

Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction *

Recent philosophical attention to fiction has focused on imaginative resistance, especially with respect to moral matters. But we also need to explain the phenomenon of ‘disparate response’: readers’ frequent willingness and ability to shift their emotional, evaluative and other interpretive responses from those they would have to the same situation in reality. I argue that an adequate explanation of both imaginative resistance and disparate response must appeal to perspectives. Trying on a perspective involves more than imagining that a set of propositions is true or experiencing something: it requires actually structuring one’s intuitive thinking in the relevant way. A perspectival account comports better with empirical evidence of malleability in readers’ responses to both fiction and non-fiction, and more accurately predicts when imaginative resistance does arise.

§1: Introduction

Recent philosophical attention to fiction has focused heavily 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 contents, especially about moral matters. Readers’ resistance in these cases seems puzzling, given that they are willing to imagine all sorts of implausible, even impossible things in other domains. Theorists have offered various explanations for resistance. Richard Moran (1994) argues that resistance arises because evaluative and emotional engagement with fiction requires more than merely imaging certain contents: it involves actual, robust responses, which are not the sort of thing readers can simply choose to do in response to an author’s prescriptions. Kendall Walton (1994), Steve Yablo (2002) and Brian Weatherson (2004) argue that resistance arises because what readers are able to imagine is constrained by fixed conceptual or metaphysical principles. And Tamar Szabó Gendler (2000, 2006a) 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, these theorists all emphasize the limits of imagination, and specifically the ways in which engagement with fiction is constrained by one’s sense of

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reality. But it is at least as notable how often readers' 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 bob 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 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*; in effect, it is the inverse of resistance.

To explain imaginative engagement in a way that makes sense of both resistance and disparate response, I will argue, we need to appeal to *perspectives*. Trying on 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 really do stick out as especially notable and explanatorily central in one's intuitive thinking. Because it requires inculcating actual dispositions of attention and interpretation, adopting a perspective is partly but not entirely under one's conscious control, and may have lingering cognitive effects after imaginative engagement ends. Recognizing the nuanced ways in which authors deploy perspectives makes it less puzzling both that fictions can produce emotional and evaluative responses that differ from those readers would have toward 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 fictional engagement. In §3, I outline some crucial perspectival factors in successful fictional engagement, 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 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 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), and Gaut (2007) are among those who make at least some appeal to perspectives, outlooks, frames, or seeing-as in explaining our emotional and evaluative responses to fiction. However, these authors rarely offer more than a passing explanation of what they mean by these terms, or put the phenomena to systematic explanatory work. Instead, most contemporary philosophical discussions of fiction explain both fiction itself, and our responses to it, by relying heavily on an analysis of imagination as the representation of contents as if they are actual.

2.1: Make-Believe

According to the standard model, the mind is primarily composed of attitudes, like belief and desire, directed toward propositional contents. Imagination is treated as the “off-line simulation” of belief (and perhaps desire; Doggett and Egan 2007). This has the advantage of establishing a strong parallel between belief about the real world and imagination about fiction, which Walton sums up 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).

This parallel allows us to bring the familiar theoretical machinery of propositional attitudes and possible worlds to bear on analyzing fiction. In particular, philosophers like Walton and David Lewis (1978) investigate the ‘principles of generation’ by which readers amplify explicit prescriptions about what is fictional into a coherent, well-rounded world. The simplest mechanism for generating implicit fictional truths is what Walton calls the “Reality Principle”: the assumption that fictional worlds are “as much like the real one as the core of primary [i.e. explicitly stipulated] fictional truths permits” (1990, 144). According to this principle, whenever a fiction is silent about some feature of its prescribed world, we fill in that gap by extension from the real world.

As Walton and Lewis take care to point out, the Reality Principle does not govern fiction in general: we don't 'import' contemporary beliefs about geography or biology into the *Odyssey* or *The Lord of The Rings*. Nonetheless, the dominant explanation for imaginative resistance does invoke a restricted form of the Reality Principle: Walton (1994), Yablo (2002), and Weatherson (2004) all argue that constitutive relations between base-level and higher-order propositions – paradigmatically but not exclusively, relations concerning evaluative propositions – are fixed across possible worlds. As Brian Weatherson (2004, 22) articulates the core assumption of this view,

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.

Combining this claim with the assumption that the operative 'opinions' are readers' ordinary views about the real world delivers what we might call the "Fixed Reality Principle": that with respect to certain domains it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to make fictional worlds differ from the real one even by explicit stipulation. On this view, while authors can make it fictional, say, that infanticide is common or that people value nutmeg, they cannot make it fictional that infanticide really is moral, or that nutmeg really is the *summum bonum*. On these higher-level interpretive matters, the view goes, 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, 39). Moreover, as readers of fiction we tend to exercise that freedom of disagreement: "when it comes to moral matters...I am more inclined to stick to my guns...I don't easily give up the Reality Principle, as far as moral judgments (moral principles) are concerned" (Walton 1994, 37).¹

¹ 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). Moran (1994, 99) makes a similar claim in more moderate terms: "We seem, then, to accept a role for the reader's...own sense of what is blameworthy or admirable in determining what is true in the fiction." However, he rejects an inter-level propositional analysis in terms of the Fixed Reality Principle, partly because it turns moral disagreement into "simple harangue" (1994, 101).

One of my central claims is that the Fixed Reality Principle is false. Although some readers do resist some fictions, it is at least as remarkable how frequently readers take up evaluations and emotions that differ from those they would have if they encountered the situation on their own terms in real life.² *Lolita*, *Triumph of the Will*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Stranger*, and many of Philip Roth's novels are frequently mentioned as cases of compelling but morally alien fictions, alongside which we might mention more popular examples like *The Shining*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, as well as less radically alien but more classic cases, like the *Iliad*, Augustine's *Confessions*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Brideshead Revisited*. The key challenge, then, is to provide an account that balances resistance against disparate response, and that predicts when each will arise in any given reader.

