Imaginative Acceptance and Attending Emotionally to Fiction

Abstract[1]

This paper addresses the 'paradox of fiction', the problem of explaining how we can have emotional responses towards fiction. I claim that no account has yet provided an adequate explanation of how we can respond with genuine emotions when we *know* that the objects of our responses are fictional. I argue that we should understand the role played by the imagination in our engagement with fiction as functionally equivalent to that which it plays under the guise of 'acceptance' in practical reasoning, suggesting that the same underlying cognitive-affective mechanisms are involved in both activities. As such, our imaginative engagement with fiction un-problematically arouses emotions, but only to the extent that we are not occurrently attending to our epistemic relation to the fiction i.e. fully attending to the fact that the object of our response is merely fictional. However, our awareness of fictionality through 'formal features' explains why fiction-directed emotions differ phenomenologically and behaviourally from everyday emotions.

Introduction

What is generally known as the 'paradox of fiction' is the prima facie puzzling phenomenon that we appear to have emotional responses to fictional characters, events and situations that we know to be fictional, and yet our ordinary, everyday emotional responses in non-fictional contexts appear to possess as essential components various features that preclude their being directed at fiction. The two such features generally cited are (a) existential beliefs about the relevant objects and their properties and (b) connections to behaviour and action. Henceforth I will normally refer to the relevant responses as 'F-emotions', where this is shorthand for 'fiction-directed emotions'.

The paradox has spawned a large literature and there are a number of more or less plausible explanations of the puzzle on the market. Nonetheless, to my mind no account has yet succeeded in providing a comprehensive resolution, primarily because the paradox raises some deep and complex issues about the nature of our engagement with fiction, the relationship between imagination, belief and emotion, and different modes of attention, that have yet to be adequately recognised, let alone discussed. In particular, no account has yet provided a solution to what I shall refer to as the 'Knowledge Problem':

Knowledge Problem (KP): How can we have F-emotions when we *know* that – in the sense that we are occurrently aware that, or are attending to the fact that – the objects of our responses are fictional?[i]

In short, I will argue that we should understand the role played by the imagination in our engagement with fiction as functionally equivalent to that which it plays under the guise of 'acceptance' in practical reasoning, suggesting that the same underlying cognitive-affective mechanisms are involved in both activities. Much of the paper will thus be concerned with demonstrating the similarities between practical reasoning and our engagement with fiction. As such, our imaginative engagement with fiction, I

claim, un-problematically arouses emotions, but only to the extent that we are not occurrently attending to our epistemic relation to the fiction i.e. fully attending to the fact that the object of our response is merely fictional. Our ability to 'bracket' fictionality, central to our ability to engage in imaginative practical reasoning projects, is thus a fundamental part of our cognitive architecture and not, as such, puzzling.

However, that we are (in the normal, rational case) in some sense aware of the fictionality of the objects to which we respond emotionally is evident from the fact that our behavioural responses to fictional scenarios are strikingly different from those caused by non-fictional scenarios; we do not leap onto the stage to save the heroine, though we may shed real tears at her plight. It is also evident from the apparent fact that our affective reactions to fiction feel similar but not identical to our reactions to non-fiction; we are sad at the fate of Anna Karenina, yet perhaps rather 'less' sad (or perhaps sad in a different way) than we would be had we known a real such Anna personally. Any solution to the Knowledge Problem must explain these two features of our emotional responses to fiction.[ii]

I will argue that this explanation hinges primarily on the role that our awareness of what I shall refer to as 'form' (or 'formal features') plays in our appreciation of fiction and in our F-emotions. This awareness too, I suggest, can be explained in terms of the ordinary cognitive-affective mechanisms that underpin our everyday emotional responses to the non-fictional. It does, however, mark some further important differences between F and non-F emotions that I remark upon in conclusion.

1. From Imagination to Emotion

The most popular solutions to the paradox consist in loosening emotional responses from their purported tightly-knit connections to belief and action and positing that real emotions can be caused by mere unasserted thoughts, such as those characteristic of the imagination or make-believe, and directed at the contents of such thoughts.[iii] In addition to the intuitive plausibility of such claims, there is increasing empirical evidence showing that certain genuine emotional responses, and some of their associated action tendencies, can be aroused equally by imaginary and real life objects and situations.[iv] Furthermore, drawing also on psychological and neuroscientific research, recent prominent philosophical theories of emotion argue for the same conclusion.[v]

So, for example, drawing on a number of empirical studies, Tamar Gendler contends that our capacity to respond with genuine emotions to merely imaginary stimuli is a fundamental part of our cognitive architecture.[vi] Specifically, she emphasises Antonio Damasio's research, which appears to demonstrate that practical reasoning tasks involving imagined scenarios concerning our own future decisions and actions is successful only insofar as it essentially involves somatically encoded emotional responses.[vii]

The connection between imagination and practical reasoning is one that I shall pursue below, but all these accounts fail to confront the puzzle of explaining just how one can have an emotional response of, say, fear, towards something that is known,

occurrently with the emotional state, to be a mere thought or merely imaginary, or towards a 'kind of imagining'. That is, even if we allow that the imagination can ground genuine emotional responses, we quickly run up against the Knowledge Problem (KP).

In a recent paper, Schroeder & Matheson do directly address KP, claiming that very early in childhood "our brains have somehow begun to learn how to assess these conflicting pieces of information", and they suggest that "because one is generally conscious that these events are fictional – i.e. one represents them as fictional – … this makes all the difference to one's emotional life. If, somehow, one ceases occurrently to represent the fictional nature of one's source, one will naturally be expected to feel more as one would feel were the source factual".[viii]

These responses are promising in suggesting, like Gendler, that our ability to engage with fiction emotionally is a fundamental part of our cognitive architecture, but they do little more to show in what ways it is fundamental. Their discussion hints at the important idea, and the point of departure for my account, that a resolution of the paradox may hinge on the nature and role of our *occurrent* representation of, or attention to, the fictionality of the objects to which we respond.

