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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

VOLUME CXII, NO. 9, SEPTEMBER 2015

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IMAGINATION, DESIRE, AND RATIONALITY*

We often have affective responses to fictional events despite the fact that we know that the events depicted are not real. We feel afraid for Desdemona when Othello approaches her in a murderous rage. We feel anger toward Othello for murdering Desdemona. We feel disgust toward Iago for orchestrating this tragic event. We experience these apparently genuine emotions even though we *know* that the events are merely fictional. This is what is known as the paradox of fiction. Our affective responses to fiction are paradoxical because, intuitively, to feel fear, anger, or disgust toward X requires that one believe that X is real.

The paradox of fiction raises the following question. Why do we experience apparently genuine emotions when engaging with fiction? That is, what mental architecture could explain these affective responses? This question is interesting even for those who do not find the paradox of fiction all that paradoxical. For even if one does not regard our affective responses to fiction as puzzling, it still is an open question what mental architecture could explain such responses.

One particular answer to this question has received much attention lately. This account, which I call the *imagination + i-desire* account, is defended by Gregory Currie, Tyler Doggett and Andy Egan, Alvin Goldman, and David Velleman.¹ According to *imagination + i-desire*,

*I would like to thank the anonymous readers and editors at this JOURNAL, Jonathan Gilmore, Amy Kind, Neil Van Leeuwen, and Chase Wrenn for their invaluable feedback on this paper. I also am grateful to the audience members at Texas Tech University, University of Glasgow, University of Düsseldorf, and the University of Oxford for their insightful comments.

¹Gregory Currie, "Tragedy," *Analysis*, LXX, 4 (2010): 632–38; Tyler Doggett and Andy Egan, "How We Feel about Terrible, Non-existent Mafiosi," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXXXIV, 2 (March 2012): 277–306; Alvin I. Goldman, *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); J. David Velleman, "On the Aim of Belief," in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

affective responses to fictional events are analogous to affective responses to real events.

Consider first affective responses to real events. Suppose one evening I am going for a walk through my neighborhood and I hear yelling coming from a house nearby. I walk closer to the house and peer in through the front windows. I see a man attacking a woman. Seeing this event causes me serious distress. Why? Presumably because I *believe* that the man is harming the woman, and I strongly *desire* that he not harm her. In this case, if I lacked either the *belief* or the *desire*, I would not experience such distress. The conflict between my belief and my desire generates a negative affective response.² I feel angry and afraid, and I am motivated to stop the man from harming the woman, perhaps by intervening or by calling the police.

Defenders of the *imagination + i-desire* account argue for a parallel explanation of our affective responses to fictional events. Just as affective response to real events result from interaction between beliefs and desires, affective responses to fictional events result from interaction between *imaginative* beliefs and *imaginative* desires. For instance, when we watch *Othello*, we *imaginatively believe* (that is, *imagine*) that Othello is in a murderous rage, and we *imaginatively desire* (that is, *i-desire*) that Othello not murder Desdemona. This conflict between what we *imagine* to be true and what we *i-desire* to be true generates our affective responses to the events depicted in the fiction in roughly the same way that conflict between our beliefs and desires generates negative affective responses to real events.

Proponents of the *imagination + i-desire* account argue that this is the best explanation of our affective responses to fiction. Their argument has two parts. First, the *imagination + i-desire* account adequately explains our affective responses to fiction. Second, the alternative accounts of our affective responses to fiction are unsatisfactory because they imply that consumers of fiction are irrational. In this paper, I challenge both of these claims.³

²This does not imply that *all* affect results from an interaction between our beliefs and desires. Affect also can result from subconscious perception of negative stimuli and emotional contagion, neither of which essentially involves interaction between a subject's beliefs and desires. The debate discussed in this paper focuses on affect resulting from interaction between belief-like states and desire-like states, so I shall not discuss these other sources of affect.

³In addition to philosophers of imagination, proponents of the Simulation Theory of mindreading defend a mental architecture that includes imagination and i-desire. See Goldman, *Simulating Minds*, *op. cit.*, pp. 281–90; Robert M. Gordon, "Folk Psychology as Simulation," *Mind and Language*, 1, 2 (June 1986): 158–71; Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Simulation Theory arguments for *imagination + i-desire* do not

In the next section, I describe the *imagination + i-desire* account and raise some worries about it. In section II, I discuss two alternative accounts of our affective responses to fiction. I argue in section III that these alternatives do not imply that consumers of fiction are irrational. In section IV, I offer some concluding remarks about what I take to be the best explanation of our engagement with fiction.

I. IMAGINATION + I-DESIRE

The *imagination + i-desire* account holds that affective responses to fiction result from interaction between imaginative beliefs and imaginative desires. In this section, I discuss imaginative belief first, imaginative desire second, and then I raise three objections to the *imagination + i-desire* account.

