Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction

§1: Introduction

Recent philosophical attention to fiction has focused largely on the phenomenon of imaginative resistance: the fact that readers are sometimes unable or unwilling to play along with an author’s instructions to imagine certain, especially moral, contents or responses. The fact that readers resist in these cases appears puzzling, given that they are typically willing to imagine all sorts of highly implausible, even impossible things, including alterations to the laws of physics.

Theorists have explained imaginative resistance in various ways. Richard Moran (1994) argues that resistance arises because evaluative and emotional engagement with fiction requires more than merely imaging certain contents: it requires having actual, robust responses of the relevant kind, and this is not the sort of thing readers can simply choose to do in response to an author’s demands. Kendall Walton (1994), Steve Yablo (2002) and Brian Weatherson (2004) argue that resistance arises because what readers are able to imagine true in the fiction is fixed by invariant conceptual or metaphysical principles. And Tamar Szabó Gendler (2000) argues that resistance is driven by readers’ unwillingness to ‘export’ certain moral principles or perspectives from fictions to reality.

Because they focus on imaginative resistance, all of these theorists emphasize the limits of imagination, and specifically the ways in which engagement with fiction is constrained by one’s sense of reality. Against this, I will argue that it is at least as notable how often readers’ evaluative and emotional responses toward fictions differ from those they would have toward the same situation in reality. Thus, I find it funny rather than cruel that the Three Stooges bop each other over the head with heavy implements. I find the events in a Stephen King novel thrilling rather than disgusting. And I root for

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Scarlett O’Hara to get her man and her mansion rather than to emancipate her slaves. This is what Shaun Nichols (2006) calls the problem of “discrepant affect,” and what Gregory Currie (1997) calls the “problem of personality.” I will call it the phenomenon of *disparate response*. It is in effect the inverse to imaginative resistance: a willingness and ability on readers’ parts to temporarily shift their real or imagined responses from what they would be in reality.

To explain imaginative engagement with fiction in a way that makes sense of both imaginative resistance and disparate response, we need a richer account of the imaginative projects proposed by authors of fiction, and of the resources readers bring to bear in taking them up. I will argue that among the most central and neglected of these resources are the *perspectives* we cultivate on worlds, whether fictional or real. A perspective requires more than just imagining that a set of propositions is true, or even imagining experiencing something. It involves actually structuring one’s thinking in certain ways, so that certain sorts of properties stick out as especially notable and explanatorily central. Because it requires developing actual dispositions for patterns of attention and interpretation, adopting a perspective is partly but not entirely under one’s conscious control. Adding perspectives to our theoretical toolkit, and recognizing the nuanced ways in which authors manipulate perspectives, makes it less puzzling both that fictions can produce emotional and evaluative responses that differ from those readers would have in the real world, and also that readers are sometimes unable or unwilling to go along with these responses.

I begin in §2 by sketching the standard philosophical approach to imagination and fictional engagement. In §3, I outline some of the major factors in successful engagement with fiction, before turning to disparate response in §4, and imaginative resistance in §5.

§2: The Standard Model

The intuition that perspectives play an important role in our engagement with fiction is not new. Richard Moran (1994, 105) is particularly explicit in this regard:

> Imagination with respect to the cruel, the embarrassing, or the arousing involves something more like a point of view, a total perspective on the situation, rather than just the truth of a specifiable proposition. And imagining along these lines involves something more like genuine rehearsal, “trying on” the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it.
Similarly, Tamar Gendler claims that the puzzle of imaginative resistance reveals that “imagining involves something in between belief, on the one hand, and mere supposition, on the other” (2000, 56), which she calls a “point of view” or a “way of looking.” Walton (1994, 1997), Currie (1997, 2010), Dadlez (1997), Carroll (2001), Goldie (2003), Gaut (2007), and others all make at least some appeal to perspectives, outlooks, frames, orientations, or seeing-as in explaining our emotional and evaluative responses to fiction. However, because it’s difficult to specify just what a perspective is, these authors rarely put perspectives to systematic explanatory work. Instead, most contemporary philosophical discussions of fiction analyze imagination as the propositional or experiential representation of a content as if it were real. This analysis is familiar, clear, and powerful. Unfortunately, the features that make it so clear also prevent it from accounting for the full complexities of literary imagination.

According to the standard model, the mind is primarily composed of attitudes, like belief and desire, directed toward propositional contents; these mental states interact in virtue of their functional roles and inferential and heuristic relations among their contents to produce new attitudes and ultimately action. Belief and desire are distinguished from each other by their ‘direction of fit’: the function of a belief is to represent a way the world is, while the function of a desire is to motivate the agent to change the world to satisfy it. Imagination can be straightforwardly integrated into this model by treating it as an additional propositional attitude, specifically as the “off-line simulation” of belief. One general advantage of this approach is a unified analysis in terms of a “single code” (Nichols and Stich 2000, Nichols 2004, Pylyshyn 2003). A more specific payoff is that it allows us to bring the resources of philosophy of mind to the analysis of fiction, by establishing a strong parallel between belief about the real world and imagination about fiction. Walton sums up the analogy thus:

Principles of generation…constitute conditional prescriptions about what is to be imagined in what circumstances. And the propositions that are to be imagined are fictional. Fictionality has turned out to be analogous to truth… Imagining aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true. What is true is to be believed; what is fictional is to be imagined (1990, 41).

Philosophers like Walton, David Lewis (1978), and Alex Byrne (1993) have investigated the
principles of generation by which readers amplify explicit prescriptions about what is fictional into a coherent, well-rounded world. On the assumption that imagination is the off-line simulation of ordinary cognitive mechanisms, it follows that these principles should closely echo the inferential and heuristic mechanisms we employ in making sense of reality.

The simplest principle by which one might generate implicit fictional truths is what Walton calls the “Reality Principle,” on which fictional worlds are “as much like the real one as the core of primary [i.e. explicitly stipulated] fictional truths permits” (1990, 144). As both Walton and Lewis point out, the Reality Principle does not govern fiction in general: we don’t ‘import’ as many of our contemporary beliefs about geography or biology as possible into the Odyssey or The Lord of The Rings. Nonetheless, one influential explanation for imaginative resistance invokes a restricted version of the Reality Principle. Thus, Walton (1994), Yablo (2002), and Weatherson (2004) all argue that certain constitutive or ‘in virtue of’ relations between base-level and higher-order propositions—for instance, what it takes for an action to count as shameful, or admirable—are fixed across all possible worlds. Brian Weatherson (2004, 22) articulates the core assumption in especially forthright terms:

The fact that it’s the author’s story, not the reader’s, means that the author gets to say what the underlying facts are. But that still leaves the possibility for differences of opinion about [which higher-order concepts to apply to those facts], and on that question the author’s opinion is just another opinion. Authorial authority extends as far as saying which world is fictional in the story; it does not extend as far as saying which concepts are instantiated there.

If we combine this claim with the assumption that the operative opinions about which higher-order concepts apply are readers’ own default opinions, then we get a very strong form of the Reality Principle, which we might call the “Fixed Reality Principle”: the view that authors lack the ability, or at least find it extremely difficult, to make fictional worlds that differ from the real one in certain ways, even by explicit stipulation: to make it fictional infanticide is moral, say, or that nutmeg is the summum bonum. A direct

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1 Walton (1990, 145) offers the following as a “working formulation” of the Reality Principle: “If $p_1,\ldots, p_n$ are the propositions whose fictionality a representation generates directly, another proposition, $q$, is fictional in it if, and only if, were it the case that $p_1,\ldots, p_n$, it would be the case that $q$.”

2 Thus, Walton (1994, 37) says that in contrast to more objective subjects, “when it comes to moral matters…I am more inclined to stick to my guns…I judge characters by the moral standards I myself use in real life…I don’t easily give up the Reality Principle, as far as moral judgments (moral principles) are
consequence is that imaginative resistance should arise when authors attempt to postulate fictions or imaginative responses that differ from the real world in those ways. As Steve Yablo (2002, 485) puts it:

It’s a feature of [the relevant class of higher-order concepts] that their extension in a situation depends on how the situation does or would strike us. ‘Does or would strike us’ as we are: how we are represented as reacting, or invited to react, has nothing to do with it. Resistance is the natural consequence. If we insist on judging the extension ourselves, it stands to reason that any seeming intelligence coming from elsewhere is automatically suspect.

One of my central claims will be that the Fixed Reality Principle is false: imaginative resistance is both less pervasive, and more complex in its etiology, than the Principle predicts.

My presentation of both the standard model and the Fixed Reality Principle have focused heavily on propositions. Some philosophers, like Steven Stich, Shaun Nichols, and Zenon Pylyshyn, do endorse a “single code” propositional model of the mind. But it is quite natural to respond that purely propositional models are too restrictive. Many philosophers, including Walton, have emphasized that engaging with a fiction involves “not just imagining that such and such is true of ourselves,” but “imagining doing things, experiencing things, feeling in certain ways” (Walton 1997, 38). Because this sort of dramatic rehearsal is vivid and engaged, with much of the phenomenal immediacy of perception, it plausibly plays a crucial role in triggering robust affective responses toward fiction (Moran 1994). Further, because dramatic rehearsal typically involves the “empathetic re-enactment” of imagined scenes “through the eyes of characters within them” (Currie 1995, 256), it appears to have a natural explanation for disparate response: imagining being some other person requires imagining having their emotional and evaluative responses, not my own. Finally, dramatic rehearsal also seems poised to explain imaginative resistance: readers will naturally balk at imagining being characters who are too different from themselves (Moran 1994).

