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for *Philosophy Through Science Fiction Stories*

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[This is the intended introduction for a collection of mostly new science fiction stories on philosophical themes. See [here](#) for the Table of Contents, publication details, and purchase information. Comments and suggestions welcome for the next few months.]

**Introductory Dispute Concerning Science Fiction, Philosophy, and the Nutritional Content
of Maraschino Cherries**

Helen De Cruz, Johan De Smedt, and Eric Schwitzgebel

“—this dialogue, for example,” said Johan, folding his arms, gazing across the table in the hotel bar at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association. “It didn’t even happen. Fictional philosophical dialogue is out of fashion for excellent reason.”

“But that’s the beauty of it!” replied Eric, looking slightly hurt. His imaginary cocktail was bright pink, with three cherries and an umbrella.

“No one will believe it. What’s the point? It’s a waste of time. If you’re doing philosophy, just lay it out straight. Say what you want to say. Don’t decorate it with fiction.” Johan pointed accusingly at Eric’s cocktail. “I mean, why an umbrella? It’s silly froufrou.”

“It’s cute!” said Helen, who you didn’t picture until just now, but who had been sitting at the imaginary table all along. “It enhances the mood. It adds color. Even if strictly speaking it

has no nutritional content, its vivid turquoise complements the pink and red of drink and cherry. Fiction dresses an idea, invites you to engage with that idea, makes it attractive in a certain sort of way.”

“The wrong sort of way!” said Johan.

“Fiction is the very flesh on the bones, not decoration,” said Eric.

“Imagine a man who is explicitly sexist,” said Helen. “He is committed to patriarchy, thinks that women should only have certain roles. They should only be mothers and homemakers. Now give him a story to read. Tell it from a woman’s point of view. Make it some future dystopia where women are oppressed in a way that even he would say is bad. Get him to sympathize with those fictional women, really feeling their plight. Tell the story vividly, emotionally, with depth and detail over three hundred pages.¹ When he pokes his head back up out of the story, maybe he’ll see the world a little differently. Maybe he’ll have a little more sympathy for women in oppressive systems. Maybe he’ll see similarities between the exaggerated situation in the fiction and the experiences of women in his own society, and maybe he’ll be a tiny bit more open to change. He’ll have shifted a little, philosophically, in his view of the world. That’s the kind of work philosophical fiction can do.”

Johan looked around the bar. For a long time, academic philosophy in Europe and North America had been almost exclusively the province of white men, and—since what is not made explicit in fiction conforms to the reader’s beliefs about the actual world²—it still showed in the demographics of the discipline³ in this imaginary hotel. Aristotle, Kant, and Locke could probably have benefited from imaginative exercises like the one Helen was describing.⁴ And yet ... “that’s not really philosophy, exactly, I’d say.” Johan paused, seeming to gauge Helen.

“Philosophy is about rational argumentation. Of course, things other than rational argumentation can change your worldview. Even listening to a great piece of music, such as Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony⁵, can be emotionally profound. It can fill you with awe just by its very sound, with no rational content at all. And maybe, in the right circumstances, it could color your future perspective. But that wouldn’t make Beethoven a philosopher or his symphonies philosophical works.”

“If the work explores or promotes a worldview,” said Eric, “I don’t see why we shouldn’t call it philosophical.” He pierced a maraschino cherry with the stem of the umbrella, then lifted it to eye level. “Now suppose that the intent of this cocktail, in its pink and turquoise flamboyance, is to celebrate life’s capacity to delight us with sweet, luxurious, unapologetic indulgence. The manager highlights this drink on the cocktail list with that very intent, and knowing that intention, the bartender mixes and presents it. This cocktail⁶, then, is itself an act of philosophy, even if certain dowdy no-funners are unable to appreciate it.” With one finger, Eric flicked the cherry off the umbrella, high into the air, aiming to catch it in his mouth on its downward arc. The cherry struck him on the chin, then bounced to the floor. The bartender, who in mixing the cocktail had no such intentions as Eric described, glanced critically in their direction.

Helen stooped to retrieve the cherry, then set it on a napkin in front of her. “So, we can drink philosophy as well as read it, Eric? Should we invite the bartender to give a colloquium talk?”

