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Literary Cognitivism

I. Introduction

The main claim of literary cognitivism is both simple and appealing: the idea is that we can acquire *knowledge* from reading literature. One might say that a humanistic liberal education is founded on this idea. Works of literature, especially those that take up enduring questions about human experience, have long played a critical role in secondary and university education. Whereas other arts, such as music and painting, have often (and unfortunately) been regarded as elective or peripheral, the study of literature is at the very center of our educational traditions. So the idea that literature is a source of knowledge resonates deeply with our educational and cultural practices.

However, as with many apparently simple matters, when studied closely, a number of puzzles arise. It is not clear what kind of knowledge one might acquire from literature and how literature *qua* literature could be a source of knowledge. We should note literary cognitivism is not normally understood as a claim about all of literature, but about fictional narrative works, particularly ones that are “realistic.” Central examples typically come from the canon of psychologically realistic novels of the 18th and 19th century and their descendants, though short stories, plays, narrative poems, and other literary forms are also generally included.

When I read William Styron’s historical novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), I might come to know a handful of specific facts about the 1831 Virginia slave rebellion; more importantly, I might learn how even acts of kindness can be cruel in the context of slavery; and perhaps I can even come to know something about what the life of a slave might have been like in that era. On the other hand, all of the things I might be thought to have learned from the book could be

called into question. Styron's book is carefully researched and gets a great deal of the history right, but he employs invention and speculation as well. Few facts are known about Turner's life, and the historical evidence concerning the rebellion itself is scant (and heavily biased, since it is written by slaveowners). Without consulting historical sources, I cannot be sure what is invented and what is not. Or consider the claim that I have acquired knowledge about kindness in the context of cruelty: this is not a historical claim, but, perhaps an ethical one. We might ask whether this ethical claim could be knowledge in the proper sense, or something else, such as an evaluative attitude. And we might wonder whether, if we read literature in order to acquire knowledge, we are reading it *as a work of literature*. More worrisome still is the possibility that rather than increasing my stock of knowledge, this novel, written by a white author trying to imagine the mind of a black slave, may reduce or corrupt my understanding of American race slavery (see Clarke 1968).

As we look at literary cognitivism closely, we encounter a series of interconnected puzzles. We can begin by noticing two related facts about fictional literature: literature often tells us things that are *not true*; and, even when literature does happen to tell us things that are true, the beliefs we acquire from literature are unreliable. In the typical case, beliefs acquired from reading works of fiction lack evidentiary warrant. How can we trust something to be true simply because we read it in a novel?

In order to answer this question, we want to know what is meant by knowledge. That is, we want an analysis of the term "cognitivism" in literary cognitivism. Does this "cognitivism" refer to propositional knowledge as something like justified true belief? Does it merely mean that the process of reading engages and so develops the same mental processes that are used in the ordinary acquisition of knowledge? We can distinguish a variety of different senses of

cognitivism, some very strong and some quite weak, and the arguments for each will be different. The weak versions are likely to be quite plausible but uninteresting. The stronger versions, on the other hand, while quite interesting, can elide the differences between the activities of reading literature (that is, reading a work *as* literature, even if it is also a work of history) and the activities of reading science or history.

Much of what we are said to learn from literature is ethical knowledge, but there are a number of different metaethical accounts of what ethical knowledge is (including whether it is, properly speaking, knowledge at all) and some are more conducive to literary cognitivism than others. Particularism as a view of ethical knowledge has been influential in philosophical thinking about literature (Nussbaum 1990), but other views about the status of ethical attitudes, such as fictionalism and expressivism, put the question of literary cognitivism in a different light. Expressivist accounts of ethical claims, which have it that ethical claims are expressions of complex conative attitudes, rather than beliefs about the world, are particularly interesting in this context (Blackburn 1984, Gibbard 1990). Literature might enrich our moral views but not increase our stock of knowledge.

