

CONSCIOUSNESS DUPLICATION AND OUR CAPACITY TO LEARN FROM LITERARY FICTIONS¹

ALLISON MITCHELL

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

Many of us share a strong intuition that fictional literature possesses cognitive value in the sense that it has the capacity to expand and/or clarify our knowledge or understanding of the world.² If we agree that we learn something when we read and discuss certain texts, we may nevertheless find the form this learning takes to be anything but obvious. Some of us would say that our engagements with literary fictions cause us to perceive the world differently. Others may claim that, by reading and discussing certain texts, we learn new ways of defining and using our standard terms and concepts. Still others may insist that some texts generate compelling questions, claims, hypotheses, theses, and arguments about the way the world must (or must not be) and the way we ought to live in it. Given the variety of ways one may construe the cognitive value of fictional literature, the philosophical task consists in determining which theory best accounts for our intuitions about the epistemic import of reading and discussing literary fictions.

The problem of fictional literature and its cognitive value breaks down into a series of more specific and interrelated questions. For example, do we acquire straightforward 'knowledge as justified true beliefs' when we read and discuss certain texts? Or do we

¹ This paper was presented at The Value of Aesthetic Experience graduate student conference at Senate House, University of London, June 2004.

² Throughout this project I am concerned only with those texts that fall within the category of 'fictional literature'. Given that 'literature' is a flexible and open-ended concept, we may call a text a work of fictional literature when it displays those excellences (identified by literary critics) that are generally associated with the various literary genres. Although not all works of fiction or literature have the capacity to generate knowledge of the actual world, those texts that count as 'fictional literature' in the above-defined sense tend to possess such cognitive value.

instead develop some kind of skill that may prove useful outside the lecture hall, library, or conference room? To the extent that we can be said to acquire knowledge from our experience of fictional literature, does this knowledge have a form that is distinct from that which we gain from non-fictional texts and contexts? Is our learning from literature a product of a unique kind of imaginative activity that occurs when we read? How should we characterize the processing-in-imagination that takes place in our literary encounters? What barriers obstruct our capacity to learn from fictional literature, and how can we overcome them? Addressing these questions individually will help us bring the discussion of literature and cognitive value into better focus.

Over the course of this paper I will defend a positive account of the cognitive value of reading fictional literature in terms of the acquisition and development of a special kind of skilled knowledge.³ This positive view grants literary fictions value in terms of their capacity to generate knowledge concerning ‘what it could be like’ to view and evaluate the world from heterogeneous points of view. The account gains substance and explanatory value from the identification and description of a process I will call ‘consciousness duplication’. This process takes place when we engage imaginatively with fictional literature, and it consists in entertaining the possible truth or aptness of the points of view expressed by the implied author, narrator, or characters of a text. In demonstrating the role consciousness duplication plays in our experience of fiction, the positive account suggests an answer to the question of how the activity of reading could be exemplary for human conduct. This answer will help clarify and substantiate a variety of alternative accounts of the cognitive value of reading fictional literature.

Some provisional remarks will help guide the course of this project. Most philosophers who characterize the cognitive worth of fictional literature in terms of the acquisition of skilled knowledge defend a ‘presentation model’ of how and what we learn when we read

³ Here I rely upon Gilbert Ryle's version of the distinction between propositional knowledge (i.e., ‘knowledge-that’) and skilled knowledge (i.e., ‘knowledge-how’), a distinction he elucidates in the second chapter of *The Concept of Mind*. Although I am concerned specifically with the possible contributions fictional literature may make to our moral knowledge, I take for granted that certain texts may contribute to our understanding of problems outside moral philosophy, e.g., concerns about personal identity, knowledge of other minds, and free will. While I direct my attention primarily towards novels, my remarks apply similarly to texts contained within the other genres of fictional literature.

certain texts.⁴ Those who defend this type of account claim that some works of fiction present a model (or set thereof) of deliberation and action that readers then treat as being exemplary for thought and behaviour in everyday life. These accounts assume controversially that the display of a set of cognitive or practical skills leads automatically to the acquisition and development of those skills in sufficiently careful and attentive readers. This assumption begs the question: in virtue of what are we led to entertain (and perhaps adopt as our own) the ‘sense of life’ displayed by a text? What occurs when we read and interpret fictional literature such that we are led to consider the possible truth or aptness of seeing the world and responding to it from an alternative point of view? ‘Presentation models’ leave this question unanswered, failing to explain how our experience of certain texts paves the way for the possible modification of our thought and action in everyday life. In order to demonstrate that reading is exemplary for human conduct, we will have to develop an explanation or description of our imaginative identifications with literary fictions. Having located this explanation, we will be in a position to defend accounts that construe the value of reading in terms of learning how to think and respond to the world in a variety of ways.

