

Narratives, Spoilers, and Cooperative Epistemic Environments

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Early draft

§1. “No one in this town has seen *Star Wars*”

On the road into Slab City, California is a large hand-painted sign that reads, “Nobody in this town has seen the movie ‘*Star Wars*’. Please, no spoilers!”. Slab City is an off-grid community, full of public art and interactive creative projects. The population varies in size according to the season, and long-time residents are sometimes called ‘Slabbers’¹. How seriously to take anything written on any signs in Slab City is unclear. However, if we take the sign seriously, the suggestion is that Slabbers’ lack of first-hand experience with the movie *Star Wars* is a reason for those who have that experience refrain from telling Slabbers key features of the film’s plot.

The Slabber’s sign is prudent. In general, spoiling a movie, especially one as old as *Star Wars*, is taken to be unremarkable – a faux pas, at worst. While there are communities in which spoiling something current is a more serious infraction, we don’t generally pay much attention to what media those around us have consumed, or what they can be likely to know as a result. This, I think, is a serious failure on our part. And, more specifically, it is a serious *epistemic* failure. When we spoil, especially without special permission, we fail to behave as we epistemically ought.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slab_City,_California

I recognize that this is a controversial claim. To make the case for it, I'll proceed as follows: first, I'll define spoiling and spoilers in terms of the valuable reveals we can experience when we encounter a work unspoiled. Second, I'll specify what I mean by *work*, and why they are the only candidates for spoiling. Then, in section 4, I'll discuss the kinds of epistemic environments that allow us to encounter works unspoiled, arguing that the epistemic benefits of doing so mean that we should not allow ourselves to be spoiled. In section 5, I'll turn to our epistemic obligations to avoid spoiling works for others before concluding in section 6.

§2. Spoilers

What would it take to spoil *Star Wars* for a Slabber? Some information can, intuitively, be shared without spoiling the movie. I think I could mention that the movie was released in 1977, or that there is space travel, or that there are weapons in it without spoiling the movie. It is tempting to think that telling someone the ending spoils the movie. In many cases, this is true. I wouldn't tell someone the ending of *The Usual Suspects*, or *Ponyo*. The ending-as-spoiler heuristic, however, will not hold in all cases. In part, this is because the boundary of the end of a movie is rarely sharp. If we mean we spoil the movie by describing the ending scene, there will be many counter examples. The ending scene of *Star Wars: A New Hope* is pretty unremarkable. Further, in movies depicting familiar stories like folk tales or histories, we often know the rough contours of the endings before we consume the depictions. These works, however, still seem to be spoilable.

It is also tempting to think that telling someone the climax of a movie's plot spoils the movie. This, again, is intuitive in some, but not all cases. We can know what happens at the climax of *Titanic* without necessarily having it spoiled for us. Here, too, the spoil-ability of depictions of familiar stories offers counter examples – I know the climax of *The Passion of the Christ*, but that film can still be spoiled for me. These counterexamples and those mentioned above make it unlikely that we can pick out a particular plot point or device as central to our definition of spoiling.

Instead of picking out a specific plot point or device, I recommend defining a spoiler as information that affects a consumer's ability to experience a valuable reveal. Here's a more precise definition of spoilers and spoiling:

Spoiler: any w -relevant information the having of which makes it significantly less likely that a consumer of w will experience a valuable reveal they would otherwise experience when consuming w .

Spoiling: A spoils w for B when A gives B w -relevant information that makes it significantly less likely that B experiences a valuable reveal B would otherwise experience when consuming w .

This helps make sense of some of the cases above. The ends of movies only sometimes include a valuable reveal. Folktales and familiar histories can still give consumers the experience of valuable reveals, even if their entire plots are known beforehand.

Notice that these definitions does not specify that the items represented by w are narrative². Narratives can be spoiled, as all the cases so far suggest. Telling someone a key plot

² This is contrary to some existing work on spoilers, i.e. (Greene, 2019; Shaw, 2011)

point from *The Usual Suspects* would certainly make it significantly less likely that that person experiences a valuable reveal while watching that movie. However, other non-narrative items can also be spoiled: Jazz performances, flavor experiences, word games, jokes, and magic tricks among them. This is because all of these include valuable reveals for the uninitiated or unfamiliar.

Several clarifications remain to be made about these definitions: first, the nature of a reveal. Let's start with some examples: when it dawns on an audience member what jazz standard a performer is riffing on, the piece of music is revealed. When a reader figures out who the culprit in their murder mystery is, the murderer is revealed. These sorts of reveals are inherently consumer-based. The facts of the matter about the jazz standard and the murderer are fixed prior to the consumer experiencing the reveal. This helpfully emphasizes that spoilers are only ever spoilers relative to the perspective of the uninitiated³.

