

## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation focuses on some of the philosophical puzzles that are associated with the experience of engaging in fictions. Some of these puzzles are longstanding in the philosophical tradition, viz., the paradox of fiction, the paradox of tragedy, and the phenomenon of imaginative resistance. Another has received surprisingly little philosophical attention: the puzzle of why we engage with fictions at all.

I argue against what I will call the Simple Story of fictional engagement. Previous discussions have (to greater or lesser degrees) described engaging in fictions

as a matter of entertaining the events described at a fictional world. In the Simple Story, the *content* of the fiction is decisively determinative of our motivations to engage in fiction and responses to fictions. That is not, however, our experience of fiction. I de-emphasize the role of the content of the fiction in our motivations and responses to fictions. Too little attention has been paid to the role of factors extrinsic to the fiction in explaining the nature of our experiences of and responses to fictions. In general, I stress that the role of the content of the fiction as determinative of our responses is far less important than has been assumed.

Some aestheticians have long been interested in psychological data and I am, too. Many, however, are wary of evolutionary psychology. They are rightfully worried that to explain the beauty of *Anna Karenina* in terms of hunting on the savannah would be to miss something deep. There is, however, a useful role for evolutionary psychology to play in explaining why we might have motivations and emotional responses to fictions. I explore this idea.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FICTION

By

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## Dedication

To Vincent Picciuto, without whom this would not be written. More than a partner,  
more than an editor, more than a friend.

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Dr. Peter Carruthers read countless drafts, constant encouragement, gave great advice, prodded me when I needed it. I count myself lucky to be advised by him. There are few people in one's life who are either an intellectual inspiration and a true mentor. Dr. Carruthers is both.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Turning on a TV to watch the latest melodramatic events in *Downton Abbey* seems a simple enough event in one's life. The act of engaging in fictions, however, turns out to raise a host of philosophical questions. My dissertation focuses on some of the philosophical puzzles that are associated with the experience of engaging in fictions. Some of these puzzles are longstanding in the philosophical tradition, viz., the paradox of fiction, the paradox of tragedy, and the phenomenon of imaginative resistance. Another has received surprisingly little philosophical attention: the puzzle of why we engage with fictions at all.

The most notable difference in my approach is to stress the importance of factors extrinsic to the content of the fiction. Previous discussions on a variety of these topics have described engaging with fictions as entertaining the events of a discrete, causally isolated fictional world. There may be facts about the actual world that are imported into the fictional world (By imported facts, for example, I mean that I import from the actual into the world of *Jane Eyre* a belief that a day lasts 24 hours). Yet it is seen as a different world. That is not, however, how we imagine fictions. We are always aware of who wrote the fiction, the context of the works creation, the tone or manner in which it is told, what message it is meant to convey about the actual world, and maybe many other details. We do not simply imagine events that happen at a fictional world. We imagine events told by someone, in a certain way, in a certain context. This turns out not to be a side issue to the topics at hand. Rather, our

responses to fictions are strongly determined by these other factors. The truths instantiated at a fictional world, while obviously important to our experience of a fiction, are much less important than many people assume.

I will argue that many theorists on these issues assume the truth of some of the properties of what I will call the Simple Story of the experience of fiction. The Simple Story has several parts:

- A) The primary or sole activity of engaging in fictions is entertaining the concepts that are instantiated at the fictional world.
- B) We implicitly import some beliefs about the actual world to the fictional world, but for the duration of the engagement of the fiction we are absorbed in a fictional spell. Any reminder that what we are entertaining is just fictional breaks the fictional spell.
- C) The primary or sole affective response we have to fictions are to the contents of the fiction.
- D) The affective response we have to fictions is entirely or basically similar to the one we would have were the events true at the actual world.
- E) The primary or sole motivation to engage in fiction is to experience the affective response to the contents of the fiction.

It is by no means the case that everyone against whom I argue thinks the entirety of the Simple Story is true. Many, however, endorse some parts of it to greater or lesser degrees. I wish to demonstrate how the Simple Story fails to capture the experience of fiction.

My approach also differs in the following way. Aestheticians are often wary of evolutionary psychology. There is a strong position, literary Darwinism, which attempts to trace literature itself, including certain plots, to evolutionary roots. This is not warranted. There is, however, a more moderate position. This is the position I take. Evolutionary psychology can be useful for explaining some brute psychological facts. I argue for the existence of these facts independently. Evolutionary psychology can demystify their presence. They can explain why we might have such psychological attributes. It is on these more basic psychological attributes that we draw on when we create and experience fictions. Evolutionary psychology is not an end-all-be-all explanation of our psychology or our aesthetics. It is important to consider evolutionary psychology, however, when we want to understand why we would do such seemingly irrational things as watch horror movies or even engage in fiction at all. Evolutionary psychology may not explain why we might want to watch *Downton Abbey* rather than *Two and a Half Men*, or whether we should want to, but it can help explain why we want to watch stories at all.

First I discuss why we engage in fiction at all. I argue that the Simple Story is wrong that the reward of fiction is solely in our responses to its contents. Fiction is inherently rewarding, regardless of the content. It is not only the content of our imaginings that can give us pleasure, it is the actual act of imagining. Here is where evolutionary psychology can be useful: to hypothesize that this may be so because imagining non-actual states of affairs is adaptive.

Next I discuss the paradox of fiction. Most of the writers on this topic are more aware than the other topics that the Simple Story is false. Yet some still

subscribe to the idea that our emotional response to the events of a fiction are what they would be if the events were actual.

Then follows my discussion of the paradox of negatively emotional art. I hypothesize that it is not only adaptive to imagine pleasurable non-actual states of affairs, but unpleasurable non-actual states of affairs as well. So it is rewarding to do so. It makes sense, however, that the imaginer needs to retain the knowledge that it is a situation she should avoid. There is, then, a bivalent emotion. The overall feeling, though, remains positive.

I end by discussing the puzzle of imaginative resistance. On this topic, more than any other, writers have been in the grip of the Simple Story. I argue that it has misled many of them. I ultimately suggest there is no one solution, but examining the puzzle elucidates the experience of fiction.

## Chapter 2: The Pleasures of Imagining

### 1. Introduction

Why would a child ever pretend that a banana is a telephone? Why would a little boy bother fantasizing that he is Superman, bounding and flying and saving the world? Why would an adult spend so much time gazing at the television, watching fictional shows for hours on end? The variety of ways in which people engage in non-actual situations, are puzzling phenomena, at least when one tries to divine the motivations for such behavior. *Prima facie*, there seems no good reason to suppose or act out situations that are contrary to fact. Pretense and engagement with fictions, however, are nearly universal among typically developing children.

The topic of ch. 4 of this dissertation, the paradox of negatively emotional art, has received philosophical attention since Aristotle discussed the nature of tragedy. The question of why people are motivated to engage in art that might sadden or frighten them has been a puzzle of endless speculation. Interestingly, the puzzle of why people are motivated to engage in fiction *at all* has been given much less scrutiny by philosophers. In this chapter, I attempt to answer that question.

Indeed, there is a range of related behaviors and experiences that involve entertaining hypothetical propositions, for which the motivations seem similarly obscure. While there is some variability between people, most children and adults daydream, fantasize, read novels, and watch plays, movies, and television. All these activities can have quite different levels of sophistication, and can manifest in vastly different behaviors. The similarity between a child sitting by herself in a backyard making a mud pie and an adult attending a revival house showing of the film

*L'Atalante* may not be immediately palpable. One is spontaneously generating a very simple pretense that something is what it is not, the other is being prompted to imagine a complex and nuanced series of events by a masterful artist. The viewer of *L'Atalante* is, of course, privy to much a mud-pie maker is not: a historically valuable aesthetic experience, a form rapport with an artist, insight into human psychology. There is at least one way the mud pie maker and the viewer of *L'Atalante* are connected, however, and it is that resemblance that is the subject of this chapter. Quite simply, in both cases, someone is entertaining a counterfactual and its possible consequences. The child has spawned her own fantasy, while the filmgoer has willingly submitted to an invitation to imagine originally dreamt up by someone else. The child's pretense is quite simple, while the film-goer's imaginings are rich and detailed. Yet both involve this entertainment of counterfactuals. It is this phenomenon, i.e., the supposing of that which is believed not to obtain in the actual world, that is under discussion—however variously substantiated that phenomenon might be. In other chapters, especially ch. 3 and ch. 5, my focus is mostly on fictional works of art. In this chapter, I focus on suppositions more generally, which I take to include engagement with works of art.

Why do people spend so much time entertaining mental representations of counterfactuals? As I suggested in ch. 1, according the Simple Story, what is enjoyable about suppositions are the emotional reactions we have to the *content* of suppositions. We experience an emotion that is similar to what we would experience were the content of the supposition to obtain in the actual world. As I will discuss at more length in ch. 3 and ch. 4, many philosophers have assumed this is more or less

the case.<sup>1</sup> A little boy daydreams that he is Superman because it would make him happy if he really were Superman. There is clearly some truth to this proposal. Yet it is not a complete explanation. First, on this view, it remains mysterious why people have emotional reactions to mental representations of non-actual situations *at all*.<sup>2</sup> Further, the pleasure we get from the content of our imaginings is not a complete explanation of our engagement with fictions. In this chapter, my argument is very simple. I argue that we enjoy supposing non-actual situations. It is not (solely) the content of our suppositions that makes supposing pleasurable. The very act of supposing itself is pleasurable—and, if this is the case, this seems a very good explanation of why we might suppose so much. We suppose, at least in part, *because we like to suppose*.

As will be made clear in what follows, I think there are many motivational factors involved in our engaging in suppositions. I am claiming that this suppositional pleasure is just one motivational factor for engaging in suppositions, albeit a very important one. The position that the content of our suppositions is the sole source of pleasure in supposing is inadequate to explain a range of phenomena.

This position has several advantages. It provides a straightforward and intuitive explanation for a range of behaviors whose motivations are not immediately clear, an account of the readiness with which we entertain suppositions, and an account of the variety of suppositions we entertain. It also provides the seeds of a

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Lamarque (1981), Gendler and Kovakovich (2005), Davies (2009), and Carruthers (2006). Carruthers' view will be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> This issue will also be discussed throughout the dissertation especially in ch. 3 and ch. 4.

<sup>3</sup> This issue will also be discussed throughout the dissertation especially in ch. 3 and ch. 4.



response to the paradox of negatively emotional art, which I will discuss in chapter 4. In what follows, I describe and delineate the phenomena I am talking about, discuss some other views, and then argue that the simplest and best explanation of the range of experiences and behaviors associated with supposing is that supposition is inherently pleasurable.

## 2. Evolution and Supposing

Those of us interested in the explanatory work that may be done by evolutionary psychology have sometimes been accused of telling “just-so stories.” This accusation is not without some merit. In ch. 4, in particular, I argue against a very strong “literary Darwinist” view that humans adapted for literature. Nonetheless, what evolutionary psychology can do is show how certain brute psychological facts may not be ad hoc, mysterious, or ungrounded. I do not argue that from a speculation about evolutionary psychology that we might enjoy supposing. Rather, I argue independently that there is a brute psychological fact that we enjoy supposing. The advantage of seeing the act of supposing as a fundamentally pleasurable activity that enhances beneficial skills is that the behavior no longer seems like a puzzling facet of human psychology. There may be many possible motivations for a given instance of supposing or engaging in fictions. Supposing itself, however, and moreover supposing that which we would not want to be actual, is then not believed to be a perplexing activity.

If there is a brute psychological fact that appears cross-culturally and occurs across human beings at the same developmental age, an evolutionary explanation is

worth consideration. This is the case with suppositions and imaginings<sup>3</sup>. There is reason to suspect that supposing and pretense are adaptive. Most significantly, pretense and storytelling (and, one might infer, story-consuming) appear cross-culturally (Harris 2003, Lillard 2004, Pinker 2003). Developmental data seem to suggest that certain aspects of pretense comprehension and performance emerge at certain ages (Harris 2003, Baillargeon 2010). While there exist cultural variations in childhood pretense, there are many similarities throughout all cultures' childhood pretense.

Moreover, it seems plausible that we like to suppose because the ability to suppose has evolutionary advantages. Much as enjoyment of sex and food confer a survival and genetic perpetuation advantage on its possessor, so too might enjoyment of suppositions. It makes sense that people who enjoy supposing are more apt to solve problems creatively, to consider several possible courses of action and choose what seems best, to empathize and become a more efficient social actor, to innovate, and to discover. Several people suggest this evolutionary advantage of suppositional ability. See, e.g., (Carruthers 2006, Harris 2000, Currie and Ravenscroft 2002). Peter Carruthers and I argue that pretense specifically adapted to enhance adult creativity, and detail the benefits of pretense (forthcoming).

I do not mean to propose that there is one sole motivation for all suppositions for all people at all times. Indeed, I would be skeptical of any position that entailed such a proposal. Other motivations could be, but are by no means limited to: problem-solving, a desire to escape from everyday cares, or wish fulfillment. One might

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<sup>3</sup> I use the terms “suppose” and “imagine” more or less interchangeably in this chapter, for reasons discussed in sec. 3.1.

engage in a fiction for a desire for deeper knowledge of psychology and other cultures, the delectation of aesthetic properties, a campy laugh, or one of any innumerable reasons. My argument is simply this: *ceteris paribus*, we enjoy imagining. This gives us reason to do it.

### 3. The Many Faces of Suppositions

Because suppositions can be so differently experienced and displayed, it may be asked whether all the phenomena I am grouping together, such as daydreams and pretense and novel-reading, warrant joint discussion. In this section, I clarify the phenomena to be discussed, and argue that there is a commonality to such activities.

#### **3.1 Delineating the phenomena under discussion**

Childhood pretend play might be seen as the exemplar of the group of phenomena under discussion, if only because it is among the most easily observable in terms of behavior. It has something in common, however, with engagement in fiction and the other behaviors mentioned above. All can involve *an agent's mental representation that P and entertaining of some consequences if P were the case, when the agent believes that P does not obtain at the actual world*. When I refer to 'supposing' or 'imagining' throughout this chapter, it is this activity to which I am referring.

There is some contention about the difference between supposing and imagining, an issue on which I will not take sides. In using the word 'imagining,' I do not mean to insist on the necessity of the generation of mental imagery, because mental imagery does not seem necessary in all instances. A child making a mud pie need not visualize the mud pie she is making as an apple pie. 'Imagining' can also be used to mean self-directed and participatory consideration of non-actual events

(Gendler 2000), and my argument does not rest on this distinction. A distinction has been drawn between supposing and imagining by Jonathan Weinberg and Aaron Meskin (2006) wherein ‘supposing’ is used for planning and considering only logical or plausible consequences, whereas ‘imagining’ is more embellished and arbitrary. I do not follow their usage, in part because it might be construed as question-begging. Among the ways they distinguish ‘supposing’ from ‘imagining’ is that the latter is more playful, which is related to what I am trying to establish. I contend that it is because supposing is pleasurable that we do tend to embellish it and enjoy it recreatively. Some of the phenomena Weinberg and Meskin (2006) list as indicative of imagining, however, are the phenomena that my account seeks to explain: “the construction of and engagement with fictions, role-playing games, and daydreaming” (p. 193). In all these, an agent entertains a proposition that she does not believe obtains in the actual world, and considers some consequences.

It is worth noting, though, that not all pretend play nor all engagement in fictions necessarily involve suppositions as I describe them. It seems conceivable that a child might act like a mouse, for example, because told to do so by an adult casting about for inventive ways to keep a child quiet. In order to act like a quiet mouse, a child need not *suppose that he is a mouse*. A teenager assigned to read *The Lord of the Flies* for a high school English class might take note of what happens in the story in order to pass an exam, without actually entertaining the situation described therein. An adult can dress as a pirate for a costume party with his only goal being to cut a dashing figure and impress other party-goers, and not to suppose that *he is a pirate*. In what is likely the bulk of pretense and engagements with fictions, however, the

mental representation of an initial premise that is believed does not obtain in the actual world and entertaining of its possible fallout are involved. These cases of pretense and engagement with fiction that do involve supposition are what I am addressing here.

### **3.2 Differences in observable behavior**

So if, as I claim, most pretense has in common with flights of fancy and engagements with fiction supposition and entertaining of consequences, why engage in pretense behavior at some times and not others? Why shouldn't it all remain inside one's head, as some of it clearly does? It is not immediately obvious that phenomena that manifest in such different outwardly observable behaviors are, in fact, related. It seems plausible, though, that much, if not most, of spontaneous childhood pretense serves to intensify suppositions. My supposing that the events depicted in the novel or film *Gone With the Wind* are taking place, even if well remembered, is nowhere close to as vivid as when I read the novel or see the film. External stimuli can greatly intensify suppositions. So a child might wish to intensify a supposition with behaviors and props.

All right, then, one might ask, if suppositions are pleasurable and external stimuli intensify them, why do we not always employ external stimuli? There might be several reasons for this. There may not be any nearby and we make do with what we have. A supposition might be sufficiently vivid on its own. A supposition might not be pleasurable enough to warrant the energy expended in intensification (I discuss variation in pleasure of suppositions in sec. 8).

Also, as Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft (2002, p. 118) point out, one must appeal to the whole of an agent's beliefs and desires to explain why some

suppositions are enacted and others are not. A person's desire to intensify a supposition with pretense or props might be counteracted by a belief that it would at that place and time be socially inappropriate to do so (or, perhaps, age-inappropriate to do so), and a stronger desire to behave appropriately. Also, although people engage in pretense behaviors when alone, pretense is also often social. There are cases of group pretense (especially among children) in which pretense is partly performance, to the gratification of pretender and observer. I suspect, too, that the desire to act out the pretense wears away with age after it has finished serving to develop some capacities. People stop babbling once they learn language and they are practiced at enunciation. Perhaps pretense behavior falls away as the mental activity it serves to establish (creativity) is more firmly established. Even though pretense, daydreaming, and entertaining of fictions, manifest in very different behaviors, they have a commonality. The motivation for pretense can be (and often is) the motivation to intensify a supposition, and thus pretense has supposition in common with flights of fancy and engagements with fictions.

### **3.3 Differences in generation of suppositions**

There is clearly a difference between internally generated supposition, such as that of a six-year-old alone in her bedroom dreaming of herself as a Hawaiian princess, an externally guided and directed supposition, such as those provided by fictions, and those that seem to be a combination of the two, such as the suppositions of a participant in a pretend game of cops and robbers.<sup>4</sup> In the first, an agent generates her own premises and fallout (by which I mean fictionally implied consequences of the premises); in the second, the agent is invited by an author to imagine certain

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<sup>4</sup> This is discussed at more length in ch. 5.

premises and fallout; and in the third, the agent is generating some premises and fallout, but is prompted by the other participants in the game to entertain *other* premises and fallout. I make no distinction between these here. Suppositions that are externally generated are not necessarily less pleasurable than those internally generated; it is often quite pleasurable both to engage with fictions and to daydream. It is certainly true that some suppositions are more pleasurable than others (I can wonder what I'm going to wear if it snows tomorrow without experiencing a rush of delight). It is also true that the negative emotion occasioned by the content of the supposition outweighs any pleasure from the act of supposing. I address variance in pleasure in sec. 8 of this chapter, and the outweighing by a negative emotion more thoroughly in ch. 5. It is my position, though, that however a supposition is generated -- whether internally, externally, or some combination thereof -- the act of supposing what is not believed to obtain in the actual world, and entertaining fallout, is *ceteris paribus* pleasurable.

#### 4. The View That the Response is the Motivation

This section outlines Peter Carruthers's (2006) view on the motivations for pretending. He restricts himself (mostly) to the case of childhood pretense, and doesn't deal directly with fictions. He offers valuable ideas, some of which are worth preserving, but ultimately additions to his view are needed. Let us use the stock example of pretense: a child pretending to talk to her grandmother on a phone that is really a banana. According to Carruthers, a child sees the banana. Its similarity in shape to a telephone then weakly activates a representation with the content 'telephone.' The child then mentally rehearses calling her grandmother on the

telephone, using the banana as a proxy. The representation of herself calling her grandmother gets globally broadcast to an array of emotional and motivational systems. This representation, however, is “tagged” as conditional on a supposition, so she is not motivated to act as she would if she believed she were talking to her grandmother. Yet her emotional systems still respond to the representation, albeit in a weaker way than to a belief. Since the child loves talking to her grandmother, she feels satisfaction out of pretending to talk to her grandmother.

For Carruthers, then, one engages in pretense in order to experience a weaker activation of the emotions one might feel were the supposition actually the case.<sup>5</sup> But what about suppositions that would be unpleasant were they to obtain in the real world? Children and adults, after all, do suppose and pretend things that they would not actually want to obtain. A child and his father might engage in a bit of pretense that the father is the monster coming to devour the child while the child shrieks and runs away, laughing. The child, presumably, does not really want to be eaten by a monster, nor does the father want to be a monster that will eat his child. Carruthers suspects that while the fear emotion that a child would feel were there really a monster chasing him is indeed weakly activated, there might also be a pleasure for the child in the very recognition of the fact that the supposition does not actually obtain. I agree that this is part of the story. It does seem that, at least sometimes, the emotions that would be aroused were the content of the supposition to obtain in the actual world are weakly activated in this type of supposition. It is a plausible explanation of why we cry at sad movies, scream at horror movies, and have (mostly) pleasant

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<sup>5</sup> Similar views for fictions as opposed to suppositions are discussed in ch. 3.



daydreams. Children seem much more likely to pretend that they are superheroes, or that they have imaginary friends, than they are to pretend that they are less deft and intelligent than they are or have fewer friends than they do.

His account does not exhaust the motivations for engaging in supposition and in pretense. On his account, only the representational content of hypothetical representations is broadcast to emotional and motivational systems. On my account, the representational content of suppositions is also broadcast to emotional and motivational systems; but in addition, *ceteris paribus*, the activation of our supposition systems, regardless of the content of these suppositions, triggers a sensation of pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

### 5. Supposing is Not Always Like Practical Reasoning

Imagining hypothetical situations and gauging what our emotions might be in response to each can be a help in practical reasoning (see, e.g., Damasio 1994, Harris 2000, Berthoz and Weiss 2006, Seymour and Dolan 2008). We can be motivated to act based on the hypothetical that gives us the more pleasurable emotional response. Imagining, however, can also take on quite a different flavor from practical reasoning. Implausible premises and unlikely fallout are entertained. Not all pleasurable emotional responses to hypotheticals are motivation to act. In this section, I argue that these facts give weight to the view that suppositions are *ceteris paribus* inherently pleasurable.

#### **5.1 A possible difference between non-human animals and children**

An experiment was performed and described by Emil Menzel (1974) in which

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<sup>6</sup> It is possible that it is *awareness* that one is supposing that is pleasurable, rather than the activation of suppositions. I am agnostic on the issue for now.

an ape named Belle was the only ape who was shown where some food was buried in an enclosure. Other apes were then let into the enclosure. When a male ape saw Belle digging up the food, he pushed her away, biting her, and took the food himself. In subsequent repetitions of the experiment, Belle seemed to hit on a solution. When the male ape was let into the enclosure, Belle would start digging in a location where there was no food. When the male ape pushed her away and began digging there himself, she took advantage of his distraction to go to where the food actually was, dig it up, and eat it.

Carruthers (2006) posits that Belle might have mentally rehearsed several actions, including, say, fighting back against the aggressive male, and digging in what she knows to be the wrong location. Starting with an initial supposition that she fights back against the male, she infers the likely consequences that he will be even more aggressive with her. This representation is broadcast to her emotional and motivational systems, tagged as conditional on a supposition. A weakly activated negative emotion ensues. Then she mentally rehearses anew, beginning with the initial supposition that she digs in a location that will mislead the male ape. She then supposes that the likely consequences will be that the male ape will get distracted and she can go to the right location and dig up the food. This weakly activates a pleasant emotion and so she embarks on that course of action.

To Carruthers, the difference between Belle mentally rehearsing scenarios and choosing the best course of action based on her weakly activated emotions and a child who pretends to talk to her grandmother on a banana phone lies in the initial supposition. Belle's initial supposition—that she is digging in a misleading place—is

grounded in beliefs. That is, she does not believe while she is mentally rehearsing digging in a misleading location that she really is doing so, but her supposition is very close to what is quite likely to obtain. Meanwhile, the child entertains the supposition that a banana is a telephone even when there is no likelihood at all that that supposition will obtain. According to Carruthers, the central difference between an ape's creative thinking and a human's creative thinking lies in the choice of initial premise: humans will engage in creative thinking with an initial premise that is not of immediate practical concern. In other cases where animals are perhaps mentally rehearsing or supposing, such as cats playing hunting games or bower birds building bowers and adding a piece just so, it also seems to be the case that what is mentally rehearsed is what is likely to obtain at some point. Moreover, the supposition (if such it is) seems restricted to a sole domain, and is heavily innately channeled. Human suppositional thinking is domain-general (Picciuto & Carruthers, forthcoming).

I would emphasize that is not only the initial premise that differs in the two types of creative thinking described, but also the likelihood of the fallout. The ape, cat, and bower bird, so far as we can infer from behavior, will entertain only the most likely fallout from the initial premise. For a human, on the other hand, likelihood is not always a constraint on which fallout from an initial premise that the human will entertain. Indeed, unlikely elaborations are often a feature of human supposing.

In supposing, we frequently do not wed ourselves to entertaining the closest possible world to the actual world where the initial premise is the case. Pretend cowboys tend to yell "Yee-haw!" and twirl lassos, but they do not generally pretend to treat diseased hooves. I think it unlikely that this is true in all cases because

children do not know that cowboys must treat diseased hooves. A child who is pretending to be a nurse by listening to other people's chests with a play stethoscope will not always be motivated, if told that nurses actually spend much of their day filling out insurance paperwork, to put down the stethoscope and pretend to fill out insurance paperwork. Some might, but not all.

As Nichols and Stich (2003) note, embellishment of the initial premises seems frequently to attend pretend play. That is, pretend play does not simply examine the most likely fallout given the initial supposition, but often elaborates with additional premises that are rather unlikely. For example, they note that in a small experiment that they ran, college students were given an initial premise and told to act out a scene based on that premise. One such initial premise was a scene at a fancy restaurant: one student was to pretend to be a waiter, another student to be a customer. The student pretending to be a waiter pretended first to take an order, then to show off a Japanese sword, then to crush peppercorns with his heel and sprinkle it on the customer's food, then to decapitate a customer (Nichols and Stich 2003, 22–24). None of the ensuing actions were logically entailed by the initial premise that the students were a waiter and a customer, nor were they, I submit, the most likely events to occur were the first student actually a waiter and the other a customer. The very fact that we do frequently entertain suppositions and unlikely fallout that are not of immediate practical reasoning use (although that might allow for leaps of creative thought) makes more plausible the contention that supposing is inherently pleasurable.

