

Literary Fiction and the Cultivation of Virtue

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Many philosophers have claimed that reading literary fiction makes people more virtuous. This essay begins by defending the view that this claim is empirical. It goes on to review the empirical literature and finds that this literature supports the claim philosophers have made. Three mechanisms are identified whereby reading literary fiction makes people more virtuous: empathy is increased when readers enter imaginatively into the lives of fictional characters; reading literary fiction promotes self-reflection; and readers mimic the prosocial behaviour of fictional characters. The paper concludes with a caution: there is a danger that readers could mimic antisocial behaviour displayed in literary fiction. If they do, reading some literary fiction could make readers less virtuous.

Keywords: Literary fiction, virtue, aesthetic cognitivism, aesthetics.

1. *Introduction*

The hypothesis that reading literary fiction cultivates virtue is an old one. Its origins can be traced to Aristotle and it was widely adopted in the eighteenth century, when Charles Batteux (1746/2015) and Adam Smith (1759/2002) defended it. More recently, Gregory Currie (1995), Martha Nussbaum (1990), Elisabeth Schellekens (2007), and other philosophers have defended the view. Even more recently, psychologists have turned their attention to the hypothesis and sought empirical evidence for it. This essay will critically examine the psychological literature. It will conclude that psychologists have succeeded in mustering

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considerable evidence for the claim that reading literary fiction cultivates virtue. At the same time, however, this essay will conclude that some of the claims that philosophers have made about literary fiction and the promotion of virtue may need to be qualified.

Two preliminary points are in order. The first is that evidence that individuals display increased empathy and prosocial behaviour will be taken as evidence that individuals have become more virtuous. Certainly, arguments can be given against the view that empathy and prosocial behaviour are indicators of good character or virtue. Nevertheless, this essay will assume that they are. This assumption is widely held and certainly not outlandish.

The second preliminary claim, on which this essay depends, is that the hypothesis that reading literary fiction cultivates virtue is an empirical hypothesis. (For the sake of brevity, I will henceforth call this hypothesis *H*.) As an empirical hypothesis, *H* ought to be testable by empirical and, indeed, experimental means. That is, an examination of readers of literary fiction should show that they are virtuous, relative to those who do not read literary fiction. Moreover, it should be possible to establish a causal relationship between reading literary fiction and virtuous actions.

While it may seem obvious that *H* is empirically testable, some writers have denied that it is. The argument for denying that *H* is testable runs as follows. According to *H*, readers of literary fiction do not acquire, or do not only acquire, propositional knowledge about how they ought to act. On the contrary, as we shall see, the moral benefits accruing to readers of literary fiction are largely non-propositional. Readers of such fiction become better able to understand other people, more able to empathize with others, and better able to recognise the mental states of others. These capacities, in turn, make them more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviour.

Putnam suggested that the sort of knowledge acquired from the reading of literary fiction is of a sort different in kind from that provided by science and, consequently, “inaccessible to scientific testing” (Putnam 1978: 89). Mikkonen (2015) endorsed the view that reading literature does not provide propositional knowledge. On his view, literature provides a sort of understanding or an ability to see significance. He is sceptical about the suggestion that we can test whether readers of literary fiction have this understanding or ability. He writes that, “The enhanced understanding gained by reading fictional literature is akin to happiness, marital satisfaction, or a mechanic’s comprehension of carburetors in that it can be conceived only from inside” (Mikkonen 2015: 277). Some things, he holds, simply do not lend themselves to empirical investigation and the sort of understanding acquired from literary fiction is one of them. We are invited to conclude that empirical investigation, at least of the sort in which psychologists engage, cannot confirm *H*.

