Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction*

§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 typically willing to imagine all sorts of implausible, even impossible things. Theorists have offered various explanations for resistance. Richard Moran (1994) argues that resistance arises, at least in part, 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 demands. 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 reality. But 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 Scarlett O’Hara to get her man and her

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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 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 manipulate perspectives makes it less puzzling both that fictions can produce emotional and evaluative responses which 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 of the crucial perspectival 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 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 perspectives, or them to systematic explanatory work. Instead, most contemporary philosophical discussions of fiction explain our responses to fiction largely through an analysis of imagination in terms of the representation of contents as if they are real.¹

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). 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).

Philosophers like Walton and David Lewis (1978) have investigated 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). Thus, whenever a fiction is silent about some feature of the fictional world – which is most of the time – we fill in the gap by positing that it is just like the real world. As 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, a dominant explanation for imaginative resistance invokes the Reality Principle in a restricted form.

¹ Moran staunchly rejects a content-based analysis, but does not claim to offer a systematic positive account of how perspectival and expressive varieties of imagination might produce (and constrain) emotional and evaluative response.
More specifically, 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 example, what it takes for an action to count as shameful, or admirable – are fixed across possible worlds. As Brian Weatherson (2004, 22) articulates the core assumption,

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’ ordinary default ones, then we get a strong, if restricted, form of the Reality Principle, which we might call the “Fixed Reality Principle”: not merely that readers should fill in what is not otherwise specified by appeal to reality, but that with respect to certain domains authors lack the ability, or at least find it extremely difficult, to make fictional worlds differ from the real one even by explicit stipulation. So, for instance, while authors can make it fictional that infanticide is common or that people value nutmeg, they cannot stipulate that infanticide really is moral in that world, or that nutmeg really is the *summum bonum* there. When it comes to moral and certain other 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: “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).²

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 and easily readers go along in cultivating

² 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 on the grounds that it turns moral disagreement into “simple harangue” or talking past one another (1994, 101).
evaluations and emotions that differ from those they would have if they encountered the situation on their own terms in real life. While specific examples are invariably controversial, *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.* (Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* is my own favorite example.) The literary canon is rife with less radical cases: classics like the *Iliad,* Augustine’s *Confessions,* the *Divine Comedy,* *Paradise Lost,* *Brideshead Revisited,* and *Pride and Prejudice* all successfully evoke emotional and evaluative responses that differ significantly from those that most contemporary readers, at least, would have to the described situations in ordinary life.

My presentation of the standard model thus far has focused on imagination as a propositional attitude. While some theorists do advocate a “single code,” exhaustively propositional model of cognition as a whole (Nichols and Stich 2000, Nichols 2004, Pylyshyn 2003), many philosophers emphasize that imagining in general, and fictional engagement in particular, involves, as Walton (1997, 38) says, “not just imagining *that* such and such is true of ourselves,” but “imagining *doing* things, *experiencing* things, *feeling* in certain ways.” Because this sort of dramatic rehearsal or simulation 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 appears to offer a natural explanation for disparate response: imagining being some other person requires imagining having *their* emotional and evaluative responses. Finally, for this same reason, dramatic rehearsal seems poised to explain imaginative resistance: while readers are willing to imagine being somewhat different, they will naturally balk at pretending to be *too* different from themselves.

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Although I agree that cognitive and imagistic simulation are central aspects of imagination, I will argue that including them within the standard model 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 in an abstract, perhaps quasi-sentential form or in a concrete, quasi-perceptual one. As I will argue in §5, this in turn leads the model to make counterintuitive predictions, especially overpredictions, about when imaginative resistance will arise. Worse, as I will argue in §4, insofar as the model explains disparate response through the off-line simulation of someone else’s attitudes, it lacks the resources explain the fact that distinct presentations of a common content can produce significant alterations in readers’ own, first-person emotional and evaluative responses to real situations.