## **5.2 Why do we pretend what we might enact?**

The impracticality of human supposing raises an important question about motivations. For Belle, a weakly activated positive emotion based on the predicted

consequences of a supposition is motivation to perform a real (not pretended) action, and a weakly activated negative emotion based on the predicted consequences of a supposition is motivation to avoid performing an action. Why does the child who has weakly activated positive emotions from pretending to talk to her grandmother not clamor really to speak to her grandmother so that she might get those positive emotions strongly activated? Surely she does sometimes; why doesn't she always do so? It might be that it is not in her power to speak to her grandmother (perhaps she cannot use a phone and is only permitted to talk to her grandmother at certain prescribed times). But it seems children do often pretend things that they are capable of requesting or of enacting for themselves.

One of the standard examples of childhood pretense is the making of mud pies. Yet while most children are capable of requesting pie or getting it for themselves (or some other food, if pie is not available), it does not seem that episodes of mud pie-making invariably lead to eating. A child might give a dog a biscuit and pretend that he is giving a dog a cookie, even though he is able really to give a dog a cookie. It seems that there's something fun about pretense *qua* pretense. If the only reward of pretense is a weaker version of the pleasure one would experience if it were true, it would not seem to be worthwhile to pretend something one is capable of actually doing; such desires would be better satisfied by simply doing those. Positing that pretense itself is *ceteris paribus* inherently pleasurable better explains why people enjoy pretending things that they are also capable of enacting.

#### 6. Impersonal Suppositions and Fiction

Forgive me for the following slightly dim view of humankind. But I suspect

that if rewards of imagining were only a weaker version of what we would feel if the content of our suppositions obtained, then we might expect that our suppositions would be primarily self-directed, or directed at close friends and family. If the situation would give us actual pleasure if it obtained, most of the time (not always!), we or our loved ones would likely be involved in that situation in some way. That is, such imaginings would more likely make us *feel* pleasure – and thus provide motivation for engaging in them – if they obtained. (Here is a less dim view of humankind: I have no doubt that the vast majority of us would *prefer* that other people, even strangers, have good things happen to them. But less often does that give us an actual sensation of pleasure.) The fact that we don't include ourselves or loved ones in many suppositions, I argue in this section, supports the idea that suppositions are standardly inherently pleasurable, and not simply a weaker version of what we might feel if the events were true.

Not all suppositions must be personal. That is, not all suppositions include an explicit concept of one's self inside the supposition. When someone supposes that penguins can fly, she does not need to suppose that *I am in a world such that penguins can fly*. Children's suppositions seem often to be impersonal in this way. A child might imagine that unicorns enjoy drinking from rainbow streams, or that ghosts of those who died violent deaths will roam graveyards and rattle chains, or that monsters are green and purple more often than they are yellow. She might draw a picture of a scene of elaborate mayhem and not put herself into the drawing at all.

### **6.1 Fictional Supposing Can Often Be Impersonal**

Reading or viewing fiction can involve impersonal imagining, at least some of the time, and perhaps most of the time. When I read *Pride and Prejudice*, I can

imagine that, in the first ball scene, Darcy rejects the suggestion to dance with Elizabeth on the grounds that she is not handsome enough to tempt him, and, although he does not realize it, Elizabeth overhears him and finds it very amusing. I do not need to deploy a concept of myself in order to do so. I do not need to imagine that somehow I am in the assembly room and privy to all conversations and goings-on (see Currie, 1995, for a discussion on this topic).

Paul Harris (2000, 65–70) makes the empirical case that consumers of fiction keep track of the emotional and epistemic point of view of a protagonist, even when the consumers of the fiction are privy to more information than is the protagonist about the fictional state of affairs and its broader emotional significance (70). This seems correct. There is, however, a conceptual difference between keeping emotional and epistemic track of a protagonist (and feeling sympathy for that protagonist), and, as Harris puts it:

As young children engaged in pretend play, and also as readers of a text, we can take up a vantage-point within an imagined spatio-temporal framework...Temporarily, we set aside the current world with its anxieties and problems, and we live instead in the imagined world. Once we enter that state of absorption, it is the events occurring within the imagined world that drive our emotional system. Indeed, our emotional response to those events is heightened by their being viewed alongside, or from the perspective of, the main protagonists. We share their aspirations and disappointments (2000, 65–66).

This is the fictional spell assumption of the Simple Story. Harris uses as evidence of our taking up a vantage point in an imagined world our absorption in fiction—we tend to get ‘lost’ in a film or novel. It is not clear, though, that that absorption is anything much different in kind from an intense concentration on any project, whether imaginary or not. People get absorbed in non-imaginary work all the time, and are a bit startled when they ‘come to,’ much as they are when they have been absorbed in fiction. Harris does not need to posit that we, in our imaginations, enter the spatio-temporal framework of the story, seeing only from a character’s point of view, or what the character might feel if he had access to the information that we as audience members possess. We can keep track of the epistemic information (and likely emotional reactions) for several different characters at once without supposing ourselves as being in that imagined world. We can suppose certain aspects of what it’s like to be a character, and feel strong sympathy for them, without putting ourselves in their world, or their spatiotemporal framework. For a more detailed back and forth debate about this issue specifically regarding film, see Currie (1995, 164-98), and Jerrold Levinson (1993). I give this issue much more consideration in ch. 5.

## **6.2. The Motivations for Impersonal Supposing**

The point is, ultimately, that we can and do entertain at least some impersonal suppositions. Fictional supposing can often be impersonal supposing, and we engage in fictions quite frequently. One does not need to undergo an arduous process to learn how to engage in fictional supposing: children are largely equipped to entertain fictions starting as young as age two (Harris 2000, 24), and can make inferences from pretended premises as young as 15 months (Baillargeon et al., 2010). If the motivation to engage in imagining were a weakened version of the pleasure we might



feel if the content of our suppositions were true, we would not spend so much time and effort imagining things that happen to other people, or imagining that things simply are other than they are without reference to ourselves. While we certainly feel some pleasure if good things happen to other people, especially those whom we like, we are surely more emotionally invested in having good things happen to us. In order to get a bigger bang for our emotional buck, it would make more sense to suppose personally nearly always rather than impersonally. If suppositions, however, are inherently pleasurable, our frequent entertaining of impersonal suppositions is more plausibly explained.

Indeed, entertaining certain fictions may well bring about stronger pleasure, not weaker, than the pleasure felt were the content of the fictions to obtain. How a story is told (the artistry, structure, pacing, etc.) can make more of a difference in its emotional impact than whether we take the story to be real or invented. If I were to find out that it really was the case that in Regency-era England, an upper-middle class woman with wit and charm and an embarrassing family managed to find her perfect match in a proud but truly decent – and extremely wealthy – man, I am not sure I would react with all that much more than an, “isn’t that nice?” Even if I were told in great detail about what happened to real-Elizabeth and real-Darcy, I might be very interested to know what happened to them, but chances are it would not make a substantial emotional impact. Reading *Pride and Prejudice* and imagining the events, however, is an immensely pleasurable experience, not merely a watered-down version of how I might feel were the contents of my imaginings true.

## 7. Neutral and Negative Suppositions

It might seem something of a mystery why we ever entertain emotionally neutral or negative suppositions, by which I mean suppositions to the content of which we would emotionally react neutrally or negatively were it to obtain. When one assumes that the primary motivation for engaging in supposition is a reward in the form of a weakened version of the emotion we would feel were the content of our suppositions to obtain, there should be no reason to entertain such suppositions. We shouldn't suppose much of anything that wouldn't be pleasurable if it obtained. Yet we do so frequently.

### **7.1. The Paradoxes of Negatively and Neutrally Emotional Imagining**

This is the topic of ch. 4, and so will be discussed in much more detail there. A few remarks here are enough to support the thesis of this chapter. We often imagine things that would make us positively unhappy were they to obtain. We watch melodramas and horror movies. Or take the child whose father pretends to be a monster who eats him up. Surely the child would not want that to be the case. On one hand, melodramas and horror movies are evidence that we do indeed experience some weakened version of the emotion we would feel were the events to obtain: we cry at sad movies, jump in fright at scary movies. And some fear does seem to be weakly activated in the child playing a monster pretense—the child might shriek as he runs away. Yet the child might also be laughing at the same time as he shrieks, obviously having fun. Children play cops and robbers (and pretend to die as part of the game), draw pictures of monsters breathing fire, and stagger around like zombies. What motivation is there for weakly activating negative emotions?

This will be discussed fully in ch. 4. Part of the explanation, however, is that at least one source of pleasure in tragedies is separate from the content of the suppositions; it is the pleasure we take in supposing anything at all. It is not clear that there is any such sharp divide in our pursuit of fictions that we have such different kinds of motivation to entertain sad or scary fictions than we do to entertain happy ones.

## **7.2. Our Readiness to Suppose**

Children pretend extremely readily from a very young age. When two-year-olds who saw a Teddy upturn a teapot (which was really empty) over a monkey's head, and were prompted, "Teddy made the monkey's head all . . . ?," the majority of the children responded in a manner appropriate to the pretense ("wet," "soggy," "teaeey," etc.), although the option to respond literally (i.e., "dry" or some such) was open to them (Harris, 2000, 17–18). Children detect violations in pretend scenarios when they are as young as 15 months old (Onishi et al. 2007). Children are very adept at supposing, even supposing relatively emotionally neutral situations, such as the upending of the teapot, or, perhaps more emotionally neutrally, the squeezing of pretend toothpaste on pretend banana, or simply that a brick is a banana (Harris 2000,18). They seem to have a willingness to engage in pretense when the reality of that pretense offers them neither a positive emotion nor a negative one, even though Harris's question was open-ended to allow for a response with the literal truth. The making of mud pies when the child is not hungry is another example. So is a child who pretends that the broccoli florets she is eating are trees in order to make broccoli fun to eat. Would she really get pleasure from eating trees were it true? Is the thought

of tree-eating so terrible that the child is relieved it's not the case? It seems that children pretend emotionally relatively neutral events, too. Suppositions get entertained even if they would not activate pleasure if true and relief if false. If the content of suppositions were the source of motivation for engaging in suppositions, children should have no reason to pretend emotionally neutral situations.

Also children willingly engage in sad and scary fictions and suppositions from a very young age. Popular children's literature includes such works as *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Charlotte's Web*.

As Currie and Ravenscroft (2002, p. 112) discuss, children's tendencies to take on a wide variety of roles is extremely hard to systematize. Children often take on roles of people they find admirable (cowboys, ballerinas), but also those of figures they find terrifying (monsters). After all, someone has to be a robber in a game of cops and robbers. Children willingly, and often gleefully, pretend to die. They pretend to be themselves, but in situations that do not obtain (talking on a banana phone to Grandma). They pretend to be non-sentient things (a house, a tree, or in a notable Nichols and Stich example, a dead cat, 2003, 4). They take on such a variety of roles that it is hard to believe that they take them all on for the pleasure that they would experience were they true—in the case of dying and non-sentient roles, they would experience nothing at all. Much childhood pretense is group pretense, and children seem especially willing to engage in secondary or less-than-admirable roles in this context. Part of that must be simply social pleasure, but it must be noted that choosing to pretend is considered a pleasurable social activity, even for those who get stuck playing the bad guys. (Or are you really stuck when you're playing the good guys?)

It seems also that we react quite differently to images we know to be fictional than the ones that we know to be true in kind, not just in degree. Depictions of what would be tragic if real can be very exciting and fun to watch. As we are all too aware, a building collapse in fiction can be boisterous fun; a building collapse in real life is horrific. Murder mysteries are often considered light, fun reads, yet hearing details about a real murder is usually quite upsetting. Indeed, if our response to supposition was entirely dependent on our emotional reactions if the supposition were true, I suspect we would not be so willing to turn ourselves over to suppositions that we do not generate. In the case of group pretense and fiction, we simply do not always know what suppositions will get generated for us. Although externally supplemented suppositions (including externally generated suppositions) can be more intense, why risk a more intense negative feeling? If our motivations for supposition lay entirely in our response to the content of the suppositions, it seems likely we would be more cautious about gauging exactly what that emotional response is likely to be before engaging in a pretense.

It is most parsimonious to posit that there is an inherent pleasure (again, *ceteris paribus*) in the activation of suppositions, regardless of content. Then one theory can explain a general motivation to engage with happy, sad, scary, and neutral fiction. Not all fictions at all times, of course. It explains, however, a general tendency to pursue supposing and fictions.

## 8. Pleasure and Its Mutability

### **8.1 Pleasure as the Motivating Force**

As discussed in sec. 1, it seems plausible that humans would have evolved to find supposing rewarding in some way. The ability to suppose is important for practical reasoning and decision-making, as it permits one to test one's response to possible situations before deciding on a course of action. It is crucial, as well, for creativity. A creature that frequently supposes would have a substantial advantage in problem-solving over a similar one who did not suppose. It makes sense, then, for humans to have evolved a system that rewards the cognitive state of supposing.

While the potential of feeling pleasure quite often does motivate one to act, pleasure is not identical to motivation. One might be tempted to suggest that we merely have some sort of intrinsic motivation, a drive or a tendency to suppose, but that supposing is not linked to pleasure as such. This position, however, fails to explain the hedonic tone that accompanies supposing. We are not just driven to read *Anna Karenina*, we enjoy reading it. A night at the movies feels like a pleasurable one. Children have fun when they pretend. Yet, as I will discuss in the next section, I suspect we also have a tendency to suppose.

This account is not consistent with a behavioral theory of pleasure. If pleasure just is to be disposed to behave in certain ways, then picking out certain behaviors as evidence of pleasure is circular. The pleasure I have in mind, then, is a substantive one. It is a mental event of some kind. Beyond that stipulation, however, this account

is consistent with many different views of what pleasure is, whether it is a body-monitoring, functionalist, phenomenological, or representationalist view (see Schroeder 2004, 83–97 for a discussion of theories of pleasure). So I remain agnostic on just what pleasure is, as long as it is a mental event. I would expect, however, that if it turns out that pleasure can be reliably empirically detectable, that it would be detectable when one is supposing. The thesis of this chapter is a testable hypothesis. In cases of entertaining tragedies, I would expect that in addition to some detectable sadness, pleasure would be detected as well.

Again, this is not to say that the *only* pleasure of, say, pretending or novel-reading is the one felt in virtue of the act of supposing. Pretending can be an occasion for social pleasure; we can enjoy the rhythm of the language in a novel. Our very melancholy response to a tragedy might indeed be something we appreciate in its own right. There does seem to be, however, a basic pleasure taken in supposing, regardless of the representational content of the supposition.

## **8.2. Variability of Pleasure**

The biggest challenge to this view is why some suppositions do not seem very pleasurable at all. I might suppose that the top speed a running cheetah might achieve is 80 miles per hour (instead of 70) and I do not get any thrill. There is also the case of nervous obsessions. A vast array of drugs exist to prevent people from dwelling obsessively on imaginings of non-actual doom. Why am I not conscious of pleasure each time I suppose something?

One might be tempted to sidestep this issue by sorting suppositions into kinds and arguing that one kind is pleasurable and the other is not. For example, one might

say that propositional supposing is not pleasurable whereas imagistic supposing is. Or perhaps that very plausible premises and conclusions (as in the case of practical reasoning) are not pleasurable to suppose, whereas suppositions involving less plausible premises and more arbitrary embellishments are pleasurable. First of all, it's not clear that any such clear demarcations between kinds of supposing exist—witness the difficulties distinguishing supposing and imagining. There seem to be many fuzzy cases. It is also not clear that plausibility of premises and the likelihood of fallout are directly related to the amount of pleasure to be had from suppositions. Take fictions: people enjoy both very gritty and realistic fictions as well as fantastic and wildly implausible fictions. The likelihood of the premises, however, may be another story.

As in the case of the supposition about a cheetah's top running speed, the pleasure of a supposition might just be extremely minor. There are endless varieties and degrees of pleasure, after all. The pleasure taken in a brief daydream of a tasty dinner that is almost ready, is a very quiet, subtle pleasure compared to a raucous game of cops and robbers. A suppositional pleasure might be masked by other occurrent, and stronger, emotions, such as boredom or irritation. Also, as stated above, content does matter in terms of our emotional reactions and motivations. We do often experience a watered-down version of the emotion we would feel were the content true (elaborations of this are discussed in all subsequent chapters); my account of pleasure in the act of supposing is meant as an *addition* to this view. Clearly the unpleasantness that certain content occasions might outweigh any pleasure one gets from supposing. Some people do not enjoy horror movies or tragedies; they may be especially sensitive to the weakly activated emotion. If a father



sees one of his children look pale and tired, and his mind jumps to leukemia, the sadness and fear incurred outweigh any pleasure.

Some movies are too violent for many people to watch. In the cases imaginative resistance, which will be discussed in ch. 5, we experience an unwillingness to have certain suppositions. The outweighing of pleasure by an unpleasant reactive emotion would seem to happen most readily when, as in the case of nervousness about a job interview, we believe that the supposition is likely to obtain. Indeed, our negative reaction to imaginings that are likely to obtain may serve the purpose of making us extra vigilant that nothing go wrong when it does obtain. The pleasure or displeasure one feels in response to suppositions depends partly on other beliefs and desires. We have many other beliefs and desires that might affect the pleasure we take in any given supposition, or the degree to which we take pleasure in it.

Take nervous obsessions.<sup>7</sup> In this case, a person is repeatedly imagining negatively-charged scenarios. On my view, why is this not the happiest person in the world? There are a few things going on here. First, nervous obsessions are not usual components of a typically-functioning cognitive system. Most people do not feel nervous obsessions frequently, and it may simply indicate something has gone awry. Second, as I have suggested, the negatively-charged emotion may outweigh the positive. Third, we may find ourselves doing it non-consciously. It certainly is not the case that we decide consciously to embark on every supposition. When our decisions to suppose are not consciously made (as is the case in nervous obsessions, but is not

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<sup>7</sup> Thank you to Dan Moller and Samuel Kerstein for pushing me on this point.

the case in engaging in fictions and pretence), imagining is often a distraction from the task at hand. That in itself is irritating. Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) found that people find mind-wandering – not necessarily wandering to non-actual representations, but mind-wandering more generally – frustrating. It may impede our concentration and thus our functioning. Fourth, (and this is *very* arguable) I am not entirely sure there is *nothing* unpleasurable about nervous obsessions. There may be some grim pleasure felt in an obsession one really *knows* almost certainly will not obtain, or a belief that if one imagines it, it will not obtain. The phenomenological difference between a nervous obsession over a child's sickness that one really *knows* is not true, after all, is quite different than the feeling one has when one's child is actually sick.

Sex and sexual thoughts seem much less controversially inherently pleasurable than supposition. Yet pleasure taken in sex is not automatic, nor is the same degree of pleasure experienced every time. The degree of pleasure can depend on many circumstances, beliefs, and desires: the partner, the setting, affections, guilt, might all be factors in variability in pleasure taken in sex. Sexual thoughts might be entertained with little discernible pleasure. They may be considered intrusive and obsessive. One may find them burdensome. The same might be true for pleasure in supposition.

### 9. Conclusion

I hope I have shown that inherent pleasure in the act of supposing, regardless of content, should be considered a supplement to attributing our motivation to engaging in suppositions to a weakened version of our emotional reactions if the

supposition held true. The response content of a supposition does not hold all the reward for the imaginer. I will further complicate the story of our motivations and rewards for engaging in fictional art in particular in ch. 5. While we clearly do react to suppositions as we might in some fainter way if they were true, it seems that this is only part of the story. An account of our motivations to engage in supposing that relies solely on our reaction to the content of a supposition is incapable of explaining all of the phenomena associated with supposing. Positing pleasure in supposition helps explain why we pretend so much as children, why we engage in fiction as adults, and why we entertain such an amazing variety of suppositions. It is the most plausible explanation for our motivation to suppose and to entertain fallout from suppositions.

## Chapter 3: Feelings for Fictions

*“But tell me how you so fearlessly descend  
To such a center — from that encompassing state  
You long to see again?’ ‘You yearn for the answer  
Deeply,” she said, ‘so I will tell in short  
How I can come to Limbo, yet feel no terror:  
Fear befits things with power for injury  
Not things that lack such power...”*

Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, Canto II

### 1. Introduction: The Paradox of Fiction

Suppose someone hears there is an escaped murderer on the loose in her neighborhood. She is afraid. She draws the blinds and triple-checks to make sure the doors are locked. Later, she is listening to the news when it is reported that there never was an escaped murderer. It was just a false rumor. Presumably she would no longer be afraid of that escaped murderer. There would be nothing for her to be afraid of. Parents reassure children that they should not be afraid of ghosts in the closet because there are no ghosts in the closet. In an example similar to one brought up by Colin Radford (1975) and discussed below, if Antonio’s friend told him she had cancer and had only six months to live, he would feel pity and grief. If she then told him she was just kidding, he would no longer feel pity. Indeed, Antonio would get pretty angry at her for manipulating him. *Prima facie*, it seems the case that if the object of our emotion (that is, its intentional object, or what our emotion is about) does not exist, we would not feel the emotion. Why, then, do fictions seem to be an

exception to this general rule? We feel affective responses to fictions that seem like emotions, even as we do not believe the fictions exist. This seems psychologically counterintuitive or even paradoxical. The problem is known in the philosophical literature as the paradox of fiction.

In Kendall Walton's now-famous example, he states the paradox roughly like this (1993):

- 1) For Charles to be afraid of fictional green slime, he must believe he is endangered by it.
- 2) People do not believe that they are endangered by fictional objects.
- 3) Charles is afraid of the green slime.

In a more recent work, Stephen Davies (2009) notes that not only may the paradox be stated differently, but a different statement of it more accurately captures the majority of affective responses<sup>8</sup> to fictions. Most people, when feeling a fear response to a fiction, are not afraid *for themselves*.<sup>9</sup> The majority of affective responses one feels while engaging in a fiction are *for* the characters in the fiction. The emotions are not self-directed.

So Davies suggests another version of the paradox, using pity. Here is his version:

- 1) To feel pity, a person has to believe that another person or creature suffers or is in a pitiable situation.

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<sup>8</sup> Until section 4, where I make the argument that such responses are genuine cases of emotion, I will call them "affective responses" to avoid question-begging.

<sup>9</sup> This is mentioned briefly in other, earlier works, such as Carroll (1990).

2) Diana, a reader of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, does not believe that Anna suffers, since (she knows) Anna does not exist.

3) Yet Diana pities Anna.

Davies thinks the puzzles have different solutions. I will argue that (1) should be denied in both cases. People have genuine emotions for objects that they do not believe exist. In the literature on the paradox of fiction, this is generally known as a "thought theory." I hope to present a version of thought theory that is more plausible than its previous proponents have done.

The organization of this chapter will be as follows. In sec. 2, I will suggest it is a mistake to solve the paradox by refining our concepts of "belief" or "emotion." Further, there are many emotions one can feel while engaging in a fiction. It is a particular subset of emotions, however, that are truly paradoxical, and I will describe what those are. Most thought theorists deny belief as constitutive of an emotion. I will disagree. Belief is indeed necessary for emotion. Jerrold Levinson makes the distinction between existential beliefs and characterizing beliefs (1997, 24). Although he disagrees with the thought theory, I will employ his distinction in defending thought theory. Characterizing beliefs are necessary for emotion. What is not necessary is an existential belief in the intentional object. In sec. 3, I will outline other solutions to the puzzle. In sec. 4, I will argue that affective responses to fictions should indeed be considered genuine cases of emotions. Diana really does pity Anna Karenina. Two related questions arise in the literature regarding the affirmation or denial of genuine emotions with fictional intentional objects. The first is whether belief is partially constitutive of emotion. I will argue that existential belief is not.

The second question is whether emotions with actual intentional objects and emotions with non-existent intentional objects constitute different natural kinds. Emotions themselves, however, may not constitute a natural kind (for arguments along these lines, see, e.g., Griffiths 1997 and Barrett 2006). If they are not natural kinds, then the question of whether emotional responses to non-existent objects are a separate kind is moot. *Emotion*, then, does not carve a genuine joint in nature, but is a concept. I will not adjudicate this issue; rather, I will address both possibilities. There is not enough difference between the emotional responses to non-existent objects and emotional responses to actual objects to warrant consideration as separate kinds, and the concept of emotional responses to fictions is not incoherent. In sec. 5, I will argue that we do not believe the intentional object of our emotion exists, in this world or at a fictional world. What remains is then the most plausible solution to the paradox. We should deny that emotional responses to fictional objects necessitate belief in the existence of their objects.

In sec. 6, I will defend my version of thought theory. Many previous solutions to the puzzle have suffered from some form or another of the Simple Story. That is, they tend to describe engaging a fiction as *imagining a world such that X*. As I will argue, this is an inappropriate way to describe our engagement with fiction, and thus our affective responses to fictions. Our affective responses to fictional objects are rarely, if ever, determined solely by the truths instantiated at a fictional world. Facts about *the actual world* partially determine the nature of our affective response to a fictional object. A response to a fictional object is never simply a response to a non-existent object. It is a response to a blend of fact and fiction.

There are two standard objections to thought theory. They are indeed implications of thought theory, but they do not have as much bite as thought theory's detractors have claimed. The first is that it is unclear, on thought theory, just at what our emotions are directed. What is a fictional object? This, I will argue, is not an issue that the thought theorist need solve. The second is that having emotional responses to contents of mental representations is irrational. The literature on the paradox of fiction has suffered from a tendency to conflate the concept of *genuine emotions* with *rational emotions*. It seems to be felt that one must prove that emotional responses to fictions are rational to prove they are genuine. These concepts are separable. Affective responses to fictions are genuine emotions. They may or may not be rational.

## 2. Definitions of Belief and Emotion

### **2.1 Against Defining Away the Problem**

There is an enormous philosophical and psychological literature on each of what constitutes a belief and what constitutes an emotion. The puzzle would be easy enough to solve were we all clear on what, exactly, is a belief, and what, exactly is an emotion. Since that is not clear, one may simply define either of these such that the puzzle is technically solved. This sort of solution, however, simply evades the issue.

One may define *belief* such that it does not represent of the view of the agent as a whole. We can simply say that a viewer believes what she is seeing *on some level*, or *a part of her* believes it. It would not be the all-things-considered view of the agent – she would not assert that she believes that the fiction is real, nor does she



behave as if it were real. For instance, when watching a movie, she does not call 911 to save the hero who is chased by a bad guy. So she does not seem to believe, all-things-considered, that the hero is *really* being chased by a bad guy.

It may well be the case that belief *ought* to be defined more narrowly than an all-things-considered view of the agent. That is beyond the scope of this paper. Defining belief more narrowly, however, is problematic when discussing the paradox of fiction. If we restrict our notion of belief to something that may be done by some subset of our cognitive system, the puzzle raised at the beginning of the paper remains. There are cases when we have an all-things-considered disbelief in the existence of the intentional object and little to no affective response. There are cases when despite an all-things-considered-disbelief in the existence of the intentional object we do have affective responses. This is the puzzle we are trying to solve. Simply restricting our understanding of belief does not help us understand that puzzle. So while it is the case that belief can, and perhaps should, be defined differently, for the purposes of this paper, *belief* means something very strong. It represents the agent's all-things-considered view, is something that she would assent to, is something her behavior seems to square with.

