

IMAGINING WHAT THINGS ARE LIKE AND THE PARADOX OF FICTION

JUSTIN D'AMBROSIO

University of St. Andrews

DANIEL STOLJAR

Australian National University

The paradox of fiction is a puzzle concerning why we have emotional responses to fiction, given that we know the objects of fiction are not real, and the events in fiction do not occur. In this paper we offer a novel account of how fiction engages the imagination that explains why we have such responses, and in doing so we provide a novel solution the paradox. The key to our solution is the recognition that the authors of fiction do not only instruct us to imagine *that* certain things are the case, but they also instruct us to imagine what various objects and events are like to people of various kinds or with various perspectives. In complying with their instructions, we often imagine what various events *feel* like to those people—we have *vicarious experiences*—and so go into imaginative states that are phenomenally similar to the experiences of the subjects from whose perspectives we are asked to imagine. Given that such experiences are exactly what authors have instructed us to undertake, the affective responses that they involve are perfectly rational.

1. Introduction

It is a truism to say that fiction engages the imagination. Fiction prompts us to imagine all manner of people and situations, and it is through this prompting that fiction manages to have its characteristic emotional effects. Le Carré's description prompts me to imagine Jim Prideaux's betrayal and capture, and as a consequence I feel deeply sad and angry. A Lovecraft story prompts me to imagine some cosmic horror, and so brings me to feel terror and dread. The affective change brought about by fiction is often powerful, can expand our emotional and empathetic capacities, and often plays a crucial role in our moral development. Without its

Contact: Justin D'Ambrosio <jzd1@st-andrews.ac.uk>, Daniel Stoljar <daniel.stoljar@anu.edu.au>

power to bring about emotional responses, fiction is nearly unimaginable.

But there is a persistent problem concerning how exactly fiction brings about its characteristic emotional responses, which is sometimes called the “paradox of fiction”.¹ The problem, roughly, is that it is not clear why we have the kinds of emotional responses to fictional characters and scenarios that we so often do, and that feel so familiar. After all, the events and characters in fiction aren’t real, so it makes little sense to be horrified at the thought of Jim Prideaux’s torture, or to feel dread when I read H.P. Lovecraft. Our world is not as these works of fiction describe, and we know it. Thus, if anything, the rational feeling to have should be one of relief, rather than sadness or horror.

There are three general kinds of solutions to this puzzle. The first kind of response—what we can call the *pretense* response—denies that we actually feel emotions such as sadness, fear, or horror in response to fiction. Instead, the view goes, we experience something closely related to these emotions, but not the genuine article: to use Walton’s term, we experience *quasi-emotions*. The second kind of response—what we can call the *thought* response—is that we do in fact have the genuine emotions, but there is no reason to think that emotional responses to fiction require beliefs about their objects’ reality. On this view, there is nothing special about emotional responses to things that actually exist—such responses are merely a special case of emotional responses more broadly. The final approach—what we can call the *illusion* approach—maintains that somehow, our beliefs that the fictional objects are not real are somehow suspended when we interact with fiction, such that our reactions to fiction are the result of genuinely believing—however temporarily or partially—in their reality.

We think that each of these purported solutions fails to explain something important about how fiction brings about its affective or emotional responses. Our goal here is to offer a better view of how fiction interacts with the imagination, and to show that this view yields a novel, superior solution to the paradox of fiction. Our view of how fiction interacts with the imagination has four components.

Component 1 is a tripartite view of imagining: we can imagine various things—i.e. we can imagine *objectually*; we can imagine that certain things are the case—i.e. can imagine *propositionally*; and—what is much less widely recognized—we can imagine *who, what, where, when, and why*—we can imagine *wh*.

Component 2 is the truism that in engaging with fiction, authors often instruct us to imagine various people, places, situations, and events that fill their

¹Most recent discussion of the problem is traceable to Colin Radford and Michael Weston’s [1975] article “How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?”, as well as subsequent discussion in Radford [1977, 1995].

fictional worlds—they instruct us to undertake various instances of objectual imagining.

Component 3 is that there is an equivalence between objectual imagining and a particular form of imagining *wh*: to imagine something—whether a person, place, situation or event—is to imagine what that thing is like.

Component 4 is the observation that when we imagine what something is like, we always imagine what something is like *to someone*. Imagining what something is like is always perspectival, and this perspectival component of imagining is crucial to how fiction brings about affective change.

The resulting view is that when the authors of fiction instruct us to imagine the people, places, things, situations, and events with which they populate their fictional worlds, they instruct us to imagine what those things are like to people of particular kinds.