§3: Factors in Full Imaginative Engagement with Fiction

In this section, I argue that the imaginative projects proposed by most authors of fiction encompass more than prescriptions to imagine contents: they also involve cultivating certain modes of interpretation, which interact with propositional and dramatic imagination to influence emotional and evaluative response. Because the standard model fixates on contents at the expense of interpretive modes, it ignores the full richness of those imaginative projects, and cannot capture the complex pattern of flexibility and limitation in readers’ actual imaginative engagement.

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 for a fiction to work, these explicitly specified 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 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 are close to what psychologists often refer to as prototypes or schemas, and which I argue drive much of our associative, intuitive thinking.  

As a rough first pass, we can say that a characterization is a stereotype or a schema. Like them, a characterization applies a collection of properties to a subject. For instance, my characterization of quarterbacks includes their being natural leaders, affable, but rather dumb and a bit 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: terror at encountering a stern professor, say, or awe at walking into a sunlit cathedral.

I take my characterization of quarterbacks to be in line with an entrenched (and very American) cultural 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 quite idiosyncratic: my characterization of a romantic weekend excursion may not match yours; or we might build up a distinctive, shared characterization 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 (and believe) that they actually tend to have above-average intelligence (in 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

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5 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. I contrast characterizations with concepts more systematically in my 2015.
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 be trying to communicate.

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.) Although it might be nice if fittingness could be cleanly reduced to statistical norms, intuitions of fittingness appear to have at least a partly aesthetic basis, which Arthur Danto (1981, 207) articulates 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.

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 about fit, especially in the form of stereotypes, to drive our beliefs about probability and actuality, with problematic and sometimes repugnant results.

The third major feature of characterizations is that they don’t merely consist in collections of attributed properties, but structure those properties along at least two dimensions 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 much in identifying 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 (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 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.

Structures of prominence and centrality are highly intuitive and holistic, in a way that the oft-cited analogy with seeing-as and perceptual Gestalts makes vivid. Contrast the two ways of seeing Figure 1. 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 can cause the basic elements themselves to represent different things: 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 effect applies with characterizations: the same property may be assigned different structural roles within the same overall set of elements, which can in turn imbue that property with different emotive, evaluative, and even conceptual significances. Thus, 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 our evaluations of particular features; they also determine our emotional and evaluative responses to the subject as a whole. A wide range of empirical evidence demonstrates that people’s intuitive characterizations and emotional and evaluative responses are closely intertwined, and depend heavily on how the represented situation is presented. Thus, priming for a certain emotion (e.g. sadness versus anger) affects subjects’ characterizations of a presented situation: which features they notice, what causal explanations they assign to those features, 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 evaluating an individual or group. In the other direction, emotional response is also influenced by how subjects characterize the situation. Similarly, evaluative judgments, such as willingness to classify consequentialist tradeoffs as morally acceptable, are influenced by factors like the order and vividness of presentation.

Moreover, these linkages among characterizations, emotions, and evaluations are not merely causal, but normative. Characterizations provide “structures of justification” for emotions, as Danto (1981, 169) puts it; as he says, “there are things we know we ought to feel given a certain characterization of the conditions we are under.” And in turn, emotions are also normatively tied to moral evaluation. Thus, on the one hand, certain types of situations call for certain emotional responses: thus, anger is

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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 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, 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.
warranted against blameworthy action, and admiration or joy at praiseworthy ones. And on the other hand, many philosophers follow Hume in holding that moral evaluations are themselves at least partially grounded in emotion, while others hold that they are justified by non-emotive perspectives or characterizations. Thus, we have both good empirical and theoretical reasons to maintain that characterizations, emotions, and moral evaluations form an intimate triangle of causal and normative interdependence.

The familiar analogy with seeing-as also allows us to make precise the sense in which characterizations resist an exclusively propositional analysis. We rarely explicitly entertain higher-order propositions about the structural relations among features in characterizations – for instance, the proposition that Bill’s bonhomie is more noticeable, or more causally explanatory, than his being a philosopher. Still, we are capable of articulating relational propositions like these; in particular, we regularly advance such claims in the course of justifying emotional and evaluative responses. However, explicitly entertaining or believing such higher-order propositions is neither necessary nor sufficient for actually having the relevant characterization. Rather, as the analogy with seeing-as brings out, characterizing involves actually structuring one’s thinking so that the relevant features really do play an appropriately prominent and/or central role in one’s thinking.

