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Fiktive Figuren als Träger von Wissen und als epistemische Autoritäten (Abstract)

- Full-length article in: JLT 13/2 (2019), 161–184.

This essay examines the question of whether and under what conditions a fictitious character can be an epistemic authority for (real) readers; more precisely: it asks whether and under what conditions readers can acquire (propositional) knowledge from the character, thus learning something from it. In answering this question, the essay brings together two debates that have so far hardly been related to each other: an epistemological debate on the concept of epistemic authority and a literary-theoretical debate on aesthetic cognitivism, i.e., the discourse about what can be learned from the reception of fictional texts.

In order for a person to be an epistemic authority for another person, two conditions must be met: 1) the first person must have an advantage in knowledge over the second person that the second person recognizes and acknowledges as such; and 2) the second person must have appropriate access to this knowledge. In order to clarify to what extent a fictitious character and a real reader can be related in this way, I first examine what it means to attribute knowledge to a fictitious character. To do so, I suggest the following analysis: In story *S*, character *C* knows that *p* if and only if *C* believes in *S* that *p*; *p* is true in *S*; and *C* is justified in *S* to believe that *p* (this suggestion, based on the classical definition of knowledge, can easily be adapted for other suggested analyses: all that is required is that all conditions in the analysis – whatever they might be – lie inside the scope of the fiction operator). Furthermore, a knowledge attribution of the form »In *S*, *C* knows *whether p*« is true if and only if in *S*, *C* knows that *p* or knows that not-*p*.

On the question of the correctness-conditions for knowledge attributions of the form »In *S*, *C* knows that *p*« and »In *S*, *C* knows *whether p*«, I will then enter the debate about fictional truths. This is necessary for two reasons. On the one hand, the attribution of knowledge is nothing but the assertion of a particular fictional truth. And on the other hand, an attribution of knowledge involves another fictional fact, namely the fact *p* (which I call the »underlying fact«). The view that is largely held in the discussion about fictional truth following Lewis is that what is true in a story does not result solely from the explicit assertions in the text, but also from *plausible consequences* [*Plausibilitätsschlüssen*] that we can be further justified in drawing. More precisely, the following possibilities arise for both facts – the underlying fact as well as the attribution of knowledge: Either the text *explicitly* contains a reference to the fact. Or it does not contain such an explicit reference, but the question of whether the fact obtains can still be answered on the basis of *plausibility conclusions*. Or there are no explicit references and plausibility conclusions cannot be drawn. In this case, there is a *point of indeterminacy*. These distinctions result in a number of possible combinations corresponding to different types of situations, some interesting instance of which I examine in more detail. One case that is especially remarkable is when there is a point of indeterminacy in the text with regard to the underlying fact, which – as I illustrate with an example – does not exclude the possibility that knowledge can be attributed to a character with regard to the proposition in question. The claim is often made about indeterminate passages that not even God can know whether the facts in question obtain – and this is correct. Hence if we are entitled to attribute the knowledge in

question to a character, this shows that fictitious characters can not only know more than the reader or the author, but even more than God.

Such situations also illustrate that more knowledge does not have to go hand in hand with more epistemic authority. For readers, the indeterminate passage remains unresolvable, and readers cannot learn anything from the character in this regard. This leads me to the question of under which conditions the reader can learn something from a character to whom knowledge is attributed that the reader does not possess. A fundamental problem for the idea that there could be something like a transfer of knowledge between a fictitious character and a real reader is that both belong to different ontological spheres, so to speak: the reader is real, the character merely fictitious. If a character were to be an epistemic authority for a reader, this would be a case of a *transfictional epistemic authority*, which must be distinguished from »ordinary« epistemic authorities as well as from *fictitious epistemic authorities* and from *epistemic authorities for fictitious truths*. I propose to analyze transfictional epistemic authorities using the make-believe theory and the extended-pretense operator: When readers find themselves in extended pretense and pretend to be part of the fictitious world, they become at least imaginatively capable of interacting with the characters, so that the characters can become imaginary epistemic authorities for the readers.

I also discuss the cognitivism debate and argue that the (fictitious) knowledge of a character can affect not only intra-fictional but also extra-fictional objects and truths. A main objection to the cognitivist view that readers can acquire propositional knowledge of reality from reading fictional texts is that fictional texts are not reliable sources and that the beliefs the reader may form through reading cannot be justified. I reject this objection and argue that readers can also acquire knowledge about reality through the attribution of knowledge to fictitious characters or even from speech acts that the characters make in the story.

Finally, I will deal with a possible objection that the epistemic authority that a character can have is completely parasitic on that of the author: the objection here is that if readers learn something, it's actually from the author. In contrast, I argue that fictitious characters can acquire an independent epistemic authority that cannot be reduced to that of the author.

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2019-10-27

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

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How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Rico Hauswald, Fiktive Figuren als Träger von Wissen und als epistemische Autoritäten.

In: JLTONline (27.10.2019)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-004205

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-004205>