An interesting solution that also draws on this idea has recently been proposed by David Suits, who argues that when we are appropriately engaged with a fiction we actually believe in the fiction and are hence caught up in the story to the extent that we are not occurrently, *fully* aware of its fictionality as such. We do not somehow lose touch with reality, but rather the physical situation one is in is 'peripheralized':

"My claim that the story experience involves believing in the story amounts to the claim that we have opposing tendencies… This tension – the confluence of the active tendencies to flee and to remain seated – accounts (in part) for the story experience, an experience which, by the way, is heightened by shutting out, as much as is practical, non-story sensory information, so that the non-story tendencies are weakened".[ix]

In short, Suits' resolution of the paradox consists in claiming that one does believe in the fiction, where belief consists in some degree of commitment to the fiction sufficient to ground appropriate and genuine emotional responses. This belief in the fiction – *qua* degree of commitment – is thus compatible with not believing in the reality of the fiction, where this involves not being *occurrently fully* aware of/committed to its fictionality as such.

There is much that is plausible and compelling about Suits' account and it offers a promising explanation of the paradox, insofar as the usual cases of F-emotions involve us holding, to different degrees, attitudes of commitment to apparently incompatible states of affairs; so long as we are not occurrently, fully focussed to the same degree on them, and hence on their incompatibility. Indeed this is the claim that I will, in a qualified form, be concerned to defend. However, Suits' account involves unwarrantedly conflating belief and imagination (as states of commitment lying on the same continuum), but it is simply not plausible to maintain that the kind of commitment one gives to fictional propositions is a state of belief; rather, it involves a particular kind of imaginative engagement.[x]

In order to explain the intensity with which we can lose ourselves in fictional worlds in the way that is required to ground our affective responses to them, to properly

appreciate works of fiction, and to account for their value, we must accept that when we engage emotionally with fiction, and when the fiction warrants it, we commit strongly to the propositions expressed therein. That is, we 'imaginatively commit' ourselves to accepting the fictional truths they provide, where this involves committing ourselves to a certain amount of authorial authority and to assenting to the propositions expressed. Naturally, this commitment is subject to a number of complex conditions involving a recognition of authorial intention, genre and other conventional constraints, as well as a sensitivity to features such as the coherence and plausibility of the narrative, the reliability of the narrator, and any number of further complex factors involved in understanding and interpretation.[xi]

In order to see just what this kind of imaginative commitment is and how it grounds our emotional responses in a way required to address KP we can, I suggest, turn to the notion of 'acceptance' that some philosophers have posited to play a central role in practical reasoning. I will argue, first, that this type of acceptance is or at least centrally involves an act of imagining, and second, that we should understand the role played by the imagination in our engagement with fiction as functionally equivalent to that which it plays in practical reasoning. As such, I suggest that the same underlying cognitive-affective mechanisms are involved in both activities and that there are good evolutionary reasons for the existence of such mechanisms.

2. Acceptance and Imagination in Practical Reasoning

According to Jonathan Cohen and Michael Bratman, certain practical pressures can lead to the *acceptance* of propositions for the purposes of deliberation, where these propositions need not be believed and may even be disbelieved.[xii] So, to take a prosaic example, I may accept for prudential reasons that it will rain this evening in the sense that I take this for granted in my deliberation and bring along an umbrella, even if I would not be willing to bet on it and have good evidence for forming a belief to the contrary. Acceptance, that is, plays a central role in practical reasoning, and differs from belief in a number of important ways. Cohen, for instance, argues that whereas beliefs are passive dispositions to feel it true that *p*, accepting is a context relative, voluntary mental act.[xiii] Bratman too contrasts acceptance with belief in holding that the former, unlike the latter, is context-independent, voluntary, does not essentially aim at truth, and is not subject to an 'ideal of integration' governed by constraints of consistency and coherence with regard to the rest of one's beliefs:

"I will not reasonably and at one and the same time believe that *p* relative to one context but not relative to another. In contrast, I might reasonably accept that *p* relative to one context but not relative to another… One may believe (have a high degree of confidence in) a proposition and still reasonably not accept it in certain contexts. And even in the absence of belief (high degree of confidence) that *p* I can sometimes reasonably accept that p in an appropriate practical context."[xiv]

Can we identify acceptance with an act of imagining? Both Bratman and Cohen appear explicitly to reject any attempt to do so, insisting that acceptance is not to be identified with pretence or supposition, for unlike these latter states, acceptance is not merely temporary but "implies commitment to a policy of premising that p"[xv] and is normally justified by reasons.[xvi] Further, acceptance "is tied more directly to action than is mere supposition; and it is tied more directly to practical reasoning than is mere pretence".[xvii]

Nonetheless, there are good reasons for thinking of acceptance as an imaginative act. We can admit that acceptance is different from mere supposition, and from pretence, in the way that Bratman and Cohen narrowly characterises them, but it seems clear that insofar as practical reasoning involves envisaging hypothetical and future scenarios, these are things that are imagined, and imagining that *p* is generally held to be a voluntary act, to be subject to some degree to the will, and what we imagine may differ between contexts. Moreover, when we engage in these imaginative projects, and those characteristic of our engagement with fiction, we are able (and in the case of fiction *must* if we are to engage appropriately), as many philosophers have noted, to preserve the same inference patterns as those governing the equivalent belief states.[xviii] Most importantly, however, it is clear that certain types of imaginative activity are far more 'full-blooded' than mere supposition and possess close connections to emotion, action, and practical reasoning.