In perception, that is, 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 and why, the explanatory relations you take to hold among them, and so on. I might endorse all these propositions without 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

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10 As D’Arms and Jacobson 2000a put it, certain emotions ‘fit’ certain situations.
11 See D’Arms and Jacobson 2000b for recent discussion.
literal seeing-as, getting those propositions to play the relevant organizational role is partly but not entirely under one’s willful control: directing my attention toward some particular features may help to induce a certain characterization, but ultimately the ‘click’ of holistic understanding just happens – or if it does.

The phenomenon of ‘framing’ and shifting characterizations is ubiquitous in our cognitive lives; it drives advertising, political discourse, and pop science journalism, among other domains. Returning to 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 into robust, intuitive characterizations of individuals and events. Logical and metaphysical inconsistency are 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: Fictional Worlds and the Objective Global Background

The specific facts that an author explicitly prescribes, and the intuitive characterizations that readers form of them, are also not isolated in another respect: they are located against a global background, 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, who tend to possess certain clusters of properties and be driven by certain sorts of 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 are important generators of implicit base-level propositions: readers fill out what a particular character must be feeling, or what will happen next, based on expectations about how people in that world generally act and what sorts of effects events typically have.

These global patterns of property distribution and connection don’t merely serve to generate, but also provide an objective basis for warranting local characterizations. More specifically, the features that
ought to be most prominent in characterizing a given subject are those that really are the most intense and diagnostic, where both intensity and diagnosticity depend in significant part on how relatively common or rare a given feature is relative to that world. Likewise, the features that ought to be most central are those that are caught up in the richest, most robust explanatory networks, where this is in turn at least strongly constrained by the operative causal structures in that world.

At the same time, the constraints imposed by these objective global patterns will rarely isolate a unique set of warranted characterizations. Minimally, because both the statistical distribution of properties and the causal structures governing a world are subtle, complex, and highly multi-dimensional, multiple assignments can legitimately be extrapolated from any limited set of explicitly stipulated data – which is all that authors usually provide. 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 seeks. But there is considerable room for variation in interests, both within and especially across worlds.

At the same time, however, this lack of objective determination does not mean that readers are free to take up whatever interests on the fiction they might see fit. Rather, one of the most important aspects of a fiction concerns what sorts of events and connections an author wants her readers to be curious about, and what sorts of explanations they should find satisfying. This profile of interests and concerns, along with a rich set of expectations about the objective distribution of properties, works together to constitute a perspective on a world.

3.3: Perspectives

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 a psychological point of view: the perceptual, cognitive, and affective states of a character embedded within that scene (Currie 1995, 1997). On this interpretation, trying on a perspective is a matter of simulating a character’s experience.
However, the species of perspective needed to explain imaginative resistance and disparate response cannot simply be assimilated to literal point of view, for several reasons. First, a reader’s emotional and interpretive responses toward particular individuals and events are not just a function of a specific character’s mental states: they also depend upon the reader’s beliefs about the wider situation, including facts of which that character may be ignorant.\textsuperscript{13} Second, in reading fiction I don’t just locate myself imaginatively within each successive scene: I often adopt an acentral and external perspective on the fictional world as a whole.\textsuperscript{14} In particular, a crucial aspect of narrative understanding consists in the capacity to stand outside the story, comprehending it as an integral, 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, such as Martha Nussbaum (1992) and Tamar Gendler (2000), have argued that in reading fiction we acquaint ourselves with new perspectives on the real world. To even make sense of these claims, perspectives need to be extractable from particular scenes. But because simulation or dramatic rehearsal is defined in terms of the contents being imagined, it cannot accomplish this.

