

Learning from Fiction¹

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The idea that fictions may educate us is an old one, as old perhaps as the view according to which they distort the truth and mislead us.² While there is a long tradition of passionate assertion from both sides of this debate, systematic arguments are a relatively recent development, and the idea of empirically testing these ideas is particularly novel.³ Ideally, the debate will be a cross-disciplinary one. Interpretive studies of literature, drama, film, and other media of fictional presentation give us a sense of the depth and significance of particular works, as well as providing reflection on more general questions about genre, style, and reception. Psychologists have recently begun to study the cognitive and other effects of exposure to fiction. Philosophers have a role to play in clarifying concepts, distinguishing in a fine-grained way between hypotheses, and constructing and assessing arguments. These three activities don't correspond neatly to discipline boundaries. Philosophers have offered interpretations of particular works, often in the cause of arguing for the cognitive richness of the work in question. In a few cases, we find collaboration across the disciplines (Wimmer et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

Our aim in this chapter is to provide some clarity about what is at stake in this debate, what the options are, and how empirical work does or might bear on its resolution.

What Is in Dispute?

Those who think we learn from fictions do not claim that we learn from all fictions, and will probably agree that fictions are sometimes a potent source of error and ignorance. For those who think that fictions do influence people's opinions, the problem is to identify situations where that influence counts as learning and to describe the factors that make that a more or less likely outcome.⁴ It will be evident from this that anyone skeptical of the power of fiction to enable learning cannot simply point to the many examples of fictions which manifestly lack this capacity; that will be agreed to by all parties. Nor is wholesale skepticism about learning from fiction—that no one ever learned anything from any fictional work—plausible; at the very least we learn about what characters and events the author has chosen to describe.⁵ What is likely to be questioned is a kind of easy-going optimism which takes it as obvious that exposure to the right kind of fiction (whatever that is taken to be) will give us valuable knowledge of the world and the people in it. It is not unreasonable to ask for evidence and argument to support such a claim, and to point out that establishing that someone learned something from a particular fictional source may be rather difficult. [p. 126]

While some, notably Dr. Johnson, have suggested that learning from fiction requires the

fiction in question to exemplify morally correct principles, recent commentators do not identify potential for learning with advocacy of any particular moral stance; a common view now is that cognitively rich and insightful fiction is unlikely to be overtly didactic.⁶ The case for learning from fiction has largely drawn on traditionally canonical authors and genres: tragic drama, the realist novels of the nineteenth century, and their modernist successors. In line with contemporary revisionism about the canon, those concerned with this issue now seek examples in a culturally wider class of works.⁷ The debate has also taken in other media, notably through a focus on film as a medium of fictional presentation.⁸ Here philosophers have been active in debating whether film has a distinctive capacity for philosophical instruction. We will not have space to focus here on this specialized aspect of the more general debate.

Knowledge, Reliability, and Fiction

This is a contribution to a volume concerned with fiction and belief. Certainly, much learning involves change of belief, but this is by no means all the learning there is, or so many assume. Learning may also involve the acquisition of skills, the refinement of our capacities, the gathering of new experiences. These things are rarely insulated from belief change but it would be controversial to say that they are nothing more than alterations to belief. And in discussions of fiction, these other forms of learning are prominent; it is said that fictions refine our empathic abilities, make us more attuned to other perspectives, and allow us to glimpse experiences distant from our own.⁹ We will at some points touch on these matters. It will also be necessary to ask whether some apparent changes in belief might actually be something else.

People believe many kinds of things: that God exists, that the coat you are wearing is red, that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that kindness is valuable. Beliefs differ greatly in their significance and in the extent to which they can be tested. But for any belief we can ask: Is that true? And we can relatedly ask: Would it be better if you changed your belief? Not every change of belief is learning; you have not learned anything by coming to believe that the earth is flat. What more is required? One answer is: your new belief must be knowledge, and that means it must be true; you can't *know* that the earth is flat when it isn't. But philosophers have convinced themselves that true belief does not generally amount to knowledge; something you read in your horoscope can be right but the horoscope did not give you knowledge though it gave you true belief. Why not? It was once thought sufficient to say that the horoscope did not give you any rational grounds (any "justification") for your belief. Most philosophers now think that this is not right.¹⁰ On one formulation of the worry, one may have a true, justified belief but still be right "by accident" in a way which denies you the status of knowing what you believe. Subsequent work has often emphasized the idea that knowledge depends on the reliability of the process by which you came to believe; a reliable process does not always yield the correct result, but when it does that is no accident.¹¹ We turn to the issue of reliability in fiction directly.