As already mentioned, there is good reason to think that genuine emotional responses, and some of their associated action tendencies, can be aroused by the imaginary as well as by real life objects and situations. Although Bratman and Cohen offer little discussion of the involvement of emotions and affective states in practical reasoning, it is plausible, in light of Damasio's research, to think that acceptance in the context of practical reasoning will often give rise to and draw upon such states. For such reasoning will often require us to realise concretely the potential consequences of our actions for our own welfare, and the arousal of autonomic, somatic responses associated with (or constituting) emotional states is the most effective way of doing this. Moreover, such reasoning will depend in part on determining how we might feel about certain decisions or even perhaps what the best thing to feel should be. Practical reasoning, that is, can often be directed at our own emotional responses, insofar as we take these to be rational and educable. Hence, as many have pointed out, the ability to simulate ourselves and others in various imaginary situations can play an important role not just in theoretically deliberating about what to do, but in how we would feel were we to do it.[xix]

In light of these considerations it is, I think, not unreasonable to hold that acceptance in practical reasoning is, or at least centrally involves, an act of imagining. A case for the stronger reading – identifying acceptance with imagining – is made by David Velleman, who argues that accepting a proposition is a way of regarding that proposition as true, and that where imagining that *p* involves engaging in a mental fiction it involves imagining that *p* is true. Imagining is therefore a way of accepting a proposition. In contrast to Cohen and Bratman, however, Velleman holds that belief is also a state of acceptance for it too is a way of regarding a proposition as true. The main difference between belief and imagination, Velleman contends, is that only the former involves regarding a proposition as true "with the aim of so regarding it only if it really is. Thus to believe a proposition is to accept it with the aim of thereby accepting its truth".[xx]

Crucially, this difference is not sufficient to make a difference between the motivational roles of belief and imagination, for even the latter can motivate us to act on the conclusions reached in light of these imaginative projects: we may be led to cook kippers and custard for our friends, having put together in imagination our olfactory memories of each; we may be led to commit that long-envisaged murder,

having imagined a way to carry it out undetected and in the process come to realize that we might not feel overly guilty as a consequence.

Focusing on children's games of pretence and relying heavily on Kendall Walton's well-known discussion of these, Velleman holds that the actions performed in such games cannot be explained in terms of acting from beliefs and desires, but must be explained as acting directly *out of* what is imagined. Otherwise, belief-desire explanations of pretence attribute to children a precocious grip on reality even during pretend play, in which their actions are to be described as deliberately producing false appearances.[xxi]

For example, on such accounts the child pretending to be an elephant performs actions believed to be elephant-like, aimed at realising the desire to behave like an elephant. But as Velleman rightly notes, this misrepresents the nature of such play and entails attributing to young children an implausibly strong grip on (or occurrent attention to) the distinction between fiction and reality:

"In order to enter *into* the fiction, the child would have to act it *out*; and in order to act it out…he would have to *act out* of imagining it, not out of a desire to represent it in action. A child who was motivated by such a desire would remain securely outside the fiction, thinking about it as such – that is, as a fiction to be enacted."[xxii]

Although Velleman's discussion centres on the role of motivation and action in imagination and pretend play, I think the very same points carry across to our emotional engagement with fiction, which if not actually involving actions on our part, does involve, as Walton outlined, playing a kind of game of make-believe which arouses *as a direct consequence of imaginative engagement* certain physiological responses and action tendencies.[xxiii] So, for example, as Paul Harris makes clear, holding that F-emotions result from merely 'pretending that *p* is real' would also entail, implausibly, saddling very young children with the ability to form a cognitively complex attitude. We must, instead, understand these responses as arising directly from imaginative engagement with the fiction.[xxiv]

Whatever one thinks about Velleman's identification of *belief* as a state of acceptance, his account is on the right track in showing how to understand both imagining and believing as states of commitment to propositions, differing in their relation to the truth of these, but similar in their affective and motivational outputs. As such, the acceptance involved in practical reasoning is, I contend, best thought of as a state of imaginative commitment. I want to show now that the role the imagination plays in fictional engagement is – modulo certain considerations – the very same role that imaginative acceptance plays in practical reasoning. Seeing how this is so illuminates the nature of our imaginative engagement with fiction and in particular the nature of our affective responses to it.

3. Imaginatively Accepting Fiction

Prima facie, it might seem odd to draw a structural and functional similarity between our imaginative engagement with fiction and the role that acceptance plays in practical reasoning, let alone to posit that the underlying mechanisms are the same, even if we are persuaded that acceptance either is or centrally involves an act of imagining. After all, the point of acceptance is to deliberate about action, to come to a

decision about the right thing to do from amongst a range of competing options. This explains why acceptance involves, in the words of Cohen, commitment to premising *p*, and also why such reasoning should intimately involve the arousal of affective states that have a direct bearing on planning, motivation and action. It is in our practical interest to be fully engaged in such deliberation. But this looks like an altogether different and more serious activity than playing games of make-believe, for fictional engagement is not normally concerned with what *we* ought to do in some possible 'real-world' scenario. Rather, the aim of this activity is, simply, enjoyment. Moreover, such deliberation essentially concerns the self, and if anything our engagement with fiction involves an escape from, or even loss of the self whilst following the adventures of fictional others.

