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Does Fiction Make Us Less Empathic?¹

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RESUMEN

En este artículo se defiende que ciertos géneros de ficción tienen la capacidad de realzar nuestras capacidades empáticas. Ofrezco tres contribuciones a este debate. En primer lugar, la evidencia a favor de esta afirmación es pobre. En segundo lugar, es importante distinguir entre la capacidad que pueda tener la ficción para favorecer una respuesta empática y la capacidad de realzar nuestro control racional de la empatía. Finalmente, sugiero un cierto número de modos en los que la ficción puede desfavorecer la empatía o la conducta pro-social que esperamos que provoque la empatía. Examinó uno de esos modos con algún detalle.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *ficción, empatía, moralidad, conducta pro-social, auto indulgencia moral.*

ABSTRACT

It is said that certain kinds of fictions have the capacity to enhance our empathic powers. I offer three contributions to this debate. First, the evidence for this claim is poor. Secondly, it is important to distinguish a capacity on the part of fiction to encourage empathic responding and a capacity to enhance our rational control of empathy. Finally, I suggest a number of ways in which fiction may discourage empathy or the prosocial behaviour we expect empathy to provoke; I examine one of these ways in some detail.

KEY WORDS: Fiction, Empathy, Morality, Prosocial Behaviour, Moral Self-Licensing.

I. REASONS TO BE MORAL

Your plan to murder your neighbour failed yesterday: during the hour of opportunity you were immersed in reading *Crime and Punishment* and forgot to carry it out. This was a good effect of your engagement with the novel, but not the kind of evidence we look for when we wonder whether fiction is good for us. Fiction did not work in the right way in this case. Perhaps the problem is that your reading of *Crime and Punishment* did not provide you with a reason to refrain from killing. You

had, all along, a normative reason not to kill your neighbour—it would be wrong to do it. But your morally inattentive reading failed to give you any vivid sense of this reason’s force, and certainly did not motivate you to refrain from killing.² We set the barrier too high if we require that fictions give us reasons for action in order to justify belief in their moral significance; we need not even argue that they have the capacity, under something like ideal conditions, to give us reasons. A story tells of a hard-working immigrant family who, fleeing persecution, arrived, settled and made an outstanding contribution to their new community. There are grounds for thinking that such a story, even when presented as avowedly fictional, will lead, at least temporarily and for some readers, to an increase in tolerant and helpful attitudes.³ But an entirely fabricated story of this kind does not provide reasons for a change of belief about the characteristics of this immigrant group—unless we also say that readers of a story which presented the fictional family as thieves and murderers provides readers with reasons for thinking worse of them.⁴

Still, it would be wrong to put these sorts of non-reason based effects alongside the *Crime and Punishment* case described above. We engineer schemes and institutions in order to improve behaviour without thereby giving anyone *reasons* for behaving differently. We try to shape urban environments that will reduce levels of aggression; we introduce opt-out pension schemes with a view to encouraging people to save. These are not reason-giving arrangements but we think (some of us) that they are worthy responses to the problem of reducing bad behaviour and encouraging a thoughtful approach to the future.⁵ What we may celebrate in fiction’s capacity to change us morally extends beyond its capacity to provide moral reasons.

There is another argument for that conclusion. You have a strong reason to swim to shore from the burning boat: you wish to save your life and swimming will save it. Being unable to swim, you stay where you are. Sometimes we need skills and abilities—new or improved ones—to act on the reasons we have. We don’t usually think of swimming as a morally significant skill but in a watery environment where people often need saving you ought to cultivate a capacity to swim well. In many environments a capacity for empathy is a morally relevant skill, or so people tell us. They hold that an openness to the feelings of others which manifests itself in a sharing of that feeling is a powerful source of information about their needs, and a powerful stimulus to action. A thought that has captured attention in literary, philosophical and psychological circles is that literature refines our empathic sensitivities to morally charged situa-

tions by exposing us to exemplars—imaginary ones—of demanding, complex situations beyond those we are likely to encounter in daily life, expanding the circle of those we care about and our ability to help them.⁶

Perhaps literature can help us develop empathic skills, assuming what common experience suggests, that we are capable of engaging empathically with imaginary people and situations as well as with real ones. The hypothesis is broadly in line with findings in other areas, notably sports science where the use of imagination in visual and motor modalities is common. In one study, golfers improved 30% over baseline through imagined stroke play.⁷ Other studies hint at even more welcome results: “motor imagery training might have an encouraging effect on motor function after stroke”.⁸ One concern about this from the point of view of fiction is that, unsurprisingly, it seems to matter a great deal that the imagined practice is correct in the sense of mirroring the conditions that would produce the desired real-world outcome. In the study of golf, it was subjects who imagined playing the correct stroke who improved; those imagining playing an inappropriate shot saw a 20% decline in performance. It is not immediately clear how we would judge practice in empathetic understanding as correct or incorrect, but it is plausible to think that a requirement of correct practice in any area is that it be in response to ecologically realistic cues. And empathy exercised in response to fictional characters is generally a response to different cues from those available in the wild. In the fictional case we generally get a good deal of authorial input clarifying the character’s situation and mental state; things much less easily available concerning real people. It should be a source of some concern to those who think that fiction improves empathic skills that the triggering conditions for fictional and for real cases are different in ways which, for all we know, matter to how facility with the one carries over to the other.

