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# Jukka Mikkonen, "Philosophy, Literature and Understanding"

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**Jukka Mikkonen.** *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding*. Bloomsbury 2021. 190 pp. \$166.95 USD (Hardcover 9781350163955); \$55.95 USD (Paperback 9781350229013).

*Philosophy, Literature and Understanding* blends a comprehensive survey of recent work in the philosophy of literature with an original suggestion about how work in this field could be done better. Its focus is on recent work in the analytical tradition, and specifically, on analytical discussions of literary cognitivism: that is, the view that the reading of literary works can confer cognitive benefits of some sort. The book's original suggestion is that work on this topic has been hampered by the assumption that the cognitive gains offered by literature should be described as advances in *knowledge*. In opposition to that view, Mikkonen argues that 'the concept of *understanding* outperforms the concept of knowledge in its ability to capture the various cognitive values of literary narratives' (10, emphasis added). The book examines several recent debates connected with literary cognitivism, arguing that the impasses that arise in them often stem from a reliance on the concept of knowledge in cases where it is not appropriate. Mikkonen further argues that these impasses might be overcome if the concept of understanding were given a more central role. The result is an interesting and original perspective on the philosophy of literature, one that opens promising new paths for future research.

The topic of understanding is not new. Dilthey used the term to designate the kinds of thinking found in humanistic enterprises, and to distinguish them from the universalistic forms of explanation practiced by the natural sciences. More recently, understanding has been explored by epistemologists and philosophers of science convinced that certain cognitive undertakings pursue something other than 'individual truths and knowledge' (51). For his part, Mikkonen characterizes understanding as a kind of sense-making that is 'holistic' (51), in the sense that it is concerned with whole phenomena rather than their individual elements. It therefore focuses on connections, on 'grasping explanatory and other coherence-making relationships' (51). Understanding is more concerned with the meanings of phenomena than with accumulating new information about them, with 'deepening what we already know' and 'evaluating the information we have at our disposal' (51). Accordingly, it is 'non-factive' (51), or at least not exclusively factive, since 'knowledge and understanding of the whole can draw us in opposite directions' (51). (In extreme cases, Mikkonen argues, 'the advancement of understanding may require deliberate distortion' (51)). In contrast with knowledge, understanding is 'largely non-propositional' and 'comes in degrees' (51). Finally,



understanding ‘can be achieved in many ways’ (52), so the pursuit of understanding must be willing to learn from very different ways of thinking.

The five chapters of *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding* sketch how analytic philosophy of literature might look if its debates were viewed through the lens of understanding rather than knowledge. Chapter 1, which serves as the book’s introduction, briefly describes its agenda and outlines the chapters to come. Chapter 2, ‘Imagination,’ discusses recent debates about how readers should and should not respond imaginatively to what they read. It is often argued that only some imaginative responses to literary works are appropriate. Explaining why, however, is quite tricky. Some argue that legitimate responses must be prompted by the work itself; others suggest that they must be under the control of the work’s author. Still others think that literary works are ‘open’ and that no imaginative responses to them are in principle illegitimate. Mikkonen tries to show that these debates have been hindered by the assumption that imagination is ‘a propositional attitude,’ or ‘a mental state which readers adopt towards the content of a literary work’ (14). He sketches an alternative view according to which we must ‘make room for different kinds of imaginative activity in literary experience’ (13). Especially important, in his view, are the kinds of imaginative responses that happen after readers have put down their books and begun to digest them. He favourably cites Peter Kivy’s observation that many literary works take a long time to finish, and that reflecting on them between reading sessions is an essential ‘part of literary appreciation’ (39).

Chapter 3, ‘Narrative,’ also tries to navigate between some of the standard approaches to its topic. At issue is whether constructing and interpreting narratives offers insights that cannot be gained in other ways. Mikkonen discusses several theorists who see narrative as one of our most fundamental cognitive tools, and one that is closely linked to selfhood and personal identity. He discusses other theorists who worry that when we export the topic of narrative to other areas, we ‘lose what is distinctive about narrative and flatten the phenomenon’ (42). Mikkonen tries to show that both sides in this debate usually assume that the cognitive gains offered by narrative must be gains in knowledge: specifically, that its value lies in ‘its ability to record events’ (50) in a way that ‘emphasizes unity and coherence’ (49). He argues that if we instead ‘approach narrative as a vehicle for understanding’ (50), debates about it look quite different. Specifically, he claims that when we grasp a development in the form of a narrative, we can gain a new appreciation of the ‘*processuality*’ (55) of certain experiences. A narrative about grief, for instance, can vividly show how this experience unfolds over time, and what it is like to live through its stages. But Mikkonen

adds that attempts to learn from narrative should not lose sight of its ‘artificiality’ —its ‘fictionalizing tendencies’ which can simplify and distort (56).

Chapter 4, ‘Cognition,’ explores different versions of the idea that reading literature can be a route to enhanced ‘*cognitive skills*’ (59). Mikkonen is skeptical of the view that reading literature can be a direct route to conceptual enhancement. He argues that this view seems plausible only when applied to literary works that ‘support our existing views about life’ (74). When we are highly confident of our views on a given topic (for example, the wrongness of racism), it is easy to applaud a work (for example, *Native Son*) that teaches what we consider the right lessons about it. But when our view of a topic is ‘misguided’ (74), the literary works we admire can have the effect of reinforcing our misconceptions. Furthermore, literary works can be complex and ambiguous, and it is not always easy to know exactly what a work is saying about a given topic. To see literature as a straightforward route to conceptual enhancement seems to assume that it offers ‘mere simple truths’ or ‘new clear-cut frames’ (75), which it obviously does not. Indeed, Mikkonen argues that one of the most valuable things literature can do is ‘confound us’ (75), reminding us that ‘things are not as simple as one has thought’ (81).

Chapter 5, ‘Evidence,’ asks what proof there is that reading literary works actually can deepen understanding. Mikkonen grants that this is a difficult question to answer. Evidence derived from armchair introspection is weak and unreliable; evidence derived in laboratories—for example, from neuroscientific studies of the reading brain—is still new and inconclusive. Mikkonen argues that we must be open to several different sorts of evidence, including some non-standard kinds. He suggests that one kind might come from the ‘practice of criticism’ (103)—that is, from the ways in which ‘professional readers’ (101), such as literary critics, have found that reading deepens their understanding of certain topics. Chapter 5 also asks what methodologies might be appropriate to the philosophy of literature, given the difficulty of finding evidence for some of its claims. Mikkonen argues that its methodology should be ‘pluralistic,’ blending ‘*metacritical*’ elements with the perspectives of lay readers and with sociological and historical studies of how certain works have been received (111).

*Philosophy, Literature and Understanding* is a valuable book. For newcomers to the philosophy of literature, it provides a helpful overview of some of the field’s main recent currents. Also valuable is its emphasis on understanding, especially on the relevance of this topic to recent debates around literary cognitivism. In one respect, however, the book’s focus on analytic

philosophy is somewhat incongruous. The concept of understanding derives from the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, and several members of that tradition—Gadamer and Ricoeur are obvious examples—have used it to produce extremely rich reflections on literature. These philosophers offer an approach to literature and its cognitive benefits that is, I suspect, far more congenial to Mikkonen than is most analytical work on this topic. Apart from a few brief mentions, however, hermeneutical philosophers such as these are not discussed in *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding*. Obviously, no book can cover everything, and any book that examines analytic philosophy of literature as insightfully as this one already has enough on its plate. For my part, though, I hope that future discussions of literary cognitivism can establish more of a dialogue between these traditions. If, and, when that happens, Mikkonen's book could serve as a helpful icebreaker.

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