PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDES IN FICTION

Abstract

Theories which seek to explain the status of psychological states experienced in fictional contexts either claim that those states are special propositional attitudes specific to fictional contexts (make-believe attitudes), or else define them as normal propositional attitudes by stretching the concept of a propositional attitude to include ‘objectless’ states that do not imply constraints such as truth or satisfaction. I argue that the first theory is either vacuous or false and that the second, by defining the reality of the states in question only nominally, risks having a result similar to the first. Then I put forward an explanation of how propositional attitudes function in fictional contexts which meets the following requirements: (a) does not postulate the existence of attitudes specific to or definitive of fictionality; (b) does not imply that we transgress our knowledge of the ontological claims of fictions for some attitudes (eg, fear) but not others (belief); (c) explains how we can adopt normal propositional attitudes towards fictions; (d) allows explanation of how attitudes adopted during fictional response connect or are relevant to our broader systems of belief and volition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Proponents of the make-believe theory of fiction claim that attitudes adopted in fictional contexts are make-believe versions of propositional attitudes. A striking feature of the critical response to this theory is that when seeking to defend the reality of psychological response to fiction, critics of make-believe are only prepared to claim that some propositional attitudes occur in fictional contexts. For example, although they claim that fictions can cause genuine fear or pity, they still do not claim that we believe fictional propositions.1 (I will use the expression ‘fictional propositions’ to refer to propositions occurring in or presented by fictions; I do not claim that there are such things as propositions which are in themselves specifically fictional.)

This asymmetry is independent of the difference between automatic reflexes and reactions that are at least potentially capable of being consistent with our beliefs. Automatic reflexes (eg, the fear caused by a loud bang in a film) bypass our knowledge of a fiction’s ontological claims and pragmatic status, so they do not explain how taking that knowledge into account affects our ability to adopt propositional attitudes.2 Such reflexes aside, what the asymmetry implies is that we contradict our knowledge of the ontological

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1 Penultimate draft of “Propositional attitudes in fiction”, British Journal of Aesthetics, 44.3, 261-276.
claims and pragmatic status of fictions when it comes to some attitudes, while complying with it in other cases.\(^3\)

Kendall Walton’s theory circumvents this problem by postulating the existence of an attitude specific to fictional contexts, namely make-believe. This attitude is adopted by stipulation or ‘mandate’,\(^4\) so that propositions we make believe can be incompatible with our beliefs. Consequently, there is no requirement for make-believe versions of attitudes other than belief (eg, make-believe fear) to be compatible with our beliefs. Another trait of make-believe, not pointed out by the theory, is that it can also be incompatible with our criteria for counterfactual validity. This happens when we are mandated to make believe that one set of fictional propositions can follow from another while believing the inference to be invalid.

Although this solution consistently confers the same status on all psychological states occurring in fictional contexts, it risks achieving this consistency at the expense of explanatory power. The theory generates a number of irreducible new states (make-believe versions of belief, desire, etc) specific to fictionality and compartmentalized from non-fictional attitudes. This raises a problem about the relevance of fictions: if the criteria that allow us to adopt psychological attitudes in non-fictional contexts are irrelevant in fictional contexts, then what mechanisms could explain why fictions interest us and absorb our attention?

I will put forward an explanation of how propositional attitudes function in fictional contexts which will meet the following requirements: (a) it will not postulate the existence of attitudes specific to or definitive of fictionality; (b) it will not imply that we transgress our knowledge of the pragmatic status of fictions for some attitudes but not others (ie, it will not be ‘asymmetrical’); (c) it will explain how we can adopt normal propositional attitudes towards fictions; (d) it will allow explanation of how the attitudes adopted during fictional response connect or are relevant to our broader systems of belief and volition.

Before putting forward this explanation (Sections 4, 5), I will argue that the key assumptions of the make-believe hypothesis are false (Sections 2, 3). Section 2 will argue that make-believe itself is not a propositional attitude. In Section 3 I will put forward a description of what I think that make-believe is, and claim that it is not a suitable model for explaining fictionality. Next, I will define two kinds of psychological response to fictions. The first kind (Section 4) are hypothetical attitudes. We do not have these attitudes, but believe that we would have them under certain conditions. We can mentally represent these attitudes, or factor them into counterfactual inferences. The contents of hypothetical attitudes can be fictional propositions. The second kind of response (Section 5) are normal propositional attitudes. Examples of such attitudes are: the desire that an inference from the conditions of a hypothetical desire to the hypothetically desired proposition be (or not be) counterfactually valid; judgments of verisimilitude, ie, beliefs that the counterfactual inferences of a fiction are (or are not) valid. Comparable fears, hopes and disappointments can be formulated on a similar basis.
2. THE STATUS OF THE IMAGINATION

