THE REAL FOUNDATION OF FICTIONAL WORLDS

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Abstract

I argue that judgements of what is 'true in a fiction' presuppose the Reality Assumption: the assumption that everything that is (really) true is fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work. By contrast with the more familiar Reality Principle, the Reality Assumption is not a rule for inferring implied content from what is explicit. Instead it provides an array of real-world truths that can be used in such inferences. I claim that the Reality Assumption is essential to our ability to understand stories, drawing on a range of empirical evidence that demonstrates our reliance on it in narrative comprehension. However, the Reality Assumption has several unintuitive consequences, not least that what is fictionally the case includes countless facts that neither authors nor readers could (or should) ever consider. I argue that such consequences provide no reason to reject the Reality Assumption. I conclude that we should take fictions, like non-fictions, to be about the real world.

Keywords

Truth in fiction; Reality Principle; prescriptions to imagine; fictionality; Walton, Kendall; Lewis, David

1. Introduction

Readers of fiction are adept at understanding what is 'fictionally true' even though this goes well beyond what the text makes explicit. We know that Candide has blood in his veins rather than oatmeal and that Sethe cannot become invisible at will, although the relevant works never say so. We also recognize fictional truths that contradict the explicit text. We know that Huck Finn is right to help the slave Jim escape and that Lolita is not Humbert Humbert's willing partner, despite the narrators' statements to the contrary. These observations pose a puzzle. How do we draw and justify conclusions about what is true in the fiction? Philosophers have answered this question by postulating *principles of generation* [Walton 1990], rules for making inferences from what is explicit to what is fictionally the case.

In this paper I do not defend a new principle. Rather, I claim that any such principle presupposes the *Reality Assumption:* the assumption that everything that is (really) true is also fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work.[1] The Reality Assumption has several surprising consequences, such as that the fictional truths go far beyond what authors or readers could know. Yet if we did not take this assumption as a starting point for interpretation, we would fail to understand even the most basic stories. In what follows I explain and defend the Reality Assumption, distinguishing it from the more familiar Reality Principle. I then reply to objections. I conclude that given the fundamental role of the Reality Assumption, we should construe fictions as inviting us to imagine about the real world.

2. Truth in Fiction

I begin by sketching the conception of fictional truth assumed in the rest of the paper. Intuitively, what is fictionally true is whatever obtains in the 'world of the story'. Some

[1] This is similar to Evans's [1982: 354] *incorporation principle* for pretence. Lewis [1983: 269] articulates the same idea but goes on to defend the Reality Principle.

philosophers take the intuition literally, spelling out fictional truth as truth at a set of possible worlds (most famously Lewis [1983]). This approach faces numerous challenges. In particular, by contrast with possible worlds, fictional worlds are typically incomplete—leaving many features indeterminate—and often impossible [Woodward 2011]. Perhaps these worries can be addressed. However, I prefer a functional account along the lines proposed by Kendall Walton [1990], for whom what is fictionally true, or simply *fictional*, is what a work of fiction prescribes that readers imagine.[2] This analysis is silent as to whether the content to be imagined should be specified by possible worlds or in some other way, focusing instead on the role of fictional truth in our engagement with stories.

Although prescriptions to imagine are sometimes associated with mandates, we need not imagine everything that is fictional. If we want to understand a work, some kinds of imagining are required. One could not grasp the basic plot of *Gulliver's Travels* without imagining Gulliver travelling to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, and so forth. A fuller appreciation demands recognizing how mistaken Gulliver is about himself (something children often miss). Still, even a full appreciation does not require imagining that Gulliver has internal organs, though it is surely fictional that he does. It is helpful to distinguish these obligations. I will say that a work *mandates* imagining that P if failure to imagine that P would mean falling below a minimum threshold for comprehension. A work *prescribes* imagining that P if we should imagine that P to have a full appreciation of the story. Finally, a work *invites* imagining that P on the following condition: if the question arises and we must choose between imagining that P and imagining that not-P, we are required to imagine the former.[3] What is fictional in a work is what the work invites imagining. Although we need never imagine that Gulliver has internal organs, if the question came up it would be absurd to deny that he does.