This view provides us with two related ways of explaining why, in interacting with fiction, we come to feel so strongly, and why having such feelings is perfectly rational. First, imagining what something is like to someone is often, although not always, to engage in experiential imagining: it is to imagine what something *feels* like to someone. In imagining what something feels like to someone, we go into a state that is phenomenally similar—perhaps even phenomenally identical—to the state that they themselves enter into when they have that experience. Thus, if we imagine what Jim’s capture feels like to Smiley, we might go into a state of imagining that is phenomenally similar to how it feels for him: we might feel guilt, helplessness, sadness, or dismay. Second, given that imagining what something is like is always perspectival—it is always to imagine what it is like *to someone*—le Carré may well be asking us to imagine what Jim’s capture feels like to someone *who wants it not to happen*, or perhaps even to someone who orchestrated it. In this case, we again go into a state of imagining that is phenomenally similar to that of a person with the relevant perspective, and so again, given this similarity, feel as they feel—in the former case, sad, horrified, or dismayed, while in the latter, smug, satisfied, or even righteous.

On our view, our emotional responses to fiction are consequences of, and rationalized by, *vicarious experiences*, to borrow a term Vendler’s famous [1979] discussion. In engaging with fiction, we have a variety of vicarious experiences: we imagine what various events and situations described by the fiction are like to people of certain kinds, often, although not always, to agents with the perspective that the authors of fiction ask us to adopt. Such vicarious experiences, while only imaginative, approximate or are phenomenally similar to the experiences of which they are imaginings. Thus, in engaging with fiction, we enter into imaginative states that feel similar to states of, e.g. sadness, anger, fear, hurt, or pity felt by

agents with certain perspectives on the objects or events we are asked to imagine. It is because fiction instructs us to go into such states that our emotional responses to fiction are perfectly rational.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We first lay out the paradox of fiction in more perspicuous form, and we discuss the three standard responses. We then present the four components of our view, which combine to yield the view that authors of fiction instruct or ask us to imagine what the various events and objects that they describe are like to agents with certain perspectives. We then show how this view allows us to provide a rationalizing explanation of why we feel the way we do in engaging with fiction, and how it solves the sharpened form of the paradox. Exactly how the view solves the paradox depends on whether vicariously experienced emotions—which are in principle phenomenally identical to genuine emotions—are in fact genuine emotions or are merely quasi-emotions. We suggest that this question parallels the debate between conjunctivists and disjunctivists in the philosophy of perception, and we present considerations in favor of adopting a form of imaginative disjunctivism about emotions. Finally, we compare our solution improves on the solutions already present in the literature.

2. The Paradox of Fiction

Above we offered an informal characterization of the paradox of fiction as the puzzle of explaining why we have the emotional responses that we do to fiction, even though we know the objects of fiction don't exist. Let's now make this more perspicuous. The paradox is standardly spelled out as an inconsistent triad. Consider a representative formulation offered by Currie [1990]:

PF1 We have emotions concerning the situations of fictional characters.

PF2 To have an emotion concerning someone's situation we must believe the propositions that describe that situation.

PF3 We do not believe the propositions that describe the situations of fictional characters. Currie [1990, p. 187]

[PF1] spells out what appears to be an incontrovertible fact: when I read le Carré's description of Prideaux being arrested by the Czech army and interrogated by Karla, I feel sad or perhaps dismayed. Further, it seems clear that my sadness concerns Jim and his circumstances—I am sad about his situation. Thus it seems we have good reason to believe [PF1].

[PF2], which is perhaps less obvious, concerns the connection between emotion and belief: we must believe the propositions describing the situation to which our emotions are a response. Why think this is true? One piece of support comes

from the contrast between our emotional responses to situations we believe to be actual, and our responses to those same situations once we recognize that they are not. When we believe, incorrectly, that fiction is fact, we may have an intense emotional reaction, but once we realize our mistake, we are relieved, and these emotions dissipate. We cannot be moved to genuine grief, for instance, by a false story, and in situations where we realize that such a response was based on a mistake, our feeling is relief. Moreover, there seem to be many counterfactuals that are true concerning such emotional response. For instance, if we were to find out that 9/11—or any other immense tragedy—was an elaborate hoax, our anger and frustration at that event would, at least if we're rational, dissipate, or at least be directed elsewhere.

However, a key question concerning the interpretation of [PF2] is the nature of the modality at issue. Is it that we cannot *metaphysically* be moved to grief by a false story? At first blush this seems too strong, and to be belied by the facts: we are moved to grief by all sorts of things. The idea that there is a metaphysically necessary connection between feeling emotion and having certain beliefs seems obviously in tension with the ways we in fact respond to fictions. But there is another natural option, which is to construe the “must” of (2), and so the “cannot” of the last paragraph, as concerning what we must and cannot do *insofar as we are rational*. This makes the puzzle into one concerning how our emotional responses to fiction can be rational, given that we know their objects do not exist. Interpreting the modality in [PF2] this way yields the normative version of the paradox of fiction. In what follows, unless we note otherwise, we will construe the paradox in this way: as a paradox of rationality.

