Explanation and quasi-miracles in narrative understanding: the case of poetic justice

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ABSTRACT

David Lewis introduced the idea of a quasi-miracle to overcome a problem in his initial account of counterfactuals. Here we put the notion of a quasi-miracle to a different and new use, showing that it offers a novel account of the phenomenon of poetic justice, where characters in a narrative get their due by happy accident (for example, when the murderer of King Mitys happens to be crushed by a falling statue of Mitys). The key to understanding poetic justice is to see what makes poetically just events remarkable coincidences. We argue that remarkable coincidence is to be understood in terms of a distinctive type of experience quasi-miracles offer. Cases of poetic justice offer a dual awareness of the accidental nature of the events and of a non-accidental process, involving intention, which it appears would explain them. We also extend this account to incorporate how we might experience magic tricks. An account of poetic justice as quasi-miraculous allows us to account for the experience of encounters with poetic justice, as involving the incongruity of seeing design in accident.

1. Introduction

Narratives provide understanding of the events they represent, organising them, as David Velleman (2003) puts it, into an intelligible whole. Saying what kind of understanding this is, and how narratives furnish it, is a matter of debate. One influential proposal (Carroll, 2001) is that narratives provide understanding by offering causal explanations of events. But, it has been argued, the phenomenon of poetic justice – where fictional characters get their due apparently by happy accident – shows that this account is wrong.

Gregory Currie (2006) proposes that in cases such as poetic justice, we take the fictional world to be inherently responsive to reasons; geared, for example, towards reward and retribution.

In other words, audiences see the connections between the fictional events as instantiations of normative laws. We shall argue that while it may be right to treat some fictional worlds as governed by such laws, this is not what is fundamental to poetic justice. We suggest a new account of this feature of narratives, based on a development of the notion of a 'quasi-miracle' introduced by David Lewis (1986a).

A quasi-miracle is a particular kind of extraordinary and striking event. Whilst Lewis's intention was to solve a problem concerning the semantics of counterfactuals, we propose to take the notion of a quasi-miracle outside that debate, and use it in a new way. There is much philosophical work to be done by examining how quasi-miracles function – including, importantly, the responses they invite when we encounter them. Exploring this allows us to pinpoint what it is to regard certain events – such as those involved in poetic justice in narratives – as cases of *remarkable coincidence*.

2. Explanation and causation

Various models of what explanations are, and how they produce understanding, have been developed in epistemology and the philosophy of science. The task is to give an account of what it is to explain an event. Following Peter Lipton (1991), a useful starting point is to take explanations to be suitable answers to *why-questions*. We can explain the train's late arrival if we can answer the question 'Why was the train late?' Explanations of different aspects of events can be construed as answers to why-questions which use different contrasts to isolate features of the event.

The next step in developing a theory of explanation is to specify which features of the world we must pick out in order to properly answer the why-question. Both Lipton and Lewis (1986b) propose versions of the view that information about the causal histories of events plays this role (at least in most even if not, in Lipton's view, in all cases). Events can be explained in terms of the causal chains which lead to them. According to Carroll (2001), this account of scientific and everyday explanation can be employed as an account of narrative understanding. Narratives provide understanding by describing events which are causally connected and by allowing us to see where these causal connections lie.

A causal thesis of narrative understanding cannot demand that every event described in the narrative is causally explained by some other event described in the narrative. Otherwise, there would be a deficiency of narrative understanding in almost all cases, with the only exceptions being descriptions of causal loops, such as in some of Robert Heinlein's stories, like '—All You Zombies—' or 'By His Bootstraps'. Neither should the thesis make the more modest demand that every event

described in the narrative which is fictionally *later* than some other event described in the narrative has its earlier cause represented in the narrative. This would not allow for cases where 'new' causal chains cut in and change the course of events. This objection is made by Ismay Barwell (2009), whose example 'The Traveller's Tale' describes the friendship of two people on a journey, then their stopping for lunch and the lunch being cut short by an attack: thieves kill one of the friends. The earlier fictional events described by the story are not causally responsible for the attack – the history of *that* causal chain is, perfectly legitimately, left indefinite by the narrative.

These considerations suggest that if the causal thesis is to succeed, it must be a nuanced one, along the lines that narrative understanding involves seeing causal connections between *enough* of the events described, or between *relevant* events. Whilst the causal account might be pushed on what counts as 'enough' or as 'relevant', that is not our concern here; we will set that question aside, apart from to say that what is understood, in cases of narrative understanding, are collections of *sequences* of events. Understanding a sequence as a whole does not obviously require being able to explain *each* event within a sequence. It is open to the causal theorist of narrative understanding to say that the contribution made by the attack in 'The Traveller's Tale' to narrative understanding lies in our identifying what it does as a *cause*, not how it came about as an *effect*.

But even granting that such an answer can be given, another, apparently conclusive, objection has been raised against the causal account of narrative understanding. The problem, as raised by David Velleman (2003) and retold by Currie (2006) and Barwell (2009), is that causal connections sometimes fail to hold between the very events which audiences associate with each other in order to make sense of the story the narrative tells.