I think the best way to understand perspectives in the appropriately wide-ranging sense is to treat them as open-ended \textit{modes of interpretation}. Specifically, perspectives are standing dispositions to characterize whatever particular entities one encounters in a certain way – to notice and attend to certain sorts of features while downplaying or ignoring others, to care about certain sorts of issues, to seek certain sorts of explanations, and to find certain sorts of responses fitting. Given this, perspectives, like characterizations, cannot be analyzed in exclusively propositional terms. While they can sometimes be partly encapsulated in general mantras 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

\textsuperscript{13} 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 through music in film, violations of genre expectations, and so on.

\textsuperscript{14} 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.
relevant perspective. Indeed, it is not even sufficient that one intuitively ‘get’ any particular characterization of any particular subject. Rather, trying on a perspective involves cultivating the ability to “go on the same way” in assimilating new information into one’s established characterizations, and in characterizing new 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 provides a way of organizing and navigating among thoughts, and enables us to form new thoughts on the basis of old ones. 

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, or appalling; who we are comfortable associating 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 through someone else’s eyes.

§4: Disparate Response

15 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), citing stereotypes as an example. 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 perceptual model in his earlier (1995, 1997) work. However, he retains the 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). 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 full agreement on a set of base-level facts and conceptual repertoire.
Given the factors we’ve just identified in imaginative engagement, the phenomenon of disparate response follows naturally. A fiction will often describe individuals and situations quite differently, and locate them against a dramatically different global background and profile of cognitive interests, than the reader would employ if she encountered them on her own. These differences lead readers to characterize those individuals and situations differently than they would on their own, producing different emotional and evaluative responses.

As I mentioned in §3.1, a range of empirical evidence supports the claim that people’s intuitive characterizations and emotional and evaluative responses depend on how the represented situation is presented: in particular, on the order of presentation, vividness of description, and type of causal explanation employed. Further, it is well-established that even brief, isolated exposure to affectively-charged verbal cues arouses measurable physiological responses characteristic of the correlative emotion, and more importantly, influences the rapidity and content of subjects’ later emotional and evaluative responses to other topics.16 Given that relatively minimal verbal priming and descriptive differences significantly alter ordinary causal and moral judgments and emotional responses, we should expect those responses to shift even more dramatically in the context of fiction, where readers’ responses are consistently filtered through language that is affectively, evaluatively, and imagistically charged. 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: Simulationism

To what extent is the perspectivalism I’ve articulated a genuine alternative to the standard model? It might seem, prima facie, that the standard model can easily explain disparate response by appealing to simulation, and specifically to dramatic rehearsal.17 First, there is significant empirical evidence that

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16 See Musch and Klauer 2003 for an overview of affective priming.
reading narratives does activate experiential representations, \(^{18}\) and specifically that readers process information from the spatio-temporal, cognitive, and emotional point of view of narrative protagonists. \(^{19}\)

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 contents that readers pretend – albeit at the authorial rather than the characterological level in order to deal with the worries about ‘external’ perspectives in §3.3.

Although there are indeed important similarities between the two views, simulationism lacks the resources to explain two key facets of disparate response. \(^{20}\) First, the empirical findings cited in §3.1 about the mutual interdependence among emotions, evaluations, and characterizations 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 or events from their own lives; even when the presented situation was explicitly hypothetical, there was no question of subjects simulating some other person’s psychology. Thus, a theorist who invokes simulation to explain disparate response to fiction but retains the traditional content-based analysis of ‘genuine’ emotion and evaluation should predict that in these cases, given that subjects are employing their own actual psychologies, they should display a stable pattern of response,

\(^{18}\) 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.

\(^{19}\) 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.

\(^{20}\) 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’ 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).
which is independent of context and mode of presentation. But as those empirical findings demonstrate, this prediction is not borne out.

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 psychology after imagination ends. Simulationists treat imagination as a functionally encapsulated module, in which imagination is “quarantined” from the rest of one’s psychology (Goldman 1992, 26). 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.” It follows that any lingering psychological effects, other than predictions delivered as output, must be the by-product of faults in the “inhibitory mechanisms” responsible for ensuring encapsulation (Currie 1995, 258).

In actuality, however, the postulated inhibitory mechanisms turn out to be so faulty as to undermine the model’s plausibility – or to transform it into perspectivalism. 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. 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.

