
APTNESS OF EMOTIONS FOR FICTIONS AND IMAGININGS

BY

JONATHAN GILMORE

Abstract: Many philosophical accounts of the emotions conceive of them as susceptible to assessments of rationality, fittingness, or some other notion of aptness. Analogous assumptions apply in cases of emotions directed at what are taken to be only fictional or only imagined. My question is whether the criteria governing the aptness of emotions we have toward what we take to be real things apply invariantly to those emotions we have toward what we take to be only fictional or imagined. I argue that what counts as a reason justifying an emotion can differ across real, fictional, and imagined domains.

GLOUCESTER: I see it feelingly.
King Lear, IV.vi

1. Introduction

One assumption shared by many otherwise different contemporary philosophical treatments of the emotions is that emotions are susceptible to assessments of rationality, fittingness, or some other notion of aptness. In that view (especially, but not exclusively, associated with theories labeled ‘cognitive’), one’s affective response to some object (an event, person, state of affairs, etc.) may properly be held to such evaluations as that it is misdirected, unjustified, abnormal, or somehow an emotion one ought not to have, in general or in the particular case. Accordingly, it may be said that fear is inappropriate if directed at what is harmless; sadness shouldn’t be felt if its object is only a trivial loss; and spite is wrong in invariably misrepresenting the relevant qualities of whatever it is directed toward. No doubt there are dissenting voices, and much rests in how one construes the

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nature of that aptness condition, but the current consensus is that at least paradigm instances of emotions bear essential *normative*, not just causal or explanatory, relations to their objects.¹

Analogous assumptions concerning the normativity of emotions apply to those directed at what is only *fictional* or *imagined* to be the case. In most cases, one who pities the murderous villain of a horror film because his innocent victim has escaped is under some misapprehension of the film's content. If one would feel shame in being discovered in some compromising position, then shame, not delight, seems to be a fitting response to *imagining* oneself exposed in those circumstances.

My primary question in what follows is whether the criteria governing the aptness, fittingness, or rationality of emotions we have toward what we take to be real things apply invariantly to emotions we have toward what we take to be only imagined or fictional. In other words, are the conditions that ground the relation of *warranted* or *merited* that holds between an emotion and its object the same whether that object is: (i) real, (ii) only imagined, or (iii) only imagined in connection with a fictional work of art? If pity is an apt response to one who undergoes undeserved suffering, are the same kinds of reasons relevant in the justification and criticism of a feeling of pity regardless of which of those domains its object belongs to? Or can an emotion be criticized as inappropriate if felt toward a state of affairs that is taken to be real but defended when – and in virtue of being – felt toward that state of affairs as represented in a fiction?

One view, which I will call a *continuity thesis*, is that the criteria for appropriateness of emotions are identical across real and imagined domains. Of course, those criteria cannot require of an apt emotion that its object exist in the real world, independent of one's imaginative or fictional stance. However, once we allow for the fact that what is imagined or represented in a fiction can bear a different intentional relation than that of belief or perception to our emotions, the considerations that can justify or criticize an emotion with respect to its fit to a real object are identical to those that can justify or criticize an emotional response to what is taken to be only fictional or imagined.

A *discontinuity thesis*, by contrast, is that there are differences between the criteria governing the aptness of reality-directed emotions and the criteria governing the aptness of fiction- or imagination-directed ones. That is, we cannot assume that if and only if an emotion is appropriate in response to an object of some kind in reality is the emotion accordingly justified (justified for the same generic reasons) when experienced in response to an object of that kind in a fiction or imagining. It may be appropriate to feel amused by an occurrence in a fiction while not appropriate to be amused by a suitably analogous event in real life.

In what follows I introduce and assess some considerations in favor of these two theses of continuity and discontinuity, both of which have a

prima facie plausibility. Certainly, much recent work in cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy of the imagination supports the idea that there is a form of continuity to be observed in how we respond to stimuli delivered via the different cognitive stances of belief and imagination.² There the psychological mechanisms that process input taken from believing that *p* are presumed to operate in the same way, with similar emotional output, as they do when the stimuli comes from pretending or imagining that *p*. But my question is about the *norms* associated with those emotions: whether what warrants our emotions holds invariantly across our responses to real and imaginative or fictional domains.

To anticipate, my conclusion is that, while certain prominent defenses of discontinuity fail, there is at least one significant argument in its favor: there are, I argue, differences across the real/imagined divide in what *kinds* of reasons for justification or criticism of an emotion can be appealed to when considering its aptness. That is, there is a difference in what sorts of considerations would qualify as potential reasons for an emotion when the emotion is directed at what is supposed to be, alternatively, real and imagined.

Although philosophical and psychological treatments of the emotions inquire into the grounds of their appropriateness, this question is rarely assumed to apply to emotions directed at fictions and imaginings. When acknowledged, those kinds of emotions are typically treated as outliers, along with phobias, that do not put much pressure on a theory of aptness.³ My strategy in what follows is to begin by offering a characterization of aptness that would be amenable to such theories that take reality-directed emotions as their primary explananda. However, this account will be posed in terms sufficiently formal to avoid making any exclusive commitment to the substantive role that specifically beliefs and perceptions may have in determining aptness. For that would too quickly exclude emotions that depend on other intentional states – such as imagining – from being apt in the same sense as emotions that depend on ‘reality-directed’ states. With that account of aptness in hand, I then ask if it can be extended without distortion to account for the aptness of all sorts of emotions, including those directed at what is only fictional or imagined.

Some caveats are in order. A concern for characterizing the rationality of fiction- and imagination-directed emotions arises, of course, in discussions of a familiar paradox of fictions: namely, the conflict (in one of many equivalent formulations) between the *prima facie* plausible claims that (i) we feel genuine emotions toward objects (events, persons, states of affairs) that we believe to be only fictional; and, (ii) we cannot, or rationally should not, respond with genuine emotions to what we believe to be only fictional.