Kendall Walton defines make-believe as an activity of the imagination. To make believe without the help of ‘props’ such as sandcastles, paintings or novels, as we do in daydreams, is just to imagine that certain propositions are true; make-believe games that do make use of props involve imagining things that those props prescribe. Therefore, the weight of the definition of make-believe (and in turn of fiction) offered by Walton’s theory rests on its concept of the imagination. However, the imagination is a fundamental and widespread activity that risks going well beyond the specific phenomena usually described as make-believe. This is why Walton seeks to distinguish the activity of imagining a proposition from an activity which is claimed to be more basic, that of ‘entertaining or considering’ or simply thinking it. According to the distinction put forward, to imagine is not just to represent something mentally, but amounts to adopting a propositional attitude towards a mental representation:

When Helen believes occurrently, thinks to herself, that there will be an earthquake in San Francisco before the year 2000, surely part of what she is doing is entertaining this proposition. Perhaps we can accept without too much strain that she is also imagining it, and that in general people imagine what they occurrently believe, disbelieve, fear, intend, desire. But suppose Dick thinks to himself that it is not the case that San Francisco will have an earthquake by 2000. He would seem to be entertaining the proposition that San Francisco will have an earthquake by 2000, as well as its negation. Must we allow that he is imagining both of them, both that the earthquake will occur and that it won’t? Occurrent imagining, as we ordinarily understand it and as we need to understand it in order to explain representation, involves more than just entertaining or considering or having in mind the propositions imagined. Imagining (propositional imagining), like (propositional) believing or desiring, is doing something with a proposition one has in mind.

No reason is given here as to why considering, entertaining or thinking the negation of a proposition should be distinct from imagining it; consequently, the claim that imagining propositions amounts to more than just mentally representing them remains unsupported. According to Walton, we can imagine both occurrently and non-occurrently; this means that the theory cannot be construed as distinguishing imagining and considering in terms of vividness or attention, which might have been a possibility given the connotation of imagery or vividness that attaches to the word ‘imagination’. In either case, this connotation cannot translate into a qualitative difference between mentally representing and adopting a propositional attitude. Even if we were to admit, for example, that imagining implied increased focus on the would-be perceptual traits of the things imagined, it would still be just a matter of considering a richer set of propositions containing perceptual attributions.

The imagination does not have criteria at its disposal that could differentiate among propositions as propositional attitudes do. We are not all
capable at all moments of believing, desiring, intending, fearing, etc any proposition, but only certain ones each time; we can, however, imagine any proposition, just as we can consider it. In the absence of such constraints, a limit for the imagination may be found in logical contradiction. But logical contradiction pertains to the intelligibility of propositions themselves. This strongly suggests that there are no grounds for claiming that imagining a proposition is different to thinking in propositional form.

Similar obstacles to defining the imagination as a propositional attitude adopted towards mental representations come from the fact that we cannot attribute conditions of satisfaction to imaginings. Walton’s concept of fictional truth is meant to provide such constraints: ‘Imaginings are constrained also; some are proper, appropriate in certain contexts, and others not. […] a fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something.’ However, the kinds of constraints described here are not conditions of satisfaction. Mandates are (external) representations of the contents of games of make-believe, and as such they cannot satisfy those contents in the way that states of affairs in the world verify, falsify, fulfil or frustrate the representational contents of propositional attitudes. For imagining or make-believe to be a propositional attitude, the constraint would have to come from things represented by the mandates. Mandates do not claim that there is anything beyond the representations and the mental contents (taken together) for the representations and the mental contents to conform to (or, alternatively, that there is anything that should conform to those representations and contents). Thus, the kind of validity that a propositional attitude can have by virtue of its reference to something beyond itself has no equivalent in imagining. Accordingly, imagining is not itself ‘bipolar’: it cannot misrepresent. Instead, the kind of constraint that a mandate imposes is satisfied once we imagine what it tells us to imagine, and beyond this, there are no conditions of satisfaction. On the other hand, misrepresenting what the mandate tells us to imagine—and thus violating the constraint defined by Walton—is not a symptom of bipolarity in imagining: it is just a symptom of the bipolarity of the perceptions or beliefs involved in picking up information from the mandates.

This does not mean that there is nothing for the theory’s uses of the expression ‘imagination’ to refer to, but it does invalidate the claim that what is referred to has the status of a propositional attitude. And in the absence of such status, those uses of the term simply refer to the activity of mentally representing propositions in counterfactual contexts. Beyond such uses, the theory also uses ‘to imagine’ and its derivatives (especially ‘imaginings’), as well as ‘make-believe’, to designate the phenomenon of fictional participation or absorption. If imagining cannot be distinguished from mentally representing, then fictional participation has to explained by different means. So does make-believe, which is a more specific phenomenon than imagining.