Similarly, the simplest way to defend what is my position, *viz.*, that emotions do not presuppose belief in the existence of their intentional objects, is to insist on what is known as the James-Lange view of the emotions. This is the view that emotions involve no cognitive content and consist simply in a bodily feeling.<sup>10</sup> Then

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<sup>10</sup> Prinz (2006) argues for an updated version of the James-Lange view where emotions have intentional objects, but not a cognitive component. So on his view, too, one could readily argue that emotions do not presuppose belief.

emotions obviously do not presuppose belief. Again, it is beyond the scope of this paper to define emotion. If we do resort to a James-Lange or similar view of the emotions, however, we fail to answer what is puzzling about the paradox. The problem cannot be erased by definitional fiat. There remains something psychologically counterintuitive left to explain. I will assume that emotions characteristically involve an intentional object, a judgment of the intentional object, a motivation to action, and a feeling.<sup>11</sup> Even on this understanding of emotions, it is still most creditable to solve the paradox of fiction by denying that emotions presuppose belief in the existence of their intentional objects.

## 2.2 The Emotions that Generate the Paradox

There is a certain subset of emotions that truly generate the paradox. Levinson argues that thought theory has traditionally concentrated on the wrong emotions, i.e., ones that do not generate the paradox:

The instances of emotional response that challenge judgmentalism – the view that the cognitive element involved in all emotions is a judgment or belief – are mostly of two types. The first type is where there is insufficient time for cognition as such, so that no real representation of the object responded to is formed, there being only a virtually instantaneous reaction (examples: apprehension at a suddenly looming shape, disgust at an accidentally felt slug). A second type is where, though cognition is involved in generating the response, the representation thus formed is either not propositional in nature, or else does not have the status of a judgment, or both (examples: phobic fear of garter snakes, unfounded resentment of female superiors)...[E]ven if emotions at this cognitive level do not necessarily involve beliefs of a *characterizing* sort about their objects, it seems that such emotions must still involve *existential* beliefs with regard to their objects, or something very close to that – that is, attitudes or stances on the order of *taking to exist* or *regarding as existent*. Otherwise, the state attributed becomes unintelligible, whether as an emotion or as anything else. How can one be said to pity, fear, admire, or

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<sup>11</sup> See Scherer (2005) for a defense of including these as components of emotions, among other components less relevant to this paper.

hate something that one does not, concurrently with one's emotion, at least *take* or *regard* as existing now or at some other time? If indeed that cannot be said, then the problem resurfaces, despite what is right in the critique of judgmentalism: since sane consumers of fiction do *not* take, regard, or view fictional characters as existing, even when fully engaged with them appreciatively, they cannot really be in the full-fledged emotional states they are casually said to inhabit. (1997, 24, emphasis his).

It may seem that phobic fear of garter snakes or unfounded resentment against female superiors do represent judgments – they are just bad judgments. They are not, however, the agent's all-things-considered judgments (one hopes). Levinson's distinction between characterizing beliefs and existential beliefs is crucial, and I will employ it in this paper. Previous theories have blurred this line and as a result have been distracted from the core of the paradox. The crucial question in the case of paradox of fiction is not whether *any* belief is required for emotion, but whether *existential* belief is required for emotion. Citing phobic fear of garter snakes as an example of fear without belief does nothing to explain the paradox of fiction. The belief that is missing in that case is not an *existential belief*, but a *characterizing belief*. Sam has a phobic fear of garter snakes. Sam believes garter snakes exist; what he does not believe is that they have the property of being dangerous to him. That is, he does not believe garter snakes warrant fear, yet he fears them. In the cases of the paradox of fiction, it is the existential belief that is missing, not the characterizing beliefs. Elena pities Anna Karenina. Elena believes that Anna is represented with properties such that Anna warrants pity. She does not believe Anna exists.

The emotions relevant to a discussion of the paradox of fiction, then, should involve a non-existent intentional object. We should also focus not on reflexive emotional responses, but on what I will call *higher-level emotions*. If we answer the

question of why we jump in fear when the vampire suddenly appears on the screen (perhaps only to laugh at ourselves a second later), we still have not explained pity for Anna Karenina. It is of course the case that we have brief reflexive emotions in response to certain objects, especially in visual fictions. Whether a non-existent object *causes* an emotion, though, is a different question than if a non-existent object is *constitutive* of one. Pity for Anna is a complex feeling that unfolds while reading the book. Unlike a reflexive response, it represents the reader's sustained all-things-considered judgment. It may continue long after we have put the book down, when we simply reflect on her. In response to Levinson's suggestions of the emotions that do not generate the paradox, then, these higher-level emotions may be characterized as *emotions that are consciously mediated, of some significant duration, and involve an agent's all-things-considered judgment of the properties of the object*. In using the phrase *higher-level*, I do not mean to pick out socially constructed emotions as opposed to basic, universal ones (such as those delineated by Griffiths 1997). For example, a case of fear or anger (two of the basic, universal emotions) might be higher-level if it is a lengthy, consciously mediated feeling that represents the all-things-considered judgment of the agent regarding the properties of its object.

Characterizing beliefs (that is, beliefs about which properties an object does or does not possess) are indeed necessary for an affective response to fictions – just not existential ones. Suppose Miranda has a conscious reminiscence about her childhood pet dog who died long ago, and thinks of her silky-soft ears. It is true that the content of Miranda's mental representation is a dog with silky-soft ears. Moreover, Miranda has a *belief* that the content represents a dog with silky-soft ears and does not

represent, say, a porcupine. Most of us believe it is true (in some way or other) that Sherlock Holmes smoked a pipe and lived at 221B Baker Street. That is, we believe that fictional objects have truth-evaluable properties. Readers of *Anna Karenina* believe it is true that the fictional object *Anna Karenina* possesses properties such that she is pitiable. When we think about her, we believe the content of our representation of her represents her such that she is in a pitiable position.

John Morreall (1993) gives objectless emotions as evidence for the case that emotions do not require belief. Even if objectless emotions were genuine emotions (they are more plausibly understood as moods<sup>12</sup>), their existence would offer no evidence regarding the emotions involved in the paradox of fiction. It is impossible to have a mental representation of a fiction with no beliefs about an object and any properties it possesses. Arguably, as Kant and Hume suggested, existence is not a predicate. So objectlessness that is fictional just is no object.<sup>13</sup> The sustained, all-things-considered, consciously mediated emotion discussed above requires having a fictional object in mind. If someone is consciously mentally representing a fictional object, then she *must* believe that the content represents some property P. Characterizing beliefs, then, are necessary constituents of emotional responses to fictions.

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<sup>12</sup> See Robert Yanal (1999, 72-75 for discussion of objectless emotions)

<sup>13</sup> Even if existence is predicative, a fictional object without properties is incoherent. If Peter van Inwagen (1977) is correct that fictional objects exist as abstract objects, then there cannot be an abstract object that is not an object. Edward Zalta describes fictional objects as unexemplified (but encoded) properties (1988). So on this view, too, if there are no properties, there are no unexemplified and encoded properties.

### 3. Other Solutions to the Paradox of Fiction

#### **3.1 The Belief Solution**

The first solution to consider is what I will call a *belief solution*. Were one to take a poll of non-philosophers and ask for their solution to the paradox of fiction, my prediction would be that they would say something along the lines of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called “willing suspension of disbelief.” That is, we temporarily take the fiction to be fact and believe it for the duration of the engagement with the fiction. Most philosophers today rightly regard this view as erroneous. We do not behave or emote as if the events we are watching<sup>14</sup> are true (as I suggest in several other chapters, with particular emphasis in Chapter 4). Again, if we see a murderer chasing our hero, we do not call 911 to save him. We stay in our seats and perhaps grab another handful of popcorn. These are not the actions of someone who believes that the events onscreen are occurring, even temporarily.

There is, however, a more plausible solution to the paradox of fiction that relies on the idea that we really do believe in the existence of fictional characters. Davies (2009) and Neill (1995) each argue that viewers believe that fictional characters really exist, but not at the actual world. Viewers believe they exist at a fictional world, and feel for what is happening to characters there. Diana can pity Anna Karenina because she believes Anna exists at a fictional world, and at the fictional world she really is in a pitiable situation. Davies thinks that the solutions to the two versions of the paradox stated above are different. The solution to the version

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<sup>14</sup> For brevity’s sake, I will refer to either “movies” and “viewers” or “books” and “readers,” but what I say should apply to any work of fiction.

involving emotions for characters as indirect objects is easily solvable. It is rational to feel pity for Anna Karenina. She really is in a pitiable situation. There is no easy solution to the puzzle of Charles's fright. Davies maintains that it is irrational to feel, say, frightened for oneself in response to a fiction because fictional worlds are isolated from our own. Thus the solution to Charles's fear of the green slime remains paradoxical (note that, on this view, a genuine emotion is conflated with a rational emotion).

In sec. 5, I will argue that Diana believes Anna Karenina (*qua* the intentional object of Diana's mental representation of her) is in a pitiable position. That is, Diana judges the represented properties of the fictional object Anna are such that Anna is in a pitiable position. But she does not believe that a mind-independent Anna Karenina exists.

### **3.2 The Pretend Solution**

Gregory Currie (1990) argues that affective responses to fictions are not real emotions, because emotions require beliefs and we do not believe in fictions. Walton (1993) takes a similar line, and expands on it. Walton argues that the first version of the paradox (the only one he discusses) is indeed solvable. Only beliefs, or something relevantly similar to beliefs, and desires incline one to action. Genuine emotions are necessarily motivating. Genuine emotions, then, require at least something relevantly similar to existential beliefs in their objects. Affective responses to fictions, however, do not motivate or incline one to action. Thus, they are not genuine emotions. In Walton's famous example, Charles is sitting in a movie theater watching a horror movie about the green slime. Charles claims that he is afraid of the slime. Walton

argues that what Charles is feeling when he claims he fears the green slime is not genuine fear. Instead, it is a combination of quasi fear (the registering of bodily changes, such as increasing heart rate and palms sweating) and fictional fear (imagining that one is afraid of a fictional object partially on the basis of quasi fear one feels). In sec. 4, I present a rebuttal to Walton.

### **3.3 The irrational “solution”**

Radford (1975) throws up his hands and claims that there is no solution to the paradox of fiction. It is irrational to respond affectively to fictions. He argues that since we do not always respond affectively to imagined negative events, we cannot just assume that it is a brute psychological fact that people respond affectively to imagined events. He gives several examples of our failure to respond emotionally to imagined events. One is a person who hears a friend tell a tale of woe about a dying sister. The listener believes all of it, and is quite saddened. When informed that the story was made up, the listener does not remain saddened about the fiction, but instead gets angry at being duped. Radford also discusses a case of watching an actor friend show off his skills by pretending to writhe in pain on the floor. One would not feel concern or pity, he suggests, but embarrassment. The former case, however, involves trickery, so is not the same as fictional imagining. For the duration of the story, the listener was not *imagining*, the listener was *believing*. Events that one believes (as opposed to those that one imagines) have a different affective tenor. So the listener is understandably feeling betrayed. The discomfort of someone witnessing her friend pretend to be in pain can be explained by, among other things, the social inappropriateness of the friend’s behavior, irritation at his showing off, or the



contextlessness of the performance. That could presumably overwhelm an emotional response to the fiction. Or, possibly, she might be not embarrassed at all but impressed and even moved.<sup>15</sup>

Radford also discusses cases where people might simply imagine bad things happening to people they know, and to imaginary people. He suggests that anyone who has an emotional response to such imaginings (that is, to fictional daydreaming without the prompt of an artwork) is a fantasist in the Walter Mitty vein, far too caught up in her own imaginings. Yet people very frequently have mind-wanderings with emotional content (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010). Radford admits that people *do* sometimes feel some emotional responses to their mind-wanderings, but it seems obvious to him that they *should not*. Indeed, one suspects that he feels having such a response may be too feminine a reaction to be considered rational. “But this is not because [tears] are always inappropriate and sentimental, as, e.g., is giving one's dog a birthday party, but rather because we feel them to be unmanly. They may be excusable though still embarrassing on the occasion of a real death, but should be contained for anything less (70).”<sup>16</sup>

If people never did have emotional responses to mind-wanderings while they did have them to fictions, then his argument would that pitying Anna Karenina is irrational would be more compelling. The fact that there is sometimes a difference in

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<sup>15</sup> In chapter 5, I discuss the variety of reasons why we might not play along with a fiction.

<sup>16</sup> Carroll (1990) also seems to suggest that some solutions to the paradox of fiction have a tinge of sexism about them: “...the idea that it is silly to be put in an emotional state by a thought content strikes me as being essentially moralistic – as making an implicit appeal to some code of courage or manliness or practicality.”

intensity in emotional response to daydreams as opposed to fictional works of art can easily be understood by the fact that our level of focus and involvement is often much greater in fictional works of art. As discussed in the previous chapter, mind-wanderings are usually a distraction from the task at hand. So we may also be annoyed to find ourselves daydreaming when we should be doing something else. When we read a novel, the imagining *is* the task at hand. Works of art also offer a much greater degree of detail. Other beliefs and desires and occurrent emotions may affect our emotional response to imaginings. Radford's examples give us no reason to deny that it is a brute psychological fact about people that we have emotional responses to imagined situations.

### **3.4 Thought theories**

Others have also argued for versions of the thought theory. However, they generally do not focus on the higher-level emotions as described in section 2.2, nor do they differentiate adequately between characterizing beliefs and existential beliefs.

As discussed in sec. 2.2, Morreall (1993) argues that emotions do not need an intentional object. Morreall argues further that even when emotions have an intentional object, that object need not exist. His argument lies primarily in listing examples of cases where we seem to feel emotions without beliefs. For example, in the case of fear, Kate might be afraid of public speaking without believing that the audience is dangerous to her, or might believe flying is perfectly safe but fear flying. These are not, however, the sort of cases that help solve the paradox of fiction. In these cases, there is apparent emotion without belief, but the belief that is absent is a characterizing belief. The existential belief is present. Kate believes the audience and

the airplane exist, she just does not, all-things-considered, believe they are dangerous to her.

Peter Lamarque asserts that we respond to “thought-contents” (i.e., mental representations of fictional objects) that are traceable to propositional fictional sentences, that is, the descriptions that constitute a fiction. On his view, thought-contents are separable from propositional attitudes and therefore neither *belief* nor *imagining* is actually part of any thought-content. So we might have an emotional response to any thought-content, because the propositional attitude is not inherently attached to the thought-content (1981).

Even if thought-contents are separable from propositional attitudes, though, Lamarque gives us no reason to believe that affective responses would be to thought-contents only. Indeed, the fact that our affective response can differ so drastically depending on whether we believe X or imagine X, as I discuss in ch. 4, strongly suggests otherwise. Lamarque suggests that we emotionally respond to Desdemona’s killing much as we would the thought of a real killing (302). Here we see another part of the Simple Story: that we respond to the imagined events of a story much as if those events were actual. Lamarque suggests that we do feel some emotions due to an interpretation of a literary work, but insists those emotions should be kept separate from the basic ones that are caused by the descriptions afforded by the work (301-302). As I will argue in sec. 5, emotions due to factors that are extrinsic to the descriptions afforded by the fiction do not simply float above and beyond the ones occasioned by the descriptions contained in the fiction. Factors extrinsic to the fiction

may participate in determining the basic emotional response to a fictional character. Lamarque's view will be discussed further in sec. 4.

Let us say I *believe* that there is a man wearing a huge curly wig who communicates solely by blowing a horn. I believe that this man is harassing a lemonade stand owner by repeatedly stealing his hat and eventually by jumping in the lemonade tank and stomping on his lemons. I am honestly not certain what my emotional response would be. I suppose I would have something like pity for the lemonade seller, and be simultaneously unnerved by and concerned for the mental health of the harasser. There may be a tinge of those feelings while watching Harpo Marx and Edgar Kennedy in *Duck Soup*, but overall my response to the characters is quite different.

Examples like *Duck Soup* are what makes Robert Yanal's version of thought theory implausible, too. On his view, disbelief is rendered "relatively inactive" (1999, 102). On the contrary, disbelief must be quite active, or else I would pity the lemonade seller and be unnerved by Harpo. Yet I am cheering him on when he stomps the lemons because he looks so angrily joyous and because it is just a step too far. I certainly would not be pleased for him if I believed the events were occurring.

Gendler and Kovakovich (2005) also deny that genuine emotions require belief. Motivations to actions do not require beliefs, they suggest. They correctly note that much of our everyday practical reasoning involves responding affectively to imagined hypothetical situations (see chapter 4 for more discussion on this). Responding affectively to fictions is part of rationality itself; people with an impaired ability to respond affectively to hypotheticals have impaired practical decision-

making abilities (Damasio 1994, Berthoz and Weiss 2006). Affective responses to fictions, then, are genuine emotions, and they are rational. It is indeed important to stress just how many of our motivations for actions are generated by emotional responses to objects that we do not believe currently exist. They are far more frequent and useful (and thus less paradoxical) than previous accounts suggest. I will differ from their view in a few ways. Gendler and Kovakovich's picture of what constitutes a rational response to a fiction, which is quite similar to Neill's and Davies' view, borrows too much from the Simple Story. They suggest what we feel in response to fictions is what we would feel if it were actual. When we do respond emotionally to fiction, we are not simply responding to characters and situations that we believe exist at a world causally isolated from the actual one (per Neill and Davies) nor do we always respond the way we would if it were true at the actual world (per Gendler and Kovakovich). Gendler and Kovakovich also do not directly address cases where we do not believe the object exists, has ever existed, and will ever exist. This might be an important difference between affective responses to hypotheticals used in practical reasoning and affective responses to fictions.

On Noel Carroll's view (1990), it is simply a brute psychological fact that we respond emotionally to imaginings. I agree with him. In this paper, I hope to strengthen the case that such responses are genuine emotions and the fact that we have them is indeed a brute psychological fact. Unlike Carroll, I will focus specifically on higher-level emotions. I also plan to emphasize something he suggests but does not stress: when we respond affectively to fictions, we are responding to a blend of facts about both the actual world and the fictional world. When we describe

our engagements with fiction as a response to a blending of fictional and actual world, the thought theory becomes more plausible.

#### 4. Affective Responses to Fictions are Genuine Emotions

##### **4.1 How to avoid begging the question**

In this section, I will consider the position that affective responses to fictional objects are not genuine cases of emotion. I will argue that they should be considered genuine emotions. In his argument that Charles is not genuinely afraid of the green slime, Walton address cases of emotion without belief, although he mostly restricts himself to phobias and other cases that are constituted partly by existential beliefs but not certain relevant characterizing beliefs (1993, 198-99). In response, he describes two situations. In one, Charles is watching the green slime, and claims to be terrified of it. In another, Aaron believes that flying is perfectly safe, yet is afraid to fly. He suggests that Aaron has a belief “on some level” that flying is not safe, yet Charles has *no* belief on any level that the slime is really dangerous to him. We can see this, Walton argues, because Aaron might either take steps to avoid flying, or, failing that, at least has the *inclination* to avoid flying. Charles, he says, has no such inclination. He does not want to run and call for help, nor does he want to flee the movie theater. Genuine emotions precipitate actions, or at least, inclinations to actions. Charles does not get up and run out of the theater, nor does he ever want to (1997, 198). The only signs of fear that Charles has are non-deliberate and non-consciously mediated, such as sweating and a racing heartbeat (198-199). These non-consciously mediated reactions are what Walton terms “quasi fear.” Real fear, to Walton, is different.

Fear is motivating in distinctive ways, whether or not its motivational force is attributed to cognitive elements in it. It puts pressure on one's behavior (even if one resists). (If sky divers and mountain climbers *enjoy* fear – not just danger – they nevertheless have inclinations to avoid danger.) To deny this, to insist on considering Charles's nonmotivating state to be one of fear of the slime, would be radically to reconceive the notion of fear. Fear emasculated by subtracting its distinctive motivational force is not fear at all (201-02).

Further, Walton argues, one may not simply argue the following: I experience emotions when imagining fictions, therefore affective responses to fictions are genuine. It is begging the question. This is correct. Carroll answers the Waltonian view by turning the tables and accusing *Walton* of begging the question. Walton, he suggests, is begging the question by insisting that something similar to belief is required for emotion (1990, p. 79).<sup>17</sup> Walton, though, is not begging the question. He attempts to establish that (a) emotions are necessarily motivating, and (b) we are only motivated by something relevantly similar to beliefs. If he were correct, Walton would have given us non-question-begging grounds for his argument. However, while he is correct about (a), he is incorrect about (b).

Walton says, "to fear something is in part to think oneself endangered by it. Charles does not think he is endangered by the slime. So he does not fear it" (197). Walton stops short of saying belief is required for a genuine case of emotion, but says "being afraid is in certain respects similar to having such a belief, in any case, and...Charles's state is not relevantly similar to that of believing that the slime

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<sup>17</sup> Carroll's other line of argument against Walton, that it does not *feel* as if we are make-believing our emotions because we don't will ourselves to have these emotions, relies on an uncharitable reading of Walton. Walton claims we are make-believing our emotions because of his definition of emotion, not because he claims we will ourselves to have these emotions. Indeed, Walton says that Charles claims he really is afraid of the green slime, which suggests that his make-believe emotions are not willed.

endangers him; hence he does not fear it” (197). Walton grants one may have momentary flashes of fear, but, like Levinson, he says these are not the emotions that give rise to the paradox of fiction:

[H]owever tempting the momentary-fear idea might be, comparable views of some other psychological states are much less appealing. When we say that someone “pities” Willy Loman or “admires” Superman, it is unlikely that we have in mind special moments of the work when she forgets, momentarily, that she is dealing with mere fiction and feels flashes of actual pity or admiration (1993, 200).

#### 4.2 How Charles is misdescribed

Let’s look at Walton’s example of Charles watching the green slime in the theater, who, I agree, does not have an existential belief of any kind about the green slime. As Davies (2009) and Gendler and Kovakovich (2005) argue, Walton fails to capture the typical movie-going emotional response in his example of Charles and the green slime. This has ramifications for the plausibility of his view. Walton says that Charles is (fictionally) afraid of the green slime attacking him (i.e., Charles). Moreover, Charles’ fear is not temporary, but held for a sustained period of time while watching the movie. He also says that Charles has no inclination to flee or call for help:

To be (really) afraid of a tornado, for instance, is to have certain phenomenological experiences (quasi fear) as a result of knowing or believing that one is endangered by the tornado. What makes the state one of fear rather than anger or excitement is the belief that one is in danger, and what makes the tornado its object is the fact that it is the tornado that one takes to be dangerous. It is clear enough what to say about Charles if this is what fear is: He experiences quasi fear as a result of realizing that *fictionally the slime threatens him*. This makes it fictional that his quasi fear is caused by a belief that the slime poses a danger, and hence that he fears the slime (244-45, emphasis mine).



During a horror movie, fear for oneself is likely to come in momentary shocks and bursts. Any sustained higher-level fear, however, is likely to be for the *characters*, not for oneself. In no horror movie that I know of is it fictionally true that it is the *audience* who is threatened by a monster for any length of time. Fictionally, the slime does *not* threaten Charles. If Charles is the typical horror movie-goer, in between momentary reflexive emotions, he is frightened for the characters. It would perhaps be fictionally true that the slime was attacking Charles if the movie, say, depicted a slime continually slithering toward the audience. (That would be a fairly boring horror movie.) It is, however, true in the fiction (i.e., not *fictional* in the fiction, but *true* in the fiction) that *the characters are endangered by the slime*. Charles *does* believe, and moreover *is correct to believe*, that the characters are in danger in the fiction. That does not mean he believes they exist (see sec. 5). But just as most of us believe it is true that Sherlock Holmes has the property of living at 221B Baker Street, Charles believes it is true that the green slime has the property of being dangerous and that the characters have the property of being endangered by the slime.<sup>18</sup> Since the characters are not fictionally threatened by the slime, but genuinely threatened, Charles's fear for them would not seem to be fictional on Walton's description.

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<sup>18</sup> It might be the case that can be no truthful statements about fictions. As I suggest in chapter 5, the idea of fictional truth is so intuitively plausible that an anti-realist stance does not seem easily workable. At any rate, the question at stake here is not whether it really is true in the fiction that the green slime is dangerous, but whether Charles believes it is. Most people believe that statements about fictions are truth-evaluable. It is safe to credit Charles with the belief that the green slime is represented as having the property of being dangerous.

Walton's description might describe correctly Charles's response were Charles playing a videogame where he battled a green slime. To the degree that Charles is correct to identify himself with his videogame avatar, the slime threatens him. However, again, it is not *fictional* that the slime threatens Charles at the game world. In the game world, it is *true* that the slime threatens him, and Charles is correct to believe himself threatened at the game world.

In short, Charles does have beliefs associated with his affective responses. They are necessary for the judgment component of an emotion of that duration. They are, however, beliefs about the properties of the object. They are not existential beliefs. When Walton says that to be afraid of a tornado is to judge it to be dangerous, he too is talking about characterizing beliefs. The tornado is dangerous whether it actually threatens Gretchen or not. The question is whether someone fears *for herself* when she believes the tornado does not exist. Walton is correct that she generally does not. But that is not what Charles is doing, either. In the next section, I will argue that the misattribution of Charles's indirect object of fear leads Walton to conclude incorrectly that Charles is not even inclined to act. Walton, then, does not establish that existential beliefs are necessary for motivations.

#### **4.3 The inclination to act**

In this section, I will argue that Walton is incorrect that something relevantly similar to existential belief is required for inclining one toward an action. Affective responses to non-existent objects *can* incline and motivate one to act.

Of course, Charles will not run to call the police, nor will he have an inclination to do so. But as Hilary Putnam (1960/1975) points out, someone's

behavior is not a particularly reliable guide to discovering whether she has a single specific mental state. The actions one takes depend on many mental states. The action one is motivated by an emotion to take is not solely dependent on the emotion and the object alone. It will depend on a web of many beliefs and desires. Even if Aaron does believe just a little bit that flying is dangerous, he stays put on the airplane, presumably because of other beliefs and desires. For example, his belief that flying is dangerous might be outweighed by his stronger knowledge that this is statistically not so, and outweighed also by his desire to be with his family for Thanksgiving. So he does not run off the plane, even if he is somewhat so inclined. Let's say Bill sees a cockroach and experiences some fear and disgust. The action that he takes in response to these emotions depends on countless other beliefs and desires, e.g., if the cockroach is inside or outside, whether in an apartment or a single family home, if there is someone else to take care of the problem, if the cockroach is a lone ranger or is likely to invite friends, if Bill believes cockroaches bear disease, if a guest he wants to impress is arriving imminently for dinner, or if Bill believes that cockroaches are a sign of filthiness.