The final claim, claim (3), seems likewise incontrovertible. Even though I have a strong reaction of sadness or dismay to Jim's capture, I do so in spite of the fact that I know his capture is merely a fiction. This is a crucial component of the puzzle: if I believed that the fiction were fact, there would be no puzzle at all. But it seems eminently plausible that I do not believe that either he or the events of his capture and torture are real, even while I experience strong feelings of grief or empathy. But if we grant this, we are left with an unwelcome conclusion. For we at once have emotions concerning a fictional scenario, and do not believe that the propositions characterizing that situation are true. Thus, by [PF2], we are irrational. Insofar as this generalizes to all of our emotional responses to fiction, it shows that no emotional responses to fiction can be rational. Given how natural such responses feel, this result is paradoxical.

3. Three Kinds of Imagining

Imagination is somehow involved in the way that fiction brings about its emotional effects. In philosophy of mind there is a view of imagination that is common

enough to be called the standard view of imagination: imagination is a mental state that represents possibilities [Yablo, 1993]. In contrast to belief, imagination is a mental state that does not represent the actual world. Of course, this is not to say that the representation of possibilities cannot help us learn about the actual world, rather just that imagination, as a faculty, is not a representational mental state that aims at truth about the actual world.

Given this view of the imagination, a natural way of understanding fiction is as prompting the imagination to represent a possible, non-actual world (or perhaps, given that fiction is never fully specified, some range of possible worlds, although we will ignore this complication here). Thus, le Carré is describing a possible world in which the story of Jim, Smiley, Haydon, and Karla unfolds as it does, and when we imagine that world, we represent that various things are the case in it. The problem is that this conception of imagination is exactly the view that gives rise to the puzzle. Why should we care how some things are in some possible world? Why should representing what is the case in another world that we know is not ours bring about such strong emotional responses?

Our view is that this is an impoverished conception of what the imagination does, and how fiction interacts with it. The key to providing a better solution to the paradox of fiction is to develop a richer understanding of kinds of things we can imagine, and the way that fiction prompts us to imagine them. **Component 1** of our view is an account of imagination on which it comes in three interrelated forms, each of which corresponds to a particular type of complement accepted by the verb 'imagine'.

First, we can imagine objects, events, and situations, and such imaginings are reported by sentences in which "imagines" has is complemented with a noun phrase. Call this form of imagining *objectual* imagining. We report instances of objectual imagining using sentences like (1) and (2):

- (1) Justin imagined Jim Prideaux.
- (2) Justin imagined Jim Prideaux's betrayal and capture.

In (1), I imagine an object—Jim Prideaux himself—and in (2) I imagine an event in which Jim figures. Of course, in many cases the objects fiction prompts me to imagine do not exist, and the events it prompts me to imagine have never occurred. But this is no obstacle; "imagine" exhibits the features of an *intensional transitive verb*. Two of the key features of intensional transitive verbs are that NPs that serve as their complements are not existence-entailing, and need not denote specific objects. Given these facts, sentences such as (3) and (4) can be literally true:

- (3) Justin imagined a unicorn.

- (4) Justin imagined Haydon's betrayal.

Even though there are no unicorns, I can perfectly well imagine one, and even though Haydon is a fictional character and has never betrayed anyone, I can perfectly well imagine the event in which he does.

Fiction may also prompt us to imagine something under one guise, and that is different from imagining it under another:

- (5) Justin imagined Superman.
(6) Justin imagined Clark Kent.

The event of imagining described by (5) is clearly different than the one described by (6), even though Clark Kent and Superman are the same (fictional) person. This is the third characteristic feature of intensional transitive verbs: even when NP complements are extensionally equivalent, they resist substitution *salva veritate*. The details of the semantics of intensional transitive verbs which account for these features are not our main focus here; we have discussed them elsewhere.² The main takeaway is that "imagine" is an intensional transitive verb that is often used to report instances of objectual imagining.

Objectual imagining contrasts with *propositional imagining*, which is the more familiar form of imagining reported by sentences in which "imagine" takes a *that*-clause complement. Consider (7) and (8):

- (7) Justin imagined that Jim was captured.
(8) Justin imagined that the world had ended.

