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The Reality of Fictional Characters and the Cognitive Value of Literature: Some Surprising Insights from Philosophy

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1. Learning from Literature

There are few intuitions as widely shared across the humanities as the belief that we can learn things about the real world and the human condition by reading great works of literature. Although texts like novels, short stories, epic poems, and plays are works of fiction, they are nonetheless valuable sources of truths and insights about important features of real life like morality, psychology, society, religion, beauty, love, and culture. By reading *Pride and Prejudice*, a reader can learn something about the way otherwise attractive people sabotage their chances at happy relationships. By reading *Les Misérables*, a reader can learn something about the complex relationships between justice, duty, and compassion. By reading *Crime and Punishment*, a reader can learn something about the psychological effects of guilt and self-rationalization. By reading *The Color Purple*, a reader can come to a greater understanding of the despair felt by victims of sexual abuse. By reading *Moby-Dick*, a reader can learn something about what life on a nineteenth century whaling ship was like. An almost endless list of similar examples could be given.

A large part of the reason why we value works like Shakespeare's and Dostoevsky's is because these texts provide us with more than simply interesting characters and entertaining plotlines; these texts are believed to be sources of profound insights into the human condition. "Great" books are, in part, considered to be great because of their cognitive value. Meanwhile, literature that appears to teach readers very little or nothing of importance—beach books, romance novels, formulaic thrillers, and the like—is dismissed as "mere entertainment" or "fluff." When contemporary advocates of the humanities are called upon to justify the inclusion of literature in college curricula, a frequent defense given is that great literature has the power to inform, instruct, and expand the horizons of readers in a special way that cannot be duplicated by more practical or vocational fields of study. On the other hand, acknowledging the unique power of literature to inform and shape readers has also led to the recognition that literature can corrupt and mis-educate readers as well. Such concerns, and accompanying calls for censorship, date back to Plato's *Republic*. But what unites bibliophiles and censors, scholars and lay people alike, is the belief some literature, despite being fictional, can teach readers important things about the real world.

Among contemporary philosophers of art, this view is known as “literary cognitivism” or simply “cognitivism.” Cognitivism has attracted many adherents among philosophers; noteworthy philosophical discussions and defenses of cognitivism are found in the works of Morris Weitz, Martha Nussbaum, and Eileen John, among others.[1] At the same time, literary cognitivism has attracted several criticisms from philosophers. One philosophical anti-cognitivist argument points out that literature is not some special source of knowledge, since all of the “truths” allegedly found in fiction can be easily acquired from non-literary sources.[2] Another anti-cognitivist criticism points out the difficulties in attributing philosophical claims like “compassion to those in need outweighs strict obedience to the law” to literary works like *Les Misérables*. Such a claim requires a certain kind of philosophical defense, something along the lines of what one would find in a treatise by Immanuel Kant or John Stuart Mill. However, literary works like *Les Misérables* almost never contain the kinds of explicit philosophical arguments or evidence that is needed to support such assertions.[3]

But what is probably the strongest philosophical argument against cognitivism is also the simplest one. According to this line of argument, the main reason why we cannot learn anything about the real world from reading literary works is because literary works are fictional. Fictional characters do not exist, the things that fictional characters say and do, do not actually happen, and all the things that are gleaned from this—i.e., the profound truths about the human condition we supposedly learn from literature—are based on nothing real.[4] For example, Antigone is not and never was a real person. Her brother’s corpse was not a real corpse that was really desecrated, she did not really bury it, and she did not really die for her defiance of the laws of Thebes. How then are readers supposed to learn anything meaningful about real-life things like justice, the dichotomy between the laws of humans and the higher law of heaven, or the culture of ancient Greece from the nonexistent goings-on of nonexistent entities like Antigone? There is an unbridgeable divide between the nonexistent realm of fiction and real life. Because of this, argues the anti-cognitivist, there is no reason to believe any lessons, insights, truths, or morals allegedly gleaned from fiction could be applicable to real life concerns and issues.

Since cognitivism about literature is such a widely held and important intuition within the humanities, it is worth considering how to respond to this philosophical challenge. Interestingly enough there is another view that has developed in contemporary philosophy of literature known as “fictional realism” that, at first glance, appears perfectly poised to respond to the anti-cognitivist objection just discussed. Fictional realism is the claim that fictional characters—things like Antigone, Hamlet, Shere Khan, the city of Minas Tirath, and the like—actually do exist. According to a fictional realist, fictional characters are full-fledged, metaphysically respectable entities. Ophelia and Minas Tirath are as existent and as much a part of the real world as Kierkegaard and Copenhagen are.

