Fiction Writing as Philosophical Methodology

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Plan for the talk

- My conclusions
- How I'll argue for my conclusions
- Some reflections on genre
- Arguing for my conclusions
- My conclusion(s)
- (Some practical advice)

Slides will be posted at `https://sluckelman.webspace.durham.ac.uk/talks/`.

My conclusions

1. The process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is a *legitimate* (modern) philosophical methodology.
2. The process is a *distinctive* philosophical methodology.

How to get to those conclusions

1. The process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is essentially a process of argumentation.
2. The distinctive benefit of writing fiction, as opposed to writing analytic philosophy, is that (1) fiction incorporates affective aspects and (2) the starting points need not be justified.

Some initial remarks

- What counts as "philosophical fiction"?
- A digression on genre.
- My specific focus: SFF.

"Philosophical fiction" and the question of genre (1)

What makes fiction *philosophical*?

- e.g., Iris Murdoch, Dorothy Sayers — literary works that consciously take themselves to be about or to involve philosophy.
- fiction that deals with philosophical *topics*:
  - personal identity
  - time-travel
  - moral and ethical norms
  - the nature of civilisation
  - immortality and the nature of the soul, etc.

"Philosophical fiction" and the question of genre (1)

- When I speak of writing (philosophical) fiction, this includes all fiction.
- But I'm going to focus on speculative fiction, especially SFF (science fiction and fantasy).
- These genres particularly enable the sort of philosophical methodology I'm arguing for.

"Philosophical fiction" and the question of genre (2)

A genre is

a way of classifying representations that guides appreciation, so that knowledge of the classification plays a role in a work's correct interpretation and evaluation [3, p. 181].

Membership in a genre is not always determined by necessary and sufficient conditions:

the vast majority [of genres] are determined by a variety of non-essential conditions, including contextual and historical conditions [3, p. 181] [including] features internal to the work. . . but also facts about the work's origins, in particular the category in which the artist intended the work to be appreciated, or in which the artist's contemporaries would have placed it [3, p. 187].

"Philosophical fiction" and the question of genre (3)

Consequences of this view:

- Boundaries of genres are not fixed: because they are contextually-defined, they can change over time, and also within a time-slice.

- This account of genre allows new genres to be born.

- Disagreement over the boundaries of a genre is part of how we can identify and conceptualise those boundaries, and indeed shed light on the nature of the genre itself [2].

- Since writing fiction forces one to address the question of genre, writing itself contributes to this epistemological process.

The first conclusion

The process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is a legitimate (modern) philosophical methodology,

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The process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is a legitimate (modern) philosophical methodology, sharing many relevant features with traditional analytic philosophy methods such as argument building, conceptual analysis, and thought experiments, as well as with more modern developments in, e.g., standpoint epistemology and intersectionality.

Fiction writing is essentially argumentation (1)

- The construction of a suitably satisfying plot *is* the construction of an argument, from the author to the reader.
- For any system or argumentation there corresponds a short story plot and to every (good) short philosophical story there is an argument structure!
- System of argumentation/argument structure: A system of back-and-forth, of proponent and opponent, of working towards a goal and being driven back from the goal—that is, of argument and counterargument.

Fiction writing is essentially argumentation (2)

Typical analytic philosophy papers exhibit an argumentation structure or system of argumentation, involving:

- setting out the problem and motivating it.
- advancing arguments towards a conclusion.
- dealing with objections that take you away from the conclusion.
- reaching the target conclusion, using only "allowed" means.

Fiction writing is essentially argumentation (3)

A good short story involves that same structure:

- introducing the characters and putting them in a position where they need to reach a resolution to something.
- the protagonists taking action towards the resolution.
- the antagonists taking action to prevent the protagonists from reaching the resolution.
- reaching a resolution (even if not the one originally aimed at!), using only "allowed" means.