3. The case of poetic justice

Following Velleman (2003), we shall take as an example the story of King Mitys, as raised by Aristotle in a discussion of narrative unity and tragedy. Mitys is murdered, and later the murderer is killed when a statue of Mitys falls on him. The falling of the statue is not caused by the murder; it is a coincidence. Yet it is the murder which makes the falling of the statue a relevant part of the story; 'for incidents like that we think to be not without a meaning' (*Poetics* 9.1452).

Grasping this meaning is an element of narrative understanding which causal accounts seem to miss out. To understand the narrative, we have to appreciate the connection between the murder and the falling of the statue. Note that even if we *could* trace a causal chain from the murder to the falling of the statue, having the causal explanation would not exhaust our appreciation of the connection between those two events in the narrative. For instance, imagine a version where the

people who erect the statue forget to secure it properly because they are so distracted by grieving for the king. The existence of such a causal chain would not *by itself* account for the significance of the falling of the statue given that the murder has occurred. Even the provision of a causal explanation of why it is the murderer, rather than someone else, who is hit by the statue may not suffice. Proper engagement with the narrative involves seeing the crushing of the murderer by the statue as a *fitting* event in the narrative, and to see it in this way is to appeal to a *normative* connection between the events, not just a causal one. It is through this normative connection that the pairing of events in the narrative makes *sense* to us.

The fact that normativity is a component of narrative understanding is a threat to any theory which simply applies an account of the explanation of actual events – such as the causal theory. Correct explanations of actual chains of events invoke normative concepts only when those chains involve *agency*. 'Because he deserved it' may be an appropriate answer to the question 'Why did you hit him?', or (depending on how the judicial system distributes punishment) to the question 'Why was he convicted?' But it is not an appropriate answer to the question 'Why did he have an accident?'

This is not to deny that the accident could be causally connected to some bad deeds the victim has done. (Perhaps he fell when he was running to escape the scene of his crime.) But the fact that what happens to the person is *bad* for him cannot, in this case, be explained in terms of the badness of the ills he committed. Notions like his 'desert' or his 'due' are not genuine explanations of why he had an accident. The very fact that it is a *bad* thing which happens to the person who has behaved badly is merely coincidental, and while we might think 'Serves him right', we would not think that in doing so we had come to any greater understanding of the events.[1]

Such considerations make it tempting to adopt an alternative, non-causal account of what kind of understanding of fictional events narratives give us. For Velleman (2003), for example, the understanding is an emotional one. Narratives guide us through emotional patterns, taking us from emotions which await resolution (e.g. hope or fear) to emotions which resolve them (e.g. delight or disappointment, relief or horror). The experience of poetic justice may, then, be a manner of assimilating events to an emotional pattern: for instance, the apt death of Mitys's murderer resolves emotions of righteous indignation at injustice into emotions of gratification. A different non-causal

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[1] This is to make two assumptions about how the actual world works. First, there are no normative forces in the actual world which are detached from agents' wills. For example, there is no such thing as 'cosmic justice', a responsiveness of the universe to good and bad (even if one sometimes wishes there were). Second, there is no supernatural agency whose normative judgement influences the course of events. We say a little more about these assumptions in footnote 9.

account comes from Barwell (2009), who suggests that narratives provide two types of understanding: one where some events explain others, and one where some events contribute to the evaluation of others. It is the murder of Mitys which makes us *evaluate* the crushing of the murderer by the statue as, say, deserved, and part of the understanding we have gained of the story's events is the ability to make this evaluation.

A third alternative is offered by Currie (2006). When presented with such cases of fitting comeuppance, Currie argues, audiences are inclined to think there really is some principle of cosmic justice at work in the fictional world, according to which wrongdoers get a punishment which reflects their crimes. Currie suggests that we regard this principle not as capturing the work of a supernatural agent, but as capturing relations of dependence between the events of the fictional world in and of themselves. In other words, we treat it as a genuine law of the fictional world; a normative law geared towards reward and retribution. The falling of the statue is not coincidence; the laws of the fictional world see to it that Mitys's murderer gets his due. If this is right, we should reject the claim that laws of nature 'do not include an evaluation as a component' (Barwell 2009, 56), at least for fictional laws which gear their worlds towards, for example, securing wrongdoers' comeuppance.

Currie's account could be seen as a way of turning the case of poetic justice to the causal theorist's advantage. Currie himself wishes to remain neutral on whether the dependence is a causal one (2006, 313). He does, however, describe an example of a reason-responsive fictional world as one in which the 'causal pathways' (2006, 314) are sensitive to how things should be for the characters. Thus it might be thought that Currie's proposal lends some traction to the view that to understand the narrative is to understand causal relations. So, for example, insofar as we see the falling of the victim's statue on the murderer as appropriate to the murderer's killing of the victim, we *are* positing a causal relation between those events. Poetic justice might thus be subsumed within a causal account. Our appreciation of narrative connections is not something other than our appreciation of causal explanations.

