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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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Fiction, Belief and Understanding

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ABSTRACT. Philosophers and other scholars have long held that reading fiction, particularly literary fiction, is cognitively valuable. They have argued, for example, that fiction deepens understanding, enhances empathy, cultivates psychological insight, exercises moral imagination, refines emotions, increases modal or conceptual knowledge, opens our minds and expands our horizons. The capacity of fiction to convey factual information is, by contrast, typically ignored in these discussions. In this paper I argue that the way we learn facts from fiction is essential to explaining several other cognitive values often attributed to fiction. Works of fiction are about the world in which we live, and they are cognitively valuable when they illuminate features of that world. I further suggest that truth and accuracy may contribute, not just to the cognitive value of a work of fiction, but also to its value as fictional literature. This is because the processes by which we learn facts from fiction are integral to literary appreciation.

1. Introduction

There is a traditional view that reading literary fiction is cognitively valuable, and any number of accounts of the relevant kind(s) of value. Perhaps fictional literature gives us moral knowledge or improves our moral capacities (e.g., Diamond, 1983; Nussbaum, 1992). Perhaps it gives us modal or conceptual knowledge (e.g., John, 1998; Stokes, 2006). Many have argued that literature gives us psychological insight, or insight into human nature (e.g., Stock, 2006; Conolly and Haydar, 2007). Some say that it gives us a sense of other people's perceptions and feelings: *what it's like* to undergo certain kinds of experiences (e.g., Novitz, 1987). Jenefer

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Robinson (2005) has argued that we learn through our emotional responses to fiction, while others suggest that our imaginative capacities are expanded or stretched (e.g., Kind, 2023). And there is some discussion of the idea that works of fictional literature or art might enhance certain kinds of traits, like creativity, perspective-taking, and open-mindedness (e.g., Huemer, 2022; Wimmer et al., 2022).¹⁰⁴

The above is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather one that illustrates the wide range of the topic. Despite this breadth, though, relatively little philosophical attention has been paid to one kind of cognitive value that can be attributed to works of fiction: the capacity to convey factual information.¹⁰⁵ This is not because people doubt that we acquire ordinary beliefs from fiction (say, about history or geography); in fact, that's widely accepted.

Instead, one reason for the neglect is the widespread assumption that when we try to identify the cognitive values of fiction (or fictional literature), what we are seeking is a value that is specific to fiction, or specific to fictional literature.¹⁰⁶ Needless to say, the provision of empirical information is not specific, since we learn ordinary facts through perception, from other people, from non-fiction representations and so on. Indeed, conveying facts is a familiar goal of many works of non-fiction. Another problematic assumption, which is typically less explicit, is that the capacity to convey factual information is somehow trivial and uninteresting. That we learn facts from fiction (it is assumed) could not possibly tell us why we value the great works of literature.

I think that both assumptions are mistaken.¹⁰⁷ However, rather than argue directly for that position, I will elaborate and defend a positive account of learning facts from fiction that does not rely on them. I will argue that the way we learn facts from fiction is not only far from trivial or uninteresting; it is also essential to other cognitive values often attributed to fiction. Therefore, people defending the cognitive value of fictional literature in other terms still have a reason to pay attention to how we learn facts.

¹⁰⁴ This idea is the focus of my current interdisciplinary research project, 'Art Opening Minds: Imagination and Perspective in Film' (with Heather Ferguson, Angela Nyhout and Murray Smith), funded by the Templeton Religion Trust (TRT-2021-10476).

¹⁰⁵ Exceptions include Friend (2014) and Ichino and Currie (2017). There has been more discussion in psychology, mainly focused on the concern that readers may believe false information (for an overview see Friend, 2014).

¹⁰⁶ I will use these terms more or less interchangeably for present purposes.

¹⁰⁷ As I note below, there are certain literary and artistic techniques that facilitate learning. The claim is that these are not unique to fiction since they can be found in non-fiction as well.