For more on these, see these three blog posts:
http://blog.apaonline.org/2017/09/05/writing-a-philosophical-novel-part-1/
http://blog.apaonline.org/2017/09/06/what-i-learned-when-i-wrote-a-philosophical-novel/
http://blog.apaonline.org/2017/09/07/structuring-a-philosophical-novel/

Fiction writing is essentially argumentation (4)

What are "allowed" means?

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What are "allowed" means?

Easier: Look at what makes a paper/story go bad/wrong:

- Invalid argumentation.

- Fallacies.

- Posthoc justifications.

- Mary-Sues.

- Inconsistencies.

- Tropes/stereotypes*

A footnote

* except, of course, when they are deployed well/subverted!

A footnote

Which is an important way in which fiction and philosophy *differ*: There is no good way to argue fallaciously in a philosophy paper, whereas a good implementation of a trope can be *amazing*!

Sara L. Uckelman
August 7, 2022 · 👥 ...

For all my Russell-Wittgenstein fanfic writing friends, today's entry gets you both

* but there was only one hotel room!
AND
* enemies to lovers

Wittgenstein Day-by-Day
August 7, 2022 · 🌐

August 1922: LW meets with Russell in Innsbruck, but the city is so full of tourists that they have to share a hotel room (Monk, pp.209-10; Kanterian, p.97).
Russell is on his way to address a projected Women's League for Peace and Freedom, but LW expresses the view that he himself would prefer a League for War and Slavery (McGuinness, p.114 note).

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  - Linguistic infelicities
  - Reverse the polarities!
  - Take theories seriously
- Acceptable "rules" much like non-fiction philosophy writing.

A concern

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No!

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A pragmatic justification:

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- So what's different?

Stories ≠ thought experiments (2)

Thought experiments:

- Focus on the deductive consequences:
  - E.g., Häggqvist's deductive reconstruction of thought experiments [4, p. 63]:

$$\Diamond C$$
$$T \supset (C \,\square\!\!\rightarrow W)$$
$$\underline{C \,\square\!\!\rightarrow \neg W}$$
$$\neg T$$

  - But the goal of fiction is not to derive a contradiction in our background theory!

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- Do not care about character (or only rarely).

- Often lack in positive aesthetic qualities.

- $\rightsquigarrow$ lack of interest in the *affective* side of narrative.

Stories ≠ thought experiments (3)

Thought experiments are often far more removed from reality than fiction.

Sisyphus is rolling a boulder towards the Grand Hilbert Hotel. The hotel has an infinite number of rooms, but they are all full, so they may not be able to accommodate him or his boulder.

If you choose to divert him, his boulder will destroy the Ship of Theseus. But the ship has had all of its constituent parts replaced, so it may not actually be the same ship.

Is Sisyphus happy?
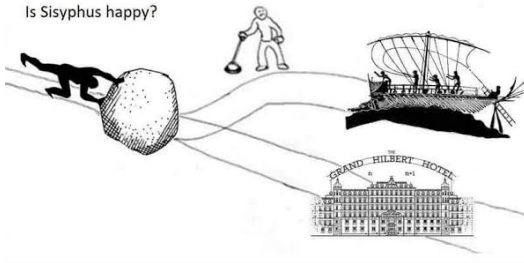
The second conclusion

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The second conclusion

The process is a distinctive philosophical methodology, that is, it can provide us with insights that would not be gained via other means.

(I will remain agnostic on whether this is for *a priori* or *a posteriori* reasons; that is, whether we *could not have* discovered these insights via other means or whether we simply *wouldn't have*).

Writing as a process of discovery

What do we discover, and how?

- Fiction as models: writing fiction = constructing a model
- Deductive consequences.
- Voice / what you *actually* believe.
- The affective stuff.

The distinctive benefits of writing fiction (1)

- Some things can be said in fiction that cannot be said in nonfiction.
- Starting points need not be justified — indeed, they needn't even be plausibly true.
- They *do* need to be motivated.

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- Some things can be said in fiction that cannot be said in nonfiction.
- Starting points need not be justified — indeed, they needn't even be plausibly true.
- They *do* need to be motivated. ⤳ Another distinction from thought experiments.
- Focus on the affective.

