



Understanding as Transformative Activity: Radicalizing Neo-Cognitivism for Literary Narratives

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Received: 12 September 2023 / Revised: 12 September 2023 / Accepted: 13 September 2023 /
Published online: 28 September 2023
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Abstract

Mikkonen’s new book and his emphasis on understanding should be regarded as an important contribution to the contemporary debate on the cognitive value of literary narratives. As I shall argue, his notion of understanding can also help explain how literature is existentially valuable. In so doing, his account can support a radicalized contemporary neo-cognitivism according to which literature can affect us existentially and lead to a personal transformation.

Keywords Aesthetic cognitivism · Neo-cognitivism · Understanding · What it is like · Transformative experience · Transformative activity

The question about whether literature conveys knowledge has become one of the central concerns of contemporary analytical aesthetics and it has sparked a virulent debate within the philosophy of literature between cognitivists who answer the question affirmatively and anti-cognitivists who regard cognitive benefits from literature as impossible, trivial or not essential to it (for an overview, see Huemer, 2019). Yet, to make the debate even more intricate, among cognitivists there has been in general little agreement regarding the kind of cognitive gains provided by literature. The most explored candidates in the current debate are propositional, practical, phenomenal, conceptual, and moral knowledge, to mention but a few. In its early days, the analytical discussion on the cognitive value of literature used to work with the idea that the cognitive gains obtained thanks to literary narratives are better understood in terms of propositional knowledge. But more recently, the debate has evolved toward “neo-cognitivist” positions (Gibson, 2008; Mikkonen, 2015). This newly coined expression encompasses a series of approaches which operate with an

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enlarged concept of cognition and which explain the value of literature in terms of gaining insight, expanding horizons, enlarging conceptual frames, or understanding.

Jukka Mikkonen's new book *Philosophy, Literature, and Understanding* (2021) has to be placed precisely against this neo-cognitivist backdrop. In this work, he opts decidedly for the cognitivist side. Mikkonen's defense of cognitivism will not be new to anyone familiar with his work. In fact, already in his previous book *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction* (2013), he argued for a cognitivist position. Yet, while in the earlier work, he explained the cognitive gains of literature in terms of propositional knowledge, in the new book, he explores non-propositional cognitive benefits. More precisely, Mikkonen develops an account that makes the neo-cognitivist notion of understanding central for explaining the cognitive value of literature. Again, this is not something out of the blue, for Mikkonen has long argued for the importance of understanding in his academic articles (e.g., Mikkonen, 2015 and 2019). In my view, with this change of focus from propositional knowledge to understanding, Mikkonen is not necessarily rejecting his previous position. Rather, this new focus should be seen as complementing his earlier interests. Already in his previous book, he showed that the question about the cognitive value of literature is not easy to answer given that the terms "knowledge" and "cognitive value" are extremely ambiguous and rich in themselves. Indeed, for Mikkonen, the cognitive value of literature has to be explained not only in terms of "knowledge" ("justified true belief" of different kinds), but also in terms of "understanding" and "skills". However, in his new book, he argues clearly for the view that "the concept of understanding outperforms the concept of knowledge in its ability to capture the various cognitive values of literary narratives" (2021, 10). As a result, he proposes a shift from knowledge to understanding.

The notion of understanding has its origins in the discussions about the differences between humanities and the sciences in the 19th century; its development was fueled by the work of authors such as Dilthey and it plays an important role in the hermeneutical and phenomenological tradition. As Mikkonen (2021, 70) notes, the notion traveled to analytic epistemology and from there to aesthetics. According to Mikkonen (2021, 51), the analytical tradition – using the notion of understanding employed by epistemologists such as Elgin, Cooper, Kvanvig and Zagzebski – comes close to the hermeneutical and phenomenological tradition in acknowledging that understanding is not only an epistemic achievement of its own kind; it is also more important than possessing truths and knowledge. Understanding is holistic, entails seeing and creating connections between bits of knowledge and has a processual nature; it involves giving significance to individual truths; it is non-factive, comes in degrees, is largely non-propositional and can be achieved in many ways. Understanding can explain why knowledge is valuable. The notion of understanding goes beyond realistic representation, verisimilitude, and propositional knowledge. It is in this regard that understanding is close to a "hermeneutic phenomenological conception of knowledge, or knowledge of a person's comprehensive experience of the world" (Mikkonen, 2021, 101). In this context, several contemporary epistemologists have argued that the goal of epistemic enterprises is understanding rather than knowledge. We can know something without understanding it.

