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Art and Understanding

In Defence of Aesthetic Cognitivism

Christoph Baumberger

We praise certain artworks for their profundity and subtlety, for the insights they provide or for how they make us see the world anew and we think these features are artistically relevant. We criticize other works for their shallowness, superficiality or sentimentality and think them thus artistically flawed. These are artistic evaluations that seem also to be, or to depend on, cognitive evaluations. Aesthetic cognitivism takes such features of our evaluations of artworks seriously. It is best thought of as a conjunction of an epistemic and an aesthetic claim:[1]

(1) *Epistemic claim*: Artworks have cognitive functions.

(2) *Aesthetic claim*: Cognitive functions of artworks partly determine their artistic value.

Aesthetic non-cognitivism is the denial of either or both of the epistemic and aesthetic claims. This kind of aesthetic cognitivism must be distinguished from cognitivism regarding aesthetic judgments; a position corresponding to the kind of cognitivism discussed in meta-ethics and usually defined by the thesis that aesthetic judgments can be true or false.

It is important not to construe the epistemic and the aesthetic thesis as too strong. The epistemic thesis (1) does not claim that all artworks have cognitive functions. I presume that works of all of the arts but not all works of an art have cognitive functions; hence, that (1) holds true not only for the representational arts, such as literature, film and figurative painting, but also for abstract painting, pure music, non-narrative dance, and even for architecture. However, I will not argue for that presumption here, and most of my examples will be taken from the representational arts. The aesthetic thesis (2) does not claim that all cognitive functions of artworks increase their aesthetic value. We can use artworks as sources of information in a manner that has nothing to do with them being artworks. Often, an artwork will teach us something about its artist, and ancient artworks reveal much about the cultures that produced them. But such a function of artworks as biographical or historical evidence does not reveal that they are therefore better works of art. Hence, only those cognitive functions an artwork has as an artwork, thus belonging to its proper functions, are artistically relevant. Furthermore, claim (1) leaves room for other functions, such as practical, decorative, political and economic ones, and can acknowledge that the importance of cognitive functions differs across the arts (and within an art for different works). While they may be central to the representational arts, they might be less eminent in abstract painting, pure music, non-narrative dance and architecture. Claim (2) leaves room for a plurality of artistic values, of which cognitive ones are just one type. Cognitive functions of artworks only *partly* determine their artistic value.

In this paper, my first aim is to defend the epistemic thesis of aesthetic cognitivism. Since it seems undeniable that artworks have cognitive functions, yet less clear whether they have

[1] Gaut 2005, 436; 2006, 115; 2007, 137.

them *as artworks*, I will focus on cognitive functions that plausibly belong to the proper functions of artworks. My second aim is to sketch a suitable epistemological framework for aesthetic cognitivism. This is important since, as David Novitz remarked, even if many philosophers have written about art and cognition, »what they have not done is examine the epistemological underpinnings of their various claims«.[2] I will try to achieve my first aim by realizing my second aim and hence argue for the thesis that artworks have cognitive functions by sketching a suitable epistemological framework. In Section 1, I present reasons for conceiving of epistemology as a theory of understanding rather than a theory of knowledge. Art will enter the stage only in Section 2, where I will show that an epistemology of understanding can and should accommodate the cognitive functions aesthetic cognitivists claimed for artworks, hence providing a suitable epistemological framework. To argue in this way in favour of the claim that artworks have cognitive functions does not beg the question since my argument for an epistemology of understanding does not depend on my aim to defend the epistemic thesis of aesthetic cognitivism. In Section 3, I will answer some of the most pressing non-cognitivist objections within the proposed framework.

1. From Knowledge to Understanding

Epistemology is usually conceived of as the theory of knowledge concerning the nature, sources and limits of knowledge.[3] Knowledge is identified with propositional knowledge and analysed in terms of justified (or reliably generated) true belief, perhaps extended by a further condition designed to avoid Gettier counter examples. Cognitive advancement is construed as the growth of knowledge. It is accomplished by the acquisition of new justified (or reliably generated) true beliefs that satisfy the additional condition.

In recent years, several epistemologists have suggested to take understanding rather than propositional knowledge as the central concept of epistemology. Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin argue that the main goal of our cognitive endeavours is not to acquire justified (or reliably generated) true beliefs but to advance our understanding.[4] The proposed revision does not suggest giving up the concept of propositional knowledge and replacing it by a concept of understanding. As we will see, having propositional knowledge is an important part of understanding a phenomenon. Hence, an epistemology of understanding has to comprise an account of propositional knowledge.

1.1 Division of Understanding

The term »understanding« is used in a variety of ways. According to the use that is of primary interest for epistemology, it designates a cognitive success or achievement. From an epistemic point of view, two grammatical forms involving understanding stand out. In case of what Jonathan Kvanvig calls »objectual understanding«,[5] the grammatical form takes an object; as when we say that Sophie understands the history of the Soviet Union or that Paul understands thermodynamics. In case of propositional understanding, the grammatical form employs a

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2 Novitz 2004, 993.

3 See e.g. Klein 2005.

4 Goodman/Elgin 1988; Elgin 1996; 2006. My argument is primarily based on their work. More recently, virtue epistemologists have proposed to define intellectual virtues as capacities or character traits that contribute to achieving the epistemic goal of understanding (Riggs 2003; Roberts/Wood 2007; Zagzebski 2001). Furthermore, it has been argued that referring to understanding may avoid the value problem for knowledge (Kvanvig 2003; Pritchard 2010).

5 Kvanvig 2003, 191.

›that‹-clause; as when we say that Sophie understands *that* the Soviet Union collapsed or that Paul understands *that* heat cannot spontaneously flow from a colder location to a hotter location. There is also a range of attributions of understanding followed by ›wh‹-clauses: Sophie understands why the Soviet Union collapsed, where Vladimir comes from, what it takes to be a student and when it is time to go. But such uses can presumably be either explained in terms of propositional or in terms of objectual understanding.[6] Objectual understanding is the core conception of understanding. Understanding is primarily related to a fairly comprehensive body of information. The understanding expressed in individual propositions derives from an understanding related to larger bodies of information that include those propositions. Sophie understands that the Soviet Union collapsed, because she grasps how the proposition stating that fact fits into and is justified by reference to a more comprehensive understanding of the history of the Soviet Union.[7] In what follows, »understanding« is used for objectual understanding and »knowledge« for propositional knowledge.

The mentioned cases of what could be called »factual understanding« must be distinguished from semantic or, more generally, symbolic understanding, like for example when we say that Sophie understands the *sentence* »The Soviet Union collapsed« or that Peter understands the Hertzsprung-Russell *diagram*; but also when we say that Paul understands the *theory* of thermodynamics. Symbolic understanding is a genuine cognitive achievement. But one can understand a sentence, a diagram or a theory without committing oneself to them and regardless of whether the sentence is true, the diagram apt and the theory answers to the facts. Neither of this holds for an understanding of what the sentence, the diagram and the theory are about. Understanding a topic in terms of a theory, for instance, presupposes that the theory is largely correct and that one commits oneself to it. Even if symbolic understanding is often a precondition of factual understanding, I am primarily concerned with the second.[8] As a consequence, rather than with understanding artworks I will primarily be concerned with their contributions to understanding aspects external to the works.

The use of »understanding« for a cognitive achievement is not the only epistemologically relevant use of the term. We can distinguish between understanding as a cognitive faculty in an inclusive sense consisting of a collection of abilities, understanding as the process of using such abilities in our inquiries, and understanding as what the cognitive process achieves.[9] Even if an epistemology of understanding focuses on cognitive achievements, it has to deal with abilities and processes as well. Processes may play a crucial role in explaining what is achieved by them, and the achievement can involve the improvement of abilities that are part of understanding as a cognitive faculty.

