The value of literature for consciousness research and ethics

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1. The ethical and existential challenges of modern consciousness research

The human mind is becoming increasingly technologically accessible.

Neurotechnology is advancing; new data and theories are spilling from neuroscience into other research fields and the public cultural sphere:

 the discovery of the neural correlates of consciousness, the predictive processing theory of brain function, braincomputer-interfaces and other collective minds-technologies, panpsychism, the concepts of trans- and posthumanism, new possibilities of bio- and psychedelic human enhancement...

Neurocentrism is on the rise and a new neuroanthropology is emerging

- → undermining of common conceptions and folk intuitions about human nature and existence
- > novel definitions of what it means to be human
- > new forms of ethical and existential uncertainty
- → a new normative and ethical vacuum

2. The value of literature (in general and for consciousness studies)

An adequate response to the neuroscientific and -technological developments requires the natural sciences and the humanities to collaboratively engage in the handling of the ethical and existential implications.

Literature represents a particularly valuable resource in this context

- There is in literature a vast field of consciousness theory and philosophy already available to researchers and the public
- With its distinctive narrative, poetic and aesthetic dimensions, literature offers ways of relating experientially and emotionally to materialist scientific and philosophical explanations of human nature and existence that are beyond the scope of conventional scientific and philosophical writing → special facility to install a sense of meaning, fascination and appreciation into existence and work against the psychological disruption of new scientific paradigms.
- Literature has a capacity for cultivating the human ability to accept and navigate moral and existential uncertainty

3. Using literature for conceptual engineering in the neurocentric age

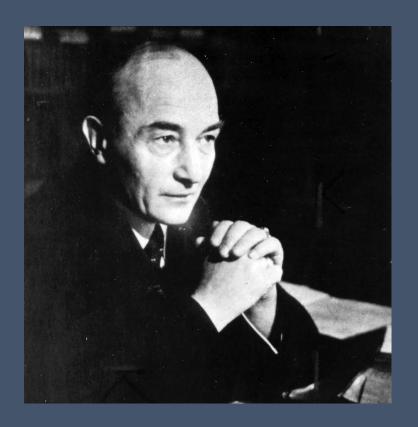
Claim/proposal:

Literature can be used for conceptual engineering for the neurocentric age

- I.e. works of fiction can be used for developing conceptions of human nature and existence that cohere with modern neuroscience
- Looking to existent literary representations of human consciousness, selfhood and existence free from
 conventional essentialist and anthropocentric ideas can normalise the reductionist scientific descriptions of
 humans, shed light on their emancipatory potential + reduce the psychologically and socio-culturally disruptive
 impact

4. Example: the anti-essentialist model of self in *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–1943)





In *The Man Without Qualities*, the two main characters develop an existential and ethical theory based on an antiessentialist idea of selfhood.

They explore an ideal for personal identity and selfhood not characterised by fixed qualities, but by mobility and flexibility \rightarrow criteria for an adequate, meaningful mode of being that enables persons to adapt to changes and handle the uncertainty of the future, i.e. a form of human enhancement.

In several passages, the main characters' selves are dissolved, boundaries between individual and surroundings disappear.

The narrative frame and the poetic language make the anti-essentialist account relatable for readers, offering a possibility to imagine more comprehensibly how these existential perspectives and modes can be incorporated into life and to experience the potential of enhancement through immersion in the story and identification with its characters.

The novel presents the anti-essential states of consciousness and modes of existence in aesthetic terms that shed light on their desirability and attraction.

The state of consciousness activated by self-transgression is one in which the subject is dissolved and at the same itself in a truer sense, e.g:

"One sometimes forget to see and hear, and is struck completely dumb. And yet it's precisely in minutes like these that one feels one has come to oneself for a moment.' 'I would say,' Ulrich went on eagerly, 'that it's like looking out over a wide shimmering sheet of water – so bright it seems like darkness to the eye, and on the far bank things don't seem to be standing on solid ground but float in the air with a delicately exaggerated distinctness that's almost painful and hallucinatory. The impression one gets is as much of intensification as of loss. One feels linked with everything but can't get close to anything. You stand here, and the world stands there, overly subjective and overly objective, but both almost painfully clear, and what separates and unites these normally fused elements is a blazing darkness, an overflowing and extinction, a swinging in an out. You swim like a fish in water or a bird in air, but there's no riverbank and no branch, only this floating!" (The Man Without