



Reading your way to yourself

Leggere: la tua strada verso te stesso

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ABSTRACT

Many readers of literature are convinced that engagement with it provides insight into the human condition, as well as helping them to become better people. This conviction turns out to be more controversial than it appears, and arguments as well as experimental studies have been marshalled supporting both sides of the debate. That debate has however focused on literature's capacity to provide knowledge of the world around us. Recent developments in Philosophy have instead highlighted distinctive features of understanding in contrast to knowledge, and in this essay I argue that a neglected aspect of literature's epistemic power is its ability to provide understanding, and in particular self-understanding as we reflect on our reactions to the narratives that make up the core of our engagement with literature.

Keywords: reading, self-understanding, narratives

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1. Knowledge and understanding

Many readers of novels, short stories and plays are convinced that their engagement with these works provides insight into the human condition; many also feel that such engagement helps them become better people. Yet in recent years both convictions have been challenged by thinkers who prize literature and cannot be accused of philistinism. As Currie (2013, 2021), for instance, points out, perhaps the great works of literary fiction simply remind us of things we already knew implicitly; and perhaps these works tend to be read by people who were already decent. So even if readers of fiction tend to be good and insightful people, it is not clear that their reading habits helped make them that way.

Some researchers have attempted to respond to this challenge by devising experiments aimed at testing the effects of reading: Kidd and Castano (2013) for instance, famously conducted studies suggesting that reading literary fiction (that is, fiction of a high-enough caliber to be termed literature) helps to enhance people's "Theory of Mind", defined as our capacity to appreciate that others besides ourselves have both cognitive states (such as beliefs) and affective states (such as emotions), and that such states might differ from our own. Although this work has generated some controversy (see for instance Panero et al., 2017), it is part of a growing body of research adding credence to the epistemic and ethical value of literary fiction.

While the above trend is encouraging, my experience suggests that it presupposes an unduly narrow idea of what we can learn from literature. For learning is not all about knowledge, and some of the most important things we can learn are about ourselves rather than the world around us.

Let me explain. The field of epistemology has traditionally focused on knowledge: what can we know and what conditions must be met for us to do so. However, emerging movements in the philosophy of science and aesthetics (among other fields) are leading philosophers to widen epistemology's horizon beyond knowledge to include understanding (Hannon, 2021). One reason for this change is that understanding points to phenomena that are not readily captured with the concept of knowledge. While we speak of knowing that something is the case, the 'that' in question tends to be a true proposition or, if you prefer, a fact (We also speak of knowing how to do something.) But it is more natural to speak of understanding a theory, a person, a culture, or an historical period, than it is to speak of knowing any of these things. And when we do speak of knowing a person, that might just refer to the fact that you've been introduced to them; your relationship may thus be superficial.

When by contrast we speak of understanding a theory, we normally have in mind the ability to see how its various propositions interact with one another, and how they jointly yield testable predictions. Likewise, we understand a person when we have a good sense of how their various attributes and character traits conspire to make them do the things they do. If I understand a person, I may be confident in predicting how they'll act in new situations, including what they'll say and how they will feel. On this way of thinking, understanding tends to be holistic rather than piecemeal as is characteristic of knowledge. What is more, understanding comes in degrees: two people might understand plate tectonics while one does so more fully than the other. As Le Bihan (2017) observes, knowledge doesn't come in degrees in anything like this way.

2. Self-knowledge and self-understanding

At any given time you have a suite of mental processes that make up your conscious experience: these include perceptual experiences of things you are looking at or hearing (a landscape or rushing wind), awareness of your body's position (whether you're sitting or standing), and tactile experience such as the texture of the clothing that might be touching your body (Green, 2018). Your conscious experience may also include something that you're saying in 'inner speech' as well as any imagery that may be traversing your

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mind, such as the feel of a grassy lawn you walked across this morning, or a scene from the movie you watched last night.

These items of conscious experience are not difficult to know about: either you're aware of them by virtue of their being a focus of your attention, or you can become aware of them with brief reflection. That is, it is not terribly difficult to achieve knowledge of our current conscious experience. Following Köppe and Langkau (2017), let's use the term 'self-knowledge' to refer to our knowledge of those mental phenomena that make up our conscious experience at a given time or over time.

More challenging than achieving self-knowledge is the project of coming to appreciate those of our emotions that last a long time (such as long-held resentments or wishes), as well as many of our character traits. These may be difficult to acknowledge due to their posing threats to our conception of ourselves. For instance, I'd like to think of myself as an easy-going and generous person, but then the resentment that a particular co-worker provokes in me had better be kept out of view so that my self-conception is not challenged.

From what we have said about understanding, it will emerge that the project of self-understanding consists in coming to appreciate how our various behaviors, tendencies thereto, and chronic affective responses to the world hang together in a unified whole. As such it will also give us some handle on what we would do in hypothetical situations that are not too far-removed from those we are in.