In fact, of course, such a simplistic conception of the value of fiction can easily be challenged. We do often take ourselves to learn from fiction, to attribute to good fiction a serious cognitive value, and many philosophers have argued that fictional narratives in particular can give us moral knowledge, can educate our emotions, and can even affect our general values and world views.[xxv] Fictions, that is, can be thought of as kinds of thought-experiments in ways that mirror the thought experiments of practical reasoning, and perhaps in certain cases they may even lead to action. We may, for example, be more likely to vote against government surveillance measures after reading *1984*; to take vegetarianism seriously, or give money to animal protection charities after reading *Disgrace*; or turn to crime after seeing the ease with which casinos can be robbed in *Ocean's Eleven*.[xxvi]

Moreover, a plausible evolutionary-psychological story can be told about the nature and value of appreciating fiction in engaging the imagination and emotions in just this way. As Paul Harris argues, for instance: "Had we not evolved a decision-making system in which the contemplation of possible lives and possible futures engaged our emotions at a somatic level, we would be less prone to spend as many hours as we do absorbed in fictional worlds."[xxvii] That is, not only does our appreciation of fiction depend upon the exercise of cognitive resources that play a fundamental role in human behaviour and well-being, the engagement with fiction offers the perfect way of exercising and developing and these capacities.

Recall, further, that acceptance is voluntary and context-relative. I choose to accept *p* for the purpose of some piece of practical reasoning that leads to action, but only in this specific context. In another context I might well choose not to accept *p*. Having chosen to accept *p*, however, we commit ourselves to *p* in the sense that we let it guide our reasoning. Analogously, I contend, we choose to engage with a fiction, to allow the author to stipulate and construct the fictional truths of the narrative, in the hope of being (at least) entertained and emotionally moved. Having made this choice, however, we can and do get caught up in the fiction in ways that do not always appear to be conscious or voluntary. That is, we are committed to the propositions expressed in the work, letting them guide our emotional responses. Yet our state of engagement with fiction remains one of imaginative 'acceptance' – rather than belief – insofar we are always capable of putting the book aside or just reminding ourselves that it is 'only fiction'. Moreover, what we accept in the context of one fiction we may refuse to accept in the context of another. Fictional works, that is, differ from each other in much the same way as practical reasoning contexts differ from each other in manifesting different practical projects.

If we think of imaginatively accepting *p* in the case of fiction as involving committing ourselves to the propositions in that fiction, our acceptance can stem from an initial aim of 'mere' aesthetic enjoyment and yet in the context of engagement be subject to the same sorts of constraints governing our commitment to *p* in the case of practical reasoning. This is thus perfectly compatible with acceptance being the choice of which propositions to take as premises, for in this case the initial choice/acceptance simply governs all of the propositions in the fiction (modulo worries about imaginative resistance, unreliable narrators etc). Furthermore, the imagination in fictional contexts, far from being unconstrained, is governed by those complex rules and principles that determine what is fictionally true in the world of the fiction – e.g. the say-so of the author, a 'reality principle', principles of internal coherence and consistency, and so on.[xxviii] What is fictional is what is to be imagined and it is in this sense that "imagination aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true".[xxix]

Here there is an important analogue of Bratman's idea that "an agent's beliefs provide the *default cognitive background* for further deliberation and planning [where] practical reasoning admits of adjustments to this default cognitive background, adjustments in what one takes for granted in the specific practical context".[xxx] Similarly in fiction, our engagement, and the fictional truths to which we commit, depends on – whilst also sometimes warping and questioning – certain background beliefs and assumptions. The author cannot in general explicitly stipulate absolutely everything that is true in a fictional world; instead, they need to draw on our present store of background beliefs about the real world, and arguably also on our present stock of desires and values in order to move us and engage us in the ways required to appreciate the fiction. Plausibly, fiction emotionally involves us only insofar as it draws on relevant aspects of familiar reality.[xxxi]

Thus, I have tried in this section to argue that our imaginative engagement with fiction functions in just the same way as it does when used as acceptance in practical reasoning. In both cases we imaginatively commit to the propositions and states of affairs belonging to some particular imaginative project, and in doing so we utilise the same cognitive-affective resources. In both cases such imaginative engagement/commitment is (a) voluntary; (b) context-relative; (c) constrained in the relevant ways by the aim of engagement; (e) arouses emotions as a necessary part of understanding and engaging with the imaginative project, be it a fictional world or a practical reasoning task.

There are, however, inevitably differences. In particular, the motivation for our imaginative engagement is generally different in each case, for practical reasoning has instrumental value in leading us to action, whilst we turn to fiction primarily for enjoyment. As such, the self is necessarily implicated in the former, but not the latter. Yet these differences do not, I think, undermine the picture I am trying to paint, for we can and do have similar instrumental motivations for engaging with some fictions, and we may also enjoy the kinds of imaginative projects we undertake under the 'rubric' of practical reasoning. The role of the imagination is, I contend, functionally the same in each case.

We are now in a position, finally, to see how this account of the nature of our imaginative engagement with fiction can be used to address the Knowledge Problem.

4. Attending to Fiction and Bracketing Beliefs

Fiction may also obviously conflict with what we believe, in just the way that what we accept for the purposes of deliberation may conflict with what is believed. In the latter case, Bratman holds that we have two options:

"one may adjust the default cognitive background in two main ways: one may posit that p and take it for granted in one's practical context even though p is not believed (or given a probability of 1) in the default background; or one may bracket p in one's practical context even though p is believed in the default background. Positing and bracketing are two ways in which there can arise important differences, at the margins, between one's default cognitive background and one's *context-relative adjusted cognitive background*."[xxxii]

The relevant notion for us here is that of 'bracketing'. In order to explain both how we are never unaware of fictionality – we never leap on stage – and yet can 'lose ourselves' in imaginative engagement in the way required to ground F-emotions (i.e. to resolve the Knowledge Problem), I contend that the belief that we need to bracket in order to fully imaginatively engage with the work is the belief in the mere fictionality of the work. Unfortunately, Bratman himself does little to articulate the notion of bracketing belief, but we can, I suggest, begin to make sense of it in terms of the notion of attention.