‘To imagine’ does have a connotation which distinguishes it from considering: that of a certain freedom from the constraints of reality. In fact, this sense of the word could be taken as covering roughly the same phenomena
as make-believe: daydreams, fantasies and children’s games. But it is not as a propositional attitude that the imagination, thus partially construed, allows thought to escape from the constraints of reality. The construal instead denotes the activity of considering propositions and drawing inferences from them when the objective is not to establish beliefs (not even conditional ones). For example, the content of a daydream can be determined by hope or desire; in a state of anxiety, a logical sequence of thoughts can be determined by fear; and in each case, it may be that the consequences feared or desired, while being logically possible, are either causally impossible or just highly improbable. In such cases we ‘do something with’ propositions not because the imagination is a propositional attitude but because the criteria of other propositional attitudes, notably volitional ones, are responsible for determining our inferences. Unlike hypotheses, whose objective is to formulate beliefs, daydreams are counterfactual contexts in which inferences may be governed by desirability at the expense of credibility. Since make-believe cannot be defined as a propositional attitude, it is likely that it can be defined (and distinguished from the imagination) along similar lines.

3. TWO VERSIONS OF MAKE-BELIEVE

According to the theory, fiction consists in playing games of make-believe defined by prescriptions or mandates stipulated by an author; these mandates stipulate what we are to imagine during the game. It is difficult to understand or assess the exact function of make-believe in such a definition of fiction without introducing a distinction. Suppose that two propositions appear in the same fiction and are presented as being related causally, with \( p \) causing \( q \). The author of this fiction could give its addressees two kinds of prescriptions:

1. Make believe that \( p \). Make believe that \( q \).
2. Make believe that if \( p \), \( q \).

Make-believe theory does not explicitly formulate (2), but only the first version. However, we will see that (1) is not specific enough to explain fictionality; I add (2) because it represents a more substantial possibility for make-believe.

We have seen part of the reason why (1) would not work as a definition of fictionality. In (1), we would have trouble distinguishing make-believe from imagining (in the sense of considering) a proposition put forward by an author, be it fictional or not. To make believe that \( p \) is to imagine that \( p \) is true, or that a certain state of affairs obtains. If the fiction was linguistic (the mandate conveyed linguistically), to make believe that \( p \) would be to imagine the truth conditions of one of its sentences, which is indistinguishable from simply understanding the fictional sentence. Perhaps it could be objected to this that unlike simply thinking in propositional form, making believe does not only consist in imagining certain conditions but also in imagining that they obtain or are the case. But the values of ‘obtaining’ and ‘being the case’ are built into the
concepts of condition and proposition: imagining conditions necessarily involves imagining that something obtains, and thinking propositionally involves imagining that something is the case. These are imaginings of what the world would be like if the proposition was to be believed. To go any further beyond this, as make-believe would need to in order to be a distinct kind of activity, would be to adopt an attitude of belief. Similarly with sentences: ‘Imagine the conditions under which the sentence would be true’ and ‘Imagine that the sentence is true’ are both satisfied in the same way: by imagining, each time, that the same conditions obtain.

Instead of trying to split hairs over the possibility of a difference at this level, it might be more helpful if we could find a difference between making believe on one side, and imagining or considering on the other, at another level. Namely, it may be that the difference aimed at cannot be defined along the vertical direction of Frege’s assertion sign as a change of attitude, but only along the horizontal direction. Making believe differs from considering only because it has to involve the use of a proposition as a starting point to make inferences from. This is, indeed, a way of behaving as if the proposition was true which we may not necessarily adopt when simply considering the proposition itself. For example, thinking ‘I’ve won the lottery’ can lead to thinking ‘I live in a castle’, which goes well beyond what is required for thinking the first proposition. This difference cannot be defined by taking one proposition at a time because in that case there is no scope for behaving as if the proposition was true when we know that it is not. However, this difference between making believe and imagining (considering) is not one between a propositional attitude on one side and what it bears on on the other, only between two phenomena of the latter kind. And we now meet a new obstacle which is that under this construal, ‘Make believe that $p$’ looks like ‘Suppose that $p$’ and like hypothetical reasoning generally. This similarity takes us to (2).

According to (2), the author of a fiction asks us not only to imagine $p$ and $q$, but also to imagine that the relation ‘if $p$, then $q$’ is valid. For example, under (2), Sophocles would implicitly make the following request of us: “Make believe that if Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, he would remain ignorant of the fact for several decades.” This version of make-believe is a mandate to suspend the criteria that would normally allow us to assess the soundness of counterfactual judgments. As (1) suspends the question of whether the propositions presented in a fiction are assertable, (2) suspends the question of whether the relations which hold fictions together as sets of hypothetical propositions are valid.

