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Fictional Resistance and Real Feelings

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Abstract: This paper outlines a solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance that makes—and if successful helps to vindicate—two assumptions. The solution first assumes a relationship between moral judgements and affective states of the subject. It also assumes the correctness of accounts of imaginative engagement with fiction—like Kendall Walton’s account—that treat engagement with fiction as prop-based make-believe in which works of fiction, but also appreciators of those works, figure as props. The key to understanding imaginative resistance, it maintains, is understanding how real feelings become part of fictional worlds.

Key words: imaginative resistance, moral sentimentalism, fiction, make-believe

1. IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

Engaging with fiction involves making believe that all sorts of unrealistic and even impossible scenarios obtain: wizardry, faster than light travel, frogs turning into princes and hunters turning into stags. But we experience a difficulty when we try, as Tamar Gendler puts it, ‘imagining worlds that we take to be morally deviant’ (Gendler 2000: 56). Consider a fiction containing the sentence (F).

(F) ‘Anna was wrong to share her food with the orphans; she could have sold what she didn’t need and made a profit.’

Or a fiction containing (Kendall Walton’s example) (G).

(G) ‘In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl’ (Walton and Tanner 1994: 37).

When we read (G) we are reluctant, or unable, to make-believe that the narrator’s judgement is correct (note, I don’t say ‘true’, for reasons that will become clear).¹ It has also been claimed (note, I don’t endorse this claim) that the power of an author to make something ‘true in the fiction’ proves inadequate in the cases of (G) and (F).²

*

Some solutions to the puzzle of ‘imaginative resistance’ draw on assumptions relating to morality,³ and some draw on assumptions about the nature of engagement with fiction.⁴ My solution hinges on two assumptions: an assumption about the acceptance of moral sentences, and an assumption about what we do when we engage with fiction.

The assumption behind one sort of solution (Walton and Tanner 1994; Walton 2006; Weatherston 2004) is that there are certain ‘dependence relations’ that are believed to hold between moral facts and non-moral facts. According to this sort of solution the stumbling block to our imagining

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the truth of (G) is that the combination of what is claimed by (G) and what is claimed by the non-moral claims of the story of Giselda (such as we assume them to be) is precluded by these dependence relations. Rather than a relation of the sort supposed by some moral realists, between moral *facts* and non-moral facts, my solution invokes a relation between the *acceptance* of moral claims and non-cognitive—more specifically, affective—states of the evaluator.

It also makes an assumption about the nature of engagement with fiction. As I will explain in section 2, to understand imaginative resistance what needs to be understood is moral acceptance *inside a game of make-believe*. The assumption about the nature of engagement with fiction that my solution presupposes—put in a way that requires explanation and caveats (to be provided in section 3)—has it that in engagement with fictions like the story of Giselda *real feelings* become *part of fictional worlds*. In combination with this assumption, the assumption about moral acceptance explains why (G) is unacceptable inside the game of make-believe I play when I engage with the story of Giselda.

2. ACCEPTANCE

My solution assumes a relationship between the acceptance of moral sentences, and the possession of affective states. The claim that ‘moral evaluation . . . is somehow grounded in human sentiment’ (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000: 722) can be identified as characterising a family of views in meta-ethics and moral psychology. *Moral sentimentalism* encompasses subjectivist views according to which moral sentences state claims about the subject’s non-cognitive states (see Prinz 2007 for a sophisticated development of this sort of view), the expressivist view that moral sentences express non-cognitivist states (Ayer 1936, Stevenson 1944, Gibbard 1990), hybrid-expressivist views like Michael Ridge’s (2014) view that moral judgements are ‘impassioned beliefs’ and versions of hermeneutic moral fictionalism (Kalderon 2005).

The assumption I will make is at home in this family of views. My assumption about moral acceptance is that, for moral subjects who are liable to experience imaginative resistance, moral acceptance requires⁵ being in the right kind of non-cognitive, more specifically, affective state. To avoid giving hostages to fortune I won’t specify the precise kind of affective states pertinent to moral acceptance. I will speak of ‘positive feelings’ and ‘negative feelings’ that can be entertained in relation to acts or practices, assuming nothing about the nature of these feelings other than that they have positive and negative valences. Moral acceptance of an act or practice, my assumption has it, requires being in a state which involves at the least *an absence of negative feelings* of the relevant sort in relation to the act or practice to which it belongs. For example I cannot sincerely endorse the practice or a particular act of infanticide if I have negative feelings of a certain sort in relation to infanticide.