Here's what I'll do. First, I'll briefly provide some background on my conception of fiction, the Genre Theory. Second, I'll give slightly more background on a claim I've made elsewhere, about how we determine what's 'true in a fiction'. Then I will describe how we acquire beliefs about ordinary facts (or about anything) from fiction. I will talk a bit about the relationship between that and understanding. Finally, and most tentatively, I will say something about why I think that learning facts is relevant to the value of works of fiction *as* fiction, or *as* literature.

2. Background Theories

According to the theory of fiction that I defend elsewhere (Friend, 2008; 2012), there are no individually necessary or jointly sufficient conditions for the fictionality of works. I'm focused on works; I'm not focused on specific utterances or sentences or passages or parts of works. This is because I think that works are the primary bearer of fictionality, though I'm not going to argue for that here. With respect to works, I claim in particular that *inviting imagining* (vs belief) does not demarcate any difference between fiction and non-fiction.

The positive account that I give—which is less relevant than the negative claim for this talk—is that fiction and non-fiction are *genres*, which means that they meet the following two conditions:

1. Works are classified by sets of non-essential criteria. These include what I call *standard features*, following Kendall Walton in 'Categories of Art' (1970); and also what I call *categorial features*, like the author's intention that a work be classified a certain way and contemporary practices of classification (still following Walton).
2. Classification as fiction or non-fiction matters to appreciation, that is, to the understanding and evaluation of works that are so classified.

The important upshot of this very brief tour of the Genre Theory is that there is nothing about the nature of fiction on my view that excludes (ordinary ways of) learning facts. So, I will

assume that we should reject any view of fiction that draws an epistemic distinction between fiction and non-fiction.

Now I turn to the second bit of background, explaining what I call the *Reality Assumption* (RA). The basic idea, that fictional worlds are in many ways like the real world, is not new with me; it has many precedents (e.g., Lewis, 1983; Ryan, 1980).¹⁰⁸ But my version is the RA: the assumption that everything that obtains in the real world is also *storified* (true-in-the-fiction), unless excluded by features of the work (Friend, 2017). The RA is a default assumption that we make when we read, or watch, or consume a fiction. It's a claim about what is true-in-the-fiction, whether we realise it or not. However, it has practical implications, indicating that when you're reading and you're trying to figure out what is fictionally the case (what is going on in this scene? why is the character doing that? will she succeed? why is she so upset? etc.), you should assume that the storyworld is (like the) real world unless you have a particular reason to do otherwise. This is a default assumption in the sense that you presuppose it when you read (or watch or consume)¹⁰⁹ fictions. Take the psychology of characters. In most works, we assume that human beings have ordinary human psychology, without even thinking explicitly about this. So, when you wonder 'why did they do that?', you automatically reach for the standard kinds of explanations of why real people do certain things.

It's important that the RA is defeasible, and indeed that it is easily defeated. As soon as you start reading a work of fiction, you will exclude from your assumption of reality all kinds of things, in particular the non-existence of certain people. So, as soon as you start reading *Emma*, you become aware of Emma Woodhouse, who is handsome, clever and rich. She doesn't exist, so you know that you should not think of the population in the story as determined by the actual population in the real world. A contrast is with Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell novels, where the population is entirely made up of people from the real world. But in most fictions that's not the case, so we exclude such facts. In this way, explicit content can give you a reason to recognize that the storyworld departs from the real world in certain respects.

Genre conventions can also provide reasons for excluding real-world facts. If you know you're about to read a vampire novel, you won't be at all surprised that there are vampires.

¹⁰⁸ Others develop the basic idea, that fictional worlds are similar to the real world, in different ways. Though I articulate the argument in terms of the RA, I suspect that any related account will sustain the main points I want to make.

¹⁰⁹ I focus on reading fictional literature in this talk, but the claims apply to other kinds of fiction as well.

Still, you assume that when they drink blood, they drink the kind of blood we (real human beings) have. You don't give up the RA across the board. And depending on your views of interpretation, you might think that authorial intention can give you reason to take the world of the work to depart from the real world.

