Truth, Justification, and Literary Merit

by

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Abstract

This thesis develops and defends a new version of an old view known as literary cognitivism, which holds that the merit of a literary work as such sometimes depends on its cognitive merit. The newness of my view lies in the way it recommends we think about the cognitive merits of a literary work as they relate to its literary merits. Whereas some cognitivists identify the cognitive merit of a literary work with the truth of its themes and others with its capacity to provide certain non-propositional forms of knowledge, I propose that the cognitive dimension most relevant to literary value is the extent to which it provides certain forms of justification for its themes. In particular, I emphasize two ways in which a literary work can justify its themes: one, by providing evidence that its themes are the products of an intellectually virtuous mind and, two, by expressing its themes within a richly coherent framework of beliefs. I argue that the literary-evaluative significance of these two forms of justification is implicit, in the first case, in literary critical judgments that refer to a work’s didacticism, and, in the second case, in judgments that refer to a work’s thematic coherence. Insofar as it bears on these sources of justification, I contend, the truth or falsity of some non-thematic propositions
can be relevant to literary value, though truth is generally not relevant at the thematic level.
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Introduction

It is commonly thought that great literature can be not only moving and beautiful but also illuminating. The focus of this thesis is on how to understand the nature of this illumination and its relevance to literary appreciation. In other words: what sort of cognitive or epistemic goods can we gain from literature and how does the capacity of a literary work to provide such goods relate to its value \textit{qua} literature?

These questions have deep historical roots. Plato speaks to them in the \textit{Republic} and \textit{Ion}, as does Aristotle in the \textit{Poetics}. They thus have claim to being some of oldest questions in the history of Western philosophy. Today they not only remain interesting in their own right but also connect up with important debates in ethics, epistemology, and metaphilosophy, for example, about the relation between ethical and aesthetic merit, the epistemic value of thought experiments, and the role of literature in moral philosophy. Their relevance extends beyond academic philosophy as well, to those actually engaged in such practices as writing, editing, criticizing, and teaching literature. These questions are thus interesting from both an historical and a contemporary perspective, and rich in both theoretical and practical implications.

This thesis will take a contemporary analytic approach to these questions, examining them, that is, mostly within the context of recent discussions among professional Anglo-American philosophers and with the aim of clarifying some of the relevant conceptual boundaries and relations. This is not to suggest that it will mainly be an exercise in defining concepts, however. Although I will offer accounts of some literary-evaluative concepts, in particular didacticism and thematic coherence, I will not go as far as defining them in the sense of specifying necessary and sufficient criteria.
And nowhere will I attempt anything like a definition of the grander concepts of literature or literary value, despite the fact that I will be making constant reference to them.

Indeed, in regard to these larger concepts, my strategy will be to assume as little as necessary. I take it that we can normally identify a work of literature when we see one and that the novels of Tolstoy, Dickens, Eliot, Lawrence, and Forster, the epics of Homer, Dante, and Milton, the plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Ibsen, and the poetry of Pope, Keats, and Dickinson are all uncontroversial cases. I also take it that literature can include some works of non-fiction, such as Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* or Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*. However, I will not presuppose any general account of what makes these works of literature count as such. In their influential *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen take an institutional approach, arguing that the concept of literature gets its meaning from the role it plays within an institutional practice, i.e. one “constituted by a set of conventions and concepts which both regulate and define the actions and products involved in the practice.”¹ In keeping with this type of account, my project might be construed as an investigation into some of the specific concepts and conventions proper to the institutional practice surrounding literature. However, my project might just as naturally be framed within other theoretical approaches to literature. Instead of an institutional account, for example, one might prefer an account of literature along the lines of Berys Gaut’s cluster theory of art, which defines the target concept in terms of a list of properties (e.g. possessing positive aesthetic properties, being expressive of emotion, being formally complex and coherent,  

being intellectually challenging, etc.), each of which counts towards the application of the concept but none of which is individually necessary or sufficient. In this case, one might construe my project as an attempt to identify more clearly some of the specific properties that belong on the list.

There may be some theories of literature that do not allow for the conclusions I reach or perhaps even the questions I pursue. Since these questions and conclusions arise from only the most minimal and intuitive assumptions about literature, however, any theory that is unable to accommodate them would seem to be an unpromising one. If there are any such theories then, so much the worse for them.

My assumptions regarding the value of literature will be almost as minimal as those regarding its nature. This is no mere coincidence. Given that the nature and value of literature are interdependent, it would be difficult to assume any particular account of the latter while remaining uncommitted to a theory of the former. Nor would this be desirable, since assuming any particular account of literary value might beg one of the main questions I hope to answer—namely, what kinds of epistemic merits are relevant to a work’s literary merits. But one might wonder how I plan to answer this question, if not by reference to some general account of literary merit.

While such an account might be useful for answering the questions I am interested in, it is far from necessary. Without knowing what ultimately makes something valuable from a literary standpoint, we can still learn a great deal about the sources of literary value by observing how those who evaluate literary works ordinarily go about doing so. The features of literary works on which readers and critics base their evaluative

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judgments and the reasons they give for counting these features relevant provide valuable evidence as to what sorts of things contribute to literary value and why. We can consult this evidence and draw important insights from it even if we have no full-fledged theory of literary value. Indeed, it is unclear how we could ever develop such a theory in the first place if this were not the case, since it seems that any reasonable attempt to do so would have to take this evidence into account.

Of course, we must be careful in evaluating this evidence. Anyone can express literary critical judgments, but not everyone’s judgments can be equally relied upon. Properly appreciating literature requires some knowledge and training, and it is obvious that more weight should be given to the judgments of those who are better informed and practiced. Accordingly, the types of judgments that will concern us here will mainly be those of professional critics (which fortunately are also better documented than those of lay readers). Yet we must make even further discriminations among these. For the judgments expressed by professional critics reflect a wide range of evaluative criteria, some of which are more widely shared and historically stable than others. Those that are less so are subject to the suspicion that they are not truly measures of literary value. In appealing to the actual practices of critics, we should therefore focus on those that are widespread and persistent, since it is these that have the strongest claim to embodying genuine literary norms.

One relevant such practice is the common use of the language of cognitive assessment in literary criticism. Critics often express praise or dispraise for literary works, that is, using terms such as “true,” “unrealistic,” “profound,” “shallow,” “intelligent,” “naïve,” and “insightful.” This practice strongly suggests the view, now
commonly known as cognitivism, that a work’s literary value is at least partly a function of its cognitive power. Within the Western literary critical tradition, this idea has enjoyed extremely wide acceptance. Some of its more famous proponents include Aristotle, Horace, Ben Johnson, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Leo Tolstoy, G.B. Shaw, F.R. Leavis, D.H. Lawrence, Lionel Trilling, and Aldous Huxley. It has also attracted the support of many recent philosophers and literary theorists, including Nelson Goodman, James Young, David Novitz, Wayne Booth, Richard Eldridge, Martha Nussbaum, Noël Carroll, Berys Gaut, Gregory Currie, and Matthew Kieran.

Admittedly, not everyone accepts cognitivism. Edgar Allen Poe and Oscar Wilde are often said to have denied it. And currently it has two notable foes in Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, whose influential *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* makes an impressive case against it. In this thesis I will not consider in detail the positive view of Lamarque and Olsen or any other anti-cognitivists. I will, however, address many of the most serious objections to cognitivism that its opponents have raised, including the claims that literary themes are generally banal and uninformative, that the value of literature seems distinctive from that of truth-seeking disciplines such as history, philosophy, and science, that literary works should be assessed on their “own terms” rather than by reference to the way the world is, that some literary works are better as such in virtue of prescribing incorrect moral views, and that literary critics do not generally argue over the truth value of themes.

Some cognitivists have traced these problems to the traditional assumption that literature’s cognitive value consists in its capacity to convey propositional knowledge or
truth, and have sought to avoid them by characterizing the cognitive value of literature instead in terms of its ability to yield some kind of non-propositional knowledge. In Chapter 1 I argue that neither of the two main types of theory that have resulted from this non-propositional approach is immune to these problems. Thus, no obvious advantage is gained by exchanging a propositional for a non-propositional view of literature’s cognitive value. I go on to argue, however, that there are considerable advantages to refocusing the propositional approach on justification rather than truth, inasmuch as doing so enables the propositionalist to deal much more convincingly with the standard objections to her view. The theory I propose, which I call justification-centered cognitivism, holds that the cognitive dimension most relevant to literary assessment is the extent to which a work provides certain kinds of justification for its thematic propositions.

The four chapters that follow are devoted to expanding, refining, and defending this proposal. In Chapter 2 I defend it against the argument that most literary works have no means of justifying their themes since they are fictional narratives and thus provide nothing in the way of discursive arguments or reports of actual events. In response to this objection I develop an account of how literary works can provide justification for their themes. The account I offer builds on the popular analogy between literary narratives and thought experiments, which I claim is useful for understanding how literary works can justify propositions they manifest at the “micro” level—i.e. the level of small-scale units of action and dialogue. However, I argue, the thought-experiment analogy obscures two factors that can be important to the justification of propositions manifested at the “macro” level (i.e. themes)—one, the coherence of the theme in relation to the other themes and
sub-thematic propositions manifested in the work, and, two, the intellectual character manifested by the author.³

Chapters 3 and 4 argue for the relevance of these two factors to literary evaluation. The relevance of the intellectual character of the author is demonstrated in Chapter 3 through an analysis of the literary critical concept of didacticism. According to this analysis, when critics fault a work for being didactic, it is often because the manner in which the author attempts to convey his message is so overt as to arouse suspicion of intellectual vices such as dogmatism, arrogance, and prejudice, which can undermine the justification the work provides for its themes. This analysis serves not only to reveal the literary critical significance of the author’s intellectual character but also to answer an anti-cognitivist challenge relating to didacticism. That is: if instruction is a literary value, as cognitivists claim, then why would we ever object to overt instruction? If my account of didacticism is correct, then objections to didactic literature often do not express qualms about instruction per se but about the quality of the epistemic goods on offer. Overt instruction in a work of literature is sometimes objectionable, therefore, precisely because it makes the work less valuable as a source of instruction.

Chapter 4 is similar to Chapter 3 in its general strategy. Like Chapter 3 it seeks to establish a connection between the extent to which a literary work provides justification

³Theorists disagree about the nature of the “author” we encounter in literary works. Some identify the author manifested in a fictional narrative with the real flesh-and-blood writer, e.g. Robert Stecker, “Apparent, Implied, and Postulated Authors,” Philosophy and Literature 11 (Oct 1987): 258-271. Others treat the author as a purely fictional construct, e.g. Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). A third view regards the manifested author as a persona of the real author. A version of this view is defended in Berys Gaut, Art, Emotion, and Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Ch.2. The position I defend in this thesis is neutral between these various conceptions. Thus, I will not attempt here to adjudicate between them.
for its themes and the extent to which it is judged successful from a literary standpoint by analyzing a literary critical concept that implies at once a literary and epistemic evaluation. Only this time the concept in question is thematic coherence and the epistemic evaluation that (I claim) is implicit in the concept focuses on the number and quality of the logical, inferential, and probabilistic relations among the beliefs expressed in the work. In this latter respect, I argue, the concept of thematic coherence closely resembles the epistemological notion of coherence that figures in various theories of knowledge and justification.

In Chapter 5 I return to the question of the aesthetic relevance of truth, to which the preceding chapters have provided only a partial answer—that truth is generally not as relevant as justification to literary value at the level of thematic propositions. I now suggest that literary value can depend on the truth of some non-thematic propositions, particularly ones concerning basic matters of (e.g.) geographical, historical, or scientific fact. Although the truth of such propositions is not an intrinsic literary value, I argue, it can bear instrumentally on literary value insofar as it can affect the degree to which the work provides certain types of justification for its themes. Once again, the specific types of justification that seem to matter have to do with the intellectual character of the author and the coherence of the work’s propositional content.

This thesis admittedly has limitations both in terms of breadth and depth. Its main aim is to motivate and sketch out a new view—or rather a new variant on an old view—about the cognitive value of literature and its relation to literary value. As I have already noted, it will not attempt to assess all possible alternatives to this view. In particular, it will not give an in-depth critique of Lamarque and Olsen’s positive view or the
Wittgensteinian view recently defended by John Gibson. Although it will engage with many potential objections to my view from these and other camps, its handling of objections will also be limited both in the sense that it will inevitably leave unaddressed some possible counter-responses and will inevitably leave some possible objections out of account altogether. There are obvious limits to what it achieves on the constructive side as well. A more ambitious project might attempt to flesh out my account in greater detail or to consider possible alternative ways of filling it in. In my Conclusion I will attempt to lay the groundwork for future research by identifying more specifically some of the main issues surrounding this thesis that remain to be explored.

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Chapter 1
Truth, Justification, and Literary Merit

1. Introduction

Literary cognitivism is the view that literary works, including fictional narratives such as novels and plays, can afford cognitive enrichment and that the extent to which they do so can bear on their value as literature. Adherents to this view can differ in terms of the degree to which they think literary value is dependent on cognitive value. At one extreme is the view, held by Nelson Goodman and James O. Young, for example, that literary merit depends exclusively or primarily on cognitive merit.\(^5\) A more popular and moderate view is that cognitive value is just one among an irreducible plurality of values that can contribute to literary excellence. Other such values may include being formally compelling or providing a rich and satisfying emotional experience.

Different forms of cognitivism can also arise from different conceptions of the type of cognitive rewards that are obtainable through literature and relevant to literary appreciation. In this respect, a broad distinction might be drawn between propositional and non-propositional views. Whereas propositional views account for the cognitive value of literature in terms of its capacity to provide propositional knowledge or some essential components thereof, such as true or justified beliefs, non-propositional views hold that literature is cognitively valuable insofar as it is a source of cognitive skills, imaginative acquaintance, or other putative forms of non-propositional knowledge.

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Propositional and non-propositional forms of literary cognitivism are not incompatible, and some philosophers—David Novitz, for example—accept both. Those who favor non-propositional views, however, are often motivated by worries about the propositional model from which they see their own views as offering an escape. In the first part of this chapter I will examine some of these worries and whether in fact non-propositional views are immune to them. In short, I will argue that they are not. Although non-propositional views may ultimately have the resources to deal with these worries, it is a mistake to think that these worries simply do not arise for non-propositional theories. In this respect, therefore, non-propositional views offer no prima facie advantage over propositional views. In the second part of the chapter, I will go on to argue that the standard objections to the propositional view have less force against justification-centered versions of this view than against truth-centered versions. That is, views that gauge a work’s cognitive excellence in terms of how strongly it justifies its themes are less vulnerable to the standard objections than views that mainly focus on whether a work’s themes are true.

2. Support for Literary Cognitivism

There are many reasons one might be drawn to literary cognitivism in some form or other. One is that it helps to explain why we value the experience of great literature as much as we do. No doubt part of the reason is that great literature can entertain and move us. But by itself this may not seem enough to account for the deep pleasure that

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comes from reading great literary works and the high esteem in which we hold them and their authors.\footnote{Young, \textit{Art and Knowledge}.}

Cognitivism also helps to explain the important role of literature in education. Literature is one of the primary means by which we seek to educate young children and, as a standard part of the language curriculum, it is often a required subject of study throughout grade school and sometimes beyond. In this latter respect, it enjoys the same status as science, mathematics, and history, disciplines whose contributions to knowledge few would doubt. If literature cannot likewise contribute to our understanding of the world, our regard for it as an essential part of one’s education might seem difficult to justify.\footnote{Gordon Graham, \textit{Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics} (London: Routledge, 2005), 58; “Learning from Art,” \textit{British Journal of Aesthetics} 35:1 (Jan 1995): 29.}

Of course, even granting that literature can contribute to knowledge, one might insist that this is not a proper aim of literature, i.e. one internal to the practice itself. But there is strong evidence to the contrary. Many poets, playwrights, and novelists are avowedly concerned with imparting instruction or enlightenment to their readers.\footnote{An off-the-top-of-the-head list would include Johnson, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Tolstoy, Arnold, Ruskin, Shaw, Eliot, Auden, Huxley, Yeats, and Lawrence.}

 Literary magazines and presses employ fact-checkers to ensure that what they print, even if it is fictional, is not based on misinformation. And, perhaps most compellingly of all, literary critics often express praise or dispraise for literary works using terms of cognitive evaluation, commending them when they are “true,” “profound,” “honest,” “intelligent,”
or “insightful” and faulting them when they are “unrealistic,” “shallow,” or “simplistic.”\textsuperscript{10}

3. Propositional vs. Non-Propositionalism

3.1. Propositional Literary Cognitivism

One way in which literature might be thought to yield cognitive gains is by giving us propositional knowledge or other associated epistemic goods, such as true or justified beliefs. Literary works are typically made up of sentences that express propositions, and sometimes these sentences take the form of general claims or observations about the world. A well-known example is the opening sentence of \textit{Anna Karenina}: “All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Literary works can also express propositions at a more general and implicit level. The contrast in \textit{Anna Karenina} between the miserable situation in which Anna finds herself, having chosen to leave her husband and son and pursue an unlawful affair with Vronksy, and the happy situation in which Levin ends up as a result of his marriage to Kitty, suggests that traditional family life contributes importantly to human well-being.

Propositions such as this that express a work’s “message” or “moral” are commonly called themes. Themes can be concerned with a wide range of humanly interesting subjects, including morality, politics, religion, sociology, psychology, history—even science and mathematics. In regard to such matters, themes can express

claims about what actually is (or has been) the case, or about what is (or was) merely possible.\textsuperscript{11}

An important part of what critics do in helping us to understand and appreciate literary works is identifying their themes and the way in which they realize and develop their thematic content. Thus, if there are certain cognitive rewards for which we value literature, it seems natural to think that the themes we find therein, insofar as they are true, justified, or illuminating, account for a significant part of these rewards.

Various objections have been raised against this view, however. Below I outline six of them.

\textit{Banality Objection}

One objection to the propositional view is that the themes we find in literature, even if true, are often banal.\textsuperscript{12} It is a commonplace that knowledge can be harmful; we do not learn it by reading \textit{Frankenstein}. Likewise, we do not learn that greed is a vice from reading \textit{A Christmas Carol}; we are all too familiar with that lesson already. Moreover, we do not generally appreciate literary works any less because they deal in well-trodden themes. On the contrary, we sometimes appreciate them more for expressing themes that are recurrent or “perennial.” For example, the idea that one’s fate and happiness are

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\begin{itemize}
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beyond one’s control is found throughout Greek and Shakespearean drama. Yet this might not make us any less appreciative of, say, a novel by Hardy in which we also encounter this theme, and it might even increase our appreciation of the novel. This is contrary to what we would expect, however, if having a revelatory theme were an important part of the value of a work of literature.

One might think that the solution to this problem is to specify themes more narrowly. *Frankenstein* doesn’t tell us simply that knowledge can be harmful; rather, it tells us only that knowledge can be harmful under the particular conditions represented in the novel. But this gives rise to another problem. That is, now the theme seems to have no relevance beyond the unrepeatable set of circumstances depicted in the fiction. The banality objection might thus be understood as a dilemma: either the themes conveyed by literary works are so general as to be platitudinous or else so specific as to apply only to the precise circumstances described in the work.

*No-Justification Objection*

Another problem for the propositional view is that it is doubtful whether works of narrative fiction like novels can ever give us justification for believing their claims.\(^\text{13}\)

Narratives, almost by definition, consist of sequences of causally connected events, not

sequences of logically connected premises. So it is hard to see how narrative fictions, *qua* narratives, could supply justification in the form of arguments. At the same time, narrative fictions seem incapable of providing justification in the form of empirical evidence since, *qua* fictions, they typically do not record actual events. Of course, the claims made in a fictional narrative may turn out to be justified when assessed in the light of information we obtain from other sources. But in that case our justification for accepting its claims comes from those sources, not from the fictional narrative. On the basis of a fictional narrative alone, then, it seems that we cannot come to know anything, assuming knowledge requires justification; all we can acquire are unproven hypotheses.

*Critical Indifference Argument*

A third problem for propositional cognitivism, according to Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, is that while critics are often concerned with elucidating the themes contained in a literary work, they are rarely if ever concerned with defending the truth or falsity of those themes. “Though the works of critics may contain statements to the effect that a literary work represents a certain view of life,” say Lamarque and Olsen, “and though it may be intimated that this view is shared or endorsed by the critic, critical treatments of literary works almost never present arguments in support of the view, or against the view in those cases where the critic intimates disagreement with it.”

Lamarque and Olsen claim that the absence of such arguments goes to show that whether or not a literary work gives us propositional truth or knowledge is irrelevant to appreciating it as literature. For were it

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relevant, they maintain, critics, in order to do their job, would need to establish not only what views a work expresses but also whether those views are true.

**Immoralist Objection**

A fourth objection to propositional cognitivism is that there are many works whose literary excellence is widely accepted among critics but the truth of whose themes is not. While many critics greatly admire *The Divine Comedy* as a work of literature, for example, most are probably unwilling to accept the theological views it embodies. What’s more, the fact that a work manifests unacceptable views may in some cases add to our appreciation of it. Matthew Kieran and Daniel Jacobson have defended this claim specifically in relation to the moral views expressed in works of literature. Known as immoralism, their view is that the expression of morally defective views in a literary work can sometimes be an artistic merit, inasmuch as it can be part of what makes the work stimulating and rewarding. Even if one rejects the pessimistic view of humanity manifested in *Gulliver’s Travels* as false, for example, one might think that the satire would be much less powerful and provocative were it not as radically misanthropic as it is.

**Textual Constraint**

A fifth worry concerning propositional cognitivism is that it seems to make the value of a literary work dependent on something other than the work itself. That is, insofar as it holds that a work’s literary value depends on the truth of its themes, propositional cognitivism seems to make a work’s literary value dependent on facts about how the external world is. But in so doing, it seems to violate what John Gibson calls the “textual
constraint”—i.e. the principle that requires that any property relevant to literary appreciation “be an actual property of the text: something we come into contact with when we explore the interior of the work.”\textsuperscript{15} The textual constraint explains why properties such as a work’s economic success and its long-term psychological consequences seem irrelevant to its literary value. If this principle is sound, it seems that such properties would also have to include the truth of a work’s theme.

\textit{Autonomy of Literary Value}

Finally, a sixth objection that has been raised against propositional cognitivism is that it fails to respect the “special nature of literary value.” The thought here is that there is something distinctive about the value of literature that is “not reducible to the values of history, philosophy, or science.”\textsuperscript{16} Presumably, we pursue these latter disciplines for the sake of acquiring true beliefs about the different aspects of reality they investigate. Thus, there would seem to be a tension between the idea that literary value is autonomous from the value of historical, philosophical, and scientific discourse and the view that the value of literary works resides partly in the truth of the views they prescribe.

\textbf{3.2 Non-Propositional Literary Cognitivism}

In light of these objections, many have come to see propositional cognitivism as naïve. Whether this conclusion is warranted is a question I will come back to in the second part of this chapter. First, however, I will consider another conclusion sometimes drawn from these objections—namely, that if one wants to be a cognitivist, one is better off


\textsuperscript{16} Lamarque and Olsen, \textit{Truth, Fiction, and Literature}, 22.
identifying the cognitive value of literature in terms of its capacity to provide some form of non-propositional knowledge, since in so doing (the thought goes) one altogether avoids the objections raised above. In this section I will examine two specific forms of non-propositional knowledge in which the cognitive value of literature might be thought to lie and consider whether shifting focus to either of these types of knowledge in fact makes the problems we have seen for propositional cognitivism disappear.

3.2.1 The Subjective Knowledge Theory

According to the Subjective Knowledge Theory (SKT hereafter),\(^\text{17}\) literature’s cognitive value lies chiefly in its capacity to provide knowledge of what it feels like to be caught up in certain situations.\(^\text{18}\) Through reading literature one might learn, for example, what it’s like to be a soldier in the heat of battle, to be stuck in a loveless marriage, or to be a victim of racism, sexual abuse, or debilitating illness. Of course, fictional literature is not the only way to find out what it’s like to experience these things; one could also find out by experiencing them in real life. However, if one wants to know what it’s like to experience, say, war—to taste the chaos, camaraderie, brutality, and boredom that it can involve—there are a number of advantages to reading a work of fiction such as *War and Peace*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, or *All Quiet on the Western Front* over actually

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\(^{17}\) This is the term Stroud, following Lamarque and Olsen, uses. Scott R. Stroud, “Simulation, Subjective Knowledge, and the Cognitive Value of Literary Narrative,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42:3 (2008): 19-41. However, this term is not universally used. Walsh calls it “realization” or “lived through” knowledge. Novitz calls it “empathic” knowledge. Noël Carroll calls it “acquaintance” knowledge.

placing oneself on the front lines. Not only do the virtual experiences afforded by such fictions obviously involve less risk, but, unlike the transient experiences of real life, they can also be returned to, repeated, and shared, thus lending themselves more profitably to reflection and discussion. Moreover, literature allows for many types of experiences that we cannot have in real life, such as the experience of historical epochs or events and the experience of having different beliefs, desires, memories, or perceptions from one’s own.

Knowing what an experience feels like “from the inside”—e.g. what it’s like to see purple, to touch sandpaper, or to feel hunger, pain, or jealousy—doesn’t seem to consist in knowing propositions. Although language can prompt us to imaginatively experience such things—perhaps just the word “purple” or “sandpaper” in the previous sentence, for example, gave rise to an imaginative experience of seeing purple or touching sandpaper—it seems inadequate to convey the content of the experience. It may appear, therefore, that insofar as SKT explains literature’s cognitive value in terms of this kind of knowledge, it lies beyond the reach of the objections to propositional cognitivism that we saw in the last section. A closer look, however, reveals this appearance to be false.

**Autonomy of Literary Value**

It might be thought that this objection does not arise for SKT because the kind of knowledge SKT says we get from literature, being non-propositional, is distinct from the kind we gain from non-literary modes of discourse. And this seems true where the non-literary modes of discourse in question are, say, physics or philosophy. But being a source of subjective knowledge would not seem to make literature distinctively valuable from other non-literary modes of discourse. A work of history, for example, can give us a sense of what it is like to have lived in another age or to be have been caught up in an
important historical moment; an anthropological text can help us to understand what it’s like to be a member of a different culture or perhaps even a different species; and a piece of journalism can convey what it’s like to be a politician on the campaign trail, a soldier fighting an unpopular war abroad, or a victim of unemployment during a bad economy. Indeed, it is often from journalists and historians that literary authors acquire their own knowledge of such things. Hence, SKT seems no friendlier than the propositional view to the idea that there is something special about the cognitive value of literature.

