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**Author(s):** Mikkonen, Jukka

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# Précis of *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition*

Jukka Mikkonen<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

This précis gives an overview of my book *Philosophy, Literature, and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* which is the subject of a book symposium in *Philosophia*. The overview covers the book's four chapters that explore i) the nature of literary imagination, ii) the epistemic value of narratives, iii) the concepts of cognition, knowledge and understanding with regard to fiction, and iv) evidence for claims about the epistemic impact of literary works on their readers.

**Keywords** Book symposium · Literature · Cognition · Understanding

This book (Mikkonen, 2021) aims to show that fictional literature has distinctive cognitive value and, further, that that value is best described in terms of *understanding*. The four chapters of the book explore (i) the nature of literary imagination, (ii) the epistemic value of narratives, (iii) the concepts of cognition, knowledge and understanding with regard to fiction, and (iv) evidence for claims about the epistemic impact of literary works on their readers.

The question of the cognitive value of literature – understood broadly as its ability to convey knowledge and insight of ourselves, others and reality – has received considerable interest in analytic aesthetic which is this book's theoretical framework. Of late, the topic has been extensively studied in psychology and the sciences of the mind. The book also attempts to build bridges between theoretical and empirical approaches and examine methodological issues in the philosophical study of literature and cognition.

The first chapter, 'Imagination', inquires into our engagement with works of imaginative literature. In general, analytic philosophers have been interested in the 'fictional' rather than the 'aesthetic' dimensions of literature. Literary imagination,

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✉ Jukka Mikkonen  
jukka.mikkonen@protonmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

our engagement with works of fictional literature, has been mostly studied as a propositional attitude which the reader adopts toward the content of the work. In analytic philosophy of literature, imagination is seen much of a passive response: about pretending or making-believe that something is the case or temporarily adopting certain beliefs and emotions. This act is considered textually or authorially guided: philosophers have been after ‘appropriate’ imaginings and regularly drawn a distinction between *imagination* (appropriate) and *fantasy* (inappropriate), or the *interpretation* (appropriate) and *use* (inappropriate) of a work.

Such views of imagination however radically differ from an ordinary conception of aesthetic experience and imagination as a constructive and creative enterprise. In this chapter, I attempt to defend the ‘aesthetic’ sense of imagination and make room for the reader’s active role in literary interpretation. I first criticize the unduly restrictive notion of an ‘appropriate’ imaginative response toward a fiction, highlighting our interest in the complexity and ambiguity of literary works. Second, I aim to demonstrate that a reader’s engagement with a literary fiction admits an intricate dialogue between the fiction and the world, arguing that literary interpretation typically involves, and sometimes even necessitates, that readers reflect the content of the fiction in different ways in relation to reality.

The second chapter explores the epistemic significance of narratives. Scholars in various disciplines have proclaimed that narrative plays an essential role in our understanding of ourselves, others and reality; narrative is repeatedly said to be the most fundamental form of processing and communicating information. Conversely, some literary scholars have argued that such ‘narrative imperialism’ reduces all the complexity and diversity of literature into simplified models and stereotypes. In turn, few analytic philosophers have contested the alleged epistemic value of narrative, claiming that ‘narrativity’ adds little to our explanations and understanding of human action.

In this chapter, I first explore recent philosophical criticism of theories that attribute epistemic value to narrativity and discuss the potential dangers of literary narratives for our self-understanding. Second, I argue that the philosophical criticism is based on two problematic assumptions: a narrow concept of knowledge and a conception of narrative as extensive, complete, and rounded. I propose that with the concept of understanding, the debate on the epistemic value of narratives, literary and everyday, takes a new course.

Building on the epistemological work of Catherine Elgin, Neil Cooper, Jonathan Kvanvig and Linda Zagzebski, I maintain that understanding is a cognitive achievement of its own kind. Unlike knowledge, understanding is holistic and processual; it is about giving significance to individual truths and seeing and creating connections between bits of knowledge, to mention some of its central aspects. Moreover, I argue that narratives do not merely store information but structure and value it; in explaining and understanding human action, narrative preserves the complexity of an situation with the emotional and motivation meanings of actions.

In particular, I defend the potential of literary narratives to contribute to our understanding of ourselves and others in terms of ‘processuality’ and ‘artificiality’. *Processuality* refers to our immersive engagement with literary narratives, in which we may learn about the structural dimension and development of emotions, for instance. *Arti-*

*fictionality*, in turn, relates to our exploring literary works as artistic fabrications. I claim that when we acknowledge the artificiality of literary narratives and approach them from an ‘external’ point of view, we may gain insight into literary schemes and techniques of storytelling. Further, sensitivity to these matters, a skill that we may refine in reading literature, is a genuine increase in understanding everyday narratives: it helps us to observe and understand the artistic, mythical and rhetorical aspects of various kinds of stories that surround us and affect our thought in the everyday.