To speak of fictions as reliable sources of true beliefs may seem paradoxical, since fictions are most often thought of as trading in stories that are not true and telling us of characters that do not exist. In fact, many of us treat fictions as reliable on some topics; indeed, there are cases where a work of fiction is among the best, most reliable source one could have. The best way to learn what is said in a novel may be to read it yourself, and the best way to learn about the qualities of an author's style may be to read their works. Those skeptical about learning from fiction have not denied this; their skepticism focuses instead on claims that fiction helps us to learn things about the world beyond and independent of the work itself. However, cases of learning about the fictional work (or its maker) from the work itself are of some interest for us because they are often cases where the reliability of the source—the fiction—can be independent of the reliability of the author. The author may

have quite unreliable views about their own style; views that a careful [p. 127] reading of the works themselves would undermine. When we consider the prospects for gaining knowledge of the world beyond the fiction, the question of the author's reliability is important, as we shall now see.

Hilary Mantel's three novels focusing on the life of Thomas Cromwell have probably shaped the views of many on the events and personalities of the Tudor court. People who did not know before reading *Bring Up the Bodies* that Anne Boleyn was tried and executed for, among other things, treason, may well come to believe it after. This does not seem an unreasonable way to acquire this particular belief; the work belongs to the genre of historical fiction, a standard feature of which is fidelity to the known major events of the period. But while Mantel's writings might be relied on to, as she puts it, "closely track the historical record,"¹² a reader who came to believe that Boleyn was as malign a person as Mantel represents her would be in a much less secure position. On questions of motive and character the historical record is equivocal in this case (as in many others) and anyway Mantel, like other historical novelists, asserts the right to speculate on matters of motive. It might turn out that the novel's representation of Boleyn's character is correct, but a reader who accepted it as truth would arguably not have acquired a *reliably* true belief.¹³

Reliance on the Author

Learning from others is most often discussed in epistemology under the heading of "testimonial knowledge," a topic which has seen a great deal of philosophical attention in the last two decades.¹⁴ Testimony, where one is simply told something, contrasts with argument, which provides you with a reason, though not always a conclusive one. Of course, in many cases, the provision of reasons is itself partly a matter of testimony; I may cite the fact that I have seen footprints in support of the proposition that there is a lion outside but you have only my word that I have seen them; it is a rare argument that is completely independent of testimony. While philosophers differ over the fundamentals of testimony, there is general agreement that in many situations it is reasonable to depend on it for one's knowledge. Is this what is happening in the case of Mantel and the last days of Anne Boleyn? Perhaps not. She was probably not seeking to *tell* these facts to her readers; she may have assumed that they would know this already, or not cared one way or the other. Learning about Boleyn's execution from *Bring Up the Bodies* illustrates one way to learn that depends on someone's reliability but does not amount to testimonial learning. This happens in other kinds of cases, as when I judge that it's raining outside because I see you take an umbrella when leaving the house. You were not telling me anything, but my believing there is rain makes sense only so long as I think you are reliable on that topic.

In fiction we do sometimes find a practice of outright assertion, or something close to it. Many things said by Victor Hugo in *Notre Dame de Paris* were intended to inform readers about the history and present state of the Cathedral, and were influential in shaping subsequent restorations. There are also cases where there is, we may suspect, an intention to communicate an opinion but only by rather indirect means. Jerrold Levinson notes that "Ibsen would not have written [*An Enemy of the People*] as he did if he had not meant to advocate a certain position about the perils of majority thinking and the herd instinct."¹⁵ While there are statements put in the mouths of characters in that play that conform to this position, there are also statements from characters that contradict it. Overall though, the play seems designed to make following the dictates of individual conscience the more attractive option. If something like what Levinson suggests was not his aim, we may think, Ibsen would have written a different sort of play. To have grounds for thinking that an author is advocating a position you don't have to

find outright assertions of that position from them; it is enough to think that an intent to advocate in this way explains, at least in part, the shape of the work itself. [p. 128]