Textual Constraint

It is generally thought that only propositions can be true or false. Since subjective knowledge is non-propositional, then, one might argue that SKT doesn’t require us to go outside a work to check the truth or falsity of its themes and therefore doesn’t run afoul of the textual constraint. It seems clear, however, that there is some sense in which a text can succeed or fail in capturing what it feels like to be in a given situation. And whether a text succeeds or fails in this regard would seem to depend on how the experience it conveys compares to the experience one would actually have in that situation, something that is external to the text. Assuming that a text that failed to capture what an experience is really like would not be cognitively valuable, then, it turns out that even on SKT the value of a literary work seems to depend on something outside the work itself.

Immoralist Objection

Given that subjective knowledge is not exempt from some truth-like condition, it also turns out to be vulnerable to an immoralist-like objection. That is, it might be argued that there are cases in which a work conveys an inaccurate or highly idiosyncratic sense of
what it’s like to experience some situation but is none the worse for it, or perhaps even
better, from a literary standpoint. Take, for example, Imre Kertesz’s novel *Fatelessness*,
narrated by a 14-year victim of the Holocaust through whose eyes we experience
Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Zeitz less as horrific than as a kind of absurd joke or prank.
While the anomalousness of this perspective would seem to make the work less valuable
from a cognitive point of view, it arguably makes the work more interesting and
imaginative and hence more valuable from a literary point of view.

*Critical Indifference Argument*

The fact that critics do not normally debate the truth of propositions expressed in literary
works is only to be expected if subjective rather than propositional knowledge is the main
cognitive reward we seek from literature. However, in that case, one might argue, we
should also expect that critics would be concerned with whether the experiences
conveyed by a literary work capture what those experiences are really like. But in fact it
is just as rare for critics to talk about this as to debate the truth or falsity of a work’s
themes. What’s more, whereas critics often attempt at least to articulate a work’s themes,
they almost never attempt to articulate the subjective knowledge a work conveys.
Indeed, if subjective knowledge is irreducibly non-propositional, this would be to attempt
the impossible.

*No-Justification Argument*

It is sometimes claimed that subjective knowledge, in contrast to propositional
knowledge, is not subject to any justification requirement. That is, whereas in the case of
someone who claims to know that *p* it is appropriate to ask for evidence for *p* that is
public and checkable, such a demand is inappropriate in the case of someone who claims to know what some experience $e$ is like, so long as the person has in fact experienced $e$. This is because, according to Dorothy Walsh, “among plain men using the English language as it is ordinarily used, it is taken for granted that if a man has undergone what we call ‘an experience,’ he knows what it is like simply and solely on the basis of his having had the experience.” However, having experienced a situation through a literary work is not the same as having actually had the experience. So the question remains whether it is ordinarily taken for granted that someone knows what a situation is like simply and solely on the basis of having experienced it through a literary work. And the answer to this question seems to be “no.” If someone were to claim to know what it is like to be a Holocaust victim simply and solely on the basis of having read a novel like *Fatelessness*, it would seem appropriate to ask for some evidence that the novel accurately represents this experience. And since such evidence does not seem to be something we could find inside the work itself, the no-justification objection once again rears its head.

**Banality Objection**

Finally, it seems that SKT is just as open as the propositional view to the banality objection. For the subjective knowledge we get from a work of literature might also be either general or particular. A novel might teach us what love is like, for example, or what love is like for this person, at this time, in this place, etc. But in the first case the

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19 Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge*, 100-101. Walsh is not alone in thinking this. Cf. Lamarque and Olsen, 371-2: Experiential knowledge “is not amenable to evidential support (or any kind of reasons, or even proof). It is accepted on the authority of the person whom one knows to have lived through a situation.”
subjective knowledge threatens to be banal, since countless works of literature might be
said to offer us the same kind of knowledge, while in the second case it threatens to be
irrelevant, since it is unlikely that the particular situation represented in the novel or will
ever be our situation. Moreover, regardless of how general or specific it is, subjective
knowledge by itself does not seem to have much epistemic value. For given that it is non-
propositional, it is hard to see how subjective knowledge could help us to form new
beliefs or correct old ones. Like a wheel in the machine that turns nothing else, subjective
knowledge thus seems idle in the sense that it does not seem able to contribute to the
growth or refinement of our theoretical understanding of the world.

3.2.2 The Practical Knowledge Theory

SKT is not the only type of cognitivist theory that seeks to assimilate the enlightenment
we gain from literature to forms of non-propositional knowledge. Another type, which
might be called the Practical Knowledge Theory (PKT hereafter), holds that literature
contributes most importantly to our epistemic enrichment by cultivating certain types of
skills.

One popular version of PKT claims that literature can promote in particular certain
kinds of perceptual skills. Some works of literature, that is, can teach us to perceive
things more finely—to notice aspects of the world we weren’t aware of before or to
experience them from a more subtle and informed perspective. A novel like 1984, for
example, might sharpen one’s perception of the ways in which governments represent

See, e.g., David Novitz, Knowledge, Fiction, and Imagination, Ch. 6. On the role
of literature in refining moral perception, in particular, see Marcia Eaton, Merit, Aesthetic
and Ethical (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), Ch. 11, and Martha Nussbaum, Love’s
their actions using deliberately vague or misleading language. It might even alter one’s whole perspective on state power, causing one, for example, to look much more warily on attempts to expand it. Some literary works, perhaps Jane Austen’s novels among them, might also improve our ability to perceive qualities like pride, prejudice, and envy, thereby contributing to our moral education.

Some philosophers have pointed to other types of skills that can be gained from literature as well. According to Jenefer Robinson, literary works can exercise and refine our emotional skills by encouraging us to respond to the characters and situations they depict with the appropriate emotions. 21 Greek tragedies, for example, can encourage us to feel pity and fear towards that which is truly pitiful and frightening: good people suffering undeserved misfortune. Gregory Currie argues that literature can also hone important imaginative skills. In particular, Currie claims, reading literature can make us better at imaginatively simulating or projecting ourselves into hypothetical situations, an ability we rely on in making decisions about what we value and how practically to achieve it. 22

Drawing on Gilbert Ryle’s famous distinction between “knowing-how” and “knowing-that,” one might argue that such skills, being cases of the former, are non-propositional. 23 And one might therefore think that the objections raised against


propositional cognitivism fail to get any purchase on PKT. Once again, however, it becomes clear on further reflection that this is not so.

**Banality Objection**

The banality objection arises for PKT in much the same way as it does for SKT and the propositional view. For the practical knowledge we gain from literature can also be characterized in a general or specific way. But, again, it often seems banal when characterized in a general way and useless when characterized in a specific way. Take, for example, the emotive skills we might be said to gain from a tragedy like *Oedipus Rex*. Characterized in a general way, as the ability to feel pity for those who suffer undeserved misfortune, the practical knowledge that *Oedipus* might be said to give us seems banal, given that it is no different from that which countless other tragic works of literature might be said to offer. Yet characterized more specifically, as the ability to feel pity in response to the particular set of circumstances represented in the play, the practical knowledge it might be said to give us seems useless, insofar as it is unlikely that we will ever be called on to respond to exactly that situation again.

**No-Justification Objection**

Ryle claims that one of the ways in which propositional knowledge is different from practical knowledge is that while “it is proper to ask for the grounds or reasons for someone’s acceptance of a proposition, this question cannot be asked of someone’s skill

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23 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), Ch. 2. Not all practical knowledge theorists equate skills with knowing-how. Amy Mullin, for example, holds that literature can give us the former but not the latter. Here I will only be concerned with versions of PKT that understand skills as forms of knowledge-how.
Accordingly, one might argue that it would be improper to demand that literary works provide justification for the practical knowledge they offer. But would it be improper? Imagine someone who claims to have learned how to perceive pride and prejudice from reading a Jane Austen novel. Given that the novel may have misrepresented the appearance of pride and prejudice, would it not be appropriate to ask what grounds she has for trusting the novel as a source of this skill? If knowing how to perform a skill requires knowing that this is the correct way to do it, as some think, then the demand for justification here would seem to be legitimate.

Critical Indifference Argument

According to the critical indifference argument, critics don’t generally make an effort to defend or refute the propositions expressed in literary works; therefore, whether a work gives us propositional knowledge must not be important to its literary value. By the same reasoning, however, it seems that appreciating a work’s literary value must not depend on knowing whether it conveys practical knowledge. For if critics don’t generally make an effort to defend or refute the propositions expressed in literary works, nor do they generally make an effort to defend or discredit the ways in which literary works teach us to see, feel, or imagine things. Critics rarely engage in debate, that is, over whether a work teaches us to correctly see, feel, or imagine things. Thus, it seems, PKT does not avoid having to answer to the critical indifference argument.

24 Ryle, Concept of Mind, 28

Immoralist Objection

Nor does it avoid having to answer to the immoralist objection. As applied to the propositional view, the immoralist objection says that there are some works of literature that seem better, or at least no worse, from a literary standpoint in virtue of advocating morally suspect views. Similarly, however, it might be said that there are works of literature that seem better or no worse as literature in virtue of promoting morally suspect skills. Take black comedy, for example, a genre that often encourages feelings of amusement towards subjects like murder and sexual violence. Insofar as black comedies get us to feel amusement towards such subjects, they arguably promote morally inappropriate emotive skills. Yet success in making light of a morally reprehensible subject may not constitute a literary defect in a black comedy, while on the contrary failure to do so may constitute such a defect. Thus, it might be argued, whether a work of literature teaches us to emote (or perceive, or imagine) properly is not relevant to its literary merit.

Textual Constraint

The same conclusion seems to follow from the textual constraint – the idea that a work’s literary merit depends only on things “we come into contact with when we explore the interior of the work.” Indeed, this idea might seem to pose even more of a problem for PKT than for the propositional view, since what we learn from literary works according to the latter view – namely, the general themes embodied therein – are at least closely related to the actual content of the works. By contrast, the skills in which some versions of PKT locate the cognitive value of literary works seem purely incidental to what the
works are about. Take Currie’s view, for example. For Currie, the cognitive reward of literature is that it enhances our ability to imagine how our real-life choices will play out. But one could conceivably reap this benefit from a literary work without really appreciating what the work is about; after all, most literary works are not about imagining how our real-life choices will play out. Nor does this type of reward seem like the kind of thing one would realize or grasp as part of one’s direct experience of a literary work, the way one might realize or grasp a propositional insight in the process of reading a literary work. Rather, if reading a work of literature improved one’s skill at imagining the consequences of one’s own choices, it seems one could only realize this after the fact, when one exercises the skill in real life and sees the improved results. Someone who objects to the propositional view because it makes the value of a literary work dependent on something outside the text itself is therefore unlikely to find a view like Currie’s any less objectionable on this score.

Autonomy of Literary Value

Finally, it is not clear how PKT preserves the autonomy of literary value any better than the propositional view, since practical knowledge does not seem to be the exclusive domain of literature any more than propositional knowledge does. Science can just as well teach us how to perceive things more finely. Studying evolutionary biology, for example, might sharpen my perception of the ways in which species are adapted to their natural environments. And history can just as well improve our ability to imagine what outcomes our choices or policies will produce. In fact, studying the outcomes that past choices and policies have actually produced would seem to be a better way of improving this ability than studying the outcomes of the choices that fictional characters make in
novels and plays. In any case, given that we can learn such skills from non-literary texts, the fact that we can also learn them from literary ones does not help to satisfy the intuition that the value of literature is somehow distinctive from the value of other disciplines.

4. Truth-Centered vs. Justification-Centered Propositionalism

The lesson of the previous section is that the standard objections to propositionalism give us no \textit{prima facie} reason to prefer non-propositional theories such as SKT or PKT, since these latter theories are subject to the very same objections. The question remains, however, whether propositionalism can be defended against these objections. If not, then however it fares in comparison to non-propositional views, propositionalism must be rejected.

In this section I argue that the answer to this question hinges on how the propositionalist evaluates the thematic content of a literary work. In this respect I contrast two approaches, one that focuses primarily on whether or not a work’s themes are true (the “truth-centered” approach) and one that places more emphasis on the extent to which a literary work provides justification for its themes (the “justification-centered” approach). I argue that the standard objections to propositionalism are much more tractable for the second approach than for the first.

4.1 Truth-Centered Cognitivism

Most defenders of propositional cognitivism have tended to focus on the truth of a work’s themes as the measure of its cognitive value. Berys Gaut is representative in this respect.
Gaut generally prefers to speak of “merit” and “prescribed responses” rather than “truth” and “themes,” but as we will see the general idea is the same.

According to Gaut, artworks often invite us to experience certain attitudes in response to the objects they present. These attitudes can be “characteristically affective” states, such as “being pleased at something, feeling an emotion towards it, being amused about it, approving of it and desiring something with respect to it,” or “purely cognitive” states such as beliefs. In any case, Gaut thinks, these attitudes will include a “cognitive-evaluative” component, consisting in an evaluation of or a point of view towards some state of affairs. If a novel invites us to feel pity for one of its characters, for example, it is inviting us not only to feel a certain affect, but also to think that the character has suffered undeserved harm. The cognitive-evaluative components of a work’s prescribed responses thus amount to propositions that the work invites us to accept. In many cases, presumably, these will be thematic propositions.

Whether a prescribed response is merited or unmerited on Gaut’s view depends on whether its cognitive-evaluative content accurately corresponds to the facts of the situation. If the character towards whom we are invited to feel pity does not actually suffer undeserved harm, then the prescribed response would be unmerited, according to Gaut, because it would involve ascribing properties to the object that the object does not in fact possess. Gaut explicitly identifies his notion of merit with what Daniel Jacobson calls warrant. For Jacobson, “a response is warranted just in case the object towards which it is directed has the appropriate evaluative property, so that the response ‘fits’ the object. For instance, anger is warranted if someone has done something outrageous; amusement is warranted if something is funny,” etc. This notion of warrant is
importantly distinct from that introduced by Alvin Plantinga, according to which warrant is the property that converts true belief to knowledge.\textsuperscript{26} Whereas warrant for Plantinga is closely akin to justification, Gaut’s notion of warrant bears more affinity with a correspondence notion of truth. It seems to fair to say, then, that when Gaut says that a work’s cognitive value depends on merit of a work’s prescribed responses, he essentially means the truth of its themes.

\textbf{4.2 Justification-Centered Propositionalism}

One can endorse propositionalism, however, without taking the kind of truth-centered approach that Gaut does. An alternative—one that I believe has been radically underexplored—is to focus on the extent to which literary works provide justification for their themes. This alternative approach does not deny that we are interested in the truth of a work’s themes. However, it recognizes that whether or not a work’s themes are true can for various reasons be less important to us than how evident it makes them, in some cases because the themes are not the sort of propositions whose truth can be easily accessed, in other cases because the truth of the themes is not really in doubt. The core idea of this approach that whether or not we accept a work’s themes on independent grounds, we judge its literary success partly on the basis of how convincingly it presents them. Literary works that fail to “earn” their ideas, regardless of how much prior plausibility these ideas have, are criticizable on that account.

A justification-centered approach is just as consistent as a truth-centered one with the general motivations behind cognitivism. If literature can supply us with good grounds for our beliefs, this helps to explain both why our interest in literature seems to go

beyond our interest in mere entertainment or emotional experience and why we study literature in school alongside subjects like history and science. The vocabulary of literary appraisal also supports the justification-centered view insofar as many terms of literary appraisal that generally refer to a work’s cognitive qualities specifically refer to qualities that seem relevant to a work’s justificatory power. Such terms include inconsistent, incoherent, naïve, unrealistic, honest, perceptive, intelligent, convincing, and persuasive.

Perhaps one reason this approach has not been given much serious consideration, however, is that, as we have already seen, it is unclear whether and how literary works can provide justification for their themes. Addressing this concern will be the task of the next chapter, where I will argue that literary works can supply reasons for accepting their themes insofar as they reveal these themes to be products of an intellectually virtuous mind and part of a system of beliefs that is both highly coherent and grounded in clear and compelling intuitions. In the meantime, however, we can begin to appreciate the appeal of the justification-centered approach by noticing the advantages it has over the truth-centered approach in dealing with the other standard objections to propositionalism.

*Banality Objection*

For the truth-centered approach, literature is enlightening mainly to the extent that it adds new truths to our cognitive store. But many great works of literature express ideas that are time-worn and familiar. Thus, the truth-centered approach seems to imply that much great literature is unenlightening. However, if the enlightenment we gain from literature takes the form or justification for our beliefs rather than novel truths, then the failure of many great literary works to yield such truths is relatively unproblematic for the cognitivist. On the justification-centered view, the persistent recurrence of certain
“universal” themes in literature can be explained in terms of the persistent need to tie down important human truths, which arises both because we can easily forget the grounds for these truths and because the grounds can change with the changing conditions of our existence. Although it remains as true today as in Sophocles’ time, for example, that our fate and happiness are beyond our control, we have some different reasons now for thinking this is true, which more modern literature can remind us of.

*Critical Indifference Argument*

Some have tried to counter the critical indifference argument with evidence that critics do sometimes judge literary works based on the truth of their themes. However, this evidence has generally been less than compelling. One reason is that it is not always clear whether the passages presented are concerned with evaluating or merely understanding the work in question. Another reason is that the number of such passages adduced has simply been too small to warrant the claim. Even if all of them really are concerned with evaluating literary works based on the truth of their themes, it is all too easy to dismiss these passages as aberrations from the norm.

The justification-centered view has no such difficulties answering the critical indifference argument. Indeed, for the justification-centered propositionalist, this argument is something to be embraced rather than answered, inasmuch as it suggests that we should look beyond thematic truth as the measure of a work’s cognitive value. The

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justification-centered propositionalist can also welcome the argument’s assumption that
critical practice is informative about the principles of literary evaluation. For in practice
critics do commonly discuss ways in which works provide (or fail to provide) support for
their themes, including the extent to which a work’s themes cohere with one another and
the quality of the intellectual character the author manifests. In the coming chapters we
will see many examples of this.

Immoralist Objection

Gaut’s main response to the immoralist objection is to claim that the literary value of
thematic truth is pro tanto: whatever literary value a work loses or gains on account of
prescribing false moral views may be outweighed by other kinds of literary merits or
demerits, such as formal unity or emotional complexity. This move allows Gaut to
explain how some literary works can be great in spite of being morally amiss: that is,
their failure to get the moral facts right is compensated by their other literary virtues. But
it is inadequate to account for cases in which it seems that we value a work highly not
despite but somehow because of its prescribing moral views we find unacceptable.

Most such cases, however, can be plausibly explained by the justification-
centered view. For these cases typically involve works that provide compelling reasons
for accepting their themes. And where this occurs, the fact that the themes are
unacceptable makes the work’s success in justifying them all the more interesting and
rewarding. Take Gulliver’s Travels, for example. Although one might think that the
attitude Swift’s work prescribes towards humanity is unacceptably harsh, the work
arguably makes a compelling case for this attitude. The work may thus seem especially
enlightening because it forces us to recognize and confront reasons that do not support our views and that we therefore often tend to ignore.

**Textual Constraint**

One might think that the textual constraint does not pose a legitimate problem for Gaut’s view. After all, insofar as a work’s thematic truth depends on facts outside the text, it is no different from originality, for example, which depends on historical facts about the relation between a given work and those that preceded it. If thematic truth cannot be relevant to literary value because it violates the textual constraint, then for the same reason neither can originality. But it seems hard to deny that originality is a literary merit. Thus, the textual constraint seems to have unintuitive implications.

Still, one might argue that the textual constraint, while imperfect as a formal principle, is motivated by a legitimate intuition which Gaut’s view fails to respect. This intuition is commonly expressed as the demand that a work of literature be evaluated “on its own terms.”

Gaut’s view might seem to do injustice to this intuition in that it might seem to license evaluations of a work’s themes based only on how merited one thinks they are in relation to the actual world, without regard for how merited they are in relation to the world of the work. On Gaut’s view, for example, it seems permissible to criticize the pessimistic view of human nature manifested in *Gulliver’s Travels* based only on how well it is supported by one’s own knowledge and experience, without

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29 See, e.g., James Harold, “Immoralism and the Valence Constraint,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48:1 (2008), 45-64, at 58: “What we want is a means of evaluating art…that looks at the work as a work of art in its own right, putting aside the long-term consequences of reading or viewing it, and just considering the value of engagement with that work on its own terms.”
considering how well the view is supported by the work itself. But to do this would be to fail to engage with the work on its own terms.

The justification-centered approach, meanwhile, insists that themes be evaluated primarily in terms of how much warrant the work itself provides for them. Thus, it naturally favors criticism that focuses on features we find within the text, such as the belief system and intellectual character manifested by the author. The justification-centered view places no proscription on inquiring about the truth of the beliefs manifested in literary works. However, it suggests that it may be inappropriate to do so without first inquiring whether the work itself provides us with reasons for accepting the belief and attempting to appreciate those reasons. In this way, justification-centered propositionalism does greater justice than the truth-centered view to the idea that literary works ought to be evaluated on their own terms.

**Autonomy of Literary Value**

We come, finally, to the argument that literary value is “autonomous” and therefore cannot depend on propositional truth, since this is something for which we value other disciplines such as history, science, and philosophy. A similar argument could be made against the justification-centered view: since justification for our beliefs is also something we seek from history, science, and philosophy, this cannot be part of what makes literature valuable either, given the assumption that literature’s value is autonomous.

Neither of these arguments seems very strong. If the claim is that the value of literature is *entirely* distinctive – i.e. that none of the things we typically seek from literature are things we typically seek from other disciplines – then it does not seem intuitively plausible. It seems likely, rather, that some of the same interests that might
typically motivate one to read a novel about the Napoleonic Wars, for example, could also be satisfied by reading a work of history on the same subject. But if the claim is simply that some of the things we value in literature are things we do not seek from science, history, or philosophy, then the claim is not inconsistent with either truth-centered or justification-centered propositionalism. For neither of these views denies that there may be some goods that we seek from literature but not typically from these other disciplines. These goods might include deep emotional involvement, formal beauty, or escape from real-life concerns.

The justification-centered view can take this last response one step farther, however. That is, not only can it point to various non-cognitive goods that are distinctive to literature, but it can also note that justification can take various forms, some of which may be more characteristic of literature than others. Whereas, for example, philosophy may characteristically offer us a priori arguments and science may typically offer empirical data in support of their theories, the justification a literary work provides may come in much larger part from the intellectual character of the author and the overall coherence of the worldview it manifests. Thus, while both the truth-centered view and the justification-centered view accept that literature shares certain general cognitive aims with history, philosophy, and science, the justification-centered view allows for the possibility that literature realizes these aims in distinctive ways.

5. Conclusions

The main conclusions to be drawn from this chapter are as follows.

(a) There are good reasons for accepting literary cognitivism, and in particular propositional literary cognitivism.
Although there are objections to propositional cognitivism, the same objections can be raised against two of the most popular forms of non-propositional cognitivism. It is therefore a mistake to think that propositionalism is \textit{prima facie} any more problematic than non-propositionalism.

Placing emphasis on the justification works provide for their themes rather than the truth of those themes makes it easier for the propositionalist to answer all but one of the standard objections. The one exception is what I have called the no-justification objection, which claims that literary works have no means of justifying their themes. Answering this objection on behalf of the propositionalist will be the aim of the following chapter.
Chapter 2
Justification from Fictional Narratives

1. Introduction

As we saw in the last chapter, one major challenge for propositionalism, and especially
for the justification-centered approach, is to explain how literary works can provide
justification for their themes. Many philosophers think they can’t. As one of them puts it,
“If we find that stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep attractive men and
women apart, we find the evidence for this truth about the great world in the great world.
The fiction does not and cannot provide the evidence.”

Various theories have been offered in response to this “no-justification argument”. In
this chapter, I assess one popular theory that has been defended by Noël Carroll and
David Davies among others. Carroll and Davies attempt to explain how fictional
narratives like novels can supply justification by comparing them to thought experiments.
I argue that there is something both helpful and unhelpful about this thought experiment
analogy (TE analogy). On the one hand, I claim, the TE analogy fails to capture some of
the distinctive ways in which long fictional narratives like novels can justify their themes,
i.e. the propositions they manifest at the most general or “global” level. In particular, I
claim, it overlooks two factors that play an important justificatory role at this level: one,
the coherence of a theme in relation to the other themes and sub-thematic propositions
manifested in the narrative, and two, the intellectual character manifested by the author of

This chapter is a slightly revised version of a paper by the same title forthcoming in the
Journal of Aesthetic Education.

the narrative. On the other hand, however, the TE analogy offers a plausible model for understanding how long fictional narratives can justify propositions manifested at the “local” level, i.e. the level of small-scale units of action and dialogue, which turns out to be important for understanding how the two kinds of justification provided at the macro level ultimately get epistemic traction. Thus, I argue, the TE analogy fails to tell the whole story of how fictional narratives like novels justify their themes though it does tell an important part.

Apart from defending this assessment of the TE analogy, this chapter also aims to clear up several confusions surrounding the no-justification argument itself. One issue particularly in need of clarification is the specific type(s) of text to which the argument applies. While there is no doubt that a work like *Pride and Prejudice* falls within its scope, there seems to be some confusion as to why. *Is Pride and Prejudice* unable to provide justification for its claims because it is a novel, a fiction, a narrative, a literary work, or what?

This question is the main focus of the first section below (Section 2). In the three subsequent sections, I develop my assessment of the TE analogy—first, presenting the case for it (Section 3); next, exposing its limitations (Section 4); and finally, suggesting how it might contribute to a more nuanced account of how fictional narratives provide justification (Section 5).
2. The No-Justification Argument

The no-justification argument (NJA) is often presented as an argument about literature or even art in general.32 A typical way of putting it is that literature cannot be a source of justification for propositions because it is “barren of systematic argument or evidence.”33 What has generally escaped notice is that there are, in fact, two arguments here, each having a distinct target, and neither posing a problem for literature as such. I call these the no-evidence argument and no-argument argument.

2.1 No-Evidence Argument

The no-evidence argument focuses on the type of evidence literary works can present for propositions. According to this argument, literature may suggest but never confirm claims about the actual world because unlike scientific studies, which offer real empirical data in support of their hypotheses, literary works offer only reports of imaginary people and events.34 The no-evidence argument points to a problem with literature qua fiction, at least in a non-technical sense of this term. That is, the problem arises for literary works only insofar as the particular subject matter they describe is “made up” or “invented.” As to whether literary discourse is fictional in any more theoretical sense of being intended


33 Posner 404.

to function in some special way or to invite some special type of response, the no-evidence argument is indifferent. Defending fictional literature against the no-evidence argument, therefore, does not require refuting any particular theory about the nature of fiction, such as the view that fictional discourse is non-assertoric. At the same time, however, it requires more than just citing examples of literature that deal with actual people and events, since these would not count as fictions in the relevant sense.