This argument is unsuccessful. Grant that reading literary fiction provides readers with a non-propositional knowledge: a way of understanding, or certain abilities, of the sort that Mikkonen and Putnam have in mind. Grant, moreover, that this sort of understanding or ability is what makes readers of literary fiction more virtuous. The argument shows at most that we cannot express in words what it is like to have this understanding or ability. This is not surprising. Many things cannot be expressed propositionally. For example, it is not possible to capture in words what it is like to be able to ride a bicycle or what being happy is like. Nevertheless, the argument still fails. It is obviously still possible to determine empirically whether someone is able to ride a bicycle or whether someone is happy. This is done on the basis of a person's actions and other observable factors. Similarly, one can determine whether readers of literary fiction become more virtuous by reading literary fiction. We just need to observe a correlation between reading literary fiction and virtuous behaviour. This will not tell us what it is like to have the understanding that makes virtue possible, but it will give us reason to believe that reading literary fiction makes people virtuous.

2. *The philosophical origins of H*

Although *H* has only recently received strong experimental support, it has long been widely adopted by philosophers. As already noted, *H* can be traced to Aristotle but it was widely held in the eighteenth century. Smith, for example, was of the opinion that literary fiction could make an important contribution to moral education. Moral education, he believed, was largely a matter of cultivating emotional responses. Imagination plays a role in the cultivation of sympathy and other innate moral responses. Smith writes that fellow feeling is not only aroused by the actual suffering of one of our fellows. Rather,

an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator. Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief for their distress, and our fellow-feeling with their misery is not more real than that with their happiness. (Smith 1759/2002: 13)

In this way, Smith believes, literary fiction cultivates fellow-feeling and makes readers more virtuous.

Batteux was another eighteenth-century writer who believed that reading literary fiction can cultivate virtue. In part, poetry (by which he means literature or literary fiction) does so, on his view, by cultivating a capacity for fine-grained perception of social reality. Batteux also agrees with Smith that literature can arouse the emotions required by a virtuous person of good character. Batteux writes that,

in order to give us a perfect and enduring pleasure, it [literature] should only arouse emotions that it is important that we feel intensely and that are not enemies of wisdom. Abhorrence of crime followed by shame, fear, and

repentance among other tortures; compassion for the unfortunate, which has an application nearly as extensive as that of humaneness; admiration for great exemplars, which inspire virtue in the heart; heroic and, consequently, proper love: these, everyone allows, are the emotions that poetry should address. (Batteux 1746/2015: 77)

Batteux suggests several things in this and related passages. For a start, literature represents certain situations or actions and these situations arouse certain emotions. These emotions track the moral qualities of the actions represented. Most importantly, poetry inspires virtues in its readers. Batteux also holds that literature can set up valuable exemplars, worthy of emulation.

Contemporary philosophers have also considered the possibility that reading literary fiction promotes virtue. Nussbaum (1990) was among the first contemporary philosophers to maintain that literary fiction is a valuable source of moral knowledge. On her view, reading literary fiction helps readers understand social situations and understand the complexities of making moral decisions. Similarly, Currie (1995) believes that imagining ourselves in the situations of fictional characters can lead to moral growth. Other philosophers have also suggested that dealing with the hypothetical situations presented in fiction can assist in the acquisition of an ability to act morally. For example, Elisabeth Schellekens holds that reading works of fiction, readers simulate experiences that they can encounter in real life. This experience prepares readers to respond appropriately. Schellekens takes the example of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and writes that, persons like Emma Bovary "have, do, and will exist in reality." After reading the novel, readers "stand a greater chance of coming to know those who in real life show similarities with Emma Bovary, and may alter [their] actions and judgements accordingly" (Schellekens 2007: 51).

Several themes emerge from the philosophical literature. Philosophers have maintained that, in reading literary fiction, people acquire insight into the lives of others by walking a mile in their shoes. In other words, readers simulate participation in social interaction. They gain practice in such interaction and, consequently, understand others and their motivations. Literary fiction can also provide exemplars of moral behaviour. Practicing social interaction leads to increased understanding of, and empathy with, others. Moreover, readers of literary fiction emulate moral exemplars. As a result, readers of literary fiction are more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviour. In short, they are more virtuous. Let us turn now to the question of whether the empirical literature supports *H* and the conclusions of philosophers.

