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**On Literary Cognitivism from the Perspective
of Difference between Literature and Philosophy**

Abstract

Contemporary discussions over the cognitive value of literature focus on analysing the way in which literature and philosophy come close in addressing a specific class of concerns: those distinctively related to the human position and human experience in the world. In light of some stylistic methodological differences between the two practices – clear and precise language of philosophy and philosophy’s focus on abstraction and objectivity vs. semantically dense language of literature accessory to conveying that which is emotional and subjective – it is often argued that the truth pertains to the domain of philosophy and deception to the domain of literature. I take that to be wrong and misrepresentative with respect to two things: philosophy’s capacity to foster understanding and literature’s overall cognitive value. To support my claim, I first show that philosophy’s traditional methods of addressing human concerns are insufficient for the task and I then move on to explaining how literature can be cognitively valuable and better equipped to shed light on some of these concerns. I end by refuting arguments which deny literature’s capacity to engage with philosophical problems.

Keywords

human experience, knowledge, literary cognitivism, anti-cognitivism, literature, philosophy, understanding

1. Philosophy, literature, and matters of human concerns

Nuances of formulation aside, literary cognitivism claims that literature provides cognitive benefits. More specifically to my interests here, engagements with literature can improve our cognitive economy, enlarge our imaginative and emotional sensibility and refine our conceptual repertoire, thus making it better equipped to deal with the complexities of the world. Literature can also sharpen our abilities for counterfactual thinking, augment our capacities for tracking and understanding causal relations, and in various other ways assist us in our cognitive and emotional endeavours of grasping and making sense of the world at large, and our place and experience in it. Champions of the doctrine view the cognitive potential of literature as contributing to its overall significance, although they recognize other components of literary value.¹ To show how profound this cognitive potential is, here I explore

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Some literary cognitivists include: Noël Carroll, “Literary Realism, Recognition, and the Communication of Knowledge”, in: John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, Luca Poggi (eds.), *A*

Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative and Knowledge, Routledge, New York 2007, pp. 24–41; Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007,



one particular way in which it is manifested – the one revealed in literature’s engagement with what are sometimes recognized as philosophical concerns. Whether it illustrates philosophical doctrines, raises philosophical questions or provides answers on its own, literature can do what philosophy does – even better, some would say. Alan Goldman, Martha Nussbaum, Cora Diamond and Eileen John argued convincingly that literature has primacy over philosophy in revealing complexities involved in our overall moral development and ethical interactions – issues, in other words, that are at the core of our *human concerns*. Philip Kitcher proposes that literature can deal with the question of how to live, concluding that boundaries between literature and philosophy are not fixed and easily separated.²

How one feels about these claims will mostly depend on which of the many conceptions of philosophy or which philosophical discipline one sees as representative of philosophy. On the view discussed here, the humanistic conception captures the essence of philosophers’ vocation, exemplified in Sellars’ view according to which philosophy aims “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” which is meant to cover “not only ‘cabbages and kings’, but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death”.³ In other words, philosophy sets itself the task of discovering the truth and providing understanding about some fundamental aspects of our human experience.

Admirable though this aim may be, the standard methods of philosophy and its insistence on strict, clear and precise language seem to generate difficulties for achieving it – or so I will claim. The quest for an overall understanding is not best served by philosophers’ dedication to the abstract nor is it easily conveyed via the neatly packed abstract definitions philosophers offer, often in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions. Iris Murdoch gives a vivid image of this defect claiming that philosophy gets hold of a problem and does not let go, relentlessly going back to it, reshaping it, and modifying the form it had previously imposed upon it.⁴ Dedication to a rigorous method of conceptual analysis causes philosophers to bypass the concrete concerns that originally give rise to their investigations, and to wander in an abstract sphere of recondite speculation. Being too general in what they deliver, they cannot help with the concrete, individual human situation. The simple scenarios described in thought experiments with which philosophers pump our intuitions exemplify the trouble. They exclude too many factors and possibilities. Forced to choose between the options philosophers allow, it is natural to protest the unreality of the imagined situation. This, as Kitcher makes clear, results in a tendency to make philosophy the exclusive property of a few selected individuals interested in splitting hairs around issues that remain disconnected from the problems of the majority.⁵

Further difficulties spring from a distinctive feature of philosophical method that many philosophers, particularly in the analytic tradition, would agree on. Ideally, philosophy should provide precise arguments, proceeding from unambiguous premises via valid inferences to clearly-stated conclusions. Readers responding to a philosophical text should evaluate the premises, scrutinize the inferences, and explore the ways of refuting the premises or the conclusion. Plato and Descartes are major paradigms of this supposedly optimal way of doing philosophy. The ideal is even more explicit in Spinoza, who presents an entire philosophical system in a deductive form. The same yearning for deductive systematization is found in the empiricist camp. Rather than invoking the light of reason that rationalists allege to be the sole source of certain truth,

empiricists like Hume suppose that a survey of the world will supply evidence for general conclusions about human nature, ignoring the possibly parochial nature of such surveys. Even if we employ the empirical method and ground our principles in observations rather than in *a priori* reflection, we might, as Wittgenstein would put it, have looked many times (too many perhaps) in the wrong place. For all his criticism of abstract metaphysical research which ultimately “reduces the philosopher to a mere peasant”, for all of his skepticism about “abstruse philosophy”, Hume himself fails to escape the trap and remains liable to the same criticism Schiller issued at Kant’s philosophical system, when he stated that “human nature is in reality more of a connected whole than philosophers, who are good only at distinguishing, can make it out to be”.⁶

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199263219.001.0001>; John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199299522.001.0001>; Catherine Elgin, *Considered Judgment*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1996; Catherine Elgin, “Reorienting Aesthetics, Recovering Cognition”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (3/2000), pp. 219–225, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/432103>; Stacie Friend, “Narrating the Truth (More or Less)”, in: Matthew Kieran, Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *Knowing Art: Essays in Aesthetics and Epistemology*, Springer 2007, pp. 35–50, doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-5265-0_3.