This would be a more substantial definition of make-believe, and one which implies a deeper understanding of fictionality. A fiction is not a random aggregate of propositional values and we do not relate to each of the propositions that it presents as if it were isolated, but in the context of a form of reasoning that connects it to other propositions. These points are recognized by (2) since it bears on the relations between the propositions that make up a
fiction. By the same token, though, it turns out that in this form, which is the only viable one of the two, make-believe theory makes quite a radical claim: it claims that what characterizes fictions is an indifference to the quality of the counterfactual inferences that connect their propositions. There are no reasons for believing that such a form of indifference characterizes either the structure of fictions or our responses to them; in fact, there are reasons for believing the contrary.

(a) Realism and verisimilitude are properties possessed by fictions whose counterfactual inferences generally are valid. Since the degree of verisimilitude is a variable of fictionality, we can define fiction neither from the improbable end of the scale nor from the realistic end.

Walton subscribes to this concept of realism: ‘The more “similar” the world of a work is to the real world, the more realistic it may be said to be. [...] We might ask how likely or unlikely it is, in one or another sense, that what is fictional should be true’. I agree with this, but I disagree that this is made possible by the adoption of a make-believe attitude. The existence of degrees of verisimilitude as properties of fictions would be actively obstructed by the adoption of an attitude such as make-believe.

(b) Fictions that deploy propositional values in a temporal sequence allow us to formulate expectations that anticipate their developments. Irrespective of whether the reactions we describe as desire, fear, hope and disappointment in response to fictions are feigned, real or hypothetical, they are only possible if we can reason from propositions already set out by the fiction to propositions not yet presented by it. Postponing definition of the status of these attitudes or reactions, we can think of them provisionally as ‘attitudes adopted towards the development of the fiction’. Fearing a fictional development presupposes reasoning counterfactually from a preceding set of propositions (those deployed by the fiction up to a given point) to a further proposition, and it is towards this consequent that we adopt the fear at issue. Similarly, desiring and hoping fictional developments require the formulation of propositions which are not yet presented by the fiction, and which might not be presented by it at all, towards which these attitudes or quasi-attitudes are adopted; disappointment is frustration of such hopes and desires. At any given point of a fiction, we can at best be mandated to make believe the antecedents of the counterfactual inferences, or the conditions that lead to formulation of the contents of volitional states, and not anticipated propositions. Therefore, mandates to make believe are issued too late to cover attitudes adopted towards anticipated propositions, and make-believe cannot explain how fear, hope, desire or disappointment, irrespective of their status, intervene during fictional response.

(c) Anticipating propositions is necessary for what is called involvement, absorption or participation in fiction. Since make-believe is a mandate to suspend the criteria under which we derive anticipated propositions counterfactually, make-believe has nothing to do with fictional participation and would even actively obstruct it. (Unlike (a), points (b) and (c) apply to fictions irrespective of their degree of verisimilitude. They apply to the extent
that a fiction is coherent enough for us to be able to reason hypothetically from its propositions.)

It could be objected that make-believe as described in (2) need not involve a systematic suspension of our criteria for making counterfactual judgments: that the criteria are in force but that nevertheless, we occasionally accept certain developments of a fiction although they would appear suspect to us if they appeared in a context where the objective was the formation of beliefs. Whatever is the case for fiction, this would be a plausible idea of make-believe such as it occurs in daydreams and children’s games: although the objective of these activities is not the formation of beliefs, they are likely to consist of pockets of valid counterfactual reasoning separated by occasional allowances to escape the strictures of credibility. The objection implies that it is not the suspension as such, but the permission to suspend criteria that is constitutive of fictionality. This is effectively an argument from poetic licence.

According to the objection, fiction still consists in making believe that one set of propositions can follow from another when this is not warranted by our counterfactual reasoning. My argument is that suspense, participation and emotional response, as properties that depend on that kind of reasoning, are not made possible by virtue of make-believe or by virtue of poetic licence, but despite them. The objection rests on a confusion in applying the concept of a ‘prescription to reason as if something was true’. When we reason from an antecedent set of conditions to a proposition towards which we adopt (claimed) propositional attitudes, the only prescription we accept is that which is present in all hypothetical contexts, namely, to reason as if the antecedents were true, or counterfactually. Behaving as if we were in the situations defined by the fiction means reasoning as if we were in those situations; whereas (2), a different form of ‘as if’, prescribes the acceptance of inferences by stipulation and therefore a suspension of that reasoning. If such a prescription is present in fiction, then it has nothing to do with fearing or desiring the fictional development.