It must be noted that fictional realism did not develop as a specific response to anti-cognitivism about literature. As a philosophical position it developed completely independently from debates over cognitivism. Fictional realism grew out of a late nineteenth-century debate about how to make sense of sentences like “Pegasus is a winged horse” that appeared to attribute properties to nonexistent (and occasionally fictional) objects.[5] Nearly all contemporary philosophical discussion of fictional realism has also treated it as independent and distinct from issues surrounding cognitivism.

Nonetheless it seems fictional realism should be perfectly poised to respond to anti-cognitivist concerns. The anti-cognitivist argument rests on the assumption that fictional characters, the worlds they inhabit, and the things that they say and do, are not real at all. The challenge for cognitivists then becomes explaining how we still can learn something about the real world from these nonexistent things. And it turns out that it is very difficult to establish contact between the realm of the nonexistent and the real world. But fictional realism easily bridges this divide. It demolishes the distinction between real life and fiction. According to fictional realism, fictional characters are *bona fide* objects, as much a part of the real world as numbers, atoms, trees, and people. If fictional characters are part of the real world, then surely we can learn things about the real world from them. So initially it appears that fictional realism could provide solid support for cognitivism.

However, I will argue here that despite these promising appearances, fictional realism is, in fact, incompatible with literary cognitivism. Treating fictional characters as full-fledged, real entities actually makes it *more difficult* for us to learn anything meaningful about the non-fictional world by reading works of literature. As a result, those who are interested in a philosophical defense of literary cognitivism must look elsewhere for assistance. And those who are committed to fictional realism for other philosophical reasons would do well to consider whether realism’s anti-cognitivist implications are a tolerable consequence of the view.

2. Fictional Realism

Fictional realism of course raises a question, if fictional characters are real things just what sorts of things are they? Even if we grant that Ophelia and Minas Tirath exist and are as real as Kierkegaard and Copenhagen, the former still seem to be very different *kinds* of things from the latter. Among fictional realists there is significant dispute about exactly what sort of object fictional characters are. The most popular and influential positions on the matter have been to view fictional characters as Meinongian non-existents, as Platonic types, or as abstract artifacts.[6] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the relative merits and drawbacks of each of these positions. Suffice to say, what all philosophers who adopt a fictional realist position seem to agree upon is that fictional characters are *abstract* objects—that is, non-physical, non-spatial, non-concrete objects. Fictional characters would fall roughly into the same category as other abstract objects like numbers, mortgages, and laws. Although the number two, a mortgage, and the speed limit on the New Jersey Turnpike have no mass or physical extension in space, these things are still taken to be real, existing objects that are just as real as physical things like a house or the New Jersey Turnpike itself. So it is with Hamlet, Ophelia, Ophelia's willow tree, and other fictional characters.

For philosophers, an important feature of an entity's being a real object is that it definitively has and lacks certain properties. The New Jersey Turnpike, for example, has the properties of being 122 miles long and being made of asphalt and lacks the property of being made of cotton candy. As a result, statements of predication referring to real entities have truth values; the sentence "The New Jersey Turnpike is made of asphalt" is a true sentence and the sentence "The New Jersey Turnpike is made of cotton candy" is a false sentence. Under fictional realism, the same applies to fictional characters. Hamlet, for example, has the property of being a prince and lacks the property of being a winged horse. The sentence "Hamlet is a prince" is a true sentence and the sentence "Hamlet is a winged horse" is a false sentence.

This simple and rather uninteresting observation is actually quite important for fictional realism. Both historically and today, fictional realists have defended their position by appealing to commonly held intuitions about sentences like "Hamlet is a prince" and "Hamlet is a winged horse." Most people would agree that the first sentence is true and the second sentence is false. However, if one is an anti-realist about fictional characters and says that things like Hamlet do not exist at all, these two sentences would no longer be true and false; they would become completely meaningless. For how can something that is mere nothingness truly be or not be a prince or a winged horse? The notion that sentences like "Hamlet is a winged horse" are not just false but utterly meaningless seems to contradict ordinary beliefs and everyday intuitions about fiction. Fictional realists argue that the only way to account for our intuitions that sentences like "Hamlet is a prince" and "Hamlet is a winged horse" have truth values is to postulate fictional characters as existent objects.[7]