3. *The empirical evidence*

In recent years, many experimenters have found that reading literary fiction is associated with increased empathy. Often the psychological literature distinguishes between cognitive empathy (or a capacity

to see matters from other people's perspective) and affective empathy (or a feeling of sympathy for other people). Various experiments have found that reading literary fiction leads to increases in both cognitive and affective empathy. Experiments have also found evidence that reading literary fiction promotes prosocial behaviour. In short, the empirical evidence seems to support *H*.

A typical experiment is that conducted by Johnson (2012). Test subjects were given the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) to assess their initial mood. Next they read a story designed to provide readers with a good example of prosocial behaviour and to arouse feelings of compassion for the characters in the story. After the subjects read the story, then the PANAS was administered again, together with an instrument measuring affective empathy. Test participants were asked to use a five-point scale to rate the degree to which they had been moved and experienced compassion, sympathy, soft-heartedness, tenderness, and warmth while reading the story. Next, the degree to which readers had been transported by the story was measured. (Transportation is the feeling of being lost in a book. William James was among the first psychologists to speak of this phenomenon. Referring to Sir Walter Scott's novel, *Ivanhoe*, he wrote that, "Whilst absorbed in the novel, we turn our backs on all other worlds, and, for the time, the *Ivanhoe*-world remains our absolute reality" (James 1891: vol. II, 292–3).) Finally, the subjects were told that they had to retrieve the debriefing forms. As they returned, the experimenter pretended, in full view of the participants, to accidentally drop six pens. He then recorded which of the participants helped pick up the pens.

Johnson (2012) found that test subjects experienced increased affective empathy. Those who experienced higher degrees of transportation into the story showed higher degrees of empathy. Increased empathy translated into increased prosocial behavior: those test subjects who experienced the highest degree of empathy were significantly (almost twice) more likely to engage in the prosocial task (assisting with retrieving the pens that the researcher had pretended to accidentally drop). However, it should be noted that another study did not confirm all of Johnson's results. It found an increase of cognitive empathy after reading a literary short story, but only for subjects with certain personality traits. This study did find that people who frequently read fiction perform better on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which measures affective and cognitive empathy (Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu 2013).

Johnson's results have received support from a series of experiments by Kidd and Castano (2013). Their experiments were designed to distinguish between the effects of literary fiction and popular or genre fiction. They randomly assigned subjects the task of reading works of literary fiction (in this case, winners of literary prizes such as the PEN/O. Henry Award). Control groups read genre fiction (selected from among Amazon.com bestsellers) and works of non-fiction. The subjects who

read the works of literary fiction scored higher on tests of cognitive and affective empathy (the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (MIE) and the Yoni test). It is worth noting, however, that scepticism has been expressed about the value of these tests as predictors of prosocial or compassionate behaviour (Koopman 2015: 63).

The studies just considered measured the increase of empathy and prosocial behaviour as a result of exposure to a single piece of fiction. It seems unlikely that reading a single piece of literary fiction will have a huge impact upon a person's character and virtuousness. Kidd and Castano (2013) suggest that reading a single story is unlikely to teach subjects much about other people. Instead, they speculate that reading literary fiction "recruits" (or starts working) their Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is the "capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states.... It allows successful navigation of complex social relationships and helps to support the empathetic responses that maintain them" (Kidd and Castano 2013: 377). More recently, other experimenters have duplicated these results (Black and Barnes 2015). These authors also found that the benefits of reading literary fiction seem to be limited to improved capacity to understand and respond to social situations. In particular, they found that reading literary fiction does not improve results on the Intuitive Physics Test.

Kidd and Castano (2013) only studied the effects of reading a single piece of short literary fiction. They suggest, however, that extensive reading of literary fiction improves ToM. Let us consider the possibility that regular reading of literary fiction increases empathy and improves character.