But whether or not the lawlike normative connections which Currie suggests that audiences imagine holding between fictional events are causal connections, we wish to question whether the appeal to these lawlike normative connections is correct and complete as an account of poetic justice. We shall argue that even if Currie is right that audiences treat some fictional worlds as governed by normative laws – i.e. as proceeding according to built-in normative connections between events – there is something else which is fundamental to poetic justice. Poetic justice should, we suggest, be understood in a way which begins with the notion of a 'quasi-miracle', introduced by Lewis (1986a). Lewis uses this notion for another purpose – to characterise events

which raise a specific challenge for a semantics of counterfactuals based in similarity between possible worlds (discussed below, in §7). Our proposal is to put the idea of a quasi-miracle to a new use, in offering a novel account of poetic justice.

4. Quasi-miracles

A quasi-miracle is a particular kind of extraordinary and striking event which appears miraculous, even though it is not. Let us begin with an example of Lewis's (1986a, 60-61). Suppose we have a room of monkeys pressing keys on typewriters at random. There are many equally probable outcomes, because there are many sequences of characters. Some of those sequences combine the characters into what we recognise as words. Yet if a meaningful sequence were produced, many of us would think something extraordinary was going on, in a way we would not if any of the no-more-probable meaningless sequences were produced. Similarly, many of us would pronounce it extraordinary if the winning lottery numbers were <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6>, though this is no more miraculous than their being <19, 1, 14, 26, 35, 33>.

Lewis comments that in the case of the typing monkeys, 'the chance keystrokes happen to simulate the traces which would have been left by quite a different process' (1986a, 60). This hints at an idea which Lewis does not himself elaborate: of an impression of design or intention within the accidental process. This is key to seeing poetic justice as a type of quasi-miracle. For, as Aristotle puts it, poetic justice hinges on the fact that 'matters of chance seem most marvellous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them' (*Poetics* 9.1452).[2] We shall offer a diagnosis of this appearance.

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[2] Thus, the mere fact that things end well for good characters or badly for bad characters is not sufficient for what we are calling 'poetic justice', since the way in which these outcomes occur need not give an appearance of design in accident. Of course, there is one sense in which the events of a fiction really are a 'product of design', in that the fiction itself (i.e. the representation of those events) has been designed by a fiction-maker. But it would be a misunderstanding to think that the fact that the events have been 'put together' by an agent in *this* way is the root of poetic justice. This is not only because this kind of design applies to all fictional events, poetically just or not, but also because in the case of poetic justice, the explanation goes the other way around: the fiction-maker's choices are guided by which sequences of events will be seen as poetically just. This is not to deny that our appreciation of an author's skill in constructing sequences which will give the appearance of design in accident may add a further facet to our enjoyment of (some instances of) poetic justice.

The extraordinariness of quasi-miracles rests on having two distinct things in play, one corresponding to coincidence, the other corresponding to design or some other non-accidental process. In some cases, this can be brought out by considering the different ways in which the probability of the outcome can be assessed, relative either to the other possible outcomes or to the different possible methods by which outcomes could be produced. A meaningful sequence of words, or the outcome <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6>, is no less probable – given the mechanism by which lottery numbers are actually selected or by which monkeys actually select keys to press – than a specific meaningless sequence of words, or the outcome <19, 1, 14, 26, 35, 33>. On the other hand, the probability of getting the quasi-miraculous outcome by means of typing monkeys or a random draw is much lower than the probability of getting that outcome by means of intention. If a person were asked to write an essay, the probability of a meaningful sequence of characters would be much higher than it is when a monkey is placed at a typewriter. And if a person were asked to think of a sequence of numbers, we would expect a familiar series like <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6> to spring more readily to mind than <19, 1, 14, 26, 35, 33>. Of course, the person may resist choosing such a series, thinking it 'too obvious'. They may deliberately choose <19, 1, 14, 26, 35, 33>, for example, if they wish to maximise the impression of randomness. But this just illustrates the point that we have a sense of which series of numbers look like they are a product of intention, and which do not.

It might be that conflating these two ways of judging the probability of the outcome explains why some people may be inclined to think that <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6> really is a less probable result than its alternatives, or why some people may be inclined to think, if these were the winning numbers, that there really must have been an alternative causal chain at work (rigging of the lottery, supernatural influence, or some other intentional intervention). But our concern is not with the person who makes a mistake, but with the experience of a person who, whilst making no such mistake, still finds the quasi-miraculous outcome striking. It might be said that nobody who really understands the probabilities of the outcomes *could* find them striking. We shall show that not only is it possible to judge the probabilities correctly and find the outcome striking, it may be the response one *should* have.

What is essential to understanding the nature of quasi-miracles is the notion of *expectation*. In a quasi-miracle, an outcome presents itself as the sort of outcome that is to be expected in other conditions. An encounter with a quasi-miracle involves the impression of there being special reasons for events to progress in that particular way rather than some other way, even though the outcome does not really demand any such explanation. It is, then, expectation and explanation which are fundamental to engagement with quasi-miraculous scenarios, and which will allow us to articulate the idea of a *remarkable coincidence*.