2.2 No-Argument Argument

Whereas the no-evidence argument notes the lack of empirical evidence supplied by literature, contrasting it in this respect with science, the no-argument argument observes the general absence in literature of any substantive or rigorous argumentation, contrasting it in this respect with philosophy. Here, again, the problem is not with literary works qua literary. Nor this time is it with literary works qua fictions, despite what some have suggested. Rather, the concern raised by the no-argument argument appears to be a concern about the narrative aspect of literature. For it would seem that the reason many literary works fail to supply arguments for their themes is that they are stories, which consist almost by definition of sequences of causally or temporally connected events rather than sequences of logically connected premises. Of course, some narratives do present arguments, which may be voiced by a character (e.g. Ivan’s eloquent statement of the problem of evil in The Brothers Karamazov) or by the author or narrator (e.g. Tolstoy’s arguments against the “great man” theory of history in War and Peace). However, pointing to such arguments is not likely to impress the no-justification skeptic,

35 See for example Posner 404-405, New 120-121, Lamarque and Olsen Ch. 13.

36 E.g. New 120-121.
who is likely to insist in every case that they are merely adventitious to the fictional narratives (*qua* narratives) that contain them.

The NJA combines the no-evidence and no-argument arguments into one. It says that fictions are unable to supply empirical evidence for propositions, that narratives are unable to supply arguments for propositions, and therefore that fictional narratives are unable to supply justification for propositions. To repeat: the conclusion of the NJA is not a claim about literature *per se*, let alone art in general. Nevertheless, it is true that many literary works will be subject to the argument insofar as many literary works are narrative fictions. Moreover, there are good reasons one might want to focus on literary forms of narrative fiction, particularly if one is interested in whether part of the value of literary works as such lies in their ability to give us propositional knowledge or justification. For the NJA claims that no fictional narratives (and *a fortiori* no literary ones) have this ability. Thus, if sound, it suggests that this ability is often irrelevant to literary value. An interest in this evaluative question explains why many discussions of the NJA—including this one—focus on novels, since novels are in many instances both literary works and fictional narratives.

Several key terms in the NJA are open to some interpretation. Let me say now a few words about how I will understand them.

2.3 Justification

The NJA implicitly assumes that one cannot be justified in accepting a proposition unless one has evidence or arguments for that proposition. The argument thus seems to assume an “internalist” notion of justification—i.e. one according to which a belief that *p* can only be justified by other beliefs or internal states that provide inferential bases for *p*. 
Some epistemologists think that the very concept of justification is such that the only candidate analyses are internalist ones. But I take it that what the NJA wants to conclude is that fictional narratives are incapable of providing justification not only in this internal sense but in a broader sense as well. That is, as I understand it, the NJA is supposed to prove that a fictional narrative can do nothing to make a proposition any more worthy of acceptance, any more reasonable or appropriate to hold, than it already is. It is thus in this broader sense, roughly synonymous with Plantinga’s warrant or positive epistemic status, that I will use the term justification in what follows.

2.4 Supply

The conclusion of the NJA as I have formulated it is that fictional narratives cannot supply justification for propositions. What is the relevant sense of supply here? The difficulty in answering this question is that supply in this context does not admit of any straightforward causal interpretation. That is, it won’t do to say that a text supplies justification for \( p \) just in case a reader forms a justified belief that \( p \) as a result of reading it, for even the most brilliantly argued philosophical treatise or extensively researched scientific report could fail to meet this condition—if, for instance, the reader failed to grasp the arguments or correctly interpret the evidence for \( p \). Yet it is precisely in contrast to these types of texts that the NJA claims fictional narratives are unable to supply justification. Moreover, it seems that even the most inane piece of gibberish could, under the right conditions, satisfy the condition—if the reader, for instance, had a strange form of dyslexia whereby he somehow experienced the text as meaningful and informative. The text in this event could be said to supply justification on a causal construal of supply but would hardly seem to deserve such credit.
The problem with the simple causal interpretation is that it makes success in supplying justification depend too much on the mind of the reader and not enough on the nature of the text itself. It seems impossible to avoid all reference to the mind of the reader, since justification must be supplied to something, after all, and it is generally thought that the only sorts of things that can be bearers of justification are mental states. However, in order to screen out the effect of unskilled or psychologically abnormal readers, it seems that the conditions on supplying justification must include some constraint on the reader’s response to the text. More specifically, it seems that a fictional narrative’s ability to supply justification ought to be measured not by what effect it has on just anyone, but by what effect it has on a suitably sensitive and informed reader, one who comes equipped with a minimum of relevant skills and background knowledge and reacts to the text in accordance with the appropriate interpretive and epistemic norms.

I take it that literary critics and scholars are the exemplars of this type of reader, if anyone is. Accordingly, my method in what follows, particularly in Section 4, will place significant weight on how these “expert” readers respond to the propositions manifested in fictional narratives. If justification can be gotten from narrative fictions, these readers would seem to be the ones most likely to get it and their responses would seem to offer the best clues as to how exactly the process works.

2.5 Propositions

The propositions manifested through fictional narratives (FNs) can vary in numerous respects. For example, although every proposition manifested in a FN may be plausibly ascribed to the author or some author construct, not all of them need be believed by the
The propositions manifested in a FN can be the objects of various attitudes of the author, affective and conative as well as cognitive. Likewise, not all propositions manifested through FNs have the same illocutionary force. Some seem to have the force of assertions, but FNs can often “contemplate” or “entertain” or “explore” propositions without asserting them.

What’s most important to note here, however, is that not all propositions manifested in FNs are equal in importance. *Middlemarch* implies both that there is something noble about the passionate idealism of people like Dorothea and Lydgate, even if the world is such that their high aspirations are rarely realized, and that in 19th Century British society a person’s property was customarily distributed after his death according to a written will. However, the former proposition clearly stands out as more central to the novel. The most central propositions in a FN are commonly referred to as its themes. Variation in terms of thematicity cuts across the two other variations mentioned above.

If one understands the NJA as categorically denying that any type of proposition could ever be justified by a FN, and one merely wishes to refute the argument, then one can safely ignore the difference between thematic and non-thematic propositions. In that case all one needs is a story about how FNs can justify any type of proposition they manifest—which type makes no difference. This is certainly one way of approaching the NJA. However, I take it this would be an unsatisfying approach for the majority of those

37 On the identity of the author, see footnote 3 above and pages 79-80 below.

38 Beardsley and some others following him use the term *thesis* for what I am calling theme (Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 403-404). *Thesis* suggests an asserted belief, however, so for reasons just discussed not all themes (in my sense) are aptly described as theses.
interested in the debate, and particularly, again, for those of us who are interested in it for what it implies about literary evaluation. For if there are any propositions for which it matters, from a literary evaluative standpoint, whether a work provides justification, the most likely candidates would seem to be those propositions to which the work as a whole seeks to give expression—i.e. its themes. So a response to the NJA that explained only how FNs can justify non-thematic propositions would provide little support to those of us who think that justification is important from a literary evaluative standpoint. It would hardly redeem FNs from a purely epistemic standpoint, either, since, as the example from Middlemarch suggests, non-thematic propositions tend to be much less interesting than thematic ones. There are thus various reasons to be unsatisfied with an answer to the NJA that fails to explain how FNs can justify their themes.

With these points in mind, let us turn now to the TE analogy.

3. The TE Analogy

The TE analogy seeks to answer the NJA by claiming that fictional narratives can work like thought experiments (TEs)—hypothetical scenarios commonly used to purchase intuitive support for claims in philosophy and other fields. Many TEs, of course, are FNs in the sense that they ask us to imagine some counterfactual sequence of events. More controversially, however, the TE analogy asserts a comparison between TEs and longer FNs such as novels. Since there is a general presumption that TEs are capable of justifying theories, the TE analogy is seen by many philosophers as a promising way of
explaining how longer FNs can justify their themes. Both Noël Carroll and David Davies have defended versions of the TE analogy.39

3.1 Carroll40

Carroll argues specifically for an analogy between FNs and what he calls “philosophical” or “analytical” TEs, meaning those that are aimed at revealing conceptual rather than empirical truths. A classic example from epistemology, which has been subject to countless variations since Edmund Gettier first presented it, runs as follows. Imagine Smith and Jones have both applied for a job. Jones has strong evidence that Smith will get the job (the boss told Jones so) and that Smith has ten coins in his pocket (Jones counted them), on which basis Jones infers that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Now imagine that Jones is right, not because Smith will get the job, but because Jones himself will get the job and unbeknownst to himself Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Jones’s belief that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket thus seems to be justified and true, but is it knowledge? For many people the intuitive answer is “no.” Gettier’s thought experiment is thus widely taken to be a refutation of the justified true belief account of knowledge.


Carroll points out several similarities between philosophical TEs like this and FNs like novels. One is that they can both be made to do the same kind of cognitive work. For example, just like Gettier cases, some FNs are designed to reveal counterexamples to universal claims. Such is the case, Carroll claims, with Graham Greene’s novella *The Third Man*. In Greene’s story, set in post-WWII Vienna, American Rollo Martins helps the police capture his best friend Harry Lime when Martins discovers that Lime has been selling corrupted penicillin to Allied hospitals. By portraying Rollo’s actions as just, Carroll claims, the story provides a counterexample to the view E.M. Forster avows in *Two Cheers for Democracy* that loyalty to one’s friends is more valuable than loyalty to any cause.

FNs can also function like philosophical TEs, Carroll says, by helping to clarify conceptual criteria. Carroll attributes this function to a thought experiment of Arthur Danto’s, which calls on us to imagine a series of visually indiscernible paintings, each with a different causal history, and invites us to reflect on which ones count as artworks and why. Carroll goes on to argue that E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* does something similar for the concept of virtue. The novel revolves around two families, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, representing two different sets of virtues—one geared toward aesthetic appreciation and the cultivation of “personal relations,” the other toward excellence in the practical spheres of business, politics, and war. Over the course of the novel the two families collide with and influence each other in various ways, with the result that the characters come to embody various mixtures of the two sets of virtues. In the end, Carroll thinks, the novel invites us to compare these various mixtures in order to reach a clearer conception of what makes a person virtuous, much as Danto’s thought
experiment invites us to compare the various paintings in order to get clearer about what makes an object a work of art.

For Carroll the analogy between FNs and philosophical TEs lies not just in the type of cognitive goods they yield, however, but also and more importantly in the way they secure these goods. Like many philosophers, Carroll thinks that philosophical TEs can lead us to new justified beliefs by calling forth unarticulated forms of knowledge we already possess, which get expressed through our intuitive responses to the fictional scenarios they describe. On this view, the explanation for why Gettier’s TE gives us reason to reject the JTB account is that the intuitions it elicits (“this is a case of justified true belief but not knowledge”) reflect some understanding we already have regarding the concept of knowledge (and justification, truth, etc). Carroll thinks that a similar story can be told about FNs like *Howards End*. That is: we come to the novel already equipped with some intuitive knowledge about the concept of virtue, which gets mobilized in the process of evaluating the various candidates for virtue presented in the novel and gives warrant to the propositions we ultimately come to embrace as a result of this process.

3.2 Davies

While Carroll compares FNs only to philosophical TEs, Davies extends the analogy to scientific TEs as well—i.e., those concerned with empirical questions. A famous example from the history of physics is Galileo’s cannonball. In order to show that all bodies fall at the same speed regardless of their weight, Galileo asks his readers in the *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* to imagine tying a lightweight musket ball to a heavy

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cannonball and letting the coupled balls drop. According to Aristotle’s view, which holds that lighter objects fall more slowly than heavier objects, the musket ball, being lighter and therefore slower, will retard the speed of the cannonball. But this results in an absurdity, for if the cannonball joined to a musket ball falls less rapidly than the cannonball alone, then the heavier object falls less rapidly than the lighter object. Aristotle’s view is thus shown to be untenable.

Drawing support from recent work in the philosophy of science, Davies suggests that such scientific TEs may warrant empirical claims in basically the same way as Carroll thinks philosophical TEs warrant conceptual claims—only Davies’ suggestion is that in the case of scientific TEs the tacit knowledge that grounds our intuitive responses is empirical rather than conceptual.42 This paves the way for an analogous explanation of how it is possible to acquire justified empirical beliefs from FNs—for example, how we can “learn about the dynamics of complex human relationships through reading Henry James, or about the rhythms of lived experience through reading Virginia Woolf.” In Davies’s words, the explanation is that

our responses to such fictional narratives mobilize unarticulated cognitive resources based in experience. The fiction is able to elicit such responses because it makes manifest constant patterns underlying the complexity of actual experience – this is reflected in our feeling that the novel has indeed

revealed such patterns to us; and this feeling is to be trusted because it reflects the operation of such unarticulated cognitive resources in our reading.43

Both Carroll’s and Davies’s accounts line up nicely in one respect with literary critical practice. That is, it is common and generally regarded as appropriate for critics to appeal explicitly to certain kinds of intuitions or feelings in responding to the themes of FNs. These intuitions typically take the form of judgments about whether or not some element of the narrative (e.g. a specific plot or character development) is “realistic” or “plausible” or “convincing,” and they can often underwrite judgments about the acceptability of the narrative’s themes. In response to The Third Man, for instance, a literary critic would be within his rights to say that it just seems intuitively implausible that a man like Martins would be good friends with a man like Lime in the first place, and on the basis of this intuition the critic might be skeptical about the story’s theme (as Carroll interprets it).

Without denying that such intuitions can play a crucial role in justifying some propositions in FNs, I am going to argue in the next section that they play a much less direct and exclusive role than the TE analogy suggests when it comes to thematic propositions. By focusing primarily on this role, I will argue, Carroll and Davies overlook the important contribution that coherence among a FN’s manifested propositions and the intellectual character of its manifested author can make to the justification of its themes. First, however, I will consider a separate pair of objections that have been raised against the TE analogy, both by Joshua Landy.

43 Davies, Aesthetics and Literature, 160.
4. Problems (and Non-Problems) for the Analogy

Landy claims that there are two key problems for the TE analogy.⁴⁴ The first is that whereas TEs “hew with obsessive tenacity to the way in which events (are taken to) unfold in the real world,” FNs tend to “add in such elements as drama and surprise,” giving their endings “an appropriateness…rarely met with in real life.” The second is that TEs, in contrast to FNs, “tend…to be as general as possible, dispensing with details…”⁴⁵ Let us begin with the first alleged disanology.

4.1 Realism

It is of course true that many types of FNs do distort reality for dramatic purposes—for instance, Hollywood movies. As Daniel Jacobson observes, “the ubiquitous happy endings of Hollywood movies…do not arise because filmmakers, or audiences, think life is like that. The first rule of Hollywood screenwriting is: Make the audience want something very badly, and then give it to them. And we do not always want the terrible truth….⁴⁶ However, many types of FNs, including works of social and psychological realism, do aim to mirror reality. Moreover, many philosophical TEs ask us to imagine things that do not or could not occur in the real world, such as teleportations, brain rejuvenations, body swaps, zombies, and magic memory-erasing pills. Landy thus seems

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⁴⁵ Landy 77.

mistaken to think that FNs are generally less true-to-reality than TEs. How they compare in this respect all seems to depend on what type of FNs and what type of TEs we choose to focus on.

Suppose Landy were not mistaken about this, however—would it follow that FNs cannot justify some hypotheses the same way TEs do? Landy seems to think so, and his reasoning seems to be that if FNs are less realistic than TEs, the intuitions they elicit cannot be as reliable. Let us grant that if a FN distorts a certain aspect of reality, then the intuitions it elicits in regard to that aspect will not be trustworthy. In that case, we should be wary of some of the feelings that Hollywood movies inspire towards romantic love, since love is in certain respects often portrayed unrealistically in such movies. However, many types of fictional narratives are unrealistic in some respects but realistic in others. Indeed, this is true even of Hollywood love stories, which sometimes offer very realistic portrayals of the problems that can complicate romances and marriages, even if they tend to suggest that these problems are more easily resolvable than they really are. Moreover, it may not be necessary for a FN to be very realistic at all in order to elicit sound intuitions about conceptual matters. To elicit sound intuitions about the concept of love, for example, it may be enough to depict a case of love that is merely possible.

It would appear that Landy’s first objection fails to hit its target, then, not only because it is based on a false disanalogy, but because even if it weren’t FNs might still warrant many types of propositions in the same way TEs do.

4.2 Detail

Landy’s second objection seems more promising at least insofar as it is based on a real difference between FNs and TEs. FNs such as novels do, undeniably, tend to be richer in
detail than TEs. But again it is unclear just how this difference is supposed to prevent FNs from justifying some claims in the same way as TEs.

The fact that FNs are more detailed would not seem to make the intuitions they elicit any less trustworthy. On the contrary, in fact, it might be thought that TEs can skew our intuitions on some issues precisely because they tend to be so vague and that more detailed stories might therefore help us to think more clearly on these issues. Daniel Dennett has suggested that this is true particularly when it comes to thinking about the relation between causal determinism and moral responsibility. In order to see how a person may be held morally responsible for actions that are causally determined, Dennett thinks, we need to appreciate how complex the causes of our actions can be, and for that we need examples that can unpack these causes in full and intricate detail. By nature TEs are too schematic and course-grained to do this, Dennett thinks. Hence, he argues, they are systematically biased against theories such as compatibilism that require complex and nuanced explanations of phenomena. Dennett leaves it open to infer that FNs like novels, on account of their greater detail, might be less biased against such theories.

Perhaps Landy’s thought is that the greater detail of FNs indicates a difference in terms of the function they are designed to serve. This thought has been expressed by Roy Sorensen, who takes the greater detail of FNs to reflect, in particular, their authors’ greater concern with entertaining their audience. But it does not follow that FNs cannot also be concerned with making theoretical points. Indeed, it is arguable that many TEs aim in some degree to be entertaining even as their primary goal is to establish serious


theoretical points. More strongly, it might be questioned whether the greater detail in FNs is always theoretically irrelevant. As Dennett suggests, there may be certain theories like compatibilism that can only be adequately appreciated through richly detailed stories. If so, then sometimes the greater detail of FNs might actually subserve theoretical aims.

Barring some other explanation, then, it is hard to see how the greater detail of FNs hinders their ability to justify some propositions in the same way TEs do. I will now argue, however, that the greater detail of FNs, while not preventing them from providing the same form of justification as TEs do, enables them to provide two other forms as well, which can end up playing a more prominent role in the process by which long fictional narratives like novels justify propositions, particularly thematic ones.

4.3 Coherence

First of all, the greater detail of FNs like novels, combined with their characteristically greater length, complexity, etc, means that they typically manifest a much larger body of beliefs and other propositional attitudes than do TEs, which in turn means that the coherence of this body of beliefs normally takes on much greater epistemic significance in FNs than in TEs.

Consider Howards End again. I take it one of the main themes of Howards End is that there is more to virtue than the exclusive devotion to “personal relations” and artistic pleasures exhibited in the novel by the Schegels, especially Helen Schlegel. Incidentally, many critics identify Helen’s outlook with the moral philosophy of G.E. Moore.49 In his Principia Ethica, influential with the Bloomsbury set to which Forster belonged, Moore

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famously claims that “the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects”—a statement that might as well have been uttered by Helen Schlegel herself.\(^{50}\) Forster’s novel may thus be read as partly an attempt to refute a (then) popular philosophical thesis. This much agrees with Carroll’s view of the novel as a kind of TE, though on the reading I am suggesting it would be a TE more along the lines of Gettier’s than Danto’s.

But now notice that the way *Howards End* supports this anti-Moorean theme is not simply by eliciting intuitions in its favor (though some intuitions are involved, on which more in Section 5), but by getting us to reflect consciously on the coherence of the theme in relation to numerous other propositions manifested in the story. Some of these other propositions are also themselves major themes of the novel. Like most novels, *Howards End* contains not just one but multiple themes. Besides the anti-Moorean theme, which is bound up with the novel’s suggestion that the best character is one that combines Schlegel and Wilcox virtues, there is also, for instance, the idea (which is really many ideas) that the health of society (i.e. English society of the early 20\(^{th}\) Century) requires some kind of reconciliation between culture and industry, rich and poor, urban and rural, and future and past. The famous epigraph of the novel, “Only connect,” invites us to reflect on one way in which all these themes hang together, and the extent to which they are unified under this (or any other) idea strengthens each of them.

The novel also invites us to reflect on the coherence between the anti-Moorean theme and a number of what we might call sub-thematic propositions—i.e. propositions

manifested in a story that serve to shed light on the meaning or reasoning behind a theme but are not quite general or central enough to count as themes themselves. Several sub-thematic propositions related to the anti-Moorean theme occur explicitly in the novel as thoughts in Margaret Schlegel’s head, as she reflects on her growing “interest that verged into liking” for the Wilcoxes:

She desired to protect them, and often felt that they could protect her, excelling where she was deficient. Once past the rocks of emotion, they knew so well what to do, whom to send for; their hands were on all the ropes, they had grit, as well as grittiness, and she valued grit enormously. They led a life that she could not attain to—the outer life of “telegrams and anger”…. To Margaret this life was to remain a real force. She could not despise it, as Helen and Tibby [Helen and Margaret’s brother] affected to do. It fostered such virtues as neatness, decision, and obedience, virtues of the second rank, no doubt, but they have formed our civilization. They form character, too; Margaret could not doubt it: they keep the soul from becoming sloppy. How dare Schlegels despise Wilcoxes, when it takes all sorts to make a world?51

There are many distinct propositions expressed in this passage that give content and support to the anti-Moorean theme: that a Moorean soul is deficient in certain respects; that it lacks neatness, decision, and obedience; that these virtues have formed our civilization; that they keep the soul from becoming sloppy, etc. Together with the more general theme, these claims form a bundle of propositions that are meant to explain and

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reinforce one another. And, again, how well they do so is important to how reasonable it is to buy the anti-Moorean theme.

We could even go a level deeper, taking each of these sub-thematic propositions and situating it within a more extended network of supporting propositions implicit in the novel. Take, for example, the claim that Wilcox virtues “keep the soul from becoming sloppy,” a line that echoes an earlier passage in which Margaret wonders aloud whether “personal relations lead to sloppiness in the end.”52 Later in the novel a friend of the Schlegels’, Leonard Bast, loses his job and faces the threat of severe poverty. Full of concern and pity for Bast but not knowing what to do once past the “rocks of emotion”—or perhaps failing to get past the rocks at all—Helen ends up sleeping with him one night, unintentionally ruining his marriage and becoming pregnant with his child. The incident recapitulates Helen’s impulsive and immediately regretted night of passion with Paul Wilcox that sets the novel going. The two incidents suggest a number of beliefs about the specific dangers to which a Moorean soul like Helen Schlegel is prone, which are designed to bolster the contention that “personal relations lead to sloppiness” and by extension the more general anti-Moorean theme. The more coherent this whole bundle of propositions is, the more justification the novel gives us for the anti-Moorean theme.

4.4 Intellectual Character

The greater detail of FNs enables a second form of justification distinct from that which TEs provide in that it typically gives us greater insight into the intellectual character of the author, which can provide further grounds on which to judge the themes of a fictional narrative as more or less credible.

52 Howards End 22.
FNs can expose various excellences and deficiencies in the minds of their creators. Good FNs generally manifest highly developed imaginative, observational, and linguistic skills, although different writers can manifest these skills to different degrees. Different writers can also manifest different degrees of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual courage, patience, humility, maturity, etc—as well as their opposite vices (dogmatism, prejudice, intellectual complacency, cowardice, hastiness, arrogance, immaturity). In general, the more intellectual virtue an author displays, the more appropriate it is to trust what she tells us.

There are lots of ways in which a story can reveal the intellectual character of its teller. In *Howards End*, the narrator (commonly identified with Forster) offers frequent observations about everything from the influence a person’s physical appearance can have upon her character (Ch. 4), to the ripples that love between two people can cause in the social waters that surround them (Ch. 20), to the tendency of women, in contrast to men, to be attracted to others out of pity for their unworthiness (Ch. 32). Most of these observations do not express or bear directly on the novel’s themes. But evidence for various intellectual qualities (e.g. psychological acumen, analytical intelligence, stereotyped thinking, etc) might be found in both the content of these reflections and the manner in which they are presented, and in light of these qualities it may be more or less reasonable to accept some the novel’s themes.

Of course, on close enough examination one might find evidence of the author’s intellectual character in a TE too. But generally TEs do not offer us the kind of prolonged exposure to the author’s mind necessary to discern stable character traits. Furthermore, the highly impersonal style in which most professional philosophy and science today is
written, while well-suited for conveying certain cognitive virtues such as clarity and logical rigor, tends to give only a very narrow picture of the author’s intellectual character. As Arthur Danto says, speaking of the classic 15-page journal article that has become the “canonical literary format” in the current age of our profession: “If, under the constraints of blind review, we black out name and institutional affiliation, there will be no internal evidence of authorial presence, but only a unit of pure philosophy, to the presentation of which the author will have sacrificed all identity.” For both these reasons, it seems unlikely that that author’s intellectual character plays a significant justificatory role in TEs.

But why think it actually plays any justificatory role in FNs? Sure, one might say, FNs can give us a more robust sense of the author’s intellectual character. But where’s the evidence that this sense makes any legitimate contribution to the justification of themes in FNs? A similar question might be asked about coherence. That is, while granting that much greater levels of coherence are possible in FNs, given the much greater number of propositions they manifest, one might still wonder whether such coherence figures appropriately in our epistemic evaluations of a FN’s themes.

My answer to each of these questions has two parts. The first involves an appeal to the practices of literary critics.

### 4.5 Coherence and Intellectual Character in Literary Criticism

As I mentioned earlier, I take it that the question of whether the themes in a FN can be justified on the basis of given set of factors is a question of whether these factors play a

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role in persuading a certain sort of reader, one who comes to the text with the necessary skills, background knowledge, and normative framework for properly understanding and evaluating the text. And I take it that literary critics are generally paradigmatic of this sort of reader. So in answering the question of whether themes in a FN can be justified on the basis of the author’s intellectual character or their coherence with other propositions in the work, I take it to be highly relevant that literary critics place considerable weight on such factors when assessing how persuasive a theme is.

When one looks at the critical literature on *Howards End*—to stick with our example—one finds many discussions about the coherence of the beliefs or other propositional attitudes it manifests, commonly supporting conclusions about the novel’s success or failure in “proving” or “demonstrating” or “making its case” for some of its themes. A typical instance comes from Barbara Rosencrance, who interprets the novel as an “exhortation to human relations,” but argues that this exhortation “must ultimately be regarded as unsuccessful” because of the inconsistency between it and the novel’s “striking sense of recoil from humanity.”

Says Rosencrance: “Forster too often substitutes preachiness for the integrated imagery of a coherent position.” In support of a more positive assessment of the novel’s suasory success, David Shusterman notes that the novel “represents the completest expression [in Forster’s work] of a unified…outlook toward living in the society of human beings…”

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55 Rosencrance 412.
One also finds many critics explaining the persuasive force of Howards End (or its shortage thereof) in terms of intellectual qualities Forster manifests in the novel. With some of Forster’s earlier novels, says Lionel Trilling, “we can sometimes feel that their assumptions have been right but rather too easy.” But Howards End “develops to the full the themes and attitudes of the early books and…justifies these attitudes by connecting them with a more mature sense of responsibility.” Trilling thinks this more mature responsibility is evident in Forster’s more honest attempt in Howards End to confront some of the difficulties with the themes of his earlier works.  