We then look at the “literary” part of “literary cognitivism,” and ask what acquiring knowledge has to do with the *value* of literature *qua* literature. Perhaps one can use literature to acquire knowledge, the same way one can use a hardback copy of a novel as a paperweight, but the true value of literature lies elsewhere. Some have argued that insofar as we treat literature as a source of learning, we do not treat it as a work of literature. This gets into deep problems having to do with what it means to treat something as a work of literature, and whether literature has distinctively aesthetic value.

Thinking about moral knowledge also suggests the problem of moral ignorance and other epistemic vices. Literary cognitivism is often cast in a positive light, as adding to our base of knowledge and contributing to our moral understanding. But there is some reason to believe, as Plato (4th c. BCE/2004) thought, that literature can sometimes be bad for our cognitive and moral lives: that it can generate false beliefs, and impede or pollute moral understanding.

In looking at these puzzles, we can try to see what truth there might be in the initially plausible-sounding claim that literature has cognitive value.

II. What is it for a work of literature to produce knowledge?

The most straightforward way to imagine learning something from a work of literature is to imagine that one acquires propositional knowledge from literature. Such knowledge would need to be capable of being stated in the form of a true proposition for which the literary work itself provides warrant.

The first problem here is deciding what the proposition in question is. If critical pluralism or critical relativism are plausible, then there might be more than one proposition that a work can be said to support, and some of these propositions might even be mutually incompatible (see Stecker 2001 for an overview). When we read *The Turn of the Screw* (James 1898/2010), do we learn about how love and courage can defeat supernatural forces, or about how suppressed sexual desire and isolation can cause mental illness? Which of these might we be said to come to know would seem to depend on a basic interpretative question that has divided critics (see critical perspectives in James 1898/2010). Critical pluralists may have difficulty being literary cognitivists.¹ For pluralists to resolve this issue, they will need some way of showing that in

some cases, the set of correct interpretations is consistent, at least with regard to the matters about which we are gain knowledge.

The principal objection to the propositional account of literary cognitivism comes from Jerome Stolnitz (1992). Stolnitz makes a two-pronged attack on the view that the arts (including literature) can give us propositional knowledge. To the extent that a work manages to say things that are true, those truths are likely either to be vague, or to lack support in the work itself. He writes: "Artistic truths are truths broad and deep, too acute and suggestive, perhaps too tremulous, to be caught in the grosser nets of science, history, or garden variety experience ..." (Stolnitz, 1992, 192) And when literature does offer us truth-claims that are clear, it does not offer us the resources to support those claims. Our confidence in the historical accuracy of Styron's book must be founded in sources external to the work itself. These kinds of detailed historical claims, in any case, are usually not the kinds of knowledge claims that interest defenders of cognitivism. Cognitivists prefer to focus on knowledge claims that have deeper human significance - like the universals that Aristotle (4th c. BCE/1987) found in poetry rather than the particulars of history - and they aim to show that these claims can be both clear and supported by the literary work.

We can divide cognitivists into two camps. First, there are those who contend that literature can be said to be the basis of propositional knowledge; and second, there are those who argue that the knowledge we get from literature is not *propositional* knowledge, but some other kind of knowledge. Call the first group "strong" cognitivists, and the second group "weak" cognitivists.

Strong cognitivists attempt to show that literature does offer evidentiary support for its knowledge claims. Noël Carroll (2011) argues that some narrative artworks offer arguments for

the theses they endorse.² These arguments are maieutic, drawing on latent memories, intuitions, and other evidence to support a conclusion. The evidence is not in the text itself, but the narrative brings this evidence out and structures it in support of some thesis. The idea is that the narrative makes use of what is already in the reader's mind in order to produce knowledge.

Another strong cognitivist, Peter Kivy (1997), attempts to solve the problem of evidence in somewhat different way. He argues that in some cases, the reader treats the thematic statements in literature as live hypotheses to be tested.³ While Kivy does not insist that the evidence against which these hypotheses should be tested is found in the *text*, he does insist that the testing is part of the appropriate experience of a literary work. The *extended* experience of engaging with literature – including the hours and days spent with the bookmark in place as well as the days and weeks after one has finished – give the reader opportunity to test the claims in the text against her own experiences and the testimony of others. Thus the work of literature makes a claim that is supposed to be true, and the experience of the reader's engagement with the work provides the evidence for the claim. What is distinctive about Kivy's view is that he thinks that the literary project of reading includes much more than the ordinary conception of the time spent looking at the page.

