

# What's Wrong with Didacticism?

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*Works of literature that are too overtly instructive are commonly faulted for being didactic. For so-called literary cognitivists, who believe that instruction is an important literary value, this seems to pose a problem: if we value literature for the instruction it affords, why would we ever object to overt instruction? In this paper I propose the following answer: overt instruction can arouse suspicion of intellectual vices in the author, such as intellectual arrogance, dogmatism, and prejudice, which can make the lessons the author seeks to convey less rationally acceptable. Overt instruction in a work of literature is sometimes a fault, therefore, precisely because it makes the work less valuable as a source of instruction.*

The following comments illustrate a familiar use of the term *didactic* in literary criticism.

[Charles McCarry's novel *Shelley's Heart*] is a failure because it is pedantic and didactic for whole furlongs of its immense length and utterly, artlessly fantastic for the remainder.<sup>1</sup>

This book is also gripping and dynamic in ways that rivet the reader even when the thinking is didactic and the prose takes a purplish turn.<sup>2</sup>

[Novelist Manil Suri's] refusal to give in to any hint of the didactic or the predictable, affirms his position as a writer worth serious attention.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of such comments, it is generally understood that *didacticism* refers to some sort of defect in a work of literature as such. The question I will explore and attempt to answer is exactly what that defect consists in.

On the face of it this question may not seem all that philosophically rich; thus, it may come as no surprise that philosophers have not generally paid it much attention. In fact, however, the neglect it has received belies its importance to a central and perennial debate in literary aesthetics concerning the relation between the value of literary artworks as such (their 'literary-aesthetic' value) and their value as purveyors of knowledge or other associated epistemic goods (e.g. truth or justified belief). Roughly characterized, the debate is between those who affirm ('cognitivists') and those who deny ('autonomists') that the proper or constitutive aims of literature—those whose realization gives rise to literary-aesthetic value—include that of informing, educating, or enlightening readers. For cognitivists like Matthew Kieran, Noël Carroll, and Berys Gaut, the fact that a work of literature has something valuable to teach us can add to its literary merit, whereas for autonomists like Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, a work that imparts true or justified beliefs may or may not on that account be worse for it from a literary-critical standpoint but will never be any better.

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1 Christopher Hitchens, 'Ode to the West Wing', *New York Review of Books*, 13 July 1995.

2 Janet Maslin, 'In "The Attack", an Arab-Israeli Learns Too Late of a Terrorist Stranger in the Family', *New York Times*, 15 May 2006.

3 Caryn James, 'A Fire in the Heart', *New York Times*, 24 February 2008.

The relevance of didacticism to the cognitivist–autonomist debate lies in the connection between a work’s being didactic and its being designed to instruct. The connection is not straightforward. Not all works that aim to instruct are necessarily guilty of didacticism. There is no question that *Crime and Punishment* and *Middlemarch*, for example, contain philosophical teachings, yet critics disagree about whether these works are didactic.<sup>4</sup> To count as didactic, the proffered instruction must be overt, and more than this—since even some overtly instructive works such as Pope’s *Essay on Man* are arguably not didactic—it must be somehow *too* overt. Yet the very possibility that instruction in literature could be *too* overt seems to pose a serious challenge to the cognitivist. That is, in Peter Lamarque’s words: ‘if instruction is an important literary value, why should overt instruction [ever] be a fault?’<sup>5</sup>

The goal of this paper is to answer Lamarque’s challenge on behalf of the cognitivist. The answer I will propose is not intended to exclude other possible explanations for why overt instruction in literature can sometimes be a fault. It may well be, as Lamarque himself suggests, for example, that overt instruction can sometimes be a fault because it can get in the way of other non-cognitive pleasures proper to literature. However, I will argue, it is sometimes the case that what makes overt instruction in literature objectionable is that it provides evidence of certain epistemic vices such as intellectual arrogance, dogmatism, and prejudice, which undercut the author’s credibility and thereby compromise the work’s value as a source of instruction. It is thus precisely because instruction is an important literary value, I will claim, that overt instruction is sometimes a fault.

In the next section I spend some time unpacking this claim. In the two subsequent sections, I go on, first, to illustrate and support my view with examples from literary criticism, and, second, to defend my view against three alternative accounts of what’s wrong with didacticism.

## I

Consider the expression ‘to protest too much’. According to the common understanding of this expression, someone who ‘protests too much’ states a point so often or strongly that others begin to question his trustworthiness. Take, for example, that friend who claims that he no longer thinks about his ex-lover. The more frequently and emphatically this friend announces that he has ‘moved on’, the more apt we are to suspect not only that the opposite is true but that our friend is guilty of dishonesty, wishful thinking, or some other cognitive vice.