Another critic, George Thomson, sees a parallel between Forster’s novel and Forster’s famous description in the novel of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. “Beethoven chose to make all right in the end,” Forster tells us, speaking of the final movement of the symphony. “He blew with his mouth for the second time, and again the goblins were scattered. […] But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things.” Thomson claims that Forster’s novel, despite ending happily, also recognizes “bravely” that “the goblins were there” and “could return,” and that Forster has therefore “earned our confidence.”

But perhaps one might wonder how relevant the evidence of literary critical practice is to a question that is, after all, epistemological. Literary critics may be good at understanding what FNs are about and appreciating their literary power, but this, it might

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be thought, is not the same as appreciating their epistemic power. If we want evidence that FNs actually have the power to justify beliefs via the coherence or intellectual virtue they manifest, we should look at what epistemologists say, one might argue, not literary critics. To address this worry, I turn now to the second part of my response, which consists in briefly noting the wide range of current epistemological theories that agree in thinking that coherence and/or intellectual virtue can play a part in the justification of beliefs.

4.6. Coherence and Intellectual Character in Epistemology

Many philosophers, including Ernest Sosa, John Greco, and Linda Zagzebski, hold that the justification of a belief depends on the intellectual character of the believer.\(^59\) According to these so-called “virtue epistemologists,” one’s beliefs are warranted only if they arise from the exercise of intellectual virtues. If you are sympathetic to this view, then you might think that the justification of a story’s themes can be affected by the intellectual character of the storyteller insofar as this determines whether the storyteller is justified in accepting the themes herself. But even if you reject virtue epistemology you can still think that the intellectual character an author conveys is relevant to assessing the justification of a story’s themes. So the idea that the justification of the themes of a FN are tied to the intellectual character of the storyteller makes sense on a wide range of analyses of knowledge and justification.

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Likewise, a wide range of theorists accept that the coherence of a set of beliefs can make a difference to their justification. Attempts to motivate this idea commonly appeal to examples in which agreement among the reports of independent witnesses to some event lends credibility to each of their reports, even though the witnesses are individually unreliable.\textsuperscript{60} Some so-called “coherentists” such as Laurence BonJour and Keith Lehrer have thought that coherence is the main criterion of justification for our beliefs.\textsuperscript{61} Although coherentism as a view about what justifies all our beliefs is less popular now than it was 25 years ago, it is still prevalent as a view of what justifies our moral beliefs, thanks to the continuing influence in moral epistemology of John Rawls’ ideal of “reflective equilibrium.”\textsuperscript{62} Moreover, many non-coherentists, while denying coherence the star role in justification, allow it a supporting part. Indeed, this is true of both of the two views often cast as the main alternatives to coherentism—foundationalism and virtue epistemology. For foundationalists, coherence between foundational and non-foundational beliefs is crucial to the justification of the latter; while for many virtue


epistemologists, coherence is essential to justification because it manifests or constitutes some intellectual virtue.

Before moving on, let me quickly recap the argument of this section. I began by arguing that FNs have the ability to justify some propositions the same way TEs do, despite Landy’s claims that FNs are generally less realistic and more detailed than TEs. I went on to claim, however, that when it comes to thematic propositions, the greater detail of FNs makes possible and more prominent two other forms of justification not generally available from TEs—first, by enabling FNs to present themes as part of a large body of propositions whose overall coherence can serve to justify the themes, and second by making the intellectual character of the storyteller accessible to us as a potential grounds for accepting or rejecting a story’s themes. The conclusion we have thus come to is that the TE analogy fails to do justice to the main ways in which long FNs like novels justify their themes.

If this is right, then for reasons discussed in Section 2 it follows that the TE analogy is inadequate as an answer to the NJA. However, this is not to say the TE analogy has no value. On the contrary, I will now argue that when drawn at the right level, the analogy proves useful in answering a modified version of the NJA that I call the no-ultimate-justification argument. In the next section, I explain what this argument is and how the TE analogy helps to answer it, once again using Howards End to illustrate.

5. The No-Ultimate-Justification Argument

I have suggested that one way a FN can justify a theme is by manifesting a network of other propositions, both thematic and sub-thematic, within which this theme coherently fits. But this claim seems open to an obvious objection. That is: why should the internal
coherence of these propositions give us any reason to think that any of them is true?
Anyone with a good imagination can make up a story that implies a highly coherent set of
propositions but that bears little or no resemblance to the way things are in the actual
world. So in order for the coherence of a group of propositions manifested in a FN to
justify any of its individual members, the objection goes, we would need to have some
antecedent reason for thinking that at least some of these propositions are true of the
actual world, and for that we would need to look beyond the FN.

A similar objection applies to my claim that FNs can justify themes by manifesting
intellectually virtuous authors. The problem here is that whether we judge an author to
have handled his subject in an intellectually fair-minded, brave, mature or otherwise
virtuous way typically depends on whether we think that he has grasped the truth, or at
least some important truths, in regard to his subject. And again, one might think, that can
only be determined by reference to the facts of the matter, which lie outside the FN.

This objection is basically a reprise of the NJA, only now the argument is not that
FNs offer no justification for their themes, but that the justification that comes from
within FNs must ultimately be grounded in justification that comes from without. Hence,
we might call this the no-ultimate-justification argument (NUJA).

It may suffice to answer the NUJA simply to note that it applies equally to non-FNs
such as philosophical texts. Just as coherence among the propositions manifested in a FN
is warrant-increasing only if some of the propositions possess some degree of warrant on
their own, so too a valid argument in a philosophical text justifies its conclusion only if
each of its premises alone has positive epistemic standing. This does not tempt us to say
that philosophical texts cannot really provide justification for their claims, so why it should tempt us to say this about FNs?

Perhaps a more satisfying answer to the NUJA, however, can be given with the help of the TE analogy. We have seen that this analogy misrepresents the way in which long FNs like novels justify thematic propositions, i.e. propositions that are manifested at the most general or “global” level, inasmuch as it suggests that intuitions play a much larger role at this level than they actually do. Yet it may accurately represent the way FNs justify propositions they manifest through individual scenes or incidents. For while intuitions do not seem to play a significant justificatory role at the global level, they do seem important at this “local” level. Applying the TE analogy at this local level would help to answer the NUJA in that it would provide an account of how some propositions manifested in a FN can be justified independently of their coherence or the intellectual character of the author, thus explaining how coherence with these propositions and intellectual virtue evidenced by them could in turn serve to justify themes.

To illustrate, let us return one last time to Howards End. I noted earlier the incident in the novel that results in Helen Schlegel’s becoming pregnant with Leonard Bast’s child. The incident is designed to support the novel’s anti-Moorean theme by suggesting one way in which the Schlegel virtues of sympathy and imagination, untempered by the Wilcox virtues of neatness, decision, and obedience, can lead to a kind of moral “sloppiness.” In contrast to the way the novel as a whole provides support for the anti-Moorean theme, the way this particular incident “demonstrates” that Schlegel virtues lead to sloppiness relies heavily on our intuitions. More specifically, it relies on our intuitively granting that under the circumstances described a woman like Helen Schlegel might
actually sleep with a man like Leonard Bast, that her doing so would count as a form of moral sloppiness, and that her being all Schlegel and no Wilcox, so to speak, would be the cause of this moral sloppiness. If these assumptions check out with our intuitive understanding of psychology, morality, and metaphysics, and this understanding is sound, then the incident justifies its point. The incident thus functions much like a TE, justifying a proposition (“here is a case of moral sloppiness caused by being all Schlegel and no Wilcox”; compare to: “here is a case of justified true belief that is not a case of knowledge”) by testing it against empirical and conceptual knowledge the reader latently possesses. Once the proposition passes this test, it can play a role in justifying other propositions, including themes, by transmitting justification to other propositions that cohere with it and by reflecting intellectually virtuous qualities in the author that can give us reason to trust other things the author thinks.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that when it comes to understanding how FNs can supply justification for their themes, it is not useful to try to construe them as wholes on the model of TEs. Unlike TEs, FNs such as novels justify their themes through a process that involves a good deal of conscious reflection. Moreover, this reflection focuses primarily on (a) the coherence of themes with the other propositions manifested in the work and (b) the intellectual character manifested by the author, factors which are not generally relevant to the epistemic success of TEs. However, at the level of individual scenes or incidents in a FN, the TE analogy is not only plausible but may also help to explain how some propositions in FNs can be justified independently of their coherence or the author’s intellectual character, which seems necessary to explain how the justification
that comes from coherence and the author’s intellectual character ultimately gets its epistemic traction. A fully adequate account of how FNs supply justification thus calls for an appreciation of how they both compare and contrast with TEs.

For the justification-centered propositionalist, the argument of this chapter does two main things. First, of course, it offers a way of answering the no-justification objection. Second, however, it suggests how the argument for justification-centered propositionalism must proceed. For if the justification that fictional narratives provide for their themes is grounded mainly in the coherence of their propositional content and the intellectual character manifested by the author, then the justification-centered cognitivist needs to show that these features in particular are relevant to assessing a work’s literary merits. It is to this task that the following two chapters will be devoted.
Chapter 3
What’s Wrong with Didacticism?  

1. Introduction

The following comments illustrate a familiar use of the term didactic in literary criticism.

[Charles McCarry’s novel Shelley’s Heart] is a failure because it is pedantic and didactic for whole furlongs of its immense length and utterly, artlessly fantastic for the remainder.  

This book is also gripping and dynamic in ways that rivet the reader even when the thinking is didactic and the prose takes a purplish turn.  

[Novelist Manil Suri’s] refusal to give in to any hint of the didactic or the predictable, affirms his position as a writer worth serious attention.

In the context of such comments, it is generally understood that didacticism refers to some sort of defect in a work of literature as such. The question I will explore and attempt to answer is exactly what this defect consists in.

The relevance of this question to the issues of this thesis lies in the connection between a work’s being didactic and its being designed to instruct. The connection is not straightforward. Not all works that aim to instruct are necessarily guilty of didacticism.

There is no question that Crime and Punishment and Middlemarch, for example, contain

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63 This chapter is a slightly modified version of a paper published under the same title in the British Journal of Aesthetics 52:3 (2012): 271-285.


philosophical teachings, yet critics disagree about whether these works are didactic.\textsuperscript{67} To count as didactic, the proffered instruction must be overt, and more than this—since even some overtly instructive works such as Pope’s \textit{Essay on Man} are arguably not didactic—it must be somehow \textit{too} overt. Yet the very possibility that instruction in literature could be \textit{too} overt seems to pose a serious challenge to the literary cognitivist. That is, in Peter Lamarque’s words: “if instruction is an important literary value, why should overt instruction [ever] be a fault?”\textsuperscript{68}

The goal of this chapter is to answer Lamarque’s challenge on behalf of the cognitivist. The answer I will propose is not intended to exclude other possible explanations for why overt instruction in literature can sometimes be a fault. It may well be, as Lamarque himself suggests, for example, that overt instruction can sometimes be a fault because it can get in the way of other non-cognitive pleasures proper to literature. However, I will argue, it is sometimes the case that what makes overt instruction in literature objectionable is that it provides evidence of epistemic vices such as intellectual arrogance, dogmatism, and prejudice, which can compromise a work’s value as a source of instruction by undercutting the author’s credibility. This claim suggests that it is precisely because instruction is an important literary value that overt instruction is sometimes a fault. Moreover, it implies that the extent to which a literary work justifies


\textsuperscript{68} Peter Lamarque, \textit{The Philosophy of Literature} (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 253.
its themes by manifesting an intellectually virtuous author is an important factor in literary assessment. It thus provides support not only for cognitivism in general but for justification-centered propositionalism in particular.

In the next section I spend some time unpacking this claim. In the two subsequent sections, I go on, first, to illustrate and support my view with examples from literary criticism, and, second, to defend my view against three alternative accounts of what’s wrong with didacticism.

2. The Proposal

Consider the expression “to protest too much.” According to the common understanding of this expression, someone who “protests too much” states a point so often or strongly that others begin to question his trustworthiness. Take, for example, that friend who claims that he no longer thinks about his ex-lover. The more frequently and emphatically this friend announces that he has “moved on,” the more apt we are to suspect not only that the opposite is true but that our friend is guilty of dishonesty, wishful thinking, or some other cognitive vice.

Authors of literary works can also protest too much, and it is my contention that this is often precisely what’s happening when authors are accused of being didactic or too overtly instructive. When an author is said to be didactic, that is, it is often because the manner in which she attempts to convey her message is so overt as to raise doubts about her intellectual character. Specifically, questions may arise as to her impartiality, her receptivity to contrary evidence, or her openness to alternative points of view. An author who tells her readers too explicitly what lessons to draw from her story, as if the reader is too obtuse to draw the lesson for himself, may also come across as intellectually arrogant
or condescending. Instruction that is especially overt or heavy-handed can thus be objectionable because it can arouse suspicion of various intellectual vices in the author, including dogmatism, arrogance, and prejudice.

Different accounts might be offered of the nature of both intellectual vices in general and these intellectual vices in particular. Drawing on Aristotle’s model of moral virtues and vices, one influential view understands all intellectual vices as entrenched dispositions or character traits, acquired through habituation and involving as essential components certain (defective) patterns of emotion and motivation. To possess an intellectual vice such as dogmatism, on this view, is to have a stable tendency toward certain feelings—e.g. feelings of attachment to one’s own beliefs that lead one to ignore criticisms or disregard contrary evidence—which ultimately arise from a deficiency in one’s motivation to achieve knowledge or high quality beliefs. This view offers one plausible way of understanding the intellectual vices involved in didacticism, though I do not insist on it as the only way.

Nor do I insist that dogmatism, arrogance, and prejudice are the only vices that can be associated with didacticism. Although I take these to be some of the most characteristic ones, I believe there are others, which may call for different types of analyses than the ones I will focus on. Some of these other vices, for example, may be rooted in a motivation that is defective not in the sense that it lacks strength but in the sense that it is not directed towards the most valuable forms of knowledge, as is arguably the case with a vice like pedantry. Or perhaps they may differ from vices such as dogmatism in that the defective motivation that underlies them is directed towards others’

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rather than one’s own acquisition of knowledge. Many of the so-called teaching vices, such as intellectual impatience and condescension, are presumably distinctive in this way. It is also possible that some of the vices that can be involved in didacticism are more like shortcomings in one’s intellectual skills (e.g. logical reasoning skills, interpretive skills, imaginative skills, etc.) or cognitive faculties (e.g. perception, memory, or intuition) than like character flaws. An account of the full range of relevant vices would thus call for an exploration of other possibilities beyond dogmatism, intellectual arrogance, and prejudice. What I aim to offer here is merely the beginnings of such an account.

On the view I propose, objections to didacticism are comparable to the sort of objection found, for example, in an essay by James Wood criticizing John Updike’s fiction for the intellectual “complacency” it exhibits in regard to “questions of faith and belief”—a “lacuna,” says Wood, “not in the quality of the prose, but in the risk of the thought”—and in Orwell’s well-known essay on Dickens criticizing the latter for lacking the “intellectual curiosity” to explore the possibilities for future progress rather than simply criticizing the present ills of his society. Objections such as these, leveled directly at the intellectual vices an author displays in his work, are standard in literary criticism. Hence, on my view, objections to didacticism can be understood as part of an already well-established literary-critical practice. What’s more, this practice might plausibly be seen as evidence for literary cognitivism. As noted earlier, literary cognitivists think that a work’s literary merit can be tied to its cognitive value, meaning its value as a source of knowledge or instruction. A work’s cognitive value, in turn, can

depend not only on whether it conveys a lesson and whether this lesson is true or novel, but also on the extent to which it provides “warrant” or legitimate grounds for accepting the lesson. Literary-critical concern with the intellectual vices authors manifest might thus be thought to reflect a concern with cognitive value given that the warrant of testimonial beliefs, i.e. those formed on the basis of someone else’s say-so, is generally thought to be reduced insofar as that person displays intellectual vice. Call this the “warrant-reduction assumption.”

There are two plausible bases for the warrant-reduction assumption. One is the idea that an agent’s intellectual character can bear on the warrant of her own beliefs. This idea is characteristic of so-called virtue epistemological theories, many of which claim that a belief counts as warranted only if it is formed in an intellectually virtuous way. Someone sympathetic to this idea might reasonably think that if A were to express the belief that p and B were to accept that p on this basis of A’s testimony, B’s belief that p would be unwarranted if A manifested intellectual vice because in that case A’s belief that p would be unwarranted. However, one might accept the warrant-reduction assumption regardless of whether one accepts that A’s belief would lack warrant in this case. For one might think that the fact that A manifested intellectual vice would give B good reason to doubt A’s expressed belief simply because it provides good evidence that it is unwarranted, whether or not it makes it so.

With the help of the warrant-reduction assumption, Lamarque’s question of why overt instruction would ever be a fault if instruction were an important literary value can now be given the following answer: overt instruction can be symptomatic of intellectual vice, which can reduce the warrant of the lessons a work seeks to convey and thereby
reduce its cognitive value. Overt instruction can sometimes be a fault, that is, precisely because it is less rewarding as instruction.

Two further assumptions implicit in this answer, while not particularly controversial, are worth making explicit. One is that literary works are means by which authors can supply testimony to readers. This assumption takes the author of a literary work to be a kind of speaker, albeit one distinct from various other speakers the work may contain, such as the narrator or a character who utters or thinks thoughts in the text. In contrast to these speakers, who might be said to speak in the work, the author might be said to speak through the work. In some cases, of course, the author may be similar or even identical to the narrator or one of the characters. In The Great Gatsby, for example, the author is commonly identified with the narrator Nick Carroway, and in Anna Karenina many of the ideas expressed by the character Levin are thought to be shared by the author. But the voice that speaks through a literary text does not necessarily coincide with any voice that speaks in it. In the view of most critics, the author of Lolita, for example, cannot be identified with the narrator Humbert Humbert or any other character in the novel.

In regard to the author, it must also be assumed that he or she is capable of manifesting intellectual traits—i.e., that the reader’s sense of the author is robust enough to support attributions of intellectual qualities—which can be the focus of a certain type of literary critical judgment. However, this does not entail that literary works are capable of manifesting authors who are fully human in terms of the richness and complexity of their personalities. Empirical studies suggest that samples of creative writing much too
brief to manifest a fully human authorial character can nonetheless be sufficient for readers to infer certain character traits in the author such as open-mindedness.71

These two assumptions are compatible with various conceptions of the identity of the author. In keeping with the practice of most critics up until the last half-century, as well as the view of some contemporary philosophers such as Robert Stecker, the author may be understood as one and the same with the actual, historical writer.72 Whatever traces of authorial personality are born by a literary work are undoubtedly caused by the historical writer, and it is often the case that these traces match up with what we know of the historical writer based on other sources. Moreover, properly interpreting and assessing a literary work seem to require understanding the historical context in which it was produced, and the reason for this, it may seem, is that the historical context limits the intentions, beliefs, etc. that the historical writer is likely to bring to the work. Insofar as the personality of the author is relevant to literary appreciation, then, it might be thought that the importance of historical context presupposes that it is the actual historical writer that is relevant.

Nevertheless, there are cases in which the authorial intentions or interests manifested through a literary work diverge from those professed by its historical writer. Robert Frost’s “Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening” strongly suggests a poet who is tempted by death, perhaps even contemplating suicide, though Frost himself


repeatedly denied that he had any such thoughts or desires in mind while writing the poem.\(^73\) In view of such cases, some theorists, while accepting that the interpretation and appreciation of a literary work depend on seeing it as a product of an agent with certain intentions, desires, beliefs, and emotions manifested to some extent through the work, are nonetheless wary of identifying this agent with the historical writer. Instead, such theorists prefer to identify this agent with some “author construct,” who is merely “postulated” by the reader or “implied,” “apparent,” or “manifested” in the work.\(^74\)

Author constructs are generally conceived as being something in between the real flesh-and-blood writer and the fictional narrator, without being identical to either.

Which of these various notions of the author should ultimately be adopted is an issue we need not pursue here, since readers may disagree on this question without disputing my assumption that authors can supply testimony and manifest intellectual vice through their works. A more pressing question to consider now is what reasons there are for accepting the account of didacticism I have just sketched. In the next section I will suggest that one reason is that it fits well with the way literary critics sometimes justify their use of the term in particular cases.

\(^{73}\) For a discussion of Frost’s comments on “Stopping By the Woods,” see Mark Richardson, *The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

3. Evidence from Literary Criticism

Although my account of didacticism is not intended merely as a description of the way the term is used, it is a virtue of my account that it captures the reasons critics sometimes give for calling works didactic. Below I offer three examples, which serve not only to show that an author’s manifestation of intellectual vice can be part of a critic’s explanation for why a work is didactic, but also to illustrate three specific vices that can be the focus of such explanations: namely, dogmatism, intellectual arrogance, and prejudice. Together these three examples suggest an application of the term that is stable over a variety of time periods and literary genres. However, I do not claim that they are representative of all actual uses of the term. As with any term, some actual uses will be nonstandard. Just as importantly, there may be standard uses of term that allow for different understandings of what is wrong with didacticism.

3.1 Didacticism as Dogmatism

My first example comes from an article by Robert Stretter on Richard Edwards’s Elizabethan drama Damon and Pithias.75 Damon and Pithias tells the story of two men so devoted to their friendship that when one of them (Damon) is falsely accused of conspiracy against the king, the other (Pithias) volunteers to take his place in prison while his friend returns home to settle his affairs. The drama is clearly designed to illustrate a certain ideal of male friendship, which Stretter traces back to Aristotle and Cicero and

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which holds that “[t]rue’ and ‘perfect’ friendship…[only] occurs between two good men, similar in all respects, who love each other for the sake of virtue.” This classical conception of friendship is exemplified in the friendship of Damon and Pithias and extolled by the play as a whole, which ends when the king, being so impressed by the mutual loyalty of Damon and Pithias, pardons them both.

Stretter claims the play “is a prime example of a didactic pedagogical drama” as well as a “dramatic failure,”76 and one of his main objectives in the paper is to explain how these two problems are related. He ultimately suggests that both arise from Edwards’ blind devotion to the ideal of friendship represented by that of his main characters, which leads the author to portray this ideal in too “uncomplicated” a light, to “paper over” all potential problems with it, and, in effect, to avoid ever grappling with the question of whether this type of friendship is really desirable or even attainable. “This question haunts Damon and Pithias,” says Stretter, “and throughout the play a range of skeptics voice their doubts about whether friendship is truly worth dying for.” However, he continues:

In the world of the play, these hints at the possible inadequacy of friendship to live up to its ideals are [merely] a rhetorical move on Edwards’s part: they are straw men that his heroes easily bat down. Edwards never appears to entertain any serious doubts about the naturalness or superiority of friendship, never betrays any lack of faith in the “perfect Amytie” which he celebrates consistently from the prologue to the triumphant conclusion with its final moral, addressed directly to the “most noble Queene Elizabeth”: “A sweete

76 Stretter 346.
companions in eche state true Friendship is alway: / A sure defence for Kinges, a perfect trustie bande.”

Stretter’s description in this passage of Edwards’ failure to “entertain any serious doubts” about his view of friendship is a classic description of the intellectual vice of dogmatism. Stretter goes on to suggest that this vice undermines the play’s artistic success not only because it translates into a lack of “genuine conflict” and thus a lack of “dramatic suspense,” but also because it makes the play philosophically less compelling. Edwards’ failure to acknowledge or give meaningful consideration to alternatives and objections to his view, says Stretter, “raises the specter of skepticism.”

The unwavering strength of Edwards’ belief in his subject, ironically, makes the chinks in the armor of amicitia all the more significant. Damon and Pithias is strong evidence that in even the most enthusiastic paens to ideal friendship, one can detect the vulnerability of the ideal.

According to Stretter, then, the play is didactic because the way it embodies its message reflects the author’s ideological rigidity, and this constitutes a literary flaw partly because it makes us skeptical of the message itself.

3.2 Didacticism as Intellectual Arrogance

I take my second example from a chapter on Lady Chatterley’s Lover in Eliseo Vivas’s critical study of D.H. Lawrence. As a writer Lawrence was unabashedly committed to

77 Stretter 359.

78 Stretter 359.

the aim of moral instruction, and most of his novels are more or less transparently designed to advance a certain philosophical or ethical agenda. *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, with its candid call for a reevaluation of Victorian attitudes to sex, is no different in this regard. More than most of Lawrence’s novels, however, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* has been subject to the charge of didacticism. Even some critics generally sympathetic to Lawrence’s pedagogical aims have found something distasteful about the way he carries them out in this work. F.R. Leavis, for example, though a well-known admirer of Lawrence’s earlier work, declared *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* a “bad novel” on the grounds that its author was guilty of “indulging the quasi-creative intervention of passionate will, didactic, corrective and reforming.”

Vivas expresses much the same objection to the novel, chafing against “the attitude of the reformer in Lawrence” and Lawrence’s “didactic recommendation” that all sex be enjoyed only for the kind of animalistic satisfactions it affords the novel’s characters. Behind Lawrence’s preachments, Vivas hears a voice saying, in effect:

> Either you—whoever you may be, whatever your heredity and upbringing may have been, whatever your aims and commitments—manage your sexual life the way I, David Herbert Lawrence, by the grace of God and my own fiat appointed teacher of mankind, manage mine, or you are wrong, and nothing can alter that fact. Never mind the fact that I, David Herbert Lawrence, am a sick man trying desperately to shed my illness in book after book

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81 Vivas 131-2. The chapter in which these objections are presented belong to a section of Vivas’ book entitled “The failure of art.”
unsuccessfully. Never mind the fact that I, David Herbert Lawrence, have suspected at times that I am a bit dotty. Never mind the fact that my mother mangled my development. It still remains an incontrovertible fact that I, David Herbert Lawrence, am, by the grace of God and my own fiat, the standard. You are not like me, you say? Obviously not—and that is what makes you wrong, utterly wrong, hopelessly wrong. Why can’t you accept a bit of healthy, individual authority? Why can’t you see what is so thoroughly self-evident?82

Vivas’s mocking imitation of Lawrence here clearly implies an accusation of intellectual vice. In particular, it implicitly accuses Lawrence of intellectual arrogance—i.e. of regarding his own beliefs and cognitive abilities as superior to others’ simply because they are his own. This accusation of arrogance underlies Vivas’s charge that the novel is didactic. Moreover, it also underlies his claim that we ought not “to assume, as some of [Lawrence’s] critics do, that what he had to teach in matters of sex is all-wise, all-healthy, and urgently needed by us.”83 In criticizing Lady Chatterley’s Lover for its didacticism, therefore, it seems that Vivas is criticizing both the intellectually arrogant way in which he thinks Lawrence conveys his message in the novel and the damage he thinks this does to Lawrence’s epistemic authority.