A widely-defended kind of solution that I assume to be correct denies the second claim, holding, instead, that our emotional responses to what we take to be fictional instantiate a broadly exhibited disposition to

respond behaviorally, cognitively, and affectively toward some kinds of stimuli in a way that is indifferent to their sources.⁴ Thus, there is nothing peculiar about our emotional responses toward fictions that would undermine their genuineness. Furthermore, such a disposition is rationally justified in light of its tendency to promote (or at least not conflict with) an individual's wellbeing or interests.⁵ These interests include garnering the pleasure offered by engagement with fictions; the ability to plan for the future by consulting one's emotional responses to the imagining of differing choices; and the capacity to learn of another's point of view through empathetic modeling of her emotions.

That approach offers a strong defense of fiction- and imagination-directed emotions being rational (or not systematically irrational) as a class. However, even if the categorical rationality of such emotions is thereby secured, we still need to ask under what conditions any particular emotional response fits its fictional or imagined object. And is such a response governed by the same criteria of appropriateness as our emotions directed toward the real world?

A second preliminary remark is that different theories of emotions offer different accounts of the dimensions (e.g. representational, etiological, physiological, motivational, phenomenological, communicative) along which emotions are to be characterized. Accordingly, the conditions grounding aptness in a theory may depend on which of those dimensions the theory takes to be central. In what follows I focus mainly on that aspect of emotions associated with their intentional, or more specifically, representational content.⁶ Although that representational aspect doesn't exhaust the nature of any emotion, it can be plausibly construed as logically prior to those other aspects, some of which, it should be noted, may be only epistemic means of identifying emotions, not essential features of them. One would not experience the deeper respiration, greater skin conductance, and rising blood pressure of fear in the absence of some sort of representational relation, however misleading, that connects one's mind or physiology to the object of one's fear.

Finally, it should be noted that there is a broader notion in which an emotion may be justified that I will not address. This is associated with what sort of emotions it is rational for a person to have 'all things considered.' There might be, for example, good prudential reasons to find the jokes told by one's boss amusing. Or I might have an adaptive 'better safe than sorry' reason to think of any animal with sharp teeth that fixes its gaze on me as threatening. However, such reasons might not justify the token instances of such feelings in their representational dimension. In some sense it is right to feel amusement at the boss's jokes or fear in response to the animal, but not in the merited sense that would make intelligible *what it is* for an object to be amusing or dangerous.⁷ Indeed, I might have reason to fear a wild animal in the narrow representational

sense of aptness sketched in this paper but reason not to fear it (assuming my fear will provoke it) in the broader rational sense identified as what kind of action a rational person would perform.

Some theorists would accept the above point but still hold that reasons of a specifically *moral* sort can make an emotion apt or inapt in the limited representational sense that I employ it here. I would suggest that this is only sometimes the case. A moral reason may count in favor of or against the aptness of an emotion if that emotion is of a kind that is essentially concerned with the morally evaluable qualities of its object, as, say, remorse, compassion, and indignation are. In other cases, we may have a moral reason not to respond with a given emotion without that reason entering at all into the aptness (in the limited sense) of the emotion. It might be always morally wrong to feel *schadenfreude* without that entailing that its objects never have the qualities that merit (in the limited sense) that kind of pleasure.⁸ In any case, my question is whether continuity or discontinuity holds in standards of aptness. So, my concern with moral constraints on aptness extends only to the question: *If* moral reasons make a difference in the aptness of reality-directed emotions (in the limited sense) must they make a difference in the aptness of fiction- or imagination-directed emotions?

2. *Apt emotions*

Most theorists of emotions subscribe to the idea that any instance of a paradigmatic emotion depends upon some mental state directed at an object identified under a generic evaluative aspect or description. The generic description brings out the evaluative property that is shared by otherwise different kinds of objects of any one type of emotion. So, for example, fear is directed at what are often very different kinds of objects that have the evaluative quality of being a threat; pity is directed at people who exhibit the property of unjustified suffering; anger is directed at what is seen as insulting. I will refer to these generic evaluative properties associated with each emotion type as the *crierial qualities* of the emotion.⁹

Although theorists of emotions largely agree that such criterial properties of emotions reflect the way emotions represent objects, or properties of objects, in light of their bearing on our well being, interests, and desires, the description of the nature of that representational relation is controversial.¹⁰ Some theorists (particularly those identified with strict cognitivism or what is often called 'judgmentalism') hold that an emotion represents its object as having certain criterial qualities via a constitutive or underlying belief in the proposition that the object has those qualities.¹¹ As a characterization of *all* types of emotions, rather than just some particularly higher order ones, this approach has fallen out of favor. One

problem is that the view seems to entail that infants and animals lacking language or the concepts required for committing to such propositions cannot experience garden-variety emotions. Another is that it requires of a person having an emotion that she have the relevant belief that its object possesses the evaluative quality criterial for the emotion. However, one can feel an emotion, say, jealousy, while acknowledging that its target doesn't exemplify the qualities the emotion attributes to it.¹²

I will adopt a more moderate cognitive thesis, which allows that there are different kinds of intentional states that may enter into an emotion: sometimes a belief in a proposition, other times a form of aspect-perception, and so on. In this view, an emotion may represent its object as having certain qualities without such representation entailing the presence of a concomitant belief that the object has those qualities.¹³ One may feel an emotion in only imagining that it is true that the object has those qualities. Or, an emotion's constitutive intentional state may not rely on any sort of relation to a proposition but, instead, be a sensory relation to its object with features relevant to the emotion being salient.¹⁴ This perspective allows (unlike strict cognitivism) that emotions can be subdoxastic and automatic states,¹⁵ or perhaps bodily responses that instantiate forms of appraisals of their objects, having been developed via natural selection and experience as reliable assessments of the value of a given stimulus for the species or the individual organism.¹⁶

In line with that approach, a generally applicable way of characterizing the relation between an emotion and its object is to say that an emotion *presents* its objects as having a certain kind of evaluative quality that individuates that type of emotion. This is analogous to how other kinds of mental states present their objects as having a certain kind of property: a belief presents its contents as true, a desire presents its contents as worth wanting, a perception of *x* presents an *x*-experience as occurring. We can propose that emotions can be evaluated according to the adequacy of the intentional representation (of whatever sort it is) upon which that presentation depends. If I resent someone's actions, my emotion is not only directed at that person's actions but presents those actions as instantiating a culpable offense toward me.

