

Book Review

## **Mikkonen, Jukka, *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition*<sup>1</sup>**

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Jukka Mikkonen's *Philosophy, Literature, and Understanding* endeavors to illuminate the unique epistemic significance of literature. In the introductory section of the book, Mikkonen provides a preview of the ideas to be explored in the subsequent four chapters. The author posits that in an era dominated by digital media and easily accessible information, it becomes crucial to identify the distinctive cognitive contributions of reading fiction. While information and knowledge can be obtained from various sources, Mikkonen contends that literature offers a unique mode of understanding, which warrants deeper exploration. This inquiry arises against the backdrop of the crisis facing the humanities and the ascendancy of the cognitive sciences in the 1990s. In essence, Mikkonen not only illuminates the special role of literature in the learning process, considering that knowledge can be acquired from diverse sources, but also underscores its significance in fostering understanding. In order to defend the cognitive worth of literature and the immersive involvement with narrative fiction, the author proposes four cognitive models: imagination, narrative, cognition, and evidence.<sup>2</sup>

Mikkonen introduces the reader to the first chapter by tackling the concept of 'Imagination,' where he carefully distinguishes between imagination and fantasy.<sup>3</sup> This distinction, as discussed by theorists like Kendall Walton and Peter Lamarque, has sparked much debate within literary theory. Walton argues that imagination is rooted in the author's clues, while fantasy is driven by the reader's own state of mind, an approach Mikkonen engages with critically.<sup>4</sup> In turn, Mikkonen suggests that these

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<sup>1</sup> London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 180pp.

<sup>2</sup> Jukka Mikkonen, *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 9.

<sup>3</sup> See *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> See *Ibid.*, 24.

rigid boundaries may oversimplify the complex interaction between reader and text, an argument he further explores in the next chapter.

In 'Narrative,' the book's focus shifts from imagination to a broader discussion of how narratives function as cognitive tools.<sup>5</sup> Drawing from both the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions, Mikkonen challenges skeptics like Daniel Dennett, who question whether selfhood can be adequately captured through stories. Mikkonen seems to uphold this by framing how "we are all virtuoso novelists" and that our lives are structured like a story (autobiography) with a central character being the self.<sup>6</sup> This analogy implies a coherent narrative structure. However, Mikkonen's following arguments seem to critique this notion by suggesting that such a structured view of narrative may overlook the complexity and diversity of individual experiences. He states, "a related concern in literary studies is that narrative imperialism reduces all the diversity and polyphony of literature into ideal models, schemas, and stereotypes," indicating that a rigid adherence to narrative structures can flatten the richness of lived experiences.<sup>7</sup> Mikkonen not only defends the epistemic value of narratives but also transcends the traditional critique by proposing that narratives, rather than merely recording events, construct reality through the reader's engagement with the text. This idea, which ties back to his earlier discussion on imagination, suggests that literature is not just a reflection of the world but a means of understanding it.

He does this through several points. First, he emphasizes the importance and role of narrative. Being a crucial factor in processing, organizing, and communicating information, the cognitivist Mark Turner states that most of what we have experienced, what we know, or even what we think about are composed of stories, being the very means to convey our thoughts.<sup>8</sup> Many researchers and scientists share this opinion (e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, Daniel Dennett, Jerome Bruner, and many others). Second, the chapter outlines the main criticisms of the importance of narrative in the social sciences and the skepticism engendered in analytic philosophy about its 'explanatory power.' Critics are doubtful that the self can be described by stories, and literary narratologists have been disappointed by the broad and superficial use of the concept of narrative in the social sciences. The criticism associated to this is that authors have spoken of "narrative hegemony" (Martin Kreiswirth) and "narrative imperialism" (James Phelan), yet both are viewed negatively.<sup>9</sup> Third, the author develops the thesis that from a

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<sup>5</sup> See *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> See *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

postmodern conception of the narrative, as well as from the hermeneutic and phenomenological tradition, we can solve the problem of the cognition of the narrative by the concept of understanding. When considering a post-modern or post-structuralist perspective, one may find greater alignment between life and narrative by focusing on their inherent complexities, such as margins, breaks, and discontinuities. This view suggests that narratives reflect the messy and incoherent nature of lived experiences, which directly challenges the notion of a unified narrative structure.<sup>10</sup> However, this perspective also raises questions about the limitations of traditional narrative forms in capturing the full spectrum of human experience.

Moreover, while some scholars argue that the epistemic value of narratives lies primarily in their ability to record events, approaching narratives as vehicles for understanding shifts this discussion significantly. In narrative theory informed by the hermeneutic and phenomenological tradition, self-narration is not merely a process of reconstruction; it is a creative act of construction. This perspective emphasizes that narratives actively shape our interpretation of reality rather than merely mirroring it. By recognizing narratives as dynamic constructs, Mikkonen invites a reevaluation of how we engage with literature, highlighting its potential to foster deeper understanding in an increasingly fragmented world. These aspects, processuality and artificiality, are key to understanding how narratives are not mere reflections of reality but active constructions that help us interpret the world.<sup>11</sup> In the following chapter, Mikkonen expands on this idea by considering how narratives contribute not only to knowledge but to cognitive development, particularly in the context of modernist literature, through our engagement with literary narratives and our exploration of literary narratives as fabrications.

