The paradox of tragedy,

or why (almost) all emotions can be enjoyed

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Abstract. We regularly intentionally expose ourselves to fictions we take to be likely to elicit in us emotions we generally find unpleasant when prompted by actual states of affairs. This is the so-called “paradox of tragedy”. We contribute to solving the paradox of tragedy by denying that, when fiction-directed, most of these emotions are in themselves unpleasant. We first provide strong evidence that these emotions, such as fear, sadness, or pity, are often enjoyed when fiction-directed. We then advance an explanation of what makes these fiction-directed emotions often not unpleasant, while their reality-directed counterparts are generally so. In the last section, we advance an explanation of what makes fiction-directed emotions often enjoyable, and argue that a complete solution to the paradox of tragedy should be *pluralist*.

Keywords: paradox of tragedy; negative emotions; fiction-directed emotions.

1. Introduction

The question at the root of the so-called paradox of tragedy is how to explain the fact that we regularly intentionally expose ourselves to fictions we take to be likely to elicit in us certain emotions – for example, fear, sadness, or pity – we generally find unpleasant when prompted by actual states of affairs. We generally do not like to experience these emotions. So why are we happy to expose ourselves to fictions that are likely to elicit them? To this question, the main existing answers consist in:

1) *Denying that the emotions elicited by actual states of affairs are identical to the emotions elicited by the fictional states of affairs that works of fiction show or describe.*

For Kendall Walton, for instance, fiction-directed emotions, unlike reality-directed emotions, are not real emotions. They are quasi-emotions (Walton 1978), which are not “full-fledged instances of the emotions they are labelled as being”, as Iskra Fileva puts it (2014, p. 174). Enjoying quasi-fear, quasi-sadness, or quasi-pity while finding fear, sadness, or pity disagreeable would then be no more puzzling than enjoying eating the shell of chocolate eggs while not liking eating the shell of real eggs.[[1]](#footnote-1)

2) *Accepting that, whether fiction-directed or reality-directed, the emotions in question are in themselves unpleasant, but claiming that*

a) *these fiction-directed emotions are not as unpleasant as their reality-directed counterparts*.

According to John Morreall (1985), this is because we have a form of control over fiction-directed emotions which we do not have over their reality-directed counterparts. It is up to us to continue or cease exposing ourselves to the fictions that prompt fiction-directed emotions, while it is not up to us when it comes to the actual states of affairs that prompt reality-directed emotions. This prevents the intensity of fiction-directed emotions from crossing a threshold above which they would be as unpleasant as their reality-directed counterparts.

b) *the intrinsic unpleasantness of these fiction-directed emotions is compensated by certain hedonic or epistemic rewards we can get from experiencing them*.

For instance, according to Susan Feagin, “when one feels pity for a character in a tragedy, one might have the positive meta-response of valuing one’s own capacity for sympathy. The painful emotion makes no positive contribution to the experience in its own right, but it is compensated for by the value of the meta-response” (Feagin 1992, p. 86). In such a case, one is pleased to observe that one is capable of such an emotional response that is evidence of one’s morally good character.

c) *the intrinsic unpleasantness of these fiction-directed emotions is* *compensated by their also being themselves hedonically or epistemically valuable*.

According to Matthew Strohl’s “strong ambivalence view”, we can take “pleasure in an experience [e.g., of watching a horror movie] partly in virtue of its painful aspects” (Strohl 2012, p. 203) when they are “making an active contribution to the pleasant character of the complex experience [they are] embedded in” (*ibid*., p. 210). You find a similar idea in Aaron Smuts’s “rich experience theory”, according to which it is only *in the very experience* of having certain painful or unpleasant emotions that we can fully understand certain deep truths concerning “the human condition” or “ways of being in the world” (Smuts 2009, p. 48). Because having such emotions is “constitutive” or “part of the understanding itself” (Smuts 2014, p. 134), we can desire to have these emotional experiences “for the sake of having the experiences” (*ibid*., p. 131). Similarly, according to Katerina Bantinaki a fiction-directed emotion like fear may be *affectively* unpleasant yet nonetheless *attitudinally* pleasurable or enjoyable. For Bantinaki, an emotion like fear is attitudinally pleasurable when we have “an approving or welcoming stance” toward it (Bantinaki 2012, p. 387) due to the benefits to be gained from experiencing it – in particular, the management, in a safe, non-risky context, “of our own reactions to fear: of our bodily responses, our thoughts, and our behavioral expressions”, which will “make us more fit in coping with fear in real-life risky situations” (*ibid*., p. 390).[[2]](#footnote-2)

3) *Denying that fiction-directed emotions such as fiction-directed fear, sadness, or pity are in themselves unpleasant*.