3. "According to the Story"

Not all statements of predication referring to fictional characters are the same. Fictional realists generally draw a distinction between two contexts in which we say, think, or write things about fictional characters. To borrow terminology used by Amie Thomasson, we say some things about fictional characters in an "external" context and say other things about fictional characters in an "internal" context.[8] The external context is used whenever we speak of fictional characters as fictional characters, recognizing that fictional characters are very different sorts of things from real-life persons and objects. For example, we use the external context whenever we say things like “Hamlet was created by Shakespeare,” “Fagin is an anti-Semitic stereotype,” and “Laura Wingfield was inspired by Tennessee Williams’ sister Rose.”

The internal context is used whenever we speak of fictional characters as they are described by their stories (or by interpretations of their stories). Using the internal context always involves a certain amount of pretense. We pretend that characters like Fagin and Laura Wingfield are not fictional characters, but rather real-life, nonfictional, spatio-temporal people who perform certain actions, who think certain thoughts, who can be psycho-analyzed, who can be morally evaluated, and the like. We use the internal context whenever we say things like “Hamlet was created by Gertrude and the murdered king,” “Ophelia probably drowned herself,” “Fagin is dishonest,” and “Laura Wingfield is emotionally troubled.”

All of these sorts of sentences are statements of predication; that is, these sentences attribute various properties to fictional characters. Now a standard fictional realist move is to say that whenever a statement of predication occurs in the internal context, there is always an implicit “predicate modifier” involved.[9] Usually this predicate modifier takes the form “according to the story.” What this means is that whenever I use the internal context to say that a fictional character has a certain property, the property I attribute to the character is not exactly the same property that I might attribute to a nonfictional entity, even if I use the same word or words to describe that property. For instance, when I say, “Ophelia is Danish,” strictly speaking I am not saying that she has the simple, basic property of being Danish that a nonfictional entity like Kierkegaard has. Kierkegaard has the property of being Danish *simpliciter*. But Ophelia, being a fictional character, has a different property, the property of being Danish according to the story. When I say, “Ophelia is Danish” what I am *really* saying—according to fictional realists—is “Ophelia is Danish according to the story.” I am implicitly attributing a different property to Ophelia from the property I would attribute to Kierkegaard. Ophelia does not have the property of being Danish *simpliciter*, like Kierkegaard does. Ophelia cannot have the property of being Danish *simpliciter* because she is a fictional character. Rather Ophelia has the property of being Danish according to the story. And, very importantly, the property of being Danish according to the story is quite different from the property of being Danish *simpliciter*.

Another way of looking at this is that for a fictional realist, all the properties that any object might have fall into one of two categories: *simpliciter* properties and according to the story properties. *Simpliciter* properties are always completely different properties from according to the story properties, even if we use the same words to describe them in ordinary speech, thought, and writing; being Danish *simpliciter* is as different from the property of being Danish according to the story as it is different from the property of being blue. As far as fictional characters are concerned, they possess both *simpliciter* and according to the story properties. The *simpliciter* properties that a fictional character has are the ones typically attributed to it under the external context of discourse. Ophelia has the property of being created by Shakespeare *simpliciter*, and the property of being a fictional character *simpliciter*. But all of the properties that fictional characters have according to internal discourse are according to the story properties, which are different from their analogous *simpliciter* properties. Ophelia does not have the property of drowning *simpliciter*, like Percy Shelley did; she has the separate and distinct property of drowning according to the story. Fagin is not dishonest *simpliciter* like Charles Ponzi was; he is dishonest according to the story, again an entirely different matter from being dishonest *simpliciter*. Laura Wingfield is not emotionally troubled *simpliciter* like Rose Williams was; she is emotionally troubled according to the story. And so on.

While all of this might sound quite convoluted, there is a very good reason why fictional realists resort to predicate modifiers like “according to the story.” The most common objection to fictional realism is that it commits us to the existence of contradictory and ontologically disreputable entities.[10] One of the most glaring contradictions involving fictional characters is that they are said, by fictional realists, to be non-physical, but are also routinely given properties like drowning or being a tiger that only concrete physical entities can have. Surely it is incoherent for fictional realists to say that Shere Khan exists as some sort of abstract object, yet at the same time insist that the sentence “Shere Khan is a tiger” is true. The property of being a tiger is something only a concrete, spatio-temporal entity can have—it involves possessing specific genes, having a particular musculoskeletal structure, being native to certain areas of Asia, and so on. Clearly no abstract entity—an entity that by definition has no genes, no muscles, no bones, and no location in space—can be a tiger.