At the same time we may, compatibly with the content of a story, imagine a great deal that is not fictional. I might imagine Gulliver with brown eyes and you might imagine him with blue, and someone else might not imagine his eye colour at all. That Gulliver's eyes are blue is not fictional, because if the question arose, we would be obligated to imagine neither that his eyes are blue nor that they are not. Given that (as far as I know) Swift leaves Gulliver's eye colour indeterminate, we are *authorized* or *permitted* to fill in this aspect of the fictional world as we desire.[4] In short, we are invited to imagine a great deal more than we should imagine for full understanding or must imagine for minimal understanding, but less than we are permitted to imagine.

Walton says little about the nature of the imagining invited by works of fiction. At a minimum, imagining that P requires forming a mental representation with the content P. When we read a story, though, we do not simply imagine a series of propositions. Instead, we imagine a *world*.[5] In particular, we construct a complex mental representation of what the story is about: the individuals, settings, situations, and events the work portrays. Psychologists call this a *situation model* [van Dijk and Kintsch 1983] or *mental model* [Johnson-Laird 1983]. It is a 'mental microworld of what the story is about', constructed by making inferences, usually automatically and subconsciously, from the explicit text, using

[2] Walton [2015] has recently argued that this is a necessary but not sufficient condition for fictionality. I believe that sufficient conditions can be given (see Woodward [2014: 830–2]). These details are irrelevant here.
[3] This is Walton's [1990: 40] most careful formulation. Note that where fictions prescribe inconsistent imaginings we should not choose between P and not-P; we are invited imagine both (whether or not we are able).
[4] Thanks to Manuel García-Carpintero and members of the PhD seminar at the University of Barcelona for discussion of these different conditional obligations.
[5] In this respect we engage not only in propositional but also in *objectual* imagining [Yablo 1993].

prior knowledge to develop and update a coherent representation of the individuals and events described [Graesser, Olde, and Klettke 2002: 234]. Psychologists postulate situation models to explain readers' capacity to understand stories, and they deploy this concept in explaining how readers are 'transported' to narrative worlds [Gerrig 1993] or take the 'mental leap' into imagined worlds [Zwaan 1999].

Now, psychologists do not restrict themselves to fiction; they deploy these representations to explain comprehension of stories more generally. In my view non-fiction narratives invite us to imagine 'worlds' just as much as fictions do [Friend 2008:155–6]. For present purposes, though, it is the content that is mentally represented which matters, rather than the attitude we take toward it.[6] Non-fiction stories clearly invite readers to form mental representations of what they are about. If what is fictional is what is so according to a work of fiction, this should not differ *in kind* from what is so according to a work of non-fiction. The point is obvious when we take the non-fiction to be inaccurate: the most hardened atheist recognizes that according to Augustine's *Confessions,* God exists. Even with accurate works we assume a comparison between what is so according to the story and what is actually so, indicating that we have an independent grasp on the former [Currie 2010: 74]. I will say that what is the case according to a story, whether fiction or non-fiction, is *storified*. From this perspective, the 'fictional truths' are just the storified propositions associated with works of fiction.[7]

In what follows I assume that works of fiction invite us to imagine what is storified, in the sense of mentally representing it as part of an imagined storyworld. So we can reformulate the Reality Assumption as follows: everything that is true or obtains in the real world is storified—that is, we are invited to imagine it as part of the storyworld—unless it is excluded by the work.[8] In the rest of the paper I defend the Reality Assumption. In the next section I distinguish it from the Reality Principle.

3. The Reality Assumption and the Reality Principle

The motivation behind the Reality Assumption is what Marie-Laure Ryan [1980] calls the *principle of minimal departure:* that storyworlds remain as close to the actual world as possible. That is how we know that Sethe lacks superpowers (despite other supernatural elements in *Beloved*), that Huck Finn does the right thing, that Humbert Humbert is deceptive or delusional. The Reality Assumption captures this intuition by instructing us to take for granted that everything that obtains in reality is storified, adjusting this presumption only as needed.