Propositional imagining is the form of imagining that underpins the standard view of imagination. Such imagining is an event or state with propositional content that aims to represent what is the case in some possible, non-actual world. So when le Carré expresses a range of propositions that are false at our world but true at another, he is aiming to bring us to imagine, and so represent, the possible world described by those propositions—the world of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

But there is a third, and much less widely recognized form of imagining that at least on its face contrasts with both objectual and propositional imagining. It is well-known that a distinction may be drawn between knowing-that and knowing-how, though the precise contours of the distinction remain a matter of dispute.³ Much less well known is that a parallel distinction may be drawn in the case of imagination. You may imagine that your car keys are on the roof, for example, and also how to get them down. Indeed, not only may you imagine

²See Dowty et al. [1981], Zimmermann [1993], D'Ambrosio [2019], and also Forbes [2006, 2010].

³For discussion of this distinction, see Stanley and Williamson [2001] and Stanley [2011].

how to such and such, almost the whole gamut of 'imagination-*wh*' is in principle available: you may imagine where you last saw your keys, who put them on the roof, what they will be like when you get them back, and so on. Call this form of imagining *imagining wh*-.

Fiction often prompts us to imagine *wh*-. When I read le Carré's novel, all of the following may be true:

- (9) Justin imagined who the mole was.
- (10) Alex imagined what being captured by the Czech army was like.
- (11) Justin imagined where and when the secret meeting was to take place.
- (12) Louise imagined why Haydon would betray England.
- (13) Daniel imagined how the Czech army managed to capture Jim.

Each of these are totally natural ways of describing how le Carré's novel might prompt our imagination. But what is it to imagine-*wh*? What is the semantics for reports in which "imagine" takes a *wh* clause as a complement? And how is it related to propositional imagining? Here we will only make two points. The first point concerns the interpretation of the embedded *wh*-clauses. Just as with the case of knowledge, there is an issue concerning whether *wh*-complements are interrogatives—i.e. whether they denote questions—or whether they are so-called "free relatives", which are referring expressions that do not denote questions. We think that at least some *wh*-clauses embedded under "imagine" are interrogatives, although others are free relatives.

The second point concerns interrogatives embedded under "imagine". Like "know", when it takes an interrogative complement, "imagine" is what is called a *responsive* embedding verb. The key feature of responsive embedding verbs is they entail that the subject bears some relation to a proposition that serves as an answer to the embedded question. Thus, if you imagine where your keys are, you imagine that your keys are in some location L. Thus, when "imagine" embeds an interrogative, the ascription is true only if the subject is in a state of propositional imagining whose content is an answer to the embedded question. Thus there is a close connection—perhaps even an equivalence—between interrogative and propositional imagining. However, in what follows, little turns on the issue of whether *wh*-clauses embedded under "imagine" are interrogatives or free relatives; imagining *wh*- can play its role in our account of how fiction brings about its characteristic emotional responses however this issue is resolved.

4. Imagining what things are like to someone

With **Component 1**'s tripartite view of imagining as background, we are now in a position to state the three further components of our view of how fiction engages the imagination. **Component 2** is perhaps a truism: authors of fiction ask those of us who consume or engage with it to imagine certain things. Perhaps the most natural way of understanding how the authors of fiction ask us to imagine these things is by thinking of fictions as implicitly prefaced with the imperative "Imagine this:". On this view, novels like *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and other works are fiction are carefully crafted sets of imaginative instructions.

Some of the things authors instruct us to imagine are propositional. Le Carré may ask us to imagine that if old Major Dover hadn't dropped dead at Taunton races, Jim would never have come to Thursgood's at all. To comply with this instruction, we must engage in an act of propositional imagining. But the authors of fiction also or instruct us to imagine objectually, perhaps even at the same time as they ask us to imagine propositionally. Le Carré instructs me to imagine Jim Prideaux, Jim's teaching French at Thursgood's, Bill Roach, Haydon's betrayal, Smiley's feelings of sadness about Anne, among countless other objects, events, states, and situations. When an author instructs us to imagine such things, we comply by going into a state of objectual imagining such as the ones reported by (1) and (2).

Component 3 of our view the following equivalence:

(14) Necessarily, to imagine NP is to imagine what NP is like.

(14) is a schematic equivalence; it states an equivalence for every noun phrase that can be substituted for the placeholder "NP". The idea behind this equivalence is that every instance of objectual imagining is in fact an instance of a particular kind of imagining *wh*. For example, according to (14), to imagine Smiley is to imagine what Smiley is like; to imagine Prideaux's capture and torture is to imagine what Prideaux's capture and torture is (or was) like; to imagine tracking the mole is to imagine what tracking the mole is like, and so on for each possible noun phrase.

