are stated “flatly and confidently,” while in others they are couched in “less forthright and certain” terms (107–108). Waldock thinks it is clear, for example, that “Milton believed in spiritual regeneration—*really* believed in it” (124), whereas he thinks Milton “obviously is not prepared to go the stake for his belief in the materiality of angels,” seeing as there is “at least some degree of hesitation” in his description in Book 5 of the angels' bodily functionality (107–108). But Waldock suggests that Milton's degree of confidence in his beliefs is not

always proportioned to the evidence he presents. For Waldock, this is part of the problem with Milton's beliefs about Adam's blameworthiness. It is not just that Milton undermines his own belief in Adam's guilt, but that in spite of this he still “requires us, not tentatively, not half-heartedly (for there can be no place really for half-heartedness here) but with the full weight of our minds to believe . . . that [Adam] did wrong” (55–56). Waldock's suggestion here seems to be that Milton's degree of confidence is not probabilistically consistent.

According to the account presented in Section II, epistemic coherence is a relation among propositional attitudes and depends on three main types of relations between them: logico-deductive, inductive-explanatory, and probabilistic. In criticizing the coherence of Milton's themes in *Paradise Lost*, Waldock construes these themes as propositions believed or accepted by Milton and takes into account the same three types of relations among these propositions. Moreover, there is evidence that Waldock's concern with these connections is partly epistemic. In particular, the language in which he often criticizes the poem's incoherencies suggests its failure to provide adequate justification for the views it expresses. The poem's ambivalence about Adam's guilt, for example, leads to a failure “to *prove* the doctrine that God at all times and in all circumstances must be obeyed,” while other incoherencies prevent the poem from “persuading us” of some view or another (55, 125). Waldock's critique of *Paradise Lost* thus suggests a close parallel between thematic and epistemic coherence. Not only does thematic coherence pertain to the same types of objects and track the same types of connections among those objects, but the literary-critical value of thematic coherence also seems tied to its epistemic value.

III.B. *Bier on War and Peace*

My second case comes from the long-running critical discussion over the literary merits of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Taking its direction from Henry James's early criticism of the novel as a “loose, baggy monster” (1908, x), this discussion has generally focused on the novel's internal coherence, with some critics continuing to insist with James that its weaknesses in this regard undermine its claim to being a truly great novel. One such critic

is Jesse Bier (1971), who extensively criticizes *War and Peace* for lacking thematic coherence.

Bier's criticisms of *War and Peace*, like Waldock's criticisms of *Paradise Lost*, are directed toward three different types of relations among the work's themes: logical, inductive-explanatory, and probabilistic. An example of logical inconsistency that Bier points to is "Tolstoi's failure to reconcile the doctrine of pre-determinism with the manifest workings of chance in his novel" (1971, 122). A major theme of *War and Peace*, as Bier and many other critics understand it, is that history is the working out of an inscrutable divine plan, not the result of the actions of "great men" like Napoleon. Tolstoy explicitly endorses this theory in the infamous epilogue to *War and Peace* and also tries to convey it implicitly through his account of Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812, in which the events unfold independently of and ultimately contrary to the will of Napoleon himself. Only the Russian commander Kutuzov, who understands that history marches toward an inexorable fate, and the best one can do is to step out of its path, gets his way. But what the story of Napoleon in *War and Peace* actually conveys, Bier thinks, is Tolstoy's belief that history is chaotic and unpredictable. And this view does not square with the story of Kutuzov, which in fact suggests the view that history can be predicted and does have its "great men" after all.

Bier claims that *War and Peace* also exhibits inconsistency in its general attitude toward the meaningfulness of life and the nobility of mankind, alternating between expressions of "sentimental optimism or humanitarianism" on the one hand and "misanthropy and nihilism" on the other (118). Tolstoy betrays his essentially unstable vision of life, says Bier, through that of his hero Pierre, who at times in the novel can see only "the petty, the humdrum, and the meaningless" in everything, but at other times is overcome with a joyous sense of "the great, the eternal, and the infinite" and filled with an all-embracing love for his fellow man (Tolstoy 2008, 1104). Bier interprets Pierre's radical mood swings in the novel as symptomatic of "an adolescent or barbaric manic-depression" in its author (1971, 119).