One of Charles' beliefs about the green slime is that the green slime is not actual. Of course, that affects the actions he will take. He will not call the police, or whomever one calls in cases of green slime attacks. But Charles may well act. He may cover his eyes or grab his partner's hand. He may look away until a certain part of the movie is over. He may well have an inclination to leave the theater. People do

indeed turn off movies or leave a movie theater when seeing movies that they find are too scary or too violent.<sup>19</sup>

Walton suggests that this is due either to a fear of *the depiction* of the slime, rather than of the slime itself, or a fear of experiencing the fiction (202, fn. 13). I do not see how it could be a fear of the depiction of the slime. If the green slime at the fictional world poses no threat to Charles, no more so do flat colors in apparent motion. It is the slime, and not its depiction, to which Charles attributes *any* properties of which he might even possibly be afraid. Walton may be correct, however, that Charles is simply afraid of experiencing quasi fear (e.g., of having his heart race too fast). That does not, however, seem to comport with the phenomenology of movie-going. Perhaps this is clearer in non-fear cases. A grand romantic gesture in a film may inspire a person to turn to one's spouse and say, "That reminds me of when we met," or perhaps "Why don't you ever do anything like that for me?" A person can see a messy house in a film, react with disgust, and go home to clean hers up. Fictions can, of course, inspire people to much grander actions than these. As I will discuss in ch. 5, many people were inspired by the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to promote abolitionism, and by Dickens's novels to agitate for the poor.

Walton might respond by saying that these are not actions that one takes to interact directly with the intentional object of the emotion. Bill is likely to do something about *that cockroach*. Aaron is likely to have an inclination to get off *that airplane*. It is not always the case, however, that when someone has an emotion for something in which she believes that the motivation for action is directed toward a

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<sup>19</sup> In chapter 4, I will discuss in further detail how a negative emotion occasioned by the content of a work may cause a viewer to avoid the work.

specific intentional object. Erica's fear of driving on highways may result in her taking a train. In that case, she is not acting with regard to a specific car but to cars more generally.

It may be the case that reasons to act require something like beliefs. Those beliefs, however, need not be *existential beliefs about the intentional object*. They may be *characterizing beliefs*. It is possible that Charles is frightened of the green slime in which he does not believe, yet takes the action of covering his eyes momentarily due to the following beliefs (among others): the green slime is dangerous to characters at the fictional world; the green slime is fictional; he can do nothing to prevent the green slime from harming the characters. Even if one grants that emotions are necessarily motivating, and that reasons to act require something like beliefs, it does not follow that these beliefs must be *existential beliefs*. One only needs characterizing beliefs about an object to form a judgment.

#### **4.4 Against difference in natural kinds**

If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, there's some reason to conclude it is a duck. The difference between emotional responses to fictions and emotional responses to actual objects does not seem principled enough to warrant consideration as a difference in kind. They have too much in common. If emotions may be considered natural kinds at all, there does not seem a reason to exclude the ones that have a fictional intentional object. Emotional responses to fictional objects and actual objects both involve a bodily component. Both have an intentional object. Both have an all-things-considered judgment of that object. Both can be motivating to act. The only way they are distinct from one another is the existential belief B in the

intentional object. Whether an emotion E includes an existential belief in its object does not do any explanatory work in describing E, except to say that B is one of many possible beliefs about the object. B may, like any other belief, determine the action toward which one is motivated by E. A belief that an intentional object is red, however, may also determine one's motivation with regard to the object. There seems no more reason to divide these emotions into different kinds (and especially to claim one as genuine and the other as non-genuine) than there is to divide emotional responses into whether or not one believes the intentional object is red.

#### **4.5 Are emotional responses to fictions conceptually incoherent?**

Let us say that emotions do not form a natural kind. Perhaps, then, Levinson is correct in suggesting that a genuine higher-level emotional response to a fictional object is conceptually incoherent. That is, it is not simply irrational. It is unintelligible. In this section, I will address that concern and argue that they are conceptually coherent.

First of all, the similarities between the two types of emotions addressed in the section on natural kinds help answer the conceptual question, too. Are these two phenomena so different that one concept cannot embrace both? Perhaps what matters more to whether an emotion is unintelligible or not are the properties of the fictional object, rather than its existence.

Perhaps it is unintelligible to have a higher-level fear *for oneself* at a horror movie, at least in a higher-level sense of emotion, although it seems to me simply

irrational.<sup>20</sup> The green slime does not have the property of being dangerous to the audience. It does not, however, seem unintelligible to fear *for characters*. They are indeed endangered. It also does not seem unintelligible to admire a fictional character. Characterizing beliefs alone (e.g., that a character speaks truth to power, or has been unjustly outcast by the community) make intelligible one's admiration or pity for a character. It does not make the admiration or pity rational (I will discuss that shortly). But intelligible, yes. It may seem as if it is simply a clash of intuitions that I find this intelligible while Levinson does not. There are independent reasons, however, to suspect that it is intelligible to most people.

There are certain behaviors associated with fictions that are best explained by higher-level emotional responses to fictional objects. The question is not whether the action motivated by an emotion will be the same action it would be if a movie-goer believed the fiction were real. It will not be. As I've suggested, the belief that the object is not real will affect the action one takes. The question is whether we can understand actions as motivated by certain higher-level emotions for non-existent objects. Fear of an intentional object is perhaps less likely to result in action than other responses because the fear is rarely for oneself, and there is not much one can do for the fictional characters. I suggested above that covering one's eyes is best explained by fear of the object.

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<sup>20</sup> Once my son said that he was too scared to sleep alone because vampires might attack him. I suggested he keep some garlic in his room to keep them at bay. "That won't work!" he said. "Why not?" I asked. He answered, "Because vampires aren't real!" So fear for oneself of fictional objects is apparently intelligible to children, at any rate.

Taking up the cause of abolitionism after reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, does seem much more clearly attributable to sorrow for the characters in the novel. Sorrow is a higher-level emotion, and it seems to have motivated some readers to agitate for social change. If a reader says she finds Joe Gargery admirable in *Great Expectations*, and then sets about trying to be as patient and understanding as he is, or at least more patient and understanding, it seems best explained by the fact that she found Joe admirable.

Levinson questions whether hate for a fictional character is an intelligible emotion (1997, 24). I would indeed think it implausible really to love or hate a fictional character, but that is largely because I do not think love or hate are best characterized as emotions. People may still love each other when they are exasperated with one another, or not thinking about one another. Love and hate are more complex, ongoing dispositional states, something more akin to (dis)valuing someone and the role she plays in your life than emoting toward her.

The other writers who have denied that beliefs are necessary for emotion have given examples of cases that do not involve fictional works of art in which there are apparent emotions without belief. Yet they have not given examples of cases that meet the criteria for higher-level emotions outlined in section 2.2 (i.e., they have an object about which one has no existential beliefs, they are consciously mediated, of some duration in time, and represents the agent's all-things considered view). For example, Morreall suggests phobias (1993); Lamarque suggests thinking of a nearby lion, or imagining oneself stranded on a distant planet might make one afraid. In the first case, lions exist, and in the second, the imaginer is herself the object of the



emotion, and thus presumably existent (1981, 295). I will attempt to give some examples below of cases outside of fictional works of art with higher-level emotions toward non-existent objects.

Suppose my partner says to me, “Let’s get another dog.” I reply quickly that we already have one and we do not need more chaos in our lives. “You didn’t really think about it,” he says. “Just think about it.” So I humor him and think about it, knowing all the while that I do not want another dog. I imagine having a dog (one that I know I will not assent to getting) and picking up even more poop, going through house-breaking, having two barkers instead of one. I am annoyed by this non-existent dog, whom I do not believe will exist. This is arguably similar to the Lamarque’s lion case. But in this case, I am not thinking of just any dog. This dog that is the object of my annoyance has the property of being the second dog owned by me, while I simultaneously believe that I will not own a second dog.

In another case, I might hear about someone who takes a gun into a crowded place (theater, school, what have you) and starts shooting and killing people, and ends by committing suicide. I start to think about how I would react if I saw a shooter killing indiscriminately in a place that I frequent – one of my classrooms, a subway, a supermarket. I think about what I would do. Would I hide? Would I try to wrest the gun away? Would I let others escape ahead of me or would I elbow them out of the way so I could get out first? The killer I am imagining is not the same shooter as in the case I heard about. That shooter, as I know, is dead. My imagined shooter is one that I know perfectly well I will not run into. Even on the incredibly off chance that I do run into *a* shooter, I know it will not be *the* shooter I am currently imagining. Yet

despite the non-existence of the shooter I am imagining, I feel fear of him, and anger at him.

These emotions are most likely not very intense (the one about the shooter might be). As discussed in section 3.3, however, there are many reasons why emotional responses to mind-wanderings might not be as intense as responses to fictions. One might be tempted then, to say that they are not full-fledged emotions. This is mistaken for two reasons. First of all, an emotion need not be intense to be an emotion. It just needs a feeling, judgment, and motivation. The above meet these criteria. Secondly, such emotional responses can be quite intense. For example, take a mother whose child was stillborn. At what would have been his fifth birthday, she imagines the five-year-old boy that never had a chance to be five: the party he would have had, the candles he would have blown out, his laughter. She feels deep grief. While the stillborn child did exist, the five-year-old that she is imagining does not exist, never did, and never will. Indeed, the grief she feels is just *because* he is non-existent. Similarly, a couple with infertility might imagine a child they would have had. They might even give her name, or think about what she would have looked like, and grieve for her non-existence.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> There is a related kind of case that is more contestable, perhaps, but still interesting to consider. Jeff McMahan suggests that to speak of the well-being of an anencephalic infant is nonsensical. Since it was never capable of consciousness, saying it was unfortunate makes no more sense than saying such a thing of a plant (1996, 147). Yet, as Eva Kittay points out in her reply to McMahan, parents grieve for anencephalic infants (2005). I agree with Kittay that this parental grief is not the same as if the parents discovered that the pregnancy symptoms were caused by, say, a tumor. This is grief *for the child*, a sense that one's child has lost something significant, even though that child does not exist (assuming personal identity consists in psychological properties) and the parents now know the child never did. It may be argued that those who grieve over an anencephalic infant believe that personhood

These cases are consciously mediated, propositional, and involve all-things-considered judgment. They involve an intentional object that the agent believes does not exist. Thus, they are higher-level emotional responses to non-existent objects.

I will sum up the case that emotions for fictional intentional objects are genuine emotions. Walton has not established that something relevantly similar to existential beliefs are required for action. Emotional responses to non-existent objects do motivate people. Given the similarities between emotional responses to non-existent objects and existent objects, a distinction of kind or concept seems unwarranted. That emotional responses to fictions are intelligible better explains some behaviors of readers, such as the one who emulates Joe Gargery. There exist some cases outside of fiction where we apparently have higher-level emotional responses to fictional objects. Therefore, we have reason to affirm that people have genuine emotions for fictional characters.

### 5. Against belief in *Anna Karenina* at a fictional world

#### **5.1 Isolated worlds?**

Next, I will turn my attention to the claim that we should deny that we do not believe that fictional characters exist. I will argue that we do not believe that fictional characters exist, at this world or any other.

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consists in human species membership, not consciousness. It would be interesting to see if those who elect abortions on discovering anencephaly, thus arguably demonstrating their non-belief in the personhood of the child, still grieved for the child. I am almost certain that they would. People who have elective abortions when they discover the fetus will have a disability often grieve for the child, even though they arguably do not believe that fetus has yet become a person. This grief does not seem solely a generalized frustration at the fact of no longer being pregnant. There is grief for *that child*.

Let's now turn to Davies' and Neill's claims that a reader, Diana (as Davies calls her), really does believe that Anna Karenina is at a fictional world, that Anna's situation is pitiable at that world, and so our emotion of pity for her is both genuine and rational. The paradox (this version of it, anyway – that is, the version that does not involve any self-directed emotions) is thus solved. Davies argues that the Charles case, as described by Walton — that is, that Charles is afraid for himself for a sustained period of time — is different. It is irrational and thus remains paradoxical. Diana's pity is rational because she understands that Anna Karenina's world is causally isolated from her own. Charles's fear is irrational because it does not factor in the causal isolation of the fictional world from our own world. His fear seems to involve the belief that the green slime residing in its fictional world might interact with him in the actual world. This makes the emotion an irrational one. (It is worth noting, as Davies does, that this renders certain sexual fantasies in which one imagines oneself as a participant in the proceedings as irrational.) When we watch a movie, then, according to Davies and Neill we *believe* those events are occurring at a fictional world. I will argue that this misdescribes the experience of engaging with fiction.

First of all, there seems something fundamentally odd about saying that we *believe* in the existence of characters and events at a fictional world. The word 'belief' is generally used to describe attitudes toward objects at the actual world, while "suppose," "imagine," or "entertain" might describe attitudes toward events at fictional worlds. Indeed, this is part of how we are to distinguish belief and imagination.

Let's say, however, that we really do believe, when reading *Anna Karenina*, that there is a fictional world where all the facts of the story are true. This seems to commit everyone who pities Anna Karenina to some sort of David Lewis-style modal realism (Lewis 1986). Or at least it suggests that that is how people feel when they engage with fictions. This is not only implausible because modal realism is implausible. It is implausible because it does not properly characterize the experience of reading. Even if modal realism is true, I do not feel it is true when I read *Anna Karenina*. I, for one, do not believe that there is a real but non-actual causally isolated world that contains a real human organism named Anna Karenina, and pity her there. That is not to say I do not have beliefs about her character or situation. The intentional object of my mental representation of her is represented with pitiable properties. Again, it is most plausible to think that there is some sort of truth in fiction, so I believe it is the case that Anna is in a pitiable position. But I do not believe she *exists*, anywhere.

It also seems to misdescribe our interaction with fictions to say that what we do when we engage in fictions is simply imagine events at some possible world, and further, that our emotions are in response to those events.<sup>22</sup> Davies suggests the following:

Before we get back to Charles, an interim summary is in order: some emotions—pity being one and fear for others being another—can be directed to worlds that cannot be touched by one's actions. They do not presuppose the possibility of direct contact between us and the situation that is the object of our emotions, either in actuality or via make-believe, but only recognition of that situation. So long as a fiction appreciated as such represents a state of affairs appropriate to eliciting such emotions, and *nothing else about the narrative or its style suggests otherwise*, the affective response appropriate to

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<sup>22</sup> My view on this is also discussed at some length in chapter 5.

that state of affairs is warranted. There are other emotions, however—fear for ourselves, for example—that should arise only with respect to worlds within which we can act or be acted upon in relevant ways (p. 276, emphasis mine).

Davies suggests that something about the narrative's style might perhaps cause one to emote differently, but never deals with the issue head on. It is a crucial issue, however. The cases where a narrative or its style might cause one to emote differently are not limited to just a few exceptions to a general rule. They are not limited to some works of avant-garde or experimental fiction. The work's style and context of creation in the actual world are at least often, and I suspect *always*, major factors in our emotional responses to fictions. In other words, the narrative and style very frequently suggest we emote otherwise. The cases where they unquestionably suggest otherwise point to serious problems with Davies's theory. The fictional world and our world are not nearly so isolated he suggests.

## **5.2 Blended worlds**

When I say that the fictional world and our world are connected, I am not only referring to the much-discussed tendency to import some beliefs from the actual world into the fictional world. (For example, we believe at least non-occurently that Anna Karenina has a liver. This fact about Anna is not to my recollection specified in the novel, but we import our beliefs about people to the novel.) While events occurring at a fictional world causally isolated from this one may or may not be the best way of discussing fictional truths (so perhaps what makes it true that Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker Street involves him doing so at a causally isolated fictional world), it is not the way to discuss engagements with fiction. The lines between our world and the fictional world are regularly blurred, both by the creators

of fictions and the consumers of fiction. This is crucial to understanding the paradox of fiction. As I argue at some length in chapter 5, we not only figure out the facts at the fictional world. We also interpret the fiction, and try to figure out what the filmmakers meant in communicating that. Further, there is all sorts of interplay between the actual world and our own.

The most obvious examples are self-referential works. These are by no means restricted to a few experimental or avant-garde works. Take this quotation from *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*:

‘Let’s go home,’ said Susan. And then, though nobody said it out loud, everyone suddenly realized the same fact that Edmund had whispered to Peter at the end of the last chapter. They were lost.

How are we to understand the phrase “the end of the last chapter”?

Presumably, in a fictional world at which we believe there really exists Peter, Susan, and Edmund, nothing happened at a chapter. What would that look like, what would it mean? If there really were two different causally isolated worlds that we are imagining, that sentence begins in one world and ends in another. Assuming causally isolated worlds, this is nonsensical, and presents a difficult challenge for an account of fictional truth to accommodate. In the experience of reading the book, however, the sentence makes perfect sense and hardly interrupts the flow of the story. C. S. Lewis is not exactly a leader of the post-modern self-referential movement; this is a book written for children. In a similarly non-avant-garde work, the James Bond movie *Casino Royale* (2006), Daniel Craig playing James Bond emerges, clad only in a bathing suit, from the ocean much like Ursula Andress as the ultimate Bond Girl in *Dr. No* (1962). The moment is funny as a role-reversal, and it also serves as a signal

that this movie will take a different attitude toward women than previous James Bond movies. The meaning of the moment – and potentially one’s emotional reaction to the moment – depend on facts about the actual world, e.g., the previous sexism of Bond movies and a message the filmmakers wish to communicate to the audience.

When a viewer watches a movie, she is not simply imagining events at a fictional world. She is aware of the identity of the author, aware of the manner in which the story is told, aware of the context of the works’ creation, guesses at what was meant by the work. In short, in addition to the actual events of the fiction, she keeps simultaneously in her mind several facts that are true of the actual world. And many of her emotional reactions to fictions are actually reactions to combinations of facts about the actual world and fictional world, not the fictional world alone.

Believing that Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx’s character in *Duck Soup*) really exists at a fictional world seems even more implausible than believing Anna Karenina does. Again, setting aside whether modal realism is true, the question we are examining is ultimately about what it feels like when we engage in fictions. It does not ring true to my experience, at least, to say that while I am watching *Duck Soup*, I believe there is a real Rufus at a fictional world to whom these events are happening.

If blended worlds were an unusual occurrence in fiction, that would be one thing. However, they are not. As suggested in ch. 2, murder mysteries are light entertainment due to delight in the puzzle provided by the author, rather than cause sadness for the characters at the fictional world. Part of the surprise of the murder of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) in *Psycho* (1960) is that a heroine played by a well-



known actress is supposed to survive more than a third of the way through the film. Part of our emotional reactions to movies are determined by our expectations of certain filmmakers and genres, which (again) are facts about the actual world.<sup>23</sup>

In short, describing the imagining of fictional events as imagining that the events are happening at a causally isolated world misdescribes the phenomenology of imagining. As I argued in ch. 2, our emotional response to a fiction is often quite different from a watered-down version of what we would feel if the fiction were true. If we believed that the events were true at a fictional world, however, then what we feel in response to fictions probably would be something like a watered down version of what we would feel if the events were true. It is not, however.

Davies' attempts to justify Diana's emotional response to Anna Karenina as genuine and rational relies on the fact that she a) believes that Anna Karenina exists at a fictional world, and b) believes that the world is causally isolated from our own. I have argued that we do not believe that Anna exists at a fictional world, at least in a psychologically real sense while we are actually engaging in a fiction. It may be the case that we believe the fictional world is causally isolated from our own, but our experience of engaging in fictions, and emotionally responding to them, involves more than simply imagining the facts that obtain there. It involves a blending of the actual world and fictional world.

#### 4.4 How blended worlds might work

The degree to which fictional worlds and the actual world blend is a subject that warrants much further philosophical and empirical study. But I will suggest a list of some of the factors that play a role in whether and how we import beliefs about our

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<sup>23</sup> This is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

own world into the fictional world and emotionally respond to facts about our own world as well as the fictional world.

- A) *Degree of resemblance to actual world.* One study found (Weisberg et al. 2009) that the closer a fiction is to the actual world, the more likely a reader is to assume that a true fact at the actual world that is not mentioned in the story will also be true in the story world. I would guess that emotional responses are more likely to be vivid if believed to be similar to something that may really occur at the actual world, e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Anna Karenina*. Relatedly, if a work involves real people, even tangentially, that may evoke different emotions. *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* may not be all that close to the actual world (so far as I know), but in using Abraham Lincoln as a character, the novel and movie can evoke a number of emotions an audience already associates with Lincoln.
- B) *Identity of author, and attitude of author toward events in work.* A rapist depicted with approval by the author will have a very different emotional response from a reader than a rapist depicted with horror by the author. Facts about the author's life may also play a role. If a reader knows that a moralizing author is being hypocritical, a book will be read differently. Note that the fact about the author's life is not imported to the fictional world.
- C) *References to other fictional works.* As in *Casino Royale*, mentioned above. Again, this fact is not imported to the fictional world.

- D) *Style or tone.* Again, as discussed above. Whether a work comes across as satirical, nostalgic, parodic, self-serious, moralizing, etc. will affect emotional response above and beyond actual events of the novel.
- E) *Aesthetic value.* We are less likely (with some embarrassing exceptions) to be moved by works of lesser quality.
- F) *Morality.* This is discussed at more length in ch. 5. But it is also the case that if one finds a work immoral, one is likely to have a different emotional response.
- G) *Facts about the audience member's life.* If a movie closely resembles an emotional experience one has had, or one greatly fears having, or one greatly desires having in one's own life, that will affect the response. For example, people often say that on becoming parents, they can no longer watch movies in which children are endangered.
- H) *Plausibility.* When a scene seems especially emotionally plausible or implausible, or seems to evoke some truth of human nature (or fail to evoke it), an emotional response can be affected.

I do not think this is an exhaustive list, but a suggestion of the beginnings of such a list.

### 6. Defending Thought Theory

In the preceding sections, I affirmed that Diana pities Anna Karenina and does not believe in Anna Karenina. Thus, my only option is to deny that she must believe that Anna Karenina is really in a pitiable situation. This option is not thoroughly appealing in every respect, but it is clearly the most plausible of the three.

### 6.1 What is Anna Karenina?

I claim that it is implausible that we believe in Anna Karenina, in this world or another. I also see no reason to think the emotions are not genuine. So, by default, I deny that emotions presuppose beliefs.

To what, then, are we emotionally responding? What kind of object do I claim is Anna Karenina? Carroll (1990) suggests we are responding to the thought of her, which opens the objection: do we think the *thought* of Anna Karenina is in a pitiable situation? How can a thought be in a pitiable situation? Walton says, “[Charles’s] experience simply does not feel like fear of a thought; characterizing it as such flies in the face of its phenomenology. And it is the *slime*, not a thought, that Charles so inevitably and unabashedly describes himself as afraid of” (203). Only a sentient being can be in a pitiable situation, and a thought is not a sentient being. Do we perhaps import her into our world and make-believe that she is part of our world? This seems psychologically implausible, too. I do not even pretend-believe she exists at our world. How can I believe that she wears dresses and not believe she exists?

I do not know what she is. I do not, however, think that it matters as much as objections to the thought theory have insisted.

We seem to accept some irresolution of characterizing beliefs about the fictional intentional objects for whom we emote. For example, consider this from Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky*:

*The eldest Oyster looked at him,  
But never a word he said:  
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,  
And shook his heavy head--  
Meaning to say he did not choose  
To leave the oyster-bed.*

*But four young Oysters hurried up,  
All eager for the treat:  
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,  
Their shoes were clean and neat--  
And this was odd, because, you know,  
They hadn't any feet.*

I do not know how to conceive of talking oysters with heads, eyes, coats, faces, and shoes but no feet. I don't have a firm handle on what all their properties would be. Would they have brains that could process language? Where are their lips? What *is* keeping their shoes on? Yet when it turns out the Walrus and Carpenter have tricked these oysters and eat them, I actually do feel sorry for them. Not only do I not believe they exist, I am not entirely sure how to characterize them. Yet I feel sad for them.

Lamarque is generally counted as a thought theorist on the paradox of fiction, but he really answers a different puzzle than the one posed by the paradox of fiction. The puzzle he answers is about the metaphysics of fictional objects and how we come to have a *particular* character in mind. He says,

What thought-contents must we be responding to for us truly to be said to be fearing Othello or pitying Desdemona? Not any tears are tears for Desdemona, not any thoughts are thoughts about Othello. Strict criteria must be applied to identify the right thoughts and thus the right tears. In general there must be both a causal and a content-based connection between the thoughts in our minds and the sentences and descriptions in the fiction. A causal connection is needed to rule out the possibility of our responding to descriptions identifying properties which as it happens belong to a fictional character but which have come to our attention from a quite different, even non-fictional, source. Not even tears for the thought of an innocent wife killed by a jealous husband who happens to be a Moor of Venice are ipso facto tears for Desdemona. It seems to be a necessary condition that there be a causal route back from the thought to Shakespeare's play. That is, Shakespeare's play must have some explanatory role in accounting for the genesis of the thought...A causal connection, though, is not sufficient. There must be a closer link as well connecting the senses of Shakespeare's sentences and the thoughts to which we respond. The paradigm connection would be one of identity of content

where the very propositions or predicates expressed by Shakespeare also identify our thoughts, such that in grasping the sense of his sentences we directly acquire corresponding mental representations identified through his own propositional or predicative descriptions (1981, 300).

That is, Lamarque attempts to explain how we have in mind *that particular* Desdemona, the *real* Desdemona, as opposed to some woman or other who happens to be named Desdemona and is strangled by her jealous husband. This is a different question, however, than whether emotions are partially constituted by existential beliefs. The primary puzzle to be answered is constitutive, not causal. Let us turn back to Anna Karenina. The heart of the paradox is this: we are apparently pitying Anna Karenina. The task at hand is to determine which of the following premises is not true: we do not believe Anna exists; we feel genuine pity; or we believe that she is in a pitiable situation. Whether a reader really has Tolstoy's Anna in mind is an interesting question, but is orthogonal to the paradox of fiction. As far as the paradox of fiction goes, it does not matter which Anna we have picked out. Say Abigail pities Tolstoy's Anna, while Bernard has failed to pick out the correct Anna and pities the fictional Anna Karenina Schwartz of Great Neck, NY (who is also fictionally in a pitiable situation). Even if we have explained what distinguishes Abigail's Anna from Bernard's Anna, or shown why Bernard has picked out the wrong Anna, we have neither denied nor affirmed any of the essential questions of the paradox. Neither Abigail nor Bernard believe in their respective Annas, both pity her, and pity still (*prima facie*) seems to require believing that the object of pity is actually in a pitiable situation.

What matters to the thought theorist is not what Anna *is*. What matters is what Abigail *believes* is the case about Anna. The paradox addresses Abigail's beliefs about Anna, and not Anna's actual state. So no matter to what fictional terms really refer, Abigail believes Anna does not exist, and believes she is represented as pitiable. Whether Abigail is wrong or right in her beliefs about what Anna is may determine whether the emotion is rational. But it does not determine whether the emotion is genuine. Suppose, say, Jordan is afraid of an escaped murderer in whom he believes due to a false news report. He is surely just as genuinely afraid as his friend Julia, who is afraid of an escaped murderer who turns out to be real. What is relevant to the constitution of their emotion is not the actual existence of the murderer, but their beliefs about the murderer.

The kind of object that Anna Karenina is matters for a metaphysics of fictional objects. We do not yet know the answer to what a fictional object really is, and neither do the billions of people who have emoted for fictional objects. We want to know why it seems like we should not emote for fictional objects, but we do. We do not have to say exactly what kind of object she is to say that it is a brute psychological fact that we do not believe in her yet have emotions for her. For a psychological explanation, we can accept a certain irresolution that we would not want for a metaphysical explanation. Psychologically, she simply *is* the intention of our representation of her. A metaphysical explanation of fictional characters will likely be a different one than the ones for whom we emote. The metaphysical one would presumably assume a causally isolated fictional world. The one for whom we emote incorporates properties that are extrinsic to the fiction.

