

Jukka Mikkonen's *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* elegantly presents new arguments to advance the research project known as literary cognitivism. Broadly, literary cognitivists try to defend two claims: 1) literature impacts our cognitive standing; 2) a literary work's cognitive value explains its value *qua* literary art. This book provides novel elaborations of both theses and forwards timely methodological proposals useful and provocative for both philosophers of literature and art at large.

The book's four chapters, which can be read together or separately, attend to a central discrepancy between the kinds of cognition that cognitivists and anti-cognitivists traditionally dispute over, and the way in which actual audiences, both professional critics and non-professional readers, appreciate works of literary art. A recurrent theme throughout the book is that seeking cognitive value is a genuine part of literary practice, but the way it is realized rarely involves the mere transferral of knowledge. Rather, Mikkonen argues that literary works help audiences to achieve *understanding* of themselves and their place in their social world.

This argument emerges from Mikkonen's proposal for a methodology bound by three constraints. First, literary cognitivism must be conducted as a form of metacriticism. Since imagination, narrative-making, and cognitive improvement are at work all the time in all kinds of contexts beyond literature, the literary cognitivist should look to criticism for evidence of what makes these features distinctly *literary*. Second, literary cognitivism should be constrained by actual literary practice, captured not just in professional art criticism, but also in literary historical and sociological reception studies. Third, it must pay attention close to actual individual readers' experiences of engaging and living with literature. Throughout,

care is taken to engage not only with the relevant philosophy, but also considerations from an admirably wide range of literary scholars, writers, psychologists, cognitive scientists and readers.

Chapter 1 directs this method towards a central theme in the philosophy of literature: the role of imagination in engaging with fiction. Two influential theories of fiction, from Kendall Walton and Gregory Currie, develop accounts in which readers of fictions make-believe that they are reading someone's reports of actual events, which mandate or intend certain appropriate imaginings in their readers, and mark other imaginative responses as inappropriate.¹ Mikkonen moves against this view by arguing that whilst this might make sense of many kinds of fiction, *literary* fictions also pique our appreciative interest by eschewing clear and complete reports. Instead, readers often find pleasure in imaginatively exploring the ambiguities, gaps and problems intentionally presented within literary fictions. Mikkonen claims that the kind of imagination that literature often distinctly calls for is not a passively receptive *attitude*, but rather collaborative *activity* with a literary work, readers using their own cognitive and imaginative skills to complement and concretize a work's narrative indeterminacies.

As this thesis is developed, care is taken to tend to the worry that emphasising these features elides the proper object of literary appreciation – the artwork itself – with the contingent, idiosyncratic commitments readers bring with them. In response, Mikkonen digs into this imaginative and cognitive overlap between artwork and audience, casting doubt on the ease of separating the two parties. Instead of seeing literary works as *objectively* containing insights

¹ Kendall Walton, *Mimesis and Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

and appropriate imaginings that are recovered by competent readers, literary practice is found to actually motivate a *relational* approach. Mikkonen argues that the imaginative and, in turn, cognitive effects are frequently dependent on “the reader’s literary competence and the interpretive frame they use, partly on the reader’s background knowledge on which the fiction operates and partly on the reader’s interest at the time.” (116)

The cognitive dimensions of this view are developed through the central two chapters. First up is a study of the cognitive importance of narrative. Mikkonen argues that anti-cognitivist critiques of the unreliability of human narrative-making are out of step with the conception of narrativity in literary studies. Here, narratives are not simply seen as means to accurately record events, but rather means to “convey understanding, as they [narratives] do not only store information but structure and value it” (52) Developing this idea fuels the book’s epistemological engine. From recent work in epistemology, Mikkonen draws out the idea that understanding is distinct from knowledge. Whereas knowledge usually aims at atomic propositions, understanding aims at a comprehensive view of some topic, grasping not just the relevant truths, but the interconnections between bits of information and their relative significance. Within this tradition, it is commonly thought that understanding is processual, arriving by degrees, and, more controversially, that it is compatible with the presence of falsehoods. Mikkonen combines these insights, particularly the latter two thoughts which are particularly apt for making sense of fictional narratives, with the sense of understanding found in the hermeneutic or *verstehen* tradition. Here, understanding is the concept that fits our investigation of ourselves and our social world. In inquiring into these topics, we attempt to come to grips with our own conceptions and misconceptions of ourselves and our values, narratives showing us how our emotional states develop and change over time or how we could reshape our grasp of abstract concepts like revenge or obligation. These two positions

come together into a theory of self-understanding that involves agents engaging with artistic fictions to help explore their own conceptions of the world over time.