It should come as no surprise that our emotional engagement with fiction is normally hindered, weakened, or even on occasion thwarted by *full* occurrent active attention to its fictionality. But what does it mean to 'be fully occurrently aware of/attending to' the fictionality of the object of one's emotion? Psychologically, things are complicated. Clearly the activity of bracketing, the kind of attention we pay, our awareness of salient features, admits of degrees, and can be more or less successful. We can deliberately focus on one feature at the expense of another; we can perhaps attend to two things simultaneously; we can switch and oscillate between objects of attention; we can also have our attention drawn, accidentally or deliberately, to features we had not noticed.

We do not generally oscillate between, as it were, losing ourselves in a story and reminding ourselves that it is only a story, or if we do we regard this as a sub-optimal state of engagement, perhaps due to flaws in the narrative, or because for some other reason we are deliberately trying not to be emotionally moved by it. Why, otherwise, would we undertake so energetically all of those precautions designed to help peripheralize the 'external' world – the fictionality of the fiction – when trying to engage with fiction? We thus bracket (or try our best to bracket) the non-story context, the mere fictionality of a work when imaginatively accepting it; that is, when committing ourselves imaginatively to the propositions expressed therein. And here of course we are often aided, at least in the case of visual fictions, by those various conventions of appreciation such as dimmed lights, silence, enhanced acoustics, and so on.

In light of these brief remarks I think we can usefully, albeit roughly, distinguish here between a rather passive and dispositional notion of just 'being aware of', and a more active and occurrent conscious state which we could call 'attending to', 'focussing on', or 'representing as [fictional]'. In the case of the former 'passive' conception, I

contend, we are never 'unaware' of the fictionality of the object, in the sense that our state is one of voluntary acceptance, for we can always remind ourselves that 'it is only fiction' and we do not leap onto the stage to save the imperilled heroine. But our belief in fictionality is appropriately bracketed, back-grounded, peripheralized, quarantined, when imaginatively and emotionally engaged with a fiction in the sense that we are not *actively* paying *full* attention *to the fact that* it is only fiction.

This notion of bracketing our belief in fictionality can be elucidated by a plausible account of the nature of propositional imagining offered by Brian O'Shaughnessy:

'in imagining that p, one has as the focus of one's mental attention only the state of affairs picked out by 'p'. It follows that, among other things, mental attention to one's epistemic relation to 'p' is excluded for the duration of the imagining. Hence in occurrently imagining that p, one is not occurrently thinking of the fact that one only imagines that p, or does not believe that p, or that 'p' is not true.'[xxxiii]

This well explains why it would indeed be puzzling or impossible for F-emotions to occur where we were occurrently and fully attending to the work *as* fiction whilst at the same time being caught up in the story; for to be attending to the fact of fictionality just is to be attending to one's epistemic relation to *p*. It is the belief in this fact that we bracket when imaginatively engaging in fiction in the way, and degree, required to ground F-emotions. Thus when we bracket, we cannot, in the usual case be paying *full* attention to the fictionality *as such* of the work with which we are imaginatively and emotionally engaged.

Note, however, that O'Shaughnessy's condition on imagining that *p* is not as straightforward as he presents it here, for the ability to engage imaginatively with fiction by imagining that *p* is subject to degree and hence can be more or less successful. It is thus dependent in part both on individual psychology, on certain conventions governing our engagement with fiction, and on particular works of fiction. As such, any plausible account of F-emotions must therefore allow for the contingency of our psychological states, but it must also account for the tension between competing attitudes – belief and imagination – which is also subject to degree and is not an unusual occurrence in our everyday engagement with works of fiction. Such tension, on my account, is a natural consequence of the fact that both imagination and belief are states of commitment that can motivate, and that our engagement with fiction depends on the extent that we succeed in bracketing the countervailing beliefs concerning the facts that one is imagining to be otherwise.[xxxiv]

Granted these contingencies, the more one is focussing on the fictionality as such the less able one will be to emotionally engage, up to the limit of paying full simultaneous attention to incompatible states of affairs; hence the point of emphasising the condition of *full* attention. The solution to the Knowledge Problem is thus relatively straightforward:

In the *normal cases* one does not 'know' that the object of one's engagement is merely fictional in the sense that one is not *fully*, occurrently, actively attending to the fictionality *as such* of the object (and hence one's epistemic relation to this object) towards which one's emotions are directed. This is consistent with our being *passively* aware of p-as-fiction, however, since all that this requires is not *actively* attending *fully* to this fact whilst involved in the relevant propositional imagining.

I do not, however, wish to exclude the possibility of unusual cases, cases where one can effectively pay full attention, simultaneously, both to the fictionality *as such* of *p* and yet also to the content in virtue of which one experiences F-emotions. But although it would be nice to say more about this, the possibility of such cases and of this kind of dual-attention seems to me to be largely an empirical matter concerning the nature of our attention. It is thus important to point out that I do not pretend that this solution to the Knowledge Problem provides anything like a complete explanation of *how* we bracket our belief in fictionality whilst being peripherally, passively aware of it. But insofar as this is partly a matter for empirical psychology, it does not, I think, affect the account I have offered here, which is designed to show simply that our ability to bracket is a fundamental part of our cognitive architecture, required for practical reasoning and for its role in appreciating fiction, and thus beneficial from an evolutionary perspective in respect of both.

Neither, is there space here to tackle the difficult question of precisely *why* and *when*, and under what conditions, imaginative engagement with fiction involves affective responses. When the fiction is particularly well made, when it is realistic, when we are psychologically susceptible (we voluntarily let ourselves be swept up in more or less involuntary imaginings in response to fiction), all suggest themselves as plausible, if relatively uninformative answers. But again, I take these issues to be as much questions for literary (and film and theatre) criticism and cognitive psychology as they are for philosophers.