One candidate for how to characterize that aptness relation would be to make such aptness depend only on whether the emotion's subtending intentional representation is a *reasonable* representation of its object.¹⁷ Here, my fear would be apt if my belief, perception, or whatever representation it is that explains the emotion, is arrived at in a way justified by reasons available to me (reasons corresponding to what I take to be true or veridical and what can be practically inferred from that). We can make intuitive sense of this proposal in the way in which we think there is nothing abnormal in a person feeling fear in response to a credible (but nonetheless false) report.

However, there is a significant consideration that calls for a more stringent approach that stresses some sort of correctness (not just reasonableness) condition: If the project of explaining what it is to be blameworthy, funny, disgusting, desirable, and so on, is the endeavor to discover under what conditions the correlative attitudes of blame, amusement, disgust, desire, and so on, are merited or apt, then the aptness of such emotions cannot be held only to the standard that their presentation of their objects is reasonable. For the representational component of the emotion might have been reasonably arrived at and yet we could still say the emotion underwritten by that representation is inapt. I could reasonably conclude that James intended to slight me, and yet, if he didn't so intend, my resentment of him would be unfitting.

A stricter condition of fit that is not subject to the above criticism is that an emotion must present its object as the object is. More specifically, it is a condition of the aptness of an emotion that its representation of its object is true (veridical, or correct in whatever way that its subtending intentional representation must be correct) *and* that the emotion is experienced in virtue of the fact that the representation is true (veridical, correct, etc.). Here, if I feel anxiety in virtue of believing that the car I'm driving is about to run out of gasoline, that emotion is apt only if it is felt in virtue of the fact that my belief is true. An adjustment to this view is required, however, in that it seems too strict in failing to isolate the *relevant* ways in which an emotion's presentation of its object and the nature of the object may depart. Not every fact about an object that an emotion commits to is relevant in whether that emotion is apt (my anxiety would still properly hold if it is diesel that my car is about to run out of). It seems that an apt emotion should be required to present an object correctly only in light of facts that make a difference in the *evaluative* qualities of the object that are criterial for the emotion.

Thus, I propose, it is a necessary and sufficient condition of an emotion being apt (rational, fitting, or otherwise warranted, in the narrow representational sense) that it correctly presents its object as having the value-relevant properties that are criterial for that emotion, and that the emotion is experienced in virtue of that presentation being correct. My fear presents the bear as dangerous. Whether that fear is apt depends on whether its subtending belief or perception of the bear correctly ascribes the evaluative property of being dangerous (a threat, etc.) to it, and I have the emotion because it has that property.

We can thus identify certain kinds of justifying and disqualifying reasons for an emotion, reasons that speak to its aptness. One sort of reason is that the object possesses the criterial property itself. Another sort of reason is that the object has properties that reliably indicate the presence of the criterial property (snarling is a good indicator of a dog being a threat). A third is that the object has properties upon which the criterial

property directly supervenes. My feeling of admiration for a person is apt even if I don't identify her as admirable but only as having a combination of qualities – say, courage, wisdom, and kindness – in virtue of which one is admirable. I should stress that this account of aptness provides only a formal characterization of when an emotion is warranted; the substantive answer of what particular qualities in an object merit a given emotion is often contested, and may change with changes in what we value (as with *awe*, which at one time may have applied solely to the supernatural).

3. *Continuity*

With the above criterion of aptness in hand we can now ask whether it supports the thesis of continuity or that of discontinuity.

A continuity theorist would point out that although the account of an emotion's aptness I offer above captures the particular kinds of constitutive intentional stances of belief and perception, which purport to represent the real world, that account need not make any *essential* reference to those kinds of particular intentional relation as the grounds of an apt emotion. Other kinds of intentional states could be plugged in to occupy the role of belief or perception as the vehicle of the emotion's 'thought content.' The idea here is that the criterion of aptness offered above can apply to many different kinds of intentional relations, each imposing its own conditions of correctness. If one feels an emotion in response to what one only imagines (desires, remembers, anticipates, entertains, and so on), that emotion is apt only if it is experienced in virtue of the fact that its intentional representation of its object is correct according to whatever standard of correctness is indexed to that kind of representation.

In the above proposal, my fear for someone in real life is apt only if I feel that fear in virtue of my accurately believing that she is in danger. Analogously, my fear for a character in a fiction is apt only if I feel that fear in virtue of my correctly imagining that she is in danger. It must be, indeed, part of, or true in, the story that she is in danger, and I imagine her in danger accordingly.

So we can say that the question of whether an emotion is warranted in response to its object is a question of whether the emotion's presentation of its object's emotion-relevant evaluative qualities is justified. If the intentional state is a belief, then it is a constraint on the aptness of the emotion that the object has the qualities in fact that the emotion presents it as having. If the intentional state is an imagining, the qualities the emotion presents the object as possessing must be possessed by it as correctly *imagined* for the emotion to be apt.