Several experiments have measured the impact of a habitual practice of reading fiction. One such study (Mar et al. 2006) began by administering the Author Recognition Test (ART), which provides a measure of what, and how much, individuals read. As revised for this test, the ART provided a measure of how much fiction and how much non-fiction test subjects read. Subjects were also assessed by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which measures empathy, the MIE-revised, and the Interpersonal Perception Task-15 (IPT-15). The IPT-15 has subjects view a series of videos of unscripted interactions between two or more individuals. Subjects then answer a series of questions to determine whether they understand the interactions. It is regarded as a good test of sensitivity and social skills. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index measures, among other things, engagement with narrative (which is akin to transportation).

The researchers found that reading a lot of fiction was correlated with the ability to perform tasks such as the IPT-15 and MIE-revised test. Readers with a high degree of narrative engagement (or transportation) performed particularly well. Reading a lot of non-fiction was correlated with poorer performance on these tests. It should be noted, however, that this test did not distinguish works of fiction and works of

literary fiction. Moreover, this experiment does not rule out the possibility that empathetic people are more likely to read literary fiction and that the readers of fiction do not owe their empathy to their reading of fiction. We will consider this possibility below.

A complex study by Koopman (2015) also suggests that familiarity with literary fiction is correlated with increased empathy. In this study, test subjects read texts on either depression or grief. Three sorts of texts were used for each sort of emotion: literary narratives, non-fiction first person narratives, and expository texts. Koopman hypothesized that personal narratives would lead to increased empathy and prosocial behaviour as well as literary fiction does. She also predicted that the texts concerned with grief would have more marked effects on persons dealing with grief. Readers were hypothesized to find it easier to imagine themselves in a position where they feel grief than they can imagine feeling depressed. The experiment controlled for a number of factors, including antecedent empathy, exposure to literature, and personal experience of grief or depression. A questionnaire was used to measure empathetic understanding.

Subjects were then asked about the extent to which they agreed that insurance policies should cover treatment for grief and depression and the extent to which they understood the plight of those suffering from grief and depression. The experiment also built in a practical measure of prosocial behaviour. Test subjects were given the option of donating some or all of the fee (€10) they received for participating in the study to a charity serving those who suffered from grief or depression.

Koopman found several interesting results that are relevant to present concerns. Those who read personal narratives of depression or grief and (to a somewhat lesser extent) those who read a fictional narrative were more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour than those who read an expository text. This gives limited support to the hypothesis that reading literary fiction promotes prosocial behaviour. Personal familiarity with grief or depression was positively correlated with donations. While the type of text the subjects read was correlated with prosocial behaviour, no correlation was found between familiarity with literature and prosocial behaviour. Exposure to literature did, however, predict increased empathetic understanding. Those with a high exposure to literary fiction were inclined to be in favour of insurance coverage for treatment for depression. On the whole, Koopman's findings are in keeping with those of other researchers. (The number of test participants contributing to charity was small in all conditions. Likely the small number of people donating was affected by the fact that all were students for whom €10 is a significant sum and a considerable incentive to participate in the study.)

Philosophers and psychologists have hypothesized that reading literary fiction makes readers more empathetic and prosocial since, readers of this genre simulate experience of social situations and practice

dealing with them. This hypothesis receives support from the study of the brains of people engaged in reading literary fiction. Our brains have what psychologists call the “default network,” a collection of regions of the brain that are responsible for simulation. Simulations include mental constructions of social contexts while reading. If reading literary fiction involves simulating experience of social situations, and practicing dealing with social situations, we would expect that the default network would be engaged. This turns out to happen.

In a recent study, test subjects underwent fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) scans while reading passages drawn from novels and a variety of non-fiction sources, including newspapers, magazines, and self-help books (Tamir et al. 2016). The passages were contrasted along two dimensions: from vivid to abstract and from descriptive of a person’s mental content (social) to non-social. Vivid and social works are taken to be literary. (I take it that, in this context, to say that a work is vivid is to say that it employs figurative language.) The fMRI results revealed that vivid passages and passages that describe the mental content of a person or persons recruited the default network. This adds to the empirical evidence in favour of *H*.