So, there are lots of ways to defeat the RA, but the idea is this: When we don't have a particular reason to think that the world of the story departs from the real world in a certain respect, we simply default to the assumption that it's like the real world in that respect. Practically, this means that any real-world facts are *available* when making inferences to understand a work. That is, if you're trying to figure out what's going on in a work, which means (subconsciously, automatically) making a variety of inferences as you go along, you can draw on any facts that you know.

The idea is that we *import* (using Tamar Szabó Gendler's (2000) term) our 'prior knowledge' to understand what we are reading or watching. 'Prior knowledge' is the term in psychology for standing beliefs and assumptions, which need not constitute knowledge in a philosophical sense (not least because the beliefs and assumptions can be false). That is, in order to understand a text, you will have to bring in what you know, or think you know. This point is standardly demonstrated by using a passage about a sport that people might be unfamiliar with, thereby indicating how a lack of prior knowledge affects comprehension. Following in the tradition, consider this passage from a memoir about cricket:

In the first innings England had scored 231, assisted by a last-wicket stand of 56 from Allott and Willis. Australia crumbled to 130 (M. F. Kent 52, Wills 4-63, Botham 3-28). But by the time Botham came in on Saturday afternoon, England had squandered their advantage in their usual spineless fashion. After 69 overs of their second innings, they had amassed only 104 for 5 on a pitch that was growing steadily easier. (Berkmann, 1996, p.60)

If you don't know cricket, you probably have no idea what is going on in this passage. (What is a 'last-wicket stand'? What does it mean that 'Australia crumbled to 130'?) It's very concise; but it is also completely transparent to anyone who understands the game. The point is: If you find it difficult to understand this passage, it's because you lack prior knowledge. I'll take for granted that it has nothing to do with your competence in reading English, for example. You may be able to understand every word, every sentence, parse the grammar and so on. What

you're missing is background information about cricket, which you need to understand what's going on.

At this point I want to re-emphasise that when we exclude facts from the scope of the RA, this exclusion is *localised* and *by domain*. When you're reading *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, you very quickly exclude facts about the ordinary laws of physics, while the principle of non-contradiction goes right out the window. But you still rely on facts about human psychology. What's interesting about *Hitchhiker's Guide* is that you apply your knowledge of human psychology to aliens, and a lot of the time that works. Ford Prefect's actions cannot be understood without assuming that his psychology is much like our psychology. For example, he wants six beers just before the world (Earth) will end. I think we can understand this desire, and in the ordinary way, even though Ford Prefect is from Betelgeuse. In short, it's a very powerful bias toward reality, and we just don't give it up unless we're forced to do so.

3. Testimony in Fiction

What I've said so far is that text comprehension relies on importing 'prior knowledge': making inferences about what obtains in a story that rely on our mental representations of the real world. (I say 'representations' rather than beliefs because I don't think these are all propositional. Our mental representations of the world can be beliefs, but they can also be imagistic or objectual, so long as they are taken to characterize the real world.) The result of the inferential process isn't yet the same as *learning*, except in the sense of learning the content of the work. How do we learn about the world by reading fictional texts? Borrowing Gendler's (2000) terminology once again, we can put the question this way: how do we *export* information that we acquire from the text into our representations of the world?

A standard (though incomplete) answer for non-fiction texts is that we learn through testimony. I'm not going to talk about the differences between *learning* in the sense of acquiring true beliefs and *learning* in the sense of acquiring knowledge, because the details of the many accounts of knowledge won't matter here. I'll assume that we have *some* justification for believing testimony if the relevant assertion is meant to convey information and there are no undefeated defeaters (see Leonard, 2023). You can substitute whatever conditions you want, so long as it turns out that we can acquire true (and sometimes justified) beliefs and/or knowledge from testimony, including the testimony that occurs within works of non-fiction.