1.2 Reasons for Revising Epistemology

Why should we take understanding rather than knowledge as the central concept of epistemology? The answer is that it more aptly captures what we consider a cognitive achievement in science, philosophy and everyday life. Some knowledge is no cognitive achievement; some cognitive achievements do not constitute knowledge, others go beyond it.

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6 The first is proposed by Kvanvig 2003, 189.

7 Elgin 2009a, 322–323; Kvanvig 2003, 192.

8 The distinction between factual and symbolic understanding is not a sharp one. The reason relates to the deficiencies of the analytic-synthetic distinction and to the holistic character of understanding (cf. Cooper 1994, 2; 1995, 206–207.

9 Goodman/Elgin 1988, 161–162.

Knowledge that is No Achievement

Knowledge of trivial or of irrelevant truths neither constitutes a cognitive achievement nor contributes to understanding a given phenomenon. If the question is why the Soviet Union collapsed, then neither to know that Moscow is a town nor to know that heat cannot spontaneously flow from a colder location to a hotter location advances our understanding of the phenomenon in question. The first truth is trivial and knowledge of the second irrelevant for answering the question at hand. But if cognitive advancement is simply construed as growth of knowledge, we should concentrate on trivial or obvious statements like »Moscow is a town«, irrespective of whether they are relevant for our question, since they are more likely than intriguing ones to be true and justifiable.[10]

Achievements that Do Not Constitute Knowledge

Some cognitive achievements contribute to, and are part of, our understanding of a phenomenon but do not constitute knowledge. Firstly, cognitive progress may be made by developing categories that impose an order on a domain appropriate to our cognitive goals.[11] Such a new categorization advances our understanding by reorganizing a domain and thereby revealing significant but hitherto overlooked or underemphasized likenesses and differences. Botany, for example, reorganizes (and enlarges) the domain of fruits when it replaces the everyday category of a berry as a small roundish juicy fruit without a stone by the category of a berry as an indehiscent fruit with fleshy pericarp. Blackberries, raspberries and strawberries are berries in the everyday sense but not in the biological sense; bananas, melons, tomatoes and zucchinis are berries in the biological sense but not in the everyday sense. The reorganization reveals that things like blueberries and strawberries that are superficially alike are deeply different and things like blueberries and zucchinis that are superficially different are deeply alike. Such a categorization contributes to, and is an essential part of, our understanding. But being non-propositional, categories are neither true nor false and hence not the right sort of matter for constituting or expressing knowledge. Of course, reorganizing a domain by an apt scheme of categories leads to new knowledge, since reclassifying the objects of a domain involves applying categories to objects they had not previously been applied to, and hence to form new propositions. But this is not the only cognitive contribution of a categorization since it can promote other cognitive goals than truth, such as simplicity. Botany could have retained the commonsense categorization and form the hypothesis that some, but not all, berries and some, but not all, vegetables are indehiscent fruits with a fleshy pericarp.[12] But the proposed categorization enables much simpler generalizations. The simplicity of an account can be an epistemic desideratum. But it is no indication of its truth. Rather, the simplest account compatible with the evidence is typically less likely to be true than some of its rivals.

Secondly, cognitive progress may be made by developing adequate three-dimensional models, drawing accurate maps and producing apt diagrams.[13] By highlighting certain features of objects and neglecting others, models, maps and diagrams provide perspectives on them: ways of conceiving of the objects that enhance our understanding of them. A Corey-Pauling-Kortum (CPK) model composed of closely packed spheres made of plastic highlights structural relations it shares with the DNA molecules and neglects features like their size, col-

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[10] See Goodman/Elgin 1988, 135–152.

[11] Elgin 1996, 104–105; 2006, 203–204.

[12] The hypothesis only makes sense if the expression »fruit« is taken to be the botanic category which includes vegetables, pods, nuts, ears and cones in the culinary sense.

[13] Zagzebski 2001, 241.

our and material. The neglect is a merit rather than a defect. Being larger, colour-coded and durable, the model makes the structural features manifest so that they can be discerned more easily than by observing DNA molecules directly. The CPK model thereby provides a perspective on them: we can understand their helical structure in terms of it. In a comparable way, we can understand the geology of a massif in terms of a geologic map and the evolution of stars in terms of a Hertzsprung-Russell diagram. Hence, our understanding of a domain can be couched in and conveyed by models, maps and diagrams. But being non-verbal symbols and non-propositional in form, they are not the sort of things that can be believed and constitute or express knowledge. Of course, they also usually lead to new knowledge. But this does not make them redundant. Either the information they convey is not fully expressible in propositional form or the inconvenience of the resulting descriptions would make them poor substitutes for the non-verbal symbols.

Thirdly, cognitive progress may be made by asking new questions, clarifying the questions we are trying to answer or replacing misguided questions by better ones. Insights into specific genes related to cognitive abilities made it possible to ask more refined and powerful questions about development, heterogeneity, co-morbidity and gene-environment interplay.[14] The ability to ask these questions is a cognitive achievement even if the behavioural sciences are not yet in a position to answer them conclusively. Furthermore, according to G. E. Moore, the difficulties and disagreements that have dogged philosophy are mainly due »to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering *what* question it is which you desire to answer«.[15] In his *Principia Ethica*, Moore distinguished clearly two kinds of questions which philosophers »have almost always confused with one another and with other questions«[16] – What kind of things ought to exist for their own sake? What kind of actions ought we to perform? – and clarifies their meaning. This is a cognitive achievement independent of Moore's particular answers to these questions. It consists of a better understanding of the problems at hand as well as the options for dealing with them. Finally, Goodman suggested replacing the question »What is art?« by the question »When is art?«. Rather than asking what essential features an object must have to be an artwork, Goodman urged us to ask under which conditions an object functions as an artwork. He thereby shifts our attention from the question of whether an object or event is an artwork to the question of how it functions.[17] This shift has advanced our understanding by allowing fizzled out debates to rest and by revealing new avenues of inquiry worthy of exploration. All three examples suggest that understanding can be located in insightful questions. But questions do not constitute knowledge since the propositions they express are asked rather than believed. Of course, questions also often lead to new knowledge. Answers to them can often be expressed in that-clauses; if we believe them and the beliefs are justified and true, they can constitute knowledge. But asking insightful questions in itself seems to be a considerable cognitive achievement; especially in philosophy, where progress »often amounts to the clarification rather than the solution of problems«.[18]

Fourthly, cognitive progress may be made by becoming directly acquainted with sensory or emotional qualities. Such direct acquaintance can deepen our understanding by providing knowledge of how it is like to have a certain experience or emotion, or to be in a certain situation. Knowing how it is like to taste coffee can deepen our understanding of coffee, knowing

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14 Plomin/Craig 2001, 47.
15 Moore 1903, vi.
16 Moore 1903, vi.
17 Goodman 1978, 57–70.
18 Glock 2008, 106.

how it feels like to be bereaved our understanding of bereavement, knowing how it is like to live as an illegal immigrant in the United States our understanding of the problem of illegal immigrants. But this sort of knowledge is irreducibly non-propositional in the sense that it cannot be adequately captured by linguistic descriptions. No matter how precise and vivid your descriptions are, they will never capture the whole content of my acquaintance with the taste of coffee or the feelings of an orphan.[19] Nonetheless, direct acquaintance often provides us with new justified beliefs, or it improves the justification of beliefs we already have. My acquaintance with the taste of a certain coffee may result in a new justified belief about its quality or confirm such a belief if I held it already. But the epistemic value of direct acquaintance is not exhausted in its providing new beliefs or forming grounds for them.[20] Even if by visiting illegal immigrants in the United States I were to gain no additional justified (or reliably generated) beliefs about their living conditions, nor improve the justification for the ones I have, I might still deepen my understanding by acquiring a sense for what it is like to live as illegal immigrant in the United States.

