

# Elusive Fictional Truth

Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne

*We argue that some fictional truths are fictionally true by default. We also argue that these fictional truths are subject to being undermined. We propose that the context within which we are to evaluate what is fictionally true changes when a possibility which was previously ignorable is brought to attention. We argue that these cases support a model of fictional truth which makes the conversational dynamics of determining truth in fiction structurally akin to the conversational dynamics of knowledge-ascription, as this is understood by David Lewis's contextualist approach to knowledge. We show how a number of the rules which Lewis proposes for the case of knowledge-ascription can be employed to develop a novel and powerful framework for the case of truth in fiction.*

## 1. Fictional Truth by Default and Undermining by Possibility Raising

Some fictional truths are determined by what is explicitly stated in a book or shown on a stage or screen, such as the fictional truth that *Harry Potter wears glasses*. One central concern in the philosophy of fiction is accounting for fictional truths which aren't explicitly stated or shown. The account we propose stems from the thought that some of these non-explicit fictional truths are fictionally true *by default*. In addition, what is fictionally true by default is capable of being *undermined*. For instance, it is true by default that certain characters do not have a glass eye. But this might be undermined by pointing out that nothing that is stated in the book or shown on stage or screen is incompatible with the character having a glass eye. We suggest that what happens in such cases is that a possibility concerning, say, a character's properties which was previously ignorable is later brought to attention, thus changing the context within which we are to evaluate what is fictionally true. We develop a model of fictional truth which makes the dynamics of determining truth in fiction structurally akin to the dynamics of knowledge-ascription, as this is understood by David Lewis's (1996) contextualist approach to knowledge.

In discussions of how to account for a fiction's 'non-explicit content', following Lewis (1978) and Walton (1990), two candidate principles have been discussed extensively. What we shall call the 'Principle of Actuality' (henceforth PoA) holds, roughly, that a fiction's non-explicit content is determined by taking the fictional world to be like the actual world, except where there are indications to the contrary. (Thus, there are no witches in *Rocky* (1976, John G. Avildsen).) The 'Principle of Mutual Belief' (PoMB) holds, roughly, that a fiction's non-explicit content is determined by taking the fictional world to be as a certain community (such as an author and an intended readership) believes the actual

world to be, except where there are indications to the contrary. (Thus, that witches exist may be a fictional truth of a fiction written in the seventeenth century.)

Whilst such principles successfully capture many cases of non-explicit truth in fiction, they have been argued to be inadequate to provide a comprehensive account of truth in fiction.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, it is sometimes held that any attempt to systematize truth in fiction in terms of a limited number of principles is bound to fail (e.g. Walton 1990, pp. 169, 184–187).<sup>2</sup>

Our framework provides a way forward. Our proposal is that we should locate what is systematic about truth in fiction in what is systematic about conversation, which is that there are certain predominant mutually shared expectations which govern what can be taken for granted in a conversation at a given point. Lewis's (1996) contextualist account of knowledge presents a number of 'rules' describing what makes possibilities ignorable or not. Whilst this may be read in isolation as primarily a work of epistemology, it is most fruitfully seen in the context of his wider work on conversational dynamics.<sup>3</sup> This allows us to see the conclusions about knowledge as driven by an account of what things conversational partners can expect of each other. It is this that we wish to apply to the case of truth in fiction. By adapting a number of Lewis's rules, we shall argue that many fictional truths which apparently fall outside the reach of the PoA or PoMB are fictionally true in virtue of the ignorability of alternative possibilities.

On this account, there are certain fictional truths which are true *by default*—for example, that Harry Potter does not have false teeth. What makes this true is not that no young people have (or are believed to have) false teeth in actuality (since some do and we believe that some do). And the fact, or the belief, that *typically*, in actuality, young people don't have false teeth does not help the PoA or PoMB. This would be enough only to render it fictionally true that *typically*, young people in Harry's world do not have false teeth, and not enough to render anything fictionally true of Harry's teeth in particular. The aspect of our determinations of fictional truth which the PoA and PoMB are not equipped to capture is the way our assumptions about what is typical guide what we take to be fictionally true of particular characters. The framework we shall present is equipped to capture this. Our assumptions about what is typical manifest in our ignoring certain possibilities for individuals, including fictional individuals. That Harry does not have false teeth is fictionally true precisely because we are in a context in which the possibility of his having false teeth is ignorable.

The need for such an approach is further illuminated by considering the option of articulating the PoA in terms of counterfactuals, as in Lewis's (1978) Analysis 1, in which (roughly) *p* is true in fiction *F* iff, were *F* told as known fact, it would be the case that *p*. It might be thought that such an articulation can accommodate the relevance of typicality to fictional truth. For we might hold that which counterfactuals are true is sensitive to facts

1 See e.g. Currie, 1990; Byrne, 1993; Lamarque and Olsen (1994, pp. 89–92, 94–95), Phillips, 1999; Bonomi and Zucchi, 2003.