The most familiar reason for adjustment is explicit, reliable content that contradicts reality. The opening line of Austen's *Emma* mentions a certain Emma Woodhouse, who is 'handsome, clever, and rich', inviting us to include a representation of Emma in the imagined storyworld. Since Emma never actually existed, this means departing from the ontology of the real world. Still, because Emma is human, we take for granted that she is like real human beings in having arms and legs, relationships with other people, and so forth. Other works demands more radical departures. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is populated by numerous aliens, outlandish events, and fantastic technologies. Still, we take Adams to be providing a fanciful vision of the real universe, so that we can assume that whatever aspects of reality remain consistent with other story-truths are themselves storified and draw

[6] Matravers [2014] agrees that both fiction and non-fiction invite readers to construct situation models, but denies that this involves imagining. The dispute is unimportant here.
[7] The same applies to non-narrative works that intuitively generate 'imagined worlds', although for these cases the term *storified* is less apt.
[8] This formulation allows for non-propositional content, if any, to be storified.

inferences accordingly. The Reality Assumption does not tell us how to make such inferences. Instead, it supplies an array of story-truths—that human beings have arms and legs and so on—which, in combination with other storified content, can form the basis of inferences to further story-truths.

How we make and justify these inferences is one focus of standard accounts of truth in fiction. These accounts typically assume that the explicit text directly generates certain story-truths from which others may be inferred. The challenge is then specifying principles or rules that underpin inferences from the former—call these the *primary* story-truths—to the latter, or *implied* story-truths [Walton 1990: 142]. Now, there are good reasons to doubt that any story-truths are directly generated by the explicit content of a work, the most obvious of which is the possibility of unreliable narration.[9] My own view is that we take as a defeasible presumption that some sentences of a text are constitutive of what is storified, adjusting this presumption where we detect unreliability.[10] But what matters for present purposes is that accounts of fictional truth identify some set of basic story-truths from which others are generated. Then they ask which principles justify the inferences from the one to the other.

Motivated by the same considerations behind the Reality Assumption, many theorists have suggested some version of what Walton [1990: 144] dubs the *Reality Principle*. Here is one:

(RP) If $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ are the primary story-truths, q is storified—that is, we are invited to imagine that q—if and only if, were it the case that $p_1, \ldots, p_n$, it would be the case that q.[11]

The idea is that we hold the primary story-truths fixed and ask what the real world would be like if they obtained. The implied story-truths are those that would also obtain in those circumstances. The counterfactual conditional is interpreted to mean that a possible world in which both the primary story-truths and q are true is closer to the actual world than one in which primary story-truths are true and q is false [ibid.: 145]. This is how the Reality Principle conforms to the principle of minimal departure.

It is widely recognized that the Reality Principle, formulated as RP, cannot be a universal inference rule for implied story-truths. One problem is that it treats primary story-truths as the only reason for departures from reality. Genre considerations may provide another reason. If in a fantasy story about knights a dragon appears, we are invited to imagine that the dragon breathes fire unless otherwise indicated, even if a world without fire-breathing creatures is closer to the actual world than one with [Lewis 1983: 274]. It is a convention of traditional zombie movies that zombies cannot run, but questions about the ambulatory capacities of the undead are not answerable by appeal to the Reality Principle [Woodward 2011: 163]. In other cases we may need to be familiar with the beliefs of the author and the original audience. It might be impossible to understand an ancient religious text without imagining various supernatural phenomena. Different interpretive strategies can also licence distinct readings of the same text. Henry James intended *The Turn of the Screw* as a ghost story about demonic possession, but an influential Freudian interpretation treats the novella as the deluded account of a sexually repressed narrator. Because a world in which human

[9] See Walton [1990: 170–174] for an array of other reasons.
[10] Story-truths can be directly generated by other features of the work as well; for instance, we may take the classification as a ghost story to establish directly (but defeasibly) the fictional existence of ghosts.
[11] This version of the Reality Principle is adapted from Walton's [1990: 145]. Other classic formulations are in Lewis [1983], Ryan [1980], and Wolterstorff [1980].

beings are delusional is more realistic than one in which there are ghosts, the Reality Principle seems to restrict us to the Freudian interpretation.

To address this worry, we might revise our formulation of the Reality Principle along the following lines:

(RP*) If $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ are the primary story-truths, q is storified—that is, we are invited to imagine that q—if, were it the case that $p_1, \ldots, p_n$, it would be the case that q, except if relevant interpretive considerations indicate otherwise.

A concern here is that all sorts of considerations may justify departures from reality, undermining the sense in which closeness to the real world constrains interpretation. Perhaps a specification of which considerations count as relevant could be tightened up. Even so, this would not be sufficient to meet a different challenge.

