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Cognitivism and the Arts

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Abstract

Cognitivism in respect to the arts refers to a constellation of positions that share in common the idea that artworks often bear, in addition to aesthetic value, a significant kind of cognitive value. In this paper I concentrate on three things: (i) the challenge of understanding exactly what one must do if one wishes to defend a cognitivist view of the arts; (ii) common anti-cognitivist arguments; and (iii) promising recent attempts to defend cognitivism.

I. Introduction

Human culture arrives at knowledge of its world in large part because it has devised effective practices for investigating it. The scientist, philosopher, historian – and on occasion even the journalist – all engage in more or less well structured practices that have as their goal (or as one of their chief goals) the exploration of some facet of natural or human reality. We might see the texts, the works, these practices produce as together constituting a record of the findings of these practices: an archive, as it were, of a culture's search for knowledge. Needless to say, many of the works in this archive will contradict one another, and it might even be the case that for every work in it that contains an important truth, there are considerably more that contain only falsehoods and nonsense. Nevertheless, if these practices and the works they produce do not always result in cognitive *achievements* – if they fail as well as succeed in the search for knowledge – they can at least be seen as cognitive *pursuits*. It is on account of this that we study these practices, perhaps engage in them ourselves and at any rate turn to them when we hope to learn a bit more about our world. This hope may often be frustrated, but we still tend to have faith in the pursuit itself.

The question one faces when discussing the possibility of a *cognitive* theory of art is whether the works artists produce have – or deserve to have – a place in this archive, that is, whether artworks record, reveal, or otherwise track and transmit truths about the world? Is art, at least at times, a kind of cognitive pursuit? The works artists produce are of course different in style and technique – and much else besides – from the sort

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of work scientists and philosophers produce. But when the artist turns to her brush, pen, or piano, might she be doing, in *some* way and at *some* level, something akin to what the philosopher or psychologist does? It doesn't, after all, seem so strange to claim that just as Freud revealed something about the workings of human mind in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, so did Shakespeare when he wrote *Hamlet*.

This question has taxed philosophers of art since Plato and Aristotle (Plato was generally sceptical of art's cognitive value, Aristotle quite optimistic) and it is today one of the most exciting debates in aesthetics. The problem is at root a tension between two very intuitive and deep-rooted ways of talking about the significance and nature of art. When called on to account for the value of art, out of one side of our mouth we tend to speak of its humanistic virtues: of the educative and edifying value of artworks. According to this conception, works of art relate to the human world much as the old adage has the eyes relate to the soul: artworks are portals through which we can peer into the deepest and most significant regions of reality (at least the human, cultural variety of reality). But out of the other side of our mouth, when we speak about the nature and value of art, we cast art as concerning itself with fictions and fantasy, with the perfection of artistic form and technique, with the beautiful and – unless one is a Kantian – the sublime. That is, we speak of art as fundamentally an *aesthetic* pursuit, and it is very difficult to reconcile this with the idea of art as a *cognitive* pursuit, for the ways we make sense of the aesthetic dimension of art almost always seem to imply that art is art just to the extent it turns its back on reality. This is why many philosophers have thought that questions of truth must be abandoned when appreciating a work of art, for to speak of truth in regard to art is to commit a kind of category error, that is, to apply to art a vocabulary meant for evaluating the success of other kinds of pursuit. Just as it would be irrelevant, indeed weird, to remark of a sociological work that the people it discusses should have been made less vicious and the cultural practices it explores more dramatic (they are how they are), there is something odd in saying of a symphony that it didn't tell you anything new about reality or that a certain play failed to give those in attendance justified true beliefs.

What makes a defence of the cognitive value of the arts challenging is that it calls on the philosopher not only to make sense of how artworks might fruitfully be seen as a kind of cognitive pursuit; it requires the reconciliation of two entrenched yet apparently incompatible ways of talking about the purpose and value of art. What I shall do in this essay is outline some of the more interesting attempts at this reconciliation. What also presents a challenge, especially to the newcomer, is that there is as much controversy concerning how to understand the nature of the problem as there is concerning how to solve it, and so it is worth discussing this in detail as well. In fact, much of what is philosophically exciting about the debate concerns the search for a proper way to set up the problem itself.

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This is no surprise, for tucked into the question of cognitivism is the massive, and foundational, issue of how art relates to reality, and questions of this magnitude tend to cause controversy at every step.

II. What is the Question?

There is considerable temptation – a temptation one should resist – to think that all one needs to do to defend a cognitivist view of art is to list off some of the ways in which we become smarter, better, or nicer in virtue of artworks. In fact, the question of cognitivism does not, contrary to a common assumption, even really hang on the issue of whether we can 'learn' from artworks, so baldly put. If it did, it would be a debate hardly worthy of philosophical attention. The reason for this is that we can learn from anything under the sun, at least if we are clever enough to ask the right questions of it – artworks, presumably, included. From certain samples of ice I can learn about the state of the polar icecaps, from a kind of leaf I can learn much about a kind of tree, and from your shoes I can learn something about your fashion sense. But just as this would not incline us to devise a cognitivist account of ice, leaves, or shoes, simply finding that we can mine artworks for certain kinds of information or use them as aids in our attempts at intellectual and moral betterment is not sufficient to ground a cognitivist view of the arts.