Alex Neill and Berys Gaut argue in this fashion that in both the case of fiction-directed and the case of reality-directed emotions such as fear, sadness, or pity, we negatively evaluate the intentional objects of these emotions – that is, the actual or fictional situations or states of affairs toward which these emotions are directed – as being at least partly “disvaluable” (Gaut 1993, p. 340) or “undesirable” (Neill 1992, p. 62). But this does not necessarily imply that we experience them as unpleasant or painful, which means that they are not intrinsically so. What justifies their usually being characterized as “negative” is the negative evaluations they incorporate, plus for Gaut their being “typically” unpleasant, which “allows room for some individuals on some occasions to enjoy them” (Gaut 1993, p. 344) – in particular, when they are directed toward fictional situations or state of affairs.

Our aim in this paper is to make progress in solving the paradox of tragedy by defending (3). While both Neill and Gaut focus on how to explain why emotions such as fear, sadness, or pity can be categorized as negative despite their not being necessarily unpleasant, a resolution of the paradox of tragedy involving (3) also needs to accomplish three further tasks. First, one needs to provide some positive evidence for the claim that fiction-directed negative emotions can be, and in fact are often, experienced as enjoyable. Unless evidence for this claim is provided, it could be argued that, even if it may be that, as Neill and Gaut have held, the negativity of emotions such as fear, sadness, or pity does not imply that they are always unpleasant, this does not show in any way that they are not unpleasant when fiction-directed. We shall provide such evidence in section 2. Second, one needs to explain what exactly makes it the case that these emotions can be not unpleasant when fiction-directed yet are generally unpleasant when reality-directed. We shall provide such an explanation in section 3. Third, to explain why some emotions can be not unpleasant is not the same as explaining why they can be enjoyable because an emotion could be not unpleasant yet also not enjoyable (it might be hedonically neutral). In section 4, we shall provide an explanation of why fiction-directed negative emotions can be experienced as enjoyable. This will be sufficient to explain the fact that we actively want to experience them. We shall then argue that, while the recognition that fiction-directed negative emotions can be enjoyable is not sufficient for solving the paradox of tragedy, it is necessary.[[3]](#footnote-3)

2. Evidence that fiction-directed negative emotions can be, and often are, enjoyed

As Gaut (1993, p. 333) remarks, the “most straightforward explanation” of the fact that we regularly intentionally expose ourselves to fictions we think are likely to elicit in us certain emotions – for example, fear, sadness, or pity – we generally do not like to experience when prompted by actual states of affairs is that we often enjoy experiencing these emotions when they are fiction-directed. And the simplest explanation of our often enjoying them when fiction-directed is that we often experience them as enjoyable rather than as unpleasant. This implies that fear, sadness, or pity are not intrinsically unpleasant, whatever their intentional objects.

This is not just the simplest explanation of the fact in question, according to Gaut and Bantinaki: saying that these emotions, when fiction-directed, are “basically unpleasant” goes “against audiences’ own reports on their experience” – audiences typically find the fear elicited by horror movies enjoyable (Bantinaki 2012, p. 386), and we have “no *prima facie* reason to assume that audiences are massively in error regarding the source of their enjoyment” (*ibid*., p. 384).