But by using a predicate modifier like “according to the story” fictional realists can dodge this problem. Whenever one says something like “Shere Khan is a tiger,” one is using internal discourse where there is always an implicit use of the “according to the story” predicate modifier. Shere Khan does not actually have the property of being a tiger *simpliciter*. Instead he has the property of being a tiger according to the story. While no abstract entity, like a fictional character, can have the property of being a tiger *simpliciter*, a fictional character can have the totally different property of being a tiger according to the story.

Using a predicate modifier also allows fictional realists to deal with characters that have contradictory properties. For example, imagine a story written about the adventures of Alexius the round square. It would be quite bad, logically speaking, for fictional realists to have to admit that there really exists an object, Alexius, who is both round and square. But fictional realists can respond by pointing out that statements like “Alexius is round” and “Alexius is square” take place in the internal discourse and involve implicit “according to the story” modifiers. Alexius is not round *simpliciter* or square *simpliciter*. Rather Alexius has the properties of being round according to the story and being square according to the story. While it would indeed violate the law of non-contradiction for one thing to be both round *simpliciter* and square *simpliciter*, no such contradiction is involved when one thing is both round according to the story and square according to the story. The latter two properties are completely different properties from the former.

4. Cognitivism Reconsidered

Fictional realists must draw a sharp distinction between *simpliciter* properties and according to the story properties in order to defend the logical integrity of their view. Unfortunately it is this use of the "according to the story" predicate modifier that poses serious problems for the compatibility of fictional realism and literary cognitivism.

Cognitivism claims that by reading certain literary works, we learn something about important features of the real world like morality, society, or philosophy. These profound claims about the human condition are found within the texts of various literary works, usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly. What are some of the important truths, lessons, and insights that great literature imparts to us, according to cognitivism? Here I will use an example from Jerome Stolnitz's article "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art." While Stolnitz is not a fictional realist and is only concerned with cognitivism in this article, his remarks have a good deal of relevance to my project here.

According to Stolnitz, from *Pride and Prejudice* we can allegedly learn psychological truths like "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart."[11] This is supposed to be a universal and generalizable truth about the human condition. But Austen's text never explicitly says, "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart." Instead this proposition appears to supervene on the fictional characters of *Pride and Prejudice* and their properties. One gleans the truth "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart" from the characters Darcy and Elizabeth, the properties they are said to have, the words they speak, the actions they perform, the emotions they have, and the way in which they interact with each other and other characters. Darcy initially appears unfriendly, Elizabeth believes Wickham's lies, Wickham is superficially charming, and so on.

In his discussion of this example, Stolnitz notes that all of the things underlying *Pride and Prejudice*'s "teaching" that "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart" are purely fictional. As he puts it, Elizabeth and Darcy's "motivations and behavior respond to and are thus largely shaped by these other people, fictional all, and to each other, of course, fictional too. [. . .] the psychologies of Miss Bennet and Mr. Darcy are fleshed out and specified within the fiction only."[12] Put in fictional realist terms, statements like "Darcy appears to be unfriendly" and "Elizabeth believes Wickham's lies" occur in the internal context of fictional discourse. These statements always contain the "according to the story" modifier. Therefore, for a fictional realist, it is not the case that Elizabeth believes Wickham's lies *simpliciter*. Instead Elizabeth believes Wickham's lies according to the story, an entirely different property.

Likewise, Darcy does not have the property of appearing unfriendly *simpliciter*; he has the property of appearing unfriendly according to the story. Wickham does not lie *simpliciter*; he lies according to the story. He is not superficially charming *simpliciter*, he is superficially charming according to the story.

Where does this leave the "teaching" of *Pride and Prejudice* that "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart"? It also appears to be a statement about fiction that takes place in the internal context. It is based on nothing but what happens in the world of the story: what the characters think, say, and do and what happens to them as a result. So this statement also contains an "according to the story" predicate modifier. Strictly speaking, then, a reader cannot learn "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart *simpliciter*" from *Pride and Prejudice*. Instead all a reader can learn is "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart according to the story."

