

Does Great Literature Make Us Better?

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You agree with me, I expect, that exposure to challenging works of literary fiction is good for us. That's one reason we deplore the dumbing-down of the school curriculum and the rise of the Internet and its hyperlink culture. Perhaps we don't all read very much that we would count as great literature, but we're apt to feel guilty about not doing so, seeing it as one of the ways we fall short of excellence. Wouldn't reading about Anna Karenina, the good folk of Middlemarch and Marcel and his friends expand our imaginations and refine our moral and social sensibilities?

If someone now asks you for evidence for this view, I expect you will have one or both of the following reactions. First, why would anyone need evidence for something so obviously right? Second, what kind of evidence would he want? Answering the first question is easy: if there's no evidence – even indirect evidence – for the civilizing value of literary fiction, we ought not to assume that it does civilize. Perhaps you think there are questions we can sensibly settle in ways other than by appeal to evidence: by faith, for instance. But even if there are such questions, surely no one thinks this is one of them.

What sort of evidence could we present? Well, we can point to specific examples of our fellows who have become more caring, wiser people through encounters with literature. Indeed, we are such people ourselves, aren't we?

There is scant evidence that reading great literature morally improves us.

I hope no one is going to push this line very hard. Everything we know about our understanding of ourselves suggests that we are not very good at knowing how we got to be the kind of people we are. In fact we don't really know, very often, what sorts of people we are. We regularly attribute our own failures to circumstance and the failures of others to bad character. But we can't all be exceptions to the rule (supposing it is a rule) that people do bad things because they are bad people.

We are poor at knowing why we make the choices we do, and we fail to recognize the tiny changes in circumstances that can shift us from one choice to another. When it comes to other people, can you be confident that your intelligent, socially attuned and generous friend who reads Proust got that way partly because of the reading? Might it not be the other way around: that bright, socially competent and empathic people are more likely than others to find pleasure in the complex representations of human interaction we find in literature?

There's an argument we often hear on the other side, illustrated earlier this year by a piece on The New Yorker's Web site. Reminding us of all those cultured Nazis, Teju Cole notes the willingness of a president who reads novels and poetry to sign weekly drone strike permissions. What, he asks, became of "literature's vaunted power to inspire empathy?" I find this a hard argument to like, and not merely because I am not yet persuaded by the moral case against

drones. No one should be claiming that exposure to literature protects one against moral temptation absolutely, or that it can reform the truly evil among us. We measure the effectiveness of drugs and other medical interventions by thin margins of success that would not be visible without sophisticated statistical techniques; why assume literature's effectiveness should be any different?

We need to go beyond the appeal to common experience and into the territory of psychological research, which is sophisticated enough these days to make a start in testing our proposition.

Psychologists have started to do some work in this area, and we have learned a few things so far. We know that if you get people to read a short, lowering story about a child murder they will afterward report feeling worse about the world than they otherwise would. Such changes, which are likely to be very short-term, show that fictions press our buttons; they don't show that they refine us emotionally or in any other way.

We have learned that people are apt to pick up (purportedly) factual information stated or implied as part of a fictional story's background. Oddly, people are more prone to do that when the story is set away from home: in a study conducted by Deborah Prentice and colleagues and published in 1997, Princeton undergraduates retained more from a story when it was set at Yale than when it was set on their own campus (don't worry Princetonians, Yalies are just as bad when you do the test the other way around). Television, with its serial programming, is good for certain kinds of learning; according to a study from 2001 undertaken for the Kaiser Foundation, people who regularly watched the show "E.R." picked up a good bit of medical information on which they sometimes acted. What we don't have is compelling evidence that suggests that people are morally or socially better for reading Tolstoy.

Not nearly enough research has been conducted; nor, I think, is the relevant psychological evidence just around the corner. Most of the studies undertaken so far don't draw on serious literature but on short snatches of fiction devised especially for experimental purposes. Very few of them address questions about the effects of literature on moral and social development, far too few for us to conclude that literature either does or doesn't have positive moral effects.

