Erschienen in: PETRASCHKA, Thomas, Hrsg., Christiana WERNER, Hrsg.. Empathy's Role in Understanding Persons, Literature, and Art. New York: Routledge, 2023, S. 174-196. ISBN 978-1-032-36776-7
https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333739-12

9 "Tell me, how does it feel?" Learning what it is like through literature

Christiana Werner

9.1 Introduction

Can we learn from literature what it is like to have an experience (WIL-knowledge) of a kind we never had before? It seems to be a quite common idea outside academic debates that we can learn what it is like to be in a specific situation by means of reading works of literature.

Independently of the problem of fiction as a source of knowledge, it is unclear whether it is at all possible to gain WIL-knowledge by reading or listening to other people's non-fictional descriptions of their experiences. Most participants in debates about phenomenal consciousness in philosophy of mind answer this question negatively. In a Lewisian line, L.A. Paul claims that we cannot know what it is like to have experiences like being a parent or a woman in Ethiopia unless we undergo these experiences (Paul 2014). On the other hand, philosophers who believe that we can gain WIL-knowledge without having the experience highlight the role of imagination, simulation, or empathy (Wiltsher 2021; Kind 2020; Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2021, Berninger in this volume).

Literature, obviously, does not need to be fictional. However, the great psychological novels which seem to be good candidates to learn what it is like for their characters to go through their experiences, are fictional. In fictional literature, the stories and the characters of the work are invented by the author. They neither need nor in many cases actually do rely on facts. Therefore, it is unclear if and how we can learn from a consciously invented narrative at all. Literary cognitivists in debates about the epistemic value of works of fiction argue, however, that we can learn by means of reading fictional literature. But then "learning" in this context usually means gaining propositional knowledge, not WIL-knowledge.

In order to investigate whether readers can learn from fictional literature what it is like to be in a specific situation we accordingly need to answer two main questions:

1) How can we gain WIL-knowledge by means of reading a text/a work of literature at all?

DOI: 10.4324/9781003333739-12

2) If WIL-knowledge transfer is at all possible by means of non-fictional sources, is it also possible to gain WIL-knowledge from fiction?

This chapter aims to answer these questions and proceeds as follows: as a first step, I will clarify the notion of what-it-is-like-knowledge. Second, I will distinguish three ways in which the term "experience" is frequently used. The interesting cases for our purposes here are what I call complex conscious states. In line with Amy Kind, I argue that skilled imaginers can imaginatively put components of such a complex state together. This "imaginative scaffolding" together with the relevant distinctions in hand allow us to turn to the question of how we can gain WIL-knowledge of these complex conscious states by means of other people's descriptions of their experiences. The idea is relatively simple: readers can imaginatively put components of another person's experience together. If they do that according to the other person's testimony, they can gain WIL-knowledge of the phenomenal character of this person's experience. Some non-fictional works of literature are testimonies of experiences in a relevant sense. Literary works of fiction in contrast can be a source of true beliefs about real people's experiences, but I will argue that for pragmatic reasons, they cannot be a reliable source of WIL-knowledge. However, literary works of fiction can be a source of WIL-knowledge of the fictional character's experience. But more importantly these works can be a source of WIL-knowledge of possible experiences, that is, experiences real people could have in situations which are relevantly similar to those described in the work.

9.2 The Locution of "What It Is Like"

I do not claim that WIL-knowledge transfer is the only aim, or is even among the most important aims of literature. But it seems that at least every now and then, people read literature in order to learn about what it is like to be a soldier in war, a parent separated from their child, or any one of an innumerable list of experiences.

In order to answer the question, of whether WIL-knowledge can be transferred by means of literature, I want to start by distinguishing three different uses of the "what it is like"-locution. First, if, for example, a teacher is asked what it is like to be a teacher in times of the pandemic, one appropriate answer could be something like "I suddenly had to teach online, which was very difficult, because my school was technically not prepared for this and neither were the kids at home". This response is of course not an exhaustive answer to the question, but nevertheless appropriate. One important initial observation is that in everyday conversations "what it is like" is not only used to refer to the phenomenal character of

mental states. As the example shows, it is often not even used to refer to psychological states at all. Instead, descriptions of the external situation can be an appropriate way of describing what it is like to be in a specific situation. Beliefs (or knowledge) about the external situation of a person (e.g. technical problems with online teaching) are propositionally structured. Hence these beliefs (or knowledge) provide no specific problems for transfer via testimony.

Second, a "what it is like"-question might be answered by means of describing a psychological state or psychological reactions to a specific situation. The teacher could also potentially answer the question thus: "At the beginning of the pandemic I was very nervous and stressed, because the online lessons were new to me and to my pupils. I was worried that I was not able to prepare the pupils for their exams". This answer delivers information about the teacher's mental state in the relevant situation. We learn that she was "nervous", "stressed" and "worried". Y. Cath calls merely propositionally structured knowledge about a person's mental state the "Bronze-standard" of knowing what it is like to be in a specific situation (Cath 2019, 16).[1] We can know in a non-phenomenal way that a person is in a specific mental state. Although this information is about the teacher's mental states, there is no reason to doubt that this sort of knowledge generates any specific problems for a transfer via testimony, because it is, or at least can be, merely propositionally structured.

Both (1) descriptions of a person's external situation or circumstances and (2) descriptions of psychological states of a person are appropriate answers to "what it is like"-questions in everyday contexts. Because beliefs about (1) and (2) are or can be merely propositionally structured, we found two possible ways of talking about what it is like to be in a specific situation which provide no (or at least no specific) problems for knowledge transfer by means of testimony. Although (1) and (2) can be appropriate answers to "what it is like"- questions in everyday contexts, knowledge about a person's external circumstances and non-phenomenal knowledge about a person's mental state should be distinguished from what I call in this chapter "WIL-knowledge".

