

MORE THAN METAPHOR: UNDERSTANDING THROUGH LITERATURE

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The debate over whether we can learn from art is as contentious as it is enduring. With the debate often centring on literature, recent theories claim that literature can deepen and enrich our understanding in novel and valuable ways. Contrary to this, Peter Lamarque accuses the neo-cognitivist of relying on empty metaphors of illumination and enrichment to spell out literature's cognitive import. This paper links philosophical and psychological research to defend the neo-cognitivist against Lamarque's charge. It highlights some of the processes and mechanisms central to experiencing the cognitive impact of literary reading. These processes help the neo-cognitivist tell a robust and empirically informed story about how 'enhanced understanding' manifests in the experience of reading.

1 Introduction

Neo-cognitivism, a phrase coined by John Gibson (2008), refers to a cluster of recent theories denying that the cognitive value of art is reducible to its capacity to furnish us with knowledge or truth. Neo-cognitivism locates the cognitive value of literature, the artform at the centre of the debate, in its capacity to deepen, enrich, and enhance understanding. Whilst moving away from knowledge allows the neo-cognitivist to bypass some canonical anti-cognitivist objections, the theory runs into problems. Peter Lamarque (1997, pp. 19-20) objects that the neo-cognitivist “constantly resorts to metaphors” such as “illuminating experience” without explaining how this so-called ‘enhanced understanding’ is supposed to “manifest”. Lamarque is not explicitly denying that literature can yield cognitive value, but casting doubt about the feasibility of the neo-cognitivist account by pointing to a perceived lack of detail and explanation. This paper proposes a response to Lamarque on the part of the neo-cognitivist, incorporating established psychological literature. There are multiple robust, empirically informed stories the neo-cognitivist can tell about how enhanced understanding manifests, and there are numerous established metrics for tracking potential cognitive uplift. To clarify, using empirical literature is not intended to ‘prove’ that the neo-cognitivist story is correct. Instead, it forms the basis of a response to Lamarque’s objection by demonstrating that the neo-cognitivist story can be much more than metaphor.¹

In §2, I introduce neo-cognitivism and a canonical counter-argument, here called the *epistemological objection*. §3 identifies a different objection, Lamarque’s objection, which accuses the neo-cognitivist of relying

¹ The methodology of the paper is intended to resemble similar empirically informed approaches that do not treat the psychological literature as definitive evidence for a given position, but treat it as a jumping-off point for philosophical thinking. I have in mind Derek Matravers’ (2014) work on fictionality and narrativity, Amy Coplan’s (2004) account of empathic engagement with narrative fictions, and Kris Goffin and Stacie Friend’s (2022) research on how we acquire biases and problematic assumptions from literature.

on metaphor instead of giving an informative account of what and how we learn from literature. §4 attempts to challenge this by canvassing some results from the empirical research, which could furnish the neo-cognitivist with productive explanatory resources. I address some limitations and upshots in §5.

2 Neo-Cognitivism

Literary neo-cognitivist theories claim that we can have genuinely cognitively valuable experiences when we read literature, but that this epistemic value is not necessarily reducible to the acquisition of new knowledge, facts, or true beliefs. By expanding cognitive value, we can side-step canonical worries about whether artworks can convey truth or knowledge—for example, Jerome Stolnitz's (1992) claim that the only truths we could glean from art would be banal or already known to us. Similarly, we need not worry about whether artworks can justify their claims, a requisite for knowledge that a medium like literature might struggle to fulfil (Gibson, 2008). Instead, what can be cognitively valuable about literature is its ability to enhance our understanding of ourselves and the world by altering, expanding, or mobilizing our existent beliefs in epistemically valuable ways (Gibson 2007).

