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Narrative and Character Formation

ABSTRACT

I defend the claim that fictional narratives provide cognitive benefits to readers in virtue of helping them to understand character. Fictions allow readers to rehearse the skill of selecting and organizing into narratives those episodes of a life that reflect traits or values. Two further benefits follow: first, fictional narratives provide character models that we can apply to real-life individuals (including ourselves), and second, fictional narratives help readers to reflect on the value priorities that constitute character. I defend the plausibility of these cognitive benefits against certain worries raised by Gregory Currie and Peter Goldie.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the taxonomy of values that works of art can convey, the cognitive values of knowledge or understanding should be regarded as reliant upon the values of aesthetic appreciation. We are not in general motivated to attend to works of art in order to derive cognitive benefit from them. We are motivated by the way artworks delight us, move us, and absorb us. It then seems to be a by-product of maximizing aesthetic engagement that cognitive values are also delivered. In particular, if we understand aesthetic value as the value taken in experiencing the qualities, forms, and meanings of a thing for its own sake (as Robert Stecker puts it), it is plausible that aesthetic appreciation promotes a sort of contemplative heuristic.¹ Aesthetic appreciation puts us in a stance toward things that precede and motivate the discernment of details, the unity of the object, and the ordered relations between details and whole. As such, the most plausible cognitive benefit that sustained aesthetic practice is likely to have for us is in cultivating the very habit of taking an aesthetic attitude toward things. This is of potentially great cognitive significance. The cognitive attitudes habituated by aesthetic appreciation may well engender our wider understanding of the world and particularly our

understanding of those items that have received sustained attention in works of art.

In the case of fictional narratives, our attention is turned most notably toward the qualities of individual persons. Accordingly, I defend the claim that fictional narratives provide cognitive benefits to readers in virtue of helping us to understand individual character. I describe this as a cognitive benefit rather than a moral benefit because I do not think that fictional narratives necessarily help us to develop morally virtuous characters.² I argue that fictional narratives serve the understanding of character in a few ways: first, they allow readers to rehearse a skill that is crucial in the understanding and formation of character: the skill to select and organize into narratives those episodes of a life that reflect traits or values. Two further benefits then follow: (i) fictional narratives provide character models that we can apply to real-life individuals, and (ii) fictional narratives help readers to reflect on the value priorities that constitute character. While these various benefits have been noted by philosophers before, their reliance on the first benefit is seldom remarked. An additional advantage of my account is in providing an analysis of how the traditional aesthetic virtues of unity, complexity, and intensity contribute to rather than undermine the promotion of these benefits. That

is, we can explain how cognitive values are not just compatible with aesthetic value but promoted by the appreciative stance. I take it to be a key desideratum of any defense of the cognitive value of art that the work qua *work of art* serves the delivery of the cognitive value. So an attractive feature of my account is that it can satisfy this desideratum for narrative fictions.

Clarifying the relationship between cognitive and aesthetic value is also important for addressing worries raised recently by Gregory Currie and Peter Goldie.³ These philosophers suggest that fictions have a dubious influence at best because they exaggerate the influence of character over behavior or exemplify standards of narrative unity that do not often apply to the lives of real people. While I admit the force of these worries to some extent, I maintain that the cognitive value of fictions is not undermined. When we understand the way that aesthetic virtues promote cognitive benefits, we can appreciate that narrative fictions can deliver their benefits without necessarily being completely accurate depictions of everyday life. The second half of this article is accordingly devoted to defending this point.

II. CHARACTER AND ITS VALUE

Humans are particularly interested in the monitoring and acquisition of character because character is understood to display features of consistency and reason responsiveness that make it especially desirable. Yet, while we possess fair intuitions about the nature of character and the importance of its development, it is easy to confuse it with personality, as the difference between the two can be quite subtle.

The standard psychological notion of a personality trait is that of an individual's disposition to display certain consistent attitudes, leading them to behave in predictable ways across a variety of situations. Some of these attitudes and behaviors may differ a great deal from the attitudes and behaviors of other individuals. Behavioral outputs can also be highly robust in that we may develop habitual reactions to certain "triggers" that are resistant to change (consider habitual annoyances or phobias). Thus, personality contributes significantly to a person's distinctiveness and consistency over time.

The more philosophical notion of character, meanwhile, is aimed at accounting for similar qualities of consistency and distinctiveness, also rooted in attitudinal dispositions. But, crucially, these qualities have to be developed in the right way or for the right reasons. It is this demand that distinguishes the universal possession of some sort of personality from the more rare possession of character. Aristotle claims that whatever natural inclinations we have toward, say, bravery or generosity must be trained and tempered with practical wisdom (*phronêsis*): the balancing of one's priorities according to an appreciation of what is truly worthwhile.⁴ It is this rational influence that makes our value-driven behavior properly ethically evaluable.⁵ Thus, the person with character consistently displays certain attitudes *because* they have managed to rationally order or reflectively endorse their preferences. A person may possess a personality feature, in contrast, just because she was born that way or has gradually been molded that way by environmental pressures.

As such, character is ethically valuable, particularly from the perspective of the individual who has it, because it is the apotheosis of self-control and autonomy. Your character traits *consist* in you aiming in a particularly steady way at the life you want to lead. From the perspective of others, having character means that you are reliable in a manner that is deliberate or reflectively endorsed.⁶ This lends a degree of trustworthiness to character that even very robust personality traits cannot match. For instance, unlike personality, if there are sneaky nonrational pressures pushing us to behave in certain ways, becoming aware of such pressures should motivate the individual with character to manage these pressures in a way that is in accordance with his values. Naturally, people also change or refine their commitments over the course of their lives. But to count as character development, such changes must follow from a process of self-reflection and not simply a compelling influence like a traumatic incident.