The counterfactual formulation of both RP and RP* requires us to consider what would be true if the primary story-truths obtained. Although we must stay as close to reality as possible, adjustments are inevitable. When Chinua Achebe plants the fictional village of Umuofia west of the real city Onitsha in *Things Fall Apart*, he alters the geography of Nigeria. The potential ramifications—what else would be true if there were a Umuofia, with all of its inhabitants, relations with other villages, and so on—are left open, since many variations will be equally close to the actual world. More fantastic stories demand more significant adjustments. According to *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the earth is a supercomputer created by intelligent mice and an infinite improbability drive allows travel faster than light by passing through every point in every universe simultaneously. Given these primary story-truths, so much would be so radically different from reality that it would seem rash to explain Arthur Dent's reactions to events by appeal to familiar features of human psychology.[12] Even more rash is the assumption that the behaviour of aliens can be explained in similar terms; yet the novel would be incomprehensible if we did not make this assumption. Our ordinary understanding does not seem to be justified by The Reality Principle.

Challenges to the Reality Principle usually lead philosophers to formulate alternative principles of generation. For instance, they propose that we draw inferences from the primary story-truths consistently with the beliefs prevalent in the author's community, or that we rely on assumptions about what a plausibly reconstructed author would intend (see sections 4–5). There are many problems with this strategy, of which I note two. First, it is unlikely that any general principle could determine what is storified for every fiction. Our interpretive practices are too unsystematic to be captured by a single, finitely characterized rule [Walton 1990: ch. 4]. A more rational conclusion is just that the Reality Principle works in some cases but not others. Second, in adopting alternative principles theorists reject not only the Reality Principle but also its motivation. In consequence they reject the Reality Assumption. This is a mistake.

The reasons so far given for questioning the Reality Principle do not apply to the Reality Assumption.[13] The Reality Assumption is not a mechanism for generating implied story-truths; it is a starting point for specifying the input into any such mechanism. According to the Reality Assumption, facts about the real world are storified not as a consequence of determining what follows from the primary story-truths, but by default. We are, from the start, invited to represent as part of the storyworld anything that obtains in the real world that

[12] The example and objection were suggested by Tobias Klauk.

[13] Other objections to the Reality Principle do apply to the Reality Assumption (see sections 4–5).

does not contradict other features of the work. Importantly, any rejections will be *localized*. That we exclude truths about planetary development or space travel in *Hitchhiker's Guide* need not have implications for psychological explanation. We default to the assumption that familiar behaviour can be explained in the ordinary way, and we do not give that assumption up unless required to do so. In this way the Reality Assumption articulates a bias in favour of reality. It does not determine the interpretation of a work, for multiple interpretations could be consistent with both the Reality Assumption and the primary story-truths. We should not expect a philosophical account to deliver the answer to every interpretive question.

Nonetheless, the Reality Assumption provides a robust starting point for interpretation, directing us to take the real world as background when making inferences to what else is storified. I claim that by contrast with the Reality Principle, the Reality Assumption applies universally. In the next section I provide evidence for the essential role of the Reality Assumption, and in the following sections I consider objections. I argue that the criticisms misconstrue the Reality Assumption as one among other possible ways of providing a story's background. Rather, it specifies a comprehensive, default position for which there is no alternative.

4. Evidence for the Reality Assumption

There is ample empirical evidence that our comprehension of stories relies on the Reality Assumption. The activation of prior knowledge, including knowledge of ordinary facts about the world, is essential to basic comprehension, underpinning inferences that go beyond or contradict explicit content. Inferences based on prior knowledge are largely 'bottom-up' and non-strategic: prior knowledge is automatically activated as we read (see Kintsch [1998: 227–38]). In this sense readers take the Reality Assumption as a default.