There are many reasons for this, but first among is that the question of cognitivism is two-place: it not only calls on us to show that there is something we can learn from art; to be cognitivists about art we *further* have to show that what we claim to have learnt from an artwork is a point, insight, or truth, *that is to be found in the artwork itself*. We praise, or mock, the cognitive value of a certain philosophical text because of the quality of the insight it struggles to articulate. This is why it is so natural to take a cognitive stance (what else?) toward philosophical texts. Cognitivism calls on us to show that artworks as well invite us to take a cognitive stance toward their content. That is, it asks us to show that if we acquire knowledge from art, it is because artworks themselves are active and competent players in the pursuit of knowledge. I do not show this, in fact I avoid the question entirely, if I refer solely to myself in defending cognitivism (to the ways in which my mind or morals have been improved through my encounters with an artwork). Since artworks are very rarely, in fact never, about *me*, I point in the wrong direction if I gesture toward myself instead of artworks when specifying the site of cognitive insight and discovery.

Few philosophers *intend* to argue something as silly as this, but, as a critical tool, it is always helpful to ask whether a certain position amounts to it, for many ultimately fall by it.[1] At any rate, the attempt to defend a cognitivist view of art requires finding a respect in which artworks have, as one might put it, *cognitive content*: something internal to their status as

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artworks that is of cognitive significance. And this is what is so hard to show, as we will see in a moment.

One brief aside before moving on. In recent scholarship it has been common to set up the problem slightly differently, framing and exploring the issue in terms of the interplay, if any, between the cognitive and aesthetic values of art: do cognitive merits (or flaws) in artworks always count as aesthetic merits (or flaws), and, if not, to what extent are we entitled to think of cognitive values as essential or even relevant to the value and experience of art *as* art?[2] I have opted against this way of framing the issue. Among other things, it seems reasonable to think that before one can intelligently discuss the interplay issue, one should *already* have a good story to tell about what the cognitive value of art consists in (and, for that matter, the aesthetic). In other words, one needs to do a lot of prior philosophical work before one is ready to enter this debate, and the problem of cognitivism should be treated as one such bit of prior work. That said, one does need to keep interplay issue in mind, since it would be a very sad thing to put in all the effort that is required to construct a cognitivist account of art, only to find that what it casts as cognitively significant about art has nothing at all to do with why we care about art.

III. Sceptical Arguments

It is here that the problem begins to take the form of a serious philosophical issue. As we just saw, cognitivism requires that we locate some layer of cognitive content *in* artworks, which would seem to be a philosophical way of saying that, when we look inside an artwork, we must find an epistemologically interesting picture or description of (or claim or statement about, etc.) reality. But there are good reasons for thinking that this is exactly what we do *not* find. We can break down the argument usually offered in support of this into four strands, none of which is entirely convincing on its own but jointly they present a genuine challenge to the cognitivist view of the arts: (i) *the problem of unclaimed truths*; (ii) *the missing tools of inquiry*; (iii) *the problem of fiction*; and (iv) *the nature of artistic creativity.* I will say something about each.[3]

(i) We do, of course, find images, sentences, perhaps even sounds, in artworks that will, if held up to the real world, turn out to be true of it, but in ways – or so the argument goes – that are uninteresting from the cognitive point of view. In the film *Mean Streets* the streets of Midtown unfold just as they do in reality, and in Caravaggio's *The Lute Player* the lute has the same number of strings real lutes have. More to the point, many of the psychological, historical, and geographic descriptions found in art (especially in literature, but also in painting, if one speaks of depictions rather than descriptions) are 'world-adequate': if we compare aspects of their content to reality, the content will, as philosophers say, 'correspond' to it, get it right. In fact, in a perfectly ordinary sense *any* image or string

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of words with propositional content[4] – in art or elsewhere – bears a truth-value and so enjoys a kind of connection to truth. This is all fine and well, but the argument is that in art, these truths, if we can call them such, are *unclaimed*: they are not asserted *of* the world *by* the work. Art does not, in other words, send these 'truths' out into the world but instead places them in a certain autonomous artistic, imaginative space. These 'truths' play a non-epistemic role in artworks: they function to give shape and structure to the world of the work rather than to inform the reader of how things stand in the actual world. When we find bits and pieces of our world in art, they in effect function as a backdrop, much as a stage-set functions in the theatre. A set that is made to resemble a street in SoHo does not, one would think, *assert* truths about SoHo. Its function in the play is not educative or epistemic but artistic and practical, in order to situate the tale it tells, as Shakespeare would say, in 'a local habitation' – fictional characters, like real people, have to live somewhere. Art tends to verge on unintelligibility when it is does not build its worlds upon known features of the real world (hence the challenge – an intentional one – of much modernist art). But that is all art does: it *uses* reality, worldly truth, as a setting, backdrop, and from this it would seem that the most we can conclude is that art *presupposes* rather than tries to *impart* knowledge of reality. When we know the images and descriptions in an artwork to be world-adequate, it seems we must have learnt their truth elsewhere, at any rate not from our encounters with artworks.