Yanal says, “Thought theory must show how thoughts that are not existentially grounded and that occur along with disbelief can generate emotion. Previous thought theorists have either simply finessed this problem or have pleaded agnosticism, though neither will do” (199, 102). Frankly, I do not know that I can show how even thoughts that are existentially grounded and occur along with belief can generate emotion. I can just say it is a brute psychological fact that they do. What I can do in each case is suggest why such emotional responses might be useful. Emotional responses to actual objects are motivating in ways that helps us survive, reproduce, and flourish. We fear lions and so run from them and live longer. We find children adorable so we tend to them. Similarly, I suggest it is a brute psychological fact that we have emotions for fictional objects. And again, what I can do is suggest why such a capacity might be useful. As suggested in the last chapter and will be detailed in the following chapter, responding emotionally to imaginings is part of how we actually make decisions. An affective response to an imagining is motivating. We respond to more close possibilities to the actual world for more immediate decision-making. We might respond to fictional objects specifically to rehearse and understand our response to a range of more distant possibilities. We are thus prepared for a broader range of eventualities.

## **6.2 Is it rational to pity Anna Karenina? Is pity the fitting response?**

There remains to discuss how we can characterize exactly what constitutes a fitting response to a fictional object, and whether it is rational to respond emotionally to fictional objects at all. I will use a “fitting” response in the sense used by D’Arms



and Jacobson – meaning a response that is appropriate, but not in a moral or prudential sense.

D'Arm's and Jacobson's sense of what constitutes a fitting emotional response to an object (which seems to correlate with Dante's in the epigraph to this paper) is that an emotional response is fitting insofar as it constitutes a proper evaluation of an object. Fear of a dog is a fitting emotional response if that dog is actually dangerous.

Implicit here is that non-fitting emotions are still genuine emotions. If emotions are a judgment, surely judgments can be mistaken. Mistaken judgments are still judgments, they are not something else entirely. We do not say a judgment is only genuine if it is correct. Similarly, we certainly talk about emotions that are not appropriate under the assumption that they are still emotions. The insistence that emotions must be rational in order to be genuine seems unwarranted. The concepts of genuine emotion and rational or fitting emotion are separable. It is worth remembering that for generations the general understanding of emotions, even toward actual objects, was that they were *entirely* irrational. While it has been useful to get away from such a drastic view, it seems that they *sometimes* may be irrational.

However, it is unclear how to characterize emotional responses to fictions as rational or irrational. The green slime will not hurt anyone at the actual world; there is no Anna Karenina. If, as I argue, emotional responses to fictions cannot be characterized as either the response we would have if the events were actual nor the response to events at a fictional world, how can we describe the emotional responses as fitting or rational? It does *seem*, however, as if there are fitting responses to

fictions. For example, it seems obviously not fitting to find Scarlett O'Hara admirable in every way.

I see two possible ways to address this preserving a possibility of rational and fitting responses to fictions. We can say that psychologically healthy people tend to respond emotionally to fictions, and the response of most typical psychologically healthy people with experience with fictions is the fitting response to a fiction. This is Carroll's (1990) tack, and he suggests further that because psychologically healthy people tend to respond to fictions, it is thus rational to respond to fictions.

Or perhaps we can say that knowing the fitting emotional response is something like pragmatics in language. It's difficult to capture in a rule-based way, but competent language-users, and fiction-consumers, seem to know what it is. Fictions are a form of communication, after all.

I am open to either of these responses, or the possibility that it really is not rational to have emotional responses to fictions. Gendler and Kovakovich (2005) argue that emotionally responding to fictions is rational because it is part of a rational process. It is one element of our practical reason. Engaging in fictions also promotes psychological health and flourishing. They say:

Note first that in order for the reasoning process described above to operate effectively, our simulated emotions and our actual emotions must line up as closely as possible: otherwise, the process of considering alternative outcomes would not give us proper information about how we would respond once one of those outcomes became actualized. So simulated emotions and actual emotions should be, in a well-functioning person, as similar as possible. This non-accidental similarity provides grounds for considering simulated emotions to be genuine, and insofar as fictional emotions exploit similar mechanisms, it provides parallel grounds in that case. So fictional emotions may contribute to our capacity for rational action through the role they play in educating our sensibilities. If so, then there is little reason to think that we

should endorse a categorical principle according to which we would, ideally, fail to feel such emotions.

As I have argued, however, our response is often not similar to what it would be if the imagined events were actual. Moreover, simply because emotional responses to fictions are part of a rational process does not mean it is, itself, rational to respond to fictions. We have reason, overall, to respond to imagined scenarios with emotions. That is perhaps enough to consider it rational to respond to fictions.

But it may be argued that responding emotionally to an object that one does not believe exists might well be an irrational step in an overall rational process. While we may have reason *generally* to respond emotionally to imagined objects, in *any given instance* we do not actually have a reason to respond emotionally. It may be the case that our intuitive feeling that some responses to fictions are appropriate, even while others are not, is mistaken.

Let us return to the question that opened the paper. Why does the non-existence of certain objects seem that they cannot be constitutive of an emotion, and why do we sometimes emote despite the non-existence of intentional objects? I have suggested that no *type* of emotion with a fictional intentional object is necessarily conceptually incoherent (e.g., fear, pity). Fear for oneself, as opposed to characters, is perhaps a token of the type *fear* that typically is constituted by, among other beliefs, an existential belief. Other tokens of emotions do not require existential belief in the object. In the initial examples, the token of fear of an escaped murderer, and the token of sadness about a friend's cancer, were partially constituted by existential beliefs in the intentional objects. When existential belief was removed, the emotion was

removed. When engaging in fictions, however, the emotions we feel never did require an existential belief.

### 7. Conclusion

In sum, the paradox of fiction is most convincingly solved by denying that emotions require existential beliefs. There is no principled reason to consider emotions with an existential belief in their objects as fundamentally different in kind than those without, and moreover no reason to consider one genuine while the other is not. They seem intelligible in light of characterizing beliefs, if not existential beliefs. Arguing that we really do believe the events in a fiction, but that they are simply occurring at a causally isolated fictional world, both misdescribes the phenomenology of consuming fictions and results in an unconvincing explanation of the nature of emotional responses to fictions. If fictional worlds are even a useful way to describe the events of a fiction, there is a lot of leakiness between our world and the fictional world. Thus the explanation of the paradox is that we are emotionally responding to an object in whose existence we do not believe. That may or may not be rational, but there is every reason to think it is genuine.

## Chapter 4: Negative Emotional Valence in Art

### 1. Introduction

The “paradox of tragedy” refers to a stubborn fact of human psychology that seems counterintuitive, *viz.*, people seek out and enjoy negatively-valenced fiction. It is a psychological truth universally acknowledged that people tend to seek pleasure and avoid pain. We avoid such negative emotions as sadness, fear, disgust, regret, and guilt where possible. To deny this fact would amount to tossing aside our most basic beliefs about the predictability of human cognition and behavior. Thus it is difficult to account for fictional tragedy and horror. Audiences seek out fictional depictions of tragedy and horror, and moreover, often seem actually to be saddened and scared by them. This phenomenon may be stated in paradox form as: (a) People avoid negatively-valenced emotions. (b) Tragedies and horrors induce negatively-valenced emotions. (c) People seek out tragedies and horror. I will call this *Paradox A*.

The paradox of tragedy has warranted extended attention by philosophers such as Aristotle and Hume, among many others. The diversity of eras and cultures in which philosophers have discussed this problem is a testament to not only to the universality of the belief that humans always seek pleasure and avoid pain, but also the universality of the pursuit of tragedy and horror, and the degree to which pursuit of fictional tragedy and horror intuitively feels like a violation of psychological law. Today, when the fields of psychology and philosophy are much more segregated than they were for Aristotle and Hume, the puzzle of human pursuit of tragedy and fiction remains of interest to philosophers as well as psychologists because of its apparent

irrationality. Why do apparently rational people engage in an apparently irrational activity?

There is a paradox that is related to Paradox A, albeit one much less fundamental to the entirety of our understanding of the human mind. It is generally assumed that our emotional responses to fictions correspond strictly to what we would feel if the events of the fiction were actual. Yet in the cases of tragedy and horror (and for that matter, a good number of action movies, murder mysteries, and slapstick comedies), we enjoy fictions that depict events that would appall us if they were actual. Stated in paradox form, this may be rendered: (a) People's emotional responses to fictions are similar to what they would be if the events were actual. (b) People would be saddened or horrified if the events of tragedies and horror were actual. (c) People enjoy tragedies and horror. I will refer to this as *Paradox B*. This paradox has received relatively little attention from philosophers, but is of no small interest to non-philosophers. Since (c) is undeniable and (a) seems intuitively true, then perhaps we must deny (b) and say that people *would* enjoy the events of tragedies and horror if they were actual.

The philosophical discussion on the topic of the paradoxes of tragedy and horror has been too narrow. It has been restricted to fictional art, such as novels, drama, operas, movies, etc. I will make a broader claim that people do not (in most cases) avoid negative emotional valence induced by all sorts of imaginings, including fantasies, daydreams, and pretend play. If this is the case, then it would not be paradoxical that we do not avoid pain in the more specific case of imaginings prompted by engagements with negatively-valenced fictional art.

First, I will establish that it is most plausibly the case that people do not avoid negative valence in imagination. I will offer a separable claim that this demystifies this psychological attribute. It is then not an ad hoc or mysterious solution to the paradoxes. More specifically, I will argue that if we understand psychology as derived via natural selection for fitness, a predilection for suppositions that produce a negative affect makes sense – it is fitness-enhancing.

Neither (a) the basic conception of humans as generally pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding, nor (b) the fact that some negative emotional valence is induced by tragedy and horror need be denied. Nor does enjoying such tragedy or horror imply that we would enjoy it if the events depicted were actual.

The paradox of negatively emotional art is an example of the usefulness of evolutionary psychology in answering certain philosophical puzzles. However, it is also an example of evolutionary psychology's limitations. I will propose that a predilection for negatively-valenced *suppositions* is fitness-enhancing. It is much less plausible that predilection for negatively-valenced *art* is fitness-enhancing. I will argue that there are evolutionary advantages to supposing negatively valenced scenarios. Further, I will argue that one would expect that we would both enjoy these scenarios and concurrently feel a negative valence in response. The pleasure we get from supposing anything at all, regardless of content, compensates for the negative emotional valence occasioned by a given scenario.

Most discussions of art that induces a negative emotional valence in its audience focus solely on tragedy. A few focus on solely on horror. Very few construe the paradoxes of tragedy and horror as part of the same phenomenon. Below, I will follow Aaron Smuts (2009) in considering them part of the same phenomenon. They have the same puzzling feature – in both cases we seek out, and seem to enjoy, a fiction that induces a negative emotional valence. There are of course, other kinds of negative emotional valence incurred by fiction, such as sympathetic humiliation or disgust. I will restrict my discussion to paradoxes of tragedy and horror for fear of getting unwieldy, but my argument stands for any negatively-valenced emotion. A solution to the paradox that explains only tragedy or only horror is unparsimonious. It implies the need for a separate explanation for a different manifestation of what is essentially the same puzzle. Unless there is a compelling reason to believe that separate explanations for tragedy and horror are needed, an explanation that suffices for both should be preferred.

## 2. Other Views

Smuts (43-54) outlines six possible explanations for the paradox of tragedy. It is an intuitive grouping, similar to the organization of responses provided by Jerrold Levinson (1997). I will also use a similar organization, merging two categories that Smuts keeps separate, and I will add another category. I will describe some of the attractions and problems for each form of response below.

**(a) Conversion theory** – According to conversion theory, the negatively-valenced emotion an audience member or reader experiences gets converted into a positively-valenced one. According to some theories, the conversion from negative to



positive valence is simultaneous or near-simultaneous with engaging with the fiction. According to others, the conversion happens later: the negative valence occurs as one is actively imagining the fiction, the positive valence occurs in retrospect, as one reflects on the experience of the fiction.

Kendall Walton (1993) offers a variant of the conversion theory. He denies that there is a paradox of tragedy by denying that sorrow itself is painful. What are painful about sorrow-causing situations in the actual world are the situations, not the sorrow. Sorrow itself, without a real object, may be enjoyable.

As will be detailed below, I agree with Walton that the absence of a real object of the sorrow is important to a dissolution of the apparent paradox. But conversion theory, in itself, is not workable as a sole explanation. The view that the conversion happens immediately implies that we do not really experience negatively-valenced emotion of any length while engaging in such fictions. But it is phenomenologically implausible to suggest that any time we take pleasure in tragedy or comedy it is because we are not *really* experiencing a negative emotional valence. There is a reason melodramas are referred to as “weepies” and ranked in terms of the hankies one uses while watching. People really do cry, and really feel sad. People really feel scared watching *The Shining*, and scream, and grab their armrests and cover their eyes. A view that denies such feelings really have a negative emotional valence or that such feelings are quickly converted into pleasure does not seem to accord with our experiences. Further, there are works of fiction that are too depressing, too scary, too violent, too disgusting for many to watch. Some people refuse ever again to see a horror movie, or, say, a movie that depicts harm to children.

Even though the sorrow (or fear, or disgust) has no object, it is experienced as too unpleasant to repeat.

The version of conversion theory that holds that the pleasurable emotion occurs upon reflection works no better. The pursuit of delayed gratification is acquired only with some maturity, and practiced by those with greater self-control. It is not with equal facility that everyone can get herself to eat broccoli and get housework done. Yet it certainly does not seem that a person must train herself to get through the unpleasantness of tragedy and horror in order to reach a future point of pleasure. It is not only people with better self-control who enjoy such fiction. Very young children, who are justly celebrated for their inability to delay gratification, engage in tragedies and horror. For example, *Charlotte's Web*, *Old Yeller*, and *Bambi* all have tragic elements, and the Grimm brother's fairy tales, Roald Dahl's books, and *Where the Wild Things Are* all have elements of horror. Children's pretend play often has tragic, horrific, and violent elements.

A recent study (Knobloch-Westerwick, S. *et al*, 2012) purported to support a conversion view. It claimed the reason people enjoy tragedies is because tragedies make them focus on close relationships and count their blessings. However, the study has several flaws. First, the only hypothesis tested was that tragedies make one count one's blessings. There was no contrasting hypothesis. It is possible that tragedies do sometimes make us count our blessings but that that is not the sole source of pleasure. Second, the study recruitment materials called the study 'Movie Enjoyment' and participants were told the movie they were about to see was an Oscar winner (a heavily abridged 30 minute version of *Atonement*). It is possible that the phrases

‘Movie Enjoyment’ and ‘Oscar winner’ would suggest to participants that they *ought* to consider this an enjoyable, enriching experience or else risk being a Philistine (or being considered such by researchers). Participants were directly asked to respond to the following: ‘This movie made me reflect on my own life and values’; ‘This movie contributed to my personal growth’; and ‘This movie made me think about the purpose of my life’. I strongly suspect that asking such questions directly elicited a response that would not have occurred otherwise.

Conversion theory is correct that our emotional response to events in art is often quite different than what we would feel if the events were actual. A response to negatively-valenced art may not be *converted*, but it is not always a watered-down version of what one would feel if it were true. A psychologically healthy person has an extremely different emotional response to seeing aliens blow up the Empire State Building in the movie *Independence Day* than she does to seeing the World Trade Center collapse in documentary footage from 9/11. Indeed sometimes viewers *hope* for greater destruction and mayhem. Imagine the audience response to a James Bond movie where nothing blows up, nobody is killed, and no one crashes during a car chase. One could imagine audience members demanding their money back. These moments are enjoyable. Murder mysteries are usually light entertainment – a typical reader does not grieve for the corpse in an Agatha Christie novel. I will discuss this qualitative difference in the emotion below.

**(b) Control theories** – Control theories suggest that we do not experience the sadness or fear we would feel if the events were true because we are in greater control over an artwork than real life. We can put down a book or turn off a movie, while

there is no shutting off real life. Smuts's critique of this view (2009, 45-46) seems on target. He points out that it fails to answer the core question posed by the paradox of tragedy: why do we willingly engage in it at all? The control theory explains why we might be *less* affected by fiction than we are by real events. But surely in a choice between minor amounts of pain and no pain, most people would choose no pain. So if the control theory were the explanation for engagement in horror and tragedy, we still have a behavior (i.e., consumption of tragedies and horror) that is apparently incompatible with one of the most basic principles of human psychology.

**(c) Irrationality/Perversity theories** – another group of explanations suggest that the urge to engage in tragedies or horror demonstrates the fact that we are being irrational or even perverse. What these theories have in common is that there is no straightforward explanation of why we engage in tragedy and horror; or, at least, one that is consonant with psychological health and virtue. These have an assumed premise that if we enjoy the fiction, we would also enjoy the scenario if it were actual. Film theorists, especially, have resorted to psychoanalytic explanations, suggesting it is some sort of perversity to indulge in such fictions – for example, that they satisfy the male need to reassert dominance over his subconscious fears of the female (e.g., Mulvey 1975, Kristeva 1982, Williams 1991). Since we are not consciously aware that we desire the events of horrors and tragedies really to occur, it is assumed that our enjoyment of fictional depiction of such events demonstrates that there exists such a desire in our subconscious. This perverse desire is, presumably satisfied or semi-satisfied by watching tragedies and horror.

Against the psychoanalytic view, it might be pointed out that viewing tragedy and horror indeed seems consonant with psychological health and virtue. It is not only the more neurotic among us who enjoy such fiction. Indeed, it has been argued that such fiction is beneficial to our moral development (e.g., Nussbaum 1990, Currie 2002). A lack of interest in fiction and pretense in children is itself a red flag for developmental disorders. Frequent fiction readers score higher on tests empathy and social acumen, with those who become more absorbed scoring still higher on empathy (Mar *et al.*, 2006, Mar *et al.*, 2009)

There is a notable exception to the fiction-is-good-for-you rule. It is perhaps the case that violent movies and videogames aggravate aggressive thoughts and reduce prosocial behavior in viewers and players (Bushman and Anderson 2009, Anderson 2010). There is debate about cause and correlation, though. Violent people are attracted to violent movies and video games (Ferguson 2010). Apparently, however, violent movies actually function to decrease crime rates by attracting violent types to movie theaters and temporarily incapacitating them while also reducing alcohol consumption (Dahl and DellaVigna 2009). The effects of violent literature do not seem to have been similarly studied.

Visual depictions of violence seem to be an exception to a general rule, however. The better emotional health of most consumers of most kinds of fiction suggests that it is not perversity that drives one to such fictions. And, as I will suggest below in the discussion of catharsis, it may well not be perversity that drives violent people to violent fictions, even though it might have an actual negative effect on their aggressive traits.

Further, desiring that something occur in a fiction does not necessitate that one desire such an event occur in real life. Gregory Currie (2010) argues that our desires about what occurs in the fiction (we do not want Othello to strangle Desdemona) are different kinds of desires from ones we have about the fiction (we want *Othello* to be a good tragedy, so we want Othello to strangle Desdemona). Both of these desires are yet separable from the desires we have for the event occurring in real life. We will not need to suggest that engaging in tragedy and horror is irrational or ascribable to subconscious motives if a reasonable explanation can be found. I will propose that there is an explanation for viewing tragedy and horror that is consonant with good psychological health, and thus there is no need to speculate about what may be going on in our subconscious minds.

**(d) Catharsis** – Aristotle’s explanation for why we engage in tragedy is that it provides a cathartic release of negative emotion. By experiencing negative emotions toward non-existent objects, we purge ourselves of our own negative emotions toward existent objects. It is hard to know exactly what this means or by what mechanism this is supposed to work, which is one problem facing the theory. Why should a fictional experience of a negative emotion clear our own away? It remains, however, perfectly possible that Aristotle is right, or right in some cases. This is a testable question. The theory seems to have some broad pre-theoretical appeal. Interestingly, angry people are attracted to violent video games in the false belief that it will provide catharsis (Bushman and Whitaker 2010). Even though violent video games may not actually be beneficial, or may even be harmful, the desire to play them may

not be at all perverse. The desire to engage in them may be a healthy desire to rid oneself of anger.

Whatever the truth of catharsis, Aristotle's basic idea that consumption of negatively-valence fiction is not perverse, but may actually be psychologically beneficial, is one worth preserving.

**(e) Rich experience theory:** Smuts advocates what he calls a 'rich experience theory':

The rich experience theorist proposes that the reason we usually seek out these experiences from art, rather than real life, is prudence and sometimes cowardice. Art provides a certain degree of safety not present from situations that arouse extreme distress, disgust, anger, fear, horror, misery, paranoia, and a host of other responses. Simply put, most of these reactions cannot be had in real life without incurring significant risks to ourselves and to our loved ones, risks that we typically do not take because they far outweigh the rewards.

It is not clear how this is truly distinct from a control theory, and why it does not face the same objection that Smuts himself raised to control theories. Why would we be motivated to have rich unpleasurable experiences? Rich experience theory can explain why we would rather have a fictional rich negative experience than a real negative experience, but not why we would have one at all.

**(f) Compensatory theories** – According to compensatory theories, while we do experience some negatively-valenced emotion in response to art, we concurrently experience some pleasure that compensates us for the pain we are experiencing. The pleasure outweighs the pain, leading to an overall pleasurable experience. As will be seen below, my explanation for the paradoxes of tragedy and horror is a compensatory one. There are problems with each of the extant compensatory theories, however. Most other compensatory views focus solely on the pleasure one can get,

directly or indirectly, from the *content* of the story. That is, the pleasure we experience is a direct function of the events depicted or described. As will be seen, that can lead to some problems for the theory. Another version of compensatory theory suggests we take pleasure in tragedy due to a greater knowledge of human nature (1989), while another suggests the pleasure is in a more thorough knowledge of the artwork (Goodman 1968). Noël Carroll attributes enjoyment of horror to the pleasure of discovery (1990).

A meta-response theory is also a version of compensatory theory. One meta-response theory advanced by Susan Feagin (1983) and in similar form by Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft<sup>(2002)</sup> suggests that the source of pleasure in tragedy is a response to our primary response of sadness. We feel sad at the events depicted, and then feel pleasure at taking ourselves to be the sort of person who finds such material sad.

Most extant compensatory theories are an explanation of why *some* adults enjoy *some* tragedies or *some* horror. They do not, however, explain the wider phenomenon. Most of the theories, especially those on tragedy, are generally too cognitively sophisticated to suffice as a general explanation for the phenomenon of engagement with negatively-valenced art. Young children read and watch and pretend – and enjoy – tragedies. Any explanation of why we engage in tragedies that purports to be exhaustive should include an explanation of what motivates children to engage in them. The meta-response theory seems inapplicable to most children, especially very young children. They are likely not cognitively able to recognize their own sadness while simultaneously holding in their heads a virtuous ideal of responding with



sadness to such events – with which they are then pleased to match themselves. Nor are young children likely watching *Bambi* in order to become more familiar with the work *qua* artwork.

Another problem with existing compensatory theories (again, especially the ones on tragedy) is that they cannot explain why we watch bad melodramas, or mediocre ones. We can curl up on the couch with a poorly written torrid historical melodrama (and yet we enjoy it), or turn on a low-budget horror movie and watch (and enjoy) despite all the transparency of the special effects and the woodenness of the acting. It is not the case that the only people who watch and read such stuff are people who mistakenly believe such artworks are great, as in (paraphrasing Pauline Kael) the teenagers who think that *Titanic* is the greatest movie they have ever seen because it probably is the greatest movie they have yet seen. People who have experienced great art still enjoy less-great art. Furthermore, they enjoy less-great art that is negatively-valenced. When engaging with a mediocre melodrama, we do not feel particularly good about ourselves for being the kind of person who feels sad in response (if anything, we might feel annoyed at ourselves for being manipulated!). Nor are we interested in the greater knowledge of human nature evinced, because we may well not believe that the author evinces a greater knowledge of the human condition than our own. Nor, would it seem, do we have a particularly compelling motivation to engage with a greater understanding of the artwork. According to most extant meta-response and compensatory theories, we would get no compensation for engaging in mediocre and bad art. The fact that we still do so, then, becomes a fact that requires further explanation.

I do not wish to dispute the correctness of some of the foregoing explanations as sources of any pleasure. Indeed, I think all of them can be sources of pleasure, and may help explain why we have a special enjoyment of great works of art. An explanation of the paradoxes of tragedy and horror, however, should acknowledge that the phenomenon of the enjoyment of negatively-valenced imaginings is much wider than the canon of great works. If a theory of negatively-valenced fiction is to be truly explanatory, it should be able to explain why we engage with negatively-valenced mediocre art and why children enjoy such fictions.

Still another problem facing these compensatory theories is that they tend to offer a much better explanation for tragedy than for horror, or vice versa. For example, one generally does not feel very proud of oneself for being frightened by Freddy Krueger, so while Feagin's meta-response theory might be plausible for tragedy, not for horror. This problem is likely to plague any explanation that seeks to explain our enjoyment in tragedy or horror as springing only from the content of the story. Types of content are usually unique to one genre, so the explanation will only serve to explain only one genre. (It is noteworthy that Goodman's view, which is not dependent on the content of the story, does not face this problem – it could easily be adaptable to both tragedy and horror. However, it would not apply to children or mediocre art.) As stated above, an explanation that can answer the paradoxes of both tragedy and horror is preferable to one that can only serve as an explanation for one or the other.

Compensatory theories do, however, seem to correspond better than the other theories to what it actually feels like to watch tragedy or horror. They also do an important bit of explanatory work that other theories cannot. On control,

conversionary, and rich experience accounts, there seems to be a unified emotional response to fictions. That is, we seem to experience a single emotional valence. The fact that sometimes our pleasure in fictions is outweighed by the negative emotion, that some fictions become too scary or too sad to be enjoyed, suggests that something like the compensatory account is more on target than the conversionary or rich experience accounts. That sense of one emotion outweighing another suggests a view with bivalent or multivalent emotions, rather than a unified emotion. If a compensatory account could be made to work, it would have the benefit of fitting nicely with the actual phenomenology of engagement with such fictions.

I intend to offer a compensatory view that can explain why children engage in negatively-valenced art, why we engage in mediocre or even bad fiction, and that will not be genre-specific.

### 3. Negatively-Valenced Suppositions as Fitness-enhancing

I will now argue that several facts about our psychology make it not only comprehensible that we feel both positive and negative valenced emotions while entertaining negatively valenced suppositions, but show that it is actually a useful trait. An ability to feel a negatively valenced emotion simultaneously with a compensatory positively valenced emotion in response to certain suppositions is fitness-enhancing.