A major part of the book addresses the nature of aesthetic cognition. In the third chapter, ‘Cognition’, I analyze the cognitive values attributed to literature from the viewpoints of knowledge, cognitive skills, and understanding. My chief claim is that the concept of understanding outperforms other epistemic concepts in its ability to capture different kinds of cognitive values that are associated with literary narratives. Nonetheless, I hold that the enhancement of understanding is far from being a straightforward process.

As I see it, it would be odd to think that complexity and ambiguity are central aesthetic values and yet maintain that literary works offer us simple truths or clarify our existing conceptions. Instead, I argue, literary epistemology ought to pay attention to the reader’s journey to understanding. My view is that literary works tend to challenge their readers’ conceptions and prompt questions to which they give no ultimate answers; thus the works trigger thought-processes that ideally lead the reader to explore and revise her conceptions. The ‘outcome’ may be rather a doubt than an insight but that, I argue, is part of cognitive advancement.

Of course, it is unclear whether fictions actually lead to epistemic changes such as those described. Although literary interpretation may require us to ‘blend’ cognitive schemes or modify our cognitive apparatus, it is difficult to show that those changes carry beyond the literary realm and affect readers’ thought in the everyday. This is a genuine problem also because all conceptual changes clearly are not for good.

Analytic philosophers have theorized extensively about the cognitive value of literature but paid relatively little attention to the effects which literary works actually have on their readers – or scrutinized the methods they use. Of recent, some philosophers sceptical about claims about the beneficial effects of fiction have demanded evidence for the cognitivist claims. The turn to methodology and evidence is partly fuelled by interest in the matter in empirical psychology. The question of evidence is complicated itself, but it is even more challenging with regard to cognitivist theories that are based on unorthodox epistemological notions, such as ‘understanding’. How are we to find articulations of the effects of literature, if they are, as the concept of understanding implies, at least partly non-propositional?

In the chapter ‘Evidence’, I analyze the methods and conceptions of evidence in the study of learning from literature. I attempt to gain a broader understanding of the matter by building bridges between the analytic philosophical enterprise, literary studies, and cognitive psychology. I first look at two common approaches in the philosophy of literature, namely, the traditional armchair method that relies on intuitions and introspection and the naturalist approach that relies on work carried out in sciences, arguing that neither of these approaches proves successful. Then I propose a pluralistic methodology and argue that we ought to look for evidence for cognitivist claims in the practice of literature and the study of it.

To begin with, such an approach needs a ‘metacritical’ element and reference to academic critical analysis (literary interpretation as conducted by professional readers): if cognitive values are literary values and cognitive enhancement a genuine literary phenomenon, there has to be evidence for it to be found in the practice of criticism. Nonetheless, academic criticism is theory-driven and does not represent all values that general readers seek in literature; nor do critical analyses allow room for the perlocutionary effects that literary works have on real individual readers. Hence a look at the actual practice of literature is needed. I suggest that the most fruitful approach to literary reception is to be found in literary historical and sociological reception studies that are conducted by literary scholars, for such studies are acquainted with theories of reading and literary culture. Such studies illuminate the kinds of values readers seek in literature, including their cognitive expectations. Finally, to understand how fictions actually advance their readers’ understanding, there is a need for the subject’s point of view. As I see it, this aspect is best manifested in essays and autobiographies, non-fictional texts whose writers examine their literary influences and demonstrate their thinking with the arts.

The book ends with a reflection on the cognitivist position and especially the notion of ‘cognitive value’. I question the orthodox idea that we ought to seek for artworks’ fixed cognitive content that would be automatically grasped in a successful reading. Sure enough, we are often interested in the assumed (authorial) ‘meaning’ of a fiction, but if we limit ourselves to recovering that meaning, we will miss a lot aesthetically and intellectually. Fictions, like other works of art, often have explicit ‘cognitive’ aims that might be acknowledged or ignored in interpretation. In the course of time, the works may lose these functions; conversely, the works may subsequently acquire philosophical or social import, for instance.

Furthermore, I propose that literary cognition is best understood as *relational*: the cognitive gain of a fiction partly depends on the reader’s literary competence and interpretive framework, her aims, background knowledge, and interests at the time of reading. In addition, understanding gained from a fiction allows *breadth* and *depth*: it can be about different *aspects* of a phenomenon, and those aspects may be understood in various *degrees*.

Finally, I question how much we can reasonably ask from individual literary works. The philosophical study of the cognitive value of literature underlies a Romantic idea of a radically transformative reading experience. Such a high standard is psychologically naïve; it ignores the small but significant insights we derive from literary narratives and the subtlety of cognitive development.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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