In what follows, I will use the term "WIL-knowledge" in the narrow sense of phenomenal knowledge, i.e. knowing a state phenomenally. There are many different ways in which WIL-knowledge is analyzed. I will assume that for WIL-knowledge someone needs to know the phenomenal character of an experience. By means of experiencing a new mental state with a phenomenal character, the experiencer gains new WIL-knowledge. For the sake of simplicity, I will assume that the experience of a mental state is not only a necessary, but also a sufficient condition for WIL-knowledge, although I am rather sceptical that this is indeed true. Much more needs to be said about the sufficient conditions of WIL-knowledge. I will further

assume that by means of experiencing a mental state we acquire new phenomenal concepts. These phenomenal concepts can be part of propositions (for an overview, see Alter and Walter 2006). Hence people can have beliefs with a propositional content which contains a phenomenal concept.

If a person has had a colour perception of a red object, she has the phenomenal concept "red". As a result, she can (for example) believe that the car in front of the house is "red", where "red" is a phenomenal concept. This person knows in a phenomenal way that there is a red car in front of the house. In contrast, a person who has never seen a red object in her life and has not gained the phenomenal concept "red" can only form the corresponding belief that the car in front of the house is red*, where red* is just a physical concept.

9.3 "Experience": Three Distinctions

The term "experience", much as "what it is like", is used in many different ways. For the purposes of this paper, we have to distinguish two ways in which the kinds of experiences referenced in Frank Jackson's original knowledge argument differ from the kinds of experience at issue here (the experience of being a teacher in times of the pandemic, being a soldier in war, being victim of oppression, and so on).

The first thing to notice is that the original debate in the philosophy of mind typically focuses on WIL-knowledge of some particular mental state, such as that of seeing something red. A possible reason for this is that many contributions to this debate refer directly to Jackson's "Mary" thought experiment. In this famous paper Jackson uses colour perception as an example for a conscious mental state with a phenomenal character (Jackson 1982). I will assume that there are mental states with a single phenomenal character where this phenomenal character has no further phenomenal components or are "undifferentiated wholes" (Kind 2020, 144). For this reason, I call these states "atomic conscious states". I assume colour perception, taste and many affective states are atomic in this sense.

It is important to see that such experiences of single perceptual properties differ both in their immediacy and lack of complexity from the experiences invoked when people talk of what it is like to go to war or to be separated from your own child (see Kind 2020).

In order to characterize the second way of using the term experience, we can return to Mary and extend the story a little and think more about Mary's experience of leaving her black-and-white room for the first time. After all, she was imprisoned her entire life and has never seen any coloured objects. Let us assume that she is thrilled, surprised and deeply moved by seeing something red for the first time (see Paul 2014). Mary's state is multi-layered: she has different emotional or affective states, certain beliefs

and desires and perceives different things, all more or less at the same time. She is, as I will call it, in a complex conscious state. The phenomenal character of this complex conscious state is a composition of its components (see Bayne 2010).

When we use the locution of experience to refer to such a state, we also refer to an experience which lasts only for a relatively short time. The examples named above, such as the experience of being a soldier in war, are by contrast experiences that last much longer. We usually do not mean by "the experience of being a soldier" a state a person is in for a short moment of time, such as "the experience of leaving the black-and-room for the first time".

So far, I have proposed that the term "experience" refers to mental states; sometimes to atomic conscious states, sometimes to complex conscious states. For both, it is plausible to assume that they have a specific phenomenal character. For a soldier in war, it would be odd to assume that this person is constantly, probably over years, either in one and the same atomic conscious state or in the same complex conscious states. This person will have different perceptual states over time and will react psychologically in various ways to several aspects of the situations she will find herself in. For this reason, I suggest that she is in a series of complex conscious states. Such a series, however, does not generate a new phenomenal character in addition to the phenomenal character of each single complex state of the series.

9.4 WIL-knowledge of Atomic, Complex, and Series of Complex States

Jackson claims that we cannot know what it is like to be in a conscious mental state unless we experience this state. Jackson's Mary thought experiment has or is supposed to have important metaphysical implications, because Mary is a super scientist with knowledge about all physical facts. Roughly, the claim is that, if Mary does not know what it is like to see something red before she has actually seen something red, there must be a non-physical fact she learns about. For the purposes of this chapter, the metaphysical questions of the debate about Jackson's thought experiment and conscious states in general are unimportant. Even physicalists in this debate, who argue that Mary does not learn anything new when she leaves her black-and-white prison, can accept that ordinary people without Mary's knowledge learn something new when they are in a conscious state they have never been in before. In these debates it is also widely agreed that we cannot learn by means of testimony and (fictional) stories what it is like to have an experience. It is of great importance to highlight that this consensus is about WIL-knowledge of what I call atomic conscious states.

Like A. Kind, I will accept that we cannot gain WIL-knowledge of atomic conscious states without having the experience of such a state. I will further assume that by experiencing an atomic conscious state, we also learn what it is like for someone else to be in exactly this atomic conscious state (Nida-Rümelin 1998). This means, when Mary leaves her black-and-white room and perceives a red object for the first time, she learns what it is like for other people to see the same nuance of red, *ceteris paribus*. What the *ceteris paribus* conditions are for learning what it is like for somebody else to be in a particular atomic conscious state depends on the type of atomic conscious state. For colour perception (for example), we can assume that people have the same form of visual apparatus, there are similar light conditions and so on.

Let us turn again to the example of Mary and the experience of leaving her black-and-white room for the first time. Some of the components of her complex conscious state are perceptions, some are emotional, some doxastic and conative states. In particular, emotional reactions towards aspects of a situation seem to depend highly on things such as a person's character traits, their biography and so on. Therefore, we can assume that different people will react differently and even the same person can react at different times differently to the same or a very similar situation. For example, if Jack was, like Mary, trapped in a black-and-white room and leaves it for the first time, it is possible and likely that Jack would react differently. Thus, his complex conscious state has different components than Mary's complex conscious state. This means "the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time" refers to complex conscious states with different components when we use it to refer to Mary's or Jack's experiences. If the phenomenal character of a complex conscious state is, as I suggest, composed of the phenomenal characters of its components, Mary's experience of leaving her black-and-white room for the first time teaches her what it is like for her to leave the black-and-white room for the first time. It does not teach her what it is like for Jack to have the same type of experience, because his experience of leaving the black-and-white room is a complex conscious state with different components and so most likely has a different phenomenal character.

