Reading (With) Others

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Abstract: *Walton's account of make-believe takes the social dimension of imagination into account. In this paper I aim to extend this suggestion and argue that works of fiction allow for encounters with concrete (yet fictitious) persons with a distinct point of view and a discernible perspective. These encounters allow us to contrast the perspective(s) that emerge from the work with one's own. I will then discuss two moments of the social dimension: imagining fictional scenarios is a social practice, a game we play together and in which we encounter others. Both of these moments shed light on the central role of fiction for the social community in which it is embedded and show how engaging with works of fiction can contribute to the inner cohesion and to the persistence of the group.*

1. The Pragmatic Dimension of Fiction

Works of fiction are omnipresent in our everyday life. If a foreign anthropologist came to describe the contemporary European or Anglo-North-American cultures[1] from an "external" point of view, she might even diagnose an *obsession* with fiction, as just about all of us consume works of fiction virtually every day – be it a TV series, a movie, a novel or a short story, a painting, a cartoon or simply the horoscope in the daily newspaper. We might be particularly obsessed, but we are definitely not alone. The practice of storytelling and the engagement in fictional scenarios are recurrent traits in all cultures and periods of history, though they do, of course, differ substantially in the concrete forms in which they are realized.

Very often, works of fiction make use of techniques that otherwise serve to describe or depict real persons and events, but they often do so in a playful manner and portray persons who have never lived and events that have never taken place (at least not in exactly the way they are presented). When they do so skilfully and at a high level of accomplishment – as it is the case with the great works of art – they draw attention not only to the content,

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[1] This is, of course, not a sociological claim, but only a personal observation of the cultures I am most familiar with. The point likely generalizes, so we might want to imagine alien anthropologists who observe us from some other planet – just to produce the intended sense of unfamiliarity.

the scenarios or the characters that are presented but also to the way in which they are presented, to the techniques of representation.[2] As a result, many of the theoretical reflections on works of fiction – in literary theory, aesthetics and art criticism, but also in philosophy of literature – focus on "formal" aspects of the works.[3] These questions are most interesting and highly relevant for our understanding of art. They do run the risk, however, to eclipse a more basic question: What is it that motivates persons to engage with works of fiction in the first place? Where does the interest in fictional scenarios come from? Creating works of fiction is a laborious and often painful process and also reading or watching them, especially when one does so in a critical and engaged manner, requires time and energy, so the question of why persons invest their resources in works of fiction seems most relevant.

To address this point, it can be useful to take not only the formal aspects of the concrete realization of an artwork into account or to restrict one's attention to the question of how levels of meaning can emerge from the material qualities of the work. In addition to these queries that are situated at the syntactic or semantic levels, as it were, I want to suggest to also take the pragmatic dimension into consideration and raise the question of what people do with works of fiction, how they use them and what role they play in social communities. This allows, as I will argue in more detail below, to construe works of fiction as encounters of concrete persons. Works of fiction are particularly powerful when it comes to express perspectives; they can, thus, be used by authors to present concrete points of view and by readers to better grasp what familiar phenomena might look like from a different point of view.

The perspectives expressed in the works are, of course, merely displayed; they are not necessarily endorsed and should be confused with that of the real author – nor, for that reason, do readers automatically absorb them and make them their own. By putting concrete perspectives on display, works of fiction allow readers to get a fuller understanding of other perspectives and contrast them with their own. This can lead them, if they think it

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[2] I am alluding here to the effect Russian and Czech structuralists have called the *poetic function* of language (cf. Jakobson, 1960). As a linguist, Jakobson described a phenomenon that can be individuated texts. The same effect can arguably be found also in other forms of representational works (in paintings, movies, cartoons, etc., be they artworks or not) that foreground the techniques of representation.