The definition also specifies that the reveal should be *valuable*. Here we should be quite careful not to be too subjective. A reveal can be valuable *for* some consumer even if it is not, *prima facie*, valuable *to* that consumer. Here's what I mean: imagine I'm teaching an algebra class to some reluctant high school students. I should not reveal to them the answer to their factoring problem despite the fact that they might report not valuing experiencing the reveal. Instead, I suggest that we understand the value of reveals as determined by the projects they facilitate. Learning algebra is good for high school students because it enables precise and careful abstract

³ This is also a bit simplified. Some works admit of multiple viewings, so what it takes to be initiated or uninitiated might be a matter of degree. Also, some viewers are inattentive. If I've been playing tetris while watching *The Usual Suspects*, I might go uninitiated through a whole first viewing.

thinking and enables other more difficult math. This sort of project is valuable for the vast majority of inquirers like us. We'll return to the question of value in section 4.

So, items are spoil-able to some consumer just in case that consumer would, upon consuming that item, experience a valuable reveal *and* there is some information that would affect their ability to experience that reveal. As we'll see in the next section, this category is restricted to certain kinds of items.

§3. Works

In our definition of spoiling, above, the spoiled item was represented by a w . W , here stands for *work*. This is because, as I'll argue, only works are candidates to be spoiled. This is not because we only experience valuable reveals when consuming works. I might experience a valuable reveal about my endurance by running a longer distance than usual. This experience cannot be spoiled because no information could make it less likely that I experience a reveal I would otherwise have experienced in running that distance. Certainly, some information could make it less likely that I go for such a run (that it will hail, for example), but if I *did* run, even with that information, I would experience the reveal. Instead, there is something peculiar to works that make them spoilable: works are prescriptively framed, and some are prescriptively framed to require consumers start with some ignorance.

Prescriptive framing, in a sense developed by C. Thi Nguyen, is a relationship between a work, an artist, and a consumer. This relationship allows the artist to create a work that prescribes

a kind of experience of the work for the consumer. Here's Nguyen on what he first calls, "a prescriptive ontology" and then later, "a prescriptive frame":

Theories of prescriptive ontology focus on the category of human artifacts called "works" – including novels, paintings, movies, and musical pieces and performances. According to a prescriptive ontology, works are partially constituted by prescriptions about how they are to be encountered (Nguyen, 2019)

And further:

[A prescriptive frame] means that, in order to [encounter] the artwork, you have to follow certain prescriptions about how you will confront it. You must attend to the work in a prescribed way in order to [encounter] the work. (Nguyen, 2020)

Here are some examples that might clarify. Imagine you experience the beauty of a spectacular sunset while walking home from work. You encounter some visual stimuli, and you have an aesthetic experience thereof. The sunset is not a work – there are no rules or prescriptions about how you encounter it. If you close your eyes to experience the light through your eyelids, or if you turn away after a brief look, you might not have as long or as detailed an experience of the sunset but you will still have experienced it.

If, on the other hand, a photographer takes a picture of the sunset for you, there are prescriptions about how you encounter that item if you are going to encounter it as a photograph. If you burn the picture or dunk it in acid, you will have experienced it as a material object but not in accordance with the prescriptions for encountering a photograph. Works, as works, must be encountered in the prescribed way.

I should note, here, that I'm not using *artist* in any kind of thick or weighty way. By *artist*, I just mean someone or some group that creates a work. Jane Austen wrote *Persuasion* as a novel. She is an artist in the sense in question. I have to read the pages in order to encounter that work. Using it as a flip-book is a violation of the prescriptive frame of the work. If my child's kindergarten class draws a comic strip, they are the artist. To encounter that comic strip, I must read it cell by cell. Licking it won't do (though it might make the 5-year-olds laugh). These are more or less central cases of artists. Other less familiar cases will also count. Matthew Van Cleve, who wrote *Introduction to Logic and Critical Thinking*, is also an artist who created a spoilable work. When my critical thinking students take his class, they are assigned to read the chapters without looking at the answer keys – that is a prescription involved in consuming that work in accordance with its frame. Wyna Liu, who creates the NY times game *Connections*, is also an artist in the sense I'm using the term. *Connections* is meant to be played without knowing the categories into which the words are grouped.

