Reply to Abell's and Currie's comments on Gilmore's *Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind*

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I am grateful to Catharine Abell and Gregory Currie for their incisive and productive commentaries on *Apt Imaginings*. In what follows, I will try to respond to their criticisms and identify where our points of agreement and disagreement lie.

Reply to Abell

I argue in my book for *normative discontinuity*. This is the claim that the criteria governing the fit, aptness, or rationality of our responses to the contents of fictions and imaginings are not only different from, but also sometimes inconsistent with, such criteria governing our truth-aiming responses to what we take to be real. That a given state of affairs represented in a fiction justifies certain imaginings, emotions, desires, or evaluations about the contents of the fiction does not entail that a belief in that state of affairs would justify analogous responses (responses with the same content) about the real world. In developing that argument, I survey, without deciding among, several competing theories as to what determines fictional content and thus what decides whether a response to a fiction reflects a correct comprehension of it.

In her commentary, Abell (2022) argues that if I am to defend a theory of normative discontinuity, I cannot remain agnostic as to which kind of account of fictional content the theory enjoins. She writes in this issue:

> while I agree with its conclusion, I think that his argument for normative discontinuity regarding our imaginative responses to fictions fails. More specifically, I do not think one can mount a successful argument for this position while remaining neutral, as Gilmore wants to do, regarding the determinants of fictive content (p.162).

For only some accounts of fictional content are consistent with my argument for normative discontinuity, and different notions of fictional content will entail different interpretations of key concepts that argument appeals to (such as 'design').

Consider the following illustration of features of a fictional representation that elicit emotions and imaginings from us without providing what would count as justifications for analogous emotions and beliefs in real life. In the opening pages of *Crime and Punishment*, the narrator

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describes the protagonist as 'remarkably good-looking, taller than average, slender and trim, with beautiful dark eyes and dark blond hair', and the pawnbroker as 'a tiny, dried-up old crone, about sixty, with sharp, spiteful little eyes and a small, sharp nose'. These passages do not tell us where a reader's allegiance should lie, but rather—through the exploitation of a common bias toward attractive people—the passages cause that allegiance to form.

Abell notes, however, that I must have some way of distinguishing between when such responses to a fictional representation are correct, and when they spring from biases or associations but are incorrect. And she rightly says that I rely for this distinction on a work's *design*.

> So, ultimately, what determines fictive content is how a work is designed, and our emotional responses to fictive representations are appropriate when they result in content attributions that conform to the work's design (p.164–165).

The problem Abell finds here is that my appeal to design as what constrains accurate attributions of content is explanatorily incomplete, for design 'can play a role in determining which imaginings are epistemically justified only if it influences *the way in which* those imaginings are elicited, and this requires those imaginings to be elicited *in accordance with* whichever factors determine the work's content' (p.166).

Thus, an imagining elicited by a fiction is not justified if it only happens to conform to the contents of the fiction—no more than the formation of a belief would be justified simply because it is true. Rather, an imagining is epistemically justified because it comes about in the right way—it arises in virtue of the work being designed to elicit that imagining. So Abell's point is that I need to identify *which* of the many ways in which a fiction's design might elicit an imagining count as a correct means to recognizing the fiction's content. An answer requires some theory of the determinants of fictive content.

As Abell notes, I acknowledge that no challenge to continuity is to be found where readers understand the contents of a fiction via the ordinary process of recognizing the communicative intentions of an author or reliable narrator. When the narrator of J. G. Ballard's novel says, 'Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash', we infer, using ordinary principle of relevance (why the unnecessary 'last'?), that there were other crashes that had preceded the one referred to (Ballard, 1973, p. 1). And there would be no threat to continuity in a case in which a reader imagines a character has a given vice because the reader recognizes that the author intended to convey that the character has that vice through the character's name. Perhaps Thwackum, in *Tom Jones*, was given his name by Fielding in order to communicate to readers that the tutor's disciplinary methods rely on the cane. In such cases, we discover what is true in a fiction just as we might discover what is true of the actual world—through a valid inference to what we are being told.