In the third chapter literary modernism is used as a test case for how this view interacts with Mikkonen's methodological commitments. Scholars of modernist literature have taken keen interest its foregrounding literary-epistemological explorations of reality and the workings of the mind. Yet ambiguity and openness are replete within these cognitively inclined works. Mikkonen points out that just as often as literary works clarify, they also obscure and confuse and leave us not knowing what to think at all. Again, this is often a key point of aesthetic interest in appreciation of modernist literature, so it should be of interest to the *literary* cognitivist. Mikkonen's innovation is to bring ambiguity firmly into the fold of cognitive value. Puzzling over ambiguity has a critical dimension, since it "wakes one up and reminds one that things are not as simple as one has thought. It leads to understanding that we tend to resort to simplifications, conventions and dogmatic thinking, and it tells us that we should be wary of such dispositions, to remember the difference between the abstract model and life." (81-2) But it also has a more positive dimension, as it "encourages us to seek answers and to ask questions." (82)

I found these points highly intriguing, but I found they raised two problems. First, I wondered if Mikkonen's view emphasis on ambiguity risks lending literature only fleeting cognitive value. Certainly, there is something cognitively important to challenging bad assumptions and opening up exploration. But once we begin to work through the ambiguity and overcome it in various ways, we may think we have reached a state of greater cognitive value. Elisabeth Camp has recently shown that idealisations, models, metaphors and open-questions, while useful at the initial exploratory stages of scientific inquiry, are often washed out as inquiry

progresses.² Depending on how you frame inquiry and its ends, a similar thing could happen with literature, making its difficulties useful for a short while, but ultimately dispensable once we resolve these problems. So, it would be interesting to see if the fleeting and potentially minor cognitive value of ambiguity is a concern or not for Mikkonen's view.

Second, perhaps in response to this kind of worry, Mikkonen detaches talk of cognitive value from cognitive improvement, holding that ambiguity alters our degree of understanding without necessarily advancing it. I again worry that it sets the epistemic bar too low. This view clashes with the way degrees are often used in epistemology to mark movements between good and bad understandings of a given topic.³ It is possible to have a bad understanding of a topic, and still say that this is some cognitive achievement. But since understanding is also used as a cognitive success term, epistemologists are often more interested in how understanding improves and regresses. Without appealing to the idea of improvement, one might worry that Mikkonen's view leads to the idea that literature is cognitively valuable if it gives us any level of understanding whatsoever, even a bad understanding. For many this might seem like an unimpressive conclusion, especially when we tend to praise advances in understanding and critique retreats or stasis. If we want to praise artworks for their cognitive value, a more fleshed-out story of how we get from cognitive transformation via confusion and exploration to actual, non-trivial cognitive improvement is still needed.

The book's most compelling arguments are saved for the finale. Chapter four takes on a new

² Elisabeth Camp, 'Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding' in Stephen Grimm (ed) *Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

³ See, for instance, Christopher Kelp, *Inquiry, Knowledge, and Understanding* (Oxford: OUP, 2021).

problem facing cognitivism: the need to show that there is empirical evidence that literature improves our cognitive standing. As Gregory Currie has found, the problem is that cognitivists have uniformly shirked any interest in answering this question, preferring the comfort of armchair theorising over the discomfort of the laboratory.⁴ Unfortunately, Currie reports that once we look at the empirical findings, the results are dim. Psychological studies simply do not yet provide any clear evidence for the kinds of epistemic boons cognitivists are accustomed to invoke.

Mikkonen's response is both bold and measured. First, they develop a critical toolbox for cognitivists to better assess the psychological literature. Mikkonen advances nine questions that the philosopher can apply to empirical studies supportive and critical of cognitivism, targeting the background assumptions about the concept of literature, epistemic advancement and the practice of reading which are informing the studies. For the cognitivist unfamiliar with empirical study trying to grapple with these studies, Mikkonen's carefully constructed critical filter is an invaluable resource. Second, Mikkonen suggests that if a cognitivism focussing on self-understanding is the best way to link philosophy and literary practice then, up until now, the psychological literature has been assessing the wrong kinds of response. Focussing only on reactions to texts read in artificial settings targeting our comprehension of various truths simply doesn't track the way readers actually grapple with literature. In a surprising move, Mikkonen points out that we already have evidence of the advancement of understanding in the form of professional literary criticism, reception studies of non-professional general readerships, and the recorded personal reflections of actual readers. It is in these kinds of qualitative studies of actual reading experience, sometimes covering the course of many years, that Mikkonen thinks we can see the cognitive value of literature unfold

⁴ Gregory Currie, *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, 2020).

in its natural practical environment.

This book acknowledges that the field of literature and the styles of reading it requires are so vast and varied that it can be hard to provide any one-size-fits-all theory. Yet for all the emphasis on the details of reading practices, I was slightly disappointed in the lack extended literary analysis undertaken. Literary examples are all too frequently given only brief glosses and exegesis. And whilst it is salutary to see serious focus placed on the specifics of modernist literature, the book is still mainly focussed on novelistic narrative fiction, poetry and non-narrative literary prose thin on the ground. In a book this compact – the main text spanning only 118 pages – choices clearly have to be made, so hopefully future work will see expansion into these areas.

This book offers a carefully measured defence of cognitivism that confidently takes on classic and emerging problems, both at the level of theory and methodology. Though I feel downplaying literature's need to produce cognitive improvement requires more defence, for cognitivists of all stripes the exciting arguments found here should be of serious interest.