Then there is a large and diverse family of weak cognitivist views, many of which are influenced, directly or indirectly, by Wittgenstein. What distinguishes weak cognitivism from strong cognitivism is just that according to weak cognitivism, the kind of knowledge we can acquire from literature is not, or at least not centrally, a kind of propositional knowledge. The knowledge we acquire from literature is instead said to be, variously, experiential knowledge (knowledge what it is like), acknowledging (coming to care about what one knows), perspectival knowledge (ways of seeing the world), or the like.

For example, Cora Diamond has argued that literature imparts moral knowledge not by showing us facts, but by causing us to “attend to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of all our faculties” (Diamond 1995, 296). Literature shows us new ways of seeing the world; it reorients us and puts our knowledge in a new light. John Gibson (2007), in a similar vein, invokes Cavell’s distinction between knowing and acknowledging, where acknowledging involves emotional and psychological integration with one’s knowledge. Literature, according to Gibson, can complete our understanding by taking lifeless propositions and making them matter to us; it engages our emotions and motivations. Martha Nussbaum focuses on how literature enriches our perceptual experience and understanding of the world: “The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly.” (Nussbaum 1990, 47-48) Literature deepens our knowledge, Nussbaum claims, by making details of the world salient to our minds and hearts.

Another group of weak cognitivists emphasizes the phenomenal knowledge to be gained through an imaginative engagement with literature: learning what it is like to be in a kind of situation, or to be a kind of person (Kieran 1996, Currie 1998). Gregory Currie emphasizes that this kind of experiential knowledge can then be put to use in planning, to yield practical knowledge: if what is like to work in the meatpacking industry is what we get from reading *The Jungle* (Sinclair 1906), then the industry must be reformed. Knowing what it is like to be in a particular situation, or to be a particular kind of person, certainly has prudential and moral utility. The primary doubts about phenomenal knowledge, however, arise, from the aforementioned problem with the evidentiary value of fictional literature. *The Jungle’s* evidentiary status is established through the research that Sinclair conducted. But our

knowledge of Sinclair's efforts and our confidence in his accuracy comes from extra-literary facts. Reading fictional literature can certainly give the reader a belief that she has acquired some phenomenal knowledge, but how can the work of literature itself assure us that this belief is warranted? Literature might provide the *illusion* of phenomenal knowledge, but without justification or even accuracy. This is a problem we will return to in Section V.

The challenge for weak cognitivists is this: the more broadly one defines the kind of non-propositional knowledge one has in mind, the more plausible it is that literature can and does give rise to such knowledge, but at the same time the notion of knowledge in question may thin out into insignificance. Peter Lamarque, responding to the claims about truth in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1978), puts it this way: "If we think of a proposition ... as saying 'this is how things are,' we might, in the spirit of Iris Murdoch, think of literary works of art as saying 'this is how to view things.' It is largely a terminological matter whether to call this latter notion 'truth.'" (Lamarque 1978, 106) Perhaps there is something we learn from literature, but this something is only knowledge in an extended, and perhaps rather weak, sense.

III. Is ethical knowledge really knowledge?

Here questions about literary cognitivism naturally lead us to questions about the nature of ethical knowledge. Many of the claims of the weak cognitivists about the knowledge we can gain from fiction are ethical claims, or at least normative claims (Currie talks of knowledge that is practical, an aid to planning). But it is not universally agreed that there is such a thing as ethical knowledge.