Finally, in science as well as in philosophy, cognitive progress is often made by contriving idealizations and thought experiments. They are critical to or even constitutive of the understanding that science and philosophy deliver. But they do not constitute knowledge since they are not true and do not even purport to be true.[21] Idealizations characterize ideal cases that do not and perhaps cannot occur. Nothing in the world exactly answers to them; hence, as descriptions they are false. Nonetheless, they contribute to scientific understanding. Idealizations are fictions designed to afford epistemic access to matters of fact that are otherwise difficult or impossible to discern. They do so by highlighting features that are instantiated in real cases or diverge at most negligibly from them. They thereby enable us to explore these features and their causes and consequences by disregarding complications that overshadow them in real cases. The ideal gas law, for example, accounts for the behaviour of actual gases by describing the behaviour of a gas composed of perfectly elastic, spherical molecules that occupy negligible space and exhibit no intermolecular attraction. There is no and cannot be such a gas. Nonetheless, scientists understand the behaviour of actual gases by reference to the ideal gas law. In circumstances where divergence from the ideal is negligible (roughly, in cases of monatomic gases at high temperature and low pressure), the ideal gas law, although not strictly true of actual gases, is true enough of them. Where the idealization is true enough, it is illuminating to think of actual gases as displaying the interdependence of temperature, pressure, and volume that is highlighted by the idealization. Whether an idealization is true enough is a contextual matter and depends on the degree of precision we want or need. Where the divergence from the ideal is not negligible, corrections have to be introduced. Instead of a simple true description of the behaviour of an actual gas, we get a complicated truth that makes reference to deviations from the ideal. This might seem to suggest that the real cognitive contribution resides not in the idealization but in the knowledge it leads to. But since truth is not our only cognitive goal and can sometimes be overridden by others like simplicity and applicability, an idealization may at least in certain contexts be preferable to the truth it

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[19] This is sometimes taken as a reason for claiming that one can come to know how it is like to taste coffee only by tasting it, or that one does not know what it feels like to be bereaved until one has experienced bereavement (cf. Novitz 1987, 120).

[20] Roberts/Wood 2007, 33.

[21] My characterization of how idealizations and thought experiments function follows Elgin. But it does not commit me to Elgin's way of spelling it out in terms of Goodman's notion of exemplification; see Elgin 1996, 180–196; 2006, 210–213; 2009a, 326–329; 2004, 122–128; 2005, 47–48; 2009b, 77–90.

approximates. The ideal gas law may advance our understanding of certain gases in ways the unmanageably complicated truth would not.

Thought experiments are fictions contrived to reveal what would happen if certain conditions were met. They are not actual, and often not even possible, experiments. The imaginary conditions that set their stage do not obtain and are often not even physically possible. Nonetheless, if their assumptions about what can be fruitfully neglected are correct, thought experiments can afford an understanding of the phenomena they pertain to. They highlight certain features, display their significance in the imaginary setting, thereby giving reasons to suspect that these features are also salient in related real situations. They draw out implications of these features and thereby revealing unrecognised or unappreciated commitments. Those commitments may speak in favour of or against the hypothesis under investigation. By considering a famous violinist being in coma who has been hooked up to you while you were asleep and who is only able to survive if he remains so for nine months, Judith Thomson supports the claim that abortion could be morally permissible even when the foetus has a right to life.[22] The fact that no violinist has ever been and probably no one will ever be hooked up to another person does not discredit Thomson's thought experiment. Thought experiments used negatively to undermine a hypothesis are often at the same time used positively to establish an alternative hypothesis. By considering how a light body tethered to a heavy body would fall, Galileo refutes the Aristotelian hypothesis that heavier bodies fall faster than light ones and establishes that the rate at which objects in a vacuum fall is independent of their weight.[23] Sometimes, the commitments revealed by a thought experiment simply illustrate a hypothesis, making it clear and evident; or they flesh it out, enriching our understanding of what its acceptance would commit us to. By considering a cannon shooting a cannon ball further and further until the earth curves away as fast as the ball falls, with the eventual result being that the cannon ball will return to the spot where it was fired and go around again and again, Newton illustrated how the moon is kept in its orbit in just the same way as an object falls to the earth.[24] By considering the fate of an imaginary cat penned up in a steel chamber, Schrödinger drew out bewildering implications of quantum mechanics that are in conflict with some powerful common sense beliefs about macro-size objects such as cats.[25]

The cognitive achievements listed in this Subsection are part of our understanding but do not constitute knowledge. In contrast to knowledge, understanding need not be couched in true beliefs or statements. It might equally be located in apt verbal categories, effective non-verbal symbols, insightful questions, direct acquaintance and revealing fictions.

Achievements that Go Beyond Knowledge

Some cognitive achievements go beyond knowledge but are involved in our understanding of a domain. Striving for understanding is considerably more ambitious than acquiring knowledge. Besides knowing the important and relevant truths that belong to a comprehensive, coherent account of a domain and comprehending the appropriate fictions (like idealizations and thought experiments), understanding comprises grasping how the various truths and fictions relate to each other and to further elements of the account (like categories, non-verbal symbols and questions), and being able to use the information: to argue within the framework of the account, to apply its results to new situations, to assess and acknowledge its limits, to

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22 Thomson 1971, 47–66.
23 See Palmieri 2005, 223–240.
24 See Ducheyne 2006, 435–437.
25 Brown/Fehige 2010.

devise suitable (thought) experiments, to ask new questions unto which the account does not yet provide conclusive answers, and so on.[26] Understanding thermodynamics, for example, involves not only knowing the important thermodynamic truths and comprehending the relevant idealizations; it also involves grasping coherence-making relationships in the large and comprehensive body of information provided by thermodynamics; and being able to provide thermodynamic explanations of new cases, to assess their limits for a given phenomenon, to design and execute thermodynamic experiments, to draw out implications of thermodynamic findings, to answer a variety of questions and ask new questions unto which thermodynamics does not yet provide an answer, and so on. In contrast to physical understanding, historical understanding of something like the collapse of the Soviet Union concerns one particular event. But this too does not amount to nothing more than knowing certain truths. Moreover, it involves grasping connections between them and further elements as well as being able to use such information; even if the application of its insights are more restricted and more tentative.

1.3 Characteristics of Understanding

As a result of the above discussion, a number of characteristics emerge distinguishing understanding from knowledge. Firstly, understanding is not a species of belief. Its content cannot even be fully explicated as a collection of beliefs since it involves grasping connections between beliefs, non-belief states like questions, non-propositional commitments like categories and non-verbal symbols, as well as having certain cognitive abilities.

Secondly, understanding is holistic. Knowledge can be broken down into discrete bits. It is knowledge of an individual fact, expressed by a proposition. The proposition is true, the knower believes the proposition and his belief is justified (or reliably generated). If the content or the justification of a belief is taken to depend on relations it bears to experiences and other beliefs of the knower, this may introduce a holistic element. But even if knowledge is partly holistic, understanding is wholly holistic.[27] It cannot be broken down into discrete bits. It is the understanding of a whole domain or topic, expressed in a more or less complex account or theory containing propositional and non-propositional elements. The account or theory answers to the facts and the understander is committed to it and justified in it.

Thirdly, unlike knowledge, understanding is gradual. For any fact, either one knows it or one does not know it. But understanding admits of degrees. Sophie has some understanding of the history of the Soviet Union, while her tutor has a greater understanding and her professor for the history of Eastern Europe an even greater understanding. Understanding can vary at least in breath, depth, significance and accuracy.[28] The professor's understanding is broader than Sophie's understanding since it is embedded into a more comprehensive understanding of Eastern European history. It is deeper since the web of his commitments is more tightly woven. It is more significant since he weights some facts they both recognize more appropriately. And it is more accurate since most of his beliefs are true or at least close to the truth while some of Sophie's beliefs are still more or less the crude characterizations a novice starts with.

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[26] Elgin 2009a, 323. While the ability to use information is seldom mentioned, grasping of interconnections is often taken to be the outstanding feature of understanding (cf. Kvanvig 2003, 192; Riggs 2003, 217; Roberts/Wood 2007, 47, 56; Zagzebski 2001, 241, 244).