If fictive content was constituted solely by the successful realization of such communicative intentions, there would be no room for normative discontinuity. However, I deny that the content of a fiction is supplied only through an author's communicative intentions. For some, fictive contents are the product of an author's *intentions in action*, not those of the communicative, reflexive sort.[1] As Abell notes in her *Fiction: A Philosophical*

1 See Lepore and Stone (2015, p. 206).

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Analysis, an author may not conform to any cooperative principle of communication in realizing the goal of eliciting a given imagining; the intention may be to elicit that imagining in whatever way is most likely to succeed (2020, p. 67).

Indeed, in illustrating discontinuity, I appeal to some of the many ways in which authors may realize their intentions to elicit a given response by causing readers to form certain imaginings without supplying justifying reasons (*from within the fiction*) for those imaginings. The non-linear soundtrack characterized by abrupt frequency transitions of a film can cause anxiety or loathing over whatever might be presented on screen, without providing any justification for those attitudes when formed on the same basis about real things. A fiction's representation of a character via physical disgust-elicitors can cause readers to feel, as the work prescribes, moral disgust toward that character, but an analogous process would not justify the attribution of vice to a real person (Wilson and Brekke, 1994, p.117). Stylistic and formal aspects of an artistic representation can cause us to attribute properties to some object in ways that would not be justified if those objects were considered independently of the medium. Thus, a painter may induce us to conceive of someone as violent or powerful through brushstrokes aggressively applied. Works of fiction rely on the activation of biases to generate recognition of their contents. Statements that rhyme appear to be construed as more insightful than those that do not, even when meaning is held constant (McGlone and Tofighbakhsh, 1999). That is a cognitive bias that is friendly to popular music, listening to which we exhibit cognitive, affective and behavioural signs, suggesting we endorse promises of eternal devotion, or anthems of violence and mayhem, even though we would not accept those avowals in contexts of real life. And, to return to the deployment of characters' names, sometimes a name is employed in a fiction—Gradgrind, Willy Loman, Becky Sharp—not to assert that the characters have certain qualities, but cause readers to attribute to those characters those qualities on the basis of associations that would hardly be justified in analogous attributions to real people with those names. For names, like many words, can exhibit a degree of *iconicity*, by which their phonological form imitates—or evokes associations that are attributed—without any factual correspondence, to their referents.[2] Here, considerations that serve only as causes of (a- or irrational) reactions to things in real experience can count as justifications of responses to what is only imagined or fictional.[3]

2 See, Dingemanse, *et al.* (2015). For example, some textual analysis studies suggest that poems with a higher frequency of plosive sounds are more likely to express a pleasant mood than poems with a high frequency of nasal sounds, which tend to indicate unpleasant moods. Auracher, et al. (2011).

3 For the contrary view, that the asymmetry in justification here in the case of emotions 'is not a difference in the kind of justificatory reason but merely a difference in what counts as specific instances of the same kind of justificatory reason' see Moonyoung Song's perceptive 'Aptness of Fiction-Directed Emotions', (2020, 58). I see the above as illustrations of discontinuity because the fictional states of affairs that elicit the fiction-directed emotion would not count as *evidence* in favour of the correctness of that emotion if those states of affairs were real.

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Of course, if we take an external perspective in which we discuss the design of the work, describing it as a representation produced with certain constitutive ends, we can justify a given claim to fictive content by pointing out that, as a given name was chosen in order to cause that imputation, the imputation is apt or correct. However, my question is over the justification of our responses by facts internal to a fiction, not properties it has as an artefact considered under external descriptions.[4]

Finally, Abell considers whether the design of a work can lead one to correctly attribute certain qualities to fictional characters (or states of affairs) without those attributions being intended by an author. If this were my view, it would mean that 'factors other than authors' intentions explain why fictions have the contents they do' (p. 167). However, my view is that authors' intentions constrain the correct description of the design of fictions, and thus those intentions do indirectly constrain what responses caused by the design of a work count as correct content ascriptions. I say *constrain* here rather than *determine* because it is likely that any work of even minimal complexity under-determines appropriate or fitting responses. There can be a great range of distinct affective, cognitive, desire-like and evaluative responses to a given fiction that, nonetheless, are all consistent with the imaginings that the fiction prescribes.