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Philip Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice, The Cases of Gustav Von Aschenbach*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013, doi: <https://doi.org/10.7312/kitch16264>; Alan Goldman, *Philosophy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013; Martha Nussbaum, “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory”, in: Garry L. Hagberg, Walter Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, Wiley-Blackwell, New York 2010, pp. 241–267, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444315592.ch13>; Cora Diamond, “Henry James, Moral Philosophers, Moralism”, in: G. L. Hagberg, W. Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, pp. 268–284, doi: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444315592.ch_14; Eileen John, “Literature and the Idea of Morality”, in: G. L. Hagberg, W. Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, pp. 285–299, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444315592.ch15>.

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I am not stating this is all that philosophy is doing. Given diversities among various philosophical enterprises, it is plausible to see some of its branches as closer to natural sciences. Sellars himself, strictly speaking, is closer to defending one such alliance (for Sellars’ view, see the opening chapters of his Willard Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.,

New York 1963). However, I take his claim quoted above as representative of overarching aim of philosophy, to understand things generally. This is, in my view, sufficiently inclusive of those aspects of human experience I want to focus on here. Consequently, my use of the term “humanistic” in this paper is less at the service of relating philosophy to the humanities (though I strongly embrace such a relation) and more at the service of emphasizing that aspect of philosophy and the questions it asks that has to do with the philosophical enquiry into humans, human experience and the human position in the world. Such enquiries are most evident in moral philosophy, where the concepts under discussion include right and wrong, reason and emotions, duties, freedom, blame, sin, agency and the like. Given the extent to which philosophers concern themselves with these questions, they are considered as distinctly philosophical questions, and in light of philosophy’s aim of reaching truth, it is argued that philosophy delivers truth about them. My concern here is to show that literature is equally dedicated to these issues and sometimes better equipped to solve them.

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Interview with Bryan Magee available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m47A0AmqxQE> (accessed on May 31, 2017), and with slight modifications, in her *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, The Penguin Press, New York 1999. I rely on both and references are given to the page numbers when the quotation is taken from the written version of the Interview.

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Philip Kitcher, “Philosophy Inside Out”, *Meta-philosophy* 42 (3/2011), pp. 248–260. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2011.01684.x>.

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Schiller’s citation is taken from: Charles Larmore, “Holderlin and Novalis”, in: Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 141–160, p. 145. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521651786.008>.

Schiller's criticism is powerful because it points to what is really at issue with the way philosophers address human concerns. Take their accounts of a struggle between reason and passion. Descartes gives us detailed, vivid, mechanistic descriptions of what happens when animal spirits triggered by reason and by emotions fight for supremacy in a person, pushing the pertinent gland in different directions until one side comes out as a winner. Thus, one acts either intelligently or emotionally. His complex story ends with a disappointingly simple moral: those who have strong will and make judgments based on knowledge of what is good will manage to overcome the invasion of emotional urges.⁷ Hume's narrative offers the opposite view – the intellect always (rightly!) remains powerless when confronted with emotions that sway the subject's decisions and actions.⁸ But this is still disappointingly theoretical. Matters are never as straightforward as the power struggle pictures suggest and regardless of how detailed rationalist or sentimentalist accounts are, neither gives us a vivid and revealing picture of our subjective experience. Why? Because abstract philosophy neglects the distinctive phenomenological feeling of what happens, what it feels like, when we have to make decisions but are unable to resolve the struggle between two competing aspects of our psychology.

As a way of contrast, consider the way literary works probe such phenomena. In describing Anna's eventual decision to express her love for Vronsky, Tolstoy brings readers to the point at which they can see clearly what is involved in abandoning any attempt to balance reasons and surrendering oneself to the force of the emotions. It would be shallow to claim that Tolstoy vindicates Hume and refutes Descartes – compare Karenin's detached composure, neither plainly inferior nor plainly superior to Anna's impulsive decision. Because Tolstoy's portrayal goes beyond the theoretical accounts and captures the experiential feel of these episodes, he enables us to acknowledge his protagonists and their psychological lives as akin to our own. Philosophical accounts, with their abstract, precise, and almost surgical analyses, fail to achieve this and thus fail to provide the sort of understanding Sellars searches for. On the other hand, literature, rich in descriptions, sensitive to individual's perspectives, imbued with accounts of emotional experiences, with its presentations of casual relations and patterns of interactions among different kinds of agents in different sorts of circumstances, provides us with a richer and a more developed register of explanations of "how things hang together".

The fact that many philosophers have at times resorted to such literary structures like myths and stories or detailed autobiographical accounts – think of Plato's dialogues or Descartes' *Discourse on Method* – indicate that not even the philosophers most admired for their generality and abstraction can always forego the help of literary forms. These literary excursions then indicate additional methods for asking and answering the sorts of questions philosophers raise regarding the world and human beings. It is not a matter of choosing one method over the other, but of recognizing, to put it in Wittgenstein's favourite metaphor, different tools in our toolbox that can be used for philosophical investigation.⁹ This is neither to instrumentalize literature nor to neglect its literary values, but to acknowledge a profound cognitive richness that imbues it. Literature has a distinctive way of responding to our cognitive needs. Anti-cognitivists often fail to recognize this because they presuppose a radically impoverished view of the ways in which literature can deliver cognitive benefits. One aspect of Stein Haugom Olsen's critique of cognitivism demonstrates this.¹⁰

Olsen denies literature's claims to knowledge by contrasting it with what he calls "informative types of discourse", namely those that aim rationally to influence one's beliefs by offering true propositions about the world and are constrained by clearly defined criteria of what is right and what is wrong. In Olsen's view, these criteria do not apply to literature so we are not to take literature as informative and should not use it as a tool for enhancing our cognitive economy. We can always decide to do so but doing so would mistreat literature's literary value.

