A Thesis

entitled

Beyond the Paradox: Answering the Real Question about Fictive Emotions

by

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Across cultures, people have engagements with fictions which can result in physiological and psychological responses. These responses are what I call fictive emotions. Fictive emotions, though phenomenologically similar to other types of emotions, are distinct in that they seem to be a reaction to characters and events that do not exist. This observation has lead philosophers to ask three questions about fictive emotions: the conceptual (Are fictive emotions possible?), the normative (Are fictive emotions rational?), and the causal (How is it that fictions can cause fictive emotions?). In the past, philosophers have focused almost exclusively on the conceptual and normative questions, avoiding the more important causal question. In the following I explain why a focus on the conceptual and normative questions is misguided and the superior benefits of working toward an answer to the causal question. Though some current work has focused on this question it has been marked by many of the latent worries of past work on the other questions. Here I will explore the motivations for a more robust explanation of fictive emotions as well as possible avenues for providing this explanation.
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Chapter 1

The Conceptual Question

Across cultures, humans constantly find themselves engaged with fictions whether they are reading a novel, watching TV, going to the movies, or playing video games; we are infatuated with made-up people and events. We do not merely observe these fictional people (or creatures, as may be the case) either, we engage (sometimes very deeply) with them. We care for, worry about, weep for, laugh with, despise and admire characters we encounter in fictions. We learn from them and we learn about them, sometimes (especially with the advent of TV) know more about, or feel closer to them than we do the actual people we encounter, in our offices, in our classes and, more frequently than we are comfortable admitting, our homes. In short we have no problem with, in fact we seek out and pay for, emotional interactions with people and things we know to be fictional, to be made-up. Most people take this phenomenon as a given. It is simply a fact about the way humans work. But, as with many things, some philosophers are uneasy simply taking this as a given. Thus, for over four decades now, our emotional responses to fictions have been discussed under the moniker of the paradox of fiction. It is my opinion that much of this conversation has been misguided. In the following I
intend to clarify why I believe the paradox of fiction is misguided as well as point to more constructive ways of discussing this important and inescapable phenomenon.

The literature has raised three problems or questions about fictive emotions. These problems can be seen as three distinct (though certainly closely related) questions:

(1) The conceptual question: Are the psychological–physiological symptoms we have when appreciating fictions properly classified as genuine emotions? Is it possible to have a genuine emotion towards a fictional character without a belief in its existence?

(2) The normative question: In having the psychological–physiological symptoms we have when appreciating fictions, are we somehow irrational? If one is moved by a fiction, must one hold a false belief, or be deluded or irrational in some way?

(3) The causal question: How do these psychological–physiological symptoms arise when we appreciate fiction? How can fiction cause these psychological–physiological symptoms in us?¹

Most of the work on the paradox has focused on the first two problems and, as we will see below, this has led to much confusion. This is because before we can categorize or evaluate these emotions in relations to others, we need to have a better understanding of how and why these emotions come about in the first place and how they fit into a broader theory of emotions. Doing so will allow us to search for a more robust and fruitful exploration of fictive emotions.² Before doing so, however, we must expel the worries associated by the first two questions. In my first chapter I will examine Colin

¹Kim (2005) Elsewhere these have been deemed the “classificatory”, “flaw”, and “explanatory” questions.
²I use the term “fictive emotion” throughout to mean the physiological and psychological reactions to fictions. This is partly for brevity’s sake but also because I feel it does not commit me to analyzing these reactions in a certain way. While I am firstly using “fictive” because of its connotations as having to do with or be about fiction or imagination, but also secondarily because it can be used to mean not genuine, which I feel appreciates the difference between these reactions and other types of physiological-psychological reactions, that some philosophers take to be very important to point out.
Radford's initial statement of the paradox as well as other responses to the conceptual question about fictive emotions. Chapter Two will consist of an exploration of the rationality of emotions and an answer to the normative question of fictive emotions. In the final chapter I will attempt to sort through the findings of my exploration, answering the questions: Why should we care about fictive emotions? and How can we study fictive emotions in a productive way? In sum, I will contend that the paradox of fiction as normally understood is not a paradox at all and that asking a different question about fictive emotions will lead us to a wealth of important discoveries, in the understanding of philosophy, ethics, art, and of course, emotions.

I should be clear what I intend to do in this paper and also what I do not intend. What I am not attempting to do is give a complete theory about fictive emotions, nor side with any particular theory of emotions in general. It is also not my intention to answer the causal question of emotions, as any adequate answer would require at least one book if not a number. What I do intend is to argue for is that the causal question is the important question about fictive emotions, as well as give recommendations about what constitutes an answer to this question and possible strategies for answering it. Included in this will be an overview of past work on the conceptual and normative question, in an attempt to show that these are best left to the side. While the paradox of fictive emotions is interesting, an explanation of fictive emotions is far more interesting, as well as far more productive.
1.1 Initial Conception of the Paradox

The seminal piece on the paradox of fiction is Colin Radford’s “How can we moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?” Radford has made a career out of defending his claim that the way that humans respond emotionally to fictional characters and events is “irrational, incoherent, and inconsistent.” In the article, Radford observes something that many people never think twice about: isn’t it strange that we have seemingly real emotions from our interaction with works of fiction, which we know are completely made up? To take the classic example, why is it that we find ourselves tearing up, if not outright weeping for the tormented life and death of Anna Karenina? Further, why do we find it perfectly normal to do so? Radford takes these observations and complicates them. By comparing our fictive emotions to other instances of emotional reaction he shows that there is more complication than most of us realize. Radford presents us with a number of scenarios which illuminate the complexities of this puzzle. First we are to consider reading “an account of the terrible suffering of a group of people.” For most, this account will likely “awaken or reawaken feelings of anger, horror, dismay or outrage;” “you may even grieve”. Now consider how you would feel if you found out the story was false; that in fact there is no such group of people and consequently no great suffering was brought upon them. Radford is betting and I am inclined to agree (at

3 Radford (1975) p.75
5 Radford (1975) p.75
6 Ibid. p. 70
7 Ibid. p. 72
least for now, as I move forward I will show why these examples are problematic) that one would cease feeling angry or sad (unless perhaps we are angry at the paper’s fact-checker). Similarly we are asked to imagine a scenario where you are at a bar and a man you meet is telling you a “harrowing” story of his sister, and you get caught up in the excitement of the story, perhaps you’re elated. Now consider how you would feel if this man promptly revealed to you that he in fact had no sister and he made the whole thing up. Radford claims, and, again, I think most would agree, that upon hearing this we would cease to be harrowed. In fact one might feel a bit “embarrassed” for being “taken in” by such a story.

What Radford thinks this illustrates is that our emotions are necessarily tied to existential claims. He assumes that I can only be moved by someone’s plight if I believe that something terrible has happened to him” and that “[w]e have to believe in his torment to be moved by it,”8 and this does seem to be at least prima facie true. However, when we consider the ways in which we emotionally engage with fictions we seem to run into a number of problems. How are we to account for emotions about characters that we know to be fictional?

Radford analyzes our responses to fiction as such because he sees existence beliefs as necessarily tied to rational emotional responses i.e. emotional responses, to be rational, must be tied to things that we believe to be real. Secondly, what we encounter when we partake in fiction are things that we recognize to not be real. Finally, though we recognize that fictional worlds and characters do not exist, we still have strong emotions towards them; which is to say that even though it is irrational, it is nevertheless

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8 Radford (1975) p.68
something that is commonplace, as Radford states: “our being moved in certain ways by
works of art, though very ‘natural’ to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us
in inconsistency and so incoherence.”

A common conception of this puzzle is this:

(1) We feel an emotion toward someone or something only if we believe that the object of our emotion is real, i.e. that it exists.

(2) We know characters and situations in fiction are not real, i.e. that they do not exist.

(3) We feel an emotion toward fictional characters or situations.

We can see that (1), (2), and (3) all seem intuitively true, but also that they cannot all be true at the same time. It is unclear exactly how Radford thinks this puzzle is best solved, but for our purposes this will be unimportant. What we should notice, however, is that the conflict between these three propositions leaves him with the conclusion that our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very ‘natural’ to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in inconsistency and so incoherence.”

What I will explore is some possible solutions to this conceptual puzzle, later looking at how it relates to the other two. Once those two are settled we allow ourselves to move towards the more important causal question.

We should notice that the original conception of the paradox is based in certain theory of emotions known as the cognitive (or more properly: judgmentalist,) theory of

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9 Radford (1975) p. 78
10 Though, I believe that the notion of having an “emotion toward” a specific person or object is more complicated than most theorist admit, I will use this language to stay consistent.
12 It may even be that Radford is simply embracing the paradox, his position being that there simply is no adequate solution.
13 Radford (1975) p. 76
emotions. Though there are numerous different conceptions of this theory, the overarching feature is that a necessary aspect of an emotion is that it be connected to an existent intentional object by a belief or a judgment. Exactly how this is played out differs for different theorists. In the decades since Radford’s original conception this theory has changed substantially, unfortunately, for many working on the paradox of fiction they failed to notice, and are still working with outdated assumptions about emotions.\textsuperscript{14} I intend to clear up and improve upon these assumptions and push the conversation forward to a more productive engagement with fictive emotions.