What I will not argue is that responding to negatively valenced *art* is fitness-enhancing. First of all, when explaining a present-day psychological phenomenon, evolutionary psychology is never the end of the story. It is one part of our total psychology. Further, while there is a commonality, there is also an enormous

psychological difference between a child reading *The Lorax* and an adult reading *Anna Karenina*. Joseph Carroll argues that seeing literature itself as adaptive will help us explain the function and form of literature (2004). While I think evolutionary psychology might be useful in suggesting why one might ever engage in negatively-valenced fiction, I cannot see how it will be useful in explaining Tolstoy's insight into Anna, his sympathy for her, his richness of detail, and so on. Jonathan Kramnick (2011) suggests that claiming literature itself is adaptive is a step too far. Attempts to create cross-cultural plot grammars have way too many exceptions, and, as Kramnick suggests, might just be attributable to what people happen to be interested in more generally – sex, death, betrayal, etc.

Kramnick says:

According to some, children regularly show a capacity for acting as if something is the case between eighteen and twenty-four months, so that for example if a cup is full of pretend water the floor beneath it will become pretend wet in the event the cup is tipped. In other words, the ability to bracket our ordinary sense of the external world and establish an internally consistent, counterfactual version of things may develop on a regular schedule across humans. So there's a reasonable chance that pretending and imagining are innate. There's also a reasonable chance that pretense and imagination feed into the way that older children understand fictional worlds. Yet the moral of this finding is not easy to draw. Pretense and imagination are likely to be features of any model of literary competence. But they are clearly not identical to such competence. Reading or attending to fictions would require other faculties or skills to be in working order alongside pretense, each of which might come online independently of the other, from language to memory to the emotions and beyond. Likewise, imagination and pretense might well feed into other dispositions, like a tendency for religious belief, as Pascal Boyer and Paul Bloom have argued. In other words, the regular pattern in which pretend play develops in young children provides evidence that literary competence (if we can speak this way) is built from features of mind selected (if at all) for other purposes (339-40).

I think this is likely the case, and it is this more modest point that I argue in this paper. It is also not surprising, then, that there might be some exceptions, such as violent fictions, to a general rule that fictions are beneficial. Literature may well simply draw on innate capacities of pretense<sup>24</sup> and imagination capacities, not be an innate capacity in itself. I will make the case here that it is not just non-paradoxical, but actually useful to suppose and pretend negatively emotional scenarios. If we have a propensity to engage in such suppositions and pretenses, however, it then seems much less paradoxical that we would then engage in negatively valenced fiction.

It does seem to be the case that, in general, we avoid pain. However, we do not seem to avoid painful *thoughts* in the same way that we avoid the experience of pain itself – even though such thoughts can cause emotional pain. In a study of mind-wandering (Killingsworth and Gilbert 2010) people were contacted at random points during the day and asked to report their activities, thoughts, and feelings. Their minds were wandering in 46.9 percent of samples. 42.5% of mind-wanderers were thinking about pleasant topics, 26.5% were thinking about unpleasant topics, and 31% were thinking about neutral topics. The participants were significantly unhappier thinking about unpleasant topics and neutral topics than they were when they were thinking about pleasant topics or focusing on the task at hand. Even though it is unpleasant to let our minds wander, and to let our minds wander to unpleasant topics, we do it quite a bit.

Also, it is certainly not the case that people avoid knowledge of other people's unpleasant situations. The prevalence of gossip, the existence of rubbernecking

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Carruthers and I argue that pretense is adaptive (forthcoming).

delays, and our fascination with stories of fires and kidnappings on the news are demonstrations of our enduring interest in other people's difficulties.

Such a strong interest would be perverse only if people who lacked such interest were clearly the more psychologically healthy among us. But that does not seem to be the case. In fact, such an interest is likely fitness-enhancing.<sup>25</sup> It can make us better social actors and better predictors of the outcomes of our own behavior. By focusing on the ramifications of other people's bad behavior and bad decisions, we might avoid similar mistakes. It also can help us better judge how certain people are like to behave, whether they are trustworthy, etc.

Gossip is an indication that we do not necessarily avoid thinking about other people's bad situations, and our enjoyment of negatively-valenced fiction may in some cases be related to our enjoyment of gossip. It seems unlikely that a predilection for tragedy or horror is *solely* an outgrowth of our predilection for gossip and finding out about other people's problems. Gossip, as a rule, tends to get less interesting the less we know the parties involved. If one hears that someone in a far-off land cheats on her husband, that is not terribly interesting. It is not nearly as interesting as if a close friend or family member cheats on her husband. (There are, of course, some exceptions for really extraordinary stories, such as murder trials that receive continuous national coverage. Also, people are quite interested in celebrities, although arguably people feel as if they "know" the celebrities.) It would seem that the events of non-actual people should be least interesting of all, as Colin Radford suggests (1975). Obviously, that is not the case when watching fictional works of art.

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<sup>25</sup> For an argument that this is the case, see Dunbar (2004).

These non-actual people are very interesting. Sometimes, we can be far more emotionally absorbed than we are for people we know.

As further evidence that our interest in gossip is not the sole explanation of our enjoyment of negative scenarios, our emotional responses and feelings of pleasure are quite different in gossip and fiction. Take the example of a murder mystery. Our emotional response is almost certainly not what it would be if a neighbor were murdered. If a neighbor were murdered, we would certainly feel fascinated, but we would feel sympathy and perhaps grief (depending on our closeness) for the victim and the loved ones, we would worry for ourselves and for people close to us, we would feel outrage at the murderer. It is different for a fiction. We might not feel much more than, say, a grim fascination with police procedure, or an appreciation of gruesome details of a murder, or appreciation at the cleverness of the murderer. It may be that our interest in gossip is related to our interest in tragedy and horror. It seems, however, that we have a different kind of interest and pleasure in fictional unpleasant situations than actual unpleasant ones.

So if not gossip, what then? Many have argued that imagining hypothetical situations and/or engaging in fictions develop decision-making and social skills (Damasio 1994, Harris 2000). A creature with a tendency to imagine hypothetical scenarios will have more mental scenarios at the ready when a novel situation calls for the execution of a plan. When a novel situation occurs, one may have already imagined something similar.

Just having more scenarios at one's fingertips, however, is not much help without some method of evaluating which scenario would be the best one to act on. Emotional responses are also part of decision-making, and moreover, are necessary to good decision-making (Damasio 1994, Berthoz and Weiss 2006, Seymour and Dolan 2008). As Damasio discusses, an emotional response to a hypothetical situation serves as a guide to evaluating which scenarios it would be more prudent to enact. Thus, emotional responses to imagined situations are an aid to decision-making. For example, in thinking about whether to blow my savings on a trip to Vegas, I could think about what would happen if I did it. I would have fun for a few days, and then struggle financially for a long time. I could think about what would happen if I did not go to Vegas. I would have enough money over the coming months. By comparing emotional responses to these two scenarios, I can decide which of these situations is the one I would rather seek out. In this way, I can avoid imprudent trips to Vegas. The more one has thought about hypothetical scenarios, and experiences an emotional response, the more one will be prepared for new situations with some ideas *and* motivations about what should be done.

Dan Moller discusses making decisions by emotional responses to imagined hypothetical futures (2011). He argues that the desire to avoid a negative feeling, such as regret or guilt, is not a good reason for a decision. If he is right, then it would unlikely be the case that emotional responses to hypothetical situations is adaptive.

He argues that negatively-valenced feelings are sporadic and short in duration. The reason to act is not in the predicted emotional response, but in the hypothetical itself. For example, a person should not give up her job to have a child because she



fears the regret she will feel. Regret is intermittent and will pass. The reason to give up a job or not should not be based on what we anticipate our future emotions will be. Moller rightly points out that we are bad at predicting how we will feel. He suggests a still-bad-but-not-as-bad option on his view: that perhaps anticipated emotions might better be seen as a heuristic (8). We predict what we will feel after the fact, and if we think we might have regrets, we take that as an indication that it's not a good option – not because of the regrets themselves, though.

First of all, as discussed above, it seems established that emotional responses do in fact aid decision-making, although perhaps they are almost certainly better for short-term decisions than long-term, big picture decisions. Secondly, I am not arguing that our emotional responses to the outcomes of hypotheticals need involve our *anticipated emotions*. Surely sometimes they do, but many times they might not. We have a positive or negative response to the outcome of the hypothetical situation, and thus an attraction or aversion to the situation. We do not necessarily predict what our feeling will be in response to the outcome, and seek out or avoid the situation on that basis. This is similar to Moller's heuristic view, but the emotional response is not to our anticipated emotional response. It is the response situation itself. It is the occurrent emotion, not the anticipated emotion.

In order to be a useful guide for decision-making, our emotional response to the outcomes of bad decisions *should* have a negative valence. That way, we know it is a plan to be avoided, rather than enacted. So my thought about having weeks without money should have a negative emotional valence, so that it seems a bad idea to spend my savings.

If entertaining hypotheticals and testing responses are part of how we make decisions, however, we would need to be willing to consider negatively-valenced scenarios. What if we were to avoid having a negative emotional valence in response to imagined scenarios, as we avoid having a negative emotional valence in our actual lives? If an emotional response to an unpleasant hypothetical has a negative valence, and we always avoid having a negative emotional valence – even in the case of hypotheticals – then we would not be well-practiced at decision-making in unpleasant situations. If we only entertained pleasurable hypotheticals, we would not get mental rehearsal for dealing with negatively-emotional situations. So if entertaining hypotheticals is good practice to our decision-making, a more effective system would have us indulge in negatively emotional hypothetical situations as well as positively emotional ones. So we should tend to indulge in negative scenarios, or even enjoy it.

But of course, we cannot *just* enjoy it. We need to know to avoid such a scenario. When we have a negative emotional response to a hypothetical, it is a clue to avoid that situation. A fitness-enhancing system for using emotional responses to evaluate hypothetical situations would, then, (a) induce a negative emotional response to the hypothetical, so that we know that is the sort of situation to avoid, but (b) we should either not mind or even enjoy such imaginings, so that we do not become averse to entertaining such hypotheticals. A emotional response that includes simultaneous positive and negative valence makes sense. The study on mind-wandering mentioned above suggested that mind-wandering in general made people unhappy, and letting their minds wander to unpleasant topics even unhappier. Yet the study did not differentiate between wanderings to actual and non-actual scenarios, *e.g.*, mulling

over past events v. contemplating possible future ones. My prediction would be that if people's minds wandered to non-actual unpleasant scenarios, they would be unhappy, but less unhappy. Further, it may also be the case that people are annoyed to find that they are not focusing on their task (as discussed in ch.1) If the task *was* to imagine, as when we engage in fiction, or there was no other task that needed to be done at that point, then I would predict they would feel pleasure combined with negative valence.

It must be noted that the whole point of this system would be that we would enjoy supposing the negatively-valenced scenario, but that we would not want it to be actual. Our negative response clues us in to the fact that this is a situation we do not want to occur even as we enjoy considering it. It is perfectly explicable, then, why we would enjoy supposing something that we would not want actually to occur. This is an explanation of Paradox B.

What I am suggesting is related to the meta-response compensatory theories, but it is importantly different. In the meta-response compensatory theories, one feels pleasure at the awareness of one's sadness. In my version, it is not the content of the supposition that causes the pleasure. The act of supposition is itself pleasurable, even if the content of the imagining incurs some negatively-valenced emotion. This encourages us to suppose frequently, and to be more willing to suppose possibly unpleasant scenarios. This explanation is cognitively unsophisticated enough to explain why children enjoy imagining tragedy and horror. Even if the content causes a negatively-valenced emotion, we will also feel pleasure. This is pleasure that can get outweighed – sometimes by the intensity of the negatively-valenced emotion

caused by the art, sometimes for other reasons. But in general, supposing and pretending anything at all is pleasurable.

In addition, our existential disbelief in the object of our imagining colors the nature of our emotional response to fictions. Our emotional response to any object depends on many beliefs. As discussed in ch. 3, the degree of fear felt in response to seeing a cockroach may depend on many other beliefs we have. When we imagine a hypothetical or engage in a fiction, there is always the concurrent belief that the object of our imagining does not exist (or does not exist yet). This can drastically change our emotional response to an event – not much sadness for the murder victim in an Agatha Christie novel is felt because, as we are well aware when we are reading, there is no murder victim. We do have some negative valence response to a murder. But in the case of an Agatha Christie novel, it is slight and vague. So our beliefs about the object of our fear can greatly affect our emotional response to them. We are able to enjoy such a depiction while concurrently recognizing that we would not want it to actually be the case.

Smuts makes this objection to compensatory theories:

They claim that the negative affect is a liability of the work, one that requires compensation. That is just what it means to compensate, or to make reparations – to offset a defect. You do not have to make reparations for something desirable. But this does not accord with the way we talk about painful art. No, we celebrate powers of emotional devastation as virtues of works such as *Don't Look Now*.

Smuts is confusing evaluation and motivation. Compensatory theorists require some kind of compensation to explain our *motivation* to engage with the artwork. We do not require that an *artistic defect* be offset. We are explaining why we are

*motivated* to engage in tragedy, that is, why we enjoy it. What must be compensated is some emotional pain felt by the consumer of the fiction. The compensatory theorist need not complain that tragic elements are an artistic defect that must be offset, or that the only value in art is the pleasure it brings the consumer. Just because the artwork induces a negative emotion says nothing about its artistic value. Indeed, a virtue of this view is that it can explain better than most other extant theories why we enjoy mediocre or bad art as well as great art.

#### 4. Conclusion

As I have argued, compensatory explanations come closest to explaining the phenomenology of engaging with tragedies and horror. If one can be made plausible, it is a strong candidate for a viable explanation of the paradoxes of tragedy and horror. I have suggested a version of compensatory theory that derives from a more general principle that supposing negatively-valenced scenarios and feeling some negative emotional response and some positive response would be fitness-enhancing. This does not explain what makes *Othello* great. It does help explain why we might ever engage in fictions that have negative valence, and seem to have simultaneous negative and positive feelings for it. It also explains why we enjoy supposing things that we do not want to occur.

This view avoids most of the pitfalls of previously-posed compensatory theories. Specifically, it can help explain why children would find tragedy and horror appealing, it serves as an explanation of both tragedy and horror (rather than only one or the other), and it can help explain enjoyment of bad or mediocre art. It also seems to be the case that people who enjoy tragedies and horror are not the most

psychologically unhealthy among us; rather, they are psychologically healthy. Yet it leaves room for the possibility that some of the more plausible views on why we enjoy, say, tragedy are *also* true. For example, it may be true that we *in general* have a reason to enjoy negatively valenced suppositions *and* that part of our enjoyment of Anna Karenina is an appreciation of Tolstoy's skill.

If my position is right, there is an explanation for why enjoyment of tragedy and horror are not perverse or irrational, but helpful to our psychological development. We need neither reject the idea that we really do feel sad and horrified while engaging in such fictions, nor need we jettison the strong psychological principle that we generally seek pleasure and avoid pain.

## Chapter 5: Imaginative Resistance and the Real World

### 1. Introduction

#### **1.1 What is imaginative resistance?**

The first recognition of the puzzle is generally attributed to David Hume (1757). We have no problem imagining all sorts of non-actual events at the invitation of an author of a fiction<sup>26</sup>. We can imagine that radioactive spiders can turn teenage boys into superheroes and that John Wilkes Booth failed in his assassination attempt on Abraham Lincoln. Yet there are certain scenarios that we do not imagine. To use a famous example, most of us can imagine that female infanticide is widely practiced, but do not imagine that female infanticide is morally justified (Walton 1994). The puzzle of why we readily imagine most kinds of things in a fiction, but do not imagine other kinds of things, is the “puzzle of imaginative resistance.”

Hume focused on the fact that we resist imagining that *moral* facts are other than we believe them to be. Recent writers have noted, however, that we experience resistance with many other kinds of imaginings. For example, one does not imagine that certain non-moral normative facts are other than what they are, e.g., a velvet painting of dogs playing poker is better than a Picasso, or chickens-crossing-the-road jokes are the height of humor (Walton 1994).

We also do not imagine certain non-normative facts. We would not, say, imagine a television that is phenomenologically indistinguishable from a fork

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<sup>26</sup> I will generally use “author,” but what I say should be applicable to film or other visual media. Indeed, I will argue below that a serious deficit in the literature on imaginative resistance has been its near-complete disregard of visual media.

(Weatherson 2004) or a five-fingered-shaped oval (Yablo 2002). Weatherson also notes that attributions of certain mental states are puzzling to imagine. For example, we do not imagine a person in a fiction is rational and believes that ghosts exist, when ghosts do not exist in the story and that person has no evidence that they do (2004, 4).

## 1.2 The Problem of the Simple Story of the Experience of Fiction

There has been a cottage industry over the last two decades in solutions to the puzzle of imaginative resistance. Looking over the literature, two facts are striking. The first is that, while there have been important insights, philosophers are not converging on a clear solution. If anything, the solutions, counterexamples, new solutions, and new counterexamples are inexhaustibly proliferating. The second is that the solutions infrequently take into account actual works of fiction. Nor do they, on the whole, attempt to explain how their proffered solutions work for actual readers and actual books. And almost none have considered visual fictions such as film and television even in theory, much less in practice.

I will argue that those two facts are related. The puzzle of imaginative resistance is not the puzzle of what we can and cannot conceive. The puzzle of imaginative resistance is fundamentally a puzzle about storytelling. Hume's observation of the phenomenon arose in his discussion of fictional art, not his much more developed thoughts on imagination. The puzzle of imaginative resistance involves an author, a fiction she creates that invites other people to imagine, and an imaginer. Ultimately, (I hope and expect) a complete understanding of the puzzle will not yield a description of a small-bore quirk of human psychology, but rather a fuller account of the experience of fictional art.



Understandably, most theorists have wanted to eliminate the ephemera to focus on the essence of the problem. Real works of fiction are vastly complicated, and imprecision is a danger. I do use a few toy examples below. Reducing the puzzle of imaginative resistance to toy examples rather than actual fictions, however, has come at some costs. The first, more minor cost, is that the ephemera tend inevitably to creep back into the picture. Counterexamples to the major theories are offered, and they are drawn from some of the elements originally eliminated for clarity. Some of the counterexamples are not actually the exemplifications of a new solution that the authors sometimes take them to be, but supplements that are beginning to take into account the complexity of fiction.

The biggest cost is that it encourages on the part of most of the theorists a misunderstanding the experience of reading fictions. This, in turn, sometimes leads to mistakes in their theories and wrong guesses about the implications. Most theorists are more or less in the grip of what I will call the Simple Story of the experience of fiction. The Simple Story of the experience of fiction is roughly this:

An author provides us with a description of a fictional world. When we engage in fictions, we entertain the concepts that are instantiated at the fictional world. We implicitly import some beliefs about the actual world to the fictional world. While we are engaged in the fiction, we are absorbed in a fictional spell. Any reminder that what we are entertaining is just fictional breaks the fictional spell.

To those who accept the Simple Story, the solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance is a matter of figuring out which beliefs from the actual world are imported to the fictional world. The solution will explain which instantiated

concepts the reader allows the author to determine, and which instantiated concepts the reader determines for herself.

The Simple Story is wrong. This conception of the solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance is useful but quite limited.

It is hard to think of a topic in philosophy where philosophers' concerns are more completely divergent from the general public's concerns than in the literature on the puzzle of imaginative resistance. While philosophers wonder why we resist imagining moral views different from our own, the general public worries that fiction invites one to adapt all too readily to different moral views. For example, there are concerns that violent films and video games will lead viewers to become violent and that the widespread availability of sadomasochistic pornography leads to a general degradation of women. As I discussed in ch. 4, these concerns are exaggerated but not totally without merit in the case of visual depictions of fictional violence.

Fiction can be morally persuasive. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is credited with changing people's minds about the permissibility of slavery and the works of Dickens changed attitudes and policies toward the poor. Letting go of the Simple Story and discussing how we imagine actual fictions can help us understand the cases in which we arrive at different moral opinion, or otherwise do *not* resist imagining situations that are morally deviant from our own views.<sup>27</sup>

My aim in this paper is to show that the Simple Story is wrong and has led to limitations and mistakes in solutions to the puzzle. I will argue that the experience of engaging in fiction involves many more factors than acknowledged in the Simple

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<sup>27</sup> Two who have discussed moral persuasion are Currie (2002) and Driver (2008), who has a particularly useful discussion of the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Story, and these factors can be the causes of puzzling resistance. Moreover, I will argue that the previously offered solutions are only apparently in dispute. They are not mutually inconsistent. There will be no one solution to the entire puzzle (although there are perhaps solutions to subsets of the puzzle). The various views are, rather, pointing to different ways in which the puzzle manifests. Most have seemed plausible because they are partially right. What an examination of the ways the puzzle emerges in real world fictions has to offer is not a solution, but rather an elucidation of just how intricate engagement in fiction is. Among our mental tasks are emoting, remembering, mind-reading the characters, mind-reading the author, entertaining a non-existent world, entertaining the historical context in which the work was created, importing and exporting beliefs between worlds, evaluating the events, evaluating the characters, refusing to entertain some beliefs, unable to entertain others. To name a few.

## 2. You Can Go Back to Hume Again

Although Hume is credited with pointing to the existence of the puzzle of imaginative resistance, there is no standard understanding of the Humean view of the nature of or solution to the puzzle.<sup>28</sup> (This may make it one of the few areas of philosophy in which there is no Humean view.) Forgive me for quoting him at some length; part of my point in citing him is his range:

We are more pleased, in the course of our reading, with pictures and characters that resemble objects which are found in our own age or country, than with those which describe a different set of customs. It is not without

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<sup>28</sup> Hume's project is prescriptive, not descriptive. That is, he is determining which factors in fiction we ought to consider when evaluating a work. Most recent writings on the topic are descriptive. Yet much of what he says constitutes description.

some effort, that we reconcile ourselves to the simplicity of ancient manners, and behold princesses carrying water from the spring, and kings and heroes dressing their own victuals... For this reason, comedy is not easily transferred from one age or nation to another... A man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners; but a common audience can never divest themselves so far of their usual ideas and sentiments, as to relish pictures which nowise resemble them.

... Where any innocent peculiarities of manners are represented, such as those above mentioned, they ought certainly to be admitted; and a man, who is shocked with them, gives an evident proof of false delicacy and refinement... But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation, this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition... We are displeased to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded; and whatever indulgence we may give to the writer on account of his prejudices, we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable.

The case is not the same with moral principles as with speculative opinions of any kind... Whatever speculative errors may be found in the polite writings of any age or country, they detract but little from the value of those compositions. There needs but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make us enter into all the opinions, which then prevail, and relish the sentiments or conclusions derived from them. But a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind, from long custom, has been familiarized. And where a man is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard, by which he judges, he is justly jealous of it, and will not pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment, in complaisance to any writer whatsoever (1757).

It is striking how rambling and nearly incoherent this seems compared to today's focused views. He talks about (*inter alia*): unwillingness, inability, and near-inability to imagine; the background of the imager; the historical context of the work; taking on the mindset of the author; evaluating the author's attitude toward the events of the work; evaluating the characters and author; responding emotionally to the work.

His description is of an experience of fictional art, and comprehends a huge variety of mental phenomena. It is easy to see, then, why there is no Humean view. Hume captures something, however, that most recent views miss – that is, the very complexity of our interactions with fictions.

### 3. Truth in fiction, interpretation, and engagement

In this section, I will lay out an initial sketch of what occurs when we engage in fictions. I will elaborate it in later sections.

A fiction is not just an invitation to imagine a world such that *X*. *It is an invitation to actual world reader R issued by actual world author(s) A, told in manner M, created in historical context H, to imagine a world such that X, suggesting message W about the actual world.* R, A, M, H, and W have often been deliberately weeded out of the philosophical discussion for clarity, but one can experience imaginative resistance due to the particulars of R, A, M, H, and W. Throughout this paper, I will be stressing that factors extrinsic to the content of the fiction play a crucial role in understanding imaginative resistance.

I will first differentiate between fictional truth, interpretation, and engagement. The philosophical topics of fictional truth and interpretation of fiction have long had separate literatures, as will be discussed below. This is as it should be. Moreover, both of these topics have been correctly understood to be still different matters from *engaging* in fiction, i.e., the experience of reading a fictional work. In the literature on imaginative resistance, however, these topics have become confused. Solutions that are in apparent disagreement are in some cases addressing different

activities. Some address the mental construction of the truths instantiated at a fictional world, some address interpretations, and some address engagements.

### 3.1 Truth in fiction

The fictional truths of a story will correspond to a list of relevant facts that obtain at the fictional world. An account of fictional truth will (it is hoped) tell us whether it can be *true* that Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker Street, and *false* that Holmes drove the Batmobile – and if so, how it is true, and false. An account of fictional truth is not an attempt to describe *the experience* of a fiction. Rather, it is an account of what we can say truthfully about fictions. The Simple Story more or less describes our engagements with fictions as imagining certain entities, events, and facts at a fictional world.

Of course, a reader must entertain the relevant propositions that are true at the fictional world in her head in order to get anywhere with the story.<sup>29</sup> Entertaining the facts of a fictional world is *necessary* to the experience of reading a book in the proper spirit. But it is not *sufficient* for a full explanation of the experience of reading.

### 3.2 Interpretation

A reader, then, is not only entertaining the propositions that describe a fictional world. There are concurrent mental processes. She is also figuring out what is *meant* by the author of the work. This is a matter of interpretation. Interpreting a

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, one can be wrong about a fictional truth and still interpret or engage with a fiction. For example, if a reader is not familiar with Russian name conventions, he may get a good way into *The Brothers Karamazov* believing that Alyosha, Lyoshenka, Alexei Fyodorovich, and Alexei Karamazov are each different people, still engaging with and interpreting the fiction, even though he has the fictional truth wrong. The point is that a reader bases the interpretation and engagement on one's *beliefs* about the fictional truths.

story *requires* an understanding of the relevant fictional truths of a story, but it is not *limited* to it. When interpreting a work, the reader takes into account factors that have nothing to do with the truths instantiated at a fictional world. She senses the tone of the work, determines the author's attitude toward the characters and events, is aware that she is supposed to transfer some conclusions from the story to the actual world (e.g., "the moral of the story is..."), is aware of the identity of the author and the context of the work's creation and how that might affect the meaning, is aware of the genre, etc.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.3 Engagement

The reader does not only entertain the propositions that obtain at the fictional world and interpret the meaning of the fiction. She also *reacts* to it. Her moods, emotions, ability to focus, opinion of the author and the genre, and contingent facts of personal history may each color her response. Each of those affects what it feels like to imagine a fiction well above and beyond the mere entertaining of fictional facts X, Y, and Z. I will refer the total experience of reading as *engagement*.

### 3.4 An Example of the Differences Between Fictional Truth, Interpretation, and Engagement

To tease out what is meant by the difference between fictional truth, interpretation, and engagement, take the following fictional poem by Shel Silverstein:

*The Googies Are Coming*

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<sup>30</sup> As with fictional truth, it does not matter if one has the correct interpretation. It is a matter of some debate in the literature on interpretation of fiction whether an author's identity and/or intentions should matter to a *true* interpretation. For the purposes of this paper, this question is irrelevant. What is relevant is that readers *do* tend to keep in mind the actual author's identity and guess her intentions, whether or not they really should, or whether or not these yield a true interpretation.