5. Remarkable coincidence

We say that to perceive a quasi-miracle as a remarkable coincidence is effectively to be in a state of dual awareness concerning the explanation of an event. On the one hand, the mere coincidence of the outcome with the events which precede it calls for no special explanation. On the other hand, what is significant about the quasi-miraculous outcome, and what distinguishes it from non-quasi-miraculous outcomes, is our ready grasp of what *would* count as an explanation for that outcome: intention, for instance. In encountering a quasi-miracle, we suggest, we are aware of it as an accidental outcome that would be explained by a non-accidental process. The fact that this process would explain is compatible with there being, as a matter of fact, no call for any special explanation of the outcome. The point can also be articulated in terms of the surprise that is sometimes felt in confronting a quasi-miracle. If a quasi-miraculous outcome is distinguished from others by being seen as the sort of outcome intention (for instance) would lead to, then it has the potential to surprise more than its alternatives do when it happens without intention. After all, in such cases, it happens without the conditions which we readily identify as the ones which would lead us to expect it. What distinguishes it from alternative, non-quasi-miraculous outcomes is that they have no conditions which we identify as ones which would lead us to expect them in particular, as opposed to other outcomes. For instance, in the lottery case, we expect there to be six numbers, but no particular numbers. What distinguishes <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6> from <19, 1, 14, 26, 35, 33> is that we have a ready grasp of what the conditions are under which <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6> could be expected – the presence of intention – and thus may experience surprise when <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6> occurs in the absence of such conditions.[3]

Thus, having a full understanding of the probabilities of various outcomes, or of the mechanisms by which they are actually brought about, need not stop a person being struck by or

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[3] It would be wrong to try to deflate what is surprising about the outcome to the simple fact that there are fewer ways for the lottery to furnish consecutive numbers than non-consecutive numbers – just as it would be wrong to try to reduce what is quasi-miraculous about Lewis's monkeys case to the simple disparity between the number of meaningful combinations of characters and the number of meaningless combinations. For then the question becomes why these categories – consecutive vs. non-consecutive, meaningful vs. meaningless – should be salient in the first place. These categorisations are impositions of the significance to human interests of certain outcomes, bringing us back to the point that certain outcomes are significant because they are the sorts of things intention would bring about.

surprised by a quasi-miracle. Indeed, somebody who appreciates that there is no special explanation of the outcome but who fails to appreciate the fact that there is something identifiable which *would* be such an explanation is lacking sensitivity to what others will take to be remarkable. Consider a person who responds to others' excitement or amusement on seeing the lottery outcome <1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6> by trying to educate them on probabilities they already understand. This person would be considered a bore (perhaps in need of some education themselves on the nature of quasi-miracles).

Further, not only does understanding the probabilities not prevent one from being struck by quasi-miracles, having a diagnosis of how quasi-miracles themselves work does not stop them from being striking, either. Though we do not take somebody who appreciates a quasi-miracle to be under an illusion, there is, here, a parallel to be drawn: having information about perceptual processes which allows one to diagnose how a visual illusion arises need not change how one sees the illusion. Likewise, knowing *why* a quasi-miracle strikes us does not mean it *no longer* strikes us.[4]

The account we have given of quasi-miracles is not meant to dissolve their strikingness, then, but to explain why they are striking and will remain striking, and why somebody may properly find a quasi-miracle striking, without making an error about how the world works.

6. Explanation (or lack of)

Remarkable coincidences are distinguished from unremarkable coincidences in that whilst they are coincidences – and thus need no special explanation – they are nevertheless seen in terms of explanations, i.e. of processes it appears would explain the events if those processes were to obtain.[5]

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[4] Currie also notes a parallel between poetic justice and visual illusions. Currie takes the analogue of the visual illusion to be the opinion that there are normative relations within a sequence of (fictional) events, whereas we take the analogue of the illusion to be the strikingness of instances of poetic justice (or other quasi-miracles).

[5] We say 'appears' here because we want to leave open that the seemingly explanatory process a quasi-miracle is seen in terms of is something that would not in fact explain, e.g. because it could not explain because it is impossible. (For brevity, we leave out this qualification elsewhere in the paper.) Note that someone who sees a quasi-miracle in terms of a process that would not in fact explain need not be taken to have made a mistake. Later, for instance, we discuss how some quasi-miracles may be seen in terms of the reversal of time. Seeing them in these terms need not commit anyone to the belief that the reversal of time is genuinely possible. The situation can look like one in which this is happening even when not only does one know it is not actually happening, one also believes it

Seeing coincidental events as something that would be explained by a non-accidental mechanism allows for those events to be seen as *lacking* an explanation, in a way unremarkable coincidences do not.[6] One response to seeing events as lacking an explanation is to posit an alternative mechanism. Thus, one might conclude that events are not coincidental after all, but the product of design or of normative laws. This is the position Currie suggests audiences adopt when engaging with poetic justice in narratives. If one is tempted by this position, then, the value of our account is in identifying the origins of the apparent need to posit such an explanation. There are, however, advantages which our account of how to engage with poetic justice has over the way of engaging which Currie lays out.