It is worth briefly noting that Gendler has recently suggested that cases such as the ones we are concerned with, of affective/behavioural reactions to fiction, may involve a state she has dubbed 'alief' rather than imagination. According to Gendler:

"A paradigmatic alief is a mental state with associatively linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated—consciously or nonconsciously—by features of the subject's internal or ambient environment. Aliefs may be either occurrent or dispositional."[xxxv]

Specifically, she holds that alief is not imagination, for the latter but not the former is subject to the will, and imagination is acceptance (in the sense I have been discussing) whilst alief is not. Yet she also suggests that cases of 'involuntary imagination' may play an important role in some cases of alief when imagination violates 'quarantining' ('bracketing' in my sense) and thereby gives rise to behaviour (affective transmission) as a result of activating "a subject's innate or habitual propensity to respond to an apparent stimulus in a particular way…"[xxxvi]

It is not at all clear to me, from what little Gendler says about such cases, whether the type of involuntary imaginative engagement one is involved in when appreciating fiction also, or instead, involves 'alief'. I suspect there are a range of cases here, ranging from the automatic sub-doxastic states of affective arousal characteristic of such cases as that of experiencing 'fear' before the green slime advancing towards one on the cinema screen, to the cognitively sophisticated and imaginatively demanding project of reading Proust. Indeed, future work on this topic ought to pay much closer attention to the various ways in which we engage with fiction, and to the various types of fiction to which we respond, for it may well be that the general assumption that we can give a unified account of our emotional responses to fiction is simply mistaken. But we must leave this issue for another day.

In any case, there is one crucial respect in which Gendler's notion of alief, and the account of the Knowledge Problem I have just defended, both fail to acknowledge a fundamental difference between F-emotions and non-F emotions. One aspect of fictionality actually plays an essential role in our imaginative engagement and in the formation and nature of our F-emotions. This is not the merely epistemic relation to fictionality proposed above as a way of resolving KP, but rather our awareness of the formal features of fictional works (as discussed in the next section). In this respect too, fictional acceptance differs in an important way from the acceptance involved in everyday practical reasoning, and explaining how this is so will allow us to address the issue raised at the beginning about why our emotional responses to fiction differ behaviourally and phenomenologically from our non-F emotions.

5. Form-infested F-Emotions

One of the most important aspects of our engagement with fiction, generally neglected in discussions of our emotional responses to it, but central to their occurrence and nature, is our awareness of and attention to what I shall refer to as the 'formal features' of art works; roughly, those features that are the vehicles for conveying the content to which we emotionally respond.[xxxvii] These include, in the case of visual media such as film, for example, the sound, lighting, camera angles and perspectives, the screen itself, and the represented characters, situations and actions depicted therein – broadly speaking, all those elements which combine to give the film the 'look' that it has, that constitute our perceptual experience of the film. In the case of literary fictions, on the other hand, we find words, sounds, rhyme schemes, and perhaps any formal features of the imagery induced by our engagement, such as its vividness.

The ways in which fictional content is conveyed through a work's formal features play a central role in the vividness, coherence and richness of our imaginative engagement and in the nature of our emotional responses arising from it. It is the powerful way in which Shakespeare uses poetic language to depict Hamlet's deep psychological conflicts that partly grounds our sympathy for him, and our appreciation for and interest in the complexity of his character. It is the way in which suspense is built, through the careful editing and directing choices made about lighting, sound, staging, and so on, that partly render films such as *The Ring* or the *Blair Witch Project* so effectively scary. The particularly detached and bleak way in which Coetzee describes Michael's journey in *The Life and Times of Michael K* fundamentally affects our emotional responses to K and our engagement with the narrative.[xxxviii]

Unless we are suffering from some sort of illusion or irrationality, we are never unaware of formal features, and although it seems evident that we can switch between more or less attention to formal features or to the content which these are used to convey, it is arguably a *sine qua non* of normal fictional experience that we simultaneously attend in some fashion to both form and content; we normally experience something like the 'twofoldness' that Wollheim held characterized our experience of pictorial depiction. Moreover, the form partly determines the nature of this content and part of what we appreciate in fiction, and art in general, just is the interconnection of form and content in these ways.[xxxix]

In short, it looks like any plausible account of fictional experience must require that our experience of form and content cannot be readily separated, but we now face the problem that our awareness of formal features just is *in some sense* an awareness of the fictionality of the object with which we are engaged. Thus, if we are to preserve something like the account outlined in the previous section, it looks like we need somehow to reconcile apparently incompatible demands. We need an account that recognises, on the one hand, that our F-emotions can be explained by the fact that we are not simultaneously, occurrently and fully attending to both the fictionality and non-fictionality of the work we are responding to; but on the other hand that recognises the central role that a full, occurrent awareness of formal features plays in arousing and shaping our emotional responses.

Fortunately, this is not really such a quandary as it first appears. 'Awareness of fictionality' can refer to a number of different types and degrees of attention, as outlined earlier, only one of which contravenes the strictures on propositional imagining given above and hence poses an obstacle to the solution to the Knowledge Problem defended in the previous section; namely, where it refers to full attention to the *bare fact* that the work F is fictional, and hence to our epistemic relation to F. But the awareness of fictionality manifest in our attention to formal features does not entail such attention. For, at least in the normal cases, it is down to the skill of the artist/author/director to combine form and content in such a way that our attention is not undesirably and *wholly* drawn to the ways in which the fictional world is manifested at the expense of attending to the emotionally relevant content.