Fictions as Reasons

You may recognize, or think you recognize, an intent in Ibsen's play to communicate the value of individual conscience. What might persuade you that what is communicated is true, or at least worth serious consideration? If this is straightforward testimony you may resist persuasion. While testimony on factual matters can seem a reasonable source of knowledge, it is often thought much less acceptable in such moral matters as the value of conscience.¹⁶ In morals it can seem, at the least, unacceptably passive simply to follow another's opinion. Anyway, thinking of a fiction like Ibsen's play as a case of testimony misses an important feature of the play itself. The play is not merely a means by which Ibsen communicates his opinion; it provides, or seeks to provide, a reason of sorts for believing what is communicated, or at least for giving it greater weight than one otherwise would. How might a fiction such as Ibsen's play provide reasons? In at least two ways. One is by providing an argument for some favored position, expressed by one or other character. Another way opens up when the play transforms an abstract moral view into a concrete scenario that purports to show *why* this is the right position, or at least why it is a position worth taking seriously.¹⁷ On this view, Ibsen shows us a way in which people acting from a self-regarding or short-sighted perspective are apt to arrive at positions with manifestly unacceptable consequences. Importantly, the aim may not be to persuade us of the truth of the moral position but to help us guard against its violation. It is sometimes noted that, when asked for the "message" of some fiction we often can do no better than a platitude: we end up saying that *The Third Man* tells us not to support our friends when they do evil things—perhaps the headline message of Ibsen's play is comparably hard to disagree with.¹⁸ But learning can be a matter of being reminded, in a vivid way, of something we knew but might be tempted to ignore.

Fictions that remind us of these things can be epistemically valuable not because they change belief but because they help to connect belief more effectively to action.¹⁹

We see now a variety of functions that a fictional work can fulfil in the learning process. One is simply to serve as the vehicle of expression for an idea. Another is to provide reasons in favor of that idea, ones that are stated or implied by its characters. A third is to add persuasive power to the idea by rendering it concrete, showing how ideas and attitudes have practical consequences.

This final claim faces an obvious objection. Surely, all Ibsen does is provide us with a story concerning imaginary people in imaginary situations; their behavior can no more persuade us of the rightness of a view than imaginary observations can persuade us of the correctness of a scientific theory. In both kinds of cases only real instances will do. On reflection however, it is not obvious that only real events can tell us anything informative. For example, we often want to know what *might* go wrong with some plan; waiting to find out what *does* go wrong gives us no way to avoid a potential disaster. Instead, we try to construct an imaginative scenario—one that hasn't happened—which conforms to the plan but in which things do go wrong; that way we can revise the plan before it is too late. Fictions sometimes does this. The film *Fail Safe* (1964) purports to show how, given the control measures in place at US bomber Command, an accidental nuclear attack on the Soviet Union could still occur. If the film's narrative fairly represented these controls and their vulnerabilities, one might then have grounds for believing nuclear war more likely than one previously did. As a matter of fact, it is widely accepted that the pathway to the attack portrayed in this film

depends on mischaracterizing the actual procedures in place.²⁰ Still, the general point holds: a fiction might, through imaginative yet realistic scenario construction, tell us something interesting.

Fail Safe investigates a well-defined and specific mechanism which depends in part on automatic systems and partly on human decision. It is not difficult to see whether it truly represents a way for the plan in place to fail. But fictions are more commonly appreciated for their exploration of processes much less clearly delineated. Martha Nussbaum highlights the way in which Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* traces the steps on the way to an understanding between Maggie Verver and her father [p. 129] Adam, finding a crucial moment in Adam's image of her as a "sea creature." James is among the most admired novelists for his psychological insight, with this late novel regarded by some as a high point. But whatever the novel's literary merits, we do not seem to have a way to check that James' scenario conforms to a plausible model of human behavior. Might the detailed interactions James describes so carefully be unrealistic? The work's literary qualities may make it hard to judge; James' late style makes for difficult reading, absorbing cognitive resources that might otherwise be focused on assessing the psychological plausibility of the events he describes.²¹ We may wonder, similarly, whether what Ibsen is doing in *An Enemy of the People* is creating a rhetorical environment likely to promote agreement with his moral outlook, without providing us with any good reasons for doing so. We are familiar with the tactic of making a certain outlook or perspective attractive by having it represented by characters who are attractive or likeable, but where their attractiveness or likability gives no real support to the outlook in question.²² Fictions, with their occasions for heightened emotions, plot twists, and vividly drawn characters are, arguably, inherently unreliable environments for evaluative learning because we are not well able to segregate our responses to what is incidental and rhetorical from what is germane to the issue.