The first potential advantage is that, given the assumptions we have made about the actual world, the view that the fictional world has normative laws may face competition from what we shall call the Principle of Actuality. This Principle, set out by Lewis (1978) and Kendall Walton (1990), takes actual truth as a guide to fictional truth. The Principle says, roughly, that we should take what goes on in the fiction to be like what goes on in the actual world, unless there are indications to the contrary.[7] Since one can account for poetic justice in terms of quasi-miraculous events without admitting fictional laws which the actual world does not share, the strategy Currie sets out looks like an unjustified departure from actuality. Normative laws make the fictional world more distant from the actual one than the fictional events require.[8]

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could not possibly happen. For further discussion of how impossible processes can give the impression of being explanatory, see our (2016a), especially pp. 134-135 on pseudo-explanations.

[6] Our account extends to incorporate cases of poetic justice where the narrative does supply some explanation (or partial explanation) for why that particular outcome came about – imagine, again, versions of the Mitys story which present some causal chain linking the death of the King to the crushing of the murderer. An event can strike us as the sort of thing intention would explain even though we are also aware of a non-intentional causal explanation for that event – just as an event can strike us as the sort of thing intention would explain even though we are also aware of its being coincidental. So the fact that a narrative provides a causal explanation does not necessarily prevent it from bringing to mind another explanation which the event can be seen as lacking.

[7] Neither Lewis nor Walton endorses this principle as a complete account of fictional truth, though both think it plays an important role in determining what we assume to be the case in the fictional world. Walton refers to the Principle as the 'Principle of Reality', but we prefer 'Principle of Actuality' since we wish to leave space for the view that fictional worlds are themselves real.

[8] Note that Currie shares our assumption that there are no normative laws of nature in the actual world. What of those who reject this assumption? They may draw a different conclusion about

We should be careful not to overstate what this shows. The conflict between normative laws and the Principle of Actuality will be avoided *if* there is some *other* feature of the fiction which suffices for it to communicate that such laws hold – perhaps an explicit statement, or an implicature to that effect. Fictional worlds can be very unlike ours, so long as the fiction indicates that this is the case. The Principle of Actuality never denies this, saying only that the fictional world is like ours *except where there are indications to the contrary*. There seems to be no reason, then, why a fiction could not represent a world with normative laws, *given* appropriate communicative acts from the fiction-maker in making the fiction. For this reason, we would want to allow for a story in which it is fictionally true that there are laws of cosmic justice. But including a poetically just sequence of events in a story does not *itself* suffice to indicate that normative laws form part of the make-up of the fictional world. A fictional world without such laws can, given our account of quasi-miraculous occurrences, do just as well.[9]

The second reason why we prefer our treatment of poetic justice to the treatment Currie describes is that making fictional instances of poetic justice processes which are mediated by reasons makes them too close to instances of justice proper, and loses something which is distinctive of poetic justice: the appearance of design in accident, and what Aristotle found 'most marvellous'. To think that there are normative laws in operation in cases of poetic justice effectively destroys the notion of a remarkable coincidence altogether.[10]

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which worlds are closer (though this would depend on *which* normative laws they take to be operative in the actual world). But just as poetically just quasi-miracles in fiction may lead someone to posit normative fictional laws, it may be certain quasi-miracles in actuality which lead someone to think the actual world is governed by normative laws. If that is so, then we say there is no need to posit normative laws in either case.

[9] However, it must be noted that this application of the Principle of Actuality depends on showing that worlds with normative laws are more distant than worlds with quasi-miracles. This may be relatively uncontentious if we follow Lewis in making widespread difference in law the most weighty factor in dissimilarity between worlds. However, what difference quasi-miracles make to similarity between worlds is a contested issue that – as we note below, in connection with the semantics of counterfactuals – is not our primary concern here.

[10] Denying that poetic justice is justice proper does not prevent an explanation of what is ethically satisfying about poetically just outcomes. The most straightforward cases can be captured by saying that there are two components to the ethical satisfaction: the satisfaction of a desire, and the moral appropriateness of that desire. Take a case of poetic justice where some harm comes to a character who we, the audience, want harm to come to. Our desire is satisfied, and is morally appropriate, if

For all we know, it may well be a fact that audiences do typically respond to many cases of poetic justice by taking it to be fictional that there are normative laws. But this is not, we suggest, the most appropriate way to respond. An aesthetically richer experience is afforded by resisting undermining the sense of remarkable coincidence, and instead having the distinctive kind of experience which quasi-miracles can offer, as events which prompt a dual awareness of their accidental nature and of the non-accidental processes that would explain them.