3.3 Didacticism as Prejudice

For my third example I turn to George Eliot’s Middlemarch. Like Damon and Pithias and Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Middlemarch is heavily freighted with philosophical and

82 Vivas 132.

83 Vivas 136.
moral lessons. Moreover, the novel’s style is marked by frequent authorial “intrusions”—i.e. explicit commentary by the author on the action and characters in the story—typically designed to enforce its moral lessons. Critical responses to *Middlemarch* in its own time often, and often disapprovingly, made note of these features, with *didactic* being one of the terms critics used to express their reservations in this regard. An unsigned review from 1872, for example, just after praising the book’s excellence “as a didactic novel,” calls explicit attention to “the reservation we have implied” in thus describing it, and immediately proceeds to complain about “the conspicuous, constantly prominent lesson[s]” in the novel.84

In justifying their disapproval of these “constantly prominent” lessons, not just one but several critics point to the suspicion it arouses that Eliot is not completely impartial or fair-minded in the picture she presents of life and human nature. The anonymous author of the above-cited review suggests that this is the pitfall of every “storyteller with an ulterior aim ever before his own eyes and the reader’s”: the reader is always “justified in suspecting a bias or one-sided estimate of qualities where a moral has to be worked out through human agency,” and as a result, the critic says, the reader’s “confidence is disturbed.” Likewise, R.H. Hutton, in another review from the same year, worries that Eliot’s constant theorizing in *Middlemarch*, and particularly “the speculative philosophy of character that always runs on in a parallel stream with her picture of character,” might have a distorting influence on her perception of human nature.85 For Hutton, as well, the


“questionable or even challengeable drift” in Eliot’s dogged moral analysis of her characters is that it leads us to suspect that Eliot may sometimes be “availing herself unfairly of the privilege of the author, by adding a trait that bears out her own criticism rather than her own imaginative conception.” In fact, Hutton claims, certain “unjust” details in Eliot’s portrayal of Celia Brooke and Rosamond Vincy prove that she is sometimes guilty of this suspected offense. The consequence of our noticing these unjust details, he says, is that we become wary of Eliot’s “prejudice” towards these characters and begin to “distrust even decidedly asserted facts” about them. These two sets of critical comments on Middlemarch further corroborate my account, in that they connect the novel’s didacticism both with the author’s display of intellectual vice and with damage to the trustworthiness of the author’s assertions.

More examples of this sort could be produced. However, it must be acknowledged that many of the examples one finds, like the one-liners I presented at the beginning of this chapter, reveal little or nothing about the critic’s reasons for ascribing didacticism and thus lie open to a variety of interpretations besides my own. To make a compelling case for my account, therefore, I will need to defend it against these alternatives on more general grounds as well. It is to this task that I now turn.

4. Alternative Accounts

What other explanations might be given for why overt instruction is sometimes a literary fault?
4.1 The Bad Company Account

One explanation starts from the idea that when we read a work of literature we enter into a kind of companionship with its author, and it is for the sake of this companionship and the rewards derived from it that we seek out and value the experience. Accordingly, our appreciation of individual literary works depends on the quality of the companionship they afford: insofar as the author proves worthy as a friend or companion, the work deserves our appreciation.86 On the basis of such a view, it might be argued that didacticism makes for a worse work of literature because it makes for a less companionable author. Just as in real life we tend not to enjoy the company of those who are arrogant or dogmatic in expressing their opinions, so in literature we find it difficult to enter into companionship with authors who exhibit this trait. So understood, the problem with didactic authors is that they violate norms of friendship rather than epistemic norms.

Let us call this the “bad company” account. One problem with this account is that it seems to rest on a mistaken view about the nature of the reader’s relationship to the author, which in many respects, it might be thought, does not resemble a friendship. Most importantly, perhaps, there is no possibility for mutual influence to occur between readers and authors the way it does – by definition, some think – between friends. Through literary texts, authors can share their experiences and values with us, but we cannot reciprocate. Thus, while we expect an author to hold some interests and values in common with us to begin with, we do not expect her interests and values to be shaped by ours as a result of our interaction.

86 For a fuller articulation and defense of this view, see Wayne Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
In other respects, too, we seem to hold authors to different standards than friends. For example, whereas an author such as the Joyce of *Ulysses* may be forgiven, even admired, for often pushing the bounds of intelligibility, such a habit would hardly be tolerated in, much less endear us to, a friend. At the same time, we accept that our conversation with friends will often be mundane but are rightly disappointed with authors who have nothing interesting, moving, or insightful to tell us. In general, it seems we are more willing to be challenged by authors than by friends, but also expect more in return.

All this suggests that literary critical norms and norms of friendship can come apart. But suppose it were insisted that nonetheless the explanation for why *didacticism* is a literary-critical flaw is that didactic authors run afoul of norms of friendship. How might this explanation go? To be satisfying, the explanation would need to say more than that didacticism is obnoxious or off-putting, since this would serve merely to redescribe the problem, not to explain it. A more satisfying explanation might go like this: we want our friends to be receptive to our interests and values, to be open to accepting and appreciating our viewpoints, and the tendency to hold forth dogmatically and arrogantly the way didactic authors typically do suggests a lack of such receptivity. The problem with this explanation, however, is that such receptivity, as just noted, is not something authors lack in virtue of being didactic but in virtue of the very nature of literary texts, which allow influence to flow from author to reader but never the reverse.

Perhaps one could think of other explanations, but it seems to me the most natural thing to say is that didacticism can violate norms of friendship *because* it can hint at intellectual vices that cast doubt on the author’s trustworthiness. After all, being trustworthy is an important part of being a good friend. A person who lies to me on a
frequent basis about serious matters that concern us as friends is not apt to be a close friend, nor is a person whose opinions on such matters, however sincerely expressed, often appear to be clouded by prejudice, arrogance, or closed-mindedness.

A good explanation for this, in turn, is that the intrinsic value of friendship is partly constituted by certain forms of knowledge or understanding that are realized through it. Friends can contribute to our self-understanding by offering us a perspective on our own character and values that we are incapable of achieving on our own, and they can help us to see what choices are best for us in view of the projects and commitments we value most. Furthermore, friends can lead us to new understandings of what we should value both by challenging us to see where our existing values are unquestioned or inconsistent and by introducing us to new and more attractive alternatives. However, the possibility of acquiring such forms of understanding depends on the reliability of our friends as observers and advisers. Hence qualities such as intellectual arrogance, prejudice, and closed-mindedness that undermine their epistemic reliability can also undermine their value as friends.

If didacticism violates norms of friendship, I am inclined to think that this is the best explanation why. Thus, I would argue, anyone who is sympathetic to the bad company view has good reason to embrace my own. Regardless, however, given that the explanation I have just offered seems perfectly coherent, one who accepts the bad company account is certainly under no obligation to reject my view.

4.2 The Bad Taste Account

Consider now a second account of what’s wrong with didacticism. According to this account, the problem with didactic authors is not that they are bad company or
epistemically unreliable, though they may be these things, but that they exhibit a
defective aesthetic sensibility. Being didactic, in other words, simply shows poor taste.
Call this the “bad taste” account.

The bad taste account fits naturally with the kind of virtue theory of art sketched
out in a recent series of essays by Peter Goldie. Goldie’s suggestion is that art,
understood broadly to encompass not just artworks but all artistic activity including both
art production and art appreciation, is valuable insofar as it expresses traits whose
exercise is partly constitutive of human well-being or flourishing. It goes almost without
saying that one such “virtue of art” is good taste—i.e. the skill to discern and the
motivation to experience aesthetic properties such as beauty, gracefulness, and elegance.
And it seems to follow that any expression of bad taste is artistically vicious. Goldie’s
theory thus offers a convenient framework within which the bad taste account can explain
why didacticism is an artistic flaw.

However, a virtue-theoretic framework is no more congenial to the bad taste
account than to my own. For besides aesthetic traits like taste, sensibility, vision,
creativity, and wit, virtues of art may also include intellectual ones like insight,
intelligence, and open-mindedness. Indeed, Goldie himself, among others, thinks that
many virtues (and vices) in the artistic domain will overlap with virtues (and vices) in
other domains, including the epistemic. Thinking of didacticism as a vice of art in
Goldie’s sense, therefore, does not force us to regard it as primarily aesthetic in character.

Perhaps one reason for so regarding it, however, is its close association with the quality of overtness or unsubtlety. Not only might it be claimed that this is an aesthetic quality, but it might also be claimed that, like ugliness or garishness for example, it is an inherently bad-making one. This is most plausibly the case with visual or musical artworks. When we describe a painting or musical motif as unsubtle, it does seem that we are remarking, with implicit disapproval, on an aesthetic quality. But it is not as clear that we are doing the same thing when we say that the message of a literary work is unsubtle. A classic view holds that an object’s aesthetic properties lie on its sensuous surface, directly supervening on its perceptual properties such that they can be immediately grasped by the properly trained eye or ear. But the sort of overtness or unsubtlety involved in didactic literature does not seem directly linked to any perceptual features. When we say that didactic writing is overt or unsubtle, we obviously don’t mean, for example, that the marks on the page are especially conspicuous. Indeed, apart from aural properties in poetry, there seem to be very few features of literary works that count as aesthetic in the classic sense.

Regardless of whether overtness is an aesthetic quality, however, it does not seem to be what is distinctively objectionable about didacticism. For even where a work’s

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90 Peter Kivy gives a thoroughgoing defense of this claim in his Once Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). The point has also been acknowledged by one prominent aesthetic theorist of art. See Nick Zangwill, “Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 60:2 (Spring 2002): 111-18. Visual poems such as George Herbert’s “Easter Wings” are a relatively rare exception.
message or aim to teach is undeniably overt, critics can disagree whether to call it didactic. *Middlemarch* is about as overtly instructive as literary fictions come, and as we have seen some 19th Century critics deemed it didactic. Yet Henry James, in his 1873 review of the novel, demurred: “Fielding was didactic—the author of *Middlemarch* is really philosophic.” If overtness were the soul of didacticism, such a judgment would be odd to say the least. Even supposing that didactic writing is “overt” in some aesthetic sense, therefore, it would be wrong to conclude from this that “didactic” is primarily an aesthetic predicate.

There are other reasons to resist this conclusion, too. Besides “overt,” “unsubtle,” and the like, most of the terms most closely associated with “didactic,” including “propagandistic,” “sermonizing,” “preachy,” “condescending,” “arrogant,” “self-righteous,” “sanctimonious,” “simple-minded,” “dogmatic,” “doctrinaire,” and “moralizing,” carry no hint of the aesthetic. Furthermore, didacticism is commonly cited as a fault in non-aesthetic contexts. In a review of a recent work in computational biology, for example, one reads:

> The book lacks any sense of historical or intellectual context: at no point does [the author] so much as indicate the existence of other work in the field to which he is almost certainly indebted. There is no bibliography or sense of provenance, no indication whether an idea is new or old. Instead, there is the dogmatic, didactic drone of a single, unchecked and often pompous voice, repeatedly intoning phrases such as “it is my strong suspicion that” or “I have increasingly been led to believe”.91

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Another reviewer has this to say about a history of early British cinema:

[The author’s] manner throughout is one of didactic scolding: “once this is grasped” – “we ought not to talk” – “it is therefore correct to speak of the diorama as a bourgeois form” – “as Audrey Field put it, a little too jokily” – “is vital to correct understanding” – “I’ve already explained”.92

Such uses of “didactic” admittedly fall outside literary criticism proper, but there is nothing to suggest that the term carries some different sense in these contexts. The fact that the works in question here are not the kind typically judged on the basis of their aesthetic merits thus poses a serious problem for the bad taste account.

In contrast, my own account has no trouble explaining such cases. Didacticism on my view is just as objectionable in works of computational biology and cinematic history as in literary fictions because it is primarily an epistemic rather than aesthetic fault. (Hence the second reviewer’s follow-up to the above comments emphasizing the work’s epistemic shortcomings: “I finished [the] book unenlightened, unpersuaded, and cross.”)

Likewise, the view I propose makes it easy to see why didacticism is closely identified with qualities such as self-righteousness, dogmatism, and simple-mindedness. For these qualities are themselves various forms of epistemic vice and as such are the very stuff in which, I claim, the badness of didacticism consists. For a variety of reasons, then, it makes more sense to regard didacticism as a show of a bad intellectual character than as a show of bad taste.

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4.3 The Spoiled Pleasures Account

Finally, we come to the view taken by Lamarque himself. In the same passage in which he defies the cognitivist to explain why overt instruction is a literary fault, Lamarque suggests that the correct explanation is that overt instruction can get in the way of certain non-cognitive pleasures proper to the appreciation of literature as such. In particular, Lamarque claims that overt instruction, by forcing us to focus on “a single ‘message’ or ‘thesis’ to be conveyed,” interferes with “one of the pleasures of a literary reading,” which “is to notice different ways that the content can be imaginatively constructed.”

Appreciating a work “from a literary point of view,” in other words, involves seeing how it can be construed under different interpretations, and didactic authors, by insisting on a single interpretation, stifle our freedom to do this.

Lamarque’s account is difficult to reconcile with my own. Although we agree that didacticism limits the realization of a certain type of literary value, the values whose realization we take to be limited by didacticism are not only different from one another but seemingly incompatible. For the greater a work’s capacity to yield multiple interpretations, the less its capacity, it would seem, to give us any meaningful instruction or guidance. If Lamarque’s account is sound, therefore, my own account would seem to be in trouble, inasmuch as it seems unlikely that we would fault a work for failing to achieve two aims it could not possibly achieve at once.

However, Lamarque’s account rests on two dubious assumptions. One is that multiple interpretability is a literary value. Were this so, one would expect each critic of a work to expound multiple interpretations of it and to embrace different readings offered

\[93\] Lamarque 254.
by fellow critics. Yet in fact each critic typically seeks to establish only one
interpretation, and there is often intense debate among critics over whose interpretation is
the correct one. Whatever pleasure there may be in noticing that a work can be multiply
interpreted, therefore, it is by no means obvious that this pleasure is proper to a literary
reading.

Nor is it obvious that didacticism actually limits the reader’s interpretive freedom.
Lamarque thinks it does because he equates didacticism with having a single message.
But it seems that being didactic is more a matter of how an author conveys her messages
than how many messages she conveys. An author who harangues us with numerous
messages is just as likely to be didactic as one who confines her harangue to a single
lesson. And an author who conveys a single lesson might not be didactic at all if she does
so gently. Hence, even if noticing a work’s multiple interpretability were a pleasure
proper to a literary reading, it is hard to see how didacticism \textit{per se} interferes with this
pleasure.

This does not mean that didacticism might not interfere with other non-cognitive
pleasures. For example, we might find it difficult to become absorbed in the imaginative
experience offered by a work if we are constantly being reminded of the author’s
presence by her excessively overt manner of teaching. But here again it must be noted
that didacticism is considered a flaw in various types of non-literary works where there is
little or no imaginative experience on offer. Thus, barring a semantic shift in these cases,
there is reason to doubt that didacticism is objectionable primarily because it interferes
with imaginative experience. Moreover, even if this were part of the problem in some
cases, there is no reason the problem might not also be partly cognitive. If an author’s
overt manner of teaching makes it difficult to become engrossed in the fiction, it might also make it difficult to trust the author because it makes us suspicious of her intellectual character. Indeed, the fact that an author refuses to let the imaginative experience of the work “speak for itself” may be part of our reason for distrusting her. Thus, this version of the spoiled pleasures account, while perhaps more defensible than Lamarque’s, does not exclude my own.

5. Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that when critics fault a work for being didactic, it is sometimes because its overt or heavy-handed manner of instruction suggests its author is intellectually arrogant, dogmatic, or prejudiced, giving the reader reason to distrust the lessons it seeks to convey. This account provides support to literary cognitivism in general inasmuch as it helps to resolve the apparent inconsistency between this view and the fact that overt instruction is sometimes regarded as a literary fault. More specifically, however, it gives ammunition to the justification-centered cognitivist inasmuch as it suggests that an important type of literary critical judgment is based on a work’s failure to provide a kind of justification for its themes. In the next chapter we will see that this is true of another important type of literary critical judgment as well, namely judgments regarding the thematic coherence of literary works.
Chapter 4
Coherence in Literature

1. Introduction

In Chapter 2 I argued that fictional narratives can provide two forms of justification beyond that which thought experiments provide. First, they can manifest intellectual excellences or virtues in their authors on the basis of which we can have reason to trust what the author tells us. And, second, they can manifest a large body of richly interconnected propositions whose overall coherence lends credibility to each of its members. We saw in Chapter 3 that the first form of justification can have literary-evaluative significance inasmuch as a work that manifests an intellectually vicious author can for that reason be charged with a literary fault. In this chapter I will argue that the same is also true of the second form of justification: when a literary work fails to provide this form of justification because of a lack of coherence among its manifested propositions, this can constitute a literary defect.

In a way, the literary-evaluative significance of the coherence of a fictional narrative’s manifested propositions may seem less surprising than that of the author’s intellectual virtue, since the very term coherence, unlike intellectual virtue, belongs as much to the vocabulary of literary criticism as to that of epistemology. Literary critics commonly use coherent and incoherent as terms of aesthetic praise and blame. However, whereas epistemologists are generally concerned with coherence only as a property of propositions, literary critics can be concerned with the coherence of a variety of features of a literary work, including its plot, characters, and style. For this reason, some have
insisted that epistemologists and literary critics are not using the same concept of coherence.\textsuperscript{94}

In this chapter I will argue against this view. The notion of coherence that plays a role in literary assessment, I will claim, is sometimes the same as that which plays a role in epistemic assessment, both in terms of the objects over which it is defined (viz. belief-contents) and the relations among those objects in which it consists (viz. logical, explanatory, and probabilistic relations). Nor is this always just a coincidence. Rather, coherence sometimes matters from a literary standpoint precisely because it matters from an epistemic one, and more specifically because it bears on the amount of justification a work provides for its themes.

The subsequent discussion is divided into four main sections. The first looks at the notion of coherence in the epistemological context, explaining its role within three major theories of knowledge and justification. The second distinguishes several notions of coherence relevant to literary assessment on the way to identifying one, which I call thematic coherence, that I argue maps closely onto the epistemological notion. The third presents two prime examples of the concept of thematic coherence in use, highlighting the ways in which it resembles the epistemological notion of coherence. The fourth section addresses several objections that might be raised against the argument of this chapter.

2. Epistemological Coherence

In epistemology, coherence is the term given to a certain type of relation among the propositional contents of a person’s beliefs, which is intuitively understood to be a matter of how tightly these belief-contents “harmonize” or “fit together” with one another. Many epistemologists think that this relationship, either by itself or in combination with other factors, can contribute positively to the epistemic status of the beliefs over which it obtains. Attempts to motivate this idea commonly appeal to examples in which agreement among the reports of independent witnesses to some event lends credibility to each of their reports, even though the witnesses are individually unreliable. In this section I attempt to characterize more precisely the nature of the coherence relation and the role it plays in each of three major philosophical theories of knowledge. What I will offer is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of epistemological approaches; there are many theories besides the ones I will discuss that do not value coherence. However, the extent to which these three theories agree about the meaning and value of coherence is nonetheless noteworthy, given what an otherwise diverse bunch they are.

According to the first type of view, known as coherentism, how well an agent’s beliefs cohere with one another is the main condition determining whether her beliefs are justified. The strongest versions of coherentism hold that an agent’s belief that $p$ is justified if and only if it sufficiently coheres with other beliefs the agent holds or stands in an appropriate relation to a system of beliefs that is itself coherent, while weaker versions treat coherence as necessary but not sufficient for justification, and in some cases even exempt certain types of beliefs (e.g. non-empirical beliefs) from the

95 For simplicity’s sake, I will often use beliefs as shorthand for belief-contents in what follows.
coherence requirement. What’s common to all versions of coherentism, however, is a commitment to denying that all our beliefs are justified in virtue of being or being derived from certain non-inferentially justified “basic” beliefs.

One of the more substantive accounts of the meaning of coherence comes from (former) coherentist Laurence BonJour. On BonJour’s view, coherence is a combined measure of the strength and number of several different types of connections among an agent’s beliefs. These connections fall into three main groups: logico-deductive connections, inductive-explanatory connections, and probabilistic connections.

The first group includes logical consistency as well as relations of logical entailment. Consistency is not a necessary condition of coherence, according to BonJour, since in reality it is rarely if ever achieved by human agents. Nor is it always rationally desirable, since one may reasonably accept, for instance, that at least some of one’s beliefs—i.e. at least some of the things one accepts as true—are false, thereby rationally committing oneself to an inconsistent set of beliefs. However, all other things being equal, he claims, a set of beliefs will tend to be more coherent the more internally consistent it is, and likewise the more valid deductive inferences can be drawn among its constituent beliefs.

Coherence, as BonJour conceives it, is also enhanced by relations of inductive support, broadly construed as relations between evidence and conclusion in any non-deductive form of inference. Induction in this sense includes those modes of reasoning

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sometimes called “conduction” and “abduction”. BonJour attaches special significance to
the latter type of reasoning, also known as “inference to the best explanation”. The
distinctive contribution explanatory connections make to coherence is expressed in
Bonjour’s account in terms of the loss of coherence caused by the presence of
unexplained anomalies, meaning cases in which “a fact or event…is claimed to obtain by
one or more of the beliefs in the system of beliefs, but…is incapable of being explained
(or would have been incapable of being predicted) by appeal to the other beliefs in the
system.” BonJour claims that anomalous beliefs damage coherence to an extent that
cannot be accounted for simply in terms of the decreased number of inferential
connections they allow for.

Finally, BonJour thinks, we must take into account the probabilistic consistency of
a belief set in assessing its overall coherence. Probabilistic consistency applies to degrees
of belief or degrees of confidence. It requires that one’s degree of belief always be
proportioned to the probability of the belief as given by the laws of probability. There are
different versions of these laws, but let us assume that one such law is that logical truths
have a probability of 1. In that case, one’s degree of belief in any logical truth would be
probabilistically inconsistent if it were less than 1. According to BonJour, this type of
inconsistency detracts from a belief system’s coherence in proportion to the disparity
between the probability the subject assigns to the belief and that which the laws of
probability assign to it.  

97 BonJour, Structure, 99.

98 What BonJour calls probabilistic inconsistency is more standardly referred to as
probabilistic coherence. Here I will follow BonJour’s terminology.
Bonjour’s account in effect combines several different approaches to coherentism into one. With the probabilistic constraint, BonJour builds into his account the basic idea of most Bayesian versions of coherentism, namely that one should follow the laws of probability in assigning degrees of confidence to one’s beliefs. By recognizing the importance of explanatory connections, he also accommodates the view of a number of his fellow coherentists, including Gilbert Harman and William Lycan, for whom coherence is essentially an explanatory relation. BonJour’s theory thus has much in common with other forms of coherentism in terms of how he understands coherence. Moreover, a similar notion of coherence also figures in two other major alternatives to coherentism, namely foundationalism and virtue epistemology.

In contrast to coherentists, foundationalists maintain that at least some of our beliefs have justification that does not derive from their inferential relations with any other beliefs and that these basic beliefs serve as the foundation for all our inferential knowledge. Foundationalist views can be weaker or stronger with respect to the degree of warrant they impute to basic beliefs and the extent to which they regard the justification of non-basic beliefs as parasitic on that of basic ones. At one extreme end of the spectrum is the possible view that justification flows “vertically” from basic to non-basic beliefs via inferential connections, but never in the opposite direction nor “horizontally” between non-basic beliefs. On this extremely strong version of foundationalism, the concept of coherence as a relation of mutual support never enters the picture. However, even this view seems to admit a role for a limited form of coherence insofar it requires that all non-basic knowledge be directly or indirectly inferable from basic beliefs. Moreover, almost no one actually accepts such a strong version of the view. Most
foundationalists, rather, seem to favor some more moderate or weak form of the view that grants that the warrant of basic beliefs depends to some extent on how well they cohere with non-basic beliefs and the warrant of non-basic beliefs depends to some extent on how well they cohere with each other.\(^99\)

Whereas foundationalism and coherentism both look to the properties of a belief (e.g. its logical relation to other beliefs) in assessing its epistemic status, virtue epistemology looks to the properties of the believer. More specifically, virtue epistemologists focus on the cognitive faculties and dispositions that give rise to beliefs and that make up the believer’s intellectual character. The basic thought is that there are certain cognitive abilities and traits that generally make for more reliable or responsible cognizers, and that only beliefs that arise from these cognitive “virtues” can count as justified or known. A list of these virtues might include, for example: powerful eyesight, tenacious memory, openness to new ideas, courage and perseverance in pursuing the truth, and humility concerning the extent of one’s own knowledge. In addition, it might also include certain other-regarding virtues such as a desire for the epistemic well-being of others (“epistemic benevolence”), a disposition to judge others’ ideas fairly and without being influenced by social prejudices (“epistemic justice”), and skill in effectively communicating one’s ideas.

According to virtue epistemology, it is the use of these virtues in forming a belief that makes the belief apt or credit-worthy. Thus, for virtue epistemologists, the coherence of one’s beliefs is not in itself a source of warrant. However, virtue epistemological theories typically preserve a role for coherence by positing an epistemic

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\(^{99}\) Robert Audi, Michael Huemer, and Susan Haack all defend such weaker forms of foundationalism.
virtue that consists in an appropriate desire for and ability to achieve coherence among one’s beliefs, or by understanding coherence/incoherence as symptomatic or partly constitutive of other virtues/ves—e.g. by interpreting incoherence as a sign of intellectual hypocrisy, self-deception, or simply carelessness. The effect of both these strategies is to allow the coherence/incoherence of one’s beliefs to count indirectly for/against one’s justification by counting directly as evidence for/against one’s intellectual virtue. A third way of giving coherence its due within a virtue epistemological account is to view it, as Wayne Riggs has suggested we ought, not as a manifestation of virtues whose value lies in their conduciveness to gaining knowledge, but as part of the ultimate aim or highest epistemic good (which Riggs calls “wisdom”) in relation to which the intellectual virtues are instrumentally valuable.  

Within virtue epistemology, as within epistemology more generally, then, there are a variety of ways of accounting for the epistemic significance of coherence. Yet underlying these differences is a shared assumption that the coherence of one’s beliefs indicates or partly determines their epistemic standing. Similarly, although there are different ways of defining the coherence relation, on a multi-dimensional account of coherence like BonJour’s, the differences here can be construed as mainly differences of emphasis.

3. Literary Coherence

The notion of coherence has various applications in literary criticism. In general, all of them are concerned with how well a literary work or some part of it hangs together. But

beyond this many of them do not seem to have any obvious kinship with the epistemological notion of coherence.