[27] A holist about belief or about justification will even construe knowledge wholly holistic. But unlike understanding, knowledge need not be construed wholly holistic; and at least for certain kinds of knowledge, such as observational knowledge, a wholly holistic construal does not seem to be very plausible.

[28] Elgin 2009a, 324–326.

Fourthly, in contrast to knowledge, understanding is not factive.[29] One can only know that p if »p« is true. But one's understanding can involve propositions that are not true; and some of them may even belong to the central propositions that constitute the account of the topic. As we have seen in the preceding paragraph, understanding can be more or less accurate. Novices like Sophie as well as scientists start out with crude characterizations that properly direct them towards their topic and then refine these characterizations. Their advancement of understanding involves a move from beliefs that are strictly false but in the right neighbourhood to beliefs that are closer to the truth. The development may result in true beliefs. But even an earlier step displays some measure of understanding. Otherwise we would have to deny that science yields any understanding, since scientific theories do not largely consist of truths with a few relatively insignificant falsehoods at the periphery. Furthermore, as I have argued in the preceding Section, even mature science is full of idealizations and thought experiments. In contrast to the more or less crude characterizations, they are not in need of improvement and not supposed to be eliminable from scientific theories. Neither can they be banished to the periphery of theories. Even if understanding is not factive, it must, of course, answer to the facts by accommodating the evidence. But since understanding is holistic, accommodating the evidence is a requirement on the entire theory, not on each individual element of it. Hence, understanding a topic does not imply that all central beliefs that constitute our theory are true.

Finally, understanding is related to a plurality of epistemic goals. Knowledge admits of an account that takes truth to be the only or at least the highest epistemic goal. If such an epistemic value monism acknowledges other epistemic goals besides truth, then it claims that they are goals only insofar as they facilitate our getting to the truth. Understanding, in contrast, demands epistemic value pluralism. Categories, non-verbal symbols and questions are neither true nor false; idealizations and thought experiments are known to be false but nonetheless epistemically valuable. According to epistemic value pluralism, truth is only one of many epistemic goals and can be overridden by others, such as generality, simplicity, parsimony, robustness, explanatory power and applicability.

2. Art's Contribution to Understanding

Having argued for conceiving of epistemology as a theory of understanding rather than knowledge, I will argue that an epistemology of understanding can and should accommodate the cognitive functions aesthetic cognitivists have claimed for artworks. Most cognitivists hold that artworks can provide knowledge. But they often insist that this is a minor and comparatively insignificant part of what we learn from artworks.[30] I will return to the function of providing knowledge in Section 3. In this Section, I focus on cognitive contributions that either are not considered knowledge or go beyond it, following the structure of my argument in Section 1. The proposed list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. Artworks may make further contributions to understanding and usually contribute in more than one way. Let me start with contributions that do not constitute knowledge.

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[29] Elgin 2009a. Kvanvig (2003, 190–191), in contrast, construes objectual understanding as factive. Other authors who take understanding to be factive focus exclusively on understanding why (e.g. Pritchard 2010, 75–77).

[30] See Novitz 1987, 133; Gaut 2005, 439.

2.1 Contributions that Do not Constitute Knowledge

Categories

Artworks, especially literary works, can provide us with new categories for classifying actual objects.[31] This is even the case with fictional works. Fictional terms do not denote when taken literally; but they can metaphorically apply to actual objects and persons. A man who devotes himself to a preposterous and hopeless but nonetheless noble undertaking is metaphorically a Don Quixote; a man who seduces women with ease and lets them down soon after is metaphorically a Don Juan. Both fictional singular terms can be used metaphorically as predicates for actual people. In grasping the metaphors, one engages in an open-ended exploration of the salient similarities between the fictional character and some actual person. Other terms are introduced as metaphors in the works themselves. In *On Love*, Stendhal used the term »crystallization« that literally denotes a physical process as a metaphor for the mental process in which unattractive characteristics of a new love are transformed into perfections. According to this metaphor, nascent interest in a loved person conceals her (or his) real features by flattering illusions analogous to the little salt prisms hiding a leafless branch of hornbeam and glittering like the finest diamonds.

Furthermore, literary works often provide us with neologism. Some of them are derived from well-known characters (»quixotic«) or from famous authors (»Orwellian«). Others have been coined by the authors. In *Lolita*, Nabokov introduced the terms »nymphet« for the nine to fourteen year-old girls to whom the protagonist is attracted and »faunlet« for the young male counterpart of a nymphet, in the same way that the mythological fauns where the counterparts of the nymphs. A »nympholept« finally is one who could discern nymphets from other girls. Obviously, the terms apply to real people.

In all these cases, the result is a reorganization: Things that more familiar categories keep apart are grouped together; things that familiar categories group together are distinguished. If the reorganization proves useful and reveals important likenesses and differences, the new categories provided by the literary works advance our understanding of the actual world. Reorganization leads to new true beliefs and perhaps to new knowledge. But we do not learn them from the works. They do not teach us that a certain man is a Don Juan and a certain girl a nymphet; that a certain action is quixotic and that a certain mental process represents a crystallization process. What the works provide us with are rather the resources for acquiring such beliefs.

Perspectives

Artworks can provide new perspectives on objects that enhance our understanding of them.[32] By emphasizing and attenuating, exaggerating and downplaying, adding and omitting, deforming and alienating, pictures make us aware of hitherto unnoticed features of objects thereby yielding a new way of conceiving of them. Edward Weston's »Pepper«-photographs (fig. 1) highlight hitherto overlooked likenesses and differences between the form and texture of paprika peppers and human bodies hence suggesting a new way of looking at both of them. Claude Monet's *Gare St-Lazare* (fig. 2) focuses on the visual impact of sunlight, smoke and steam, suppressing the detailed features of the objects we would expect to find in a picture of a railway station. By inviting us to attend directly to our visual experience rather than seeing

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[31] Elgin 2002, 3–6; John 2001, 338–339; Scholz 2001, 41–43.
[32] See Young 2001, 76.

past it for the sake of the information it provides, the painting suggests a new way of looking at our surroundings that reveals features of it we usually neglect. Francisco de Goya's aquatint prints *The Disasters of War* (fig. 3) focus on the brutality and cruelty of war scenes with anonymous protagonists rather than known patriots, and do not integrate the isolated scenes into a narrative that makes sense of them. The prints thereby avoid the bombastic heroics of most previous war art and provide a new and disturbing perspective on war that is devoid of the consolation of divine order or the dispensation of human justice. The perspective drives home the message that there is nothing noble about war, and it may bring us to hypothesize, for example, that the killing Goya depicted so perspicuously »obeys urges embedded at least as deeply in the human psyche as any impulse toward pity, fraternity, or mercy«.[33]