In exploring how a relation between moral acceptance and non-cognitive states could account for our reactions to sentences like (G) I won’t be breaking entirely new ground. Currie’s (2002) and Stokes’s (2006) accounts of imaginative resistance—according to which imaginative engagement in the puzzling cases requires ‘desire-like’ or ‘value-like imaginings’ as opposed to ‘belief-like imaginings’—are compatible with an understanding of moral acceptance as identical to some non-cognitive state. I will have more to say about these accounts below.

My assumption concerns the acceptance of moral sentences. When engaged in make-believe we can be authorised to ‘accept’ certain sentences that we don’t have reason to believe if the rules of the game of make-believe permit us to ‘accept’ these sentences. For example, if we’re pretending that tree stumps are bears and there is a tree stump behind a bush we are authorised to ‘accept’ ‘there’s a bear behind that bush.’ Let me call the stance we should adopt in this case towards ‘there’s a bear behind the bush’ ‘make-acceptance.’ Moral cognitivism equates acceptance to belief

and therefore equates make-acceptance to make-belief. But I am not supposing a cognitivist view of moral acceptance; and so I won't assume that make-acceptance is make-belief.

Given my feelings about female infanticide, I don't accept endorsements of this practice. But the puzzle of imaginative resistance is not a puzzle about acceptance. It's a puzzle about make-acceptance: acceptance inside a game of make-believe. I am supposing the well-established hypothesis that engagement with fiction involves make-believe. When I read *Middlemarch* I make-believe that an idealistic young woman marries a dusty pedant. When I watch *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* I make-believe that Earth has been invaded by body snatchers. According to Gregory Currie, 'we are intended by the author to make believe that the story as uttered is true' (Currie 1990: 18) and engagement with the fiction involves recognising and complying with this intention. According to Walton (1990) the appreciator participates in a game of 'prop-based make-believe' in which the work of fiction plays the same role as the tree stumps in the bear-tree stump game.

If engagement with the story of Giselda involves participation in the type of game of make-believe we allegedly play when watching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or reading *Middlemarch*, it seems that participants in the *Giselda*-game should make-accept (G). If there is no indication that the narrator is unreliable then the rules of such games prescribe we imagine the narrator is to be trusted. The rules of the game of make-believe, it seems, require make-acceptance of (G). I don't *accept* endorsements of infanticide; but why should this stop me from *make-accepting* (G)?

An understanding of what make-acceptance involves—or at any rate requires—would be helpful at this point. For Currie and Stokes—in line with a non-cognitivist understanding of moral acceptance as something other than belief—the make-acceptance of moral sentences involves a special 'desire-like' or 'value-like' type of imagining, as opposed to the 'belief-like' type of imagining involved in make-belief. I don't endorse the idea that make-acceptance involves imagining in a special kind of way.⁶ But if, as I am assuming, moral acceptance requires being in the right affective state—then an obvious suggestion is that make-acceptance requires at least the subject's *imagining that they are in the right affective state* (whether or not this involves a special kind of imagining). I cannot make-accept an endorsement of infanticide (or a fictional case of such) unless I imagine myself to feel the right way in relation to infanticide.

But this, in itself, doesn't seem to be of much help in explaining my resistance to make-accepting (G). I don't feel the right way in relation to infanticide, but what is to stop me imagining that I feel the right way? The non-possession of a non-cognitive state is not typically a bar to the imagined possession of that state. It is easy for us to imagine or pretend our feelings are other than they are. I can pretend to be enthusiastic when I'm bored for instance.

If the rules of the game of make-believe I play when I read the Giselda-story mandate me to make-accept (G), and this involves a mandate to imagine I feel a certain way—or on Currie and Stokes's supposition, to imagine in a special way—why am I unable or unwilling to comply? Stokes identifies this problem, but his proposed solution doesn't obviously solve it. Stokes draws on David Lewis's suggestion that 'we value what we desire to desire' (Stokes 2006: 395). Accordingly the 'value-like imaginings' that engaging with the story of Giselda requires me to have are

second-order desire-like imaginings. To make-value is to make-desire to desire: to imaginatively desire that one desire such-and-such. (Stokes 2006: 395)

Imaginatively desiring that one desire such and such, Stokes points out, involves 'imagining being a certain kind of person' (Stokes 2006: 401), e.g., 'being the kind of person who values the practise of female infanticide' (ibid.) and this, Stokes claims, is what we have difficulty imagining.