However, we should not overestimate the rationality of other, nonfictional, modes of communication when it comes to evaluative matters: are not our ordinary attempts to change people's moral outlooks similarly rich in rhetorical trappings? Where, in any case, is this supposed divide between rhetoric and moral argument? Only stern rationalists in morals see no place for the activation of sentiments in moral persuasion; what has come to be called the "Humean theory of motivation" insists that belief alone never motivates and that desire is essential (Smith, 1994). Fictions may sometimes go to excess in this direction but we can find fictions where this is avoided. And fiction has the advantage that it allows for disengagement and reflection (especially so in the novel) that may help us avoid being carried along by the authoritative tone of a present speaker.

So far we have spoken of learning from fiction as if it were a special kind of learning, distinct from that provided by more conventionally authoritative means such as textbooks and lectures. But some have sought to find a closer connection between fiction and the systematic inquiry we find in science and philosophy. The idea is that fictions sometimes provide *thought experiments*, a practice well established in science and philosophy for advancing research and which involves imagining a scenario rather than actually observing it. Occasionally, these thought experiments have a somewhat literary feel to them, as with the story of Schrödinger's cat which (on one interpretation of quantum mechanics) is simultaneously alive and dead until observation resolves the contradiction. In philosophy, thought experiments are often invented in order to support or undermine claims in moral philosophy, metaphysics, and elsewhere. For example, the now famous "trolley experiment" first suggested by Philippa Foot prompts us to explore the acceptability, in varying circumstances, of sacrificing one life in order to save many.²³

There has been some enthusiasm for the view that novels, dramas, and films may provide

reliable pathways to belief by shaping sometimes rather elaborate thought experiments.²⁴ The claim here need not be that thought experiments in fiction prove anything—this will be admitted concerning thought experiments in other areas. The claim need only be that they are capable of adding to the reasons, if not always for believing a proposition, then at least for taking it seriously.

Notably, however, there is growing opposition to thought experiments at least as they occur in philosophy; these are the ones most similar to those we might identify in novels, dramas, and films since they often involve human characters in morally charged situations. On this view, philosophical thought experiments are apt to be highly misleading because of the strain they put on our cognitive resources. For example, they ask us to extend our judgement from ordinary to extraordinary cases, something it is said we cannot reliably do.²⁵ [p. 130]

Others, however, don't dispute the usefulness of at least some thought experiments in science and philosophy, but insist that the complex works of literature so often appealed to by those who say we learn from fiction are not comparably reliable. Thought experiments in science and philosophy succeed best when they focus exclusively on a single precisely characterized problem, avoid rhetorical elaboration, subplots, and nonessential details, and allow a sustained (often brief) act of imaginative engagement with the events described. The novels and dramas so often valued for their capacity to instruct us are often bewilderingly complex in construction, with a plethora of surprising events and vivid characters designed to evoke emotions from mild amusement to hatred; the best-regarded novels sustain these sorts of complexities over days and even weeks of attentive reading. All this greatly increases the concern we may have that our cognitive resources are, in the context of a thought experiment, pushed beyond the bounds of reliability.²⁶