4. *Criticisms of H*

While the empirical evidence seems to suggest that reading literary fiction makes people virtuous, someone might object that this evidence is misleading. Possibly highly empathetic people read literary fiction, and this is why reading literary fiction is associated with higher degrees of empathy. In other words, perhaps the causal arrows lead from high empathy to the reading of literary fiction rather than from reading literary fiction to increased empathy. As well, some philosophers have objected to *H* on grounds that reading literary fiction takes readers away from the real world in which they can practice virtuous behaviour.

The possibility the causal arrows lead from being empathetic to reading literary fiction has been anticipated and ruled out in the experimental literature. In one experiment, the empathy of test subjects was measured prior to the experiment, immediately after they had read the text (either a work of fiction or, in the control group, a work of non-fiction), and one week after reading the text. The researchers found that higher empathy measurement post-experiment was correlated with the degree to which subjects were transported into the story. They ruled out the hypothesis that increased empathy post-experiment can be explained by higher empathy pre-experiment (Bal and Veltkamp 2013). Another study arrived at a similar result. This study tested subjects for the “Big Five” personality traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism/stability, and openness. The subjects were then given the ART and the MIE test. Openness was the only personality trait associated with reading fiction. Performance on the MIE test was also correlated with reading literary fiction. The

researchers concluded that they needed to control for openness when gauging the impact of reading fiction on empathy. Analysis of the experimental data revealed that, after controlling for gender (women are more empathetic than men), age, English fluency, and openness, the degree of people's exposure to fiction predicts they will perform better on a test of empathy (Mar, Oatley, and Peterson 2009).

Some philosophers have also objected to *H. Candace Vogler* has criticised the hypothesis that reading literary fiction leads people to become more virtuous. She believes that, on the contrary, time spent reading literary fiction is, from a moral point of view, wasted. Time spent reading literary fiction is time not spent engaging with one's fellow human beings. The only way to become more virtuous she believes, is to perform virtuous acts. She writes that if, for example, "I seek to cultivate generosity, I *give*.... Since silent reading induces *retreat* from my circumstances, silent reading is the *opposite* of habituating myself to noticing what's going on in my world *by* noticing" (Vogler 2007: 33).

The flaw in this sort of reasoning is now apparent. To a certain extent, at any rate, simulating engaging in virtuous and prosocial acts assists people in becoming more virtuous. This should not be surprising. One becomes a better pilot by flying aircraft. But one can also become a better pilot by training on a flight simulator. Similarly, the empirical evidence suggests that a person becomes more virtuous by reading literary fiction and simulating acts of empathy with other people. By reading literary fiction and simulating interacting with other people, readers can learn how to interact better with others.

5. *How literary fiction makes people virtuous*

The mechanisms by which literary fiction makes readers more virtuous, and improves their characters, are likely imperfectly understood. Still, the psychological literature is beginning to provide insight into these mechanisms. This section will address three mechanisms that appear to be at work. For a start, readers become caught up in a story and imagine themselves in a social situation. This gives them practice in dealing with, and reflecting on, social situations, especially when readers are transported into a story. In particular, readers can practice "perspective-taking," seeing the world from the perspective of others. This practice, in turn, helps readers understand other people (that is, it increases cognitive empathy). This leads to increased emotional empathy with a wide variety of people and, in particular, people unlike ourselves. Secondly, literary fiction provides opportunities for self-reflection. In other words, fiction provides readers with the opportunity to examine their own lives and this leads to improved character. Emulation is the third mechanism whereby literature leads to the cultivation of virtue. Humans have a tendency to imitate the actions of others, including others imitated in fiction.