The distinctive benefits of writing fiction (2)

> *The idea of creative work providing a viable interpretation of other art objects is perhaps most famously associated with Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence (1973) which states that 'the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but another poem — a poem not itself' [6, p. 73].*

Writing short speculative fiction as an *epistemological tool*:

- Akin to the role played by diagrams in the development of proofs of mathematical theorems.
- Ideas can be germinated, developed, and brought to fruition.
- Valuable as a vehicle even if the vehicle is entirely absent from the final product (as the diagrams are often absent from published proof).

The value of unjustified foundations

One distinctive benefit of writing fiction as opposed to writing analytic philosophy is that the starting points need not be justified.

- It can be a struggle for contemporary philosophy to even get started.
  - Justifying assumptions, justifying the assumptions used to justify the assumptions, justifying *those* assumptions. . .
  - It's tiring! (For writer *and* reader!)
- Taking certain things for granted makes life *easier* to find out the consequences—deductive and affective.

Finding your voice

- Fiction also makes it easier to find your voice—what *you* believe in.
- One can say what one really wants to say, rather than hedging, or prevaricating, or writing philosophese.
- The "oh! *that's* what it is!" moments.

The affective stuff (1)

Fiction can give you a lot of information about reality (Eleonora Orlando, this symposium, Tuesday, August 15).

By the very nature of fiction, this information is conveyed in a *non-deductive* way. How?

The affective stuff (2)

Through the affective parts of fiction.

- To write well, one must learn how to inhabit a character (to take their stance/standpoint).

- You don't just work out the formal/deductive consequences of taking on a position, but also the ways in which this would affect people, their lives, their relationships, their language, their practices. A way to learn things that are not necessarily about *facts*.

- All the moral benefits of *reading* fiction also apply to *writing* it.

My conclusions, again

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My conclusions, again

1. The process of writing (short) (speculative) fiction is a *legitimate* philosophical methodology.
2. The process is a *distinctive* philosophical methodology.
3. You should all try your hand at writing!

Some practical advice (1)

So you want to write some fiction. . .

- You don't need to start with a novel!
- You don't need to start with a short story!
- You can start with flashfic!
    - Flash fiction: 500–1500 words, typically <1000.
    - Micro fiction: < 500 words.
    - Drabbles: exactly 100 words (not counting the title).

What kind of writer are you?

- pantser
- planner
- plantser
- idea-first
- character-first

Writing flash fiction (1)

- Flash fic ≠ vignette: A full plot/story is needed, not just a scene.
- Evoke ideas, characters, scenes, feelings, rather than describing them.
- Leave many questions unanswered; let the reader fill in the gaps.
- Element of surprise: A good ending will both violate *and* satisfy expectations.
- From the same prompt, try writing many different stories.

Writing flash fiction (2)

- Make every word count: Use strong, vivid vocabulary but don't over-rely on adjectives/adverbs. Make use of your title, too!
- Don't attempt too much: You don't have the word count to do many scenes or many characters.
- POV matters: 1st person is often easier than 2nd or 3rd; but don't be shy about experimenting.
- Recommended reading: *Pocket Workshop: Essays on Living as a Writer* [5].

Types of scenes (Kress, *Pocket Workshop*)

- opening
- dramatic
- exposition
- summary
- flashback
- climax
- denouement

Types of exposition (Buckell, *Pocket Workshop*)

- flashback
- dialogue exposition
- narrator exposition
- exposition through character's internal voice
- interacting with information

Flash Fiction Challenge

Flash Fiction Challenge

Your prompt:

> "Why would it be necessary to have a ladder for
> someone already holding the sun?"
> —Bernard of Clairvaux

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Obrigada!

Questions?

Q: Where can I read your fiction?
A: `https://sluckelman.webspace.durham.ac.uk/fiction/`

Q: Where can I read Russell/Wittgenstein fanfic?
A: `https://archiveofourown.org/works/841419` [not by me!]