While the ethical value of character is widely appreciated, the aesthetic value of character is less commonly recognized. To see the aesthetic value of character, we must acknowledge the way that character reflects the unique life history of the subject. One does not simply decide to adopt certain preferences. Both habitual behavioral implementation and sustained critical reflection upon one's

values are required.⁷ So while character is metaphysically a set of dispositional properties possessed by the individual at a given moment, it is the *product* of an organizing process that individuals engage in throughout their lives. This is analogous to the way a painting must be understood as the product of the artistic process that created it. And just like a painting, when we appreciate a person's character as the product of the unique life story that created it, we appreciate the person in a respect in which they are irreplaceable or worthwhile for their own sake.⁸

While some readers may prefer to regard the appreciation of a person as a nonaesthetic matter, valuing a person for her own sake is entirely continuous with the formulation of aesthetic value we get from Stecker. Nietzsche also expresses a comparable view quite nicely in a famous passage of *The Gay Science*:

To "give style" to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added, there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed, there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distant views—it is meant to beckon toward the far and immeasurable. In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small: whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!⁹

Here Nietzsche envisages a conception of character in which aesthetic value trumps ethical value. Like Nietzsche, I am concerned less with the development of ethically good character than with strong character more generally. It is in helping one to understand oneself and one's values, whether morally good or bad, that I think the principal cognitive benefits of narrative fictions lie. Thus, I concern myself in this article with the structural features of character that Nietzsche seems to regard as meriting aesthetic approval. In Section VI, I also have something to say about the role of aesthetic ideals in the construction of charac-

ter. While I have doubts about how effective such ideals could be, it seems that character is as much a matter of aesthetic concern as it is of ethical concern.

III. NARRATIVES

I have claimed that character and life history are intertwined. Our life histories are bound up with the process of trying to bring order to this history. It is for this reason that we should regard narratives as the royal road to the formation and understanding of character. Narratives about our lives reveal to us (and others) the commitments, casted in struggle, which make up our character.

Narratives function by representing the continuities between different life episodes. They do this by identifying underlying causes or mental states, particularly emotions and desires, that explain how one event is connected to another. This activity is then guided by two overarching principles: selectivity and conflict. Beginning with selectivity, if one links up one's past and present by telling a story about oneself, it necessitates the filtering of one's various experiences and influences, emphasizing some details, ignoring others. In particular, one traces the regularity or continuity of the things that matter the most. So in tracking the things that matter the most, narratives allow us to distinguish enduring values from fleeting notions or whims. Thus, Harry Frankfurt claims that "a person is no more to be identified with everything that goes on in his mind . . . than he is to be identified with everything that goes on in his body."¹⁰ And elsewhere: "the person, in making a decision by which he identifies with a desire, constitutes himself. . . . It is these acts of ordering and of rejection—integration and separation—that create a self out of the raw materials of life."¹¹

So, many details of a life will simply be irrelevant to the nature of one's character. Which details exactly will depend on what character traits one possesses. Take, for example, the choice to wear a tie. For some people this detail will matter. It might, for instance, matter to the character of Coco Chanel. It might matter, for different reasons, to the character of Steve Jobs, who was known to wear the same clothes every day. For these people, it means something whether or not they choose to wear a tie, and so the narratives they tell about themselves (or that are told

about them by others) will make note of this detail. For the rest of us, meanwhile, the choice of a tie tends not to matter very much, and so it would not ordinarily show up in our narratives. But it must be noted that our characters are rarely completely fixed, and that as our values and commitments change, so can the details that we select as relevant to our life stories. For instance, at one time, it may have been a feature of one's character that the choice of tie had very little relevance for one's larger concerns. But what if your choice of tie was commented upon by someone, who, beginning from that conversation, went on to become the love of your life? What if, to commemorate that occasion, you ceremoniously wore the same tie every anniversary? And what if, following a bitter divorce, you began to avoid all objects with that same pattern from then on, and so on. Now the choice of a tie plays a definite role in one's narrative. And in this way we can see that the selection of character-revealing details may be continually revised as one's commitments and life projects develop. Details that were once regarded as irrelevant can come to acquire new importance in light of future developments.

Alongside the principle of selectivity, narratives also signal character by representing conflict and resistance. Without some minimal degree of resistance from the environment, we could barely register the emotions, desires, and intentions that connect up different episodes at all.¹² Accordingly, any narrative that is about a person will tend to highlight that person's conflicts, the barriers that she overcomes or that defeat her. And in revealing underlying motivational states, conflicts will thereby help to highlight the enduring commitments of the agent.

A particular subvariety of conflict highlighted by narratives then concerns conflict between preferences. Narratives often linger on the choices that we make or the dilemmas that are thrust upon us. On many occasions, value conflicts are most clearly exemplified by our conflicts with other people. For instance, the child wants to devote himself to the theater while his parents urge him to choose a steady career. He accordingly tells a narrative about his development that signals how he prioritized the arts and rejected the pedestrian lifestyle of his parents. Later, while freezing in his bedsit, he wonders if his parents were not right after all. This is a point I will reiterate when discussing the cognitive benefits of fictional depic-

tions of character. The representation of interpersonal conflicts is particularly useful for coming to recognize one's priorities.

Thus, narratives present the material out of which we come to be aware of what our values are and how they stack up against each other. At the same time, our characters reciprocally influence the way our future narratives will go. This is because our value commitments should, ideally, play a significant role in the kinds of situations we get ourselves into in the attempt to live up to them.¹³ If we recognize a consistent fascination with blood and guts, perhaps a career as a surgeon would be ideal. In this way, character eventually becomes a deeper organizing principle for the generation of narratives. Indeed, within the domain of intentional-level explanations for the continuities between events, it is potentially the most powerful organizing principle, because in ideal cases, one's character could connect events stretching out over many years and across all kinds of varying situations.