The obvious fact that Mary and Jack react differently might be missed because of the fact that we called both of their experiences "the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time". As noted in section 9.3, we often type experiences by non-mental features and it is important to note that the similarities we highlight by using the same locution are very often only similarities of non-mental features (e.g. "leaving a black-and-white room"). Because people can react quite differently, their complex states have different components and thus often, if not always, different phenomenal characters. For this reason, there is no

unique phenomenal character of experiences like the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time. And it is moreover for this reason that by means of having the experience of leaving the black-and-white room for the first time Mary does not learn what it is like for Jack or anybody else to leave the black-and-white room for the first time. Having said this, it is of course important to note that there might nevertheless be similarities in people's emotional reactions and it might even be that many people react in the same emotional way to specific situations. It is however not very likely that all of the components of a complex state are exactly the same and so it is very likely that the phenomenal character of the complex state will even differ in cases where people have the same emotional reaction.

I have suggested that experiences like being a soldier in war are best described as a series of complex states. Since there is no additional phenomenal character of such a series, there is or can be only WIL-knowledge of the atomic or complex conscious states which are components of the series. There might be situations which are in one way or another typical or characteristic of, or important for being a soldier in war or any other prolonged experience. If this is the case, then people might have the phenomenal character of their complex conscious state in this typical, important or characteristic situation in mind, when they talk about "what it is like to be a soldier in war".

9.5 Mental State Prediction and WIL-knowledge

In sections 9.3 and 9.4, I argued that we often type experiences not by referring to mental states, but to non-mental features of a person's situation. Because people react differently to their immediate situation, the fact that two people undergo an experience individuated in this way, as in the example of the experience of leaving the black-and-white room, does not mean that these two people are or were in the same complex conscious state. Further, one and the same person might react differently at different times. Most likely they were in different complex conscious states, and hence the phenomenal character of their states will most likely differ. For this reason, the experience of such an experience as leaving the black-and-white room is not a source of WIL-knowledge of other people's experience or of future experiences of the same person. It seems, however, that the situation would be different, if a person knows the components of her future complex state.

Let us turn once again to Mary and change the story again slightly. If Mary is not only a super physicist, but also an omniscient psychologist with all-encompassing knowledge about her own psychological reactions, she would be able to predict the way in which she reacts to her first colour

perception. If Mary was thrilled, surprised and deeply moved in her life before, she would not only know the way in which she will react, but she will also know what it is like for her to be thrilled, surprised and deeply moved. This means that she will be surprised by the phenomenal character of her experience of seeing something red, but she will not be surprised that she is surprised. Because she knows her psychological reactions to her first colour perception and because she has been in those states before which constitute her reaction, she also knows what it will be like for her to react to seeing a red rose for the first time.

The extended Mary thought experiment shows that we need to distinguish between (a) knowing how somebody reacts psychologically and (b) knowing what it is like to undergo these psychological reactions. Moreover, the extended Mary thought experiment shows that (a) and (b) can come apart. Knowing how a person reacts psychologically or knowing that a person is in a specific psychological state can be, as we have already seen, merely propositionally structured. As such this knowledge provides no specific problems for transfer by means of testimony. For people without all-encompassing psychological knowledge it is, however, difficult to predict how somebody will react, even how one will react herself to an input or to being in a certain mental state. Empirical evidence suggests that people are in general not very good at predicting their own psychological and especially emotional reactions to a situation (see Maibom 2016, 2018) One reason why it is difficult to predict psychological reactions is the complexity of human psychology. Heidi Maibom mentions a further problem, namely the tendency of people to imagine how they should react emotionally in a specific situation, instead of how they would. How we think we should react and how we actually react can of course differ greatly (Maibom 2018), hence people rarely predict the reactions they will have. If we could predict or know how we will react to something, which is occasionally possible especially if this is a psychological reaction we have had before, we know what it is like to have this reaction. If a person wants to know the phenomenal character of a complex experience, we need to distinguish two cases.

First, complex conscious states can consist of (some) components which the imaginer has never experienced herself. It seems likely that extreme external situations provoke often extreme psychological reactions. Being confronted with danger on a battlefield might provoke a kind of fear that is probably not provoked by something in peaceful situations. It seems very plausible to assume that an imaginer who has not previously been in every one of the conscious states that are components of the complex experience cannot, at least not completely, know the phenomenal character of this complex experience, even if she were in a position to know what the components are.

Second, complex conscious states can consist of mental states the imaginer was in before. In this case, like in the extended Mary thought

experiment, the imaginer knows what it is like to be in the relevant mental states. Unlike super-scientist Mary however, people – very often – do not know the components of their own future complex experience or of another person's complex conscious state. But it seems that a person could know what it is like to have the complex experience, if she knew the components.

9.6 Imaginative Scaffolding

In debates about consciousness, the decisive function ascribed to knowledge of "what it is like" by conceptions such as the "ability" account (Lewis 1983, 1988; and in Nemirow 1980) and "phenomenal concepts" accounts (Balog 2012; Sundström 2011) is that such knowledge involves the agent's ability to remember or imagine what it is like to be in a specific state. Further, Amy Kind (2020) argues that people are capable of what she calls imaginative scaffolding, which is roughly the capacity to put components of an experience imaginatively together. With distinctions between atomic and complex mental states in hand, we can now see how such imaginative scaffolding can work. Assuming that a person has both the ability for imaginative scaffolding and WIL-knowledge of the components of a complex experience, imagination can be a source of WIL-knowledge of complex experience the imaginer has not yet had.

The ability for imaginative scaffolding and WIL-knowledge are, however, necessary and not sufficient conditions for successfully imagining a future complex mental state. As we have already seen, the imaginer also needs to know what the components of the complex states are that she has to put imaginatively together. If the imaginer wants to know what it will be like for her to have a future experience, she therefore has to predict what the components of her future complex state will be. Even if it is true that people are not successful in predicting their own psychological states in a specific situation, still it may well be that someone succeeds in imagining her exact reaction and her exact complex state in a specific situation. Hence, she could form true beliefs about her future complex state. Although this is possible, this scenario seems to be a matter of luck. Therefore, imagination, it seems, cannot be a context of justification for beliefs about our own future complex states. Even if a person is epistemically lucky and acquires a true belief by means of imagining her future complex experience, it still would not count as knowledge.