Consider also the case of Norman,

a disappointed spectator who comes out of a horror film and complains that it wasn’t scary enough. He wanted to be really frightened, but the film hardly raised a mild tremor of apprehension in him. […] The problem was, he avers, that it wasn't frightening. (Gaut 1993, p. 335)

According to Gaut, Norman’s complaint is hard to understand if Norman does not enjoy being scared when watching movies. In contrast, if Norman does enjoy being scared by horror movies his complaint makes perfect sense. And this not only goes for fear and horror movies or thrillers, but also for sadness and tragedies or psychological dramas, for example. This is why, when such movies, plays, or novels do not move us to tears, or do not make us deeply sad for the main characters and their fate, we tend to be disappointed and to judge that these fictions are, in a central respect, failures.

However, one could object that the fact that a person complains about a horror movie’s not being sufficiently scary does not necessarily mean that this person *enjoys* being scared, and may simply show that they *wanted* to be scared. Isn’t wanting and expecting to experience emotions like fear and sadness compatible with their being in themselves unpleasant and with one’s expecting them to be so? Don’t we sometimes want and expect to undergo unpleasant experiences for the benefits that should follow? When you stay at your desk and revise for your exams instead of playing tennis or going to the beach, or when you do your daily 30-minute physical exercise routine instead of staying in your armchair reading interesting papers, you want and choose to do something unpleasant in the expectation of future benefits.

The crucial point though is that we do not anticipate these experiences with *enthusiasm*, *excitement* and *eagerness*. Thinking that something is worth doing from a prudential and/or epistemic point of view is not sufficient for anticipating it with enthusiasm, excitement or eagerness. One also needs to expect it to be pleasant or enjoyable. Now, when we are about to watch or read an effective thriller or a powerful tragedy that should elicit intense fear, sadness, or pity, we often anticipate these moments with enthusiasm, excitement and eagerness. This is evidence that we expect these moments to be enjoyable rather than unpleasant or just hedonically neutral. Moreover, that we anticipate these moments of fiction-directed fear, sadness, or pity with enthusiasm, excitement and eagerness is more compatible with our experiencing these moments as *affectively pleasurable* than with our experiencing them as *affectively unpleasant but attitudinally pleasurable,* or as *affectively unpleasant but compensated by greater hedonic goods*. So, when a person complains about a horror movie’s not being scary enough *and* was enthusiastic, excited, and eager to watch it, this does not just indicate that they wanted to be scared, but that being scared by horror movies is affectively pleasurable for this person, which supports (3) – that is, the view that emotions such as fiction-directed fear, sadness, or pity are not in themselves unpleasant.

Additional evidence for the claim that we often experience emotions such as fiction-directed fear or sadness as enjoyable is that, when we experience them, we often do not want them to stop or do anything to prevent ourselves from being exposed to the fictions that prompt them. On the contrary, we are generally upset, or at least dissatisfied, when phone calls or power failures interrupt our experiencing these emotions. We generally take interruptions to spoil our experience of the fiction in question. We also often do not like it when fictional events unfold in such a way that these emotions do not have time to grow, or stop too quickly and abruptly (even if, maybe incoherently, we want the characters we like to quickly escape the fictional events or situations that elicit in us these emotions). This indicates that the valence of the emotions in question is not negative but positive – if negatively valenced psychological states are defined, as Jesse Prinz does, as those that “carry an internal signal […] that shouts ‘less of this’” and typically impel us, behaviorally, to avoid the situations that elicit them, while the opposite is true of positively valenced ones (Prinz 2019, p. 909). It may be that positively valenced emotions do not necessarily have a positive hedonic tone and can be affectively disagreeable. But the fact that fiction-directed emotions such as fear or sadness are generally positively valenced is, once again, more compatible with our experiencing these emotions as affectively pleasurable than with our experiencing them as affectively unpleasant but attitudinally pleasurable, or as affectively unpleasant but compensated by greater hedonic goods.

Consider also the fact that we often recommend certain fictions to people we love, and whose wellbeing matters to us, on the basis of the fact that these fictions will elicit in them strong fiction-directed fear or sadness. We sometimes recommend certain gut-wrenching fictions to people we care about because of the remarkable artistic and/or epistemic value of these fictions. But typically, when we recommend fictions that should prompt strong fiction-directed fear or sadness, it does not seem like we want them to experience something the unpleasantness of which is compensated by its also having a hedonically positive dimension, or by other sorts of rewards (e.g., artistic and/or epistemic rewards). Typically, recommending a thriller or a tragedy to friends and family does not seem like recommending they read Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons* given the exceptional epistemic value of this book, or like recommending they take regular physical exercise given the many benefits, hedonic or otherwise, that should follow in the medium or long term. In these two latter cases, we typically do not expect our relatives to enjoy, while they are doing it, what we recommend they do. Things appear to be different when we recommend reading or watching thrillers or tragedies that should elicit fiction-directed fear or sadness. This would mean that we typically expect them to enjoy the very moments during which they experience these emotions, and to enjoy these fictions partly because of their enjoying these moments.