To illustrate, consider inferences concerning characters' emotions. Gernsbacher, Goldsmith, and Robertson [1992] had participants read a series of stories. In one, Tom visits the shop where his friend Joe works, then steals money from the till. Later Tom learns that Joe was fired because of the missing money. The researchers wanted to know if readers would automatically represent the implied emotional state. After reading the story, participants read a further sentence, one version of 'It would be weeks before Tom's *guilt/pride/shyness* would subside'. In two experiments, participants read the target sentence more quickly when the word matched the implied emotion (guilt) than when it did not. To rule out the possibility that readers inferred the emotional state only when they read the target sentence rather than while reading, a third experiment had participants read the original stories without the target sentences. They were then asked to pronounce a printed word as fast as they could. Although pronunciation is a cognitive task unrelated to comprehension, participants were systematically slower in pronouncing target words that mismatched the implied emotion than those that matched. Their prior knowledge had already been activated.

Haenggi, Gernsbacher, and Bolliger [1994] replicated the results of the first two experiments for both emotional and spatial inferences. Significantly, they found that readers with low and high comprehension skills, or with greater and lesser empathic tendencies or spatial imagery ability, exhibited the same pattern of responses. The researchers concluded that making online inferences about emotion or location 'is a relatively effortless process that is rather driven by familiar knowledge about emotional states and spatial relations than by cognitive abilities' [ibid.: 93]. In other words, we rely on the Reality Assumption automatically and unreflectively in the ordinary course of reading. Notice that this is so regardless of the mechanism for generating implied content. We would draw the same conclusion about Tom's emotional state deploying the Reality Principle as we would if we were trying to determine what the (fictional or implied) author believed or intended us to infer; but only so long as we began with our ordinary knowledge of human emotion.

A different study focuses on real-world truths independently of inference. Weisberg and Goodstein [2009] had participants read three short stories, ranging from wholly realistic to very unrealistic. The participants then judged whether a series of true statements that 'were not mentioned in any of the stories and had no bearing on any of the events or characters in the stories' also obtained in the storyworlds [ibid.: 72]. The statements reported facts about mathematics ('2+2=4'), science ('People have hearts'), social conventions ('It is rude to pick one's nose'), and contingent reality ('Washington, D.C., is the capital of the United States'). Overall, the more realistic the story and the less contingent the fact, the more likely participants judged it as storified. Participants took approximately three quarters of the mathematical and scientific truths to obtain in the realistic storyworld. For the other stories mathematical facts were judged storified at the same rate, whereas only around half of scientific facts were judged storified. Even in the least realistic story readers judged as storified over a quarter of the conventional facts. In other words, the participants consistently assumed that some real-world facts obtained in fiction, although they were sensitive to the kind of fact and the realism of the story.

If the Reality Assumption constitutes a starting point for interpretation, the more a story requires us to reject real-world assumptions, the harder it should be to comprehend. And this is what we find. Graesser, Kassler, Kreuz, and McLain-Allen [1998] had participants read chapters from Alan Lightman's novel *Einstein's Dreams*. In each chapter the scientist dreams about a village in which time operates differently than in reality: in a circle, backwards, standing still, and so on. Participants were asked to rate the story-truth of a series of statements, including inferences from the explicit content. Most readers were accurate in drawing inferences consistent with real-world assumptions about time. But only readers who possessed 'literary expertise' (training with literature) had any success in verifying the story-truth of inferences relying on atypical conceptions of time. The accuracy of readers with low literary expertise did not differ significantly from chance. The Reality Assumption explains these results.

So far we have good reason to recognize the Reality Assumption as the default starting point for interpretation. The empirical evidence shows that our ability to make inferences that take the real world as background is essential to our capacity to understand what we read. Even when we exclude certain real-world facts, we still take for granted that others are storified.

Critics may retort that this is merely a descriptive claim. The fact that we *do* rely on the Reality Assumption does not entail that we *should*. Perhaps readers are systematically mistaken in deploying the Reality Assumption. But such an error theory is implausible.[14] The basic skill of understanding stories is not exclusive to the erudite; it is common among children as well as across cultures. Moreover, reliance on the Reality Assumption is effective precisely because authors expect readers to take the real world as background. If one goal of interpretation is understanding why authors have written what they have, ignoring the Reality Assumption would mean failing the meet that goal. So we would need excellent reasons to give it up.

A number of critics have put forward such reasons in arguments against the Reality Principle. If their objections are successful, perhaps we must adopt an alternative starting point for interpretation. In the final two sections I consider these objections, reformulated to target the Reality Assumption.

5. Alternative Backgrounds

[14] I owe this reply to Carrie Ichikawa Jenkins.