So conceived, self-understanding is harder to attain than self-knowledge. We might seek self-understanding through a long course of psychotherapy. Many people however lack the time and financial means for such an undertaking. We might instead seek self-understanding by talking to our friends, particularly those who are insightful, patient, and honest enough to tell us things we might not want to hear. Yet a third option is to seek such self-understanding by paying attention to our responses to works of fiction such as novels and short stories. In spite of their being populated by fictional characters, we may find ourselves admiring one character for his patience and fortitude (such as Gabriel Oak in *Far from Madding Crowd*), detest another for their hypocrisy (such as Lord Darlington in *Remains of the Day*), and even feel jealous of a third for their cleverness (such as the cook Chichibio in *The Decameron*). May such experiences be clues on a path to self-understanding?

3. Reading about others to understand yourself

Here are some examples suggesting an affirmative answer. In *Jane Eyre*, the eponymous heroine has discovered that two sisters that had recently cared for her in a time of crisis are her cousins. Jane wishes to show her appreciation for their compassion as well as commemorate their new relationship. She now describes to their ascetic brother how she will welcome them to the home they will share:

My first aim will be to *clean down*... Moor House from chamber to cellar; my next to rub it up with bees-wax, oil, and an indefinite number of cloths, till it glitters again; my third, to arrange every chair, table, bed, carpet, with mathematical precision; afterwards I shall... keep up good fires in every room; and lastly, the two days preceding that on which your sisters are expected will be devoted...to such a beating of eggs, sorting of currants, grating of spices, compounding of Christmas cakes, chopping up of materials for mince-pies, and solemnising of other culinary rites, as words can convey but an inadequate notion of to the uninitiated like you. My purpose, in short, is to have all things in an absolutely perfect state of readiness for Diana and Mary before next Thursday; and my ambition is to give them a beau-ideal of a welcome when they come (Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, Ch. 34).

I have read *Jane Eyre* several times, and in each case the above passage produces a strong emotion. This is not merely because the food and other comforts of home described in the passage are appealing. Instead,

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I believe it is because these comforts are organized in order to serve as expressions of affection on Jane's part toward her newly discovered relations Diana and Mary. My so construing these comforts helps me to appreciate something I did not understand about myself in my first readings of the novel: that I, too, take pleasure in offering hospitality to those I care for; like Jane, I rejoice in giving friends and loved ones a 'beau-ideal of a welcome'.

For another example, consider Primo Levi's autobiographical short story, 'Phosphorus' (Levi, 1984) in which he described his acquaintance with another young chemist, Giulia, while working at a chemical plant in Milan in 1942. Being Jewish, Levi was at this time subject to racial laws, and so was glad to get any employment offered him. His (non-Jewish) friend Giulia is engaged to a man whose parents do not approve of the union, but she is bent on winning them over. Accordingly she asks Levi to give her a ride on his bicycle to the fiancé's parents' residence, outside of which he waits while she meets with them. Levi writes,

There was this man, whom Giulia had at other times described to me as generous, solid, enamored, and serious; he possessed that girl, disheveled and splendid in her anger, who was writhing between my forearms intent on steering; and, instead of rushing to Milan to present his arguments, he was holed up in some border barracks to defend the nation. Because, being a *goy*, he was of course doing his military service: and... I felt myself overcome by an absurd hatred for this never encountered rival. A *goy*, and she was a *goy*, according to my atavistic terminology: and they could have gotten married. I felt growing within me, perhaps for the first time, a nauseating sensation of emptiness: so this is what it meant to be different: this was the price for being the salt of the earth. To carry on your crossbar a girl you desire and be so far from her as not to be able even to fall in love with her, carry her on your crossbar along Viale Gorizia to help her belong to someone else, and vanish from my life (Levi, 1984, pp. 127-8).

Levi's phrase 'nauseating sensation of emptiness,' pounds in my chest whenever I read this story. I have not experienced anything approaching the suffering Levi underwent in the time he here describes or the later unspeakable horrors of his internment at Auschwitz. However, I intuitively identify with the emptiness he describes, and I may hypothesize that this is due to an experience of also being different, and in a way that has at times made others inaccessible to me. Levi's description gives words to that pain and helps unify its disparate manifestations into a coherent pattern.

As readers we may not only follow a story, but also note our own reactions thereto. Those reactions may be suggestive of larger patterns of emotional response hiding in plain view in our own lives: perhaps you've felt the disappointment of missed opportunities but have failed to notice what triggers that emotion; by heeding your reaction to a character who shares that disappointment you may begin to connect these dots in your life and perhaps understand their source. If so, your reading has occasioned self-understanding.

The possibility of such literature-inspired learning is, I suggest, part of what readers have in mind in stressing its capacity to provide insight. Further, I see no reason why it could not be tested experimentally, although the design of such an experiment may be more complex than similar studies conducted previously. Appreciating the type of insight at issue, however, requires separating self-understanding from self-knowledge as we have described these notions, while also keeping, as you read, one eye on the page and another on yourself.

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