Abell endorses normative discontinuity because of the asymmetry between how beliefs formed in response to testimony are justified and how imaginings, according to her institutional theory, are justified: 'beliefs formed in response to testimony are epistemically justified only if they result from processes that accord with speakers' intentions, whereas imaginings formed in response to fictions are epistemically justified if they result from processes that accord with the content determining rules of fiction' (p.168). Illustrating the latter, she writes, 'when a reader imagines that a character is morally bad because he is described as ugly or deformed, her imagining is epistemically justified if it is guided by her grasp of the content determining rules of fiction, which prescribe imagining him as such' (p.168).

Alternatively, I embrace that demonstration of how an imagining can be justified on the basis of a content-determining rule that prescribes a certain kind of response to a given feature of a fictional representation, I do not endorse the claim that such content-determining rules of fiction are the exclusive source of the contents of fictive utterances. This resistance is due in part to problems I find in Abell's idea that, in the production of fictive content, an author's intentions are trumped by the rules governing their utterances: 'the contents of authors' fictive utterances can differ from the contents they intend them to have' (2020, p. 10). These concerns include (i) the implication that an author may furnish utterances, the contents of which prescribe imaginings that she could not intend—say because of limits to her knowledge; and (ii) the implication that we ought never to adjust our understanding of an author's utterance to correspond with how it was intended; there is only the content of the utterance that is determined by the relevant institution-given rules. This implication rules out the possibility that a novel can sometimes contain mistakes that should not be taken as a source of its fictional content (e.g.

4 On internal and external descriptions, see Lamarque and Olsen (1996).

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inconsistent descriptions of the same event within the story). Instead, I take it that when content-determining rules come into play to elicit a given imagining on the basis of some utterance, it is always because an author intended those rules to apply. And here I assume that in determining the fictive contents of an author's utterance, one should defer to the intention with which it was made—that is, if one has access to that intention and it can be plausibly realized by the utterance in question.

That last constraint speaks to a larger point that I want to register here. I argue that considerations that serve only as causes of (a- or irrational) reactions to things in real experience can count, when represented in a fiction, as justifications of responses to what else is fictional. However, I do not think this difference reflects anything peculiar to fictions.[5] Instead, it reflects how the kinds of reasons that justify responses to imaginings are indexed to the functions of the practices in which they are elicited. In some cases, imaginative activity has an epistemic role like that of beliefs and perceptions, where the aim is to (for example) envision the outcome of a choice between two alternatives. Such projects are better realized if responses to the imagined object are based on reasons that speak to its relevant properties, and are not the result of some independent cause. Many fiction- and imagination-directed responses, however, are elicited in practices with constitutive functions—for example, pleasure, vicarious experience and absorption—the realization of which does not depend on the responses being rationalized by facts about their targets. We can recognize that how we come to feel about something in a fiction, an advertisement, a fantasy, a hyper-optimistic visualization conducive to athletic achievement, is not merited by a descriptive accounting of its properties, and yet the manner in which it is imagined prompts us to be appropriately affected that way nonetheless. Different purposes in engaging with imaginings implicate different norms for apt responses.

But this appeal to the purposes of the imagining-eliciting practices raises a question: are apt responses constrained by (i) the contents of a fiction, or (ii) the constitutive aims of the practice of engaging with fiction? I take respecting (i) to be a typical dimension of adhering to (ii). That is, I largely address the kind of engagement with a fiction in which we seek pleasure, and other ends typical of fictions, in and through responding as a work prescribes. No doubt, many works aim to garner certain responses, but (e.g. because of poor technique or imaginative resistance) fail to bring those responses about. So, I appeal only to cases in which the prescribed engagement is successfully realized.[6]

Reply to Currie

I argue that, sometimes, an imagining can be justified on the basis of facts within a fiction that, if those facts were true, would not serve as evidence for an analogous belief. Likewise, the contents of a fiction or imagining may justify affective or evaluative responses that

5 *Contra* Goldie (2003).