Literature's cognitive power can be misrepresented in another way. Iris Murdoch has argued that literature and philosophy are both "truth-seeking" and "truth-revealing activities" but the way she characterizes this truth in connection to literature, as "organised vision", is problematic.¹¹ Literary cognitivists do not need to invoke any *sui generis*, metaphysical, or metaphorical kind of truth in order to ground literature's cognitive value. That would impose an additional obligation in that we would have to show how this particular kind of truth connects to our idea that literature tells us about how things are in the world.

I suggest that literary cognitivism is best understood as a claim relating to the impact of literature on our cognitive economy. While there are many propositional truths that can be found in literature (thus making it informative discourse after all, even if the intention to inform does not necessarily or primarily figure among the intentions on the part of the author), what literature is most capable of providing concerns its indirect influences on our meaning-making capacities and cognitive and emotional processes of grasping the complexities of our situatedness in the world, as indicated in the opening sentences of this paper. I now turn to providing an epistemological grounding for how such influences are possible.

2. How literature yields knowledge: a lesson from contemporary epistemology

One problem with anti-cognitivism is that it asks us to ignore the cognitive benefits literature provides in order not to lose sight of its literary values. Many have attacked this demand, but not, as I intend here, from the epistemological point of view.¹² When we recognize that the cognitive demands put in front of us are far more complicated than acknowledged by most anti-cognitivists, it becomes less problematic to see how literature serves these demands.

First of all, our cognitive endeavors cannot be captured by the opposition between knowing and not knowing. Various activities figure in the route

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René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, London 1975.

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David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739. Available at: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/hume-a-treatise-of-human-nature> (accessed on May 31, 2017).

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Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wiley-Blackwell, New York 2009.

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Stein Haugom Olsen, *The Structure of Literary Understanding*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1978.

11
I. Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 11.

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For a most recent criticism see: A. Goldman, *Philosophy and the Novel*.

from ignorance to knowledge and many others follow our coming to know something. Cognitive progress is not a piecemeal accretion of separately established facts but a dynamic interplay of novel proposals and entrenched commitments.¹³ Integration of new material often requires reconfiguration of commitments already in place and revision or repudiation of earlier adoptions. What matters is that cognizers are active in their search for knowledge.¹⁴ We inquire, we make judgments, we reflect on whether we know, we postpone judgments when we suspect our lack of evidence, we reevaluate and reorganize our entire body of beliefs. Sometimes we realize there's more to knowing something than we originally thought, often we need guidance from others, more experience, different perspectives and even opposite views to challenge us and make us question ourselves and our ways of coming to know. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it should show the insufficiency of a view presupposed by literary anti-cognitivists, who are most often focused on the relation between truth and literature, at the expense of other cognitively valuable activities literature inspires.

All this cognitive labour manifests our ability to ponder things and try to make sense of them. Cognitive life does not boil down to knowing discrete, unrelated propositions. Having a large corpus of known propositions is important, but there are other ways of improving our cognitive economy than adding a few more. We may come to understand how to deploy some of the propositions in our corpus, enhancing our skills at applying them to the situations we encounter. Subsuming one piece of information under some more general rule, and thus reorganizing our corpus, may aid in this increased skill, and may lead us to new inquiries, and ultimately more propositional knowledge. Bundling a number of different virtues under a useful term, we may contrast the mere size of someone's corpus with the person's *understanding*. Literary cognitivists have always insisted upon a special relation between literature and understanding. My cursory sketch of some modes of understanding may help us appreciate the cognitive benefits anti-cognitivists such as Olsen overlook.

Understanding differs from knowledge in that it is not piecemeal. It consists of having a clear grasp of the complexities of a given situation, particularly with respect to causal, inferential and explanatory connections. Lack of understanding may be manifest in one's hasty judgments, particularly in the moral domain. Understanding a moral principle means being able to apply it and act upon it in situations which are similar in all the relevant salient features. In other words, understanding something implies that one can successfully use propositions one knows, making the relevant connections between experiences and situations. The person who understands deploys a wider framework to make the experience of a world, of himself and others, more coherent. Above I claimed that this kind of insight can be gained from literature. Now I will show how literature's cognitive benefits can be accommodated within this wider epistemological framework which makes room for one's active involvement in the cognitive pursuits that culminate in coming to understand the complex ways of being human.

An important obstacle to acknowledging this is to see literature as primarily an entertaining activity. Before Plato's famous attack on it, its primary function was educational, and various instances of didactic literature still bear traces of that.¹⁵ Among various and complex functions to which literature was subject we must include spiritual uplift or religious education, where authors propose a theodicy or question God's ways.¹⁶ Literature sometimes explores political or social circumstances, usually aiming to incite reactions or change of attitudes.

Even when these various functions are combined with literature's pleasure giving function, the ability to entertain is rarely sufficient to confer great value.

Because literary works are multifaceted, they inspire multiple readings – a fact most anti-cognitivists do not consider. We reread on different occasions, pursuing different interests, attending to different aspects of the work and gaining different benefits. With some works this interest will be purely (or almost purely) aesthetic or artistic – one might think of such great writers as Joyce who takes great delight in playing with language and making parts of his texts difficult (but rewarding!) to penetrate through linguistic innovation or syntactic complexity. Yet, that does not imply that readers cannot also take into consideration what literature tells us about ourselves and our world. Many critics see Joyce's works, including his most "difficult" ones as portrayals of Dublin's cultural and social life that bear on broad aspects of the human condition. Repeated readings offer the possibility for appreciating what was missed and for rearranging episodes of a work in new ways, which reveal new possible interpretations. Readers come to works equipped with different background beliefs acquired through various experiences (including literary ones) which might highlight some aspects of the work that were not previously salient. They attend to passages they had not reflected on in the previous readings. Think of the haste with which young readers see Karenin as a stereotypical bureaucratic, an emotionally distanced and cold husband who does not understand Anna's passionate nature. Yet, an older reader may recognize him as a mature and reflective human being, committed to social norms who does his best to balance his roles of a statesman, a husband and a father. We may not relinquish the judgment that Anna was justified in leaving him, but an awareness of the discrepancies between their characters deepens our sense of a complexity of human relations. It expands our ability to take into consideration different character traits and beliefs that give rise to how one behaves. That is useful for our attempts to understand human behaviour in our everyday life.