According to the Reality Assumption, we take the real world to provide the background to every story. Critics object that this approach treats every story as realistic. As noted above, primary story-truths are not the only reason to depart from the Reality Assumption; genre conventions and other considerations are also relevant. Perhaps prior to knowing the genre of a work we ought to assume that anything at all might be storified. Only for realistic texts should we assume that the backdrop of the story is the real world [Matravers 2014: 85–6].

Genre conventions do underpin departures from reality, but they are too limited in scope to generate most of what is storified. Even in fantasies where mythical creatures abound, facts about people, rocks, and trees typically remain the same. In the Grimms' fairy tale 'The Frog Prince', a talking frog exacts a promise from a princess to love him in exchange for his rescuing her most prized possession from the bottom of his well. The princess promises, then runs off. The text is silent on why the princess cannot retrieve the golden ball herself but the frog can. It is silent on the princess's motivation for attempting to escape the frog. But the reader has no trouble drawing the relevant inferences, relying on real-world knowledge. Or consider the following passage from Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Rick Deckard has been arguing with his wife about her spending:

> He rose, strode to the console of his mood organ. "Instead of saving," he said, "so we could buy a real sheep, to replace that fake electric one upstairs. A mere electric animal and me earning all that I've worked my way up to through the years." At his console he hesitated between dialing for a thalamic suppressant (which would abolish his mood of rage) or a thalamic stimulant (which would make him irked enough to win the argument). [Dick 1968: 4]

A few pages into the novel, the reader cannot yet understand how people control their moods with a console or why they would have electric sheep. However, she can already infer that a real sheep is more valuable, and she can understand Deckard's anger and the temptation of each of the possible moods. These inferences rely on the background supplied by the Reality Assumption. Because the Reality Assumption fills in the gaps left open by genre conventions, such conventions cannot replace it.

A different objection is that the Reality Assumption divorces a story from its originating context. Suppose that in a society where everyone believes that the earth is flat, someone tells a story that ends with a ship's sailing beyond the horizon [Walton 1990: 151]. Nothing in the story specifies the fate of the ship or the shape of the earth. If we take the Reality Assumption as our starting point, it seems we should take it as storified that the earth is round and infer that the ship sails safely on. Yet the original audience would have concluded otherwise.[15] Perhaps our default position should be not that the background is the real world as *we* take it to be, but as the author and intended audience took it to be. Such considerations might motivate an alternative to the Reality Assumption, the Mutual Belief Assumption, according to which we are invited to imagine the content of any of the mutual beliefs of the author's society not excluded by features of the work.

In fact the Mutual Belief Assumption cannot replace the Reality Assumption in providing the background to a story. First, restricting ourselves to a set of beliefs leaves too many aspects of the storyworld indeterminate.[16] Suppose that I read Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, lacking detailed knowledge of the Tudor period. Characters make reference to events of which I am ignorant and I want to fill in the gaps. The Reality Assumption directs me to find

[15] Walton uses this example to motivate an alternative to the Reality Principle, the Mutual Belief Principle. Other formulations of the same principle are in Wolterstorff [1980] and Lewis [1983].

[16] Byrne [1993: 28] raises this objection against Currie's account of fictional truth.

out what actually happened. According to the Mutual Belief Assumption, I should instead poll the citizenry. Since most readers have relatively few beliefs about the history, the latter strategy will leave large gaps. Even for fictions that presuppose very different worldviews—for instance the Christian worldview of medieval and Renaissance poetry—ordinary details could not be filled in without reliance on the Reality Assumption.

Second, adopting the Mutual Belief Assumption would systematically generate incorrect story-truths. In works produced in some societies, it would be storified that there are ghosts and fairies, that mental illness is caused by demonic possession, or that comets are omens of catastrophe sent by the gods—even if the stories in question suggested no position on these matters. More disturbing, many works would generate storyworlds in which slavery is just, women are inferior to men, or tyranny is the best form of government [Walton 1990: 154]. We might be willing to treat such claims as storified when they are explicit or essential to understanding the plot, but the Mutual Belief Assumption suggests that a society's belief system is sufficient to generate these story-truths by itself.