The prescriptive frame of a work is partially but not entirely determined by the intentions of the artist. The frame is built up out of conventions and intentions and depends on and is shaped by legibility. Artists don't have free reign when it comes to prescriptive frames because they are working in response to existing expectations on the part of the consumer. It is possible for Austen to write *Persuasion* without including a users' guide precisely because there exist and existed conventions for how to encounter novel-type works. These conventions were broadly known and had evolved out of earlier prescriptive frames like those for works like myths and oral histories. Some works, however, do contain users guides. Consider Neal Stephenson's *Anathem*, which begins with a note to the reader on how to navigate some unfamiliar terminology. The

note begins, “if you are accustomed to reading works of speculative fiction and enjoy puzzling things out on your own, skip this note”. Stephenson is here acknowledging that the prescriptive frame of this kind of work might differ enough from the frames for more familiar novels to render the work illegible to the uninitiated⁴.

It is not plausible, however, that the prescriptive frame for a work be entirely up to the artist for another reason. Artists will have some but not a complete understanding of the experiences a consumer of the work will have when consuming it. I raise this in part to explain the interplay between the artist and the context in creating the prescriptive frame. I also raise it to explain why I don’t define spoilers in terms of artist’s intentions. Artists may intend or expect consumers to experience some valuable reveals as part of encountering a work, but these expectations do not exhaust the possible valuable reveals.

The prescriptive frames of spoilable works involve encountering the work with some ignorance. Part of the prescriptive frame of encountering a narrative like *Star Wars*, is that the movie is watched in order, with the consumer ignorant of the later parts when they watch the earlier parts. The diachronic nature of encountering a work like a movie means that the prescribed way to encounter it is starting at the beginning. Similarly, the first time one encounters a logic puzzle, one is prescribed to be in ignorance of its solution. If I introduce a logic puzzle by first telling its solution, I’ve done it wrong. Just like the *Mona Lisa* is meant to be seen from the front (in good lighting, unobscured, etc.), spoilable works are meant to be encountered with some key ignorance.

⁴ I skipped the note, my tolerance for spoilers being unusually low.

Prescriptive frames render consumers vulnerable. Imagine trying to encounter *Persuasion* while a construction crew demolishes the apartment above yours. Imagine trying to follow the prescriptive frame for the *Mona Lisa* while the Louvre is packed with much taller people. An uncooperative environment can keep you from encountering a work despite your best efforts. Consumers need cooperative epistemic environments in order to follow prescriptive frames. We'll turn to these environments in the next section.

§4. Narratives and Cooperative epistemic environments

Recent work in social epistemology has emphasized the importance of communities for inquiry (C. Elgin, 2021; C. Z. Elgin, 2011; Gunn, 2023; Johnson, 2023). Our deep dependence on and interactions with other inquirers forms our inquiry. We learn how to inquire, what questions are worthy of inquiry, and what standards to apply to candidate beliefs from our communities. In all these ways, we are vulnerable to our communities.

Our communities are one part of our epistemic environment, but some theorists include other features as well (Blake-Turner, 2020; Contessa, 2023; Hedstrom & King, 2006; Jarczewski, 2025; Kidd, 2019; Levy, 2023). The quality of the information available to inquirers, the epistemic infrastructure that enables the flow of information, and the technical instruments the community has at its disposal are all thought to be involved. The quality of an epistemic environment can affect the quality of the inquiry that members of a community can achieve. As Christopher Blake-Turner puts it, "Epistemic environments can be better or worse, insofar as they are more or less conducive to members of the epistemic community achieving positive epistemic statuses." (Blake-

Turner, 2020, p. 10) While I've not yet made the case that experiencing works unspoiled contributes to achieving positive epistemic statuses, we can still observe that epistemic environments can be more or less conducive to experiencing valuable reveals by enabling encounters according to the prescriptive frame of a work.

Let's make that case now, starting with the epistemic import of narrative. Narratives appear in philosophy papers, math textbooks, and news articles. We, as the sorts of inquirers we are, use narratives to enhance our reasoning, to teach one another, and to preserve lessons for future inquirers. This epistemic utility offers a bit of a puzzle. Narratives are distinct from information in that they are both less epistemically weighty and (sometimes) more epistemically efficacious. So-called dry facts about some content are often less compelling than narratives that help induce similar beliefs. But this content, at first glance, seems epistemically unhelpful. As Amy Flowerree puts it, "Narratives are often unmoored representations (either because they do not purport to refer to the actual world, or because they are grossly oversimplified, or because they are known to be literally false)" (Flowerree, 2023, p. 912). We need, then, some account of what makes narratives epistemically valuable.