To appreciate literature's ways of being cognitive we also need to abandon the idea that cognitive benefits can only be delivered if propositional claims are poured, as it were, into one's head. While there are many factual descriptions in literary works which are informative, literary cognitivists insist on much stronger cognitive gains. Literary descriptions have the capacity to "let us into" their worlds so we come to appreciate what is involved in a particular situation in ways that other types of descriptions cannot achieve. We know many things at the factual level, but we do not understand what it feels like to experience

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See: C. Elgin, *Considered Judgment*.

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There are of course instances of knowledge that, skepticism aside, require a minimum engagement on the part of the cognizer, such as knowledge that there is a computer in front of me now. But this should not be taken as a counter-argument to my claim. The knowledge that literature imparts is far more complex and cannot be compared to such simple instances.

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It is worth keeping in mind that throughout *The Republic* Plato makes several references to the things that can be learned from Homer. He does not deny literature's educational

powers, only claims that because of the ways in which it can influence people, it should be subject to strict paternalistic censorship. That kind of censorship would be pointless if literature lacked the power to educate. For an analysis of Plato's views on art, see: Nives Delija Trešćec, *Platonova kritika umjetnosti [Plato's Critique of Art]*, Naklada Jurčić, Zagreb 2005.

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Think of the opening lines of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the poet explicitly states that his intention is to explain God's ways to men. Think also of such poems as John Donne's *If poisonous minerals* or *Batter My Heart* or Gerard Manley Hopkins' *Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord* or *The Windhover*.

them, which makes us unable to appreciate the motivational force that reactions to circumstances have in one's actions. Literature may lead us to reflect on our tendencies to snap judgments. Think of the particularly complex moral situation of Kate Croy in Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*. Not only does she have to choose between marrying a man she loves and saving her decrepit father, she also has to find a way to help her sister and evade her aunt's calculated schemes. By acknowledging all the aspects of her situation we come to recognize and feel her entrapment: the snap judgment gives way to a more nuanced assessment. While we may criticize Kate for the plan she designs, we can nevertheless feel that a particular domain of human behaviour – the one that might seem morally gray – is made intelligible. We come to understand, even if we do not justify, why people sometimes do things we find morally blameworthy. We know Kant would object to the way she uses Milly, but we feel all the forces that pull her in different directions and we understand that only by opposing Kant's imperative does she stand any chance to resolve the forces, and benefit those around her. On the other hand, we cannot be happy with a Humean reassurance that, in acting on her emotions, her love for Merton and despair over her family situation, she had no other way of acting and has therefore acted well. We can neither condemn her nor vindicate her. The black and white of moral systems devised by philosophers proves inadequate. Most of the humanistic concerns on which literary works focus involve concepts Wittgenstein described as open. Such concepts resist being captured by definitions or being inserted in sharp normative principles. Hence literature often exposes precise philosophical accounts as radically impoverished. Consider the concept of sin. Is this concept only intelligible against a religious background? If so, is someone sinful because God made him so or because Adam and Eve had free will and exercised it in eating the apple? What is right and what is sinful when Creon condemns Antigone? Did Hester Prynne sin against society or against God's law, and what remains of her sin when she rejects the guilt society wants to impose upon her? Should Kate Croy be found sinful because she violated Kant's categorical imperative? How we come to think of sin can be influenced by various literary works that present different manifestations of supposed sinfulness, which are typically richer and broader than those depicted in philosophical accounts.

Some genres such as poetry typically embody a vision of the world which might reinforce our ideas or challenge them, triggering us therefore to consider possibilities we might have missed before or bringing us to the point from which we can see familiar things from a different angle. Many of the poems by Robert Frost are built up from common, everyday material but on the thematic level, they deal with crucial issues of how the world is. Consider his poem *Design*. A description of a moth caught on a spider web on a flower develops into a metaphysical reflection on nature and design, good and evil, free choices and determinism. Yet, the overall tone of the poem is rhetorical rather than assertive, thus inviting the reader to reflect on, not simply to accept, a particular perspective or a world view. This reflection might cause a change in how a reader thinks of his own moral actions against the background of religious beliefs he might have.

The moral to be taken from these examples is that literature can help us profit cognitively by enriching our cognitive economy and by developing our cognitive skills. Such enrichment might consist in gaining understanding, awareness or a fuller grasp of real phenomena to which the matter of the works can be connected. We might thus acquire a more developed conceptual scheme or even a completely changed perspective on life. We might develop a moral and emotional sensibility or better imaginative capacities, which can help us

when we try to understand others and our interactions with them. One reading of *Design* might make us wonder, or suggest, that some moral categories we employ – like blame or responsibility – may not be applicable in a world in which everything unravels according to God’s design. Kate Croy’s situation might make us sensitive towards the interplay of circumstances and character traits. These kinds of cognitive benefits cannot be cashed out propositionally. They cannot be as easily provided by other sources, even discourses that are truth oriented and cognitively rich.

Anti-cognitivists often fail to appreciate the character of the benefits literature brings. When in a piece of literature we come across a sentence that reads “Human behavior is predetermined in principle in almost all of its actions and offers few choices, of which fewer still are taken”, a reader is not supposed to take this as a factual claim for the author to defend with arguments.¹⁷ After all, philosophers have been trying to do that for ages and have not succeeded in proving or refuting it. Rather, given the overall setting of the novel, the claim serves as an invitation to consider a perspective on a world that leaves no room for free will. We saw how this question was raised by Frost, and how it might serve as the basis for valuable reflection.