I.1. Imagination as a Distinctive Cognitive Attitude. Imaginative belief typically is characterized simply as imagination. Although disagreement abounds about many aspects of imagination, philosophers have come to a consensus that imagination is a distinctive cognitive attitude, that is, a content-bearing representational state with a distinctive functional role.⁴ The rationale for this claim is that although imagination shares *some* of the characteristics of belief, it is unlike belief in other important respects.⁵

Imagination and belief are similar in that they both aim to accurately represent the world, or the fictional world in the case of imagination. They both exhibit inferential orderliness and activate affective systems. Moreover, it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to believe and imagine blatantly contradictory propositions. Despite these similarities, imagination is not *reducible* to belief. Imagination guides action differently than belief. Imagining that a mud pie is a delicious treat guides my action differently than believing it is. Imagination is subject to conscious, voluntary control, whereas belief is not. Imagination is less restrictive than belief insofar as one can imagine many false and absurd propositions that one in no way believes. Imagination-induced

depend on the claim that alternatives to Simulation Theory imply that consumers of fiction are irrational. Thus, only the first part of my argument against *imagination + i-desire* applies to Simulation Theory.

⁴Timothy Schroeder and Carl Matheson, "Imagination and Emotion," in Shaun Nichols, ed., *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 19–40. For a dissenting view, see Peter Langland-Hassan, "Pretense, Imagination, and Belief: The Single Attitude Theory," *Philosophical Studies*, CLIX, 2 (June 2012): 155–79.

⁵Nichols, introduction to *The Architecture of the Imagination*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–9; Shaun Nichols, "Just the Imagination: Why Imagining Doesn't Behave Like Believing," *Mind and Language*, XXI, 4 (September 2006): 459–74.

affect typically is less intense, less durable, and sometimes quite different than belief-induced affect.

The upshot of these considerations is that imagination, though it is belief-like in several respects, is not reducible to belief. Imagination has a distinctive functional role. These considerations justify positing a *sui generis* mental state of imagination. There is widespread agreement that imagination is a legitimate distinctive cognitive attitude.⁶

I.2. I-desire as a Distinctive Cognitive Attitude. In contrast with the consensus about imaginative belief, imaginative desire is quite controversial.⁷ Although positive accounts of i-desire differ in several respects, each account regards i-desire as a content-bearing representational state with a distinctive functional role. According to proponents of i-desire, the mental state i-desire is not a desire, nor is it a species of desire. Furthermore, an i-desire is not simply an imagining. To i-desire X does not consist in imagining *that* you desire X. Rather, to i-desire X is to *imaginatively desire* X, just as imagining X consists in *imaginatively believing* X.

The argument for i-desire is similar in structure to the argument that imagination is a distinctive cognitive attitude. The argument holds that desire and i-desire share some similarities but differ in important ways.⁸ Both i-desire and desire have a world-to-mind direction of fit; that is, the contents of my desire and i-desire need not match the state of the world, or the fictional world in the case of i-desire. Furthermore, both desire and i-desire have the capacity to motivate behavior and generate affect.

Although desire and i-desire are similar with respect to direction of fit and the capacity to guide behavior and produce affect, proponents of i-desires argue that i-desire is not *reducible* to desire. The content of i-desires is less restrictive than the content of desires. That is, we desire in imagination states of affairs that we would not desire in reality. The behavior motivated by desire differs from behavior motivated by i-desire, because i-desire motivates *pretend* behavior. Finally, affect generated by i-desire is less intense, less durable, and sometimes quite different from the affect generated by desire.

⁶ Currie and Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds*, *op. cit.*; Nichols, introduction to *The Architecture of the Imagination*, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9; Shaun Nichols and Stephen P. Stich, *Mindreading: An Integrated Account of Pretence, Self-Awareness, and Understanding Other Minds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Schroeder and Matheson, “Imagination and Emotion,” *op. cit.*

⁷ Various terms in the literature denote roughly the same idea, for example, i-desire, pretend desire, mock desire, and desire-like imagining. For simplicity, I shall use the term *i-desire*.

⁸ Currie and Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–23; Doggett and Egan, “How We Feel about Terrible, Non-existent Mafiosi,” *op. cit.*, pp. 287–89; Velleman, “On the Aim of Belief,” *op. cit.*, p. 260; Goldman, *Simulating Minds*, *op. cit.*, pp. 281–84.

Proponents of *i*-desires argue that desire cannot be the right mental state for fictional contexts. The content of our real desires is too limited for imagination, and real desires would generate inappropriate behavior and affect. For these reasons, proponents of *i*-desires argue that we need to posit a new kind of mental state, *i*-desire, to explain our imaginative engagement with fiction.

I.3. Problems with Imagination + I-desire. In philosophy of mind and aesthetics, debates persist about the need to posit *i*-desire, the nature of *i*-desire, and whether it can do the work it is posited to do.⁹ I shall discuss these objections to *i*-desire in this section. Even if the *imagination + i-desire* account turns out to be the best explanation of our affective responses to fiction, the view faces a number of difficulties.