The foregoing does not mean that all fiction-directed emotions are enjoyable, and it is indisputable that we often do not want to watch certain movies or read certain books because of the fiction-directed emotions they are likely to elicit in us.[[4]](#footnote-4) But the foregoing three arguments constitute strong support for the claim that fiction-directed emotions such as fear, sadness, or pity are not intrinsically disagreeable and are often experienced as affectively pleasant. [[5]](#footnote-5) Since it is extremely rare to enjoy these emotions when they are reality-directed, what is needed now is to capture the *raison d’être* of this hedonic difference.

3. Why negative emotions are often not unpleasant when fiction-directed

In the previous section we provided evidence that the hedonic quality of emotions such as fear, pity, or sadness is often positive when fiction-directed, even though their hedonic quality is generally negative when they are reality-directed. In this section, we shall advance an explanation of why these emotions can be not unpleasant when fiction-directed. This explanation starts from remarks from Cain Todd and Jerrold Levinson, and will consist in generalizing and articulating more precisely the insights upon which their remarks are based.

According to Todd, our “awareness of and attention to formal features that are intrinsic to an appreciation of the fiction and that govern and shape our emotional responses to it” (Todd 2014, p. 239) contributes to explaining why “[o]ur first-order affective reactions to negative, unpleasant representational content are not straightforwardly intrinsically negative” (*ibid*., p. 241). But another factor intervenes: our awareness of the non-actuality of the intentional objects of our fiction-directed emotions. In the case of fiction-directed fear, for instance, it follows from our awareness of the non-actuality of its intentional objects that we know that they cannot harm us, or anyone else. This is not so with reality-directed fear. What makes reality-directed fear unpleasant is the fact that it is accompanied by the belief that someone or something that matters to us is threatened by the intentional object of the fear. Matthew Kieran also appears to endorse this idea: “Normally we think of fear as an intrinsically unpleasant thing to feel and are geared up to avoid it. But in non-standard conditions where there is no threat, from roller coasters to horror movies, […] many of us often actively seek out and enjoy the emotion” (Kieran 2005, p. 82).[[6]](#footnote-6)

This explanation of why fiction-directed fear is not unpleasant is plausible. The question then is whether this is also the case for other negative fiction-directed negative emotions, such as pity or sadness. Let us consider how Levinson explains the pleasure we can take in listening to sad music:

Emotional responses to music typically have no life-implications, in contrast to their real counterparts. The sadness one may be made to feel by sympathetically attending to music has no basis in one’s extramusical life, signals no enduring state of negative affect, indicates no problem requiring action, calls forth no persisting pattern of behavior, and in general bodes no ill for one’s future. (Levinson 1982, p. 338)

In short, this sadness is not connected to “the real existence of an evil”, to “some situation [that] exists in one’s life which is to be bemoaned” (*ibid*., p. 338–339). So this emotion, being “bracketed from and unfettered by the demands and involvements of the corresponding emotion in life”, being “divorced from all psychological and behavioral consequences, is in virtually all cases something that we are capable of taking satisfaction in” (*ibid*.).

This suggests a more general thesis about reality-directed and fiction-directed negative emotions: in both cases, experiencing them goes with taking the (real or fictional) situations or states of affairs toward which they are directed to be deplorable – in other words, with evaluating negatively their intentional objects. But in the former case experiencing these emotions necessarily involves taking something we do not want to be the case to have happened (or to be liable to happen) in the real world whereas in the latter case experiencing these emotions does not necessarily involve this because we are aware of the non-actuality of the intentional objects of the emotions in question.