But this line of objection has limited force. We should distinguish between two kinds of opportunities for engagement with mind that literature provides. One is engagement with the work’s characters, and this is where the objection just considered is meant to apply. But we can also think of fiction as providing opportunities to engage with the minds of authors. And authors need not and usually won’t provide direct access to their own mental states; they may make no special efforts to help us understand them and may indeed have no interest in whether we do or not. We understand the author, to the extent that we do, in the way that we understand other real people: through the things they say and do, the things they make and through the ways they speak and do things. Stories

are things made that record the maker's complex and sustained activity of narrative construction and so are full of clues to the maker's beliefs, values and motives. Readers can use these sources to build and update a picture of the agent's outlook, even when the agent herself is absent from the scene. Understanding the minds of authors through exposure to their stories is simply a refinement of our ordinary practices of interpreting others, and there is no reason to think of it as violating ecological constraints in the way that the interpretation of characters usually does.

Our capacity to access the maker's outlook in this way has another consequence. I have down-played fiction's role as a giver of moral reasons, emphasising instead its (presumed) capacity to inculcate skills, with fictions providing models of human behaviour analogous, some say, to those simulators of flight used to train pilots.⁹ But fictions do sometimes offer moral reasons. Didactic fiction makes its broadcasting of moral lessons explicit, but implicit messages abound in subtler genres. I noted just now how exquisitely tuned we are to the outlooks of others, hoovering up clues from their behaviour in all sorts of situations. We infer people's attitudes and beliefs from their wardrobe preferences, their choice of vocabulary, their facial expressions. Confronted with a story—a record of very sustained and focused behaviour—we ask “Why this story, why these characters, why this way of telling?” The answers will sometimes point to the serious opinions behind the story. A Jamesian story with detailed attention to motive and feeling will suggest opinions concerning moral psychology; we may take these to be the opinions of an expert, and adopt them ourselves. So one way for literary works to convey reasons is by functioning as indicators of the opinions their makers have concerning such things as moral responsibility.¹⁰

There are other ways: one is for fictions to serve as *stimulus enhancers*. I take the label from the study of animal behaviour. Some cases of what seem at first sight to be one animal learning from another turn out to be cases where the behaviour of one animal simply draws the attention of the other to some opportunity which the second creature then exploits in the appropriate way and without imitation.¹¹ In the same way we might learn from a fiction because it makes vivid some proposition which we have, perhaps on reflection, our own reasons to sign up to.

The inculcation of skills and the provision of reasons need not be separable aspects of the cognitive work done by a fiction. Providing skills can itself be partly a matter of giving reasons: we give tennis players a reason to keep their eye focused on the point where ball and racket made contact when we say that this will help them control the subsequent di-

rection of the ball. An increased capacity for empathy opens the way to motivating reasons. Sharing another's suffering makes you want to help, and knowing the quality of their suffering gives you a reason to do so.

II. A COMPLEX PICTURE

That's the optimistic view of fiction's relation to empathy, and surely there is something in it. But in the end the picture is bound to be a messy one. It's only ever some literary works, in some contexts, for some readers, which promote this kind of learning. Literature can spread ignorance, prejudice and insensitivity as effectively as it provides knowledge and openness. Experiments show how easily we pick up false information from stories, and people's perception of risk is notoriously degraded by imagination. Risk perception is vulnerable, of course, to real but objectively improbable threats as when heavy smokers focus their attention on the danger from rare pollutants. But there is evidence that we have only to imagine the danger from a non-existent psychiatric patient to want tighter controls on the mentally ill.¹² Nor is empathy always in the service of admirable results: empathy-inducing stories, fictional or not, of the wrongs done to one's ethnic group can fuel hatred against outsiders.¹³ Reading a sustained and demanding literary work is a complex experience, some aspects of which may be empathy-friendly while others are its enemies, and the net moral effects of a given work for a given subject will be even harder to predict or explain than my opening remarks suggested.

Current psychological research has yet to confront this complexity. Has it produced any evidence for the supposed effects of fiction on empathy? Reviewing work by now a decade old, Suzanna Keen judged the evidence weak at best.¹⁴ Since then new studies have appeared, some of them claiming remarkable results. In Section V, I comment on some of this work. But my main purpose is to argue for two claims which may be of interest to those with a serious interest in the empirical study of literature and empathy. In brief: (i) It is one thing to show that literature makes us more empathic; another to show that it makes us more usefully discriminating empathisers (Section IV); (ii) a serious study of the effects of literature on empathy should investigate possible ways that literature might compromise our empathic tendencies and not focus exclusively on good news stories (Section VI).

A reason why (i) and (ii) are points worth airing is that empathy research in relation to literature is not on an entirely helpful trajectory. The belief that reading quality fiction does us some good is almost an article of faith with liberal, educated people and the example of Mr Gradgrind has made it difficult to question this view without seeming to adopt a particularly soulless form of utilitarianism.¹⁵ While there is some evidence to point to and which we will consider, the situation may usefully be compared to that concerning opinion on the effects of children's pretend play, also widely believed to confer all sorts of cognitive and other advantages. While many studies over several decades have claimed that pretend play is crucial to the development of various capacities in children, including understanding mental states, a recent review by Angeline Lillard and colleagues at Virginia concludes that there is after all little real evidence that pretend play aids in the development of this or other capacities.¹⁶ The details of Lillard's conclusions will be tested over time, but her work does suggest that we have been too confident about the positive benefits of pretend play, and too ready to accept questionable evidence in that view's favour. We should be similarly hesitant about the connection between empathy and fiction, especially given that the number of studies claiming a positive effects of fiction on empathy is tiny by comparison with the number claiming positive effects for pretend play. There is every reason here for caution—even for some healthy scepticism. It is not my aim to show that literature is less empathy-enhancing than everyone has been hoping it is. But we do need to be alive both to the limitations of empathy itself as an instrument of moral action, and to the possibility that literature has negative effects on empathy as well as positive ones.¹⁷

Two further context-fixing points are worth making: First, I am not concerned here with the question of whether fiction's supposed capacity to enlarge empathy has consequences for how we should think about literary value in general or the literary value of particular works. What I say here will be consistent with the view that a work's capacity to enlarge empathy makes no difference at all to its value as literature. Even people who hold that view may be interested in whether fiction is a valuable inducer of empathy; no one outside the circle of Dorian Grey thinks that artistic values are the only value worth having. Secondly, those who claim that literature's capacity to induce empathy contributes to personal growth, moral enlargement, helping behaviour and the rest need not claim that this is the only mechanism by which literature has, or can have, these good outcomes. It might be claimed that literature calls forth

non-empathic emotions and other states which independently contribute to these good outcomes. While some of the results I'll consider here may apply to these other states, I will limit the explicit discussion to empathy which, in the next section, I will do my best to describe.