The first difficulty with *imagination + i-desire* involves the nature of *i*-desire and its capacity to motivate behavior. *I*-desires allegedly are involved in three capacities: understanding other people (mindreading), imaginative engagement with fiction, and pretense. Recall that *i*-desires are supposed to motivate pretend behavior. When I *i*-desire to have tea, this motivates me to pretend to have tea. My *i*-desire to eat a pie motivates me to pretend to eat the mud pie. Yet, *i*-desires often do *not* motivate pretend behavior, for example, in the case of fiction and mindreading. According to this view, when I am watching or reading *Othello* I have the *i*-desire that Othello not kill Desdemona. However, this *i*-desire does *not* motivate me to pretend to stop Othello from murdering Desdemona. It is not that I am motivated to pretend to save Desdemona but this is *overridden* by some other *i*-desire or genuine desire. I am not motivated to pretend to do *anything* in this context. Similarly, *i*-desires do not motivate in the context of mindreading. When I try to understand a target's behavior, according to this view, I imaginatively believe as the target believes and *i*-desire as the target desires. However, the *i*-desire adopted for the sake of mindreading does not motivate me to pretend to do anything. Thus, *i*-desires motivate behavior only sometimes.

The problem here is that the motivational powers of a mental state are supposed to be essential and intrinsic to typical mental states of that type. Typical desires motivate one toward action. This is not an unduly strong requirement. It does not imply that we always will act

⁹Eric Funkhouser and Shannon Spaulding, "Imagination and Other Scripts," *Philosophical Studies*, CXLIII, 3 (April 2009): 291–314; Amy Kind, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Desire," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXIX, 3 (2011): 421–39; Nichols and Stich, *Mindreading*, *op. cit.*; Jonathan M. Weinberg and Aaron Meskin, "Imagine That!," in Matthew Kieran, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 222–35; Peter Carruthers, "Why Pretend?," in Nichols, ed., *The Architecture of the Imagination*, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–110.

on that motivation. We may have competing desires that override that motivation. Furthermore, it allows that *atypical* members of a mental-state type may not motivate us at all. Desires that cannot be satisfied, for example, may not motivate one to act to satisfy that desire.¹⁰ As Eric Funkhouser and Shannon Spaulding argue, “Not all desires dispose or incline us toward action, but all desires that can be satisfied by the agent have the disposition to so dispose.”¹¹ Thus, the motivational powers of a mental state are intrinsic to typical mental states of that type. The problem with i-desire is that *many* i-desires, notably those attributed to consumers of fiction and mindreaders, do not motivate pretend behavior at all.

This leaves proponents of i-desires with the following dilemma. Either i-desires in fiction and mindreading *do* motivate pretend behavior, or they do *not* because they are atypical members of the mental-state type i-desire. The claim that we are motivated to pretend when consuming fiction is implausible. I certainly experience no such motivation to pretend when watching a film or reading a novel. There is no good independent reason to think that in consuming fiction we constantly are (unbeknownst to us) suppressing our motivation to engage in pretense behavior. Similarly, the claim that we are motivated to pretend when mindreading others is *ad hoc* and doubtful. I do not experience the motivation to pretend when I am trying to understand others. Mindreading is pervasive; we constantly are thinking about how to understand others. If this idea were correct—if i-desires in mindreading generally motivate pretend behavior—we constantly would be suppressing the motivation to pretend according to what we think others want to do. This is a bizarre, unmotivated idea. Thus, the first horn of the dilemma, which claims that i-desires in fiction and mindreading are motivational, is implausible.

The second horn of the dilemma is unappealing, as well. According to this idea, i-desires that do not motivate are atypical i-desires. I-desires are supposed to be involved in mindreading, imaginative engagement with fiction, and pretense. Only in the latter context are i-desires motivational. Thus, this horn of the dilemma holds that i-desires in fiction and mindreading are atypical. This is hard to believe, though. Mindreading and imaginative engagement with fiction are very common behaviors. In fact, they are much more common than episodes of pretending. There is no good independent reason to regard i-desires in mindreading and fiction as atypical.

¹⁰ Sometimes unattainable desires are called *wishes*. This is a mere terminological difference.

¹¹ Funkhouser and Spaulding, “Imagination and Other Scripts,” *op. cit.*, p. 303.

Indeed, the fact that they are more prevalent than *i*-desires in pretense suggests that, if anything, they should be regarded as the typical case.¹² Both horns of the dilemma are troublesome for the *i*-desire proponent. These considerations about the intrinsic nature of motivational capacity suggest that there is a fundamental flaw with the concept of *i*-desires.

A second worry about *imagination + i-desire* is the justification for *i*-desire. Positing a *sui generis* mental state is warranted only when such a state is needed to explain the phenomena. There is widespread agreement that we are justified in positing imagination as a *sui generis* mental state. However, once we have imagination we do not need to posit *i*-desires. We do not need *i*-desires to explain why we sometimes engage in pretend behavior. All we need is desire and imagination. We pretend because we sometimes genuinely desire to act out our imaginings. Moreover, we do not need *i*-desires to explain our affective responses to fiction. As previously noted, imagination itself generates idiosyncratic affective responses. Nor do we need *i*-desires to explain how we can want things to happen in the fiction that we would not want to happen in reality. We simply genuinely desire that a fictional event occur, which has no implications for our desires about real events.¹³ We can explain the motivation to pretend, affective responses to fiction, and the scope of our desires in fiction without *i*-desires. This undermines the claim that we need *i*-desire to explain our engagement with fiction.¹⁴

A third problem with the *imagination + i-desire* account is identifying the content of our imaginings and *i*-desires. The *imagination + i-desire* account holds that we engage with fictions by imaginatively simulating

¹²Moreover, proponents of this view posit *i*-desires to explain pretense. However, as I argue above, positing an *i*-desire does not explain why sometimes we are motivated to pretend and other times we are not. Thus, positing *i*-desires does not really explain pretense, either.