6 I acknowledge, of course, that many works furnish greater value when interpreted ironically or subversively. And some artistic practices such as film-making are much more open-ended in the authority that they assign to a creator's intentions.

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would not be justified if those contents belonged to a truth-apt state. I call this a *discontinuity* thesis. Its denial, a commitment to *continuity*, is evinced in certain assumptions made by many philosophers and psychologists about fiction-directed imaginings. These include, inter alia: the view that, in order to provoke a given response to a fictional scenario, authors must present a representation of what would bring it about in the actual world; that a fiction can be morally edifying through furnishing an empathetic connection with its fictional characters that is carried over to empathy with their real-life counterparts; that one's response to a morally freighted fictional scenario reveals the contours of one's evaluative disposition toward what is real; and, that psychological studies that deploy imagined scenarios to elicit affective or evaluative states tell us about those kinds of responses in the wild, not just instances triggered by acknowledged fictional depictions in the lab.

I argue that the norms that govern such responses do not apply invariantly across fictional- and real-world instantiations, for a difference in what such responses are answerable to makes a difference in how they can be justified. While beliefs and other real-world-directed representations 'aim at truth', imaginings aim at what is true in, or according to, a fiction or imagining. This means that considerations that would count as reasons justifying a response to content that is imagined may not count as reasons for that response to that same content when it belongs to a veridical representation.

In his challenging commentary, Gregory Currie (2022) identifies a significant difficulty in setting up the debate between proponents of continuity and discontinuity: identifying a genuine conflict between the two positions requires specifying a plausible standard of similarity against which we can compare apt or rational responses to fictions with those to real life. In respect of what *kind of similarity* do our responses to imagined situations mirror, or not, those to real ones? I ask that question with reference not to the degree of similarity, but to the consistency between criteria of justification in the two domains.

Currie raises two kinds of objections to this project. One is that my demonstrations of certain kinds of counterexamples to continuity do not succeed, or at least that they allow plausible alternative interpretations that do not require us to accept discontinuity. The other is that, on the one side, truth-apt states such as belief representations and, on the other, imagined or fictional representations, are not sufficiently parallel to motivate the debate over continuity. It is only if we are comparing like with like—which Currie disputes—that we should care if the norms governing mental representations in the two domains are consistent.

Because there is a significant debate over whether emotions and desires (and, one might add, evaluations) directed at the contents of fictions are of the same explanatory kind as ordinary analogues of those states directed toward real things, Currie focuses only on the application of my question to imaginings of the representational sort—namely, those that are analogous to belief representations. However, I will return to these other kinds of attitudes toward fictions later to suggest their relevance to one of his objections.

Currie notes a problem with my phrasing of the continuity position: '…it is rational to imagine that p is true according to a given fictional representation of the world if and only if it would be rational to believe, for the same kinds of reasons, that p is true in the actual world' (2020, p. 136). He rightly notes that we do not imagine some fact in a fiction is true *according to a fictional representation*; we imagine that it is true. However, the scope

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of the phrase Currie emphasizes is intended in my formulation to include only 'that p is true', for the point is that a reader imagines p *in virtue of and in a way that corresponds to* the fictional representation.

In any case, he writes, if the above formulation of continuity is the right one, no one would be a continuity theorist. For 'beliefs get their justification from the evidence of perception, from testimony and by inference from what we know or reasonably believe' (p. 190). Whereas, imaginings do not arise from, e.g. the evidence of testimony or perception. Nor is it irrational to imagine something just because one desires to, while it would be (epistemically, but perhaps not practically) irrational to believe something for that reason (p.191–192).