Let's look at a passage from Euclides da Cunha's 1902 journalistic and literary history of Brazil's War of Canudos, *The Backlands (Os sertões)*. Da Cunha went into an area of Bahia state, which was largely ungoverned in the late nineteenth century, to report on an uprising by a religious group. The book is reportage, painting a picture of the geography, climate, agriculture, history and people as well as the war between the rebels and the government soldiers sent in to restore order. Though da Cunha displays many biases within his descriptions, much of what is known about the event comes from his testimony. In the following passage, he describes the bandits who were running wild before the war:

As an example, the entire valley of the Rio das Éguas and, to the north, the Rio Prêto form the homeland of the bravest and most useless men in our country. From these parts they habitually embark on expeditions to challenge the bravery of the political henchmen. Such forays usually end with arson and sacking of towns and cities throughout the valley of the big river. (da Cunha, 2010, p.184)

I take it that you can learn from this work through da Cunha's testimony.

The same can occur in fiction (cf. Vidmar and Baccarini, 2010). The following passage is from Mario Vargas Llosa's (1981) fictional retelling of the War of Canudos based on da Cunha's history, *The War of the End of the World (La guerra del fin del mundo)*:

There had always been men who came onto the haciendas to steal cattle, had shootouts with the *capangas*—the hired thugs—of the landowners, and sacked remote villages, outlaws whom flying brigades of police periodically came to the backlands to hunt down. (Vargas Llosa, 2012, p.20)

In this passage, Vargas Llosa offers testimony about the same bandits described by da Cunha, who is his source in portraying them as running around the backlands and fighting with each other. If we can learn about them via testimony from da Cunha, there is no reason that we can't also learn about them via testimony from Vargas Llosa. Nothing in the Genre Theory excludes the possibility of testimony in fiction, including via direct assertion.

However, that isn't the usual way of learning from fiction. Straightforward assertions are much less common in fiction than in non-fiction (though not all learning from non-fiction is via assertion or testimony either). Learning facts from fiction is often more indirect. A good

example is this passage from Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, about the experience of Koreans during the Japanese occupation and then in Japan. The novel spans the late nineteenth through much of the twentieth centuries. The scene is set in Osaka in 1933:

Yoseb was an easy talker by nature, and though his Japanese was better than proficient, his accent never failed to give him away. From appearances alone, he could approach any Japanese and receive a polite smile, but he'd lose the welcome as soon as he said anything. He was a Korean, after all, and no matter how appealing his personality, unfortunately he belonged to a cunning and wily tribe. (Lee, 2020, p.38)

I take it that from this passage, readers can acquire true beliefs, even though the content is not asserted, because Yoseb does not exist. For example, you can acquire the following true beliefs: that (i) at least some ethnic Koreans cannot be distinguished by sight from ethnic Japanese, and (ii) that in 1933 the Japanese held certain negative stereotypes about Koreans.

Those are two of the various conclusions you might infer from this passage and export into your beliefs. To draw those conclusions requires all kinds of interesting competences, like the ability to recognize that the last sentence is not the narrator's judgement of Koreans but an attribution to the Japanese, even though this is not marked; the attribution is made via free indirect discourse. And you also have to have sufficient general reading abilities, background knowledge about history, the signs of prejudice and so on.

How do you learn (i) and (ii) from *Pachinko* if not by testimony? If testimony that *p* requires stating that *p*, then Lee's passage isn't testimony, at least according to many accounts (see Leonard, 2023). What she stated instead was that Yoseb did this, that and the other; Lee never manifestly *states* (i) and (ii). However, there are broader conceptions of testimony. Kathleen Stock, defending the pervasiveness of testimony in fiction, says it's 'roughly, the conveying of information to a hearer with the aim of being believed, partly on the speaker's say-so' (Stock 2017, p.19). I think you could potentially apply that to Lee, on the assumption, which seems to be right, that she was trying to convey something about life in Japan for Koreans.

But I don't think all cases can be understood in that way, even on this broad conception. Here's an example from Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2020, p.75):

Dominique came across Nzinga at Victoria station in the rush hour
as she was being knocked down by the steamrolling effect of
London's ruthless commuters determined to catch their trains at all
costs

This description is (in case you haven't been in London) accurate, so that readers can learn something about rush hour in London from the passage. I think it's very unlikely that Evaristo was describing the scene in order to *tell* people about what it is like in London during rush hour; rather, she's taking that for granted as part of a shared background. Many of her readers are British and very familiar with train stations at rush hour, so the description is more of a reminder of something that they know.