According to Mikkonen, “narrative explanations and understanding seem close companions” (2021, 52). In his view, literary narratives convey understanding insofar as they do not just store information but structure and value it. Moreover, the notion of understanding captures the fact that the cognitive benefits of literature might come in degrees and “are not instant and straightforward” (2021, 3). The cognitive benefits are obtained in the course of reading, they involve a distinctive imaginative engagement on the part of the reader, and they are embedded in a literary practice which includes critical discourse and collective metacognition. Rather than giving answers, literature often challenges our conceptions and invites conceptual exploration. As Mikkonen puts it, literature triggers “thought-processes that might lead the reader to examine and revise her intuitive conceptions” (2021, 10). Importantly, for Mikkonen, the notion of understanding changes the discussion on the cognitive value of literature because, among other things, it shows that the cognitive impact of literature depends also on the reader and implies a shift of attention to experience “marked by complex imagining, engagement with narrative and shifts of perspective and purpose” (2021, 118). In sum, knowledge is too narrow a concept to successfully explain “our epistemically beneficial use of narratives in our lives” (2021, 42).

The notion of understanding that we apply to the natural world cannot be applied directly to explain what it means to understand ourselves or the social world by means of literature. In particular, Mikkonen focuses on two aspects that one should attend to when exploring the cognitive value of literary narratives: processuality as a form to engage with narratives; and artificiality as our exploration of narratives in terms of artifacts. Regarding processuality, for Mikkonen, narratives have the ability to embody emotional and motivational meanings and to connect these meanings with the reader’s intentions. Narratives provide an insight into the processual dimension of the emotions and unfolding actions. They foster a particular model of attention and internalization. Artificiality is important insofar as we “gain insight into literary schemes and techniques of storytelling that affect our everyday stories” (2021, 56). For Mikkonen, being sensitive to narrative techniques increases our understanding of real-life narratives.

In the context of his defense of understanding, Mikkonen shows the cognitive value of confusion. Though the idea that the cognitive value of literature is not to provide knowledge but to advance the reader’s comprehension has been defended by other authors, it is a general trend among them to explain away confusion from literary experience. Indeed, while it has been underscored that conceptual enhancement consists in giving expression to conceptions which are not articulated, in revising conceptions, generating new cognitive frames or enriching frames, the cognitive benefits of confusion have been scarcely investigated. Yet, in his book, Mikkonen argues that “conceptual confusion related to literary cognition has to be examined a bit further” (2021, 76). Drawing on the works of Harrison, John, Novitz, Elgin and Davis, he argues that literary narratives make the reader explore new concepts. However, more radically than in any of these authors, Mikkonen defends the view that the confusion caused by literary works might contribute to our thinking by fostering conceptual enquires which might result in more doubt than insight.

Coming from a philosopher, this view might sound rather strange at first. Confusion is not only unpleasant; it also obstructs thought and action, whereas philosophy “is after illumination and clear and distinct ideas” (2021, 80). Yet, Mikkonen argues that the kind of confusion which is cognitively valuable differs from the feeling of confusion in practical life. While in real life confusion is unpleasant, in fiction the reader occupies the place of an observer and is in a safe position so that she can put beliefs and conceptions to the test. Moreover, not all forms of confusion associated with the literary experience are interesting from the point of view of their cognitive value. Mikkonen writes: “Confusion, in order to affect the reader’s reflections and be valuable, needs to be somehow intelligibly or aesthetically justified and intriguing. There has to be some sort of coherence or continuity or unity – or a reason to disturb them – so that the reader may engage and proceed with a work that confounds her” (2021, 81). Furthermore, different literary genres allow for different forms of indeterminacy. In short, the kind of confusion at stake here is that which appears when the reader’s beliefs and principles cannot construct a meaningful story. For Mikkonen, confusion contributes to understanding by leading us to the insight that we resort to “simplifications, conventions and dogmatic thinking” (2021, 81), reminding us about the gap between abstract model and life, encouraging us to find a solution to a dilemma or an unpleasant, complex situation, triggering thought-processes and stimulating cognitive skills. Confusion need not lead to a refinement or reorganization in order to be valuable: “The procedure, whether it leads to conceptual revision or not, is already significant, as we notice the complexity of a situation, become aware of our conceptual restrictions and are encouraged to seek answers” (2021, 83).