To see design in accident (or, more generally, one process in another) is to experience incongruity. This may explain why we take pleasure in, and may well be amused by, quasi-miraculous outcomes (whether consecutive lottery numbers or narrative connections such as poetic justice), if incongruity is one basis of amusement and humour.[11] Magic tricks give rise to the same experience, and often produce amused laughter. The nature of magic tricks is illuminated by thinking of them in terms of quasi-miracles. Engaging with a magic trick involves appreciating the trick's appearance of

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the character's behaviour has merited the desire. Note, however, that poetic justice does not always simulate justice proper – the outcome for a wrongdoer, for instance, may be much worse than what justice would exact (as is perhaps the case for Mitys's murderer). (Note that Currie may incorporate this by invoking, e.g., vengeful (rather than just) fictional worlds, just as we can incorporate it by saying that vengeful (rather than just) intentional processes are the ones that would explain the accidental outcome.) When satisfaction is taken in *those* outcomes, the desires they satisfy arguably go beyond what is morally appropriate. Nevertheless, the desires are at least aligned in the right way, in being negative responses to a character's wrongdoing (or positive responses to a character's rightdoing). Moreover, it is not as if the outcome satisfies any desire that the person suffers a harm (or benefit) unjustly, since poetically just outcomes are (on our account) accidental. The fact that the desire is aligned in the right way and the excess is not brought about by injustice mitigates, to some extent, the satisfaction taken in 'excessive' poetically just outcomes. We leave for another time what more there is to be said about the ethics of poetic justice, and how it intersects with wider issues concerning the ethics of engagement with fiction, but suffice to say that our account offers the beginnings of a promising account of the nature of the ethical satisfaction taken in poetic justice.

[11] For a good collection covering incongruity theories as well as other approaches to laughter and humour, see Morreall (1987). It has been queried, by an anonymous referee, how we can treat poetic justice as involving incongruity when it also involves, as we noted earlier, a sense of fit between fictional events. The two aspects have different bases. The sense of fit is accounted for by the awareness of how an intentional relation between events would explain. The sense of incongruity is between the acknowledged impression of this fit-securing explanation, and the acknowledged accidental nature of the process.

needing an explanation one knows it does not have (magic).[12] Here, as in some other cases of quasi-miracles, a response of laughter may be overdetermined. A further reason for laughing in response to a magic trick might be that you are so impressed by the magician's imagination or ingenuity. This reason is not disconnected from the incongruity of quasi-miracles, though, since part of what is ingenious or imaginative is the ability to envisage new scenarios which will strike audiences in the way quasi-miracles do.

The case of magic tricks is complex, for a couple of reasons. First, it may be that we do not see *intention* as the mechanism which would, if it were to obtain, explain the outcome. What may be going on in the case of magic tricks is that we see the outcome of the trick as an outcome which some non-naturalistic mechanism could explain, whilst also thinking we do not or cannot know *how* that mechanism would operate (which is, after all, the hallmark of treating that mechanism as magical). Second, if we were to treat magic tricks as genuine quasi-miracles, that would give us reason to pause over the claim that quasi-miracles must be low-probability occurrences (e.g. Williams, 2008). Lewis contends that quasi-miracles are improbable, but that '[w]hat makes a quasi-miracle is not improbability per se, but rather the remarkable way in which the chance outcomes seem to conspire to produce a pattern' (1986a, 60). Whilst we are in agreement with Lewis that remarkableness is what is fundamentally of interest in the nature of a quasi-miracle, perhaps we could go further and suggest that this allows for some quasi-miracles that are not particularly improbable.[13] The outcome of a magic trick is not improbable, given the magician's skill. Yet it still brings to mind the scenario of a magical process playing out which explains the outcome in some other way.

However, closer reflection suggests that an outcome's having low probability is not irrelevant to the experience of magic tricks. Even if the outcome has a high probability – and we know the trick has been executed in just such a way as to arrive at that outcome – it may be that the trick's ingenuity is so great, or is taken to be so great, that we are put in mind of a high likelihood of it going wrong, and not ending up with the outcome it should. It may be that the story the magician tells about what they are trying to do is designed to put us in mind of a process we would not expect to be successful for them, e.g. if they appear to be making it harder for themselves by introducing complicating features which are presented as part of the process by which the trick works (but in

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[12] This serves to bolster, albeit in different terms, Leddington's (2016) claim that the experience of magic tricks is an aesthetic experience.

[13] The fact that Lewis concentrates on improbable cases is in part because of the discussion concerning counterfactuals in which his account is embedded. We say more about that discussion in the next section.

actual fact is probably misdirection). This impression of low probability may be part of what is involved in experiencing magic tricks as quasi-miraculous.