I claimed that it is wrong to see the cognitive deliverances of literature as *sui generis*. Literature is not a separate source of knowledge if that implies that it is disconnected from other sources of knowledge at our disposal or that we need some special skills – in addition to having a substantial real-world experience and to being familiar with aspects of different genres – in order to assess it when considering its reliability in epistemic terms. Olsen is wrong to suppose that accepting a perspective offered by literature is not grounded in reasons or in rational methods of deliberation. Readers will evaluate how what the authors are saying fits with their background and underlying set of beliefs, and they will reflectively consider whether or not the suggested perspective is worth embracing or should be rejected.¹⁸ At the most fundamental level, readers can recognize the epistemic merit of the perspectives presented – it suffices to compare the psychological insight that novels by Dostoyevsky or James deliver with authors who are less successful in doing so. Think of “beach literature” where characters remain one-or-two dimensional, flat and most importantly, unbelievable in their conducts and motivations.¹⁹

The evaluation of the cognitive strength of literature is not different from the evaluation of other types of discourses and a failure to see that makes anti-cognitivists blind to the cognitive power of literature. They will claim that literature seduces us into accepting something due to its elaborate, poetical language, or due to its emotional impact, neglecting the fact that other types of discourse are not manipulation free or void of emotional impact. Discussions

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Michel Houellebecq, *Atomized*, Vintage UK, London 1998.

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Philip Kitcher develops a substantial account of the psychological processes and changes that take place in the process of reading, see P. Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice*, pp. 179–191.

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Mystery novels and pornographic literature are often criticized for the flatness of characters and simplicity of actions involved. Although both of these genres tackle important

human concerns – propensity to wrongdoing and evil and various forms of sexual interactions and behavior – the manner in which they do so is often not supportive of deeper psychological portrayals of characters. Because of that, while the novels might be interesting from the point of the stories presented, they are not reliable for what they say about human beings and their behavior. The fact that we can make such judgments with respect to the reliability of different literary works shows our sensitivity to their epistemic reliability.

surrounding climate change, moral aspects of abortion or euthanasia, the status of creationism with respect to darwinism, to mention a few, are conducted in discourses Olsen considers informative, yet exhibit traces of manipulation and rely on or include emotional, rather than, strictly speaking, rational persuasion. Olsen could still claim that these are instances of malpractice, serious defects in what are otherwise nonmanipulative, unemotional, value-free discussions, while literature is inherently manipulative and emotionally charged. But that is another hasty generalization. Even if science should be, it is not value-free. On the other hand, even if it is often assumed that emotional response is an ineliminable, even essential element of the reading experience, that in itself does not mean that because of it, the audience cannot track potentially cognitive elements. After all, imaginative and cognitive engagements are equally important for the proper understanding of complex issues involving human agents – issues, in other words, that are my concern here, and that literature and philosophy both address.

There are literary genres, such as the sentimentalist novel of the early 19th century or politically engaged novels opposing or defending slavery, that relied on manipulative tactics of arousing sympathy, but most literature does not attempt to trigger specific emotional reactions via manipulation.²⁰ Nor is it true that the readers will not recognize manipulative techniques by employing the same mechanisms they use when they evaluate what they are told in everyday practices of knowledge-acquisition, such as testimonial exchanges. We sometimes lack definitive means for evaluating the truth of what we are told, yet we accept it because we recognize that our informants are reliable or that the information we are being given seems reasonable enough.²¹ Often this is a matter of underlying, subconscious psychological processes, and we can assume that the same goes on when it comes to evaluating literary works. When Olsen divorces literature from informative discourses, he does so by demanding that it conforms to criteria other informative discourses sometimes fail to meet.

Once parameters of genre are taken into consideration, cognitive engagement with literature is not radically different from cognitive engagement with other types of discourses, or with experience generally.²² In the process of reading and making sense of characters and their actions, we rely upon our ability to make sense of the world at large, that is, on our skills to interpret real people's behaviour. There are multiple steps one takes during the reading process itself. Trying to make sense of a work often involves considering hypotheses about the actions of characters, forming judgments about them, making efforts to understand them, deliberating on whether or not they were justified in what they did, considering the circumstances in which they acted and eventually reaching a more comprehensive way of putting things together. Reading various literary works, which present conflicting or incompatible world views, invites evaluation of different perspectives. Many anti-cognitivists treat this incompatibility as a problem, claiming that the contradictory views put forward by different works only testify to literature's overall epistemic unreliability and a lack of clear criteria as to what is right or what is true. But many questions we have about ourselves and the world cannot be given definitive answers and can only be understood properly if all that matters to them is taken into consideration. Different literary works reveal different aspects of these questions and that is why diverse treatments we find in literature matter to how we come to think of them. In that way, literature enhances our conceptual repertoire by enabling us to broaden our understanding of the concepts we employ. In that way we reach a broader understanding, as Sellars would put it, of how things hang together.

3. Literature's philosophical engagement

I started off by claiming that philosophy may not always provide us with the best modes of gaining insights into those issues that are at the core of concerns we have as human beings, mostly because of its aspirations for the abstractions, generalizations and austere definitions. These are, I claimed, too sterile to be applicable to the complexities of our situations. I then suggested that literature, in light of its love for details, richness of descriptions, dedication to individual perspectives and its focus on concrete situations, experiences and attitudes (as represented by the characters and exhibited in the storyline), is better equipped to address those issues that remain under radar of abstract philosophy. By sketching how literature satisfies criteria of epistemic reliability, I offered reasons to doubt anti-cognitivist's arguments against taking it as reliable in addressing our cognitive concerns. I will end by challenging one line of thought much debated in contemporary debates on the nature of literature and philosophy, namely that of the possibility of doing philosophy in literature. Given the complexity of this debate and the limitation of space, I will focus on one particular claim, which negates the fact that the common ground between the two, subsumed here under humanistic concerns, suffices to advance a kind of bonding that Goldman, Diamond, John and Nussbaum advocate.