2.2: Dramatic Rehearsal

So far, I have described make-believe exclusively as a propositional attitude. While some theorists do advocate a "single code" propositional model of cognition (e.g. Nichols and Stich 2000, Nichols 2004, Pylyshyn 2003), many philosophers emphasize that imagining also involves, as Walton (1997, 38) says, "imagining *doing* things, *experiencing* things, *feeling* in certain ways." Because such dramatic rehearsal has much of the phenomenal immediacy of perception, it plausibly helps to trigger robust affective responses. Further, insofar as dramatic rehearsal involves the "empathetic re-enactment" of imagined scenes "through the eyes of characters within them" (Currie 1995, 256), it has a natural explanation for disparate response: imagining being some other person requires imagining having *their* emotional and evaluative responses. Finally, it also seems poised to explain imaginative resistance, insofar as readers will naturally balk at pretending to be *too* different from themselves.

I will argue that the standard model, even with dramatic rehearsal, cannot by itself resolve the puzzles. The fundamental problem, as Moran (1994, 76) emphasizes, is that both propositional and imagistic imagination are individuated in terms of contents: of *what* is represented in imagination, either

² Currie (1997), Dadlez (1997), Posner (1997), Goldie (2003), Kieran (2002, 2003) and Nichols (2006) all draw attention at least briefly to disparate response.

in an abstract or a concrete modality. In §4, I argue that insofar as the model explains disparate response as the mere simulation of someone *else's* attitudes, it cannot explain the fact that distinct ways of presenting the same content can significantly alter readers' own emotional and evaluative responses to *real* situations. Further, I argue in §5 that it leads the model to make counterintuitive predictions, especially overpredictions, about when imaginative resistance will arise.

§3: Factors in Full Imaginative Engagement with Fiction

In this section, I argue that the imaginative projects proposed by authors of fiction encompass more than prescriptions to imagine contents: they also involve cultivating certain modes of interpretation, which interact with both propositional and dramatic imagination to influence emotional and evaluative response.³

3.1: Local Facts and Characterizations

Let us grant that the most basic thing an author does is to prescribe a set of propositions as to be imagined. Even so, for a fiction to work, these propositions cannot be isolated: they must cohere into rich representations of complex events involving robust individuals. Many theorists have noted that the coherence in question 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 the operative species of comprehensibility by appealing to a class of mental representations that I call *characterizations*, which

³ One clarificatory note: in keeping with most contemporary philosophical discussions of fiction, I will speak freely of authorial intentions (and opinions, as Weatherson and Walton do above). I endorse a species of hypothetical intentionalism, on which an 'author' is a character we construct in the course of reading (e.g. Nehamas 1987, AUTHOR XX). The connection between this postulated authorial figure and an actual writer's mental states is a matter of significant debate, but largely orthogonal for current purposes; readers who are queasy about authorial intentions may frame the discussion in terms of what 'the text' demands or elicits from its ('model') readers instead.

are close to what psychologists often refer to as prototypes or schemas, and which I argue drive much of our associative, intuitive thinking, in domains as diverse as science, politics, and poetry.⁴

As a rough first pass, we can say that characterizations are stereotypes or schemas. Like these more theoretically familiar cognitive structures, a characterization applies a collection of properties to a subject. For instance, my characterization of quarterbacks includes their being natural leaders, and affable but rather dumb and shallow. In addition to such general traits, characterizations also often include more specific, experientially-represented properties; thus, I tend to think of quarterbacks as having a certain sort of square, clean-shaven jaw, gleaming teeth, and a ready smile. Characterizations often also include representations of how the subject tends to or should make one feel: admiration, or scorn, say.

My characterization of quarterbacks instantiates an entrenched American stereotype. But where stereotypes are ways of thinking about types, characterizations can also represent individual persons, objects, and events. And where stereotypes are communally shared, characterizations can be highly idiosyncratic: my characterization of a romantic weekend excursion may not match yours; or we might build up a shared, distinctive characterization together over time. Stereotypes, then, are a special case of characterizations.

The second major feature of characterizations, which strongly differentiates them from concepts, is that they don't require direct commitment to their subjects actually possessing the ascribed properties. Thus, I'm under no illusion that quarterbacks are especially likely to have gleaming teeth or square jaws; and I've read that they actually tend to have above-average intelligence (in marked contrast to linebackers). Still, there is a species of commitment involved in my characterizing quarterbacks as I do: 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; and if I were to say someone 'looks like a quarterback', this is part of what I would likely be aiming to communicate.

⁴ For a fuller account of characterizations, see AUTHOR XX. I discuss their role in the interpretation of metaphor in AUTHOR XX, XX, and XX; in slurs in XX, and in scientific inquiry in XX.

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 relative to a more general type. Although it might be theoretically satisfying if fittingness could be reduced to more familiar, truth-conditional statistical norms, intuitions of fittingness appear to have at least a partly aesthetic basis, which I take Arthur Danto (1981, 207) to articulate 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.

The third major feature of characterizations, which will be especially important in explaining resistance and disparate response, is that they don't merely consist in collections of attributed properties, but *structure* those properties in our intuitive thinking, along at least two dimensions of 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; while 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 to identify him.

Along the second dimension, some features are more *central* than others, insofar as an agent treats them as causing, motivating, or otherwise explaining many of the subject's other features (Thagard 1989, Sloman et al 1998, Murphy and Medin 1985). 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 having a square jaw does. A good measure of centrality is how much else about the subject would intuitively change if that feature were removed.

Structures of prominence and centrality are highly intuitive and holistic, in a way that the oft-cited analogy with perceptual Gestalts makes vivid. Contrast the two ways of seeing Figure 1. On either way of seeing, the perceptual significance and function each constituent element depends on the significance and function of many other elements. Switching between ways of seeing shifts the relative prominence and centrality of those elements dramatically, which can then in turn alter the significance of the basic elements themselves, so that the same set of pixels comes to be seen as a nose, say, or as a wart.