This means that, unlike reality-directed negative emotions, fiction-directed negative emotions *are not necessarily associated in one’s mind with actual (past, present, or future), or likely to become actual, states of affairs one judges to be deplorable*. This can explain why experiencing fiction-directed negative emotions can be, and often is, not unpleasant while experiencing reality-directed negative emotions is almost always unpleasant. Both Balzac’s Father Goriot and our neighbor might arouse our pity for the same reason (they suffer from the ingratitude and indifference of their cherished daughters). But our pity for our neighbor is painful whereas our pity for Father Goriot is not because our pity for our neighbor is accompanied by the belief that a real human being really suffers from the ingratitude and indifference of his daughters whereas our pity for Father Goriot is not accompanied by this belief.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Our awareness of the non-actuality of the intentional objects of our fiction-directed negative emotions does not however *always* make them painless, far from it. They can still be unpleasant when directed toward fictional situations or states of affairs that remind us, or make us aware, of non-fictional situations that we judge deplorable and toward which we have negative emotions. In such cases the occurrence of fiction-directed negative emotions is a hedonic reason to stop watching a movie, reading a book, or listening to a piece of music. A clear example of such a hedonic reason is stopping watching a movie or reading a novel due to the negative emotions provoked by the main character, who has Alzheimer’s, which reminds one of one’s close friend or parent who has just died from it.

It also seems that, whether elicited by reality or by fictions (or, more generally, by representations), disgust is always, at least partly, a fundamentally disagreeable emotion. This is evidenced, among other things, by the varying degrees of queasiness, physiological rejection response and aversion behavior that always accompany it, whether, for example, in movie theatres toward fictional objects, or in the street toward real ones. Note that this peculiarity of disgust among negative emotions cannot be explained by invoking its alleged distinctive “transparency” – that is, the idea that if one experiences disgust toward a real object, one would also experience disgust toward a realistic representation of this object that makes it perceptually recognizable. Indeed, one could argue that pity is also “transparent”. What we find pitiful in real life we also find pitiful in fictions; if we have pity for the lot of our neighbor who suffers from his daughters’s ingratitude, we will also have pity for the lot of Father Goriot whose situation is similar to that of this neighbor. A better candidate for explaining the fact that, whether elicited by reality or by fiction, disgust remains, at least partly, fundamentally unpleasant is another characteristic of this emotion. This is its being, as Filippo Contesi puts it, “peculiarly object-centric” while fear, for instance, is more “situation-centric” (Contesi 2017, p. 1816). This does not mean that the intentional objects of disgust are objects rather than situations or state of affairs, but rather that the mere perceptual recognition or imagination of certain objects is sufficient for disgust to be elicited, and that in this process the nature and details of the situation in which this object is recognized or imagined are “in many cases bracket[ed] off” (*ibid*., p. 1817). One could then argue that, cognitively speaking, disgust is often insensitive to whether the situation or context in which it is elicited is fictional or not. As a result, whether disgust is fiction-directed or reality-directed often does not make a major hedonic difference, which is not true, as we have seen, of other negative emotions.

4. Why negative emotions are often enjoyable when fiction-directed

As we already indicated, very few of the existing solutions to the paradox of tragedy involve denying, as we do, that fiction-directed negative emotions are in themselves unpleasant. As a result, the existing explanations of why we intentionally expose ourselves to fictions that elicit emotions we find unpleasant when prompted by actual states of affairs rarely claim that these emotions are often enjoyable when fiction-directed. These explanations generally claim that there are epistemic, prudential, or hedonic benefits that can be gained from having intrinsically hedonically costly fiction-directed emotions, and these benefits largely outweigh the hedonic costs involved. The reason that the benefits largely outweigh the hedonic costs is that 1) we can control the extent to which we are exposed to the fictions that elicit these emotions and 2) we can experience these emotions without putting ourselves or anyone else at risk. Neither is true with the reality-directed counterparts of these fiction-directed emotions. Having already explained (in section 3) why fiction-directed negative emotions, unlike their reality-directed counterparts, can be, and often re, not unpleasant, it is now time to provide an explanation of why fiction-directed negative emotions can be, and often are, not just hedonically neutral, but rather hedonically positive or enjoyable.