Knowledge, Reasonable Belief, and Understanding

We have focused so far on whether and how we can get knowledge from fiction. In at least two ways this may be too narrow a formulation. First of all, the process of learning, where it focuses on belief, should surely have as its target the idea of belief improvement, and not every improvement in belief results in knowledge. If I used to believe the earth is flat and am told it is spherical that seems like dramatic improvement even though the earth is not, strictly speaking, spherical. We must be careful not to set standards for learning from fiction that we would not apply in other areas; fictions able to improve belief would surely add to the case for learning from fiction. But the problem with a focus on knowledge is not only that it may be too demanding; in some circumstances knowledge will not be enough. The thought here is that one may have knowledge but lack what we might call “understanding,” something likely to be emphasized by those who say that the value of fiction lies in its capacity to make us wiser. On this view one may know a certain proposition—know that it is true—but lack understanding of it.²⁷ In some respects, the desired understanding may consist simply in more knowledge: knowledge, for example, of what explains it or caused it to be so, knowledge of its actual or likely consequences. But an emphasis on understanding also moves us into an area flagged earlier for investigation: skills and abilities. Understanding an event is said sometimes to involve being able to judge how things would be if that event had occurred in a slightly different way, or what would have to have happened for the event not to have occurred at all. It is far from clear that having this ability resolves neatly into knowing facts of various kinds, though it will involve such knowledge.

Encouraged by this thought we may see a close connection between fiction and skills, abilities and habits of various kinds. Thus, Elaine Scarry (2012) speaks of “the capacity of literature to exercise and reinforce our recognition that there are other points of view in the world, and to

make this recognition a powerful mental habit.” As well as helping us to recognize other perspectives, fiction is sometimes said to acquaint us with the experiences of the people who have them (see e.g., Putnam, 1978, 83–96; Walsh, 1969). We are said, for example, to gain from literary and filmic representations some knowledge, limited no doubt, of what it is like to be caught up in tragic events, to be exposed to extremes of deprivation, to be socially marginalized—all experiences we may well want not to undergo but which we think it would be good to know more about. It is far from clear that this kind of knowledge consists merely in coming to have certain true beliefs.

To this it may be objected that while we may feel, as the result of reading a novel, that we have a sense of what some experience would be like, we have no idea whether we are right—only actually having that experience would let us know that. Believing that we know something is no guarantee that we do. True, you may one day have that experience, and conclude that you were right in thinking that fiction had given you some prior acquaintance with it. There are two important questions to ask about that. One is philosophical and highlighted in our earlier discussion: why would this be anything other [p. 131] than a lucky accident? What reason do we have for thinking that we can mimic human responses to a complex situation purely on the basis of description of that situation? The second draws on the psychology of memory: can we be confident that we are recalling the imagined experience in such a way that it could (reliably) be compared with the actual current experience? This is, of course, an empirical question and one not easy to answer given that there is disagreement among psychologists of memory about the nature and extent of its proneness to error.²⁸ Our next section takes up the issue of the relevance of empirical studies to the question of what and how we learn from fiction.

Empirical Perspectives

The contributions of philosophers, critics, and literary theorists to the debate about learning from fiction have so far been notable for their lack of engagement with systematic empirical inquiry. The underlying assumption seems often to be that our own experience with fiction provides support for the view being advocated; friends of learning from fiction are often happy to testify to its effects on their own cognitive development. Such testimony is not worthless, but we can no more rest content with it than we could with assurances from school pupils that they learned French very well. In schools we have exams, and in the area of more practical skills we have equally objective measures; we are able to tell with reasonable accuracy whether a plumbing apprentice can mend pipes effectively. Do we have anything comparable to support claims about learning from fiction?

There is some evidence. But the search is at an early stage and there are difficulties in the way of getting the data we would most like to have. Much current research exposes people to brief passages of fiction followed immediately by a battery of tests, whereas the claims traditionally made on behalf of fiction concern the cumulative benefits of extensive and varied reading. Studies that addressed such claims directly would be costly in participants’ time and commitment and would take decades to complete. Another difficult question concerns causal direction: are people more empathic because they read extensively in fictions that calls on empathic skills, or do they gravitate to fictions of this kind because of their prior capacity and enthusiasm for empathy?