¹³For a fictional event *E* to occur is for it to be true that *E* occurs in a fictional world. Put more precisely, for an *F*-event *E* to occur, where *F* is a fiction, is for it to be true that *E* occurs in every world where *F* is told as known fact. For example, for Othello's killing of Desdemona to occur just is for it to be true that Othello killed Desdemona in every world where Shakespeare's play is presented. When the fiction is enacted, this involves certain kinds of overt behavior by the actors. Further difficult questions lurk in the background about what it is to be true within a fiction and the extent to which the author and audience's intentions determine this. Unfortunately, I do not have space here to address these further questions.

¹⁴Moreover, the argument for *i*-desires overgeneralizes. The same argument may be used to posit imaginative versions of *all* propositional attitudes. If all we need to justify positing a *sui generis* imaginative mental state is the claim that the state differs in how it is produced and the behavior it motivates, then this is sufficient to justify positing imaginative versions of just about any propositional attitude.

the characters.¹⁵ We imagine what Desdemona believes and i-desire what she desires, which generates in us a fearful response. However, as observers we do not always imaginatively believe or desire what the characters believe and desire.¹⁶ We do not imaginatively desire that Othello kill Desdemona or that Iago ruin Othello's life. The object of our desires often is different from the object of the characters' desires. Moreover, our affective responses are not simply imaginative versions of the characters' emotions. We have different information than the characters, and the object of our desires and emotions are different from those of the characters. Our mental states are not simply imaginative versions of the characters' mental states.

This objection is not new, and proponents of *imagination + i-desire* have a ready response. Following Currie and Goldman, one could argue that observers imaginatively adopt the perspective of a *hypothetical observer of facts*.¹⁷ On this view, we simulate an actual narrator or an implicit narrator, a hypothetical observer of facts. Although one *may* imaginatively adopt the perspective of one (or more) of the characters in a fiction, one generally adopts the perspective of a hypothetical observer. Imaginatively adopting the mental states of a hypothetical observer handles the objections articulated in the previous paragraph.

Unfortunately, this move introduces even more problems. Imaginatively simulating the mental states of a hypothetical observer of facts is redundant. Why would we imaginatively adopt the mental states of a hypothetical observer of facts when we simply could *be* the observer of fictional facts? If we are the observers of facts, then imaginative simulation endorsed by proponents of the *imagination + i-desire* view seems to play no role.

Suppose for the sake of argument that we do in fact imaginatively simulate the perspective of a hypothetical observer of facts. Appealing to imagination and i-desire is supposed to explain how we understand and respond to the fiction. We imagine what the hypothetical observer

¹⁵ Alternatively, one could regard imaginings and i-desires as explanatory constructs rather than causal mental states. On this view, the best explanation of our affective responses to fiction requires positing these theoretical states, but one can remain agnostic on whether the i-desires actually are caused by mental simulation. My third objection would not apply to this version of *imagination + i-desire*.

¹⁶ Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 306–13.

¹⁷ Gregory Currie, "The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind," in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver, eds., *Emotion and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 63–77; Alvin I. Goldman, "Imagination and Simulation in Audience Responses to Fiction," in Nichols, ed., *The Architecture of the Imagination*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–56.

of facts believes, i-desire what the hypothetical observer of facts desires, and perhaps i-emote as the hypothetical observer of facts emotes. This idea raises a number of questions.

First, why would a hypothetical observer of facts have *desires* and *emotions* regarding the fictional events? The hypothetical observer of facts most resembles a third-person omniscient narrator. A third-person omniscient narrator, who is not a character in the fiction, usually does *not* express desires about the fictional events or have affective responses to the events depicted in the fiction. A third-person omniscient narrator typically presents events and the thoughts of characters. A third-person omniscient narrator, like all narrators, presents a perspective of the events and sets a tone for the narrative. The perspective and tone are set by the diction of the narrator, the details and events she focuses on, and other literary devices. However, typical third-person omniscient narrators do not explicitly express desires or exhibit emotion about the events depicted.¹⁸ The hypothetical narrator that we allegedly imaginatively simulate would be an idiosyncratic narrator.

Second, even if the hypothetical observer of facts has beliefs, desires, and emotions regarding the fictional events, imaginatively simulating the mental states of a *hypothetical observer* would not generate the right sort of affective responses. This view holds that our affective responses result from simulating the narrator, but this seems to misidentify the object of our affect. The object of our affect is the fictional events and characters themselves, not the hypothetical observer's mental states. For example, imaginatively simulating Desdemona's mental states would generate the fear-like response that we experience, but imaginatively simulating a hypothetical observer of Desdemona would not because the hypothetical observer is not in any danger.