The question of what it is to correctly imagine something is too nuanced to be adequately addressed here (*viz.*, can one *incorrectly*

imagine x if x has no counterpart in the real world? Can one *correctly* imagine a metaphysical impossibility?) However, it is uncontroversial to allow that what one imagines can be subject to correctness conditions if it purports to represent facts that hold independently of one's imaginative activity.

Emotions felt in response to what we imagine do, indeed, present their objects as having qualities that are values in relation to something that exists independent of our imaginative activity – namely our wellbeing or what we care about or desire. An emotion's presentation of the content of what we imagine is constrained to get at least that relation correct. I might imagine that I am playing with a harmless puppy but feel a rush of agitation and apprehension because I was once severely bitten by a dog. My fear presents the imagined state of affairs as posing a threat even though that state of affairs is, as stipulated, harmless. The emotion presents the imagined scenario as exemplifying an evaluative quality that it does not have.

The more directed or scripted an imagining is, the closer it becomes the sort that is generated by fictions. But there is a continuum from (i) free imagining whose contents have no counterparts in the real world; to (ii) the prescribed sort whose correctness is constrained by its constitutive ends ('imagine what would happen if . . .'); to (iii) the prescribed imagining characteristic of our engagement with fictions. The continuity theorist holds that an emotion in response to some object in the fiction will be apt if the subtending intentional state – the work-guided or prescribed imagination – correctly presents the object as having the qualities criterial for that emotion.

Of course, an important question here is what it is for it to be 'true in a work' or 'part of a fiction' that a represented object has the criterial qualities for a given emotional response. One influential view, generally described, is that for a proposition to be true in a fiction in a primary sense is for it to be *fictional* that the proposition is true. Here, for a proposition to be fictional is for it to be uttered, inscribed, etc. as part of a kind of communicative act in which an author intends to get an audience to make believe or imagine that the proposition is true. Other propositions might be true in a work in a secondary sense because they form the background of those propositions that an author explicitly intends that an audience imagines to be true, or follow from those propositions as inferences that are licensed by the work.¹⁸ This account can be extended to certain facts, among them evaluative facts, holding as part of a fiction, whether or not those facts are conveyed via propositions. In other words, it may be part of a fiction that, say, an event is tragic, but our access to that fact is not via a statement that such and such is the case but via an awareness of how that evaluation is expressed in the work in the manner that the event is depicted.

There are other accounts of what makes some proposition true, or some fact hold, in a work of fiction, but the continuity theorist can say that, whatever it is for something to have certain qualities as part of a work, the formal criteria governing the aptness of emotions are the same across real, imaginative, and fictional domains. Indeed, it might seem mysterious how we could respond emotionally to a work in a way that reflects an adequate comprehension of its contents if we were not bringing to the work our schemata for appropriate responses to real things. It is rarely the case that a work explicitly tells us how to feel toward what it depicts. Also, even when a work does carry such instructions, we still need to determine how to respond to the depicted-content-plus-instructions.

4. *Discontinuity: frames and points of view*

One immediate challenge that is often raised against the continuity thesis is the strong intuition that it is a hallmark of our engagement with fictional (and other imaginative) representations of things that we often respond to them with emotions that depart from and are inconsistent with the emotions we hold in response to their real life counterparts. We can find a kind of person contemptible in real life but likable when represented in a narrative.¹⁹ We often respond to the content of daydreams, to sexual, and other kinds of fantasies, in ways that we recognize are contrary to how we would respond if their events really transpired. In watching a film we might worry that the gang of safecrackers in the basement will be heard by the cops on the street above but, in real life, we would welcome their being discovered. Assuming that Kant is right that the 'Furies, diseases, devastations of war' can be represented as beautiful in a description or picture, we might feel pleasure toward those objects when thereby represented or imagined, without any tendency, not even a countervailing or silenced one, to feel pleasure in seeing their actual presence.

Such emotions can be rationally inconsistent insofar as they attribute inconsistent values to an object, and that inconsistency is not explained (away) by such ordinary circumstances as those attributions being *pro tanto*, or to the object under different aspects or descriptions. There is no interesting conflict in my experiencing admiration for the ingenuity of a real safecracker but contempt for his aims, or in Lois Lane feeling love for Superman but not Clark Kent.

If we do have genuinely *inconsistent* emotional responses to an object when it is, respectively, part of the actual world and represented in a fiction or imagining, this does not, of course, entail that such distinct responses have an equal claim to being endorsed at a higher level of reflection. Perhaps, as Plato charged, works of art corrupt the proper focus of our feelings. However, the discontinuity theorist will point out the intuitive

undesirability of classifying a ubiquitous kind of emotional response (whether to fictions or to modal facts about what might have been or could be the case) as never, except perhaps accidentally, realizing its putative aim of reflecting the value of its target. The discontinuity theorist would propose, instead, that if we can respond with apt yet contrary emotions to an object in the real world and the object as part of what is fictional, we ought to be persuaded that there are different criteria governing aptness in those different domains. If the continuity thesis forces us to decide that only one of those contrary emotions can be apt, this presents a strong intuitive challenge to the thesis's plausibility.

However, for that challenge to continuity to hold, a discontinuity theorist needs to explain how it is possible that we can (under at least some conditions) have such contrary but apt responses to an object when it is represented, respectively, in our beliefs and fiction-guided imaginations. For without such an explanation, one who wants to preserve the continuity thesis in the face of such a challenge might (1) accept the counterintuitive result above; (2) revert to the idea that fiction- and imagination-directed emotions are not genuine emotions and so don't stand as counter-examples to continuity; or (3) propose that if an object in a fiction and the object in real life can provoke such different responses, perhaps we are wrong to identify those objects as belonging to the same relevant kind.