This is, of course, not the sort of thing cognitivists believe literature can teach us. As Stolnitz says, "many of them have insisted that art brings to light, above all, human character—the hidden, unvoiced, perhaps, apart from art, the unknown impulses and affects that stir and move our inner and then outer beings. They will settle for nothing less than psychological truths about people in the great world, truths universal."[13] In other words, cognitivism holds that literary works give readers knowledge of *simpliciter* truths. Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart *simpliciter*. Compassion to people in need outweighs obedience to the law *simpliciter*. Guilt and self-rationalization have such-and-such effects on the psyche *simpliciter*. But under fictional realism, literature can never make claims to *simpliciter* truths like these. Instead, all that a reader can learn from a work of fiction is what is true according to the story. That includes claims about psychology that are true according to the story, claims about morality that are true according to the story, and claims about philosophy that are true according to the story—in short, all of the valuable insights and truths about the real world and real human condition that cognitivists claim we can access by reading great works of literature.

Conclusion

In this essay I hope to have shown why literary cognitivism is incompatible with fictional realism due to the use of the "according to the story" modifier. According to fictional realism, the only truths a reader can learn from a literary work are statements about what is true according to the story, which undercuts cognitivism. A fictional realist is forced to conclude that we can learn nothing profound about the real world and the real human condition from reading works of fictional literature. Whether this consequence is tolerable or not, is something that fictional realists would do well to consider.

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Endnotes

1. Morris Weitz, *Philosophy in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963); Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Eileen John, "Art and Knowledge," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2005), 417–429. See also Noel Carroll, "Art and the Moral Realm," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 126–151; Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 3–26; Jerrold Levinson, "Messages in Art," in *Art and Its Messages*, ed. Stephen Davies (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 70–83.

2. Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," in *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings*, eds. Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 317–323. First published in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992): 191–200.

3. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

4. John Gibson, "Cognitivism and the Arts," *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008): 1–17; Colin Radford, "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volumes* 49 (1975): 67–80; Stolnitz, 318–319.

5. The nineteenth-century debate can be seen as originating with John Stuart Mill. See Mill, *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive* (London: 1843), 66, 103–104, 159, 188, 200. The most noteworthy responses to Mill came from Franz Brentano. See Brentano, "The Distinction Between Mental and Physical Phenomena," in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. Roderick Chisholm (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1960); Brentano, "Genuine and Fictitious Objects," in Chisholm;

Brentano, “Presentation and Judgment Form Two Distinct Fundamental Classes,” in Chisholm.

6. For a discussion of Meinong’s view of fiction, see Venanzio Raspa, “Fictional and Aesthetic Objects: Meinong’s Point of View,” in *Modes of Existence*, eds. Andrea Bottani and Richard Davies (Piscataway: Transaction Books, 2006), 47–80. Neo-Meinongian accounts of fictional realism are found in Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) and Edward Zalta, *Abstract Objects* (The Netherlands: Reidel, 1983). Nicholas Wolterstorff advocates a Platonic version of fictional realism in *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). The seminal defense of the artifactualist theory of fictional realism is Amie Thomasson’s *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Thomasson also presents artifactualism in “Fictional Characters and Literary Practices,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 157–183; “The Ontology of Art,” in *The Blackwell Guide of Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 78–92; “The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 221–229. Additional defenses of artifactualist fictional realism are found in David Braun, “Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names,” *Nous* 39 (2005): 596–631 and Nathan Salmon, “Nonexistence,” *Nous* 32 (1998): 277–319.\

7. This argument is found in Charles Crittenden, *Unreality: The Metaphysics of Fictional Objects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 95; Robert Howell, “Fictional Objects: How They Are and How They Aren’t,” *Poetics* 8 (1979): 152; Parsons, 52–54; Maria Reicher, “Two Interpretations of ‘According to a story’,” in *Modes of Existence*, eds. Andrea Bottani and Richard Davies (Piscataway: Transaction Books, 2006), 153–160; Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 5–6; Peter van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” in *Ontology, Identity, and Modality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

8. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 105–111.

9. See David Lewis, “Truth in Fiction,” in *Philosophical Papers: Volume I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 262; Howell, 138; Reicher, 154–157; Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 94–95; Achille Varzi, “The Talk I Was Supposed to Give,” in *Modes of Existence*, eds. Andrea Bottani and Richard Davies (Piscataway: Transaction Books, 2006), 132.

10. Examples like this are discussed in Anthony Everett, “Against Fictional Realism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 102 (2005): 624–649.

11. Stolnitz, 318.

12. Stolnitz, 319.

13. Stolnitz, 318–319.