A New Approach to the Paradox of Fiction

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ABSTRACT: It seems that an intuitive characterization of our emotional engagement with fiction contains a paradox, which has been labelled the 'Paradox of Fiction'. Using insights into the nature of mental content gained from the disjunctive theory of perception I propose a novel solution to the Paradox, explained and motivated by reference to Kendall Walton's influential account of fictionality. Using this insight I suggest that we can take the phenomenology of fictional engagement seriously in a way not allowed by Walton.

The 'Paradox of Fiction'

The following paradox underlies recent analytic philosophy on the topic of fictionality:

(a) Readers or audiences often experience emotions such as fear, pity, desire, and admiration toward objects they know to be fictional, e.g. fictional characters

(b) A necessary condition for experiencing emotions such as fear, pity, desire etc. is that those experiencing them believe the objects of their emotions to exist.

(c) Readers or audiences who know that the objects are fictional do not believe that these objects exist.[1]

1. Peter Lamarque and S. H. Olsen, ed., *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007): 298.

These three statements have a certain intuitive appeal; each seems like a plausible part of the characterization of fictional experience. However, the three statements are clearly mutually incompatible. Any attempt at a theoretical solution to the paradox has thus tended to take the form of choosing which statement to reject, and giving an account of why it is dispensable. Each statement in turn has been rejected by at least one recent theorist, and a variety of compensatory moves have been suggested. My approach will be introduced and motivated by a discussion of Kendall Walton's solution, from which I will then move, appropriating an insight from the 'disjunctive theory of perception,' in order to propose a novel solution to the paradox[2]. In brief, my suggestion is that we take as seriously as possible the phenomenology of fictional experience as commonly reported, in particular the fact that fictional emotions tend to feel both real and relational. I will show in what follows that we can do justice to this aspect of fictional experience without implying the existence of fictional objects, by appealing to the idea that we are not always authoritative about 'how things are for us.'

In brief, Walton retains statements (b) and (c) and rejects (a). Walton claims that, rather than it actually being the case that we are afraid, or envious, or pitying of fictional characters and objects, it is 'make-believe' that we are afraid, envious, pitying etc.

For Walton, when his imaginary film-goer Charles is watching a film about a ball of slime terrorizing people and says 'I am afraid of the slime,' this should not be taken as evidence that he is indeed afraid of the slime. Walton claims he cannot be afraid of the slime because the slime does not exist and Charles knows this. Instead we should interpret Charles' utterance as part of the game of 'make-believe' which constitutes Charles' artistic or imaginative engagement with the film. Charles does have "certain phenomenological experiences" which normally arise "as a result of

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knowing or believing that one is endangered."[3] These experiences, termed by Walton as 'quasi-fear,' constitute fear within the make-believe, meaning Charles does not feel genuine fear of the slime.[4] This analysis is not in line with how Charles takes his experience to be, and so Walton's solution should be considered as revisionist with respect to the subject's self-report of his or her experience of fiction.

An Alternate Approach to the Paradox

I propose that we attempt to do greater justice to the experience of the ordinary film-goer or book-reader. This includes the fact that most take themselves to experience genuine emotions for fictional objects and characters. More specifically, I aim to do justice to the intuition that what makes Charles' exclamations of fear correct is something other than their being true in a relevant game of make-believe.

Let us examine (a). Why do some theorists deny this statement? Walton frames this claim in terms of belief in the object of one's emotions, but it seems that more fundamental than positing that this is the actual existence of the objects themselves. That is to say that fear, pity, envy, admiration, all of the commonly used examples in this field, are relational psychological states. One would hardly deny that one could become sad or melancholy after reading a book, or indeed that a book made one sad. That is because sadness is a mood; it does not have an object as such, though it

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3. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1990): 244.

4. Make-believe truths are generated according to the rules of the 'game,' which obviously varies, though there will likely be a set of standard rules, based on conventions, for each artistic medium, say; the work of art serves as a 'prop' in the game. For example, the slime moves towards the camera which generates the fictional truth that the slime is advancing towards the audience, and thus that Charles is threatened by the slime. This fictional danger gives rise in Charles to feelings of 'quasi-fear' which, combined with the fictional truth that he is in danger, make it fictional that he is afraid. What makes it fictional that he is afraid of the slime, is that fictionally he is threatened by the slime, and that this is what gives rise to his feelings of quasi-fear. Whilst it may sound somewhat convoluted, Walton suggests that this process is parallel to the case of 'normal' fear. (*Mimesis as Make-believe*, 249-5).

may have an explicit cause. Pity, however, is pity of or for an object. This I shall take as an assumption in what follows. The worry motivating denials of (a), then, is that if states such as 'pity for x' are relational, then they cannot be found to be objectless. Thus if the apparent object of pity does not exist then either it is not pity or its object is not what it appeared to be.