Figure 1: The Old Crone/Young Lady

Much the same holistic, intuitive organizational effect occurs with characterizations: the same feature may be assigned different structural roles within the same overall set of elements, which can in turn imbue that feature with different affective, evaluative, and even conceptual significances. Thus, a spatio-temporally equivalent gesture can seem threatening or merely awkward, depending on one's characterization of the person performing it, and especially of their race and other demographic features.⁵

Characterizations don't just influence interpretation of particular features; they also guide our emotional and evaluative responses to entire subjects and situations. A range of empirical evidence demonstrates that people's intuitive characterizations are closely intertwined with their emotional and evaluative responses, and depend heavily on how the represented situation is presented. Thus, affective priming – for sadness, say, or anger – affects which features subjects notice, what causal explanations they give for those features, and whether they assign blame.⁶ Priming for specific emotions also affects the valence and intensity of subjects' evaluative judgments, by influencing which elements within a

⁵ Devine 1989, Duncan 1976.

⁶ E.g. Keltner et al 1993, Tiedens and Linton 2001, Lerner et al 2002, Small et al 2006, Dasgupta et al 2009.

stereotype they employ in evaluating an individual or group.⁷ In the other direction, emotional response is strongly influenced by how a subject characterizes the situation;⁸ and evaluative judgments, such as willingness to classify consequentialist tradeoffs as morally acceptable, are significantly influenced by factors like the order and vividness of presentation.⁹

Moreover, these linkages among characterizations, emotions, and evaluations are not merely causal, but normative. Characterizations provide “structures of justification” for emotions, in Danto’s terms; as he says, “there are things we know we ought to feel given a certain characterization of the conditions we are under” (1981, 169). Emotions are also plausibly tied to moral evaluation. On the one hand, certain types of situations warrant certain emotional responses: anger at blameworthy actions, and admiration or joy at praiseworthy ones (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000). The connection in the other direction is more controversial, but many philosophers follow Hume in holding that moral evaluations are themselves at least partially grounded in emotion, and others hold that they are justified by non-emotive perspectives or characterizations. Thus, characterizations, emotions, and moral evaluations plausibly form an intimate triangle of causal and normative interdependence.

In addition to bringing out the intuitive, holistic structure of characterizations, the analogy with seeing-as also allows us to make precise the sense in which characterizations are not fully propositional. The structural relations among features in our characterizations are typically tacit: for instance, we might intuitively treat Bill’s bonhomie as more explanatory than his being a philosopher without ever realizing that we think this. Still, we are capable of articulating such relational, structural propositions; in particular, we regularly advance them while debating the appropriateness of differing emotional and

⁷ Forgas 1990.

⁸ 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 (Mauro et al 1992). See Wallbott and Scherer 1986, Ortony et al 1988, and Smith 1989 for other discussions of connections between cognitive appraisal and emotional response.

⁹ 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 theoretically. Many philosophers claim that emotions impose an intuitive, coherent ‘gestalt’ on a field of constituent features: e.g. A. Rorty 1980, de Sousa 1987, Greenspan 1988, Calhoun 1994, Carroll 2001, Robinson 2005, and Currie 2010, 98.

evaluative responses, especially in politics, personal relationships, and art criticism. But even if our tacit endorsement of such higher-order propositions can be articulated, explicitly endorsing or entertaining them is neither necessary nor sufficient for actually having the relevant characterization. Instead, just as with seeing-as, characterizing involves *actually* structuring one's intuitive thinking in the relevant way, so that prominent features really do stick out in one's attention, and central features really are intimately connected to many other ascribed features.

Just as there is a phenomenologically striking and practically efficacious difference between seeing-as and “looking plus thinking” (Wittgenstein 1958, 197) in perception, that is, so too with characterizing in thought. Suppose you tell me, in explicit detail, about your characterization of Bill: which of his (purported) features you take to be especially prominent and why, what explanatory relations you take to hold among them, and so on. I might endorse all these propositions without managing to intuitively ‘get’ your characterization: ‘getting’ requires making those propositions play the appropriate structural role, and this is partly but not entirely under my voluntary control. Although directing attention one way or another, or entertaining a concept in connection with a given feature may help, ultimately the ‘click’ of holistic understanding just happens – sometimes intruding unbidden, and sometimes never arriving despite my best interpretive efforts.

The phenomenon of shifting characterizations by means of ‘framing’ is ubiquitous in our cognitive and communicative lives, for better and for worse. In the case of fiction, we can say that the most minimal condition on the species of psychological comprehensibility required for successful imaginative engagement is that readers be able to fit the various individual propositions that an author prescribes together into robust, intuitive characterizations of individuals and events. Logical and metaphysical inconsistency need not be not inherently problematic, so long as the inconsistent propositions are low in prominence and segregated in centrality, and outweighed by other interests (Gendler 2000, 69).

3.2: Objective Global Background

In §3.1, I argued that a fiction's explicitly prescribed facts are not isolated, but must be integrated into intuitively coherent characterizations. They are also not isolated insofar as they are located against the global background of a larger world, which includes at least broad statistical distributions of properties and patterns of causation. That is, different fictional worlds are inhabited by different sorts of people and objects: actions and qualities that would be shocking or impossible in a Jane Austen novel are unremarkable in the world of Philip Roth, and vice versa. Readers fill out implicit assumptions about what particular events transpired, and predict what will happen, based on their expectations about how people in that world generally act and what sorts of effects events typically have. Moreover, these global patterns of property distribution and connection provide a basis for *warranting* certain characterizations and predictions, insofar as the features that ought to be most prominent in characterizing a given subject are those that really are the most intense and diagnostic, and the features that ought to be most central are those that are caught up in the most robust, causally explanatory networks.¹⁰

3.3: *Perspectives*

The constraints imposed by these global patterns rarely isolate a unique set of warranted characterizations. Minimally, both the distribution of properties and the causal structures in a given world are subtle, multi-dimensional, and typically implicit. More importantly, both diagnosticity and explanatory centrality depend heavily on one's cognitive interests and goals, about which agents obviously differ significantly. At the same time, at least when it comes to fiction, readers are not simply free to take up whatever interests they see fit. Rather, an integral part of the project proposed by most fictions includes recognizing what sorts of events and connections an author wants her readers to be curious about, and what sorts of explanations they should find seek and be satisfied by. This profile of interests and concerns, along with a rich set of expectations about the world's distribution of properties, together constitute a *perspective* on a world.