(ii) Above I invoked the idea of a cognitive pursuit. Whatever one thinks a practice must do to count as a cognitive pursuit, arguments against the cognitivist view of the arts often begin by pointing out that we will find that art does none of them. What distinguishes a genuine cognitive pursuit from practices that merely pontificate, dissemble, or bullshit (all infomercials and most forms of advertising, for example) is that cognitive pursuits do not merely *say* but *show*. The difference between a tee-shirt that proclaims 'Golfers Make Better Lovers' and a scientific study that concludes the same lies in the support that underlies the assertion: none in the case of the tee-shirt and much in the case of the scientific study. And it is the offering of epistemic support that sends an image, sound, or word out into the world and gives it a claim to cognitive value, a claim to being genuinely *informative* of the world. When we explain what makes a pursuit cognitive, in addition to stating its goal (the production of knowledge, one would think), we talk about how it tries to achieve its goal, and here we tend to describe the way in which it employs the various tools and techniques of *inquiry*: the construction of arguments, the offering of evidence, the giving of reasons: the construction of some rational structure of thought and scrutiny through which a claim is articulated and asserted of the world. On the whole, art uses none of the tools and techniques of inquiry, and thus the question becomes what would then even invite us to treat artists as players in the pursuit of

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knowledge? If art were a cognitive pursuit that for some inexplicable reason shunned the tools of inquiry, it would seem spectacularly ill-suited for its job. And if art refuses to use these tools and techniques, how could it possibly *show* us – in any epistemologically relevant sense of 'show' – something of cognitive consequence about our world? It is for this reason that many philosophers fear that if we cast art as a cognitive pursuit, we will soon find its epistemic status much more similar to that of the tee-shirt than that of the scientific study: it can perhaps say but, again, it cannot really show.

(iii) In most of the representational arts the content is *fictional*, which is one way of saying that art tends to represent chimeras, objects of the creative imagination and not the stirrings of the real world.[5] To the extent that art engages in a form of representation, art represents *make-believe*, *imagined* worlds and not the real one. In this respect there is a so-called 'representational divide' that runs between art and the real world, a gap art seems uninterested in bridging. In the representational arts, the rails of reference run not from word/image to world but from word/image to fictional worlds. Thus reality – and hence the domicile of worldly truth – is simply bypassed. If this is so, then artworks do not present readers with objects that are sufficiently 'real' to give plausibility to the idea that we have come into contact with reality in art. And if we do not come into contact with reality in art, how could we possibly learn about reality from art? To this extent, it is not only that art fails to offer adequate support for what it says about reality, as (ii) has it. Art does not talk about reality at all, so strictly speaking there is nothing for it to support. And if we regard the content of the representational arts as fictional, even those world-adequate images and descriptions we find in art will be treated as *make-believe* or *entertained* – and not *asserted* – truths, used by the work to qualify a fictional world rather than to inform us about the real one, which reinforces in a powerful way the argument of (i).

(iv) When we reflect on the role of creativity in the representational arts, it might well seem that an artist's activity should be understood in terms of a certain kind of *freedom* from reality, a freedom that poets and philosophers such as Schiller and Nietzsche equate with humanity's capacity to escape the empirical world and in so doing achieve a kind of liberation. If artists merely copied – merely offered mimetic reproductions of – aspects of the real world, it is hard to see why we should praise their creativity, since copying, of course, is not quite *creative*, as one simply duplicates 'what is' instead of bringing into existence something genuinely new. It is perhaps better to see art not as in the business of recording reality but of significance precisely because it has found away to get away from it. Art is not The Great Mirror but The Great Escape. To this extent it is not necessarily a sad thing that artists cannot, or do not, offer knowledge of the world. It is, on the contrary, a great human achievement, a moment of emancipation from reality, that we can turn our backs

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on the real world and create something that is, in all likelihood, much more interesting to behold, assuming that the vast majority of us do not live in a world as beautiful as the one we find in a Manet painting, as exciting as in a Conrad story, or as meaningful as in a Wordsworth poem. The point is, if we wish to do justice to the human achievement that is the practice of art-making, there is something alluring about the idea that we should do so by emphasizing the distance between art and reality rather than by trying to show that art, like most pursuits, is just one more way of exploring it.