However, his objection does not correctly represent the analogy I pose between beliefs and imaginings. My question is whether, *modulo* the difference between the respective targets of belief and imagining, the mental representations elicited by a story are subject to the same norms of correctness as those governing parallel representations formed about actual things. Do, specifically, belief-like imaginings get their justification only from the imagined evidence of perception, from imagined testimony, and via inferences from what is antecedently imagined to be true? The relevant parallel between the justification of beliefs and imaginings thus holds between the justification of beliefs based on actual evidence and the justification of imaginings based on pretend or imagined evidence internal to the imaginative engagement. Of course, there might be reasons for an imaginative response to a fictional representation that are not drawn from evidence internal to the story. For example, knowing that a fiction belongs to a given genre, or is modelled on an earlier work, might enable me to imagine certain things to be fictionally true without there being any facts internal to the story from which I could infer those fictional truths. However, I am exclusively concerned with criteria governing the formation of, and transitions among, representations that are imagined to be true in virtue of other things that are imagined to be true.

I accept something like Currie's formulation in his commentary of the similarity standard, Strong, as what should be appealed to in the debate between continuity and discontinuity.

> (Strong) Readers of fiction are subject to norms in imagining that closely parallel the norms that apply to a believer whose beliefs have the same contents as the imaginings of the reader. The close parallel in question is this: where the reasonableness of the belief that P depends on some condition R being true, the reasonableness of imagining that P depends [on] R being pretence or make-believe.

However, I think we should eliminate the modifier 'closely' and ask the more categorical question: When we say a belief that P is justified by some condition R being true and an imaging that P is justified by some condition R being make-believe, are the relevant norms of justification invariant across those contexts of belief and imagining?

I argue that the answer is No. The norms of justification are not continuous from belief to imaginative contexts. In defending that thesis, I appeal to illustrations of how our imaginative responses to a fiction are justified on grounds that would not justify analogous formations of beliefs.

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I describe these as cases in which readers arrive at the correct imaginings in virtue of their reliance on some norm or principle that says that the presence of one feature is a reliable indicator of another (e.g. physical disgust felt for a character in some contexts is a reliable indicator of the character's venality). Currie is not persuaded that these are genuine counterexamples to continuity. A plausible alternative description is that such examples show how fictions can prompt us to arrive at correct imaginings (imaginings that correctly represent what is true in the fiction) via irrational means. I reject that alternative description because we need to maintain a distinction between such imaginings evoked as part of a correct comprehension of a story and those that are genuinely irrational responses (as when a reader's bigotry leads to his mistaken attribution of, say, dishonesty to a character on the basis of his ethnicity). Contra Currie, the distinction here is not between two different ways of behaving irrationally. Rather, it is a distinction between a process of imagining that is rational because it is arises from and accords with the work's design, and a process of imagining that is irrational because it flouts the work's design.

Currie wonders why I do not accept an alternative kind of case as a counterexample to continuity: where we infer from something we believe about a fiction (its genre, its author's tendency to certain plot twists) to a given imagining of what is true in the fiction. Such 'externalist' cases do not have ready analogues in the real world, so they might seem to be good cases of discontinuity. However, I do not think they are such cases, because, conceptually, they *could* have analogues in the real world—as seen when people offer explanations or make predictions based on their belief in fate or Providence. Inferring from my belief about a fiction (it belongs to such and such a genre) that P is true within it is parallel to inferring from my belief about a supernatural being directing reality that P is true.

Granted, it appears that there is an asymmetry in virtue of the former inference connecting a belief to an imagining, and the latter a belief to a belief. But that is because an inference from a belief about, say, a fiction's genre, and an imagining of what is fictionally true includes a step that is obscured. We move, for example, from beliefs about the typical plot of a detective story to an imagining, in reading such a story, that (A) *people who seem like obvious suspects are likely not guilty of the crime*. It is from that imagining that we infer the further imagining: (B) *the most obvious suspect is not guilty*. Indeed, fictional master detectives often make that inference from A to B, thereby distinguishing them from their bumbling foils. This confirms the parallel between belief giving rise to belief and imagining giving rise to imagining.[7]