9.7 Empathic Scaffolding and Non-fictional Literature

In the previous section we have seen that there is a way to imagine what it is like to be in a complex state one has not experienced before. We

have two necessary but not sufficient conditions: the imaginer needs WIL-knowledge of the components of the complex state and the general ability to put components of a complex state imaginatively together. So far I have discussed only the scenario in which a person tries to imagine her own future complex state. I argued that because of the complexity of human psychology and the fact mentioned by Heidi Maibom that people tend to imagine how they should react, people are not good at predicting their own psychological reactions. This means that it is not very likely that even a person who has WIL-knowledge of all the components of a future complex state will be able to put the components in her imagination correctly together. The attempt to imagine what it will be like to be in a specific future complex state fails in this case, not because of any arguable peculiarities of the phenomenal character of mental states or the WIL-knowledge of them, but only because the imaginer does not know what the components of her future complex state will be. The key would be to know or to correctly predict the components of a complex experience.

At this point other people's testimony of their experiences comes into play. In many works of non-fictional literature authors describe in detail their own experiences. Thus, these non-fictional works of literature, such as autobiographies, are a type of testimony. For the sake of simplicity, I take it for granted that readers can gain propositional knowledge from these non-fictional works of literature. If non-fictional literature contains descriptions of the author's experiences in the sense that she describes her complex mental states in specific situations, readers can gain propositional knowledge of the author's experiences.

We are, however, not interested in propositional knowledge transfer by means of literature. The question is whether readers can also gain WIL-knowledge. In order to understand how testimony can transfer WIL-knowledge, we need to see that forming beliefs is not the only way of responding adequately to testimony. There is a widely accepted view in aesthetics that fictional narratives are invitations to imagine the content of the fictional work (Currie 1990). Without going into the details of this account, it seems unproblematic to assume that we can not only imagine fictional content, but also the content of non-fictional descriptions of other people's experiences. It is further important at this point to note that readers do not only propositionally imagine the content of a work of literature. Readers can also imagine experientially. This can involve having mental pictures, sounds, and so on of what is described in the text. When it comes to descriptions of complex mental states, there is also a way of experientially imagining what it is like to be in the described states.

So far, I have discussed cases in which people imagine their own future state and we have found that will they most likely not imagine their future complex state correctly. Readers of works of literature are in a different

situation: they can use the descriptions of complex states they find in the works as a kind of instruction manual or script for imagining another person's complex experience, namely the author's complex experience.

This provides the key to explaining literature's and the imagination's role in coming to know what it is like to have a complex experience: the work of literature needs to detail those mental states that are components of the complex experience. Authors can name component states, but they can also use more literary ways, e.g. metaphors, to describe their complex conscious state in a specific situation. This does not mean that the descriptions somehow contain information about the phenomenal character of the experience. The transfer of WIL-knowledge of a complex conscious state requires cooperation on the part of the reader's imagination and proceeds as follows: the author can characterize her individual complex experience, at least in part by describing her relevant mental states. The reader, an agent without this complex experience, can use the author's descriptions as an instruction manual for her imaginings. On the basis of the description of the mental states, which partly constitute the complex experience, and the reader's prior WIL-knowledge of such states, the reader can imagine what it is like to be in the component states and, at least up to a certain point, put the components of the complex experience imaginatively together. If the reader is successful, she acquires, on the basis of her literature-driven imaginings, knowledge of what it was like for the author to have undergone the complex experience.

It is important to highlight that the knowledge the reader gains by means of this process is not WIL-knowledge of her own future experience, but of another person's experience. Empathy is often seen as a process which enables the empathizer to recognize another person's mental state and to learn what it is like for this person to be in this state (e.g., Coplan 2011). Thus, empathy and imaginative scaffolding according to testimony share an epistemic goal, because both empathizer and imaginer learn, in case of success, what it is like for another person to undergo her experience. Because of this shared epistemic goal and because imaginative scaffolding according to another person's description is essentially directed towards another person, I call this process empathic scaffolding. Although it is important and interesting, this is not the place to compare imaginative scaffolding with the numerous definitions or characterizations of empathy we can find in philosophical and psychological debates.

But we must remain cautious about the limitations of this process. V. Simoniti (2021, 572) argues that, "for example, we do not go up to victims of political oppression and say "I know how it must feel; I have read many novels about oppression", nor do we consult artworks in preparation for some distinctly practical challenge". Although he mentions novels as an

example for literary art and not a non-fictional genre, it is important to take his scepticism seriously.

The reader of non-fictional literature can by these means most likely only gain partial knowledge of what it was like for the author to have had her complex experience. How close the reader's knowledge will be to full knowledge of what the specific complex experience was like depends in particular on three factors: (1) on the extent of the reader's WIL-knowledge of the component states of the complex experience, (2) on the detail and richness of the author's descriptions, and (3) on how closely the reader's imaginings conform to the author's descriptions.

Furthermore, it seems that speakers use expressions like "I know how it feels" or "I know what it is like" in everyday contexts often to express that they had a complex conscious state or a series of complex conscious states of the same type before. Such statements express a personal acquaintance with this type of experience. If true, this explains why it seems odd for a reader who never had an experience of the specific type to claim that she knows what it is like.

It seems to me, however, to be an open question whether competent speakers want to express with statements such as "I know what it is like" that they have WIL-knowledge of another person's complex conscious state. As I have argued in sections 9.3 and 9.4, we cannot assume that our experience of a complex conscious state is a source of WIL-knowledge of another person's conscious state of the same type. If we understand statements such as "I know how it feels" or "I know what it is like" as an expression that the speaker has full WIL-knowledge of the other person's state, these statements become problematic for both readers and those who had a complex conscious state of the same type as the other person. This is the case, because it is hardly likely that they really have full WIL-knowledge of the other person's state.