These are the arguments that make the prospects of a cognitivist view of art appear bleak. When we look in artworks we find no truths claimed of the world, no employment of the tools of inquiry, and, to round things off, descriptions of fictional rather than real states of affairs. And if it is built into the idea of an artist that artists create new worlds rather than merely copy the real one, why should we even wish to take a cognitivist view of art? The anti-cognitivist argues that on this view of the value of art, artists will at best look like very inept players in a game ruled by scientists and philosophers.

One might complain that these arguments are only convincing when levelled against the *representational* arts. This is true. But when we take the representation out of art, the argument looms that we shall soon find ourselves with *nothing* that could possibly link the content of an artwork with reality. Representation (broadly conceived, to include reference) is, after all, how philosophers describe how words, sounds, and images forge an initial point of contact with the world. It is by representing the world, in the broadest sense, that some content is made to be *about* it; and so if we look at the non-representational arts, we seem to lose the very thing that would endow a work with worldliness, that would so much as put it in contact with reality. In other words, while it is true that the anti-cognitivist arguments just canvassed largely only work against the representational arts, they seem to have same terrible consequence for all the arts, representational or otherwise. If the novel cannot even inform us about reality, then how could absolute music, abstract painting, or modern dance?

IV. Defending Cognitivism

So how might the philosopher beholden to cognitivism respond to these sceptical challenges? There are almost as many strategies for defending cognitivism as there are cognitivists, and so I will have to speak on a rather cosmic level of generality when organizing these strategies into basic kinds of approach one may take up. By necessity the classification I offer here will be artificial, and one should be aware that many prominent defences of cognitivism fit comfortably under more than one of the following headings. That said, one can detect three very broad kinds of approach: those that argue the arts can give us a kind of *philosophical knowledge*, those

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that argue that the arts can give us a kind of *experiential knowledge*, and those that argue for what one might call *neo-cognitivism*. I will discuss each and briefly canvass common criticisms raised against them.

PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE

Whatever 'philosophical knowledge' might ultimately consist in – and this is largely irrelevant to the debate – in Western philosophy the term identifies a kind of answer one struggles to give to a certain set of questions. The conception of what counts as a philosophical question and of what one must do to answer it has, like much else in philosophy, its origins in Plato. In the Socratic dialogues, Socrates poses questions of the 'What is X' form: What is knowledge? What is beauty? What is Virtue? And the expectation is that what will count as an answer, good or bad, will come in a certain form, namely in *propositional* form, and it will affirm, or deny, of some issue of philosophical interest that thus-and-such is the case.[6] That is, it will offer an answer of the X is F variety: beauty *is* the object of love, virtue *is* a certain state of the soul, an unreflective life *is not* worth living, and so on. Knowledge of this form is often treated as the gold-standard in philosophy: because it addresses an issue of philosophical (rather than, say, philatelic) import, it speaks to our interest in the human situation; and because the answer comes in propositional form, it can play a direct role in rational discourse, conceptual thought,[7] and intellectual education (if it weren't propositional, it would be, for obvious reasons, difficult to express, to teach, and indeed to think[8]).

What is attractive about this approach is that it takes seriously the idea that the arts, like philosophy, speak about the human situation: it is natural to conceive of both the philosopher and the artist as exploring how humans hang together morally, socially, and psychologically. The problem, of course, is that so few artworks *explicitly* pose or answer philosophical questions. If artworks offer knowledge of this sort, this knowledge will then have to be *implicit* in an artwork, and the task for the aesthetician who takes seriously this approach will be that of developing a plausible account of how we can bring to light the philosophical truths hidden deep inside artworks. In the contemporary debate aestheticians who embrace this approach tend to suggest one of the following two methods of excavation: what I will call the *thought-experiment analogy* and *critical cognitivism*.

The thought-experiment analogy begins by pointing out something eminently reasonable: many of our most prized cognitive pursuits regularly enlist fictions – and, more generally, the imagination – in their pursuit of knowledge.[9] To give a few examples, in the sciences we have Schrödinger's cat and Maxwell's demon, and in philosophy we have Searle's Chinese room, Putnam's brain in a vat, and contemporary philosophy of mind's slightly embarrassing obsession with zombies. However one wishes to define a thought-experiment,[10] thought-experiments clearly use fictions, the imagination,

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and the conventions of story-telling to direct thought toward a conclusion about some item of epistemic interest. They do so by raising questions of the 'what would happen if X were the case' or 'what should we say (scientifically, philosophically, etc) if X were the case'. In short, thought-experiments enlist fictions to lead us toward a worldly truth, and this jibes very well with what many of the representational arts seem interested in doing: inviting us to explore the human situation by asking us to imagine human life from a variety of perspectives. They will be *imagined* perspectives on *fictional* states of affairs, but so what? If it works for the scientist and philosopher, it should also work for the poet and novelist. And note how directly the themes of great art seem to invite the idea that art (at least some kinds of art) can fruitfully be seen as a thought-experiment. If one wishes to prompt others to draw an important conclusion about our economic, sexual, or technological practices, what could be better than having them imaginatively explore the world of a destitute prostitute, the struggles of an exploited worker, or a future in which humans have been entirely replaced with automatons? There is an abundance of novels, poems, films, and even paintings for which we could make a plausible case that issues of just this sort are explored. These are big questions, and they tend to prod us in the search for big answers, insights that deserve the name of philosophical knowledge.

