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Replies to Vendrell Ferran, Piercey, Schechtman, and Collins

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Abstract

i) Ingrid Vendrell Ferran's defence of the 'experiential view' and her related conception of 'radical neo-cognitivism', ii) Robert Piercey's view of the epistemic value of plots and emplotment, iii) Marya Schechtman's revisionist ideas of self-narration, and, finally, iv) David Collins's suggestion of the value of an imaginative engagement with the author of an artwork.

Keywords Book symposium · Literature · Cognition · Understanding

I am extremely grateful for the careful attention that the critics have given to my work and, further, delighted to find out that they have all focused on different aspects of the book. The critics have made insightful remarks which would deserve fuller discussion than the space here permits. (Not that I yet had an answer to all the points they make!) In what follows, I attempt to answer to what I consider the most pressing issues in the critiques.

1 Reply to Vendrell Ferran

Vendrell Ferran (2023) proposes that my view of the cognitive value of literature could be developed to a 'radical neo-cognitivism' that highlights the 'power of reading to affect us existentially and to lead to personal transformation'. She suggests that my focus on *understanding* ought not lead us to overlook other theories which purport to explain the cognitive value of literature in non-propositional terms. In particular, she emphasizes 'the experiential view', a position that approaches literary cognition 'in terms of making the reader imaginatively acquainted with experiences'.

In her text, Vendrell Ferran offers an admirably clear and nuanced formulation of the experiential position. She argues that rather than providing us phenomenal

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knowledge (knowledge of what it is like to undergo a given experience), literary narratives offer us imaginary experiences; that instead of truth, the cognitive gains of reading ought to be explained in terms of *acquaintance*; and that while imagination is not a substitute for experience, it may take us ‘close to what it is like to undergo the experience in question’. What makes such neo-cognitivism ‘radical’, Vendrell Ferran argues, is that it takes literature impacting not only the reader’s cognition but her entire existence. She holds that literary works may affect our core preferences and values, leading us to see the world in a new manner and change how we experience ourselves. Moreover, she maintains that rather than a revelation (epiphany), transformation is an activity that connects to the processual nature of reading in which we search for meaning.

In the book, I am somewhat critical of the experiential view for a few reasons; nevertheless, the position which Vendrell Ferran defends is much more interesting and credible. Certainly, I believe that art has the kind of transformative potential Vendrell Ferran describes. In the book, I sympathetically refer to the radical insights which the philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright gained in reading the *Brothers Karamazov*, for instance – and there would be a lot more anecdotal evidence that seem to support the experiential-transformativist view. Yet, I still have some doubts about the position.

To begin with, while some literary works might offer us imaginings by which we could gain insights about certain experiences, could not there be other works with provide us persuasive but misleading imaginings? As I argue in the book, referring to Harold (2016), a literary work might provide its reader a mere illusion of knowledge – the author’s vision of an other’s experiences – which could be cognitively (and ethically) harmful. The question is: what makes the work’s imaginative content epistemically reliable and what is the criteria for distinguishing false impressions from epistemically valuable imaginings?

As for reading as transformative activity, I heartily side with Vendrell Ferran. I believe that many, if not most, of us are familiar with the phenomenon and can mention an artwork that *felt* as if it changed the way how we look at the world. But how long do such changes last? Do they really affect our values and thinking, and how exactly? I would expect that the long-term impact of an art experience is typically not that significant (although, again, there is certainly anecdotal evidence of transformative *revelations*). Perhaps the transformative value of literature is rather in the continuous process – that works of literature constantly offer us new perspectives? Even so, that claim ought to be supported with evidence, and I find the matter extremely difficult to study.

2 Reply to Piercey

In his critique, Piercey (2023) defends the cognitive value of *plot*. While Piercey agrees with me in that ‘a purely knowledge-based account cannot capture much of what is cognitively important about narrative’ and that ‘an account based on understanding can disclose features of narrative that have gone largely unnoticed’, he would not like to dismiss plot-based definitions of narrative. He argues

that ‘it is precisely *because* narrative is a route to understanding that we should care about *plot*’ (emphasis in original). As Piercey sees it, the features which I present as characteristics of understanding are elements of plots. Further, he argues that ‘[s]ome of the most interesting cognitive gains offered by narrative are inseparable from the activity of constructing plots – not because narrators always succeed at forcing life into tidy stories, but precisely because they often fail to do so’. In his careful and constructive response, Piercey offers a lucid reading of Ricœur’s *Temps et Récit*, which he takes to show that ‘the activity of trying to shape events into a coherent plot, but failing to do so, offers important insights to both storytellers and readers’. As for the book symposium format, the problem is, as Piercey puts it: ‘I believe that Mikkonen can happily accept nearly everything I have said’, for that is pretty much true.