9.8 Empathic Scaffolding and Fiction

There are certainly many very important non-fictional works of literature and therefore many opportunities for readers to learn what it was like for their authors to go through their experiences. However, people often have fictional works of literature in mind when they think of sources of WIL-knowledge of other people's experiences. Moreover, it seems to be generally accepted that great works of fictional literature are very important or especially good sources of WIL-knowledge. J. Gibson writes for example in the *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*:

> I call this experiential knowledge (some will prefer to call it "phenomenological knowledge"), and think of it as a broadening of our

> understanding of both the range of possible human experience and the what-it-is-like to be the subject of these experiences (See Walsh 1969 and Gibson 2008). My own life provides me with no knowledge of what it is like to be one who finds all experience impoverished, as subjecting us to a constant stream of tedious, meaningless, repetition. Nor does it reveal to me what it is like to have my community turn against me and scatter my family across various concentration camps in Poland. But I can read Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* or Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*. Literature, in this sense, compensates for the incredibly limited range of experience the real world offers us, and in doing so it enriches our knowledge of experience itself. Empathy for "real" people is often thought to yield knowledge. It is clearly thought to offer a kind of knowledge of others' mental states, and this is significant enough.

And he goes on:

> [a]s David Novitz claims, literature gives us "empathic knowledge" insofar as it gives readers a "pretty good idea" of, or enables them to know something about, what it feels like to be ensnared" in a certain situation (Novitz 1987, 136. For discussion, see Lamarque 2014, 137). The basic features of empathy—its reliance on imagination for the sake of other-directed perspective-taking—make it a natural ally in literature's apparent quest to illuminate the nature and variety of human experience.
>
> (Gibson 2016, 241)

Gibson is a proponent of so-called literary cognitivism, whose central claim is roughly that readers can learn from works of fiction (Currie 1990; Konrad 2017; Stock 2017; Vendrell Ferran 2018; Garcia-Carpintero 2019; Voltolini 2021). In particular he claims, as we can see in the quotation above, that we can acquire WIL-knowledge by means of reading fictional works of literature.

Prima facie, it seems that if readers find fictional descriptions of a fictional character's experiences, they can proceed in the same way as in the case of non-fictional descriptions of experiences: they can imagine the respective mental states as described or alluded to, bearing in mind that that these descriptions are fictional. In section 9.7, I focused on non-fictional descriptions of experiences and how readers can use them as an instruction manual for their imagination. Accordingly, I will focus solely on fictional descriptions of experiences and the question whether they can function in the same way as their non-fictional counterparts. Because of this focus, I leave it open whether there are any other ways of gaining

WIL-knowledge by means of imagination and reading fiction. In particular I will not discuss whether or not aesthetic responses to literature can be a source of WIL-knowledge. I seek to distinguish four different claims about what exactly we learn (among possibly many other things) from reading fiction:

1) By means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it would be like for themselves to undergo the experiences described in works of fiction
2) By means of reading fiction, readers learn what it is like for fictional characters to undergo the experiences described in works of fiction
3) By means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it is (or was) like for a real person (such as the author, someone the author knows, etc.) to undergo an experience described in works of fiction
4) By means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it could be like for someone to be in a situation described in works of fiction. This means we acquire WIL-knowledge about possible experiences

In the quotation above, it seems that Gibson has something like claim (1) in mind when he argues that literature provides the possibility to learn what it is like to be in situations that a reader will not encounter in her life. We could also interpret his words as assuming that readers learn what it is like for them to undergo these experiences, because there is something general in what it is like to "have my community turn against me and scatter my family across various concentration camps in Poland".

Experiences like these are, according to my analysis in section 9.3, types of complex conscious states or series of complex conscious states. As I have argued, types of complex states are often individuated not by referring to the mental states of the experiencer, but by referring to non-mental features of the experiencer's situation. This is the case for Gibson's examples too. I further argued that people react psychologically very differently to the different features of their situations. Thus, people who go through something like Gibson's examples will be in different mental states and it is thus very likely that the phenomenal character of their mental states will differ. Hence, there is no unique phenomenal character of Gibson's examples of experiences.

But even if he does not assume that there is a unique phenomenal character of the aforementioned experiences, I do not believe that a reader will learn what it would be like for her to undergo these experiences. If the work of literature contains descriptions of the mental states of the character who undergoes the experience, the reader gains information about the character's specific state. Albeit unlikely, it may be that the reader herself will be in the same mental state as the character in the work, if she has gone through an experience similar to that described in the fictional work.

A reader might also try to imagine how she would react psychologically if she were in the situation described in the fictional work. In this case we are again confronted with the problem that we are in general not very good at predicting our own reactions towards a specific situation, as I argued above. It might be that a reader predicts her own reactions correctly and that she is a very skilled imaginer in the sense that she can accurately bring together in her imagination the components of her future experience. As I argued in section 9.6, this seems to be a matter of luck. Thus, even true beliefs about future experiences we gain in this way cannot count as knowledge. Therefore claim (1) is false.

In general, one reason to think that reading works of fiction is a particularly good way to gain WIL-knowledge seems to be the elaborate and rhetorical use of language we find in these works. Our ordinary language is sometimes not sufficiently fine-grained or lacks vocabulary to name or describe mental states. If a person cannot describe her own experience adequately, it seems that there is no way in which another person can learn what it is like for the experiencer. In these cases, stylistic devices can be a way of describing mental states and thus help readers to imagine the described state. Therefore, the idea could be that skilled authors find a way by means of these stylistic devices and the special artistic use of language to describe experiences, thereby enabling readers to learn what something is like for other people, especially those who lack these linguistic and rhetorical skills.