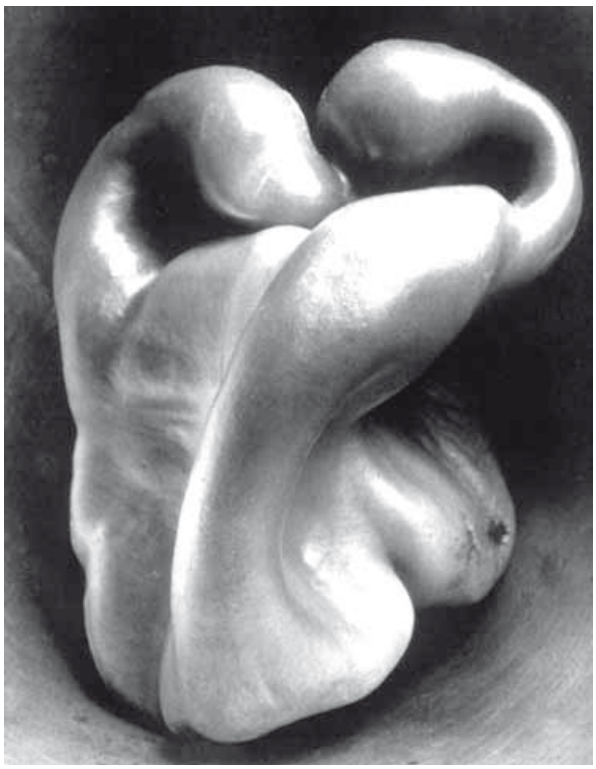

Fig. 1: Edward Weston, *Pepper No. 30*, 1930

Literary works can function in a similar way. By carefully selecting and describing fictional incidents, actions and characters, they provide perspectives on real people and their relationships and interactions.[34] In Edward Casaubon, George Eliot has grouped together a set of qualities to define a character with depth and plausibility. We can learn to see a man in these terms and so discover more about him, even if we are reluctant to metaphorically call him a Casaubon. David Novitz suggests that convincing resemblances between the clergyman in *Middlemarch* and some academics may bring us to entertain a hypothesis about the latter: »If […] Casaubon resembles some academics in respect of his confined interests and his love of isolation, and if, as is also the case, Casaubon demonstrates a lack of security that manifests itself in a mean-spirited desire to control others, one might venture the hypothesis that the confined interests and truncated lives of some academics are indicative of a lack of confidence that, in its turn, is productive of the desire to exercise power and control over other people.«[35]

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[33] Hughes 2003, 289.
[34] See Graham 2005, 70.
[35] Novitz 2004, 998.

In all these cases, the works suggest new beliefs or lead to new hypotheses. Weston's photographs suggest that paprika peppers, viewed from a certain angle and in a certain light, are evocative of human bodies. *Middlemarch* leads to the hypothesis that some academics demonstrate a lack of security that manifests itself in a desire to control others. The perspectives provided by the works advance our understanding if the beliefs and hypotheses cohere with established beliefs and enable us to make sense of the phenomenon they concern. If the hypotheses are thus confirmed, we will eventually believe them. If the beliefs are true, they may constitute knowledge. But perspectives are not reduced to such knowledge. Weston's photographs furnish us with a new way of looking at paprika peppers and human bodies; the clergyman in Eliot's novel with a new way of thinking about academics. In both cases, what we learn resists a settled paraphrase. As in grasping a metaphor, one engages in an open-ended exploration of salient similarities between two disparate entities, paprika peppers and human bodies in one case, a fictional character and some academics in the other case. Additionally, what we learn will, at least in the perceptual case, often outstrip our words.

Fig. 2: Claude Monet, *Gare Saint-Lazare*, 1877, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 3: Francisco de Goya, *Why?*, Plate 32 of *The Disasters of War*, 1810–1814

Questions

Artworks can raise important questions that prompt further inquiry. Literary works, for example, seldom offer moral doctrines or solutions to moral problems. More often, they show that a moral decision is more complex and difficult than we thought so far, thereby posing demanding questions.[36] When we engage properly in Gottfried Keller's *Green Henry*, for instance, we will find ourselves confronted with moral questions about self-deceit and veracity, about autonomy and our duties towards others, about the value of individual fulfilment and the demands of society, and so on. These questions are often as pertinent to our own life as to the lives of the fictional characters. Raising them does not straightforwardly impart new moral beliefs, let alone new moral knowledge. The contribution to moral understanding rather lies in inviting critical reflection and testing moral beliefs we have uncritically adopted at some stage or other of our lives. The novel achieves this by bringing us to apply our beliefs to complex imaginary situations that have been described in fine and nuanced details by Keller.

Often, raising pertinent moral questions about some conduct is related to providing a new perspective on it. By rendering Emma's adulterous affairs understandable as an attempt to

[36] See Novitz 2004, 1001; Scholz 2001, 45.

escape the banalities and emptiness of provincial life and withholding any explicit moral judgment, *Madame Bovary* provides a new perspective on adultery. The novel thereby raises questions about adultery and invites the reader to reflect critically on its rights and wrongs. According to Hans Robert Jauss, this appeal to moral reflection is promoted by stylistic means. In Flaubert's *style indirect libre*, the thoughts of characters are reported without the signals of direct discourse. The thought concerning adultery expressed in the phrase »at last she was going to possess those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired«, for instance, is not explicitly attributed to Emma or to the narrator. Hence, the reader has to decide whether she should take it as Emma's or as the narrator's thought. By employing this new device and refraining from explicit moral judgment, Flaubert was »able to jolt the reader of *Madame Bovary* out of the self-evident character of his moral judgment, and turned a predecided question of public morals back into an open problem«.[37] Not only literary works raise important questions by providing new perspectives. Elgin suggests that by expressing a tapestry of mortification, hope, uncertainty, and fear, the *Confiteor* of Bach's *B-Minor Mass* conveys the utter incomprehensibility of divine forgiveness.[38] Given that the sin to be forgiven is the murder of the forgiver's son, the music raises the questions: Why should God forgive? How can God forgive? But according to Elgin, the complex expressiveness of the music leads to even more basic questions that concern not only divine forgiveness: What exactly is forgiveness? How is it possible? What does it cost? Again, raising these questions does not straightforwardly lead to new beliefs or even knowledge. The cognitive contribution of the music rather lies in problematizing what had previously seemed unproblematic. Realizing that we do not really understand forgiveness may prompt further inquiry into issues in moral psychology that deserve to be examined.

Phenomenal Knowledge

Artworks can provide us with knowledge of how it is (or was or would be) like to have certain experiences or emotions, or to be in a certain situation.[39] They do so by broadening our experience in encompassing things we might never otherwise have undergone or felt. From Claude Simon's novel *The Flanders Road* we can learn something about how it is (or was) like to take part in the French military collapse as a cavalry man in 1940. The novel achieves this by focusing on the perspective of the protagonist and eschewing all explanations from an omniscient narrator. The seemingly chaotic arrangement of the text and the very long and intricate sentences with their unconventional punctuation evoke the turbulent flood of sensations, emotions and memories as they show up in the consciousness of the protagonist: jumbled, discontinuous, fragmented and in apparently random juxtaposition. What we learn by reading the novel can constitute phenomenal knowledge and deepen our understanding of some aspects of Second World War if it fits with our experience and well-established beliefs. The acquaintance that leads to this knowledge is, of course, symbolically conveyed and imaginative rather than a direct acquaintance through experience or feeling. We fortunately neither directly experience the bombardment by German airplanes that killed almost the whole cavalry regiment, nor do we feel the horror and fear of the protagonist. Rather, Simon's detailed description combined with our own remembered experiences and feelings of horror and fear enable us to sympathize with the protagonist and imagine what it is like to be so heavily bom-

[37] Jauss 1986, 180–182.
[38] Elgin 2002, 10.
[39] See John 2001, 333–335; Novitz 1987, 132–137.

barded. But although the phenomenal knowledge we may gain thereby is based on verbal descriptions, it is not reduced to propositional knowledge. The descriptions enable us to imaginatively acquaint with the wartime experiences of a cavalry man; but they do not capture the whole content of our acquaintance.

Fig. 4: Rembrandt, *Bathsheba with King David's Letter*, 1654, Musée du Louvre, Paris

The cognitive function of providing phenomenal knowledge is not confined to literary works. Paintings and music, for instance, can achieve the same by non-verbal means. From Rembrandt's *Bathsheba with King David's Letter* (fig. 4) we can get an idea of what it is (or would be) like for a woman who loves her husband to be forced into adultery by an attractive man of power. The painting achieves this by, among other things, showing the expression on Bathsheba's face that, according to Berys Gaut, reveals »a mixture of introspective sadness, tinged with a gentle resignation, with perhaps a hint of a half-smile of erotic anticipation«.[40] From the second movement of Beethoven's *Eroica,* and from the »Dead March« from Handel's *Saul* we can learn what it is like to experience various shades of mourning. The two pieces of music achieve this by providing us with different perspectives on mourning. The »Funeral March« from the *Eroica* with its large, unrestrained gestures is unsettling; the mourning it expresses is tied up with distracted and passionate railing against fate. The »Dead March« from *Saul* is stately and dignified; the mourning it expresses is restrained, dignified and resigned.[41] In all these cases, the works may lead to propositional knowledge. But the phenomenal knowledge gained by the works does not reduce to it. For instance, if we thought that mourning is always passionate, bitter and tinged with despair, we can learn from the »Dead March« that mourning can be restrained, dignified and resigned. But this propositional characterization does not fully capture what it is like to experience the mourning expressed by Handel's music.