There are various suggestions for how this epistemic value might manifest in literary contexts.² Some have suggested that literature is cognitively valuable in an analogous mode to thought experiments (Carroll, 2002; Elgin, 1993, 2002; Vidmar, 2013). Elgin has explored the resemblance between literary fictions and philosophical or scientific thought experiments, arguing that they are all 'exemplifications', serving as instantiations of features of the real world that can yield insight without stating a particular propositional truth. Such exemplifications can function as vehicles for exploration and discovery by presenting recognizable features in new (fictional) contexts (Elgin 1993, 2002). As Car-

² For an excellent in-depth overview and classification of recent neo-cognitivist theories of fiction, see Green (2022).

roll (2002) echoes, literary narratives mobilize our existent beliefs and concepts in fictional settings, which allows us to clarify and condition them. Stecker (2019) offers an agnate account, which claims that literary narratives offer us hypotheses which we can hold up and test against the real world, much like in philosophical enquiry. In juxtaposing a feature of the world with the literary conception of it on offer, we might come to articulate our knowledge of that feature more clearly, form new connections between related propositions or concepts, foreground some aspect of it, or clarify our existent beliefs about this feature, all of which can help to form a more comprehensive and coherent picture of ourselves and the world.

Eileen John (1998) argues that works of fiction can have conceptual results, which is to say, they can affect how we use a given concept and alter our understanding of its conditions of application. Put another way, our engagement with some fictional narratives takes on the character of conceptual inquiry. As conceptual inquiry, literature can yield similar epistemically-valuable results to philosophy. Vidmar-Jovanović (2019b) goes further, arguing that literature can produce both direct cognitive benefits in the form of knowledge acquisition and indirect cognitive benefits such as deepened understanding or refined perception, a capacity it shares with philosophy. One method through which literature achieves this is by encouraging readers to attend to and reflect upon themes within the text, which can lead to a “an intensified awareness of the nuances of the concept at stake or as a more refined perception of what is involved in a given problem and/or its solutions” (ibid, p.159).

This represents only a small sample of the varieties of approach to explaining the different kinds of epistemically valuable gains we can make from our engagement with literature that are not exclusively tied to knowledge-acquisition. Key commonalities across the board include the claim that literature can be valuable for how it puts our beliefs into

action, encouraging us to be better users of concepts or more perceptive in situations, as well as the idea that literature can stimulate reflection, wherein we can come to evaluate, refine, or reassess our beliefs about ourselves and the world. In such instances, the claim is that fiction can feed into fact.

Although neo-cognitivism might avoid some of the classic worries about literature's ability to disseminate propositional knowledge, it faces its own problems. Here, two specific objections are identified within the literature, bifurcated into what will be called the *epistemological objection*, and then *Lamarque's objection*. Michael Hannon (2021) worries that neo-cognitivists appear to take for granted that enhanced understanding is something distinct from increased knowledge or that understanding is in a crucial sense irreducible to knowledge, which is not a given in the epistemological debate. Baumberger et al. (2017) point out that the conditions for understanding appear to track conventional conditions for knowledge, namely justified, true belief. We take it that to understand *x*, we must have a representation of *x*, where we have good reasons for forming said representation and where this representation does "fit the facts" or track truth (Hannon 2021, 271). If understanding is reducible to knowledge or faces similar requirements to it, then the neo-cognitivist is back to having to deal with sceptical worries about literature's ability to disseminate knowledge, such as its lack of justificatory resources. Numerous neo-cognitivists have taken on the epistemological challenge including Baumberger (2013) and Vidmar-Jovanović (2013, 2019a, 2019b, 2023). Broadly, the popular move is to defend the irreducible and knowledge-independent value of understanding, as Elgin does, which can be bolstered by supporting work in epistemology such as that of Jonathan Kvanvig (2003) or Linda Zagzebski (2001, 2019). Ultimately, whether one finds this approach compelling will come down to one's own epistemological commitments.

3 Lamarque's Objection

Here, a different objection is identified; call it *Lamarque's objection*. Lamarque's objection highlights that even if we grant the epistemic value of understanding, the neo-cognitivist will still face problems which suggests vindicating neo-cognitivism on epistemological grounds will not be enough to defend the position. Lamarque's basic concern is that the neo-cognitivist "constantly resorts to metaphors" when describing how literature might enhance understanding, for want of any concrete account of what this 'enhanced understanding' actually amounts to. He objects that the stock phrase 'enhanced understanding' "yields very little" when it comes to spelling out the "cognitive payoffs" of literature (Lamarque 1997, 19). Lamarque grants that there may well be ways of cashing out 'enhanced understanding' that are not reducible to knowledge acquisition, which would vindicate the neo-cognitivist on the epistemological front, but objects that it remains difficult to get a grip on what the actual cognitive gains are. Even where metaphorical language of 'illumination' or 'crystallization' is not invoked, neo-cognitivists will often stress the holistic and somewhat ineffable quality of understanding. Elgin (1993, 14) has it that "understanding need not be couched in sentences" and that sometimes understanding may be "inarticulate". Lamarque worries such claims leave us with little to go on when it comes to explaining how and what we learn from literature.