IV. THE BENEFITS OF FICCTIONS

Having outlined the nature of character and its relationship with narrative, we are now in a position to see how fictional narratives may be a cognitive benefit to the reader. The primary benefit that we should identify is actually one that is seldom commented upon: the pure exercise of our skills in recognizing narratives.¹⁴ This is not a trivial skill. To comprehend a narrative fiction requires the identification of themes reflected in both style and content at multiple levels of detail simultaneously. Details must be hierarchically organized in the mind of the reader insofar as they reflect underlying themes of the work or the "deeper nature" of the individuals depicted within it. As we progress through a work, busily enjoying ourselves, we implicitly engage in an exercise of prediction-error minimization. The discernment of a theme or character trait gives rise to expectations concerning how it might be consistently and relevantly reflected in the forthcoming narrative. Our sense of theme is then updated or revised according to whether or not our expectations are satisfied. The sharpening of these pattern-recognizing abilities in our engagement with narrative fictions then seems likely to usefully transfer to the identification of actions, thoughts, or emotions that reflect

the traits of real-life people, including ourselves. As in the case of fiction, the traits we discern similarly give rise to predictions concerning the actions, thoughts, and emotions that could (or should) reflect these traits in the future. We will then update and revise the attribution of traits as a function of whether or not our predictions (or resolutions) are successful.

It should be noted that nonfiction biographies, as well as narratives of historical events, may equally offer the kind of benefit to the reader outlined here. Nonfictional narratives, moreover, have the advantage of being true or, at least, sensitive to evidential standards regarding what actually caused what. However, insofar as we are concerned with rehearsing a certain skill, the emphasis in fictional narratives on aesthetic qualities such as unity, complexity, and intensity has compensatory benefits. A fictional narrative possessing vivid or subtle details or powerful organizing themes is an ideal training ground for gradually coming to understand the complex network of concerns that can make up a person's life. Aesthetic qualities both motivate attention and support a gradual learning curve. Works of art are ideal vehicles for delivering information to human brains (as theories of aesthetic pleasure emphasize). They accordingly develop our habits for acquiring and making sense of complex sets of information.

Thus, I suggest that fictional narratives have cognitive benefits in virtue of their structural or formal features while also working with content that is more or less similar to real-life events. Since this benefit is generated simply in the process of trying to understand the fiction (and forming expectations about how it will proceed), it is common to all engagements with fictions, though naturally more complex works will tax our narrative-recognizing capacities to a greater extent.

Similar claims are developed in a more general way by James Young and Catherine Elgin, who both describe the techniques that authors use to guide our perspectives on the objects they represent (including, one supposes, fictional characters).¹⁵ Both authors argue that a cognitive skill is developed as we engage with such fictions: the capacity to recognize something about the world that we might not previously have been able to recognize. Their claims are complementary to mine but operate at a different level in the sense that I am first concerned with sharpening the basic

ability to connect external details with underlying traits prior to the acquiring of some particular perspective on the world from the fiction.

Two more specific benefits for the reader's character development can be understood as following from the principles of selectivity and conflict that guide narrative construction (again these are somewhat overlapping with the benefits described by Young and Elgin). Insofar as fictional narratives provide exemplars of selectivity in portraying what matters in the characterization of a person, they provide models that we compare to real-life individuals. And insofar as fictional narratives depict inter- and intrapersonal conflict, they help us to reflect on our own value conflicts. In either case, it must be emphasized that it is a consequence of the way that fictional narratives emphasize virtues of unity (continuity and coherence of narrative) and intensity (dramatic tension) that these further benefits are sustained.

The benefit of providing character models is drawn from a long tradition of regarding the fictional narrative as a sort of thought experiment, a role that nicely distinguishes the value of fictional narratives from that of real-life biographies.¹⁶ It is in this vein, for example, that Samuel Johnson praises Shakespeare:

Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful; the event which he represents will not happen, but if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned; and it may be said, that he has not only shewn human nature as it acts in real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed.¹⁷

One particular formulation of this benefit that I am interested in comes from Gordon Graham.¹⁸ Graham articulates in some detail how fictional narratives provide exemplars that enhance our powers of understanding because we can compare the characters we find in these works with the people we are acquainted with in real life (including, one would assume, one's own self). So, crucially, fictional narratives do not provide knowledge about human nature in virtue of accurately portraying some *type* of human being. Rather, possessing the fictional exemplar helps us to see the real world afresh, allowing us to perceive personal characteristics that we might not otherwise have noticed. We may, for example, acquire the ability to perceive aspects of Austen's *Emma* in ourselves

and thereby see our actions in a new light as a consequence of what has been associated with the fictional character.¹⁹

Note that it is an attractive feature of Graham's account that the particular details of the artwork are never dispensable to the delivery of this source of understanding. We are not being given some generalized truth that could just as easily have been summarized in theoretical terms. All the subtleties and complexities of the fictional depiction play a role in our appreciation of the model provided. So a statement like "she reminds me of Jane Austen's Emma" may reference a complex set of interacting features that are hard to articulate more specifically but nevertheless possible to recognize. Even characters that are less richly drawn (such as Mr. Woodhouse) become exemplars for us in this way. We do not have to formulate propositional rules for their character traits. We need only retain an intuitive image of them.