Setting aside the first two worries about simulating a hypothetical observer, this account still does not offer a compelling explanation for all of our affective responses to fiction. Cases of discrepant affect, such as dark humor, present a problem for this view. As viewers of *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, we are amused by the depiction of a homicidal maniac intent on nuclear holocaust. In other contexts, we would find this scenario horrifying.

¹⁸ Avid readers of fiction will be inclined to search for and find counterexamples to this claim, so let me be clear that I am not asserting that it is not *impossible* for a third-person omniscient narrator to have explicit desires and emotions regarding fictional events. This occurs in the Lemony Snickett novels and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example. However, it is *unusual* for a third-person omniscient narrator explicitly to want the events to turn out a certain way and to express emotions about the events in the fiction.

To explain this phenomenon, presumably Currie and Goldman must say that the hypothetical observer of facts is amused by the homicidal maniac's behavior. We simulate the hypothetical observer's beliefs, desires, and emotions regarding the fictional events, and doing so generates similar imaginings, *i*-desires, and affect in us. Thus, because the hypothetical observer experiences discrepant affect, observers experience discrepant affect.

This explanation highlights the redundancy of appealing to a hypothetical observer to explain our affective responses to fiction. Consider the following question. Why would the hypothetical observer experience discrepant affect? Whatever explanation one offers (mode of presentation, context, and so on) can be used to explain directly our discrepant affect, thereby making superfluous the appeal to a hypothetical observer of facts.

Specifying the content of our imaginative mental states is problematic. Adding to the theory the claim that we simulate a hypothetical observer of facts solves the problem of specifying the content of our imaginative mental states. It does so, however, at the cost of obscuring the explanation of our affective responses to fiction.

The problems with the *imagination + i-desire* account that I discuss do not on their own decisively refute the view. Recall that the argument for *imagination + i-desire* is an inference to the best explanation. Proponents of the view argue that it is adequate and the alternative accounts are inadequate. Specifically, they argue that the alternative explanations imply that consumers of fiction are irrational. I shall challenge this claim in the next two sections. If my challenge is successful, it will undermine both parts of the abductive argument for the *imagination + i-desire* account.

II. ALTERNATIVES TO IMAGINATION + I-DESIRE

The two main competitors to the *imagination + i-desire* account are what I call *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire*. According to the *desire + desire* account, when we have affective responses to fiction it is because we have two conflicting desires about the fiction. We desire that the fiction be such that some event, E, occurs in it, but we also desire that the fiction be such that E not occur in it.¹⁹

¹⁹ Currie, "Tragedy," *op. cit.*, refers to this as the *change-of-content* solution. Doggett and Egan, "How We Feel about Terrible, Non-existent Mafiosi," *op. cit.*, call this the *desire-about-the-fiction* view (and also the *Smith/audience member view*). Jonathan Gilmore offers an account of our affective responses to fiction that does not fit cleanly into my three-way distinction. His account involves three desires, and in a sense is a combination of the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts. See Jonathan Gilmore, "That Obscure Object of Desire: Pleasure in Painful Art," in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Suffering Art Gladly: The Paradox of Negative Emotion in Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 153–70.

For example, we desire that *Othello* be a tragedy in which Othello murders Desdemona, but we also desire that the play be such that Othello not murder Desdemona. These conflicting desires are meant to explain why it is that we have particular affective responses (feeling afraid for Desdemona and angry toward Othello) despite the fact that we know that these events are not real and we do not want the fiction to turn out differently (we do not wish that *Othello* were a romantic comedy).

According to the *desire + desire* account, we are sad and angry about the events in the fiction because we desire the fiction to turn out differently. We desire that the fiction be such that Desdemona lives. But we are not disappointed in the fiction, and we are not motivated to jump on the stage and try to stop Othello from killing Desdemona, because we also desire that the fiction be such that Othello murders Desdemona. These conflicting desires generate our idiosyncratic affective responses to fiction. The *desire + desire* account does not invoke imagination as part of the explanation of our affective responses to fiction. Imagination is involved in consuming fiction, of course, but conflicting desires *about the fiction* allegedly explain our affective responses.

The *imagination + desire* account explains our affective responses to fiction in the following way: we imagine that some event in the fiction, E, occurs, and we desire that E not occur.²⁰ This account invokes imagination and a *real* desire about a fictional event.²¹ For example, we imagine that Othello murders Desdemona, and we have a real desire that Othello not murder Desdemona. This is not an *i-desire*, which is what the *imagination + i-desire* account posits. Nor is it a desire *about the fiction*, which is what the *desire + desire* account posits. It is a *real* desire about a *fictional* event.