This equivalence can also be construed as a semantic claim. Put semantically, our view is that reports of objectual imagining conceal a particular type of question. Concealed questions are a phenomenon that has recently received much attention in semantics.⁴ Consider the following pairs of sentences:

- (15) a. John knows the capital of Idaho.
b. John knows what the capital of Idaho is.
- (16) a. Adam guessed Eve's phone number.
b. Adam guessed what Eve's phone number is.

⁴See, for instance, Frana [2017], Nathan [2006], and many others.

- (17) a. Mary remembered the kind of wine she likes most.
 b. Mary remembered what kind of wine she likes most.

Each of (15-a)-(17-a) contains an attitude verb complemented with a definite NP. But each of (15-a)-(17-a) appears to be equivalent to (15-b)-(17-b), respectively, and each of the latter sentences embeds a *wh*-interrogative. When such an equivalence holds, between a sentence involving an attitude verb with a definite NP complement, and a sentence involving that same verb that embeds an interrogative, the first sentence is said to conceal the question denoted by the interrogative. Given this background, our proposal can be formulated as the semantic claim that (18-a) is equivalent to (18-b):

- (18) a. S imagines NP
 b. S imagines what NP is like.

Thus, the NP complement in (18-a) conceals a question expressed by the interrogative “what NP is like”.

There are a number of pressing questions about this semantic proposal. First, does the equivalence hold not only for definite, but also for indefinite NPs in the complement of “imagine”? Does it hold for the relational and notional readings of “imagine”? Isn’t the phenomenon of concealed questions much more restricted than what you propose for the case of “imagine”? And, *pace* our discussion of the distinction above, are *wh*-clauses embedded under “imagine” genuine interrogatives, rather than free relatives? We have addressed these questions elsewhere, and so we will not aim to answer them here.⁵ For the moment we simply acknowledge that the semantic proposal that reports of objectual imagining conceal questions is a substantive empirical hypothesis, for which there is significant, but not conclusive evidence. But importantly, while we think it is true, our view is not hostage to this empirical hypothesis. First, even if imagine does not embed interrogatives, and so cannot conceal questions, the semantic equivalence in (18) may still hold if “what NP is like” is construed as a free relative. Second, our main point in this paper concerns the metaphysics of imagination, so however the semantic questions turn out, it is still open to us to maintain the metaphysical equivalence in (14).

Component 4 of our view concerns a distinctive feature of imagining what things are like. Imagining what something is like is always perspectival; to imagine what something is like is always to imagine what something is like *to someone*. When le Carré asks us to imagine what Haydon’s betrayal is like, he doesn’t ask us to imagine it unqualifiedly, from nowhere—he asks us to imagine it from various perspectives, sometimes from Smiley’s perspective, other times from Prideaux’s perspective, and perhaps even from the perspective of someone who

⁵See D’Ambrosio and Stoljar [2021, forthcoming].

knows that Prideaux and Haydon were lovers. One major piece of evidence for the perspectival nature of imagining is that *what X is like* complements have more structure than is apparent at first—things are always like something *to someone*. We may ask, for example, not only ‘what is getting home late like?’ and ‘what is Sally’s getting home late like?’ but also ‘what is Sally’s getting home late like to Mary?’ (Suppose for example Mary is Sally’s mother sitting up concerned about Sally’s getting home late.)

Thus, at least in cases where *wh*-clauses concern what certain events are like, we must keep separate both the agent of the event with which we are concerned, and the subject to whom that event is like something. This entails that in constructions that embed ‘what NP is like’ clauses, there will sometimes be three subjects to keep track of that are in principle distinct. In cases where a subject imagines what a particular event is like, such as ‘Suzy imagined what Sally’s getting home late was like’, there is, first, the subject doing the imagining, namely, Suzy; second, the agent of the imagined event—in this case, Sally; and third, the person to whom Sally’s getting home late was like something—in this case, Sally’s mother Mary. We can call this last subject the *experiencer*, for it is this person to whom the event or object is like something.⁶

The experiencer argument is what accounts for the perspectival nature of imagining what things are like, and this argument is distinctive. When we imagine what Haydon’s betrayal of Prideaux is like to someone who knows that they were lovers, we need not imagine what it is like to a *particular* person. The experiencer argument position has a notional reading, in the same way that the object position of an intensional transitive verb has a notional reading. Just as John may be looking for a pen, but not a particular one, we may imagine what Haydon’s betrayal is like to someone who knows Prideaux, but no particular such person. Indeed, there need be no person that fits that description, and yet we can imagine what such a betrayal is like for someone of that kind. The fact that the experiencer argument position has a notional reading explains why perspectives, like the objects of searches, are so elusive.