Another good example comes from Anna Ichino and Gregory Currie (2017, p.73): In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy writes that 'Anna looked out of the window and saw Alexey ringing the front doorbell', from which sentence, they point out, you can learn that there were doorbells in nineteenth-century Russia. It's unlikely to be the main thing you focus on, but you can learn it. Still, I assume that Tolstoy was not trying to convey this information to his readers. He was taking it for granted and deploying it in the usual way, in order to set up the scene. So, these are cases which can't be explained through testimony even in the broadest sense. Stock (2019) calls these kinds of cases 'true-in passing' (TIP) sentences.

To address such statements, Ichino and Currie (2017) suggest that readers take the text to be *expressive* of an author's beliefs, even when the author doesn't intend to express those beliefs. Stock says that readers are able 'to non-accidentally ascertain that the authorial intention behind some descriptively accurate TIP sentence, in a particular case, refers to truth-telling in a way that cannot easily be eliminated' (Stock, 2019, p.490). So, you read the Tolstoy passage and infer that there were doorbells in nineteenth-century Russia, because you have some reason to think that that's probably supposed to be, or assumed to be, accurate.

Now, I won't deny that these mechanisms are among the ways that we pick up such truths. But I want to say that focusing on TIP sentences, or how we glean bits of information from testimony, is misleading with respect to the overall learning process. The accounts tend to presuppose or at least suggest that learning facts from fiction means something like extracting true propositions from various statements that you identify as TIP sentences, where

the information is somehow hidden away in passages about fictional characters. But this is not the best way to conceptualise the learning process.

4. The Learning Process

First, learning in any interesting sense isn't the same as memorization, which is what you would get if you just collected a list of facts. Rather, learning is integration with prior knowledge to enable application in new situations. Moreover, in reading an extended text, we do more than absorb isolated titbits of information. I suggest that we can think of the learning process as having two 'stages' (note that this is an abstraction; they happen more or less simultaneously). One is comprehension of what you read, which is a precondition of learning anything; and the other is exporting some of the relevant information into your mental representations of the real world—but not all of it, because some of it's not true.

Let me say something about reading comprehension in the first stage that goes beyond what I said earlier. For psychologists, reading comprehension involves the construction of a *mental model* (Johnson-Laird, 1983) or *situation model* (van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). This is a complex, dynamic mental representation of what the text is about: the individuals, the situations, the events as they unfold (see e.g., Graesser, Olde, and Klettke, 2002). Situation models are constructed as we read from inferences we make to understand what is happening and to fill in the gaps left by the explicit text. If you're familiar with Roman Ingarden's (1979) *Literary Work of Art*, or Reader Response Theory (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1979), you'll know that scholars in literary studies have been discussing how readers fill in those gaps for a very long time. More recently, psychologists have amassed a great deal of empirical evidence for the idea that we draw on our prior knowledge to elaborate mental representations that go beyond what is explicit (see e.g., McCarthy and McNamara, 2021). At the same time, mental models are used to explain understanding more generally: our understanding of the world around us, of other people, and so on (see e.g., Gentner and Stevens 2014).

The second stage of learning consists in selective exportation from the situation model for the story. This is incorporating some but not all elements of the model into your mental representations of the real world (including beliefs) in memory. The more you comprehend in the first stage, the better you can learn. Going back to *Pachinko*: Learning (i) and (ii) requires a variety of inferences deploying background knowledge and what you have represented about

the story so far, up to that point. The result is not just a bunch of propositions stored in memory. From this long text what you get, and what you're supposed to get, is a larger and more complex picture of life for Koreans in Japan over time. So, you might be acquiring propositional knowledge, but you're also acquiring something else, or something more, which may be more valuable depending on your views in epistemology. This is *objectual understanding*: in addition to learning truths, you grasp the relations between them, how to reason with them, how to apply them and so on (Kvanvig, 2003; Elgin, 2017). For example, I visited Korea after I had read *Pachinko*, so I was not surprised that I couldn't tell the difference between some people who were ethnic Korean and some who were ethnic Japanese. I was able to apply the information to real-world experience. So, as I said, it's more than acquiring a set of new propositions. When you understand more about a phenomenon, when you have a more elaborated model from comprehending the text, you can develop more interesting and useful representations of the real world.