On this view, we do not get confused and think that the events depicted in the fiction are real because we merely are *imagining* these fictional events. We are not motivated to jump onto the stage and stop the actors because our desire is about a fictional event, not a real event that we could stop. If the desire were about an actual event and we could satisfy this desire, then we would be motivated

²⁰ Currie, "Tragedy," *op. cit.*, refers to this as the *simple* solution. Proponents of this view include Funkhouser and Spaulding, "Imagination and Other Scripts," *op. cit.*; Kind, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Desire," *op. cit.*; Nichols, "Just the Imagination," *op. cit.*; Nichols and Stich, *Mindreading*, *op. cit.*; Weinberg and Meskin, "Imagine That!," *op. cit.*

²¹ For a fictional event E to occur in a fiction F is for it to be true that E occurs in F in every world where F is presented. (See fn. 13.) Distinguish desires about E from desires about F. According to *imagination + i-desire*, my desire that Desdemona not be murdered is a desire about E, a particular fictional event. It is not a desire about F, the fiction itself, even though facts about F determine whether my desire about E is satisfied.

to act. The conflict between what we imagine to be the case and what we desire to be the case allegedly explains our affective responses to fiction. The chart below summarizes these three accounts.

Imagination + i-desire: We imagine that E occurs, and we i-desire that E not occur.

Desire + desire: We desire that E occur in the fiction, and we desire that E not occur in the fiction.

Imagination + desire: We imagine that E occurs, and we desire that E not occur.

Currie, Doggett, and Egan, prominent proponents of *imagination + i-desire*, argue that the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts imply that consumers of fiction are irrational.²² First consider the *desire + desire* account. We desire that the fiction turn out such that E occurs, and we also desire that the fiction turn out such that E does not occur. We knowingly desire two contradictory states of affairs. Having contradictory desires is not *ipso facto* irrational, but it leads to irrationality in this case.

According to Currie, Doggett, and Egan, if we have conflicting desires about the fiction, the rational response to the fiction is disappointment or ambivalence. Whether or not E occurs in the fiction, one of our desires will not be satisfied. The *rational* response to an unsatisfied desire is disappointment. Something we want to happen did not happen. However, we are not at all disappointed or ambivalent about the fiction. We enjoy the fiction as it is. Thus, this view makes us out to be irrational. Moreover, when we engage with the fiction a second time or when we know how the fiction will turn out, we *know* that E will occur, so it is irrational to desire that E not occur. Thus, it is argued, the *desire + desire* account makes us out to be irrational with respect to the fiction.

²² Whereas this argument is stated explicitly in Doggett and Egan's article, it is only implicit in Currie's arguments. In "Tragedy," *op. cit.*, Currie has a different target and a different strategy than do Doggett and Egan. Currie's target is the paradox of tragedy, and he invokes i-desires to explain why our desire for some state of affairs within a fiction has different satisfaction conditions than our desire for that state of affairs in the real world. Moreover, Currie thinks of his argument as distinct from Doggett and Egan's argument (personal communication). Nevertheless, Currie's arguments against *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* implicitly rely on claims about the rationality of desires attributed to consumers of fiction. Thus, though I note the difference between Currie's project and Doggett and Egan's project, the fact that both rely on claims about the rationality of desires in fiction warrants putting them in the same category for my purposes here.

Now consider the *imagination + desire* account, which holds that we have real desires about fictional events. We desire, for example, that Othello not murder Desdemona. According to Doggett and Egan, a desire about a fictional event rationally implies a desire about the content of the fiction. The desire that Othello not murder Desdemona allegedly rationally implies the desire that the fiction be such that Othello not murder Desdemona. For Othello not to murder Desdemona the content of the fiction *must* be different. As Doggett and Egan say, “having the desire about the fictional character (at least) *rationally requires* that one have the corresponding desire about the content of the fiction, since as you well know, the only way for the fictional character to have the property that we desire him to have is for the content of the fiction to make it so.”²³

This presents a dilemma. On the one hand, if we have a desire about a fictional event *without* a desire about the content of the fiction, then we are irrational because we fail to desire what we know is required to satisfy our desire. On the other hand, if we desire what follows from our desire about the fictional event, then we have conflicting desires about the content of the fiction. We desire the fiction be such that Othello murders Desdemona and we desire the fiction be such that Othello does not murder Desdemona. The rational response to the fiction is disappointment because one of our desires will not be satisfied. But we are not disappointed, so this option also makes us out to be irrational. The latter horn of the dilemma is the same problem faced by the *desire + desire* account.

The implication that our affective responses to fiction are irrational is unacceptable. It is one thing to *argue* for the conclusion that affective responses to fiction are irrational, but it is another thing altogether for a theory incidentally to imply that such responses are irrational. Affective responses are not merely accidental byproducts of engaging with fiction. Affective responses to fiction are a necessary part of aesthetic appreciation of fiction. Proper aesthetic appreciation of fiction *may* require irrationality, but that claim requires defense.