If this is the case, then such let us consider self reports as Charles'

(1) I am afraid of the slime.

According to the above assumptions, (1) reports Charles as being in a relational state, which requires the existence of its object for its own existence. Therefore (1) can only be accepted by us as theoreticians on pain of implying

(2) The slime exists.

This, I will assume, is something we wish to avoid.[5] The desire to preserve the relationality of such emotions as fear, without being committed to the inference from (1) to (2) has motivated Walton to provide an alternative analysis of self-reports such as (1). Walton's analysis has (1) mean

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5. Having said this, to explain exactly how we wish to deny the slime's existence is somewhat tricky. Nathan Salmon for example, has suggested that fictional characters do exist as 'abstract entities' created by their authors ('Nonexistence,' *Noûs*, 32.3, 1998: 295). It seems, then, that we could claim that Charles is really afraid of the abstract entity which is the slime; a similar position is advocated by Peter Lamarque who claims that we are afraid of fictional characters in the sense of their being the 'intentional object' of the thought of the character ('How can we fear and pity fictions?' *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 294). There is the problem here, however, that just as Charles does not feel himself to be make-believedly but really afraid of the slime, so he does not feel that he is afraid of the sense of a thought, or an abstract entity. His experience, we are claiming, feels like 'fear-of-the-slime,' where the slime very much resembles the monster he sees on-screen. Thus even if, with Salmon, we wish to say that fictional characters do exist, it is a much greater stretch to claim that they exist in a sense strong enough to claim that Charles is afraid of the slime which does justice both to how he feels and to our assumed relationality of fear. It is difficult to specify a sense in which fictional characters exist which does not succumb to revisionism with respect to self-reports.

(1′) Make-believedly I am afraid of the slime.

This, to be sure, implies

(2′) Make-believedly the slime exists.

But this is not a problem, because make-believedly the slime does exist. It is one of the simplicities of Walton's theory that he allows all interaction between the real and the fictional to occur in the same 'world,' that of the game of make-believe where both Charles and the slime exist; neither (1′) nor (2′) imply (2).

We can see, then, that Walton's account copes admirably with this shift of focus on the paradox. However, as I have stressed, it remains re-visionist. I have not yet proposed an alternative, but I hope that, having re-oriented our perspective on the central problem of the paradox, we can now make some progress towards an alternative solution.

The Disjunctivist Insight

In this section I will attempt to sketch an alternative approach to the characterization of Charles' situation by appropriating an insight from a position in the philosophy of mind and perception known as 'disjunctivism.'[6] It has been an implicit assumption of the above discussion that if Charles was in a state which he could not tell from fear of the slime, then this would imply that he was indeed in a state of fear of the slime. I will call this assumption the assumption of the 'transparency of phenomenology.' The above attempted to show that this is to be considered problematic, given

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6. cf. Matthew Soteriou, "The Disjunctive Theory of Perception," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/perception-disjunctive/> I hope that at least in characterizing the 'disjunctivist insight,' I will have stuck to relatively uncontroversial ground within this position. For an overview of the development of this position, along with a discussion of some of the controversies within it, see the 'Introduction' to *Disjunctivism: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Byrne and Logue (London: MIT Press, 2009).

the assumption that fear is an object-directed state. It is the apparent dilem-
ma we face in characterizing Charles' experience that we either need to re-
ject Charles' self-reports or reject our very plausible model of fear, on pain
of having to accept (2). I would suggest that this apparent dilemma is what
allows Walton and others to propose their accounts without much regard
to Charles' phenomenology and self-reports; after all, if we acknowledge
that he does feel exactly like he is afraid, then he must be, according to the
assumption about phenomenology.

Our commitment to anti-revisionism leads us to accept that (1) is
the natural and proper thing for Charles to say. We should try to take his
report at face value. How then do we stop the inference to (2)? The reason
for accepting (1) is that whatever the cause of Charles' state, it seems to
him that he is in fear of the slime.[7] Given the transparency assumption, to
say that it seems to a subject that he is in fear of the slime is to report on a
state of his phenomenology that is common between the veridical case in
which

(3) I am experiencing fear with relation to the slime

and the illusory case in which

(4) I am subject to an experience indistinguishable from
relational fear of the slime.