Besides its "failure to reconcile contrasting themes" such as these, Bier also criticizes the novel for its "failure to unify closely related themes" (127). Bier wonders why, for example, Tolstoy never draws a connection between his

obvious respect for nature as a powerful agent in human history—above all, it is winter that vanquishes Napoleon in the novel—and his apparent admiration for "naturalness" as a human character trait: "Is it too much to ask of a great author to detect the potentialities of his closest themes?" Bier asks rhetorically. "Is he not responsible for imaginatively fusing and perhaps developing the intellectual and narrative consequences of two great positive ideas like naturalness of character and the role of Nature in men's affairs, especially since he has pointed them for us?" (127–128). The problem here is not that these ideas are logically incompatible, but that there is no overarching idea in the novel under which both can be explained. This second line of criticism thus evidences a concern for the inductive-explanatory coherence of the novel's themes.

A third line of criticism implicit in many of Bier's comments is that Tolstoy sometimes places more confidence in his beliefs than is warranted by the evidence he presents for these beliefs. For example, Bier claims that the novel does not support "the potency of [Tolstoy's] conviction" in "the ideal of loving-kindness" (119). Likewise, Bier suggests that the tension between Tolstoy's "belief that large predetermining forces maneuver for the total good . . . [and] his frequent view of universal and human chaos" is made more problematic by his "devout" acceptance of the former view (122). Such comments suggest a concern with the consistency of Tolstoy's beliefs not only in a logical but also a probabilistic sense.

Unlike Waldock, Bier does not directly connect thematic incoherence with a lack of persuasive or justificatory force. The immediately underlying concern for Bier is what the thematic incoherence of *War and Peace* reveals about the character of its author. Yet it is clearly Tolstoy's intellectual character that is in question. For what Bier thinks the novel's inconsistencies reveal is that its author lacked the courage to accept certain difficult truths, such as the meaninglessness of life and the inability of individuals to influence the course of history. The novel seems to vacillate about these truths, according to Bier, because Tolstoy "lacked the interior courage . . . that brave will, above all, to look steadily down" (121–122). Bier's objection about the thematic incoherence of *War and Peace* thus seems grounded in an objection to a kind of intellectual cowardice that this incoherence manifests in the author.

In Bier's critique of *War and Peace*, then, we find further support for the two main conclusions suggested by Waldo's critique of *Paradise Lost*: one, that judgments of thematic coherence and judgments of epistemic coherence track the same types of relations among the same types of objects and, two, that the literary-critical value of thematic coherence is partly rooted in its epistemic value. It should be noted that these claims are logically independent: one could accept the first without the second and vice versa. However, insofar as each helps to explain the other, the two claims are also mutually reinforcing. If the interest and critical import of thematic coherence in literature did not come at least in part from its epistemic value, it would be difficult to explain why the concept nonetheless tracks the same set of relations as epistemic coherence. Contrariwise, if thematic coherence did not supervene on the same set of relations as epistemic coherence, it would be difficult to explain why assessments of thematic coherence seem laden with epistemic judgments.

One might disagree with Bier's interpretation of *War and Peace*. Perhaps, one might think, the thematic tensions in the novel are less plausibly interpreted as symptoms of intellectual cowardice or manic depression than as manifestations of a mind grappling with difficult issues and experiencing the pull of opposing views. It is not that Tolstoy is unwittingly committed to contradictory beliefs, but that he is capable of inhabiting and recognizing the appeal of competing outlooks. In this case, the novel's thematic tensions would be blameless, or perhaps even virtuous, from an epistemic standpoint.

It may well turn out, in light of a closer and more thorough examination of the textual details, that this is indeed a better reading than Bier's of *War and Peace*. But whether Bier has correctly interpreted *War and Peace* seems beside the point. For even if we suppose that the thematic tensions in *War and Peace* reflect Tolstoy's well-justified ambivalence regarding the questions of life's meaning and man's free will, it seems implausible to think that every work that appears thematically incoherent should be interpreted in the same way. This would amount to thinking that no work could ever be faulted for thematic incoherence. Were it so, then Bier and Waldo would be guilty not merely of misinterpreting two particular works of literature but of failing to grasp a general literary-critical principle ruling out the *kind* of

interpretation they offer. Regardless of whether this kind of interpretation fits *War and Peace*, however, it seems plausible to think that it fits at least *some* works.