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21 See Gendler 2006b for philosophical discussion of recent empirical research.
22 Friend 2003 endorses the same conclusion, though she does not explicitly endorse simulationism.
These demonstrations of “contagion” are aberrant on a quarantining model, but follow naturally from 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 patterns which govern our inferential and associative trains of thought, which in turn make certain explanations and future plot developments seem natural, and trigger certain affective and physiological responses. As these characterizing structures are activated or constructed, they become part of our integrated mental economy, persisting at least temporarily after the imaginative episode has ended.

Moran (1994) inaugurated contemporary discussion of resistance by arguing for the actuality of our interpretive and emotional responses to fiction, pointing out that a “quarantining” view of emotions toward fiction makes it puzzling why our imaginative abilities should be so constrained in this domain when they are so expansive when it comes to matters of fact. Moran also stresses the importance of the way that contents are presented, and emphasizes that emotional response involves a species of imagination that is directed toward “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 can be seen as an elaboration of his. However, what simulationists get right, but Moran at least downplays and sometimes seems to deny, is just how flexible our imaginative capacity to “enter into” highly alternative psychologies is, even with full awareness that – indeed, often 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 “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. My emotional and evaluative responses to fiction are real, in the sense that adopting a perspective requires actually structuring and interpreting what is imagined. But perspectives are also often quite temporary, and quite knowingly disparate from our “real temperament.” They are not
straightforwardly ‘mine’, in manifesting a stable underlying character which I, or those who know me well, 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 precisely from what they take to be a widespread refusal or inability for readers to have or imagine disparate responses toward fiction. There is room for argument about the relative frequency of disparate response, of course. But even if it is comparatively rare, it’s not plausible to insist that it never occurs; and so proponents of the Fixed Reality Principle need some explanation of it. As with simulationism, it might seem that the Principle can simply incorporate perspectivalism, since both the Fixed Reality Principle and perspectivalism 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; this is what explains their robust invariance. By contrast, the grounding relations invoked by perspectivalism are thoroughly psychological. In particular, they are merely the propositional manifestation of what is at base a non-propositional mode of interpretation. Both differences, I claim, favor perspectivalism.

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 affects her readers’ responses, she has manipulated them into responding in a way that is not genuinely warranted, by leading them to ignore or distort the real, invariant relations between base-level and interpretive propositions. I do think this distinction provides a compelling diagnosis of at least some 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’ associative heuristics renders
them prone to failures of rationality. However, even if we grant that variations in emotional and evaluative response produced by ‘framing’ are the product of irrationality and/or manipulation when applied to reality, the same conclusion doesn’t follow for fiction. Well-crafted fictions can genuinely warrant alternative responses, as the perspectival machinery of §3 helps us explain.

In the real world, the objective facts impose significant constraints on warranted characterizations. 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 narrow the range of acceptable interpretations and warranted responses. Further, most of the features that are attributed in the course of characterizing real subjects are themselves objective, or at least robustly intersubjectively accessible. As a result, we can make good sense of the possibility that someone has mischaracterized a situation. Further, we can attempt to filter out the perspectival aspects of their testimony to get at how we think things really are, and so how the situation should be characterized. In short, when it comes to the real world, we can make sense of the sort of robust distinction between description and 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 of them; 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 interpretation, to determine what the ‘base’ facts would be independently of the author’s say-so.

Second, in a well-crafted fiction the author’s characterizations of the base-level facts are grounded in aspects of the fiction for which proponents of the Fixed Reality Principle are willing to grant authorial control. In particular, warranted assignments of prominence and centrality depend significantly

25 Though see Elqayam and Evans (2011) for critique of the view that human cognition ought to reflect the canons of formal reasoning. In my 2015 I argue that the relationship between associative and rule-governed cognition is more symbiotic than antagonistic.
on the fictional world’s global distribution of properties and its 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 not want to imagine that these things are true; but they are undeniably the sorts of things that could be true.  

Once their fictionality is granted, though, 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.

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 them 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 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 footing to say what counts as important, or good, or shameful in those fictions. Such ‘alternative’ readings can be interesting, even 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 undermines our readerly authority.  