That is, in the normal cases we do not, when engaging emotionally with fiction, attend fully to the formal features *for their own sake*, and insofar as we do our F-emotions will, in the usual cases, fail to be aroused. Indeed where this happens we frequently condemn the fiction as flawed and deem it one of the chief values of good fiction when, through the smooth combination of form and content, this unfortunate drawing of our full attention to formal features is avoided. [xl]

So, we can block out irrelevant aspects of the non-fictional context (the mere fact that it is a fiction), but allow that an awareness of fictional formal features helps arouse and shape our F-emotions. Thus, we do have emotions, genuine emotions, for fictional characters and situations *known* to be purely fictional, where: (a) this knowledge is not part of the content of one's occurrent thought – one's epistemic relation to *p* (the work of fiction) is not fully and occurrently attended to; (b) certain aspects of the work's fictionality of which we are occurrently aware partially cause and shape our emotional responses; (c) because of this, our F-emotions differ in certain respects (such as their phenomenology and behavioural consequences) from emotions that are not fiction-directed. The greater the attention we pay to formal features the more attenuated, in general, we should expect our emotional reactions to be.

Crucially, this role of the awareness of form in F-emotions too fits within the general cognitive framework I have been trying to sketch. In salient respects we approach artworks much as we approach the human begins who created them. We regard, appreciate and experience them with (at least) an implicit background belief in agency that allows us to see the formal features of the works as products of a creative process

and as being there for a reason. That is, part of the default cognitive background of such engagement is an acceptance of 'agency', and the formal features are perceived as meaningful and expressive of such agency. Furthermore, empirical studies have shown that human beings have an innate tendency to animate the world around them, and to perceive signs of agency even in non-sentient objects. We are simply hardwired to respond affectively to the world around us in virtue of features of the world we 'perceive' as expressive signs of agency.

In other words, I suggest that the formal features of artworks play a role analogous to the expressive behaviours of human beings to which we respond emotionally. And as in this latter case, we may be more or less aware of, and pay more or less attention to, the various features in virtue of which we perceive human beings as expressive and in virtue of which we respond emotionally.[xli]

So, both F and non-F emotions involve the awareness of formal features, and this awareness is simply part and parcel of our cognitive-affective architecture. But in conclusion we need to point out some further distinctive differences between F and non-F emotions that help also to explain the behavioural and phenomenological differences but which deserve further consideration than I can devote to them here.

F-emotions, even of the puzzling tragic variety, are always positively valenced in the sense that we enjoy having them, which is why we engage with fiction in the first place. This enjoyment stems partly from our awareness that our reactions are being guided and constrained by the relevant extra-fictional features of works which itself provides us with a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure. This pleasure involves, amongst other things, an appreciation of the skilful and cognitively satisfying interplay of form and content, the alleviation of the burden of responsibility over our emotions that plagues us in real life, and a dimension of discovery and satisfaction in the unity and coherence that fictional narratives, in contrast to real life 'narratives', can readily provide. As such, we can also enjoy experiencing these emotions for their own sake, shorn of the usual burdensome links to real-life actions and considerations.

These observations may help point the way to understanding many other puzzling features of our emotional responses to fiction and with further time we might even find a route to understanding part of the cognitive value of fiction, through certain epistemic features of F-emotions, but thankfully this formidable task can be left for another paper.

References

[i] As we shall see below, the various ways of formulating the Knowledge Problem are importantly different.

[ii] See Schroeder, Timothy & Matheson, Carl. "Imagination and Emotion", in S. Nichols (ed.) The Architecture of Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction pp. 19-40. (Oxford: Clarendon 2006)

[iii] For example: Moran, Richard. "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination", *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), 75-106; Neill, Alex. "Fiction and the Emotions", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), 1-13; Lamarque, Peter. Fictional Points of View (New York: Cornell University Press 1996); Currie, Gregory. "The Moral Psychology of Fiction", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73, (1995), 250-59; Currie, Gregory. "The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind", in M. Hjort and S. Laver (eds.) Emotion and the Arts pp. 63-77. (Oxford: OUP 1997); Gaut, Berys. "Reasons, Emotions and Fiction", in M. Kieran and D. Lopes (eds.) Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts pp. 15-34. (London: Routledge 2003); Brock, Stuart. "Fictions, Feelings, and Emotions", *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007), 211-42.

[iv] Damasio, Antonio. Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain (London: Quill 1995); Gendler, Tamar & Kovakovich, Karson "Genine Rational Fictional Emotions", in M. Kieran (ed.) Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics pp. 241-53. (Oxford: Blackwell 2005); Schroeder & Matheson 2006.

[v] Choi, Jinhee. "Fits and Startles: Cognitivism Revisited", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003), 149-57; Prinz, Jesse. Gut Reactions: a perceptual theory of emotion (New York: OUP 2004); Robinson, Jenefer. Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art (Oxford: Clarendon 2005).

[vi] Gendler, Tamar. "Pretense and Belief", in M. Kieran and D. Lopes (eds.) Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts pp. 125-42. (London: Routledge 2003); Gendler & Kovakovich 2005.

[vii] Gendler 2003,136

[viii] Schroeder & Matheson 2006, 34-35. They also point briefly to the specific creative nature of artworks, including features such as pleasure in the skill of execution, as playing a role in explaining this emotional difference. (35) They do not explore this latter suggestion in any detail, but it will be crucial for my discussion later.

[ix] Suits, David. "Really Believing in Fiction", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2006), 369-86, pp. 380-1.