I assume that we find this use of language more often in fictional literature, which however has no monopoly on this feature. We can find stylistic devices obviously in non-fictional literature as well. But beliefs about the experiences of fictional characters face a general problem of beliefs and assertions about fiction: how can a belief or an assertion about a fictional entity be true? This concerns claim (2). According to fictional anti-realists (Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Yagisawa 2001; Everett 2005), there are no fictional characters; hence, there is no entity with the described experience. According to fictional realists (Inwagen 1977; Salmon 1998; Thomasson 1998; Voltolini 2006; Kripke 2013), fictional characters exist but they suggest that the characters are artefacts and therefore entities without a mental life (see Gibson 2008, 583). For this reason, it also cannot be literally true that a fictional character is in a state of joy or jealousy (etc.). A solution to the problem of true beliefs and assertions about fiction will therefore depend on a metaphysical theory of fictional entities.[2] If there is a solution to the general problem, I am quite optimistic that there would be no specific problem for WIL-knowledge of mental states of fictional characters. In this case we could assume that readers can gain WIL-knowledge of a fictional character's experience by putting together in their imagination the components of the character's complex mental states according to

the fictional text. They could then also have true beliefs about the fictional character's experience. Hence, I agree with claim (2), with the proviso that there is a solution for the problem of true assertions about fiction.

However, this is probably not the knowledge people might have in mind when they claim that we can learn about experiences by means of fictional literature. This assertion rather seems to state that we can learn something about the experiences of real people. This leads us to claim (3).

Authors sometimes create fictional characters by describing their own experiences. Because the character's inner life is in these cases based on the author's real experiences, it seems that the fictional description could function as testimony, in much the way as do non-fictional descriptions of experiences. Would a reader who imagines experiences according to such a fictional description gain phenomenal knowledge of the author's experience?

Another possibility is that authors of fiction interview people about their experiences. The author could use these people's testimony within the fictional work, such that the fictional work includes proper descriptions of real people's experiences. If we assume that these descriptions are adequate, it seems that a fictional work which contains these descriptions contains true propositions.

Some literary cognitivists in the debate about the epistemic value of fiction argue that passages in fictional works can be true assertions (Currie 1990; Konrad 2017) or that fictional works can contain, besides purely fictional utterances also utterances which are both fictional and assertive at the same time (Friend 2008; Stock 2017). Hence, they argue that these passages can work as proper testimony because of their assertive character. If this were true, the descriptions of the real people's experiences could play the same role as testimony we encountered in the case of non-fictional literature. Readers of fiction could then gain WIL-knowledge of the experiences of a real person by means of imagining the experiences according to the assertive passages.

In what follows I will argue against this cognitivist view. Rather for pragmatic than semantic reasons, fictional literature cannot play the role of testimony in the process of gaining WIL-knowledge of other people's experiences.

George Saunders, an author of fictional short stories, describes in the *Guardian* in October 2022 the process of the creation of one of his fictional characters, a sexist barber. The character is based on a real person who used to live in the same town as the author:

> Every day, I got to inhabit the mind of this sexist dope and cosy up to the reader by making fun of him. The humour of the story had to do with how blind this guy was to his own faults, as he harshly judged everyone around him, especially the women. What a crude, arrogant

> misogynist! Who, though past 40, still lived with his mother! Hah! Take that, idiot!
>
> (Saunders 2022)

After some weeks of work, the author however found, as he tells in the article, that he became unhappy with the character and his story:

> The short story is about change. This is not a short story: "Once upon a time, an asshole stayed an asshole". In real life, sure, that narrative ("Asshole remains asshole") abounds. But a story wants change and should be set within a window during which a change might reasonably be expected to occur.
>
> (Saunders 2022)

Obviously, an author of fiction can write about things she has never experienced before. If a work of fiction contains descriptions of experiences of a fictional character including descriptions of complex states of this character, it may well be that these descriptions are entirely made up. The author might also simply imagine what he or she finds to be a plausible reaction towards a situation she might have made up.

Saunders' reflections also show that he feels obliged to conform to the conventions of the literary genre he has chosen. At this point it is important to keep in mind the Janus-faced nature of fictional characters: within the world of the story, fictional characters appear to us as human beings with human psychology. Fictional characters are, however, also artefacts created by authors with a specific function in the story (Lamarque 1996, 2008; see also Lamarque's chapter in this volume). When Saunders realizes that he has to change his text in order to conform to the genre's conventions and write a good story, he decides to change the character in order to make the story more interesting and less one-dimensional. The previously flatly sexist barber becomes a sexist barber with vulnerability who experiences self-consciousness. Saunders, however, did not seek out the real person who inspired him in the first place. He did not enter into conversations with him to find out more about this person. He rather changed the main character by adding features he found in his own personality or life.

This example shows that authors of fiction can – and often do – follow a variety of aims when creating a fictional character. One aim of realistic novels is to create a character with an inner life that appears plausible to readers. But this does not mean that the character's inner life is created in such a way that we could find a real-life counterpart. Authors of fiction are free to combine descriptions of their own experiences or testimony of other real people's experiences with invented descriptions. Furthermore, fictional characters have often specific functions in the narrative, such as

being another character's opponent. Or they might be created such that the descriptions are meant to be understood in an allegorical or some other non-literal way. We saw that Saunders created a character that allowed him to tell a story which involved a change or development of the character.

These and similar aims have an influence on the way a fictional character is created. As a result, even in cases where authors interview real persons and use their descriptions of their experiences or when they describe their own experiences, these descriptions can be mixed with invented passages. And readers accept or even assume that descriptions of experiences they find in fictional works are influenced by these different aims of the author. In particular, experienced and professional readers will not only focus on the character as a human being in the world of the story, but also on the character's function in the literary work.

Because authors of fiction are allowed and expected to write made-up stories, it is not always easy for readers to recognize which passages are or are meant to be about facts in the world and which are entirely invented. When it comes to descriptions of experiences, this seems to me to be particularly problematic. How should readers discover or decide whether a description of an experience contains a made-up element? A reader's background knowledge about human psychology might help to identify extremely implausible descriptions, but it will not help to identify made-up elements which are in the realm of plausible psychological reactions. For this reason, it is extremely difficult for readers to find true propositions or to reliably distinguish them from made-up passages in the work. This in turn means that, although a work of fiction can contain true propositions, it is not a reliable source. On the contrary, it seems to be a matter of luck whether a reader identifies a sentence in a fictional work as a true assertion or proposition. Hence, a (or part of a) work of fiction cannot play the justifying role of testimony. And this consequently means that readers of fictional works can gain true beliefs about the experiences of real people, but these beliefs cannot count as knowledge. Therefore, claim (3) is false.

