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## Is there a Specific Sort of Knowledge from Fictional Works?

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RESUMEN

La discusión en torno a la naturaleza y el valor de la ficción ha prestado a menudo atención a la posibilidad de adquirir conocimiento a través de la misma. Con frecuencia se ha invocado el supuesto carácter imaginativo de la apreciación de las obras de ficción y el tipo de respuestas emocionales que la ficción es capaz de desencadenar en el espectador para dar cuenta de su supuesto valor cognitivo. Mi propósito en este trabajo será examinar si la ficción como tal posee un valor cognitivo específico. Aunque considero que las obras de ficción pueden proporcionar cierto tipo de conocimiento, creo que las virtudes cognitivas que a menudo atribuimos a la ficción no se derivan de su carácter ficcional como tal. Más bien, tales valores se apoyan sobre diversas propiedades que tienen que ver con el hecho de que nos encontramos ante representaciones. Así, considero que pese a que es innegable que las obras de ficción poseen diversos tipos de valor cognitivo, no podemos decir que ninguno de ellos esté vinculado de manera intrínseca al carácter ficcional de la representación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *ficción, valor cognitivo, imaginación, emoción, literatura.*

ABSTRACT

Reflection on the nature and value of fiction has often paid attention to the possibility of acquiring knowledge through engaging with fictional works. The alleged imaginative character of fiction appreciation and the sort of emotional responses that fiction is able to prompt in the viewer have been frequently invoked in order to explain the peculiar cognitive value that fictions may possess. In this paper, I would like to question whether fiction as such possesses a specific kind of cognitive value. Although I agree that fictional works can convey certain kinds of knowledge, I think that the cognitive virtues that we attribute to fictional works do not have much to do with their fictional character as such. Rather, these values are grounded upon the various properties that the different representational artefacts that can serve to produce fictional works possess. Thus, while I think fictional works can deliver various sorts of cognitive value, this value is not intrinsically connected with the fictional nature of these works.

KEYWORDS: *Fiction, Cognitive Value, Imagination, Emotion, Literature.*

## I. SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE FROM FICTION

Is there something about fiction that makes it a special cognitive artefact? Can we show that the cognitive value that fiction possesses is specially linked to its fictional nature?

The question whether fiction possesses cognitive value has been subject to dispute ever since the nature of fiction has been discussed. Contemporary theories of fiction have also developed a view about this subject matter in tandem with their proposals about the nature of fictional representation. Thus, accounts that have placed the focus upon the imaginative character of fiction have simultaneously explored the theme of the cognitive value of fiction in terms of the cognitive virtues that the exercise of the imagination may bring about<sup>1</sup>. This form of addressing the problem of the cognitive value of fiction has led to the thought that whatever the cognitive virtues that fictional works possessed they had to be intimately linked to their fictional character. This invites the thought that the alleged cognitive value of fictional works – if genuine – is grounded upon its fictional nature. However, many of the defenders of the idea that fiction can convey some kind of knowledge do not go beyond merely showing that the conditions for cognitive value are compatible with a work's fictional character – however we conceive it.

My aim in this paper will be to show that although fictions can convey different sorts of cognitive value, these are not connected in any significant way to their fictional nature. In this sense, I will try to show that some of the defenders of the view that fictions possess cognitive value have often addressed this problem in a way that may be somehow ambiguous. While they have successfully shown that fictions can possess cognitive value, they have mistakenly taken this value to be such that only fictions could afford it. My point is that we should be cautious in deriving from the fact that fictions can afford knowledge of several kinds that this is a form of knowledge available only through fictions. If it were, it could not be available through a similar but non-fictional representation. But, as I will try to show, the features upon which the cognitive value of fictions relies are not exclusive to fictional works and, in fact, non-fictional works possess them too.

Nevertheless, before reaching this conclusion, I would like to explore some of the usual arguments that have been offered in order to motivate the idea that fiction affords a peculiar kind of knowledge. As we shall see, the thought that there are some forms of knowledge that

can only be properly conveyed through fiction has not been alien to artists and philosophers alike.

In the first pages of Jorge Semprún's work *L'écriture ou la vie* we read: "a doubt about the possibility of telling is hunting me. Not because the experience lived is unspeakable (...) It is a worry that does not have so much to do with the form of a possible narration but with its substance. Not to do with its articulation but its profundity. Only those who are able to transform their testimony into an artistic object – or into an object of recreation – will be able to achieve this substance, this transparent profundity. Only the artifice of a controlled narration will partly achieve testimonial truth."<sup>22</sup> This statement, although appearing within a fiction, could be read as expressing the view that we need to rely on fictional discourse in order to properly express or communicate certain things, facts or experiences. It appears as if the attempt to convey certain contents will systematically fail if we adopt a non-fictional stance.

But, why should certain contents be such that they can only be available through fictional representations? Maybe the explanation of this asymmetry between fiction and non-fiction does not have much to do with the kind of content conveyed but with the sort of access that each form of representation affords. Perhaps the way in which fiction puts us into contact with certain contents is such that the way in which we cognitively grasp them is special. But, what features of fiction could explain this?

In order to show how the problem has been addressed so far I will pay attention to two aspects of fictional works, which have been appealed to in order to flesh out the idea that fiction can possess cognitive value: the alleged imaginative character of fictional works (section II) and the ability of fictional works to generate emotional responses (section III). My aim will be to show that while either of them is able to answer positively the question about the possibility of acquiring knowledge through fiction they fail to show that this knowledge is specifically linked to that fictional nature.

In section IV, I will try to show that those who defend the view that fictions possess cognitive value in virtue of their fictional character should also endorse that the non-fictional counterparts of those fictional works could not possess special cognitive value -at least not in the same way. However, I think this cannot be easily shown because the reasons that are usually invoked in order to justify that fictions can possess that sort of value are related not so much to the fictional character of a particular representation but rather to the kind of representation the fictional work is made of.

Accordingly, I hope to conclude that the cognitive value that can be attributed to fiction is not specially linked to its fictional character and, hence, that there is no specific sort of cognitive value that can be attributed to fiction as such.