3.1 Phonosemantic Coherence

One example is the kind of coherence that critics look for between phonetic and semantic properties of a text. The idea that these properties ought to somehow reinforce one another is famously expressed in Pope’s dictum that in literature, and especially poetry, “the sound must seem an echo to the sense.” Pope himself offers several illustrations of this principle in his “Essay on Criticism”:

Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows,
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar,
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main. (ll. 366-73)

Interestingly, there is evidence that the sounds of statements can influence our willingness to believe them. Studies have shown, for instance, that the same aphoristic statement is more likely to be thought true if it rhymes than if it doesn’t. Poet Kenneth Koch notes how rhyme can make even nonsensical statements, such as “Two and two /
are rather blue” seem pregnant with truth.\textsuperscript{102} Whatever psychological effect the sounds of words may have, however, it is hard to see how they could stand in logical or explanatory relations with anything else. Phonosemantic coherence thus seems importantly different from epistemological coherence.

3.2 Subject Coherence

Another type of coherence that can matter to literary critics has to do with the relation among a work’s subjects. Although a literary work may have many subjects, a critic may complain of incoherence when they cannot all be subsumed under a single general description. According to Percy Lubbock, for example, \textit{War and Peace} lacks coherence because it oscillates between two irreducible subjects—one, the “drama of youth and age”, about “the processional march of the generations, always changing, always renewed,” and the other, the “drama of war and peace”, about a particular episode in the history of a particular nation.\textsuperscript{103} This kind of coherence seems more conceptual than the first, but the items over which it obtains are non-propositional all the same. Thus, it too would appear to be distinct from the epistemological notion of coherence.

3.3 Stylistic Coherence

Critics can also be interested in the coherence of a work’s style. Specific stylistic elements that may be said to cohere (or not) include a work’s diction, rhythm, imagery, and point of view. Lubbock claims \textit{War and Peace} also lacks this kind of coherence, in that it fails to maintain a consistent point of view. Whereas in the war scenes “the


\textsuperscript{103} Percy Lubbock, \textit{The Craft of Fiction} (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), Ch. 3.
predominant point of view is simply [Tolstoy’s] own, that of the independent story-teller,” the story of “youth and age” is narrated through the minds of its main characters. “In the one case,” says Lubbock, “Tolstoy is immediately beside us, narrating; in the other it is Peter and Andrew, Nicholas and Natasha, who are with us and about us, and Tolstoy is effaced.”

Stylistic coherence calls for uniformity or sameness of technique; it does not require logical consistency or relations of explanatory support among an author’s beliefs. Again, therefore, the notion of coherence involved here does not seem the same as the epistemological one.

### 3.4 Storyworld Coherence

Sometimes the type of coherence that concerns literary critics is one that pertains to various elements of the fictional world represented in a literary work, such as its plot, characters, or settings. The notion of coherence applied to plot typically has to do with causal connectedness. A plot is normally judged to be coherent, that is, to the extent that each event follows as a causal consequence from what comes before and provides a sufficient causal basis for what comes after. Some theorists believe that a narrative must possess at least some degree of this type of coherence in order to even count as a narrative, and most critics seem to regard it as a condition of a good narrative. Following Aristotle, for example, critics typically spurn the use of *deus ex machina*, a

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104 Lubbock 38-9.

device whereby a happy resolution to a story’s conflict is brought about through a sudden and unlikely turn of events.\textsuperscript{106}

A similar notion of coherence, one that can also be traced back to Aristotle, is often applied to characters in literary works. With characters, as with plot, says Aristotle, the poet “ought always to seek what is either necessary or probable, so that it is either necessary or probable that a person of such-and-such a sort say or do things of the same sort.”\textsuperscript{107} Some critics think that Dostoevski’s Raskalnikov lacks this type of coherence, in that his conversion to Christianity at the end of \textit{Crime and Punishment} does not seem probable given the consistently cold and remorseless disposition he has displayed throughout the rest of the novel.\textsuperscript{108}

Notions of coherence that have to do with causal connectedness between events or actions are concerned with a kind of diachronic relationship between the facts of a story. But the facts of a story may—and most critics would say, generally ought to—cohere synchronically as well. As a rule, a character ought not have brown eyes and blue eyes at the same time.\textsuperscript{109} If it is said that a character slept soundly one night, it ought not to be said that he didn’t sleep at all that same night.\textsuperscript{110} And if murder is the reason initially


given for why a character is in prison, political dissidence ought not be the reason given later.  

In cases like these, the demand for coherence seems to amount to a demand for logical consistency. That is, it seems that an author ought not to assert on Page 1 that a character has blue eyes and on Page 10 that she has brown eyes because this amounts to asserting both p and not-p. Contradictions like these can be objectionable for many reasons. They can be distracting for the reader and demonstrate a lack of carefulness on the part of the author. However, contradictions in the fictional facts of a story do not seem to constitute contradictions in the author’s beliefs. This is because the author’s attitude towards what he or she asserts as fictionally true does not seem to be properly characterized as belief. It would be odd to say, for example, that Flaubert believed that Madame Bovary was an adulteress, except perhaps as a way of saying that he believed that he asserted as much. For the same reason, it would be odd to say that Flaubert believed both that Madame Bovary had blue eyes and that she had brown eyes, though he asserts both. The more natural thing to say is that he simply made a mistake in constructing the fiction.

Storyworld coherence thus does not seem to map on to epistemological coherence. However, there is another literary-critical notion of coherence of that I will now argue does. I call this thematic coherence.

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3.5 Thematic Coherence

Thematic coherence concerns how well a work’s themes hang together, both with each other and with what might be called sub-thematic propositions. Regarding themes, it is worth adding here a few points to what has already been said in earlier chapters.

First: critics sometimes use the term *theme* to denote what I earlier called subject, as when they say that the theme of some work is war, and sometimes to denote what a work says about its subject, as when they say that the theme of a work is that war is hell. I use the term *theme* here in this latter sense. Themes in this sense have propositional character, though they need not always be formulated as propositions. One could say, for example, that a major theme of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is the danger of intellectual ambition or that a central theme of Proust’s *Recherche* is the impossibility of achieving happiness through love.

Second: while there can be one theme that stands out as particularly salient in a literary work, this need not be the case. Often literary works, especially longer ones like novels and plays, have multiple themes.

Third: themes are world-directed. That is, they say something about the real world, as opposed to merely stating information about the fictional world of the work. Thus, for example, the first proposition below, in contrast to the second, would not count as a theme of Twain’s novel.

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(a) Huck Finn acts contrary to the dictates of his conscience in choosing not to betray Jim to the authorities.

(b) Doing the right thing sometimes requires acting against one’s conscience.

Fourth: it is conventional to construe a work’s themes as expressions of the mind of some creative agent. For convenience’s sake, I will refer to this creative agent as the author. However, in doing so I do not mean to sanction any particular view about the identity of this agent. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is an ongoing debate over this issue, with some theorists defending the traditional practice of identifying this agent with the historical author and others insisting that this agent be identified instead with some author “construct,” which is merely “postulated” by the reader or “implied,” “apparent,” or “manifested” in the work. For my purposes here, it is not necessary to settle this debate.

Fifth: various elements of a literary work, including many of the ones I have just been discussing, can contribute to thematic meaning. Faulkner’s use of multiple narrators in *As I Lay Dying*, for example, is generally recognized as a stylistic expression of certain typically modernist ideas about the “subjective” or “perspectival” nature of reality and the isolated condition of the individual consciousness. Similarly, the short, direct sentences and simple, sparse language in which Hemingway’s narrators typically speak suggests the view, some critics say, “that the use of the intellect, with its careful discriminations, may blur the rendering of experience and may falsify it.” Aspects of a

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114 See Note 67.
work’s fictional storyworld, such as its plot and the thoughts of its characters, can also suggest themes. In *Anna Karenina*, for example, the fatal outcome of Anna’s affair with Vronsky, in contrast to the rosy outcome of Levin’s marriage to Kitty, suggests Tolstoy’s view that traditional family life is an important source of human happiness. In *Howards End* and *The Magic Mountain*, major themes are presented as the insights of fictional characters. (For Margaret Schlegel: “Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at is height.” For Hans Castorp: “For the sake of goodness and love, man shall grant death no dominion over his thoughts.”)[116]

Even acoustic effects in literature can carry thematic significance. Critics have connected Emily Dickinson’s frequent use of slant rhymes, for instance, with various themes, including the “‘imperfect correspondence’ between dreams and harsh reality”[117] and the “fractured” nature of the universe.[118]

Literary works can manifest propositions that are similar to themes in all five of these respects yet are nonetheless not considered thematic. Take, for example, the proposition that the Mississippi River flows south or that not all Christians are compassionate. Neither of these propositions counts as a theme of *Huckleberry Finn*, yet both are world directed and evidently accepted by the author. Such propositions are what

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I call sub-thematic.\textsuperscript{119} The connections between a work’s sub-thematic and thematic propositions can also be relevant to its thematic coherence.

Thematic coherence compares to epistemological coherence in terms of its objects, which are in both cases the contents of beliefs or other propositional attitudes. But what about the coherence relation itself? That is, how do the relations in terms of which literary critics assess thematic coherence compare to those in terms of which epistemologists assess epistemic coherence? In the next section I will argue that there is considerable resemblance between thematic and epistemological coherence in this respect as well. For evidence, I will draw on texts from two historic debates in literary criticism, one concerning \textit{Paradise Lost} and the other \textit{War and Peace}, which both center on the issue of thematic coherence.

\textbf{4. Two Case Studies in Thematic Coherence}

\textbf{4.1 Waldock on \textit{Paradise Lost}}

The first debate is what has come to be known as the “Milton Controversy.”\textsuperscript{120} The roots of the debate go back to Addison and Johnson, but it was in the 1940’s and ‘50’s that it reached its highest pitch, with such cultural heavyweights as F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot, and C.S. Lewis all entering the fray. The general issue at stake was the canonicity of Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost (PL)}, a 17\textsuperscript{th} Century English epic poem that promises to “justify

\textsuperscript{119} What distinguishes these propositions from themes is an interesting question which I unfortunately do not have time to pursue here. The short answer would seem to be that themes are more central or important to the work than sub-thematic propositions. But it is not easy to say precisely what it means for a proposition to be central to a work.

the ways of God to man” through a retelling of the Biblical stories of Satan’s fall from heaven, God’s creation of Earth and man, and the Original Sin and punishment of Adam and Eve. On one side of the debate stood those who accepted the traditional status of PL as one of Western literature’s great masterpieces; on the other, those who sought to expose it as a second-rate work, marred by stylistic excesses and thematic dissonances.\textsuperscript{121}

In his book \textit{Paradise Lost and Its Critics}, one of the leading detractors of PL, A.J.A. Waldock, argues that there is often a tension between the themes that Milton explicitly asserts in the poem and those that are suggested implicitly in the way Milton tells the story—a clash, as Waldock says, between “commentary and presentation.”\textsuperscript{122} Waldock points to three major instances. One is Milton’s depiction of the Fall. According to Waldock, Milton portrays Adam’s decision to eat the forbidden apple as motivated by an admirable love for Eve. But in so doing he forces us to doubt a basic premise of the poem: “that Adam is to be condemned.”\textsuperscript{123} The second instance is Milton’s characterization of Satan, whom Milton explicitly describes as evil but implicitly portrays as admirable.


\textsuperscript{122} Waldock 26.

\textsuperscript{123} Waldock 56.
We hear about Satan’s pride...we see something of his malice, we can perhaps deduce his folly, and we know that theoretically he and his mates are in misery. But what we are chiefly made to see and feel in the first two books are quite different things: fortitude in adversity, enormous endurance, a certain splendid recklessness, remarkable powers of rising to an occasion, extraordinary powers of leadership (shown not least in his salutary taunts), and striking intelligence in meeting difficulties that are novel and could seem overwhelming.\textsuperscript{124}

The third instance is Milton’s characterization of God. Milton is explicitly committed to a belief in God’s perfect goodness and knowledge, says Waldock. But the speeches that Milton has God give in the poem suggest “nervousness, insecurity, and doubt,” as well as “flagrant disingenuousness and hypocrisy.”\textsuperscript{125}

One natural way of framing Waldock’s criticisms is in terms of logical consistency. It might be thought, that is, that in all three cases the problem is simply that Milton wants to assert both $p$ and not-$p$ at the same time—that Adam is to be blamed and that he is not to be blamed, that Satan is to be despised and not to be despised, and that God is to be revered and not to be revered. Indeed, Waldock recognizes these “logical difficulties” as one aspect of the problem.\textsuperscript{126} However, part of what makes these logical inconsistencies

\textsuperscript{124} Waldock 77.

\textsuperscript{125} Waldock 103, 101.

\textsuperscript{126} Waldock 61.
particularly troubling for Waldock is that in every case each member of the inconsistent pair of beliefs is bound up with a large body of other beliefs also implicit in the poem.

Take Milton’s ambivalence in regard to Adam’s guilt, for example. On the one hand, the assumption that Adam is guilty of a grave offense is central to Milton’s project in *PL* of justifying the ways of God to man, in that it lies at the heart of the theological system from which this problem arises and Milton’s solution comes. Within this system, the belief that Adam is blameworthy is connected by relations of mutual support to myriad other beliefs—that Adam is related to God as creature to creator, that this relation obligates Adam to obey God, that man was created “sufficient to have stood, though free to fall,”127 that such freedom is the source of man’s dignity and a blessing bestowed on him out of God’s goodness, and so on. Together these ideas are supposed to provide an explanation of why man is susceptible to sin and death. Thus, Waldock is hardly exaggerating when he says that “the whole of *Paradise Lost* rests on [the belief in Adam’s blameworthiness].”128 On the other hand, the belief that Adam has done no serious wrong by eating the apple, and perhaps even done right, seems to Waldock to be supported by a wealth of textual details. Added together, these details amount to a relatively coherent perspective on Adam, albeit one that is radically at odds with the first. Thus, in order to interpret Milton as definitely committed to either one of these two views of Adam, Waldock says, one “has to jettison at least half the text.”129


128 Waldock 55.

129 Waldock 59.
The logical contradictions, then, are just the tip of the iceberg, the superficial result of “deep underlying ambiguities in the theme.”\textsuperscript{130} Beneath the surface, Waldock suggests, there is a more radical disjointedness in Milton’s belief set, consisting not so much in any strict logical inconsistencies as in a large-scale collapse of explanatory integration. But there is even more to it than this. For in addition to both the logical and the inductive-explanatory aspects of the poem’s incoherence, Waldock also observes a third aspect, which has to do with Milton’s degree of confidence in the beliefs he expresses in \textit{PL}.

As Waldock frequently observes, not all of Milton’s doctrines are advanced with the same degree of conviction. In some cases, the ideas are stated “flatly and confidently,” while in others they are couched in “less forthright and certain” terms.\textsuperscript{131} Waldock thinks it is clear, for example, that “Milton believed in spiritual regeneration—\textit{really} believed in it,” whereas he thinks Milton “obviously is not prepared to go the stake for his belief in the materiality of angels,” seeing as there is “at least some degree of hesitation” in his description in Book 5 of the angels’ bodily functionality.\textsuperscript{132} But Waldock suggests that Milton’s degree of confidence in his beliefs is not always proportioned to the evidence he himself presents. For Waldock this is part of the problem with Milton’s beliefs about Adam’s blameworthiness. It is not just that Milton undermines his own belief in Adam’s guilt, but that in spite of this he still “requires us, not tentatively, not half-heartedly (for there can be no place really for half-heartedness

\textsuperscript{130} Waldock 42.

\textsuperscript{131} Waldock 107-108.

\textsuperscript{132} Waldock 124, 107-108.
here) but with the full weight of our minds to believe... that [Adam] did wrong."\footnote{133 Waldock 55-56 (my italics).}

Waldock’s suggestion here seems to be that Milton’s belief that Adam did wrong is probabilistically inconsistent with others he holds.

In the previous section we saw that assessments of epistemological coherence take into account three main types of relations among beliefs: logico-deductive, inductive-explanatory, and probabilistic. Waldock’s assessment of PL’s thematic coherence focuses on these same three types of connections. Moreover, it is evident that Waldock’s concern with these connections is partly epistemic. In particular, the language in which he often criticizes the poem’s incoherencies suggests its failure to provide adequate justification for the views it expresses. The poem’s ambivalence about Adam’s guilt, for example, leads to a failure “to prove the doctrine that God at all times and in all circumstances must be obeyed,” while other incoherencies prevent the poem from “persuading us” of some view or another.\footnote{134 Waldock 55 (his italics), 125.} Waldock’s critique of PL thus suggests a close kinship between the literary-critical notion of thematic coherence and the epistemological notion. Not only does thematic coherence pertain to the same objects and track the same connections among those objects, but the literary-critical value of thematic coherence also seems tied to its epistemic value.

4.2 Bier on War and Peace

The long-running critical discussion over the greatness of War and Peace (W&P) provides further evidence of the kinship between thematic and epistemological
coherence. Taking its direction from Henry James’ early criticism of the novel as a “loose, baggy monster,” this discussion has generally focused on the novel’s internal coherence, with some critics continuing to insist with James that it lacks too much in this regard to be considered an achievement of the highest order. The hundredth anniversary of the publication of *W&P* provided the occasion for one such critic, Jesse Bier, to question again the novel’s high reputation and call attention to a number of apparent defects in the novel that would seem to belie it, including several alleged examples of thematic incoherence.

One of these that Bier discusses is “Tolstoi’s failure to reconcile the doctrine of pre-determinism with the manifest workings of chance in his novel.” One of the major themes of *W&P*, as Bier and many other critics understand it, is that history is the working out of an inscrutable divine plan, not the result of the actions of “great men” like Napoleon. Tolstoy explicitly endorses this theory in the infamous epilogue to *W&P* and also tries to convey it implicitly through his account of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812, in which the events unfold independently of and ultimately contrary to the will of Napoleon himself. Only the Russian commander Kutuzov, who understands that history marches towards an inexorable fate and the best one can do is to step out of its path, gets his way. But what the story of Napoleon in *W&P* actually conveys, Bier thinks, is Tolstoy’s belief that history is chaotic and unpredictable. And this view doesn’t square with the story of Kutuzov, which in fact suggests the view that history can be predicted and does have its “great men” after all.

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Bier claims that *W&P* also exhibits inconsistency in its general attitude toward the meaningfulness of life and the nobility of mankind, alternating between displays of “sentimental optimism or humanitarianism” on the one hand and “misanthropy and nihilism” on the other.\(^{136}\) Tolstoy betrays his essentially unstable vision of life, says Bier, through that of his hero Pierre, who at times in the novel can see only “the petty, the humdrum, and the meaningless” in everything, but at other times is overcome with a joyous sense of “the great, the eternal, and the infinite” and filled with an all-embracing love for his fellow man.\(^{137}\) Bier interprets Pierre’s radical mood swings in the novel as symptomatic of “an adolescent or barbaric manic-depression” in its author.\(^{138}\)

Besides its “failure to reconcile contrasting themes” such as these, Bier also criticizes the novel for its “failure to unify closely related themes.”\(^{139}\) Bier wonders why, for example, Tolstoy never draws a connection between his obvious respect for nature as a powerful agent in human history—above all, it is winter that vanquishes Napoleon in the novel—and his apparent admiration for “naturalness” as a human character trait: “Is it too much to ask of a great author to detect the potentialities of his closest themes?” Bier asks rhetorically. “Is he not responsible for imaginatively fusing and perhaps developing the intellectual and narrative consequences of two great positive ideas like naturalness of

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\(^{136}\) Bier 118.


\(^{138}\) Bier 119.

\(^{139}\) Bier 127.
character and the role of Nature in men’s affairs, especially since he has pointed them for us?”

The incoherencies for which Bier criticizes *W&P*, like those for which Waldock criticizes *PL*, have three aspects: logical, inductive-explanatory, and probabilistic. Their logical aspect is easiest to see: the novel implies the theme that history is unpredictable and the theme that it’s predictable, that life is meaningful and meaningless, etc. Bier’s repeated reference to the incoherencies in *W&P* as “contradictions” shows his awareness of this first aspect.

Bier implicitly faults the novel for being incoherent in an inductive-explanatory sense as well. For example, Bier complains that the novel fails to establish any connection between two of its major ideas, “the naturalness of character and the role of Nature in men’s affairs.” The problem here is not that these ideas are logically incompatible, but that there’s no overarching idea in the novel under which both can be explained. Bier’s complaint here thus essentially concerns a lack of explanatory coherence among the novel’s themes.

Lastly, Bier’s objections sometimes concern the degree of confidence Tolstoy places in his beliefs, specifically inasmuch as it sometimes seems out of proportion with the evidence he presents. For example, Bier claims that Tolstoy does not provide adequate evidence in the novel to support “the potency of his conviction” in “the ideal of loving-kindness.” Likewise, Bier suggests that the incoherence between Tolstoy’s

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140 Bier 127-128.
141 Bier 122, 122, 124.
142 Bier 119.
“belief that large predetermining forces maneuver for the total good... [and] his frequent view of universal and human chaos” is made worse by his “devout” acceptance of the former view.\textsuperscript{143} Bier’s critique of \textit{W&P}, like Waldock’s of \textit{PL}, thus seems partly based on its probabilistic inconsistency.

Bier’s critique is similar to Waldock’s in one other important respect, too. That is, like Waldock’s, Bier’s critique suggests that thematic incoherence can be a literary-critical fault at least partly because it can be connected to epistemic faults. In particular, Bier suggests that some of the incoherencies in \textit{W&P} stem from Tolstoy’s lack of intellectual virtue. According to Bier, for example, Pierre’s oscillations between nihilism and “sentimental optimism” indicate that Tolstoy “lacked the interior courage of his countryman Dostoyevski, that brave will, above all, to look steadily down,” which Bier claims is an “essential quality of greatness in an author.”\textsuperscript{144}

In Bier’s critique of \textit{W&P}, then, we find further support for the two main conclusions suggested by Waldock’s critique of \textit{PL}: one, that judgments of thematic coherence and judgments of epistemological coherence track the same types of relations among the same types of objects; and, two, that the literary-critical value of thematic coherence is partly rooted in its epistemic value. It should be noted that these claims are logically independent: one could accept the first without the second, and vice versa. However, insofar as each helps to explain the other, the two claims are also mutually reinforcing. If the interest and critical import of thematic coherence in literature did not come at least in part from its epistemic value, it would be difficult to explain why the

\textsuperscript{143} Bier 122.

\textsuperscript{144} Bier 121-122.
concept nonetheless tracks the same set of relations as epistemological coherence. And contrariwise, if thematic coherence did not supervene on the same set of relations as epistemological coherence, it would be difficult to explain why assessments of thematic coherence seem laden with epistemic judgments. Thus, evidence for either claim is effectively evidence for both.

5. Objections and Replies

I now turn to addressing some of the more serious objections that might be raised against these claims. In each case, I present the objection first, followed by my reply.

5.1 Coherent-Fantasies Objection

If coherence in the literary context can have the same sense that it does in the epistemological context, this just goes to show that coherence in this sense must not be warrant-increasing. For literary fictions are often highly coherent and yet clearly not credible on that account. Some of the most bizarre fantasies and science fictions are just as coherent as the most true-to-life realist novels. And different realist novels can present different and incompatible versions of reality while nonetheless exhibiting the same degree of coherence. Literary artists thus demonstrate, through their ability to coherently imagine the diverse and far-fetched worlds that they do, that coherence in itself is not a constraint on rational belief formation.

The force of this objection depends to some extent on a confusion between thematic and storyworld coherence. As explained earlier, thematic coherence pertains to propositions that the author is assumed to accept in regard to the actual world. In contrast, storyworld coherence pertains to features of the fictional world represented in
the work, such as the fictional characters, settings, and events it describes. These fictional worlds can be far removed from our own, and their internal coherence indeed gives us no reason to accept them as real. But just because a work’s fictional world is far-fetched does not mean that its themes must be far-fetched. Even the wildest fantasies and science fictions may manifest true propositions in the realm of, e.g., philosophy or human psychology. It is a mistake to assume, therefore, that such types of works, however unfaithful to reality their fictional worlds may be, necessarily embody unacceptable belief systems.

Still, there is no denying that it is possible to construct many coherent yet deviant belief systems. And this, it must be granted, does pose a problem for the view that coherence can provide justification “from scratch”—i.e. that coherence among a set of beliefs is sufficient on its own to boost their rational acceptability. Yet coherence among beliefs might still arguably increase warrant where some of these beliefs have independent justification. And indeed it is often the case that some of the thematic and sub-thematic propositions manifested in literary works do have such justification. In Chapter 2 I suggested that literary works can provide coherence-independent justification for some of their thematic propositions insofar as they can function at the micro-level like thought experiments. I argued that several episodes in *Howards End*, for example, work like thought experiments to generate intuitive support for the idea that the Schlegel virtues of sympathy and imagination, when unmixed with the Wilcox virtues of neatness, decision, and obedience, result in moral “sloppiness.” If this is right, then the independent justification for themes needed to make thematic coherence warrant-increasing may sometimes be supplied by means internal to the work. But the independent justification
may also come from sources external to the work, such as the testimony of others or our own experience. This is plausibly the case with many common literary themes—for example, the difficulty of controlling one’s own life, the ability of human beings to find happiness in the worst of circumstances, and the fearful consequences of repressed guilt—for which we often possess evidence from experience and received wisdom quite independent of that which literary works provide.

5.2 Insufficient Themes Objection

No literary fiction has a sufficient number of themes for coherence among them to yield justification. Justification through coherence requires extensive relations of mutual support, realizable only within a system of considerable size and complexity. But even large novels like War and Peace typically have only a handful of themes. The value of thematic coherence in literature, therefore, cannot be epistemic.

Whereas the first objection denies that there are any conditions under which the coherence of a belief system can secure justification from scratch, this second one assumes that such conditions exist but denies that works of literature can ever meet them. This second objection can be answered in the same way as the first, by suspending commitment to the view that coherence can yield justification from scratch and adopting the less controversial view that coherence yields justification only if some of the cohering beliefs possess independent justification. Assuming that this condition is often met by literary themes and that when it is the threshold for justification with respect to how large the cohering set of beliefs must be is significantly lower, this makes it possible to explain how thematic coherence can yield justification even when the number of themes involved is small.
This move may not be necessary to answer the insufficient themes objection however. For thematic coherence, as I defined it earlier, extends not only over themes but also over what I called sub-thematic propositions, of which some works possess a large number. This is not mere stipulation on my part. The cases we looked at in the previous section show that when critics assess thematic coherence they are concerned not only with themes but sub-themes as well. Recall, for example, the following passage I quoted from Waldock concerning Milton’s ambivalent attitude toward Satan:

We hear about Satan’s pride...we see something of his malice, we can perhaps deduce his folly, and we know that theoretically he and his mates are in misery. But what we are chiefly made to see and feel in the first two books are quite different things: fortitude in adversity, enormous endurance, a certain splendid recklessness, remarkable powers of rising to an occasion, extraordinary powers of leadership (shown not least in his salutary taunts), and striking intelligence in meeting difficulties that are novel and could seem overwhelming.