A more psychologically oriented way to put the benefit outlined here is in terms of making certain organizing features more *accessible* to the reader than they were previously. And it is by making certain details vivid, or "sticky," that fictional narratives make the character traits with which these details are associated more accessible to the reader. Accordingly, this cognitive benefit, while available to all fictions, is relative to how memorably the different characters are depicted. Thus, as the reader goes about his or her day-to-day life, the character exemplar acquired from reading is easily recalled, because the associated features that so impressed the reader are readily attributed to the people that the reader meets. For better or worse, this "tagging" of underlying character traits by reference to more easily observable features seems to be how the empathic faculties of the reader are enhanced on the Graham-type view. We rely on the selectivity displayed by narrative exemplars to pick out the features we take to be relevant to real-life characters.

It is in virtue of the way that fictional narratives rehearse the skill of relating outward features to underlying character dispositions that we are able to draw character models from fictions that can be applied to life. So, note that the background skill of discerning narratives in people is here supplemented by a library of exemplars that we glean from fictional narratives. For instance, the fiction helps us to see how a particular emotional episode may be embedded within the wider motivational

set of the protagonist, and we are given a vivid picture of that emotional experience that adds to our library of the kind of inner life available to someone *like that*.

In accordance with this point, it is worth stressing that some fictions may provide only simplistic genre characters where others are more nuanced. It is even difficult to say that "superior" fictions will provide complex characters since it seems that the aesthetic virtues of unity and intensity (in character) can, on occasion, outweigh the virtues of complexity (consider, for instance, various supporting characters in Dickens). Our best attitude to all this seems to be just that fictions provide models, good or bad, and it is up to us which fictional models we regard as best fitting the people we encounter in real life. As such, although I endorse the traditional view that fictional narratives serve as useful thought experiments regarding characters—particularly as articulated by Graham—I must add a proviso. It depends on the sensibilities of the reader as to whether he or she is encouraged to accumulate simplistic rather than complex character exemplars. Narratives are offering a definite cognitive benefit here—providing more models—but this benefit is relative to the cognitive predispositions of the reader. Potentially, if the reader is fed a diet of complex works, their cognitive 'tastes' may become more refined. We thus have a reason for getting children to read the kinds of works that display the kind of character models that meet our approval.

Moving on to the benefit of reflecting on value conflicts, philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, Martha Nussbaum, and Noël Carroll have defended the claim that narratives provide exemplars of evaluative attitudes and, for Nussbaum especially, exemplars of moral sensitivity and deliberation.²⁰ Nussbaum thinks that if novels guide us through the sensitive ethical deliberations of their protagonists, we will be inculcated with similar deliberative behaviors. Perhaps this is so, but not all novels depict this kind of deliberative richness. A much more straightforward and widely applicable account is just that novels allow us to engage with the evaluative attitudes displayed by their protagonists and compare and contrast the worth of these attitudes for ourselves.²¹

The attitudes presented include that of the narrator, where signs of narrative unreliability are a healthy reminder that it, too, is an evaluative

perspective that we may or may not wish to endorse. One might also point to fictional narratives in which a tree or the wind is ascribed intentions and agency or narratives featuring supernatural creatures. These kinds of examples are interesting for highlighting that the evaluative attitudes expressed by a character become inextricably bound up in our minds with that character's wider stylistic qualities. For instance, the ponderousness of Treebeard in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is bound up with the character's "tree-like" qualities. One might accordingly complain that fictions never give us unbiased views on the values under consideration. But I am inclined to accept that evaluative attitudes are always bound up with their mode of presentation, and these modes of presentation matter a great deal to us. As observed above, one does not simply endorse an attitude; one must also find ways of incorporating that attitude into everyday practice. If one strives to become generous, for instance, there is likely to be a whole range of personal sacrifices that go along with maximizing that value, including a greater willingness to give one's time and attention to others. In conceptualizing the quite radical shift in personal style that may be required, one can be imaginatively guided by certain dramatic examples from fiction, such as the transformed Mr. Scrooge.

There is some debate concerning the extent to which we empathize with or simulate the attitudes of different fictional characters or narrative perspectives on those characters.²² Most philosophers would allow for a plurality of ways in which we can get in contact with the attitudes depicted in the text, all more or less capable of giving us a sense of *what life is like* from a certain perspective. This seems sufficient for us to draw rich comparisons between different evaluative perspectives. And, once again, the skill of discerning narratives will allow us to anticipate the likelihood of conflicts developing between the different evaluative perspectives. Indeed, narratives are given dramatic intensity via powerful images of the emotions and desires driving the protagonists and the sense of how these are going to collide. Thus, putting us in a position to compare the experiential lives of different people seems vital for what interests us about narratives.

If we can get a feel for what it is like for different characters, we can view the interaction between different fictional characters as potentially mirroring the internal motivational conflicts of the

reader. As mentioned above, our conflicts with other people are a useful means to become aware of how our values stack up against each other. Thus equally, insofar as we find ourselves more or less in sympathy with different characters, in taking sides regarding the hoped-for development of events, there is a cognitive benefit in helping us to figure out our priorities.²³

There is an interesting symbolic lesson to be found in fictional works in this respect. The ability of the characters to tolerate each other, enjoy each other, or dominate each other becomes symbolic of the ability of the traits emphasized in those characters to cohere. For example, Anna Karenina's passion, Vronsky's vanity, and Alexey's propriety cannot happily be combined. And this can be a generalized way to categorize different types of narratives, where broadly speaking, tragedies signal a catastrophic inability to reconcile conflicting values and comedies display just the opposite. Of course, I do not expect that readers will explicitly take narratives to be symbolic in this way. Yet to the extent that readers regard the conflicts between the protagonists to be plausible or well founded and given further that they form expectations concerning how those protagonists might further interact, there is certainly an opportunity here for the reader to grasp, at least implicitly, the higher-level compatibility between traits or preferences.