An explanation that is widely subscribed to is that our response to a fictional object is not just to the object in itself but also to the object *as presented* in a fictional representation.²⁰ The idea here is that the manner in which the contents of a fiction are represented can impose a frame or point of view on the content, such that we respond to it with potentially different emotions than we would toward its instantiation in the real world.²¹

Framing effects occur when the same content is presented in different ways such that different kinds of cognitive, explanatory, and evaluative attitudes toward that content are privileged. A choice, for example, between whether to drill for oil on land or at sea can be presented in a way that highlights considerations of economic efficiency or a way that stresses environmental protection. Each way of framing the question affects what properties of oil drilling are salient foci in one's deliberations and thus what appear to be the relative advantages of one option over the other.²²

The proposal at hand is that a work of fiction does not merely represent persons, events, states of affairs with whatever properties they have or consequences they result in when they exist in real life, it represents those objects in a way – via a framework or point of view – that makes some of those properties or consequences more relevant to us than others as the basis of our response. The style in which an event is represented might, for example, make certain properties of the event more salient, elicit only certain inferences, direct our attention away from some of its effects, or emphasize some explanatory lines over others. Presenting a car chase as

thrilling, for example, might require diminishing the saliency of the collateral destruction and injury it is shown as causing, and other likely costs we might infer, in favor of maintaining our focus on a desire we share with the fictional protagonists to capture the villain.

As in that example, among the properties that such framing effects can steer our attention toward are evaluative properties that are criterial for a given emotion. Through presenting an object in a way that such properties are foregrounded, a work can express an emotional attitude toward what it represents and may succeed in inducing us to adopt that attitude as well. *The Great Dictator* depicts Henkel, the Hitler-type played by Chaplin, as amusing and ridiculous through only a minor focus on the monstrous off-screen actions attributed to him in the film but much emphasis on his on-screen antics. Renoir's portrayal of the café society of *Le Moulin de la Galette* evokes an easy cheerfulness through showing its polite and care-free atmosphere; Picasso's moody portrayal in his own *Moulin de la Galette* generates a contrary evaluation of the dancehall-restaurant by highlighting its sordid and seamy allure.

That structure of framing devices and points of view may offer a good explanation of how we can have contrary responses to an object when represented in a fiction and when taken to be real; however, I want to propose that it fails as an argument against continuity.

It is true that our responses to the content of a fiction are typically to that content as presented in a vehicle of representation that embodies a point of view. However, that only tells us that the comparison made above between emotions directed at what we take to be fictional and real is *not like-with-like*, and so does not furnish a genuine *test* for continuity. The question should not be:

- Can we have contrary but apt responses to a scenario of some kind in real life and a scenario of the same kind as-presented-in-a-fiction?

But, rather,

- Can we have contrary but apt responses to a scenario as-presented-in-a-fiction and that scenario presented in the *same* manner – that is, identically framed – in real life?

Events in real life don't typically occur in a given *style* (although one may perform some action in a style) but we can see and describe them from comic, tragic, ironic, and so on, points of view (we might engage in gallows humor, construing events as comic, even though we believe, all told, that they hardly merit amusement). And the same facts may be described using different forms of figurative language and rhetoric, thereby eliciting different evaluations and emotional responses. Framing effects, of course,

occur in real life as well as fictions, disposing us to treat certain features of a situation, among all those elements we are aware of, as more salient factors in our deliberations and evaluations than others.

Thus, if our emotional responses to an object in a fiction can be apt yet contrary to those we have toward the object in real life, that cannot be explained as due to our access to the objects of a fiction being distinctively affected by a framework or point of view. For our response to objects in real life are often apprehended in that manner as well.

Let me offer a rejoinder on behalf of the discontinuity proponent that, while intuitively appealing, should be rejected. The rejoinder is that while an emotional response to a real object on the basis of properties a point of view makes salient is susceptible to being challenged by properties that other points of view might make salient, the evaluation-relevant qualities of an object in a fiction are *only those* that the fiction's point of view presents the object as having.²³ The evaluative qualities are constitutive of the object of a fiction or imagining, not just made salient in it. My emotional response to a real object is committed to presenting it in light of all considerations available to me and, in that respect, is committed to diminishing any recognized distortion that framing effects may impose. By contrast, my emotional response to an object in a fiction is committed to presenting it as the artwork presents it, not to getting the content of the depiction right somehow independent of how it is shown or described.²⁴

The problem with that argument for discontinuity is that it would show only that the amount of potentially determinate facts about the objects of our emotions differs across reality and fiction; not that there is any difference in the criteria governing what emotional responses are apt in light of the information that is available. In the case of actual objects, the information at our disposal is not limited to that supplied by the viewpoint in which the object is presented – one can always ask if one is justified in adopting that viewpoint, rather than another, or if the reasons in favor of evaluating an object within a given perspective are outweighed or cancelled by other reasons from within that perspective, or from another. In the case of fictions, the only facts we have to respond to are those supplied via the fiction (including the assumptions and inferences it authorizes) and the framework or point of view the work offers on that content. An 'all things considered' approach to the content of a fiction has less to consider but the normative relation between our emotions and those objects of fiction may be the same as that between our emotions and objects in the actual world.

5. *Discontinuity: reasons and causes*

Where I propose the discontinuity thesis can gain some traction is in an account of what *kinds of considerations* can count as reasons in justifying

(or criticizing) a given emotional response to the content of a fiction or imagination. Recall that, according to the account of aptness in the limited sense offered earlier, an emotion is apt only if it is experienced in virtue of correctly presenting (via its subtending intentional state) its object as having the properties criterial for the emotion. And the only reasons justifying that aptness are those that speak to the object's possession of those qualities. By contrast, a discontinuity proponent might propose that if a work of art or exercise of the imagination is designed or intended to evoke an emotion toward some object it represents, and succeeds in doing so, that is a justification for the emotion in its representational dimension even if it is not supported by any other reasons that speak to the object's possession of the emotion's criterial qualities.