I agree that an exclusively propositional model is too restrictive. But I will also argue that dramatic rehearsal alone cannot solve the puzzles. The fundamental problem is that both propositional and dramatic imagination are individuated in terms of contents: of what is represented in imagination, concerned.” Weatherson is slightly more cautious, but says that “there is a strong default assumption” that the standard “in virtue of” relations are imported into stories, and “it is not easy to overcome this assumption” (2004, 17).
either in an abstract, perhaps quasi-sentential form or in a concrete, quasi-perceptual one. As a result, standard models of fictional response cannot explain the ways that authors ask their readers to manipulate how they represent a given content. And this in turn prevents them from explaining why mere imagination regularly has genuine, persisting cognitive effects, and in particular why differences in how the same content is presented produce similar emotional and evaluative alterations in application to real situations as they do toward fiction. Finally, exclusively content-based models also make predictions about when imaginative resistance should arise that are not borne out by many readers’ actual responses. To identify the limitations of exclusively content-based models, however, we need a more detailed account of the factors that underwrite successful imaginative engagement.

§3: Factors in Full Imaginative Engagement with Fiction

In this section, I argue that the imaginative projects proposed by most authors\(^3\) encompass much more than prescriptions to imagine contents: they also involve cultivating certain interpretations and ongoing interpretive dispositions, which interact in intimate ways with both propositional and dramatic imagination to influence emotional and evaluative response.\(^4\)

3.1: Local Facts and Characterizations

The most basic thing an author does, as Walton and Lewis say, is prescribe a set of propositions as to be imagined. But those propositions cannot be isolated and disconnected: they must cohere into representations of events concerning a collection of individuals. Many theorists have noted that this

\(^3\) Throughout, unless otherwise noted, by ‘author’ I mean the implied author, who is constructed or postulated as the creator of this fiction, and whose intentions may diverge from those of the actual historical writer; for discussion, see e.g. Booth 1961, Nehamas 1987, Eco 1992. Currie (2010, ch. 4) argues that there is no useful distinction between implied authors and external narrators, while Goldie (2003) focuses on external narrators without discussing authors. Although I think there can be important differences between real authors, implied authors, and external (and internal) narrators, for current purposes the distinction is largely moot.

\(^4\) Contemporary high fiction often disrupts the typical relationship between author, reader, and fictional world. But to understand either intentional or unintentional disruptions in imaginative engagement, we first need a grip on the canonical case.
coherence is not just (or even) logical or metaphysical consistency, but something closer to psychological comprehensibility. I suggest that we can get a more precise grip on this sort of comprehensibility by appealing to a class of mental representations that I call *characterizations*.\(^5\)

As a rough first pass, we can say that a characterization is a stereotype or a schema. Like a stereotype, a characterization applies a collection of properties to a subject. For instance, my characterization of quarterbacks includes their being natural leaders, affable, and a bit shallow. Some of these properties may represented in highly specific, vivid terms: for instance, I picture quarterbacks as having a certain sort of square, clean-shaven jaw and gleaming teeth. Characterizations also often include representations of how the subject tends to or should make one feel, such as terror at encountering a stern professor in the hallway, or awe at walking into a sunlit cathedral.

So far, none of this distinguishes characterizations in principle from either stereotypes or concepts. But where stereotypes are at least typically ways of thinking about *types*, characterizations can also represent individual persons, objects, and events. And where stereotypes are communally-shared, characterizations can be quite idiosyncratic: my characterization of a romantic weekend excursion may not match yours, and I might have a characterization of something the rest of the community doesn’t notice, such as my route to work. So stereotypes can be considered a special case of characterizations.

The second major feature of characterizations, which strongly differentiates them from concepts\(^6\) (but not stereotypes), is that they don’t always require commitment to their subjects actually possessing the properties ascribed to them. Thus, I’m under no illusion that quarterbacks are especially likely to have gleaming teeth or square jaws. Still, there is a species of commitment involved in my characterizing quarterbacks in this way: I take those features to be *fitting* for them. If I were casting a quarterback in a movie, for instance, I would look for an actor with those features. Similarly, some features attributed in my characterizations of individuals might be ‘just-so’ or apocryphal facts which I take to be fitting albeit

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\(^5\) For a fuller account of characterizations, especially in the context of metaphor, see Camp 2003.

\(^6\) Many philosophers have argued that concepts differ from prototypes—or more generally, from what psychologists typically call ‘concepts’—not least in that prototypicality doesn’t determine category membership. The point is even clearer for stereotypes. See e.g. Rey 1983, Fodor and Lepore 1996, and Laurence and Margolis 2000.
factually false. Conversely, I might acknowledge that a subject actually possesses certain features which I marginalize as not fitting: for instance, I might tend to forget or otherwise dismiss the fact that Bill once attended seminary, because I take it not to fit with his sporty, carefree manner.

When assessments of fittingness do come apart from how we take a subject to actually be, it’s often because we believe that an individual is exceptional or aberrant for its type. (In particular, the generic force of stereotypes allows us to maintain them in the face of exceptions.) However, intuitions of fittingness also have a normative, specifically aesthetic basis. Arthur Danto (1981, 207) invokes the relevant notion of ‘fit’ in connection with style:

The structure of a style is like the structure of a personality…This concept of consistency has little to do with formal consistency. It is the consistency rather of the sort we invoke when we say that a rug does not fit with the other furnishings of the room, or a dish does not fit with the structure of a meal, or a man does not fit with his own crowd. It is the fit of taste which is involved, and this cannot be reduced to formula. It is an activity governed by reasons, no doubt, but reasons that will be persuasive only to someone who has judgment or taste already.7

If we were more fully rational, we would sharply distinguish what we take to be fitting from we believe to be actual or even probable. But in fact, we often allow intuitions grounded in stereotypes to drive our beliefs about probability and actuality, with highly problematic results: in particular, one reason prejudices are so difficult to eradicate is that our stereotypes bias our grasp of the actual statistics.8 In fiction, where the concern is more with aesthetic satisfaction than factual accuracy, fittingness plays an even more pervasive, and less obviously insidious, role.

The third major feature of characterizations is that they don’t merely consist in collections of properties, but structure those properties in a complex pattern which varies along at least two dimensions

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7 D’Arms and Jacobsen (2000a) invoke a distinct but equally important notion of fittingness, understood as “a relation analogous to that between a true belief and the world” (2000a, 68) which is tailored specifically for emotion: an emotion is fitting insofar as it has the right ’shape’ and ’size’ for its object, independent of broader, moral or prudential concerns.

8 For instance, Ryan et al (1996) found that subjects who judged members of a group (e.g. sorority members) to display less variability were more likely to assign stereotypical properties to individual members of that group, and to have high confidence in their assignments. Nelson et al (1996) found that subjects were unable to repress stereotypical judgments in judging probable career goals of both gender-typical and -atypical strangers, even after those stereotypes had been discredited. Diekman et al (2002) found that subjects consistently underestimated male support for female-stereotypic positions on social and political issues. See Judd and Park (1993) for discussion and review of stereotype accuracy.
of psychological importance. Along the first dimension, some features are more prominent than others. Prominence is roughly equivalent to what Amos Tversky (1977) calls salience, which he in turn defines as a function of intensity and diagnosticity. A feature is intense to the extent that it has a high signal-to-noise ratio: it sticks out relative to the background, like a bright light or a hugely bulbous nose. A feature is diagnostic to the extent that it is useful for classifying objects as belonging to a certain category, like the number of stripes on a soldier’s uniform. Both intensity and diagnosticity are highly context-sensitive: in a room full of bulbous noses, or on a heavily scarred face, an ordinary bulbous nose will not stand out; and in such a room, knowing that the man I’m looking for has a bulbous nose won’t help me to identify him.

Along the second dimension, some features are more central than others, insofar as one treats them as causing, motivating, or otherwise explaining many of the subject’s other features. For instance, I take a quarterback’s being a natural leader to explain more of his other features—why he’s popular and confident, why he smiles so readily, indeed why he’s a quarterback at all—than his having a square jaw does. A good measure of centrality is how much else about the subject one thinks would change if that feature were removed.

Assignments of prominence and centrality are highly intuitive and holistic, in a way that the oft-cited analogy with seeing-as makes vivid. Contrast the two ways of seeing Figure 1 below. On either way of seeing, the role that each constituent element plays depends on the roles played by many other elements. When I switch between ways of seeing, the relative prominence and centrality of those elements shift dramatically. And in turn, this causes the elements to represent different things: the same set of pixels comes to be seen as a nose, say, or as a wart.

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Much the same effect applies to characterizations: the same property can take on different significances—especially, different emotional and evaluative valences—depending on the larger structure in which it’s embedded. So, for instance, the same gesture might seem threatening or merely awkward, depending on who is making it and how one characterizes them.