To clarify my position, I suggest – like Piercey suspects – that *definitions* of narrativity based on experientiality (e.g. Fludernik, 1996) are more interesting than plot-based definitions; and that both small and messy (or incoherent) stories also may have value in self-narration. Piercey, in turn, advances that plots are interesting because narrators often *fail* in trying to make things nice and tidy. The question Piercey raises – how different conceptions of narrative affect cognitivist theories based on the notion of understanding – is very important and interesting, and I am afraid that I cannot attempt to answer it here. As I argue in the book, ‘[n]arrative explanations and understanding seem close companions, as causality and evaluation play a central role in both of them’. What I consider important in narratives, from the viewpoint of understanding, is that they structure and value information and convey contextual meanings (motivation, emotion) and a multiplicity of viewpoints.

Nonetheless, I am sure that there is something to problematize in our mutual understanding of the cognitive value of narrative, namely, the epistemic benefits of confusion (a sense of ambiguity of an experience) and the processual nature of cognition. Both Piercey and I think that there may be epistemic value in people’s failing to make sense of a narrative, be that a literary or autobiographical narrative. Piercey connects this to a form of a self-understanding as ‘an appreciation of what cannot be done’, explaining it as ‘an experience in which readers bump up against the limits of their capabilities, thus gaining a deepened sense of the meaning of their condition as a whole’. In the book, I attempt to illustrate the benefits of this via *negativa* approach to literary cognition by drawing from the works of Harrison (1991), John (1998), Novitz (1987, 2004), Elgin (2002), and Davis (2013). As I see it, literature and the arts provide us a safe place for escaping simplification and experiencing with the unknown and obscure. I write:

‘[M]any works resist attempts to find solutions for the questions they provoke. Our urge to find a solution for a dilemma or an unpleasant complex situation triggers thought-processes and ideally stimulates cognitive skills. [...] Although confusion may be a phase on the way to clarity – before getting back to our existing beliefs or adopting new ones – it does not need to lead to refinement and reorganization in order to be valuable. The procedure, whether it leads to conceptual revision or not, is already significant, as we notice the

complexity of a situation, become aware of our conceptual restrictions and are encouraged to seek answers.’ (Mikkonen, 2021)

Piercey, in turn, emphasizes ‘more extreme cases’. In such, ‘readers are unable to settle on *any* satisfactory interpretation of a work, because every attempt to make sense of it falls short in some way’ (emphasis in original). As for processuality, he argues that ‘the understanding made possible by narrative can be inseparable from the process of trying and failing to construct orderly plots’. Again, I quite agree with Piercey – and Ricoeur, whom I rely on in the book. Yet, I think that we should keep in mind that to find a narrative confusing and, further, find fascination in confusion, requires a skilled, reflective, and intellectually curious reader. Also, I think that we have to be careful what we wish for. Is the outcome of confusion always for the good? What about conceptual distortion and uncertainty about one’s beliefs and principles?

3 Reply to Schechtman

In her insightful piece, Schechtman (2023) explores self-narration as a form of self-understanding. She assumes that while I raise some questions about the ‘anti-narrativist’ challenges in the philosophy of narrative, I accept the basic conclusion that self-narration is ‘questionable as a direct means of self-understanding’. She is right: I see many obstacles and pitfalls in self-narration as a means for self-understanding – although I am also little skeptical about self-understanding (and even selves), and for that reason I consider her revisionist view even more interesting.

Schechtman argues that features, such as selectivity, interpretation, and revision that are claimed to fictionalize (or artify) everyday life-narratives are rather critical parts of self-understanding. For this reason, she claims that literary works might have ‘additional and more direct potential’ benefits for self-understanding than what I describe in the book. Schechtman maintains that while the concept of the self has been much debated, there is a consensus about the basics. According to her,

‘[s]elf-understanding is plausibly taken to be precisely a matter of distinguishing what is central and important in one’s history from the noise of a human life. Typically, this involves looking for patterns, interpreting the significance of events, and revisiting these interpretations from different perspectives as their implications play out.’ (Schechtman, 2023)

Further, she proposes that self-narration is best seen as ‘a form of dynamic cognitive and affective activity through which we interpret and experience what happens to us as part of an ongoing life with a narrative shape’. This is in line, she says, with a contemporary scientific understanding of *episodic memory* which is reconstructive in nature. According to the current research, she maintains, ‘[r]emembered experiences are [...] often updated, contextualized versions of the original experience, introducing information that was not available at the time’. In explaining ourselves to others, she argues, we revisit and update the ongoing sense of ourselves quite much the same way we operate on episodic memories. In her view, this ‘dynamic

sense of self' is 'spontaneously constructed and reconstructed with the benefit of multiple points of view and represents our most up-to-date and contextually relevant information about ourselves in an efficient form'. Hence, she states, self-narration is not a way to but a form of self-understanding. Moreover, she claims that our understanding of ourselves changes does not mean that the self is fictional but that it is developing.