2 See Friend, 2017 and Badura and Berto, 2019 for further discussion of the prospects of the PoA and PoMB.

3 E.g., as a companion piece to Lewis, 1979.

about how things typically are. This may seem to fit with the fact that counterfactuals are non-monotonic; adding new information to the antecedent can affect the truth-value of the counterfactual by changing which worlds are under consideration. Thus, 'If I were ten years younger, I would have all my own teeth' may be true, though 'If I were ten years younger and a boxer, I would have all my own teeth' is not. This may suggest that counterfactuals are, by nature, geared towards what is typical until information is introduced to override this; thus, a version of the PoA articulated in terms of counterfactuals may seem well-placed to capture the role of typicality in truth in fiction.<sup>4</sup>

If we understand the non-monotonicity of counterfactuals as Lewis himself does, however, then it is explained not by what is assumed to be typical but by how the introduction of new information changes which worlds we are considering the comparative similarity of, where similarity is determined purely by what the facts (and laws) are in those worlds. In the case of Harry Potter's teeth, the counterfactual 'Were *Harry Potter* told as known fact, Harry would not have false teeth' would still come out false (by Lewis's standards), since whether or not Harry has false teeth does not affect the overall similarity of a world to the actual world as it is (or as we believe it to be). What is required, if a counterfactual analysis is to capture how typicality impacts on truth in fiction, would be to say that the truth-conditions of counterfactuals are a matter not of similarity itself, but of our judgements of what makes a world more 'like' this one in a looser sense, which builds in our assumptions concerning what is typical.<sup>5</sup> In doing this, we would, we suggest, be grounding the truth-conditions of counterfactuals in the conversational dynamics which capture what we are conversationally permitted to assume and to ignore. Thus, the key to understanding the role of typicality in truth in fiction is, as we are proposing, how to understand these dynamics.

Alternatively, might we circumvent the issue for the PoA and PoMB by adding a third principle? We might introduce a 'Principle of Normalcy', along the lines that if normally Fs are G, then if fictionally *a* is F, fictionally *a* is G, except where there are indications to the contrary.<sup>6</sup> But we propose that if such a principle is to work, accurately capturing the profile of fictional truth by default, its application would have to be determined by the underlying conversational dynamics. To introduce principles of normalcy (or typicality) immediately raises obvious questions about how to systematize the concepts involved: Normal by what standard? The approach we are proposing is that the relevant standards are conversational, as laid out in our account below. Normalcy, as it is relevant to truth in fiction, is a function of ignorability. In and of itself, an appeal to normalcy (or typicality) cannot replace the hard work that needs to be done, of systematizing the conversational dynamics relevant to fictional truth.

The account we propose will also explain how what is fictionally true by default is capable of being undermined. External interventions such as adaptations, interpretations

4 We thank an anonymous referee for raising this.

5 The one place where Lewis does seem to move towards such a model is in his discussion of quasi-miracles (1986). There is a broader debate to be had about whether Lewis could have applied this treatment in his general account of counterfactuals, rather than as an exception.

6 We thank another anonymous referee for raising this suggestion.

or authorial statements can affect what is fictionally true in a given story by changing the context in which we are to evaluate what is made fictionally true by a particular set of, say, words, and images. In Section 4, we work through some examples of such changes, and show how our account provides an illuminating treatment of them. The central notion which we think governs the dynamics of changing contexts in the case of fiction is the *introduction of possibilities*. Thus, what is fictionally true by default in one context (e.g. a young character not having false teeth) may be undermined in that we shift to a context in which it cannot be said to be fictionally true, by bringing previously ignorable possibilities to attention (such as the possibility that the young character has false teeth). Possibility-introduction enables fictional truths to be ‘revised’ over actual time, in the sense that what was true in a fiction in, say, contexts prevalent at the time of its release is not true in the fiction in later contexts because of the possibilities which have subsequently been brought to attention.<sup>7</sup>

Recent discussion of the apparent revisability of fictional truth has focused on the case of serial fiction (e.g. Cameron, 2012; McGonigal, 2013; Caplan, 2014; Walters, 2015). Serial fictions often call for us to revise our judgement of what is fictionally true. Whilst the same is true of many fictions—notably of unreliable narrations—the special interest of serial fiction lies in there being reasons to say that the updating of audience judgement corresponds to an updating in the fictional truth itself. These reasons stem from the fact that the parts of the serial can be defined as distinct fictions in their own right. For instance, one running example from the debate over serial fiction is whether the sentence ‘Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father’ is true when uttered before the release of *Episode V* (1980, George Lucas) of the *Star Wars* serial. *Episode IV* (1977, George Lucas) taken on its own—as a self-standing fiction, as opposed to a part of a larger *Star Wars* fiction—appears to make it true that Luke’s father is a dead hero, since this is what Obi-Wan Kenobi reports to Luke and there is no obvious reason to think that he speaks falsely. *Episode V* then reveals that Vader is Luke’s father (and forces a reinterpretation of Obi-Wan’s claim as being true only from, as Obi-Wan puts it, ‘a certain point of view’). Roughly, the explicit representation of a new fictional fact ‘overrides’ the earlier fictional truth.

Our aim is broader than that which is the focus of the serials debate. Fictional truths can be undermined regardless of whether the work is a serial. This is because possibilities can be introduced in a number of ways, for example, by critical interpretations, statements from authors or readers, casting decisions, and the abandoning of previous stereotypes. Moreover, it follows that even in fictions which are serials, fictional truths can be undermined in ways other than those the existing debate over serials seeks to make

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7 We will not discuss, here, the ignoring and raising of impossibilities in the case of fiction. The status of so-called ‘impossible’ fictions is contentious, and we would not give the same account of fiction’s apparent capacity to represent the impossible as others would (e.g. Priest, 1997; Nolan, 2007; for our own account, see Bourne and Caddick Bourne, 2016). We think that the best way to account for the apparent content of impossible fictions is to resist subsuming them within the semantics of truth in fiction. The position we advance here does not, however, rely on our position concerning impossible fiction. (There is a further general consideration, beyond the topic of this paper, of whether fictional names introduce widespread impossibility to fiction. We don’t think they do, for reasons spelled out in Bourne and Caddick Bourne (2016).)

sense of. Furthermore, the feature of fictional truth we aim to capture is different from what the serials debate aims to capture. Our aim is to give an account of how something can be fictionally true by default, and how fictional truths of this particular type can be undermined by conversational contexts which introduce new instances of indefiniteness to the fiction, as we shall explain below.