Characterizations don’t just influence the evaluative significance of particular features; they also produce and justify certain emotional and evaluative responses toward the subject as a whole. We often justify our emotional responses to individuals and events by appealing to characterizations; as Danto (1981, 169) says, “like beliefs and actions, …emotions…are embedded in structures of justification. There are things we know we ought to feel given a certain characterization of the conditions we are under.” And emotions are in turn often normatively tied to moral evaluation: anger is warranted against blameworthy actions, for instance, and admiration or joy at praiseworthy ones. Conversely, many philosophers, following Hume, have held that moral evaluation is itself at least partially grounded in emotion;\(^\text{10}\) while others have held that it is justified by a warranted characterization or perspective on the situation, independent of emotion.\(^\text{11}\) Thus, there are good intuitive and theoretical reasons to maintain that characterizations, emotions, and moral evaluations form an intimate triangle of interdependence.

The analogy with seeing-as also allows us to make precise the sense in which characterizations are non-propositional. We rarely explicitly entertain higher-order propositions about the structural relations among features in our characterizations—for instance, the proposition that Bill’s bonhomie is

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\(^{10}\) See D’Arms and Jacobson 2000 for recent discussion.

more prominent, or causally explanatory, than his being a philosopher. But even when we do, entertaining or believing such a proposition still isn’t equivalent to characterizing Bill in the relevant way. Rather, characterizing requires actually structuring one’s thinking so that the relevant features play an appropriately prominent or central role in one’s thinking. In perception, there is a phenomenologically striking and practically efficacious difference between “seeing-as” and “looking plus thinking” (Wittgenstein 1958, 197): for instance, I might know that a particular element $x$ in Figure 1 represents the old crone’s nose, and that $y$ represents a wart, and so on, without successfully seeing the figure as (a picture of) an old crone. So too with characterizing in thought. Suppose you tell me, in explicit detail, about your characterization of Bill: which features you take to be especially important, the explanatory relations among them, and so on. I might endorse all of these propositions, because I trust your judgment, without ever managing to ‘get’ your characterization, because the relevant features don’t intuitively stick out as prominent or central in my own mind. Further, just as with literal seeing-as, getting the relevant propositions to play the relevant organizational role is partly but not entirely under one’s willful control: directing one’s attention toward some particular features may help induce a certain characterization, but ultimately the ‘click’ of holistic understanding is something that just happens—or doesn’t.

Returning to imaginative engagement with fiction, we can now say that the most minimal type of psychological comprehensibility required for successful imaginative engagement is that readers must be capable of fitting the various propositions prescribed by an author together into intuitive characterizations of a collection of robust individuals and events. Logical or metaphysical inconsistency is likely to be tolerable so long as any inconsistent propositions are low in prominence and segregated in centrality, and outweighed by other interests (cf. Gendler 2000, 69).

However, this is only the most minimal condition on engagement. These characterizations of individuals and events can’t themselves be scattered and disconnected: readers must be able to embed them into a larger, higher-order characterization of the fictional world as a whole. In particular, the prescribed events must be connectable into a coherent narrative. While causal connections are common in narrative (Carroll 2001), continuous causal connections are neither necessary nor sufficient for
narrative coherence. Rather, the events must be tied together by overlapping strands of centrality, where this includes non-causal forms of explanation and motivation, including especially what David Velleman (2003), following Frank Kermode (2000), calls the “tick-tock” of an emotional cadence, such as fear giving way to relief. One especially important factor in producing these emotional cadences is that narratives reveal their constituent events only gradually. As a result, the fiction happens to us, much as real life does: we are taken by surprise, have our suspicions confirmed, and wonder what will happen next. Moreover, unlike in real life, in fiction the events themselves, and not just their telling, have been constructed to facilitate such epistemic and emotional cadences.

3.2: Fictional Worlds and the Objective Global Background

The base-level, local facts that an author explicitly prescribes, and the characterizations that readers form of them, are also not isolated, insofar as they are located against a global background, including at least broad statistical distributions of properties and patterns of causation. A fictional world is a place inhabited by certain sorts of people and objects, who tend to possess certain clusters of properties and who are governed by certain sorts of causes and motivations. Actions and qualities that would be shocking or impossible in a Jane Austen novel, say, are unremarkable in the world of Philip Roth—and vice versa. In turn, these global patterns of property distribution and causation are among the most important generators of the fiction’s implicit base-level propositions: readers fill out what particular characters must be feeling or what will happen based on their expectations about how people in those worlds generally act and what is likely to happen to them.

These global patterns also provide a crucial objective foundation for warranting local characterizations. The features that ought to be most prominent in characterizing a given subject are the most intense and diagnostic ones; and both a feature’s intensity and its diagnosticity depend on how common or unusual that feature is in that world. Similarly, the features that should be most central in one’s characterization of that subject are those that are caught up in the richest explanatory networks about it; and this is significantly constrained by the world’s operative causal structures. At the same time,
the objective global patterns don’t themselves suffice to warrant a unique set of characterizations. Minimally, because both the world’s statistical distribution of properties and its causal structure are subtle, complex, and highly multi-dimensional, multiple assignments of each can legitimately be extrapolated from any limited set of explicitly stipulated data. More importantly, both diagnosticity and centrality depend heavily on one’s cognitive interests: diagnosticity because it is a function of which categories one is interested in sorting the subject among, and centrality because it is a function of what sorts of explanations one is seeking. And in turn, there is room for considerable legitimate variation in one’s cognitive interests, both in the real world and especially in fiction.

So, both a fiction’s global objective patterns and its operative cognitive interests play a crucial role in generating implicit base-level facts, in warranting local characterizations, and in turn, in warranting emotional and evaluative responses toward those facts. However, neither a fiction’s objective patterns nor its cognitive interests are themselves typically fully explicit. Global statistical patterns are so complex and multi-dimensional that they are difficult to articulate at all, and are so numerous that they cannot all be rendered explicit. Nor, as I mentioned in §1, can they simply be imported from one’s assumptions about the real world. Even relative to a given time and place, and even for a realistic novel, people’s views about the actual distributions of properties and causal patterns vary too widely for either author or reader to assume they are mutually shared.

A fiction’s governing interests are also often only implicit. But even when they are stated explicitly, as in the first line of Austen’s *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”—they are often intentionally challenged by the fiction’s actual developments and focus; and they are almost invariably more subtle and complex than such statements allow. Further, those interests often depart markedly from readers’ interests in the real world. Thus, here too readers cannot simply extrapolate from what they are explicitly told or from their default assumptions about reality.

Rather, readers must pick up on both the fiction’s objective global patterns and its governing interests largely by extrapolation: from the base-level facts that have been explicitly stipulated, from how
the author directs her readers’ attention, and from how she explains and evaluates particular actions and events. In order to extrapolate the appropriate global patterns and concerns, though, and more generally to make intuitive sense of the fiction as a whole, readers cannot just approach the local facts and author’s local interpretations on a case-by-case basis. Rather, they must be sensitive to the author’s overarching perspective.

3.3: Perspectives

Given the factors I’ve already identified in imaginative engagement with fiction, we can now specify fairly straightforwardly both what perspectives are and how they interact with the rest of readers’ imaginative engagement.

On the most literal interpretation, a perspective is simply a point of view: a spatio-temporal location from which I imagine experiencing a sequence of events within an imagined scene. With just a slight extension, we might understand a perspective as including the psychological point of view of some character embedded within that scene (Currie 1995, 1997). In addition to its considerable intuitive appeal, this analysis would be relatively parsimonious, by allowing us to treat perspectives as direct manifestations of dramatic rehearsal. Further, there is significant empirical evidence that reading narratives does activate experiential representations, and specifically that readers process information from the spatio-temporal, cognitive, and emotional point of view of narrative protagonists. Thus, for instance, subjects are quicker both at reporting the locations of objects which are close to or in front of them.

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12 Tettamanti et al 2005, Speer et al 2009. However, there is considerable variability in how much imagery subjects report experiencing: at one extreme, William James (1890/1981, 708) reports that he “can seldom call to mind even a single letter of the alphabet in purely retinal terms.” At the other end, Elaine Scarry (1999) reports extremely vivid, complex, and sustained mental imagery, and construes fiction-making in general in heavily imagistic terms. See e.g. McKelvie 1995 for self-reports of experiential imagining; see Schwitzgebel 2008 for philosophical discussion of the unreliability of introspection and experiential self-report.
protagonist (Rinck et al 1996) and at interpreting sentences reporting emotions which match those
implicitly felt by the protagonist (Gernsbacher et al 1992).\textsuperscript{13}

However, the sorts of perspectives that are relevant for explaining the puzzles of imaginative
resistance and disparate response cannot simply be assimilated to literal point of view. First, a reader’s
emotional and interpretive responses toward particular individuals and events are not merely a function of
simulating a specific character’s mental state: they also depend upon the reader’s beliefs about the
fictional world as a whole, including facts of which that character is ignorant.\textsuperscript{14} Second, in reading fiction
I don’t only locate myself imaginatively inside each successive scene: I often also adopt an acentral and
external perspective on the fictional world as a whole, without needing to rehearse all of its constituent
events sequentially.\textsuperscript{15} Finally, we need to explain how a single perspective can apply to multiple
situations or even multiple worlds. Various theorists (e.g. Nussbaum 1992) have argued that we read
fiction to acquaint ourselves with new perspectives on the real world; Gendler in particular argues that
imaginative resistance arises “because in trying to make that world fictional, [the author] is providing us
with a way of looking at this world which we prefer not to embrace” (2000, 79). To make sense of these
claims, we need to analyze perspectives in a way that allows them to be extracted from particular scenes.
But because dramatic rehearsal is essentially defined in terms of the particular contents being imagined, it
cannot accommodate this.