## II. FICTION AND THE VIRTUES OF IMAGINATION

With few exceptions [Friend (2006), (2014) and Matravers (2014)] the idea that fiction is essentially linked to imaginative activities has been dominant. Walton's proposal of fiction as make-believe (1990) is usually acknowledged as the germ of a cluster of theories that share the idea that fictional representations are basically intended as invitations to imagining their content. The identification between fiction and imagination could encourage the thought that, if fictional works could afford knowledge, we could clarify its specific features by paying attention to the ways in which imagination works.

Although there is no shared view on this,<sup>3</sup> the focus on imagination, and the ways in which imaginative activities put us into contact with certain contents, could seem promising. If fiction is essentially linked to imagining, maybe Semprún's view could be clarified in terms of the virtues of imagination.

In what sense could imagination afford some distinctive and cognitively valuable way of getting to know certain contents?

Although there are several activities that may be considered as being part of the imagination, there is a tendency to characterize it in contrast to belief.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, belief and imagination can be considered as two distinct propositional attitudes, which can take similar contents as their object. I may believe that it is Friday night (if, for example, my favourite TV series is on and that is usually the day when my favourite series is screened on TV) or I may imagine it (while knowing it is Monday evening). Thus, a definition of fiction in terms of imagination involves works of fiction being representations that invite imagining rather than believing. Non-fictional representations, by contrast, would be those that prescribe believing the represented content. Thus, if I read a biography I do so with the expectation of getting accurate information about someone's life; while if I read a fake memoir I expect to imagine a character's life without truly believing that the reported information necessarily corresponds to any actual fact.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is in the sort of attitude prescribed

where the difference between fiction and non-fiction lies according to this characterization.

One immediate restriction that derives from this characterization of imagination is that it leaves little room for non-propositional imaginative activities. In fact, a bare look at the literature on imagination and its types shows that this parallelism between imagination and belief is far from being comprehensive. Imagination seems to include cases of what is called experiential imagining, like visualizing,<sup>6</sup> where the imagined content is more like a perceptual experience than a propositional attitude. Cases like this have motivated the thought that the wide range of activities that are usually considered under the concept of imagination exceeds the belief-imagination contrast. Thus, experiential imagining has been usually invoked in order to justify that imagination can afford experiential knowledge or know-how states. I can, for example, come to know what something would look like by visualizing it or how something would appear to someone by trying to visualize it from her perspective or point of view.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, we can still wonder if the fact that certain content is entertained through imagination can convey some cognitive value. Is propositional imagining cognitively valuable? Do we gain any knowledge from imagining that *p*? Or from imagining it from a certain point of view? And, if so, is that cognitive value special in some sense?

Some authors [Currie (2010), Friend (2006), (2008), (2014), Davies (1996), (2007), (2012), and García-Carpintero (2016)] have defended the view that we can acquire proper knowledge from engaging with fiction.<sup>8</sup> They think that, although fiction is primarily concerned with imagination, it is compatible with the fictional status of a work that it aims at producing beliefs in the reader or appreciator.

Following Lewis (1978) and Gendler (2000), García-Carpintero<sup>9</sup> has identified at least two types of cognitive value that can be derived from appreciating fiction: the first is labelled, after Gendler's terminology, "narrative as clearinghouse" and takes place when, after the so-called Reality Principle,<sup>10</sup> we can reasonably infer certain truths about the actual world from reading a fiction.<sup>11</sup> Since we have sensible expectations that authors do respect the Reality Principle, we can, without giving up on the idea that the content has to be primarily imagined, come to form proper beliefs about the actual world. Fictional stories which are set up in a specific time and place and which are regarded as realistic can plausibly convey this kind of knowledge.

The second type of knowledge is called "narrative as factory". This second type corresponds to cases where we can attain knowledge by ex-

porting certain claims that are made evident by the fiction itself. Modal knowledge,<sup>12</sup> for example, could be a case in point. Although some authors prefer to refer to this sort of cognitive value in terms of comprehension or understanding rather than in terms of truth,<sup>13</sup> there are sound defences of the reliability of fiction as a mode of conceptual clarification. In this vein, Eileen John (1998), (2001) has defended that we can attain conceptual knowledge through our engagement with fiction. Fiction provides, in her view, reliable devices for exploring our concepts and their relations. In order to ground this view, John points to the fact that the very understanding of the content of a fictional work often requires both the exercise of our conceptual abilities and the capacity to grasp conceptual relations which could have been hidden before encountering them in the fictional work. In this sense, fictional narratives can provide at least conceptual clarification of the sort that philosophy affords.<sup>14</sup>

García-Carpintero endorses these two types of cognitive achievements as proper to fictional works and aims at showing that they are compatible with his view of fiction as a specific form of speech act – one which has, at its core, a prescription to imagine the contents represented in the fiction. He argues that, while fiction necessarily involves a prescription to imagine, it is possible to assert some content through the kind of speech act that is characteristic of fiction. In fact, assertions are frequently conveyed through what could be regarded as non-assertoric modes of expression.<sup>15</sup> Thus, either by virtue of exporting certain statements, which may be directly or indirectly conveyed, or by persuading the reader that, for example, certain conceptual relations hold, we can reasonably obtain knowledge from fiction.

Now, are any of these forms of knowledge specially linked to the fictional nature of a particular work? Do any of the defining features of fiction play a significant role in the way that knowledge is conveyed through fiction? We have seen that the key argument is that in both cases it is perfectly possible for assertions to be conveyed through other speech acts; hence, what is primarily intended as a fictional speech act becomes a way to convey knowledge about the actual world or about modal –or conceptual– facts. Fictions could then involve, at least in some cases, knowledge through testimony.<sup>16</sup>

However, there seems to be nothing specifically linked to the imaginative character of fiction involved in the way this cognitive value is determined. The fact that assertions can often be made by virtue of producing the characteristic speech acts of fiction and therefore, that

knowledge can be obtained thereby, does not require any appeal to fictionality as such. The point is more general.