III. SOME FEATURES OF EMPATHY

“Empathy” is regularly used in ways that do not coalesce around a straightforward definition.¹⁸ Without seeking a definition I simply describe features I take to be important for present purposes. They supplement aspects of common usage with some insights from science. They point, I hope, towards paradigmatic cases of the phenomenon I'm interested in.¹⁹ In speaking of empathy I have in mind:

1. An affect- involving mental state;
2. a response to the (real or imagined) affect-involving state of another (the target);
3. in which you are (normally) aware that your state is a response to the state of the target,
4. which often presents itself as a way of understanding what the target's state feels like by presenting its affective component as *similar to* the affective state of the target,
5. which usually involves having thoughts as well as feelings which mirror, or are presented as mirroring, the thoughts of the person you are empathizing with. In empathising with your fear of the tiger I will have thoughts about tigers as well as anxious feelings,
6. which is not the same as sympathy; empathising with someone may leave me devoid of sympathy; I might relish your suffering, and a powerful leader may exploit the emotions of others by having an empathic sense of their intensity and direction; conversely, my failure to empathise with your plight need not prohibit me from sympathizing, and taking steps to help you,
- 7 but which may have, in normal circumstances and for psychologically normal subjects, a tendency to promote sympathy and may be an especially direct and effective mechanism for mobilizing helping behavior²⁰

8. which is in part biologically realized by having systems responsible for affect-generation in the self be responsive to emotions observed or imagined in others,²¹
9. which nevertheless seems to be cognitively penetrable, educable and to some extent under the control of conscious will.

7 and 9 are important points for our purposes since they suggest both the possibility of a genuine place for fiction in motivating empathic effort and for empathy in affecting our moral behaviour. I take up this issue in the next section, but will end this one with a brief elaboration of 9, perhaps the less familiar of these two claims.

There has been some tendency in the psychological literature to treat empathy as an automatic response not affected by higher, cognitive factors. But Singer and colleagues, in a study of empathy for pain, found empathy to be modulated by the affective link between the empathizer and the person in pain. Male but not female viewers' empathy was affected by whether the person in pain was perceived as having behaved unfairly in a prior game of iterated prisoner's dilemma. Males also showed an increase in experienced reward which was correlated with their expressed desire for revenge against the unfair player.²² In another study empathic response to pain was modulated by knowledge that the pain was caused in the process of curing a disorder.²³ The level and quality of empathic response is also influenced by people's beliefs about empathy itself. A study by Karina Schumann and colleagues found that people expended greater empathic effort in responding to someone with conflicting views and spent more time listening to the personal story of a racial outgroup member when they believed that empathy is capable of development than they did if they believed the contrary.²⁴ The next section will build on the thought that empathy is not merely a spontaneous and uncontrolled outburst of feeling but is susceptible to some degree of top-down influence.

IV. MONITORING THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF SKILLS

Friends of fiction's moral significance have wanted to emphasise not merely its capacity to increase empathic sensitivity but its help in improving moral discrimination. For Nussbaum, following Henry James, the competent moral agent is "finely aware and richly responsible", able to judge sensibly in a complex moral environment where available clues are subtle and potentially misleading.²⁵ Let us distinguish two kinds of

purposes for which we work on our skills and capacities. Some skills quickly arrive at an adequate steady state, as with my bike-riding: barely competent but able to get me to the village shop. With other purposes in mind a skill may require maintenance of higher-level control even though individual components of the action are performed so quickly as to defy rational deliberation, as with the piano playing of an aspirant concert artist. The pianist's behaviour never becomes automated in the way my bicycle riding so obviously has. The pianist cannot let her mind wander; she must be constantly assessing and modulating her performance.²⁶

This is a relevant distinction for us. We noted in Section II that unconstrained, unreflective empathy often does not lead to desirable results. Helping behaviour produced by unreflective empathy tends to be arbitrarily disposed, favours those close to us with whom we empathise easily, and proceeds without regard to justice or economy of means; it makes us sensitive to the individual victim of a policy and indifferent to the many whose lives the policy saved.²⁷

If reading literature simply magnifies our empathic responses without giving us the power to modulate and direct them it arguably does little good. And some of the greatest literature seems vulnerable to the worry that it encourages sensitivity to irrelevant or distracting cues concerning the distribution of empathic concern. Tzachi Zamir points out that we care deeply about Cleopatra's death but rarely give thought to the deaths of Charmian and Iras whose speech is less memorable; their bodies lie on the stage unmourned.²⁸ What serious advocates of learning from literature surely hope for is that it will help us to be more thoughtful and discriminating empathisers, capable of putting our empathic capacities to good use by having moral reasoning in an oversight role. The internal demands of narrative coherence and the need to focus on interesting and atypical subjects do not make it easy for fictions at any level of quality to satisfy this goal. Nor does the currently available evidence, even on the most optimistic construal, support the idea that literature does this. Experimentalists have found that, immediately after reading a short story, subjects were more willing to help someone pick up dropped pencils than were non-readers; other experiments have shown raised scores on tests of empathy such as "reading for the eyes" in which subjects answer questions about the emotion expressed in a pictured face, and on self reports of empathy. While such tests may show elevated empathic tendencies they do not tell us much about the controlled, reflective and discriminating use of empathy.²⁹