## 2. Lewis's Contextualist Approach to Knowledge

On Lewis's account, 'Subject *S* knows proposition *P* iff *P* holds in every possibility left uneliminated by *S*'s evidence; equivalently, iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*P*' (Lewis, 1996, p. 551).<sup>8</sup> What is central to understanding this biconditional is the phrase 'every possibility'. Lewis writes:

An idiom of quantification, like 'every', is normally restricted to some limited domain. If I say that every glass is empty, so it's time for another round, doubtless I and my audience are ignoring most of all the glasses there are in the whole wide world throughout all of time. ... They are irrelevant to the truth of what was said. ... Likewise, if I say that every uneliminated possibility is one in which *P*, or words to that effect, I am doubtless ignoring some of all the uneliminated alternative possibilities that there are. (Lewis, 1996, p. 553)

So, Lewis argues, a subject can be said to know that *P* iff their evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*P*, except for those possibilities we are properly ignoring. This is Lewis's way of answering the sceptical argument that we never know anything because there are always possible scenarios in which our beliefs are false which our evidence does not eliminate (for instance, the existence of a deceiving demon). In many contexts, Lewis argues, such possibilities are properly ignored.

In introducing far-fetched possibilities, the sceptic changes the context in which knowledge-claims are made. Suppose a parent has dropped off their child at school and seen them walk in. They can truly claim to know that their child is at school. Suppose the sceptic then turns up and argues to the parent that they do not know this because, for all their evidence tells them, it could be that they are dreaming, or they dropped off the child at a school façade, or they dropped off a goblin convincingly disguised as the child. According to Lewis's account, the parent can no longer truly be said to know that they have dropped off their child at school. They are no longer properly ignoring these uneliminated possibilities, because they are no longer ignoring them at all, because the sceptic has introduced them to the conversation.

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8 We are not here offering an analogous definition as a general theory of fictional truth. The account of the conversational dynamics of fictional truth we propose could be adopted as the basis of such a definition, but equally, it could be adopted as part of the 'mechanics of generation' of fictional truth (as in (Walton, 1990, pp. 138–140)), whether or not one thinks there are also necessary and/or sufficient conditions for fictional truth. Here, we remain neutral on these questions.

Whether the parent can be said to know depends on what is ignorable in the conversational context. Our proposal is that what is fictionally true also depends on what is ignorable in the conversational context. To make good on this, we shall show how certain elements of Lewis's contextualist framework for knowledge can usefully be imported into the case of fictional truth.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Distinction Between Eliminating and Ignoring

One fruitful way of thinking about what a fiction leaves *indefinite* is in terms of all the possibilities that are left standing once some possibilities have been eliminated by what the fiction says. Suppose that a fiction leaves it indefinite whether a character, Immanuel, is left-handed or right-handed. In such a case, the fiction says nothing that rules out Immanuel being left-handed, and nothing that rules out Immanuel being right-handed. The disjunction 'Immanuel is left-handed or he is right-handed' is true in the fiction, but neither of the disjuncts 'Immanuel is left-handed' and 'Immanuel is right-handed' is true in the fiction.<sup>10</sup>

Now suppose the fiction tells us that Immanuel sat down to write a letter. Certain possibilities are eliminated (e.g. that he lies down to write). Many possibilities are left in play, including that he writes the letter with his right hand and that he writes the letter with his left hand. But there are other possibilities which were not eliminated: that Immanuel writes using an amanuensis, or using his feet. These possibilities, though, are ones that probably would not occur to a reader as possibilities for Immanuel. They are not *left* in play because they were never in play in the first place. Where the possibilities are not in play, they do not contribute to rendering it indefinite what Immanuel does. Thus, whilst it is not fictionally true by default that Immanuel writes with his right hand as opposed to his left hand, it is fictionally true by default that Immanuel writes with his hands as opposed to his feet, and that he does not use an amanuensis, and so on.

This element of truth in fiction goes beyond what can be determined using either of the two well-known principles mentioned earlier, the Principle of Actuality (PoA) and the Principle of Mutual Belief (PoMB). Neither Principle is sufficient to make it fictionally true that Immanuel does not write his letter using an amanuensis, for instance. In actuality, some people do write letters using an amanuensis, and it is a mutual belief that some people do so. Neither the PoA nor PoMB can deliver the result that Immanuel does not.

What neither the PoA nor the PoMB captures is the contribution made to determining fictional truth by assumptions about how things 'usually', 'normally' or 'typically' are. Such notions are vague and hard to systematize. This is because, we suggest, they have as their origin the complex of factors which makes certain possibilities ignorable in a given conversational context. In later sections we shall say more about some of these factors.

9 The success of our proposal is independent of whether Lewis's framework succeeds for the case of epistemology—our claim here is only that it works for the case of the dynamics of truth in fiction.