[3] While literary criticism and aesthetics often focus on aspects that are related to the stylistic dimension of the works, many philosophers of literature are concerned with linguistic form and the workings of language, especially with aspects like reference and truth. Incidentally, I am not suggesting that we can draw a clear-cut distinction between form and content of a work of art.

necessary, to adjust their own ways of seeing things – in ways that are similar to that in which we fine-tune our own perspectives to that of members of our social community with who we directly engage and interact in everyday life.

An enquiry that focuses on the pragmatic dimension does not need to collapse into a sociological study that describes, on the basis of empirical data, the ways in which actual persons do, in a given place or a given period, create or appreciate works of fiction. Rather, it will aim at gaining a deeper understanding of delineating what we might call the "logical space" in which these practices take place. The goal, thus, is not to document the moves that are actually made, but to understand which moves are possible within the practice. An enquiry at the pragmatic level will aim to reveal, in other words, the rules and conventions that are constitutive for the practice.

2. The Social Dimension of Imagination

The guiding question of a study of fiction along these lines should, thus, take the form: "*why do people care…?*" Why do people care to spend their time and energy to come up with fictional scenarios and make the products of their fantasies accessible to others? Why do they care to engage in works that depict unreal scenarios that seem to have no friction with the real world and cannot be put up to a "reality-check"?

The observation that works of fiction are artefacts, created by persons[4] for other persons, that carry meaning or express a point of view might be a promising starting point for addressing these questions. It invites us to conceive of fiction as a form of communication or a contribution to a conversation between members of a community.[5] In this light, a work of fiction would be conceived as a unidirectional act of conversation that allows a sender (author/artist) to transmit a message to the receivers (readers/spectators).

Put in these terms, however, the limits of the analogy become quickly manifest: it risks to reduce the role of fiction to the transmission of information and assigns a purely

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[4] I am aware that this affirmation might be empirically wrong as there might be works, now or in the near future, created by intelligent machines that have not been programmed specifically to produce a work in exactly that way. It seems to me, however, that the assumption that works are created by real persons seems to be deeply anchored in our understanding of literature and art. If art is a practice or a series of intertwined social practices (Sedivy, 2014), it seems obvious that moves can be made only by members of the community. Should computer-generated art become more present, the community would drastically change, which would bring about a substantial transformation of the practice.

[5] The analogy has been explored, in the context of the discussion concerning authorial intent, by Noël Carroll (1992). See also Greve (2012).

passive role of receiving messages to the reader. Both points seem inappropriate. For one, works of fiction notoriously do not transmit (true) information[6], nor do authors support the claims that might emerge from the text with evidence or arguments. Two, many (though not all) of the motives one can have to consume a work of fiction require active participation from the reader or spectator. Sometimes one might read a book or watch a film just to relax or to kill time, but typically we do not just passively absorb, but critically receive a work, it arouses aesthetic appreciation in us, triggers our imagination and encourages us to explore counterfactual scenarios. All these reactions require active participation from the reader or spectator.

Kendall Walton's theory of fiction (cf. 1990) and especially his conception of *games of make-believe* have provided for the required extension of this perspective that allows to take the aspects I have mentioned into consideration. Walton, as is well known, emphasizes the role that works of fiction play for our imaginative activities. "Imagination" is notoriously an umbrella term (cf. Kind, 2013) that is used for a whole range of phenomena and which, thus, can be studied from very different perspectives that highlight very different aspects. While some philosophers prefer to focus on the subject, the person who is imagining, and conceive of imagination as a private mental act, a lived experience, Walton underlines the social dimension. He reminds us that imagination is not essentially private; rather, it is an activity that can always be shared with others. One way to do so is to create works of fiction that prescribe the audience to imagine something. The work establishes fictional truths and so presents a fictional world to the reader for her to explore. Fictional worlds are insulated from the real world, but they are not like "distant planets"; rather, by inviting them to actively participate in games of make-believe, the readers or spectators become part of this fictional world.