Although I think this view can be understood as a defence of the cognitive value of fiction without clearly endorsing the stronger view that I am trying to discuss, García-Carpintero seems to get close to the view expressed by Sempérn. He concludes, just before quoting Murdoch's view,<sup>17</sup> that "good fictions focus our attention on the points they convey *in a unique way*" [Ibid. (2016), emphasis mine]. However, as we have seen, he has shown at most that aiming at belief is compatible with the fictional nature of a particular representation, not that our acquaintance with this knowledge is special in some respect.

If we think of the two distinct mechanisms or types of knowledge discussed in his paper, we can easily see that they can be exemplified through other types of speech act. Hence, nothing specific to the speech act that lies at the core of fiction making is required for these cognitive achievements. Comparable non-fictional representations could also afford them in a similar way.

As I would like to defend in the last section of this paper, the reason why there are no distinct features that knowledge from fiction possesses as opposed to knowledge from non-fiction is because, ultimately, what matters is not the fictional/non-fictional status of a particular representation, but the sort of representation involved. Thus, we should look at the specific features that characterize a particular representation rather than at its fictional status in order to explain its capacity to convey knowledge through indirect assertion or conceptual clarification. If we take, for example, a false biography, such as *Deception* by Philip Roth, many of the implicit assertions that we can acknowledge while reading it as fiction could also be available if we read it as non-fiction. This is not merely so because while reading it as non-fiction a belief attitude should be in place. Rather, it has to do both with the way in which the representation is put together and with the indirect assertions that can be correctly grasped from it.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, that acquiring knowledge is compatible with the fictional status of a representation is not enough to ground the idea that fiction can afford knowledge in a special way. What seems special about that knowledge, if we follow Murdoch, is not grounded upon its fictional nature but on its artistic worth. And that is why the cognitive value of a representation – at least the kind explored by García-Carpintero, that is, as indirect assertion – relies more on its artistic or literary value than on its fictional status.

Still, it could be defended that there might be truths that we can only attain through imagining certain scenarios and that at least to this extent knowledge from fiction will afford a sort of cognitive value unavailable without imagination. This is what partly supports the analogy between fiction and philosophical experiments. For, in both, imagination and conceptual thinking are fundamental. If it were the case that some truths can only become graspable through imagining certain scenarios maybe we could provide a more solid ground for the claim that knowledge from fiction is of a special kind.<sup>19</sup>

Although it seems true that there are contents we can imaginatively experience that might be impossible to experience in reality, I think it might be useful to examine whether it is only through imagination that these contents could be available. If we think, to begin with, of imaginings through which we come to experience what is empirically impossible for us to experience (for example, how it would feel to live in Saturn or what it would be like to have lived in Paris at the time of the French Revolution) we can probably note that these sort of contents could have been thoroughly experienced under the appropriate conditions and that, therefore, these are not cases that prove that there is some kind of knowledge that can be exclusively conveyed through imagination.

Still, we can explore whether other contents that might be graspable through imaginings are more exclusive. We have seen that conceptual or modal understanding seems to find a breeding ground in imagining. But, is imagination unique in this sense? Does imagining, as opposed to, for example, supposing or hypothesizing, provide a distinctive grasp of these contents? My intuition is that we should refine our views on this family of activities in order to show that there are crucial distinctions between them.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, fiction could turn out to be especially valuable cognitively speaking only if it alone was the activity that could provide, together with the alleged knowledge that supposition or hypothesizing can convey, a sort of experiential knowledge. There are two paths we could take at this point. The first one is to consider that any representation that primarily invites imagination rather than belief will count as fiction (but, then, we should include much philosophical reasoning as fiction). The second will be to consider that not all imaginative activities will count as fiction but, then, we need to provide some further condition for fiction and its alleged cognitive value.

Thus, even if fiction requires imagination it is not obvious that all the activities that involve imagining are properly called fiction. Imagination might be triggered in many ways and with many purposes and it is



not obvious that all of them will be fiction-related.<sup>21</sup> In fact, imagination is often involved in our grasping the content of non-fictional representations such as literary valuable biographies or historical reports.<sup>22</sup> And this suggests that imagination might be linked more to the way in which literary or narrative features invite certain thoughts and imaginings than to the fictional nature of a work.

In this sense, it is not clear that the cognitive value we presumably obtain from fiction is of a special kind, or that the fictional character of a representation suffices to explain the cognitive virtues we can enjoy in reading fictions.

### III. FICTION, IMAGINATION, AND EMOTION

One prominent debate concerning our engagement with fiction has focused upon the nature of our emotional responses to fictional works. Questions about their rational character or their similarity to actual emotions have been discussed in recent decades and have nourished the idea that fiction can trigger emotion in a cognitively vivid way. In this sense, if some of the cognitive values we tend to ascribe to fictions partly rely upon their capacity to produce emotion we need to say something about the nature and rationality of emotional states.

To begin with, I will point out some of the cognitive virtues that have been usually ascribed to emotions in general. Secondly, I will revise some of the alternative views on fictional emotions<sup>23</sup> in order to see if they can properly account for the cognitive value of fictional emotions. Thirdly, I will argue that if fictions are to possess some special cognitive value by virtue of their capacity to trigger emotional responses in the appreciators, these emotional responses should be to some extent exclusive to fiction. However, as I will try to show, the features that account for the cognitive value of emotional responses to fictions are not exclusive to fictional representations or derive in any significant sense from the fictional character of those representations. Ultimately, I would like to argue against the idea that this cognitive value is exclusive to emotional responses to fiction and I will defend that it is a sort of value that both fictional and non-fictional representations can afford.

#### III.1 *Emotions as Cognitively Valuable States*

Before discussing some aspects that might be relevant for considering that fictional emotions can be of cognitive value I would like to briefly

motivate the idea that emotions in general can be epistemically valuable. One reason for thinking so derives from a certain view of emotions which foregrounds their connection to states such as belief and their positive effect upon our perceptual abilities.