Here Waldock records evidence of what he takes to be an example of thematic incoherence. But many of the statements he lists here—for example, that Satan possesses fortitude, that he possesses endurance, that he possesses splendid recklessness—are sub-thematic propositions. That is, while they resemble themes in key respects\textsuperscript{145} and might be seen as providing support for themes,\textsuperscript{146} they are not central enough to the poem to

\textsuperscript{145} Keep in mind that for Milton the characters and events in \textit{Paradise Lost} are not fictional. So propositions the poem manifests about, e.g., Satan can be understood as world-directed.
count as themes themselves. Such propositions can be quite numerous, especially in works the size of *Paradise Lost*. Even if the number of themes in a work is small, therefore, when they are combined with the work’s sub-themes, the resulting network of propositions might sometimes be rich enough in the relevant kinds of coherence relations to yield justification.

**5.3 Valuable Incoherence Objection**

Incoherence in literature can be epistemically valuable. Through incoherent literature “we can experience what sheer chaos…might be like, and perhaps what it would be appropriate to think and feel, without the potentially terrible cost which would follow in the real world.”¹⁴⁷ Much of the interest and value of Dada, for example, lies in its deliberate use of techniques that fracture our experience of reality and subvert our conventional expectation of order and intelligibility. Such techniques “make us stop and think about the ways in which we can be led into thinking certain institutions, social practices and structures are ‘natural’ and therefore cannot be changed. Thus the usually negative value of incoherence can have a positive value when it is artistically used to get us to see things in a new light.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ William Blake famously claimed that Milton “was of the Devil’s party.” Many of Blake’s contemporaries took a similar view of the poem, interpreting Satan, for example, as “a symbol of noble, virtuous resistance to arbitrary power.” For a discussion of some of these “trans-valuational” interpretations of *PL*, see Peter A. Schock, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Blake's Myth of Satan and Its Cultural Matrix,” *Journal of English Literary History* 60:2 (1993): 441-470.


¹⁴⁸ Kieran 389.
This objection fails to distinguish between certain non-thematic forms of incoherence, which may indeed be cognitively valuable, and thematic incoherence, which is not cognitively valuable as a rule. In much modernist and postmodernist fiction (e.g. “The Waste Land,” *The Sound and the Fury*), for example, one encounters a lack of what I earlier called storyworld coherence—i.e. a lack of continuity or connectedness among the fictional events, characters, and settings represented in the work. Critics sometimes interpret this kind of incoherence as conveying insight regarding (e.g.) the fragmented nature of experience or the self, and they sometimes value it as such. But in the first place, this kind of incoherence is not to be identified with thematic incoherence, for reasons discussed earlier in this chapter. And in the second place, it seems that the cognitive value of this type of incoherence actually depends on the cognitive value of thematic coherence. For where storyworld incoherence is thought to be cognitively rewarding, the usual explanation is that it contributes to some coherent thematic program. This contribution is precisely what redeems this type of incoherence from a cognitive standpoint. If the incoherent storyworld of a work did not make sense at the thematic level, it would fail to be cognitively valuable.

The same is true of the kind of incoherence we find in some Dadaist poetry, such as the purely phonetic poems of Hugo Ball or the randomly assembled newspaper clippings of Tristan Tzara. The type of incoherence such works exhibit involves an absence of conventional semantic or syntactic relations among the words and sentences in a text, resulting in the most extreme cases in sheer nonsense. Again, it is important to note that this kind of incoherence is not identical with thematic coherence. Moreover, if this kind of incoherence has cognitive value, as some supporters of Dadaism have claimed, it
seems that this value must be explained in terms of its contribution to some coherent thematic message. Indeed, this is precisely how Dadaists themselves like Tzara tried to justify the incoherence of their work. In particular, Tzara suggested that the incoherence of this poetry expressed a truth about the illogical and “idiotic” nature of life:

We are often told that we are incoherent, but into this word people try to put an insult that it is rather hard for me to fathom. Everything is incoherent. The gentleman who decides to take a bath but goes to the movies instead. The one who wants to be quiet but says things that haven't even entered his head. Another who has a precise idea on some subject but succeeds only in expressing the opposite in words which for him are a poor translation. There is no logic. Only relative necessities discovered a posteriori, valid not in any exact sense but only as explanations. The acts of life have no beginning or end. Everything happens in a completely idiotic way.\footnote{Tristan Tzara, ”Lecture on Dada,” in 《Seven Dada Manifestoes and Lampisteries》, trans. Barbara Wright (London: John Calder, 1981), 107-112, at 111. It is also interesting to note that according to several scholars one reason for Dada’s decline was the fact that the incoherence in their art failed to serve a fully coherent ideology. Besides the idea that reality itself is illogical and “idiotic,” the incoherence of Dada art was supposed to convey a disgust with art itself, as traditionally conceived and practiced. But in choosing to express their anti-art message through artistic means, Dadaists seemed to be caught in a contradiction. It is commonly said that this tension was a major source of the discontent with Dada that motivated the more positive turn towards Surrealism. See David Hopkins, 《Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction》 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004): 17; David Cunningham, ”Dada,” 《The Literary Encyclopedia》, ed. Robert Clark (2001). Accessed July 20, 2010. http://www.litencyc.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/php/topics.php?rec=true&UID=251.}

Still, one might think that there can be cases of thematic incoherence that are cognitively rewarding, particularly where the “the themes in question are significant ones and the
thematic incoherence in the artwork reflects the difficulty commonly conceived to be involved in reconciling these disparate themes and concepts.\textsuperscript{150} Tolstoy’s alleged failure in \textit{War and Peace} to resolve his commitment to determinism and free will might be seen as one such case. Incoherencies of this sort might be thought to be epistemically valuable inasmuch as they “give the reader an opportunity to reflect on tensions involved in simultaneously holding different ideas, both of which have some strong appeal.”\textsuperscript{151}

Even if it is granted that thematic incoherence can lead to such cognitive benefits, however, it does not follow that it ever enhances a work’s literary-aesthetic value. For not all cognitive merits are literary-aesthetic merits. \textit{Great Expectations} features vocabulary that commonly appears on standardized college-entrance exams, but this obviously does not count as a literary-aesthetic merit of the novel. On what basis can it be determined whether an epistemic merit is a literary-aesthetic merit? A basic methodological assumption of this project is that the actual practices surrounding the composition, publication, and critical reception of literary texts provide strong evidence for the functions and values of literature. Accordingly, if we want to know whether thematic incoherence can be a literary merit, we should examine these practices to see, for example, whether critics ever praise works for thematic incoherence. Cases of this, however, are in fact very hard to come by, while cases of critics condemning works for thematic incoherence, such as those we saw in Section 4, are quite abundant.

Of course, what one critic sees as thematic incoherence may be construed differently, and more positively, by another critic. Where Bier sees an inability to

\textsuperscript{150} Amy Mullin, personal correspondence.

\textsuperscript{151} Amy Mullin, personal correspondence.
reconcile determinism and free will in *War and Peace*, for example, another critic might see an admirable ability to imagine different perspectives or an astute recognition of the psychological pull they both exert on humans. But rather than embracing the work’s thematic incoherence, these interpretations simply explain it away. The same is true of interpretations that treat apparent thematic incoherence as evidence that the author is being ironic—i.e. that she doesn’t actually accept all of the views she presents. Such interpretations typically seek to vindicate the author from the charge of thematic incoherence by revealing ways in which she subtly undercuts or "discounts" some of the views that she superficially endorses. So in none of these cases would the critic be affirming the literary value of thematic incoherence.

Indeed, it is questionable whether the logic of critical discourse would even permit this. For it seems axiomatic in literary criticism that only features of a work that can be shown to fit within a consistent and comprehensive interpretation of the work can be claimed to contribute to its literary value. As Stein Olsen explains, “every feature of a text which furthers the artistic purpose (the integration of meaningful elements as expressed in an interpretation) is given a positive value, while every feature of the text which cannot be assigned significance or only an indeterminate significance and which therefore frustrates interpretation of the work, is given a negative value.”

We have seen how certain forms of incoherence in a literary work—for example, incoherence among the elements of a work’s storyworld—can be resolved by being brought under a coherent thematic interpretation of the work. However, there is no higher-level description of the work under which thematic incoherence can be resolved. So it is hard

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to see how thematic incoherence could ever be assigned positive literary value.

5.4 Other Explanations for the Value of Thematic Coherence

One might accept that thematic coherence is a literary merit but deny that its epistemic value is part of what makes it so. Instead, one might claim, coherence “acquire[s] value through contributing, with the subject, to the definition of a humanly interesting content.”

Unfortunately, this explanation for the value of thematic coherence runs afoul of a point made earlier in connection with the coherent-fantasies objection. That is, coherence among a group of statements seems to impose no constraints on the content of those statements. A group of uninteresting themes can be just as coherent as a group of interesting ones, since the number and strength of the logico-deductive, inductive-explanatory, and probabilistic relations among a set of beliefs are independent of the subject to which the beliefs pertain. Thus, it is difficult to explain just how the thematic coherence of a work could make its themes more “humanly interesting,” if not by making them more rationally acceptable.

Alternatively, it might be claimed that “when a doctrine is embodied in a literary work, its coherence will help to unify the work—as Lucretius’ metaphysics becomes the underlying unity of On the Nature of Things”—and it is for this reason that thematic coherence has literary value. I.e., thematic coherence is a literary merit not because it is an epistemic merit but because it increases a work’s overall unity.

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Whereas it is hard to see how coherence among a work’s themes could make them more humanly interesting, it is not hard to see how thematic coherence could increase a work’s unity. But it is open to question whether unity is always valuable from a literary-aesthetic standpoint. Disunity may actually be a merit in some literary works, such as the Dadaist poetry mentioned earlier. Moreover, there are some types of literary works, such as picaresque novels, that seem to require disunity but are not therefore regarded as inferior forms of literature.\textsuperscript{155}

One might try to account for these cases by claiming that the types of disunity they involve are less damaging than that which is involved in thematically incoherent works. But explaining how some types of disunity can be more damaging than others would seem to require an appeal to some standard other than unity, by which different cases of disunity could be comparatively assessed. And in that case the ultimate explanation for the disvalue of thematic incoherence would have to be given in terms of that standard rather than in terms of the disunity it causes. One would thus be forced to give up the initial claim that thematic coherence is valuable because it adds to a work’s unity.

6. Conclusions

I have argued for two main conclusions in this chapter: one, that the concept of thematic coherence has the same descriptive criteria as epistemological coherence; and two, that the literary value of thematic coherence can derive partly from its epistemic value, which consists in its bolstering the rational acceptability of a work’s themes or the

trustworthiness of its author. This second claim goes to support the broader contention of this thesis that literary value, insofar as it depends on the epistemic merits of a work’s themes, depends less heavily on the truth of those themes, which is often difficult to establish, than on the extent to which the work provides justification for them. The question remains, however, whether the same is true of all propositions manifested in literary works. Might there be some non-thematic propositions whose truth is important from a literary-critical standpoint? I take up this question in the following chapter.
Chapter 5
The Literary Relevance of Truth

1. Introduction

I have been arguing that the truth or falsity of a literary work’s themes is often less relevant to its literary value than the strength of the justification it provides for these themes. However, this is not to say that literary value never depends on the truth of any propositions manifested in a work. In this chapter I will argue, on the contrary, that there are cases in which the falsity of non-thematic propositions can bear negatively on a work’s literary value and that in many such cases this is because the falsity of these propositions limits the extent to which the work justifies its themes.

Before proceeding, however, a few words are in order about the notion of truth that I will be concerned with here. There are various senses in which a literary work might be described as true. One sense concerns the relation between the author’s ideas or sentiments and those expressed in the work. A literary work is true in this sense if the ideas or sentiments expressed in the work accurately reflect those of the author. This sense of truth basically equates with sincerity.156 Another sense concerns the relation among the ideas expressed in the work. A work is true in this sense if its ideas hang together or cohere with one another.157 Perhaps critics sometimes use “true” in these or


other senses. However, the notion of truth that I will be concerned with here is the more orthodox one according to which a proposition \( p \) is true if and only if \( p \) is in fact the case—i.e. if and only if the state of affairs corresponding to \( p \) actually obtains. This sense of truth has to do with the relation between the way things are represented as being in a literary work and the way things actually are.

I will assume that many propositions are true in this sense, including, paradigmatically, the observations and theories offered up by the empirical sciences. In Section 4 I grant that moral judgments can also be true or false for the purpose of entertaining an objection to my view. However, none of my own claims in this chapter hangs on this more controversial assumption.

2. Pro-Truth vs. No-Truth Views

Philosophers disagree whether there are any propositions expressed in literature such that their truth-value is relevant to the literary merit of the works containing them. “No-truth” theorists such as John Hospers, Arnold Isenberg, and Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen defend a negative answer to this question while “pro-truth” theorists such as Gregory Currie, Berys Gaut, M.W. Rowe, and Christoper Mole defend an affirmative answer.

Pro-truth theorists do not claim that truth is always relevant to literary assessment. In particular, they acknowledge that literary value does not depend on the truth of fictional sentences, such as those describing the actions of Anna Karenina, the appearance of Moby-Dick, or the geography of Lilliput. It is generally understood that

such sentences are not about real particulars and thus cannot be true (or perhaps even false) in the usual sense.

While no-truth theorists think that truth is never relevant to literary value, however, it is not because they think all sentences in literature are fictional. Most admit that literary works can contain sentences about real things, both particulars and kinds. This is most obviously the case with works of non-fictional literature such as biographies and memoirs. But even fictional works of literature such as novels sometimes contain sentences that are naturally read as comments or observations about the real world. For example:

All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, Ch. 1)

Now envy and antipathy, passions irreconcilable in reason, nevertheless in fact may spring conjoined like Chang and Eng in one birth. (Melville, Billy Budd, Ch. 13)

The facts of life do not penetrate to the sphere in which our beliefs are cherished; they did not engender those beliefs, and they are powerless to destroy them... (Proust, In Search of Lost Time, “Swann’s Way”)

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves… (Eliot, Middlemarch, Ch. 21)
Furthermore, literary fictions often imply statements about reality. According to various critics, for example, *Heart of Darkness* implies that “mendacity is the most mortal of sins,” *The Merchant of Venice* that extreme justice is extreme injustice, and *A Passage to India* that “conqueror and conquered cannot be friends.”¹⁵⁸ Articulating these statements, or themes, is widely seen as one of the main goals of literary interpretation and as such one of the major tasks of literary critics.

No-truth theorists do not generally deny any of this. Nevertheless, they insist that assessing a literary work *qua* literature never depends on evaluating the truth of its statements. Rather, according to Lamarque and Olsen, these statements are relevant to literary appreciation only insofar as this involves appreciating how a work’s themes give coherence to and receive imaginative expression through the work’s narrative content. How closely a work’s themes connect to “central human concerns” can also be a factor, they allow. But whether its themes turn out to be true or false matters to its merits only from a philosophical, historical, or scientific standpoint, not from a literary one.¹⁵⁹

The position I have been defending so far in this thesis is more congenial to the no-truth than the pro-truth view in that it claims that the truth of themes is rarely relevant to literary value. But not all propositions manifested in literature are thematic. Many, while like themes in being about the actual world, tend unlike themes to be straightforward


factual propositions. Literary works often feature actual particular people, places, and events about which they state or imply various propositions of this sort. *War and Peace* contains many factual propositions, for example, about the personality and appearance of Napoleon Bonaparte, *A Tale of Two Cities* about the events and circumstances leading up to the French Revolution, and *The Grapes of Wrath* about the landscape and climate of Oklahoma, California, and various regions in between. Many of the assumptions typically made by science fictions, legal thrillers, and spy mysteries about the current state of science, law, or international relations are also of this kind. So, too, are many of the basic assumptions manifested in literary works about human behavior and psychology.

Critics often fault literary works for getting such facts wrong. Some of the more famous factual errors in literature to draw critical censure include Shakespeare’s references to the seacoast of Bohemia in *The Winter’s Tale*,\(^{160}\) Keats’s confusion between Cortez and Balboa in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,”\(^{161}\) Natty Bumppo’s impossible feats in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Deerslayer*,\(^{162}\) and Ibsen’s unscientific representation of syphilis in *Ghosts*.\(^{163}\) More recently, critics have pointed to factual

\(^{160}\) Ben Johnson is reported to have scoffed at this error in R.F. Patterson (ed.), *Ben Johnson’s Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden* (London: Blackie, 1923).

\(^{161}\) Tennyson was apparently the first to point out this error in Francis Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*.

\(^{162}\) Famously criticized by Mark Twain in “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses,” (1895).

errors in the fiction of William Golding,\textsuperscript{164} Ann Patchett,\textsuperscript{165} Michael Crichton,\textsuperscript{166} Jacob d’Ancona,\textsuperscript{167} Jackie Collins,\textsuperscript{168} and Norman Mailer,\textsuperscript{169} to cite just a few examples. To these must be added the countless complaints to be found in literary criticism about stilted dialogue or improbable plot twists, which are naturally construed as judgments to the effect that a work falsely implies that people of such-and-such a type might talk in such-and-such a way or that events of such-and-such a sort might occur in such-and-such circumstances.

Critical practice thus suggests that while truth does not usually matter at the level of themes it often does matter at the level of basic factual propositions. But even at this more basic level not all propositions seem equal in terms of their literary relevance. Berys Gaut notes that “\textit{Moby Dick}, for instance, is replete with detailed claims about nineteenth-century whaling practices, but that seems irrelevant to its value as a novel—would one fault it, for instance, if it turned out that Melville had made up some of those practices?”\textsuperscript{170} For pro-truth theorists, then, there arises what I call the demarcation


\textsuperscript{170} Berys Gaut, \textit{Art, Emotion, and Ethics} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 84.
question—the question of what makes the truth-value of some propositions but not others relevant from a literary standpoint.

3. The Demarcation Question

3.1 Embeddedness

One answer to the demarcation question, suggested by Berys Gaut, focuses on the embeddedness of the proposition, i.e. the extent to which the proposition is woven into the stylistic and narrative details of the work. According to this theory, the more thoroughly a proposition is bound up with author’s style and “construction of particular characters and events,” the more the truth of the proposition will tend to matter to the work’s literary merits.171 This theory offers a plausible explanation for why we probably wouldn’t fault Moby-Dick if it turned out some of its claims about whaling were false, namely that these claims are not deeply embedded enough in the novel to be aesthetically relevant. It also accounts for certain cases where factual errors do seem to vitiate a work, such as the case of Ibsen’s Ghosts, which assumes that syphilis is a heritable disease, and Lord of the Flies, which implies that short-sightedness is corrected by concave rather than convex lenses. For in these cases the false proposition is intimately bound up the work’s plot and symbolism.

However, it seems neither necessary nor sufficient that a proposition be deeply embedded in a work for its truth to be aesthetically relevant. Some propositions are deeply embedded in literary works as a matter of generic convention. Certain genres characteristically follow certain narrative formulas that imply, for instance, that in the end

crime always gets punished or love always works out. Although we might regard a genre as inferior for embodying such falsehoods, we generally don’t fault individual works within a genre for following its prescribed conventions. Furthermore, sometimes the truth of a proposition can matter aesthetically even when it is peripheral to the narrative. Arthur Danto cites three examples: a Cynthia Ozick short story that has its characters visit a museum that did not exist at the time the story is set, a Robb Forman Dew novel that attributes a Flaubert saying to Mies Van der Roe, and an unnamed friend’s novel that begins “with some people driving up Fifth Avenue, a southbound-only street.”

Although these inaccuracies do not significantly impact the development of plot, characters, or theme, Danto still finds them “disfiguring.”

3.2 Subject Matter

Alternatively, one might think that what makes the truth of a proposition relevant from a literary standpoint is its subject matter. Certain subjects, it might be claimed, are the proper domain of literature insofar as literary techniques are especially suited to treating such subjects and readers are especially inclined to turn to literature for insights into them. According to Oliver Conolly and Bashshar Haydar, these subjects include “the inner life, character, conditions for happiness, and the moral dimension that attends any serious consideration of human possibilities.” It is relevant from a literary standpoint whether a work tells the truth about such subjects, claim Conolly and Haydar. However,

in regard to other matters, such as theology and metaphysics, literature cannot be held accountable for telling the truth.\textsuperscript{173}

Like the first, this theory seems capable of explaining why \textit{Moby-Dick} would be no less of a masterpiece if it turned out that Melville had made up some of the whaling practices he describes there. On the present theory, the falsity of these descriptions would be irrelevant because the history of whaling is not a proper subject of literature. However, this theory has difficulty explaining why critics sometimes do fault errors like the ones in \textit{Ghosts, Lord of the Flies}, and the three works Danto mentions, since these errors pertain to subject such as biology, optics, geography, and history that would also seem to lie outside the supposedly proper realm of literature. Another problem for this theory is that there are sometimes statements in literature whose subject matter is of the supposedly relevant kind but whose truth seems irrelevant from a literary standpoint. Polonius’ fatherly advice to Laertes in \textit{Hamlet} (Act 1, Scene 3) arguably contains many such statements. It would appear, then, that subject matter does not determine aesthetic relevance either.

\subsection*{3.3 Authorial Acceptance}

A closer look at Gaut’s Melville example suggests a third possibility. Gaut claims that some of the statements contained in \textit{Moby-Dick} about nineteenth century whaling practices are aesthetically irrelevant because we wouldn’t fault the novel if it turned out that Melville had made them up. But what if some of these propositions turned out to be false not because Melville deliberately made them up but because he incorrectly believed

them to be true? My own intuition is that in this case the falsity of the propositions might well end up being aesthetically relevant. Perhaps, then, whether the truth of a proposition is aesthetically relevant depends on whether the author accepts it as true.

Unfortunately, authorial acceptance also turns out to be inadequate as a general demarcation criterion. As Hume rightly observes, we are quick to forgive authors for false beliefs that they hold merely as a result of their cultural or historical milieu. The fact that Shakespeare accepted the Elizabethan theory of humors, for example, does not generally impair our appreciation of his plays. Conversely, there may be some falsehoods in literature that spoil a work even though we know they do not represent the author’s views. Such falsehoods can detract from our enjoyment of a work by making it difficult to imaginatively engage with it. Christopher Mole offers the example of spatial bilocation in the Harry Potter novels. “On finding that the world of the Harry Potter novels is one in which the characters can be spatially bilocated… we find that the predicaments of the characters are suddenly less interesting. We can no longer be gripped by the question, ‘How will they get out of this one?’ If anything can happen, then anything might.”

3.4 Thematic Justification

Given the problems we have now seen for three demarcation theories, the promise of finding a single reductive criterion might be starting to look dim. However, if we focus instead on the more modest task of simply trying to categorize some of the main types of

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situations in which factual errors are aesthetically relevant, I believe a still interesting and satisfying generalization emerges. That is, in a large number of cases in which a falsehood is aesthetically relevant, the common explanation seems to be that it gives us reason to be skeptical of other claims the work makes.

The details of this explanation can go in one of two ways. One is that when we encounter a falsehood in literature, we might reasonably be led to question the author’s intellectual character. Failure to get basic facts about history, geography, science, and the like can indicate intellectual laziness, sloppiness, lack of curiosity, and other epistemic vices. And these in turn can be grounds for distrusting the author’s grasp of more complicated matters. If Moby-Dick contained false statements about whaling, they might turn out to be aesthetically relevant for this reason. This also seems to be at least part of what’s going on in many actual cases where critics complain about factual errors, such as the case of Ghosts, Lord of the Flies, and the works Danto cites. Indeed, this is precisely how Danto explains his annoyance with the novel that begins with people driving up Fifth Avenue: “I could not read further: a man whose grip on reality is that weak is not necessarily to be trusted with the more delicate psychic facts to which we expect a novelist to be true.”

Mole gives another example of this type of case.

In his ‘Botany Bay Eclogues’ Robert Southey wrote:

Welcome, ye wild plains
Unbroken by the plough, undelved by hand
Of patient rustic; where for lowing herds,
And for the music of the bleating flocks,
Alone is heard the kangaroo’s sad note
Deepening in the distance.
A second way in which factual errors can undermine the credibility of a work’s larger claims is by making its coherence count for less. Take *Ghosts*, for example. Suppose it turned out that Ibsen was justified in thinking that syphilis is heritable. (Imagine, if you like, that he did extensive research on the disease before writing the play and that the best science of his day supported this belief.) In that case the factual error would not give us any reason to think less of Ibsen’s intellectual character. But it might still result in our being less persuaded of the work’s central theme, namely that we are doomed to inherit the sins of our fathers. Part of the explanation for this, I think, is that the heritability of syphilis not only symbolizes but also exemplifies this theme. Were it true that syphilis is heritable, that is, this would actually go to support the idea that each generation’s “sins” accrue to the next. Of course, the fact that the proposition is false does not make it any less coherent with the theme. But from an epistemic standpoint, it makes the coherence less valuable: the play’s coherence generates less warrant for the theme than it would have if it were true that syphilis is heritable.

Some errors may weaken thematic justification in both these ways. Science fictions commonly warn about the dangers of certain current technologies by envisioning a future in which those technologies are developed or applied in morally or politically

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Southey is trying to get his nineteenth-century readers to realize the hardships endured by the convicts transported to Australia, and his tone is sometimes one of chastising us for our carelessness. But kangaroos, of course, make no sad note that deepens in the distance. The most they can manage is a kind of tutting sound. Southey had never been to Botany Bay, and the poem is made worse when this inaccuracy reveals carelessness on his own part. (p. 503)

177 According to one scholar, this is not far from the truth. Evert Sprinchorn, “Syphilis in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*,” *Ibsen Studies* 4:2 (Nov 2004): 191-204. Sprinchorn claims that “Ibsen was painstaking and meticulous in his research” and that his depiction of syphilis in the play is consistent with what Dr. Alfred Fournier, the “leading authority” on syphilis in Ibsen’s day, had written about the disease.
problematic ways. If the author’s understanding of current technology is inaccurate, however, then such works may fail to be persuasive as cautionary tales both because the author may fail to earn the reader’s trust and because the framework of propositions supporting the prediction includes some falsehoods, thus making their support count for less. Moreover, errors that undermine thematic justification may also detract from our appreciation of a work in other ways. Ibsen’s error in *Ghosts* not only weakens the “argument” of the play but may also prevent us from becoming imaginatively immersed in the fiction. The two ways in which I have suggested that falsehoods can weaken thematic justification are neither exclusive of each other, then, nor of other explanations for aesthetic relevance.