The view that some ethical claims are in fact expressions of knowledge states is also (confusingly) called "cognitivism." Meta-ethical cognitivists, not to be confused with literary

cognitivists, think that ethical claims express beliefs about the world, and that these beliefs are either true or false. Meta-ethical expressivists, on the other hand, think that ethical claims do not express beliefs or any representational attitude, but rather complex *conative* attitudes, which are neither true nor false (except perhaps in some minimal or attenuated sense). Fictionalists agree with expressivists that ethical claims do not express beliefs, but rather than pointing to some conative state, fictionalists hold that they express pretense or pretense-like representational attitudes. Even among cognitivists, there are some who doubt that there is such a thing as ethical knowledge, because they doubt whether any ethical beliefs are true, because there are no ethical facts in which to ground them. And this is far from a comprehensive list: there is a great variety of views about the relationship between ethical claims and knowledge. For the literary cognitivist, however, three positions are of particular interest: particularism, fictionalism, and expressivism.

Particularism is a version of cognitivism that eschews one standard feature of cognitive accounts: the idea that there are true ethical statements in universal form, such as “All acts of cruelty are wrong.” All true ethical claims are claims about particular acts or states of affairs. One could not learn from reading *Nat Turner* something general like “Kindness in the context of slavery can be cruel” but only that “*These* acts of kindness in *this particular* institution of slavery are cruel.”

If particularism is right, then ethical knowledge gleaned from literature will be a little bit like aesthetic knowledge: highly particular, detail-oriented, not governed by or inferred from rules, and grounded in perception.⁴ Jonathan Dancy compares ethical and aesthetic knowledge: “The direction in which I think the particularist should move is to compare the activity of choosing some features of the particular situation as especially salient (significant) with the activity of the

aesthetic description of a complex object such as a building.” (Dancy 1983, 546) According to particularists, knowledge that one gains through reading works of literature resembles one’s knowledge concerning the value of those works: both are highly specific, context-dependent, and cannot be inferred from general principles about what is valuable. Ethical knowledge gained *through* literature and aesthetic knowledge *about* literature are cousins.

Meta-ethical fictionalism is the view that ethical discourse refers in much the same way that fictional discourse refers. Ethical claims are not avowals of belief, but of some kind of belief-like pretense. Fictionalism is sometimes motivated by ethical anti-realism, but is distinct from it. (One could be a moral anti-realist and an expressivist, and moral fictionalism is compatible with agnosticism about moral facts.) There are some fictionalists who think ethical discourse can and should be eliminated; others see a useful role for ethical discourse, even though it is false (Joyce 2005). There are many varieties of ethical fictionalism, but many resort to concepts like make-believe or pretense, sometimes drawing explicitly on Kendall Walton’s (1993) account. (Walton himself does not endorse fictionalism about ethical discourse.) According to fictionalists, knowing that torture is wrong is like knowing that Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker Street. Neither wrongness nor Sherlock Holmes are part of the world as it really is, but norms of fiction tell us what is appropriate to say about wrongness just as they tell us what to say about Sherlock Holmes’ address. So “torture is wrong” is not literally true (there is no such property as “wrong”), but it is appropriate to say so just when the act of torture stands in the appropriate relation to the stories we tell each other about wrongness. Fictional accounts of ethical discourse again suggest a curious resemblance between ethics and aesthetics – at least for those who are fictionalists about fictional characters and events (cf. Thomasson 1999). The knowledge we gain

though reading literature is of a piece with the knowledge we have of the events in the world of the work of literature: both are sustained by rules of pretense or make-believe.

Ethical fictionalism may be an attractive position for the literary cognitivist. If we are fictionalists about ethics, then the ethical lessons we learn from reading a work of fiction no longer need to pass some imagined barrier from fictional worlds into the real world. All of our ethical beliefs belong to the world of fiction. So there is no need to ask how reading a novel like *Nat Turner* could resonate with and enrich our ethical thinking outside of our experience of the book: the moral claims in the book are sustained by the same kind of norms that sustain ordinary moral views. If *Nat Turner* is realistic – that is, if the moral norms of the work are continuous with the norms and practices of our lives – then there’s no reason that we can’t use it to support our moral convictions.