I think the best way to understand perspectives in the appropriately wide-ranging, abstract sense
is to treat them as open-ended modes of interpretation. Specifically, I suggest we analyze perspectives as
standing dispositions to characterize whatever particular entities one encounters—to notice certain sorts
of features while ignoring others; to seek certain sorts of explanations; and to find certain combinations of

\textsuperscript{13} See Lang 1984, Bourg 1996, and Harris 2000 for reviews of evidence for affective and experiential
activation in reading; see Coplan 2004 for useful philosophical discussion of empirical evidence and a
defense of empathy in fictional engagement.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Moran 1994, 91; Carroll 2001, Goldie 2003. Further, as Tamar Gendler (p.c.) points out, I can learn
such things through a wide range of cues: most obviously, non-linearity and foreshadowing in narrative,
but also music in film, violations of genre expectations, and so on.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Goldie 2003, 57; Currie 2010, 49. Film may differ from verbal fiction in how much viewers adopt
external perspectives. There also appear to be significant differences across individuals in the degree to
which they cultivate an internal engagement.
features especially fitting. Like characterizations, perspectives cannot be analyzed in exclusively propositional terms. Many aspects of perspectives can be articulated propositionally. For instance, they may include certain overarching commitments, like “engage in random acts of kindness” or “look out for number one,” for instance, or a collection of epistemic or moral concerns. Perspectives are also grounded in a host of tacit assumptions about what sorts of properties one is likely to encounter, what sorts of explanations are most appropriate, and hence what types of emotional and evaluative responses are warranted given a set of lower-level facts. However, as with characterizations, explicitly entertaining or even endorsing those precepts and propositions is neither necessary nor sufficient for cultivating the relevant perspective. Indeed, it is not even enough to ‘get’ some particular characterization, so that one’s intuitive thinking about that specific subject exhibits the relevant structure. Rather, trying on a perspective requires cultivating an intuitive ability to “go on the same way” in assimilating new information about that subject, and in characterizing other subjects. In this sense, a perspective is better construed as a tool for thinking than as a thought itself: it determines no truth-conditions on its own, but gives us a way to organize and navigate among a host of thoughts, and to form new thoughts on the basis of old ones.16

16 Although the theorists I cited above as invoking perspectives and frames don’t specify what they mean by them, what they do say is compatible with my account. Thus, Gendler (2000, 69) describes “ways of seeing things” as “ways that focus on some elements of the situation while ignoring others,” and says that “framing things in certain ways activates certain behavioral dispositions and affective propensities” (2006, 151), with stereotypes constituting one instance of this. Walton (1994, 33) describes an “orientation,” which is “distinct from one’s beliefs and can vary independently of them,” as having “a lot to do with the organization, salience, and accessibility of what one believes.” Moran (1994, 100) says that “There are more ways of changing someone’s mind than changing his or her beliefs… much of what [philosophy and literature] aim at is not on the level of specifically altered beliefs but rather…changes in the associations and comparisons one makes, differences in the vivid or ‘felt’ appreciation of something already known, or changes in one’s habits of attention and sense of the important and the trifling.” Finally, in his (2010), Currie develops a notion of narrative ‘point of view’ which is more abstract than the model in his earlier (1995, 1997) work, and which is largely compatible with my view. However, he retains his earlier perceptual model insofar as he defines narrative point of view in terms of an agent’s limitations in awareness, conceptual resources, and capacities for action (2010, 89). More specifically, he claims that “if [two people’s] points of view are distinct, then there must be at least one thing which one of them could see or hear or tell or do which the other could not” (2010, 90). As such, his model cannot account for the crucial fact that perspectives are the sorts of things we can actively embrace and advocate to one another, and about which we can differ even given agreement on the base-level facts.
The effects of perspective are perhaps most familiarly illustrated by differences in political orientation. A hard-right conservative may watch Fox; be especially alert to situations where a non-Christian immigrant has deprived a Christian, native-born American of a job or other resource; explain this in terms of a widespread tendency for liberal elites to favor outsiders in order to undermine tradition; and diagnose the proposal to build a mosque at Ground Zero as a fitting exemplar of the encroaching dangers. By contrast, a dyed-in-the-wool liberal might listen to NPR; be especially alert to situations where brown-skinned immigrants are abused by uneducated white Americans; explain this in terms of a widespread fear of diversity among those whites; and hold up as a fitting illustration of this mindset the latest politician who advocates for laws supporting a traditional definition of marriage but turns out to be homosexual or unfaithful. With respect to any particular situation, these two people may eventually come to agree about the basic facts. But their different perspectives will lead them to interpret those facts quite differently, by locating them within distinct nexuses of further facts, possibilities, and values. In this sense, pervasive perspectival differences can lead us to feel that two people inhabit fundamentally different worlds.

The perspectives we bring to everyday life constitute a significant part of who we are. By the same token, however, a large part of the pleasure of most fictions lies in cultivating an alternative perspective: in seeing the world through someone else’s eyes. In particular, because the cognitive concerns that structure fictions’ local characterizations and drive their overarching narratives are relatively free from practical constraints, they can vary more widely than perspectives in reality can: from curiosity about the plot, to the vicarious pleasures of seeing virtue triumph or of reveling in vice, to celebrating the kaleidoscopic diversity of humanity or nature. Almost always, though, readers are intended to empathize with some characters, and to respond with concordant emotions to events that they undergo: say, to feel pity at the heroine’s despair.

3.4: Style and Personality
We have now identified three intertwined, large-scale factors that strongly influence readers’ local imaginative engagement with fiction: the fiction’s objective global background, its profile of cognitive interests, and the ongoing dispositions to characterize that constitute perspectives. But we’ve also seen that all three factors are too subtle and complex to be rendered fully explicit. Instead, some of the most powerful cues about a fiction’s implicit principles of generation and interpretation are provided by the author’s style. Among other factors, a fiction’s genre—e.g. mystery, adventure, romance, bildungsroman, mid-century American realism—sets up certain interpretive concerns, and constrains our expectations about sorts of events, people, and properties we will encounter. In addition, any words—e.g. ‘hussy’, ‘cop’, ‘brigand’, ‘debonair’, ‘reckless’—are conventionally associated with at least coarse-grained characterizations, in the form of connotations or Fregean ‘coloring’, and thus contribute these as well as their semantic values to what is to be imagined. Similarly, figurative tropes and allusions contribute less conventional, more context-specific characterizations. Finally, literal spatio-temporal and psychological points of view are often indicated implicitly through grammatical features like choice of pronouns and anaphors, word order, and aspect for tense.

In addition, though, beyond these fairly direct if implicit contributions to what is to be imagined, an author’s style also contributes to readers’ imaginative engagement by evincing a certain personality. In real life, we expect a person’s representational perspective to fit together with their non-representational style: a strong handshake, tucked-in button-down shirt, and clipped speech and hair all fit, for instance, with a concern for objectivity, focus on essential details, and practical interest in getting the job done. Representational perspective and non-representational style thus intertwine to form what Iris Murdoch (1956, 39) calls a “texture of being.”\(^\text{17}\) In fiction, instead of a physical style, we are

\(^{17}\) As Murdoch says: “When we apprehend and assess other people…we consider…their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things…constitute what…one may call the texture of a man’s being or the nature of his personal vision.” Currie (2010, ch. 7) provides concrete illustrations of specific ways in which verbal style expresses personality and perspective; Moran (1994) and Goldie (2003) also emphasize the importance of expressive features in regulating emotional response.
presented with a continuous stream of carefully cultivated verbal expression. But because we know how style and perspective fit together in real life, in reading a fiction we can exploit non-representational stylistic aspects as an implicit guide to the fiction’s operative perspective, which can in turn provide us with important clues to what is true in that world.

To get a taste for how style and personality are revealed in writing, and how they can underwrite perspectives and principles of generation, contrast the opening paragraphs of Jane Austen’s *Emma*:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father; and had, in consequence of her sister’s marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period. Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses; and her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection.

Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse’s family, less as a governess than a friend, very fond of both daughters, but particularly of Emma. Between them it was more the intimacy of sisters. Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own.

The real evils, indeed, of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.

with those from Philip Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theater*:

Either forswear fucking others or the affair is over.

This was the ultimatum, the maddeningly improbable, wholly unforeseen ultimatum, that the mistress of fifty-two delivered in tears to her lover of sixty-four on the anniversary of an attachment that had persisted with an amazing licentiousness—and that, no less amazingly, had stayed their secret—for thirteen years. But now with hormonal infusions ebbing, with the prostate enlarging, with probably no more than another few years of semi-dependable potency still his—with perhaps not that much more life remaining—here at the approach of the end of everything, he was being charged, on pain of losing her, to turn himself inside out.