[x] There are many reasons for distinguishing states of belief and imagination, including the different functional roles they play and the different connections to action, memory, perception, and other mental states that each possesses. (See Schroeder & Matheson, 2006, 25). Even if we welcome a broad concept of belief, therefore, Suits' mistake is well captured by Greg Currie's warning (in another context) not to "confuse the false view that imagination lies on a continuum *of* belief states with the true view that imagination lies on a continuum – or better, within a multi-dimensional space – *with* belief." Currie, Greg "Desire in Imagination", in T. Gender and J. Hawthorne (eds.) Conceivability and Possibility pp. 201-221. (Oxford: Clarendon 2002a), 201-221, p. 209.See also Gendler & Kovakovich (2005) for further discussion.

[xi] Walton, Kendall. Mimesis as Make-believe (London: Harvard University Press 1990); Gendler, Tamar. "Imaginative resistance revisited", in S. Nichols (ed.) The architecture of imagination: New essays on pretence, possibility, and fiction pp. 149-74. (Oxford: Clarendon 2006); Lamarque, Peter "Logic and criticism", in John, E., & Lopes, D. M. (eds.) Philosophy of literature: Contemporary and classic readings pp. 154-62. (Oxford: Blackwell 2002)

[xii] Cohen, Jonathan. "Belief and Acceptance", *Mind* 98 (1989), 367-89; Cohen, Jonathan An Essay on Belief and Acceptance (Oxford: Clarendon 1992); Bratman, Michael E. "Practical Reasoning and Acceptance in a Context", *Mind* 101 (1992), 1-15.

[xiii] 'to accept that *p* is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that *p* – that is, of going along with that proposition…as a premises in some or all contexts for one's own and others' proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations…' Cohen 1989, 368.

[xiv] Bratman, 1992, 9.

[xv] Cohen 1989, 368

[xvi] Cohen 1992, 13-14

[xvii] Bratman 1992, 9. Cohen thinks of supposition as a merely temporary act of imagination. Cohen, 1992, 12-13.

[xviii] e.g. Currie, G. and Ravenscroft, Ian. <u>Recreative Minds</u> (Oxford: Clarendon 2002); Meskin, Aaron and Weinberg, Jonathan M. "Emotions, Fiction, and Cognitive Architecture", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003), 18-34.

[xix] Currie 1995; Walton, Kendall "Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime: On Being Moved by Fiction", in M. Hjort and S. Laver (eds.) <u>Emotion and the Arts</u> pp. 37-49. (New York: OUP 1997); Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002

[xx] Velleman, J. David (2000). *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon), 250-1.

[xxi] Walton 1990; Cf. Harris 2000; Cohen 1992, 22

[xxii] Velleman, 2000, 259.

[xxiii] Walton, 1990

[xxiv] Harris, Paul. <u>The Work of the Imagination</u> (Oxford: Blackwell 2000), 82

[xxv] Nussbaum, Martha. <u>Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature</u> (Oxford: OUP 1992); Kieran, Matthew. "Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996), 337-51.

[xxvi] See Gendler 2003 for further discussion of cases that she labels 'affective transmission'

[xxvii] Harris 2000, 88.

[xxviii] e.g. Lewis, David. "Truth in Fiction", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978), 37-46; Walton 1990; Lamarque 2002.

[xxix] Walton 1990, 41.

[xxx] Bratman, 1992, 10

[xxxi] Currie, 2002; Kreitman, Norman. "Fantasy, Fiction, and Feelings", *Metaphilosophy* 37 (2006), 605-22.

[xxxii] Bratman, 1992, 10-11.

[xxxiii] O'Shaughnessy, Brian. <u>Consciousness and the World</u> (Oxford: Clarendon 2000), 362. For further discussion see Stock, Kathleen. "Thoughts on the 'Paradox' of Fiction", *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* 3 (2006), 37-58. Cf. Schroeder & Matheson, 2006, 24.

[xxxiv] This tension might manifest itself in a number of different ways and affect individuals (and perhaps classes of individuals) differently. For example, children seem to lose themselves mere easily in games of make-believe than adults, and adult individuals may find it more or less easy to peripheralize their beliefs in the fictionality of the objects to which they are attending in order to try to lose themselves in the fiction.

[xxxv] Gendler, Tamar. "Alief and Belief", *Journal of Philosophy* (2008a), 634-63, p. 642.

[xxxvi] Gendler, Tamar. "Alief in Action", *Mind and Language* 23 (2008b), 552-85, p. 568

[xxxvii] A notable exception is Robinson 2005, who argues that formal features play the role of 'coping devices' in managing our emotional responses to fiction. I will not discuss this account here, however, for it is, on the one hand, limited to negative emotions, and on the other hand fails to recognise that formal features simply do not always play the role of coping strategies, for frequently our appreciation of negative emotions and situations stems not from coping in the ways she claims, but in confronting them directly.

[xxxviii] I take this to be obvious enough as to require no sustained discussion of concrete examples, but this account obviously presupposes a certain inextricability concerning the relation between form and content, a full defence of which cannot be mounted here. See Thomson-Jones (2005) for a fuller account.

[xxxix] Cf. Meskin & Weinberg, who note 'the ease with which we can be *engaged in and moved by* a fiction while at the same time *thinking about it as* a fiction with various artistic properties.' 2003, 32.

[xl] Obviously there are fictions where the intention is to draw one's attention to the fact that the work is a fiction, and although my account is not meant to cover such cases I suggest that these will either fail to arouse F-emotions in response to the fictional content or will arouse different kinds of emotional responses altogether dependent upon the peculiar states of engagement and appreciation such fictions are designed to induce.

[xli] For further fascinating discussion of these issues see: Noordhof, Paul. "Expressive Perception as Projective Imagining", *Mind and Language* 23 (2008), 329-58; Walton, Kendall. 'Projectivism, empathy and musical tension', *Philosophical Topics* 26 (1999), 407 – 440; Cochrane, Thomas "A Simulation Theory of Musical Expressivity", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (2010), 1-17.