This response might seem to concede too much. If it is granted that a work can in principle exhibit thematic tensions without being epistemically flawed, must it not also be granted that the literary-critical value of thematic coherence is not grounded in its epistemic value? The answer depends, in part, on whether the kind of works in question—that is, ones in which the thematic tensions are taken to reflect the author's ambivalence or indecision between opposing but equally attractive views, rather than the author's unwitting commitment to contradictory positions—can really be said to be thematically incoherent. I return to this question in Section IV.B below.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

IV.A. *Is Thematic Coherence an Epistemic Merit?*

According to the view known as literary cognitivism, literary works can have epistemic value, and features that contribute to their epistemic value can for that reason contribute to their literary value. The two literary critical discussions we have just seen suggest that thematic coherence is one such feature. Critics regard thematic coherence as a literary merit in part because they take it to be an epistemic merit. Examples of literary criticism such as these thus provide evidence for literary cognitivism, assuming we can trust literary critics to know what count as literary and epistemic merits.

The first part of this assumption seems safe: if anyone appreciates the norms that govern the practice of literary criticism, it would seem to be those who are professionally engaged in this practice. However, one might argue that the fact that literary critics think thematic coherence is an epistemic merit gives us no reason to believe it. Indeed, one might think that literary fictions demonstrate an obvious objection to this assumption. For literary fictions are products of the imagination, and as such they often depict worlds that bear little resemblance to the actual one. Yet in the hands of a skilled author, these worlds, despite being unrealistic, may be carefully

constructed so as to be highly coherent. The fact that a literary work is coherent, then, does not seem to give us any reason to believe it.

Some of the force of this objection, I think, arises from a confusion between thematic coherence and what might be called storyworld coherence. Whereas thematic coherence pertains to general propositions that the author is presumed to accept in regard to the actual world, storyworld coherence pertains to features of the fictional world represented in the work, such as the characters, settings, and events it describes. These features can be described as coherent in various senses that are consistent with their being described as unrealistic. For example, the events of a work may be said to be coherent to the extent that each one follows as a causal consequence from what comes before and provides a sufficient causal basis for what comes after. In this sense, the events of a work may be highly coherent while nonetheless being unrealistic in the sense of having never occurred, or being unlikely to occur, in the actual world. The same is true of fictional characters. A fictional character may be described as coherent to the extent that he or she acts in ways that seem necessary or probable given the personality he or she has been ascribed and the fictional circumstances in which he or she has been placed. A character may be coherent in this sense, however, without resembling any person that exists or is likely to exist in the actual world.

It is true, then, that storyworlds can be highly coherent without being realistic. But such storyworlds need not imply unrealistic themes. Even the wildest fantasies and most far-fetched science fictions can convey true general propositions about ethics, politics, or psychology. In fact, the extent to which such storyworlds are coherent in either of the senses described above would seem to depend on how realistic they are with respect to certain general propositions they contain. For example, a story whose characters are highly coherent in the sense that they act in accordance with their ascribed personalities would have to contain realistic assumptions about the types of actions that accord with the types of personalities in question. The fact that fictional *storyworlds* can be coherent and unrealistic at the same time, then, does not go to show that a work's *themes* can be coherent and unrealistic at the same time.

Nevertheless, it does seem possible for a literary work to embody a highly coherent yet wholly

false set of themes. This possibility admittedly threatens the view that thematic coherence by itself is an epistemic merit. However, it does not mean that thematic coherence cannot contribute to the epistemic standing of a work's themes. In particular, it remains plausible to think that thematic coherence can enhance the epistemic standing of a work's themes where some of the work's themes or subthemes already have independent justification. That is, just as the validity of a deductive argument can "transmit" justification from the premises to the conclusion, so, too, can coherence transmit justification from some propositions to others. In fact, on BonJour's view, the inferential relations between premises and conclusion in a valid deductive argument are just one type of coherence relation. Thus, if the validity of an argument can transmit justification from some propositions to others, then coherence can do the same *a fortiori*.

