

Philosophy and fiction: common problems, uncommon solutions? (By D*n*ld D*vids*n?)

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Abstract. I consider a proposal for what the relation between philosophy and fiction is: the same problems appear in both, but fiction explores solutions which are not available to philosophers. I use Joe Horton's all-or-nothing problem to illustrate the proposal, but pose an objection to it.

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"In danger of death am I

But still need an explanation why"

What is the relation between philosophy and fiction? Philosophy as a field is large – with topics including what there fundamentally is, what we can know, and why be moral. Fiction too is large – with its many genres. The sensible answer is that there are various relationships between various parts. I wish to focus on one proposed kind of relationship: in some cases both philosopher and fiction author share a problem, but the author explores solutions which are not available to the philosopher.

To illustrate the proposal, take a problem which Joe Horton developed by adapting an example from Derek Parfit, namely the all-or-nothing problem. This is the situation in abstract. Two children are at risk of death. It is a severe risk to your health or life even for you to save one, and so it is morally acceptable for you to leave them to die. But if you do attempt to save, there's no greater cost with saving two than one. In which case, it seems morally wrong to save

just one. But then saving two and saving none are the morally acceptable options: saving one is somehow worse than not saving any. The problem is how to avoid this counterintuitive conclusion.

According to the proposal, the fiction writer can explore solutions not available to the philosopher and that is the proper role of fiction regarding the problem. One such solution comes to mind readily: any attempt to save one is sure to go wrong. If two children are at risk of drowning and you take your boat out to where they are, they begin to cling to each other as you approach. It is as if they understood your troubling intention in advance. How can you now save only one? If they are trapped in a building and to jump into your arms would lead these arms to break and you withdraw after the first child jumps, the cradled child mysteriously dies as well. A philosopher who proposed these solutions in a research seminar would find they are dismissed as speculations about the nature of reality that we have no reason to accept – in practice they would not even be mentioned, says the proposal. But there's nothing stopping the fiction writer from introducing them. The concepts of philosophy and fiction are used to organize a plurality of solutions, some placed under the heading of the former, some under the latter.

However, the proposal faces an objection: “You have just written a work of philosophy and incorporated solutions apparently only available in fiction.” The domain of philosophy cannot be so easily restricted, nor fiction I believe.

Reference

Horton, J. 2017. The All-or-nothing Problem. *Journal of Philosophy* 114: 94-102.