This highlights an important aspect of Walton's theory: imaginings in games of make-believe always have a self-referential or *de se* component; a participant of a game of make-believe is in one way or another always part of the world of the game. While an onlooker might, like a critic, just analyze or "stare at" the work[7], an appreciator who uses the work as

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[6] It can be doubted that works of fiction and, more specifically, literary works of art do transmit information in the first place; but even where they would do so, they notoriously would not "guarantee" for the veridicality of that information.

[7] Critics often do, of course, appreciate works of art. When they perform their critical analyses, however, they need to keep distance to the work. They avoid getting "caught up" in the story or immersing into the fictional

a prop in a game of make-believe becomes more directly involved: "it is in a first-person manner that appreciators are to, and do, imagine about themselves; they imagine, from the inside, doing things and undergoing experiences" (Walton, 1990, p. 213f).

3. Make-Believe and Experience

Our knowledge is – at least in great part – based on experience, which often is less comfortable as one would hope. To make experiences one has to go out into the real world and risk to be exposed to difficulties or to encounter situations that are potentially dangerous. Moreover, to gain experiences that substantially widen our cognitive horizons, one has to leave the terrain of the familiar behind and make adventurous explorations of hitherto unknown phenomena or territories. In contrast, readers of a novel sit in their cozy armchairs; they move but their eyes and occasionally their hands, just to turn the pages. What relevant kind of experience could they possibly have?

It is a commonplace that also imagination plays a crucial role in the advancement of understanding, but it is less obvious exactly how imagining fictional scenarios can add to our knowledge or widen our cognitive horizons. Walton's approach provides an interesting framework for addressing these problems. In games of make-believe we explore fictional worlds. Where these fictional worlds share relevant features with the real world, these explorations can allow for valuable conclusions.[8]

For my purposes, the first-person involvement in games of make-believe is of particular interest. When participating in a game of make-believe, according to Walton, we immerse into a fictional world of which we become a part. And though we might just be sitting in an armchair, we imaginatively explore the fictional scenarios and the protagonists' fictitious experiences. As we are drawn into the fictional world in first person, as it were, these experiences gain a new quality and allow us to draw relevant conclusions. Yet, we can do so in a protected environment, without exposing ourselves to any risk. Is this a safeguard

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world and focus their attention on the props themselves and not on the fictional truths they generate (cf. Walton 1990, 53). A similar point, incidentally, can be made concerning empathy: critics typically avoid taking an empathic stance when analyzing a work, as John Gibson has pointed out. The notion of empathy is "not helpful for explaining criticism and interpretation" (Gibson, 2015, p. 238).

[8] The relevance of Walton's theory of make-believe for the cognitive advancement in the sciences, especially for thought experiments and modelling, is discussed in Salis and Frigg (2020).

way to make relevant experiences that add to our knowledge? Walton does suggest so when he states:

> There is a price to pay in real life when the bad guys win, even if we learn from the experience. Make-believe provides the experience—something like it anyway—for free. Catastrophes don't really occur (usually) when it is fictional that they do. The divergence between fictionality and truth spares us pain and suffering we would have to expect in the real world. We realize some of the benefits of hard experience without having to undergo it. (Walton, 1990, p. 68)

It is important not to confuse this kind of cognitive benefit with the acquisition of phenomenal knowledge or knowledge *what-it-is-like*, that is, the kind of knowledge that Mary gains when leaving her black-and-white room in Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment (cf. Jackson, 1982). Jackson famously argues that there are aspects of experience that a physicalist theory cannot shed light on: the qualitative aspects that one can know only if one has made the relevant kind of experience oneself. As examples for this qualitative aspect, Jackson mentions "the hurtfulness of pains, the itchiness of itches, pangs of jealousy, … the characteristic experience of tasting a lemon, smelling a rose, hearing a loud noise or seeing the sky" (Jackson, 1982, p. 127).