The objection under consideration, then, does not threaten the view that thematic coherence can be an epistemic merit under certain conditions. Furthermore, these conditions—namely, that some of the work's themes or subthemes be independently warranted—normally seem to obtain. This is most obviously true of works of psychological and social realism, which deliberately aim to represent people and society in accordance with general principles that are true of the actual world and that most readers already have reason to accept. However, even nonrealistic works of fiction typically embody a large number of assumptions that readers already justifiably share. Swift's Lilliputians, despite their inhuman proportions, are otherwise governed by the same physical, biological, and psychological laws as actual humans, for example. Readers thus come pre-equipped with justification for many of the general propositions literary works express. Noël Carroll (2002), David Davies (2007), and I (Repp 2014) have argued that literary works can also equip readers with coherence-independent justification for their claims insofar as they can function like philosophical and scientific thought experiments. That is, literary works can present us with imaginary scenarios that provide justification for claims by eliciting sound intuitive responses in their favor. A full defense of this claim is beyond the scope of this article, but the main point here does not depend on it. Thematic coherence need not yield justification "from scratch" in order

to be an epistemic merit. All that is required is that readers have independent justification for accepting some of the work's themes, and the knowledge readers bring to the work is typically sufficient to meet this requirement.

IV.B. *Is Thematic Coherence a Literary Merit?*

If this response to the first objection is sound, then literary critics are typically justified in assuming that thematic coherence is an epistemic merit. More boldly, however, one might question whether they are justified in assuming that it is a literary merit. The literary value of thematic coherence might be challenged, in particular, on the grounds that thematic *incoherence* in literature can sometimes be a literary merit. In an apparent endorsement of this claim, Haack says early on in her article that “the effort to express contrasting moods or competing values . . . can be artistically fruitful” (2004, 170). Later, she offers several examples evidently intended to support this claim.

We enjoy not only narrative parallels but also contrasting intertwined plots and skillfully sliced and spliced narratives; we appreciate the well-chosen anachronism of the modern-dress production of a Shakespeare play that successfully conveys its lessons for our time; and we find the well-chosen grammatical incongruity not only a rich source of verbal humor, but also, sometimes, a wonderfully effective literary device: as with the pleasant shock of the opening line of chapter 5 of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*: “My landlady was a voluble man”—a startling verbal incongruity that is exactly right given her cast of hermaphrodite, but otherwise very human, characters. (174)

In a similar vein, Matthew Kieran (1997) has argued that much of the interest and value of Dadaist art lies in its deliberate use of techniques that fracture our experience of reality and subvert our conventional expectation of order and intelligibility. According to Kieran, the incoherence resulting from these techniques is artistically valuable because it allows us to “experience what sheer chaos . . . might be like, and perhaps what it would be appropriate to think and feel, without the potentially terrible cost which would follow in the real world” (1997, 388).

In assessing these arguments, it is important, once again, to keep clear the distinction between

thematic (in)coherence and other nonthematic forms of (in)coherence. Narratives that are “skillfully sliced and spliced” or contain anachronisms may lack storyworld coherence, that is, continuity or connectedness among the fictional events, characters, and settings represented in the work; but storyworld incoherence is not the same as thematic incoherence. Nor is the kind of incoherence we find in Dadaist literature—such as the purely phonetic poems of Hugo Ball or the randomly assembled newspaper clippings of Tristan Tzara—which consists in the absence of conventional semantic or syntactic relations among words and sentences, not in a lack of consistency among ideas embodied in the work as a whole.

Haack's and Kieran's examples thus do not directly challenge the artistic value of thematic coherence. Moreover, in explaining why certain types of nonthematic incoherence can be artistically valuable, both Haack and Kieran seem to affirm the artistic value of thematic coherence. For Haack, an anachronistic production of a Shakespeare play can be artistically satisfying when it “successfully conveys its lessons for our time.” It is thus because it can contribute to coherence at the thematic level, Haack seems to think, that this form of storyworld incoherence can be an artistic merit. Likewise, for Kieran, the disordering techniques used in Dadaist literature can be artistically rewarding because they convey thematic ideas concerning “what sheer chaos . . . might be like, and perhaps what it would be appropriate to think and feel” in response to it. Again, the thought seems to be that nonthematic incoherence can be an artistic merit insofar as it lends itself to an interesting and coherent set of themes.

Incidentally, some of Tristan Tzara's (1981) own remarks about the incoherence of Dadaist art suggest a similar line of reasoning. In passages like the following, Tzara attempts to justify the incoherence of Dadaist art in terms of the coherence of its thematic significance.