10 For a defence of this view of indefiniteness and a development of its semantics, see Bourne and Caddick Bourne, 2016.

For now, the point is that, whatever the prospects of the Principles overall, they do not incorporate the role of *ignorability* in generating fictional truths.

This has implications for what fiction-makers must do if they want to leave open certain features of their fictional worlds, rather than resolve them by default. What this view illustrates is that to *not eliminate* a possibility is not always sufficient to generate indefiniteness. Some possibilities need to be brought into play if they are to impact on fictional truth.

This brings us to a note on the normative significance of ignoring. One might think it lamentable that there are contexts where certain possibilities are not in play in the first place. Perhaps the fact that certain possibilities concerning Immanuel's writing are uneliminated but ignored reflects homogenizing tendencies in how we think about human physicality. One might say it *ought not* be fictionally true by default that Immanuel writes with his hands. The proper target of this objection, however, is not the proposed account of truth in fiction, but the facts about what is ignorable. What is fictionally true by default is determined by what is ignorable in a given conversational context, but some contexts may be ethically better ones to be in.

To take another example, in many cases where one character is specified to be the parent of another, it is fictionally true by default that they are a biological rather than adoptive parent. In many contexts, there is an asymmetry between biological parentage and adoption in their capacity to generate fictional truths; adoptive relationships between characters obtain when specified explicitly, but biological relationships between characters obtain by default because adoption is frequently ignorable. What such examples bring out is that the 'proper' in 'properly ignoring' does not signal ethical propriety. It relates simply to what possibilities we can expect to be in play in a given context, short-sighted though that context may turn out to be once we engage in active reflection on what possibilities it ignores.

#### 4. The Rule of Attention

Lewis proposes a number of 'rules' describing what counts as properly ignorable in a context. A particularly important rule for our purposes is the *Rule of Attention*: 'a possibility not ignored at all is *ipso facto* not properly ignored' (Lewis, 1996, p. 559). If somebody *raises* a possibility, they thereby draw our attention to it, which means that, in the context, it is not properly ignored. In other words, they have put it in play. For Lewis, this captures what the sceptic does by mentioning the possibilities with which they propose to undermine knowledge-claims. For '[n]o matter how far-fetched a certain possibility may be, no matter how properly we might have ignored it in some other context, if in *this* context we are not in fact ignoring it but attending to it, then for us now it is a relevant alternative' (p. 559).

The Rule of Attention explains how external factors can undermine what was previously true in a fiction. We shall mention four such factors. First, a possibility can be raised by discussion of what is true in the fiction. As soon as the possibility of Immanuel writing with his feet is mentioned, the context becomes one in which the possibility is in play,



and, thus, it is no longer true in the fiction that Immanuel writes with his hands. Simply to point out that a possibility *has* been ignored is to raise it, and thereby to affect what the fiction represents. Note that although the most straightforward way to raise a possibility is to state it, possibilities need not be stated to be raised. For instance, asking about a fictional family ‘Are they blood relatives?’ raises the possibilities of them not being blood relatives that the question presupposes.

Secondly, fiction-makers’ supplementary remarks outside the fiction itself—for example, in interviews, on what they take their characters to be like—can also change the context to one in which new possibilities are not properly ignored. On our proposed framework, the significance of fiction-makers’ declarations is not that they reveal fictional truths which were not accessible to those who did not create the fiction (although they may sometimes be presented in that form). What fiction-makers’ declarations can do, though, is undermine what was previously fictionally true by default; they do this when they introduce possibilities that may previously have been ignorable.

Thirdly, adaptations can influence which possibilities are in play for the originals from which they are adapted. For example, we take it initially to be true by default in Leskov’s ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk’ that Katerina and Zinovy have attempted, unsuccessfully, to conceive. In the film adaptation *Lady Macbeth* (2016, William Oldroyd), Alexander (Zinovy’s counterpart) achieves sexual satisfaction in ways other than intercourse with his wife. Once we attend to the possibility that Zinovy avoids intercourse, this possibility is not simply uneliminated by the book, but becomes uneliminated *and* not properly ignored; thus, the film adaptation makes it indefinite in the book whether the marriage is consummated.

Fourthly, casting choices can bring to attention possibilities for a character that were previously ignorable. For instance, when Noma Dumezweni was cast as Hermione in the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016), it prompted discussion among some consumers of the *Harry Potter* franchise about what was true in J.K. Rowling’s original book series. It was clear that, for at least some readers, the reason the casting of a black actor was striking was that the Hermione of the books was taken to be a white character. Rowling wrote, on ‘Twitter’: ‘Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified ...’. However, this shows only that the text says nothing that *eliminates* possibilities in which Hermione is not white. It may nevertheless be that some of the original contexts of the books’ publication made such possibilities *ignorable*. The very fact that the casting prompted extensive discussion of whether the Hermione of the books was white suggests that there were, previously, prominent contexts in which alternative possibilities were ignorable—that is, in which the mere absence of explicit specifications in the book served not to generate indefiniteness but to leave Hermione white by default.<sup>11</sup>

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11 There are a number of interesting features of this case, including the fact that film adaptations of the books already existed in which a white actor (Emma Watson) plays Hermione, and that the play was not a direct adaptation of one of the books, but a sequel to a story which already had a life both in the book series and in the film series. For the purposes of this paper, we are isolating one feature of the possible conversational dynamics of the case, as encapsulated in Rowling’s Twitter comment on how the play relates to what is made fictionally true in the books.