V. CURRENT EVIDENCE FOR THE EFFECTS OF FICTION ON EMPATHY

What, in fact, do these tests show? Keith Oatley and colleagues at Toronto are pioneers in this field and have claimed that “[e]ngaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference”.³⁰ The evidence they provide is somewhat weak. They say that reading a fictional narrative, as compared with reading an “instructional text”, leads to the activation of more personal memories, and was engaged with for longer, and that “It is possible that these longer reading times reflected a more attentive approach to the text, which aids in producing a simulative experience when combined with certain text features such as metaphors and rich descriptions”.³¹ Whether these factors do promote simulative activity and, if so, whether the resulting activity improves performance on empathy tasks is unclear. The same research group also claims to have shown that “individuals who have been exposed to more fictional literature tend to exhibit better empathic abilities”, though they say it would be difficult to see what the direction of causation is.³² Another study which used the reading for the eyes test is ambitiously titled “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind” and popularly cited as having shown that fiction makes us better people. The improvement in empathy performance was actually small, its durability was not examined, and the way of choosing reading materials—by the experimenters themselves and not by a neutral party—have been strongly criticised.³³ Another study found increased empathic tendencies a week after reading part of a Sherlock Holmes story, as measured by self-report [Bal & Veltkam (2013)], but only for readers who were highly emotionally involved in it (“transported” as psychologists sometimes say); readers who reported low emotional involvement were found to have reduced empathic tendencies after a week.³⁴ There was no significant increase in empathy for those who read newspaper extracts and in one of the two experiments there was a decrease in empathy for those who had been highly engaged by the story. These results are somewhat difficult to interpret; taking them at face value one will worry that the overall impact of fiction reading on empathy is negligible or negative, given that a good deal of our reading of fiction is not very emotionally involved; starting a novel and giving up because it is not very involving would then be a dangerous thing.

Another concern is that the tests of empathy used in this experiment and in some others—self-report—did not demonstrate any change

of behavioural disposition.³⁵ One further experiment did probe for helping behaviour after the reading; a correlation was observed between those who helped and those who reported high levels of “transportation” or imaginative engagement with the story.³⁶ Since helping behaviour was manifested immediately after the reading it is unclear how long the effect lasted; we know that trivial events like finding a dime in a phone booth can lead to immediate and minor helping behaviour, without, presumably, leading to shifts in a person’s outlook or dispositions.³⁷

A question these studies have begun to address is the extent to which the “literariness” of a fictional work contributes to its empathic effects. This question is crucial to some of the arguments that have been presented in favour of fiction’s improving capacities; many have argued that the literary canon, or some revised version of it, is especially valuable in its capacity to illuminate obscure aspects of moral psychology—accepting at the same time that works much less worthy in literary terms such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* have made an historical difference to people’s empathic connection to others. Some of the studies already mentioned have tried to get a handle on the effects of “quality” fiction and on the responses of people who habitually read it. A recent study of this kind is by Emy Koopman who exposed subjects to three kinds of texts: literary and “life” narratives, distinguished by the greater degree of foregrounding of language and style in the former, and non-narrative instructional texts.³⁸ For readings of each of the two narrative texts subjects were divided into those who were told that the text was fiction and those who were told that it was non-fiction. The effect of reading on pro-social behavior was measured by willingness to donate a small amount of money; results were inconclusive because few donated, but there was modest evidence that the life narrative was more effective than the literary one; it made no difference whether or not subjects were told they were reading fiction. Koopman concludes that “reading single narrative fragments has limited effects on measures related to real-life empathy... when pro-social behavior is triggered, this appears to be short-lived.”

VI. DOUBTS ABOUT THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF FICTION ON EMPATHY

Studies like those just outlined have contributed valuable methods and results to the debate over fictions relations to empathy; that they leave the extent and even the existence of a positive causal relation in doubt is unsurprising at this early stage. Some studies hint at amplifica-

tion effects, where reading precedes increased helping behaviour directed at available targets, and at increased self-estimations of empathy. But there is no evidence for fictions capacity to regulate empathy or make it the servant of a principled morality. Finding such evidence will not be easy.

Given the complexity and variety of literary fiction, the various circumstances in which we encounter it and the extent of variation between individual readers it is reasonable to expect that more sensitive studies will identify a range of effects, many specific to particular cases, including null effects and tendencies to reduce or misdirect empathy as well as cases where fiction boosts or refines it. With a view to extending our causal horizon, let's consider a range of assumptions we might make about the effects of fiction on moral cognition and moral behaviour. I divide them into two groups.

Empathy with fictional characters has no significant effect on helping behavior

1. Empathising with fictional characters has no significant effect on our tendency to empathise with real people, because the stimuli available in fictional cases, with direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the character, is so much richer than the stimuli available in real life cases. Repeated responding to the richer stimulus does not make us more prone to respond to the weaker.
2. Empathising with fictional characters has a tendency to promote empathy for real people but little or no tendency to affect helping behavior, because empathy and helping behavior are in fact only weakly connected, if at all.³⁹
3. Empathising with fictional characters has a tendency to promote empathy and helping behavior in the real world but only at very short time scales, perhaps because the empathizing with fictional characters merely primes us for empathizing with real people.
4. Empathising with fictional characters is in fact a rare occurrence in the experience of reading fiction and so is largely irrelevant to our tendencies to real-world empathy and helping behavior.⁴⁰

Empathy with fictional characters has a significant but negative effect on helping behaviour

5. Empathising with fictional characters eats into our empathy capital, leaving less empathic capacity for responding to real situations.