But why? I have no difficulty imagining that I am an ogre—with ogre-ish values—or a vampire, or a zombie, if the game I'm playing requires me to imagine these things. If Stokes is right about what engaging with the story of Giselda requires us to imagine, it remains unclear why we have any difficulty complying.

Let me drop talk of special ways of imagining to re-state the problem. Imaginative resistance consists in the fact that despite the apparent requirement on me to make-accept (G), I am reluctant or unable to make-accept (G). Arguably it is not even true that my engagement with the fiction authorises me to do so. But if make-accepting (G) involves imagining that my non-cognitive attitudes to female infanticide are other than what they are, it is not at all obvious why I would find it difficult or have any reluctance to make-accept (G); and it is not obvious why there couldn't be a game whose rules authorise my doing so.

3. REFLEXIVE PROPS

There may be a game whose rules authorise my imagining that my attitude towards female infanticide is other than it actually is. But according to my second assumption—the assumption about the nature of engagement with fiction that I will now explain and defend—the game of make-believe I play when I engage with the story of *Giselda* is *not such a game*.

According to Walton a work of fiction is a prop. It plays a similar role to that played by the tree stumps in the bear-tree stump game. If there is a tree stump in a certain location, players of this game are required, by the game's tacitly understood 'principles of generation' (Walton 1990: 38) to pretend that there is a bear in that location. Other features of the stumps—their size for instance—likewise generate 'prescriptions to make believe' in certain ways.

Tree stumps as props put a heavy burden on the imaginations of those pretending that they're bears. Works of fiction make it easier for us: it is easy to imagine that an idealistic young woman marries a dusty pedant because *Middlemarch* gives a detailed (purported) account. But fundamentally what is going on when we engage with these works of fiction, for Walton, is the same sort of thing that is going on in all games of prop-based make-believe. Real features of the props, in line with 'principles of generation,' generate prescriptions to make-believe.

When I engage with *Middlemarch*, the novel is a prop that generates prescriptions to make-believe. But crucially it is not the only prop. According to Walton,

What is not so obvious, but of very considerable importance, is that viewers and readers are reflexive props in these games, that they generate fictional truths about themselves. (Walton 1990: 213)

Walton points to the devices by which works of fiction *draw people in* (Walton 1990: 215) to games of make-believe:

Gulliver's Travels makes it fictional of itself that it is the journal of a certain ship's physician, Lemuel Gulliver. It is almost inevitable that in reading it, one should understand it to be fictional that one is reading such a journal. (Walton 1990: 215)

Walton and Currie claim that *all* works of fiction invite or mandate the reader or watcher to imagine *of themselves* that they are reading of—or in some other way bearing witness to—real events. The second assumption that my explanation of imaginative resistance relies on is a delimited version of this claim: in typical engagements with fiction, and particularly in engagements with works of fiction that prompt imaginative resistance, *de se* imagining is invited or prescribed. In engaging with these works the reader or watcher becomes—so to speak—part of the fictional world.

This assumption, no less than my first assumption, stands in need of defence; but I can't mount a full defence of either. The most I can show is that they aren't so disreputable as to rule out an explanation that appeals to them. If my explanation of imaginative resistance is superior in many ways to its rivals, then I will have helped show that the assumptions *earn their keep*.

The assumption about fiction is invoked by Walton (1978, 1990) to explain the nature and extent of our emotional involvement in fictions. The way we get emotionally 'caught up' in fictional events is explained by the assumption that we imagine ourselves somehow to be witnessing them.

For Walton (due to demanding criteria for what count as emotions) the fear I experience when watching *Alien* is a 'pseudo-emotion'; but this is a dispensable part of the explanation.

In his defence of the assumption, Currie (1997) argues that cases of rooting for fictional anti-heroes are best explained by the supposition that when I do this, I imagine myself to be the sort of person who approves of the likes of Tony Soprano and Steerpike.⁷ Peter Alward's (2006) reply to Currie maintains that anything that can be explained by the assumption that engagement with fiction invites *de se* imagining can be better explained by the assumption that it invites merely *de re* imagining. However Kathleen Stock points out that even if this is right, a case can be made that *de re* imagining of the sort envisaged (e.g., imagining of the novel you're reading that it's a true account) is 'intrinsically perspectival' (Stock 2013: 892), and so must involve *de se* imagining.