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4 Hugh Mercer Curtler, for example, criticizes the epilogue of *Crime and Punishment* for being a piece of ‘didactic baggage’, while Ernest Simmons praises Dostoevsky for avoiding ‘a didactic manner’ in the novel. See Hugh Mercer Curtler, ‘The Artistic Failure of *Crime and Punishment*’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 38 (2004), 1–11; Ernest J. Simmons, ‘The Art of *Crime and Punishment*’, in *Dostoevsky: The Making of a Novelist* (New York: Vintage, 1940), 158–71. For more on *Middlemarch*, see below, ‘Didacticism as Prejudice’, in Section II, and ‘The Bad Taste Account’, in Section III.

5 Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 253.

Authors of literary works can also ‘protest too much’, and it is my contention that this is often precisely what’s happening when authors are accused of being ‘didactic’ or too overtly instructive. When an author is said to be didactic, that is, it is often because the manner in which she attempts to convey her message is so overt as to raise doubts about her intellectual character. Specifically, questions may arise as to her impartiality, her receptivity to contrary evidence, or her openness to alternative points of view. An author who tells her readers too explicitly what lessons to draw from her story, as if the reader is too obtuse to draw the lesson for himself, may also come across as intellectually arrogant or condescending. Instruction that is especially overt or heavy-handed can thus be objectionable because it can arouse suspicion of various intellectual vices in the author, including dogmatism, arrogance, and prejudice.

Different accounts might be offered of the nature of both intellectual vices in general and these intellectual vices in particular. Drawing on Aristotle’s model of moral virtues and vices, one influential view understands all intellectual vices as entrenched dispositions or character traits, acquired through habituation and involving, as essential components, certain (defective) patterns of emotion and motivation.<sup>6</sup> To possess an intellectual vice such as dogmatism, on this view, is to have a stable tendency toward certain feelings—e.g. feelings of attachment to one’s own beliefs that lead one to ignore criticisms or disregard contrary evidence—which ultimately arise from a deficiency in one’s motivation to achieve knowledge or high-quality beliefs. This view offers one plausible way of understanding the intellectual vices involved in didacticism, though I do not insist on it as the only way.

Nor do I insist that dogmatism, arrogance, and prejudice are the only vices that can be associated with didacticism. Although I take these to be some of the most characteristic ones, I believe there are others, which may call for different types of analyses than the ones I will focus on. Some of these other vices, for example, may be rooted in a motivation that is defective not in the sense that it lacks strength but in the sense that it is not directed towards the most valuable forms of knowledge, as is arguably the case with a vice like pedantry. Or perhaps they may differ from vices such as dogmatism in that the defective motivation that underlies them is directed towards others’ rather than one’s own acquisition of knowledge. Many of the so-called teaching vices, such as intellectual impatience and condescension, are presumably distinctive in this way. It is also possible that some of the vices that can be involved in didacticism are more like shortcomings in one’s intellectual skills (e.g. logical reasoning skills, interpretive skills, imaginative skills, etc.) or cognitive faculties (e.g. perception, memory, or intuition) than like character flaws. An account of the full range of relevant vices would thus call for an exploration of other possibilities beyond dogmatism, intellectual arrogance, and prejudice. What I aim to offer here is merely the beginnings of such an account.

On the view I propose, objections to didacticism are comparable to the sort of objection found, for example, in an essay by James Wood criticizing John Updike’s fiction for the intellectual ‘complacency’ it exhibits in regard to ‘questions of faith and

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6 Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

belief’—a ‘lacuna’, says Wood, ‘not in the quality of the prose, but in the risk of the thought’—and in Orwell’s well-known essay on Dickens criticizing the latter for lacking the ‘intellectual curiosity’ to explore the possibilities for future progress rather than simply criticizing the present ills of his society<sup>7</sup> Objections such as these, levelled directly at the intellectual vices an author displays in his work, are standard in literary criticism. Hence, on my view, objections to didacticism can be understood as part of an already well-established literary-critical practice. What’s more, this practice might plausibly be seen as evidence for literary cognitivism. As noted earlier, literary cognitivists think that a work’s literary merit can be tied to its cognitive value, meaning its value as a source of knowledge or instruction. A work’s cognitive value, in turn, can depend, not only on whether it conveys a lesson and whether this lesson is true or novel, but also on the extent to which it provides ‘warrant’ or legitimate grounds for accepting the lesson. Literary-critical concern with the intellectual vices authors manifest might thus be thought to reflect a concern with cognitive value, given that the warrant of testimonial beliefs, i.e. those formed on the basis of someone else’s say-so, is generally thought to be reduced insofar as that person displays intellectual vice. Call this the ‘warrant reduction assumption’.

There are two plausible bases for the warrant reduction assumption. One is the idea that an agent’s intellectual character can bear on the warrant of her own beliefs. This idea is characteristic of so-called virtue epistemological theories, many of which claim that a belief counts as warranted only if it is formed in an intellectually virtuous way. Someone sympathetic to this idea might reasonably think that if *A* were to express the belief that *p* and *B* were to accept that *p* on this basis of *A*’s testimony, *B*’s belief that *p* would be unwarranted if *A* manifested intellectual vice, because in that case *A*’s belief that *p* would be unwarranted. However, one might accept the warrant reduction assumption regardless of whether one accepts that *A*’s belief would lack warrant in this case. For one might think that the fact that *A* manifested intellectual vice would give *B* good reason to doubt *A*’s expressed belief, simply because it provides good evidence that it is unwarranted, whether or not it makes it so.