A proponent of the idea that fictional works of literature are especially good sources of WIL-knowledge might reply that the experiences of fictional characters are exemplifications. Learning about the fictional character is a way of learning about the possible experiences of real people in the same or similar situations. This is roughly what claim (4) is about. Green (2022, 280), for example, claims that

> [s]ome works of fiction may be summarized as a whole, or contain elements that, in effect, say: "this is what X is like" […] where values for X might include: losing a child to opioid addiction, being a victim of intimate partner violence, learning to accept one's limitations.

> In the most straightforward cases, such works follow characters who undergo the foregoing experiences.

Now, a literary cognitivist could argue that authors of great works of fiction are highly skilled imaginers. In particular they are very good at imagining other people's experiences in the way these experiences really are. Quite apart from their linguistic skills, this is what makes them extraordinary authors. Hence, we have good reasons to believe that, although the descriptions of experiences in their works are invented, they match the experiences people would have if they were in the situation described in the work. Cognitivists could argue that some authors are such highly skilled imaginers that regarding their descriptions of experiences, it is very likely or psychologically plausible that real people in the situation have complex states like that described. Some real people who are in the situation described in the literary work have exactly the complex mental states or series of these states described by the author. This could only be true in cases where there are such real situations as those described in the fictional work. But even if there are not or have not been such situations as described in the fictional work, cognitivists could argue that we do not gain WIL-knowledge about past experiences of real people, but about possible experiences.

It seems that in general people are not very good at imagining other people's experiences or their situations. This of course does not exclude the possibility that there are people with extraordinary imaginative skills (Kind 2020). This means it is possible that an author might be such an extraordinary imaginer that she can correctly describe a complex mental state or a series of complex mental states of another person although she has not talked to this person. While I agree this is possible, I think it is relatively unlikely that many authors are such highly skilled imaginers. Especially in cases where authors write about people in circumstances very different to their own, the chances are quite high that the author describes experiences not exactly in the way the experiences of a real person in these circumstances are. If these authors use their own personalities as a source of inspiration for their characters, it seems very likely that their characters will somehow remain within the realm of the author's own experiences. These authors may well still write about possible experiences, but I would suggest that the descriptions of these possible experiences are of less epistemic value. The reason is that these possible experiences will most likely be very different from real people's experiences.

There are, however, of course cases where authors write fictional stories, but these stories take place in circumstances with which the author is familiar. In these cases, the plot of the story and its characters are invented, but its background (such as where the characters live and what the circumstances of their lives are) is not. The descriptions of the characters'

experiences are made-up and so are only potential sources of knowledge about possible experiences. Nevertheless, it seems in these cases more likely that real people under these circumstances have experiences like those described in the story. Therefore, I suggest that these cases are more epistemically valuable with respect to WIL-knowledge of the described experiences.

9.9 Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to discuss whether we can learn what it is like to have an experience of a new kind by means of other people's testimony and literature. I argued that it is possible to put components of a complex mental state imaginatively together if a person has WIL-knowledge of these components. By putting the components of a complex state together, she can in such a case acquire WIL-knowledge of a complex state she has not been in before. However, the imaginer needs to know the components of a complex state in order to be able to put them imaginatively together. In general, it seems that we are not very good at predicting our own psychological reactions towards a specific situation. Because of this, predicting the correct reaction seems to be a matter of luck. Hence, I argued, the imagining our own future complex conscious states cannot be a reliable source of WIL-knowledge of our future complex states.

The situation is different for other people's experiences: I argued that another person's testimony of her experience can be a reliable source. If the imaginer imagines the other's experience following reliable testimony, her imagining of the experience is a source of WIL-knowledge of another person. There are works of non-fictional literature which can count as testimony in this sense. By means of imaginatively putting together components of a complex conscious state, in accordance with a description of that state, the imaginer can acquire WIL-knowledge of the author's state.

For works of fiction the situation looks rather different. I distinguished four different claims about works of fiction as a source of WIL-knowledge. First, I argued that claim (1) is false: by means of reading fiction readers will not gain WIL-knowledge of their future experiences, because it would be a matter of luck if the reader reacts in exactly the same way as the author describes it. Second, I argued that if there is a theory that can explain true beliefs and assertions about fiction, we can acquire WIL-knowledge of a fictional character's experience. However, I assumed that this is not the knowledge that people like John Gibson have in mind when they claim that we can acquire WIL-knowledge by means of reading fiction. According to some literary cognitivists, some works of fiction (or parts thereof) function like testimony. Hence, they argue, readers can learn from fiction. In contrast, I claimed that there are pragmatic reasons why fiction cannot count as testimony about real people's experiences. Even if

a work contains true descriptions of a real person's experience, it is a matter of luck if readers can identify these descriptions. Therefore, and third, readers cannot gain justified true beliefs about other people's experiences by means of imaginatively putting the components of a complex state together, according to a fictional description. This leaves claim (4) as the most promising candidate: by means of reading fiction, readers can learn what it could be like for someone to be in a situation described in works of fiction. This means we acquire WIL-knowledge about possible experiences. I think "possible" cannot mean logically or metaphysically possible, because it seems rather uninteresting to learn about all these possibilities. Instead I think we are as readers interested in descriptions of experiences that have psychological plausibility. If this analysis is correct, much more needs to be said to explain in which sense the experiences we can learn about from fiction are "possible".[3]

Notes

1 Cath distinguishes the Gold- from the Silver- and Bronze-standard of what he calls knowledge of experience ("KoE"): "Gold-standard KoE: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way

it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences of going to war. Silver-standard KoE: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences distinct from, but relevantly similar to, the experience of going to war (which she has not had). Bronze-standard KoE: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in some non-phenomenal way" (Cath 2019, 16).