What this impacts on is not *whether Dumezweni should have been cast*—we take it for granted here that this was good casting—but *what the casting does* to the fictional truths of the original books. Casting a black actor as Hermione in the theatre production means that if we subsequently consider what is fictionally true in the books, the possibilities we have in play are different from the possibilities we had in play before the casting, since a new possibility has been brought to our attention. Whilst previously the possibility of Hermione being black was uneliminated but properly ignored, it is now uneliminated and not properly ignored, since not ignored at all.<sup>12</sup> With the casting of Dumezweni in the play, the context changes to one in which we can truly say that Hermione's colour is left indefinite by the books.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Rules of Conservatism, Resemblance, and Method

The Rule of Attention is one amongst several rules which Lewis proposes to capture the expectations governing our general conversational behaviour. Whilst not all are illuminating for the case of fiction, the Rules of Conservatism, of Resemblance and of Method can be used to reveal further factors in determining truth in fiction.

The *Rule of Conservatism* is that '[w]e are permitted, defeasibly, to adopt the usual and mutually expected presuppositions of those around us' (Lewis, 1996, p. 559). Or, unpacking this in terms of what possibilities are ignorable: 'Suppose that those around us normally do ignore certain possibilities, and it is common knowledge that they do. (They do, they expect each other to, they expect each other to expect each other to, ...) Then ... these generally ignored possibilities may properly be ignored' (p. 559).

Once applied to the case of fictional truth, the Rule of Conservatism gives this result: if it is commonplace to ignore possibilities of, for example, a character being adopted, then in such a context, simply not saying anything about a character's relations to their parents will be enough to make it fictionally true that they are not adopted.

The reasons *why* it is commonplace to ignore certain possibilities will vary from case to case. But one potential reason concerns fiction itself. Audiences' expectations may be a function partly of their experience of how fictions tend to function. Unless they are made unignorable by another rule—such as the Rule of Attention—we will ignore possibilities that would introduce atypical instances of indefiniteness. For example, if fictions which state explicitly that a character is adopted also tend to make their adopted status a 'plot point', so that whether a character is adopted has come to be seen as the kind of thing that makes a big difference to narrative development, then this will make indefiniteness

12 Again, the propriety of 'proper' ignoring is distinct from ethical propriety (see Section 3).

13 We are supposing that Dumezweni's colour serves to make it fictionally true *in the play* that Hermione is black. Making it fictionally true (in the play) that Hermione is black is one way of raising the possibility that Hermione is black, with the result that this possibility is then also in play when we subsequently consider the fictional truths of the books. However, we might think that actors' colour does not always serve to represent characters' colour. In that case, all that needs noting is that the casting of Dumezweni prompted mention *in the surrounding discussion* of the possibility that Hermione is black. *These* raisings of the possibility suffice to make the context one in which the possibility is not ignored.

over adoption atypical for the practice of fiction as it currently is, and thus contribute to a tendency to ignore all but one possibility in cases where the biological relations are not indicated explicitly.

Lewis's *Rule of Resemblance* is that if possibility *P1* is not properly ignored, and possibility *P2* saliently resembles *P1*, then *P2* is not properly ignored either. Perhaps this captures something about fiction. For example, once the possibility of Hermione being black is brought to attention, it is plausible that it does not simply become indefinite *whether Hermione is black or white*; rather, Hermione's colour becomes indefinite in a more expansive sense. The Rule of Resemblance appears to capture this by allowing that a whole range of possibilities become relevant precisely because they are also possibilities concerning colour.

But there is an issue for the Rule of Resemblance. It struggles to capture adequately the phenomenon of fictional truth by default. In fictional truth by default, there is an *asymmetry* between the possibility that is fictionally true by default and alternative possibilities, and this asymmetry is that the alternative possibilities are ignorable in the context. The Rule of Resemblance would destroy this asymmetry in cases where the alternative possibilities resemble the possibility that is fictionally true by default. For instance, it is fictionally true by default, we suggest, that characters are not missing an eye. But the possibility of having one eye resembles the possibility of having two eyes (e.g. with respect to whether a person has any vision, and with respect to being a possibility concerning a person's face). Similarly, it is fictionally true by default, we suggest, that young characters do not have false teeth. But the possibility of having false teeth resembles the possibility of having natural teeth. Thus, there is a conflict between what the Rule of Resemblance would apparently make it conversationally improper to ignore, and the facts on the ground about what, given our conversational practices, people typically expect one another to expect when making and engaging with fictions. The uneasy relationship between the Rule of Resemblance and the account of conversational dynamics in which it is embedded arises from the fact that the property of resemblance, when construed independently of how people direct their attention, outruns the limits of the associations between possibilities we would ordinarily expect others to expect us to make.<sup>14</sup>

If the Rule of Resemblance is to have any role to play in fiction, *salient* resemblance must be construed in terms of how we would expect each other's patterns of attention to move between possibilities in virtue of resemblances we recognize between them.<sup>15</sup> This construal allows for the way in which raising one possibility (such as Hermione being black) opens up indefiniteness which goes beyond the disjunction of only the new possibility and the possibility which was originally fictionally true by default (i.e. beyond

14 This is paralleled within Lewis's account of knowledge-ascriptions. Lewis invokes the Rule of Resemblance to enable the resolution of Gettier problems, but it threatens to undermine his account elsewhere, for, as Lewis acknowledges, the Rule of Resemblance renders salient a particular dimension of resemblance which makes unignorable the possibilities which lead to scepticism (Lewis, 1996, pp. 556–557). Because of this, Lewis says he is forced to make an *ad hoc* exception to which salient resemblances matter.