Eric lifted his cocktail. “That would be awesome! But of course she will need to perform in her accustomed liquid medium.”⁷

“Argument by cocktail? I wouldn’t go as far as that,” Helen said, gazing absently at the hotel’s logo on the crumpled napkin. “But maybe a great painting can express a philosophical idea more vividly and effectively than an expository essay. Take Picasso’s *Guernica*—such an austere, quasi-monochrome study in the horrors of war.⁸ A few days ago, I was in a museum and saw a painting by, I think, a French painter, of glossy horses standing in the shade and bedraggled donkeys standing in the glaring sun.⁹ It showed how they kept those animals for hire, but clearly it was also a social commentary. Its basic content was kind of obvious and simple—but it was political philosophy. And maybe it would reach people better than an essay. I imagine some aristocrat contemplating the painting, pitying the donkeys. Maybe later, as he’s rolling along in a lovely carriage, he sees someone selling apples in the bleaching sun and thinks “What are we doing? We’re treating people as badly as those donkeys!” It’s not like he couldn’t get similar ideas from prose and think the same thing non-metaphorically, but the vividness of the metaphor hooks him in, leads him along, makes the idea salient and emotional and memorable in a way it wouldn’t otherwise be.”

“But, Helen,” groaned Johan, “now everything will become philosophy. You can’t sustain the compromise position you want. Every work of fiction, implicitly or explicitly, critiques or celebrates a worldview. The main characters have ideals and values, they make life choices, and by portraying these sympathetically or unsympathetically, and by showing us how those values and choices play out in the story, the fiction nudges us toward a worldview. But surely, we don’t want to say that all fiction is philosophy. And it isn’t just fiction. All movies and TV shows, all lyrical songs, and maybe all songs of any sort—maybe even architecture and fashion and product design. If you say that painting is philosophy, lots of things risk becoming philosophy, until you end in the inanity of turquoise-umbrella cocktail philosophy. Eric’s ability

to appreciate the cocktail in phenomenological terms does not turn the bartender into a phenomenologist. Where do you stop?”

“Why stop?” said Eric. “I rather like the idea that everything you do is implicit philosophy. Every choice you make manifests your worldview. Every public act is a kind of advertisement for a way of being. We are all always philosophers. Why does philosophy need to be some rarified, privileged activity?”

“Are we doing okay here?” The server appeared in severe gray and black hotel uniform—a uniform that expressed, if Eric was right, the hotel management’s particular philosophy of hospitality. Smoothly, she cleared the cherry and napkin. “More drinks? How about some food?”

“We’re discussing the philosophy of cocktails,” said Helen. “If you don’t mind my asking, in your opinion, is there a philosophy of cocktails? Would you describe yourself as a philosopher?”

The server looked annoyed. “I don’t know about any of that. Are you guys okay on drinks, then?”

“We’re fine,” said Johan, sympathetically. “Thanks.”

“Okay, maybe she wouldn’t be a good choice for a colloquium slot,” conceded Eric.

“There have to be boundaries,” pressed Johan. “If everything is philosophy, then nothing is. To be a coherent discipline, you need to rule some things in and other things out. A work of fiction, or maybe even a cocktail, might be in some broad sense ‘philosophical’—but unless you

have an expository argument for a philosophical thesis, you don't really have a work of philosophy."

"How about Wittgenstein, Confucius, Thales?" suggested Helen. "They didn't always present arguments for their claims, but we recognize them as philosophers, right?"

"Wittgenstein did provide arguments, even if they were sometimes sketchy and fragmented. Confucius and Thales make an intriguing case. I think it's fair to say that many don't consider them to be philosophers by today's analytical standards," said Johan.

"How about the famous 'trolley problem'?" said Helen, arranging peanuts on the glossy, dark brown tabletop, five nuts¹⁰ in one row and an outlying nut about eight inches away, near Johan. She grabbed Eric's maraschinoed cocktail and started sliding it along the tabletop toward the group of five nuts. "An out of control trolley is headed toward five people who will certainly be killed if nothing is done. But wait. You see that you're standing next to a switch that can shunt the trolley onto a side-track. If you flip the switch, the trolley will be diverted away, saving the five people. Yay!" Helen diverted the glass from its path toward the five nuts, aiming instead toward the lone nut. "Sadly, there is one person on the side track who will now be killed by the trolley. The question is, if you're standing there with that choice, should you flip the switch? Should you kill one person in order to save five? Or is killing such a forbidden and horrible act that you shouldn't do it, even if it means five people will die as a result of your inaction?"¹¹

"Yes, we all know the trolley problem," said Johan, rolling his eyes maybe just the tiniest bit. "It's a colorful way of posing the ethical question of whether you should do what maximizes good consequences or whether you should instead abide by rules such as 'do not kill' even in the

face of bad consequences. My point is that you don't need that fluff. You don't need to make a story of it. In fact, the story is distracting. It contains irrelevant detail that could illegitimately influence your judgment. And then again, it doesn't contain enough detail for your purposes. No blood splatters, no anguished screams, no frantic arm-waving by those people who apparently can't leave the tracks. I mean, what are these people doing on trolley tracks anyway? Why can't they get out of the way? Are they tied down, or what? And it's even sillier the way you've done it just now, with this pink cocktail and peanuts, as though somehow having these legumes here helps us think about it better. The whole thing is absurd, not conveying the gravity of real life and death choices. And because it's so comical, maybe it's easier than it should be to just count up the peanuts, and say 'flip the switch'. You might actually reach a different and worse judgment than you would in real life. Better to stick with the core arguments and considerations, rather than add irrelevant details."