Let us note first that it may be that fiction-directed negative emotions can be enjoyable, and not just hedonically neutral, partly because, as Levinson argues, being unconnected to “the real existence of an evil” and “free of practical consequence” (Levinson 1982, p. 339), “we can approach them like wine-tasters”, and “savor” the feeling they involve "for its own sake” (*ibid*.). It may also be that, when they are strong or intense – particularly in the case of fear – they are a source of pleasure due to the endorphin release that accompanies them and, more generally, to their stimulating or invigorating effect that “makes us feel alive” (cf. Bantinaki 2012, p. 390). One might also be tempted to hold, building on what we said in the previous section, that experiencing any sort of emotion is enjoyable so long as it is not associated in one’s mind with certain (likely to be) actual states of affairs[[8]](#footnote-8) one judges to be deplorable. This would imply that many or most fiction-directed negative emotions are enjoyable, unlike their reality-directed counterparts.[[9]](#footnote-9) But we would like to argue here for another explanation – less broad but also less contentious than the previous one – of what can make fiction-directed negative emotions enjoyable.

This explanation is based on a central function of all fiction-directed emotions: whether positive or negative, they enable us to *experience* fictional situations that, without these emotions, we would just *take cognizance of*. Smuts, as already mentioned, holds that having certain fiction-directed negative emotions enriches our life *epistemically* by being constitutive of our understanding of certain important truths about “the human condition” or certain “ways of being in the world”. But, whether negative or positive, these emotions do much more than this. They enrich our life by enabling us to *experience* the fictional situations toward which these emotions are directed, and not just to *have knowledge of* these situations by getting acquainted with the content of the works of fiction that show or describe them.

In other words, fictions that move us enrich our life in a strong or quasi-literal sense, that is, by supplementing our experience of the real world with that of the fictional situations they show or describe. Novels or movies that do not move us may well have epistemic value. They may give us knowledge of the actual world or of the counterfactual possibilities they present to us. They may violate our usual categories of thought, as Noël Carroll (1987) argues. They may also teach us lessons about life that are of moral and prudential value. But they cannot enrich our lives by being a way of experiencing situations we would not have experienced otherwise. Fictions that move us, on the other hand, enrich our lives by allowing us to experience situations without those situations being actually instantiated, and so enrich our lives without exposing ourselves (or anybody else) to any danger related to these situations when actual. Thrillers, for instance, by eliciting fear, allow us to experience fearful fictional situations that enrich our lives without taking the risks we would have taken had these situations been actual.[[10]](#footnote-10) Accordingly, it is not just that fictions that move us can enrich our life by being a way of experiencing situations we would not have experienced otherwise; it is also that they enable us to experience situations we would not want to experience otherwise.

(Let us remark, in passing, that what goes for fiction-directed emotions also seems to go for reality-directed emotions: without them, we would not really or fully experience the actual situations we find ourselves in and would rather be like interactive spectators of these situations – that is, we would merely take cognizance of, and causally affect, them while they would also causally affect us. So, while fiction-directed emotions enable us to be more than just pure spectators of the fictional situations toward which they are directed, reality-directed emotions enable us to be more than just interactive spectators of the actual situations toward which they are directed.)

Is this sufficient for making our fiction-directed negative emotions enjoyable? It is tempting to answer this question in the affirmative by maintaining that, if there is no risk or harm involved for us or anybody else that goes along with experiencing these emotions, then it is fundamentally enjoyable to experience more lives or worlds than our sole real life in this actual world, and so, to have the emotions through which this happens.

This claim, however, must be qualified if it is to be defensible. Indeed, it would not be enjoyable to be forced to experience fictional situations we do not want to experience, or at moments we do not want to experience them. Moreover, it is always possible that we realize, while encountering fictional situations we thought we would enjoy, that we in fact don’t – for instance because we find them clichéd, banal, poor, or because they remind us of certain terrible actual states of affairs. Having the emotions that enable us to experience these situations would not be particularly enjoyable in the former cases and would even be unpleasant in the latter.