¹⁰ For discussion of these criteria in application to scientific frames, see AUTHOR XX.

On the most literal interpretation, a perspective is simply a *point of view*: a spatio-temporal location from which I rehearse a sequence of events within an imagined scene. While such a spatio-temporal understanding is obviously too restricted to encompass the interpretive perspectives at issue here, perspectives might be treated as psychological points of view with a fairly minimal extension: as a character's perceptual, cognitive, and affective states. Trying on a perspective is then naturally thought of as a matter of simulating an embedded character's experiences of a scene as events unfold (Currie 1995, 1997).

Although character simulation is an integral aspect of much fictional engagement, it does not suffice to capture the sort of perspective needed to explain imaginative resistance and disparate response. Briefly, first, warranted emotional and interpretive responses toward particular individuals and events don't just depend on a specific character's cognitive states at that moment, but also on the wider situation, including facts of which that character may crucially be ignorant.¹¹ Second, readers often have reason to step out of imaginative immersion within successive scenes, to adopt an 'acentral' and external perspective on the fictional world as a whole.¹² In particular, a crucial aspect of narrative understanding consists in comprehending a story *sub specie aeterni*, as an integrated, structured whole (Mink 1970). Finally, an adequate account of imaginative engagement needs to explain how the same perspective can apply to multiple worlds. Various theorists (e.g. Nussbaum 1992, Gendler 2000) have argued that fictions acquaint us with new perspectives on the real world; to even make sense of these claims, perspectives need to be extractable from particular scenes and stories.

I think the best way to understand perspectives at an appropriately general level is to treat them as open-ended modes of interpretation.¹³ Perspectives are standing dispositions to characterize whatever one encounters in a certain way: to notice and attend to certain sorts of features, to care about certain sorts

¹¹ Cf. Moran 1994, 91; Carroll 2001, Goldie 2003. Further, as XX (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 through music in film, violations of genre expectations, and so on.

¹² 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.

¹³ For further discussion of perspectives, see AUTHOR XX, XX.

of questions and issues, to seek certain sorts of explanations, and to endorse certain sorts of affective and evaluative responses. As such, perspectives are essentially non-propositional: while they can sometimes be crystallized in slogans like ‘Look out for number one’ or ‘Turn the other cheek’, explicitly entertaining or endorsing such precepts is neither necessary nor sufficient for deploying the relevant perspective. Indeed, it is not sufficient for having a perspective that one have any particular beliefs or desires, or even that one intuitively ‘get’ any particular characterization of any particular subject. Rather, a perspective is a general ability to “go on the same way” in assimilating and responding to information and experiences. In this sense, a perspective is a tool for thinking rather than being a thought itself: it determines no truth-conditions of its own, but provides a way of organizing and navigating among thoughts.¹⁴

The perspectives we bring to everyday life constitute a significant part of who we are. They influence which sources of information we seek out and believe; what we find funny, interesting, and appalling; who we feel comfortable with. With respect to any particular situation, two people with divergent perspectives may eventually come to agree about the basic facts. But they will interpret those facts quite differently, by locating them within distinct nexuses of further facts, possibilities, and values. In this sense, pervasive perspectival differences can make us feel that we inhabit fundamentally different worlds. By the same token, however, a large part of the pleasure we derive from reading fictions lies in cultivating alternative perspectives: in seeing the world, including our own, through someone else’s eyes.

¹⁴ Although the theorists I cited in §1 as invoking frames and perspectives don’t specify what they mean by these terms, what they do say is largely compatible with my account. Thus, Gendler (2000, 69) describes “ways of seeing things” as “focus[ing] 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). 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 “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 perceptual model in his earlier (1995, 1997) work. However, he still retains the perceptual model insofar as he defines narrative point of view in terms of *limitations* on an agent’s awareness, conceptual resources, and capacities for action (2010, 89). As such, his model cannot account for the key fact that perspectives are something we can try on and advocate, and about which we can differ even given full agreement on a set of base-level facts and conceptual repertoire.

§4: Disparate Response

In §3, I identified a range of factors that influence not just what but how readers imagine in engaging with fictions. In particular, a range of empirical evidence supports the claim that our intuitive characterizations and responses depend on the order, imagery, and point of view of presentation. It is also well-established that even brief, isolated exposure to affectively-charged verbal cues arouses physiological responses characteristic of the correlative emotion and influences the rapidity and content of subjects' later responses to this and other topics.¹⁵ Given that relatively minimal verbal framing and affective priming significantly alter ordinary causal and moral judgments and emotional responses, it is unsurprising that those responses shift more dramatically in the context of fiction, where readers' responses are consistently filtered through language that is affectively, evaluatively, and imagistically charged. As we might put it, 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.

4.1: Simulation

To what extent is the perspectivism articulated here a genuine alternative to the standard model? It might seem that the standard model can easily explain disparate response by appealing to simulation.¹⁶ After all, there is significant empirical evidence that reading narratives activates experiential representations,¹⁷ and specifically that readers process information from the spatio-temporal, cognitive,

¹⁵ See Musch and Klauer 2003 for an overview of affective priming.