1.2 Answering the Conceptual Question

In the literature there have been four basic responses to the conceptual puzzle. Firstly, one can deny (2), claiming that we don’t actually realize the characters are fictional when we react to them. Secondly, one can tweak (3) and claim that when we respond to fictional characters we are actually responding to something else.\textsuperscript{15} Third, one can deny (3) and claim that fictive emotions are not genuine emotions. Lastly, one could deny (1) and claim that existence claims are not necessary for emotional reactions. Here I will be arguing for the fourth response, that beliefs or judgments are not necessary for genuine emotions. Answering the conceptual question in this way will bring us closer to making up ground on the more important causal question. As part of my defense of this

\textsuperscript{14} Some still hold many of the same assumptions e.g. Kim (2006), (2010) and Davies (2010). Though there are many theorists coming around e.g. Robinson (2005) and Currie (2002)

\textsuperscript{15} For example, see: Weston (1975), Mannison (1985), and Charlton (1984)
position I will briefly explain the flaws of the other three responses and why they are counterproductive in answering the more important question about fictive emotions.\(^{16}\)

1.2.1 The Illusion Reply

The first response is usually characterized as a suspending of disbelief about the work of fiction in which we are engaged in. The basic thought is something like this: when we respond in an emotional(or emotional-like) way to characters and events in fictions we do so because we –forget” it is fiction, or we somehow lose touch with reality (or perhaps the irreality of the situation). When we are watching \textit{Halloween} we grip our chair, gasp loudly, breakout into sweats maybe even tear-up because we, at least for a moment, forget that we are watching a movie and that Michael Myers is not an actual person. We believe that Jamie Lee Curtis and P.J. Soles or maybe even we ourselves are under are actually under attack. We can see that this move is both effective in dissolving the paradox and at least intuitively plausible. It is effective because (when we react to them) we don’t believe that the fictional characters are actually fictional, we are not caught up in the seemingly contradictory belief that we believe that we are reacting to things that we know to be made up. Thus we can have genuine emotions about fictional characters because they are treated as real. This view is also plausible because it does seem when we are engaged in fictions we get more –caught-up” with what is happening on the screen or on the page (or in our head!) than with the thought or belief that what we

\(^{16}\) I should be careful here, I am not advising we completely disregard these responses. Though I feel that these responses are inadequate for answering the conceptual question, the larger point here is that this is the wrong question to ask because any answer even the one I will defend begs an answer to the causal question. As we will see insight that can be gleaned from these responses will be helpful in answering the causal question.
are reacting to is not real. In fact it seems that these thoughts only come after the reaction when we tell ourselves (or our children) that it is “only a movie” or it “only in our heads”.

Though this view does seem initially plausible, it quickly runs into problems. Most importantly, it does have the obvious difference of behavior. If we found ourselves on Halloween witnessing a masked knife-wielding madman chasing a group of teenagers we would be motivated to act in some way. The brave would try to fight-off the attacker, another may call the police, another still would scream for help, and many assuredly would run away as fast as they could. Though we can’t be sure which of these we would choose, I think we would all agree that we would do something. In the movie theatre however, we do no such thing, if we did we would be thought to be crazy. This of course begs the question though: why not? If we truly “forget” that what we are witnessing a fiction we would surely spring into action in some capacity, or at least feel an intense variety of fear that forces our inaction. Yet we do not. While we have the phenomenological aspect of the emotion “fear” we do not normally have the motivational aspect. Furthermore, it seems that this view “unacceptably depicts consumers of fiction as having both a rather tenuous grip on reality and an amazing ability to manipulate their beliefs at will.”

17 This also raises the further question of why we would want to watch teenagers be murdered by a psychotic madman and to a certain point enjoy it. However I will largely ignore this interesting point. For more on this see Carroll (1990) especially pp.158-194

18 Another complication here is the difference between mediums. While it seems at least plausible that we forget the maniac is real in a drama or at the movies; he is seemingly right in front of us. When we are reading a book however this seems less plausible. If we are reading the novelization of Halloween in Toledo, Ohio it is difficult to think we forget we are there and not in fact in Haddonfield, Illinois. Especially since Haddonfield is a fictional town in the first place. This can, however, be cleared up by looking at the importance of context to emotions. See Kreitman (2006).

19 Levinson 1997 p.23
similar between fictive emotions and reality-inspired emotions there are also important differences that this answer to the conceptual problem leaves out.

1.2.2 The Surrogate-Object Reply

The second possibility is to retool (3) and claim that when we respond to fictional characters and events we are actually responding to something else. This response is called the transfer strategy\textsuperscript{20}, or the surrogate-object\textsuperscript{21} response because theorists who take this stance\textsuperscript{22} escape the paradox by claiming that, when we respond to fictional characters, we are actually responding to something that we do in fact believe exists, not the fictional characters we do not believe exist.\textsuperscript{23} There are multiple versions of this response the most prominent claims that we respond to a surrogate or real-life correlate to the character\textsuperscript{24}, i.e. they escape the contradiction by transferring the object of our fictive emotion from the fictional character to actual people. Even when we avoid the obvious problem that we can have fictive emotions about things that are not humans, this reply seems inadequate.

Those who defend this reply argue that when we respond emotionally (or seemingly emotionally) to fictional characters, we are actually responding in that way because we perceive the real-life correlates of the fictional characters. For example when

\begin{footnotes}
\item[20] Currie, (1990) p. 188
\item[21] Levinson p. 27
\item[22] Paskins -On being moved by Anna Karenina and Anna Karenina”
\item[23] Another variation of this view is called the thought reply, in which the actual object of emotion is not the character or event, which does not exist, but the thought of the character or event. This view is defended by, for example, Currie (1990), Lamarque (1981), and Smith (1995.) Though this view can be seen in two ways, either a denial of (1) or using an amended version of (3). For our purposes, we can see that similar arguments for and against can be found, in the case of the former, in the non-judgmentalist” section, and, in the case of the latter, in the current section.
\item[24] For an example of this view see Morreall (1993)
\end{footnotes}
we pity a character who has committed suicide, we are actually responding to possible real people who are in the same position or made the same choice. If we take this route then we make fictive emotions of the same status as ones that come with our interaction with historical stories or possible events. These situations however come with their own complications. This also seems to imply that science fiction and fantasy stories become very problematic, along with any story that includes events that seem improbable if not impossible to happen to anyone in real life. We will revisit this line of thinking when we discuss the possible evolutionary explanations of fictive emotions, but for now, as is, the response seems inadequate.

1.2.3 The Make-Believe Reply

The next response denies statement (3), that we do in fact have genuine emotions in response to fictions. In this view fictive emotions are seen as emotion-like physiological response, but not emotions proper. Defenders of this view claim that it is only pretend or “make-believe” that we, say, feel fear or pity towards fictions. The most sophisticated version of this response belongs to Kendall Walton who claims that fictive emotions are not of the same type as “normal” emotions (or emotions stemming from our interaction with “real” things) but are what he calls “quasi-emotions”. Though Walton’s argument has received considerable attention in the literature, I will show that

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25 A similar response has been that what we are responding to is people we know in our own lives that share traits with the characters in the fiction. So we feel afraid of the abusive father, because we are afraid of our own abusive father. But this fails pretty quickly because someone who has never been abused can feel pity for the victims and fear the perpetrator of the abuse. This isn’t to say that our own experiences have nothing to do with the occurrence or intensity of fictive emotions but this leads into the third, casual question, which I pick up below.

26 Walton’s response is grounded in his larger theory of aesthetic appreciation in which he sees a piece of art as a “prop” in a game of “make-believe” of which our quasi-emotion is merely a part. For more see Walton (1990)
his view is based on very vague if not wrong assumptions and only serves as an ad hoc argument to attempt to save an outmoded version of the cognitive theory of emotions.\textsuperscript{27}

Walton considers the following example of Charles (which has become a standard in the literature):

Charles is watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. He cringes in his seat as the slime oozes slowly but relentlessly over the earth, destroying everything in its path. Soon a greasy head emerges from the undulating mass, and two beady eyes fix on the camera. The slime, picking up speed, oozes on a new course straight toward the viewers. Charles emits a shriek and clutches desperately at his chair. Afterwards, still shaken, he confesses that he was terrified of the slime.\textsuperscript{28}

So the question is: Was Charles really terrified? Walton is compelled to answer “no”. This is based on two arguments (well assumptions really) which stem from Walton’s implicit conception of an emotion.\textsuperscript{29} We can almost assume from above that Walton takes (1) to be a given. For him any genuine instance of fear will be accompanied by a belief in the object of fear. So in this way Charles’s state is crucially different from that of a person with an ordinary case of fear. The fact that Charles is fully aware that the slime is fictional is, I think, good reason to deny that what he feels is fear.\textsuperscript{30} By “crucially” here I take it to mean that Walton believes that two necessary conditions of a genuine emotion are an intentional object and a belief in the existence of that object; this

\textsuperscript{27} Though similar accounts that get beyond these assumptions seem to save this reply from many of the criticisms. See: Walton (1997), Kim (2006), and Doggett and Egan (2012)
\textsuperscript{28} Walton (1990), p.196
\textsuperscript{29} Walton takes a basic cognitive conception of emotions, in that he takes the following to be necessary conditions of an emotion: a) emotions have an intentional object and that intentional object exists b) emotions are felt, they have an affective property, and c) emotions have a motivational aspect in that they motivate one to act in a certain way.
\textsuperscript{30} Walton (1978) p. 6
he sees as simply “a principle of common sense.”\textsuperscript{31} So while Charles has the feeling of fear (as indicated in his behavior when he emits a shriek and clutches desperately at his chair”) he does not have the proper belief.