The characteristic feature of this kind of knowledge is that it is about aspects of experience that are ineffable; it is, in other words, impossible in principle to fully express them with words. This entails, however, that also literary works of fiction have to fall short in imparting this kind of knowledge to the reader: even a most skilfully drafted poem cannot teach the colorblind what red looks like; nor can a most detailed description in a novel provide an acquaintance with the sensation of pain to a reader who has never experienced pain. To fully understand (literary) descriptions of the relevant states, it seems, one needs to draw on one's own, personal reservoir of experiences, which in empathy one uses as a sample for the experiences of others (cf. Walton, 2015a).

Thus, the participant's first-person involvement brings colour into the fictional world, as it were, and enriches it with the relevant experiential qualities that she draws from her past experiences. "Our real selves make themselves felt in what we imagine, as well as in what we feel and the manner in which we imagine what we do" (Walton, 2015d, p. 283). In consequence, Walton suggests that rather than imparting new knowledge, participation in games of make-believe reveals facts about oneself that were (or easily could have been)

familiar to me beforehand. In this way it can help me, for example, to "clarify my interests and desires" (Walton, 2015d, p. 279) or to get a more profound understanding of myself. Should we conclude that works of fiction cannot impart experiential knowledge to the reader, but merely mirrors the experiences she has made in the past? Are they but Freudian tools that allow us to gain access to those aspects of our "real character and personality" (Walton, 2015d, p. 277) that we normally repress or, for some reason or other, tend to overlook? If so, experiences described in works of fiction would not add to our knowledge about others, but merely reveal facts of our inner life to which we should have had access and which we could have known independently of the work.

Walton seems to acknowledge this point but hints that deepening our understanding of ourselves goes hand in hand with getting a better understanding of the others and the situations in which they live.

> These self-imaginings are important even when our main objective is to gain insight into others. In order to understand how minorities feel about being discriminated against, one should imagine not just instances of discrimination but instances of discrimination against *oneself*; one should imagine *experiencing* discrimination. It is when I imagine myself in another's shoes (whether or not I imagine *being* him) that my imagination helps me to understand *him*. (Such imaginative understanding may be what has been called *Verstehen*.) And when I imagine this I also learn about myself. (Walton, 1990, p. 34)

Literary works of fiction, especially those that describe the imagined scenarios in a colourful and detailed manner, draw the reader into their fictional world and make her become a participant in a game of make-believe. Thus, they make it easy to imagine oneself being part of a fictional scenario, be it in the shoes of the characters or in that of a bystander who merely observes the situation. It should, thus, be easy to empathize with the characters and to get a better understanding of the situation in which they live. By switching perspective in imagination, one might gain a better understanding of what it means to bring up a child as a single mother, to be target of racial attacks or to live in poverty – and so, according to Walton, learn about myself.

Things are not that easy, though. As I continue reading, it will come natural to confront the way I think I would move or feel in this situation with the characters' course of action and the feelings ascribed to them. When reading some works, I might conclude that my (hypothetical) ways to act or react to the situation more or less match with that of the

characters; when reading other works, I might realize that they differ substantially. In the first case, it is difficult to see how the work of fiction can reveal new insights about my own personality or character. Rather than learning about myself, it would merely confirm my way of seeing things and consolidate my habitual patterns of behaviour. In the latter case, however, I would have difficulties to put *myself* in the shoes of another. The course of action described in the work might be inacceptable for me – but make sense for a person who holds convictions or principles that are at odds with all I stand for. In this case, parallel imagining (cf. Walton, 2015a) would be blocked. Rather, my imagining to act or react this way in the given situation would require me to imagine *being someone else* who sees things and feels about them very differently from how I do; but then, how could this reveal something about *my* personality and character?