These two different cases share a 'highest common factor' and it
is that highest common factor that makes it the case that (1) is true.[8] The
highest common factor is normally conceived in a mind-dependent fash-

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7. In this respect, the treatment of (1) follows what many say about self-reports of perceptual expe-
riences. Compare the case where someone says, when told that there is no lemon in front of them,
"Well it certainly seems that there's a lemon, whether there is or not!"
8. John McDowell, "Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge," *Studies in the Philosophy of Logic and
Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 22.

ion, such as a 'sense-data' or 'representational content.' For now, we can characterize it neutrally as

(1'') It is to me that I am fearful of the slime.

If this common factor is the core of the experience reportable by (1), then it implies (2). Accepting the transparency of phenomenology, (1'') means that (1) and so it seems to Charles that he is afraid (a state necessitated by our anti-revisionism), which means that he is afraid. And, in the case at hand, states of fearfulness are relational. So, without some alternative account of what it is to be fearful, (1'') still entails (2).

The 'disjunctivist insight,' which I wish to discuss here rejects the assumption of the transparency of phenomenology, and so denies that we can move from the fact that two states are subjectively indistinguishable to the claim that they share a highest common factor. Put another way: we should not individuate psychological states by reference to their subjective indistinguishability.[9] This denial of the common factor between subjectively indistinguishable experiences allows for the genuine object-dependence of perceptual states even in the face of arguments from illusion or hallucination – just because I cannot tell the difference between veridical and hallucinatory cases, it does not mean that the veridical perception of an apple does not essentially involve that apple. If, then, (1) can be truthfully reported in the circumstance of (3) and (4), and we deny that (3) and (4) share any relevant common factor, then the claim (1'') that makes (1) true cannot be construed as a univocal state common between (3) and (4). It must be taken disjunctively:

(1'') = either (3) or (4)

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9. cf. J.M. Hinton, "Visual Experiences," *Mind, New Series*, 76.302, (1967): 226 and M.G.F. Martin, 'The Limits of Self-Awareness,' *Philosophical Studies*, 120.1-3, (2004):37-89.

And as it is (1″) that makes (1) true, the same applies for (1). The move from (1) to (2) is then blocked because (4), according to the disjunctivist insight, does not describe an object-dependent state, and so does not entail the existence of the slime. In short, when Charles truthfully self-reports (1), either he is reporting on a relational state involving slime, or he is reporting on something else, but the difference between the two is not transparent to him; for all he knows, it could be one or the other. There is no common state between the two.

If, then, we take this plausible account of the meaning of Charles' utterance as an expression of how he takes himself to feel, but persist with the disjunctivist insight that how Charles takes himself to feel is to be explained by appeal to one or another of two distinct types of mental state, then we can accept Charles' utterance of (1) without being committed to (2). Whereas the traditional (a)-denialist approach sought to prove that Charles does not seriously or genuinely take himself to be afraid of the slime because that would entail the existence of the slime, we can escape this revisionism with our disjunctive analysis.

It might be objected that we have not saved how Charles takes his experience to be – after all, he thinks he genuinely is afraid of the slime, which we deny – but what we have preserved is how it is for him in terms of what he thinks he is doing when he utters sentences such as (1). We then ultimately deny (a)-the claim that we have genuine emotional reactions to fictions - as we must if we wish to preserve the assumption of the relationality of fear whilst denying the relevant existence of fictional objects, but we have done so without the same revisionism with respect to Charles' self-reports. We achieve this, in part, by saying that things can be, from Charles' point of view, exactly as they would be if he were genuinely afraid of the slime without implying that the slime exists.

Though our analysis of (1) may seem counter-intuitive, it is not an analysis which is unique to the problem of fictionality, and if we accept disjunctivism about perceptual states then we will be committed to many

other such analyses. Furthermore, representationalist or sense-datum theorist analyses are hardly famed for their intuitive appeal. Regardless, my aim here is merely to show that, given the disjunctivist insight, we can provide an alternative approach to the paradox.

Conclusion

We have established that an alternative analysis of the paradox is possible on the disjunctivist model, which blocks the problematic inference from (1) to (2). We have thus removed a key motivation for solutions such as Walton's. The ultimate value of this account will rely upon a number of questions which have not been fully addressed here, such as the plausibility of the disjunctivist position with respect to subjective reports, and the plausibility of the analogy between perceptual states and certain emotional states. As my purpose here is primarily to propose an alternative approach to the paradox, I will not go into such matters here. I do wish, however, to anticipate two criticisms likely to emerge from the literature on the paradox.