She was Drenka Balich, the innkeeper’s popular partner in business and marriage, esteemed for the attention she showered on all her guests, for her warmhearted, mothering tenderness not only with visiting children and the old folks but with the local girls who cleaned the rooms and served the meals, and he was the forgotten puppeteer Mickey Sabbath, a short, heavyset, white-bearded man with unnerving green eyes and painfully arthritic fingers who, had he said yes to Jim Henson some thirty-odd years earlier, before *Sesame Street* started up, when Henson

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18 As Jenefer Robinson (1985, 227) puts it, “the verbal elements of style gain their stylistic significance by contributing to the expression of [a] personality, and they cannot be identified as stylistic elements independently of the personality they help to express.”
had taken him to lunch on the Upper East Side and asked him to join his clique of four or five people, could have been inside Big Bird all these years.

These paragraphs tell us a lot about their different worlds, of course, both locally and globally. But they also exhibit markedly different expressive styles. Austen tends to employ sequential, independent syntactic structures, while Roth prefers multiple dependent clauses and appositive phrases. Austen’s rhythm is brisk and crisp, while Roth’s is open and gamboling. Austen employs a proper, polite register, while Roth can be aggressively improper. These sorts of formal features underwrite larger-scale psychological and perspectival qualities, such as Austen’s comparatively detached description of Emma as against Roth’s immersion in Sabbath’s thoughts; and Austen’s focus on broad social dynamics versus Roth’s interest in concrete physical and emotional detail.

In this way, each author’s expressive style underwrites a distinctive perspective. And in turn, we expect authors who express themselves in these ways and employ these perspectives to construct worlds with matching profiles of objective properties, so that the author’s choices about what to notice and how to explain it appropriately reflect the distribution of properties and causal structures in that world. Thus, by putting rhetorical flesh on a perspective’s abstract bones, authorial style helps us both to pick up on the author’s cognitive concerns and characterizing dispositions, and also offers us an implicit guide to the fiction’s principles of propositional generation.

§4: Disparate Response

As I mentioned in the introduction, recent philosophical discussion of fiction has focused heavily on imaginative resistance, especially on cases where we hold fast to our moral compass and refuse, as Hume says, to “pervert the sentiments of [our] heart…in complaisance to any writer whatsoever.” And as we saw in §2, a range of theorists hold that when it comes to interpretation, especially moral evaluation, the author’s opinions are “just…their own personal moral sentiments; we are free to disagree, even though it is the moral nature of the fictional world, not the real one, that is in question” (Walton 1994,
Authorial authority, on this view, extends only as far as specifying the world’s base-level facts; the question of how to characterize, conceptualize, and evaluate those facts is entirely up to us (Weatherson 2004, 22)—where the “us” in question is us “as we are: how we are represented as reacting, or invited to react, has noting to do with it” (Yablo 2002, 485). The result is the view that authors lack the ability, or find it extremely difficult, to make fictional worlds different from the real one in moral or other high-level respects, or to stipulate that alternative interpretive responses are appropriate.²⁰

Against this “Fixed Reality Principle,” it is important to recognize just how often readers do go along with cultivating alternative evaluations and emotions.²¹ Specific examples are likely to be controversial, but many people cite Lolita, Triumph of the Will, Natural Born Killers, Pulp Fiction, The Stranger, and many of Philip Roth’s novels as fictions that successfully induce many readers to respond, both emotionally and morally, in ways that depart dramatically from their ordinary standards. (Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian is my own favorite example.) And the literary canon is rife with less radical cases: the Iliad, Augustine’s Confessions, the Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, Brideshead Revisited, and Pride and Prejudice all evoke emotional and evaluative responses which differ significantly from those that contemporary readers would have in real life.

4.1: Perspectives and Disparate Response

Once we take into account the sorts of factors I identified in imaginative engagement with fiction in §3, the phenomenon of disparate response follows quite naturally. A fiction will often describe individuals and situations quite differently, and locate them against a quite different global background and profile of cognitive interests, than the reader would employ if she encountered them on her own.

Moran (1994, 99) makes the same basic claim in more moderate terms: “We seem, then, to accept a role for the reader’s (or audience member’s) own sense of what is blameworthy or admirable in determining what is true in the fiction.” However, he does allow that readers can shift their evaluative responses by taking up alternative perspectives.

I focus on moral response, because it is the most discussed, both by philosophers and by psychologists; I believe similar results hold for other forms of evaluation, including beauty and humor, though I won’t attempt to establish that here.

These differences lead readers to characterize those individuals and situations differently within the fiction than they would otherwise, in turn producing different emotional and evaluative responses.

A wide range of empirical evidence supports the claim, which I made on intuitive and theoretical grounds in §3.1, that people’s intuitive characterizations and their emotional and evaluative responses are closely intertwined with one another, and depend heavily on how the represented situation is presented. Thus, priming for a certain emotion (e.g., sadness versus anger) affects subject’s characterizations: which features they notice in a presented situation, what causal explanations they assign to those features, and whether they assign individual blame. Priming for specific emotions also affects the valence and intensity of subjects’ evaluative judgments of individuals and groups, by influencing which elements within a stereotype they employ in their evaluation (Forgas 1990). In the other direction, emotional response is also influenced by how subjects characterize the situation: for instance, some cross-cultural differences in emotional response seem to be grounded in differences in the degree of responsibility and self-control that subjects assign in a given situation-type. Similarly, subjects’ evaluative judgments, such as willingness to classify consequentialist tradeoffs as morally acceptable, are influenced by factors like the order and vividness of presentation. Finally, even brief, isolated exposure to affectively-charged verbal cues, like ‘buxom’, ‘ghastly’, or ‘terrorist’, arouses measurable physiological responses characteristic of the correlative emotion, and influence the rapidity and content of subjects’ later responses to and evaluations of other topics.

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24 On the effects of framing on evaluative response, see Tversky and Kahneman 1981, Bartels 2008, Bartels and Medin 2007. See Levin et al 1998 and Iliev et al 2009 for overviews of framing effects, especially in moral contexts. These empirical findings about the connections among characterizations, emotion, and evaluation are also supported by theoretical reflection. Many philosophers claim that emotions impose an intuitive, coherent ‘gestalt’—that is, a characterization—on a field of constituent features. For instance, Noël Carroll (2001, 224) says that “[t]he emotions focus our attention. They make certain features of situations salient, and they cast those features in a special phenomenological light. The emotions ‘gestalt’, we might say, situations.” Cf. also e.g. A. Rorty 1980, de Sousa 1987, Greenspan 1988, Calhoun 1994, Robinson 2005, and Currie 2010, 98.
25 See Musch and Klauer 2003 for an overview of affective priming.
Given that relatively minimal priming significantly alters people’s causal and moral judgments and emotional responses, we should expect those judgments and responses to shift even more dramatically in the context of fiction. In fiction, unlike reality, readers intentionally allow both their attention and their operative cognitive concerns to be guided by the author. Their responses are filtered through affectively and evaluatively charged language, which both arouses responses in its own right and also itself contributes to an overarching style that expresses a distinctive perspective and personality. Fictions are in effect highly sustained, intense, cleverly designed priming experiments, which readers participate in willingly and knowingly, and often at least in part for the purpose of trying on alternative perspectives.

4.2: Simulationism

Even if perspectives provide a natural explanation for disparate response, it would be preferable to explain disparate response using only standard philosophical resources. And it would seem, *prima facie*, that the standard model can explain disparate response quite easily, by appealing to dramatic rehearsal. Pretending to be someone else, either a character or an author, by simulating their beliefs and perhaps their desires, will naturally lead a reader to simulate that person’s emotional, interpretive, and evaluative responses.26 Indeed, some simulationists, such as Currie (1997) and Weinberg (2008), include characterization-like “configurational features” within the simulation’s scope. So perhaps we can even appeal to perspectives without departing substantively from philosophical orthodoxy.

However, there are two important features of disparate response that simulationism cannot explain.27 First, the empirical findings I cited in §4.1 about the mutual interdependence among emotions,

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27 I am also skeptical of simulationism’s explanatory usefulness on general grounds. One reason is that insofar as the person being simulated has a very different psychological make-up, determining the appropriate ‘start state’ for simulating their responses requires detailed input from a representation of their psychology, including just their beliefs and desires, but also their characterizing dispositions and other aspects. But then much of the work is being done prior to, rather than within, the simulation, in a way that undermines a sharp distinction between simulation and “theory theory” (cf. Saxe 2005, Gaut 2007, 150). A second reason for skepticism is that subjects make systematic errors in predicting others’
evaluations, and characterizations did not concern fiction. In many cases, subjects were asked to recall actual emotionally charged situations, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 or events from their own lives; and even when the presented situation was explicitly hypothetical, there was no question of simulating some other psychology. Thus, a theorist who invokes simulation only to explain the phenomenon of disparate response to fiction, but retains the traditional propositional attitude analysis of emotion and moral evaluation, should predict that in these cases, given that subjects are employing their own actual psychologies, they should display a stable, context- and presentation-independent pattern of response. There is no room for the simulationist machinery to engage.