4. Coherence and Credibility

A more profound analysis of phenomenal knowledge, I fear, does not help us to overcome this impasse. It seems more promising to focus on the holistic character of games of make-believe. As Walton states, "[f]ictional truths come in clusters, and so do one's imaginings of the propositions that are fictional" (Walton, 2015c, p. 18). When participating in games of make believe, we do not imagine isolated propositions one by one, we rather imagine a whole battery of propositions that add up to a fictional world – which is insulated from the real world; the cluster of imagined propositions is *quarantined (cf. Salis & Frigg, 2020, p. 31)*, as it were. This allows us to take the propositions into consideration independently of their truth value and without having to worry about whether they are compatible with the rest of our beliefs; it makes, in other words, the *free game of imagination* possible.

But why should we accept an author's invitation and participate in the game in the first place? The way in which Walton develops his account of make-believe, starting with an analysis of children's games, shows nicely that we have a natural inclination or curiosity to participate in games of this kind. Moreover, "[e]ngagement in make-believe tends to be infectious" (Walton, 2015b, p. 100). Works of fiction, thus, have a genuine fascination for us and we are even more willing to accept an author's invitation to participate in the game when we come to note that the work in question has already caught the attention of others. However, as all young authors who are despaired over the failure of their debut novel know too well, an invitation alone does not suffice: a work has to fulfil minimal requirements to

merit the attention of a broader audience. I shall mention two of them that seem to be particularly relevant from my argument: *coherence* and *credibility*.

It seems obvious that the cluster of propositions a reader is prescribed to imagine should be coherent. A set of propositions that contains obvious contradictions[9] would not add up to a self-contained fictional world and participation in the game of make-believe would become impossible. Coherence is merely a formal criterion, though, that can easily be met by an attentive author (at least if assisted by a meticulous editor).

For our discussion, credibility seems to be a more central requirement. It is a fact that readers get easily irritated when they come across descriptions that are too fanciful or far-fetched, when the characters' behaviour is completely unrealistic, when their "inner life" is incomprehensible, or when the plot is unconvincing. Yet, it is more difficult to be defined in a clear-cut manner, it seems to be essentially vague. Whether or not a work is credible does not only depend on features that are intrinsic to the work, it also depends on conventions that hold in our social practices and on the reader who participates in the game of make-believe – it is not, in other words, the world of the work, but the world of the game that needs to be credible.[10]

At times, a game world might appear implausible or unconvincing – and, thus, lose its attraction and alienate the reader – because she participates in it in a way that is not exactly authorized by the work. This might be the case of a reader who is not aware of genre-conventions. The description of a travel on a spaceship faster than light is acceptable for most readers, but might ruin the novel for a physicist who reads her first *science-fiction* novel and who is not aware that in this genre some laws of physics are occasionally suspended. A more interesting example is that of biased, tendentious, or superficial descriptions of a *milieu* or of the characters' course of action or their inner life, which can create a serious obstacle for readers who have a genuine interest in the situations described and already bring a differentiated understanding to the text. These readers might share the author's overall position or not; in the first case, they will likely find the work simplistic and overly didactic, in the latter case they might even feel offended or outraged. Both groups of readers are aware that they hold a work of fiction in their hands and that, in consequence,

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[9] Minor contradictions my go unnoticed or can be interpreted away, but obvious contradictions, once noticed, can completely ruin the game for the reader.
[10] For the distinction between the world of the work and the world of the game, cf. Walton (1990, p. 58).

no part of the work stands in contradiction to their previously held views – after all, they are only invited to imagine the described scenarios, but not prescribed to believe that they have actually taken place. What they do struggle with is the way in which the scenarios or characters are described, which obstacles a differentiated reflection and a mature judgement of issues that are most relevant to them.[11]