There is much to admire in these remarks; they offer a very interesting view to self-narration, highlighting the dynamic nature of the self without completely relativizing the matter (as in the sense that selves were born in narration). While I maintain in the book that our self-understanding typically develops in our life, partly because of self-narration, I am not however sure if all changes in self-understanding count as improvement while they might appear as such. Surely, we learn a lot about ourselves in the course of life and come to see some of our inclinations and prejudices, for instance, hopefully acknowledging them in telling ourselves. Yet, the distorting factors might still be lurking around. Nevertheless, I maintain that some of these distorting factors which antinarrativists attribute to narratives are rather casting defects in metacognition (memory, reflection) and manifest in other forms of self-reflection too. While Schechtman argues that some of the distorting effect of memory are rather a feature than a bug and serve pragmatic purposes, she also thinks that the 'common biases can and often do interfere with narrative self-understanding'.

Despite that I consider selves in a dynamic and developing sense, and for this reason I very much appreciate Schechtman's view of self-narrative as reconstruction, I still find it difficult to abandon the traditional epistemic perspective and fidelity as an ideal. This is, as both Schechtman and I see it, where the social dimension of storytelling comes in. Schechtman writes: 'Since selves are intrinsically social creatures, others play an important role in calling us out when our interpretations and recollections misrepresent', whereas I propose that '[b]y telling stories, we bring our self-conceptions and self-misunderstanding, our complexities and inconsistencies, for others to comment, challenge, correct and complement'.

4 Reply to Collins

Collins (2023) thinks that there is a form of imagining associated with literary experience (or interpretation) which has cognitive value and which I overlook in the book, namely, an imaginative engagement with the author mediated by the work. Moreover, he argues that this form of imagining is necessary for understanding and appreciating a work as an artwork. What Collins has in mind are occasions in which the reader imaginatively reflects the author's creative choices, such as the work's arrangement and presentation. As he sees it, such reflection might help us understanding 'human thinking and behaviour, social interactions, etc., in the real world, including our own thinking and motivations'. According to him, 'habitually engaging with literary works (or other artworks) in this way and asking why they are the way they are [...] can dispose us to be generally open-minded and inquisitive'. Further, Collins proposes that –

‘actively forming and testing hypotheses about what the artist is doing during our engagement with a work, in order to understand why the work is as it is, gives us practice in abductive reasoning, where this practice can make us better able to form fruitful hypotheses in other situations by giving us a sense, learned through trial and error, of which hypotheses are more plausible and more likely to be true given the evidence at our disposal’ (Collins, 2023).

Now, an imaginative engagement with a literary work (or an artwork) is a complex phenomenon which can be distinguished into various kinds of imagining and, further, these different kinds of imagining may be associated with (partly) different ‘cognitive’ values. Assumedly, the act of pondering an author’s aims and choices is a commonplace among readers who write themselves, for instance. Also, I expect that such critico-intellectual gymnastics might have some short-term impact on interpersonal understanding in real life, as Collins proposes. Nonetheless, I also expect that such speculation is both work- and reader-relative. What triggers such reflection? How much a reading (or literary experience) can include it? We cannot problematize or question everything in the work, as the publisher’s copy editor does in reading and commenting the manuscript, for it will break the spell of immersion. (Conversely, I think that much of the hypothesizing Collins speaks of (e.g. humour, reliability) is spontaneous and goes unnoticed in reading.)

Moreover, while I think that there are cases in which we might want to look for the opinions of the historical author (Mikkonen, 2013), we might not want to limit art interpretation in general to the search for the intentions of the historical author. Why not try all sort of interpretations that are compatible with the text, as long as they provide aesthetic pleasure? Indeed, I certainly agree with Collins idea that artists ‘are not always fully aware of their own processes of working and the motivations for their creative choices’. In addition, I would say, no matter how detailed plans an author might have, the questions which readers may raise about her work will always surpass those plans. (I also expect that instead of speculating alone, we could greatly benefit from imagining and gain new viewpoints to the work from reviews, essays, and conversations.) Finally, I think that much of the aesthetic and intellectual fascination with artworks is that there are no final answers (as Piercey argues in his critique) but perplexity and confusion always remain; that makes artworks valuable.

Once again, I am indebted to the critics who have offered me a lot of food for thought. Despite focusing on particular aspects of the book, there are also very interesting connections between the commentaries, and together they raise many important points about processuality of cognition, *Erlebnis*, narration, and the nature of imagination in literary experience, to mention some.

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