6. Empathising with fictional characters gives us a sense of having responded well, lessening our desire to be empathic to the real people we encounter when we put the book down; we have done enough empathizing for the day.
7. Empathising with fictional characters, because it is not accompanied immediately by helping behavior, weakens the psychological connection between empathy and helping behavior. In general, the more one does A without then doing B, the less one is naturally inclined to do B after doing A.⁴¹
8. Empathising with fictional characters has a tendency to promote empathy for real people which then strongly affects helping behavior, but in ways which lead to undesirable outcomes as often as to desirable ones. For empathy distorts our sense of justice and focuses us disproportionately on providing short-term help for those we happen to know.

I won't work through all eight scenarios: the list is there merely to illustrate the variety and richness of the set of strategies available to anyone who wants to pour cold or at least cooling water on the enthusiasm of some for the literature/empathy connection. I have said something briefly about 8. I will focus now on 6. It alerts us to the possibility that, as well as amplifying our empathic responses fiction may sometimes depress them.

VII. SELF-LICENSING

Recent psychological work on what is called moral self-licensing claims to identify a system governing conscientious in behaviour, mediated by subjects' perception of their own status as just and rational beings.⁴² This literature was pointed out to me by Catarina Dutilh Novaes, to whom I am very grateful. Let me briefly describe some of these results.

In one experiment subjects who were offered and took a vitamin supplement subsequently smoked more than controls did.⁴³ In another, subjects given an opportunity to establish non-racist credentials were then more likely than controls to endorse a view which might be seen as racially problematic.⁴⁴ The hypothesis is that the prior behaviour enhances a sense of self-worth which in turn gives people the feeling of being licensed to behave less well or less sensibly thereafter. This suggests that the experience of empathising with fictional characters might actually re-

duce our tendency to exercise empathy in response to the plights of other, real people.

Note that self-licencing does not seem to be the product of the admitted fact that people have limited capacities for empathy or other energy-consuming activities, leading to a decline in worthy behaviours in a given time period. For one thing it is not clear how this would explain the smoking case, since taking a dietary supplement is not very effortful. More importantly, we can easily produce the mirror image phenomenon: when people perceive their actions to be lazy, indulgent or otherwise unworthy they are more inclined to subsequently worthy action. Researchers into self-licencing tend to assume that the process in either direction is homeostatic, mediated by self-image. A boost to self-image licenses a relaxation of standards, while a threat to it posed by perceived transgression calls forth compensating good behaviour.⁴⁵

How does self-image mediate this process? Not, presumably, by providing a reason for the subsequent behaviour; you could not justify apparently unworthy behaviour produced by such a mechanism by saying that you were feeling sufficiently good about yourself to warrant behaving badly.⁴⁶ If self image mediates in these cases it is more likely that it does so via something more akin to emotion than to judgement. I don't think we commonly recognise an emotion triggered by fluctuations in self-worth, though we do speak of "feeling good (bad) about ourselves". Still, something rather emotion-like seems to operate here. Just as fear may disincline you to walk on a solid glass floor above a ravine without your judging that there is any danger, you may be demotivated from carrying out good deeds by comfortable feelings of self-worth, without thinking of this as justifying your behaviour.⁴⁷

I said that feelings of self-worth partially control but do not justify cessation of such worthy activities as smoking less, being vigilant about racist attitudes and empathising with others. I don't however mean that such feelings are simply brute causes of the cessation. Things are a little more complicated. Discussing the way stereotype threat leads to a loss of access to knowledge and hence to poor performance on a test, Tamar Gendler makes a distinction which is likely to apply here also. I suggest that moral self licencing

isn't just the result of something straightforwardly causal like bumping your head and getting a concussion... nor is it the result of something straightforwardly reason-based like reading a revisionist textbook or thinking through a Brain-in-a-Vat scenario.... Rather, it's the result of some-

thing ... not sufficiently well-conceptualized to call a reason, but that (in a way in between a reasony and a causy fashion) *eases* us towards a certain outlook on the world.⁴⁸

In the cases we are considering, a feeling of self-worth whispers permission to be less good.

A similar point needs to be made about another aspect of my account. Self-licensing is a two stage process, and we have been looking at the second stage, the transition from feelings of self-worth to cessation or reduction of good behaviour.⁴⁹ But the first stage is from good behaviour to feelings of self-worth, and here the relation looks to be conventionally justifying. I'm right, aren't I, to think of myself as a good person when I do good things? There are worries here about the competing roles of situation and character in determining action and the possibility of a general scepticism about characterological assessments. But putting these controversial and arcane considerations aside, folk psychology seems to endorse the idea that good behaviour justifies feelings of self-worth, while recognising that such feelings can be excessive. But if that is how self-licensing works, how can it apply to fictional cases? Beatrice, who spends her day counselling people in difficult situations, is entitled to all the feelings of self-worth she allows herself; Eugenie, who spends her days reading Tolstoy and empathising energetically with Anna Karenina surely isn't.⁵⁰