Walton’s second argument is that Charles does not display the proper behavioral response to the green slime therefore he is not experiencing genuine fear. According to Walton, there are deliberate actions that go along with genuine instances of fear. For example, someone who is genuinely afraid of a giant green slime coming after them would take deliberate action to get away from them. He claims that “even a hesitant belief, a mere suspicion, that the slime is real would induce in any normal person seriously to consider calling the police and warning his family.”\textsuperscript{32} Though Charles exhibits involuntary behavior such as gripping his seat or shrieking, he does not take what Walton believes to be the appropriate \textit{deliberate} action. To clarify what he means, let us compare Charles while he is watching the slime to someone who fears flying, let us call him Kevin. While most would agree that Kevin has a fear without a proper intentional object (like Charles), he importantly, has a different behavioral reaction to his object of fear. Although “[h]e realizes, in one sense, that airplanes are (relatively) safe [and] he says, honestly that they are, and can quote statistics to prove it. Nevertheless, he avoids traveling by air whenever possible.”\textsuperscript{33} We can think that he is even brilliant at coming up with excuses and rationalizations for not flying. But for Walton herein lies the difference between Charles and Kevin; Kevin performs \textit{deliberate} actions that one would expect of someone who thinks flying is dangerous, or at least he is strongly

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. p.6
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. p.7
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid. p. 9
inclined to perform such actions;”\textsuperscript{34} i.e. Kevin fears dying in a plane crash so he avoids using airplanes. His fear leads him to deliberate action, outside of any involuntary behavior he may exhibit (perhaps he breaks out into sweats when his boss tells him he may have to fly to Tulsa). Charles, on the other hand, “does not even have an inclination to leave the theater or call the police. The only signs that he might really believe he is endangered are his more or less automatic, non-deliberate, reactions: his pulse rate, his sweaty palms, his knotted stomach, his spontaneous shriek.”\textsuperscript{35} Walton concludes that because Charles does not have the proper deliberate actions accompanying his fear, while Kevin does, “[t]his justifies us in treating the two cases differently.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus, in Walton’s terminology Kevin experiences real fear while Charles only experiences quasi-fear. Since what consumers of fictions feel when engaged with fiction is not a real emotion, the paradox is resolved because we need only accept (1) and (2).

While Walton’s nice and neat usage of Modus Tollens seems to save one from the paradox, his argument fails to achieve soundness. This is because his solution is based on two undefended assumptions. First, Walton takes it to be a commonsense view that “fear must be accompanied by...a belief that one is in danger.”\textsuperscript{37} However this claim goes undefended by Walton. What reason do we have for not taking the case of Charles as a counterexample of his theory of emotions; i.e. why is it not commonsensical to consider fictive emotions to be prime examples of emotions without said requisite beliefs? Walton of course believes this is because Charles’s fear (or quasi-fear) does not meet the belief criterion for an emotion. Further he claims that this is not a case of

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. p.8
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid. p.8
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. p.7
genuine emotion because if it were we would have to give up the criteria for recognizing an emotion and since this is the common sense view which is not to be abandoned”. But it seems here that Walton is begging the question, he is categorizing fictive emotions as quasi-emotions” because to not do so would conflict with his system of categorization. In order for this view to be compelling, Walton needs to give a fuller explanation why this theory of emotions is correct both empirically and conceptually, outside his weak claim that it is common sense”.

If this is not an adequate objection we can instead look at the numerous counterexamples to Walton’s claim that (1) is correct. First, we can look at an example that Walton actually gives, that of the pteromerhanophobic whom I have called Kevin”. Kevin is well aware that flying is not dangerous, yet he fears flying and actively avoids it. This (along with any example of a phobic) seems to be a clear case of someone who has a feeling of fear without a belief that he is in danger. But suppose that you buy Walton’s distinction between gut” and intellectual” beliefs, we can still find problems when we move from the standard examples of fear and pity to other emotions: amusement, arousal, disgust and jealousy.

38 Ibid. p.8-9 Walton states that while Kevin has an intellectual” belief that flying is perfectly safe, he has a (seemingly stronger) gut” belief that airplanes are dangerous. Though I will admit this is an interesting suggestion, Walton fails to give any sort of explanation of how this actually works nor how we are supposed to cash out this type of non-cognitive belief into words. Further, this response would force Walton to explain why a gut belief is more important than an intellectual one. Also, now we need to amend (1) to (1a): We feel an emotion toward someone or something only if we believe in our gut” that the object of our emotion is real, i.e. that it exists. This becomes even more dubious than Walton’s initial commonsense” claim. 39 I am contending that these are emotions, though this has been debated. For a discussion see: Morreall (2009) (1989)
The paradox of fiction has largely ignored any emotion besides fear, pity, or admiration,\(^40\) and this is a major flaw with many accounts of it. When we look at a wider range of emotions, the problem seems much less paradoxical. This strategy can especially illustrate the flawed assumptions that go into Walton’s account. For example while it may seem (to some,) problematic that we feel real fear towards fictional characters, we would be hard-pressed to find someone who supports the claim that we do not feel genuine amusement towards fictional characters.\(^41\) The physiological response of laughter and giddiness is of the sort that it seems almost silly to say that it is only make-believe or quasi-amusement. Yet the characters which we are responding to have the same status as the green slime or Michael Myers. A similar case can be made for arousal and disgust. When someone is reading a juicy bodice-buster or watching Cinemax around 2 AM and they become aroused one does not seem to be involved in a game of make-believe or a quasi-arousal. It seems that either we are aroused or we are not, full stop, existence-belief or not. Likewise you are disgusted by an eyeball being ripped from the socket (and feel that disgust) whether you are watching *Hostel* or some perverse documentary. You may even participate in the same *deliberate* action (e.g. turning your head away, leaving the theater, taking a break from your popcorn and *Milk duds*) as a reaction to both. We would have to go well beyond common sense to believe that we are experiencing quasi-disgust in such an instance.

Even if you disagree that the above are properly considered emotions, we can make a similar case using a paradigm example of emotion: jealousy. Take the following

\(^{40}\) For exceptions see New (1999) and Davies (2009)
\(^{41}\) We could even feel amusement *because* the characters are fictional. That is, if the characters were real, we may feel a different emotion.
example: You are standing in a lecture hall. Your students and colleagues are applauding the exciting paper you have just presented. At the reception afterwards, a senior colleague raises a toast to your insightful and monumental work, hailing you as the future of the discipline. Then you wake up, realizing that is all just a dream. In fact, you are in bed, the paper is unfinished, and you lie there anxious about how it will be received, in the event that you do actually finish it. In such a situation, I don‘t think it is too far of a stretch to say that you are jealous of your dream-self. Nor is it a stretch to say that this jealousy is not of a different kind than what you felt when, last year, you saw a professional rival receive such praise after he gave a paper. Even beyond the feeling of jealousy, (and getting into Walton’s second argument) which is identical, this jealousy of your dream-self motivates you to receive the same acclaim. As a result you take deliberate action to write the best paper you possibly can as soon as possible. The action is connected with the feeling, though it stems from witnessing imagined or fictional events(which you know to be fictional.) Your jealousy of a fictional entity caused you to take real action. This would force Walton to claim that this is a case of genuine jealousy, which opens the door for other genuine reactions to fictions.

Walton’s motivational argument fails for a similar reason as the belief argument. Namely it seems to entail that Walton is claiming that every emotion has a requisite action tied to it. However, this also goes unsupported; Walton gives no support or mechanism for how we are decide what a proper or improper action or reaction to a given emotion is. Given the enormity of the theory that this claim would require to be supported, it is safer to say that –[it]here is no one action, nor even a set of actions, which
is always and everywhere concomitant with or identical to a given belief.”42 (Suits 374)
Overall, Walton's argument is inadequate because in trying to solve the paradox of
fiction he raises two much bigger problems: defining what emotions are and finding the
proper reaction to every emotion (and why they fail to obtain in quasi-versions of those
emotions. By relying on a narrow conception of the cognitive theory of emotions he
presents a view that is at best overly complex and worst just flat out wrong. Though
shortly we will see what we can salvage from Walton's work by putting his analysis to
work on the causal question.