Carroll develops a related point that a novel may thematically explore the balance of character traits by depicting their varying instantiation in a number of different people (what he calls a "wheel of virtue").²⁴ The example he uses is that of the balance between imaginativeness and practicality in various members of the two families depicted in Forster's *Howard's End*. This particular novel is a deliberate exploration on the part of the author of the optimal way in which such character traits should be mixed. Other novels should allow us to form judgments about the balance and relationship between traits without having explicit goals to this effect.

I would add here that while we might "try on" a certain evaluative perspective in the course of reading, it is probably rare that definite desires to mimic certain characters are raised in us. More generally, the contemplative aesthetic attitude invites us to evaluate all the perspectives presented, and, if we endorse any of them, certain of our attitudes will be slightly strengthened or weakened

as a result.²⁵ So with regard to the average reading experience, we should not expect radical revision of our life goals or any trend toward a particular kind of character. As Joshua Landy has argued, literature “helps us to find our own values, which may turn out to be moral values such as rich responsibility, but which may just as well turn out to be, say, an individualist (and other-sacrificing) perfectionism.” Works of literature, he says, are like friends: “We rather prefer them to invite us to be who we are.”²⁶

V. THE SKEPTICAL CHALLENGE

I have claimed that fictional narratives offer character-relevant cognitive benefits in terms of sharpening our narrative-recognizing capacities, adding to our inner library of character models and giving us the opportunity to reflect on our value priorities. We must now address two challenges to these claims. In this section I address a criticism from Gregory Currie and in the next section one from Peter Goldie.

Gregory Currie has argued that fictions systematically misrepresent the ways that character traits influence behavior because the empirical evidence suggests that character does not in fact exist.²⁷ His position is supported by John Doris, who argues that people are far more sensitive to small situational factors than should be observed if our actions were guided by robust character commitments.²⁸ Currie allows that fictions may still reveal a lot about the immediate determinants of behavior such as desires and deliberations. But he observes that character functions in narratives as an organizing principle for the presentation of these lower-level states, making their interplay “vivid and coherent.”²⁹ This organizing principle is deceptive. Consider, for example, the following passage from *War and Peace* discussed by Peter Goldie:

The first thing he saw on riding up to the space where Túshin’s guns were stationed was an unharnessed horse with a broken leg, that lay screaming piteously beside the harnessed horses. Blood was gushing from its leg as from a spring. Among the limbers lay several dead men. One ball after another passed over as he approached and he felt a nervous shudder run down his spine. But the mere thought of being afraid roused him again. ‘I cannot be afraid,’ thought he, and dismounted slowly among

the guns. He delivered the order and did not leave the battery. He decided to have the guns removed from their positions and withdrawn in his presence. Together with Túshin, stepping across the bodies and under a terrible fire from the French, he attended to the removal of the guns.³⁰

Goldie comments:

If we know Prince Andrew as does a careful reader of *War and Peace*, we can say to ourselves: ‘That’s right! It makes sense that he would do that. And how much like Prince Andrew to dismount slowly!’ Not what I would have done in those circumstances, I feel sure, and not the only intelligible thing for someone to do, but nevertheless, in retrospect, a very understandable response from him.³¹

Now Currie does not deny that fictions can present valid examples of deliberation. It is surely possible for someone to display the attitude displayed by Prince Andrew in this passage. We can moreover expect that if he can resist the terrors of war once, he could probably do it again. Rather, skepticism about character should stop us from feeling assured that, having displayed moral fortitude in other contexts in the past, it is predictable that Prince Andrew will manage the terrors of war as well as he does in this passage or that he will continue to display moral fortitude in other contexts in the future (if he were real). We would be better off paying attention to situational factors that tend to make people behave in apparently brave ways.

So if character does not exist, a great deal is lost in our capacity to draw models from narratives, for these models encourage us to draw vivid and coherent connections between the behaviors of the people we encounter in real life by reference to their hypothesized characters. But to perceive people in this light is deceiving or illusory because no such character connections exist. It is somewhat like seeing faces in clouds. Our attention may indeed be drawn to details that we would not have otherwise noticed, but that is not what really matters when it comes to understanding people better. We are not deceived about the bare presence of the detail; we are deceived about the status or meaning of that detail with respect to an organizing principle.

The problem is not just that fictions may give us faulty character models. Insofar as the skill

of reading narratives is guided toward discerning characters, we may be training ourselves with a useless skill. Potentially the cognitive benefit of weighing up priorities is also affected. Although we can reflect on the attitude of Prince Andrew in reading this passage and perhaps come to endorse courage under fire more strongly as a result, we should never be confident that our endorsement will make a blind bit of difference if we ever found ourselves in such a situation—because a-rational situational factors may well override the attitudes we endorse under less pressured circumstances.