Returning now to our favourite cricket passage above, it is clear that better comprehension of what you read also means that you can better export information. If you understand cricket, you can learn a lot about the match from this passage. In fact, you can learn a lot from the first two sentences, which are the most opaque to anyone who doesn't know cricket. If you don't know enough to interpret those sentences, probably all you can learn is something like: The England team was doing okay, but then lost an advantage. What you won't recognise is that Kent is a batsman, Willis and Botham are bowlers, that the scores indicate incredible bowling and so forth. That Willis and Botham bowled brilliantly is something you can learn about this match if you understand cricket, and something you're unlikely to learn if you don't. So, the comprehension process is essential to what you can learn.

As I've said, we do not believe or export every representation in our situation models into our beliefs. If we did, we'd believe that there were elves and hobbits and wizards. So, readers who are competent don't believe that Yoseb, Nzinga or Dominique exists simply because they read the relevant novels, nor do they believe that there are ghosts simply because they read Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. So, how does the selection process work? My answer is that *both* import and export rely on the Reality Assumption. For domains you take to be within the RA's scope, you are likely to export information into your belief structures. In other words, when you take a work to be realistic in a certain respect, you don't just *import* prior knowledge

to understand what you're reading, you also *export* information from the work. This is because you have taken the author to be accurate in that domain. For instance, if you read *Beloved*, it's impossible to comprehend Sethe's motivations if you know nothing about the history of slavery. To understand the central event in the novel, that Sethe kills her daughter, you have to understand why she would do that; and the only way is to understand something about the horrors of slavery. At the same time, you can learn a lot about the situation in that period, for example that many escaped slaves ended up in Cincinnati, Ohio. We take the facts about slavery, runaway slaves and geography to fall within the scope of the RA in *Beloved*, but not descriptions of the characters and their particular experiences.

Thus far I have made a psychological claim, that this is how people read: they subconsciously identify certain aspects of the work as accurate, they import information from their prior beliefs to fill in the relevant gaps, and they export what seems to be new information about those domains. This suggests a normative claim: if we are justified in taking a certain domain of facts to fall within the scope of the RA—to treat the work as accurate in that respect—then we have a default justification for forming beliefs concerning topics therein. Or this is so at least in the absence of undefeated defeaters, such as reasons to think the author is unreliable. For example, Michael Crichton is unreliable about climate change in the novel *State of Fear*. If you know this and you're rational, you shouldn't export information about the (putative) conspiracies among climate scientists and so on. The upshot is that learning facts from fiction essentially involves, and is involved in, understanding. We import prior knowledge about certain domains to understand the work, and we simultaneously export new information about those domains. It's all part of the same process.

With that in mind, I turn now to a short argument for a big claim. Many forms of cognitive value attributed to fiction are kinds of understanding, such as insight into various aspects of human nature and human psychology (e.g., other people's emotions or motivations), insight into social relations, others' experiences ('what it's like'), and so on. The claim is that insofar as fictions can foster these kinds of understanding, it is via the same mechanisms as we learn ordinary facts: comprehending the text and selectively exporting information.

If you read *War and Peace*, you get some idea of what it's like to be in a certain kind of a battle at a certain time. Do you *know* what it's like? No, I think obviously not. But do you get *some* understanding, more than what you had before? It seems as if you do. My claim is

restricted to these kinds of cognitive value, which are frequently attributed to fictional literature. Whether we export a general conception of human nature or specific geographical information, the understanding relies on the same export constraints of truth and accuracy. We don't acquire *genuine* understanding of social relations or others' experiences if these are misrepresented. To say, 'I read a book that has a completely misleading picture of how love works, and now I understand love', makes no sense. So, to acquire any of these kinds of understanding, the work cannot radically misrepresent the phenomena.