15 There is some affinity between this approach and Lewis's final comments on salience in dealing with his lottery example (1996, pp. 565–566).

simply ‘Hermione is black or Hermione is white’). But the construal does this without destroying the notion of fictional truth by default. Resemblances between possibilities will have a role to play in fictional truth only when we would expect them to exert some influence on what we are likely to recognize as possibilities for, for example, the character in question. In a context where it is simply presupposed that a character has two eyes, for example, the audience does not recognize the possibility of their having two eyes as something which resembles the possibility of having one eye.

Lewis’s *Rules of Method* are that it is proper to ignore possibilities of failure in two standard methods of non-deductive inference: sampling, and inference to the best explanation. That is, ‘[w]e are entitled to presuppose ... that a sample is representative, and that the best explanation of our evidence is the true explanation’ (Lewis, 1996, p. 558). The possibilities the Rules of Method make ignorable are possibilities in which the methods we trust turn out to be unreliable ones.

We suggest that the same is true for the case of fiction, but with an important difference in the standards for trusting a method. Fiction can exploit commonly held biases and stereotypes in a way the methods Lewis is interested in are designed to exclude.<sup>16</sup> In hearing a story about a torturer, we may suppose the fictional torturer to be male, if we are in a context where, for example, aggression and lack of empathy are seen as male traits, so that an author would have to deliberately specify that their torturer is female if they are to avoid the torturer being male by default. In determining what is true in a fiction, the relevant methods are the heuristics we employ in day-to-day life, rather than the methods we employ to expose flaws in those heuristics.<sup>17</sup> That an heuristic is flawed is not relevant to determining what is true in a fiction, until the point where its flaws become commonly enough known that it is no longer an heuristic. Given this reliance on heuristics, we might say that what seems to be operative in the case of fiction should be called the *Rule of Thumb Method*.

The Rule of Thumb Method is in a bootstrapping relationship with the Rule of Conservatism. When someone ignores what those around them tend to ignore, it is partly because they work with the same heuristics; and the reason they employ those heuristics is partly because those around them employ those heuristics.

## 6. Returning to the Original Context

Lewis proposes that a change of context can be ‘undone’ (Lewis, 1996, p. 560). For instance, though we might, in a particular conversation, attend to possibilities raised by the sceptic, doing so ‘does not plunge us forevermore into [this] special context’ (p. 559). We think the same applies in the case of fiction: possibilities that are made relevant in a new context may become ignorable again.

16 For a classic statement of how heuristics, despite being unreliable, are pervasive in human reasoning, see [Tversky and Kahneman, 1974](#).

17 This is consonant with the view (see, e.g., [Currie, 2016](#)) that the possibilities of learning from fiction are limited because establishing truth in fiction does not deploy the methods that are reliable indicators of actual truths.

In both Lewis's case and ours, the ease or difficulty of returning, at a later stage of engagement, to the presuppositions of an earlier context, is a psychological and social matter. Lewis considers a 'persistent' conversationalist who keeps interrupting our everyday conversations by raising possibilities that undermine everyday claims to knowledge (p. 560). Although, normally, it would be easy to return to ignoring these possibilities once the business of everyday life resumes, a sufficiently persistent conversationalist will not allow this. 'Even if we go off and play backgammon, and afterward start our conversation afresh, [they] might turn up and call our attention to [the possibilities] all over again' (p. 560).

Similarly, possibilities concerning fictional characters (and events, and so on) may remain unignorable because somebody repeatedly brings them to attention. Suppose a teacher is talking to their class about Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) and raises the possibility that the 'weird sisters' are not witches but merely (human) weird sisters. Suppose that the students discuss it for a while, but then revert to calling the sisters 'witches' and treating them as supernatural. By raising the possibility again and again, the teacher would force the students repeatedly back to a context where the possibility is unignorable. Nevertheless, without such interventions, the students would find it easy to return to a context where such a possibility is not in play, and in which, therefore, it is fictionally true that the women are witches.

By contrast, some possibilities may be such that, once they are raised, contexts in which they are ignorable are hard to come by. The influence of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James makes it more difficult for a fiction-maker to now have it fictionally true simply *by default* that a character's eerie experiences are genuine encounters with the supernatural. The wide exposure of contemporary (adult) audiences to the possibility that such experiences are delusions has the consequence that this possibility is typically not ignorable.

## 7. Fictional Truth as Elusive

Lewis deems knowledge 'elusive' because the practice of epistemology licenses introducing those possibilities which undermine knowledge-claims. When we start to *examine* knowledge (i.e. do epistemology), knowledge 'vanishes' (Lewis, 1996, p. 550), as we place ourselves in a context where the possibilities which undermine our knowledge-claims are no longer ignorable. We suggest that, insofar as the practice of interpreting fiction involves attending to possibilities that were previously ignorable, it can make fictional truth elusive in a similar way. Just as there is a sense in which knowledge vanishes when pursuing the question of what is known, there is a sense in which (some) fictional truths vanish when pursuing the question of what is fictionally true: what is definite in one context becomes indefinite in a new context, as possibilities become unignorable.<sup>18</sup>

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18 Some may find Lewis's use of 'vanishes' objectionable as a metaphor for the difference between contexts in the evaluation of knowledge-ascriptions, arguing that the type of change connoted by the word 'vanishing' is too remote from the type of difference that is really at issue in Lewis's account. We are less troubled by the metaphor, particularly as it places attention on the dynamics, which is our key focus here. But those who dislike the metaphor may ignore it in favour of how it is cashed out here and in the remainder of the section. Thanks to a referee for pushing us to not take for granted the acceptability of this way of talking.