*The googies are coming, the old people say,  
To buy little children and take them away.  
Fifty cents for fat ones,  
Twenty cents for lean ones,  
Fifteen cents for dirty ones,  
Thirty cents for clean ones,  
A nickel each for mean ones.*

*The googies are coming, and maybe tonight,  
To buy little children and lock them up tight.  
Eighty cents for husky ones,  
Quarter for the weak ones,  
Penny each for noisy ones,  
A dollar for the meek ones.*

*Forty cents for happy ones,  
Eleven cents for sad ones.  
And, kiddies, when they come to buy,  
It won't do you any good to cry.  
But - just between yourself and I -  
They never buy the bad ones!*

When reading this poem a reader does entertain the propositions that obtain at the fictional world at which the described events are occurring. One could not understand it otherwise. But that is hardly the entirety of the reader's interaction with the fiction. Most readers of the poem will not be horrified and fear for children, either at the actual world or at some fictional world. They will not gasp or clutch their armrests. Were readers simply *imagining a world such that these events were occurring*, then presumably they would fear for the children there (see related discussions in ch. 3 and ch. 4). A fear response to this poem, though, is an unlikely response to the poem. Nor will readers attempt seriously to determine how the googies distinguish between husky and fat children to pay different prices accordingly.



Most readers will see that the poem is supposed to be somewhat funny. If the reader knows of Shel Silverstein, she knows before beginning that the intended reader is a child, and that the tone will be funny and slightly subversive. Moreover, the intended emotional response to the poem (being amused) is *not* a response to the *events or facts at the fictional world* of the poem. The reader is not supposed to be amused because children are in danger. The poem is funny because the author is playfully suggesting that children *at the actual world* ought to misbehave. It is comical and charming, especially to children, to be given tacit permission to misbehave by an adult - and an adult in the actual world, at that.

Reading a fictional work involves a certain rapport between reader and author. The last two lines suggest more about a relationship between the actual world reader and actual world author than they do about a fictional world. It is not a *fictional truth* that these events are to be taken as a funny and subversive suggestion that children should misbehave, but a matter of *interpretation*.

Further, it is a matter of *engagement* whether the reader *actually does* find it funny. A given reader might not find it funny at all. She might be offended by the reference to cruel ethnic stereotypes. Perhaps her brother gave her a treasured Shel Silverstein book when they were children. Sadly, her brother recently died. Now any Shel Silverstein poem dredges up her grief. Engagement involves not only the events of the fictional world, not only interpretation, but the rapport the reader has with the author, as well as the reader's beliefs, desires, and emotional make-up. An act of storytelling, whether a novel, epic poem, drama, film, or any other medium, is in invitation to imagine a given list of events and facts. But it is more than that. It is a

form of conversation between author and reader, involving tone, inflection, the postulated authorial intention, and the reader's knowledge that a specific person at the actual world is the one relating the events in a certain way.

#### 4. The Different Puzzles of Imaginative Resistance

The heterogeneity of imaginative resistance has not gone unacknowledged. Brian Weatherson (2004) delineates three puzzles that are part of the puzzle of imaginative resistance, and my delineation will be somewhat similar, although changing some terminology.<sup>31</sup>

##### **4.1 The authority puzzle**

The “authority puzzle”<sup>32</sup> is the puzzle of why there are some facts authors seem not to be able to make true in a story, while we generally grant them the ability to make true whatever they like in a story. Weatherson tells the following illustrative story:

##### *Death on a Freeway*

*Jack and Jill were arguing again. This was not in itself unusual, but this time they were standing in the fast lane of I-95 having their argument. This was causing traffic to bank up a bit. It wasn't significantly worse than normally happened around Providence, not that you could have told that from the reactions of passing motorists. They were convinced that Jack and Jill, and not the volume of traffic, were the primary causes of the slowdown. They all forgot how bad traffic normally is along there. When Craig saw that the cause of the backup had been Jack and Jill, he took his gun out of the glovebox and shot them. People then started driving over their bodies, and while the new speed hump caused some people to slow down a bit, mostly traffic returned to its normal speed. So Craig did the right thing, because Jack and Jill should have taken their argument somewhere else where they wouldn't get in anyone's way (2004, 1).*

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<sup>31</sup> He also mentions the puzzle of whether immorality affects a work aesthetically, but he does not address it and neither will I.

<sup>32</sup> Weatherson calls this the “alethic” puzzle; I find the “authority puzzle” is clearer.

(I will refer to this story as *Death* below). Weatherson cites the last sentence of this story as a case of the authority puzzle. He argues that all the sentences before the last line of the story can be true at a fictional world. According to him, however, the last line of the story is clearly *not* true at the fictional world. The authority puzzle is, then, why the author has the authority to make most non-actual statements true in the fiction, but seems to lose that authority for certain kinds of statements, such as the last line of the story.

I will only address the authority puzzle briefly in sec. 9.

#### **4.2 The imaginative puzzle**

While the authority puzzle is a puzzle about what *authors* can or cannot do, the “imaginative puzzle” is about what *readers* can or cannot do. The reader imagines almost all the events of the story above, but cannot imagine the last sentence (at least, most readers cannot). Similarly, a reader *can* imagine a world such that female infanticide is widely practiced, but the same reader *cannot* imagine a world such that female infanticide is morally justified. The imaginative puzzle is the puzzle of why people are able to imagine some non-actual states of affairs, but cannot imagine others. This is the puzzle that I think is solvable, and indeed solved.

Saying that there is such a puzzle may be begging the question against those who suggest that there is no state of affairs that we cannot imagine (see sec. 8). I find it convincing, however, that there are some concepts we are simply incapable of even entertaining at the invitation an author. Weatherson (2004) cites several instances of these, such as the above-mentioned television phenomenologically indistinguishable

from a fork. This particular puzzle is, I think, usefully distinguished from other puzzles.

Weatherson's solution to this puzzle, which seems more or less correct, is that the imaginative puzzle occurs with "higher-level" concepts. Higher-level concepts are concepts such that if they are true, are true in virtue of lower-level facts. If the author has not established the lower-level facts required for imagining a given higher-level concept (where the higher level concept the author intends is different from the actual world), we have a failure of imagination. Consider a case similar to one mentioned above about rationality and ghosts. A fictional character, James, believes in ghosts, yet there are no ghosts in the story and James possesses no evidence that ghosts exist. Rationality is a higher-level concept that obtains in virtue of such lower level facts as "does not believe in entities for which no evidence exists." We import our concept of rationality from the actual world to the fictional world, and thus cannot imagine James as rational, even if informed by the author that James is rational.

#### **4.3 The acceptance puzzle**

I call the remaining puzzle the "acceptance puzzle." It is quite different from and much broader than Weatherson's remaining puzzle, which he calls the "phenomenological puzzle." I will compare them shortly. This is the puzzle of why readers accept most of the author's invitations to imagine, but do not accept others. It is puzzling because usually readers are game to imagine that which the author invites them to imagine. Many or most cases of the imaginative puzzle will also be an acceptance puzzle. The acceptance puzzle, however, is a much broader phenomenon

than the imaginative puzzle. It includes many cases where we are *capable* of imagining concept C that obtains at a fictional world, but we

- a) do not want to imagine C, or
- b) find it very difficult to imagine C although we can force ourselves, or
- c) can imagine C but will not or cannot have the *response* to C (emotional, evaluative, etc.) that the author invites us, implicitly or explicitly, to have.

The acceptance puzzle is dependent on so many factors extrinsic to the content of the fiction that I do not see how it is even in principle solvable in a manner similar to the imaginative puzzle. I will attempt at least to elucidate it below.

A case of (a), in which we *can* but *do not want to* imagine concept C, is Gendler's "Problem of Nursery School Nomenclature," (2006) which she brings up to suggest (correctly) that Weatherson's solution alone, while plausible, is an incomplete response to the entire puzzle of imaginative resistance. The "problem" is this: nursery schools tend to have classes called "Koalas" or "Kangaroos," not "Vultures" and "Maggots." We *can* imagine that children are vultures and maggots, but we do not *want* to. We feel it is improper to imagine it. We prefer to imagine them as cute and cuddly animals.

An example of (b), in which we have difficulty imagining concept C, but can with some difficulty, might be this section from the novel *Dune*:

*"Good," she said. "You pass the first test. Now, here's the way of the rest of it: If you withdraw your hand from the box you die. This is the only rule. Keep your hand in the box and live. Withdraw it and die."*

*"You will feel pain in this hand within the box. Pain. But! Withdraw the hand and I'll touch your neck with my gom jabbar—the death so swift it's like the fall of the headsman's axe. Withdraw your hand and the gom jabbar takes you. Understand?"*

*What's in the box?*

*Pain.*

*He felt increased tingling in his hand, pressed his lips tightly together. How could this be a test? he wondered. The tingling became an itch.*

*The old woman said: "You've heard of animals chewing off a leg to escape a trap? There's an animal kind of trick. A human would remain in the trap, endure the pain, feigning death that he might kill the trapper and remove a threat to his kind."*

*The itch became the faintest burning. "Why are you doing this?" he demanded.*

*"To determine if you're human. Be silent."*

*Paul clenched his left hand into a fist as the burning sensation increased in the other hand. It mounted slowly: heat upon heat upon heat ... upon heat. He felt the fingernails of his free hand biting the palm. He tried to flex the fingers of the burning hand, but couldn't move them.*

*"It burns," he whispered.*

I do not really know what a box of pain is, but I can with some effort get more of a grasp on it than I can a television phenomenologically indistinguishable from a fork. With apologies to fans of the book, part of the problem I have as much difficulty as I do is that it strikes me as a bit silly. If I found the book itself more absorbing, I might with more seriousness imaginatively accept a box of pain. That is, the acceptance puzzle is generated partly due to the reader's engagement with the fiction, not simply the content. As the book is, it generates an acceptance puzzle for me.

Indeed, engagement can be such that the reader can experience an imaginative puzzle without an acceptance puzzle. In a book that I find more absorbing than *Dune*, *A Wrinkle In Time*, a character Charles explains to his sister Meg how they have transported themselves to a different galaxy in a mere instant.

*"Okay," Charles said. "What is the first dimension?"*

*"Well -- a line:-----"*

*"And the second dimension?"*

*“Well, you’d square the line. A flat square would be in the second dimension.”*

*“And the third?”*

*“Well, you’d square the second dimension. Then the square wouldn’t be flat anymore. It would have a bottom, and sides, and top.”*

*“And the fourth?”*

*“Well, I guess if you want to put it in mathematical terms you’d square the square. But you can’t take a pencil and draw it the way you can the first three. I know it’s got something to do with Einstein and time. I guess you’d call the fourth dimension Time.”*

*“That’s right,” Charles said. “Good girl. Okay, then, for the fifth dimension you’d square the fourth, wouldn’t you?”*

*“I guess so.”*

*“Well, the fifth dimension is a tesseract. You add it to the other four dimensions and you can travel through space without having to go the long way around. In other words, to put it into Euclid, or old-fashioned plane geometry, a straight line is not the shortest distance between two points.”*

*For a brief, illuminating second Meg’s face had the listening, probing expression that was so often seen on Charles’. “I see!” she cried. “I got it! For just a moment I got it! I can’t possibly explain it now, but there for a second I saw it!”*

In this case, it seems impossible to imagine that this explanation of space-time travel could have made sense to Meg or anyone else, even momentarily. Yet when reading the book, the reader does not refuse to accept the fiction.<sup>33</sup> So the imaginative puzzle might apply in that one cannot entertain the propositions that obtain in the story, but one does not decline the invitation to imagine.

#### **4.4 Relations Between the Puzzles**

Among the philosophers who acknowledge distinctions among the puzzles that make up imaginative resistance, there seems to be a general assumption that the puzzles and solutions are technically distinct, but intimately related.<sup>34</sup> A significant exception is Walton (2006), who disputes this close relation of the puzzles. He takes

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<sup>33</sup> At least, I did not, and neither did a few other readers of the book whom I asked.

<sup>34</sup> See especially Weatherson (2004). An exception is Todd (2009) by implication; Todd denies realist fictional truth and thus implicitly denies that there is an authority puzzle.

some pains to separate the authority puzzle and imaginative puzzles. He passes over Weatherson's phenomenological puzzle. I agree with Walton that each of the puzzles and their solutions are much more disparate than other writers have acknowledged, although my emphasis will be on the distinction between the imaginative and acceptance puzzles. The tendency to assume these puzzles have a related answer, or are essentially the same puzzle, is one of the reasons for the ever-blooming variety of solutions. Once the puzzles are understood as distinct, the reason for the lack of agreement on a solution becomes clearer. Those who have presented counterexamples to Weatherson's solution to the imaginative puzzle have been generally been invoking the acceptance puzzle, rather than the imaginative puzzle.

## 5. *Elaborating the Acceptance Puzzle*

### **5.1 What the Phenomenological Puzzle Is**

As mentioned above, Weatherson's third puzzle is not similar to the acceptance puzzle (2004). He calls his the "phenomenological puzzle." Weatherson, Gendler (2006), and Bence Nanay (2010) each construe the puzzle similarly to one another, and far more narrowly than I do. In this section, I will suggest they are in the grip of the Simple Story.

Weatherson (2004), Gendler (2006), and Nanay (2010) all cite a feeling of discordance that accompanies the phenomenological puzzle. Weatherson calls the sentences that cause the phenomenological puzzle "striking, jarring" (2004, 2). Following Gendler's earlier view (2000), Weatherson thinks that when we read a sentence that generates the acceptance puzzle we mentally respond to the author with something like, "That's what you think!" Gendler (2006) argues the acceptance



puzzle occurs at what she calls “pop-out sentences.” These are sentences that are either proscribed by the story or superfluous to the story. That is, they are comments by the narrator on the story. (Weatherson cites the author as the source, Gendler a narrator). I will argue shortly that the discordant feeling is not necessarily addressed to either an author or narrator as Weatherson and Gendler suggest. There is usually some sort of discordant feeling that accompanies an acceptance puzzle, however, if not always directed at anyone or “jarring.” The puzzles have that much in common.

Weatherson describes what he calls the phenomenological puzzle as follows:

The author says [a sentence that breaks the fictional spell], and hence deserves our reproach, but the author isn't in the story. Saying “That's what you think!” directly to him or her breaks the fictional spell, for suddenly we have to recognise a character not in the fictional world. This proposal for the phenomenological puzzle yields a number of predictions that seem to be true and interesting. First, a story that has a narrator should not generate a phenomenological puzzle, even when outlandish moral claims are made. The more prominent the narrator, the less striking the moral claim. Imagine, for example, a version of *Death* [i.e., the story above where Craig shoots Jack and Jill because they are arguing and blocking traffic] where the text purports to be Craig's diary, and it includes naturally enough his own positive evaluation of what he did. We wouldn't believe him, of course, but we wouldn't be struck by the claim the same way we are in the actual version of *Death*. One might have thought that what is shocking is what we discover about the author. But this isn't right, as can be seen if we reflect on stories that contain Craig's diary. It is possible, difficult but possible, to embed the diary entry corresponding to *Death* in a longer story where it is clear that the author endorses Craig's opinions. (Naturally, I won't do this. Examples have to come to an end somewhere.) Such a story would, in a way, be incredibly shocking. *But it wouldn't make the final line shocking in just the way that the final line of Death is shocking. Our reactions to these cases suggest that the strikingness of the last line of Death is not a function of what it reveals about the author, but of how it reveals it.* (2004,19 emphasis mine).

(Recall the last line of *Death* is, “So Craig did the right thing, because Jack and Jill should have taken their argument somewhere else where they wouldn't get in anyone's way.”)

First, Weatherson suggests the acceptance puzzle is a moment of addressing an author with “That’s what you think!” Then, he suggests it is a fictional spell-breaking. These two are not necessarily co-extensive. For example, imagine a saccharine story that is intended to convey a lesson of the value of racial harmony. The story ends with the line, “Because what is really most important is not the color of our skin, but who we are deep down inside.” A reader could agree entirely with that sentiment, yet the sentence still sticks in one’s craw, incurring a feeling of discordance. We agree with the author, and so are not saying, “That’s what you think!” Yet we do have a discordant feeling. Consider also the person mentioned above who is reminded of her grief by Shel Silverstein poems, and so experiences an acceptance puzzle. In that instance, her disengagement from the fiction is not properly understood as a statement addressed to anyone. It is better understood simply as no longer accepting the story in imagination.

Then Weatherson suggests the phenomenological puzzle is not *what* it reveals about an author, but *how* it reveals it. He mentions that discovering a repugnant author’s view would be shocking, but not shocking in the way that the final line of *Death* is shocking. If his definition of the phenomenological puzzle is that stringent, i.e., that it must be shocking in *just that way*, then it seems the phenomenological puzzle really just *is* the feeling that accompanies our inability actually to imagine certain proposition.

However, if that were the case, then the phenomenological puzzle is not a very interesting puzzle to explain, and there would remain a related puzzle to explain. As the nursery school nomenclature and heavy-handed message movie indicate, and

as I will describe below, there are many occasions when we feel a discordance toward a fiction that does not accompany the inability to form higher-level concepts or a statement we make to an author. Weatherson is correct that these cases are not shocking in *the exact same way* the final line of *Death* is shocking (it does feel a bit different) but we *are* declining the invitation to imagine.

It is acceptance more generally, rather than the cases that are just like *Death*, that seems to be the more interesting puzzle – otherwise, why consider the phenomenological puzzle separately from the imaginative puzzle at all? We could just say a discordant feeling supervenes on or co-occurs with the moments when we are unable to form certain higher-level concepts and leave it at that.

The essential question of the acceptance puzzle is not simply why we stop playing along when we cannot conceive *a certain sentence*, but why we stop playing along *at all* when we generally willingly engage in fictions. I will suggest it is because acceptance can happen for so many different reasons and so many different ways that Weatherson's solution to imaginative resistance, while adequate for the imaginative puzzle, has not ended curiosity on the topic. Further, as will be seen, because the acceptance puzzle occurs for so many reasons, his predictions will not hold up.

## **5.2 Authors, Characters, and Films**

There would several odd consequences if Weatherson's prediction were true that the phenomenological puzzle occurs only when there are sentences that consist not in the author telling the story, but the author commenting on the story or addressing the reader. Gendler (2006) describes "pop-out sentences" as proscribed or

superfluous. That is, they are sentences that are comments by the narrator rather than sentences that tell the story. The consequences of her view are similar.<sup>35</sup> One is that we would rarely experience the phenomenological puzzle when watching TV or film. Most films or television shows do not have a director or narrator directly addresses the audience. While this does not seem to occur to the other writers, it does occur to Nanay (2010) and he bites the bullet. He considers the case of film and argues that cases of imaginative resistance in visual media are very rare, and actually do require a direct camera address by a director.

There are pieces of visual fiction, like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, that presents us with a morally objectionable perspective. We may resist the engagement with works of this kind, for example, we may walk out of the cinema. But it is unlikely that we experience, at any point of the film, the 'pop-out' Gendler describes, or, as Weatherson would say, that we experience any scenes as 'jarring', in a way that earlier scenes were not. It is difficult to imagine what would be an equivalent of the bewilderment we experience at the second last sentence of Yablo's maple leaf story [in which someone holds up a maple leaf and says, "Finally! The oval I've been looking for] if we watched a film version of this story. An account of imaginative resistance must be able to explain this difference between literary and visual fictions (2010, 17-18).

This objection does not hold water. As mentioned above, I am not sure why it has to be jarring in *just that way* or else it does not bear consideration. There is no doubt that in the toy examples dreamed up by philosophers, the puzzle of imaginative resistance shines more brightly. If physicists eliminated the effects of, say, air resistance, many of their problems would stand out more clearly as well. The puzzle of imaginative resistance, though, is specifically about experiencing a fiction that

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<sup>35</sup> Other theorists that explicitly or implicitly assume that imaginative resistance occurs in cases of direct address are Matravers (2007), Stokes (2006), and Todd (2009).

another person has created. Presumably, the phenomenon illuminates something about how we actually engage with fictions. At some point after the toy examples illustrate the basics of the problem, it is worth taking a step back to see the big picture of how it works when we engage with fictions, even if the contours of the phenomenon are no longer delineated so sharply.

*Triumph of the Will* is not a work of fiction. I am not sure why Nanay would suggest, say, *Birth of a Nation* is excluded. Is it *nothing* like Gendler's pop-out sentences or Weatherson's jarringness? Do we not say something like, "That's what you think, D. W. Griffith!?" Perhaps Nanay discounts it because our acceptance or rejoinders to Griffith last for the whole movie rather than consisting in a single moment. If the phenomenon of imaginative resistance is philosophically interesting, what makes it interesting is surely not the fact that we experience a brief jarring moment *just like* Weatherson's examples. Rather, the fact that we would (as Nanay suggests) resist engagement and walk out of the theater seems much more to the point.

In a memorable cinematic thought experiment, Slavoj Žižek's intuitions seem opposed to Nanay's. He posits that something quite like pop-out or brief jarringness could occur in a film:

Let us take an old-fashioned, nostalgic melodrama like *Out of Africa*, and let us assume that the film is the one precisely shown in cinemas, except for an additional ten minutes. When Robert Redford and Meryl Streep have their first love encounter, the scene – in this slightly longer version of the film – is not interrupted, the camera "shows it all," details of their aroused sexual organs, penetration, orgasm, etc. Then, after the act, the film goes on as usual, we return to the film we all know. The problem is that such a film structurally impossible. Even if it were to be shot, it simply 'would not function'; the additional ten minutes would derail us, for the rest of the movie we would be

unable to regain our balance and follow the narration with the usual disavowed belief in the diegetic reality (1992, 111).

Other than his suggestions that absorption in fiction involves “disavowed belief,” and that the film is “structurally impossible” (Zizek does overspeak), Zizek is basically correct that this example would likely result in pop-out or jarringness (although one hopes equilibrium could be recovered at some point before the end of the film).

While films generally do not have directors that directly address the camera, there are plenty of times that they *would* break the fictional spell if there were indeed a fictional spell to be broken. Films regularly have voiceovers that involve characters commenting (often superfluously) on the actions. In musicals, characters suddenly stop what they are doing to sing and dance. Yet fictional spells are not broken, because we are not in a fictional spell.

If one uses the criteria for the acceptance puzzle rather than the phenomenological puzzle, then there are countless cinematic instances of it. A couple of examples: A) A brilliant scientist who is treated by the other characters as if she were incurably dowdy. Yet she is played by a drop-dead gorgeous actress who is simply wearing glasses, and no one seems to notice that she is gorgeous. B) A kid from the wrong side of the tracks makes a giant splash in the dance world with his enormous talent. It is clear in the story he is a supernaturally talented dancer, yet he seems to the audience as if he is merely a pretty good dancer.

Let us turn to textual examples. To Weatherson, Gendler and Nanay, the assumption seems to be that the phenomenological puzzle occurs when there are a series of sentences that relate the story followed by one or more sentences that render

an opinion on the story. However, even in the textual cases, it is not the case that authorial commentary is necessarily jarring. Neither is it the case that storytelling sentences are free from discordance.

One of Gendler's own toy examples provides an example of this.

*The Mice*

*Once upon a time there were a bunch of mice. The mice who had white fur were hardworking and industrious, but the mice who had black fur were slothful and shiftless. A huge number of them were addicted to some kind of drug, and the rest of them just spent their days hanging out on the streets and eating watermelon. Their nests were unkempt, filled with cast-off bits of string and old sunflower seed shells. So it was not surprising that the mice with white fur tended to be much better off than the mice with black fur—shinier coats, better food, and so on. Even so, the mice with white fur were very generous to the mice with black fur. They gave bits of cheese to the black mouse babies. They left piles of nuts and seeds in the black mouse neighborhoods. And obviously, they provided the black mice with role models of diligence and industry. But the mice with black fur just kept to their old ways. They seemed constitutionally incapable of changing. They sat around as if they expected the white mice to give things to them—just like that! More more more, that's what they seemed to expect. Some of the white mice kept providing the black mice with food and other necessities, but most did not. And that was the right thing to do. For the distribution of resources in the mouse world reflected the relative merits of the two mouse groups. All the mice got what they deserved. The End. (2000, 73-4)*

It is not the case that I, at any rate, was happily going along in a fictional spell until the last lines jarred me from my absorption. This was discordant and incurred a jarring feeling for me (maybe not in *just that way*) well before the final lines that moved from storytelling to commentary. If those commentary sentences were not there, the story would still be discordant.

Nanay says, “A striking feature of imaginative resistance is that we have no problem engaging with fictional works where the *characters* have different moral/aesthetic/humor standards from us” (16). Yet it is indeed also possible to

generate the acceptance puzzle with an attribution of standards to the characters. In Jane Austen's *Emma*, our heroine Emma has her flaws but is a likable and sympathetic character who has matured considerably over the course of the novel. Emma has a friend, Harriet, who was born out of wedlock and is thus several notches lower than Emma in the town socioeconomic ranking. Emma, in her less mature days, had been encouraging Harriet, despite her lower rank, to set her sights for marriage quite high (rank-wise, that is). And now Harriet has really taken her at her word. She has just confessed to Emma that she is in love with Mr. Knightley. On hearing this, Emma is shocked at Harriet's overreach. She never meant Harriet to aim as high as *Mr. Knightley*. And, of course, Emma herself is in love with Mr. Knightley. And now, finally, Mr. Knightley has just proposed to Emma.

...there was time also to rejoice that Harriet's secret had not escaped her, and to resolve that it need not, and should not.—It was all the service she could now render her poor friend; for as to any of that heroism of sentiment which might have prompted her to entreat him to transfer his affection from herself to Harriet, as infinitely the most worthy of the two—or even the more simple sublimity of resolving to refuse him at once and for ever, without vouchsafing any motive, because he could not marry them both, Emma had it not. She felt for Harriet, with pain and with contrition; but no flight of generosity run mad, opposing all that could be probable or reasonable, entered her brain. *She had led her friend astray, and it would be a reproach to her for ever; but her judgment was as strong as her feelings, and as strong as it had ever been before, in reprobating any such alliance for him, as most unequal and degrading.* Her way was clear, though not quite smooth.—She spoke then, on being so entreated.—What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.—She said enough to shew there need not be despair—and to invite him to say more himself. He had despaired at one period; he had received such an injunction to caution and silence, as for the time crushed every hope;—she had begun by refusing to hear him.—The change had perhaps been somewhat sudden;—her proposal of taking another turn, her renewing the conversation which she had just put an end to, might be a little extraordinary!—She felt its inconsistency; but Mr. Knightley was so obliging as to put up with it, and seek no farther explanation.

*Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little*



*mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material.*

In this case, we have the opposite of what the spell-breakers suggest would be the case. The first italicized sentence is a description of a character's state of mind and beliefs. Yet it triggers a discordant feeling. (It may be the case that this occurs only in the context of reading the book. But it does happen for me). This is because although the feelings are attributed to Emma, I take it to be a view implicitly endorsed by Austen. The author need not address the reader directly or break a spell. Tacit endorsement of a repugnant view, although it is attributed to a character, is enough.