There is a puzzling mismatch between the strength of opinion on this topic and the state of the evidence. In fact I suspect it is worse than that; advocates of the view that literature educates and civilizes don't overrate the evidence — they don't even think that evidence comes into it. While the value of literature ought not to be a matter of faith, it looks as if, for many of us, that is exactly what it is.

Now, philosophers are careful folk, trained in the ways of argument and, you would hope, above these failings. It's odd, then, that some of them write so confidently and passionately about the kinds of learning we get from literature, and about the features of literature that make it a particularly apt teacher of moral psychology. In her influential book "Love's Knowledge," Martha Nussbaum argues that the narrative form gives literary fiction a peculiar power to generate moral insight; in the hands of a literary master like Henry James, fiction is able to give

us scenarios that make vivid the details of a moral issue, while allowing us to think them through without the distortions wrought by personal interest.

I'm not inclined to write off such speculations; it is always good to have in mind a stock of ideas about ways literature might enhance our thought and action. But it would be refreshing to have some acknowledgment that suggestions about how literature might aid our learning don't show us that it does in fact aid it. (Suppose a schools inspector reported on the efficacy of our education system by listing ways that teachers might be helping students to learn; the inspector would be out of a job pretty soon.)

I'm confident we can look forward to better evidence. I'm less optimistic about what the evidence will show. Here, quickly, is a reason we already have for thinking the idea of moral and social learning from literature may be misguided.

One reason people like Martha Nussbaum have argued for the benefits of literature is that literature, or fictional narrative of real quality, deals in complexity. Literature turns us away from the simple moral rules that so often prove unhelpful when we are confronted with messy real-life decision making, and gets us ready for the stormy voyage through the social world that sensitive, discriminating moral agents are supposed to undertake. Literature helps us, in other words, to be, or to come closer to being, moral "experts."

The problem with this argument is that there's long been evidence that much of what we take for expertise in complex and unpredictable domains – of which morality is surely one – is bogus. Beginning 50 years ago with work by the psychologist Paul Meehl, study after study has shown that following simple rules – rules that take account of many fewer factors than an expert would bother to consider – does at least as well and generally better than relying on an expert's judgment. (Not that rules do particularly well either; but they do better than expert judgment.)

Some of the evidence for this view is convincingly presented in Daniel Kahneman's recent book "Thinking Fast and Slow": spectacular failures of expertise include predictions of the future value of wine, the performance of baseball players, the health of newborn babies and a couple's prospects for marital stability.

But why, I hear you say, do you complain about people's neglect of evidence when you yourself have no direct evidence that moral expertise fails? After all, no one has done tests in this area.

Well, yes, I grant that in the end the evidence could go in favor of the idea that literature can make moral experts of us. I also grant that moral thinking is probably not a single domain, but something that goes on in bewilderingly different ways in different circumstances. Perhaps we can find kinds of moral reasoning where experts trained partly by exposure to the fictional literature of complex moral choice do better than those who rely on simple moral rules of thumb.

I haven't, then, in any way refuted the claim that moral expertise is a quality we should aspire to. But I do think we have identified a challenge that needs to be met by anyone who seriously wants to press the case for moral expertise.

Everything depends in the end on whether we can find direct, causal evidence: we need to show that exposure to literature itself makes some sort of positive difference to the people we end up being. That will take a lot of careful and insightful psychological research (try designing an experiment to test the effects of reading "War and Peace," for example). Meanwhile, most of us will probably soldier on with a positive view of the improving effects of literature, supported by nothing more than an airy bed of sentiment.

I have never been persuaded by arguments purporting to show that literature is an arbitrary category that functions merely as a badge of membership in an elite. There is such a thing as aesthetic merit, or more likely, aesthetic merits, complicated as they may be to articulate or impute to any given work.

But it's hard to avoid the thought that there is something in the anti-elitist's worry. Many who enjoy the hard-won pleasures of literature are not content to reap aesthetic rewards from their reading; they want to insist that the effort makes them more morally enlightened as well. And that's just what we don't know yet.

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