¹⁶ For defenses of simulationism in fiction, see Goldman 1992, Currie 1995, 1997, 2002; Walton 1997; Nichols and Stich 2000; Nichols 2004, 2006; Weinberg and Meskin 2006; Weinberg 2008; Doggett and Egan 2008.

¹⁷ Tettamanti et al 2005, Speer et al 2009. However, there is considerable variability in how much imagery subjects report experiencing. 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.

and emotional point of view of narrative protagonists.¹⁸ Indeed, some simulationists, such as Currie (1997) and Weinberg (2008), include characterization-like “configurational features” within the scope of what is simulated. So perhaps we can pack perspectives within the scope of pretended contents – albeit at the authorial rather than the characterological level, in order to deal with the worries about ‘external’ perspectives in §3.3.

While there are important similarities between the two views, simulationism lacks the resources to explain at least two key facets of disparate response. First, the empirical findings cited in §3.1 about the mutual interdependence among characterizations, emotions, and evaluations do not concern fiction. In many cases, subjects were asked to recall actual emotionally charged situations, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; and even when the presented situation was explicitly hypothetical, there was no question of subjects simulating some other person’s psychology. Thus, a simulationist account of disparate response which retains the standard, content-based analysis of real emotions and evaluations should predict that in cases like these, where subjects are employing their own actual psychologies, they should display a stable pattern of ‘genuine’ response, independent of context and mode of presentation. But this prediction is not borne out empirically.

Second, the simulationist lacks a plausible explanation for imaginative “contagion”: the way in which mere imagination can have persisting effects on one’s actual psychology.¹⁹ Because simulationists treat imagination as a functionally encapsulated module, in which imagination is “quarantined” from one’s ‘real’ psychology (Goldman 1992, 26), they predict that, as Nichols and Stich (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.”²⁰ It follows that any lingering psychological effects, other than

¹⁸ For instance, subjects are quicker at reporting the locations of objects described as close to or in front of the protagonist (Rinck et al 1996), and at interpreting sentences reporting emotions which match those implicitly felt by the protagonist (Gernsbacher et al 1992). 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 the empirical evidence and a defense of empathy in fictional engagement.

¹⁹ See Gendler 2006b for philosophical discussion of empirical research.

²⁰ Friend 2003 endorses the same conclusion, though she does not explicitly endorse simulationism.

predictions delivered as output, are the by-product of faults in the “inhibitory mechanisms” responsible for ensuring encapsulation (Currie 1995, 258).

Here too, however, the postulated inhibitory mechanisms turn out to be so faulty as to undermine the model’s plausibility – or transform it into a form of perspectivism. 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; subjects who imagine or think about certain types of people (professors, soccer hooligans, the elderly) behave more like them on unrelated tasks; and subjects who read juxtaposed passages about distinct but related topics (e.g. the social status of gay people and the persecution of left-handers) are more likely to recall ‘analogically constructed’ claims as having been explicitly presented.²¹ Although many of these effects are transitory, the perspectives that subjects deploy on their initial encounter with an imagined scene can significantly affect later recall and evaluation, with the strength of the perspective’s effect depending on how heavily the text burdens the reader’s working memory span.²²

While “contagion” is aberrant on a simulationist, quarantining model, it follows naturally on a perspectival account. Even when we are fully aware that the contents we imagine are not real, our characterizations of those contents are not merely simulated. While we are absorbed in reading a fiction, certain things really do jump out at us and others pass as filler; and we really do link individual features and facts into intuitive patterns that govern our inferential and associative trains of thought, which in turn make certain explanations and plot developments seem natural, and trigger certain affective and physiological responses. As these characterizing structures are activated or constructed, they become part of our actual overall mental economy, persisting at least temporarily after the imaginative episode has ended.

Moran (1994) inaugurated contemporary discussion of imaginative resistance by arguing for the actuality of our interpretive and emotional responses to fiction, and stressing the importance of the way in

²¹ Gerrig 1993, Bargh et al 1996, Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg 1998, Banfield et al 2003, Perrott et al 2005.

²² Pichert and Anderson 1977, Baillet and Keenan 1986, Lee-Sammons and Whitney 1991.

which contents are presented and emphasizing that emotional response involves a species of imagination that is directed toward a “context-dependent...quasi-perceptual appreciation of the situation...grounded in the relevance or relative importance of various factors” (1994, 102). In all these respects, my account is an elaboration of his. However, what simulationists get right, but Moran at least downplays and sometimes appears to deny, is just how flexible our capacity to “enter into” highly alternative psychologies is, even in full awareness that – indeed, often precisely because – those psychologies depart from those we would reflectively endorse or intuitively employ on our own. In this sense, it is not straightforwardly true that, as he says, “the responses of laughter, lust, indignation, relief, delight in retribution, etc. [we have to fiction] are normally treated as expressions of genuine attitudes that we actually have” (1994, 93). While our ability to try on a certain perspective does reveal something about our “real temperament” (1994, 93), what it reveals may be as much about our imaginative flexibility as our moral commitments and virtues. My emotional and evaluative responses to fiction are indeed real, in the sense that adopting a perspective requires actually structuring and interpreting what is imagined. But because perspectives are also often quite temporary, they are not straightforwardly ‘mine’, in the sense of manifesting a stable underlying character which I would endorse, or even that those who know me would ascribe to me.