With the help of the warrant reduction assumption, Lamarque’s question of why overt instruction would ever be a fault, if instruction were an important literary value, can now be given the following answer. Overt instruction can be symptomatic of intellectual vice, which can reduce the warrant of the lessons a work seeks to convey and thereby reduce its cognitive value. Overt instruction can sometimes be a fault, that is, precisely because it is less rewarding *as instruction*.

Two further assumptions implicit in this answer, while not particularly controversial, are worth making explicit. One is that literary works are means by which authors can supply testimony to readers. This assumption takes the author of a literary work to be a kind of speaker, albeit one distinct from various other speakers the work may contain, such as the narrator or a character who utters or thinks thoughts in the text. In contrast

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7 James Wood, ‘John Updike’s Complacent God’, in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 227–235; George Orwell, ‘Charles Dickens’, *All Art Is Propaganda: Critical Essays* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2008), 1–62.

to these speakers, who might be said to speak *in* the work, the author might be said to speak *through* the work.<sup>8</sup>

In regard to the author, it must also be assumed that he or she is capable of manifesting intellectual traits—i.e. that the reader's sense of the author is robust enough to support attributions of intellectual qualities—which can be the focus of a certain type of literary critical judgement. However, this does not entail that literary works are capable of manifesting authors who are fully human in terms of the richness and complexity of their personalities. Empirical studies suggest that samples of creative writing much too brief to manifest a fully human authorial character can nonetheless be sufficient for readers to infer certain character traits in the author such as open-mindedness.<sup>9</sup>

These two assumptions are compatible with various conceptions of the identity of the author. In keeping with the practice of most critics up until the last half-century, as well as the view of some contemporary philosophers such as Robert Stecker, the author may be understood as one and the same with the actual, historical writer.<sup>10</sup> Whatever traces of authorial personality are born by a literary work are undoubtedly caused by the historical writer, and it is often the case that these traces match up with what we know of the historical writer, based on other sources. Moreover, properly interpreting and assessing a literary work seem to require understanding the historical context in which it was produced, and the reason for this, it may seem, is that the historical context limits the intentions, beliefs, etc., that the historical writer is likely to bring to the work. Insofar as the personality of the author is relevant to literary appreciation, then, it might be thought that the importance of historical context presupposes that it is the actual historical writer that is relevant.

Nevertheless, there are cases in which the authorial intentions or interests manifested through a literary work diverge from those professed by its historical writer. Robert Frost's 'Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening' strongly suggests a poet who is tempted by death, perhaps even contemplating suicide, though Frost himself repeatedly denied that he had any such thoughts or desires in mind while writing the poem.<sup>11</sup> In view of such cases, some theorists accept that the interpretation and appreciation of a literary work depends on seeing it as a produce of an agent with certain intentions, desires, beliefs, and emotions manifested to some extent through the work, but are nonetheless wary of identifying this agent with the historical writer. Instead, such theorists prefer to

8 In some cases, of course, the author may be similar or even identical to the narrator or one of the characters. In *The Great Gatsby*, for example, the author is commonly identified with the narrator Nick Carraway, and in *Anna Karenina* many of the ideas expressed by the character Levin are thought to be shared by the author. But the voice that speaks through a literary text does not necessarily coincide with any voice that speaks in it. In the view of most critics, the author of *Lolita*, for example, cannot be identified with the narrator Humbert Humbert or any other character in the novel.

9 Albrecht C. P. Küfner *et al.*, 'Tell Me a Story and I Will Tell You Who You Are! Lens Model Analyses of Personality and Creative Writing', *Journal of Research in Personality* 44 (2010), 427–35.

10 Robert Stecker, 'Apparent, Implied, and Postulated Authors', *Philosophy and Literature* 11 (1987), 258–71.

11 For a discussion of Frost's comments on 'Stopping by the Woods', see Mark Richardson, *The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

identify this agent with some ‘author construct’, who is merely ‘postulated’ by the reader or ‘implied’, ‘apparent’, or ‘manifested’ in the work.<sup>12</sup> Author constructs are generally conceived as being something in between the real flesh-and-blood writer and the fictional narrator, without being identical to either.

Which of these various notions of the author should ultimately be adopted is an issue we need not pursue here, since readers may disagree on this question without disputing my assumption that authors can supply testimony and manifest intellectual vice through their works. A more pressing question to consider now is what reasons there are for accepting the account of didacticism I have just sketched. In the next section I will suggest that one reason is that it fits well with the way literary critics sometimes justify their use of the term in particular cases.