Attacks have come from both, cognitivists such as Murdoch and anti-cognitivists such as Olsen. Mostly they rely on the differences in style and structure of philosophy and literature, and on the supposedly different aims these two disciplines are to fulfil. Philosophy should be clear and precise, Murdoch claims, and its role is primarily to clarify things, while literature is dense and ambiguous, full of hidden meanings and mystification, aiming to entertain. Philosophy is about reasons, analysis and constant revisions of one's solutions to the problems originally identified by Plato. On the other hand, literature as an art form is primarily a storytelling activity, and as such, is

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Amy Mullin has argued that art is less subject to manipulation, given that "supposedly expert scientific knowledge may itself be infected by shared sexist or racist biases of the experts, particularly when the community of expert knowers is neither itself diverse nor open to criticism from without". See: Amy Mullin, "Art, Understanding, and Political Change", *Hypatia* 15 (3/2009), pp. 113–139. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2000.tb00333.x>. See: Heather Douglas, *Science, Policy and the Value-Free Ideal*, University of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg 2009, for a discussion over value-free ideal in science.

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See: Elizabeth Fricker, "Critical Notice: Telling and Trusting: Reductionism and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony", *Mind* 104 (4/1995), pp. 393–411, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/104.414.393>; Elizabeth Fricker, "Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy", in: Jenifer Lackey, Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 225–250, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199276011.003.0011>; Robert Audi, "Testimony, Credulity, and Veracity", in: J. Lackey, E. Sosa (eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony*, pp. 25–49, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199276011.003.0002>. For an analogy between literary fiction and testimony, see: Iris Vidmar, Elvio Baccarini, "Art, Knowledge, and Testimony", *Synthesis Philosophica* 25 (2/2010), pp. 333–348; Snježana Prijic Samaržija, Iris Vidmar, "Fikcijsko svjedočanstvo", *Prolegomena* 11 (1/2012), pp. 65–82.

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Needless to say, making sense of what is happening depends on taking into consideration features of the genre and literary norms. A reader who, upon reading a science fiction novel concludes that one can change one's appearance at one's volition, has radically misunderstood the norms of science fiction, but the fault here does not lie with the author. For the role of genre in estimating literature's reliability, see: Iris Vidmar, "Plato's Ion in the Context of Literary Cognitivism", *Glasnik za društvene nauke* 4 (2012), pp. 111–152.

not hospitable to philosophy. Without denying that Murdoch's view captures what is for sure often understood as the essence of philosophy and literature, I will offer a rundown of arguments aiming to find a place for philosophical expression in literature.²³

"I feel very strongly that one should keep [literature and philosophy] apart from each other", Murdoch says, adding, "I am very conscious ... of when I'm writing philosophy and when literature". She rejects the insertion of philosophical themes into literary works, explaining this tendency as critics' attempt to make novels more interesting. Writers are well educated and influenced by the culture of their time, which explains why some works seem philosophical, but despite appearances, the amount of philosophy that writers manage to express in novels is "likely to be small".²⁴ Ultimately, she stipulates (echoing a similar claim by Olsen, which I address below), when philosophy enters a novel, it ceases to be philosophy.

Being a successful literary author and an acclaimed philosopher, Murdoch might be taken as an authority on the issue of closeness and distance of the two practices. However, I do not think that her experience can so readily be translated into conclusive arguments for keeping the two at a radical opposition. Not only is it at least possible that among other writers who engage with literature and philosophy some will not share her sense of a clear division, but she is wrong to presume that the kind of transparency she relies on is available to readers. An author cannot predict how her work is going to resonate with the audience, or how *philosophically rich* the audience will see it. It suffices to think of Camus, who is still considered a philosopher regardless of his rejection of that title.

Despite Murdoch's negative view on literature's treatment of philosophy, she is instructive on the issue of the epistemic reliability of authors, a point frequently contested by anti-cognitivists. The fictional domain absolves writers from the obligation to tell the truth and remain faithful to how things are. Literary cognitivists have to render this legitimate worry mute if they are to sustain their position. Murdoch provides a useful direction in which such a defense can go, insisting on the embeddedness of literature in a wider intellectual context in which it pursues the same questions as writers from other disciplines. To mention but one example, consider the extent to which Romantic literature was influenced by German Idealism inspired by Kant and developed by post-Kantians. From Kant on, a clear line of philosophers dealing with the problem of mind–world relationship was successfully criticized in the writings of Hölderlin, himself a philosopher dissatisfied with philosophy's ways of addressing human concerns. Literature thus continues the philosophical line.²⁵

Murdoch's most threatening claim concerns the alleged imposition of philosophy on literature. If philosophical interpretations of literary works are offered in order to make works interesting rather than because the works themselves inspire such interpretations, then any possibility of literature seriously engaging with philosophy has to be abandoned. However, given the extent to which human concerns are at the heart of literature – and negating that would raise serious challenges to how literature has traditionally been understood and appreciated – Murdoch's diagnosis has to be rejected. Philosophy is something that is either in the work itself, or in the way readers respond to a work (where, as suggested, this might be captured by her coming to a more thoughtful, more revised world view), and it cannot (and should not) be imposed in cases where such an imposition is not grounded in the work itself. Doing so, which according to Murdoch is effective in all or most of the instances of literature's philosophical engagement (except, she claims, for Sartre's *La Nausee*), runs the risk of rendering the connection between philosophy and literature trivial.

Not all literature is philosophical but a great amount of it is, not because of the rich philosophical imagination on the part of the interpreter who imposes philosophy on otherwise non-philosophical work but because it is in the nature of much literature to concern itself with philosophical issues.²⁶

Murdoch and Olsen both claim that philosophy stops being philosophy when inserted into literature. While literature and philosophy share the same concerns and work with the same thematic concepts – namely, those that we use to make sense of human experience in the widest sense of the term – Olsen does not see this as literary treatment of philosophical issues, nor does he see these concepts and concerns as philosophical. Instead, he claims, when concepts from contexts outside of literary ones are taken over by literature, they should be understood and interpreted in the light of the literary tradition. When interpreting a literary work, “the critic often invokes literary precedents as justification for the application, but he never invokes non-literary uses of the terms as this would not be helpful”.²⁷ Given that the primary function of these terms has to do with literary aims,