5. Encounters with Concrete Persons

This last consideration, I think, sheds an interesting light on the question of how, by imagining fictitious experiences, we can gain new insights and deepen our understanding of others and of ourselves. The hypothesis I want to submit is that works of fiction add to our understanding when they can be construed as genuine encounters with a recognizable perspective that can be attributed to a concrete person – where "concrete" must not be interpreted as "real" or "actually existent".[12] The term "perspective" is arguably a cluster concept that can be used in a wide variety of ways. I propose to understand it in a minimal sense that is tied to its most literal use as a "*point* of view" to which a specific way of seeing things can be attributed. A perspective, in this minimal understanding, is like an ideal mathematical point, a centre of gravity, around which propositions (beliefs, assumptions, etc.) and dispositions to act or react in given circumstances can be organized in a coherent and organic way. This happens in the form of third person ascriptions that are subject to phenomena like an origin, orientation, occlusion and distortion and have an indexical element (cf. Van Fraassen, 2008, p. 85). This understanding of perspective is more minimal than that of Elisabeth Camp, who defines it as "an open-ended disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world — an ability to 'go on the same way' in assimilating and responding to whatever information and experiences one encounters" (Camp, 2017, p. 78).

Fictional characters can be credible or convincing for a reader even when they are not similar to her or do not share her general outlook on things. The way the characters act,

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[11] We need to distinguish this kind of example from cases in which the "message" of the work stands at odds with the reader's take on the relevant issues. These scenarios, though quite frequent, are less interesting for my overall argument.

[12] It is worth mentioning that this is one among many ways in which works of fiction can widen our cognitive horizons. The cognitive value of fiction and literature has been extensively discussed in the last decades (cf. Gibson, 2008) and several interesting proposals have been presented. The reflections I offer in the present paper are not intended as an alternative to the others, but will at best complement them.

feel, or react in a given (fictional) scenario might differ radically from the way the reader would act, feel, or react in a comparable (real-life) situation. What is important for the characters to be credible is that the reader can "make sense" of them. Characters are, in other words, credible for a reader if their choices, their behaviour and their inner lives are coherent with the goals, convictions, principles, background assumptions, and values that can be meaningfully ascribed to them, in a third person perspective. To do so, we need to imagine "what it is like" to be in a certain situation. Grasping a perspective in this minimal sense does not, however, require us to shift perspective (cf. Goldie, 2011, p. 305f), we do not need to imagine "from the inside" what it is like to be in this point or situation; nor does it require us to integrate the character's disposition into our own – and thereby becoming, at least temporarily, another person, as Camp (2017, p. 94) suggests. I do not want to deny that these deeper engagements with perspectives that are presented in works of fiction are possible for readers who want to get involved and are willing to bring their empathic understanding to the text. What seems relevant to me, however, is that a mere grasping of another perspective is possible also in a more minimal sense.

The specifics that characterize particular perspectives are dictated to a considerable extent by the work but, as fictional characters are notoriously incomplete and not determined in all their properties, there remain blanks – often substantial ones – that need to be "filled in" by the reader. Thus, the character's credibility depends not only on the author's craftsmanship, but also on the way the work is received by the reader. The very fact that the credibility of a fictional character is an issue unveils our tendency to detect a concrete person in the characters, as well as our efforts to ascribe complete and self-contained perspectives to them.

Not all works of fiction attribute a central role to the characters, though. Sometimes, a work describes familiar situations or phenomena in an unusual manner that sheds a new light on them and so allows the reader to see the world with "new eyes", as it were. Thus, a concrete perspective can emerge not only from the characters, but also from the narrator's or the (implied) author's voice or, more generally, from the way in which the fictional scenarios, characters, and events are presented.[13]

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[13] We could say that the work "speaks to us", as we "have a direct sense of distinctively human utterance, of 'man speaking' and speaking in some characteristic tone of voice" (Walsh, 1969, p. 117). John Gibson makes a

There are, thus, (at least[14]) two ways in which concrete persons can emerge from a work of fiction. For this to happen, it is necessary that the characters' actions and reactions – or the voice of the narrator or the implied author – point back to a focal point in which a concrete point of view, a coherent and self-contained perspective on the world, becomes manifest. The exact way in which this happens can vary widely from one work to another and depends also on conventions that hold for certain genres, periods, and traditions, etc.