By contrast, however, if we do grant these authors their

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

27 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.”
operative assumptions, interests and concerns, then their proposed characterizations and attendant emotional and evaluative responses become much more appropriate.

To this point, I’ve focused on disparate moral and emotional response. One of Yablo’s and Weatherson’s key arguments, however, 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. I think we should be suspicious of the Fixed Reality Principle here as well. The comparative paucity of disparate response for such cases may merely 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. Once a genre begins to grow, there is little predicting where it will end. Thus, math nerds might take inspiration from Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, by exploring what it would be like to inhabit alternative mathematical spaces. 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 and philosophy provide multiple examples of propositions that were once taken to be inconceivable but have since become widely accepted. Absent more convincing evidence, we should reject general, a priori limitations on what we might be able to imagine, given sufficient interest, context, and effort (cf. Camp 2004).

Gendler (2000, 2006) also argues against explaining resistance by positing general metaphysical or conceptual principles which entail incoherence or impossibility in the imagined contents. Instead, she emphasizes, as I have, that successful engagement depends upon distinctively psychological structures of attention. Specifically, she argues at several points 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). That is, she claims we resist because we worry about precisely the sort of ‘contagion’ that I argued simulationism cannot explain. In these respects, as with Moran, my account can be seen as an elaboration of hers. However, there is also an important difference.

Despite her frequent invocations of imaginative 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); although readers happily indulge perspectives within the confines of fiction, she claims, they are committed to the immutability of the moral (and perhaps other conceptual) principles that govern reality.

While I agree that exportation is an important factor in producing resistance, I think that even Gendler’s weakened Reality Principle still accords much too much systematicity to readers’ willingness and refusal 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 willingly try on alternative perspectives outside the confines of fiction, either in reading non-fictional narratives like Augustine’s Confessions, or in the context of political and ethical debate. On the other hand, as we’ll see in the next section, and as Gendler herself admits, we sometimes resist even when we know that a fiction is intentionally distorted, and that its perspective is not intended for exportation. Thus, it seems that resistance often depends on more nuanced issues of internal construction and personal motivation than on fixed metaphysical and moral commitments to reality.

§5: Imaginative Resistance

In §4, I argued that existing accounts fail to do justice to disparate response. For all their theoretical differences, Walton, Weatherson and Yablo’s metaphysical/conceptual universalism, Currie’s simulationism, Moran’s affective realism, and Gendler’s exportationism all assume a stable self who can
not or will not actually take up ‘alien’ emotional and evaluative responses. 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 do toward the real world. This view fails to explain, not just the malleability of emotional and evaluative responses to reality, but also the way that alternative responses can be genuinely warranted within fictions. In this section, I argue that perspectivalism 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 interpretive propositions. Resistance depends, however, not primarily on what authors claim to be true, but on how skillfully they ground those claims within a rich, coherent and 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 (and is known to be) entirely commonplace and that causes no harm. A fiction may also be interpretively inconsistent even if all its objective facts are consistent. For instance, many critics accused Natural Born Killers of glamorizing violence through its presentational style even as it explicitly preached against media sensationalism. Such interpretive inconsistency may 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 in order to bring home how dangerous they are (Gaut 2007). However, unless reader can discern some coherent interpretive plan for the fiction as a whole, such objective and interpretive inconsistencies are likely to shake their trust in the author. (Indeed, bad fictions
can trigger resistance by prescribing responses that are unwarranted, 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 the fiction’s operative assumptions and perspective depart from the reader’s defaults, the more likely resistance becomes, as the reader loses the ability or the desire to alter his ordinary cognitive dispositions in the suggested way. (Conversely, though, a fiction that mimics a reader’s standing assumptions and perspective too closely also risks disengagement, either by failing to pique his interest or by reminding him too painfully of reality.28) In particular, getting readers to go along with alternative interpretive judgments, especially but not exclusively moral evaluations, requires a lot of highly-skilled work: at a minimum, the author must build up a rich body of novel background assumptions, frame the described actions and events in an appropriate way using evocative, expressive language and imagery, and entice the reader to share the fiction’s operative interests and concerns. Finally, because perspectives are ongoing, intuitive dispositions to characterize, and only partly under voluntary control, readers must be trained into them gradually and given a compelling motivation 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, the sorts of examples employed almost exclusively by philosophers in discussions of imaginative resistance – do typically provoke resistance.29 But for this same reason, such cases cannot show that those same propositions would still be rejected if embedded within more complex, well-executed fictions. And the pervasiveness of disparate response in engagement with actual fictions (and even with actual 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 their judgments further from their default equilibrium.