Putting all three components together yields the following view. Authors of fiction give us instructions to imagine various things. When the author of a fiction instructs us to imagine objectually—i.e. to imagine an object or event—given Component 2, she asks us to imagine what that object or event is like. Given component 3, this is an instruction to imagine what that object or event is like from a particular perspective—i.e. what it is like *to* an experiencer of a particular kind. Thus, the authors of fiction engage our imagination by instructing us, by means of the fiction, to imagine what things are like to people with certain perspectives on the objects or events we are asked to imagine.

⁶For further discussion of this point, see Gisborne [2010], Stoljar [2016], and D’Ambrosio and Stoljar [2021], among many others.

5. Solving the Puzzle

We now have all of the materials we need to solve the paradox of fiction. Before turning to the three premises of the puzzle, let us begin by using the three components of our view to provide an explanation of why those who engage with fiction have the kinds of emotional responses that they do, and why it is rational for them to do so.

On our view, authors of fiction often ask us to imagine what various events and situations are like to people of particular kinds. Why should imagining what something is like to someone generate the kinds of emotional responses with which we are so familiar? Our account in fact has two different albeit complementary ways of explaining and rationalizing these responses. First, consider instances in which authors instruct us to objectually imagine an event, and so, given Components 3 and 4, instruct us to imagine what that event is like to someone. To imagine what an event is like is—standardly or typically, although not always—to imagine what it *feels* like to some person, typically the agent of the event itself. So to instruct someone to imagine what something is like to someone is typically to instruct them to engage in *experiential* imagining: it is to instruct them to imagine what that event feels like to some experiencer.

This view is not strictly speaking entailed by the equivalence in Component 3 of our view. To ask someone to imagine an event is not necessarily to ask them to imagine what that event *feels* like. One can imagine what something is like in many ways. One can imagine what it looks like, smells like, tastes like, feels like, or sounds like. We can think of imagining what something is like as a determinable, and the various ways in which we can imagine what that thing is like as its determinates. But we think it is more natural to imagine certain things in certain modalities. For instance, when we are asked to imagine an event or a state, we think, by default, we are asked to imagine what that event *feels* like. Consider (19):

(19) Imagine what swimming in that water is like.

The dominant interpretation of (19) is a strengthened one, on which you are instructed not just to imagine what swimming in that water is like in some modality or other, but what swimming in that water feels like. You are asked to imagine what swimming in that water is like *from the inside*, as it is sometimes put.

This is made all the more plausible by the fact that (19) is equivalent to (20), and (20) clearly reports an instance of experiential imagining.

(20) Imagine what it's like to swim in that water.

The same equivalence holds for the corresponding declaratives:

- (21) John imagined what swimming in that water is like.
- (22) John imagined what it's like to swim in that water.

There is wide agreement that the phrase “what it's like” has a particular connection to phenomenal consciousness—it is typically used to talk about experiences. We agree, and here we think that it is used to report an instance of imagining a particular experience: imagining what swimming in that water feels like to someone—typically the agent of the event. By contrast, when we are asked to imagine an object, we think it is most natural to comply by imagining what that object *looks* like. Consider (23):

- (23) Imagine Smiley.

Here, we think that the natural interpretation is that we are being instructed to imagine what Smiley *looks* like. One reason for this is that unlike events, objects do not have agents, and cannot be undergone, and so cannot feel like anything to the people who undergo them.

The claims we have just made are pragmatic: we have made the claim that sentences such as (22) implicate a particular strengthened, experiential reading, while sentences such as (23) implicate a non-experiential, perhaps perceptual reading. But it is plausible that these pragmatic defaults are underpinned by psychological dispositions. In imagining what an event is like, we may be psychologically disposed to imagine what the event felt like to the agent of the event. By contrast, when imagining what an ordinary object is like, we may be psychologically disposed to visualise that object—to imagine what it looks like.

Given that instructions to imagine what various events and states are like are often instructions to imagine what things *feel* like to various agents, it immediately becomes more intelligible why fiction makes us feel the way we do. In imagining what a particular event or situation feels like to someone, we are the agent of an event that is phenomenally similar, or perhaps even in principle phenomenally identical to, the experience that the person themselves has. Thus when we imagine what learning of Haydon's betrayal is like to Prideaux, we have an experience that is phenomenally similar to—or feels similar to—the one that Prideaux has upon learning that Haydon is the mole. Prideaux's experience is one in which he feels overwhelmingly sad, betrayed, and angry. In imagining what this experience is like for him, we are the agents of a vicarious experience where we feel similarly.