7. The scope of the account

7.1 How does our account relate to the discussion of the role of quasi-miracles in the semantics of counterfactuals?

Lewis introduces the idea of a quasi-miracle to extend his semantics of counterfactuals to incorporate indeterministic laws of nature, which render it physically possible that an event happens which we naturally want to say 'would not' happen. For instance, there is a chance, given the peculiarities of quantum mechanics, that a dropped plate flies off sideways rather than falling to the ground, which seemingly renders it true that if I had dropped the plate, it might have flown off sideways. This, in turn, seemingly forces us to deny that if I had dropped the plate, it *would not* have flown off sideways, which also seemingly makes it difficult to maintain that if I had dropped the plate, it would have fallen to the floor (Hawthorne, 2003; Williams, 2008). Lewis is particularly concerned with the scenario of 'perfect convergence', where, after an event takes place, all traces of it disappear. Indeterministic laws make such 'cover-up jobs', as Lewis (1979, 470-471; 1986a, 60) calls them, perfectly lawlike, though improbable. Because Lewis's semantics for counterfactuals is based on similarity between worlds, and similarity is roughly a matter of maximising match between worlds in particular facts and events, and minimising discrepancies between their laws, the possibility of perfect convergence is a challenge for Lewis's semantics. Supposing that the actual world is indeterministic and event *e* does not take place, a world where *e* takes place but is followed by lawlike perfect convergence will seemingly be more similar to the actual world than a world where *e* takes place but is not followed by convergence, since neither need differ from the actual world in its laws, and the first has greater match in particular fact. It would seem to follow that if *e* were to take place, perfect convergence would happen. To avoid this, Lewis proposes that 'a quasi-miracle to accomplish perfect convergence' itself 'detracts from similarity', since it is 'such a remarkable coincidence that it would be quite unlike the goings-on we take to be typical of our world' (1986a, 60). But, as Lewis acknowledges, if convergence detracts significantly from similarity, then we are left with the tension noted above: the fact that the most similar worlds to the actual world avoid convergence licenses us to say that convergence *would not* happen, and yet the laws of the actual world call for us to say that it *might*.

In light of this, various responses have been proposed. Lewis points to a reading of 'might' which makes it compatible with 'would not' (1986a, 63-65). Hawthorne (2003) favours an alternative to the Lewisian semantics for counterfactuals. Williams (2008) proposes that the Lewisian semantics can be rescued by a modification which replaces Lewis's appeal to avoidance of quasi-miracles with an appeal to avoidance of *atypicality*. Which of these responses, if any, is the right one is not our concern. We are not interested, here, in how (if at all) quasi-miracles factor into the semantics of counterfactuals. Our interest lies in how to utilise what it is that is remarkable about these outcomes to illuminate the nature of other quasi-miracles: here, poetic justice. As Williams notes (2008, 390), Lewis does not give a definition of remarkableness. However, Lewis does say something (already quoted above in §4), which is not picked up by either Hawthorne or Williams in their discussions, and which we think gives the essence of a quasi-miracle: namely, the fact that one process 'simulate[s] the traces which would have been left by quite a different process' (1986a, 60). We have argued that it is in seeing one process in another that we find quasi-miracles remarkable.

It has been objected (by an anonymous referee) that some examples, of the type which is used in the debate concerning quasi-miracles and counterfactuals, are not covered by our account. An instance of the type of example which is thought problematic is that 'an egg may jump back into its shell'. The objection raised is that such a case does not involve events that are seen as something intention would explain, and thus falls outside our model.

Our first response is that it is not obvious that such a case would not involve seeing the event as one which intention would explain. As evidence, consider the words used to set it up: 'an egg may jump back into its shell'. There is a difference between saying that an egg jumps and that it moves, since jumping has stronger connotations of action and, thus, of intention. To say an egg jumps is to give a description which animates the egg, so it is not obvious that we do not recognise an accidental movement as being the sort of thing a conscious egg might deliberately have done. And even if no impression is created of the egg as agent, the peculiarity of the situation may be suggestive of some other agency behind the scenes (e.g. if we would be inclined to say it 'looks like witchcraft').

Second, although the cases of poetic justice, the typing monkeys and the lottery are seen in terms of intention, we are not wedded to it being intention that is seen as the thing that would explain a quasi-miracle. Other processes may play this role in other quasi-miracles, such as in the case of some magic tricks. Another process, besides intention, which may come to mind as the sort of thing that would explain the egg's behaviour is some sort of 'reversal of time'. This could also apply to some of Lewis's cases of convergence, such as his example where the usual effects do not follow the pressing of a button which is supposed to initiate a nuclear attack. Such quasi-miracles

may be evocative of more than one process at work, bringing to mind processes of reversal (e.g. if some traces of pressing the button appear, but then disappear or seem to be 'undone') and of intention (e.g. in the appearance that a disaster has been 'averted'). Or a quasi-miracle may bring to mind processes of reversal, but no processes of intention. Consider the case where ripples on a pond 'contract inward and get higher [and] when they reach the center a stone flies out of the water' (Lewis 1986a, 58). To our ears, 'flies' here carries no connotation of agency. (But if to your ears it does, that is just as friendly to our general account.) And there are many options for the different processes that might be brought to mind as what would explain a dropped plate flying off to the side: magnetism; internal propulsion; poltergeists; magic; invisible string.[14]