It is more plausible that we draw on information about societal beliefs only when some aspect of a story cannot adequately be understood without it. This is how we read non-fiction written long ago or far away. Sometimes our ignorance of the author's context prevents us from understanding her representation of the world, although we take for granted that the work is about the same reality we inhabit. To construct an appropriate representation of the storyworld, we might need to reject real-world truths for some aspects of the story. But such rejection will be localized. And given the Reality Assumption, we resist abandoning the truth unless we must do so to understand or appreciate a story.

6. Irrelevant Story-Truths

Perhaps the most compelling objection to the Reality Assumption is that it storifies a glut of irrelevancies. It will be storified in Voltaire's *Candide* that there was a major California earthquake in 1906, that the Higgs boson is responsible for all of the mass in the universe, and that I cannot do without my morning coffee. Indeed every story will include vast collections of remote facts immaterial to the narrative. Not only will these be unknown to the author, many will remain unknown to any potential audience. It follows that storyworlds will be determinate in surprising respects. If it is true that Emma Hamilton had exactly N hairs on her head and no feature of a narrative contradicts this—as would be the case, for example, in any narrative that never mentions Hamilton—then it is storified in that narrative that she had exactly N hairs on her head. This result seems to conflict with the intuitive incompleteness of storyworlds (see section 1).[17]

These consequences do not undermine the Reality Assumption. First, adopting the Reality Assumption does not entail that stories are determinate in every respect. It is storified in *Gulliver's Travels* that Gulliver's eyes are either blue or not blue; but because the text is silent on the issue, we are invited to imagine neither disjunct. This does not imply any kind of metaphysical incompleteness. Rather, it indicates a limit on how much a representation can specify that we imagine. The Reality Assumption supplements the story, but does not fill every gap.

Second, story-truth entails an *invitation* to imagine, not an obligation. Readers cannot imagine everything that is storified: given limitations on working memory capacity, they cannot consider all aspects of the storyworld.[18] Nor should they. A reader who attempted to

[17] Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting I discuss incompleteness in more detail. The example is due to Richard Woodward (in correspondence).

[18] See McNamara and Magliano [2009] for an overview of factors influencing the inferences readers actually make.

represent every story-truth would fail to understand the story altogether. Good readers pay attention to what is important, remembering the details and making the inferences that increase comprehension. Still, if the question came up and we had to decide between imagining that the Higgs boson is responsible for mass in *Candide* and imagining that it is not, we should imagine the former. The alternative would imply that *Candide* is a kind of science fiction in which basic laws of physics fail to operate. Nothing of such serious weight is likely to turn on Emma Hamilton's hirsuteness. At the same time, it is hard to see what would motivate us to *deny* that she had precisely the number of hairs on her head that she did have, or to insist that it was indeterminate, if the question came up. In practice such questions rarely arise, nor should they. Rather than excluding irrelevant story-truths we simply ignore them, treating them as background and focusing instead on those story-truths that are relevant to appreciation [Walton 1990: 148]. Why certain story-truths and not others count as relevant is an issue to which I return below.

It must be conceded that reports of story content typically exclude backgrounded information. One is unlikely to say, 'In *Candide*, San Francisco had an earthquake in 1906'. It would, though, be equally odd to declare that the Higgs boson gives particles mass in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Yet we do not doubt that the events and individuals in his history obey the laws of physics. That readers make the same assumption for fiction is borne out by the Weisberg and Goodstein experiment discussed above. Participants had little trouble making discriminating judgements concerning the story-truth of statements that were entirely irrelevant to the narratives, including mathematical and scientific truths.

These story-truths are unlikely to enhance our understanding of most narratives. Some philosophers therefore argue that we should restrict what is storified to the content that an informed reader would think that an author—not necessarily the actual author, but a fictional or ideal version of the author constructed in interpretation—believed [Currie 1990: ch. 2], intended readers to imagine [Byrne 1993], or intended to be part of the story [Phillips 1999]. The thought is that our comprehension of stories is much like our comprehension of other forms of communication, wherein we seek to understand what someone else aims to get across.