Thus, the explanation of why we feel what we do is that we are engaged in an instance of experiential imagining—a vicarious experience—whose phenomenal character is similar, or perhaps even identical to, that of the experience we are imagining. We feel sad because we are imagining what Haydon's betrayal feels like to Prideaux, and to him, it feels sad. It is the phenomenal character of our vicarious experiences that provides the explanation of why have emotional

reactions to fictions, or at least why we have reactions that are phenomenally similar to those emotions.

But there is a second way to understand why we have the emotional responses that we do to fiction that has to do specifically with the perspectival nature of imagining. We said above that to imagine what something is like is always to imagine what it is like *to someone*. But the authors of fiction manipulate perspective by getting us to imagine what things are like to people of particular sorts or kinds. Thus, one way that authors are able to bring about affective response is by getting us to imagine what things things are like to people who have certain kinds of features: perhaps they have certain kinds of beliefs or desires or sensitivities. Consider again our example of Haydon's betrayal: le Carré may instruct us to imagine what that betrayal is like to someone *who wants it not to happen*, or to someone *who has no communist sympathies at all*, or to someone *who is themselves a Russian agent embedded in the British secret service*.

What Haydon's betrayal is like will be different to each of these different kinds of people, from each of these different perspectives. To someone who wants that betrayal not to take place, the event will occasion dismay or unhappiness. To another Russian mole, discovery of the event may occasion fear, surprise, or perhaps feelings of superiority. Thus another way of explaining why we have the kinds of emotional responses that we do to fiction is that we are instructed to imagine events and situations from certain kinds of perspectives, and the vicarious experiences that we undertake from those perspectives likewise have certain phenomenal characters. Thus, the perspective we are instructed to adopt affects the phenomenology of the vicarious experiences that we have in engaging with fiction, and when the experiencer himself has certain kinds of emotional responses, we will have those responses vicariously.

The resulting view is that emotional responses to fiction are rationalized by, to borrow a term from Vendler [1979], vicarious experiences. In vicarious experience, we imagine what something is like to someone—paradigmatically, what an experience of theirs feels like to them—and in doing so we ourselves have an experience that is phenomenally similar to theirs. In imagining what an experience feels like, just as in imagining what something looks like, we have an experience that is phenomenally similar to the real thing. When we imagine what something looks like, we have an experience that is phenomenally similar to visual perception, and in imagining what something feels like, we have an experience that is phenomenally similar to having that feeling itself. Thus, when we vicariously imagine an experience that occasions grief or dismay, we too will come to experience grief or dismay.

Now let us return to the inconsistent triad that generates the paradox of fiction, and examine which component to reject in light of the view we have just proposed.

PF1 We have emotions concerning the situations of fictional characters.

PF2 To have an emotion concerning someone's situation we must believe the propositions that describe that situation.

PF3 We do not believe the propositions that describe the situations of fictional characters. Currie [1990, p. 187]

Which claim that generates the paradox can we now deny? There are actually two options, depending on whether we take vicarious experiences of emotion to be genuine experiences of emotion. What our view tells us is that vicarious experiences can be in principle phenomenally indistinguishable from the experiences of which they are imaginings, and so vicarious experiences of emotion are in principle phenomenally indistinguishable from the genuine experiences of emotion of which they are imaginings.

If we take vicarious experiences of emotion to not be genuine experiences of emotion, then we should deny [PF1]. This is due to the fact that if vicarious experiences of emotion are not genuine experiences of emotion, then in engaging with fiction, we do not experience genuine emotions. Rather, we experience only something that is merely phenomenally indistinguishable from genuine emotion, but not the genuine article. This leads to what we might call "imaginative disjunctivism" about emotion. While certain vicarious or imaginative experiences of emotion can be phenomenally indistinguishable from genuine emotions, because of the fact that genuine emotions require that we believe that the propositions describing the relevant situation, these vicarious experiences of emotion are not genuine emotions. On this view, our account of vicarious emotional experience becomes an account of quasi-emotions.

But there is another possibility. We might think that to vicariously experience emotion is to genuinely experience emotion. When I imagine what learning about Haydon's betrayal feels like to Prideaux, and go into a state that is phenomenally similar to the state he would go into, I am experiencing genuine dismay, sadness, and anger. If this is the view we adopt, then we should clearly deny [PF2], for in this case, we can have genuine emotions while failing to believe the propositions that characterize the situation that these emotions concern. We can call this view "imaginative conjunctivism" about emotion. According to imaginative conjunctivism, vicarious emotional experience is emotional experience, and to vicariously experience sadness, for instance, is to experience sadness.