Finally there is expressivism, the leading non-cognitivist approach. Expressivists hold that there are no ethical beliefs at all, true or false. Rather, there are attitudes expressing (variously) plans, values, attitudes, desires, or the acceptance of norms. One of the central ideas behind metaethical expressivism is that ethical claims exert psychological pressure on action in much the way that desires do. Ethical claims are motivationally potent, and that motivation is their primary function. On this view, the ethical “knowledge” we gain from literature would be new motivational states which are integrated into our existing conative architecture, changing (subtly or dramatically) what we care about and how we are moved to act. Expressivists like Blackburn have attempted (see his 1984, Chapter 6) to show how we can give an account of improving one’s stock of attitudes, approximating the characteristics of knowledge. This “knowledge,” however, is not a matter of acquiring new beliefs or acquiring new evidence for them.

If this account were correct, it might seem to be the death-knell for literary cognitivism, at least in its ethical incarnation. On this view, literature cannot be the source of ethical knowledge because there is no such thing. However, expressivists have developed accounts of how we reason and deliberate with sophisticated non-cognitive states – how we can draw inferences from one plan to another, for example. So there's no reason to think that the expressivist view is incompatible with some weak versions of cognitivism. Expressivism might be applied to literary cognitivism in such a way as to change the conversation in interesting ways. Rather than worrying about what propositions are learned through literature or how literature provides evidence for those propositions, literary expressivism might instead emphasize the distinctive ways in which literature enriches our thought and character, in ways unlike those of science or history. The value of literature can still be "cognitive" in some extended sense, not by producing knowledge but by refining our sentiments and values (cf. Robinson 1995).

Of course, all of the metaethical accounts here discussed are contentious. It is far from clear that any of these are correct. But this discussion suggests that our views about literary cognitivism (at least in its ethical mode) will be affected by our metaethical commitments.

IV. What does knowledge have to do with the value of literature?

Perhaps the real problems lie elsewhere. After all, as Kivy and Carroll suggest, clearly there are ways in which we can construe the activity of reading literature that are at least conducive to knowledge. And it is plausible that literature can be a source of insight, particularly moral and practical insight, as the metaethical expressivists would concede. Rather than focusing on what is and what is not "knowledge," we can ask instead about the distinctive value of literature and

the extent to which a work's potential to contribute to something like knowledge adds to that value.

It is not easy to say what distinctive value literature has. Literary value may be considered a species of aesthetic value, which is distinct from economic, pleasure, or ethical values, but aesthetic value has always seemed most plausible when applied to non-narrative art forms, and particularly those that foreground sensory experience, such as absolute music and abstract sculpture. Literary value, if it is a kind of aesthetic value, is an odd bird. Aesthetic value is traditionally distinguished from other kinds of value on the basis of its non-practical role, sometimes requiring distance or disinterestedness from the content of the work, and also by focus on the formal, sensory features of the work. Clive Bell (1914) infamously maintained that pure aesthetic attention to a painting would leave the viewer unaware of what the painting represented. The difficulty is that it is hard to imagine reading a novel with serious literary attention while ignoring the story, focusing *only* on the formal, sensory elements.

Accounts of literary value tend to focus on two kinds of qualities of works of fiction: the formal or sensory qualities; and the structural or thematic qualities. The former are particularly salient in poetry, as we think of words being read aloud, with attention to their rhythm, alliteration, and similar qualities. But they can also be found in prose and they certainly do add to a work's value. For example, consider this passage from *Lolita*: "Lo-lee-ta: the trip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta." (Nabokov 1997, 9)⁵ The sound of the words, and even the sympathetic movement of the tongue as one reads creates a kind of aesthetic delight unrelated to story or even meaning. Few, however, would argue that this sort of formal, sensory value is the *principal* distinctive value of narrative works of literature.

One can also look at non-sensory features of literature with a formal eye. For example, one can attend to the role of narration and point of view in establishing character. This can include attention to frame stories, point of view changes, the use of flashbacks or other nonlinear temporal devices, and so on, with one's attention focused on how the device has the effect it does. Such devices can be used well or poorly, and one can take great aesthetic delight in their successful use. (Consider James Wood's (2008) discussion of different uses of free indirect discourse.)