Several philosophers have written about the epistemic benefits of narrative. Antonia Peacocke, for example, argues that narratives are epistemically valuable because they expand our imaginative capacities. She writes,

Literature can expand your phenomenal imagination not only by giving you new feelings... but also by directing your attention to subtleties of your own past experiences. You can use your concepts of these feelings in predicative combination with others to imagine what it's like to experience particular permutations of feeling you have never enjoyed firsthand. That can help you

understand and empathize with others in ways that would otherwise have been unavailable to you. (Peacocke, 2021, p. 299)

All of these benefits are epistemically valuable. Improved self-understanding and improved empathy with others will not only generate more justified true beliefs for us, but will also make us better able to attend to the epistemic needs of our community members.

Similarly, Amy Flowerree argues that narratives are epistemically valuable because they enable a particular kind of reasoning. She writes, “when we reason through narrative, we apply a modal framework to a particular person, object, or event in our experience in order to better understand it” (Flowerree, 2023, pp. 920–921). Narratives, then, in addition to improving our access to true beliefs about ourselves and others, also help by “illuminating what is possible, plausible, probably, required, forbidden, implausible, improbably, impossible for the object being reasoned about” (Flowerree, 2023, p. 921). This helps us make better inferences in our non-narrative thinking.

As a third example, Merel Talbi argues that autobiographical narratives help us build common ground in our communities of inquiry (Talbi, 2025). When we’re inquiring with others, we are often in a position of trying convince others of our beliefs. This why we offer testimony and arguments to other members of our communities of inquiry. Often, however, attempting to convince an interlocutor by offering them facts is ineffective (perhaps even paternalistic (Casey, 2024)). It can be more effective to offer an autobiographical narrative (Kubin, Puryear, Schein, & Gray, 2021; Stammers & Bortolotti, 2020). This is, in part, because “narrative is a social and joint endeavor” (Talbi, 2025, p. 479). When a person tells their interlocutor a story, especially an autobiographical story, the speaker and the interlocutor construct a shared understanding of the

experiences relayed. Given the epistemic interdependence between members of communities of inquiry, this kind of common ground can be helpful in increasing epistemic care and decreasing polarization.

This is a small sampling of the kinds of benefits of narratives that philosophers have identified. Social scientists and narratologists have also studied various benefits of the practice of telling and hearing stories (Bruner, 1987; Keen, 2007; Phelan, 1996). Many of these can be more or less directly understood as epistemic benefits.

Narratives are spoilable and are, as these theorists have argued, epistemically important. Other spoilable works are, I think, also epistemically important. The reveals we experience when we encounter a work unspoiled help us to understand the world, to understand our communities, and to understand ourselves. It's possible that some reveals are most clearly aesthetically valuable and are epistemically valuable only in the weak sense that they give us more true beliefs about aesthetic matters. Take, for example, the reveal of the jazz standard a musician is using in their improvising. As the identity of the standard becomes clear to me, I gain more true information about how jazz improvisation and standards can relate. A similar value is available for the reveals in jokes. When I hear a new joke, I learn something about humor. This is true information, but it's hard to say why it is generally epistemically valuable⁵. Instead, we should say that if someone is inquiring about jazz, jokes or aesthetics then more true beliefs about those matters is epistemically beneficial⁶.

⁵ Unless we want to say that more true beliefs are always better, which I don't.

⁶ This will generate a fiddly epistemic prohibition against spoilers of primarily aesthetically valuable works. That is, we will have a prohibition against spoilers that is epistemic insofar as a consumer would otherwise experience an *epistemically* valuable reveal.

In this section, I've argued that we rely on cooperative epistemic environments in order to experience the epistemically valuable reveals available in (at least some) spoilable works. Hopefully, the epistemic value of narratives and other spoilable works has convinced you not to spoil such works for yourself. However, if my claims about epistemic environments and spoilers are right, then that has implications for how we're epistemically obligated to treat one another with regard to these works as well. I'll spend the next section filling in some details of these obligations.

§5. Spoilers and Other-regarding Epistemic Obligations

Some epistemologists find other-regarding epistemic obligations to be counter-intuitive or even implausible (Wrenn, 2007). Many others, however, have argued that we, as the kinds of epistemically interdependent inquirers we are, have epistemic obligations to other inquirers (Dotson, 2011; C. Z. Elgin, 2011; Fricker, 2007; Johnson, 2018, 2023; Lackey, 2020; Levy, 2024)⁷. I won't rehearse or adjudicate these arguments here. For now, we can understand this section provisionally: if we have epistemic obligations to others, the obligation not to spoil (without special permission) is among them.