## II

Although my account of didacticism is not intended merely as a description of the way the term is used, it is a virtue of my account that it captures the reasons critics sometimes give for calling works didactic. Below I offer three examples, which serve not only to show that an author’s manifestation of intellectual vice can be part of a critic’s explanation for why a work is didactic, but also to illustrate three specific vices that can be the focus of such explanations: namely, dogmatism, intellectual arrogance, and prejudice. Together these three examples suggest an application of the term that is stable over a variety of time periods and literary genres. However, I do not claim that they are representative of all actual uses of the term. As with any term, some actual uses will be non-standard. Just as importantly, there may be standard uses of the term that allow for different understandings of what is wrong with didacticism.

### *Didacticism as Dogmatism*

My first example comes from an article by Robert Stretter on Richard Edwards’s Elizabethan drama *Damon and Pythias*.<sup>13</sup> *Damon and Pythias* tells the story of two men so devoted to their friendship that when one of them (Damon) is falsely accused of conspiracy against the king, the other (Pythias) volunteers to take his place in prison while his friend returns home to settle his affairs. The drama is clearly designed to illustrate a certain ideal of male friendship, which Stretter traces back to Aristotle and Cicero and which holds that “[t]rue” and “perfect” friendship ... [only] occurs between two good

12 The ‘postulated author’, ‘implied author’, ‘apparent author’, and ‘manifested author’ are notions introduced, respectively, by Alexander Nehamas, Wayne Booth, Kendall Walton, and Berys Gaut. See Nehamas, ‘The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal’, *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981), 133–49; Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 71–6; Walton, ‘Style and the Products and Processes of Art’, in Berel Lang (ed.), *The Concept of Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 72–103; and Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 72–4.

13 Robert Stretter, ‘Cicero on Stage: *Damon and Pythias* and the Fate of Classical Friendship in English Renaissance Drama’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 47 (2005), 345–65.

men, similar in all respects, who love each other for the sake of virtue.' This classical conception of friendship is exemplified in the friendship of Damon and Pithias and extolled by the play as a whole, which ends when the king, being so impressed by the mutual loyalty of Damon and Pithias, pardons them both.

Stretter claims the play 'is a prime example of a didactic pedagogical drama' as well as a 'dramatic failure',<sup>14</sup> and one of his main objectives in the paper is to explain how these two problems are related. He ultimately suggests that both arise from Edwards's blind devotion to the ideal of friendship represented by that of his main characters, which leads the author to portray this ideal in too 'uncomplicated' a light, to 'paper over' all potential problems with it, and, in effect, to avoid ever grappling with the question of whether this type of friendship is really desirable or even attainable. 'This question haunts *Damon and Pithias*', says Stretter, 'and throughout the play a range of skeptics voice their doubts about whether friendship is truly worth dying for.' However, he continues:

In the world of the play, these hints at the possible inadequacy of friendship to live up to its ideals are [merely] a rhetorical move on Edwards's part: they are straw men that his heroes easily bat down. Edwards never appears to entertain any serious doubts about the naturalness or superiority of friendship, never betrays any lack of faith in the 'perfect Amytie' which he celebrates consistently from the prologue to the triumphant conclusion with its final moral, addressed directly to the 'most noble Queene Elizabeth': 'A sweete companion in eche state true Friendship is alway:/ A sure defence for Kinges, a perfect trustie bande.'<sup>15</sup> Stretter's description in this passage of Edwards's failure to 'entertain any serious doubts' about his view of friendship is a classic description of the intellectual vice of dogmatism. Stretter goes on to suggest that this vice undermines the play's artistic success not only because it translates into a lack of 'genuine conflict' and thus a lack of 'dramatic suspense', but also because it makes the play philosophically less compelling. Edwards's failure to acknowledge or give meaningful consideration to alternatives and objections to his view, says Stretter, 'raises the specter of skepticism.'

The unwavering strength of Edwards's belief in his subject, ironically, makes the chinks in the armor of *amicitia* all the more significant. *Damon and Pithias* is strong evidence that in even the most enthusiastic paeans to ideal friendship, one can detect the vulnerability of the ideal.<sup>16</sup>

According to Stretter, then, the play is didactic because the way it embodies its message reflects the author's ideological rigidity, and this constitutes a literary flaw partly because it makes us sceptical of the message itself.

### *Didacticism as Intellectual Arrogance*

I take my second example from a chapter on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in Eliseo Vivas's critical study of D. H. Lawrence.<sup>17</sup> As a writer Lawrence was unabashedly committed to the

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>17</sup> Eliseo Vivas, *D. H. Lawrence: The Failure and the Triumph of Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1960), 119–47.

aim of moral instruction, and most of his novels are more or less transparently designed to advance a certain philosophical or ethical agenda. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, with its candid call for a re-evaluation of Victorian attitudes to sex, is no different in this regard. More than most of Lawrence's novels, however, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has been subject to the charge of didacticism. Even some critics generally sympathetic to Lawrence's pedagogical aims have found something distasteful about the way he carries them out in this work. F. R. Leavis, for example, though a well-known admirer of Lawrence's earlier work, declared *Lady Chatterley's Lover* a 'bad novel' on the grounds that its author was guilty of 'indulging the quasi-creative intervention of passionate will, didactic, corrective and reforming'<sup>18</sup>