Contrary to more traditional views of emotion, which emphasized the contrast between emotion and rationality, most contemporary approaches to emotion, from both philosophy and psychology, have offered a much less irrational portrait of emotional states.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, emotions seem to be responsive to beliefs and other epistemic states. This link provides emotions with a certain rational character.<sup>25</sup> On the other, emotional states seem to be beneficial in terms of the development of some perceptual and cognitive abilities. Although this relation has been much more emphatically defended within theories of value perception, the epistemic role it may play in some ordinary perceptual experiences has also been defended. For example, fear may enhance our perceptual attention and hence be useful in terms of the amount and relevance of the information we come to perceive.<sup>26</sup>

These two features have nurtured, in turn, the idea that emotions can have a genuine role in the formation of belief and other epistemic states and that we should conceive them as a necessary component of our cognitive relations to the world and to ourselves.

Now, we may ask whether these values are still present when we emotionally respond to fiction or if fictional emotions could possess other different cognitive values that, in turn, justifies the view that fiction possesses some special cognitive character.

I propose to address this issue by examining the extent to which emotions towards fiction can be compared with emotions in real life in terms of their cognitive properties. In order to do so, two different aspects can be explored. The first concerns what is known as the paradox of fictional emotions<sup>27</sup> and the second, the continuity or discontinuity between our emotional responses to fiction and to real scenarios. It could be expected that elucidating these two aspects will help us to establish whether emotional responses to fictional works could be cognitively valuable.

### III.2 *The Paradox of Fictional Emotions*

The rationality of our emotional responses to fiction seems at odds with the aforementioned claim that emotions usually correlate with beliefs about the objects of those emotions. Since it seems irrational that we feel actual fear towards what we know is nonexistent or false, we

seem to respond irrationally to fictional works when we feel pity for a character, whom we know does not exist, or fear for her destiny, which we know is meant to be merely imagined.

I think we can broadly distinguish three alternative accounts for this problem. The first, usually ascribed to Radford (1975), simply points to this paradoxical nature and assumes the irrationality that allegedly pervades our emotional responses to fiction. A second alternative [Walton (1978)] consists of giving up the idea that responses to fiction are real emotions and defending that they are *sui generis* states, called quasi-emotions. And the third, which aims at defending that emotional responses to fiction are both real and rational, solves the paradox by giving up on the idea that the rationality of an emotion depends on a belief about the actuality of the object of the emotion [Carroll (2001)].

Although I will not examine in detail these different alternatives, I think we can at least point to the relationship between this problem and the alleged cognitive value that we can attribute to works of fiction by virtue of their capacity to elicit emotional responses in their appreciators.

As we have seen, one of the features that provide emotions with some degree of rationality is their correlation with appropriate beliefs. However, this seems to cause a problem for emotions towards fiction, for they typically lack the belief that would be required if the emotion was possibly regarded as rational. Now, since it seems that in order to grant that the alleged emotional responses to fiction are cognitively valuable we have to account for their rational character, we cannot be very optimistic in this respect. If all emotions towards fiction are irrational by default we could hardly build a positive view about their cognitive worth. So, apparently, only the second and the third alternatives set out above could provide some basis for optimism; and this optimism arises either from discarding the consideration of these responses as fully fleshed emotions or from forsaking belief.

As we have seen, Walton's solution involves a re-description of the states whose rational character is under suspicion in terms of quasi-emotion. This move helps him to avoid the charge of irrationality while being consistent with his view of fiction as make-believe. In order to argue for this interpretation, he also appeals to the seeming lack of motivational force that typically characterizes our responses to fiction. Although there is usually expressive behaviour associated with the quasi-fear we experience in seeing Dracula on the screen, we do not tend to flee from the cinema as a result of it. In fact, Walton claims that from the point of view of their phenomenological character emotions and quasi-

emotions might be indistinguishable. What distinguishes them is that while the former are responses usually grounded upon belief states and possess motivational force, the latter are based upon our imaginings and do not result in action.<sup>28</sup>

Walton's view has been criticized both with respect to the notion of quasi-emotion and for his reluctance to acknowledge that works of fiction might generate emotional responses with motivational force.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, we could wonder whether these emotion-like states can afford the same cognitive merits as ordinary emotions, or whether fictional emotions have to be real emotions in order to bear some cognitive value.

I think Walton's account, in spite of other possible flaws, can provide, in principle, a consistent picture of the cognitive value of our responses to fiction. Although he does not think that these states can be the source of action, we have seen that his view on quasi-emotions involves these states being phenomenologically similar to actual emotions. In this respect, we could expect quasi-emotions to share the cognitive virtues that emotions possess by virtue of their phenomenological qualities. If, as we have seen above with the emotion of fear, being in that state could benefit our perceptual experience of the environment, we can assume that experiencing quasi-fear could likewise enhance our perceptual attention and make us more sensitive to certain aspects of the represented content.<sup>30</sup>

However, even if we assume that responding to fiction mirrors emotional responses in this respect, a further problem arises. For, what exactly will we be able to learn through them? If we follow the analogy, we should assume that the cognitive advantage that quasi-emotions can afford might well be limited to the fictional world being represented. It may be that experiencing quasi-fear enhances attention and hence perceptual experience of a fictional scene. However, this will only help us to establish that the cognitive value of quasi-emotions stops at the very same point where fiction does. Can we show that the cognitive value of these states can also be extended to non-fictional contexts? And, if so, will that enriched view of the cognitive value of quasi-emotions help us to flesh out the idea that fiction can afford a specific sort of cognitive value by virtue of its fictional character? Although I suspect that much of what should be said in this respect can only be empirically founded, I do not think there are principled reasons against this possibility. It is rather an uncontroversial claim that we can come to enhance our perceptual abilities through imagining certain contents while perceiving certain things or events. After all, part of what constitutes basic scientific prac-

tice in psychology seems to assume this. So, in this respect, we could conceive quasi-emotions as playing a positive role in perfecting the exercise of our perceptual abilities both in fictional and ordinary contexts.