And then there is theme. The themes of the work are the topics or ideas that are presented for contemplation. They can be trivial or important, narrow or broad. According to Lamarque and Olsen (1994), the best-known proponents of this view of literary value, a work's literary value is a function not only of how the theme is presented (which, in turn, is related to the various sensory and structural elements just described) but also the centrality and importance of the theme itself. The best of works of literature, according to Lamarque and Olsen, deal with "perennial" themes. This last criterion is not formalist (at least not strictly): we are looking at the content, and not only the mode of presentation. However, Lamarque and Olsen deny that we are interested in treating the theme as a "thesis," in Beardsley's (1981) sense. When one looks at a work like *Lolita*, one asks about the theme of self-delusion and illusion-making that runs through the novel, but one does not consider whether, for example, it is *true* that self-delusion is a necessary part of human relationships. To engage in the latter kind of evaluation, they argue, is to fail to engage the work as a work of literature. According to such views of literary value, then, knowledge plays no real role in our aesthetic appreciation of works of literature. As soon as we start looking for evidence or asking about what is true, we have stopped treating the work as literature.

Literary cognitivists have two responses to this argument. The first, which we have already discussed, is to weaken the view of knowledge, so that contemplation of themes and careful emotional attention counts as contributions to knowledge. The second, however, is to deny that the distinction between literary value and non-literary values can be maintained.

There is no such thing as literary value, or at least there is no account of literary value which systematically excludes taking an interest in truth and evidence. Peter Kivy has argued (2011) that with the exception of some kinds of serious academic study, we do not read novels in the way we would need to in order to appreciate these aesthetic features. What is important in narrative works of literature depends on the events and characters in the story in a way that is utterly unlike what matters in painting or music. Story is essential to literature in ways that it is not essential to other arts. Kivy writes: "... if there *are* aesthetic properties to be experienced in the novel, they are, for most serious readers, in the story, not the structure. In this very important respect, then the novel is a *non-aesthetic art*." (Kivy 2011, 37, emphasis in original) If Kivy is right, then there is no distinctive sphere of literary value, and no reason to privilege theme over thesis, or attention to formal details over attention to historical details. Reading books with an eye to what they can teach us does not necessarily distract us from the work's real value. Whether or not its role in promoting knowledge is one of the principal values of literature depends on whether we think that literature has its own distinctive kind of aesthetic value.

V. Can literature undermine knowledge?

If literature can some enhance our cognitive lives, then it is plausible that it can also sometimes do the reverse. Plato (4th c. BCE/2004) was famously concerned about this: poetry, he thought,

strengthened the appetitive parts of the soul while weakening the reasoning part. There are at least three different ways in which literature may be thought to be an epistemic danger to readers. First, there is the worry about acquiring false information; second, there is the problem of false confidence and its negative effects; and third, there are worries about how we might mistakenly import from literature misconceptions about character and about our lives.

A number of philosophers (see Currie 1998, Gendler 2006, Harold 2006) have noted that when we imaginatively engage with works of fiction, what we imagine affects what we believe, or at least what we are inclined to believe. We automatically export much of what we read in fiction into our stock of beliefs. Richard Gerrig, summarizing the psychological literature, writes “persuasion by fiction is the default outcome: it is only under circumstances encouraging special scrutiny that readers will treat the fictional information in such a fashion that its impact is attenuated.” (1993, 227) Even when we are aware that we are reading a work of fiction – even when we *know* that particular historical facts have been invented by the author – we tend to believe what we read. And there is a subtler effect as well. Even if we resist adding some fictional claim to our stock of beliefs, we may still be primed to give more credence to similar claims when we encounter them, because we have practice imagining what it would be if these claims were factual and we will be particularly attentive to evidence in their favor (Gerrig 1993, p 227-239). Of course, when what we read in fiction happens to be true, this is a good thing; but the rest of the time, there is reason to worry.