“... this vocabulary therefore gains a sort of autonomy from the identical vocabulary which is used as a body of interpretative terms in philosophy, religion and science; an autonomy due to the fact that as interpretive terms the two identical classes are used to interpret different phenomena.”²⁸

A minor issue in this argument is the fact that not all philosophical usage of concepts is at odds with everyday usage – what it means to know or what it means to act freely are some of the questions that sometimes proceed by examining the way concepts of knowledge and freedom are used in our ordinary discussions. The crucial problem is Olsen’s claim that thematic concepts change their meaning once they are contextualized. If that were the case, not only would it be unclear where the interpretive concepts come from, but he would also have to explain the correct use of critical vocabulary, if in fact it is not grounded in the extra-literary practices to which the concepts usually belong. If Olsen were right and the concepts change meanings, it would be impossible to understand anything before learning the meaning that these concepts acquire once they are contextualized.²⁹ Neither philosophers nor lit-

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For a more developed discussion of these arguments, see: Iris Vidmar, “Challenges of Philosophical Art”, *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 8 (2016), pp. 545–569.

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I. Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 19.

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See: Charles Larmore, “Holderlin and Novalis”, in: K. Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, pp. 141–159, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521651786.008>; Rolf-Peter Horstmann, “The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling”, in: K. Ameriks (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, pp. 117–139, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521651786.007>. Larmore argues that “Hölderlin’s main thesis is that, contrary to Fichte, subjectivity cannot function as the first principle of philosophy, for it cannot be understood in its own terms” (p. 146).

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A literary work can also be philosophical because the author had the intentions of writing a philosophically-laden work. This option raises a set of issues in its own right, but I cannot debate it here.

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S. H. Olsen, *The Structure of Literary Understanding*, p. 114.

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Ibid., p. 115.

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Once a literary author employs philosophical concepts, he does not change the meaning and connotations these words have – if he did, it would make no sense to employ them in the first place. When Michel Houellebecq writes in *Atomised*: “Individuality, and the sense of freedom that flows from it, is the natural basis of democracy. In a democratic regime, relations between individuals are commonly



erary authors have the ability to bring new meanings into existence simply by inserting words into a specific context. What they do share is the capacity to shed light on the nuances of concepts (see the discussion of sin above), which is what literary cognitivists argue all along.

The notion of “the” literary tradition, which, on Olsen’s account determines and justifies the use of concepts, raises further worries for his theory, as it is hard to understand how such a monolithic tradition could operate in the isolated way he invokes. On the one hand, plenty of authors resist easy classification – think of Sartre, Camus or Stanislaw Lem. On the other hand, understanding literary works would be impossible if literary tradition were somehow creating its own domain of knowledge, divorced from other intellectual domains. To appreciate a poem such as *Design*, reader needs some familiarity with Darwinism and Creationism, with the notion of freedom and determinism, with the concepts of moral culpability and blameworthiness. These are all concepts pertaining to domains other than literature, but it is only if they are brought into the reading experience with the meanings they have in these extra-literary contexts that the poem can be understood. The undeniable link with William Blake’s *Tyger* is less helpful for coming to terms with the challenges that Frost issues at one’s conception of the world, although it is important for appreciating distinctively literary ways in which these two poets approach and develop themes of good and evil in their poetry.

4. Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to mitigate some of the charges issued at literature’s cognitive value, and to do so by showing how it can be useful in helping us with those concerns we have as human beings, concerns which develop out of our shared experiences and circumstances. I argued that literature indeed manages to address many of these concerns in ways that remain out of reach of philosophy, as it is usually – and narrowly – conceived. If literary cognitivism is not focused on establishing a direct link between literature and truth, but insists instead on embracing a wider account of cognitive gains – deeper understanding, more nuanced appreciation, development of sensibility – there is no reason to exclude literature from cognitively relevant discourses. This is not to diminish literature’s artistic value or literary accomplishments of the author; it is simply to acknowledge one aspect of literary experience. With at least some works of literature, we feel cognitively enriched.

My brief and sketchy criticism of the strictly rigid styles of philosophical writings was meant to show that, even if traditionally desired as a tool of philosophical explorations, plain and clear philosophical language is not the best tool to address and understand our human experience, imbued with emotional, psychological and ethical complexities. I would also suggest that plain and clear philosophical language is not in itself resistant to confusion and misunderstanding, even falsity. The myriad of interpretations of one and the same philosophical claim issued by Kant, Plato or any other philosophical legend should silence those who claim that philosophical language is by default clear and its message transparent.

A challenge can be issued to my claim that literature can reliably trace particular aspects of our experience I indicated above, given that the stories we read about are mostly fictional. However, convincing arguments show that nothing in the language of literary fiction itself makes it inconvenient to describe our experience. Fiction is about the mode of presentation, not about the falsity of that which is presented.³⁰ Anna’s misery, passion and love are no less real

than that of you and me, even if she is only a creation of Tolstoy's brilliant mind. What we need, but are unlikely to get, is an account of what made Tolstoy, or other literary giants, so insightful in portraying human concerns, not a list of arguments inviting us to turn away from the insights they provide.

Finally, I was concerned with refuting views according to which literature and philosophy should be kept apart. The two might differ in their aims, but many of our greatest literary works are concerned with issues that are most often accommodated within philosophical paradigms. It is an additional question how one is to approach these works and how we are to evaluate them. What matters though, and I will finish with this thought, is to recognize that the similarity of themes or cognitive potential of both, literature and philosophy, should not inspire an inamicable, rivalry relation between the two. Our cognitive aims are complex, diverse and hard to accomplish and we should take all the help we can get to fulfil them. With respect to them, literature and philosophy are both immensely helpful; and they should both be praised and valued for that.

Acknowledgments

A previous version of this paper was presented at the conference *25th Days of Frane Petrić*, Cres, 2016. I am very grateful to the audience for their comments, to two anonymous reviewers, and to Ljudevit Fran Ježić for his technical help regarding the paper. Special thanks go to Philip Kitcher for his comments on an earlier version of this paper and for his support during my research on this topic.