Consider again Immanuel's writing. Suppose we attend to what is fictionally true, spelling out what has been left indefinite by the fiction; we might say 'Immanuel is either left-handed or he is right-handed, but this is not specified either way'. In going so far, this prompts us to notice a third option: couldn't Immanuel just as well be ambidextrous? And then a fourth: couldn't he just as well not write with his hands at all? And so on. At each stage of interpretation, the fictional truth concerning how Immanuel writes the letter is elusive; the scope of the disjunction that is fictionally true widens when we examine what disjuncts are included in it.<sup>19</sup>

The view we are proposing here is not the view that there is a fixed and unchanging fiction, and what changes is our knowledge of it. In saying fictional truth is elusive, we do not mean that there is *elusive knowledge of* fictional truths.<sup>20</sup> Neither are we proposing that there is a single fiction which undergoes change. Better, we suggest, to hold that a fiction is a product of the representational resources (including, for example, the words on the pages or the images on screen) and a conversational context, such that any set of representational resources can issue in multiple fictions according to the multiple contexts it might find itself in. The intuitive way of understanding this is to think of a fiction's content as its 'fictional world', such that what changes, when the context changes, is *which* fictional world is represented.<sup>21</sup> The elusiveness of fictional truth, then, amounts to the fact that, insofar as the practice of interpreting fiction involves attending to possibilities that were previously ignorable, we cannot remain within a given context whilst engaging in interpretation. We can stay put in our context, with its fictional world, just so long as we suspend taking the conversation any further. By going on raising new possibilities concerning the fictional truths, we make it the case

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19 There are further aspects of interpretation which also involve attending to possibilities, such as interpreting aspects of a fiction as symbolic, metaphorical, or allegorical. This dimension of interpretation may also be characterized by a type of elusiveness. For instance, it may be that once we propose that a fictional event can function as a symbol of one thing, we also come to recognize the possibility that it functions as a symbol of some other similar thing, or indeed of something entirely different. What is seen as symbolic for death might equally be seen as symbolic for capitalism, for austerity, for tyranny, for social media. Insofar as such interpretation is governed by the introduction of possibilities, the elusiveness identified by Lewis's contextualism may help explain why some take the endpoint of interpretation to be destruction of meaning, in the sense that no reading of a fiction can claim to be secure. But whilst some think that reading aspects of fictions symbolically, metaphorically, or allegorically is part of determining what is fictionally true, we happen to think that this aspect of interpretation does not involve determining fictional truths at all, but instead involves *using* fictional truths in a particular way, typically involving drawing comparisons between them and something else (see, e.g., Bourne and Caddick Bourne, 2018). As such, we do not wish to propose the present account as an account of this aspect of interpretation.

20 Although others are welcome to use the view in this way. This is not the route we wish to take, however. Our view is that the content of a fiction is fixed by what is communicated, and the account we give here is an account of what is communicated.

21 In fact, we think the best view of the metaphysics of fiction takes the intuitive understanding literally—see Bourne and Caddick Bourne (2016)—although that is not necessary for our argument here.

that the fictional world which is now at issue is not the one that would have been at issue had we not done so.<sup>22</sup>

Since our proposed framework imposes no in-principle limit on what possibilities can be raised, does this mean all possibilities are equal? Suppose somebody raises the possibility that Sherlock Holmes is a robot. We might attempt to say that the possibility is eliminated—for example, by pointing to some part of the story which mentions some organic properties of Holmes. Then suppose the possibility-raiser says that perhaps Sherlock Holmes is a special type of robot made partly from organic material. This possibility-raiser's conversational behaviour looks similar to the sceptic's. It also looks as if it gets something *wrong* concerning how to engage with the fiction.

We propose that the best way to understand this, insofar as it is judged to be a misfire in possibility raising, is to articulate the idea of raising a possibility which should not be raised, *given what we want to get out of the current task*. This applies both to the case of truth in fiction and to the case of knowledge-attribution. Suppose a witness making a report to the police is presented by the person taking the statement with the possibility that they are a brain in a vat. The officer has placed themselves and the witness in a context unhelpful for the task at hand, which is to get a report of what happened. There is no interest in the possibility of being a brain in a vat so far as that task goes, even though there would be interest in the possibility if, say, the witness were to reconsider it when assessing, in an epistemology seminar, whether they had knowledge of what happened.