Currie, Doggett, and Egan argue that the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts imply that these affective responses to fiction are irrational. I shall assume with Currie, Doggett, and Egan that it is implausible that proper aesthetic appreciation of fiction requires irrationality. Some people may be irrational in some instances of consuming fiction, but affective responses to fiction are not *always* irrational. This assumption stems from a more general assumption

²³ Doggett and Egan, “How We Feel about Terrible, Non-existent Mafiosi,” *op. cit.*, pp. 284–85.

that attributing widespread irrationality *prima facie* is implausible. Of course, we are irrational sometimes, and perhaps consistently irrational in particular circumstances. But, I shall assume, an account that implies that we all are irrational all the time, in all sorts of circumstances, is implausible. Thus, if the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts imply that we are irrational whenever we affectively engage with fiction, this constitutes a serious strike against these views.

The arguments against the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts assume that there are rationality constraints on desires. Doggett and Egan acknowledge that their argument depends on as-yet unspecified rationality constraints on desire. They say, “the paper relies heavily on some rational constraints on desire while leaving open a full characterization of those constraints, and leaving open a characterization of the rational constraints on i-desire. Those characterizations are for future work.”²⁴

In the next section, I argue that there may not be *any* rationality constraints on desires. It is quite difficult to articulate general principles of rationality for desires that are not rife with counterexamples. Moreover, even for the candidate rationality principles least subject to pervasive counterexamples, the desires posited by *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* are not irrational.

III. RATIONALITY CONSTRAINTS ON DESIRE

Let us set aside any Humean worries about the *possibility* of rationality constraints on desires. I propose we adopt a simple dispositional account of desire such that to desire X is to be *disposed* to take actions one believes will bring about X. This account of desire allows that we may not always take actions to bring about X. If we have other stronger desires that override our desire for X, or if our desire cannot be satisfied, we may not take any action to bring about X. Like all accounts of desire, this simple dispositional account is subject to debate. Nevertheless, in discussing the rationality constraints on desire it helps to have *some* account of desire at hand, and this is the most widely held account. Hence, I shall assume this simple dispositional account.²⁵

Allowing that rationality constraints on desire at least are possible, what are the candidate rationality constraints? Though much is written on the *practical* rationality of desire, the practical norms are applied in

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁵ Chase Wrenn has proposed an account of desire in terms of contrastive preferences that may work just as well here. See Chase B. Wrenn, “A Puzzle About Desire,” *Erkenntnis*, LXXIII, 2 (September 2010): 185–209.

virtue of desire's role in forming intentions and acting. This is the wrong model for evaluating the rationality of desires in fiction because no such intentions or actions are present in the case of desires about the fiction. We need instead an account of the *theoretical* rationality constraints on desire. The question is whether a desire can be irrational independently of its relation to our goals, intentions, and actions.

Unfortunately, very little is written on the theoretical rationality of desire. However, there is an extensive literature on the topic of theoretical rationality of *beliefs*. We have a better grasp on these rationality constraints, and perhaps some of the rationality constraints on beliefs also rationally constrain desires. The most plausible candidates are consistency, inferential coherence, justification, and possibility.²⁶ I shall consider whether any of these candidate rationally constraints apply to desires.²⁷

III.1. Consistency. Many people think that logical consistency is a rationality constraint on *beliefs*. It is inconsistent to believe at the same time P and not-P. Of course, we have innumerable beliefs, and it is very likely that lots of them are inconsistent with each other. It is impossible to go through all of our beliefs and ensure that none of them is inconsistent with any other belief. Thus, the logical consistency constraint is not so strict as to require that *all* of our beliefs be consistent. Rationality requires something weaker, such as that when we learn new information, we revise occurrent beliefs and the most relevant dispositional beliefs that are inconsistent with the new belief.

Perhaps there is an analogous consistency constraint on desires. That is, perhaps rationality requires that when we develop a new desire, we revise our occurrent desires and the most relevant standing desires that are inconsistent with the new desire.

The problem with logical consistency as a rationality constraint for desires is that we *often* have inconsistent desires. For example, at this moment I desire to go for a run right now, and I also desire *not* to go

²⁶ Some propose rationality constraints that apply uniquely to desires. For example, Robert Audi argues that desires are rational only if they are desires for the good. Michael Smith argues if I believe that a perfectly rational agent would have a particular intrinsic desire then it is rational for me to have that desire and irrational for me to lack that desire. These interesting, controversial views have limited relevance for our project. None of the views canvassed in this paper attribute to consumers of fiction desires for things that are bad for them or desires a perfectly rational agent would lack. See Robert Audi, *The Architecture of Reason: The Structure and Substance of Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

²⁷ Kind, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Desire," *op. cit.*, offers an argument very similar to the argument advanced in this section, as does Gilmore, "That Obscure Object of Desire," *op. cit.* I am indebted to both of these excellent articles, especially Kind's article, for inspiration for this section.

for a run right now. I recognize that I have both of these desires, and I recognize that they are inconsistent. That does not motivate me to reject one of these desires. This case is not an anomaly. In fact, I have these two desires, and other pairs of conflicting desires, every day. People have conflicting occurrent desires *all the time*.

Assuming, as Doggett and Egan do, that accounts that attribute widespread irrationality are implausible, consistency is not a plausible constraint on desires.²⁸ Thus, the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts do not imply that we are irrational just because they hold that we may have conflicting desires about the fiction.