I think, however, that we can resist drawing such strong conclusions from the skeptical arguments. The evidence that situational factors can sometimes make us forget our resolutions does not undermine the fact that resolutions *raise the probability* of acting on certain values and habitual practice doubly so.³² If Prince Andrew has a self-conscious commitment to being brave and if he realizes (quite naturally) that here is a bravery-relevant situation, the evidence from psychology does not give us reason to think he would not at least try to act as he does here, and it may well come off. Moreover, it seems perfectly possible for such a person to think, “Gosh! I was rather brave that time. I should maintain that attitude in the future!” Or, he might say to himself, “I was a real fool that time. I could have gotten myself killed for nothing!” Either case would count as a character development and is perfectly intelligible. A third alternative is that Prince Andrew suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, and his commitment to bravery is destroyed. This, too, is perfectly intelligible but would not count as character development. Yet, despite this possibility, it is clear that our self-conscious resolutions (what Bratman calls our “self-governing policies”) are major determinants of our behaviors.³³

In a similar vein, Jonathan Webber has argued that the empirical studies indicating the dominance of situational factors rely on temporarily increasing the cognitive accessibility of certain attitudes that it is normal to possess (that is, to conform to social norms) in a way that can cause some of our other attitudes (to help others) to be suppressed.³⁴ This evidence is consistent with understanding the possession of a character trait according to the degree to which it raises the probability of acting on the relevant value. Meanwhile, many of the traits of interest to virtue ethicists are not a matter of simply reacting to situations but

are primarily concerned with the kinds of situations we actively aim to bring about or avoid, such as novelty seeking or shyness. These traits are not generally addressed in the psychological studies discussed by character skeptics.

I reject then the fundamental skepticism that fictions cannot portray valid models of character and that we cannot validly learn to discern character-relevant narratives by engaging with fictions. I have, however, been sufficiently impressed by the same empirical evidence that impresses Currie and Doris to relegate the status of character to that of an ideal that may not be very commonly attained. Indeed, the skeptical evidence suggests that vigilance regarding one’s character is more vital than has traditionally been recognized.³⁵ The similarities between personality and character in terms of delivering consistency and distinctiveness probably make character seem more prevalent than it really is. We may believe that we are acting on reflectively endorsed commitments when in fact we are motivated by less rational pressures.³⁶ So in the terms that I understand character, I judge that fictional narratives habitually *exaggerate* the presence of character because they habitually suggest deep consistencies in the value-driven behavior of their protagonists when such consistencies are probably rather rare.³⁷

For this reason, we must advise caution when discerning character-revealing narratives in the lives of *other* people or in applying models gleaned from literature.³⁸ The practice is, however, more secure when it comes to narrating our own lives, since even if a narrative starts out as mere confabulation, the self-conscious attempt to live up to a narrative is a valid form of character building. Moreover, while perfect consistency in one’s value-driven behavior may be vanishingly rare, we nevertheless gradually approach this ideal as we continually reflect on our actions and circumstances and struggle to maintain our values. In our own case, we also have rather better (though not perfect) acquaintance with the extent to which our actions follow from our values. Though of course self-deception remains a significant possibility and the psychological evidence helps us to acknowledge that, it has always been recognized that character commitments are revealed only by lifelong practice and careful reflection.

When it comes to the benefit of trying out different evaluative attitudes, our defense should also be robust. I have not claimed that the cognitive

benefit of fictional narratives comes from being surreptitiously inculcated with some evaluative perspective. Rather, the benefit comes from the narrative making vivid the way a person might commit to a value in a manner that allows us to weigh up that value commitment for ourselves. The critic who complains that fictional narratives tend to overestimate the importance and causal role of character in deciding the outcome of events should accordingly be mollified. On the sort of reading I am promoting, exaggeration is a virtue. It is precisely because of the ways that narrative fictions idealize or exaggerate the role of character traits in determining events that allows us to more clearly discern what the value amounts to. We see the kinds of behaviors or outcomes that are most compatible with that attitude. For example, *War and Peace* flags for us the way a brave person might feel and behave in a certain terrifying situation. Equally, the conflict between characters permits us to see more clearly than usual the way that values can interact. Thus, the aesthetic virtue of intensity serves the cognitive benefit of figuring out our priorities particularly well, giving fictional narratives a compensatory advantage over more truthful biographies or histories.

VI. THE IDEAL OF UNITY

A second challenge to the hypothesized cognitive benefits of fictions comes from Peter Goldie. Goldie supports the notion of character and particularly the structural role that narrative plays within it, but he worries that we may derive standards from fictions that are not suitably applied to real life. In particular, Goldie suggests that in the attempt to fit the events of our life into a grand narrative, we may be encouraged to over-attribute narrative meaning to events that would better be understood as coincidence.³⁹ For instance, the struggle to reconcile oneself with a catastrophic occurrence like the death of a child may lead only to bitterness or self-deception if we attempt to find some larger reason for that occurrence. As Goldie notes, in many cases, the best that might be said is simply that sometimes unfortunate things happen. The world has not conspired to pick you out for any particular reason or grander purpose, and moving on may best be achieved in coming to terms with this bleak, if truthful vision of the world.

Goldie's worry seems to encourage us to qualify the cognitive benefit of narrative discernment: that we should not try to discern narratives in all circumstances. However, Goldie is warning us against a certain dubious kind of narrative in which it is implicitly supposed that there is some external author of events that will give to each according to their deserts, rewarding heroes and punishing villains. The response to Goldie's warning is to clarify the way in which telling narratives about ourselves or others is supposed to work. To be clear, when we apply a narrative to ourselves or others, we are trying to discern underlying features or patterns that connect certain life events together, that is, that certain events contribute to the development of a particular trait or that a preexisting trait is causally responsible for bringing about various behaviors. We are not trying to model or predict how events proceed independently of the way our intentions, emotions, or preferences seek to influence the outcome of events.

So the cognitive benefit of sharpening our narrative skills via engagements with fictions should avoid Goldie's worry so long as our narrative skills are applied toward the revelation of character. For instance, in any narrative about one's life aimed at revealing one's character, one would almost certainly include experiences of catastrophic loss. The reactions to such events can reveal important and potentially distinctive features of one's character as well as contribute to the development of new value commitments.