Thought Experiments

Art can contrive thought experiments. It has been suggested that while scientific and philosophical thought experiments are fictions in science and philosophy, literary fictions are

[40] Gaut 2007, 22.
[41] Young 2001, 93–96.

thought experiments in art.[42] Hence, if thought experiments make cognitive contributions, works of fiction do as well. Like scientific and philosophical thought experiments, literary fictions ask what would happen if we assume that certain conditions obtained and invite us to explore the consequences of making these assumptions. They advance our understanding if their driving assumptions are adequate. Some present a paradigmatic case, others go to the extremes. In both cases, they may afford epistemic access to things that are obscured in the less pure instances we typically encounter in reality.

Like ordinary thought experiments, literary fictions can be used to support, undermine, illustrate or flesh out some hypothesis or idea. William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* brings us to imagine a situation in which the Jewish heroine was given a choice by a drunken medical doctor on her arrival at Auschwitz: she had to choose which one of her children was to be sent immediately to the gas chamber, or they would both be sent there. By rendering the details of her choice extraordinarily vivid and exploring its consequences for Sophie's life, the novel supports the hypotheses that there are genuine moral dilemmas and that the guilt someone feels from making such a choice can obsess and even destroy her.[43] George Orwell's *1984* invites us to imagine a society where the mighty party regularly revises historical records to concord the past to the current political agenda and destroys all previous records. Besides discrediting and eliminating bits of evidence, the party also sets arbitrary standards for what counts as evidence and reason by convincing people that they can and should embrace contradictions. The novel can thus be read as an epistemological thought experiment that »undermines the conviction that intersubjective agreement, grounded in what is intersubjectively agreed to be good evidence, suffices for epistemic justification«.[44] Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* imagines a landed gentry society of early 19th century England, seen from the viewpoint of a young woman with a tendency of judging the character of other persons on first impressions. By showing how she is forced to revise her judgments as the story proceeds, the novel illustrates the hypothesis that first impressions are a poor guide to a person's character. Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* incites us to imagine a man with a distinctive sense of justice who has been wronged. Since he remains unsuccessful in demanding his rights through legal channels, he resorts to criminal means and initiates a private war. The novella fleshes out the idea that one is entitled to take the law in one's own hands if one's rights are not satisfied by the state, and it shows where the acceptance of such an idea would lead to.

There are, of course, differences between ordinary thought experiments and literary fictions. Firstly, while scientific and philosophical thought experiments are usually quite austere, literary fictions are developed in much more detail. Furthermore, many different aspects of a literary fiction matter, and every semantic distinction can make a difference to what the fiction conveys. Not only the plot, but the characters, their perspective on events, the perspective of the narrator, even the sound, texture, tone and grain of the descriptions may be significant; and the subtlest details of what the fiction entices us to imagine may be relevant for what it transmits.[45] As a result, literary thought experiments are often more convincing than their philosophical counterparts; but to get their lesson, considerably more interpretative effort is

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[42] Elgin 1996, 180–183; 2002, 8–12; 2005, 47–53; cf. Carroll 2002, 3–26; John, 1998, 332; Swirski 2007, ch. 4. Carroll seems wrongly to assume that the knowledge thought experiments lead to is always conceptual knowledge.

[43] See Gaut 2007, 162–164.

[44] Elgin 2005, 50–51.

[45] See Elgin 2005, 48–49.

needed. Secondly, in contrast to scientific and philosophical thought experiments, literary fictions are usually not contrived as part of a theory and not even with reference to a specific theory or hypothesis.[46] As a result, the hypotheses are usually not explicitly stated in the work but have to be inferred from it. In most cases, there will be a variety of hypotheses that can be correlated with a work; and new interpretations can always reveal further ones. *Sophie's Choice*, for instance, is about many other things than moral dilemmas, for example, about the Nazi death camps, about the nature of absolute evil, about what it means to lose faith in God and about the love of a young, self-congratulatory man to an older, much more experienced woman. Concerning all these further topics the reader can infer hypotheses the novel supports, undermines, illustrates or fleshes out.

The two differences between ordinary thought experiments and literary fictions are related to the fact that while scientific and philosophical works may *contain* and *use* thought experiments, literary fictions *are* thought experiments. Hence, it becomes evident that contriving thought experiments is not on the same level as are the other cognitive contributions of artworks discussed in this Section. Rather, by functioning as a thought experiment, a fictional work can provide a new perspective on a topic; and by providing a new perspective a work can raise pertinent questions about the topic, deliver new categories for dealing with them and teach us what it is like to be in a situation relevant to the topic.

2.2 Contributions that Reach Beyond Knowledge

Besides cognitive contributions that do not classify as knowledge, artworks make contributions to our understanding that go beyond a knowledge of isolated facts.

Grasping Connections

Artworks can deepen our understanding by enabling us to grasp connections between what we already believe. Let me illustrate this by a slightly modified example I owe to Noël Carroll.[47] Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays a few weeks in the life of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s. When the play opens, the family is about to receive an insurance check over $ 10,000. Each of the family members has a different idea on what to do with this money. As the play progresses, they clash over their competing dreams. At a certain point, Mama places a down payment on a house for the family. This house is in an entirely white neighbourhood. When the future neighbours find out that the Youngers are moving in, they offer them money for staying away.

Suppose that the white audience in 1959 already believed the following two propositions:

(3) Persons deserve equal treatment.

(4) African-Americans are persons.

Assume furthermore that these beliefs are pale in the sense that the audience does not fully appreciate their import. Now, the play makes (4) clear by showing that the dreams and family bonds of the major black characters are no different from those of other persons. It thereby

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[46] There are exceptions. According to Carroll, there can be little doubt that Ursula Le Guin's short story »The Ones Who Walked Away from the Omelas« is designed to challenge utilitarianism (Carroll 2002, 21, note 34); the same may be true of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (cf. Young 2001, 85, 100). But in both cases, this is hardly the only aim the authors pursue with their fictions.

[47] Carroll 1998, 142–143.

prompts the audience to acknowledge the connection between (3) and (4) and to draw the following conclusion:

(5) African-Americans deserve equal treatment.

On this basis, the play encourages the white audience to form the moral judgment that the way in which the prospective white neighbours of the Youngers respond to their purchasing a house in their neighbourhood is wrong. But let us focus on (3), (4) and (5). In one sense, the audience acquires the new belief that (5) holds. But since (3) and (4) imply (5), the audience is already committed to (5). In another sense then, the audience deepens its understanding of what it already believes.

Improving Cognitive Abilities

Artworks can enhance or refine our general cognitive abilities of reasoning, emotion, perception, imagination, memory, and so on.[48] They do so by providing us with exercises in cognitive activities, or by representing exemplars thereof. In one case, we learn by doing. A novel can improve our cognitive abilities by prompting us to engage them reflectively in our attempt to come to grips with the development of the characters and their interactions. In the other case, we learn by encountering an exemplar. A novel can advance our cognitive abilities by carefully describing how the characters of the story make use of these abilities and refine them during their development. In both cases, the improvement of a general cognitive ability is achieved by improving a specification of it with respect to a certain problem or phenomenon. A novel may improve our moral reasoning by refining our ability to morally reason about the problem of illegal immigrants; a series of paintings may improve our perception by refining our ability to perceive the impact of different lightening conditions on the atmosphere in a certain situation. Having one's cognitive abilities improved is not identical to having one's stock of knowledge increased. The improvement of cognitive abilities may, of course, lead to new knowledge. But it may equally enable us to construe adequate category schemes, develop useful diagrams, maps and models, raise insightful questions and contrive helpful idealizations and thought experiments.