Instead, the prescription in (2)—and make-believe generally, since (1) has no explanatory power—boils down to poetic licence. A classical example of (2) is the deus ex machina, which does not contribute to producing suspense and participation but to undoing them. Make-believe is useful as an explanation of why all fictions do not allow the same degree of psychological participation. Instead of arising automatically from the adoption of a special attitude, psychological participation is a result of the quality of the reasoning of each fiction and a function of how much the issues raised in its hypotheses can interest us. It is also a function of criteria such as credibility and desirability, as we shall see now.

4. HYPOTHETICAL DESIRES

In non-fictional contexts, attitudes adopted towards propositions embedded in a counterfactual inference can be either real or imagined. For example, if X
knows \((p, q)\) to be false, the desires in (3) are imagined but those in (4) are real (the antecedents may be completed with ‘~\((X \text{ prefers } p \text{ to } q)\)’):

\[
(3) \text{ If } [X \text{ desires } q \text{ and } X \text{ believes } (\text{if } p, \sim q)], \text{ then } X \text{ desires } \sim p
\]

\[
(4) X \text{ desires } q \text{ and } X \text{ believes } (\text{if } p, \sim q) \rightarrow X \text{ desires } \sim p
\]

Suppose that we tried to transpose these formulations to fictional contexts with the aim of describing the psychological status of our responses to fictions, with \(X\) standing for the interpreter of the fiction and \((p, q)\) being anticipated propositions (propositions not yet presented by the fiction). Under (3), attitudes during such response would not be real but imagined or represented. Under (4), we could adopt real attitudes towards the propositions defined by fictions and their contents would be determinable by counterfactual inference. However, the antecedent of (4) contains a desire, ‘\(X\) desires that \(q\)’, and it is the possibility of having such a desire in a fictional context that is at issue. On what grounds could this possibility be denied?

The grounds could not be that \(q\) is false or that it is unasserted in the fiction, since this applies equally in the non-fictional context. Nor could the obstacle be non-existence or inexistence of the state of affairs towards which we adopt the psychological attitude, since this also applies as a matter of course when we have desires in non-fictional contexts. Another option would be to claim that \(q\) can have a referent only in non-fictional contexts. Although this argument succeeds when we are opposing fictions to assertions or beliefs, it works less well when we oppose fictional uses of propositions to volitional attitudes. Some of our desires refer successfully because they are about existing objects or situations that we wish to see changed; but unlike beliefs, volitions do not require successful reference for the same reason that they do not need to be true: the existence of their referents could be part of what is desired. So far, it looks as though we can adopt some attitudes towards fictional propositions but not others (desires but not beliefs), or as though we adopt propositional attitudes towards fictions ‘asymmetrically’. For example, fear could be admitted on similar grounds to desire, as a fear of inexistential objects.

However, for (4) to work in fictional contexts, a further condition would have to be met. If we adopted fully-fledged desires directly towards fictional propositions, then we should also prefer the satisfaction of those desires to their non-satisfaction. I will argue that desires adopted towards fictional propositions are not of this kind and that therefore they can only be imagined or represented desires. In Section 5 I will argue that fictions can also cause desires in the full sense (desires such that we prefer to see their conditions met), but that these desires do not bear directly on fictional propositions.

Desire for something defined by a fictional proposition emerges on the basis of hypothetical conditions laid out by the fiction up to the time that the desire occurs. These conditions do not appear in (3) and (4). For example, if \(q\) is the
desire formulated during a reading of *The brothers Karamazov* that Dmitri Karamazov be acquitted at his trial, this desire will be conditional on much of what has preceded in the novel. It will occur in the following manner (X being the interpreter of the fiction):

(5) If X believed that \((p_1, \ldots, p_n)\), then X would desire that \(q\)

or ‘In the closest possible world in which \((p_1, \ldots, p_n)\) are true, I desire that \(q\)’ or, more simply, ‘If, all other things being equal, such-and-such a situation were to occur, I would prefer it to be resolved in such a manner’.

Because it is conditional, the desire that \(q\) can only be satisfied in possible worlds defined by the fiction, that is, in possible worlds where the conditions \((p_1, \ldots, p_n)\) are true. For example, suppose that \(p_n\) is ‘Smerdyakov secretly admits to the murder’; then, the desire that Karamazov be acquitted should only be satisfied in a possible world where \(p_n\) is true. This consistency is necessary so that the desire satisfied can belong to the same type as the desire formulated. A sufficiently fine-grained individuation of the desire may require truth of all propositions in the novel which define the character in question and the conditions of his actions; but even a less fine-grained definition of the type would still require truth of a large subset of those propositions. Another way of understanding this requirement is through the default of reference in fictional sentences. The referent of the desire that Karamazov be acquitted is not a rigid designation for ‘Karamazov’ but anything that satisfies a lengthy complex description; therefore, any desire in which ‘Karamazov’ acts as a referring expression can only be satisfied if something also satisfies that complex description.15