The result is that while we have an explanation of why we feel the way we do when we engage with fiction, and why it is rational to feel this way, the question of whether we are feeling genuine emotion or merely something phenomenally indistinguishable from it will depend on how deeply we cleave to [PF2]. If we think that vicarious experiences undertaken from the perspective of a character

who does not exist, in response to a situation that does not exist, do not count as genuine experiences, then we will deny [PF₁] and keep [PF₂]. But if we are happy to allow that vicarious experiences of emotion from the perspective of a fictional character are genuine experiences of emotion, then we can keep [PF₂] and deny [PF₁]. We think that this is roughly speaking a matter of labeling. What matters to the paradox of fiction is that *how we feel*, whether or not that is considered a genuine or merely vicarious emotional experience, is perfectly rational.

6. Rival Responses

Approaches to solving the paradox can be sorted into three categories, depending on which of these three claims they deny. The *pretense* response, made famous by Kendall Walton [1990, 2000], results from denying [PF₁]. Walton insists that genuine emotions require, metaphysically, that the subject believe the propositions characterizing the situation to which those emotions are a response. For example, according to Walton, one does not feel genuine fear while watching a horror movie, or genuine sadness when one reads of Prideaux's capture and torture. Rather, in response to reading of these situations, we experience *quasi-emotions*. According to Walton, quasi-emotions are generated by beliefs about what is fictionally the case: given our beliefs about what is true in the fiction—for instance, that Prideaux has been betrayed—we feel quasi-sad, quasi-angry, and quasi-dismayed. Quasi-emotions are consequences of a game of make-believe or pretense.

But how does appealing to quasi-emotions advance our understanding of how these feelings are generated, or why such responses are rational? Given that quasi-emotions are phenomenally just like genuine emotions, or at least very similar to them, why is it rational to feel the way we do? Appeal to quasi-emotions just pushes this problem back. We could equally well formulate a paradox involving quasi-emotions which yields the conclusion that our quasi-emotions are irrational. Perhaps worse, appeal to quasi-emotions seems to simply name the problem that we have identified: there is something different going on when we respond emotionally to fictions than to what we believe to be real. Calling such responses quasi-emotions may solve the initial puzzle, but it does nothing to explain how such feelings—whether they are quasi-emotions or genuine emotions—are rational, or to make them intelligible.

The so-called *thought* response, which can be traced to the work of Lamarque [1981], results from denying [PF₂]. The thought response takes its name from the idea that the mere thought of something can occasion emotions such as fear or joy. If this is true, and all that is necessary for emotions to be rational is the thought of fictional things, rather than the belief that they exist, then the problem appears to dissolve. The idea in this form of response is to make emotional response to

what really exists a special case of emotional response more generally, where the general case requires no accompanying beliefs concerning the situation to which our emotions are responses.

Depending on how it is spelled out, this response does little to advance our understanding of why our emotional responses to fiction are rational. One form of the view simply asserts that the emotions are generated by our thoughts about nonexistent objects, holding that since these emotions are incredibly natural, must be rational [CITE]. Another form of the view invokes evaluative beliefs about the the characters of the fiction, claiming that such evaluative beliefs can be genuinely, rather than merely fictionally true, and then claims that these beliefs are responsible for our emotional responses. [CITE] But in either case, it seems that given the nonexistence of the objects of these thoughts or beliefs, we lack an explanation of the contrast between our emotional responses to fiction and to things we believe to be true.

Finally, the *illusion* response, defended by Langland-Hassan [2020], among others, denies [PF3]. According to the illusion response, we in fact *do* believe the propositions characterizing the situations to which our emotions are responses, at least while we are immersed in the fiction. On Langland-Hassan's version of this proposal, the propositions that we believe are ones concerning what is fictionally true—those propositions are literally true because they concern what happens “in the fiction”. Nonetheless, he claims, such propositions provide us with a distinctive kind of *aesthetic* reason in virtue of which our emotional responses are warranted. On his view, facts about the fiction serve as reasons that rationalize our emotional responses.

At least at first blush, this response is again lacking. Isn't claiming that the facts about the fiction serve to rationalize our response to simply restate the puzzle? Wasn't what was wanted an explanation of why those facts should serve as reasons, given that the situations described by the fiction aren't real? We find this sort of explanation—one which depends on calling the facts about the fiction a certain sort of reason—unsatisfactory as a rationalizing explanation.

[say more here, obviously]

We do not take these objections to definitively undermine any of the three responses we have discussed. However, we do take them to show that, at least in their simple forms, each approach to solving the paradox faces significant challenges. The main problem for each is that they simply do not provide a good explanation of why it is that we have such strong emotional responses, given that the things to which we are responding are not real or do not exist. Our view, to which we now turn, provides just the explanation that these views lack.

7. Conclusion

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