We are often told that we are incoherent, but into this word people try to put an insult that it is rather hard for me to fathom. Everything is incoherent. The gentleman who decides to take a bath but goes to the movies instead. The one who wants to be quiet but says things that haven't even entered his head. Another who has a precise idea on some subject but succeeds only in expressing the opposite in words which for him are a poor translation. There is no logic. Only relative

necessities discovered *a posteriori*, valid not in any exact sense but only as explanations. The acts of life have no beginning or end. Everything happens in a completely idiotic way. (1981, 111)⁹

What justifies the incoherence of Dadaist literature, Tzara seems to be saying, is that it makes sense at a thematic level. Behind it lies a coherent set of themes: that “everything is incoherent” and “everything happens in a completely idiotic way.”

The examples canvassed so far, then, provide no support for the claim that thematic incoherence can be an artistic merit; indeed, they arguably suggest just the opposite. Amy Mullin has offered another argument for this claim, however. According to Mullin, when “the themes in question are significant ones and the thematic incoherence in the artwork reflects the difficulty commonly conceived to be involved in reconciling these disparate themes and concepts,” thematic tensions can be artistically valuable insofar as they “give the reader an opportunity to reflect on tensions involved in simultaneously holding different ideas, both of which have some strong appeal” (Mullin, personal communication).

Let us imagine a work that meets all of Mullin’s conditions: its thematic issues are significant and difficult to resolve, and the work prompts the kind of cognitively valuable reflection Mullin describes. For convenience, we may suppose this work is *War and Peace*. On the one hand, it is open to question whether the cognitively valuable effects of this work’s thematic incoherence should count as an artistic merit. Even literary cognitivists acknowledge that literary works can have cognitive benefits that are not artistically relevant. Reading *War and Peace* might also improve one’s SAT score, for example, but such an effect would seem to be too incidental to the work to be considered an artistic merit. Whether the work’s tendency to make us reflect on the tensions between different views about free will and life meaning should be counted as an artistic merit thus seems to depend on whether this effect is part of the design of the work. If not, then it arguably should not be considered an artistic merit.

If so, however, then it is open to question whether the work is really thematically incoherent. For if the work is designed to prompt reflection on the tensions between opposing views on free will and life meaning, then it seems that these tensions themselves, and not the opposing

views, ought to be regarded as the thematic focus of the work. The novel’s expressions of opposing views would then be in the service of a more general, coherent set of themes about the difficulty of reconciling these views. Mullin’s suggestion, then, seems to face the following dilemma. Either the rewards of reflecting on a work’s thematic tensions are external to the design of the work, and therefore the work should not be credited for them, or these rewards are internal to the design of the work, and therefore the work is not really thematically incoherent.

Regardless of whether this problem can be overcome, however, Mullin’s idea poses no necessary threat to my claim that thematic coherence can be a literary merit. This is because the kind of cognitive good that Mullin associates with thematic incoherence is distinct from the kind I claim for thematic coherence. Mullin’s claim is that reflection on a work’s incoherent themes can yield insights into the tensions between different ideas and develop cognitive skills, while mine is that thematic coherence yields warrant for believing the work’s themes. Both claims could thus be accepted without contradiction. The resulting view would allow thematic coherence to count as an artistic merit insofar as it gives warrant to a work’s themes while allowing thematic incoherence to count as an artistic merit insofar as it promotes cognitively valuable reflection on tensions between opposing ideas. Since, on this view, both coherent and incoherent literary works would be capable of having cognitive value, some literary cognitivists might even find this view attractive.

One further argument for the literary value of thematic incoherence, however, must now be dealt with. According to this argument, which was noted earlier in Section III.B, thematic tensions in a literary work can sometimes be a literary merit because they can sometimes reflect an author’s justified ambivalence toward a complicated issue or manifest intellectual virtues such as open- or fair-mindedness. This argument challenges both the literary and epistemic value of thematic coherence. In fact, it cuts even deeper than this, for what it claims about the themes of a literary work could just as easily be claimed about the beliefs of an ordinary epistemic agent. More fundamentally, then, it raises a question about the value of epistemic coherence. That is: when it comes to certain issues, particularly those on which opposing views

are supported by equally strong reasons, is it not justified or virtuous to be of two minds?