So for hypothetical desires to become actual desires, we have to desire the coming into existence of a possible world that verifies the conditions that the hypothesis has presented in causing us to formulate a desire that \(q\). A conditional such as ‘If I were let off early I would like to visit Ann on the way to Joe’s’ defines a hypothetical desire, but its antecedent defines possible worlds whose existence I may desire and wish to bring about. But ‘If I was wrongly accused of someone’s murder I would like to be acquitted’ defines a hypothetical desire without defining possible worlds whose existence I desire or wish to bring about. Similarly, *The brothers Karamazov* defines a hypothetical desire in me that Dmitri Karamazov be acquitted; but it does not define a desire in me for the coming into being of any of the worlds necessary for satisfaction of that desire.

Transition from hypothetical desires to real ones is highly unusual in fictional contexts, and at least uncharacteristic as a fictional response. This is because bringing about the existence of possible worlds that fictions define (in order to satisfy our hypothetical desires) would also imply satisfying further conditions at the expense of other desires that we happen to have at the moment we engage in the fictional hypothesis. Unlike ‘If I were let off early I would like to visit Ann on the way to Joe’s’, fictional hypotheses are generally too long, complex and highly particularized for their satisfaction to be
compatible with the remainder of our volitions, so that shifting out of hypothetical mode is not an option. If we formulate desires directly towards fictional propositions, these are likely to be desires that we prefer not to see satisfied. Such desires could correctly be described as hypothetical desires: desires that we would have under certain conditions, or in possible worlds, whose existence we do not desire.

The situation regarding volitional response to fictional propositions is comparable to the more familiar one concerning belief. If the desire that \( q \) in possible worlds defined by a fiction is not a desire for the satisfaction of \( q \), this simply mirrors the fact that the truth of \( q \) in possible worlds cannot validate a belief that \( q \). We are not able to desire the kinds of things that fictions define for the same reason that we do not believe what they define, namely, that both attitudes are valid in possible worlds but not in the actual world.

It has been argued that we may be frightened by a thought even when we are not frightened of a thing that could count as the intentional object of our psychological state, so that attitudes adopted towards inexisting entities could explain the presence of propositional attitudes in fictional response. However, the claim that in fiction we adopt propositional attitudes towards thoughts, without consideration of the existence of intentional objects, risks effectively producing a result similar to Walton’s postulate of specifically fictional attitudes. For example, when the attitudes are volitional, limiting their scope to thoughts means being indifferent to their satisfaction. Excluding this from the concept of desire would result in postulating a special form of volition, one that does not seek satisfaction, simply in order to explain fictionality. But we can avoid this if we claim that the desires in question are hypothetical, or desires that we would have under the conditions defined by fictions, and that we can mentally represent them and factor them into counterfactual inferences.

5. DESIRE IN FICTION

Desires of the kind that we prefer to see satisfied do occur in response to fictions, but their contents are neither fictional propositions nor propositions desired on the basis of what the fiction literally or grammatically claims (as is the desire that Dmitri Karamazov be acquitted). Suppose that \( p_{n+1} \) is a hypothetical desire and \((p_1, \ldots, p_n)\) the conditions under which \( X \) believes that it would occur; here are two of the forms that such desires can have:

\[
(6) \ X \text{ desires that } [\text{if } (p_1, \ldots, p_n), \text{ then } p_{n+1}] \text{ be valid}
\]
\[
(7) \ X \text{ desires that the author reason } [\text{if } (p_1, \ldots, p_n), \text{ then } p_{n+1}]\]

(6) should not be confused with

If \((p_1, \ldots, p_n)\), then \( X \) desires that \( p_{n+1} \)
which is a desire that X would feel under certain conditions, and therefore a hypothetical desire. Nor does (6) state that X desires the world to be such that a set of fictional propositions be true in it. Instead, it says that X desires the world to be such that a given counterfactual inference will be valid in it.

Suppose that $p_{n+1}$ is ‘Karamazov is acquitted’. Then the interpreter’s desire in (6) is the desire that the inference from $(p_1, \ldots, p_n)$ to Karamazov’s acquittal be valid, or non-vacuously true. This desire would be satisfied if the actual world was more like or closer to a possible world in which $(p_1, \ldots, p_n, p_{n+1})$ are true, than to any possible world in which $(p_1, \ldots, p_n)$ are true and $p_{n+1}$ false. Irrespective of whether the desire formulated in (6) is satisfiable or could lead to the formulation of intentions, it is a desire of the kind that interpreters may wish to see satisfied since it does not additionally require satisfaction of a relatively large set of the fiction’s propositions. In this, it differs from the desire that Karamazov be acquitted, whose satisfaction would require the coming into existence of a world in which $(p_1, \ldots, p_{n+1})$ are true. The difference is due to the fact that the requirement for truth of the conditions of the hypothesis has been replaced with the requirement for proximity to possible worlds in which they are true.