As we have seen, empirical evidence indicates that readers of literary fiction simulate social interaction. This evidence includes fMRI results that show that reading fiction recruits the default network. In simulating social interaction, readers of literary fiction are led to engage in what is known as perspective taking. Perspective taking involves adopting the perspectives of others and imagining what it is like to see the world from their points of view. Readers have the experience of walking a mile in the shoes of a variety of people, and of people quite different from themselves. Having imagined themselves living the lives of others, they acquire more cognitive and affective empathy for a variety of people. That is, they understand the perspective of, and feel for, these people.

That seeing the world from the perspective of others promotes virtue, is supported by the research of Kaufman and Libby (2012). These authors conducted an experiment in which three versions of a story were used. In one, the protagonist was revealed early in the story to be gay (gay-early story). In another, he was revealed late in the story to be gay (gay-late story). In the final version, he was revealed to be heterosexual (straight-story). All test subjects identified themselves as straight. The experimenters found that readers of the gay-late story were more transported than were readers of the gay-early story. Likely this was because readers found it easier to enter into the life of someone they perceived to be similar to themselves. Most interestingly, the readers of the gay-late story, having walked in the steps of a gay man, manifested positive attitudes towards gay people after reading the story. On a five-point scale of beliefs about gays, they had significantly more positive beliefs compared to readers of the gay-early and straight stories. Similar results were found with stories in which the protagonist was revealed early and late in a story to be African-American. Readers of the story in which the character was revealed late to be African-American were found to score significantly lower on a test of racist attitudes (Kaufman and Libby 2012). Another study indicated that readers transported into a story about a Muslim woman had increased empathy for Muslims, compared to those who did not read the story (Johnson 2013).

The effect of simulating social interaction is increased by transportation into a story. Several writers, including Johnson (2012) and Bal and Veltkamp (2013), have noticed that reading literary fiction is particularly associated with increased empathy when readers are transported into the story. When readers are transported, they “let go of key components of their own identity—such as their beliefs, memories, personality traits and ingroup affiliations—and instead assume the identity of a protagonist” (Kaufman and Libby 2012: 2). These protagonists can be quite various and different from the readers, in personality, characteristics, and situation in life. The experience of transportation makes perspective taking more compelling. The experience of

reading fiction becomes almost like being another. When these others are diverse, the extent of one's fellow feeling and empathy can be considerably extended.

Abundant evidence indicates that literary fiction's focus on the experience of individuals is one of the factors that increases its impact on readers' characters. Literary fiction focuses on individuals, while non-fiction tends to focus on groups of individuals. Human beings seem to be constituted in such a way that we are more affected by a story about an individual than a non-fiction report about a group of individuals. Consider for example an experiment that had one group of subjects read a chapter from Malikia Mokkeddem's novel *L'Interdite* (1994). This novel is concerned with the sexist treatment of an Algerian woman who returns to her homeland. Another group read an essay on the condition of women in Algeria (Hakemulder 2000). Readers of the selection from *L'Interdite* were significantly more concerned about, and inclined to resist, the condition of women in Algeria than were readers of the essay. The opportunity to see the world from the perspective of another human, to be transported, is plausibly held to be the factor that makes literary fiction contribute to increased empathy and prosocial attitudes.

Literary fiction provides readers with a better opportunity to practice simulation of social behaviour than does popular fiction. The fictional worlds of literary fiction have the complexity of the real world. They are not over-simplified and full of caricatures such as Mary (or Marty) Sues. (A Mary Sue (masculine: Marty Sue) is an implausible, over-idealised character.) Since the worlds of literary fiction are realistic, negotiating them is like negotiating the real world.

Consider now the second mechanism whereby literary fiction contributes to the cultivation of virtue. Recently Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) have suggested that reading literary fiction enables readers to engage in contemplation and self-reflection. Here they are building on a remark by Yann Martel, the author of *The Life of Pi* (2001) and other novels. Martel suggested that literary fiction provides readers with the opportunity to reflect on their lives. In particular, Martel spoke of the "stillness" provided by reading literary fiction. It is hypothesized that readers who are more reflective are more likely to avoid purely self-regarding behaviour.