It seems important to point out, however, that these encounters with concrete (yet fictitious) persons are not substantially different from encounters with real persons who actually exist and with whom we have direct acquaintance. We never can have a full or comprehensive knowledge of others. Even if we know another person very well, there are aspects of her life of which we have to remain ignorant. In every encounter with the other we gain singular impressions which we combine to an overall picture by generously filling in the blanks. We interpret the (verbal and non-verbal) behaviour of the other as expressions of a concrete point of view, a coherent and self-contained perspective on the world. In short, we apply more or less the same strategy both in our encounters with real persons and in moments in which we try to individuate a concrete person in a fictional character or in a narrator's voice.

According to the line of reasoning I have sketched, an immersion in fictional worlds can impart a kind of knowledge to the attentive reader that she could also gain from actual encounters with real persons. Works of fiction, thus, are not (primarily) Freudian tools or revealing mirrors that unveil hidden traits of the reader's personality. Rather, they allow the reader to get to know in detail the perspective and personality traits of another person – who does not have to be real, but needs to be credible. This raises the question, however, of why we should care to meet fictional characters, when there are so many real persons out there with whose perspectives and personality traits we could explore? What is the specific value of encountering concrete perspectives in works of fiction? Several points come to mind. First and foremost, encounters with fictional characters are less demanding and

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similar point when he observes that sometimes we seem to identify with the work or the work's perspective (cf. Gibson, 2015, p. 241f).

[14] I am, of course, oversimplifying here. Literary works of fiction and, more generally, literary works of art come in many different forms and adopt very different strategies; in consequence, the encounters with concrete persons in works of fiction can take place in many different ways. For an illuminating discussion of how lyric poetry invites for a personal engagement and, thus, invites for encounters of this kind, cf. Ribeiro (2009).

require less attention and continuous efforts over time than encounters with real persons – and we do not risk to pass as indiscrete when exploring the darkest corners of the character's personality. Moreover, we are less likely to run risks – not because we do not have to worry that the bad guys might win, as Walton (1990, p. 68) suggests, but because a work of fiction can provide us a more profound understanding of the bad guys and of how they see the world, but spares us a potentially unpleasant encounter in person. Finally, a continuous interest in works of fiction presents us a plenty of perspectives and diverse points of view that goes far beyond the ones we would likely meet in everyday life.

6. Reading with Others

The perspective on fiction that I have sketched in the earlier sections, according to which works of fiction allow for encounters with concrete (yet fictitious) persons, who view the world from a recognizable point of view, enables us to discern a function of fiction that is often overlooked in the debate: engaging in a work of fiction invites us to confront our own perspective with that of others. This is not only central for deepening our understanding of others and of ourselves, it has also an important impact on the social community of which we are part, in at least two ways: first, Walton's emphasis on the social dimension of imagination sheds light on how it is possible that in nearly all cultures we find a body of works that is familiar to (nearly) all members of the community and so, in turn, determines the moves they can make within the practice. This shapes the identity both of the group and of its members and contributes to its persistence over time. Second, encounters with others are of essential importance also on a more basic level. The direct contrast with the (concrete) perspective of others is a central element in a dynamic process of fine-tuning or calibration that allows us to conform one's own forms of behaviour to that of the other members of our community. I will shortly address both points in turn.

The first point is inspired by an appreciation of Walton's suggestion that imagination is an activity in which we often engage together with others, a game we play together with other members of our community. We have noticed earlier that engagement in make-believe tends to be infectious (Walton, 2015b, p. 100). I take this to mean that people are naturally attracted to works they think other people, or better: to other members of their social community, have appreciated. It is an effect of this process that in most cultural communities a set of works has emerged with which most members are (more or less)

familiar. These works – we might think of a *canon* in a weak normative sense[15] – function as cornerstones or points of reference that circumscribe what we might call, in analogy to Sellars's notion of a "logical space," a "cultural space" within which members of a community can make their moves and perceive the moves of others.