But Stock doesn't accept that engagements with fiction always involve either *de se* or *de re* imagining. Given the control we are capable of exercising over what and how we imagine,

it seems that the fact, if it is one, that were imagining in response to fiction to be *de se*, or *de re*, it would solve or explain some other theoretical problem about imaginative engagement with fiction, is not enough to show that it is in fact *de se* or *de re*. We also need to establish that this provides accessible reasons for the agent to engage in such imagining. (ibid.)

In reply to this point I invoke the persuasive case that Walton makes (Walton 1978: 13) that the child whose parent is pretending to be a monster engages in *de se* imagining. That the child is emotionally involved in the game in the way and to the extent that he is, is plausibly explained by the hypothesis that he imagines of himself that he fears 'the monster.' But the fact that, were the imagining to be *de se*, this would explain something that needs to be explained, doesn't provide an actually motivating reason for the child to imagine *de se*. It doesn't provide an accessible reason according to any sense of 'accessible' according to which a similar reason for imagining *de se* when engaging with fiction is not accessible to us.

What the child does, on Walton's account, is more or less what we do when we engage with fiction. The child, like us, can exercise control over how and what he imagines. But he, and we, do not exercise the full measure of conscious control that we are capable of exercising. It is part of the account that we are following a deeply rooted tendency. This is a crucial part of the account for my purposes. It explains why there is a typical, default type of *de se* imagining that I engage in when I read the story of Giselda. My assumption that cases of imaginative resistance involve this type of imagining isn't impugned by the fact that we (usually) don't have clearly articulated motivating reasons to imagine in this way. I will now set out how, in combination with my first assumption, this second assumption explains imaginative resistance.

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On Walton's account the text of the Giselda story generates a prescription to make-believe—under the rules of the game of make believe typically played by those who engage with the story—that certain events occur, including an act of infanticide by a woman called 'Giselda.' But the text of the story is not the only prop that generates prescriptions to make-believe. The description of a fictional case of infanticide prompts real feelings in the reader—as descriptions or depictions of fictional events are wont to do—and these feelings generate a prescription, under the rules of the game, for their subject to make-believe that they have these very feelings in relation to the actions of a woman called 'Giselda.' My explanation of imaginative resistance assumes this account is correct. The other assumption it makes concerns the feelings in question and their relation to moral acceptance. The real feelings prompted in me by (G)—a pretend endorsement of an imaginary case of infanticide—are the sort of *negative* feelings my assumption about moral acceptance invokes. I am assuming that the affective state I would have to be in to accept an endorsement of infanticide,

and I would have to imagine myself to be in to make-accept (G)—a fictional case of infanticide—involves the absence of such feelings.

This explains my difficulty in make-accepting (G): if I'm imagining in line with the rules of the game that features me and my feelings as props, I am imagining that I have anti-infanticide feelings that preclude the acceptance of an endorsement of infanticide.

The full story is complicated, as befits a complicated phenomenon. If there is a prescription to make-believe that the narrator of the Giselda story is reliable then there is a prescription to make-accept (G). But there is a simultaneous prescription to imagine I feel a certain way—the way I actually feel—that precludes acceptance of (G). It may be felt that we find it easier to make-reject (G) than to make-accept (G): insofar as the tension we feel is resolved, it is resolved in favour of the make-rejection of (G). If this is right, I suggest the reason is that we're not sure that we *must* make-believe that the narrator is correct. Awareness of the existence of 'unreliable narrators' means one cannot be sure if one is required to make-believe that the narrator of a story is reliable. The apparent prescription to make-accept (G) can easily be understood as merely apparent,

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We resist make-accepting (G). It has also been claimed (see for example Gendler 2000: 58) that the author has difficulty in making (G) 'true in the fiction'; but I have not endorsed this claim, and I will explain my hesitance.

I will make use of more terminology from Walton. Walton speaks of the 'world of the fiction,' and the 'world of the game' to circumscribe sets of prescriptions to make believe (Walton 1990: 57–61). The game of make-believe I play when I engage with *Middlemarch* involves me as a prop. Insofar as my reactions generate a prescription, in the game of make-believe I'm playing, to make-believe that I feel sympathy for Dorothea, it is *true in the game* that I have this feeling, and it can be said that the *world of the game* includes my having this feeling. But the *world of the fiction*—the 'work world' (Walton 1990: 59)—is not the same thing as the world of my game. The world of the game I play when I engage with *Middlemarch* differs from the world of the game you play when you engage with *Middlemarch*. My feelings are not part of the latter nor yours of the former. The world of *Middlemarch* comprises just what is common to all 'official' *Middlemarch* game-worlds (Walton 1990: 59–60, 215–216).