Having admitted that much, the thing is: can we also show that this role is specific to fiction or that it strongly depends upon the fictional character of the prop that sustains it? My impression is that we cannot unless we also assume Walton's view of fiction as make-believe and, in particular, his identification of representation and fiction.<sup>31</sup> However, although many authors have followed Walton in his approach to fiction in terms of imagination, many have objected that Walton's view is too broad and will include as fiction things that we would intuitively classify as non-fiction.<sup>32</sup>

The problem can be presented in terms of a dilemma. Either we accept Walton's view and we can no longer preserve some of our most firmly established intuitions about what counts as fiction, or we accept it but at the cost of losing what might be specifically fictional in our explanation of quasi-emotions. If, following Walton, the mere use of a prop in a game of make-believe produces a fiction the distinction between emotions felt towards represented non-fictive content and emotions felt towards represented fictive content becomes blurred. And this will mean, in turn, that our belief in the special character of those emotional states cannot be properly grounded upon the fictional character of a representation as opposed to its representational character tout court. Ultimately, I think that, if we follow Walton, we would have fewer resources to show that emotional responses to fiction have a special sort of cognitive value of. We would be committed to accepting that -however special quasi-emotions are from a cognitive perspective- the value they possess is not related to the fictional character of the representation but to the bare representational character of the prop involved. In this sense, even though Walton's view seemed promising, I think the consequences that follow from it fail to show that the cognitive value that our emotional responses to fiction might convey is special or specially linked to the fact that we are responding to a work of fiction. Rather, as I have suggested above, it seems that if they have some distinctive properties, these are related more to the fact that we are responding to a representation of a certain kind than to the fact that the representation is fictional.<sup>33</sup>

Could Carroll's view offer a better prospect of a positive answer? As we have seen Carroll's view aims at showing that the real character of our emotional responses to fiction is not at odds with standard criteria of rationality for emotions. The way to achieve this is by broadening those

criteria so that they are not exclusively limited by belief. Entertaining a certain thought<sup>34</sup> about a particular object or event is sufficient to meet the conditions of emotional rationality. For example, I may come to feel real fear if I merely think or imagine that my friend's delay is due to a car accident even if I do not believe it strictly speaking.

Fictional works are, then, just a particular case of one of the ways in which we can experience proper emotions in the absence of belief. Paintings, movies and novels are ways in which we can come to grasp certain thoughts about certain objects, characters or events. In doing so artworks trigger proper emotions about those contents. Those emotions simply need to be consistent with the way in which the content is represented for them to count as rational. Thus, what warrants a particular emotional response towards some represented content is partly given by the way in which it is so represented, and not merely by features of the object.

This focus upon the way in which the content is represented has also made Carroll pay close attention to the way in which formal aspects of certain representations can play an important role in the way emotions are provoked in the spectator; and, hence, be part of the justification of fictional emotions. Thus, for example, some emotions that we typically feel with suspense films are not simply caused by the events displayed but by typical filmic resources such as sudden noises, special editing, or the point of view of the camera.<sup>35</sup> These aspects are, in fact, very powerful mechanisms for emotional activation but they are not, strictly speaking, features of the fictional world perceived in the film. Thus, it is not true in the fiction *Psycho* that some frantic music is heard while Marion Crane is murdered in the bathtub.

Although Carroll's view has the virtue of acknowledging the role that these formal aspects might play in launching certain emotions, it is not clear that this role is exclusive to fictional representations. Similar devices can be used in non-fictional representations to the same emotional effect. In fact, both fictional and non-fictional representations can similarly generate emotional responses to the represented content. In this sense, Carroll's appeal to the idea that we can justifiably rely on the mode of presentation of a particular content as a way to justify fictional emotions is neither exclusively linked to fictional representations, nor dependent on the fictional character of a representation. A documentary using similar devices to *Psycho* will likely prompt similar emotions in the viewer. Thus, appealing to the role that some representational features play in the constitution of certain emotions cannot provide a way to de-

fect anything distinctive about fictional emotions that cannot also be found in emotional responses to non-fiction.

In my view, emotions are rather to be distinguished in terms of the kind of object to which they are responses. While some are about the represented content as given in a particular representation and, so, are responsive to both the represented content and the formal features of the representation, others are about real facts, people or objects in our environment. This might invite the thought that maybe what has been considered as distinctive of fictional emotions is rather applicable to a broader class of emotions, the class of emotions triggered by representations rather than by directly perceived events, people or objects.<sup>36</sup> But, then, it will be useless to try to defend that fictions may possess a specific sort of cognitive value in virtue of the way in which they trigger emotions. Nothing worth saying about these emotional states seems to depend in any significant way upon the fictional character of a representation.

In the following section I will explore a further way to approach this issue. Instead of focusing on the nature of our emotional responses to fictional works in order to find some property that could account for their special cognitive value, I will focus upon an apparent puzzle that might threaten our confidence about the cognitive value of fictional emotions.

### III.3 *The Continuity Between the Emotional Responses to Fiction and Reality*

At the beginning of this section I said that we could explore the alleged cognitive value of fiction by virtue of the kind of emotions that it typically generates in the appreciator. So far, we have seen that there might be reasons to defend their rationality in spite of the fictional character of their objects. This at least makes them compatible with knowledge. But, can they also be cognitively valuable in a more general sense? Can they afford some cognitive value that applies beyond the fictional world?

I have already pointed out that emotions are taken to be cognitively valuable partly by virtue of their contribution to other epistemic states. They not only enter into rational relationships with other cognitive states but they also play a role in constituting them.<sup>37</sup> So, we could examine whether emotional responses to fiction can be cognitively valuable in this respect too. And, if so, will that value be special in any significant sense?