After exploring the role of imagination in the reading process in the second chapter, the third chapter was devoted to an examination of narrative's role as a cognitive tool. There he broadened the discussion, showing how narratives not only structure personal experiences but also shape our broader understanding of the world. Building on this, the fourth chapter, titled 'Cognition,' shifts the focus to how literature fosters cognitive development, delving deeper into the epistemic contributions of literary narratives. Mikkonen explores the cognitive value of literary narratives in terms of knowledge, understanding, and cognitive skills.<sup>12</sup> He proposes a shift in epistemology from knowledge to understanding to promote a positive interpretation of literature in cognitive terms. Can reading modernist

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<sup>10</sup> See *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> See *Ibid.*, 59.

narratives, for example, provide insight into the workings of the mind? Or can literary narratives challenge and confuse our thinking in a valuable way? Skeptics call for a methodological discussion and request evidence that readers actually learn from literature.

First, the assumption that we interpret literary minds similarly to how we interpret people in our everyday encounters is a standard belief in cognitive approaches to literature. The theory of mind has been influential in explaining our engagement with literary narratives, suggesting that our ability to attribute mental states—like beliefs, desires, and intentions—plays a central role in how we process stories. Mikkonen elaborates on this idea by noting,

Looking for minds in literature is not an odd enterprise. After all, many authors definitely put great effort into the psychological interest (or plausibility) of their works ... How about minds in literature? We will run into difficult epistemological problems if we limit ourselves to the mimetic approach. ... Of course, literary works may offer great insights into the human mind, but sometimes an insight may be an impression only.<sup>13</sup>

He challenges this simplified view by emphasizing the complexity of interpreting fictional minds, which often involves multiple layers of abstraction and imaginative engagement beyond everyday cognition. This opens up a critical space where the book interrogates whether the theory of mind alone is sufficient for explaining our intricate relationship with literature.

Second, narrative perspective refers to the features that determine how a story is told and what is revealed, which includes the narrator's point of view, the reliability of the narration, and the emotional involvement of characters. These features shape not only the narrative perspective but also the reader's understanding of the text. Mikkonen highlights how cognitive approaches may overlook the importance of these narrative mechanisms by focusing too heavily on cognition, thereby risking the reduction of literary complexity to mere interpretive formulas. He notes that although understanding a literary work often demands of the reader to amend one's cognitive apparatus, "it is unknown if the conceptual modifications required in the interpretation of the work carry over the literary experience and affect the reader's actual cognitive mechanisms."<sup>14</sup> This critical stance raises

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

questions about whether cognitive theories adequately account for the richness of narrative structures or if they flatten the complexity that literature inherently offers.

Third, cognitivists often rely on unconventional concepts of truth, such as insight, revelation, expanded understanding, artistic truth, poetic truth, and literary truth.<sup>15</sup> While Mikkonen does not entirely reject these ideas, he engages with them critically by questioning their applicability across all literary experiences. By transcending the debate between cognitivists and anti-cognitivists, Mikkonen opens up the possibility that literature may not always aim to deliver truth in the conventional sense but instead offer *understanding*, which allows for a broader and more flexible interpretation of what literature can achieve.

In addition, many contemporary aestheticians argue that the cognitive value of literature lies not in imparting new knowledge to readers, but in promoting understanding. These theories often use the term “understanding” without endorsing a particular epistemology. Mikkonen refers to this idea by drawing on David Novitz’s claim that literary works might help readers “notice conceptual relationships we have not thought of before,” allowing them to ‘rearrange’ or ‘remodel’ their world.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Noël Carroll’s theory of clarificationism emphasizes how literature can deepen readers’ moral understanding by rehearsing their existing moral knowledge and emotions. Carroll suggests that in interpreting a work, readers “access and mobilize their cognitive, emotive and moral repertoire,”<sup>17</sup> and through this engagement, they may explore and augment their understanding. Thus, literature serves as an occasion for readers to exercise and refine knowledge they already possess, further reinforcing the idea that its value lies in fostering deeper insight rather than merely delivering new information.

Furthermore, the study of the cognitive value of literature should extend beyond discussions of truth and knowledge. Mikkonen argues that literature can also engender confusion and doubt, which may have significant cognitive value.<sup>18</sup> Here, he departs from the common assumption that literature’s cognitive value lies solely in its clarity and insight and introduces the idea that the disorientation or ambiguity experienced by readers can provoke deeper reflection, offering an alternative way of thinking about how literature contributes to cognitive development. However, not all confusion is valuable. Mikkonen critiques certain cognitive theories for failing to

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<sup>15</sup> See *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See *Ibid.*, 77ff.

distinguish between productive confusion—one that challenges readers to think more deeply—and confusion that merely obstructs understanding. This argument reflects Mikkonen’s commitment to refining and extending the debates within cognitive literary theory.