Likewise with the story of Giselda what is true in this story is what holds in the work world. But as appreciators' attitudes are not part of this world there seems to be no obstacle to (G)'s being true/acceptable in *this* world, and so true/acceptable in the story of Giselda. The distinction between game worlds and the work world allows the articulation of a nuanced position on 'fictional resistance.' There is a sense in which (G) is true/acceptable in the fiction and holds in the world of the fiction. On the other hand, engagements with the story of Giselda are governed by prescriptions to make-believe the contrary of (G); and the truth/acceptability of (G) is not part of the imaginary world that an appreciator of the story is enjoined to enter, despite the best efforts of the author.

4. CONCLUSION

My solution has it that when we enter a fictional world, as it were, we take certain non-cognitive states with us. We also take *some* beliefs with us: we need them to flesh out the fictional world. But if the work indicates that one of these beliefs has no place in the fictional world then we leave it behind. Even our beliefs in metaphysical dependence relations and logical relations are willingly left behind: we readily *make-believe* that they are false. That is why the classical forms of the 'dependence solution' mentioned at the start are unconvincing (cf. Gendler 2000: 66–72).

But our affective states are different. I am not denying that we *could* leave these behind too, or even simulate different affective states. But it is not easy for us to set aside our natural responses.

I find it difficult to keep up the pretence that I feel only love towards the xenomorph in *Alien*. Thus I follow Walton (not in the letter) in assuming that typically a fiction *takes advantage* of our natural emotional responses. It elicits feelings which we then incorporate into the pretence we are engaged in: imagining of ourselves that real individuals or events have caused us to feel the way we do. Harnessing our natural responses in this way makes for a rich and involving imaginative experience. That is a causal explanation of the fact that we typically imagine in this way, even if it does not provide a motivating reason to the imaginer.

My solution isn't a 'can't' solution. But my contention is that when sentences like (F) and (G) *do* prompt imaginative resistance this is explained by the assumptions I have made about moral acceptance and the nature of our imaginative engagement with fiction.

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Is my explanation the best explanation? I contend it is better than standard 'dependence' solutions. Anna Mahtani argues that the correct explanation needs to allow that moral principles are 'imported' (Mahtani 2012: 427) into fictional worlds. My explanation allows this and explains *why*.⁸ One might fault it for failing to cover all cases of imaginative resistance. It has been maintained that it isn't only moral claims that provoke resistance. Deviant *evaluative* claims of other sorts allegedly also prompt resistance. But a solution that invokes something special about moral principles can maintain that evaluative judgements of other types are special in the same way.

There are also non-evaluative claims that we allegedly have difficulty imagining. But these examples are contested;⁹ and it is important to bear in mind that alleged cases of 'imaginative resistance' may not all be cases of the same phenomenon. The phenomenon exemplified by cases like (F) and (G), I contend, is best explained by the account I have given.

NOTES

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1. Kathleen Stock (2005) suggests that if the story is filled out in certain ways we can and would go along with (G). But it is certainly not the case that *every* filling out of the story removes our resistance. Stock's 'contingent impossibility' solution fails to explain imaginative resistance prompted by many versions of the story of Giselda.
2. This second alleged phenomenon has been labelled 'fictional resistance.'
3. E.g., Walton and Tanner 1994, Walton 2006, and Weatherson 2004.
4. E.g., Gendler 2000, Mahtani 2012, and Stock 2005.
5. A stronger version of the thesis takes 'requires' to mean 'necessitates.' A weaker version takes 'requires' to mean 'is difficult without.' This version for example insists only that agreement with an endorsement of infanticide is difficult without being in the right sort of affective state (which involves at least the absence of negative feelings of the relevant sort about infanticide).
6. As Stokes notes 'The suggestion that there is a uniquely desire-like mode of imagination has invited scepticism' (Stokes 2006: 391). See Stokes 2006: 391, notes 11 and 12, for a summary of criticisms and replies.
7. This arguably underestimates how readily we are actually attracted to individuals whose actions we deplore.
8. Mahtani speculates that moral principles need to be imported because 'general moral principles are simply not the sorts of things that we can imagine' (Mahtani 2012: 427); because 'when we can think of no experience whatsoever that would count as experiencing a given claim, then that claim cannot be imagined' (Mahtani 2012: 428). But we can imagine that the Goldbach conjecture is false. My proposal is a better way of filling in the details of the 'sketchy' (ibid.) import solution.
9. See Gendler 2000: 66–72.

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