I think that we need to examine two distinct problems in order to offer a positive answer to these questions. The first concerns whether the sorts of relations into which emotions can enter in ordinary contexts can also be instantiated by fictional emotions. That is, whether there is some continuity in the way emotional states behave in fictional and ordi-

nary contexts. The second points to the alleged problem of asymmetric emotions. This problem alludes to emotional responses to fictions that seem to be at odds with the emotions that would be expected if they were responses to actual states of affairs. Some classic cases are those narratives which get the reader to admire the villain or some other morally dubious character.<sup>38</sup> No less frequent are works that crudely demand excitement and delight at violent fictional episodes. But, maybe, the most interesting cases are those in which we feel certain unease at experiencing the emotions that seem to be deserved by the work while realizing something odd is involved in feeling such emotions. These cases, although far more rare, can be also found and have attracted much philosophical discussion. The film *Talk to her* by Almodóvar or *Lolita* by Nabokov can be exemplary works in this respect.

One immediate concern that may follow from considering these cases is that fictions can be used in order to corrupt our sentiments and, hence, that we should be cautious in trusting their alleged cognitive and emotional value. But maybe this suspicion is less compelling than it might appear at first sight. Certainly, fictional works can manipulate our emotional responses to the events represented by presenting those events under particular perspectives whose justification or legitimacy might be harder to discern. But, as I will try to show, the reasons that explain this apparent corrupting power do not derive from the fictional nature of the work but from the aesthetic and expressive qualities that are constitutive of a particular representation's point of view.

But, before doing so, I will try to show what, in my view, could explain these puzzling cases. As we have seen when discussing Carroll's view on fictional emotions, our emotional responses to fictional works are not only determined by the represented content but also by certain formal aspects of the representation. In this sense, a response of sudden fear might be perfectly well motivated by the use of filmic devices, such as a sudden loud noise, which trigger the viewer's alert mechanisms. I think that a close consideration of these aspects can help us explain why certain fictional works are able to produce responses in the appreciators that they would have considered as undeserved if the represented events they were responding to had been actual, instead. If we look at some of the examples mentioned above, we can see that our complex and morally problematic response to the protagonist of *Talk to Her*, Benigno, can be partly explained by the perspective under which the character and his morally dubious actions are represented. This perspective, in turn, is construed not merely by focusing upon certain aspects of the story rather than others (for example,



as it has been pointed out,<sup>39</sup> the rape scene is never directly shown on the screen but, rather, it is conveyed through a metaphorical image of ejaculation), but also by endowing the filmic representation with qualities that promote a sympathetic view of Benigno. For example, we are offered many more shots of him than of any other character in the film thus promoting our proximity to him. On the other hand, the perspective of the two female protagonists – which could serve as a counterbalance to Benigno’s perspective – is almost inexistent because, for most of the film they are in a coma and when we see them we mostly see them at a distance or as subjects who refuse to express themselves. These features promote, then, a particular attitude towards Benigno that some authors have considered as morally problematic. Since the film invites the viewer to empathise with Benigno and, thus, is not straightforwardly condemning rape, it can be considered as morally problematic in this sense. It will invite an emotional response that would be contrary to the morally merited response to these events.

Although I do not think that all the cases in which fictional works achieve this puzzling emotional effect are corruptive for this reason, and that some highly valuable works can enhance our moral discernment precisely by provoking these problematic feelings, I think we can still defend fiction from this attack precisely by looking at what seems to be at the root of these emotions. As I have pointed out, I think that fictional emotions are partly justified by features of the representation and not merely by features of the represented content. But this is a phenomenon that is indifferent to the fictional status of a particular representation. Non-fictional representations can also produce these kinds of responses and, if we look at some emblematic cases of propaganda,<sup>40</sup> they often do. In this sense, even if there is something wrong with the phenomenon of asymmetric emotions, we cannot give up our confidence about the cognitive value of fictional emotions simply in virtue of this fact. For, if we did, we should rather give up on the confidence about the emotional and cognitive value of representations in general. Whatever is dubious about those cases will also threaten non-fictional cases.

#### IV. THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF FICTION AS THE COGNITIVE VALUES OF REPRESENTATION

After having examined some of the common arguments that have been offered in order to support the idea that fiction might, by virtue of its fictional character, possess some special cognitive value, I would like

to emphasize the insufficiency of any of these arguments. If something can be shown about the cognitive value of fiction, it is that the reasons we have for identifying such value are not exclusive to fiction. Rather, it is grounded upon the greatness or skilfulness of the representational artefacts which constitutes it. And, hence, we should look more closely at literary, pictorial or filmic merits than to their fictional character. Thus, my view is that part of the alleged attribution of cognitive value to our emotions towards fiction is grounded not upon the nature of fiction as such but in the features that, when present, make both fiction and non-fiction fine representations.<sup>41</sup>

But then why has so much emphasis been placed upon the fictional character of some representations in order to figure out the cognitive values we usually find in good fictions? I think that part of what can explain this misunderstanding has to do with the fact that fiction making has been one of the practices where the search for artistic achievement, understood in terms of literary, narrative or filmic merit, has been more prominent. Most fiction makers have tried to produce convincing fictional worlds by modulating the expressive and cognitive virtues of each representational medium and this has, in my view, motivated the thought that fictional works possess some cognitive values. However, they actually possess these values not by virtue of their fictional character but by virtue of their representational merits.

I think this misunderstanding has been quite prominent in the literature that has dealt with the cognitive value of fiction and is often reflected in the indistinctive use of words like 'fiction' and 'art' in order to refer to this problem.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for example, I am not sure that a proper understanding of Semprún's statement involves taking fiction as crucial in order to convey certain themes. He might well be referring to the literary merit of a representation as being responsible for this cognitive value.