Iris Vidmar

O književnome kognitivizmu iz perspektive razlike između filozofije i književnosti

Sažetak

Suvremene rasprave o kognitivnoj vrijednosti književnosti usredotočene su na analizu sličnosti pristupa književnosti i filozofije kada je riječ o specifičnoj domeni pitanja: onih koja se na jedinstveni način odnose na položaj čovjeka i njegovo iskustvo u svijetu. S obzirom na neke stilističke i metodološke razlike između ovih dviju praksi – jezik filozofije jasan je i precizan, a filozofija je usredotočena na apstraktnost i objektivnost; tomu nasuprot, književni je jezik semantički gust, posvećen tomu da prenese ono emocionalno i subjektivno – često se tvrdi da istina spada u domenu filozofije, a obmana u domenu književnosti. Smatram da je takav stav pogrešan i da na pogrešan način ocrtava kako sposobnost filozofije da doprinese razumijevanju tako i kognitivnu vrijednost književnosti općenito. Kako bih potkrijepila svoju tezu, najprije pokazujem da su metode koje filozofija tradicionalno koristi kada nastoji objasniti ljudsko iskustvo neadekvatne za taj zadatak. U središnjem dijelu okrećem se književnosti; pokazujem u čemu se temelji njezina kognitivna vrijednost i na tim temeljima tumačim prednost koju ima nad filozofijom kod tuma-

regulated by a social contract. A pact which exceeds the natural rights of the co-contractors, or which does not correspond to a clear retraction clause is considered de facto null and void" (p. 89), he uses the concepts of personal freedom, democracy and social contract in the same sense as political philosophers do, otherwise it would not be possible for these concepts to contribute to the themes he develops in the novel. See I. Vidmar, *Challenges*

of Philosophical Art, for a discussion of such examples.

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See Richard Gaskin, *Language, Truth and Literature, A Defense of Literary Humanism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199657902.001.0001>.

čenja aspekata ljudskoga iskustva. U završnom dijelu pokazujem u čemu griješe oni koji tvrde da se književnost ne može baviti filozofskim problemima.

Ključne riječi

filozofija, ljudsko iskustvo, književni kognitivizam, anti-kognitivizam, književnost, razumijevanje

Iris Vidmar

Über den literarischen Kognitivismus aus der Perspektive der Differenz zwischen Philosophie und Literatur

Zusammenfassung

Zeitgenössische Diskussionen über den kognitiven Wert von Literatur zentrieren sich um die Analyse der Ähnlichkeit der Herangehensweisen von Literatur und Philosophie, wenn es um eine spezifische Domäne von Fragen geht: jenen nämlich, die in einzigartiger Weise mit der Position des Menschen und seiner Erfahrung in der Welt zusammenhängen. Angesichts einiger stilistischer und methodischer Unterschiede zwischen diesen beiden Praktiken – die Sprache der Philosophie ist klar und präzise und Philosophie ist auf Abstraktheit und Objektivität konzentriert; demgegenüber ist die literarische Sprache semantisch dicht und der Übertragung von Emotionalem und Subjektivem gewidmet – wird oft behauptet, die Wahrheit gehöre zur Domäne der Philosophie und die Täuschung zur Domäne der Literatur. Ich finde, eine solche Haltung sei falsch und umreiße inkorrekt sowohl die Fähigkeit der Philosophie, dem Verständnis einen Beitrag zu leisten, als auch den kognitiven Wert der Literatur im Allgemeinen. Um meine These zu untermauern, demonstriere ich zunächst, dass die Methoden, die Philosophie traditionell verwendet, wenn sie die menschliche Erfahrung zu erklären sucht, für diese Aufgabe inadäquat sind. Im zentralen Teil wende ich mich der Literatur zu; ich zeige auf, worauf deren kognitiver Wert beruht, und deute auf diesen Grundlagen ihren Vorteil gegenüber der Philosophie bei der Auslegung der Aspekte der menschlichen Erfahrung. Im Schlussteil zeige ich, worin diejenigen fehlgehen, die behaupten, die Literatur könne mit philosophischen Problemen nicht umgehen.

Schlüsselwörter

Philosophie, menschliche Erfahrung, literarischer Kognitivismus, Antikognitivismus, Literatur, Verständnis

Iris Vidmar

Sur le cognitivisme littéraire à partir d'une perspective de la différence entre la philosophie et la littérature

Résumé

Les débats contemporains sur la valeur cognitive de la littérature se concentrent sur l'analyse de la ressemblance des approches en littérature et en philosophie lorsqu'il est question d'un domaine spécifique d'interrogations : celui qui se rapporte de manière spécifique à la situation et à l'expérience de l'homme dans le monde. Au vue de certaines différences d'ordre stylistique et méthodologique de ces deux pratiques – le langage de la philosophie est clair et précis, la philosophie étant centrée sur l'abstraction et l'objectivité ; au contraire, le langage littéraire comporte une densité sémantique, il s'attache à transmettre l'émotionnel et le subjectif – il n'est pas rare d'affirmer que la vérité appartient au domaine de la philosophie, et l'illusion au domaine de la littérature. J'estime qu'une telle approche est inexacte et qu'elle représente faussement autant la capacité de la philosophie à contribuer à la compréhension que la valeur cognitive de la littérature de manière générale. Afin d'étayer ma thèse, je montre premièrement que les méthodes dont la philosophie se sert traditionnellement pour expliquer l'expérience humaine sont inadéquates pour cette tâche. Dans la partie centrale, je me penche sur la littérature ; je montre quel est le fondement de sa valeur cognitive, et j'interprète, sur la base de ces fondements, sa supériorité face à la philosophie en ce qui concerne l'interprétation des divers aspects de l'expérience humaine. Dans la partie finale, je montre quelles sont les erreurs de ceux qui affirment que la littérature ne peut pas traiter des problèmes philosophiques.

Mots-clés

philosophie, expérience humaine, cognitivisme littéraire, anti-cognitivisme, littérature, compréhension