4.3: The Fixed Reality Principle

Proponents of the Fixed Reality Principle are committed to denying the ubiquity of disparate response: after all, their primary evidence for the Principle derives from a purportedly widespread refusal or inability by readers to have disparate responses toward fiction. While there is room for disagreement about the comparative frequency of disparate response, it’s not plausible to insist that it never occurs; and so proponents of the Fixed Reality Principle need some way to explain it. Here too, it might seem that the Principle can simply incorporate perspectivism, given that both the Fixed Reality Principle and perspectivism invoke ‘grounding relations’ between base-level and higher-order propositions. However, this structural similarity masks a fundamental difference: the grounding relations invoked by the Fixed

Reality Principle are conceptual and/or metaphysical relations among propositional contents; indeed, this is what explains their robust invariance. By contrast, the grounding relations invoked by perspectivism are psychological; more specifically, they are the propositional symptom of what is at root a non-propositional mode of interpretation. Both differences, I claim, favor perspectivism.

The most plausible way for a proponent of the Fixed Reality Principle to explain disparate response is to claim that when an author's mode of presentation does affect her readers' responses, this is because she has *manipulated* them into responding in a way that is not genuinely warranted, by leading them to ignore or distort the genuine, invariant relations among base-level and interpretive propositions. I do think this constitutes a compelling diagnosis of at least some of the malleability of emotional and evaluative responses with respect to *reality*. Thus, Tversky and Kahneman's seminal work on 'framing effects' is standardly taken to demonstrate that people's reliance on 'cheap and dirty' associative heuristics renders them prone to failures of rationality.²³ However, even if we grant that such framing effects are the product of irrationality and/or manipulation when applied to reality, the same conclusion doesn't follow for fiction. As I argued in §3, well-crafted fictions can genuinely warrant alternative responses.

In both the real world and fiction, the given, objective facts impose significant constraints on which characterizations are warranted. That is, relative to a background statistical distribution, 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. These constraints significantly constrain the range of acceptable characterizations and warranted responses. In the real world, most of the features that are attributed in characterizations are real subjects are also intersubjectively accessible. As a result, we can frequently make good sense of the possibility that someone has genuinely mischaracterized a particular situation. We can also attempt to systematically filter out the perspectival aspects of some particular agent's testimony, in order to get at

²³ Though see Elqayam and Evans (2011) for critique of the view that human cognition ought to reflect the canons of formal reasoning. In AUTHOR XX I argue that the relationship between logical and associative cognition is more symbiotic than antagonistic.

how we think things really are, and hence to develop our own characterizations of whatever they tell us about. In short, when it comes to the real world, we can make sense of the sort of robust distinction between pure description and further interpretation that is required to underwrite the claim that “authorial authority...does not extend as far as saying which concepts are instantiated,” as Weatherson (2004, 22) puts it. However, the same does not hold for fiction, for at least three reasons.

First, a fiction’s base-level facts have no independent reality apart from the author’s presentation; and authors typically employ evocative, expressive, characterization-rich language in specifying those facts. As a result, it is often difficult or impossible to ‘peel off’ the author’s interpretation, to determine what the ‘base’ facts would be independently of their say-so.

Second, in a well-crafted fiction the author’s characterizations of the base-level facts are significantly grounded in aspects of the fiction for which proponents of the Fixed Reality Principle are willing to grant authorial control – specifically in the fictional world’s global distribution of properties and operative 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 lacking in innate intelligence, they are incapable of securing and performing more sophisticated jobs. They also sincerely care about at least some of the aristocrats. Many readers will want to resist imagining *that* these things are true, and for good reason; but they are undeniably the sorts of things that *could* be true in some alternative possible world.²⁴ But once the fictionality of these propositions is granted, then it becomes much more plausible to treat slavery as a rather inevitable, and hence uninteresting, part of the social background, not worthy of concerted interpretive attention. Again, this is not to say that the fiction is *right* to prescribe imagining this, only that it is an imaginatively coherent prescription.

Third, in a well-executed fiction, the author’s interests and concerns are so integral to the proposed imaginative project that one cannot engage substantively with that project without taking those interests seriously. A reader of *Gone with the Wind* who focuses exclusively on the plight of the slaves, or a reader of *Pride and Prejudice* who insists on focusing his attention on the events of the Napoleonic War

²⁴ Gendler’s (2000, 73) example of the black and white mice illustrates this point forcefully.

rather than the local parishioners' foibles, is likely to make quite different judgments about what emotional and evaluative responses are warranted than their authors do. But such a reader doesn't merely differ in his "personal sentiments" about a common set of basic facts (Walton 1994, 39). Rather, by refusing to treat those novels as they were intended – in both cases, as romances exploring (and indicting) women's established roles in aristocratic society – he has disengaged so thoroughly from their overall projects that he has lost the standing to say *what* counts as important, or good, or shameful in those fictions. Such 'alternative' readings can be important imaginative exercises in their own right. But they are effectively rewritings, along the lines of Alice Randall's parodic *The Wind Done Gone*. In this sense, substantial differences of interpretive opinion must always be relatively local: we are indeed always "free to disagree" with the author, as Walton insists, but pervasive disagreement constitutes a form of opting-out which ultimately undermines our readerly authority.²⁵ By contrast, though, if we *do* grant these authors their operative assumptions, interests and concerns, then their proposed characterizations and attendant emotional and evaluative responses become much more appropriate.

Up to this point, I've focused on disparate moral and emotional response. One of Yablo's and Weatherson's key arguments, is that imaginative resistance also arises for a range of non-normative, more purely metaphysical topics: thus, it is difficult to imagine fictions in which maple leaves are both five-fingered and oval (Yablo 2002, 485), or in which a knife and fork are observationally indistinguishable from a television and armchair (Weatherson 2004, 5). For these cases, disparate response seems less pervasive, and our interpretive responses more fixed. Even here, I think we should also be suspicious of the Fixed Reality Principle. The comparative paucity of disparate response for such cases may reflect contingent limitations in readers' current interests and imaginative capacities. Literary genres and tropes – time travel, say, or shape-shifting, or magic – can expand authors' and readers' imaginative horizons, by offering practice in imagining the details of a certain class of remote possibilities. Thus, math nerds might take inspiration from *Flatland*, exploring what it would be like to inhabit alternative mathematical spaces;