Accordingly, we shall advance a more plausible claim: all fiction-directed emotions

i) that do not remind one, or do not make one aware, of non-fictional situations that one judges deplorable and toward which one has negative emotions (cf. section 3), and

ii) that enable one to experience fictional situations one wants to experience (for whatever reason – e.g., knowing what it was like to live in the violent societies of the Middle Ages, how it would be to try to escape a monster in a spaceship, or how it is for human beings to have lost loved ones in certain dramatic circumstances),

are *themselves* enjoyable, as it is *through* or *in* *having* these emotions, and not just *by* *means of* them, that we experience these situations. This helps to explain the puzzling fact on which the paradox of tragedy is founded: that we regularly intentionally expose ourselves to fictions we take to be likely to elicit in us certain emotions we generally find unpleasant when prompted by actual states of affairs.

It is crucial here to underline that this is not to say that recognizing the overlooked reality of enjoyable fiction-directed negative emotions is sufficient to explain why we regularly intentionally expose ourselves to such fictions. Recognizing the reality of such emotions is undoubtedly part of the explanation, and it appears to be necessary for accounting for the fact that we often anticipate these emotions with enthusiasm, excitement and eagerness. But this is not to say that recognizing the reality of enjoyable fiction-directed negative emotions is sufficient to explain why we regularly intentionally expose ourselves to the fictions that are at the heart of the paradox of tragedy.

Indeed, we think it is hardly disputable that such fictions i) often remind us, or make us aware, of actual (past or present) states of affairs we judge to be deplorable and toward which we have unpleasant emotions, and ii) are often intended by their authors to elicit in us, their consumers, these personal memories, from which these fictions gain much of their (often irreplaceable) aesthetic, moral, political or epistemic value. We also agree, in line with Smuts’s “rich experience theory”, that iii) we often intentionally expose ourselves to such fictions because we know that they will elicit in us hedonically negative affects through which these fictions nevertheless gain much of their (often irreplaceable) aesthetic, moral, political or epistemic value. In short, it clearly would be wrong to claim that we expose ourselves to tragedies, dramas, etc. *just because* certain emotions that are supposed to be intrinsically hedonically negative are in fact often experienced as pleasant when fiction-directed.

Accordingly, and unlike most existing accounts, we think that a complete solution to the paradox of tragedy should be *pluralist*: we regularly intentionally expose ourselves to fictions we take to be likely to elicit in us certain emotions we generally find unpleasant when prompted by actual states of affairs not just because a) it is through the unpleasantness of these fiction-directed emotions that certain fictions gain their aesthetic, moral, political, or epistemic value, or just because b) these fiction-directed emotions can in fact be pleasant. When we intentionally expose ourselves to such fictions, it is sometimes (mainly) because of (a), and sometimes (mainly) because of (b). When it is (mainly) because of (b), we typically anticipate reading, watching or listening to these fictions with enthusiasm, excitement and eagerness. When it is (mainly) because of (a), this is much less the case because we do not expect to *enjoy* the moment. It is rather with a mix of apprehension, resoluteness, and a satisfactory sense of (future) achievement that we typically anticipate reading, watching or listening to the fictions in question.