Additionally, he critiques the assumption that confusion in understanding fictional events influences the reader’s understanding of reality. While some cognitivists argue that literary experiences impact real-world cognition, Mikkonen is more cautious, suggesting that while literature can shape thought, it may not always translate into tangible changes in the reader’s worldview. This skepticism offers a balanced perspective on the cognitive value of literature, acknowledging both its potential and its limitations. His analysis transcends traditional debates by proposing that the real value of literary narratives lies in their capacity to expand the reader’s cognitive frameworks, rather than simply offering a reflection of reality.

In the last chapter, titled ‘Evidence,’ the author tackles the empirical side of the debate by examining the claims made by cognitivists that literary reading produces cognitive benefits, such as improved inferential skills. Here, he carefully weighs the evidence presented by psychologists and philosophers. Some studies claim that reading literature improves inferential skills and empathy, but Mikkonen critiques their methodological limitations. For example, he highlights issues such as unclear distinctions between cognitive gains directly linked to literary reading and those arising from broader educational contexts. Furthermore, many studies fail to account for the symbolic complexity of literary works, which makes it difficult to isolate specific cognitive benefits from broader interpretive skills. Mikkonen further argues that the reliance on empirical data in this field is not always reliable, as it often fails to capture the complexity of how literature influences thought. By critiquing both the traditional armchair method and the empirical approach, Mikkonen calls for a more nuanced understanding of literary cognition—one that neither depends solely on intuition nor reductive scientific measures.

Gregory Currie’s anti-cognitivist stance, which argues that short-term improvements in literary reading do not significantly affect long-term dispositions, presents another critical challenge. As Currie states, “Cognitivists’ claims about the educative function of literature are empirical claims with no self-validating power; the function cannot be known in advance of seeing what sorts of behavioural changes exposure to the narrative in question leads to.”<sup>19</sup> Mikkonen engages with this argument by suggesting that the benefits of reading may be subtler, operating on both conscious and unconscious levels, and may manifest over longer periods in

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<sup>19</sup> See *Ibid.*, 91.

perception, thoughts, and behavior. However, the empirical evidence for these claims remains contentious, leading Mikkonen to question whether these cognitive benefits can be consistently demonstrated through scientific measures alone. He critiques these studies for often neglecting the role of the reader's personal motivations and contexts, thus overlooking a key variable in understanding literature's cognitive impact.

Finally, Mikkonen identifies weaknesses in sociological studies that attempt to measure the cognitive effects of reading through surveys, pointing out that these often produce biased or superficial answers. He argues that personal interviews or qualitative research would yield more authentic insights into readers' experiences, thus offering a more grounded approach to understanding the cognitive effects of literature. Mikkonen also warns against over-reliance on reader testimonies, suggesting that post-reading epiphanies may be unreliable due to cognitive biases. These "illusions of understanding" are framed as affective results rather than genuine cognitive insights.<sup>20</sup> This critical analysis underscores the limitations of current empirical approaches, and Mikkonen's work calls for a more comprehensive exploration of the unique cognitive features of literature.

*Philosophy, Literature, and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* is a substantial and thoughtful contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the cognitive value of literature. The author skillfully navigates between the views of cognitivists and anti-cognitivists, providing a balanced analysis that invites readers to rethink the role of literature in fostering understanding rather than merely imparting knowledge. His approach, which blends philosophical analysis with literary theory, opens a rich dialogue on how fiction shapes our cognitive frameworks, particularly through its emphasis on imagination, narrative, and cognitive engagement.

While the book offers a thorough and nuanced discussion, there are areas where it might benefit from further exploration. For example, while it effectively identifies flaws in empirical studies, such as methodological ambiguities and biases, it leaves room for further exploration of potential, robust alternatives. The call for more qualitative methods, such as personal interviews, is a step in the right direction, yet the book could have engaged more deeply with potential interdisciplinary approaches that might offer fresh perspectives on how literature influences cognition. The focus on the cognitive effects of literature also occasionally overlooks the affective dimensions of literary engagement, which might complicate the cognitive claims discussed.

Moreover, while the critique of over-reliance on post-reading epiphanies and 'illusions of understanding' is valid, it could have been

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.



extended further. The unique experiential quality of literature—its ability to evoke both confusion and clarity—does not easily lend itself to traditional forms of validation. Mikkonen acknowledges this, yet the conversation could have been pushed by exploring more radical theoretical frameworks that challenge the very premise of measuring cognitive effects in literature. Similarly, early chapters, where the book navigates complex debates on imagination and narrative, provide significant insights that might have benefitted from more integration into later critique of cognitive literary theory.

Despite these shortcomings, *Philosophy, Literature, and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* offers an excellent overview and deep engagement with key philosophical questions, making it a thought-provoking and indispensable text for scholars in both philosophy and literary studies. Its strengths far outweigh its limitations, even as these limitations invite further debate and inquiry.

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## Reference

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