2 In the debate about the metaphysics of fictional characters, possibilists claim, roughly, that fictional characters are possible entities. A consequence of this view could be that my claim 2 about learning from fiction collapses into claim 4. I would like to thank Jakob Roloff and Jan Seibert who pointed this out to me.

3 Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the audience of the workshop "Empathetic Understanding", held at Duisburg-Essen University in May 2022, for their useful feedback on an earlier version of this chapter. I am also grateful to Matthias Vogel, Serena Gergorio and Gerson Reuter and the members of his research colloquium for discussing an early version of this chapter so constructively. I also would like to thank Katharina Sodoma, Vid Simoniti, Rachel Wiseman and last but not least Neil Roughley for their helpful comments and lunch time discussions.

Bibliography

Alter, T., and S. Walter, eds. 2006. *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Balog, K. 2012. "In Defence of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy". *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 84: 1–23.
Bayne, T. 2010. *The Unity of Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Berninger, A. 2023. "Experience and Understanding in Response to Holocaust Testimony". In *Empathy's Role in Understanding Persons, Art, and Literature*, edited by T. Petraschka and C. Werner, 84–102. London, New York: Routledge.
Boisserie-Lacroix, C., and M. Inchingolo. 2021. "Empathy for a Reason? From Understanding Agency to Phenomenal Insight". *Synthese* 198: 7097–7118.
Coplan, A. 2011. "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects". In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by A. Coplan and P. Goldie, 3–19. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cath, Y. 2019. "Knowing What It is Like and Testimony". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97 (1): 105–120.
Currie, G. 1990. *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Everett, A. 2005. "Against Fictional Realism". *Journal of Philosophy* 102 (12): 624–649.
Friend, S. 2008. "Imagining Fact and Fiction". In *New Waves in Aesthetics*, edited by K. Stock and K. Thomson-Jones, 150–169. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
García-Carpintero, M. 2019. "Assertions in Fiction: An Indirect Speech Act Account". *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 96: 445–462.
Gibson, J. 2008. "Cognitivism and the Arts". *Philosophy Compass* 3 (4): 573–589.
Gibson, J. 2016 "Empathy". In *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, edited by N. Carroll and J. Gibson, 200–219. London: Routledge.
Green, M. 2022. "Fiction and Epistemic Value: State of the Art". *British Journal of Aesthetics* 62 (2): 273–289.
Jackson, F. 1982. "Epiphenomenal Qualia". *Philosophical Quarterly* 32: 127–136. doi: 10.2307/2960077.
Kind, A. 2020. "What Imagination Teaches". In *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change*, edited by J. Schwenkler and E. Lambert, 133–146. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Konrad, E.M. 2017. "Signposts of Factuality". In *Art and belief*, edited by E. Sullivan-Bissett and H. Bradley, and P. Noordhof, 42–62. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kripke, S.A. 2013. *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Lamarque, P. 1996. *Fictional Points of View*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
Lamarque, P. 2008. *The Philosophy of Literature*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
Lamarque, P. 2014. *The Opacity of Narrative*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
Lamarque, P., and S.H. Olsen. 1994. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Lewis, D. 1988. "What Experience Teaches". In *Proceedings of the Russellian Society* 13: 29–57.
Lewis, D. 1983. "Postscript to 'Mad Pain and Martian Pain'". In *Philosophical Papers 1*, edited by D. Lewis, 130–132. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Lewis, L. 2007. "So This is What it's Like: A Defense of the Ability Hypothesis". In *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on*

Consciousness and Physicalism, edited by T. Alter and S. Walter, 32–51. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Maibom, H. 2016. "Knowing Me, Knowing You: Failure to Forecast and the Empathic Imagination". In *Knowledge Through Imagination*, edited by A. Kind and P. Kung, 185–206. New York: Oxford University Press.
Maibom, H. 2018. "Self-Simulation and Empathy". In *Forms of Fellow Feeling: Empathy, Sympathy, Concern and Moral Agency*, edited by T. Schramme and N. Roughley, 109–132. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nemirow, L. 1980. "Review of Thomas Nagel, Mortal Questions". *Philosophical Review* 89: 473–477.
Nida-Rümelin, M. 1998. "On Belief about Experiences. An Epistemological Distinction Applied to the Knowledge Argument against Physicalism". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1): 51–73. https://doi.org/10.2307/2653630.
Novitz, D. 1987. *Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Paul, L.A. 2014. *Transformative Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Salmon, N. 1998. "Nonexistence". *Noûs* 32 (3): 277–319.
Saunders, G. 2022. "'Could I Understand the People Who Rushed into the Capitol?': George Saunders on How Stories Teach Empathy". *The Guardian*, 15 October, 2022. www.theguardian.com/books/2022/oct/15/could-i-understand-the-people-who-rushed-into-the-capitol-george-saunders-on-how-stories-teach-empathy.
Simoniti, V. 2021. "Art as Political Discourse". *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61 (4): 559–574.
Stock, K. 2017. "Fiction, Testimony, Belief, and History". In *Art and Belief*, edited by E. Sullivan-Bissett, H. Bradley, and P. Noordhof, 19–41. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sundström, P. 2011. "Phenomenal Concepts". *Philosophy Compass* 6: 267–281.
Thomasson, A.L. 1998. *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Van Inwagen, P. 1977. "Creatures of Fiction". *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (4): 299–308.
Vendrell Ferran, I. 2018. *Die Vielfalt der Erkenntnis. Eine Analyse des kognitiven Werts der Literatur*. Münster: Mentis Verlag.
Voltolini, A. 2006. *How Ficta Follow Fiction: A Syncretistic Account of Fictional Entities*. Berlin: Springer.
Voltolini, A. 2021. "What We Can Learn from Literary Authors". *Acta Analytica* 36: 479–499.
Walsh, D. 1969. *Literature and Knowledge*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
Wiltsher, N. 2021. "Understanding What It's Like To Be (Dis)Privileged". *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 102: 320–356.
Yagisawa, T. 2001. "Against Creationism in Fiction". *Noûs* 35 (s15): 153–172.