Meanwhile Goldie's worry helps us to recognize that while fictional and real characters share many structural features, they operate under different overarching principles of selection. In our own lives, we selectively narrate episodes that reflect our values and preferences with less of an eye toward some ultimate outcome and more of a sense that all these things happened to a single person. In the case of narrative fictions, in contrast, the overarching principle of selection is typically the plot. This overarching principle should not be carried over into our character-based narratives.

Writers sometimes claim that characters take on a life of their own and begin to dictate how the plot develops. But this process will, in general, follow the establishment of a *narrative problem*, which draws the protagonists away from positions of stability, providing forward momentum to the story until the narrative problem is settled one

way or the other and stability is regained.⁴⁰ That is, if you present a certain kind of person with a certain sort of problem, then the nature of their character may well dictate how events develop (especially since fictional narratives idealize the manifestation of character traits). But, ultimately, the fictional narrative is framed around that problem while only a small portion of a real person's life is so focused. So it is unrealistic to apply that same standard of selection to a person's whole life. Accordingly, applying a plot standard to real life that is derived from narrative fictions could generate unhealthy expectations.

The interesting issue underlying Goldie's worry is the extent to which fictional narratives present aesthetic ideals for life at which we might aim. Since fictional narratives are guided by narrative problems, our lives may seem fairly incoherent in comparison. What fictional narratives often display, and what we typically lack, is the focus on an issue of some importance and the freedom to doggedly pursue it from one situation to the next. What we experience is more often grinding away at some goal day after day and then going home in the evening and thinking about something else for a while. We may retain the same general values and goals. But we also concern ourselves with multiple unconnected issues in any single day and have a sense of time being reset every night. This is the kind of feature of life that novels do not generally portray, precisely because it is not conducive to a focused narrative.

To what extent should we blame ourselves for lacking the focus of fictional characters? Alexander Nehamas suggests that fictional characters display an ideal to which we should aspire.⁴¹ Because fictional characters are nothing more or less than the totality of features and actions depicted in the text, they display a kind of super-essentialism; they would not be the same character were any detail to differ. Nehamas suggests that we should similarly acknowledge and accept everything that has ever happened to us, pointing to Proust as a good example of this ideal. However, Nehamas's ideal seems rather unfair since fictional characters only display unity because the unimportant details have already been shorn away; they are already the finished product of a selective process. So while our lives may seem to lack the aesthetic virtue of unity in comparison to fictional characters, we can hardly be blamed for it since our lives are far

bigger and more complicated than even works of Proustian dimensions.

Still, we are often moved by the ideal of unity. The establishment of character is, after all, essentially a move toward a more coherent existence. And it is not unusual for individuals to seek not just unity but singularity. Sometimes we latch onto a master value around which all other values are felt to lie. This is partly what Nietzsche is referring to in the passage from *The Gay Science* quoted above. Yet it seems equally valid to appreciate an individual life for its complexity and nuance. In his later notes, Nietzsche synthesizes these values when he declares that "the highest human being would have the highest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured. Indeed, where the plant 'human being' shows itself strongest one finds instincts that conflict powerfully (for example, in Shakespeare) but are controlled."⁴² Certainly this is an attractive aesthetic ideal. However, it is highly uncertain to what extent one could deliberately realize such an ideal. Nietzsche implies that some lucky people will just find themselves in possession of one of these aesthetically rich characters. I am inclined to think that while we might aim at greater unity, complexity, or intensity, there are so many uncontrolled factors in life that it is already challenge enough to put some of the main themes in order.

Overall, while I doubt the effectiveness of aesthetic ideals in character construction, it is worth acknowledging that we have aesthetic standards and that we are likely to gain these standards from our acquaintance with works of art. Note that there do not seem to be clear ethical grounds for preferring a complex over a simple character. For instance, even if we thought that moral particularism was an ethically superior stance, that would not entail the ethical superiority of complex characters. One's moral sensitivity to the particularities of a situation is compatible with the simple character commitment to serving justice. A complex character, meanwhile, might possess the complex commitment to all kinds of intellectual or aesthetic values in addition to the moral good. Consider also in relation to this the aesthetic value of originality. There is nothing very ethically valuable about having an original character, but it is something we appreciate in our friends, and it would be a poorer life if we could only retread some established character model, unresponsive

to the particular manners of the contemporary world.

VII. CONCLUSION

I have claimed that fictional narratives offer character-relevant cognitive benefits in terms of (i) helping us to rehearse the skill of selecting details of our lives so as to discover organizing character commitments and, as a consequence of this benefit, also (ii) supplying character models that we intuitively apply to ourselves and others and (iii) making vivid what it means to commit to different evaluative attitudes, giving us the opportunity to reflect on our priorities. These values have been promoted before, but hopefully I have managed to strengthen their plausibility, particularly in defending them from the criticisms of Currie and Goldie and in clarifying the way that aesthetic virtues such as intensity, unity, and complexity can serve cognitive values rather than undermine them. We can thus acknowledge that fictions qua works of art play a role in delivering cognitive benefits and that the acquisition of cognitive benefits is compatible with aesthetic appreciation for its own sake.

Supplementing this exploration of the cognitive benefits of fictions has been a concern with the extent to which character is a matter of aesthetic appreciation. It seems that fictional narratives may move us to aim at certain aesthetic ideals in our characters, but I doubt that we have a great deal of control over whether or not we succeed. Life throws all kinds of external and internal contingencies at us, and managing to make some kind of order out of all of this already has significant ethical and aesthetic value.⁴³

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1. Robert Stecker, "Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value," *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 1–10.

2. If aesthetic appreciation teaches us to more readily adopt an aesthetic attitude toward things, this certainly has moral import, but it may be both good and bad in this respect. While the aesthetic attitude may stop us from acting recklessly, it may also make us less inclined to get involved.