What I suggest in response is that stage one of the process is governed, in fictional cases, as little by rational processes as is stage two. We are familiar with situations in which mental processes which normally provide some kind of justificatory warrant are vulnerable to illusions of warrant created by merely imagined experience or activity. If I had been watching a serious documentary about the danger from vampires lurking in dark places I would have some reason to think twice before taking the short but dark-alley-involving way home. Watching an avowedly fictional movie on the same topic would provide no such justification, but it might still cause me to avoid the dark alley.⁵¹ In the light of the feelings, the alley-avoiding behaviour can surely seem to the agent appropriate in some admittedly rather shallow sense; certain feelings unambiguously suggest to us certain courses of action, and we are naturally and for good evolutionary reasons prone to respond to those promptings, without waiting for further justification.⁵² Similarly, the Anna Karenina-induced feelings of personal effort, accomplishment and sensitivity might seem to legitimise (and not merely be a cause of) subsequently reduced levels of

effort when it comes to empathising with family, friends and those real but distant people in desperate need. Indeed there is evidence that self-licensing can be produced by merely imagined activity; Subjects in one experiment designed to induce self-licensing were more prone to frivolous purchases (luxury jeans vs dull vacuum cleaner) after they had imagined volunteering for community service; the imagined volunteering seems to have improved self-image though imagining yourself doing something worthy is little reason to raise your assessment of your actual worth.⁵³ There is also evidence that describing how well you would behave in ideal circumstances, which very likely produces an imagining of behaving well, makes people report less creditable real intentions than they would otherwise report.⁵⁴ Again, the process here is not merely causal even though it is not properly justificatory; imagining volunteering eases us, as Gendler puts it, towards a better self-image.

CONCLUSION

It is certainly plausible that there are pathways from reading fiction to being a better empathiser. Interesting questions include “Are any of these plausible pathways actual?” “If so, how often they are actualised?” “If any of these pathways exist, do they simply increase our sensitivity to empathy-inducing stimuli, or do they also help us control and direct our empathic urgings in sensible ways?” To none of these questions do we have clearly defensible answers, though some of the evidence we have weakly suggests a yes answer to the first. I have suggested that, in giving a yes answer, we may need to say additionally: “But there are also pathways that reduce empathy and these compete for dominance with the empathy-increasing ones”. The literature on moral self-licensing shows why that proposition needs to be taken seriously, though it falls far short of showing that it is true. *

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NOTES

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¹ Versions of this paper have been read at various places including the Turin workshop on Fiction & Intentionality 2015 and the Institute of Philosophy, London workshop on Language, Literacy, Literature & Mind, 2016. I am grateful to those who participated in the discussion on both occasions and to the kind folk who read and commented on its various versions. They include Robyn Carston, Sarah Churchwell, Stacie Friend, Fred Kroon, Tony Marcel, Barry Smith, Alberto Voltolini.

² On motivating and normative reasons see Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994), Section 4.2.

³ See e.g. Johnson, D.R., Transportation into literary fiction reduces prejudice against and increases empathy for Arab-Muslims, *Scientific Study of Literature*, 3 (2013): 77–92.

⁴ Assume that in fact the group has about as many at each end of the sociality spectrum. You may argue that reason is on the side of tolerance and a positive view of others, thus creating an asymmetry between the reason-giving capacities of the two stories. But fictions about a kindly SS Officer do not give us reasons for thinking better of that group.

⁵ As well as trying to form habits in this way we may want such “nudges” to go along with a public culture which encourages reflection and debate, which is reason-promoting in ways which will help subjects to exercise some control over the direction and strength of their habitual behaviour. See below, Section IV.

⁶ Psychologist Emy Koopman puts the claim like this: “Through feeling for [characters], readers could generalize these feelings to the real world, becoming more sensitive to and gaining a better understanding of others’ distress, and, perhaps, reacting more empathically to others” (‘Empathic Reactions After Reading: The Role of Genre, Personal Factors and Affective Responses’, *Poetics* 50 (2015): 62-79, p.64). The claimed effects of engagement with fictional situations and characters go beyond the cultivation of empathic skills; Matthew Keiran suggests that fictions of certain kinds cultivate more general mind-reading capacities: “We do not just learn that servility can be self-serving but, in doing so, exercise and cultivate the more general ability to see how the tone and nature of particular outward actions can be revelatory of certain character traits” (‘Comedy and Tragedy’, *Ethical Perspectives*, 20 (2013): 427-450).

⁷ Woolfolk, R., Parrish, W., & Murphy, S. (1985), ‘The Effects of Positive and Negative Imagery on Motor Skill Performance’, *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 9, 335-341.

⁸ Sharma, N., Pomeroy, V. M., & Baron, J. (2006) ‘Motor Imagery: A Back Door to the Motor System After Stroke?’, *Stroke*, 37, 1941-1952, p. 1948.

⁹ See e.g. Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams*, Wiley, 2011.

¹⁰ See A. Ichino & G. Currie 'Truth and Trust in Fiction' in Helen Bradley, Paul Noordhof and Ema Sullivan-Bissett (eds) *Essays on Art and Belief*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

¹¹ For discussion see e.g. Celia Heyes, (1994), 'Social Learning in Animals: Categories and Mechanisms'; *Biol. Rev.* 69, 207-231.

¹² See e.g. Green, M. & T. C. Brock, 'The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2000) 79, p. 705. See also Gerrig, R. & D. Prentice, 'The Representation of Fictional Information', *Psychological Science* (1991) 2; Marsh, E. J., Meade, M. L., & Roediger, H. L. 'Learning Facts from Fiction', *Journal of Memory & Language*, (2003) 49: 519-536. For discussion of some of these cases and suggestions about how the results might be interpreted see Ichino & Currie, 'Truth and Trust in Fiction'.

¹³ For this and other concerns about the partiality of empathy see Prinz, J. 'Against Empathy', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, (2011), 49: 214-233; 'Is empathy necessary for morality?', in Amy Coplan & Peter Goldie (Eds.), *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (pp. 211-229), Oxford: Oxford University Press. Others see an important role for empathy when reflectively constrained; Following Hume and Smith, Antti Kauppinen argues for the moral significance of an "ideal-regulated empathy...", a broadly affective response to another's perceived situation that is regulated by reference to an ideal perspective" ('Empathy, Emotion Regulation, and Moral Judgment', in Heidi Maibom (ed), *Empathy and Morality*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 105). See also Julia Driver, 'The Secret Chain', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (2011), p. 49, Spindel Supplement, 236. See also below, Section IV.