Second, the simulationist lacks a plausible explanation for the pervasive phenomenon of “imaginative contagion”: the way in which merely imagining something can have persisting effects on one’s own, real psychology after imagination ends. According to simulationists, imagination is a functionally encapsulated module, operating with belief, and perhaps imagery and desire, interacting via the usual cognitive principles and heuristics but “off-line,” disconnected from actual perception and action. The appeal to encapsulation entails a robust quarantining of imagination from the rest of one’s psychology (Goldman 1992, 26), both in the sense that one does not import one’s actual beliefs and desires into the simulation, but also in that one does not export the results of the simulation back into one’s actual psychology. Simulationism thus predicts that once a simulation has ended, as Nichols and Stitch (2000, 120) put it, “the events that [occur] in the context of the pretense have only a quite limited effect on the post-pretense cognitive state of the pretender.” All of the action in our engagement with fiction, including emotional response, is sequestered within the imagination. It follows that any lingering psychological effects of the simulation, other than predictions delivered as output, must be the by-product of faults in the inhibitory mechanisms responsible for ensuring encapsulation (Currie 1995, 258).

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behavior of a sort that suggest they are not simply pretending to undertake the relevant action themselves, but are relying at least partly on folk psychological assumptions (Saxe 2005).

28 See Gendler 2006b for philosophical discussion of recent empirical research on imaginative contagion.

29 Friend 2003 endorses the same conclusion, though she does not explicitly endorse simulationism.
In actuality, however, the postulated “inhibitory mechanisms” turn out to be so faulty as to undermine the model’s plausibility. Among other effects, reading even very short fictions lowers the rapidity and confidence of subjects’ judgments about things they manifestly know to be true, such as the speed limit or how J.F.K. died (Gerrig 1993). Subjects who imagine or think about certain types of people (professors, soccer hooligans, the elderly) behave more like them on unrelated tasks. Subjects who imagine being in a large group even exhibit ‘bystander apathy’, to a degree proportional to the size of the imagined group (Garcia et al 2000). Although many of these effects are fairly transitory, the perspectives that subjects adopt on an imagined scene can significantly affect their later recall and evaluation of it (Pichert and Anderson 1977), with the strength of the perspective’s effect depending on how heavily the text burdens the reader’s “working memory span.”

These demonstrations of “contagion” are aberrant on a model that sequesters imagination entirely within an encapsulated module. By contrast, they are quite natural on an account that invokes characterizations and perspectives. Our characterizations of imagined propositions and experiences are not themselves merely simulated. In particular, while we are absorbed in reading a fiction, certain things really do jump out at us and others pass as mere filler; and we really do link individual features and facts into patterns which govern our inferential and associative trains of thought, which make certain explanations and future developments seem natural, and which trigger certain affective and physiological responses. Once these characterizing structures have been activated, either by being raised from long-term memory or by being constructed in the course of reading, they become part of our integrated mental economy, and persist at least temporarily after the imaginative episode has ended.

4.3: The Fixed Reality Principle

Proponents of the Fixed Reality Principle, such as Walton, Yablo, and Weatherson, are committed to denying the ubiquity of disparate response: their primary evidence for the Principle comes

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precisely from what they take to be a general refusal or inability on readers’ part to have or to imagine disparate responses toward fiction. There is certainly room for argument about the relative frequency of disparate response as against imaginative resistance, though both anecdotal and scientific evidence suggests that disparate response is quite common. Even if it is comparatively rare, however, it’s not plausible to deny that it ever occurs.

Given the actuality of disparate response, the most plausible explanation for the proponent of the Fixed Reality Principle to offer is that when an author’s expressive style and mode of presentation do affect her readers’ responses, this is because she has manipulated them into responding that way; but she cannot, or can only with great difficulty, warrant those responses.\(^{32}\) Thus, one of Weatherson’s (2004) key points is the need to distinguish readers’ experiences of resistance (the ‘phenomenological’ puzzle) from authors’ failures make propositions fictional (the ‘alethic’ puzzle); and he illustrates this distinction by claiming that if we assume that gratuitous meat-eating is immoral in reality, then a story which describes a man as moral in virtue of giving meat to villagers fails to make that claim fictional, even though most readers won’t experience resistance toward it (2004, 21)—thereby implicitly appealing to the distinction between manipulated and warranted responses.

This distinction provides a compelling, albeit not entirely uncontroversial, diagnosis of the malleability of emotional and evaluative responses with respect to reality. Thus, Tversky and Kahneman’s work on “framing effects” is standardly taken to demonstrate that people’s reliance on ‘cheap and dirty’ cognitive heuristics renders them prone to failures of rationality and evaluation.\(^{33}\) More generally, we often criticize each other for mischaracterizing situations by wrongly focusing on features that should not be especially diagnostic or central. However, even if we grant that disparate evaluative response as a result of framing effects is a manifestation of irrationality as applied to reality, it doesn’t

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32 As Eva Dadlez (1997, 95) puts it, an author “manipulates our attention in such a way that making certain construals is virtually a foregone conclusion…[A] pattern of attention…is guaranteed, since those are the only situations we get, and there is little else to attend to.”

33 Though see Elqayam and Evans (2011) for critique of the view that human cognition ought to reflect the canons of formal reasoning.
follow that the same robust distinction can be maintained for fiction. Manipulation is possible, but well-crafted fictions can genuinely warrant alternative responses.

In the real world, the objective facts impose significant constraints on warranted characterizations. Relative to a background distribution of properties, certain features really are more intense than others; relative to a particular profile of cognitive interests, certain features really are more diagnostic; and relative to some explanatory purposes, certain features really are more central. It is also plausible that some cognitive interests and explanatory purposes are better than others, at least pragmatically and perhaps morally. These constraints are unlikely to determine a unique best characterization for any subject of at least moderate complexity. But they do narrow the range of acceptable interpretations significantly; and in turn, they significantly constrain which emotional and evaluative responses are warranted. Further, many or most of the features attributed to any given subject are themselves robustly objective, in the sense of being accessible to people with quite different perspectives. As a result, we can make good sense of the possibility that someone might have mischaracterized a situation. And we can attempt to filter out the perspectival aspects of someone’s testimony to get at how things really are, and thereby determine for ourselves how we think the situation should be characterized and evaluated.

By contrast, in fiction there is much less room for the robust distinction between description and interpretation that would be required to underwrite the claim that “authorial authority… does not extend as far as saying which concepts are instantiated [in the fictional world]” (Weatherson 2004, 22). There are at least three reasons why fiction differs from reality in this way. First, a fiction’s base-level facts have no independent reality apart from the author’s presentation of them; and as we saw, authors often employ evocative, characterization-rich language to specify those facts. As a result, it is often difficult or impossible to say what the ‘basic’ facts would be if they are not interpreted in much the way the author describes. Second, a fiction’s proposed imaginative project includes its overarching cognitive concerns, which guide and ground its local characterizations. And these concerns are typically so integral to the fictional enterprise that one cannot engage substantively with the fiction unless one takes them
seriously. So, for instance, a reader of *Pride and Prejudice* who insists on focusing his attention on the course of the Napoleonic War rather than on the local parishioners’ social foibles doesn’t merely differ in his “personal sentiments” toward or interpretation of the basic facts: he is so disengaged from Austen’s project that he lacks the authority to say what is important, or good, or shameful in the fiction. Perhaps war really is more important than matchmaking in actuality; but if so, this at most shows that novels about matchmaking are not worth one’s time and energy. It does not show that matchmaking doesn’t matter within the fiction. Similarly, a reader of *Gone with the Wind* who focuses primarily on the plight of the slaves, refusing to treat the novel as a romance and an exploration of women’s roles in the aristocratic South, is effectively engaged in rewriting Mitchell’s novel as Alice Randall’s parodic retelling, *The Wind Done Gone*. This may be an interesting and even important imaginative exercise in its own right; but it is not Mitchell’s proposed game. By contrast, if we do temporarily adopt the concerns that structure these novels as they are actually written, then both their local characterizations and their correlative responses become much more natural and appropriate.

Third, in well-crafted fictions, the author’s proposed characterizations of the local, base-level facts are grounded in aspects of the fiction for which proponents of the Fixed Reality Principle are willing to cede authorial control. In particular, warranted assignments of prominence and centrality partially depend on the global distribution of properties and causal structure. In *Gone with the Wind*, for instance, it is a background assumption that the slaves generally accept their social position. Because they are uneducated, and likely lacking in innate intelligence, they are incapable of finding and performing more sophisticated jobs. They also sincerely care about at least some of the aristocrats. Many readers will not want to imagine that these things are true; but they are undeniably the sorts of things that could be true. And once their fictionality is granted, then it becomes much more plausible to treat slavery as an inevitable, rather uninteresting part of the social world, and to focus on Scarlett’s travails instead.

As Gendler (2000, 63) puts it, imaginative resistance—responding ‘That’s what you think’ (or, we might add, ‘That’s your personal opinion’)—is “something which is always available as a last resort, but which, if overused, undermines the entire convention of which it is supposed to be offering local criticism.”