Mikkonen’s model is based on the idea of a continuity between the conceptual activity that takes place in literary interpretation and the reader’s actual conceptions. Against Lamarque and Olsen’s (1994) view that literary works provide concepts of their own realm of application and offer an imaginative rather than a discursive interpretation, Mikkonen claims that “it is one thing to say that literary interpretation requires conceptual adjustment and quite another thing to say that this contributes to the reader’s knowledge and thinking in general” (2021, 83–84). On this issue, he argues that concepts are tools to be applied to every context. In his view, we start reading with a standard understanding of the concept, and when we realize that a concept is used in a different sense, we then adopt the new sense.

With his book, Mikkonen offers a clever defense of understanding as a central concept to explain the cognitive benefits of literature. His arguments in favor of the cognitive value of understanding are convincing. The idea that understanding has a stronger explanatory power than knowledge is appealing, and one can only agree regarding the importance of a shift from knowledge to other cognitive benefits. Mikkonen’s book is erudite, well-informed, and clearly written. One aspect which is particularly valuable is that though the book is embedded in the analytical and Anglo-American aesthetic tradition, Mikkonen discusses and values approaches developed by proponents of the hermeneutical and phenomenological traditions. The book is a “must read” for all authors interested in the cognitive value of literature. In addition to providing a staunch defense of understanding, given the extended discussions of other positions in the debate, the work will also

be useful for those who are not familiar with the debate and want a general introduction to the issue.

That said, Mikkonen's focus on understanding should not lead us to overlook other important neo-cognitivist positions which explain the cognitive value of literature in non-propositional terms. I am thinking here about what I call "the experiential view", which explains the cognitive value of literature in terms of making the reader imaginatively acquainted with experiences. The experiential position enjoys many supporters. After being initially defended by Walsh (1969), its contemporary proponents include Gabriel (e.g., 2014), Schildknecht (2007), Reicher (2007), Döring (2001), and myself (Vendrell Ferran, 2018), among others. Though the experiential view is often regarded as defending that literature provides knowledge of "what it is like" to undergo a certain experience, we should be cautious about how to understand this expression. For the experiential view, the knowledge of "what it is like" is not to be understood as justified true beliefs about the phenomenal character of an experience. Rather, the expression refers to a kind of acquaintance with the qualitative feel of an experience thanks to our imagination. In the experiential view, literary narratives enable us to become imaginatively acquainted with certain experiences. Two remarks are in order here. First, given that the kind of cognitive gain is explained here in terms of acquaintance and not in terms of truth, acquaintance is neither right nor wrong, but it can be accurate and as such it can enrich our lives. Second, proponents of the experiential view do not argue that imagination can be a substitute for experience. Rather, they argue that via literature, we can come close to what it is like to undergo the experience in question. We do not undergo the experience thanks to literature, but we imagine undergoing it. The experiential view is a neo-cognitivist position insofar as it does not reduce the cognitive value of literary narratives to knowledge of truths, and it underscores its non-propositional dimension. Indeed, to become familiar with an experience by virtue of imagining it is not the same as to gain propositional knowledge about it. Experience (imaginative and non-imaginative) is experience and not knowledge (a difference already raised by Lamarque & Olsen, 1994, 373; Beardsley, 1981, 391; Hospers, 1946, 238). The experiential view is also neo-cognitivist in underscoring the cognitive powers of imagination and the importance of the reader's engagement with the literary narrative.

My thought here is that Mikkonen's view, which underscores understanding, as well as the experiential view presented above can be regarded as two powerful and complementary views that explain the cognitive value of literature in non-propositional terms. Though understanding is cognitively valuable insofar as literary narratives contribute to reorganizing our conceptual abilities rather than adding bits of information, we should not conclude from this that understanding is the unique cognitive value. To be clear, Mikkonen himself is aware that understanding is not the only cognitive value of literature, and he does not defend a value-monist position. Yet, his focus on understanding could lead one to overlook other non-propositional cognitive gains such as becoming imaginatively acquainted with an experience. At the same time, Mikkonen's focus on understanding should not lead us to think that understanding is the highest cognitive value. Though he argues that understanding is

higher than propositional knowledge, and I agree with him in this regard, the value of experience (imaginative and non-imaginative) as a form of contact with reality should not be neglected.

So far, I have summarized Mikkonen's position by embedding it in the contemporary debate. I have also shown the relevance of taking other non-propositional views, such as the experiential view, into account. In what follows, my aim is to show the role that his concept of understanding could play in the development of a radical form of neo-cognitivism, according to which the cognitive benefits of literature have an impact not only on the reader's cognition but also on her entire existence. An important hint of the radical neo-cognitivism I have in mind here can be found already in Beardsmore. In a text published in 1972 and insightfully entitled "Learning from a Novel", Beardsmore argues that there are forms of learning which cannot be reduced to Ryle's "knowing that" nor to his "knowing how". Beardsmore indicates that one of these forms of learning occurs precisely in those cases in which a reader's existence takes on a new significance after engaging with literature. In my view, Beardsmore's form of learning from literature can be perfectly explored in today's neo-cognitivist frame. The idea is that reading literature might lead to a transformation, which is existentially significant for the reader. This is the radical neo-cognitivism I have in mind. It is a form of neo-cognitivism because it explains the cognitive value of literature in non-propositional terms; it is radical because it links the cognitive with the existential gains.