Hawthorne (2003) cites some examples of what he takes to be quasi-miracles which are actual. They include the fact that the apparent size of the sun is that of the moon, and the coincidences between the lives of Kennedy and Lincoln. He does this in order to undermine the role that quasi-miracles play in Lewis's semantics of counterfactuals: 'General Lesson: If low probability remarkable events make for dissimilarity, that had better not be because one supposes that the actual world does not itself contain plenty of them.' (2003, 403)

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[14] Of course, any event *could* be explained by an alternative process, were the world to work in a different way. So why is it that some, but not all, events are seen in terms of some, but not all, alternative explanatory processes? A full answer to this psychological question is beyond the scope of this paper, and is not required for our account, which simply puts to work the observation that it happens. Nevertheless, there are a few gestures we can make in what might be the right direction. First, there needs to be something attractive, from the point of view of explanation, about the process that is seen as one that would explain – but not attractive enough for it to be taken as the actual explanation. What features qualify an explanation as attractive is not a question for here, but a question for the philosophy of explanation in general. Second, and relatedly, some quasi-miracles may lend themselves to a general tendency humans may have to look for agency where they can. Third, there may be external factors, as well as factors internal to our explanatory practices, that make some processes come to mind more readily than others. For example, perhaps exposure to horror films affects how readily one sees a rocking chair moved by the wind in terms of a haunting. Finally, it may be that no illuminating general account can be given of why there is an awareness of some alternative explanatory processes and not others, on some occasions and not others. The answer may depend on the particulars of the case. To illustrate, in the case of the murder of Mitys, it is significant that we are already primed to think in terms of justice since the story involves a murder.

Hawthorne cannot assume that Lewis should take these cases to be quasi-miraculous, however, because Hawthorne does not give an account of remarkableness that shows that these events are remarkable in the way the examples Lewis cites as being quasi-miraculous are. Since part of our task has been to give an account of the remarkableness of quasi-miracles, we are in a position to judge whether these examples should be considered to be quasi-miraculous: they are quasi-miraculous if and only if they prompt a dual awareness of both the coincidental nature of the events Hawthorne details, and an alternative process which would have explained them. We will not take a stand here on whether Hawthorne's particular examples meet this condition. Our own proposal for a clear case which illustrates the presence of quasi-miracles in the actual world is that of the 'fine-tuning' of the conditions of the universe at the time of the Big Bang, such that the universe supports life. Since this is coincidental, and yet intelligent design is the sort of thing that would explain it, we have here the appearance of design in accident.

The real interest in the prospect of actual quasi-miracles is not exhausted by whether they undermine Lewis's semantics of counterfactuals. There are many potential quasi-miracles across actuality and fiction which are philosophically interesting in their own right. Even if Hawthorne is right that quasi-miracles play no useful role in the correct semantics of counterfactuals, and even if Williams is right that they should be replaced by a different notion (atypicality) in that project, this is not to say that there is no useful role quasi-miracles can play in the solution to other philosophical problems. What we have argued in this paper is that the notion of a quasi-miracle can at least be usefully applied to give an account of poetic justice.[15]

7.2 How does our account relate to other theories of how narratives provide understanding?

One difference between our account and alternative accounts is that we have focussed on explicating the notion of remarkable coincidence which is in common between what, we argue, constitutes the best way of engaging with certain narratives (e.g. those involving poetic justice) and

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[15] In addition to the other applications of the idea of a quasi-miracle that we have mentioned in this paper, we have previously argued in our (2016a) that quasi-miracles help in understanding the apparent fixity of the future in *Macbeth* (2016a, 58-62), hypotheses about recurring time in fiction (2016a, 110-113), and the idea that the 'quantum suicide' experiment would provide confirmation for a particular interpretation of quantum mechanics (2016a, 114-115). (Readers can judge for themselves which slight revisions we would make to those discussions, given the arguments of this paper.) We have also argued in our (2016b) that quasi-miracles help in understanding the notion of redemption in narrative.

what, we argue, constitutes proper engagement with other quasi-miraculous situations. Currie and Velleman, by contrast, are motivated by the question of what is in common between all narratives (or, in Currie's terms, all representations with a certain degree of narrativity). One interesting consequence of this is that the affective responses to narrative which such accounts emphasise (e.g. involving emotional resolution) are not the same as the affective responses which we emphasise (involving the appreciation of incongruity). Charting the relationship between these affective responses is, however, a task for another time.

What does our account show about the role of causal explanation in narrative understanding? In a sense, our account is not hostile to causal accounts of narrative understanding. For it may be – though we are not wedded to this – that one's sense of what *would* explain the quasi-miraculous outcome in poetically just situations is a sense of what would *causally* explain it. On the other hand, our approach is friendly to non-causal accounts of narrative understanding. Understanding poetic justice, we have argued, involves a dual awareness of both the accidental nature of events and the non-accidental process which would explain them, constituting the experience of incongruity that amounts to seeing design in accident. This appreciation is a real part of narrative understanding, but it is not the grasping of a causal explanation – nor is it straightforwardly the grasping of any explanation at all.[*]

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