As Weatherson and Walton point out, the fact that readers are willing to judge that certain

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28 Thanks to Marc Moffett for the latter point.
29 Weatherson (2004, 17) restricts his conclusions about puzzling fictions to such invitations, although his discussion often suggests broader application.
propositions are true in a fiction doesn’t \textit{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 that undermine those propositions’ fictionality. However, 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 requires embracing a massive error theory about many readers’ ordinary engagement with fiction. Perspectivalism simultaneously rehabilitates most reader engagement and also explains the distinctive profile of cases where imaginative resistance does arise.

It is also true that even if many readers are frequently willing to participate imaginatively in alien fictions, they might still have good moral and aesthetic reasons not to do so. The interpretive role of perspectives makes morally alien fictions especially risky, insofar as 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 available even in the contemplation of actual [scenarios]” (2006, 153).\footnote{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 \textit{deny} it, after he or she has registered an appreciation of the phrase” (1989, 91). In my (2015b), I defend a tempered version of Moran’s claim that this ‘compulsion’ lends metaphorical insults a distinctive rhetorical power.} It follows that fictionality offers no blanket immunity: \textit{whether or not} their perspectives are intended for exportation, some distorting dystopic visions are so demonic that we really should balk at trying them on, even just temporarily and just on the fictional world.

At the same time, though, 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. 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.

Alien fictions can also be aesthetically risky, by requiring readers to expend imaginative effort in ways that may be unpleasant or even hurtful. Various theorists have 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 that this entails systematic conclusions about merit. Readers and critics regularly acknowledge that aesthetically meritorious works of art can be challenging along other dimensions: by employing disruptive language, say, or eschewing traditional harmonies. If that challenging feature is sufficiently integral to the work – if it is “incorrigible,” in Daniel Jacobson’s terms – then we typically don’t count it as an aesthetic deficit (Jacobson 1997, 191). Indeed, one might count the ability to draw readers into an alien perspective as an aesthetic virtue, given that doing so requires significantly greater skill. Nor should we be surprised if many readers are unwilling to invest the extra effort required for engagement; rather, we might be impressed that the fiction manages to pull 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

31 Kieran (2003) argues that this can constitute an aesthetic, and not merely instrumental, merit.
32 Further, it is unclear how to determine when a fiction is aesthetically flawed because inaccessible: inaccessibility to a particular reader might reflect a mere lack of imagination, or a prudentially warranted but aesthetically ungrounded 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 fitting, in D’Arms and Jacobson’s (2001) sense of appropriately matching their target.
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. 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 all 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 across the board, but especially in fiction, where, as Plato warned, we are tempted to think it safe to ‘let ourselves go’.

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33 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 subject-general, 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. But by then, it may be too late. As Alexander Nehamas (2000) says,

Like everything that beckons, beauty is risky and dangerous. It may disappoint and hurt. Worse, it may cause harm by fulfilling its promise....Spending time with such a thing, with other things like it, with other people who like it as well will have an effect on me which I cannot predict in advance. Once that effect is in place, I may have changed into someone I would not have wanted to be before I began. But I may now no longer be able to see that what I am, perhaps, is perverted. How can I tell if I have followed the right course? Which standards should I apply to myself?

An author initially convinces us to spend time with her by inviting us into a compelling alternative world. We may think we are confining our commerce with her to that world, and she may ask no more of us. But even such limited engagements can have broader and deeper effects than we realize. 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. *Pace* Plato, however, we must each make that decision for ourselves, using our current best lights.
References