Can the neo-cognitivist spell out the cognitive effects of literature without resorting to metaphor? Is there anything more informative that the neo-cognitivist can say about the ways in which literature intervenes in our understanding of ourselves and the world? The last two decades of psychological research leave the neo-cognitivist better placed to answer this sceptical question. There are now a number of different metrics for tracking perceived cognitive benefits from literature, and some promising results that appear to support some of the neo-cognitivist's key contentions. The next section will canvas some developments in the

empirical literature that suggest changes to our conception of ourselves and the world can be impacted by different kinds of reading-experience, including empathic engagement and reflection induced by both fictional and literary texts. Both empathic engagement and reflection might serve as good markers for tracking and identifying ‘enhanced understanding’ in literary reading. Whilst substantial consensus on the link between these kinds of literary engagement and perceived cognitive impact is not yet established, there is enough evidence to suggest Lamarque’s objection is not insurmountable.

4 The Psychological Perspective

The empirical research on cognitive enrichment from reading suggests that there are two key methods through which literature can affect and alter our understanding of ourselves and the world: by engaging us empathically in a form of ‘role-playing’ that allows us to simulate situations and can lead to self-modification of our beliefs, or by stimulating reflection that can lead to interrogation or revision of our existing beliefs. Both methods chime with some of the proposed epistemically-valuable processes that were outlined by the theories discussed in §2. Eva-Maria Koopman and Frank Hakemulder’s (2015) meta-analysis of the psychological literature concludes that changes to a reader’s empathy and reflection are central to understanding learning from literature. They stress that we ought not to conflate narrative, fictionality and literariness as concepts, and subsequently develop a framework that dissects the specific cognitive mechanisms associated with each kind of text. In this context, they define narrative texts as “texts presenting a sequence of events in which one or more characters are involved” (ibid, 83) and claim that literary texts involve “unconventional, novel, and deviating ways of representing” (ibid, 83) including features like unusual imagery or complex linguistic features. The framework developed by Koopman and Hakemulder finds that the existing research supports two complementary contentions a) that our empathic engagement with

narratives can lead to “self-modifying feelings” which can in turn lead to changes in concepts/beliefs and b) that appreciating literary features of texts can lead to self-reflection. Thus, there are at least two key ways in which literature can bring about cognitive benefits: via engaging us empathically which in turn can stimulate changes in self-perception, or by leading us into reflective activity which creates space for various epistemically valuable activities like questioning, refining, or expanding our beliefs and concepts.

The first part of this framework concerns our empathic engagement with narratives. The main test used for measuring empathic responses was the “Reading the Mind in the Eyes” test, which is a widely accepted measure of empathy. In this test participants are shown 36 photographs of people’s eyes as if they were looking through a letterbox, and then, for each photograph, they pick one out of four possible words to describe the eyes. In repeated studies, it was found that engagement with fiction, as opposed to non-fictional or expository texts, lead to higher RMET results (Mar et al. 2006, 200; Hakemulder 2000; Djikic et al. 2009, 2013). Mar et al. (2006) found exposure to fiction correlated with greater social ability and self-reported empathy on several empathy tests including a revised version of RMET and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) which tracks empathy according to four subscales: (1) Fantasy, (2) Perspective-taking, (3) Empathic Concern and (4) Personal Distress. Kidd and Castano (2013) found that exposure to literary texts led to higher scores on several cognitive and affective empathy tests compared to popular fictional texts, albeit these positive effects were limited to the short term and not connected to life-long exposure to literature.

Kidd and Castano’s explanation for literature’s potency over fiction in enhancing theory of mind (the ability to identify and understand the inner emotional state of others) was that literary representations of social situations were less likely to be governed by convention or ste-

reotype, and more likely to deviate from our everyday expectations of social behaviours. Similar results were reported by Djikic et al. (2009), who found that readers of Anton Chekhov's "The Lady with The Little Dog" reported statistically significant changes in the self-evaluation of key traits such as conscientiousness and emotional stability, whereas readers of a reiteration of the story in a non-fictional style did not.