1.2.4 The Non-Judgementalist Response

From the failed attempts to answer the conceptual question above, we can see that
the only move left is to deny the truth of (1) and claim that we can have genuine emotions
without having beliefs about the existence of the stimulus of our emotion. This response
has been gaining much attention in the literature, some even take this view to be a
given.43 Here I will offer a brief sketch of this response in comparison to the other three,
leaving a full explanation for the next section, in connection to the causal question. As I
stated before, this is the most plausible and satisfactory solution to the conceptual
question. How this response works is simple; when we deny (1) we can then say that we
have genuine emotions in reaction to fictions because in order to have a genuine emotion
we do not have to believe in the existence of whatever it is that gives us the emotion.44

42 Suits (2006) p. 374
43 See Stecker (2011), Robinson (2005), Gendler and Kovachovich (2006). This is of course not to say that
everyone is on board e.g. Doggett and Egan (2011) and Kim (2005) & (2010)
44 Notice that even though we deny (1) this does not mean that there is no difference between fictive
emotions and other instances of emotions. All I am arguing for here is the claim that existence beliefs are
Much of my argument can be gleaned from the above responses. To gather support let us first look at Radford’s example above of the man at the bar telling us a harrowing story of his sister. We remember that when the man tells us the story is made up, our emotions for the “woman” cease. Radford takes this to show that emotions require a belief if the existence of whatever it is we are reacting to, because as we can see when we did believe the woman was real; we had a certain set of emotions, but when we discover that the woman is not real, the emotions are gone. This, however, does not show what Radford believes it has, but something weaker. What this example shows is that “if an emotion is grounded on a belief, removal of that belief tends to remove the emotion grounded on it.”\footnote{Gaut (2007) p. 211} It does not support the stronger claim that any proper emotion requires an appropriate belief. Further, this case is clearly not completely analogous to cases of fictive emotions because we go into fictions knowing that the events and characters are not real, the status of their existence does not change like in the sister example.\footnote{One way in which the sister example and, say, seeing a film is similar is that in both cases the emotion does not seem to carry-over, outside of the theater or the story. It would at least be safe to say that we don’t achieve the same emotion after we see it and in the days after.} What this example shows is that there is something that needs explaining when it comes to fictive emotions, not that fictive emotions are not emotions or are in some way incoherent.

Another strategy for arguing against (1) is to examine cases that seem to include genuine emotions but do not contain existence beliefs. First we can simply imagine a fearful situation. For example, imagine a loud, whirling machine with gears crunching...
and buzzing. Now imagine someone much stronger than you slowly bringing your hand to the gears, until you can feel the wind whipping off them. Then imagine the crunch and tearing and ripping of flesh and bone as the machine mangles your hand.\(^48\) Now you do not have the belief that you hand is actually mangled or even that the machine exists, but you do have the distinctive chill of fear. We can also have fear for imaginings about the future: imagine your spouse leaving you, losing your job, dying in a global nuclear war, or computers becoming self-aware and enslaving the human race. While we may believe that none of these things will actually happen, we can seemingly still get a rise out of ourselves by imagining them. Similarly we can look at counterfactual cases, a favorite example in the literature is to imagine \(\neg\)what would have happened if Hitler had won the Second World War.\(^49\) Surely a frightening yet equally nonexistent prospect. We can also seemingly have fears of things we know to exist but are not in fact dangerous\(^50\) in the form of \(\neg\)irrational\(\) fears or phobias\(^51\). Lastly, we can look at what we could call \(\neg\)extreme\(\) cases, such as skydiving or bungee jumping. It is unproblematic to feel fear in such cases, but this feeling does not seem to rely on any existent subject or object. We are afraid even though we are (relatively) safe (statistically speaking), which is to say that we are afraid even though we do not believe we are in danger.\(^52\)

Those looking to defend (1) can reply to these cases in two ways, both of which are very weak. First, one can respond that in such cases, we do in fact have beliefs, they

\(^48\) A similar example is found in Carroll (1990) p. 78-79
\(^49\) Gaut (2007) p. 211
\(^50\) This is different than the other cases in that we do believe the object of our fear to exist (e.g. airplanes, or spiders) yet we do not believe that they obtain the proper status as something to be feared.
\(^51\) See the case of Kevin above in response to Walton. Also Greenspan (1980)
\(^52\) A less \(\neg\)extreme\(\) example of such a case is the Skydeck in the observation deck of the Sears Tower. Here patrons are standing on a glass platform and this platform is extended outside of the building, so you are standing on nothing but glass, hundreds of feet in the air.
are just irrational. While this may make sense in the case of the phobic, it does not work for counterfactual or “extreme” cases. For example, when I fear the possible reality after Hitler won World War II, I do not hold the belief that Hitler actually won World War II (which would indeed be irrational). Likewise, I do not actually hold the irrational belief that I will fall to my death when I skydive, otherwise why in the world would I do it?  

Second, one could respond by making the criteria for an emotion even stronger by claiming that an emotion is only genuine when it motivates the proper action. The feeling Charles has when he sees the green slime is not genuine fear because it does not motivate him to perform the proper action and “fear emasculated by subtracting its distinctive motivational force in not fear at all.” However, this claim seems problematic in cases outside the realm of fiction, because emotion does not seem to be the only motivation for certain actions, if we have good reason to not impulsively act upon emotions, we do so. For example, Kevin, though he has a fear of flying, may still board an airplane because his father is dying in Spain, (because traveling by boat will get him there too late) or even because he is trying to convince or train himself that flying is not as scary as he thinks it is. In such a case we see that we sometimes act because of an emotion while at others we act in spite of them. Just because Kevin forces himself onto a plane does not mean he is not afraid. Similarly, we may have an emotion yet not act at all when we do not believe we have a motivation. For example, we can pity Julius Caesar for being betrayed by Brutus. It’s hard to say what the proper action would be in this case, (take a flight to Rome? Phone the President of Italy?) but this lack of action

53 Outside of suicidal desires.
54 This, as I say above, is a problematic claim in its own right.
55 Walton (1990) p. 203
does not seem to threaten the fact that we can have real emotions towards historical people and events. This type of example works in the present as well. We can watch a report about a hurricane that is going to hit the coast of Florida and feel pity or even fear for the residents without being motivated to act in any way. Should we say that this absence of motivation implies an absence of emotion? Clearly not. Thus it seems unproblematic that Charles fears the green slime without fleeing the theater or calling the police or his family. Even if he does have such an urge to get away from the slime, being a competent consumer of fiction, he knows that closing his eyes or looking away is just as good as running away, because the spatial distance is less important than a sort of psychological distance.

Above we have looked at the most prominent responses to the conceptual question of fictive emotions. I have shown that the illusion, surrogate-object, and make-believe theories are all inadequate for answering the conceptual question. From this I concluded that the only reasonable response is also the most intuitive one, which is to simply answer "yes" to the conceptual question. Most importantly by laying this question to rest we are closer to answering the more important causal question. Next, I will be exploring the normative question of fictive emotions, defending fictive emotions against the claim that they are irrational.
Chapter 2

The Normative Question

Colin Radford has claimed that our emotional responses to fiction must be seen as irrational and indeed incoherent. The normative paradox can be expressed (similar to above) in the three propositions:

(1a) We feel a rational emotion toward someone or something only if we believe that the object of our emotion is real, i.e. that it exists.

(2a) We know characters and situations in fiction are not real, i.e. that they do not exist.

(3a) We feel a rational emotion toward fictional characters or situations.

Since all of the propositions seem initially plausible, we will need to find a way to reject one of them. Radford’s strategy is to deny (3a) and claim that fictive emotions are irrational. Below I will explain Radford’s position as well as other possible (and I would say more plausible) alternatives. I will also briefly explore the notion of rationality in general, as well as relate this normative question to the more important causal question. To show that our responses to fiction are irrational, Radford compares them to what he thinks are paradigm cases of irrational emotion. One is an example from his own

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56 Radford (1990) p. 349
childhood. He says that when he was a young child he visited a natural history museum where he saw a stuffed tiger which frightened him very much. He claims that — despite my knowing and telling myself that it was stuffed, it continued to frighten the younger me on several visits.” Radford admits that is irrational to fear a stuffed tiger; — After all, what is there to fear? Nothing — and I knew that.” Likewise, when we fear a movie monster, we also fear without the appropriate belief. Thus Radford feels he is justified in treating the cases as the same, which is to say that they are both irrational. However, I would claim that these cases are not as analogous as Radford claims.

However, the stuffed tiger example and cases of fictive emotions are not as analogous as Radford makes it seem. This example ignores context and presentation in fiction; it is not just about the happening in the fiction but the way that it is described. Saying that a made-up woman threw herself in front of a train, is a far cry from the actual words and descriptions leading up to her death as we get them from Tolstoy. The artfulness of a piece certainly changes the way we react to a given fictional situation. If a movie is poorly acted or a story poorly written, or is fully clichés or is illogical as a fiction, not in an impactful way, but in an accidental way, we will certainly have different emotions. But this is a problem that usually gets ignored in the literature because the wrong questions (the conceptual and the normative) are being asked. We can see that this aspect is part of the causal explanation because we realize that it is a certain way that fictional happenings are presented that affect us not the mere mentioning of them. Also

57 Radford (1982) p. 529
58 Ibid. 530
59 See Dadlez (1996) for a similar claim.
60 See Krietman (2006)
we can see ways in which this differs and is similar to real events. Say that you are stuck in traffic near some train tracks and upon seeing a police officer you ask them what the hold-up is and they tell you that a woman threw herself on the tracks. You may say to yourself “that is sad” or “what a shame”, but I am doubtful that you would feel strong feelings for the event or that you would weep. Now consider that this same woman who died on the tracks actually happened to have a documentary crew following her for the past 5 years of her life. The documentary focuses on the woman's failures in love and in her professional life, perhaps there is also a lengthy montage on a tragedy that befell her family and all this leads up to her dramatic choice to end it all at the train tracks. Certainly viewing this would have a greater impact on you emotionally and you will perhaps tear-up or weep. My main point can thus be stated that a confusion that leads to our paradox is first that they do not treat the experience of a work of art as it truly is lived and second, that they forget the context with which we experience fiction, that is, as fictions. The paradox comes from a stuffed tiger, but the experience of a piece of fiction is emotional only if it is much more than that. Looking at the factors that cause certain emotions in certain people will be productive, while treating our experiences of fictions in an impoverished way, as a collection of propositions not as a visceral lived experience, will not be.