Before exploring the role consciousness duplication plays in our experience of fictional literature, we must articulate a few preliminary definitions, assumptions, and qualifications. We may associate the phrase ‘sense of life’ with the widest possible range of ‘conscious mental states’, including thoughts, beliefs, needs, desires, and emotions.⁵ In considering how a reader may take on the ‘sense of life’ of a literary fiction, we are concerned primarily with ‘phenomenal consciousness’, or ‘what it is like’ to experience the world in a certain manner.⁶ A novelist’s ‘sense of life’ is ‘what it is like’ for him to experience persons and situations in a particular way; it is the subjective character or quality of his experiences. In so far as a literary fiction expresses ‘what it is like’ to experience different objects, persons, and situations in different kinds of ways, its ‘sense

⁴ Martha Nussbaum defends an Aristotelian version of the presentation model in *Love’s Knowledge*, while Richard Eldridge expresses a Kantian version in *On Moral Personhood*.

⁵ I borrow the phrase ‘sense of life’ from Nussbaum and define it in my own terms.

⁶ Thomas Nagel states famously, "An organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it is like to *be* that organism--something it is like *for* the organism" ("What is it like to be a bat?" 519).

of life' may or may not be that of the novelist; a text's 'sense of life' will be a product of the different characters' experiences, the narrator's interpretation of them, the author's organization and expression of the story, and the particular set of past experiences and current dispositions a reader brings with him to the literary encounter. We can define a text's 'sense of life' as 'a set of subjective experiences interpreted and expressed by an author and understood variously by different readers'. More precisely, a text's 'sense of life' consists of a suggested way (or set thereof) of seeing and evaluating different objects, persons, and situations. There is no one 'sense of life' for any particular text, and an individual reader may possess numerous and heterogeneous 'senses of life' as 'what it is like to be him' changes in response to various fictional and non-fictional encounters. Nor is the 'sense of life' of a literary fiction or a person in any way fixed, given, or straightforwardly open to view: texts can be semantically indeterminate and complex, and the nature of an individual's complicated and changing states of mind may be difficult to determine on the basis of words and actions alone.

That there are different concepts of consciousness creates the need for a further distinction between 'state consciousness', or intransitive consciousness, and 'consciousness of', or transitive consciousness. If a person states that he feels dizzy, this is an expression of intransitive consciousness; if he remarks that he sees the room as a spinning wheel, this is an expression of transitive consciousness.⁷ This further distinction will help us characterize the kind of act an author performs when he writes a literary fiction as well as the kind of work we do when we read and discuss certain texts. Moreover, the distinction will enable us to determine how we learn differently when we engage with fictional versus non-fictional texts and contexts, thereby providing us with reason to grant fictional literature with a distinctive kind of cognitive value.

Before setting out the series of steps whereby consciousness becomes 'duplicated' in the process of reading, we must be clear about the end result of the literary encounter.

⁷ Some philosophers would challenge the basis for this distinction. According to higher-order thought theories of consciousness, a conscious state just is a state that one is conscious of, and 'consciousness of' is a matter of a state being accompanied by a thought to the effect that one is in that state. See David Rosenthal, "Two Concepts of Consciousness." To conflate intransitive and transitive consciousness is to overlook the variety of cases in which one can be conscious without being conscious of anything.