Keith Oatley (1999, 2016) argues we should understand our empathic engagement with narrative fiction as involving 'role taking'. Role taking is a simulation where we make a mental model of the world, take on the goals and plans of the protagonist, and subsequently experience emotions in accordance with the success of these goals and plans. Oatley argues that self-identifying with characters and their engagement with the social world can lead to both pro-social attitudes and what is termed in the literature as 'self-modifying feelings'. We can understand 'self-modifying feelings' as emotional states which lead to changes in how we understand the world of the text, which can then be "carried forward as an altered understanding of the reader's own lifeworld" (Miall and Kuiken 2004, 176). Koopman and Hakemulder's conclusion, based on these studies and analyses, is that empathic identification with the narrative was crucial for changes in conception of either oneself or the depicted subject matter. They explain this phenomenon in terms of narratives as thought-experiments, wherein we take up the perspectives of characters, which in turn "can result in a broadening of readers' consciousness" (Koopman and Hakemulder 2015, 91). This conclusion was recently tested again in the context of young adult readers, where it was found that exposure to both young adult and adult literature correlated with perspective-taking and increased social and moral cognition (Black and Barnes 2020). Rather than testing for empathy and moral cognition after exposure to a text, Black and Barnes used the Author Recognition test, which gauges exposure to literature by getting participants to identify known authors from a list of established writers, with foils to offset cheating or socially desirable responding.

Whilst D.R Johnson (2013) found that fictionalised narratives involving Arabic Muslim female characters elicited longer-lasting pro-social attitudes toward Arabic Muslim women than equivalent expository texts, Koopman and Hakemulder's (2015) assessment is that the lack of systematic comparisons between fictional, literary, and expository texts should dissuade us from concluding that fictions or literary fictions could be more persuasive than purely expository texts (c.f. Green et al. 2012). Given this hesitation, an initial worry might be, then, that the neo-cognitivist with the aid of the psychologist cannot establish anything particular to literature about enhancing understanding; they can only establish that literature is cognitively valuable by virtue of its narrativity or fictionality. The second part of Koopman and Hakemulder's (2015, 82) framework provides resources for thinking that there is something more specific to literature which is that literary or aesthetic features of a text have been shown in some research to stimulate what they call 'self-reflection', by which they mean "thoughts and insights on oneself, often in relation to others, and/or society (in the present context of course evoked by reading)". There is also some research that suggests the greater the literariness of a text, the more likely it is to yield self-reflection (Sikora et al. 2009). This is said to be the result of a process called defamiliarization: the process of becoming unsettled by deviating linguistic features found in literary texts that causes a change in how the subject perceives a concept (Miall and Kuiken, 1994, 1999, 2002). Striking linguistic features of a text defamiliarize by getting readers to take up a new perspective on familiar things. Miall and Kuiken (1994) note that reported defamiliarization was associated positively with both experienced readers and readers who found the text to be striking or beautiful. From a philosophical point of view, we would say that self-reflection occurs predominantly when the aesthetic experience with the text is fruitful and rewarding.

Van Peer et al. (2007) explored this phenomenon in relation to poetry. After giving readers one of six different lines of poetry that were of vary-

ing complexity and supplying a questionnaire which asked participants to rank their agreement with statements like “It makes me stop and think”, “I think it introduces a new perspective”, and “I find it striking”, they found that the lines which deviated from everyday language (for example by virtue of being considered more beautiful, more complex or elaborate as well as use of simile and metaphor) generated greater perceived cognitive impact. Koopman and Hakemulder cite Van Peer et al.’s experiment as evidence that literary features of a text such as novel metaphors, rhyme, and style contribute to higher levels of cognitive reflection. Sikor et al. (2011) found that readers responding to Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* reported a similar experience, where stylistic features like complexity or striking imagery prompted readers to self-implicate themselves in the text, which in turn lead to self-reflection. The team termed this kind of reading ‘expressive enactment’:

In this mode of reading: (a) stylistic features give narrative objects, characters, and places a sensuous and engaging presence; (b) mutations of the sensuously present “other” occur across striking or evocative reading moments; and (c) the reader becomes metaphorically identified with these transformations in ways that deepen self-perception. (ibid, 135)

In fact, readers with prior grief experience were more likely to experience this type of reading experience, suggesting a potential overlap or interaction between empathic/self-implicating mechanisms as well as aesthetic features and reflection. Koopman and Hakemulder conclude from the research on defamiliarization that encountering novel, complex, or striking features of a literary text can halt the ordinary flow of our thinking, which in turn creates space, which they call “stillness”. In stillness we can reflect, alter, refine, evaluate, or interrogate our beliefs about ourselves and the world.

5 Upshots and Limitations

Lamarque's objection is motivated by a scepticism about whether the neo-cognitivist has anything informative to say about how and what we learn from literature, a scepticism echoed in the recent work of Gregory Currie and Stacie Friend. In *Imagining and Knowing*, Currie forcefully argues that fiction is more closely intertwined with the value of imagination than it is knowledge. For Currie, pretence is the central feature of our engagement with fiction, and it is precisely this pretence which undermines our ability to jump from beliefs about the fictional world to beliefs about the real world (Currie 2020). In a recent empirical study attempting to recreate an experiment by Djikic et al. (2013) that found that reading fiction was associated with a lower need for closure, where need for closure was thought to track decreased creativity, open-mindedness and imagination, Currie, Friend, and colleagues found that exposure to literature did not correlate with increased imaginative capacities (Wimmer et al. 2022). Further, Wimmer et al. (2021) failed to replicate research that suggested fiction's ability to encourage transportation and identification had positive effects on social and moral cognition. This research fuels Currie's scepticism about cognitivism (see Currie 1998) and of course would call into question some of the contentions discussed in §4.

This highlights the need for caution when drawing lessons from the empirical literature. Broad and general claims such as 'literature makes us more knowledgeable' or 'fiction makes us more moral' will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate empirically, and the conclusions we should draw from the existing research should be narrower. However, the question of whether fiction or literature can make us more morally and socially adept does not necessarily invalidate the research that suggests literature can inspire reflection or get us to take up the perspectives of characters. Neo-cognitivists such as Elgin, John, or Vidmar Jovanović claim that literature can prompt us to reflect

and guide our attention in such a way that we can form new beliefs or reshape existing ones in ways that add depth and complexity to our understanding of ourselves and our social world, and Koopman and Hakemulder's metanalysis certainly suggests that reflection is a crucial mechanism through which literature can bring about changes in concept. Thus, rather than conclude that literary readers are cognitively superior, we can offer empirical support to the more focused claim that reflection plays a central role in our epistemic engagement with literary texts. We can value literature for its ability to create opportunities for cognitive enrichment without being committed to the claim that it necessarily cultivates understanding in all instances. Further, the explanatory resources available in the empirical literature, particularly the models invoking role-taking and reflection, help the neo-cognitivist push back against Lamarque's claim that the neo-cognitivist account is purely metaphorical. Even if we're not in a position to make claims about whether literature invariably leads to better empathy scores or long-term social effects, we do have ways of explaining the methods through which literature can alter the way we think about ourselves and others that go beyond empty metaphor.

Without blindly accepting the results of the various studies discussed, we can still maintain that there are various well-documented mechanisms that can be absorbed into the neo-cognitivist framework to further substantiate their claims about the cognitive benefits of literature. For example, the phenomenon of role-taking/transportation in fictional and literary reading is now very well-documented, and it also bears a striking resemblance to the neo-cognitivist claims that works of literature can function as thought experiments in ways that can yield epistemically valuable results. It is possible that the psychological literature could provide greater insight into how we can come to learn from thought experiments, as well as the role that empathy and self-implication play in this process. Similarly, there is a substantial amount of empirical literature that cites the importance of complexity and nov-

elty in language, structure, and imagery as relevant to the stimulation of reflective activities. It may well be of interest to the philosopher to pursue this line of thought and consider how these particular aesthetic features can be linked to enhanced understanding. Rather than treating the existing data as definitive or conclusive, we can look to it for inspiration for future philosophical investigation.

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