Similar is the critical cognitivist approach.[11] What is ingenious about this approach is its simplicity. We may not find an explicit structure of argumentation, of posing and responding to philosophical questions, *in* artworks. But we often find them when we look at critical discussions *of* artworks. What we see in critical discourse is a rationally, often argumentatively, structured manner of scrutinizing artworks. Among other things, critics can make explicit the great themes of great art, addressing them as ways of regarding the world, and reflecting on their epistemic status, on their truth. We see this activity on clearest display when we look at our critical practices, but even the solitary reader, listener, or viewer can engage in this activity in the comfort of her armchair. We might not find these themes cast as philosophical hypotheses in artworks, but in the 'reflective aftermath'[12] of appreciation, we can treat them as such, and in doing so we can, under the guidance of the artwork, come to grasp their truth (if that they have). And note that critical cognitivism, arguably unlike the thought-experiment approach, seems well-equipped to travel from literature to the other arts. If one possesses sufficient critical talent, one should be able to elicit implicit themes, layers of philosophical aboutness, from even a symphony or statue. We would not be terribly surprised to find a clever critic derive an insight into the nature of joy from Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* or the value of the contemplative life from Rodin's *The Thinker*.

The thought-experiment analogy and critical cognitivism have much in their favour. Though in different ways, each offers a plausible response to all four of the sceptical challenges. Each embraces the fictionality and

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creativity of art and so can respond to challenges (iii) and (iv); and each has a story to tell about how we can link artworks with a kind of cognitive pursuit through which art can be seen as generating genuine *claims*, and so they seem able to respond to (i) and (ii). The worry, however, is whether they really answer the question itself, that is, whether they take seriously that the challenge is one of finding a layer of cognitive content *in* artworks. It is the reliance on the notion of *implicit* philosophical content in artworks that is most worrisome. One always has the nagging feeling that 'implicit' just means 'not really there'. And if it is not really there, then one has not shown that artworks have a kind of cognitive content, and thus the problem has been avoided rather than solved.[13] One clear difference between thought-experiments and most artworks is that in the former, but virtually never in the later, there is a surrounding apparatus of argumentation, thesis-stating, and conclusion-drawing, and, *absent this apparatus*, the claim that an artwork *is* or *contains* a thought-experiment becomes unconvincing. And critical cognitivism concedes that *none* of this can be found *in* artworks, and so it directs our attention toward critical discourse. But if we look away from artworks and at critical conversations about them, we seem to have looked away from the very thing whose nature we promised to illuminate when we took up the challenge of defending cognitivism. These are the problems one must take seriously if one decides to endorse a version of critical cognitivism or the thought-experiment analogy.

EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

A different approach addresses another intuition we have about the value of the arts, especially the representational arts. When we walk into a gallery, read a novel, or view a film, we very often find ourselves confronted with a vision of people encountering something of significance. That is, they often seem to be having what we humbly call a 'valuable experience'. For all sorts of anatomical, temporal and financial reasons, reality will never offer us the occasion to experience the world as Madame Bovary, Achilles or King Midas did. Art can be seen compensating for the extremely limited way we each encounter the world by offering us an occasion to do in the imagination what real life can never make possible. Surely the occasion to witness this great variety of *kinds* of human experience is a potential source of cognitive insight. The sort of knowledge one gets from this will not come in the form of an answer to a philosophical question. It will rather be a broadening of our awareness of the ways in which, one might say, we are in the world. Drawing solely on my own experiences and my preferred books of theory, I will acquire no significant knowledge of what it is like to be a victim of systematic racial oppression or an immigrant struggling to make his way to an unwelcoming country. But I can read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or watch Elia Kazan's *America*,

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America and in so doing acquaint myself with a region of human experience that would otherwise remain unknown to me.

Unlike the philosophical knowledge approach, the proponent of the experiential knowledge approach can make a compelling case that what he casts as of cognitive value is a proper, explicit, feature of the content of an artwork. If we do not quite seem to find thought-experiments in most works of art, we certainly do find characters that have experiences, and this is all the philosopher who embraces a version of the experiential knowledge approach needs to make his case. For this reason it strikes many as a much more plausible, and direct, route to a defence of cognitivism. There are a great number of ways one might develop this approach, but at least two have enjoyed considerable popularity in contemporary aesthetics: the *subjective knowledge approach* and the *simulation approach*.