It could be objected that we cannot desire the validity of a judgment, or that the purpose of judgments is to form beliefs, not desires. While this may point to the fact that the formulation used is unfamiliar, it does not amount to a substantial objection. When the conditions of a desire are formulated in propositional form, we desire the coming into existence of a possible world which verifies that proposition; in this sense, these more familiar desires could be construed as desires that a proposition be true. Accordingly, the desire that a counterfactual judgment be valid is the desire that the world be structured in such a way that it makes certain things more likely than others. The formulation expresses the fact that the desire can only shift out of would-be or hypothetical mode by dropping the requirement that the world verify the conditions of the hypothesis defined by the fiction. In simpler terms, when we say that we want Karamazov to be acquitted we do not mean that we want to find ourselves living in tsarist Russia, but we do mean that we prefer the world to work in one way rather than another.

Other fully-fledged attitudes which connect the content of fictions to the actual world can also be adopted in response to fictions. Desire can be the desire that the world be, or not be, such that a fictional representation of an event is non-vacuously true. Fear can be the fear that reality may be structured so as to allow for the occurrence of things that the fiction represents. As a source of fear this is quite deep-seated, because putting our belief-systems in question is unsettling in itself; ghost-stories can have this effect on us. A familiar variant of (6) are judgments of verisimilitude: belief or disbelief that the counterfactual inferences that structure the development of a fiction are valid.

The disagreement over whether we adopt real or quasi-attitudes in response to fictions, and the difficulty of resolving it decisively either way, may simply be due to the fact that we have reactions both of the kind that (5)
describes and of the kind that (6) describes. The two kinds of response are closely connected. One connection is that the contents of the real attitudes are formulated in the hypothetical or represented attitudes. But in addition to this, belief-judgments in the form of (6), or judgments of verisimilitude, are likely to determine the extent to which we implicitly believe hypothetical attitudes defined during fictional response to be relevant to our experience of the actual world. To the extent that a hypothesis defined by a fiction appears plausible to us, it will be plausible that counterparts of our hypothetical desire-, hope- or fear-types will occur in reality. Once again, this principle of relevance will depend on how fine-grained an interpreter’s criteria are for individuating the attitudes in question.

(7) is a form of desire whose content refers to the fiction itself or to the agent who has structured it. Such references pertain to the fact that there is a discrepancy between propositions anticipated by interpreters and propositions actually presented by the fiction. (7) can explain why certain emotions caused by fictions, while apparently contradictory, are in fact compatible because they have different referents.

Suppose again that \( p_{n+1} \), which X hypothetically desires, is ‘Karamazov is acquitted’. I may hypothetically desire that \( p_{n+1} \) occur, and in addition to this I may genuinely want the world to change so that the wrongly accused can be acquitted, while not wanting the author to conclude \( p_{n+1} \) from the conditions laid out in the fiction. For example, I may not want this because I think that a happy ending would be ‘out of place’ or else throw the credibility of the author’s reasoning into doubt. Alternatively, a hope or desire that an author reason toward a hypothetically desired proposition may also be a hope that the author demonstrate how the world may plausibly allow a certain outcome. Therefore, by referring to the fiction or to the author, the contents of attitudes defined in the form of (7) can explicitly treat fictions as representations and as capable of making ‘statements’. (7) can also accommodate less high-minded motives. For example, viewers may wish a film to represent a catastrophic explosion simply in order to see what it would look like, without this implying a desire that the world be such that they risk being subjected to catastrophic explosions (6), or even a hypothetical desire for catastrophes (5). It is possible that katharsis functions at this level, since it too consists in a desire that the fiction represent an event which is desired neither hypothetically nor as a matter of probability ((5) and (6) respectively).

The way fictions work in (6) and (7) is no less important to their definition or understanding than is their functioning at a conditional level. It does not seem a viable project to separate effective and hypothetical attitudes during fictional response and claim that (6) and (7) are responses for critics and commentators, while the other kinds of response are more widespread or central to a definition of fictionality. This would overlook the fact that something has to determine the degree of interpreters’ interest and participation in the outcome of hypothetical situations, and that the likely candidate are attitudes which can relate fictions to the actual world. It is more
useful to think of how hypothetical and effective attitudes relate along symbolic lines: the hypothetical desire, hope or fear interests us to the extent that its outcome stands for the outcome of counterparts of its type in the actual world. There is no reason to think that private interpreters or consumers of fictions are not mentally endowed to make these connections; critics and commentators explicitly hammer out their response to fictions, but this response is likely to be of the same nature as that of private interpreters.