In recent years, there has been quite a lot of small-scale research into the effects of fiction, much of it focused on aspects of social cognition: our ability to understand and respond fluently to the thoughts, desires, and feelings of others. There are established psychological tests used to measure people’s empathic capacities, as well as their ability to comprehend the mental states of

others (a major component in so-called “theory of mind” or “ToM”), and these tests are typically applied immediately after reading. Results have been mixed and in some cases only very small effects have been found.²⁹ Replication of some apparently positive results has been hard to achieve, and where improvements on empathy and ToM-related tasks have been found it is often unclear how long the results last.³⁰ Indeed, large and lasting effects on skills and abilities from one episode of reading would be surprising, so the current absence of strong evidence for a fiction-effect should not discourage researchers from conducting more fine-grained or more long-term studies. In relation to change over time, we may distinguish between the inculcation of skills and attitudes, such as one’s capacity for empathy and hospitality toward immigrants, where significant change tends to be slow and incremental, and straightforward cases of change in factual belief which are sometimes instantaneous; I start believing it is raining as soon as I see the rain.

When it comes to acquiring factual beliefs from fiction the experimental data is somewhat mixed. One study suggests that fictions in various media can be successful in promoting factual belief, though retention is fragile (Brodie et al., 2001); there is also evidence that fictions may produce false beliefs quite easily (Appel and Richter, 2007; Marsh and Fazio, 2006). Concerning evaluative attitudes, evidence has been found for the effect of fiction on attitudes to out-groups, medical treatment, and negative stereotypes.³¹ The effects described in these studies would be seen by most people [p. 132] as positive, since they involve transitions to less prejudiced and more inclusive attitudes. But Kris Goffin and Stacie Friend (2022) suggest a number of reasons why fictions may also increase bias.³²

Studies of fiction’s effects on beliefs and attitudes are one aspect of a larger field of study: the persuasiveness of messages. Until fairly recently, work in this area was dominated by studies of advertising and other areas where the message is said to be “overt,” contrasting with the implicit or covert messaging of fictional stories. Gerrig’s articulation of the idea of “narrative transportation”, the process by which a reader is “taken to” the world of the story, eventually returning to the real world in some way cognitively changed, provided a framework for thinking about the effects of such messages (1993). The idea was taken up in an influential study (Green and Brock, 2000) which suggested that degree of transportation is a strong determinant of the cognitive effects of narrative, but that whether the narrative in question is read as fiction or as nonfiction makes very little difference. Why should degree of transportation make a difference, while thinking the work is fiction rather than nonfiction seems not to? It is said that readers who are more transported are less likely to be “vigilant” in their reading: less prone to consider the material critically and more likely to believe what they might otherwise reject. But a study by Prentice and Gerrig (1999) suggests that fictionality (the quality of being—or being regarded by the reader as—fiction) may actually reduce vigilance; participants told that the story they were reading was fiction were more likely to accept on its basis such false claims as “mental illness is contagious” than were those who read it as nonfiction.³³ It remains an open question whether, at least in some circumstances, recognition that a work is fiction does dampen the effect of reading on belief.

We may also ask: did subjects in Green and Brock’s experiment really change their belief? Note that reader’s opinions were tested immediately after reading. People’s greater willingness to endorse the idea that the world is dangerous might simply be an effect of the extent to which they were emotionally moved by the story (emotional involvement being a significant feature of transportation). We are familiar, after all, with the way emotions color the way the world seems, sometimes for quite brief periods. A related query asks whether we are here failing to distinguish between belief in the ordinary straightforward sense and what we have called “attitude” or an evaluatively tinged way of seeing the world, something often responsive to emotion but not identical to it. To say that the world is a dangerous place might in some contexts—an

academic seminar on risk—be a purely factual judgement, but in ordinary communication it is more likely to be an expression of pessimism rather than a factual assessment. Still, neither possibility nullifies the interest of Green and Brock’s experiment. The result indicates an effect of storytelling on our way of seeing the world, if only a temporary one. And whatever the effect of fiction-reading in this case is, it appears not to be less than the effect of taking the story to be fact.

Limitations and Summary

We have simplified in various ways. For example, we have considered the effect of fiction on belief in terms of an encounter between an individual learner and a single work. As theorists of cultural evolution emphasize, learning in humans is often the product of multiple sources; if fictions change our beliefs they do so as contradicted or reinforced by other sources, against a background of approval or disapproval from authorities and peers, as mediated by our own biases and assumptions. A proper study of the role of fiction in shaping belief will have to accommodate these factors.