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To this point, I’ve focused almost exclusively on disparate emotional and moral response. However, one of Yablo’s and Weatherson’s key arguments is that imaginative resistance can also arise with respect to a range of non-moral, non-normative topics, such as shape and ontology. For instance, it is difficult to imagine fictions in which it is plausibly true that maple leaves are both five-fingered and oval (Yablo 2002, 485), or that a knife and fork are observationally indistinguishable from a television and armchair (Weatherson 2004, 5). For these cases, characterizations appear to play a more marginal role, and a Fixed Reality Principle for the relevant “in virtue relations” seems more plausible. Indeed, in some cases, we might doubt that there is any genuine thought about an alternative reality there to be imagined.

I agree that there are fewer clear cases of disparate response for metaphysical than for moral judgments. Nevertheless, I think we have grounds to reject a Fixed Reality Principle in these areas as well. The comparative paucity of disparate response may simply reflect the fact that most topics about which people actually diverge in their interpretive opinions, and which are also sufficiently engaging to feature in a novel, are moral. It may also reflect contingent limitations in readers’ current imaginative capacities. Established literary tropes and genres—time travel, say, or shape-shifting or magic—expand authors’ and readers’ imaginative horizons, by offering practice in imagining the details of a certain class of remote possibilities. For a genre to become established, a significant number of authors and readers must find those possibilities interesting enough to warrant their time and effort. But once a genre begins to grow, there is little predicting where it will end. For instance, math nerds might take inspiration from *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, and begin exploring what it would be like to inhabit alternative mathematical spaces. Relative to a world governed by topological rather than geometrical principles, readers might well be willing to accept that the outline of a five-fingered maple leaf was a circle, because it is a continuous closed one-dimensional space. Similarly, for extremely small or extremely large creatures, a knife and a television might be observationally indistinguishable. More generally, the history of science and philosophy provide many examples of propositions that were once taken to be inconceivable, even nonsense, but that later came to be widely accepted: for example, the
claims that light is both particle and wave, that a blade of grass could be produced by purely physical processes, or that mental states might be brain states. Thus, I believe we should be suspicious of any general, *a priori* limitations on what we might be able to imagine, given sufficient interest, context, and imaginative effort.\(^{35}\)

Once we take into account all of the imaginative alterations to their ordinary sense of reality that readers must undertake to engage fully with many fictions, the phenomenon of disparate response becomes both more difficult to state, and also less puzzling. On the one hand, it is no longer straightforward to identify what counts as encountering “the same situation” in real life and fiction, given all the required shifts in operative cognitive concerns and background patterns of property distribution and causation. But this also makes it less puzzling that readers often respond differently to “the same situation” narrowly construed. Yablo says that the concepts that engender imaginative resistance “depend[] on how the situation does or would strike us…*as we are*: how we are represented as reacting, or invited to react, has noting to do with it.” However, the empirical evidence on the malleability of cognitive, affective, and evaluative response suggests that “who we are” is less stable, even in reality, than many philosophers—and ordinary people—like to think.\(^{36}\) When it comes to fiction, the difference is even more dramatic between, as Wayne Booth (1961, 137) says,

myself as reader and the often very different self who goes about paying bills, repairing leaky faucets, and failing in generosity and wisdom. It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author’s. Regardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full.

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\(^{35}\) Cf. Camp 2004. Some of these cases may better be described as instances of change in the concepts themselves rather than in the domain of application of a fixed concept. Distinguishing between the two classes of cases is a delicate matter, with vague boundaries. But the fact remains that both in the history of science and in fiction, there can occur a continuous evolution under a constant label from an original, narrow domain to which ordinary people are willing to apply the relevant concept, to an expanded or shifted domain which includes instances that were inconceivable from the earlier vantage point.

\(^{36}\) Currie (2010, ch. 11) raises similar worries about the stability of personal character, and draws dire conclusions for the usefulness of fiction for comprehending reality. He does not, however, mention the “fundamental attribution error” or “correspondence bias” (Jones and Harris 1967, Ross 1977, Gilbert and Malone 1995): the widespread bias toward explaining behaviors of others by appeal to persistent character traits, while explaining one’s own behavior in terms of contextual features. If the bias for stable characters structures our understanding of both reality and fiction, and if it is also a sufficiently adaptive interpretive strategy, then we may need to adopt a fictionalist stance toward character across the board: it may be fundamentally unreal, but worth pretending to be real.
No author can force us to “subordinate [our] mind and heart” to their novel; we are always free to disagree, as Walton says. The author has merely proposed a certain imaginative project, with which we can do what we will. Among other things, it can sometimes be worthwhile to read “against the grain,” by systematically attending to features of the fiction that the author neglects. But pace Hume, Walton, Weatherson, and Yablo, many ordinary readers are remarkably willing to follow authors’ interpretive leads, even when it leads them into quite unfamiliar terrain. And in a well-crafted fiction, the ‘objective’ facts and the suggested interpretive responses are so intimately integrated that when readers do resist, this typically takes the form of disengagement with the novel as a whole, rather than a mere difference of “personal opinion” about a common set of base-level facts.

§5: Imaginative Resistance

On the face of it, it should not be especially puzzling that readers sometimes resist taking up the imaginative projects that authors propose: creating a fiction that engages a wide range of readers is a complex, hard-won achievement, which can fail to come off in all sorts of ways. In this section, I argue that content-based principles alone cannot explain when imaginative resistance occurs. Resistance depends, not primarily on what authors claim to be true, but on how skillfully they ground those claims within a larger imaginative project, and on how motivated readers are to enter into that project.

As I argued in §3, a successful fiction must do much more than just prescribe imagining a set of propositions and experiences. At a minimum, the objective local and global facts need to be internally consistent and fitting, and presented in a way that enables readers to form intuitive characterizations of robust individuals and events. Further, the author’s overarching perspective and expressive style must fit together into a psychologically coherent personality, from which readers can extrapolate the fiction’s implicitly operative principles of generation and characterization. Finally, the particular emotional and evaluative responses that the author prescribes must be grounded in correlative characterizations that fit with the local base-level facts, with the global background of objective property distributions and
causal structures, and with the author’s overarching perspective and personality.

Fictions may trigger resistance by being inconsistent in one or more of these ways. Most obviously, an author may prescribe evaluations that are unwarranted given the fiction’s global background: for instance, decrying as shameful something that other characters do without feeling embarrassment or causing harm. More interestingly, a fiction may be interpretively inconsistent even if all its objective facts are consistent. For instance, many critics accused Oliver Stone in *Natural Born Killers* of preaching the message that media sensationalism promotes violence even as his presentational style glamorized that violence. Such interpretive inconsistency can be intentional: the explicit moralizing may provide a fig leaf for indulging prurient interests; or the author may want to ‘seduce’ her readers into indulging those interests precisely to bring home how dangerous they are (Gaut 2007). Unless the reader can discern some coherent interpretive plan for the fiction as a whole, however, objective or interpretive inconsistencies are likely to shake his trust in the author. For instance, Wayne Booth (1961, 79) says that D.H. Lawrence misinterprets the characters and events in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* in ways that distort the plot, despite Lawrence’s own voluble insistence that it is immoral for the author to “put his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection.”

Fictions can also provoke resistance in the absence of any internal inconsistency, either objective or interpretive. The more radically the fiction’s operative assumptions, perspective and style depart from the reader’s own defaults, the more likely it becomes that some sort of resistance will occur, because the reader lacks either the ability or the desire to alter his ordinary cognitive dispositions as the author intends. (Conversely, a fiction that too closely mimics a reader’s assumptions and perspective risks either failing to pique his interest or reminding him too painfully of reality.) In particular, because perspectives are ongoing, intuitive dispositions to characterize, and are only partly under conscious voluntary control, readers must be trained into them gradually, through immersion in an expressive style and by application to specific individuals and events. In addition, getting readers to go along with high-

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38 Thanks to Marc Moffett for this point.
level interpretive judgments, especially moral evaluations, requires building up a rich body of background factual assumptions, and enticing the reader to share the fiction’s structuring concerns.

Given all this, we should not be surprised if short, stylistically unexpressive fictions which explicitly stipulate contrafactual interpretive propositions—what Weatherson (2004, 7) calls “simple direct invitations to imagine,” of the sort that philosophers have employed almost exclusively in their discussions of imaginative resistance—typically provoke resistance. The likelihood of resistance also appears to increase as those propositions depart more dramatically from a given reader’s default commitments: thus, it is likely to be easier to get contemporary readers to characterize out-of-wedlock birth as shameful, say, or to root for a protagonist to revenge his father’s murder, than to take female infanticide to be warranted. But even if resistance is more likely for what readers take to be more radically contrafactual propositions, this does not show that readers generally reject the possibility that they could ever be fictional. And some well-known works—*Juliette*, *Triumph of the Will*, or *V for Vendetta*, say—do elicit dramatically alternative evaluations in a significant number of readers. Rather than having a fixed moral compass, we might say that readers have a moral center of gravity, with more effort required to displace their judgments further from their natural equilibrium—and with some readers (perhaps especially philosophers who study morality and modality) requiring more energy to produce significant displacement than others.