Outside of attacking Radford for using a poor analogy, there are two strategies for defending fictive emotions against the charge of irrationality. Before, going into these defenses I would like to explore the motivation for such a defense. I contend that the reason so many theorists are rubbed the wrong way or feel threatened by this proposal is

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62 Though this may be putting this point to rest too quickly.
that they think that fictions are important and not just fictions as words on a page or pieces of cellulose but as felt experiences. We hear it so often we usually fail to put it into words, but the emotional connections we have towards or for characters in fiction are important to us. I’m sure each one of us can think of a work of fiction that changed our way of thinking, our view of the world or others; in other words: fictions change our lives. When Radford and others claim that these emotions, these relationships that we have formed are irrational and incoherent, many take offense (and many have in writing). It is very close to saying that our emotional connections with our friends or families or teachers or even enemies are incoherent. This is because, at least intuitively, our emotions must be rational to be meaningful. By constructing this paradox, or perhaps by constructing this phenomenon as a paradox seems to bring something very basic and important to us under attack.

Another preliminary concern is the term rationality itself. It seems that theorists who want to say that fictive emotions are irrational are using the term in an unorthodox way, in a way the “irrationality” that they claim is a trivial sort of irrationality. Now, philosophers take their rationality very seriously, so it should not be surprising that many have been up in arms about Radford’s charge that our fictive emotions are “incoherent” and “irrational”. This claim seems to be implicit in a certain conception of the cognitive theory of emotions, namely if emotions are necessarily tied to judgments or beliefs, if we have emotions they must be tied to a proper belief. Thus if an emotion is the result of

63 Glenn Hartz even goes so far as to say that the claim of irrationality “seems to involve turning one’s back on humanity itself.” Hartz (2000) p. 577
64 For example see: Neill (1995)
65 This isn’t to say that using terms in an unorthodox way is always unjustified, it is just that in this case it is not justified and can only lead to equivocation and semantic confusion.
two inconsistent beliefs, it is irrational. However, this seems to lead to at least two different types of irrational emotions. The first, which is usually connected to phobias, are "bad", namely we think that it is behavior that should be changed, or the belief behind the emotion is irrational, so when the belief is improved or clarified, we will cease having the said irrational emotion. In other words it is a problem that we should fix if we can.

The second type of irrational emotions, which characterizes fictive emotions, is a trivial sort of irrational emotion. This is a type of emotion which, though it is irrational, does not need to be changed or improved by a belief, in fact it is impossible to do so (fictional characters and events cannot suddenly become real). We can illuminate this point with an analogy with vision. When someone is nearsighted we think that their vision is defective and should be corrected with glasses or corrective surgery. If we asked a nearsighted person to tell us which of two objects fifty feet away were bigger, they may tell you that one is bigger when in fact they are exactly the same size. In fact they cannot help seeing the object in that (imperfect) way. Contrast this with someone with perfect vision asked to distinguish which line of the Muller-Lyer illusion is larger. Like the near-sighted person they will see one as larger. The important difference here is that the near-sighted person was mistaken because of some sort of defect while the person with perfect vision was mistaken because his vision was working correctly (and because he didn't have a ruler handy).

Just as we could say that there is something imperfect with the person's vision in both cases, it seems like a trivial description of the optical illusion.

66 This now seem obvious that this is an incomplete understanding of emotions. See, for example: Greenspan(1980), Ekman(1990), Prinz(2004), Griffiths(1997), Damasio(1994) and (1999), and Robinson (2005)

67 A similar reason may be given for why the phobic is afraid.

68 Just as fictive emotions can be indicative of properly functioning emotional capabilities.
case because there is no recourse for correction nor should we think one is necessary, unlike the nearsighted case. Therefore, if this analogy holds, we see that to classify both fictive fear and phobic fear as irrational is unjustified, even if they are both based on non-existent dangers.

The first type of defense is a theoretical defense of the rationality of fictive emotions and I will only go into it briefly because it follows closely to arguments found in the previous section on the conceptual question. First, we could respond, with Walton, that (3a) should be tweaked to accommodate for the fact that we do not feel genuine emotions for fictions, but quasi-fictions. This entails that quasi-emotions have a different criteria for rationality because they are not reliant on beliefs as genuine emotions are.\(^{69}\)

While this works, I still think that it is wrong for reasons stated above.\(^{70}\) The other strategy is to simply deny (1a). This is similar to the anti-judgmentalist view above and works for largely the same reasons.\(^{71}\) If we do not require emotions to be tied to beliefs, then the claim of rationality seems confused.\(^{72}\) Even if we do not believe, as Radford did, that emotions are easily broken-down to propositions, there seems to be another sense in which emotions can be rational or coherent and that in the practical or functional sense.\(^{73}\) While Radford’s intuition does seem right—it does seem odd to fear or pity something that doesn’t exist—if we understand the role that they play in our cognitive abilities they

\(^{69}\) For a detailed explanation of how this would work see Kim (2010)
\(^{70}\) One of the reasons being that such a claim, while allowing us to escape the claim of irrationality, further complicates the theory.
\(^{71}\) We can even now say that another merit of that view is that it solves the normative as well as the conceptual problem.
\(^{72}\) I would also say that there is a third way out of the theoretical problem here and that would be to claim that emotions are arational. While I think this claim is right for many reasons, we do not have space to explore it here.
\(^{73}\) Some theorist claim that the affective properties of emotions can be considered, I do not take the notion of a “rationality of a feeling” to be particularly useful, nor am I certain I know what it means. This type of analysis seems to fall back into judgmentalist view of emotions. For more on this see Gaut (2007) 216-226
seem far less "irrational". As I stated above, fictive emotions, while seemingly odd at first are actually a sign of a properly functioning brain and once we understand the function of such emotions they become more coherent and appropriate.

2.1 Practical Rationality

Radford claims that when we have fictive emotions we find ourselves having inconsistent beliefs. While inconsistency is usually considered a sin against philosophy, there are very good reasons for experiencing (what could be characterized as) inconsistent emotions, namely that they are socially and individually adaptive. Patricia Greenspan claims that ambivalent emotions are "perfectly rational in light of the special relationship between emotions and behavior." She believes that emotions have different criteria for rationality than beliefs or judgments. To substantiate this claim she constructs a clever scenario of ambivalent emotions. She asks us to imagine that we are in competition with a close friend for a position or prize (perhaps a job or admittance to a PhD program). Now imagine how you would feel when you learn that your friend has beat you out and been granted the position. It is reasonable to say that you are unhappy: you really wanted that job. It also seems that it is just as reasonable to say that you are happy for your close friend: perhaps she has been struggling as of late and you know this will give her a big boost of confidence. It also seems to make sense to say that I have "mixed feelings" about the news. According to Radford and other judgmentalists, we would be irrational in this scenario because we feel contrary emotions about the same

74 This is in contrast to paradigmatic cases of irrational emotions, such as the cases of phobics.
75 Greenspan (1980) p. 238
76 I am not sure that rationality is even the correct term here, it will be used here in lack of a better term and to stay consistent with Greenspan.
proposition or object. To escape this claim judgmentalists could say that while it seems that we feel both emotions, we actually only feel one. Or similarly they could claim that one emotion is stronger than the other so that is the true emotion. This, however, seems to misrepresent how we actually feel, we don't feel just one of the emotions, we feel both. This shows that emotions, if we are going to classify them rational or irrational, require different criteria than propositions, beliefs, or judgments. Greenspan contends that since our normal conception of rationality is inadequate here, we should utilize a more pragmatic classification of rationality in emotions. She thinks that ambivalent emotions have a more adaptive explanation than having to choose what one emotion we are feeling at any given time. Instead of focusing solely on our disappointment with the situation, when we sympathize with our friend, we are acting in our best interests. For Greenspan:

[g]enuine emotional identification with others, ... motivates spontaneous sympathetic behavior, behavior that expresses our concern for others' interests for their own sake. I think it should be obvious that such behavior facilitates social relations, and thus promotes an important human end, in a way that detached behavior, or behavior arising from tempered self-interest, would not be likely to. Indeed, even if my conflicting emotions blended to form a positive reaction to my rival's victory, my happiness for him would presumably be weaker than it would be if I failed to resolve the conflict. By allowing the conflict, but controlling its behavioral effects, I can express my strong commitment to someone else's interests without losing sight of my own.77

This relates to fictive emotions 78 as well because, even though we know the characters do not exist, sympathizing with them can enrich our understanding of ourselves and other

77 Greenspan (1980) pp. 240-241
78 There is also the interesting ambivalence we have towards certain characters. For example Anna Karenina, we do not want her to commit suicide, yet at the same time we do because if she doesn't the work becomes it works against the logic of the story and we would feel, cheapened, as readers, if we don't,
real” people; for it is one of the important purposes and rewards of engaging emotionally with stories and other fictions, that it encourages us to sympathize and even identify with fictional characters.