Compare Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 22.

3. Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, rev. Hugh Tredennick and Jonathan Barnes (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 1144b.

5. Compare Susan Wolf, "Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues," *Ratio* 20 (2007): 145–167.

6. I am not claiming that sticking to a character trait is always a matter of conscious reasoning.

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1152a25–33, 1147a21–22.

8. I do not mean to suggest that one cannot aesthetically value someone's personality. I only suggest that such appreciation would not attach so definitely to the individual possessing that personality.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 163–164 (§290).

10. Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (University of California Press, 1976), p. 240.

11. Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Wholeheartedness," in *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. Ferdinand Schoeman (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 38–39.

12. Compare John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), pp. 59–60.

13. Compare Robert C. Solomon, "What's Character Got to Do with It?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (2005): 648–656.

14. Though see Goldie, *The Mess Inside*, who has much to say about our "narrativising tendencies." The thought underlying his concern is that fictions rehearse our narrative skills.

15. Catherine Z. Elgin, "The Laboratory of the Mind," in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative and Knowledge*, ed. Wolfgang Huemer, John Gibson, and Luca Poggi (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 43–54; James O. Young, *Art and Knowledge* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 80–104.

16. For more recent formulations of this benefit, see Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 3–26; Elgin, "The Laboratory of the Mind"; David Davies, "Learning through Fictional Narratives in Art and Science," in *Beyond Mimesis and Convention: Representation in Art and Science*, ed. Roman Frigg and Matthew C. Hunter (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), pp. 51–69.

17. Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," in *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), pp. 218–263, at p. 222. Available online: <http://www.bartleby.com/39/30.html>.

18. Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), chap. 4.

19. Young describes how the depiction of Emma may help us to recognize how certain of our own behaviors that we might have regarded as helpful are in fact officious (*Art*

and Knowledge, p. 95). This enhancement of recognitional capacity or judgment is highly compatible with Graham's claim.

20. Hilary Putnam, "Literature, Science, and Reflection," *New Literary History* 7 (1976): 483–491; Martha C. Nussbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 148–167; Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue."

21. Compare Joshua Landy, "A Nation of Madame Bovarys: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement through Fiction," in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 63–94.

22. See, for instance, Matthew Kieran, "In Search of Narrative," in *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Matthew Kieran and Dominic Lopes (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 69–87; Amy Coplan, "Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 141–152; Paul Taylor, "Sympathy and Insight in Aristotle's Poetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 265–280.

23. Accordingly, while forming explicit judgments regarding the relative priority of different values should enhance the benefit described here, I do not regard it as necessary.

24. Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue."

25. James Harold, "Infected by Evil," *Philosophical Explorations* 8 (2005): 173–187, argues that we may be unknowingly primed with morally bad viewpoints as a consequence of imaginatively engaging with the thoughts, perceptions, and emotions of evil characters. Harold reviews some empirical evidence that supports his claim, though the longevity and strength of the effect is as yet uncertain.

26. Landy, "A Nation of Madame Bovarys", p. 80. Compare Paul Taylor ("Sympathy and Insight in Aristotle's Poetics"), who argues that by having emotions aroused as a consequence of simulating the perspective of a fictional character, one may come to learn about one's own reactions.

27. Currie, *Narratives and Narrators*, chap. 11.

28. John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). Doris appeals to experiments such as J. M. Darley and C. D. Batson, "'From Jerusalem to Jericho': A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behaviour," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973): 100–108; and A. M. Isen and P. F. Levin, "Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972): 384–388.

29. Currie, *Narratives and Narrators*, p. 212.

30. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (Oxford University Press, 1933), Volume 1, p. 252.

31. Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 182.

32. See also Goldie's discussion of the Milgram Experiment in *The Emotions*, pp. 162–175. Here he argues that a person's character traits will still play an important role in explaining his or her deliberations and behavior even if, under some circumstances, situational factors override.

33. Michael E. Bratman, "Reflection, Planning, and the Temporally Extended Agency," *Philosophical Review* 109 (2000): 35–61.

34. Jonathan Webber, "Character, Attitude and Disposition," *European Journal of Philosophy* 21 (2013): doi: 10.1111/ejop.12028.

35. Compare Goldie, *The Mess Inside*, p. 96, n. 11.

36. Meanwhile, I certainly endorse the more universal possession of personality traits. But I do not hold such traits to very high standards of cross-situational consistency, allowing that such dispositions may be overridden by various pressures (it is part of the nature of our emotion dispositions, such as phobias or habitual annoyance triggers, that they are sensitive to certain types of circumstance).

37. It is worth noting, however, that some novelists are more sensitive to the ways that situations can cause people to act "out of character" than others and can accordingly help us to become sensitive to these possibilities. Indeed, Tolstoy is one such example. Recall, for example, the way that Alexey temporarily abandons his commitment to propriety when it appears that Anna Karenina is about to die.

38. Shinobu Kitayama and Ayse K. Uskul review evidence that European Americans more readily attribute character traits to individuals than Asians without sensitivity to situational constraints ("Culture, Mind, and the Brain: Current Evidence and Future Directions," *Annual Review of Psychology* 62 [2011]: 419–449). To some extent, then, it seems that our practice of character attribution is culturally influenced, and this is potentially reflected or reinforced by our literary models.

39. Goldie, *The Mess Inside*, pp. 164–168.

40. In certain cases, a narrative problem may be established simply by putting two antagonistic characters in the same situation.

41. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 165.

42. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), pp. 506–507 (§966). Compare Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 92–93 (essay II, §18).

43. Thanks to Al Baker as well as the editors and anonymous referees of this journal for their numerous helpful suggestions on this article.