Elsewhere, taking the experiential view as a point of departure, I have argued that becoming imaginatively acquainted with certain experiences might lead the reader to a personal change (Vendrell Ferran, 2023).¹ More precisely, I have argued that engaging with literary perspectives and becoming acquainted with certain experiences can be regarded as an activity which transforms the person we are. My thought here is that Mikkonen's understanding has similarly transformative powers. Certainly, this is not an issue that Mikkonen takes up in his book, at least not in the radical form I am suggesting here. Nevertheless, in my view, this is an important issue that helps to explain how what we learn from literature might have an impact in our lives which goes beyond a change in our cognitions. Understanding – just as having an imaginative experience – is one of these forms of learning from a novel which cannot be explained in terms of propositional or practical knowledge. Rather, it has to be explained in terms of a transformation of the person we are.

To develop my argument, let me introduce the technical notions of "transformative experience" and "transformative activity". According to L. A. Paul, an experience is transformative when it leads us to see the world in a new manner (2014, 8). In her view, experiences can be either epistemically or personally transformative. They are epistemically transformative when they provide us with new information. For her, eating durian is transformative in this sense because the taste of this fruit is very different from anything we already know. By contrast, a personally transformative experience changes our core preferences, ultimately changing how

¹ Learning truths might lead to transformation too. However, I am interested here only in those accounts typical of neo-cognitivist positions which underscore the processual and imaginative nature of the cognitive benefits of literature.

we experience ourselves and transforming us as persons (2014, 16–17). Becoming a parent is a good example of a personally transformative experience. For Paul, the most interesting cases are those in which an experience is transformative in both senses.

That said, for Paul, there are some insights which can only be gained by undergoing the relevant experience. However, in my view, our imaginative activities, on certain occasions, can also be transformative (Kind, 2020). In fact, if we agree with Beardsmore that there are forms of learning from a novel which are not only cognitively but also personally transformative, a personal change is a possible outcome of reading literature.² Such a possibility occurs when we become imaginatively acquainted with an experience by reading literature as well as when a literary narrative causes in us a state of confusion in which we try to understand a new concept. In trying to understand, we are engaged in a process that searches for meaning. This might change our cognitive structure, but it can also lead to a change in our preferences and values. For instance, if a situation which was familiar to us appears, through the course of our engagement with a narrative, under a totally different light, making some meanings available which differ substantially from those familiar to us, this might lead to a change in what we regarded as important or significant. These thoughts would require further elaborations, but I want to suggest here that Mikkonen's notion of understanding can help us to explain how reading literary narratives might lead to personal transformation.

Regarding Paul's transformative experiences, Callard distinguishes between two types: transformative revelations and transformative activities (2020, 149). Transformative revelations might happen at once, while transformative activities are something that we grow into, like learning a new language. Transformative activities affect our thinking and the way in which we live. Here the doing and learning are identical. Given that reading literature has a processual nature, involves our imagination, and presupposes a mobilization of the reader's psychology, understanding as well as undergoing an imaginative experience can be regarded as transformative activities rather than transformative revelations. In my view, the idea of a personal transformation in which our core preferences and values are changed captures Beardsmore's original intuition. This gives rise to a radical version of aesthetic cognitivism, according to which literary narratives can have an impact on the reader, leading one to personal change. In this frame, I think that Mikkonen's notion of understanding can be of help in developing a radical neo-cognitivism for literary narratives, one which underscores the power of reading to affect us existentially and to lead to personal transformation.

Mikkonen's book and his emphasis on understanding should be regarded as an important contribution to the contemporary debate on the cognitive value of literary narratives. As I have argued here, his notion of understanding can also help explain how literature is existentially valuable. In so doing, his account can support a radicalized contemporary neo-cognitivism.

² There are several applications of the notion of transformative experience to the fields of psychology, narrativity, art, and ethics (see Lambert & Schwenkler, 2020), but to my knowledge the application to the field of literary fiction is new.

Funding Work on this project was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Projekt: Mental Images and Imagination. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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