CONCLUSION

This description of how propositional attitudes function in fictional contexts meets the four requirements mentioned in the introduction. It does not postulate the existence of attitudes specific to or definitive of fictionality, thus avoiding the risk of circularity or uninformativeness. That the attitudes formulated in (6) are not specific to fiction is made particularly evident in the case of belief: judgments of verisimilitude bearing on fictions are identical to counterfactual judgments in non-fictional contexts. Nor are the hypothetical attitudes in (5) specific to fiction, as thoughts like ‘If I was wrongly accused of murder I would like to be acquitted’ testify. The theory does not compartmentalize the experience of fictions from the rest of our experience but shows that the two are intimately connected, thus allowing explanation of why fictions interest us. Nor does it imply that while we are capable of being consistent with our knowledge of the ontological claims and pragmatic status of fictions when withholding belief, we nevertheless contradict this knowledge when it comes to adopting other attitudes.

Finally, a word on how this theory stands with respect to a salient feature of fictionality, its default of reference. One way of overcoming the theoretical problems that this default causes is to replace the requirement of reference with a requirement of satisfaction for descriptions. Since the designations of fictional propositions have no referents, the only meanings that interpreters can attribute to those designations have to be derived from the predicates of preceding grammatically co-referring propositions. When we deal with relatively large sets of apparently co-referring propositions, such as those that define a fictional character, these descriptions become lengthy and highly particularized. Strictly speaking, what prevents us from adopting propositional attitudes directly towards fictional propositions is not their failure of reference: since the referring expressions of fictional propositions can only be made sense of as complex descriptions, fictional propositions could be satisfiable in principle. Instead, the obstacle is that those complex descriptions define individuals so highly specified that it is not worth trying to project them. This is why, unlike hypothetical attitudes defined in non-fictional contexts, those defined in fictional contexts remain hypothetical on a more or less systematic basis. In terms of reference, this can be understood as follows. In fictional hypotheses, references represent sets of conditions unsatisfied in the actual world. In non-fictional hypotheses, to the extent that references in the
sentences that make up their conditions are satisfied, those references represent sets of conditions (or individuals) that already exist.

NOTES


2 For several descriptions of such reactions see John Morreal, “Fear without belief”, *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (7) (1993).

3 Lamarque denies the contradiction by claiming that the attitudes in question have intentional contents but not objects. But claiming that only such attitudes can occur in fictional contexts, and that subjects know their states to be objectless in such contexts, amounts to qualifying the states in question as hypothetical rather than as real. Skulsky avoids the contradiction by claiming that attitudes towards fictional propositions are founded on belief that the propositions are logically possible. But the fact that belief is modal in fictional contexts could equally imply that other attitudes are hypothetical. Briefly, broadening the definition of attitudes to avoid contradiction risks defining attitudes that are not effectively adopted.


5 Respectively, *MB* 43-51 (esp. 44) and *MB* 37-40.

6 The imagination serves directly to define fictionality in the theory: ‘Briefly, a fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something. Fictional propositions are propositions that are to be imagined’ (*MB* 39).

7 *MB* 20.

8 *MB* 16-18.

9 *MB* 39.

10 It is part of certain games of make-believe that their mandate-conveying props (pictures for example) are seen as if they are the things they represent; within such games, the props do indeed stand in for the states of affairs that normally satisfy the contents of propositional attitudes. This point of view is legitimate within games of make-believe, but cannot be adopted when we are trying to decide whether make-believe (really) is a propositional attitude.

11 I treat apparently referring expressions (“Oedipus”, “Karamazov”), as shorthand for unsatisfied complex descriptions.

12 Rather than indicative conditional judgments, assuming that fictional propositions are not presented as being true.

13 *MB* 328.

14 See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1454b; also 1455a on issues surrounding fictional participation.

15 I discuss the problem of reference again in the Conclusion.

16 Lamarque, McCormick (*op. cit.*).

On the subject how fictions make statements see Nicholas Wolterstorff, Works and worlds of art, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980. Wolterstorff claims that ‘even though telling a tale is not to be identified with making a claim, yet one can make a claim by telling a tale. One can make a point by telling a story’ (p. 107).

This solution can be traced back to Russell’s explanation of how we understand sentences like ‘The king of France is bald’. Lamarque (in work separate from his account of psychological response) develops the solution along Fregean lines, by taking the predicates in fictional sentences to stand for the senses of their referring expressions. Despite its different ontology, and because of its unusual semantics, Nelson Goodman’s theory of exemplification in fiction works along comparable lines. Goodman claims that null terms exemplify—and therefore are describable by—metalinguistic labels which express their meanings. (Nelson Goodman, Languages of art, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1976 [2nd ed.]; pp. 66-67.) However, Goodman provides no account of how such exemplified values are derivable from fictional sentences or representations.