To defend this claim I want to consider a challenge: Even if learning facts relies on understanding, the converse might not hold, because understanding in other ways might not require truth/accuracy. For example, Stock (2006) has defended the claim that acquiring psychological insight from fiction does not require any reason to think the portrayal true or accurate, as long as the motivations or explanations appear *possible* for human beings. Relatedly, there is a traditional idea often traced to Aristotle that fiction is educational precisely because it is not factual or truthful, because it is concerned with possibility rather than particulars. Fiction abstracts and simplifies. Instead of giving you all the details of historical events, a good fiction conveys the core causal components. This provides a better sense of what matters, but only by shedding some of the less important truths or facts. Inspired by Aristotle, psychologists like Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley (2008) think of fictions as simplified simulations of human interaction; we learn from them precisely because they are simplified in ways that ordinary human interactions are not. Catherine Elgin (2017), an advocate of the value of understanding over propositional knowledge, compares fictions to scientific models and thought experiments. In all these cases we find that abstraction and idealisation (forms of falsification) are what makes them effective tools for learning.

Elgin (2017) thus argues that understanding is *non-factive*, so that representations need not be true to constitute genuine understanding. There are two reasons for this position: First, understanding is gradual; it can be better or worse. By contrast, a particular belief is either true or false. So, we can say that Copernicus understood the motion of celestial bodies better than Ptolemy, even though he thought that the planets in the solar system orbited the sun in circles. This is a better understanding than the view that the celestial bodies are going round the earth; but it's false, because they travel in ellipses. Copernicus's model of how the solar system works is inaccurate, but it represents better understanding than Ptolemy's model.

Second, Elgin argues that in science we find many ‘felicitous falsehoods’, such as the ideal gas law. The ideal gas law not only enables understanding of the interactions of gases in terms of pressure and volume; it arguably does so better than an accurate description would. The model abstracts away from many facts about real-world gases, such as the fact that the molecules interact with each other. There are no gases in reality that are accurately described by the ideal gas law. Nonetheless, Elgin argues, the model cannot be improved upon by improving its accuracy; a more accurate description of the movements of molecules in a container would not help us understand the behaviour of gases better. It’s the simplification that makes the model useful.

We can apply this idea to fiction (as Aristotle himself did, at least on a common interpretation). Many standard features of fiction seem to contribute to understanding. For example, there is empirical evidence that people understand narratives better than expository texts, possibly because they are exposed to narratives from a very young age. Fictions also have first-person or more generally ‘here/now’ perspectives, deploying concrete, imagistic language. Many provide multiple ‘inside views’ via free indirect discourse; these are the works that are usually credited with fostering deeper understanding. Fictions typically invite personal and emotional engagement, elicit our interest and attention, and so on. These features tend to increase active inferential processing and thus understanding.¹¹⁰ In my view, all these features can be present in non-fiction. But there’s no doubt that invention makes it easier to construct a narrative with those features.

Here are some cases that demonstrate this point. There are fictions that function like counterfactual history, such as Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* or Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*. These novels are designed to illuminate real events by imagining that they unfolded differently. There are also fictions that seem to function as thought experiments, like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. They invite us to imagine a society like *this* and consider the consequences. In terms of simplification, a good example is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Solzhenitsyn wrote non-fiction accounts of the gulag system, but you can best learn what it was like by reading this very short novel. In it, Solzhenitsyn takes his own

¹¹⁰ I discuss evidence for these claims in Friend (2006).

experiences and the experiences of other prisoners and compresses them all into the experiences of a fictional character across a single day. This is using invention to provide information that would be harder to extract from a purely truthful description.

So, the challenge to my claim—the claim that understanding from fiction relies on the same mechanisms by which we learn facts—is as follows: Isn't it the case that when we acquire understanding from fiction, what's really valuable is that it's *false*?