Limiting this discussion for the moment to fictions, it is, of course, true that works of art often evoke a given emotion by supplying reasons for that emotion that reflect its object's possession (in the fiction) of the criterial qualities. If we feel contempt for a character because of his evil intentions, our emotion may be provoked by an awareness of just those reasons that make that emotion justified. There, it would be true in the fiction that the individual merits such contempt and the fiction might frame his actions and circumstances in such a way that our attention is directed toward his contempt-meriting properties. Any resulting emotional response of contempt would be justified by the same criteria as if in response to things outside of fictions.

However, works of art also represent objects in ways that elicit emotions without supplying what would count as reasons for the emotions when they are held toward objects in real life. Fear toward events in the cinema or theater can be provoked by a menacing soundtrack, while a tendency to delight is triggered through cheerful music. We are often induced to see characters as morally contemptible or threatening by their being described or shown as physically ugly or deformed (perhaps exposing a disposition to endorse the idea of 'beauty of soul'²⁵) or through their being accompanied by a character-specific leitmotif. Likewise, the beauty of an elegy doesn't tell us that the objects the poem describes merit a distanced sadness, so much as dispose us to feel that emotion toward them. We are often prompted to identify the literal qualities of the media of visual works of art (roughness, austerity, fragility, pliancy) as figurative properties of whatever content the work embodies, evoking emotions that don't reflect the properties of that content considered independently of the use of that medium. We see this also in how the scale of a monument can evoke awe toward its subject, without offering any description of the subject that would warrant that feeling; and in how a painter may dispose us to think of some content as ethereal or fleeting through depicting it with transparent washes or get us to think of someone as powerful or primitive

through brushstrokes violently applied. Finally, the naming of characters (Becky Sharp, Pecksniff, Naipaul's *Mr. Biswas*); the repetition of words ('nothing' and its cognates in *King Lear*); and the register (clinical, heroic, vernacular) of a description may activate evaluations of the represented events or individuals that don't stem from properties of the events or individuals themselves. That an unfortunate person is named Gradgrind in real life would give us no reason (although perhaps a tendency) to assume he is rigid and dour.

In identifying those features of a representation by their roles in realizing such functions we adopt an *external* stance on the work, a stance that identifies elements of a fiction in terms of such artifactual aspects as character, plot, style, medium, meter, tone (and other aspects of the vehicle of representation) but not as the content that is represented. By contrast, an *internal* stance identifies elements of a fiction imagined as if they were real or were being recounted by a real narrator.²⁶ Othello's speech is rough from the internal stance ('rude am I in my speech') but eloquent from the external, in the poetic language Shakespeare uses. Such external features do not lie within the scope of the operator 'it is fictional that' or 'it is part of the content that,' however, they can cause us to adopt evaluative attitudes toward what does.

Although there is no unitary explanation for how such phenomena shape our evaluative attitudes toward what is depicted, some rely on well-studied automatic and subdoxastic tendencies.²⁷ We may be caused to see a character in a morally negative light through being primed with disgust elicitors (such as references to filth and noxious smells) and other aversive stimuli.²⁸ A disposition to experience what has been called emotional contagion is sometimes exploited when a film's close-up shot of an individual expressing an emotion triggers that emotion in audiences.²⁹ Similar effects may occur in involuntary responses enjoined by 'mirroring' or 'resonance' mechanisms in which the part of the somatosensory cortex that is activated when one engages in some kinds of physical behaviors is also activated when one observes or visually imagines someone else exhibiting that behavior.³⁰ Verbal and cinematic narratives can induce us to empathetically adopt a character's or narrator's point of view and emotionally appraise the facts in the story as that fictional individual does, even if a descriptive accounting of those facts would be unlikely to justify our evaluation.³¹

Such devices by which an emotion is elicited in audiences may work *both* in causing one to feel a certain way about a fictional object and in giving one a reason (from the fiction) to feel that way. When the murkiness of a stage-set primes us to feel fear, that can plausibly be described as the activation of an adaptive response, and thus qualify as a rationally justified representation of the scene's evaluative qualities. And one may feel an emotion in response to a character's facial expression because one is tacitly

relying on it as a kind of testimony about some state of affairs. If so, the emotion is grounded in a reason that speaks to the facts (in the fiction) of the situation.³²

However, it would be an unjustified optimism about automatic emotional responses to assume that they all instantiate a reliable capacity to detect our individual or species-relative evaluative relation to things. And, in any case, even if such capacities are categorically rational, they can be activated on particular occasions in ways that don't successfully realize their function of detecting the valency of our relation to things. As anyone not immune to advertising can attest, we may be explicitly aware that a fictional event, state of affairs, and so on, doesn't warrant a given emotion (the facts within the depiction don't strike us as offering sufficient reason for the emotion), and still we *feel* it.³³

Indeed, works of fiction often exploit the different deliverances of our cognitive awareness and subdoxastic appraisals. We are discomfited by the approach of an apparently harmless child because of the accompanying eerie music; we are surprised, like characters in the fiction, to find that the person with the pleasant visage turns out to be the serial killer.