²⁵ As Gendler (2000, 63) puts it, responding 'That's what *you* think' (or '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."

relative to a world governed by merely topological rather than geometrical principles, readers might well be willing to accept the outline of a five-fingered maple leaf as a circle, because it is a continuous closed one-dimensional space. More generally, the history of science suggests that we should reject general, *a priori* limitations on what we might be able to imagine given sufficient interest, context, and effort.²⁶

Gendler (2000, 2006) also argues against explaining imaginative resistance by positing general metaphysical principles entailing impossibility among contents, instead emphasizing that successful engagement depends upon psychological structures of attention. Specifically, she argues that resistance stems from a desire not to add objectionable perspectives to our “conceptual repertoire” (2000, 77), because doing so may “render these undesirable patterns of response available even in the contemplation of actual [scenarios]” (2006a, 153). In effect, that is, she claims that we resist because we worry about precisely the ‘contagion’ that I argued simulationism cannot explain.

In all these respects, my account is an elaboration of hers. However, there is also an important difference. Despite her invocations of contagion, Gendler’s primary explanation of resistance relies on what is in effect a weakened version of the Fixed Reality Principle, which we might call the Fixed-Reality Reality Principle. That is, she argues that morality fictions produce resistance when “the reader feels that she is being asked to export a way of looking at the actual world” from the fiction (2000, 77): while readers happily indulge perspectives within the confines of fiction, she claims, they are committed to the immutability of moral (and perhaps other conceptual) principles governing reality.

While I agree that exportation is a factor in resistance, I think that even Gendler’s weakened Reality Principle still accords much too much systematicity to readers’ willingness and resistance to engage with alien fictions. On the one hand, many people are genuinely moved by fictions, like *Paradise Lost*, which deploy alien perspectives that the author intends realistically, even didactically. Many readers also try on alternative perspectives outside of fiction, either in reading non-fictional narratives like Augustine’s *Confessions*, or in political and ethical debate. On the other hand, as we’ll see in §5, and as Gendler herself admits, we sometimes resist fictions we know to be intentionally distorted. Thus, it

²⁶ For further discussion, see AUTHOR XX, XX.

seems that resistance often depends on more nuanced issues of internal construction and personal motivation than on fixed metaphysical and moral commitments about reality.

For all their theoretical differences, Walton, Weatherston and Yablo's metaphysical/conceptual universalism, Currie's simulationism, Moran's affective realism, and Gendler's exportationism all assume a stable self who either cannot or will not actually take up 'alien' emotional and evaluative responses toward the real world. When disparate response does occur, they assume, it is because the reader has been manipulated into responding in a way they would or could not willingly, actually do. I've argued that this assumption fails to explain both the actual malleability of emotional and evaluative responses to reality, and also the way in which fictions can genuinely warrant alternative responses.

§5: Imaginative Resistance

In §4, I argued that existing accounts fail to explain disparate response. In this section, I argue that perspectivism also provides a better explanation for imaginative resistance. Walton, Weatherston and Yablo are right to notice that readers approach fictions with default interpretive assumptions, including especially assumptions about relations between base-level and higher-order propositions. However, resistance depends not primarily on *what* authors prescribe as fictional, but on how skillfully they ground those claims within a coherent, well-motivated imaginative project.

As I argued in §3, a successful fiction does 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 particular emotional and evaluative responses the author prescribes must be grounded in characterizations that fit the local base-level facts, the global background of property distributions and causal structures, and the author's overarching interests and concerns.

Fictions may trigger resistance by being inconsistent in one or more of these ways. An author may prescribe evaluations that fail to be warranted by the fiction's global background: for instance, decrying as heinous a type of action that is also presented as entirely commonplace in that world and as causing no

harm. A fiction may also be interpretively inconsistent even given consistency in its objective facts: for instance, critics accused *Natural Born Killers* of glamorizing violence by means of its presentational style even as it explicitly preached against media sensationalism. Some such interpretive inconsistencies are intentional: the explicit moralizing may provide a fig leaf for prurient interests; or the author may want to ‘seduce’ her readers into indulging those interests to bring home how dangerous they are (Gaut 2007). However, unless readers can discern some coherent higher-order interpretive plan, objective and interpretive inconsistencies are likely to shake their trust in the author. (Indeed, bad fictions can trigger resistance by prescribing unwarranted responses, even when their inter-level interpretive commitments are utterly conventional.)

Fictions can also provoke resistance in the absence of any internal inconsistency. The more radically a fiction’s operative perspective departs from the reader’s defaults, the more likely resistance becomes, as the reader loses the ability or desire to shift their ordinary cognitive dispositions in the prescribed way.²⁷ Getting readers to go along with alternative interpretive judgments, especially but not exclusively moral evaluations, requires sustained, highly-skilled work: at a minimum, building up a rich body of novel background assumptions, framing the described actions and events in an appropriate way using evocative, expressive language and imagery, and enticing the reader to share the fiction’s operative interests and concerns. In addition, because perspectives are ongoing, intuitive dispositions to characterize, and only partly under voluntary control, readers must be trained into them gradually and given compelling motivations to persist in cultivating them.

Given all this, we should not be surprised if short, stylistically unexpressive fictions which explicitly stipulate interpretive propositions that are wildly contrafactual by the reader’s lights – that is, precisely the sorts of examples that have been employed almost exclusively by philosophers in

²⁷ Conversely, a fiction that too closely mimics a reader’s standing assumptions and perspective also risks disengagement, either by failing to pique his interest or by reminding them too painfully of reality. Thanks to XX for the latter point.

discussions of imaginative resistance – do typically provoke resistance.²⁸ But for this same reason, such cases cannot demonstrate that those same propositions would still be rejected if embedded within more complex, well-executed fictions. The pervasiveness of disparate response in engagement with actual fictions – and with actual reported scenarios – suggests precisely the opposite. Rather than having a fixed moral compass, it appears that readers have something more like a moral center of gravity, with more effort being required, especially for some readers, to displace judgments further from their default equilibrium.