"Johan, you have too high an opinion of the rationality of philosophers," Helen replied. "Maybe some god or ideal cognizer could just think about abstract principles like 'maximize good consequences' or 'don't kill innocent people' and then figure out all the implications, weigh them against each other, and reach a well-grounded ethical conclusion undistracted by irrelevant details, as you call them. But that's not how the human mind works—not even the minds of great philosophers. We need a story to think through the implications. We need something specific to consider, something that ignites the imagination and the emotions. That's what fiction, especially, is so great at, and why it can have such philosophical oomph. A superhuman genius could maybe think abstractly about a government with the power to rewrite history and the news and see all the horrible things that would flow from that. For the rest of us, to really grasp its awfulness, it helps to read George Orwell's *1984*.¹² Or consider ... " Helen

thoughtfully munched a peanut saved from the trolley, “what if we could upload our consciousness onto computers and live in artificial computational worlds? So much of philosophical interest could follow from that! We could duplicate ourselves, back ourselves up, totally rewrite our own values and priorities if we wanted, give ourselves any sensory experiences we desire. The nature of risk, selfhood, scarcity, and death would all change radically. Thoughtful science fiction stories, like Greg Egan’s *Permutation City* and *Diaspora*, can help us imagine what it might really be like, help us see aspects that might not be immediately obvious.¹³ If you try to just sit and think about it abstractly, you’ll fail. To make progress you need to think narratively—what someone would do if such-and-such, and then how others might react, and what would happen next. That’s how human brains work.¹⁴ Even just ‘abstractly,’ once you really start to think about it, you begin to write a mini-fiction. That’s why philosophers so often use thought experiments, to help their audience think along with them. So why not just acknowledge that fiction is part of how we do philosophy?”

“Okay, maybe most of us need fiction as a crutch,” acknowledged Johan, looking down critically at Helen’s diminishing peanuts. “But we should try not to rely on fiction. We should avoid it as much as we can. Think of your trolley problem. There’s this interesting study that suggests that if the one person you have to kill to save the five is named “Chip Ellsworth III” and you’re a political liberal, you’re more likely to divert the trolley to kill him than if the one person is named “Tyrone Payton,” and vice versa if you’re a political conservative.¹⁵ The irrelevant details confuse you. You imagine the annoying rich white guy, and suddenly you’re a consequentialist! You’re fine sacrificing him to save others. But if it had been someone different, you’d have embraced a different moral principle. In a fiction, if you tell the story one way, maybe you sympathize with the protagonist and then you think, okay, what he’s doing is

fine. If you tell the story some other way, maybe you don't sympathize with the protagonist, and you come to a different conclusion. What drives those sympathies might be how the person talks, their race, whether they're funny, whether they had a sad childhood—irrelevancies. Fiction, maybe, can be a partner or an aid to philosophy, but we should be wary of it, and the best philosophy ultimately pushes such details away to focus on fundamental principles without all the peanuts and umbrellas."

"That's exactly wrong!" intervened Eric, who had been making steady progress on his cocktail while Helen and Johan were arguing. "Take everything you just said, Johan, and reverse it. Standing just by themselves, abstract statements like 'maximize good consequences' or 'act on that maxim that you can at the same time will to be a universal law' are empty slogans.¹⁶ To give them flesh, they need to be applied to real and hypothetical cases. What did Thomas Jefferson mean when he wrote 'all men are created equal'? It's vacuous until we figure out how it applies. Does it mean that all men should get the vote? That all *people* should get the vote, and not just men? That no one should be enslaved? That there should be no hereditary titles?¹⁷ Jefferson and his friends could all agree on the slogan, while they disagreed on these other issues. There's no substance until you include the details that you, Johan, want to strip away as irrelevancies. Helen says that fiction is useful for thinking through philosophy, given that we aren't superhuman geniuses, but I'd go farther. Fiction isn't merely an aid. The examples are the heart of the matter, where the best philosophical cognition happens. It's the abstract slogans that are the crutch. Abstract slogans can serve as aids to memory or give hints about a general direction of thought. To treat 'everyone as equal' can mean a great many different things, depending on who says it in what context with what applications in mind. You're right, Johan, that the trolley problem is silly. But you react by running in the wrong direction. It's silly

because it has too little detail rather than too much. As you said, we want to know why these people are on the tracks, how did you come to be standing near the switch, what kind of trolley it is, and why it is out of control. Working out the full story in plausible detail will take much more than a paragraph. It will take a fiction. Really thinking through the ethics of a fully-developed imaginative scenario—that’s every bit as much philosophy as is some abstract theorizing by Plato or Kant.”