Since the improvement of general cognitive abilities by engaging with artworks is widely discussed,[49] I focus on the enhancement of the more specific ability to apply certain principles or concepts. This cognitive contribution is important since we often possess general principles or concepts that are very abstract and that we may not be able to apply to particular situations. As we have seen, having such an ability is part of our understanding. Hence, its enhancement advances our understanding; but it does not necessarily lead to new knowledge. Artworks can improve our ability to apply general principles and concepts precisely because they deal with the concrete and particular rather than the abstract and general.[50] Consider two cases. In non-challenging cases, artworks supply us with vivid – often imaginary – examples. They thereby enable us to see how to apply the abstractions to particulars, making the principles or concepts more vivid; often not only by revealing their import, but also by providing the correspondent

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[48] Besides cognitive abilities or skills that have to do with processing information about the world, artworks may also enhance or even provide strategic abilities or skills. A favourite hero may furnish us with purely practical strategies for handling a tricky situation; strategies which we may adopt when we find ourselves in a similar situation (Novitz 1987, 119; 2004, 995).

[49] Hilary Putnam (1978) focuses on improving practical reasoning, Jenefer Robinson (1997) on educating our emotions, Berys Gaut (2006) on enhancing our imaginative capacities, Martha Nussbaum (1990) discusses the refinement of a whole range of cognitive and moral abilities.

[50] See Carroll 1998, 144–146; Conolly/Haydar, 2001, 115; Young 2001, 95.

knowledge of how it is like to be in such a situation. *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, gives us an arresting example by which to understand the general proposition that first impressions are a poor guide to a person's character. Goya's *Disasters of War* (fig. 3) vividly exemplify the horrors of war. In challenging cases, artworks supply us with complex imaginary situations or hard cases. They thereby drive us to test and, if necessary, revise our principles or concepts, thereby refining our understanding. Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* questions the assumption that adultery is morally wrong by describing Emma's adulterous affairs in all their different aspects and complexities. Orwell's *1984* undermines the conviction that intersubjective agreement suffices for epistemic justification by describing a plausible case where such agreement is generated by epistemically illicit means. Of course, the same artwork can present non-challenging cases with respect to certain aspects of its content and challenging cases with respect to other aspects. While the challenging cases may lead us to new beliefs and even to new knowledge, the non-challenging cases do not. But they nevertheless deepen our understanding of our principles or concepts by teaching us how to apply them to particular situations and making them more vivid.

3. Non-Cognitivist Objections

Here are three of the most pressing non-cognitivist objections against the epistemic claim of aesthetic cognitivism.

(6) *No-belief objection*. Since artworks as such do not refer to the actual world, they as such do not convey beliefs about it, they at most suggest possibilities. A novel should be read as starting with »let us imagine that…«, not »it is asserted that…«**.** To acquire beliefs about the actual world from artworks requires a refusal of the aesthetic stance, since this stance involves a suspension of reference to the world.[51]

(7) *Banality objection*. If artworks convey beliefs about the world, their content is completely banal.[52] One does not learn these beliefs from the artworks. Having them already is more of a precondition for understanding the works. The only moral truths Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* conveys are banalities like »murder is wrong«, which we do not learn from the novel. Comprehending the novel rather presupposes that the reader grasps the moral precepts that motivate its narrative.[53]

(8) *No-justification objection*. Even if one acquires true beliefs from artworks, they can never be justified or at least not simply on the basis of one's acquaintance with the work. Dickens' *Bleak House* may be accurate about the slowness of estate litigation in nineteenth-century Britain, but it cannot provide evidence for its accuracy. One cannot be justified then in believing its claims simply on the basis of reading the novel. For that one needs to consult the history books.[54] Hence, artworks can at most suggest hypotheses or present a point of view.[55]

All three objections assume, like most non-cognitivist objections, that if artworks have a cognitive function at all, it is the function of being a source of non-trivial knowledge. They

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[51] Diffey 1997, 30.
[52] Stolnitz 1992, 193–194.
[53] See Carroll 1998, 130; 2002, p. 4.
[54] Stolnitz 1992, p. 169.
[55] See Graham 2005, p. 64.

then argue that artworks as such cannot have this function since according to (6) they violate the belief condition for knowledge, according to (8) the justification condition for knowledge and according to (7) they are at best a source of trivialities. As we have seen, the underlying assumption is false. Artworks can provide new categories and perspectives, raise important questions, provide knowledge of how it is like to have certain experiences or emotions, develop elaborated thought experiments, enable us to grasp connections between what we already believe and enhance our cognitive abilities. Hence, even if the three objections would be successful, they would only undermine some (and, according to many cognitivists, comparatively insignificant) cognitive functions of artworks. However, as I will argue in the remaining part of this last Section, the objections are not successful.

3.1 No-Belief Objection

The no-belief-objection reflects a shift that is very common in the debate about aesthetic cognitivism: that from art to fiction. But not all artworks are fictional. Non-fictional works refer to actual objects and convey beliefs about them. Biographies and documentary films with artistic aspirations refer to real people and places and can be thought of as beginning with »it is asserted that…**«.** Many portraits and landscapes denote real persons and scenes and impart beliefs about them by representing them as having certain properties.

Even fictional works sometimes refer to actual objects and convey beliefs about them. Some novels consist partly of fictional and partly of non-fictional statements. T.C. Boyle's *Water Music* contains long descriptions of the environmental conditions in West Africa. Other novels include non-fictional elements within fictional descriptions. Keller's *Green Henry* opens with a description of shipping on the Lake of Zurich. Its sentences are simultaneously fictional statements »about« a fictional world and factual statements about a real town and lake. They thereby convey beliefs about how Zurich and its lake looked in the nineteenth century. In a comparable way, Konrad Witz' representation of St. Peter's encounter with Christ after the resurrection in *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes* (fig. 5) locates the fictional subject at the Lake of Geneva with the Mont Salève in the background. The painting thereby imparts beliefs about how the lakeside looked in the fifteenth century (and suggested to Witz' contemporary compatriots that the miracle occurs here and now).

Fig. 5: Konrad Witz, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1444, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire

Moreover, like thought experiments in science and philosophy, fictional works can convey beliefs about actual people or situations by highlighting features they share with them but are not easily accessible in them. The claims that lead to the beliefs in question are implicit in

the works rather than explicit claims the works put forward. In this way, Orwell's *1984* claims that intersubjective agreement is not sufficient for a belief to be epistemically justified; Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* claims that first impressions are a poor guide to character. The no-belief objection, thus, presupposes an over-simple distinction between claims about the actual world and claims about mere possibilities or counterfactual states of affairs.[56] As thought experiments show, explorations of counterfactual states of affairs can reveal much about the actual world. And claims about some features of the world, such as virtues, values and duties, entail or otherwise ground claims about counterfactual conditions, whose features can be explored through thought experiments. A claim about having a certain virtue, for instance, commits me to a claim about how I would behave in counterfactual situations. If I hold that I am truly courageous, I must also claim that I would withstand certain sorts of hardship I have never been subject to. So, it is relevant to determine whether I am courageous to figure out what I would do in these merely possible situations. Hence, we can learn about aspects of the world through imagination, and ordinary or literary thought experiments can aid these imaginings.