What does it mean to have taken on a novelist or text's 'sense of life'? We can understand the process of duplication as one in which a reader entertains the possible truth or aptness of experiencing 'what it could be like' to perceive and evaluate objects, individuals, and situations in a particular way. The metaphor of 'duplication' means that a reader's capacity to experience value in the world is multiplied through his experience of fictional literature; ideally, he leaves an interpretive encounter with a new sense for 'what it could be like' to experience value in the world from an alternative point of view. He may learn, for example, 'what it could be like' for other persons to feel loyalty towards a friend or family member, or 'what it could be like' to be misjudged or misunderstood by a lover. 'Taking on the sense of life' of a literary fiction is less a matter of experiencing new states of mind or deciding to act in a new way, and more a matter of understanding and assessing new ways of perceiving and responding to particular situations. Not only is the 'duplicated reader' *conscious of* new objects, persons, and states of affairs, but he has at his disposal a broader and more diverse set of possible *conscious* responses to them.

We are now in a position to demonstrate the role consciousness duplication plays in the process of reading, thereby closing the explanatory gap ignored by those philosophers who express a 'presentation model' of the cognitive value of fictional literature. The following line of thought is meant to illustrate the process whereby readers take on a represented point of view as their own while reading:

P1: A reader becomes exposed to new perspectives when he identifies with characters in a literary fiction.

P2: Acquiring a new perspective amounts to becoming 'conscious of' new objects, persons, or situations.

P3: A reader becomes 'conscious of' new things through his experience of fictional literature.

P4: Transitive consciousness 'brings with it' intransitive consciousness, i.e., the experience of attending to particular objects, persons, or situations has a subjective character.

P5: In attending to fictional contexts and expressing a 'consciousness of' different

persons and situations, a novelist also expresses ‘what it could be like’ to experience them as having (or lacking) value.

P6: A reader learns new ways of experiencing ‘what it could be like’ to value different objects, persons, or states of affairs when he reads literary fictions.

C: When a reader engages with fictional literature, he becomes ‘conscious of’ evaluatively relevant contexts while at the same time developing an awareness of how one could think and feel in response to them.

Some interpretative remarks will help clarify the meaning of the argument. Premise one is motivated by the idea that our literary encounters expose us to alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and evaluating the world. When we identify imaginatively with characters in a literary fiction, we imagine ‘what it could be like’ to be a particular kind of *actual* person in a particular kind of *actual* situation. Identification with a fictional character involves adopting the hypothetical perspective a person would have if placed in real circumstances resembling those of the fictional world.⁸ Concerning premise two, seeing the world from a different point of view involves being ‘conscious of’ different objects, persons, and states of affairs. The process of imagining one’s self as another individual involves a kind of ‘observational retraining’ in which one becomes inclined to take note of different things in a different manner. Premise four invokes the distinction between transitive consciousness (i.e., ‘consciousness of’) and intransitive consciousness (i.e., ‘state consciousness’). Although not all instances of intransitive consciousness are also instances of transitive consciousness, all instances of ‘consciousness of’ are also instances of ‘state consciousness’.⁹ Since being ‘conscious of’ the world always has a subjective character, we can say that an expression of transitive consciousness is always additionally an expression of intransitive consciousness. If a person remarks that he sees an object, person, or situation in a specific way, he both directs our attention to a feature

⁸ Space constraints prevent me from clarifying and defending this account of our imaginative identifications with fictional characters.

⁹ For example, in certain situations (e.g., driving a car or playing a sport) one may cease paying attention to objects or persons but nevertheless continue responding to them in the usual ways. One cannot, however, attend to those situations without there being ‘something it is like’ to attend to them.

of the world and expresses ‘what it is like’ to experience it.¹⁰ Of course, a novelist rarely states directly that his experience of a person or situation has this or that kind of subjective character. Rather, we should understand literary fictions in general as expressing ‘what it could be like’ to perceive and evaluate objects, persons, and situations in a variety of ways. In writing a novel, an author expresses both a ‘consciousness of’ different states of affairs as well as possible ways of experiencing their value. In reading that text, we develop an awareness of ‘what it could be like’ to respond to evaluatively relevant contexts in new ways. To the extent that a reader allows himself to be ‘observationally retrained’ to note different modes of responding to different kinds of persons and situations, he gains exposure to new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in response to them.

The phenomenon of consciousness duplication is more likely to surface out of encounters with literary fictions rather than non-fictional texts. Why does fictional literature encourage the replication of the kind of attention a novelist, narrator, or fictional characters pay to morally relevant contexts?¹¹ Here we may return to the connection between the imagination and the acquisition and development of new perspectives. While both novelists and authors of non-fictional texts write from a particular point of view, the novelist will be more inclined to foreground his particular perspective while the writer of non-fiction will be more concerned to describe situations as if from no point of view. When we read a literary fiction, we assume that we are encountering a particular version or interpretation of events, a story that would be told

¹⁰ Ascriptions of transitive consciousness can be understood as reports of ‘seeing-as’ or ‘noticing an aspect’ in the sense explored by Wittgenstein in the latter half of his *Philosophical Investigations*.