Vivas expresses much the same objection to the novel, chafing against 'the attitude of the reformer in Lawrence' and Lawrence's 'didactic recommendation' that all sex be enjoyed only for the kind of animalistic satisfactions it affords the novel's characters.<sup>19</sup> Behind Lawrence's preachments, Vivas hears a voice saying, in effect:

Either you—whoever you may be, whatever your heredity and upbringing may have been, whatever your aims and commitments—manage your sexual life the way I, David Herbert Lawrence, by the grace of God and my own fiat appointed teacher of mankind, manage mine, or you are wrong, and nothing can alter that fact. Never mind the fact that I, David Herbert Lawrence, am a sick man trying desperately to shed my illness in book after book unsuccessfully. Never mind the fact that I, David Herbert Lawrence, have suspected at times that I am a bit dotty. Never mind the fact that my mother mangled my development. It still remains an incontrovertible fact that I, David Herbert Lawrence, am, by the grace of God and my own fiat, the standard. You are not like me, you say? Obviously not—and that is what makes you wrong, utterly wrong, hopelessly wrong. Why can't you accept a bit of healthy, individual authority? Why can't you see what is so thoroughly self-evident?<sup>20</sup>

Vivas's mocking imitation of Lawrence here clearly implies an accusation of intellectual vice. In particular, it implicitly accuses Lawrence of intellectual arrogance—i.e. of regarding his own beliefs and cognitive abilities as superior to others' simply because they are his own. This accusation underlies Vivas's charge that the novel is didactic. Moreover, it also underlies his claim that we ought not 'to assume, as some of [Lawrence's] critics do, that what he had to teach in matters of sex is all-wise, all-healthy, and urgently needed by us.'<sup>21</sup> In criticizing *Lady Chatterley's Lover* for its didacticism, therefore, it seems that Vivas is criticizing both the intellectually arrogant way in which he thinks Lawrence conveys his message in the novel and the damage he thinks this does to Lawrence's epistemic authority.

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18 F. R. Leavis, 'The New Orthodoxy', *Spectator*, 2016 (17 February 1961), 229–30.

19 Vivas, *D. H. Lawrence*, 131–2. The chapter in which these objections are presented belongs to a section of Vivas' book entitled 'The Failure of Art.'

20 Vivas, *D. H. Lawrence*, 132.

21 Vivas, *D. H. Lawrence*, 136.



### *Didacticism as Prejudice*

For my third example I turn to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Like *Damon and Pithias* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Middlemarch* is heavily freighted with philosophical and moral lessons. Moreover, the novel's style is marked by frequent authorial 'intrusions'—i.e. explicit commentary by the author on the action and characters in the story—typically designed to enforce its moral lessons. Critical responses to *Middlemarch* in its own time often, and often disapprovingly, made note of these features, with *didactic* being one of the terms critics used to express their reservations in this regard. An unsigned review from 1872, for example, just after praising the book's excellence 'as a didactic novel', calls explicit attention to 'the reservation we have implied' in thus describing it, and immediately proceeds to complain about 'the conspicuous, constantly prominent lesson[s]' in the novel.<sup>22</sup>

In justifying their disapproval of these 'constantly prominent' lessons, not just one, but several, critics point to the suspicion it arouses that Eliot is not completely impartial or fair-minded in the picture she presents of life and human nature. The anonymous author of the above-cited review suggests that this is the pitfall of every 'storyteller with an ulterior aim ever before his own eyes and the reader's': the reader is always 'justified in suspecting a bias or one-sided estimate of qualities where a moral has to be worked out through human agency', and as a result, the critic says, the reader's 'confidence is disturbed.' Likewise, R. H. Hutton, in another review from the same year, worries that Eliot's constant theorizing in *Middlemarch*, and particularly 'the speculative philosophy of character that always runs on in a parallel stream with her picture of character', might have a distorting influence on her perception of human nature.<sup>23</sup> For Hutton, as well, the 'questionable or even challengeable drift' in Eliot's dogged moral analysis of her characters is that it leads us to suspect that Eliot may sometimes be 'availing herself unfairly of the privilege of the author, by adding a trait that bears out her own criticism rather than her own imaginative conception.' In fact, Hutton claims, certain 'unjust' details in Eliot's portrayal of Celia Brooke and Rosamond Vincy prove that she is sometimes guilty of this suspected offence. The consequence of our noticing these unjust details, he says, is that we become wary of Eliot's 'prejudice' towards these characters and begin to 'distrust even decidedly asserted facts' about them. These two sets of critical comments on *Middlemarch* further corroborate my account, in that they connect the novel's didacticism both with the author's display of intellectual vice and with damage to the trustworthiness of the author's assertions.

More examples of this sort could be produced. However, it must be acknowledged that many of the examples one finds, like the one-liners I presented at the beginning of this paper, reveal little or nothing about the critics' reasons for thinking didacticism objectionable and thus lie open to a variety of interpretations besides my own. To make a

22 Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 7 December 1872, 733–4; repr. in David Carroll (ed.), *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 314–20.