For this argument to succeed, it is not enough that the answer to this question be affirmative. What must also be true is that the ambivalence that seems like a justified or virtuous response to some difficult issues really amounts to incoherence. The strongest line of defense against this argument, I think, would focus its resistance on this point. When opposed views are supported by equally strong reasons, the proper response, it seems, is not to adopt an incoherent set of beliefs or attitudes, but rather to suspend judgment. While it may be intellectually virtuous to remain ambivalent in the sense of continuing to appreciate the attractions of opposing views, to be ambivalent in this sense is not to simultaneously hold the beliefs that *p* and that not-*p*. Rather, it is to hold a separate belief that *p* and not-*p* are both supported by strong reasons. Virtuous ambivalence should not be confused with incoherence.

If this is right, then literary works in which thematic tensions seem to manifest an intellectually virtuous appreciation for the attractions of opposing views should not be interpreted as thematically incoherent. But suppose it is wrong. Assuming the objection cannot be met some other way, then a more complicated epistemology of coherence, one that recognizes the epistemic ambivalence of coherence itself, would have to be accepted from the outset. The simple view that thematic coherence is always a literary merit because it is always an epistemic merit would thus have to be jettisoned. However, the objection does not deny that the literary value of thematic coherence is tied to its epistemic value. On the contrary, it affirms that claim. Thus, even if this objection were granted, the main contention of this article, that the concept of thematic coherence tracks the concept of epistemic coherence, would not be compromised.

iv.c. *Is Thematic Coherence a Literary Merit Because It Is an Epistemic Merit?*

A third possible objection to my account accepts that thematic coherence has both literary and cognitive value but denies that there is a connection between the two. According to this objection, thematic coherence is a literary merit not because it is a cognitive merit but for some other reason.

One proposal, that of Lamarque and Olsen, is that thematic coherence “acquire[s] value through contributing . . . to the definition of a humanly interesting content” (1994, 265). Whether a work’s thematic content is “humanly interesting” presumably depends on the subject matter of its themes—whether the themes pertain to issues that are of deep and lasting concern to human beings. However, it seems that a group of uninteresting themes could be just as coherent as a group of interesting ones, since the factors that affect the coherence of a set of propositions—namely, the number and strength of the logico-deductive, inductive-explanatory, and probabilistic relations among them—seem independent of the subject matter to which the propositions pertain. Thus, it is hard to see how the thematic coherence of a work *could* make its themes more “humanly interesting.”

Alternatively, it might be claimed that the thematic coherence of a work contributes to its literary value by contributing to its unity.¹⁰ The advantage of this proposal is that there is intuitively a much tighter connection between thematic coherence and unity than between thematic coherence and humanly interesting content. Indeed, the connection seems so tight one might suspect it of being merely trivial or tautologous. One challenge for this proposal, then, is to specify a notion of unity that it is clearly distinct from the notion of thematic coherence. A further challenge is to ensure that the type of unity specified is invariably valuable from a literary standpoint. Not all forms of unity will meet this condition. The type of unity lacking in picaresque novels, for example, seems at best only variably valuable from a literary standpoint, since picaresque novels are not generally regarded as inferior literary forms on account of lacking this type of unity.¹¹

The task for anyone who claims that thematic coherence contributes to literary value by contributing to unity is thus to clarify the relevant notion of unity, and several constraints make this task tricky. However, even supposing this claim could be clarified in a convincing way, it would pose no threat to my claim that thematic coherence contributes to literary value by contributing to the credibility of a work’s author or themes. For as long as one accepts that thematic coherence can contribute to literary value in more than one way, one can consistently maintain both claims. Like Mullin’s idea that thematic incoherence can be

cognitively valuable, the idea that thematic coherence is artistically valuable for noncognitive reasons need not be false for my own view to be true.

V. CONCLUSION

I have argued in this article that the literary critical concept of thematic coherence has the same criteria as epistemic coherence and that thematic coherence can add literary value to a work at least in part because it can add epistemic value by enhancing the warrant of a work's themes or the trustworthiness of its author. Such features might add epistemic value to literary works in various ways. Some regard warrant and trustworthiness as epistemically valuable properties in their own right, worth admiring and seeking independently of any other goods to which they might conduce. More commonly, however, warrant and trustworthiness are thought to be connected to important epistemic goods such as truth and knowledge. The more warranted a work's themes or trustworthy the author, many philosophers think, the more likely it is that those themes are true and that in accepting such truths readers gain knowledge, as distinct from mere true belief.