Some evidence indicates that readers of literary fiction are reflective and Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) canvass some of this evidence. Other evidence is provided by an experiment that tracked the sorts of memories evoked by the reading of literary fiction as opposed to other sorts of texts. This experiment had one group read a short story by Pär Lagerkvist, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Another group read an essay on the growth of the world's population. As subjects read the text they were asked to record the sorts of memories they experienced. Memories were divided into three categories: memo-

ries of events in which readers had actively participated; memories of events which readers had observed without participating in them; and memories of events that the readers knew only by report (Seilman and Larsen 1989). Readers of the short story were significantly more likely to recall memories of events in which they had actively participated than were readers of the expository essay. Another study has confirmed these results, and found that the memories evoked by reading fiction are more vivid than those aroused by reading non-fiction (Mar and Oatley 2008). The sorts of memories evoked by reading literary fiction, in comparison to those aroused by non-fiction, is evidence that reading fiction promotes self-reflection.

The question of how self-reflection assists readers in becoming virtuous remains to be addressed. Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) suggest that by promoting self-reflection, by leading readers to take a moment to think, readers avoid knee-jerk reactions. Readers of literary fiction have an increased opportunity to see some matter from a range of perspectives. If this is right, this capacity of literary fiction works in concert with its capacity to promote perspective taking and transportation. By engaging in self-reflection, readers of literary fiction are more likely to engage in perspective taking. As already noted, perspective taking is associated with empathy and prosocial behaviour.

The third mechanism whereby literary fiction improves character is by the setting of good examples that readers can emulate. As we have seen, Batteux long ago suggested that literary fiction functions by setting good examples, examples that readers can emulate. Certainly, a great deal of evidence suggests that humans tend to emulate or imitate the behaviour of other people. As two psychologists note in a survey of the experimental literature, “there is substantial evidence for facial, emotional, verbal, and behavioral mimicry. We mimic virtually everything that we can observe another person do, and even “catch” their affective states as well” (Chartrand and van Baaren 2009: 226). A good deal of evidence suggests that we do not only mimic real people. We also mimic fictional characters (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 2010: 55, 57).

Given that mimicry is so common in human behaviour, and that there is evidence that readers mimic characters, it seems likely that part of the effect of literary fiction on character is due to the setting of good examples. This conclusion is suggested in one of the studies already discussed in this essay. Johnson suggests that the prosocial behaviour detected in his experiment was promoted by the fact that the main character in the story used in his experiment “modeled prosocial behaviour” (Johnson 2012: 152). Presumably, readers then mimicked this prosocial behaviour.

Other mechanisms are likely at work when reading literary fiction cultivates character. Several philosophers, including Young (2001) have suggested that the emotions evoked by works of literary fiction, and other works of art, can assist readers in understanding individuals and

social situations. This understanding has the potential to increase empathy and prosocial behaviour. Unfortunately, the role of emotions in cultivating virtue has not been subjected to sufficient empirical study. Some tantalizing pieces of information are available. For example, one study has found that reading a short story by Chekhov is associated with the changing of readers' self-perception of their personality traits and these changes were also correlated with emotional arousal (Djikic 2009). Johnson (2012) has also suggested that arousal of compassion, sympathy, soft-heartedness, tenderness, and warmth play a role in promoting virtue. The relationship between emotional arousal by literary fiction and the cultivation of virtue deserves further attention.

6. *Fiction and harm to character*

Many philosophers have suggested that literary fiction can make readers more virtuous, and we have seen that this hypothesis enjoys considerable empirical support. Few recent philosophers have, however, considered the possibility that reading literary fiction could make readers less virtuous, that is, more inclined to make moral errors. Currie is among the few who have considered this possibility. He writes that, while literary fiction has the potential to increase moral understanding, it also has "the capacity to induce moral error" (Currie 1995: 257). Almost no psychologists have entertained or tested this possibility. There is, however, reason to be concerned that some works of fiction could lead readers to be less virtuous.