23 R. H. Hutton, 'George Eliot's Moral Anatomy', *Spectator*, 5 October 1872, 1262–4; repr. in David Carroll (ed.), *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 302–5.

compelling case for my account, therefore, I will need to defend it against these alternatives on more general grounds as well. It is to this task that I now turn.

### III

What other explanations might be given for why overt instruction is sometimes a literary fault?

#### *The Bad Company Account*

One explanation starts from the idea that when we read a work of literature we enter into a kind of companionship with its author, and it is for the sake of this companionship and the rewards derived from it that we seek out and value the experience. Accordingly, our appreciation of individual literary works depends on the quality of the companionship they afford: insofar as the author proves worthy as a friend or companion, the work deserves our appreciation.<sup>24</sup> On the basis of such a view, it might be argued that didacticism makes for a worse work of literature because it makes for a less companionable author. Just as in real life we tend not to enjoy the company of those who are arrogant or dogmatic in expressing their opinions, so in literature we find it difficult to enter into companionship with authors who exhibit this trait. So understood, the problem with didactic authors is that they violate norms of friendship rather than epistemic norms.

Let us call this the ‘bad company’ account. One problem with this account is that it seems to rest on a mistaken view about the nature of the reader’s relationship to the author, which in many respects, it might be thought, does not resemble a friendship. Most importantly, perhaps, there is no possibility for mutual influence to occur between readers and authors the way it does – by definition, some think – between friends. Through literary texts, authors can share their experiences and values with us, but we cannot reciprocate. Thus, while we expect an author to hold some interests and values in common with us to begin with, we do not expect her interests and values to be shaped by ours as a result of our interaction.

In other respects, too, we seem to hold authors to different standards than friends. For example, whereas an author such as the Joyce of *Ulysses* may be forgiven, even admired, for often pushing the bounds of intelligibility, such a habit would hardly be tolerated in, much less endear us to, a friend. At the same time, we accept that our conversation with friends will often be mundane but are rightly disappointed with authors who have nothing interesting, moving, or insightful to tell us. In general, it seems we are more willing to be challenged by authors than by friends, but also expect more in return.

All this suggests that literary critical norms and norms of friendship can come apart. But suppose it were insisted that nonetheless the explanation for why *didacticism* is a literary-critical flaw is that didactic authors run afoul of norms of friendship. How might this explanation go? To be satisfying, the explanation would need to say more than that didacticism is obnoxious or off-putting, since this would serve merely to re-describe the

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24 For a fuller articulation and defence of this view, see Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

problem, not to explain it. A more satisfying explanation might go like this: we want our friends to be receptive to our interests and values, to be open to accepting and appreciating our viewpoints, and the tendency to hold forth dogmatically and arrogantly the way didactic authors typically do suggests a lack of such receptivity. The problem with this explanation, however, is that such receptivity, as just noted, is not something authors lack in virtue of being didactic but in virtue of the very nature of literary texts, which allow influence to flow from author to reader but never the reverse.

Perhaps one could think of other explanations, but it seems to me the most natural thing to say is that didacticism can violate norms of friendship *because* it can hint at intellectual vices that cast doubt on the author's trustworthiness. After all, being trustworthy is an important part of being a good friend. A person who lies to me on a frequent basis about serious matters that concern us as friends is not apt to be a close friend, nor is person apt to be a friend whose opinions on such matters, however sincerely expressed, often appear to be clouded by prejudice, arrogance, or closed-mindedness.

A good explanation for this, in turn, is that the intrinsic value of friendship is partly constituted by certain forms of knowledge or understanding that are realized through it. Friends can contribute to our self-understanding by offering us a perspective on our own character and values that we are incapable of achieving on our own, and they can help us to see what choices are best for us in view of the projects and commitments we value most. Furthermore, friends can lead us to new understandings of what we should value both by challenging us to see where our existing values are unquestioned or inconsistent and by introducing us to new and more attractive alternatives. However, the possibility of acquiring such forms of understanding depends on the reliability of our friends as observers and advisers. Hence qualities such as intellectual arrogance, prejudice, and closed-mindedness that undermine their epistemic reliability can also undermine their value as friends.

If didacticism violates norms of friendship, I am inclined to think that this is the best explanation why. Thus, I would argue, anyone who is sympathetic to the bad company view has good reason to embrace my own. Regardless, however, given that the explanation I have just offered seems perfectly coherent, one who accepts the bad company account is certainly under no obligation to reject my view.

### *The Bad Taste Account*

Consider now a second account of what's wrong with didacticism. According to this account, the problem with didactic authors is not that they are bad company or epistemically unreliable, though they may be these things, but that they exhibit a defective aesthetic sensibility. Being didactic, in other words, simply shows poor taste. Call this the 'bad taste' account.

