

“A new objection to Lewis on truth in fiction”

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Consider this (very short) fiction:

Once upon a time, a stranger wandered into a small Midwestern American town. He was dressed strangely, and he did not speak English. For a long time, no one could figure out who he was or what he was doing there. Finally, Anna, the local French teacher, arrived. She was able to communicate with the stranger. The end.

In this fiction, a *human* stranger meets a *human* French teacher. The (interpreted) text, however, mentions nothing about humans. Obviously then, what is true in fictions extends beyond the propositions given in the literal text of a story. Indeed, truth in fiction extends beyond even the entailments of the literal text. So, what is the relation between truth in fiction and the literal text of a story?

David Lewis offers two proposals. On one proposal, *Analysis 1*, what’s true in the fiction is what is true in the possible worlds nearest to the actual world where the literal (interpreted) text of the story is told as known fact, instead of as fiction. On another, *Analysis 2*, we’re to consider the worlds nearest to the “collective belief world” of the author’s society – the world that members of the society overtly take themselves to be in. Objections to Lewis have focused primarily on whether it is always true in the fiction that someone is telling the story, and on whether all fictions describe possible worlds. We present a novel objection to Lewis’s approach.¹ The focus on *nearness* of

¹ Currie (p. 66) briefly presents an argument similar to ours, but he does not seem to appreciate its generality; he limits the discussion to facts about historical figures who are also characters in fictions, and as an objection only to *Analysis 1*.

worlds allows irrelevant factors to influence truth in fiction.

The point is most easily seen via counterexample. Consider our fiction from above. It is true in the fiction that our stranger spoke French. However, (we now stipulate,) in fact, the literal text of our story is true. That is, the nearest world to the actual world in which the given story is told as known fact is the actual world. The events described really did occur, in Freeland, Michigan. And Anna, the local French teacher, was able to communicate with him because she knew American Sign Language; the visitor was not a French speaker – he was deaf. So according to *Analysis 1*, it is true in the fiction that our Anna spoke in sign language to the deaf visitor, who did not speak French. This would be so even if no one involved with the story, including the author, knew anything about the events in Freeland. On *Analysis 1*, someone who reports that it's true in the fiction that the visitor spoke French is mistaken. This, we take it, is decisive against *Analysis 1*; far-off events with which neither author nor audience has no acquaintance whatsoever do not influence what is true in the fiction.

What of *Analysis 2*? One might think that the reference to “collective belief worlds” is exactly what is needed to avoid this objection. But the same problem arises once again, in a slightly more complicated version. *Analysis 2* references the worlds that are closest to the world that the society overtly believes itself to occupy. We will therefore encounter our same problem in cases where our fictional text is true of the collective belief worlds, but some truths in the collective belief worlds are not truths in the fiction. Let us stipulate that it is generally believed (whether truly or not) that Alex Rodriguez is an overpaid baseball player who cannot perform in high pressure situations, and furthermore that it is generally believed that Alex Rodriguez is six feet

and three inches tall, and that he hit a home run last night. Suppose that a father, not thinking at all of Alex Rodriguez at the time, relates the following text to his son while watching the World Cup:

Once upon a time, there was an athlete named “Alex.” Alex’s squad’s fans were unhappy. They’d been excited to get him on the team, but many felt that he couldn’t handle the high pressure. Physically, he was a solid specimen – six feet and three inches of muscle! But for some reason, he didn’t seem able to rise to the occasion. Apparently, even top paid athletes can choke!

This story is true in the collective belief world, so *Analysis 2* would have us pick out that world to generate our fictional truths. It is also true in the collective belief world that Alex hit a home run last night; nevertheless, this is not true in the fiction. Indeed, (depending on the exact conversational context the text is related in) it may be true in the fiction that Alex plays not baseball, but soccer.

Both of Lewis’s formulations, then, give rise to decisive counterexamples; citing the nearest worlds, whether indexed to the actual world or to collective belief worlds, imports too many irrelevant features into our fictions.

References

Currie, Gregory (1990). *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.
Lewis, David (1978). “Truth in fiction.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15:37–46, 1978. Reprinted in D. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1*, Oxford University Press, 1983