

Chapter 4

FICTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT

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It is not unusual for a reader of a novel, especially that of the nineteenth century variety, to assume that, in reading, she is acquiring important insights into human beings. Yet philosophers have often found this assumption problematic. Most agree that fiction can be a source of psychological understanding, either explicitly, via psychological descriptions of characters, or implicitly, via the construction of psychological character portraits. However, there is disagreement about the importance of fiction's potential contribution in this area.

Some have suggested that the psychological information presented in a work of fiction could not reasonably strike a reader as true without the reader having come across it already in some other non-fictional context. Jerome Stolnitz represents this view when he writes: "Art, uniquely, never confirms its truths. If [on reading Jane Austen] we find that stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep attractive men and women apart, we find the evidence for this truth about the great world in the great world" (1992: 198; see also Diffey 1995: 210). Meanwhile, Noël Carroll suggests that, in the moral realm, which presumably includes the realm of moral psychology, "if... learning is a matter of the acquisition of interesting propositions heretofore unknown... then... there is no learning when it comes to the vast majority of narrative artworks" (1998: 141). In contrast, others have cast fiction as a potentially 'self-sufficient' source of psychological understanding (Robinson 1995; Conolly and Haydar 2001: 119).

As already intimated in Carroll's remark, a second prong of the attack has it that the psychological information provided by fiction cannot be genuinely *interesting*; that, at best, it is made up of 'truisms' (see also

Stolnitz 1992: 194). Others deny this, emphasizing the importance of the information acquired (Graham 1995; Robinson 1995; Conolly and Haydar 2001).

It seems obvious that fictions can be a 'self-sufficient' source of interesting psychological insights, and it seems curious that some writers have thought otherwise. One contributory factor here might be a certain picture of what it is to acquire psychological understanding, according to which such understanding is inductively acquired through extrapolation from evidence. On this view, where *p* is a proposition expressing some piece of psychological information, one comes to recognize *p* as true by encountering, either directly or via testimony, partial evidence for *p*, with the degree of confirmation for *p*, increasing, at least initially, in proportion to the number of occasions upon which such evidence is encountered.

Such a picture might appear to validate both the thought that a work of fiction cannot be 'self-sufficient' with respect to any psychological information disseminated, and that a fiction can provide knowledge only of uninteresting truisms. One who supposed that psychological information was acquired inductively, via direct or indirect exposure to relevant evidence, might be tempted to treat a psychological portrait or description delineated in a fiction as a kind of testimony – that is, as a form of second-hand evidence of the phenomenon picked out. If this were so, then the mere fact of its single appearance in a fiction could not be enough, on its own, to show the reader that it picked out a genuine phenomenon 'in real life;' the reader would have to be exposed to additional appearances before she could assume this with any reliability. (Analogously, neither would a single report of cold fusion legitimize the assumption that cold fusion was possible.) In fact, assuming that one treats a psychological description expressed in a work of fiction as testimony *about* the phenomenon in question, rather than as some kind of first-hand evidence *of* that phenomenon, additional complications about the reliability of the information presented seem to be raised, along the lines of those raised for testimony generally.

At this point, one might take one of two positions (or, like Stolnitz, take both). Perhaps motivated by worries about the reliability of the testimony of authors concerning psychological matters, one might deny that a psychological portrait or description in a fictional work could count as *any* kind of evidence for a psychological truth – authors, after all, are not generally trained as psychologists and are all too prone to imply contradictory statements (Stolnitz 1992: 196). Or, less counter-intuitively, one might acknowledge that fiction can be, and often is, a source of psychological understanding for a reader (Stolnitz 1992: 193), in which case, at least two things would follow. First, any information presented in a work of