There is, thus, a mutual dependence between the works that constitute the cultural space and the social practice of imagination: the set of "canonical" works emerges from the practice, as it contains the works that are regarded as particularly valuable, as "good practice" by members of the community – and at the same time provides a shared frame of reference that shapes and enforces the rules that constitute the practice. In short, individual members, who participate in the practice, shape with their contributions the within which the practice is performed, and the cultural space determines, at the same time, the rules that constitute the practice. Moreover, the rules that determine the practice are also the rules that allow individual members to reflect about themselves and to express who they are and who they want to be.[16] In consequence, in virtue of its social dimension, imagination has a considerable impact on shaping the identity of the persons who partake in it.

Second, the relevance of engaging in encounters with other persons, be they fictional or real, becomes most obvious when we take the social nature of human beings into consideration. Social communities are held together by a number of interrelated rule-guided practices that Wittgenstein has called our *form of life* (cf. Wittgenstein, 2009). The rules that guide and constitute these practices, however, are never explicitly spelt out. In a way, we follow them *blindly*. In consequence, these systems of rules are highly dynamic and change considerably over time – a point that is often overlooked in the philosophical debate, which often tends to focus on codified systems of rules which, by their very nature, serve to provide stability and to perpetuate established systems.

The fact that most of the rules that constitute our practice are not stated explicitly but hold implicitly explains their malleable nature. Moreover, they need to be adapted over

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[15] When I speak of a "weak normative" sense, I intend the body of works with which members of a cultural community are typically expected to have some basic acquaintance. This expectance puts a weak normative demand on them. Moreover, I take it as an empirical claim that most cultures, but even many more circumscribed social groups, do in fact share acquaintance with such a body of works. I explicitly do not want to subscribe to the elitist understanding of a canon as the body of works with which one has to be well-acquainted in order to count as educated or refined.

[16] It is, of course, part of our literary and aesthetic traditions that authors and artists – in an act of creativity – violate or overcome these rules. They can do so only locally, though, by violating isolated rules while respecting (*by and large*) all the other rules that are constitutive for the social practice.

time to a great range of new and unforeseen situations, which accounts for minor changes and adjustments in the system of rules and the ways in which they are applied. The slow and continuous changes in our rule-following behaviour is not result of a process of deliberation. They occur organically as the rules are applied in ever new circumstances and by different members of the community.

In light of this dynamism, it is essential for the integrity of the community over time that all of its members adapt equally to the changes which are arbitrary and unpredictable. This is possible only if individual members of the community continuously fine-tune their own rule-following behaviour to that of others, which allows them to stay "in line" with the others and remain members of the community. Should they fail to do so, the community would eventually fall apart. Given the dynamic nature of rule-following, the mechanisms of fine-tuning and calibration, which are deeply rooted in our biological constitution, are conditions of possibility of a social community.[17] Confronting one's own ways of doing things, one's convictions, principles, background assumptions, goals, and values with that of others is an essential aspect of this mechanism of fine-tuning – and engaging in works of fiction is, as we have seen, a most efficient way to carry it out.

7. Conclusion

These last two points can give us a more profound understanding of the value of literary works of fiction. Much of the debate in philosophy of fiction over the last three decades has focused on the question of whether works of fiction can add to our knowledge or advance our moral understanding. Kendall Walton's theory make-believe, which emphasizes the social dimension of imagination, allows us to appreciate the relevance of fiction within a broader perspective. If the line of reasoning I have sketched in this paper is plausible, it shows that next to its cognitive and moral values, literary works of fiction also have an important role in the social community in which they are embedded: by allowing for processes of calibration and fine-tuning among members of the community, they contribute to its inner cohesion; by providing cornerstones that circumscribe our "culture space", it

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[17] For a more detailed discussion of this mechanism of calibration or fine-tuning, cf. (Huemer, 2020 and 2021).

provides us with the expressive means that determine who we are and allow us to reflect on who we want to be.[18]

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