Another simplification is that we have focused here on the effects on belief of broadly realist fictions: narratives with plausible human characteristics in naturalistic settings. This ignores a range of important cases: many operas, fantasy literature of certain kinds, absurdist drama, experimental novels, and short fictions. Questions raised above, such as whether readers are able to determine the [p. 133] psychological plausibility of plot developments, can seem irrelevant to such works, yet one would hesitate to say that they have no interesting capacity to restructure our beliefs.

What we have done is to focus on a range of arguments, many of them underdeveloped in the existing literature, which suggest how more conventional fictions might change belief, attending especially to the positive changes we call learning. We also outlined the more obvious objections that might be brought against these proposals. Finally, we reviewed the highlights of a growing literature intended to find experimental evidence for (or against) fiction’s capacity to change belief and other cognitive processes.

Notes

- 1 The authors acknowledge the generous support of the Leverhulme Trust, under grant RPG-2017–365: Learning from fiction: A philosophical and psychological investigation.
- 2 Plato’s view of the moral and cognitive value of fiction was pessimistic (see *Republic* books II, III, X); Aristotle was more positive (*Poetics*, 1448b 13–19, 1451a 38–1451b 12, *Rhetoric*, 1371b 4–10). Later commentators with broadly positive views, often focusing on Shakespearean drama, include Dr. Johnson (see below note 4).
- 3 Early in the contemporary debate was Walsh (1969); see also Goodman (1976), Novitz (1987), Carroll (2002), Young (2003); Gibson (2007). Particularly influential has been Nussbaum 1990; for criticism of her position see, e.g., Kalin (1992). For negative views about learning from fiction, see Stolnitz (1992), Diffey (1995). Lamarque and Olsen (1994), while not disputing the possibility of learning from fiction, argue that to value a work of art as a work of art is not to value it for its truth or the knowledge it imparts. Currie (2020) combines philosophical and empirical arguments to mount a case that is largely (but not wholly) skeptical of claims about the educative effects of fiction. Dubourg and Baumard, in this volume, are especially skeptical. Useful introductions to the debate are Gaut (2003), Gibson (2008). An early experimental investigation of the impact of fictional information on real-world beliefs was Gerrig and Prentice (1991). Other important studies prior to the last decade are Prentice, Gerrig and Bailis (1997); Marsh, Meade, and Roediger (2003); Appel and Richter (2007).

- 4 Note that readers are often unaware, or reluctant to admit, that they are susceptible to persuasion by fictional media (Dill, 2009; Golan and Day, 2008), though they may judge others more susceptible than themselves. (Douglas, Sutton, and Stathi, 2010; Golan and Day, 2008). Hans and Dee note the contribution of police and crime fiction to the general pool of lay legal knowledge (1991, also Glasser, 1988; Haney and Manzolatti, 1980). Bloom says as much about our understanding of hospital procedures, submarines, and crime (2010, 167). Children seem particularly susceptible to this phenomenon: reading anthropomorphic literature, for instance, appears to increase their attribution of human-like properties to such entities as stones, whales, birds, and trains (Hopkins and Weisberg, 2016, 62, 63).
- 5 But see Dubourg and Baumard, in this volume: “for the moment, it is more reasonable to conclude that fictions don’t impact beliefs”.
- 6 For Johnson, see contributions to his twice-weekly periodical *The Rambler*, anthologized in Johnson (1977), ed. Bate. A theme of Johnson’s was that (then) contemporary realistic fiction, unlike the fantastical tales of earlier times, was apt to invade the opinions, and the morals, of readers and so writers must guard against making immorality seem attractive (see Johnson, 1977: 11–12).
- 7 For a useful anthology of writing from the seventeenth-century writers influential in canon construction to contemporary works of criticism and revision see Morrison (2005).
- 8 On film, see essays by Livingston (2006), Wartenberg (2006), and Smith (2006). See also Smith (2017). For an interesting empirical study of the effects of film on attitudes, see Butler et al. (1995).
- 9 See, e.g., Nussbaum (1990, 280): “the reader of Proust’s novel comes to know his or her own love through a very complex process, one that involves empathic involvement with Marcel’s suffering.” Psychologist Keith Oatley and colleagues claim that “engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference” (Mar and Oatley, 2008, 173). John Gibson (2008) emphasizes the importance of fiction for providing us with opportunities to experience the lives of others.
- 10 Edmund Gettier’s (1963) very brief paper, and one of the most cited in philosophy, crystallized these doubts, though they are visible in earlier work by Bertrand Russell and others.
- 11 Alvin Goldman’s (1967) is an early statement of the view. [p. 134]
- 12 Reith Lecture 1, June 13, 2017. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b08tcbrp>.
- 13 At least for the case of film viewing, there are institutions that seek to track fictional deviations from reality; see e.g., <https://www.historyvshollywood.com/>. We are grateful here to Françoise Lavocat.
- 14 Coady (1992) has been influential in reviving interest in the epistemology of testimony. For slightly earlier work, see Fricker and Cooper (1987). Lackey and Sosa (eds.) (2006) is a collection of essays on the topic. For the place of testimony and testimony-like exchanges in fiction, see Friend (2014); Stock (2017); Ichino and Currie (2017).
- 15 Levinson (1996, 225).
- 16 See Hills (2009). For a more positive view of moral testimony, see Jones (1999). See also Hopkins (2007).
- 17 See Nussbaum (1990, 139–40) for the claim that a fiction (in this case Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl*) may provide a “persuasive argument” for something “for which a philosophical text would have a hard time mounting direct argument.” On whether narratives, fictional or otherwise, can provide arguments see Olmos (2017); Schultz (1979); Hunt (2009). On whether narratives can constitute explanations, Velleman (2003) is critical of the idea while Carr (2008) defends it.
- 18 See again Stolnitz (1992); also Carroll (1998).
- 19 Noël Carroll (2000, 368–69) says that “what art teaches us generally is not new maxims and concepts, but rather how to apply them to concrete cases.” This way of thinking about