Thus, thematic coherence may increase the epistemic value of a literary work directly, insofar as it increases the warrant of the work's themes or the trustworthiness of its author, or indirectly, insofar as increasing the warrant of the work's themes or trustworthiness of its author in turn makes the work more valuable as a source of other epistemic goods such as truth and knowledge.

My analysis of thematic coherence provides novel support for the more general view known as literary cognitivism, which holds that epistemic or cognitive merits can be literary merits. On this view, literary value is not "autonomous" or isolated from other types of value, depending solely on a work's formal properties or its tendency to elicit some kind of *sui generis* "aesthetic" attitude. Rather, literary works are valued at least in part for their ability to illuminate reality, to deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. The standards for evaluating literary works thus include some of the same criteria by which we evaluate works of science, history, and other forms of "cognitive" discourse.

Literary cognitivists differ in terms of the degree to which they think literary value depends

on epistemic value and the type of epistemic rewards they think are most important to literary appreciation. The account of thematic coherence I have defended in this article points to a form of literary cognitivism that is moderate in the first respect and "propositionalist" in the second. That is, it suggests a version of literary cognitivism that allows that epistemic value is just one among a plurality of values that can contribute to literary excellence, and it emphasizes the capacity of literary works to provide epistemic goods associated with propositional knowledge, such as true or warranted beliefs, as opposed to skills, imaginative acquaintance, or other putative forms of non-propositional knowledge. My account specifically emphasizes the literary importance of thematic warrant and authorial trustworthiness, epistemic goods that literary cognitivists—even those inclined toward propositionalism—have tended to neglect. Thus, this article offers not only a new argument for literary cognitivism, but also gestures toward a new kind of literary cognitivism, one that focuses more on the ways in which literary works can justify their themes than on the truth of those themes. This view might offer an attractive alternative to cognitivists who are uneasy about the importance of thematic truth in literary assessment but continue to see thematic propositions as central to the epistemic rewards of literature.^{12,13}

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an appropriate relation to a system of beliefs that is itself coherent, while weaker versions treat coherence as necessary but not sufficient for justification and in some cases even exempt certain types of beliefs (for example, nonempirical beliefs) from the coherence requirement.

3. Robert Audi (1993), Michael Huemer (2001), and Susan Haack (1993) all defend such weaker forms of foundationalism.

4. The two should "echo" each other, according to Pope. Pope offers several illustrations of this principle:

Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,

Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.
(ll. 366–373)

5. The term 'thesis' comes from Monroe Beardsley (1958, 403–404). Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen use the term 'thematic statement' (1994, 401–402).

6. What distinguishes these propositions from themes is an interesting question, which I unfortunately do not have space to pursue here. The short answer would seem to be that themes are more central or important to the work than subthematic propositions, but it is not easy to say precisely what it means for a proposition to be central to a work.

7. Robert Stecker (1987) defends the traditional practice of identifying this agent with the historical author. Alexander Nehamas (1981), Wayne Booth (1983), Kendall Walton (1979), and Berys Gaut (2007) all defend author "construct" views.

8. A summary of the debate can be found in Bergonzi (1960).

9. It is also interesting to note that according to several scholars one reason for Dada's decline was the fact that the incoherence in their art failed to serve a fully coherent ideology. Besides the idea that reality itself is illogical and "idiotic," the incoherence of Dada art was supposed to convey a disgust with art itself, as traditionally conceived and practiced. But in choosing to express their anti-art message through artistic means, Dadaists seemed to be caught in a contradiction. It is commonly said that this tension was a major source of the discontent with Dada that motivated the more positive turn toward Surrealism. See, for example, Hopkins (2004, 17).

10. This is perhaps the view expressed in Beardsley's claim that "when a doctrine is embodied in a literary work, its coherence will help to unify the work—as Lucretius' metaphysics becomes the underlying unity of *On the Nature of Things*" (1958, 428).

11. For arguments along these lines, see Stampp (1975) and Lord (1964, 1967, 1978).

12. The *locus classicus* for objections to truth-centered cognitivism is Stolnitz (1992).

13. Thanks to Jennifer Nagel, Tom Hurka, and Amy Mullin for feedback on early drafts of this article and to an anonymous referee at this journal for valuable comments during the review process.

1. For simplicity's sake, I will often use *beliefs* as shorthand for *belief-contents* in what follows.

2. The strongest versions of coherentism hold that an agent's belief that *p* is justified if and only if it sufficiently coheres with other beliefs the agent holds or stands in