Second, and related, there is the problem of false confidence. One of the dangers noted in the criticisms of Styron’s *Nat Turner* is that white readers would come to believe, falsely, that they had understood *what it had been like* to be a black slave in early 19th century Virginia. This kind of phenomenal knowledge has, we noted, often been thought to be one of the cognitive virtues

of literature. But the illusion of phenomenal knowledge can be dangerous epistemically and ethically. If a reader imagines he knows what it is like to be another, then he might attempt to make ethical or policy decisions on that basis. Such decisions could be terrible mistakes, reinforcing racist policies, for example, rather than reforming them. Ignorance and the illusion of knowledge is a dangerous combination.

Third, stories are not like lives, and characters in books are not like people. But reading literature may prompt us to envision our lives as if they were stories and to imagine ourselves and others as though we had the kinds of character traits that fictional characters do. While some philosophers (Velleman 2005) have extolled the virtues of telling stories about one's own life, there are clearly also dangers in expecting that one's own life will have narrative economy, or a clear central conflict to be overcome. Thinking of our lives as having the structure of stories can be useful, but it can also be misleading in important ways (Goldie 2011). While we do not consciously believe that our lives will follow the arc of the protagonist in a romance novel, such stories can nonetheless shape our emotional experiences and expectations in ways that will mislead and thwart our goals.

Further, as Gregory Currie has discussed, some of the recent criticisms of virtue ethics, based on findings from social psychology, seem to discredit the claim that real people have stable, long-term character traits (see Doris 1998, Harman 1999). Characters in literary works, of course, do have such character traits. If we come to see ourselves and others as though we are like the characters we read in novels, then reading literature will reinforce our false sense that some people are brave, and others cowardly. This, in turn, can lead us to treat ourselves and others in inappropriate ways.

All of these concerns are, however, perfectly compatible with literary cognitivism. Some books might make us more knowledgeable and others less, or, more likely, a book could make us both more and less knowledgeable at the same time, in different respects. But if cognitive value is one of the important values of literature, then we should not overlook the potential disvalue of false beliefs and other epistemic vices that could be the result of reading literature.

VI. Conclusions

We noted at the outset that literary cognitivism focuses on what we can learn from realistic works of literary fiction. One area for further research is the cognitive value of non-realistic literature and non-traditional forms: satire, surrealism, non-narrative poetry, and so on (see Harold 2007, Liao forthcoming). It is unlikely that there could be anything like a unified account of the cognitive value of these different forms, but further study of these forms would enrich the field.

The central claim of literary cognitivism has deep connections to other important and difficult problems: the nature of knowledge itself, the metaethical status of ethical claims, the concept of literary value, and the psychology of reading. One's view of the plausibility of literary cognitivism will affect and be affected by one's assessment of the plausibility of the various views on these related topics.⁶

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¹ See Thomson-Jones 2012, who makes a similar point regarding pluralism and ethicism.

² Carroll endorses both strong and weak cognitivism. In some works (e.g., Carroll 2002), he claims that narrative artworks, rather than offering arguments or evidence, offer opportunities to clarify and reflect on views we already have, allying him with the weak cognitivists. However, more recently (e.g., Carroll 2011), he has also said that narrative artworks can offer arguments for the claims that they aver.

³ A related approach attempts to show that literature produces knowledge in the same way that philosophical or scientific thought experiments do. See David Davies, "Fictional Truth and Truth through Fiction" in this volume, for a discussion.

⁴ Of course, one might be a particularist about ethics and a universalist about literary value (Beardsley 1981). If so, the parallel would not hold.

⁵ I am indebted to C. Namwali Serpell for her analysis of this passage. Serpell's interpretation of *Lolita* is given at greater length in her 2004 lecture.

⁶ I am indebted to David Davies, A. W. Eaton, and John Gibson for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. I am especially grateful to Davies for his remarks on the discussion of fictionalism. Of course, any errors that remain are my own.