However, the improper identification between fiction and literature has often promoted, in my view, two wrong views about the nature of representation and fiction. While, as I have been trying to show, some of the cognitive virtues that have been exclusively attributed to fiction are in fact dependent upon the specific representational nature of the fictional work in each case, non-fictional representation has been subject to the opposite flaw. We often find that some postmodernist approaches to the problems of fiction and literature assume that non-fictional literature is as 'deceitful' as fictional literature.<sup>43</sup> The reason why they assimilate fiction and non-fiction has to do with a certain view of representation in

general as fiction; and they think in this way because they assume that any time we try to convey certain content through a representational device – be it fictional or non-fictional – a particular selection, and a certain presentation, of certain contents is involved. Now it seems that according to this line of thought the bare fact that representation, in order to be able to represent some content, requires selecting particular words, perspectives, and, if artistic, literary devices, means that it always implies some falsification of the events that are told. But, I think that, unless we simply assume that representation always implies falsifying the represented content, there is no reason why the constructivist and intentional character of representation is at odds with truth. In fact I think that the idea that all kinds of representations are necessary ‘falsifying’ devices is sometimes strikingly thought to be compatible with the idea that fictional works can convey a special sort of knowledge that mere representations cannot.

I think that both views are mistaken, albeit for different reasons. They either misidentify the source of the cognitive value of both fictional and non-fictional representations or they identify fiction and non-fiction in virtue of the constructive aspect of both.

But the necessarily selective and constructive character of any representation does not necessarily involve fictionality – on pain of giving up the distinction between fictional and non-fictional representations. Nor is it true that the cognitive value of fiction – if grounded precisely upon this selective and constructive character – is exclusive to fiction or derived in any significant way from its fictional nature.

## V. CONCLUSION

My aim has been to explore whether certain views about fiction and about the nature of our responses to fiction provide us with an argument in favour of the view that fiction can afford a specific sort of knowledge or a particular way of accessing certain truths. Although I think there is abundant evidence in favour of the view that fictions can convey knowledge of different sorts, I think the way in which this claim has been understood is unwarranted. We have seen that the capacity to convey indirect assertions can be both exemplified by works that are constituted by the speech act characteristic of fiction making and by works which are intended to be straightforwardly assertoric. Secondly, we have seen that if the cognitive value of works of fiction depended upon their

capacity to provoke emotional responses in the appreciators, these emotions, if rational, would possess no distinctive cognitive value in terms of their capacity to enhance our perceptual abilities.

Thus, I think that once the cognitive value of fiction is seen as grounded upon features that are not specific to fiction we can acknowledge that fiction can possess this sort of value while at the same time show that there is nothing specifically fictional about it. Moreover, acknowledging this common source of cognitive value should not be thought of as implying that there is no difference between fiction and non-fiction for while the latter is mainly intended as assertion, the former is primarily intended to be imagined.

As I have pointed out the tradition of thought known as ‘literary humanism’ has promoted the view that literature can afford some cognitive experiences that are both peculiar and exceptionally valuable. However, if we look at the reasons that help us to reinforce the idea that fictions possess cognitive value, none of them show that the fictional character of a particular representation is playing a significant role in the constitution of these values. Rather, what explains them are properties that have to do with the representational means used to produce a work. In this sense, we can expect to learn at least as much from a fictional as from a non-fictional representation. What makes both of them cognitively worthwhile has to do not with their status as fiction or non-fiction but with their literary, filmic or depictive merits. \*

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This is, for example, the case with Walton's account (1990).

<sup>2</sup> "...una duda me asalta sobre la posibilidad de contar. No porque la experiencia vivida sea indecible (...) Algo que no atañe a la forma del relato posible, sino a su sustancia. No a su articulación sino a su densidad. Solo alcanzarán esta sustancia, esta densidad transparente, aquellos que sepan convertir su testimonio en un objeto artístico. O de recreación. Únicamente el artificio de un relato dominado conseguirá transmitir parcialmente la verdad del testimonio" [Semprún (1995), pp. 25-26; my English translation is based upon the Spanish translation of the work].

<sup>3</sup> Some, like Lamarque and Olsen (1994), deny that knowledge, even if it could be properly obtained from appreciating fiction, will be relevant to a work's aesthetic value as fiction.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, most theories of fiction that appeal to the notion of imagination tend to assume this contrast as fundamental.

<sup>5</sup> *Deception* (1990) by Philip Roth could be a case in point.

<sup>6</sup> On the experiential modes of imagination see Wollheim (1974), Gaut (2003), and Goldie (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Wollheim has argued in favour of this idea (1974).

<sup>8</sup> Currie has been, together with Walton and Lamarque & Olsen, one of the defenders of the imagination account of fiction. However, partly due to the acknowledgement that fictional works are usually a patchwork of belief and imagination, he has claimed that we should shift the focus of attention: instead of focusing upon fictional works as a whole, we should examine the nature of fictional statements. Friend is not committed to the idea that imagination is the essential attitude that defines fiction, but she is not contrary to the idea that a great amount of what fiction does is to prescribe imaginings. Finally, Davies and García-Carpintero are strongly committed to the imaginative view of fiction.

<sup>9</sup> I follow his proposal here because, without giving up on the idea that a prescription to imagine is essential to fiction – and without being affected by what is usually called the patchwork problem –, he seems to be able to defend the view that fiction can afford knowledge. According to García-Carpintero (2016) the patchwork problem typically affects intentionalist approaches to fiction that acknowledge that some fictions contain assertions and, thus, can be vehicles of knowledge through testimony.

<sup>10</sup> Following Walton's formulation the Reality Principle establishes that "if  $p_1, \dots, p_n$  are the propositions whose fictionality a representation generates directly, another proposition,  $q$ , is fictional in it if, and only if, where the case that  $p_1, \dots, p_n$  it would be the case that  $q$ ". Walton (1990), p. 145.

<sup>11</sup> That this practice is not at odds with the consideration of the status of a work as fiction is reflected in literary criticism practices. For example, a work can be blamed for not being true to life or to the world being depicted. Presumably this criticism applies to works that we would classify as realist.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis (1978) compares fiction to philosophical experiments in this respect.

<sup>13</sup> Lamarque & Olsen (1994), for example, would not object to the idea that fiction could in some cases afford this sort of cognitive value. However they are more reluctant to characterize it in terms of truth.

<sup>14</sup> Authors, such as Martha Nussbaum (1990), have gone even further and have defended the view that some moral conundrums cannot be properly addressed from a merely philosophical point of view. In Nussbaum's view, literature is a necessary means to approach some critical problems in moral reflection and understanding. Since Nussbaum clearly focuses upon literature in general and not only upon fictional narratives, I think her view cannot be properly considered as the target of this paper.