“But Eric!” spluttered Johan.

Helen interrupted him with a finger in front of his lips. “Johan, don’t forget. *You’re* a fiction.”

Johan tossed both of his hands into the air. “So what? I’m still right. Pay attention to my abstract content!”

“As you said at the beginning, this whole conversation didn’t even happen. We’ve only met Eric in person once, and at that time we didn’t even discuss these issues. Plus, I happen to know that the real flesh-and-blood Johan doesn’t agree with you at all.”

Johan narrowed his eyes. “That has nothing to do with the merits of my argument.”

“Well, we could have you win by wishing Eric away, for example, or having him say something obviously foolish.” And indeed, suddenly, Eric and his now-empty cocktail glass were nowhere to be seen. All that remained was a wobbling cherry on the table near his seat.

“Yet another way to cheat in fiction,” said Johan. “Give the other side a bad argument, an unappealing representative, or just write them out of the story altogether, maybe in a pink puff of smoke.”

“Ah,” said Helen, “but another great thing about fiction, much harder to achieve in ordinary expository writing, is that you can present the complexity of things without fully committing to a single authorial perspective. You can leave things unsettled. A fiction can speak to us with the same multivocality in which the world speaks to us. It can include details that surprise the author and that speak to the readers in ways the author couldn’t foresee or understand.”

“Such as this dialogue here, you’re going to say next.”

“If we’ve written it well enough,” replied Helen.

“But that’s—”

Johan disappeared in a pink puff of smoke.

Now please imagine Helen alone at the table, eating the cherry with a mischievous smile.

Endnotes

¹ Atwood, M. (1985). *The handmaid's tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

² Lewis, D. (1978). Truth in fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(1), 37-46.

³ See e.g., Wilhelm, I., Conklin, S. L., & Hassoun, N. (2018). New data on the representation of women in philosophy journals: 2004–2015. *Philosophical Studies*, 175(6), 1441-1464; Schwitzgebel, E., & Jennings, C. D. (2017). Women in philosophy: Quantitative analyses of specialization, prevalence, visibility, and generational change. *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 31(2), 83-106; Botts, T. F., Bright, L. K., Cherry, M., Mallarangeng, G., & Spencer, Q. (2014). What is the state of blacks in philosophy? *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 2(2), 224-242.

⁴ Van Norden, B.W. (2017). *Taking back philosophy. A multicultural manifesto*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁵ van Beethoven, L. (1812). *Symphony No. 8 in F major, Op. 93*. The work can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-f3iKeUJm4>

⁶ On the philosophy of cocktails, see e.g., Bakewell, S. (2016). *At the existentialist café. Freedom, being, and apricot cocktails*. London: Vintage.

⁷ Schwitzgebel, E. (2020). *A theory of jerks and other philosophical misadventures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, chapter 50, The philosopher of hair.

⁸ *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. s.v. "Guernica (Picasso)" (accessed August 10, 2019). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_\(Picasso\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_(Picasso))

⁹ Actually, Joseph Stevens is a Belgian painter. We apologize for embarrassing fictional Helen in this way. The work is linked here:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Stevens_-_Horses_and_Donkeys_for_Hire.jpg

¹⁰ Real-world Johan wishes to point out that peanuts are technically legumes rather than nuts. Real-world Eric objects to Johan's privileging of scientific over culinary taxonomy, with its implication that you could make a fruit salad from zucchinis and tomatoes. Dupré, J. (1981). Natural kinds and biological taxa. *Philosophical Review*, 90(1), 66-90.

¹¹ The original papers describing the trolley problem are Foot, P. (1967). The problem of abortion and the doctrine of double effect. *Oxford Review* 5:5-15. Thomson, J. J. (1985). The trolley problem. *Yale Law Journal*, 94(6), 1395-1415. Since then a whole cottage industry has sprung up analyzing the problem.

¹² Orwell, G. (1949). *Nineteen eighty-four. A novel*. London: Secker and Warburg.

¹³ Egan, G. (1994) *Permutation city*. London: Orion/Millennium. Egan, G. (1997). *Diaspora*. London: Millennium.

¹⁴ Gottschall, J. (2012). *The storytelling animal. How stories make us human*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

¹⁵ Uhlmann, E. L., Pizarro, D. A., Tannenbaum, D., & Ditto, P. H. (2009). The motivated use of moral principles. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 4(6), 476-491.

¹⁶ On maximizing good consequences, see Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2003/2019). Consequentialism. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 edition). URL:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/consequentialism>. On universalizing maxims, see Kant, I. (1785/2006). *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals* (A.W. Wood, trans). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹⁷ Finkelman, P. (1996). *Slavery and the founders. Race and liberty in the age of Jefferson*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.