If standard cognitive pursuits like science and history strive to obtain an objective view of the world, perhaps the arts are best seen as running in the opposite direction, striving not for a detached, external perceptive but a view from the 'inside' of life. The subjective knowledge approach takes this as its cue, arguing that art offers us the occasion to shed our skin for a spell and inhabit other subjectivities.[14] We will not get *knowledge that X* from this but *knowledge of what X is like* (or would be like). In the latter case X identifies not a theory or proposition but what it is like to be someone (other than myself) or undergo something (other than what I in fact do undergo). By 'descending into the subjective view from *here*' (Burri 312) one acquires knowledge of an important but often neglected – by epistemologists, not artists, the argument would go – purchase on the world: the perspectival and experiential. But perspectives and experiences are part of the fabric of reality, certainly of human reality, and so having a practice such as art that makes these aspects of the world cognitively available to us performs an important epistemic service.

There is something one should wish to preserve in all of this, but, if taken literally, the subjective knowledge approach is not very promising. Since Captain Ahab, Madame Bovary and the like are fictional, there is, if we are being precise, no *real* experience the what-it-is-like of which they could inform us. Indeed, as fictions, they have never really experienced anything at all, so they wouldn't seem to have much to teach us about experience. Second, the great characters of fiction are on the whole too *sui generis*, too *exceptional*. What kind of experiential knowledge do I 'learn' from, say, Oedipus? – what it is like to have fate conspire against me such that I kill my father and sleep with my mother and in the process win and lose a kingdom? Surely this is not a *kind* of human experience.[15] Lastly, from the moral and political point of view, we should be very reluctant to claim that reading a book or looking at a painting is sufficient to give us *knowledge* of what X is like, for if X identifies, say, the experience of surviving Auschwitz or years of domestic violence, in no sense can I claim that my mere acquaintance with an artwork has put me on an

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experiential par with someone who has actually lived through horrors of this sort. Only *real* experience can give us that right, which is, sadly, why those of us who have never known love or loss will not be able to correct this ignorance simply by going to the library.

Even if we do not literally get subjective knowledge from art, surely there is something of cognitive value in the multiplicity of finely detailed perspectives and experiences art brings to our attention, even if fictional.[16] The simulation approach has been helpful in pointing out how one might avoid the shortcomings of the subjective knowledge approach while preserving the allure of the intuition it harnesses. In aesthetics as in the philosophy of mind, theories of simulation have enjoyed great popularity in recent years, and there are many ways of being a 'simulationist'. What is, I think, most helpful for cognitivism is the following suggestion. I do not, strictly speaking, assume *someone else's* subjectivity, psychology, when I encounter fictional characters. I remain myself and, in my imagination, work through the experience of encountering what the great characters of fiction do. Thus the knowledge I achieve from this will be knowledge about myself and not another subject. There are two ways in which this can be done. On a first-personal account, I simulate the experience of being, say, Madame Bovary, running, off-line, what I take to be her desires, beliefs and feelings and, in so doing, coming to learn something about how I would feel if in a similar context, if undergoing a similar experience. On a third-personal account, I do much the same thing, but instead of imagining that I am *undergoing* what Madame Bovary does, I simulate the experience of *witnessing* the events of the story as though real, as though recounted as true, taking up, perhaps, the perspective of a novel's narrator. In each case, *I* am the object of knowledge, in the sense that I come to learn what I would think, feel or believe if I were to live through or witness what the great characters of literature do. Would I remain as committed to certain ideas, values and principles were I to suffer or behold the events depicted in the film *Hotel Rwanda*?[17]

Given the flexibility and variety of simulation theories of the imagination, it is very difficult to say anything general about its prospects; one suspects that with a bit of tinkering the theory has the capacity to survive the common sceptical charges against cognitivism. Simulation is in essence a kind of inquiry, and if art makes use of it, it would seem a small step to showing that art, too, is therefore a kind of inquiry. This is extremely helpful to cognitivism, and for these reasons, sceptical arguments (iii) and (iv) do not seem to pose serious challenges to it. Moreover, it makes fictions and the broader creative aspect of art the very thing art gives us as fodder for our simulations, so it would not seem to have much trouble addressing (i) or (ii). The worry, however, is whether it addresses the problem, the question, on which cognitivism is premised. There does seem to be a bit too much 'me' in all of this, and cognitivism is, again, about what goes on in artworks and not in the mind of the consumer about art

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(except in a secondary, derivative sense). If what endows these simulated experiences with cognitive value is that I ask '*what would I think or feel if . . .*', I am talking about *my* cognitive discovery, not an artwork's. No sensible person will deny that we can, and do, enlist artworks in our personal cognitive pursuits, and that artworks can have, if we just find a clever way of using them, instrumental cognitive value. But the simulation approach does not seem to take seriously that the question since Plato has been whether *artworks themselves embody or articulate a kind of knowledge*. It is an attractive theory for many reasons, but aesthetics is still waiting for a defence of it that actually takes the question of cognitivism seriously.