The bad taste account fits naturally with the kind of virtue theory of art sketched out in a recent series of essays by Peter Goldie.<sup>25</sup> Goldie's suggestion is that art, understood

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25 'Towards a Virtue Theory of Art', *BJA* 47 (2007), 372–87; 'Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008), 179–95; 'Virtues of Art', *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010), 830–9.

broadly to encompass not just artworks but all artistic activity, including both art production and art appreciation, is valuable insofar as it expresses traits whose exercise is partly constitutive of human well-being or flourishing. It goes almost without saying that one such ‘virtue of art’ is good taste—i.e. the skill to discern and the motivation to experience aesthetic properties such as beauty, gracefulness, and elegance. And it seems to follow that any expression of bad taste is artistically vicious. Goldie’s theory thus offers a convenient framework within which the bad taste account can explain why didacticism is an artistic flaw.

However, a virtue-theoretic framework is no more congenial to the bad taste account than to my own. For besides aesthetic traits like taste, sensibility, vision, creativity, and wit, virtues of art may also include intellectual ones like insight, intelligence, and open-mindedness. Indeed, Goldie himself, among others, thinks that many virtues (and vices) in the artistic domain will overlap with virtues (and vices) in other domains, including the epistemic.<sup>26</sup> Thinking of didacticism as a vice of art in Goldie’s sense, therefore, does not force us to regard it as primarily aesthetic in character.

Perhaps one reason for so regarding it, however, is its close association with the quality of overtness or subtlety. Not only might it be claimed that this is an aesthetic quality, but it might also be claimed that, like ugliness or garishness for example, it is an inherently bad-making one. This is most plausibly the case with visual or musical artworks. When we describe a painting or musical motif as unsubtle, it does seem that we are remarking, with implicit disapproval, on an aesthetic quality. But it is not as clear that we are doing the same thing when we say that the message of a literary work is unsubtle. A classic view holds that an object’s aesthetic properties lie on its sensuous surface, directly supervening on its perceptual properties such that they can be immediately grasped by the properly trained eye or ear.<sup>27</sup> But the sort of overtness or subtlety involved in didactic literature does not seem directly linked to any perceptual features. When we say that didactic writing is overt or unsubtle, we obviously don’t mean, for example, that the marks on the page are especially conspicuous. Indeed, apart from aural properties in poetry, there seem to be very few features of literary works that count as aesthetic in the classic sense.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of whether overtness is an aesthetic quality, however, it does not seem to be what is distinctively objectionable about didacticism. For even where a work’s message or aim to teach is undeniably overt, critics can disagree whether to call it didactic. *Middlemarch* is about as overtly instructive as literary fictions come, and as we have seen some nineteenth-century critics deemed it didactic. Yet Henry James, in his 1873 review of the novel, demurred: ‘Fielding was didactic—the author of *Middlemarch* is really philosophic.’ If overtness were the soul of didacticism, such a judgement would be odd

26 ‘Towards a Virtue Theory of Art’, 383.

27 Frank Sibley, ‘Aesthetic Concepts’, repr. in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (eds), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 127–41.

28 Peter Kivy gives a thoroughgoing defence of this claim in his recent *Once Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). The point has even been acknowledged by one prominent aesthetic theorist of art. See Nick Zangwill, ‘Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?’, *JAAC* 60 (2002), 111–18. Visual poems such as George Herbert’s ‘Easter Wings’ are a rather rare exception.

to say the least. Even supposing that didactic writing is 'overt' in some aesthetic sense, therefore, it would be wrong to conclude from this that 'didactic' is primarily an aesthetic predicate.

There are other reasons to resist this conclusion, too. Besides 'overt', 'unsubtle', and the like, most of the terms most closely associated with 'didactic', including 'propagandistic', 'sermonizing', 'preachy', 'condescending', 'arrogant', 'self-righteous', 'sanctimonious', 'simple-minded', 'dogmatic', 'doctrinaire', and 'moralizing', carry no hint of the aesthetic. Furthermore, didacticism is commonly cited as a fault in non-aesthetic contexts. In a review of a recent work in computational biology, for example, one reads:

The book lacks any sense of historical or intellectual context: at no point does [the author] so much as indicate the existence of other work in the field to which he is almost certainly indebted. There is no bibliography or sense of provenance, no indication whether an idea is new or old. Instead, there is the dogmatic, didactic drone of a single, unchecked and often pompous voice, repeatedly intoning phrases such as 'it is my strong suspicion that' or 'I have increasingly been led to believe'.<sup>29</sup>

Another reviewer has this to say about a history of early British cinema:

[The author's] manner throughout is one of didactic scolding: 'once this is grasped' – 'we ought not to talk' – 'it is therefore correct to speak of the diorama as a bourgeois form' – 'as Audrey Field put it, a little too jokily' – 'is vital to correct understanding' – 'I've already explained'.<sup>30</sup>

Such uses of 'didactic' admittedly fall outside literary criticism proper, but there is nothing to suggest that the term carries some different sense in these contexts. The fact that the works in question here are not the kind typically judged on the basis of their aesthetic merits thus poses a serious problem for the bad taste account.