learning in the moral sphere is strongly influenced by Aristotle's emphasis on *phronêsis* or practical wisdom in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Related ideas are taken up in section "Knowledge, Reasonable Belief, and Understanding" below.

- 20 It might be argued that the film's cognitive value survives this observation about inaccuracy, depending instead on its vivid portrayal of the thought that "If the system does fail, these are the terrible consequences," combined with the surely plausible thought that *some* failure is a realistic possibility. Perhaps *Dr. Strangelove*, with its satire sometimes bordering on absurdity, makes this point more effectively because it allows us to turn aside from interrogating the detailed realism that *Fail Safe* aims for.
- 21 The idea that more demanding fictions leave us less capacity to scrutinize their implicit empirical claims is controversial. Some research suggests that stylistic ease or difficulty in fiction has no statistically significant effect on credulity and degree of belief change (Marsh and Fazio, 2006, 1145).
- 22 Psychologists refer to the "halo effect." For example, a person judged physically attractive is disproportionately likely to be rated as intelligent. The first empirical study was due to Edward Thorndike (1920).
- 23 See Foot (1967). Another noted thought experiments in philosophy is Hilary Putnam's (1975) "Twin earthscenario" which suggests that the contents of our thoughts depend on the external environment. Among many in the physical sciences are Newton's "bucket experiment" intended to show the absoluteness of rotational motion, and Einstein's "lift" experiment, used to show that light rays are bent in gravitational fields.
- 24 See e.g., Elgin (2007), Green (2017).
- 25 See e.g., Machery (2017). Tamar Gendler (2004) argues that thought experiments do have a distinctive, though fallible, capacity to provide justifications for our beliefs.
- 26 See Egan (2016), Currie (2020), Section 8.4.
- 27 See Hills (2016). Against this Paula Sliwa (2015) argues that understanding is not a different category from knowing.
- 28 For a recent review of findings and opinions, with some rather positive conclusions about memory's reliability see Brewin et al. (2020).
- 29 See the meta-analysis by Dodell-Feder and Tamir (2018).
- 30 See Kidd and Castano (2013) for an empirical study claiming evidence for the effects of fiction on empathy. For a failure to replicate their study, see Panero et al. (2016). For a response see Kidd and Castano (2017, 2018). See also Samur, Tops, and Koole (2018).
- 31 On evaluative attitudes, see Vezzali et al. (2015); on medical treatment, Green (2006); on negative stereotypes, Kaufman and Libby (2012).
- 32 See also Kris Goffin and Agnes Moors' contribution to the present volume.
- 33 For discussion and references see Friend (2014).

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