The locution many theorists appeal to of it being 'fictionally true,' or 'make-believe' in a work that an object, event, scenario or so on, has an emotion-relevant quality tends to obscure this distinction between the different ways in which it can be part of a work that an object is fearsome, admirable, disgusting, and so on. The means described above can play a role in generating what is fictionally true or part of the content of a work. But their *distinctive* contribution to that content is made, not through a description or representation of an object or event as bearing certain evaluative qualities, but through causing us to experience that content so as to impute such evaluative properties to it, e.g. as being menacing, liberating, vile, admirable, and so on. Imputing such properties is not merely projecting them onto the objects of a fiction. For objects of a fiction are in part *constituted* by properties that we are merely caused (without being based on fiction-given reasons) to attribute to them, when that attribution fits what the work is designed to bring about.³⁴

In the actual world, something has the criterial quality that would make fear apt only if it is dangerous, a threat, etc. It is that relation that an object has to our wellbeing, desires, or interests that fear essentially registers. It may be that we could not sustain an emotional response toward an object of a fiction if there were *no* facts internal to it that could serve as reasons for the emotion. However the representational aptness of an emotion need not depend exclusively on such reasons. For something depicted in a fiction can be fearsome (it can be part of the content of the fiction that it is fearsome) just because we are *caused* to feel fear toward it, if that is in accordance with the ends with which the work was designed. When an

emotion is generated by either reasons or causes in accord with how the work is designed, the emotion correctly presents its object as having the emotion's criterial quality.

Perhaps if a work is *too* effective in pulling our heart-strings (to use a causal metaphor), we may charge it with being a debased form of art, or kitsch.³⁵ And we may criticize a person's aesthetic sophistication if he is too readily affected by, and in accord with, a work of art's obvious or trite emotional elicitors. However, those points address how the aesthetic and artistic merit of a work of art is connected to the means by which it elicits our emotions, not points that pertain to the conditions of aptness (in the limited representational sense) of those emotions. A preference for high art rather than sob-stories and melodramas need not be a desire for non-manipulative art but for art whose machinery is less predictable or better concealed. Of course, not just any causes that can prompt an emotion toward a fictional object can give that feeling warrant (affection for a film's characters is not merited if it springs only from an administration of oxytocin).³⁶

6. *Emotions and functions*

The modest defense of the discontinuity thesis that I offer above reflects, I suggest, the fact that the kinds of reasons that we countenance as justifying or challenging our emotions depend on the functions of the practices (or stances defining those practices) in which our emotions are elicited.

Thus, as we have seen, a reality-directed emotion typically has the function of accurately appraising the objective individual- or species-relative value of its object (the value is determined relative to the individual or species but possessed independently of any particular judgment of that value).³⁷ The only reasons that count in favor of the aptness of such emotions (in the narrow representational sense) are those that speak to the possession of whatever values are imputed by those emotions to their objects.

Analogously, in some cases one's imaginative activity has an epistemic or practical role analogous to that of belief and perception, where the function is to aid in discovering some truth about the actual world or, say, in planning for the future. That purpose is better realized if one's emotions are based on reasons that speak to qualities of their object, not the result of some independent cause.

Many fiction- and imagination-directed emotions, however, are generated in activities that are defined by ends – such as pleasure, entertainment, and absorption – that don't require that the emotions always be rationalized by the facts of the objects to which they respond. One may feel warmly disposed toward a figure in a painting only because the beauty of the work

is designed to cause one to feel that way. Even if that feeling is not justified by any facts that are represented, it may be still be justified if one of the internal purposes of engaging with that work of art is to respond with the emotions the work is designed to solicit (assuming that solicitation is successful).

Another way of stating the above point is that, in response to the content of some fictions and imaginations – but not in response to the content of our beliefs and perceptions – the fact that we are merely caused to feel a given way may be a reason to feel that way. For the elicitation of that emotion may be a means by which a fictional work of art or prescribed imagining gets its audience to attribute certain evaluative qualities to a fictional or imagined object, when the recognized facts about the object (in the fiction) do not sufficiently justify that attribution. Thus there are some kinds of reasons that justify an emotion felt toward a state of affairs represented in a fiction or imagining that would not justify that emotion when felt toward an analogous state of affairs in the real world.³⁸

Department of Philosophy
Yale University

NOTES

¹ Outside of the theory of emotions proper, this normative approach occupies the center of major sentimentalist accounts of value defended both by cognitivists such as John McDowell (2001), and David Wiggins (1998); and by noncognitivists such as Simon Blackburn (1998) and Allan Gibbard (1992). These philosophers share the view that certain evaluative qualities of an action or person (such as being morally blameworthy) might best be analyzed solely in terms of what sentiments or emotions it is *merited* for one to feel toward those actions or qualities.

² See Nichols and Stich, 2000; and Schroeder and Matheson, 2006.

³ Representative treatments of the appropriateness of emotions are: Roberts, 2003; Nussbaum, 2001; Helm, 2001; de Sousa, 1987; and Greenspan, 1988. Some accounts that build moral or aesthetic considerations into the concept of an apt emotion directed at works of art are: Currie, 1990; Livingston and Mele, 1997; Choi, 2003; and Robinson, 2005. For the appropriateness of emotions and desires directed toward fictions that represent real-life individuals, see Friend, 2003; and Currie, 2010a.

⁴ Such source-indifference is seen in an affective sense in, e.g., how one can become angry in thinking about some event that one believes has little chance of occurring, without the intensity of one's feeling being discounted in proportion to that likelihood. It is well documented in a behavioral sense in psychological studies such as those that demonstrate that even when subjects are assured that they are not being observed, they exhibit a greater degree of socially positive behaviors (e.g. being honest and charitable) associated with being observed when their environment includes a mere picture of eyes. See, e.g., Bateson, Nettle and Roberts, 2006.

⁵ See Lamarque, 1981; Matravers, 1998; Joyce, 2000; Gaut, 2007; and Gendler and Kovakovich, 2006.

⁶ See Peacocke, 1995 for the notion of representational content. On the content of a perception having correctness conditions, see Crane, 1992.

⁷ On the problem of individuating the 'right kind of reasons' in favor of an evaluative attitude, see Rabinowicz, and Ronnow-Rasmussen, 2004.

⁸ For this point and a subtle discussion of the aptness of sentiments in general, see d'Arms and Jacobson, 2000.