¹¹ The positive account avoids Horton's criticism of theorists who overlook the respects in which literary fictions confront us differently from non-fictional texts and everyday life. See "Life, Literature, and Ethical Theory," 83-4. The fact that literary fictions are ‘closed’ and ‘complete’ systems that present situations in a ‘streamlined’ fashion *contributes* to their cognitive value. In so far as we know everything there is to know about a paired down fictional character or fictitious state of affairs, we are more capable of understanding and assessing a literary fiction's ‘sense of life’. Of course, actual persons have more complex and malleable ‘senses of life’, and real moral dilemmas can be exceedingly difficult and indeterminate. Nevertheless, identifying with a point of view expressed by a novelist, character, or text may prepare us to respond in a more sophisticated manner to (more challenging) real persons and states of affairs.

differently if expressed by an individual other than the author of the text. When we read works of non-fiction, we still understand that we are encountering a ‘version’ of events, yet we are less interested in the ‘version’ than we are in the particular events described. Moreover, in fictional literature we are more inclined to encounter descriptions that place emphasis on states of intransitive consciousness, or ‘what it is like’ to have this or that experience. In non-fictional texts, an author tends to encourage readers to be ‘conscious of’ this or that situation. In this sense a literary fiction foregrounds the subjectivity of the implied author or characters and the subjective quality of their experiences, while a work of non-fiction foregrounds the described persons and states of affairs. To the extent that they focus our attention more so on ‘what it could be like’ to experience and evaluate different situations, literary fictions present more prominent and powerful ‘senses of life’ than most works of non-fiction. Since consciousness duplication is a matter of considering the possible truth or aptness of alternative ‘senses of life’, we will be more likely to experience the phenomenon in response to fictional literature.¹²

The central role consciousness duplication plays in our experience of fictional literature clarifies why the activity of reading can be exemplary for human conduct. To the extent that the kind of attention authors pay to evaluatively relevant contexts becomes replicated in the minds of readers, those persons gain exposure to possible ways of seeing and evaluating the world from alternative points of view. Learning ‘what it could be like’ to perceive and assess situations differently is beneficial to all persons’ self-development, regardless of their particular moral orientations.¹³ Acquiring and developing the skill of seeing the world from heterogeneous points of view enables a person to understand better the claims and concerns of those around him. An appreciation of ‘what it could be like’ to experience the world differently puts one in a position to take the thoughts, beliefs, needs, and desires of others into account when deciding how to respond to concrete dilemmas. Moreover, one may begin to appreciate the role one plays within the context of a wider

¹² Autobiographical and biographical texts, insofar as they foreground ‘what it is like’ to experience the world from a particular point of view, are works of non-fiction that share fictional literature's capacity to generate consciousness duplication.

¹³ As C.S. Lewis puts it, "In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person's place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity" (*An Experiment in Criticism*, 138).

community, or how one's own thought and behaviour could be seen from another point of view. Whether one is an Aristotelian, Kantian, Utilitarian, or sympathizes with another framework altogether, the ability to appreciate one's position amidst persons who may have radically different conceptions of value is an important skill to acquire and develop. Understanding and appreciating different points of view encourages all persons to consider the breadth and diversity of options they have in interpreting and responding to particular situations.

REFERENCES

- ELDRIDGE, Richard. *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- HORTON, John. "Life, literature, and ethical theory." *Literature and the Political Imagination*. Ed. John Horton and Andrew Baumeister. London: Routledge, 1996 (70-97).
- LEWIS, C.S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961.
- NAGEL, Thomas. "What is it like to be a bat?" *The Nature of Consciousness*. Ed. Block, Flanagan, and Güzeldere. MA: MIT Press, 1999 (519-527).
- NUSSBAUM, Martha. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- ROSENTHAL, David. "Two concepts of consciousness." *Philosophical Studies* 49 (1986): 329-359.
- RYLE, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.