What Greenspan's argument demonstrates is that it is “basically rational” and certainly adaptive to respond emotionally to the trials and tribulations, the joys and triumphs of other people (and even rabbits). It is adaptive to be able to sense one's wants and wishes, interests and goals to be at stake when reading and thinking about Anna Karenina. This is because it is adaptive to respond to her as though she were one of my “own kind”, just as in Greenspan's example, it is adaptive to respond to my friend as if she were truly a friend. When I respond compassionately to Anna, I am sympathizing with her fate in a way that is socially adaptive.79

Above we saw that our ability that to have seemingly contrary emotions can contribute (and most likely did contribute) to “social cohesion”80. Further, this ability, as well as its benefits can be reflected in our fictive emotions. Besides the social benefits, fictive emotions can also be seen as individually adaptive in two ways: its relation practical reasoning81 and the cultivation of what Jenefer Robinson calls a “sentimental education,”82 which I will expand on here.

as emotional people, feel the pain of her death. Although interesting, any extensive discussion will take us outside the scope of the paper.

79 Robinson 2005 p. 148
80 For more on this evolutionary perspective of art see: Boyd (2010), Dissanayake, and Scalise-Sugiyama
81 Though this is not something I will get into here. See Damasio (1994), Harris (2000 and Gendler and Kovachovich (2006) Gendler and Kovachovich claim that “research seems to show that our ability to engage in practical reasoning rests on the following sort of process: We imaginatively engage with the potential consequences of various courses of action, thereby activating our emotional response mechanisms, and we encode the results of these simulations somatically; the presence of these somatic markers” then helps to guide our future behavior. Call these emotions “simulated emotions.” It is clear that simulated emotions are a fundamental feature of our cognitive repertoire. It is also clear that there are striking resemblances between simulated emotions and fictional emotions.” P. 245 What is important for us here is merely that since fictive emotions play a role in our rationality, it seems odd to call them into question as irrational, in that without them the rationality that we have would be impossible.
82 Similarly Gendler and Kovachovich claim “fictional emotions may contribute to our capacity for rational action through the role they play in educating our sensibilities.” p. 246
Fictive emotions can bolster our emotional intelligence. By this I mean that having genuine emotions about fictions allows us to mature emotionally, without having to face the risk or pain of actual events that may bring those emotions about.

Several writers have stressed that the most important learning we achieve through reading great novels is emotional: we learn both through watching the emotional development of the characters and through responding emotionally to them. Martha Nussbaum, for example, has argued that much of what is psychologically important and morally profound in a novel is learned through our emotional involvement with it.\(^\text{83}\)

Similarly, Robert de Sousa claims that

at least one component of the need for art is the desire to experience the emotions called forth by death, by sexual thrall, by revenge, or by painful or ridiculous alienation, by evoking the relevant paradigm scenarios without needing to live through the actual events and their natural causes.\(^\text{84}\)

This is to say that we can learn from fictions (and non-fictions) emotionally, as well as intellectually. For example, if we hear a story about the regret of revenge\(^\text{85}\), we not only learn the lesson that revenge, while it can be initially attractive, also produces guilt, shame and sadness, in an intellectual way, but by allowing ourselves to practice feeling what the character feels, we learn it in an emotional way; which in many ways is a much deeper lesson. Further it is one that we can apply to other less severe cases. Importantly, in this case, (as well as any other emotional involvement with fiction) we can feel the emotions without actually getting revenge and suffering the personal and social negatives that accompany it. Here we can see that

[b]y engaging emotionally with fictional characters and situations, we broaden our range of simulated encounters, gaining insights about others’ experiences that are processed much as if they had been our own. Without such a capacity, actual

\(^{83}\) Robinson 154  
\(^{84}\) De Sousa 1987 pp.320-1  
\(^{85}\) A good example here may be Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart”
experience would be our only source of such emotional encounters, severely limiting the range of our reactive possibilities.\(^{86}\)

Without practice on fictional cases, we would be severely limited in our emotional understanding of the world and others.

The utilitarian qualities of fictive emotions make the question of rationality seem slightly odd.\(^{87}\) The thought here is that once we know that an ability is useful and adaptive there seems to be little motivation for categorizing such emotions as one way or another.\(^{88}\) One of the reasons this question is odd is that our fictive emotions, by and large, add to our rationality. Instead of considering fictive emotions as trivially irrational aides to rationalization, as Radford would have us, it is more productive to assume that these emotions are rational, in whatever sense emotions can be irrational in the first place, which is a justified assumption as seen above.

\(^{86}\) Gendler and Kovachovich (forthcoming)

\(^{87}\) Richard Joyce (2000) has stated that the question is not Why do we have irrational emotional responses to fiction? but rather Why do we want to have emotional responses to fiction? A proper answer to this question [which we saw above] is sufficient to dispel the accusation that these responses must be irrational.

\(^{88}\) Though there are cases when we want to say that fictive emotions are irrational. For example, if but the question here is if fictive emotions are irrational, categorically not whether or not it is possible to categorize some fictive emotions as more or less rational than others. Further this question largely rest on issues that I cannot accommodate with a full treatment here such as how to evaluative interpretations of fictions as better or worse and issues of authorial intent. As I note above, there can be sharply different ways of emotionally responding to fictions and this usually, at least in part has to do with the quality of the work (see Currie 1990) more than the psychology or rationality of the reader or viewer.
Chapter 3

The Casual Question

Before we move on to the causal question about fictive emotions, I would first like to review our progress so far. In Chapter One we explored the conceptual question about fictive emotions. We saw that though there are many plausible responses to this question, most were flawed because of a reliance on an outmoded judgmentalist theory of emotions. As a result we found that the best response was to reject the notion that emotions are essentially judgments. Answering in this manner allows us to resolve the conceptual question because it seems that without the necessity of judgment for emotions, there fails to be a paradox of fiction. Therefore the possibility of fictive emotions is no longer endangered. This conclusion carries over to the normative question. Since emotions cannot be merely cashed out into judgments, propositions, or beliefs, it then seems odd to say that emotions are irrational because they are based on inconsistent beliefs; in fact, as we saw there is a wealth of examples of such emotions. Furthermore, we have seen convincing arguments for the practical importance of having fictive emotions. From this we have concluded that it is misguided to categorize fictive emotions as irrational and those who do seem to be employing a fuzzy notion of
rationality to begin with. So after our consideration of the first two questions we can safely say that fictive emotions are genuine and rational.

Now that we are past the misguided worries that have marked past work on fictive emotions, we can now move to the more productive casual question, which can now be properly restated: Given that fictive emotions are instances of genuine, rational emotions, how do these emotions come about? Further, how are they similar to and different from other types of emotions? Fictive emotions I have claimed, will only be properly fit into the larger picture of emotions through empirical research, not through ad hoc arguments to salvage patently flawed theories. I should be quick to mention that though this conversation can only be pushed forward utilizing scientific findings, philosophers still have important roles to play. Philosophers can now aid in shaping research programs of emotions, not hand down judgments on which emotions or emotion-like occurrences are “real” or “genuine”.

While a complete answer to the causal question would require a larger venue, here I would like to reemphasize the importance of this question above the other two questions about fictive emotions. In the remainder of the essay I will be first arguing for the importance of answering this question. Next I will look at some possible avenues for answering this question, focusing on an example from cognitive science. I will finish by pointing the way towards future research on this topic.

### 3.1 Motivations for Answering the Causal Question

Above, discussing the rationality of fictive emotions, we saw the importance of fictive emotions to the education of our emotional sensibilities as well as our practical reasoning abilities. Obviously, answering the casual question will provide a better
understanding these features of our cognitive functions. In addition, there are many possible benefits from an answer to the causal question. First, more generally, we will have a better understanding of how fictive emotions differ from other types of emotions, placing them all in a more comprehensive theory of emotions. More specifically, the benefits I will discuss are: a better understanding of the way we do philosophy, as well as an enriched understanding of certain sub-disciplines especially ethics and aesthetics, an understanding of why we make fictions (and other forms of art) the way that we do and why we enjoy some fictions and not others (and what our interactions with these fictions say about us), insight into the way in which we conduct psychological and sociological research especially when employing virtual or simulated environments, and, hopefully, a more robust understanding of ourselves and why we feel and think as we do. I should note that some of these benefits are already being realized, while others have yet to gain attention. Thus, what follows is a combination of possibilities and whenever available, examples.

One realm where there are already a number of examples of the importance of an understanding of fictive emotions is psychology, especially experiments utilizing simulation or virtual technology. There are already examples of psychologists utilizing virtual reality in order to conduct experiments on a number of topics, most commonly phobias and interpersonal interactions, the application of which can be more widespread in the future as we gain a better understanding of fictive emotions and the imagination in general; what appears to be motivating much, if not all, of these virtual-

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89 It could also be said that a side benefit of such research is that it can illuminate human rationality to those working in artificial intelligence. See DeLancey (2001) and Hobbs (1990)
90 For example: Bass et al. (2004), Muhlberger et al (2007) and Lang et al. (1983)
91 For example: Dotsch and Wigboldus (2008), Bailenson and Yee (2005), and Slater et al., (2006)
research examples is the general belief that their respective findings can be generalized beyond the virtual realm, or can offer some insight into those responses that occur under similar but non-virtual conditions.⁹² Above we saw that the traditional conception of fictive emotions and the associated worries no longer pose a threat to this motivation, the question now turns from if they are generalizable to a question of to what extent they are so.