The communicative approach is unsatisfactory, however. First, it is difficult in advance to determine which truths might contribute to the appreciation of a work. For example, Voltaire describes the aftermath of the (real) Lisbon earthquake of 1755 in *Candide*, where it provides one of many counterexamples to the thesis that this is the best of all possible worlds. That the Lisbon earthquake was followed by more damaging earthquakes in later centuries may well be relevant to our evaluation of Voltaire's argument. But even a plausibly reconstructed Voltaire could not have believed or intended anything to do with later earthquakes. Second, restricting what is storified to what could have been intended closes off interpretive options that should not be closed off by a philosophical account of story-truth. Take the attitude of the (implied) author of *Huckleberry Finn* to the escaped slave Jim. The ironic distance from the unreliable narrator is clear; Huck's belief that he sins by helping Jim is not shared. Yet many aspects of Jim's portrayal remain stereotypical. At the end of the novel, he is depicted as a comic figure straight out of a minstrel show. Readers today may reject this image, not laughing (as apparently intended) along with Twain's original audience, but instead imagining Jim as suffering underneath. Such an interpretation should not automatically be excluded.

We should therefore reject attempts to restrict the story-truths to a narrower class than those determined by the Reality Assumption. That it is strange to report certain story-truths, such as that the Higgs boson is responsible for the mass of particles in *Candide* or *Decline and Fall*, can easily be explained by our purposes in talking about stories. Our usual aim is to

describe the situations and events that contribute most directly to the plot, those that are foregrounded rather than the multitude of backgrounded story-truths. The foregrounded story-truths are those that enhance understanding and appreciation of the work: these are the ones we are *prescribed* to imagine.

This observation prompts another objection, namely that adopting the Reality Assumption renders the notion of story-truth irrelevant to any interesting questions about literature.[19] There is a distinction between the story-truths as defined here and what is in an intuitive sense 'part of the story', and it is only the latter we care about.[20] I do not disagree. However, the difficulty lies not with the Reality Assumption, but with the notion of story-truth itself. We need not think that contemplation of Lemuel Gulliver's internal organs is significant to appreciation to recognize that he has them; denying that he does would be perverse. The same applies to many of the examples that standardly appear in philosophical discussions of fictional truth. When Lewis [1983: 268] points out that Sherlock Holmes does not have a third nostril and has never visited the moons of Saturn, he is not claiming that these story-truths matter to our appreciation of Conan Doyle's tales.

If we want to circumscribe a narrower domain of relevant story-truths, we should not reject the Reality Assumption. Instead we should limit how we apply the test for invitations to imagine. First, we can restrict the circumstances in which we raise the question of whether or not a particular proposition is storified to cases where we are attempting to understand some feature of the work, thereby excluding idle speculation—or philosophical arguments. In interpreting Hamlet's state of mind, questions about the causes and symptoms of depression are appropriate, whereas questions about stars in a nebula are (probably) not. If the latter questions are not permitted to arise, facts about nebulae will not be treated as relevant. Second, we can place constraints on when we must choose between imagining that P and imagining that not-P. Perhaps we are required to choose only when the decision has implications for other interpretive issues. The Higgs boson example is a case in point: denying that the basic laws of physics apply in *Candide* would dramatically change the genre. Assuming that no such consequence would follow if one denied that Emma Hamilton had N hairs on her head, we may exclude consideration of her hair in focusing on what is relevant. Although these restrictions make perfect sense, it is difficult in the abstract to say which truths will contribute to appreciation and therefore arbitrary to limit what is storified.

I conclude that the objections do not undermine the Reality Assumption. We have good reason to take it to specify a default position in interpretation. Not only do readers adopt the Reality Assumption in practice, no other way of supplying the background to a fiction has the same scope.

This conclusion raises an intriguing question: what explains the default status of the Reality Assumption? The simplest explanation is that in reading we take works of fiction, like works of non-fiction, to be about the real world—even if they invite us to imagine the world to be different from how it actually is. As already noted, imagining a storyworld does not mean directing one's imagining toward something other than the real world; it is instead a mental activity that involves constructing a complex representation of what a story portrays. So the fact that we imagine storyworlds provides no motivation for severing fiction from reality. Indeed the motivation is all on the other side. If works of fiction do not concern reality, we must face serious puzzles about how we learn from fictions and why we care about the characters that populate them. Rather than try to bridge that gap, I propose that we deny its existence. If fictions are about the real world, the question is rather why imagining

[19] This objection is due to Richard Woodward.
[20] Paisley Livingston [1993] helpfully draws this distinction.

our world in different ways can engage and enlighten us. This is a far more fruitful question to pursue.[21]

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