In contrast, my own account has no trouble explaining such cases. Didacticism on my view is just as objectionable in works of computational biology and cinematic history as in literary fictions because it is primarily an epistemic rather than aesthetic fault. (Hence the second reviewer's follow-up to the above comments emphasizing the work's epistemic shortcomings: 'I finished [the] book unenlightened, unpersuaded, and cross.') Likewise, the view I propose makes it easy to see why didacticism is closely identified with qualities such as self-righteousness, dogmatism, and simple-mindedness. For these qualities are themselves various forms of epistemic vice and as such are the very stuff in which, I claim, the badness of didacticism consists. For a variety of reasons, then, it makes more sense to regard didacticism as a show of a bad intellectual character than as a show of bad taste.

### *The Spoiled Pleasures Account*

Finally, we come to the view taken by Lamarque himself. In the same passage in which he defies the cognitivist to explain why overt instruction is a literary fault, Lamarque suggests that the correct explanation is that overt instruction can get in the way of certain

29 Adrian Woolfson, 'Genetic Mountaineering', *London Review of Books*, 6 February 2003.

30 Richard Mayne, 'The Schoolmen Ride Again', *London Review of Books*, 15 May 1980.

non-cognitive pleasures proper to the appreciation of literature as such. In particular, Lamarque claims that overt instruction, by forcing us to focus on ‘a single “message” or “thesis” to be conveyed’, interferes with ‘one of the pleasures of a literary reading’, which ‘is to notice different ways that the content can be imaginatively constructed.’<sup>31</sup> Appreciating a work ‘from a literary point of view’, in other words, involves seeing how it can be construed under different interpretations, and didactic authors, by insisting on a single interpretation, stifle our freedom to do this.

Lamarque’s account is difficult to reconcile with my own. Although we agree that didacticism limits the realization of a certain type of literary value, the values whose realization we take to be limited by didacticism are not only different from one another but seemingly incompatible. For the greater a work’s capacity to yield multiple interpretations, the less its capacity, it would seem, to give us any meaningful instruction or guidance. If Lamarque’s account is sound, therefore, my own account would seem to be in trouble, inasmuch as it seems unlikely that we would fault a work for failing to achieve two aims it could not possibly achieve at once.

However, Lamarque’s account rests on two dubious assumptions. One is that multiple interpretability is a literary value. Were this so, one would expect each critic of a work to expound multiple interpretations of it and to embrace different readings offered by fellow critics. Yet in fact each critic typically seeks to establish only one interpretation, and there is often intense debate among critics over whose interpretation is the correct one. Whatever pleasure there may be in noticing that a work can be multiply interpreted, therefore, it is by no means obvious that this pleasure is proper to a literary reading.

Nor is it obvious that didacticism actually limits the reader’s interpretive freedom. Lamarque thinks it does because he equates didacticism with having a single message. But it seems that being didactic is more a matter of how an author conveys her messages than how many messages she conveys. An author who harangues us with numerous messages is just as likely to be didactic as one who confines her harangue to a single lesson. And an author who conveys a single lesson might not be didactic at all if she does so gently. Hence, even if noticing a work’s multiple interpretability were a pleasure proper to a literary reading, it is hard to see how didacticism per se interferes with this pleasure.

This does not mean that didacticism might not interfere with other non-cognitive pleasures. For example, we might find it difficult to become absorbed in the imaginative experience offered by a work if we are constantly being reminded of the author’s presence by her excessively overt manner of teaching. But here again it must be noted that didacticism is considered a flaw in various types of non-literary works where there is little or no imaginative experience on offer. Thus, barring a semantic shift in these cases, there is reason to doubt that didacticism is objectionable primarily because it interferes with imaginative experience. Moreover, even if this were part of the problem in some cases, there is no reason the problem might not also be partly cognitive. If an author’s overt manner of teaching makes it difficult to become engrossed in the fiction, it might also make it difficult to trust the author because it makes us suspicious of her intellectual

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31 Lamarque, *Philosophy of Literature*, 254.

character. Indeed, the fact that an author refuses to let the imaginative experience of the work 'speak for itself' may be part of our reason for distrusting her. Thus, this version of the spoiled pleasures account, while perhaps more defensible than Lamarque's, does not exclude my own.

#### IV

I have argued that when critics fault a work for being didactic, it is sometimes because its overt or heavy-handed manner of instruction suggests its author is intellectually arrogant, dogmatic, or prejudiced, giving the reader reason to distrust the lessons it seeks to convey. This account should be welcome to those who think that instruction is an important literary value inasmuch as it helps to resolve the apparent inconsistency between this view and the fact that overt instruction is sometimes regarded as a literary fault. According to my account, being didactic can sometimes count against a work's literary merits precisely because it diminishes its value as a source of instruction. To explain what's wrong with didacticism, therefore, accepting that instruction is an important literary value, far from making it difficult, may sometimes be necessary.

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