A good example of work in psychology utilizing virtual environments is Slater et al.’s virtual reprisal of the Milgram study on obedience⁹³. The original study consisted of a participant, under the direction of an authority figure, asked to administer shocks to a (nonexistent) –learner‖. The test was designed to observe the obedience of the participant under the pressure of an authority figure. Slater’s version is set up the same way except the participant is fully aware that the –learner‖ is fictional. Instead of testing the obedience of the participant, this version is designed to compare the similarity between the responses of those dealing with a virtual –learner‖ and those, in the original test, who believed they were actually administering pain. Slater concluded that –humans tend to respond realistically at subjective, physiological, and behavioral levels in interactions with virtual characters‖, even though they are under no illusions about the reality of their –victim‖.⁹⁴ On every measurable level, including their own testimony, the participants in both versions seemingly experienced the same negative emotions. Because of these similarities it seems that many experiments utilizing virtual reality would be transferable

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⁹³ Milgram (1974)
⁹⁴ Slater et al. (2006)
to non-virtual situations.\textsuperscript{95} There can be many practical benefits of such research, including but not limited to: a reduction in the necessary number of people to facilitate the experiment and therefore, conceivably, a reduction in cost, an ability to better homogenize the experiment’s set up over the course of multiple trials, and an ability to perform certain experiments without any possible ethical concern, of which Slater’s experiment is an example. Though this is not to say that future experiments utilizing virtual reality and simulations will not come with their own separate ethical concerns, especially as technology improves.\textsuperscript{96}

Such research can be used to explore the extremely popular immersive fictions of videogames and virtual online communities.\textsuperscript{97} Exploring the question about the how and why of fictive emotions will help us better analyze a claim that has been around since at least the early 1990’s: our interactions with fictional characters and environments, especially immersive fictions such as video games, shape our behavior.\textsuperscript{98} This will also point towards answers to a related question: Why is it more difficult for people of certain ages\textsuperscript{99} and backgrounds to tell the difference between fictions and the real world?\textsuperscript{100} Further an increased understanding of fictive emotions can allow us to explore the

\textsuperscript{95} This is of course not to say that the emotional states are exactly the same in virtual and non-virtual environments, more sophisticated experiments would require further explanation of fictive emotions in general.

\textsuperscript{96} Philosophers will have much work to do on the metaphysics and ethics of virtual reality, in general and when utilized in experiments.

\textsuperscript{97} Such as MMORPG’s such as World of Warcraft and avatar sites such as Second Life. See Cogburn (2009) and Tavinor (2005)

\textsuperscript{98} Most will remember the news reports after the infamous Columbine shootings about which video games the shooters were playing, most notably the shooter Doom.

\textsuperscript{99} Or why our imaginative abilities change over time.

\textsuperscript{100} This could also improve our understanding of things like schizophrenia and autism. For more see Tooby and Cosmides (2001)
therapeutic benefits of immersive fictions\textsuperscript{101} as well as training for things like flight or combat. Ultimately this research could be utilized by artists to develop art that is more purposed (which is not to say more meaningful) and effective (as far as it evokes certain emotions). We could utilize fictions to educate children\textsuperscript{102} and rehabilitate criminals. While we could imagine this turning into an undesirable scenario similar to Alex’s experience in \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, it doesn’t have to. We can expect that the more we learn about sympathy and sentimental education it could be we effective. We can deal with the associated ethical concerns when we get to them, they are no reason to prima facie reject such a possibility. As philosophers, we have a wealth of material to work with and think about especially as immersive fictions become more realistic and pervasive\textsuperscript{103} Not only can a fuller explanation of fictive emotions give us a better understanding of how fictions affect us but also a better understanding of what they reveal \textit{about} us. There has been a belief in the ability of art to reveal our true feelings, which is at least as old as \textit{Hamlet}\textsuperscript{104}, and almost assuredly older than that. Though this has been written about in the past\textsuperscript{105} in connection to the paradox of fiction, it is something that has never received

\begin{quote}
Similar to uses of art therapy and music therapy, I can conceive of "fictional therapy" as a tool for overcoming things like anxiety, stress, phobias, even negative and unwarranted prejudices and stereotypes. Teaching them intellectual lessons connected with "emotional instruction". This may be similar to what Plato had in mind when in \textit{The Republic} he states that, in respect to children "We must do everything to insure that what they hear first, with respect to virtue, be the finest told tales for them to hear." 378e Further, this can be relevant to our "real" interactions over virtual interfaces such as Facebook and Myspace. These are examples of "places" in which we interact with others as we present ourselves, not as we "really" are, just like "avatar" sites. Such sites allow us create an image of ourselves made of the attributes we want people to see (have you ever untagged yourself in a photo?). It is very similar in some respects to a semi-autobiographical novel, it is based on a real person, with fictions peppered in to make it more interesting (if we so choose). Further cases which require philosophical attention are fiction/non-fiction hybrids such as: reality TV shows and Stephen Colbert, and maybe even professional wrestling. See Smuts (2010) Most will remember Hamlet’s plan to expose the guilt of his usurping uncle by his reaction to a play which includes a portrayal of fratricide. See for example Currie (1990) or Walton (1997) who gives the example of a spelunker: Imagine going on a spelunking expedition. You lower yourself into a hole in the ground and enter a dank, winding passageway. After a couple of bends there is absolute pitch darkness. You light
\end{quote}
an adequate explanation; answering the causal question will be able to provide one.\textsuperscript{106} This question becomes much more complicated when we look again to interactive fictions like video games. For example, what is revealed about us when we solicit a prostitute in \textit{Grand Theft Auto III}, kill her, take her money and laugh about it?\textsuperscript{107} On the other side of this, an explanation of fictive emotions can give us insight into how fictions alter our emotional reactions to real-world objects. For example, how do the experience of arousal through romance novels and pornography change our expectations and experiences of arousal in the real-world? This is to say we will be better able to comprehend how our real-world experiences and feelings shape our understandings of art and how engagements with art shape our understanding of the real-world.

Another important area that could be benefited by an enriched explanation of fictive emotions is philosophy itself in the form of a better understanding of thought experiments,\textsuperscript{108} particularly when used in ethics. Peter Singer summarizes a basic strategy in ethics (which he of course disagrees with) and that is to show that in some

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\textsuperscript{106} Though similar questions have been asked recently in cognitive science. See: Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) Especially relevant here is work on imaginative resistance which broadly speaking is the apparent resistance to imagine situations that one finds immoral. Similarly this can be applied to the resistance to engage with certain fictions because of its morally questionable content.

\textsuperscript{107} For the ethics related to video games see Cogburn (2009) and Tavinor (2005)

\textsuperscript{108} See, for example Davies (2009)
circumstances the theory leads to judgments that are contrary to our common moral intuitions.”\textsuperscript{109} Whether this is something that has normative force is, of course, still up for debate.\textsuperscript{110} Nevertheless, we have intuitions with a connection to emotion, about thought experiments. An improved understanding of how these types of imagined examples impact us emotionally, is very important for philosophers; it seems that many philosophers take the similarity of these emotions for granted. If these emotional reactions do not carry over, then it seems to bring a very important tool for philosophers into question.\textsuperscript{111} Furthermore, since thought experiments can (supposedly) give us a better understanding of how we would react emotionally to ethically important situations we do not need to put ourselves in the actual situation. And as we saw above reacting to imagined scenarios is much preferred to actually having to decide to, say, change the track, or how to distribute the food on a life boat. When we can experiment in our minds we do not need to spend as much time experimenting in the real-world.\textsuperscript{112} I hope these sketches, though brief, have aided to clarify a point that is largely left out of the literature, even those writing in support of answering, or attempting to answer, the causal question, that is, the importance of answering this question. I have written about these potential benefits of further explanations of fictive emotions as a way to motivate future research.

\textsuperscript{109} Singer (2006)
\textsuperscript{110} For more on this debate see, for example, Singer (2006), and Sandberg and Juth (2011)
\textsuperscript{111} As we saw above, these emotions should be generalizable, however, we still have much to learn about how and to what extent they are.
\textsuperscript{112} From a study of such experiments and their associated emotions, we can learn about how the “set-up” or presentation of a thought experiment changes the way we react to them. This seems plausible if we compare a thought experiment to a joke: a good joke and a bad joke can convey the same information through a different presentation, (which can include: different timing, ordering, vocal variation, word choice, who is telling the joke, what situation or text precedes the joke) however, the important difference is the emotional reaction of the audience, perhaps in the case of a joke: amusement versus bewilderment. Likewise in a thought experiment, the presentation can be the difference between accepting a philosopher’s point or not.
by highlighting possible practical applications, but also to illustrate that these benefits can only come through an answer to the causal question. While answers to the conceptual and normative questions may be interesting philosophically, they fail to have the same practical applicability.