As Weatherson and Walton point out, the fact that readers are willing to judge that certain propositions are true in a fiction doesn't *ipso facto* establish that those propositions really are fictional. The author might have manipulated her readers into accepting them, or both author and reader might be so prejudiced that they turn a blind eye to internal inconsistencies. But the broader the range of readers an author successfully induces to accept such judgments, and the greater the level of detail with which authors and readers can justify them, the less plausible it becomes to dismiss those judgments as mistaken. I've argued that disparate response is so pervasive that endorsing the Fixed Reality Principle entails a massive error theory about many readers' ordinary engagement with many fictions. By contrast, perspectivism rehabilitates most reader engagement and explains the distinctive profile of cases where imaginative resistance does arise.

It is also true that even if many readers do willingly participate in alien fictions, they might have good moral and aesthetic reasons not to. The non-propositional nature of perspectives makes morally alien fictions especially risky, since 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. As Gendler says, trying on a perspective may “emphasize similarities we prefer to overlook” (2006, 151) but which, once noticed, we cannot ignore; by adding that perspective to our “conceptual repertoire” (2000, 77), we “render these undesirable patterns of response

²⁸ Weatherson (2004, 17) restricts his conclusions about puzzling fictions to such invitations, although his discussion often suggests broader application.

available even in the contemplation of actual [scenarios]” (2006, 153).²⁹ It follows that fictionality by itself offers no immunity: whether or not their perspectives are packaged for exportation, some distorting dystopic visions are so demonic that we really should balk at trying them on.

At the same time, I don’t think this warrants across-the-board resistance. Alien fictions constitute an important potential source of knowledge, precisely because they enable us to comprehend deeply different perspectives in a lived way.³⁰ This can help us interact more effectively with those who accept them. More importantly, we may ultimately embrace their perspectives for ourselves, deciding that our earlier rejection was prejudicial. Refusing to try on alternative perspectives protects us from the risk of moral perversion, but by cutting us off from any potential for moral growth.

Various theorists have also argued that morally alien fictions are *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 that it would be immoral to cultivate (Gaut 2007). Here too, I agree that alien perspectives raise the aesthetic stakes, but deny any systematic conclusions about merit. Readers and critics regularly acknowledge that aesthetically meritorious artworks are challenging in other ways: by employing disruptive syntax, say, or eschewing traditional harmonies. If that challenging feature is sufficiently integral to the work or “incorrigible,” then we typically don’t count it as an aesthetic deficit (Jacobson 1997, 191).³¹ Indeed, one might well count the ability to draw readers into an alien perspective as an aesthetic virtue, given that doing so requires significantly greater skill.

§6: Conclusion

²⁹ Gendler connects perspectives in fiction with Moran’s (1989) discussion of the ‘compulsion’ involved in metaphorical perspectives. In AUTHOR XX, I defend a modified version of Moran’s claim that this ‘compulsion’ lends metaphorical insults a distinctive rhetorical power.

³⁰ Kieran (2003) argues that this can constitute an aesthetic, and not merely instrumental, merit.

³¹ Further, it is unclear how to determine when a fiction is aesthetically flawed because inaccessible: inaccessibility to a particular reader might reflect lack of imagination, or a merely prudentially warranted caution. As Jacobson (1997) argues, it would be question-begging to assume that emotional or evaluative responses to fiction are aesthetically unmerited simply because immoral.

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” fictions might provide. As Putnam says, it's not primarily knowledge that a certain proposition is, or even could be, true. Rather, the species of possibility with which a fiction acquaints us is conceptual or cognitive in the sense of being a tool for thought.³² Trying on a perspective requires actually, if temporarily, re-structuring our thoughts, by altering what we notice and care about, what explanations we seek, and what emotional and evaluative responses come naturally to us. In many cases, we drop these characterizing dispositions soon after we close the book. But often, there is at least some lingering effect. And sometimes, with or without our fully realizing it, these subtleties ramify to alter our interpretive judgments of analogous situations in reality.

At a more theoretical level, then, fictions teach us that our ‘real selves’ are less stable than many people like to think. In motivating the Fixed Reality Principle, Steve Yablo (2002, 485) says that

It's a feature of [the class of resistance-producing 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.

Yablo is correct that for an interesting and sizeable class of concepts, extension-determination depends importantly on our intuitive response. But he is wrong to assume that resistance naturally follows. A well-executed fiction does not deliver authorial intelligence from ‘elsewhere’: it invites us in to its world and its way of seeing, thereby altering ‘how we are’, at least temporarily. The idea that we bring a stable set of commitments to bear on our encounters with the world is deeply intuitive; but it is itself at least a partial fiction. Perspectives, framing, and expressive evocation influence our emotional and evaluative responses

³² See also Danto (1981, 167), Tanner (1994, 58).

across the board, but especially in fiction where, as Plato warned, we are tempted to think it safe to ‘let ourselves go’.

The open-ended nature of perspectives makes the decision whether to even attempt to cultivate an alternative perspective especially difficult. Although we may have our suspicions, we can’t really know what a fiction’s perspective will be until we are deep in its midst. We may think we are confining our commerce with that perspective to that world, and the author may ask no more of us. But even such limited engagements can have broader and deeper effects than we realize. And by the time we do realize, it may be too late: engagement with art may “pervert” us, as judged by our own previous standards, and blind us to that perversion, making it appear as enlightenment (Nehamas 2000). *Pace* Plato, however, there is no independently given standard about what counts as perversion; we must each make that decision for ourselves, using our current best lights. Our real selfhood, such as it is, consists in our ongoing decision – reflective or tacit, monumental or moment-by-moment – to cultivate certain habits of attention and response rather than others.

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