Finally, Currie poses a more general challenge to my account that does not depend on the interpretation of putative counterexamples to continuity: that comparing norms for engagement with fiction with norms for engagement with reality is not a comparison of like with like. If true, this makes the question of continuity otiose. For, if the criteria governing the formation of beliefs are not only different from, but different *in kind* from, the criteria governing the formation of imaginings, it is not an interesting question whether the norms operative in one domain are consistent with those in the other. He notes that there is an apparent parallel in how 'the relevant norm of belief is one that

7 There is no doubt a problem here of the right way to characterize a belief in an entity who directs a world without that belief being about something in the world.

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places belief in relation to truth, whereas the norm of imagination places it in relation to truth-in-fiction' (p.193). However, this appearance dissolves when we notice that truth is an extensional notion and truth-in-the-story is intensional. If mercury is poisonous, so is quicksilver, as the terms are co-referential. Yet, if I believe that mercury is poisonous, this does not entail that I believe the same of quicksilver. Analogously, the Black Death was a plague spread by bacteria; yet Bocccaccio's fictional representation of ten Florentines escaping the plague is not a representation of their fleeing bacterial infections (his contemporaries attributed the infection to 'miasma').

Currie's challenge is thus to deny the putative parallel between working out what is true and working out what is true in a fiction—a parallel that both sides to the argument between continuity and discontinuity presume.

I agree that the metaphysical differences between truth and truth-in-fiction make the satisfaction conditions of, respectively, belief and fiction-directed imaginings different. However, our assessment of the rationality of forming a given mental representation does not turn on whether it fits its satisfaction conditions.[8] To assess the rationality of a belief is not to ask whether it is true, but whether it is formed in the right way—for example, through validity-preserving inferences, justified reliance on testimony, and so on. Analogously, the rationality of fiction-directed imaginings depends on the processes by which they arise, not that they happen to correctly represent the contents of the story. The debate over epistemic norms is thus a debate over the norms governing belief and imaginings, *both* of which exhibit intensionality. Just because I believe that the *Mona Lisa* is a masterpiece does not mean I believe *La Joconde* is a masterpiece, as a visitor to the Louvre seeking the former but confusedly seeing only signs for the latter might attest. And just because I imagine the dog did not bark at the intruder in the Sherlock Holmes story, it does not entail that I imagine the dog did not bark at its owner. No doubt, some epistemic norms may not be invariant because of the different nature of fictional truth and truth: discovering that I fully believe two contradictory things should force me to lessen my credence in each belief or to give one of them up; imagining a contradiction in virtue of following a story—for example, in a magical realist style—may not always require reassessing where, in forming those imaginings, one went wrong.

Finally, notice that the intensionality of fictional contexts does not motivate an analogous objection to the framing of the debate over the continuity of affective, conative and evaluative norms.[9] That is because those norms govern representations characterized by intensionality in both fictional and real-world contexts. Moral disgust, for example, presents its object as evil. We can ask whether the kinds of reasons that can justify that

8 As Currie notes in his commentary, 'Right imaginings need not be rational ones, just as true beliefs need not be rational, as Gilmore (2020) himself says' (191).

9 I allow that if our affective and conative (and perhaps evaluative) responses to fictions instantiate only imaginative counterparts of real emotions and desires, then the question of continuity governing the norms of such responses would seem insignificant. If my feelings for P in the real world and feelings for P when represented in a fiction are not of the same explanatory kind, why care whether the norms of fit or aptness governing the relation between those feelings and their targets are consistent across the real and fictional contexts? However, given that these attitudes are supposed to be counterparts, we might want to know why their justifications do not behave analogously.

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emotion felt for a fictional character are the same kinds as those that can justify the emotion felt for someone who is real. Likewise, we can ask whether the desire for a fictional character to thrive can be supported by reasons that would support a desire for an analogous real person to thrive. In these respects, our responses to actual states of affairs and to those represented in fictions are sufficiently similar for the question to be raised of whether those norms apply invariantly across engagements in the two domains.

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