First, although we have avoided the mutual incompatibility of the paradox's claims by ultimately rejecting (a), our account itself might be incompatible with (b) – the claim that belief in the object is a necessary condition for emotion. It would certainly render our solution inefficient if we found ourselves rejecting two of the statements of the paradox. As it is, we can show that (b) does not have any claim upon (4) and thus no necessary impact upon our analysis of (1) as (1''): simply put, (b) is a claim about real emotions, (4) is not. To elaborate, let us imagine a mental state called 'counterfeit-fear.' The minimal definition of counterfeit-fear is that it is a mental or psychological state which is subjectively indiscriminable from genuine fear, but which is not dependent on its 'object' for its existence; it is the sort of thing which is appropriately reportable by statements such as (4). My claim here is that (b), in its current formulation, has nothing to say about counterfeit-fear, and so does not pose a problem for anyone wishing

to interpret Charles' utterance as (1″). To draw the analogy with the perceptual case, a veridical visual experience of a lemon requires the relevant existence of a lemon; an illusory experience of a lemon does not. On the disjunctivist model, to say that 'seeing a lemon' requires a lemon obviously does not make a claim about hallucinating a lemon.

Second, having introduced the term 'counterfeit-fear' might cause one to wonder more specifically what such a mental phenomenon might be like, and particularly whether or not there is anything to distinguish it from Walton's quasi-fear.[10] The answer is that there is nothing explicit at this point neither in Walton's nor our present discussion to preclude the identification of counterfeit and quasi-emotions , and this may lead to worries.

However, quasi-fear alone is a rather formless feeling in Walton. It lacks intentionality and should be seen more as an ingredient of the experience of fear than as its manifestation. Walton explains quasi-fear with reference to its role in an experience of real fear:

> "To be (really) afraid of a tornado, for instance, is to have certain phenomenological experiences (quasi-fear) as a result of knowing that one is endangered by the tornado. What makes the state one of fear rather than anger or excitement is the belief that one is in danger, and what makes the tornado its object is the fact that it is the tornado that one takes to be dangerous."[11]

The role of quasi-fear here is that, in combination with beliefs or facts about its causes, it forms part of the experience of fear-of-x. It is not open to us to allow counterfeit-fear this sort of role, because by hypothesis

10. Walton says in direct characterization of quasi-fear is that it is a set of "certain phenomenological experiences" which arise "as a result of knowing or believing that one is endangered," and which make it make-believe that one feels fear (Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe*, 244). Elsewhere it is suggested that quasi-fear in Charles' case is the relevant aspects of his 'physiological-psychological state' as he watches the film (Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe*, 196). Both of these definitions are broad enough to encompass all we require of counterfeit-emotions.
11. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe*, 245.

it should be subjectively indistinguishable by itself from fear-of-x. What this boils down to is saying that counterfeit-emotions must be considered as having an intentionality which Walton denies (at least provisionally) to quasi-emotions. The challenge is thus to suggest a model upon which counterfeit-emotions could have some feeling of intentionality, though obviously they will not be 'about' their 'object,' as it is their object which we wish to deny. Again, having recourse to the perceptual case, a hallucinatory experience of a lemon will certainly feel exactly as though it is 'about' a lemon, even though there is no lemon. Either way, I find it quite implausible to suggest that one's psychological or phenomenological state when, say, afraid of a dog, does not at the very least include a disposition to react in a certain way to dog-like stimuli, and I believe the case could be made in much greater detail. The above does not constitute a full defence of the proposed solution, and is not intended as a full dismissal of Walton's account. I hope, however, to have shown that there is a plausible position which is capable of defence.

We have seen that there are problems with Walton's account, at least with respect to his revisionism regarding the subject's self-reports. Further, it has been shown that if we accept that there can be non-relational psychological states which are subjectively indistinguishable from genuine emotions, then the analysis of statements such as (1) as (1'') allows us to accept utterances of (1) made in response to fiction without falling into such revision. This move is one which has had great success in recent philosophy of perception, and it has been shown that it has promise in helping us to understand the logic and quality of fictional engagement, suggesting that Walton's Charles is best understood not as making-believe that he is afraid, but as mistaken about the nature of his own experience.[12] ❖