Finally, the aesthetic stance does not involve a suspension of reference to actual objects. This is shown by our aesthetic evaluations of artworks. The evaluation of the accuracy of descriptions and the faithfulness of representations is often important to an aesthetic evaluation of artworks.[57] This is true of non-fictional works, such as biographies, documentary films, portraits and landscapes, where serious falsities and misrepresentations of their subject matter is an aesthetic flaw. To say that a biography is unfaithful to the facts or that a documentary film distorts the truth is clearly a legitimate aesthetic criticism. But also in the case of fictional works, the evaluation of their explicit or implicit claims may be aesthetically relevant. Orwell's *1984*, for instance, would certainly have been of less aesthetic value if it would have claimed that being acquired between two and three in the afternoon is sufficient for a belief to be epistemically justified.

3.2 Banality Objection

The second objection claims that the beliefs artworks convey are banal; and that we do not learn them from the works since having them already is a precondition of understanding the works. But artworks can provide us with interesting general beliefs. The mentioned belief we can get from Orwell's *1984* is certainly not banal. From Styron's *Sophie's Choice* we can acquire the beliefs that there are genuine moral dilemmas and that the guilt someone feels from making a choice in a dilemma situation can obsess and even destroy her. Whatever the truth of these beliefs may be, they are not banal. The existence of moral dilemmas has been denied by many philosophers; and they have attempted to explain away feelings of guilt as irrational or misconceived.[58]

The general claims an artwork makes are typically made implicitly by the work's treatment of particulars. They are displayed in the fine-grained descriptions or representation of particular characters and events. Hence, the cognitive contribution of artworks does usually not primarily consist in conveying general beliefs considered in abstraction from the particulars of the narrative and its characters. It rather lies in the detailed descriptions or representations of particular (and often imaginary) cases that suggest the general beliefs. The cognitive

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[56] See Gaut 2006, 117; 2007, 147–148.
[57] See Gaut 2005, 447.
[58] See Gaut 2007, 162–164.

contribution of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* does not primarily consist of the claim that first impressions are a poor guide to character; it rather lies in the nuanced description of an imaginary case that, among other things, illustrates this claim. The cognitive contribution of Goya's *Disasters of War* (fig. 3) does not primarily consist of the message that there is nothing noble about war; it rather lies in the unadorned perspective on war they provide, and that, among other things, suggests this message.

Furthermore, that having certain beliefs is a precondition of comprehending an artwork does not show that we cannot acquire new interesting beliefs from the work. Comprehending a scientific treatise, for instance, presupposes a vast number of scientific, semantic and everyday beliefs; but, of course, we can nonetheless acquire interesting beliefs from reading the treatise. The same holds for artworks. We indeed do not learn that murder is wrong form *Crime and Punishment*; and having this belief may be a precondition of actually comprehending Dostoevsky's novel. But this does not show that we cannot learn other, typically more specific, truths from the novel, for instance, about what it is like to live with having committed murder.[59] Moreover, an artwork can even undermine some of the beliefs its comprehension presupposes. Understanding *Oedipus at Colonus* may presuppose the conviction that every person who has committed parricide and incest deserves blaming. Sophocles' play then undermines this conviction by representing a person who is the victim of forces beyond his control and has been ignorant of the consequences of his actions; who has suffered terribly and who feels genuine remorse.[60]

3.3 No-Justification Objection

There is a strong and a weaker version of the no-justification objection. The strong version claims that beliefs about the world we acquire from artworks can never be justified. This claim commits a genetic fallacy. The origin of beliefs in artworks, or even in fictional works, does not prevent them from being justified precisely the way we justify beliefs derived from experience or testimony.[61]

The weaker version claims that we cannot be justified in beliefs we acquire from artworks simply on the basis of our acquaintance with the works. This claim is partly correct but does not show what it should. Artworks can provide some justification for the beliefs they convey. This seems evident in case of non-fictional works; it is, however, also true of fictional works. Through their choice and presentation of narrative events they often, for instance, suggest some reasoning the audience is invited to adopt and provide imaginative acquaintance that grounds beliefs about what it is like to be in a certain situation. But to fully justify the beliefs acquired from artworks we have to go beyond the works and investigate whether the beliefs fit with well-established beliefs, helping us to make sense of the phenomena they concern.

This, however, does not prevent us from using the works as sources of knowledge, since the same holds for undeniable sources of knowledge such as reference works. They can only be said to impart knowledge about the world if we are justified in believing that they are reliable. But our knowledge of their reliability is not acquired from our acquaintance with the reference work. Hence, there seems no more reason to hold that fictional artworks cannot yield knowledge than to hold that reference works cannot.[62] This may be denied by pointing out that reference works, but not fictional works, are subject to what Gaut calls an »institu-

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59 See Conolly/Haydar 2001, 122.
60 See Young 2001, 85.
61 Novitz 2004, 1002.
62 Novitz 1987, 132; 2004, 999.

tional guarantee«: they are usually refereed, their claims being checked by peer reviewers. So, if one consults a reference work, one seems to know that it is a reliable source of knowledge; but that never seems true of fictional works. Now, there is certainly a difference here. But it is only a difference of degree in the robustness of the testimony. First of all, good art critics may function somewhat like scientific peer reviewers.[63] Furthermore, simply by looking at the reference work, one can neither tell whether the peer reviewing has really occurred, nor that it has been done properly. To ascertain whether it has been done properly, one must go beyond the text and investigate its generative conditions. That again places fictional and reference works on an equal footing.[64]

The no-justification objection is formulated in terms of beliefs and hence with respect to knowledge. But the problem it raises is also pertinent to understanding since it too implies some sort of justification. Categories, perspectives, questions, acquaintances provided by artworks and abilities promoted by them can be misleading. Not all categories suggested by novels prove to be useful; popular films often provide a rather delusive perspective on war; by many works of fiction we are offered a quite unhelpful sense of what it is like to be in love; and cognitive abilities can be so misrepresented in artworks that we would be badly misled if we tried to apply them in real life, even though they apply fruitfully to the world of the work. But if one can be mistaken, one needs confirmation that one is right. Hence, even the putative cognitive contributions that do not constitute knowledge or go beyond it need to be justified. The concept of justification that is required to encompass them is more complex than traditional truth-conducive justification. There are two reasons why this is so. One is that some of the putative contributions are non-propositional and hence neither true nor false. The other is that truth is only one of many epistemic goals that have to be weighed against each other. Hence, a concept of justification is required that is applicable to non-propositional components and related to a plurality of epistemic goals. Elgin has, convincingly to my mind, argued that the model of wide reflective equilibrium provides a conception of justification that fulfils both requirements. According to it, a system is justified if it is in wide reflective equilibrium. Roughly, a system is in wide reflective equilibrium if its propositional and non-propositional components are reasonably in light of one another and in light of relevant background theories, the system as a whole is reasonable in light of our antecedent commitments about the subject at hand and does justice to our epistemic goals.[65] The justification artworks provide makes their contributions initially tenable; to be fully tenable they have to be integrated into a system in wide reflective equilibrium.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that an epistemology of understanding is better suited than a theory of knowledge to do justice to the cognitive achievements of science, philosophy and the everyday; and that such an epistemology can and should accommodate a wide range of cognitive functions of artworks and provides a suitable epistemological framework for aesthetic cognitivism.

If the epistemic claim of aesthetic cognitivism is established and a suitable epistemological framework sketched, reflections on the diverse cognitive functions of artworks can give

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63 Young 2001, 106.
64 Gaut 2005, 442–443.
65 Elgin 1996, 101–145.

indications of how to understand certain cognitive contributions or even reveal further contributions that may also play an important role in science, philosophy or everyday life. Such reflections can thereby advance our understanding of some cognitive achievements or even change our understanding of what counts as a cognitive achievement. The issues raised by considering artworks as a source of understanding are then not only important to aesthetics. They are also of general epistemological interest. This is in part afforded to the fact that what we learn from artworks often lies in epistemologically challenging domains. Hence, an epistemology of understanding that transcends the narrow bounds of traditional theory of knowledge is well advised to investigate the cognitive functions of art.[66]

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