My own preferred view of epistemic obligations to others understands them in terms of epistemically evaluating communities of inquiry. A community is more or less as it epistemically ought to be insofar as it is meeting the epistemic needs of its members. Inquirers are interdependent – they rely on one another both to meet their needs in inquiry and to refrain from

⁷ This is a partial list

causing that inquiry to go off the rails. This reliance generates obligations – building from care ethics, I call these obligations to provide epistemic care.

Many of the details of a care-based epistemology are superfluous for our purposes here. We can focus on the criteria I recommend for evaluating communities of inquiry, adapted from Joan Tronto's work on care ethics (Tronto, 1993). Providing adequate epistemic care requires a community to ensure that its members are able to be:

- Attentive: Adequate numbers of community members must be able and motivated to notice the care needs of other community members.
- Responsible: A sufficient subset of those who are attentive must be well-positioned to take responsibility for meeting those needs.
- Competent: those who take responsibility must have adequate skills and know-how to meet the needs for which they take responsibility.
- Responsive: those who receive care must be able to respond to that care adequately and without dehumanizing, disrespecting, or otherwise rendering unduly vulnerable the care providers.

We can briefly illustrate the way this works in an epistemic context by taking a philosophy classroom as a test case. Imagine you're teaching an introduction to ethics class. You and your students are all members of a community of inquiry with mutual epistemic vulnerabilities. You are competent and responsible to meet your student's needs to understand the *Nicomachean Ethics*. If you are inattentive to their needs (perhaps because you're overworked, or otherwise distracted), then the community will not do as well, epistemically, as it otherwise would. Upon

observing that you're inattentive, a student might step up to try to meet the class members' Aristotle-related needs. This might be the best distribution of responsibility, given your overwork, but it will only go well insofar as that student is competent to meet those needs and the rest of the class can responsively accept that care. If the rest of the students feel they are being condescended to or disrespected then they are unlikely to either learn or be kind of the student attempting to provide care. This will render the community less epistemically adequate than it otherwise would have been.

We are now in a position to pull together some of the threads of this discussion. The valuable reveals in spoilable works are often epistemically valuable to the consumer. Experiencing those valuable reveals is contingent on encountering those works with the ignorance prescribed by the works' frames. Maintaining that ignorance relies on a cooperative epistemic environment. Part of that epistemic environment is the community in which one is encountering the work. This renders consumers vulnerable – they can only maintain their ignorance and encounter the work in accordance with its prescriptive frame if other community members are behaving as they epistemically ought. That requires them to be attentive, responsible, and competent. In the case of spoilers, it requires that community members attend to who might know what about the work, to take responsibility to prevent spoilers, and to be competent to do so.

I don't take this to entail that spoilers are never permissible. Spoiling, even when it prevents a consumer from experiencing a valuable reveal, might be the best of a bad set of options. If my choice is between giving my student the answer to a logic puzzle or having him leave class so frustrated he never returns, spoiling the puzzle might be the best way to provide

epistemic care. We can also sometimes permissibly consent to be spoiled, thereby granting the kind of special permission often needed to make otherwise impermissible things permissible. This is not to say that I should simply take my student's word for it when he asks for the answer to the puzzle – nuance and relationship building is part of the epistemic care involved in good teaching. But it might mean that if my friend tells me that she'd like to know key plot points from *Ponyo* to decide if it is suitable for her 4-year-old to watch, it is permissible for me to spoil that work. Negotiating this space is part of adequate care provision – it is part of being an attentive, responsible, competent and responsive community member.

§6. Conclusion

I've argued, here, that we have epistemic obligations not to spoil spoilable works because such works regularly involve epistemically valuable reveals. We have self-regarding obligations to avoid spoilers because of the epistemic benefits of experiencing these reveals. And we have other-regarding obligations to avoid spoiling because members of our communities rely on us to maintain the cooperative epistemic environment necessary for encountering the works in question. In so arguing, I hope to have emphasized the following points first made by other theorists: first, narratives and other spoilable works have a prescriptive ontology encountering them properly involves approaching them in a particular set of ways. Second, these works are often epistemically valuable in that they teach us about ourselves and allow us to connect with others. Third, our ability to navigate our epistemic environments is deeply social – we rely on other members of our communities to support us and to avoid derailing our inquiry. All of this

taken together supports the controversial with which we began: spoiling is (usually) a serious epistemic failure.

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