¹⁴ See Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford University Press, 2010). As well as examining experimental studies Keen looked at suggestive commentary in the public domain and at the responses of her own students, finding similarly unsupportive results.

¹⁵ Among recent evidence-light expressions of the educated liberal view see Neil Gaiman, 'Face facts: We need fiction', *Guardian* 24 October 2013.

¹⁶ See Lillard, A. S., Lerner, M. D., Hopkins, E. J., Dore, R. A., Smith, E. D., Palmquist, C. M., 'The impact of Pretend Play on Children's Development: A Review of the Evidence', *Psychological Bulletin*, 2013 Jan, 139: 1-34.

¹⁷ There is no inconsistency in supposing it has both kinds of effects; the same object may have both empathy increasing and empathy reducing features; the features may be activated in different circumstances or in the same circumstances; the features might affect different populations or the same one. If it's the same population in the same circumstances, the positive and negative effects on a given individual would produce a net result for that individual, itself positive, negative or null.

¹⁸ For something on the history of the notion, and especially on the term "empathy" see my 'Empathy for Objects', in Goldie & Coplan (eds.), *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*.

¹⁹ De Vignemont & Singer say: There is empathy if: (i) one is in an affective state; (ii) this state is isomorphic to another person's affective state; (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person's affective state; (iv) one knows that the other person is the source of one's own affective state. These correspond roughly to my 1, 2, 3 and 4 (see Frederique de Vignemont & Tania Singer, 'The Empathic Brain: How, When and Why?' *Trends in Cognitive Science*, (2006), 10: 435-441).

²⁰ The actual contribution of empathy to moral cognition and behavior is disputed. Batson has argued for a close connection between empathy and altruistic behavior (see e.g. Batson, C.D., Batson, J.G., Singlsby, J.K., Harrell, K.L., Peekna, H.M., and Todd, R.M. (1991) 'Empathic Joy and the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis', *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 61, 413-426; as indicated above (note 13) Jesse Prinz argues that empathy is not necessary for moral judgement, development or motivation; he also questions whether we should cultivate moral systems based on empathy, and whether empathy is the "key to a well functioning moral system" ('Is empathy necessary for morality?' 221). The answer might be no to both questions and yet it still be true that empathy has a role to play in mobilizing helping behavior.

²¹ Thus subjects with impaired disgust responses are impaired in their recognition of disgust in others (see R. Adolphs et. al., 'Dissociable Neural Systems for Recognizing Emotions', *Brain and Cognition* (2003) 52: 61-9.

²² T. Singer, et al., 'Empathic Neural Responses are Modulated by the Perceived Fairness of Others', *Nature*, 439 (2006), pp. 466-469.

²³ Lamm, C. et al., 'The Neural Substrate of Human Empathy: Effects of Perspective Taking and Emotion Regulation', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* (2007) 19:1, pp. 425-8. For arguments in favour of the responsiveness of empathy to belief, see de Vignemont & Singer, 'The Empathic Brain: How, When and Why?'

²⁴ Karina Schumann, Jamil Zaki, and Carol S. Dweck, 'Addressing the Empathy Deficit: Beliefs About the Malleability of Empathy Predict Effortful Responses When Empathy Is Challenging', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2014) 107: 475-493

²⁵ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1992), Chapter 5.

²⁶ See Julia Annas, 'Practical Expertise', in J. Bengson and M. Moffett (eds) *Knowing How*, 2011, Oxford University Press.

²⁷ On the dampening of empathic responses to the suffering of out-group members see Mina Cikara, Emile G. Bruneau and Rebecca R. Saxe, 'Us and Them: Intergroup Failures of Empathy, Current Directions', *Psychological Science* (2011) 20: 149-153. Paul Bloom writes "...if a planet of billions is to survive, however, we'll need to take into consideration the welfare of people not yet harmed—and, even more, of people not yet born. They have no names, faces, or stories to grip our conscience or stir our fellow-feeling. Their prospects call, rather, for deliberation and calculation. Our hearts will always go out to the baby in the well; it's a measure of our humanity. But empathy will have to yield to reason if humanity is to have a future" (Bloom, 'The baby in the well', *New Yorker*,

May 20th 2013. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/20/the-baby-in-the-well>; see also Pappas, N. 1997. 'Fancy justice: Martha Nussbaum on the political value of the novel', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (1997) 78: 278-296).

²⁸ Paper delivered at the Shakespeare and Philosophy conference, University of Hertfordshire, August 2014.

²⁹ I do not suggest that the available tests are pointless; on the contrary they are to be welcomed as the beginning of a serious empirical investigation of a topic too long left to people's intuitive judgements.

³⁰ Mar, R. A. & Oatley, K., 'The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience'; *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, (2008) 3, p.173. Uses of "can" and "it is possible that" makes it a little unclear what they are claiming.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.179. One problem here is that this research does not distinguish the effects of fiction from the effects of narrative; the contrast with an "instructional text" creates a contrast between narrative and non-narrative discourse, not between fiction and non-fiction. This point is well made in Koopman, 'Empathic Reactions After Reading'.

³² Mar, et. al. 'Bookworms versus Nerds'; Koopman found a correlation between exposure to literature and empathic responses but does not claim to have found a causal relation ('Empathic Reactions After Reading', p.76).

³³ By David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, in *Science*, 18 October 2013: Vol. 342 no. 6156: 377-380. For criticism see <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=7715>. This criticism applies to nearly all the available studies. For a typical popular reaction to the study see "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy, Study Finds", *Guardian*, Tuesday 8 October 2013: "New research shows works by writers such as Charles Dickens and Téa Obreht sharpen our ability to understand others' emotions – more than thrillers or romance novels."