My answer is that even if invention facilitates understanding, this does *not* undermine the significance of truth or accuracy for understanding from fiction. First, 'non-factive' does not mean 'divorced from reality'. Elgin herself says scientific models are supposed to help 'make sense of the facts' (2017, p.329), to be applicable within certain constraints and so on. In any case, I think the comparison with scientific models is misleading, because scientific modelling relies on scientists' understanding the parameters within which accuracy is or is not required. The ideal gas law works as a model because abstracting away from certain features doesn't change the fundamental real-world relation between pressure and volume of a gas. If it did, the model would no longer be useful. This is a feature of science case that's hard to apply to the fiction case. And everyone, including Elgin, would agree that if we export or believe what is inaccurate, our understanding is less than it would otherwise be, *ceteris paribus*. If you have two equally coherent, elaborated models, the one that is more accurate is going to be better.

I'll illustrate this with a classic example deployed by Elgin (2017, p.237): Jane Austen's simplified models of human relations, famously relying on nothing more than 'three or four families in a country village'. If we learn from Austen's novels, it's because the simplified representation is accurate and therefore applicable to real situations, though at a more abstract level than, say, learning some historical facts from a historical fiction. In reading Austen, you don't learn (in the relevant sense) about the specific activities of certain individuals, since they do not exist. Instead, you can export a picture of life in Regency England, or even more abstractly, a picture of relations between people applicable across times and places. This picture must be accurate *at the abstract level* if we are to acquire genuine understanding.

5. Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion, I turn to the most tentative part of my argument, concerning the relation

to aesthetic or artistic or literary value (I will use these terms interchangeably). I claim that a fiction's capacity to convey facts can contribute to its value *as art* or *as literature*. To defend this claim—or any claim about the contribution of cognitive value to aesthetic value—requires an account of *when* a cognitive value contributes to this value of a work. What are the criteria? I will not defend a new account here, but instead consider the issue in light of criteria that have been suggested by other aesthetic cognitivists.

According to one view, a work is more artistically valuable when the cognitive value is one to which fictional literature is uniquely or especially attuned, such as moral psychology (Conolly and Haydar, 2007). Oliver Conolly and Bahshar Haydar suggest that *Middlemarch* is more valuable as literature in virtue of it telling us something about moral psychology than *Moby Dick* is for telling us a lot about whales, because informing readers about whales is not a special capacity of literature. A second position relies on the idea that artistic value involves *achievement* (see e.g., Huddleston, 2012).¹¹¹ A simplified version of this idea is that if an artist intends to do something (that contributes, that is difficult to accomplish, etc.) then the work is more valuable in virtue of achieving what they set out to do. The third proposal is that cognitive value contributes to artistic value when the cognitive gain is *inseparable* from the appreciation of the work (see Thomson-Jones 2005). Eileen John (1998) argues in great detail and convincingly that this may be so for the conceptual knowledge acquired from some works of literature.

Briefly, I suggest that a work's capacity to convey ordinary facts can be essential in all these ways to our appreciation of a work. First, it can foster significant forms of understanding. That's the conclusion of my argument above, that learning facts is part of how we understand what we read and therefore contributes to understanding other people and the world around us. Second, the capacity to convey facts can manifest artistic achievement. Hilary Mantel spent five years engaging in research for *Wolf Hall*, ensuring (for example) that no character in the novel was located in a place that they could not be, given where the historical records indicated they were before or after. That is how much she cared about getting it right. You might think, 'what a waste a time'. But I think, 'what an achievement!'. So, in my view *Wolf Hall* is partly valuable because of this accomplishment.

¹¹¹ The view is controversial. See Grant (2020).

Most important is the third criterion. I have argued that to understand a work is to import and export information within domains we take to be realistic. You couldn't understand a work of fiction without (subconsciously) determining the respects in which the storyworld is like the real world, because comprehension requires importing prior knowledge. But once you start importing information about a topic, you are likely to export information about the topic as well. In other words, learning facts is inseparable from understanding any work of fiction, and therefore inseparable from appreciation.

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