So far, I’ve focused on readers’ willingness or resistance to respond to fiction in certain ways. But as noted in §4.3, the mere fact that readers are willing to pretend or judge that certain propositions are true in the fiction doesn’t show that those propositions really are fictional: the author might have manipulated her readers into false beliefs about what is fictional. In particular, both author and reader might be so prejudiced that they turn a blind eye to the sorts of internal inconsistencies that can undermine a higher-order proposition’s fictionality. However, the broader the range of readers that an author successfully induces to accept such judgments, and the greater the level of detail with which authors and readers can

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39 Weatherson (2004, 17) explicitly restricts his conclusions about puzzling fictions to such invitations, although his discussion often suggests a broader application. Walton, Weatherson and Yablo in particular all argue for limitations in what can be fictional by appealing to isolated, artificial examples.
justify those judgments, the less plausible it becomes to dismiss them as mistaken simply because they conflict with a favored metaphysical theory. I’ve argued that disparate response is so pervasive that the Fixed Reality Principle can be saved only by embracing a massive error theory about many readers’ engagement with fiction. But it is unclear that the Principle is itself sufficiently well-supported to warrant such an error theory. By contrast, a model that appeals to perspectives can smoothly explain both the pervasiveness of disparate response and the particular profile of cases where imaginative resistance does arise.

At the same time, even if many readers are often capable of engaging deeply with many alien fictions, they might still have good moral or aesthetic reasons not to do so. Participating imaginatively in a morally alien fiction can be morally risky, because trying on a perspective, even temporarily, involves genuinely cultivating a propensity to find certain things notable, to seek certain sorts of explanations, and to respond emotionally and evaluatively in certain ways. Tamar Gendler articulates the risk nicely: trying on a perspective, even just within the context of fiction, may “emphasize similarities we prefer to overlook” (2006, 151); and once we have noticed these similarities, we cannot go back and un-notice them, or deny they exist.40 We have already added that perspective to our “conceptual repertoire” (2000, 77), and may thereby “render these undesirable patterns of response available even in the contemplation of actual [scenarios]” (2006, 153).41

40 Gendler connects perspectives in fiction here with Moran’s (1989) discussion of the ‘compulsion’ involved in metaphorical perspectives; as he puts it, “If someone is described as having all the charm of a damp kitchen sponge, it’s no good simply to deny it, after he or she has registered an appreciation of the phrase” (1989, 91). In my (ms.), I spell out and defend Moran’s claim (along with that of Wayne Booth and Ted Cohen) that this ‘compulsion’ lends metaphorical insults a distinctive rhetorical power.

41 Gendler sometimes claims that resistance is occasioned by “a general desire not to be manipulated into taking on points of view that we would not reflectively endorse as authentically our own” (2000, 56). However, we often balk at being manipulated even for ends we endorse—as when our pleasure turns to disappointment when we discover that the nightingale’s song we have been enjoying is artificially generated (Kant, Critique of Judgment §42; thanks to Paul Guyer for discussion.) More importantly, as we’ve seen, a fiction can genuinely warrant alternative perspectives, and not merely manipulate us into adopting them. Gendler’s primary explanation of imaginative resistance centers on the notion of ‘exportation’. She argues, against Walton and others, that readers typically are willing to engage with morally alien fictions that are “distorting”: that is, where the author employs “distancing mechanisms” to signal that its evaluative principles are not intended realistically (2000, 78). Rather, she claims, fictions produce resistance when “the reader feels that she is being asked to export a way of looking at the actual...
Although the risk is genuine, I don’t think it warrants across-the-board resistance. Morally alien fictions can offer us important knowledge, by enabling us to comprehend an alien perspective in a lived way.\textsuperscript{42} This can help us to interact more effectively with those who embrace it. More importantly, we may ultimately embrace that perspective for ourselves, deciding that our earlier rejection was prejudicial. Refusing to try on alternative perspectives protects us from the risk of moral perversion, but at the cost of cutting us off from the potential for moral growth.

Morally alien fictions are not just morally, but also aesthetically risky, insofar as they require readers to expend imaginative effort in ways that are likely to be unpleasant or even hurtful. Various theorists have argued that morally alien fictions are \textit{ipso facto} aesthetically flawed, because they demand imaginative responses which “morally sensitive” readers are psychologically unwilling or unable to indulge (Walton 1994; Carroll 2001), or which it would be immoral for them to cultivate (Gaut 2007). Here too, I agree that alien perspectives raise the aesthetic stakes, but I deny that this entails any systematic conclusions about aesthetic merit. Readers and critics regularly acknowledge that aesthetically meritorious works of art can be challenging along other dimensions: in virtue of employing disruptive language, say, or eschewing traditional harmonies. If the challenging feature in question is not gratuitous, but sufficiently integral to the work—if it is “incorrigible,” in Daniel Jacobson’s terms—then we often don’t count it as an aesthetic deficit (Jacobson 1997, 191).\textsuperscript{43} Indeed, one might argue that the ability to draw at least some readers into trying on a morally alien perspective constitutes an aesthetic virtue: precisely because an author who presents an alien perspective must support it with a body of local and

\textsuperscript{42}Kieran (2003) argues that this can constitute an aesthetic, and not merely instrumental, merit.\textsuperscript{43} Further, it is unclear how to determine when a fiction is aesthetically flawed because inaccessible: inaccessibility to a particular reader might just reflect lack of imagination, or prudentially warranted but aesthetically irrelevant caution. As Jacobson (1997) argues, it would be question-begging to assume that emotional or evaluative responses to fiction are aesthetically unmerited simply because they are immoral: they might still be \textit{fitting}, in D’Arms and Jacobson’s (2001) sense of appropriately matching their target.
global facts, train her readers into a new way of characterizing those facts, and provide them with sufficient motivation to temporarily displace their own perspectives and commitments, creating an engaging morality fiction takes special skill. We shouldn’t be surprised if many readers are unwilling to invest the extra effort required for engagement, preferring to spend their time with more ‘comfortable’ fictions. Instead, we might decide to be impressed that it pulls in as many readers as it does.

§6: Conclusion

What, in the end, do we learn from fictions? Putnam says that in reading Celine’s Journey to the End of the Night, I do not learn that love does not exist, that all human beings are hateful and hating (even if—and I am sure this is not the case—those propositions should be true). What I learn is to see the world as it looks to someone who is sure that hypothesis is correct…Being aware of a new interpretation of the facts, however repellent, of a construction…that can be put upon the facts…is knowledge of a possibility. It is conceptual knowledge (1978, 89-90, emphasis in original).

We now have a better understanding of what sort of “conceptual knowledge” this might be. As Putnam says, it’s not primarily knowledge that a certain proposition is, or even could be, true. Rather, the perspective with which a fiction acquaints us is conceptual or cognitive in the sense of being a tool for thought: it structures and colors our thoughts by determining what we notice and dismiss, what sorts of explanations we seek, and what emotional and evaluative responses come naturally to us. “Trying on” a perspective requires actually, albeit temporarily, structuring one’s thinking in these ways. In some cases, we may drop these characterizing dispositions soon after we close the book. But often, there is at least some lingering effect—perhaps not a direct shift in propositional attitudes, but rather more subtle changes in predilections to notice, explain, and respond. These subtleties can eventually ramify, however, to alter our interpretive judgments of analogous situations in the real world.

44 He goes on: “To think of the novel itself as presenting us with some kind of nonscientific knowledge of man is making it all somehow too much like propositions” (1978, 91). Similarly, Danto (1981, 167) says that it is “one of the main offices of art less to represent the world than to represent it in such a way as to cause us to view it with a certain attitude and with a special vision.” Cf. also Michael Tanner (1994, 58).
The standard philosophical model, on which imagination is the propositional or experiential representation of contents as if they were real, makes this kind of learning through fiction mysterious. It also makes mysterious why readers sometimes resist and other times willingly go along with emotional and evaluative responses that depart significantly from those they would have in ordinary life—as well as why our responses to reality display much the same malleability. By contrast, a model of the mind which acknowledges that emotion and evaluation are intimately bound up with perspectives, and that perspectives are only partly under conscious control, renders all of these phenomena much more comprehensible. Fictions are complex imaginative enterprises, in which narrative, characterization, perspective, and style are integrated into a cohesive whole. A fiction must earn its perspective by embodying it in a fitting expressive style and by applying it consistently to the local and global facts; but when it does, a well-crafted fiction can warrant, and effectively elicit, significantly alternative responses from many readers.

Perspectives fit uneasily within the standard representational theory of mind. Although they are not part of content as traditionally understood, they are a pervasive and normatively-governed aspect of our mental, intentional lives. Different perspectives can make it more or less easy to access and assimilate different facts, and can warrant distinct evaluations of the same set of facts. Imaginative engagement with fiction brings out the role of perspectives especially clearly, because trying on a new perspective is such an integral part of what makes many fictions compelling. However, once we see how perspectives function in fiction, we can also observe them at work in our mental lives more generally: scientists and historians regularly try on and advocate alternative perspectives in the course of their investigations; and political and moral debate is in significant part a matter of dueling perspectives. To make systematic sense of discourse in these areas, we need a principled account of perspectives, of the sort I have begun to articulate here.
References

——— (ms.): “Why Metaphors Make Good Insults”