Recognizing that many falsehoods are aesthetically relevant because they weaken thematic justification helps us to see why factors such as embeddedness, subject matter, and authorial acceptance might be mistaken for general demarcation criteria. The more deeply a proposition is embedded in the narrative and stylistic details of a work, the more closely connected it is likely to be to the work’s themes. Whether it is true or false will therefore tend to make a bigger difference to the degree of justification the themes derive from the work’s thematic coherence. It will also tend to reflect more heavily on the author’s intellectual character, since the more embedded the proposition is in the work the more responsibility the author might seem to have for getting it right. Something similar might be said about subject matter. Since themes tend to concern some subjects, such as “the inner life, character, and conditions for happiness,” more than others, the subject matter of a proposition will tend to correlate with its thematic relevance, which in turn will correlate with how significantly the proposition’s truth bears on the author’s
intellectual character and the value of the work’s thematic coherence. Finally, the truth or falsity of a proposition will have implications for authorial character or thematic coherence only if the author accepts the proposition.\textsuperscript{178} This is not sufficient; as noted earlier, authors are sometimes not held accountable for false beliefs they accept, particularly when these beliefs were widely accepted during the author’s time. But this exception also makes sense on the view that falsehoods are aesthetically relevant insofar as they weaken thematic justification, for such beliefs, while they may still make a work’s thematic coherence count for less, do not usually give us reason to question the author’s intellectual character.

Although it explains why embeddedness, subject matter, and authorial acceptance can make a difference to the aesthetic relevance of a proposition, however, the theory I am proposing remains importantly different from the three I considered at the start of this section. For one, whereas those theories aim to cover all cases, mine does not. For another, it is an implicit assumption of those theories that the truth of some propositions can matter directly or non-instrumentally to literary value. What each proposes is a criterion for distinguishing these propositions from those whose truth doesn’t bear directly on literary value. By contrast, the view I am suggesting does not assume that truth is an intrinsic literary value. At the thematic level, I have argued, it is not so much

\textsuperscript{178} Sometimes authors accused of errors will excuse themselves on the grounds that their work is fiction, the implication being that they do not really accept the false propositions in question. But in doing so authors will sometimes incite further criticism for not caring about the truth. Such cases may appear to show that falsehoods need not be accepted as true by the author to count as evidence of intellectual vice. But the evidence for intellectual vice in such cases is not the falsehood itself, but the author’s indifferent attitude towards truth, which he might have even if all the propositions in his work are actually true. So I don’t think this type of cases represents a counterexample to my claim here.
truth as justification that matters to literary value. And at the sub-thematic level, I have claimed, truth matters but in most cases only instrumentally so—that is, only insofar as it contributes to thematic justification.

This marks an important difference between my view and most pro-truth views, which assume that truth can have intrinsic literary value. Nevertheless it might seem that the view I am now endorsing is also a pro-truth view, inasmuch as it allows that truth can be relevant (albeit indirectly) to literary value. It might thus seem to invite the same objections I presented back in Chapter 1 against truth-centered cognitivism. These objections must therefore now be revisited.

4. Objections

4.1 Banality Objection

According to the banality objection, the wisdom contained in great literature is often conventional and commonplace: our happiness can be determined by circumstances beyond our control, science and technology can be misused, ambition can be a bad thing, etc. This suggests that a work’s literary value does not depend on the informativeness of its themes.

Does the same argument apply to the kind of non-thematic propositions whose truth I claim can be aesthetically relevant? No doubt these propositions are often banal. But some can also be genuinely informative. Consider, for example, the descriptions in *Moby-Dick* of 19th Century whaling practices or those in *Bleak House* of the legal system in mid-19th Century Britain. Moreover, even if they were never informative, this would only suggest that teaching us such propositions is not an intrinsic or constitutive aim of literature. It would give us no reason to deny that the truth of such propositions can
contribute instrumentally to the constitutive aims of literature, nor (as I argued in Chapter 1) that these aims can include providing certain forms of justification for themes. Indeed, in some cases, the fact that a non-thematic proposition is banal may partially account for its contribution to thematic justification. Demonstrating awareness and acceptance of commonplace truths is one way in which authors can build the trust on which the credibility of their themes depends. Thus, the banality objection, while it may pose a threat to some versions of the pro-truth view, does not seem to pose a threat to my own.

4.2 No-Justification Objection

The no-justification objection claims that the statements expressed in literary works are typically not backed up by evidence the way claims made in philosophical, historical, and scientific texts typically are. Thus, the objection goes, literature must not share with these disciplines an interest in conveying truth. This is one way of reading Hospers’ claim that literature cannot be concerned with communicating facts because “most of the statements in [literature] are not documented enough for us to be able in any way to verify them.”

In Chapter 2 I argued that this claim is simply false. Although literary works do not often present arguments or empirical evidence in support of their claims, they can provide justification in other ways, in particular by manifesting an author of sound intellectual character and embodying a larger system of beliefs, some having prior epistemic standing, within which its claims coherently fit. Moreover, even if this were not the case, it would not follow that truth is irrelevant to literary value. Encyclopedias

report information without usually citing evidence of its correctness, and yet the value of an encyclopedia as such surely depends on its factual accuracy.

There is another way to read Hospers’ claim that renders it somewhat more plausible. On this reading the claim is not simply that there is no evidence within literary works by which to verify their claims but that these claims are such that they cannot be verified at all. This indeed seems true of many of the thematic statements found in literature. As the examples from Section 1 above illustrate, literary themes often deal with subjects, such as happiness, love, justice, sin, and freedom, in regard to which the facts, if there are any, are not clear and well established. As a result, there is no easy way to check the truth of these statements. However, not all propositions found in literature are difficult to verify. The kind that I claim is relevant to literary value is typically well documented and easily confirmed or disconfirmed. Thus, even on a more charitable reading, Hospers’ argument does not show that truth is never relevant to literary value.

4.3 Textual Constraint

The textual constraint is John Gibson’s term for the principle that a work’s literary value depends only on its internal properties. We saw in Chapter 1 that it is difficult to specify a sense of “internal” that makes this principle intuitively acceptable. Nevertheless, I suggested there that the textual constraint represents an expression of the widespread feeling that literary works ought to be evaluated “on their own terms,” which seems incompatible with evaluating them on the basis of the truth of their themes inasmuch as this is something established by reference to the world rather than the work.

Basic factual propositions manifested in literature are no different from themes in this latter respect: their truth must also be established by reference to the world. But
there is a sense in which it is natural to say that the “terms” of a work, as opposed to the “terms” of the world, are an appropriate basis for evaluating its themes but not an appropriate basis for evaluating its factual propositions. That is, it is natural to think of a work’s “terms” in this context as the assumptions or premises on which it is constructed—what Henry James would call its *données*. In works of fiction, these can include many propositions that are not true in the actual world but which we are expected to go along with anyway. This is the sense in which the terms of a work can be distinct from the terms of the world. And these terms can provide a basis for evaluating a theme in that the theme can be more or less persuasive depending (among other things) on the coherence of these propositions.

But understood in this way, the “terms” of a work are not something on which we can evaluate basic factual propositions manifested in literature. For normally these types of propositions are “terms” in this sense. Take *Bleak House*, for example. At the thematic level the novel implies a critique of the prevailing social and political order in Dickens’ England. This theme can be assessed on the novel’s own terms in the sense that we can ask how persuasive it is given the premises of the novel, which include many factual statements about the workings of the English courts. But if these factual statements are part of the novel’s “own terms”, then these terms are not an appropriate basis for evaluating these statements themselves. On a very natural way of understanding it, then, the idea that we ought to evaluate literary works on their own terms implies that it is inappropriate to assess themes by reference to the world outside the work but does not imply the same about factual propositions.
4.4 Autonomy of Literary Value

This objection appeals to the supposedly “special nature” of literary value as a reason for denying the literary relevance of truth. The thought seems to be that if literary value depends on truth then it is no different from the value of history, science, or philosophy. But this is clearly a non-sequitur. If literary value depends on truth, it is no different in that respect from the value of other forms of discourse. But admitting that literary value is similar in that respect is consistent with maintaining that it is different in many other respects. The extent to which literature makes demands on imagination and emotion in comparison to these other disciplines strikes me as a particularly salient one. Although such differences are not the focus of this thesis, I do not wish to deny that they exist and are important.

However, one might claim that allowing even this similarity does injustice to the special nature of literary value. This would be true if literary value were completely *sui generis*—if we could not appreciate literary works as such for any of the same reasons we appreciate works of philosophy, history, or science. As I suggested in Chapter 1, however, this view goes too far. Although it seems clear that literature can be valuable in ways that history, science, and philosophy generally are not, it also seems clear that there is some overlap in terms of the types of goods we seek and derive from these various disciplines. Who could deny, for example, that literature and philosophy can both afford pleasure? Granted, literature has distinctive ways of providing pleasure, but this makes it no less correct to say that pleasure is an aim common to both disciplines. I would argue that the case is analogous with certain cognitive goods such as justification and truth. Literature has distinctive ways of providing justification, but insofar as it seeks to provide
justification at all, its aims, when characterized at a suitably general level, overlap with those of other disciplines. The distinctive ways in which literature provides justification (and pleasure) are what account for the special nature of its value.

4.5 Immoralist Objection

The immoralist objection notes that some great works of literature espouse morally reprehensible views and that some literary works are even better as such on account of their immorality. Matthew Kieran gives the (non-literary) example of *Goodfellas*. According to Kieran, the film gets us to admire a way of life that is immoral in demanding complete loyalty to the group and total disregard for outsiders. But this, he argues, is part of what makes the film aesthetically rewarding.¹⁸⁰

The same phenomenon might occur even when the theme in question does not pertain to morality in a narrow sense. *Anna Karenina* expresses a form of anti-intellectualism that we may ultimately find unacceptable but that may, partly for that reason, make the work more interesting. But it is hard to imagine a case in which our appreciation for a literary work is directly enhanced by its containing a factual error. We may sometimes tolerate such errors, as when they seem to reflect the author’s intellectual or cultural environment more than his intellectual character. But such errors often seem to mar a work, and the explanation I have given for this is consistent with my explanation for why immoral themes sometimes make works more rewarding. The latter explanation is that in cases where a work provides compelling justification for a theme, the fact that the theme is morally unacceptable can make the justification provided for it all the more

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impressive and provocative. And the former explanation is that factual errors can undermine the justification a work provides for its themes. Thus, on my view, the importance of thematic justification explains both the disvalue of errors at the factual level and the value of errors at the thematic level.

4.6 Critical Indifference Argument

The most widely discussed objection to the pro-truth view comes from Lamarque and Olsen (L&O). According to L&O, the main reason for thinking that truth is irrelevant to literary value is that critics do not normally argue for the truth or falsity of the propositions expressed in literary works: “Though the works of critics may contain statements to the effect that a literary work represents a certain view of life, and though it may be intimated that this view is shared or endorsed by the critic, critical treatments of literary works almost never present arguments in support of the view, or against the view in those cases where the critic intimates disagreement with it.”

But this, say L&O, is contrary to what we should expect if the pro-truth view is correct, since in that case establishing the value of a literary work as such would require establishing the truth of the propositions it expresses. In Chapter 1 I dubbed this the critical indifference argument.

Various attempts, none highly convincing, have been made to rebut the critical indifference argument. M. W. Rowe challenges the empirical claim on which it rests,

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181 Lamarque and Olsen 332.
adducing several passages, including the one below from Lionel Trilling, in which critics are allegedly arguing for the truth or falsity of themes.\textsuperscript{182}

What [Keats] is saying in his letter [to his brothers on 22 December 1818] is that a great poet (e.g. Shakespeare) looks at human life, sees the terrible truth in its evil, but sees it so intensely that it becomes an element of the beauty which is created by his act of perception – in the phrase by which Keats describes his own experience as merely a reader of \textit{King Lear}, he ‘burn[s] through the evil’. To say, as many do, that ‘truth is beauty’ is a false statement is to ignore our experience of tragic art. Keats’ statement is an accurate description of the response to evil or ugliness which tragedy makes; the matter of tragedy is ugly or painful truth seen as beauty. To see life in this way, Keats believes, is to see life truly.\textsuperscript{183}

Unfortunately, it is not clear in this or any of the other cases Rowe cites that the critic is doing more than indicating his agreement with the statement in question, which L&O admit that critics sometimes do. Indeed, it’s not even clear in such cases that the critic is doing that much. One could argue, as Lamarque does, that Trilling here is simply trying to interpret the meaning of Keats’s assertion.\textsuperscript{184}


Peter Kivy takes a different tack against the critical indifference argument. Kivy accepts L&O’s claim that critics do not usually argue for or against the truth of thematic statements but denies that truth must therefore be irrelevant to literary appreciation. According to Kivy, L&O’s mistake lies in assuming that literary appreciation is part of the critic’s job when in fact, Kivy claims, the critic’s responsibility is only to explicate the content of the work. Appreciating its content, which includes evaluating the truth of its themes, falls mainly to the reader.\textsuperscript{185} This claim, however, seems to fly in the face of actual critical practice, which is devoted in significant part to the production of reviews, rankings, scholarly assessments, reassessments, and other types of response undeniably aimed at appreciation as much as explication.

A much more natural explanation for why critics do not normally argue for or against the truth of themes is that themes often concern matters, such as ethics, metaphysics, and psychology, that lie beyond their special expertise as critics. This idea supports L&O’s argument insofar as it explains both why critics do not actually engage in assessments of philosophical arguments or scientific evidence for themes and why one might think it inappropriate for a critic to do so. That is, it might seem that in doing so a critic would be overstepping the proper limits of her authority. At the same time, this idea is consistent with the fact that critics do, in various ways discussed in previous chapters, assess the extent to which themes are justified by features internal to literary works. For the ability to discern the quality of such features (e.g. thematic coherence and authorial character), far from being beyond the expertise of literary critics, seems to be an essential part of it.

The critical indifference argument thus seems defensible insofar as it applies to propositions whose assessment requires philosophical, scientific, or other non-literary expertise, and this is arguably the case with most thematic propositions. But it is not the case with the kinds of factual propositions whose truth I claim can be aesthetically relevant. On the contrary, the average reader is often well qualified to assess the truth of such propositions, based on education or experience she either already possesses or can easily acquire. Moreover, as noted earlier, perceived factual errors in literature often receive critical commentary and debate.

Debates over such errors are not usually debates over the truth or falsity of the propositions in question. Typically, rather, they concern whether the authors were justified in their erroneous beliefs or whether the works actually imply them. But the absence of debate over the truth-value of these types of propositions is importantly different from the absence of debate over the truth-value of themes. In particular, whereas it is plausible to think that the latter reflects limitations on literary critics’ expertise, it seems likely that the only reason critics do not debate the truth-value of basic factual propositions is that most of the time these propositions are simply not open to debate. Thus, while there is reason to think that absence of argument over thematic truth indicates its literary irrelevance, there is no such reason to draw this inference in the case of basic factual truth. On the contrary, that critics are often concerned with a work’s factual accuracy seems sufficient evidence that truth is relevant to literary value at this more basic level.
4.7 The Value of Justification

The six objections from Chapter 1 have now been answered. Before I close, however, one further question needs to be addressed concerning my claim that justification is an intrinsic literary value but truth is generally not. That is: Is it possible to value justification without valuing truth? On one view, what makes justified belief more epistemically valuable than non-justified belief is that it is more likely to be true. Of course, it does not automatically follow that justification can only be valuable from a literary standpoint insofar as it is truth-conducive. Perhaps thematic justification somehow contributes to a work’s literary value without contributing to its epistemic value. However, thus far I have made no attempt to argue for this claim, and to do so now would be to abandon the position I have been advocating for—namely, that the literary value of thematic justification derives from its epistemic value. Given this position, my claim that a work’s literary value generally depends more on how much justification it provides for its themes than on whether they are true may seem problematic for anyone who thinks that justification is epistemically valuable only because it gets us closer to the truth.

One way to respond to this objection would be to deny the assumption that justified belief is valuable only because it is more likely to be true. In fact, many epistemologists do reject this assumption, and for good reasons. One is that justified true belief seems intuitively more valuable than mere true belief. But if a belief is true, the fact that it is also likely to be true does not seem to make it any more valuable. In addition to this so-called “swamping problem,” the view that justification is only valuable
because it gets us closer to the truth also faces the “new evil demon problem.”

Suppose our world were controlled by an evil demon, who made it the case that all those beliefs we currently consider most justified are in fact false—e.g. my belief that I am now sitting at a computer, that I am in Toronto, that my name is Charles, etc. Must we say that in that case all these beliefs would no longer be justified? This would seem to follow if one accepts that justification is necessarily truth-conducive. But many find this implication untenable.

These arguments have led many to doubt that the value of justification depends on the value of truth. However, one need not deny this in order to accept the view I am proposing. For I have not claimed that we do not value the truth of thematic propositions. On the contrary, it seems evident that we do value the truth of many thematic propositions inasmuch as we investigate them not only through literature but also through scientific, historical, and philosophical means. Nor have I claimed that the truth of a work’s themes is never directly relevant to its literary value. A literary work whose theme was that the best life is one filled with continuous and intense pain would almost certainly be criticizable for the falsity of its theme.

But cases like this are very rare. More often we find that the themes of literary works are propositions whose truth we are willing—at least to a certain extent or in certain contexts—to entertain, whatever our prior beliefs regarding them might be. This is one of the senses in which I believe it is true to say that literature involves the “willing

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suspension of disbelief.” It is not necessary that we give prior assent to a work’s themes in order to fully appreciate it as literature. And although we often appreciate literary works more if they provide compelling reasons for accepting their themes, we do not generally appreciate them any less if by the end we are (through no fault of the work) unable to assent to their themes. Thus, a work that provides compelling reasons to accept its themes insofar as it manifests an author of exemplary intellectual character and a body of beliefs that is well grounded and richly coherent is likely for that reason to be appreciated more as literature. And if we still ultimately believe or come to find out that its themes are false, our appreciation for it is not likely for that reason to be diminished. Likewise, we are not likely to regard a work very highly as literature if we think it fails to provide compelling reasons for accepting its themes, and whether we ultimately think or come to find out that its themes are true is not likely to make us regard it any more highly.

This may be the case with other kinds of works too. I suspect many philosophers would say that a work’s philosophical merit depends not on whether its most general claims are true or false but on how well it argues for those claims. At any rate, it seems one could accept that this is true about philosophical merit while also accepting that good philosophical arguments are valuable because they generally lead us to the truth. More generally, it seems one could accept without inconsistency that, on the one hand, we value justification because we think it is truth-conducive and, on the other hand, there are practices from which we demand certain forms of justification for beliefs but not that those beliefs be true. On my view, literature is one such practice. Hence, if this general
principle is true, then accepting my view is consistent with accepting that justification is valuable because is truth-conducive.

4. Conclusions

The main conclusions of this chapter may be summarized thus:

(a) The kinds of propositions whose truth is most often relevant to literary value are non-thematic propositions concerned with facts about (e.g.) history, geography, and science.

(b) The truth of such propositions is often relevant because it bears on the degree of justification the work provides for its themes.

(c) The truth of such propositions can in this way contribute instrumentally to literary value but does not constitute an intrinsic literary value.

I have shown that these conclusions are not seriously troubled by the objections raised in Chapter 1 against truth-centered cognitivism, nor by the view that justification itself is only instrumentally valuable as a means to truth, which it turns out there are good reasons to doubt.
Conclusion

The main work of this thesis is now done. Our final task is to recap the results of this work and consider some of the issues arising from it that deserve further investigation.

1. Recap

The overarching aim of this thesis has been to establish the viability of a new form of literary cognitivism. Its newness lies in the way it recommends we think about the cognitive merits of a work of literature as they relate to its literary merits. Whereas some cognitivists equate the cognitive merits of a literary work with the veracity of its themes and others with the extent to which it provides certain types of non-propositional knowledge, the view I propose identifies certain types of justification that literary works can provide for their themes as the cognitive aspect of literature most relevant to literary appreciation. In particular, it emphasizes the importance to literary value of the coherence of a work’s propositional content and the intellectual character of its author. I have argued that the literary evaluative relevance of these two factors is implicit, in the first case, in literary critical judgments that refer to a work’s thematic coherence and, in the second case, in judgments that refer to a work’s didacticism. Insofar as it bears on these sources of justification, the truth or falsity of some non-thematic propositions can be relevant to literary value, even though truth is generally not relevant at the thematic level.

2. Issues for Further Investigation

2.1 Justification-Centered Moralism?

A major debate in contemporary aesthetics concerns the relation between moral and aesthetic value in art. The three main positions in the debate are moralism, immoralism,
and autonomism. Moralists claim that moral merits in art, when aesthetically relevant, are always aesthetic merits; immoralists claim that moral merits in art can sometimes be aesthetic merits but so can moral flaws; and autonomists claim that a work’s aesthetic merits never depend one way or the other on its moral merits.

The references to moral merits and flaws in these claims can usually be understood as references to some specific class of cognitive merits and flaws. That is, the moral merits or flaws of an artwork, in the sense that concerns most participants in this debate, are features of the work in virtue of which it can be said to promote or hinder knowledge or cognition of a specifically moral kind. The debate over this issue thus closely corresponds to the debate over whether and what kind of cognitive merits in general can be aesthetic merits, with many arguments and positions in the latter debate having analogues in the former. For example, just as some cognitivists conceive a work’s cognitive value mainly in terms of the truth of its themes while others conceive it mainly in terms of what it can provide in the way practical knowledge, so too some moralists conceive of a work’s moral value mainly in terms of the correctness of the moral views it espouses while others conceive it mainly in terms of the morally relevant skills it cultivates.

The novel form of cognitivism that I proposed in Chapter 1 of this thesis corresponds to an equally novel form of moralism, one that construes the moral merit of an artwork as its success in justifying any moral themes it expresses. In fact, such a view in regard to literature is already implicit in the theory I have been defending, which regards it as a good-making feature of literary works that they provide certain types of justification for their themes, whatever subject—including morality—these themes may
pertain to. And to some extent I have already begun to build a case for this form of moralism. In defending my theory, I have frequently used examples involving moral themes. In addition, it will be recalled, I have addressed an objection to my view (viz. the “immoralist objection”) aimed specifically at its implicit moralism.

Given the novelty of this form of moralism, however, it would be worth devoting a future project to isolating and developing the case for it. In particular, such a project might usefully extend the present discussion by considering the possibility that there is something distinctive about moral propositions—for example, that they require special types of justification or perhaps cannot be justified at all. In this thesis I have assumed without argument that this is not the case but in so doing so have made it easy to deny that literary works are accountable for justifying moral themes even if they are accountable for justifying other types of themes. A subsequent project aimed at showing that moral themes can be more or less justified and that the forms of justification they require can be made available through literary works would thus help to secure the move from justification-centered cognitivism to justification-centered moralism.

2.2 Broadening the Case for Justification-Centered Cognitivism

Further research might also help to broaden the case I have presented here for justification-centered cognitivism. One way it might do so by turning up further evidence that the coherence of a work’s propositional content and the intellectual character of its author can matter to its literary value. When we begin to look around, we might find that there are other literary vices besides didacticism (sentimentality perhaps?) that typically involve an element of epistemic vice. We might also discover some terms of literary praise (imaginative? complex? authentic?) that typically imply praise for the author’s
intellectual character. Likewise, it might turn out that thematic coherence is not the only type of coherence relevant to literary value that tracks the epistemic coherence of a work’s propositional content. More careful analysis might reveal that some forms of storyworld coherence do the same. For instance, when we look more closely at the notion of character coherence, we might find that what it typically amounts to is something like epistemic coherence among a set of psychological principles implicit in the character’s portrayal.

Further research might also bring to light more ways in which literary works can justify their themes. Besides demonstrating intellectual virtue and thematic coherence, for example, literary works might also turn out to be capable of making arguments for their themes. In fact, several philosophers have already made efforts to establish this. Lester Hunt, for example, has recently tried to show that literary fables such as Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* can typically be understood as (enthymemic) analogical arguments. Such efforts can be seen as continuous with mine in that, while I have not explicitly affirmed that literary works can make arguments, I have left several openings in my account for this possibility. My claim that literary works can function at some level like thought experiments represents one such opening, since I have not excluded the view

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thought experiments are really just disguised arguments. Likewise, my claim that literary works are capable of expressing groups of propositions connected by relations of logical and inductive support also opens up the possibility that literary works can make arguments. For it allows that the structure of the logical and inductive relations among these propositions may sometimes be such that it is natural to say an argument is being made.

2.3 The Bigger Picture

In arguing that literary value can depend on certain cognitive considerations, I have not denied that it can depend on other considerations too. I mentioned a few of these in Chapter 4 in my survey of non-epistemic forms of coherence that can be relevant to literary value. However, much remains to be explored in terms of what these other considerations are, how they interact with and compare in importance to cognitive considerations, and what they and cognitive considerations have in common that makes them all relevant to literary assessment.


189 In his novel How to Be Good, Nick Hornby depicts a character who is suddenly transformed from a misanthrope into a moral saint, but as a result loses the caustic sense of humor that was one of his few endearing qualities. The novel might thus be seen as making an implicit argument that because (1) moral saintliness is incompatible with having a certain type of humor and (2) this type of humor can be a genuinely good-making feature of one’s personality, (3) moral saintliness is not an ideal entirely worth pursuing. Similarly, The Brothers Karamazov might be thought to imply the following triad of beliefs, of which the third logically follows from the conjunction of the first two: (1) if God does not exist, then there is no moral law; (2) there is a moral law; (3) God exists.
The picture of literary value that emerges when we start to explore these questions more fully seems likely to be a complicated one. Many different aspects of a literary work can be the focus of literary appreciation; which aspects are most appropriate to focus on seems to vary from one type of literature to the next; and insofar as a work is worthy of appreciation in some respects it might be impossible for it to be worthy of appreciation in other respects. This last possibility is suggested by recent empirical research indicating that certain features we value in literature are triggers for common types of cognitive biases. Some studies have shown, for example, that propositions tend to be accepted more readily if they are expressed in poetic language than if they are expressed in prose, an effect that Daniel Kahneman explains in terms of our bias towards “cognitive ease.”¹⁹⁰ There is also evidence that details of a story that we are prone to regard as contributing to its plausibility can in fact make it statistically less likely to be true.¹⁹¹

These findings raise interesting questions about the extent to which the various dimensions of literary value are compatible, which I hope to pursue in subsequent projects. If the arguments of this thesis are sound, however, then such projects may safely proceed on the assumption that at least one of these dimensions is cognitive, and that the capacity of literary works to provide certain types of justification for their themes is a crucial part of this dimension.

¹⁹⁰ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Canada: Doubleday, 2011), Ch. 5.

¹⁹¹ Kahneman calls this the “conjunction fallacy.” *Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow*, Ch. 15.


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