NEO-COGNITIVIST APPROACHES

The last approach I shall canvass, briefly, is a motley of arguments that have in common only one thing: the denial that cognitive value is always a matter of truth and knowledge. There are, one would suspect, many forms of cognition that cannot be explained in the standard philosophical vocabulary of knowledge acquisition, many ways of coming to grasp the world that do not rely on my having come into possession of a new worldly truth. If a case can be made for this, it would offer the aesthetician the attractive prospect of being able to avoid the standard anti-cognitivist arguments altogether, since they tend to set their sights on the idea that artworks are vehicles of truth and knowledge. Moreover, neo-cognitive approaches address a feeling many of us have that the arts offer a more diffuse, but still cognitively significant, encounter with reality than could be captured in a proposition, claim or by answering a 'what is it like' question.

Since neo-cognitivism picks out such a diverse set of arguments, I will not risk trying to group them into kinds of approach. I shall simply describe what I take to be the more interesting examples of neo-cognitivism and invite the reader to reflect on the possibilities each opens up. One possibility is to argue that art, rather than offering knowledge of the world, is of value because of how it transforms the knowledge we *already* possess. Much of what we know of the world we know in a wooden, merely conceptual manner. Art might take this as its lead, clarifying in important ways the knowledge we bring to it rather than trying to issue new knowledge of the world. Thus art can, if not offer worldly truths, then at least enlighten us by 'mobilizing what we already know and what we already feel', and in so doing 'become an occasion for us to deepen our understanding of what we already know and feel'.[18,19] Or one might point out that just as moral responses do not so much convey *knowledge* of an event as they given expression to an agent's awareness of its significance, so artistic narratives help bring to light the significance and import of our characteristically human practices. That is, artworks, like moral responses, embody ways of acknowledging, responding to, the values and

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kinds of meaning we find in the world.[20] Or one might opt for the simple approach and argue that art offers 'understanding', a sort of fleshing out of our conceptual space and possibilities of thought. This would not offer the consumer of art discrete bits of knowledge but a valuable expansion of her cognitive capacities.[21] In an approach that seems much better suited than these for travelling beyond the literary arts, we might argue that art's cognitive value resides primarily in its capacity to promote certain cognitive and perceptual *virtues*, for example the capacity to attend to detail, grasp meaning, look beyond surfaces and contemplate an object selflessly. As one philosopher puts it, 'making sense of a painting by Kitaj requires open-mindedness, so it requires a closed-minded person to become more open-minded', and this would seem to be a noteworthy cognitive accomplishment.[22]

One has the sense that neo-cognitivism is what lies on the frontier of the debate on cognitivism. There are many ways of developing the intuition it embraces. Indeed, all one has to do is identify a kind of cognitive state other than knowing and one has the foundation for a neo-cognitivist account of the arts. Like the philosophical knowledge and experiential knowledge approaches, neo-cognitivism too runs the risk (inadvertently or otherwise) of ignoring the question and simply commenting on how consumers of art become smarter or better in virtue of their time with artworks. And since the kind of insight art offers is not propositional, not expressible in terms of an acquired truth, one will have a rough time telling one's peers precisely what he has learnt from an artwork. It does not, in other words, seem like a particularly quantifiable kind of information or insight the neo-cognitivist is after. But perhaps that is the point: art, unlike accounting, is a few atmospheres above the cognitive competition and we should not expect it to speak to us in the same way.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion let me link this discussion to kindred debates in contemporary aesthetics. The attempt to defend a cognitivist view of art is – or should be seen as – part of a much larger, grander philosophical project. For lack of a better term, one might describe this project as the attempt to defend a *humanistic* view of the arts: the view of art that casts artworks as intimately bound up with the human world and human values. The defence of cognitivism is an important component of this view (it might be seen as its foundation). But if not linked to other issues of why art matters to us in this humanistic sense, it can result in a coldly intellectualist and aesthetically impoverished view of art. The most obvious other issues concern the ethical and emotional dimensions of art. And once one has offered a compelling account of the ethical, affective and cognitive significance of art, one must, as I said earlier, then go on to offer an account of the interplay of the humanistic and aesthetic dimensions of art: to what

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extent do we value art *as art* on account of, say, its moral or cognitive value?[23] This means, of course, that offering a satisfying and fully developed defense of cognitivism is ultimately much more of a challenge than I have let on here.