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1. We shall not discuss in this paper the respective merits and limits of the various answers to the paradox of tragedy mentioned in the section. We shall simply note here the main problem with this Walton-inspired solution of the paradox of tragedy: quasi-emotions are supposed to provoke “bodily and psychological reactions that are similar” to genuine emotions, but unlike genuine emotions lack “motivational force”. Someone experiencing quasi-fear “does not exhibit deliberate behavior characteristic of fear at all”. But if genuine emotions and quasi-emotions are phenomenologically similar – that is, if they are not phenomenologically different in the way in which eating the shell of chocolate eggs and eating the shell of real eggs are –, and if fear, sadness, or pity are unpleasant, then invoking Waltonian quasi-emotions simply cannot solve the paradox of tragedy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hume’s “conversion view” does not belong to this family of views. On Hume’s view, one’s fiction-directed emotions “that are in themselves disagreeable or uneasy” (Hume 1987, p. 216) can be converted into an overall pleasurable experience, in which “no negative affect persists past this conversion” (Strohl 2018, p. 3) in virtue of their connection with one’s appreciation of the formal or aesthetic qualities of the work that elicit them. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We shall not discuss here the question of whether, while not unpleasant, fiction-directed negative emotions are nevertheless sufficiently similar to their hedonically negative reality-directed counterparts to both be subcategories of the same negative emotions – that is, to be adequately characterized as reality-directed and fiction-directed subcategories of fear, sadness, pity, etc. In our phrasing of the paradox of tragedy, we have presupposed that this is the case, but the paradox does not hinge on this. The problem could have been formulated as follows: how to explain the fact that we regularly intentionally expose ourselves to fictions we take to be likely to elicit in us certain emotions we ordinarily categorize as unpleasant when prompted by actual states of affairs? To this question, our answer would be: because the former, fiction-directed, emotions are often enjoyable, unlike their reality-directed counterparts. Whether or not both types of emotions are subcategories of the same negative emotions is irrelevant here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See for instance what Smuts says about Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage*: “I would not describe my experience of this episode as pleasurable, but I find it to be one of the most effective ‘unfaithfulness’ fictions ever created…Indeed, it contains some of the most powerful moments in cinematic history. I would strongly recommend it to others, largely for the experience it affords. But it is not pleasurable. No, it is nothing less than emotionally devastating” (Smuts 2014, p. 130). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. At this point, one might want to argue that it is an indisputable fact that the hedonic quality of the sensations and physiological symptoms that go with these emotions, even when they are fiction-directed, is negative, which clearly makes them unpleasant, and sometimes even painful. But as Neill, Feagin and Bantinaki have argued, this alleged fact is everything but one: these symptoms and sensations “aren’t 'painful' or 'unpleasant' in anything like the way [those] that go with stepping on a thumb-tack are painful and unpleasant” (Neill 1992, p. 62); “increased heart acceleration followed by constrained breathing, for instance, are signs of arousal, but they are bodily responses that […] can occur in both negative and positive emotions” and “are not, literally, pains” (Bantinaki 2012, p. 387). “In certain contexts”, Bantinaki underlines, “these signs of arousal are not even unpleasant and, as Feagin argues, might even be enjoyed, as for instance when they occur in the sight of the person with whom one is madly in love” (*ibid*., p. 386).

There seems to be, however, one type of emotion, whether reality- or fiction-directed, that is always associated with unpleasant sensations and bodily symptoms: disgust, and the varying degrees of queasiness and aversion behavior that always accompany it. Given the centrality of disgust in horror movies and its rarity in other cinematic genres, this means that horror movies probably elicit many more uneasy feelings and emotions than other cinematic genres. This certainly explains why so many people do not want to watch horror movies while they are generally fine with all other genres. We shall say more about the peculiarity of disgust in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bantinaki does not seem to take one’s awareness of the non-actuality of the intentional objects of one’s fiction-directed fear to be *sufficient* for it not to be *affectively* unpleasant. For her this awareness seems to be what makes it possible for this emotion to be *attitudinally* pleasurable. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Note that if one adopts a Lewisian view of possible worlds and holds that consistent fictions such as *Father Goriot* describe such worlds, one’s negative emotions directed toward Goriot should be hedonically similar to those directed toward actual people whose life is similar to his life as described by Balzac. Indeed, in both cases there really are, from this Lewisian perspective, loving fathers suffering from their children’s ingratitude. We however know of nobody whose metaphysical views so affects their emotional reactions to fictions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Maybe what makes disgust always (at least partly) unpleasant is its always being associated psychologically with such things, whether it is reality-directed or fiction-directed. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. If so, what Jean-Baptiste Du Bos takes to go for all emotions in fact just goes for all positive emotions, whether reality- or fiction-directed, and for many fiction-directed negative emotions. Hume characterizes Du Bos’s view, which he opposes, as follows: “No matter what the passion is: Let it be disagreeable, afflicting, melancholy, disordered; it is still better than that insipid languor, which arises from perfect tranquillity and repose” (Hume 1987, p. 216–217). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For instance, trying to escape a hired killer such as Anton Chigurh in Joel and Ethan Cohen’s *No Country for Old Men*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)