If we carefully examine the psychological literature, we find that there is reason to worry that literary fiction could make people less virtuous. The problem is that reading literary fiction is a complex activity. In reading literary fiction, affective empathy seems to be induced and this leads to prosocial behaviour. Johnson (2012) is one of many empirical studies that supports this view. But he also found that the affective empathy aroused by a work of literary fiction is unable to fully explain the effect of reading fiction on prosocial behaviour. Another factor, namely the mimicking of prosocial behaviour, must play a role.

The problem is that fiction need not always set good examples. If it does not, then there is a chance that it would sometimes make people less virtuous. Surprisingly little effort has been made to test the hypothesis that works of fiction with immoral characters, who are treated sympathetically, could lead readers to emulate their behaviour and act immorally. Experimental results in other realms suggest that this worry is not groundless. Representations of violent behaviour on television have been shown to increase violence and antisocial behaviour in test subjects. A meta-analysis of the many studies of the effects of television violence on behaviour concludes that regardless of the ages of the test subjects, there is a strong co-relation between television violence and aggression and antisocial behaviour. The combination of violence with erotica has even worse effects on viewers and leads to "sexual callous-

ness” (Paik and Comstock 1994: 537). A meta-analysis of the psychological literature on violent video games found that exposure to such games was “positively associated with aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect” (Anderson et al. 2010: 167). Exposure to such games is also associated with antisocial behaviour and decreased empathy. These effects are found across cultures. In contrast, prosocial video games lead to prosocial thoughts and behaviour (Greitemeyer and Osswald 2010).

As already indicated, little empirical evidence is available to test the hypothesis that literary fiction that approvingly represented persons who are engaged in violent, aggressive, or antisocial behaviour could make readers less virtuous. However, given that violent television and violent video games have deleterious effects on empathy and prosocial behaviour, it seems likely that literary fiction that favourably or sympathetically represents immoral characters will similarly be associated with aggressive and antisocial behaviour. This is a concern that has been around since Plato’s *Republic*. Plato was deeply concerned that people would imitate immoral behaviour that poets depict. Although Plato is sometimes ridiculed, we should not be surprised if some novels, like television programming and video games, lead to reduced empathy and prosocial behaviour. Ayn Rand’s *Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* have undoubtedly had a deleterious effect on the characters of generation after generation of American teenagers.

Someone might deny that literary fiction has the potential to make readers less virtuous. One could deny, for example, that works that harm character are works of literary fiction. The suggestion that *Atlas Shrugged* is literary fiction is certainly tendentious. It is not a carefully observed, insightful exploration of society or personality. It is “morally incoherent.” It is characterized by pontification, bombast, and “a naïve attitude towards history and philosophy that at times can only be described as sophomoric.” It has been suggested that it is “an effective rather than a literary novel” (Bertonneau 2004: 296, 298 and 306). In this way, it can be argued that *Atlas Shrugged* is a work of fiction, but not an example of a work of literary fiction that harms character since it is not a work of literary fiction. One might similarly argue that any work that harms character is not literary fiction. On this view, works of literary fiction, by their very nature, express a genuine understanding of society and provide insight into morality. On such a view, reading literary fiction cannot lead people to become less virtuous.

I am sympathetic to this view. Literary fiction will typically be the product of careful observation. Any good observer of society and persons is likely to grasp moral facts. Nevertheless, I am not confident that we can so easily rule out the possibility that some works of fiction, plausibility classified as literary fiction, can harm readers’ characters. At any rate, it still seems possible that some works of literary fiction could harm the characters of some readers by modeling immoral behaviour in a positive light.

7. Conclusion

The recent psychological literature provides empirical support for *H*, the hypothesis that reading literary fiction makes people more virtuous. At least, reading some literary fiction makes some people more virtuous. The mechanisms whereby literary fiction makes people more virtuous deserve more careful attention. Perhaps such attention will help address the concern that some literary fiction could have a deleterious effect on the characters of some readers.

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