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Short Biography

John Gibson is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Louisville and received his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in 2001. He is the author of *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford, 2007) and coeditor of *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative and Knowledge* (2007) and *The Literary Wittgenstein* (2004), both with Routledge. His essays have appeared in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and *British Journal of Aesthetics*, and his 'Literature and Knowledge' is forthcoming in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*. He is currently getting to work on short book he thinks he will call *Poetry, Metaphor & Nonsense: An Essay on Meaning*.

Notes

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[1] I argue for, rather than merely assert, this in Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life*.
[2] For example, see Berys Gaut's and Peter Lamarque's essays on cognitivism in Kieran, *Contemporary Debates*.
[3] The *locus classicus* of anti-cognitivism regarding the arts, at least in the contemporary debate, is Stolnitz. Other works which elaborate arguments for (though do not always ultimately endorse) anti-cognitivism are Graham; Diffey. Lamarque and Olsen offer the most sustained evaluation of arguments both for and against cognitivism. Also worth reading is Carroll, 'Ethical Criticism' (though Carroll discusses ethical issues in this essay, the debates are so intimately linked that his arguments transfer with ease to a discussion of cognitivism).
[4] *Implicit* propositional content, in the case of images.
[5] Of course there are paintings and poems that depict or describe, for example, a real landscape or an actual person's physical features. But it is often argued that to regard something as art is to treat it as fictional or regard it as an autonomous object of aesthetic appreciation (in either case the problem of unclaimed truths, among many others, rears its head). Also note that even if we accept that artistic representations of this sort can convey information about, even knowledge of, what it represents, it would not be what most of us want from a cognitivist account of art, since it would give us the rather paltry claim that art can tell or show us that a particular person or place *looks like this or that* (instead of offering us those great, broadly humanistic, truths we hope that art at times teaches us). This variety of knowledge is both too particular and too uninteresting from the philosophical point of view to make cognitivism seem a view of art worth embracing.

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[6] One might – and many aestheticians would – prefer to call what I am describing here *propositional knowledge* rather than *philosophical knowledge*. With a slight shift in emphasis, it could just as easily be called conceptual knowledge or discursive knowledge.
[7] This is because conceptual thought is often understood to be propositional in nature.
[8] At least if one is teaching a kind of *knowledge that*, as philosophers on the whole do, rather than a skill-based *knowledge how*.
[9] The most influential statement of this is Carroll, 'Wheel of Virtue'. Also of significant interest is Elgin.
[10] For a helpful overview, see James Robert Brown's entry on thought experiments for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thought-experiment/>.
[11] The best example of this approach is Peter Kivy, 'The Laboratory of Fictional Truth', in *Philosophies of Arts* 120–39. Though I do not link it to a form of propositional knowledge, I argue for a kind of critical cognitivism in Gibson, 'Interpreting Words'. While it also has elements in common with what I am calling the thought-experiment approach, one should mention here John.
[12] See Kivy 125.
[13] There are a few didactic literary works that one could plausibly argue have the implicit structure of a thought-experiment (for example a novel like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which 'derives' a socialist manifesto from its fictional tale of class oppression, or *Everyman* and the general genre of the morality play), and this might be enough to reveal the implausibility of a categorical denial that artworks can engage in cognitive pursuits. See Carroll, 'Wheel of Virtue' for an honest discussion of this.
[14] A popular defense of this is Walsh. A sophisticated recent defense is Burri.
[15] One might argue that philosophers who defend a version of the subjective knowledge approach do not intend for the kind of knowledge we acquire from art to be *this* specific, to be so tied to the exceptional circumstances of (many) fictional characters. We learn something more general from art, something of broader import that is merely brought to our attention in the unique circumstances of a fictional character. This may be true, but if we conceive of the cognitive value of art as consisting in a kind of *general* knowledge about the human situation, it no longer seems to be a genuine form of *subjective* knowledge. If we subtract out reference to the specific ways in which some agent actually does experience the world, the supposed knowledge one will gain will no longer be properly 'experiential' or 'subjective' knowledge. As a rule of thumb, it is not a good idea to find recourse in the 'general' or 'universal' when explaining the nature of subjective knowledge, for fairly obvious philosophical reasons.
[16] For influential accounts of simulation approaches, see Feagin; Currie; Walton.
[17] There has been a growing number of critics of the idea that our imaginative (and emotional) participation with fictions requires the kind of identification with characters (or implied narrators) the simulationist claims it does. For the sake of space I have omitted a discussion of what is controversial about simulation theories of the imagination. For excellent discussions of this, see Kieran; Meskin and Weinberg; Weinberg and Meskin.
[18] For a similar defence of art's capacity to clarify the knowledge we bring to it, see Eldridge.
[19] See Carroll, 'Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding'.
[20] See Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* for an example of this. For a discussion of acknowledgement, see the essays collected in Cavell.
[21] Though none amount to just this claim, the following offer variations on its general theme: Graham; Novitz; Farrell.
[22] Lopes 147.
[23] For an excellent discussion of this, see Gaut.

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