We might similarly think that some instances of possibility raising would be in tension with the aims we are trying to achieve when engaging in interpretation of fiction, and thus, that some ways of making fictional truths vanish are better than others. When somebody thinks that an instance of possibility raising has misfired, it is because one of the goals of interpretation is to generate something interesting and rewarding, and in this case the indefiniteness that has been introduced by raising the possibility looks to have no prospects of being interesting or rewarding. The aims of interpretation do not lend themselves to introducing *any* old possibility which would undermine what is, in our current context, fictionally true by default. Although they *can* be undermined, some such fictional truths are just not worth undermining. By contrast, epistemology's aim of examining the status and security of knowledge can be served by the introduction of any old possibility which might affect whether we deem knowledge to be had or not. An instance of possibility raising

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22 For the purposes of this paper, we need not be drawn further on what form of contextualist (or relativist) semantics, of those available (such as those taxonomized in [Walters, 2015](#)), is best suited to capture truth in fiction given the account of the conversational dynamics proposed here. This is partly because we wish to remain open to the view that since conversations adapt in various ways to accommodate participants' awareness of context-sensitivity, for certain questions there is—as Lewis suggests for the question of whether speaker's context or assessor's context governs evaluation of what the speaker said—no general answer, 'apart from the usual principle that we should interpret what is said so as to make the message make sense' (1996, p. 566 fn.24). But it is largely because what is most important for our purposes—as it is for Lewis's—is the underlying conversational dynamics; to have shown how 'complicated phenomena' (in our case, truth in fiction) derive their complexity from 'the complex pragmatics of context-dependent ignoring' ([Lewis, 1999](#), p. 7).

that is not interesting or rewarding when we are trying to record a witness statement may nevertheless be interesting and rewarding when we are trying to do epistemology.

The aims of interpretation have the consequence that what counts as a misfire depends on what other practices we are engaged with. What is interesting and rewarding when doing literary studies may be different from what is interesting and rewarding when doing philosophy, or from what is comedically interesting and rewarding—which, in turn, affects what instances of fictional truth by default are worth undermining. Raising the possibility that the weird sisters are not witches offers obvious rewards—for example, in forcing a reevaluation of what the causal influences on characters' behaviour shows about their personal responsibility. Raising the possibility that Holmes is a part-organic robot probably does not. Or suppose we are in a context where heuristics about teenage boys and teenage girls make things fictionally true by default in *Harry Potter*. Now suppose somebody raises the possibility that *Hermione is much more flatulent than Ron*, either in conversation or through their own performance of the role. Some might say this is not a very rewarding interpretative move. But perhaps it delivers when the aims are comedic. The incongruity between this suggestion and the usual heuristics may itself be funny at the ground level—to someone with a sense of humour of a certain sophistication—and the move may be more comedically rewarding still if the suggestion is presented as if it were congruent with the aims of serious literary scholarship; perhaps serving as a parody of the practice. (And, if not found funny on any level, would lack comedic as well as literary interest.)

So, all possibilities are equal, but some are more equal than others. Introducing a possibility can effect a change to what is fictionally true by undermining something that was fictionally true by default. This in itself does not discriminate between possibilities. But not all cases of introducing a possibility are equally fruitful given the aims of a particular communicative exchange. The aims we adopt privilege some possibilities over others, as the ones that are more likely to be raised given the aims that we are pursuing. As such, our aims influence what is fictionally true because cooperative conversationalists will be less likely to create contexts which are unrewarding relative to those aims.

The framework we have set out allows us to clarify the status of the Principle of Actuality and the Principle of Mutual Belief. In principle, results of the PoA or PoMB are subject to being undermined, but there are various reasons for expecting many of the fictional truths that would be generated by such principles not to be undermined. In many cases, the conversation would be far-fetched, in that the introduction of the alternative possibilities would not ordinarily be conversationally motivated. What sort of conversation might somebody have that would make it relevant for them to raise the possibility of the existence of witches when considering *Rocky*? Such conversations may be had, but are not the ones we ordinarily expect to have. Further, when introduced, such possibilities may well be ones that do not serve the aims of interpretation, and so we would be less likely to remain in such a context—the new indefiniteness would not 'stick'. The status of the PoA and PoMB is as useful, but defeasible, shorthands capturing likelihoods for how conversations will progress and what will not be undermined. This does not mean they exert no influence on which possibilities we are likely to raise and which we are not. If we



assume that those around us are unlikely to raise possibilities that conflict with actuality, for example, then such possibilities will be ignorable by the Rule of Conservatism, and are consequently less likely to be raised. As such, the PoA and PoMB are self-reinforcing.<sup>23</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

Fictional truths can be undermined by raising possibilities, and enabled by ignoring them. By providing an account of this and articulating the notion of fictional truth by default, we have shown that there is a clear framework for a part of everyday engagement with fiction which might otherwise be thought so unsystematic as to resist philosophical analysis.<sup>24</sup>

Craig Bourne  
University of Hertfordshire, UK  
[C.Bourne@herts.ac.uk](mailto:C.Bourne@herts.ac.uk)

Emily Caddick Bourne<sup>ORCID</sup>  
University of Manchester, UK  
[emily.caddickbourne@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:emily.caddickbourne@manchester.ac.uk)

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- 23 There is a special case of possibility-raising which merits treatment in its own right: raising possibilities which conflict with the assumptions we would otherwise have made about what was eliminated and, as such, would require us to construe as a species of unreliable narration what would otherwise have been taken as reliable narration. For example, raising the possibility that 'it was all a dream' would call for us to revise our judgement of things that would otherwise be established as fictionally true simply on the basis of what is stated explicitly. Such cases of possibility-raising amount also to cases of renegotiating the boundary between what is eliminated and what is ignorable. This is continuous with a more general issue: what exactly is made explicit by a fiction is not always a straightforward matter. But pursuing this further here would take us beyond the concerns of the present paper.
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