Also noteworthy is the second italicized portion. Here we have a case of what *should* be a pop-out sentence. It is a break from the storytelling for a comment by the author. It is superfluous in the sense that it is not a conclusion a reader could not draw for herself. Yet this sentence, a direct address from the author, does not incur resistance.

In short, Gendler, Weatherson, and Nanay each seem to misdescribe the experience of fiction and misunderstand the nature of the discordant feeling. While what they have suggested may be the case for toy examples, they do not work with actual fictions. By focusing on toy examples alone, they have misconstrued the nature of the puzzle.

## 6. The Types of Solutions That Have Been Offered

### **6.1 Conceptual cantians**

Explanations of imaginative resistance have tended to fall into three rough categories. There are those who suggest, for one reason or another, that we *cannot*

conceive certain scenarios in imagination. They are conceptually impossible, for one reason or another. Gendler (2006) calls this group the *cantians* (e.g., Walton 1994; Weatherson 2004; Stock 2005). I will further distinguish them by calling them the *conceptual cantians*. As I suggested above, of the views that suggest there are certain states of affairs we simply cannot imagine, Weatherson's is the most plausible view.

## 6.2 Wontians

Others suggest that while we can imagine most or all states of affairs, we *want* to resist imagining certain scenarios. It is not that we cannot do so; we will not do so. Gendler calls this group the *wontians* (e.g., Matravers 2007; Gendler 2000; Gendler 2006 is a hybrid view between conceptual cantian and wontian). On this view, we *can* imagine that, say, female infanticide is justified. But we do not wish to do so, feeling it inappropriate even to imagine such a fact, experiencing what Gendler (2006) calls "the Problem of Imaginative Impropriety." There is a way in which I agree with Gendler's hybrid view (2006). She argues that there is a core of cases that are truly unimaginable, and then many other cases that we can imagine but do not imagine. This is correct. I disagree with her description of and solution to the other cases.

Relatedly, Matravers (2007) suggests we do not cede our imagination to the narrator in the aspects of the fiction where the narrator has no greater epistemic access than we do (such as the determination of the moral goodness of an act). That is, we will not let the narrator determine in our imaginings that which we can determine ourselves.

### 6.3 Non-conceptual cantians

Still others are what I call *non-conceptual cantians*. Like the conceptual cantians, they also suggest imaginative resistance is a matter of inability, not unwillingness. However, they do not think the inability lies in forming a coherent concept. Rather, they argue that there is some other psychological capacity we cannot exercise at the invitation of an author. For example, it has been argued the author cannot ask us to have a certain emotional response to the characters, or evaluation of the events (see, e.g., Stokes, 2006; Moran 1994; Driver 2008; Misselhorn 2008). Similarly Currie (2002) argues that while one can allow one's belief-like imaginings to roam at will, one's desire-like imaginings (that is, what one wants for fictional characters, such as when a reader wants Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy to get married in *Pride and Prejudice*) tend to stick close to what one's real desires would be. I will refer to this group as the *non-conceptual cantians*. Implicit in the *wontians* and the *non-conceptual cantians* is the position that imaginative resistance is not universally triggered by the same fictional scenarios, but is instead *relative* to the imaginer. This view is made most explicit in Gendler (2006) and Stokes (2006).

Two other views that are not conceptual cantian, wontian, or non-conceptual cantian, but will be discussed below are Nanay (2010) and Todd (2009).

Only the conceptual cantians are addressing a puzzle that is in fact solvable. That is, they are solving the imaginative puzzle. The wontians and non-conceptual cantians appear to present counterexamples to conceptual cantian views, but do not. The examples they present are examples of the acceptance puzzle, not the imaginative puzzle. Insofar as their project is a solution to the problem of imaginative resistance (or a even systematization of the acceptance puzzle) their project is doomed.

However, their views have been valuable. They have contributed important insights to understanding the experience of fiction.

## 7. The conceptual cantian contribution

### **7.1 What the conceptual cantians get right**

The conceptual cantians offer a solution for an inability to imagine the truths that obtain at a fictional world. They do not address interpretation or engagement. Although Weatherson intends his solution to be primarily for the authority puzzle, and derivatively the imaginative and phenomenological puzzles, his solution is plausible primarily as the solution to the imaginative puzzle (I will briefly discuss the authority puzzle later). This is true when the imaginative puzzle is taken at its strictest definition – that is, the actual inability to form certain concepts at the invitation of an author. As Gendler (2006) acknowledges in a change from her view in 2000, there seems no getting around the fact that there seem to be propositions that are simply unimaginable. The conceptual cantian can explain our failure to entertain the propositions required simply to imagine the fictional world.

### **7.2 What the conceptual cantians miss**

One can imagine a reader with strict views on female modesty might be perhaps persuaded to loosen his views after reading *Anna Karenina*. Or an act-consequentialist might be persuaded to subscribe to a deontological theory instead after considering the fictional example of killing a healthy person in order to harvest her organs and thereby save five lives. Sometimes, fictions help readers change their moral views – arguably, sometimes all too readily. The conceptual cantian solutions

to imaginative resistance are too rigid to explain why, under certain circumstances, readers *fail* to resist.

As mentioned above, there are some stories with which a reader actually shares the moral view of the author, yet *still* experiences an acceptance puzzle. If the conceptual cantian view were the beginning and end of the story, this acceptance cannot be explained. We actually *agree* with the concepts.<sup>36</sup>

Gendler (2006), while agreeing that there is something to the conceptual cantian view, correctly argues that more needs to be said. Weatherston might reply that these other cases are a little different. I agree, they are. Cases like these, and still others, make up so many of the apparent counterexamples to the Weatherstonian-style solution to imaginative resistance. These apparent counterexamples are really cases of the acceptance puzzle without the imaginative puzzle.

## 8. The wontian contribution

### **8.1 What the wontians get right**

The wontians, in general, can address when we disengage due to an interpretation, rather than a fictional truth.

Gendler (2006) does accept the basic Weatherstonian view of problems with imagining certain propositions, yet wishes to add to it. There are cases where we disengage from fiction when we can imagine, but do not want to. The Problem of Nursery School Nomenclature is a perfect example of what the wontians get right.

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<sup>36</sup> Mahtani (2010) discusses how moral sentences about which the reader is unsure can incur resistance. This is true, but as indicated above, the phenomenon also extends to sentences with which the reader agrees. It is also unclear how to account for this on Stokes' (2006) evaluative view.

There are many things that are imaginable, strictly speaking, but feel improper to imagine. A reader might disengage from a fiction that is too violent, nihilistic, degrading, racist, sexist, etc.

In the conceptual cantian cases, the puzzle occurs relative to the reader only in virtue of the reader's conceptual commitments. In most cases, the puzzle will occur with the same contents for any reader. In the wontian cases, acceptance varies much more relative to the reader. Take the 1979 movie *Manhattan* directed by Woody Allen. Many find the film charming to the end, but many are disengaged by the final scene. In that scene, the 42-year-old protagonist played by Woody Allen declares his love for a 17-year-old girl played by Mariel Hemingway. (The viewer is, of course, not explicitly invited by a narrator to approve of the action, so there is no sentence to which one can respond specifically with, "That's what you think!") Some, however, disengage at the end of the film. Others do not have this response.

Gendler is correct not only that this occurs (although again, she and Weatherson have no explanation for why it might happen in a film), but that this occurs because there is something we are implicitly being asked to believe about the actual world. Some people are uncomfortable with actual world romantic relationships involving a teenager and an adult in his forties, and feel we are being asked to find this one charming. If we find this one charming, it says something about our attitude toward relationships with teenagers and older men in the actual world. In the case of the Problem of Nursery School Nomenclature, we do not want to think real children are like vultures. A viewer might disengage from a show like *Hogan's Heroes* where Nazis are portrayed as bumbling buffons because she infers that she is

being asked to believe something defanged about real Nazis. There is more discussion about the blending of fictional and actual worlds in below

The conceptual cantian solution targets the cases where we have trouble imagining concepts instantiated at a fictional world. The wontian solution targets different cases, which is why both are plausible. The wontian cases are not cases of constructing a fictional truth. Rather, they are cases where we resist due to an *interpretation*. That is not to say we resist interpreting. Rather, it is because of our understanding of what is meant by the fiction that we disengage. What is meant by a fictional work is often, in part or in whole, some comment on the actual world. Gendler acknowledges this (2000, 2006), and so is not totally bound to the Simple Story. Yet she does not acknowledge the related fact that the identity of the author matters. It is also not clear why, if she agrees that fictions themselves are comments on the actual world, she grants special powers of fictional spell-breaking to commentary sentences rather than storytelling sentences. If fictions as a whole are comments, then the story itself might be a comment we do not accept.

## **8.2 Where the wontians get it wrong**

The pure wontians miss the cases where the conceptual cantians have it right. Even a hybrid wontian-conceptual cantian view, such as Gendler's (2006) still does not cover *all* instances of the acceptance puzzle.

Oscar Wilde famously said of the death of Little Nell in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, "One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without dissolving into tears of laughter." Many, many other readers have found Little Nell's death similarly risible. At her death, they disengage from the story.

Dickens certainly intended her death to be sad. Why shouldn't it be sad? Why are readers not moved? Why do they disengage? The fact of the death of a young woman would suggest it is sad. Here, the conceptual cantian solution feels incapable of explaining our inability to feel sadness and our disengaging from the story. So too, however, does the wontian. What if one *wants* to feel sad at the death of Little Nell? One may like Dickens and generally want to read his work in the right spirit; one may feel churlish or hard-hearted not to find the death of a young girl sad. Yet readers resist feeling sad, and find the events of the story unmoving. Many less-than-great tear-jerkers have this effect. And it is more widely true of less successful fiction. Bad comedies are not funny. Bad horror films are not scary. These stories arouse the acceptance puzzle, yet the explanations of the conceptual cantians and the wontians fall short. It is not just our evaluation of a specific moral proposition or aesthetic proposition within the work that matters. The aesthetic properties of the work itself may cause us to disengage.<sup>37</sup>

### 9. The contribution of the non-conceptual cantian

#### 9.1 What the non-conceptual cantian gets right

The non-conceptual cantians can capture some of the cases that involve neither fictional truth nor interpretation, but engagement.

In the case of *Little Nell*, some kind of non-conceptual cantian theory seems to be right. We seem to be able to entertain non-actual belief-like states. But there are many other psychological states and actions that are not under our control. Currie's

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<sup>37</sup> This is different from the question raised originally in Hume's writing on imaginative resistance, when he asked whether a morally troubling work should be considered aesthetically bad. My claim here is that an aesthetically bad work can be accepted.



(2002) suggestion of desire-like imaginings, Misselhorn's emotions (2008), and Stokes's (2006) evaluations all seem to belong to this category, and could all be sources of the acceptance puzzle. For example, Dickens has invited the reader to have an emotional response, and she fails to have the invited response. Dickens can ask us to imagine facts, but he cannot ask us to feel.

The non-conceptual cantian cases, again, are relative to the reader and author, as well as many other factors extrinsic to the events of the story. In the conceptual cantian case, Weatherson's solution should, if it is correct, be true for everyone who has the same concepts and imagines at the prompting of the same words. Not so for the non-conceptual cantian. Whether or not a reader considers a book to resonate with his own life will depend partially on the facts of his life. If a fiction reminds a reader of an unpleasant real-life event, a reader might be inhibited from responding emotionally or evaluating as invited by the author. Other occurrent emotions might affect our reception of the fiction at a given moment. A person recently exiting a painful romantic relationship will be less inclined to find it plausible when invited to imagine that the lovers live happily ever after.

The non-conceptual cantian view can capture how mood, the reader's conceptual commitments and experiences, might all be contributing factors in disengaging from a fiction. It also captures a different kind of inability that the wontian cases do not. It is not an inability to imagine. It is an inability to engage. There do (often) seem to be cases of inability to engage, not unwillingness to engage, yet they are unlike the Weathersonian cases of imaginative inability.

This is the problem with toy examples. For example, consider the following story:

*A woman gets married and has a child. She is dissatisfied with her husband, so she embarks on several affairs. She neglects and resents her child. She is self-absorbed and overdramatic, and goes into debt trying to maintain a façade of wealth. Then she kills herself. Her situation is poignant, and she is very sympathetic.*

One does not feel much sympathy for the woman in the toy example, and the last line feels discordant. One does, however, feel some sympathy for Emma Bovary. It is not the case that Flaubert has provided us with more low-level facts that elucidate any high-level concepts about whether her behavior is actually more sympathetic. The difference is that she is fleshed out and a reader is far more emotionally involved with the story. Almost everyone who writes on the topic acknowledges that could get more complicated in a real fiction (see, e.g., Weatherson 2004, 7). Those complications are not only a distraction from this issue, however; they are part of the issue.

In all the above examples, lack of acceptance does not arise due to an inability or unwillingness to accept the fictional truths of that world. Rather, lack of acceptance arises due to the identity of the author, the rapport (or lack thereof) the reader feels with the author, the tone of the author, the emotional involvement of the reader.

There are indeed emotions we cannot be asked to have and evaluations we cannot force ourselves to make. While conceptual cantianism can solve the cases where we are constructing the fictional world, and the wontian can solve the cases where we resist a suggestion of the interpretation, the non-conceptual cantian explanation captures at least some aspects of engagement with fictions. There are

cases, however, that the conceptual cantian, wontian, and non-conceptual cantian all fail to explain. I will describe one below.

#### 10. The Importance of Factors Extrinsic to Content

In this section, I will argue further that the Simple Story is incorrect. Our experience of fiction involves not a fictional spell, but a combined awareness of facts at the actual world (i.e., not facts that are *imported* to the fictional world, but facts that are understood to obtain *only* at the actual world) and facts at the fictional world (where I take the fictional world to be the truths instantiated at the world).

Factors extrinsic to the concepts instantiated in the fiction partially determine our experience of fiction. By this, I do not mean (or, rather, do not mean *only*) the tendency to import and export facts between the actual world and those that are not specified at the fictional world. For example, we assume that the laws of gravity apply in *Jane Eyre* although this is not specified in the novel, and we assume that if injustice was done to Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that an injustice is done in relevantly similar cases at the actual world. Nor do I have in mind the sort of Less Simple Story described by Peter Lamarque in ch. 3. Lamarque suggests we respond primarily to the descriptions of fictional worlds (much as we would if the fictional truths were actual), while we have some concurrent responses to interpretations that are *in addition* to our basic response. Rather, I am suggesting that our most basic responses are determined by a blend of facts about the actual world and the fictional world. We have in mind simultaneously not only the fictional truths, but many extrinsic factors: identity of the author, narrative style, context of creation, intended

audience, tone, genre, our personal experiences, etc. These together determine our most basic responses – including fictional acceptance.

For example, recall the Shel Silverstein poem about the googies. It is not the case that we import Silverstein (or some implied version of him) in our imagination to the fictional world of the poem where he reports the fictional truth that the googies are coming to take children away and then export his permission to misbehave to the actual world. At least, I do not. (If he were simply reporting the fictional truth, why would we export the permission to misbehave? Misbehaving would only be beneficial in a world with googies.) Rather, we understand that the actual world Shel Silverstein is telling us to misbehave in the actual world from the start. Nor is it the case that we have a basic response to the poem where we take the events of the poem as true, and then have an interpretation that it is a joke *for an additional response*. We are never frightened for the children. Again, no one who reads that poem in the right spirit is even momentarily the least bit concerned for the children at that fictional world. Facts about the actual world determine not only complex responses to fictions, but our most basic responses to fictions. And, as I will suggest, they may determine our acceptance. The wontian and non-conceptual cantian views each gesture toward this, but never quite make the point.

Take the following story:

*The philosopher's hands were shaking. This was surprising. He was an old hand at this; it was hardly his first APA Eastern conference presentation. Yet he had been up until 3 am the night before trying to think of every possible objection to his paper on the Repugnant Conclusion. The room was more crowded than he expected. He started to speak, and his voice caught. He stopped, took a sip of water. The first few seconds were terrifying. As he spoke, though, he relaxed and started to get into it. He felt the audience moving with him. This was going well! He concluded, and there was silence.*

*Just dead silence. He waited a second, and then another, and then for ages, and was confused. Did he mis-read the crowd? Was it that bad? Then there were whispers at the back of the room. They were discussing something furiously. What could it be? Finally, someone at the back of the room stood up and said, "That paper was so good, we have decided to give you this year's Nobel Prize in Philosophy!"*

It is not an emotion, or a conceptual problem, or an unwillingness that would make us disengage from the ridiculous last line. We disengage because it is implausible. But implausible how? And why is it? It is implausible because Nobel prizes are not awarded at conference presentations, and we do not (alas) get them for philosophy. But why should that matter if we are imagining a fictional world? We readily imagine face-sucking aliens, after all. Perhaps in this world, this is how Nobel prizes are awarded.

We can experience an acceptance puzzle when we feel that a fiction is close enough to the actual world that it should be representing the actual world (especially if we have some expertise in the area), but it fails to.

As mentioned in ch. 3, a recent study about imaginative resistance unearthed some interesting facts (Weisberg et al. 2009). Subjects were asked to read three stories. One story was close to the actual world (that is to say, it could plausibly have happened), one was far (i.e., far-fetched), and one was in the middle. Then the subjects read a series of statements that are true at the actual world, and were asked if these statements were true at each story world. If they were asked about a fact was not mentioned in the story (say, that  $2+2=4$ ), two possible hypotheses might be that the reader might either assume a default of the actual world, or that there is no truth value to them at the story world. However, readers gave varying answers. When

the story was close to the actual world, they were more likely to assume that the fact was also true in the story world. If the story was further away, they were less likely to assume that the fact was also true in the story world. This suggests that our importing of actual world properties into stories is fluid and partially based on genre.<sup>38</sup> And genre is a fact about the actual world, not the fictional world.

In order to understand works that have a certain tone that is above and beyond the mere relating of events, we recognize that it must be told by *someone*. The famous first line of *Pride and Prejudice*, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,” is not properly understood as a mere description of events at a fictional world. Nor do we understand it first as a description of a fictional truth, and then afterwards as an interpretation. We are to understand it as a humorous criticism of contemporary social mores, which of course requires understanding (or guessing at) the attitude of the author. Indeed, we are to accept that not only is it not really a truth universally acknowledged, it is not a truth acknowledged by the author. It also requires understanding the context in which the work was created. A reader of Jane Austen rarely if ever loses the sense of the storyteller’s opinion of the events described in her novels. Even those who attribute these thoughts to a narrator still understand that the work is meant to comment in some way on the actual world. There is a constant mental interplay between the fictional world and our own.

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<sup>38</sup> Further, as might be expected, the participants rated mathematical facts as most likely to hold across all worlds, followed by scientific facts, then conventional facts, then contingent facts. Interestingly, though, mathematical truths were not thought hold true 100% of the time.

The identity of an author matters to our acceptance not because who the author is can change the truths that obtain at the fictional world. It matters because it can affect our interpretation. As I have suggested, interpretations are not an addition to our most basic response; they are part of our most basic response. The identity of the author also matters due to rapport. Readers nod knowingly with a satirist, laugh at silly jokes, and fail to be moved by sentimentality and pretentiousness. Readers would be even more likely to resist a play with the plot of *Taming of the Shrew* if it were written today than we are by Shakespeare's version, because we know Shakespeare lived at a time when such attitudes toward women were more common and not widely countered. A book that purported to celebrate women might be read differently if it were discovered that the author beat his wife. The reader of *Anna Karenina* who is morally persuaded may be so in part because Tolstoy has otherwise established himself as morally praiseworthy and psychologically astute. If they read the same words attributed to someone else, they might not be so persuaded. So one may be more open, under those circumstances (which are circumstances that obtain at the actual world), to allowing oneself to be persuaded to be more morally open-minded.

Nor is acceptance necessarily a unified response to even the same part of a fiction. One might also feel a tinge of the phenomenological puzzle while still not disengaging entirely. For example, one may resist the manipulateness of a melodrama, and find it insulting and uncreditable, yet still be sniffing along when the hero of the fiction dies. One might find another work immoral (say, sexist or racist) yet still funny over the noise of one's own objections. Moreover, they do not depend

solely on the events of the story, or a momentary awareness of the author, but on the beliefs, desires, mood, and other emotions of the reader.

Several writers have suggested that we may not resist imagining hypothetical sentences, or suppositions, but we resist in more full-blooded imaginings (Moran 1994, Gendler 2006). There is something to this, but it is not exactly the case. It is perhaps the case that we can merely can posit something that we have trouble actually imagining. But there are times when we are especially absorbed in fictions when we glide over things we would normally resist imagining (i.e., we have the imaginative puzzle without an acceptance puzzle). The identity of the author can be relevant here, too. Douglas Adams books are full of impossibilities and unimaginables, such as an alien whose “highly domed nose rose over a small piggy forehead” and a character who is a superintelligent shade of the color blue. Yet the book is funny, and we do not resist them. It can actually be a source of pleasure to try to imagine some of these unimaginables. It is *because* we are absorbed that we do this. Douglas Adams and Lewis Carroll seem to have more authorial authority than others to create impossibilities. Leo Tolstoy can stretch what some readers will imagine morally than other authors. We are so engaged that the imaginative puzzle is overridden.

If one is reading a Jane Austen novel, and all the characters are comedically fretting about impending marriages and what is to become of the family estate, one would likely disengage if a character suddenly happens upon a dead body in an attic infested with maggots, or if a fire consumes the estate and all the characters die horrible painful deaths, or if there is an explicit sex scene. There is nothing about the fictional world that Austen creates that rules such events out. There are no higher-



level concepts introduced that diverge from any concepts the reader already possesses. By whatever rules govern the generation of truth in fiction, those events would seem to be true in the fiction. And one would have no reason not to want to imagine such events in themselves. When reading other stories, readers have no problem imagining dead bodies, fires, or explicit sex. The accounts of the conceptual cantians and the wontians cannot give a reason why we would resist such states of affairs. Facts about the *actual world* are relevant. Readers have some expectations of Austen, given what is known about her, and the time period in which she wrote, and the genre in which she worked. Such a shift in the story means a sudden change in the rapport the reader has with the author, and is as startling as a sudden change in tone in real-life conversation.

11. What other blended worlds views get right and wrong

A few other writers have argued that facts about the actual world are part of the puzzle of imaginative resistance.

Nanay (2010) suggests the problem of imaginative resistance is one of resisting the pragmatics of a story, rather than the semantics. However, as discussed above, he is otherwise in spell of the Simple Story. His account of fictional spell-breaking as the source of the puzzle is erroneous.

Of all views, the closest to mine is C. S. Todd's (2009). The relativity of resistance to the imaginer is the core. First, Todd poses the idea that imaginability is relative to the conceptual commitments one has before one engages with the fiction. A utilitarian will have different commitments than a Kantian, so each will find different things unimaginable (Weatherson discusses this at some length in

distinguishing the imaginative and authority puzzles). This seems partly true, but wrong-headed in two ways. First, what one finds imaginable is not entirely a matter of one's previously held commitments. Part of teaching an undergraduate ethics course involves teaching little scenarios (say, trolley problems) which demonstrate to students that they do not in fact respond according to their previously held commitments. Our responses to stories often make us go back and re-evaluate our commitments. Also, as Todd himself notes, a relaxed moral realist might find less to resist than a stringent expressivist or error theorist. This is likely because previous conceptual commitments play less of a role than do the emotions, an idea he does not discuss with any seriousness. Imaginability may well be relative to an imaginer, but on Todd's view it remains to be explained why we resist when we do.

Todd is correct, however, in suggesting that we should not be looking at fictions as a list of stipulated facts. He rightly points out that the manner in which the story is told matters, and he also rightly suggests that who the author is matters. But then Todd holds that there is no real fictional truth - that readers simply interpret what that author means, with no fictional truth for a reader to approach. Most cases of resistance, he claims, are when we are wondering just why an author is saying *that*. "The cases presented are puzzling only in the sense that they raise questions about context, about authorial intention, interpretation, and evaluation, and it is to these issues that we must look to find a notion of fictional truth."

Todd conflates fictional truth with interpretation. One can be realist about fictional truth, and still say interpretation is a different act altogether. I have been at some pains to say that stories are told in a certain way by a certain person in the

actual world. That is not to say that there is *no* fictional truth. Indeed, it is so intuitively plausible that it is true in some way that Sherlock Holmes smoked a pipe that one would not want to rule out a realist notion of fictional truth just to accommodate imaginative resistance. One can have one's cake and eat it, too. There is fictional truth – the events and facts of the stories. However, we also interpret a work, and engage with its author, and resistance can occur in the process of doing these.

While others have considered the role that facts at the actual world play in the puzzle of imaginative resistance, none have accurately captured the scope and extent of that role. With the arguable exception of Todd (2009), none have acknowledged that, once such facts are included, a true “solution” is no longer possible.

### 12. The Authority Puzzle

If it is the case, however, that factors extrinsic to the story events can cause the acceptance puzzle, it stands to reason that the acceptance puzzle and the authority puzzle are actually not closely linked. Indeed, it is not clear that there is an authority puzzle at all. Gendler cautiously suggests this at the end of her paper (2006). Walton suspects there is an authority puzzle, but stresses it must be much more different from the imaginative puzzle than Weatherston suggests. Both Gendler and Walton suggest that it seems in principle the case an author might make unimaginable concepts true in the fiction. I do not see why she wouldn't. The only reason Weatherston gives to think there is a puzzle with authorial authority at all is because it *feels* as if that sentence at the end of *Death* is not true at that world. It *feels* as if the author cannot say what concepts get instantiated there. At the very least, it has been shown that the

acceptance puzzle happens for all sorts of reasons. The feeling of the acceptance puzzle for other reasons feels at least somewhat similar to the feeling of the acceptance puzzle due to the inability to make concepts. In some cases, it may not be clear which is which. In that case, it seems one should be cautious about drawing too many firm conclusions about authorial authority simply because of things we *feel* ourselves unable to imagine.

### 13. Conclusion

I have tried to loosen the grip of the Simple Story and return the puzzle of imaginative resistance back to its origins, i.e., fictional art. We are in no fictional spell when we engage in fictions. We do not disregard the actual world to inhabit the fictional world. I have tried to clarify the nature of the acceptance puzzle in particular. The acceptance puzzle arises for a wider variety of reasons than other theorists have recognized, even the ones who acknowledge that factors at the actual world play a role in our experience of fiction. The supposed counterexamples to Weatherston's theory provided by non-conceptual cantians and wontians just are moments of the acceptance puzzle. They are not actual counterexamples.

The non-conceptual cantian and wontian projects are doomed to fail in two ways. First, they do not account for the cases where we simply are unable to entertain certain mental representations. Second, and more importantly, because there is such a variety of reasons why the acceptance puzzle can occur, and so many are relative to the author and the reader, acceptance cannot be systematized. Yet acceptance points to something very important that imaginative resistance does not. It shows very clearly that the experience of fiction is not simply imagining a world such that X. The

experience of fiction is, *inter alia*, part imagining a world such that X, part mostly one-sided conversation between author and reader (and a specific author at that), part evaluation, part social skills education, part mind-reading, part historical excavation (just what exactly happened to Emma when ‘Mr. Elton [was] making violent love to her’?), part moral education, and part emotional adventure.

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