⁹ The property (whether projected onto or detected in an object) that is criterial for an emotion is frequently referred to as an emotion's 'formal object.'

¹⁰ This view that emotions present the world to us as having criterial value-laden features is defended in different forms in Greenspan, 1988; de Sousa, 1987; and Roberts, 1988.

¹¹ See, e.g., Nussbaum, 2001 and Solomon, 1976.

¹² See Deigh, 1994.

¹³ Roberts, 2003; Greenspan, 1988.

¹⁴ Cf. de Sousa, 1987; Rorty, 1980; and Roberts, 1988. Some moderate cognitivists thus identify emotions as analogous to, or as a type of, a perception. See, e.g., Tappolet, 2000; Johnston, 2001; Döring, 2003; and, in a different perceptual model, Prinz, 2004.

¹⁵ Cf. the neo-Jamesian account of emotions in Damasio, 1994.

¹⁶ These subdoxastic sorts of appraisals may come before, or along with, higher-order cognitive appraisals. See LeDoux, 2000.

¹⁷ Cf. Greenspan, 1980.

¹⁸ This long-standing approach is developed, with important differences, in Walton, 1990 and Currie, 1990.

¹⁹ This asymmetry is discussed in by Currie (1997, p. 65): 'We frequently like and take the part of people in fiction whom we would not like or take the part of in real life. The desires we seem to have concerning fictional things can be very unlike the desires we have concerning real life.'

²⁰ Flint Schier, for example, writes 'Our reaction to fictional characters is not just a reaction to fictional people, it is a reaction to them *as represented* in the text . . . Therefore, our reaction is necessarily governed by *how* they are represented, and the kind of emotion that it is appropriate to feel is determined by the quality of the representation,' (1983, p. 85).

²¹ For an account of a point of view in terms as an operator that identifies only certain features of a given context as relevant to one's judgment or deliberation, see Brandom, 1982. Discussions of framing and point of view in relation to fictions include Gendler, 2000; Currie, 2010b; Dadlez, 1997; Goldie, 2003; and Moran, 1994.

²² See Tversky and Kahneman, 1981, p. 453. See Currie, 2010b for frame-effects generated by narrative points of view.

²³ Dadlez, e.g., makes this point in saying that a fiction 'manipulates our attention in such a way that making certain construals is virtually a foregone conclusion. . . those are the only situations we get, and there is little else to attend to' (1997, p. 95).

²⁴ More precisely, *insofar* as one engages with a work of fiction as its author intended it to be engaged with, how one's emotions present an object in the fiction is guided (if not fully determined) by how the artwork presents that object. This qualification acknowledges that some atypical practices of interpretation sanction responses to a work that run contrary to the responses that the work either prescribes in a determinate manner, or, more liberally, merely authorizes or permits. In any case, as I show below, this rejoinder on behalf of the discontinuity proponent is unsuccessful.

²⁵ See McGinn, 1997.

²⁶ This way of describing the distinction is taken from Lamarque and Olsen, 1997, pp. 144–5. An analogous distinction is noted by Kendall Walton (1978, p. 21).

²⁷ Noel Carroll writes, 'Through the manipulation of sound and image, filmmakers often address audiences at a subcognitive, or cognitively impenetrable, level of response. Loud noises – either recorded effects or musical sounds – can elicit instinctual responses from spectators as can the appearance of sudden movement. The movie screen is a rich phenomenal field in terms of variables like size, altitude, and speed, which have the capacity to excite automatic reactions from viewers, while the display of certain phobic and sexual material may also call forth responses barely mediated by thought' (Carroll, 1999, p. 22).

²⁸ See Schnall *et al.*, 2008 for studies showing test subjects were more severe in their moral judgments of various scenerios when exposed to morally irrelevant factors such as an unclean test environment.

²⁹ Plantinga 1999, pp. 239–55.

³⁰ For a discussion of mirror neurons and their postulated connection to empathy, see Gallese, 2001. Bruno Wicker *et al.*, discuss emotional contagion (Wicker *et al.* 2003).

³¹ See Gernsbacher, Goldsmith and Robertson, 1992.

³² It is also often the case that the presence of such emotion-eliciting devices can serve as reasons for our emotions, just because they can be employed to signal to the audience what sort of events will soon occur, or what as-yet-unacknowledged feature of a character will be exposed. However, these grounds for an audience's emotions are not internal to the fiction (not within the scope of the operator 'it is fictional that. . .'), but are rather devices external to the fictional world that shape our attitude toward what is internal. I thank Gregory Currie (*personal communication*) for pointing out this distinctive source of emotion-justifying reasons vis-à-vis fictions.

³³ For an account of complimentary, simultaneous, or dual processing of information, see J. Greene *et al.*, 2004. Kahneman (2003) discusses the degree to which the lower automatic system is effectively monitored by the higher cognitive one.

³⁴ A work's way of presenting some content may, of course, not be successful.

³⁵ As in Greenberg, 1939.

³⁶ Of course, artists regularly challenge, and sometimes succeed, in expanding the boundaries of acceptable elicitors.

³⁷ No doubt, there are some circumstances in which our reality-directed emotions properly take on a non-representational function, as in the practices of conditioning or 'covert sensitization.' One trying to quit smoking or gambling might think of some aversive stimulus (say, rats or vomit) every time she considers the prohibited activity. When successful, these associations lead to a decreased desire for the object or activity by merely *causing* a negative emotion toward it. However, here there is a distinction between having reasons (of a theoretical kind) to feel a given way and reasons (of a practical or instrumental kind) to cause one to feel that way. The latter kinds of reasons do not serve in place of the former, although they might lead to their discovery.

³⁸ I'm grateful to Gregory Currie, Tamar Gendler, and an anonymous reader for this journal for their helpful criticisms and suggestions.

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