3.2 Towards Answering the Causal Question

Above we saw some of the motivation for giving a fuller explanation for fictive emotions. In the final section I will briefly explore possible strategies for answering the causal question. As one could assume, this answer is not going to come from one method or even one field, but will consist of a number of methods and disciplines coming together. This will require a collaborative effort on the part of philosophers, aestheticians, psychologists (of all sorts: clinical, developmental, and evolutionary), neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, as well as those in the budding field of evolutionary literary criticism\textsuperscript{113}. Next, I will look at one of these possible avenues, cognitive science, in more detail, focusing on how it could be effective in pushing us toward the answers we are looking for as well as how it can utilize work from other fields.

Before going into our example, I would like to provide a cursory list of what I think an answer to the causal question should include. This list includes, but is not limited to the following:

[a] How it is we have affective responses to fiction similar to non-fictive emotions (furthermore, when and to what extent is one generalizable to the other?).

\textsuperscript{113} See Carroll (1995), Boyd (2010), Scalise-Sugiyama (2006), and Wilson and Goettsheall (2009)
[b] Why these affective responses seem directed at fictional characters and events (i.e. why it seems we feel pity for Anna).

c] Why responses to fictions usually fail to motivate behavior we would normally associate with non-fictive correlates (i.e. our fear at the cinema usually does not cause fight or flight behavior).

d] Why, after over forty years is there no consensus about the status of fictive emotions (Why are fictive emotions odd in the first place and why have they been hard to pin-down theoretically).

e] Why does our affective response to fiction in general change over time?

f] Why does our affective response to a certain fiction change after multiple encounters?

h] How do different types of fictions affect us differently?

i] How do fictive emotions change our non-fictive emotions (In other words how do we learn emotional or sentimental lessons from fictions)? This is not to say that any work into fictive emotions must answer all of these questions. However, if it is to be productive, it should allow for additions and amendments that, when made, can explain any feature that is lacking. Furthermore, any such work should be more than merely theoretical, in that it is capable of incorporating empirical findings from the fields mentions above. Next we will turn our attention to a possible example.

Recently there has been a considerable amount of work on cognitive approaches to the workings of the imagination.\textsuperscript{114} Imagination, of course, being an important component to our ability to create and enjoy fiction. Since there is a large conversation and much work being done on such things as imaginative resistance, mindreading,

\textsuperscript{114} For example see: Currie and Ravenscroft (2002); Goldman (1989), (1992); Harris (2000); Nichols (2004) and Nichols and Stich (2000) to name but a few.
pretense, and modal counterfactual statements there is hardly room here to discuss the intricacies in any detail. Instead I will limit myself to work on the interaction between imagination and the emotions. Specifically I will be looking to the work of Weinberg and Meskin as they work to tackle the causal question through a cognitive framework. Though I’m not sure I completely agree with their conclusions, they serve as a good example of work that can be done on the explanation of fictive emotions once we look past the conceptual and normative questions; and when we break out of the restriction to folk and philosophical resources, and look for some added help from science in solving such philosophical conundrums.”¹¹⁵

Weinberg and Meskin propose that philosophers interested in the imagination shift their methodology from the traditional paradox-and-analysis model to a more empirically-oriented phenomena-and-explanation model.”¹¹⁶ Here they are reiterating my point in the preceding: we need to abandon work on the first two questions about fictive emotions for the third, causal question. Their preferred model of exploration is, of course, heavily reliant on science. They believe that scientific considerations can provide at least two benefits to the conversation on imagination: [i] First, they can provide further data against which competing explanations can be evaluated."¹¹⁷ This feature is important when we remember the faulty or misleading thought experiments or examples given above (e.g. the stuffed tiger and the man telling tales about his non-existent sister). Relying on actual cases which have had measurable effects, rather than purely imagined cases, to compare explanations allows for more lucid conversations because everyone can

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.176
¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.177
work with the same examples. Secondly, scientific considerations can be an extremely important source of theoretical machinery to be deployed in candidate explanations."\textsuperscript{118}

This is evident when we look back at the theories given in answering the first question, many of which were plausible but ultimately inadequate. For example, the illusion reply seems to be basically describing something most would agree with: when engaged with fiction we, in some sense, get lost in the work. The problem is, when we stop there, the theory seems incredibly implausible, however if it were bolstered by an explanatory framework incorporating empirical evidence it may be able to work. However, as is, there is no mechanism for pushing the reply past the mark of "merely plausible". Next, I will show how Weinberg and Meskin's strategy for explaining fictive emotions reaps these benefits by giving a brief overview of their work.

Weinberg and Meskin first compare "imaginative states and belief states". Importantly, they find that while the two states have "significant functional similarities" they are still rooted in distinct cognitive systems. The states are functionally similar in that they can both influence affect systems as well as be utilized by inferential mechanisms; i.e. both give rise to feeling and both can be utilized in inferential reasoning.\textsuperscript{119} Though, they find functional similarities between the two states, there is significant features of, especially the way the imagination interacts with perception and generally lacks influence on actions. This motivates them to posit distinct systems

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p.177
\textsuperscript{119} For empirical evidence of this point about inference see Leslie (1994)
underpinning imagination and belief, which they represent using “imagination box” and “belief box”.  

With this framework set, Weinberg and Meskin lay out the four phenomena associated with fictive emotions that require explanation:

[A] our affective responses to fictions are phenomenologically and physically robust;

[B] these affective responses are fictionally directed (i.e. their intentional objects are fictive);

[C] our affective responses do not result in the full range of behaviors (that standard emotions produce); and

[D] such affective responses have an ambiguous relationship to full-fledged emotional responses.

[A] is quickly explained because one of our assumptions in creating the “imagination box” was that it is able to interact with our affective mechanisms, therefore it seems the imagined encounters, such as fictions will give rise to affective states similar to beliefs. 

[B] is explained by the similarities between the “syntactic and semantic form” of the representations causing the belief or imagining. Because of the similarities and the fact that belief affects are caused by “real” objects (which is to say they are the intentional objects causing the belief) we can assume that imagining affects (fictive emotions) are caused by imagined objects. Further, we can assume that because our imagining box is disconnected from the belief box and the motivational mechanism, even though fictions

120 Following a model constructed by Shaun Nichols and Steven Stitch; see Nichols and Stitch (2000) and Nichols (2004)
121 Weinberg and Meskin (2006) p. 183 Notice these are very similar to [a] through [d] above.
122 Ibid., p.183
are adequate to give rise to affects, they need not motivate behavior, which serves as an explanation for [C]. From the explanans of first three points we can see that the common confusion of how to characterize fictive emotions represented as [D] comes from the functional similarity but non-identity between believing and imagining.\(^{123}\)

While it may seem unnecessary to speak of different boxes in order to understand fictive emotions (or cognition in general) it does have merit theoretically in that each box is something clear and distinct to talk and argue over.\(^{124}\) This is a large improvement over the loose terminology of theorists dealing with the conceptual problem. Another virtue of this account is that it clearly expresses what it intends to explain and perhaps most importantly, instead of pitting our intuitions against each other\(^{125}\); it uses their combination as a starting point for a full explanation. Also, it is not an approach to simply explain fictive emotions, but cognition in general, allowing fictive emotions to be placed in a full picture of cognition. Furthermore, this account leaves itself open to improvement and scrutiny from empirical findings in neuroscience and psychology.\(^{126}\) Therefore, outside of the actual truth of this account, for these reasons Weinberg and Meskin’s should be taken as a model for future research about the important causal question of fictive emotions.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., p. 183
\(^{124}\) This is to say that there is plenty to argue over.
\(^{125}\) As we saw happen in the conceptual and normative questions.
\(^{126}\) For a number of examples of such evidence see Schroeder and Matheson (2006)


3.3 Conclusion

In the preceding, we have seen, as some theorists have already claimed, that any work on fictive emotions should be done through the causal question. This is in marked distinction from much of the work on such emotions in the past. We can now abandon much of the worry associated with past work on the paradox and focus on the fertile ground of the causal question. I hope to have shown that any engagement with the conceptual or normative questions should be accompanied by a robust answer to the causal question. However, importantly, we should not forget about previous answers to the conceptual question, as they can be important starting-points for future research. Though I do think that the previous views are neither adequate nor focused on the right aspect of the problem of fictive emotions, I think that they are worth sorting through because the three questions are closely related and though they are inadequate, they are not indefensible; in fact they are important starting points for more productive work on fictive emotions, as Robert Stecker has pointed out, while now we can ―kick away the ladder‖, the paradox of fiction has been a valuable tool for exploring the nature of both imaginative and emotional responses to fiction.‖127 Past aestheticians have documented and investigated some of the more complex and puzzling aspects of human psychology,‖128 and we would be unwise to ignore their insight.

Fictive emotions are not only the concern of philosophers of art or mind; as we have seen there are many benefits outside of philosophy to be found in further research into fictive emotions. Here I have attempted to motivate such research. What will be

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127 Stecker 2010 p. 308
128 Weinberg and Meskin (2006)
much more difficult is finding an explanation of how fictive emotions works and how they relate to our conception of knowledge, rationality, and ourselves. We are left with many questions; however, if I have been successful we now also have a clearer way to answer them.
References