<sup>15</sup> Using García-Carpintero's own example, one may assert that a novel is not worth reading by asking who would like to read it at all.

<sup>16</sup> Of course not all fictions will work in this way. Allegedly, the expectation of acquiring knowledge through fiction is more justified when we engage with certain fictional genres than with others.

<sup>17</sup> "Art is a special discerning exercise of intelligence in relation to the real; and although aesthetic form has essential elements of trickery and magic, yet form in art, as form in philosophy, is designed to communicate and reveal" [Murdoch (1997), p. 454].

<sup>18</sup> This does not involve the distinction between fiction and non-fiction being irrelevant for the proper appreciation of a particular work. If I read a biography as if it were fiction or vice versa many of the assumptions and inferences made by the reader will be different. The claim that I discuss is not whether the difference between fiction and non-fiction may guide our cognitive expectations while engaging with a work – I assume it does. The point I aim at discussing is that we should find an explanation of the alleged cognitive value of fictional works in terms of this difference.

<sup>19</sup> Again, this claim will require accepting the view that fiction is to be defined primarily in terms of imagination.

<sup>20</sup> For some discussion of this point see Nichols (2006).

<sup>21</sup> Walton's account will probably be the only view that will be unaffected by this alternative and, therefore, the only one available if the claim that fiction can possess some cognitive value in virtue of its imaginative status is to be established.

<sup>22</sup> Both Friend (2012) and Matravers (2014) have defended the view that imagination is not exclusive to fiction and that it may play a necessary role in our grasp of non-fictional representational content.

<sup>23</sup> Although the expression 'fictional emotion' might be confusing, for it may invite the thought that these states are not real, I will use it to refer to the emotional responses or states we typically experience when dealing with fictional works without assuming they cannot be real emotions. In any case, the expression 'fictional emotions' should not be understood as referring to pretended or feigned emotions.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, many of the problems that were typically used against the idea that emotions responded to rational constraints have also been found to affect

states such as belief, whose conditions of rationality were conceived as much more reliable. Thus, for example, the problem of recalcitrant beliefs seems to mirror the problem of irrational emotions such as phobias. Although it has been acknowledged that belief might not always behave as rationally as could be expected to (and this does not, by itself, render emotions more rational), research on these close fields has made the gap between emotions and other intentional states narrower and considerations about rationality more flexible.

<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, most theories of emotion leave some room for cases where the tie between emotion and some epistemic state is broken or in-existent; phobias will be a case in point.

<sup>26</sup> The positive role of emotions in perceptual refinement has thus been proposed in relation to the evolutionary role of emotions.

<sup>27</sup> The paradox arises because we seem to respond with real emotions to what we know to be merely fictional.

<sup>28</sup> Actually, if they provoked some action in a particular agent we would likely describe her as unable to tell fiction from non-fiction.

<sup>29</sup> Derek Matravers (1997), (2014), has argued against Walton's explanation of our behaviour towards fictional works in terms of quasi-emotions partly by showing that there are cases where fiction can lead to action and cases of non-fiction that leave the viewer inactive.

<sup>30</sup> In fact, some authors [Carroll (1997)] have defended that feeling a particular emotion while appreciating a fiction might be a necessary condition for understanding it properly.

<sup>31</sup> Walton's commitment to this identification makes his view unable to distinguish, for example, between fictional and non-fictional paintings. According to his view, all paintings will be, to the extent that they are representations, fictions. However, many authors consider that this is an undesirable consequence of Walton's view and that we should be able to craft the notion of fiction in such a way that it will allow such distinctions. See, for example, Davies (2002).

<sup>32</sup> In fact, his view not only implies that all pictorial representations are fiction, but also that natural objects or events which come to be used as props in games of make-believe become fiction in virtue of this use. In fact he distinguishes between ad hoc props that "are pressed into service for a single game of make-believe on a single occasion" [Walton (1990), p. 51] and artefacts that are designed to be props.

<sup>33</sup> My suspicion is that since Walton is happy to accept that fiction and representation are co-extensive terms, he will also be happy with this consequence. However, I think that, in tune with most of Walton's critics, one of the basic problems with his view is precisely that it does not leave any room for distinguishing between fictional and non-fictional representations.

<sup>34</sup> Entertaining a thought is conceived of as representing the object or event under certain aspects without adopting a belief attitude towards the content of the thought. Carroll (1997)

<sup>35</sup> One well-known formal resource of film's narrativity is the use of music to provide some particular emotional tone to a scene [Chion (1995)].

<sup>36</sup> This line of thought has also been defended by Matravers (2014). However, his main target is the idea that we should understand fiction as primarily related to imagination.

<sup>37</sup> This view has been criticised by Livingston (2002).

<sup>38</sup> The TV series *The Sopranos* has been often appealed to as a good example of this possibility. See Carroll (2013)

<sup>39</sup> Eaton (2009) and Pérez-Carreño (2013).

<sup>40</sup> I assume that the defining feature of propaganda is prominently pragmatic. Propaganda is not primarily produced as a representation that aims at truth or at provoking imaginings. Rather, its aim is to move the audience it addresses and to trigger some action or response in them. In this sense, propagandistic representation can be assimilated more to an order or an invitation to do something than to an assertoric or fictional representation.

<sup>41</sup> I think this view is in some respects coincident with Iriondo's view (2015) about the cognitive value of fiction and testimonial literature.

<sup>42</sup> I think it is not incidental that the common label for naming the view that fiction can possess cognitive value is "literary humanism".

<sup>43</sup> In fact, some of the common remarks that literary authors make in relation to the relationship between fiction and truth usually assume this claim. Thus, for example, Coetzee's recent criticism of psychoanalysis and other similar therapies that involve the 'construction' of a narrative about the self tends to assume that the bare attempt at producing a sensible narrative involves some kind of falsification about the self. See Coetzee & Arabella Kurtz (2015).

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