³⁴ P. Matthijs Bal & Martijn Veltkamp, 'How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation', *Plos One*, Published: January 30, 2013, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0055341. In their second experiment in which readers read a fictional extract from Nobel Prize winner Jose Saramago the positive effect on empathy for those highly engaged by the story was not significant. The results of the first experiment were that people who were high in transportation into the Sherlock Holmes story increased their empathy, but there was no significant change in empathy in those who read the newspaper extracts. In the second experiment, people who were high in transportation into the story by Saramago increased their empathy somewhat but the increase was not significant, while people who were high in transportation into the newspaper extracts significantly decreased their empathy from. In both experiments, people who read the fictional stories but were not transported into them showed decreased empathy.

³⁵ See also text to note 19 above.

³⁶ D. Johnson, 2012 ‘Transportation into a Story Increases Empathy, Pro-social Behaviour, and Perceptual Bias Toward Fearful Expressions’, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52: 150–155

³⁷ Isen, Alice, and Paula Levin, 1972 ‘Effect of Feeling Good on Helping’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21: 384-88.

³⁸ Koopman, ‘Empathic Reactions After Reading’.

³⁹ If empathy does not promote helping behaviour, why has it evolved? One hypothesis is that it evolved as part of a more general capacity for mind reading, not designed for helping but designed to aid in deceiving and avoiding deception. Alternatively it might have evolved as part of a suite of capacities designed to promote social cohesion: empathy may help bring people’s mental states into alignment.

⁴⁰ See Noel Carroll, ‘Simulation, Emotion and Morality’, in G. Hoffmann and A. Hornung, *Emotions in Postmodernism*, Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1997, and Matthew Kieran ‘In Search of a Narrative’, in M. Kieran and D. M. Lopes (eds) *Art and Imagination*, London, Routledge, 2002. For a response to these claims see Currie, ‘Anne Bronte and the Uses of Narrative’, in *Arts and Minds*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴¹ Anna Laetitia Aiken wrote in 1773 that “Nothing is more dangerous than to let any virtuous impressions of any kind pass through the mind without producing their proper effect” (quoted in S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, New York, OUP, 2010: 47). But Aiken turns out to be making a slightly different suggestion than the one above: that virtuous feeling itself grows progressively weaker if not accompanied by action.

⁴² For a review of current research in this area see Anna C. Merritt, Daniel A. Effron, and Benoit Monin, ‘Moral Self-Licensing: When Being Good Frees Us to Be Bad’, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4/5 (2010): 344-357.

⁴³ Chiou, W.-B., Wan, C.-S., Wu, W.-H., & Lee, K.-T. (2011); ‘A Randomized Experiment to Examine Unintended Consequences of Dietary Supplement Use Among Daily Smokers: Taking Supplements Reduces Self-Regulation of Smoking’, *Addiction*, 106(12): 2221-8.

⁴⁴ Monin, B., & Miller, D. T. (2001), ‘Moral Credentials and the Expression of Prejudice’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81: 33-43.

⁴⁵ As we might expect, factors impacting on self-conception can affect behaviour without their being a record of good/bad prior behaviour; simply framing an action in terms which make the self salient (“Don’t be a cheater” vs “Don’t cheat”) makes it less likely that people will perform the bad act (C. J. Bryan, G. S. Adams, B. Monin, ‘When Cheating Would Make you a Cheater: Implicating the Self Prevents Unethical Behaviour’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, (2013) 142: 1001-5.

⁴⁶ Though thinking badly of yourself would be an acceptable reason, if one is wanted, for doing good.

⁴⁷ That said, some of the behaviours recorded in the self-licencing literature may have a more strategic motivation: in one experiment subjects were told

they would, a day later, chose between a White and a Black candidate for a job. Before reporting their decision, subjects were asked whether certain behaviours (a police officer stops a black man whose appearance matches the description of a suspect) were racist. When the White applicant was more qualified, participants were more inclined to judge these as racist, perhaps in anticipation of the suspicion that their choice would itself be thought racially biased (Anna C. Merritt et. al., 'The strategic pursuit of moral credentials', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48, 2012: 774-777).

⁴⁸ Gendler "On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias", *Philosophical Studies* (2011), 156: 33-63. Gendler labels these intermediate states "easons".

⁴⁹ Or from feelings of lack of self-worth to increased demonstrations of goodness—given the topic of this paper, I am focusing on the other disjunct but it must not be forgotten that both kinds of transition are, on current thinking, aspects of the same, homeostatic phenomenon.

⁵⁰ Which is not to say that there is anything wrong with such an activity.

⁵¹ One can ask awkward questions about the justification provided by the documentary; perhaps, like many representations of risk, the effect on people's behaviour would be disproportionate to the real probability of vampire attack (perhaps vampires are actually rather rare and the probability of one being in this alley is vanishingly small). Still, relative to the generally poor sensitivity to probabilities among humans, disinclination to walk down the alley would have some justification in the circumstances described above.

⁵² Thus advice on avoiding dangerous situations often emphasises the importance of responding to one's feelings of danger even when unaccompanied by grounds one could give for the danger's existence.

⁵³ Khan, U., & Dhar, R., 'Licensing Effect in Consumer Choice', *Journal of Marketing Research*, (2006) 43: 259-266.

⁵⁴ Tanner, R. J., & Carlson, K. A., 'Unrealistically Optimistic Consumers: A Selective Hypothesis Testing Account for Optimism in Predictions of Future Behavior', *Journal of Consumer Research*, (2008) 35: 810-822.