One could argue that the desires in my examples actually are not inconsistent. The appearance of inconsistency disappears once one takes into consideration the perspectival nature of the desires. For example, I desire to run for the sake of my mental and physical well-being, but I desire not to run in order to get more sleep. These are not all-things-considered inconsistent desires, and in fact all-things-considered inconsistent desires are relatively rare. Perhaps, one could argue, inconsistent desires are irrational when they are all-things-considered inconsistent.²⁹

This is a plausible amendment; however, it does not help Currie, Doggett, and Egan, because inconsistent desires about a fiction are not all-things-considered inconsistent. We desire that *Othello* be such that Othello kills Desdemona because we want to watch a beautiful tragedy, but we want the fiction to be such that Desdemona lives because we want love and truth to prevail over malicious deceit. Thus, even with the amended consistency constraint, conflicting desires about a fiction are not irrational.

III.2. Inferential Coherence. Like consistency, inferential coherence often is advanced as a rationality constraint for beliefs. The inferential coherence constraint for belief requires that we believe what follows from our beliefs. For example, if I believe that I will run early in the morning, and I believe that I must be awake to run, rationality requires that I believe that I will be awake early in the morning. Perhaps there

²⁸ For an argument that logical consistency is too strict a rationality constraint *even for beliefs*, see Kenny Easwaran and Branden Fitelson, "Accuracy, Coherence, and Evidence," in Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne, eds., *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Volume 5 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 61–96. Easwaran and Fitelson argue that in the preface paradox, logical and evidential consistency norms conflict but do not give rise to irrationality, which suggests that the logical consistency norm is too demanding even for beliefs. Easwaran and Fitelson argue that a more appropriate rationality constraint on belief is *coherence*: for a set of judgments, B, there is a possible world in which all propositions in B are accurate. I consider a version of this constraint co-opted for desires in section III.4.

²⁹ Gilmore, "That Obscure Object of Desire," *op. cit.*

is an analogous inferential coherence constraint on desires. Thus, this suggestion is that rationality requires that I desire what follows from my desires.

The inferential coherence requirement is explicit in Doggett and Egan's argument. They write, "having the desire about the fictional character (at least) *rationaly requires* that one have the corresponding desire about the content of the fiction, since as you well know, the only way for the fictional character to have the property that we desire him to have is for the content of the fiction to make it so."³⁰ The inferential coherence requirement also is implicit in Currie's arguments.³¹ Both arguments imply that rationality requires that we desire what follows from our desires.

The problem with this proposed rationality constraint is that inferential coherence amongst desires often is violated. For example, I desire to run early in the morning, but I do not desire to wake up early in the morning. To run early in the morning, I have to wake up early the morning. I desire the former, but I do not desire the latter even though the former requires the latter. In other words, I desire the end but not the means. This is not an anomaly. In fact, I have these desires just about every day. Many people have such desires.

Again, assuming that attributing widespread irrationality is the mark of an implausible theory, we should reject inferential coherence as a rationality requirement for desires. Rationality does not require that if we have a desire about the fictional character, we must have a corresponding desire about the content of the fiction, because rationality does not require that we desire what follows from our desires.

III.3. Justification. Beliefs are thought to be irrational when they are formed without sufficient justification. Arbitrary and *ad hoc* beliefs are irrational. Perhaps a rationality constraint on desires is that there be some justificatory basis for the desire. Derek Parfit offers the following example in support of this idea.³² Suppose I desire to live a life with as little pain as possible. Suppose also that I desire an extraordinarily painful operation on Tuesday over a mildly painful operation any other day simply because the pain will occur on Tuesday. Further suppose that I know all of the relevant details and have no false beliefs about the case. Parfit argues that in this case my desire for the extraordinarily painful operation on Tuesday is irrational.

If arbitrary and *ad hoc* beliefs are irrational, it is because of the functional role of beliefs. Beliefs are supposed to represent the world

³⁰ Doggett and Egan, "How We Feel about Terrible, Non-existent Mafiosi," *op. cit.*, pp. 284–85.

³¹ Currie, "Tragedy," *op. cit.*, p. 636.

³² Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 120–26.

accurately. Beliefs aim to be true. If the basis for a belief is wholly arbitrary, that is, if there is no evidence at all for the belief, then there is no reason to think that it is true. In fact, there is good reason to think it is not true. Thus, it is irrational to hold beliefs without any justification.

But here there is a disanalogy with desires. Desires are not supposed to represent the world accurately. Whereas beliefs have a *mind-to-world* direction of fit, desires have a *world-to-mind* direction of fit. Hence, arbitrariness does not generate the same kind of problems for desires as it does for beliefs. Arbitrary and *ad hoc* desires may be strange, violate social norms, and thus seem inappropriate, but that does not imply that they are *irrational*.³³ In some cases, acting on an arbitrary desire may be *practically* irrational insofar as satisfying the desire may conflict with one's intentions, goals, and beliefs. In such cases, the desire itself is not *theoretically* irrational (like arbitrary beliefs are), yet acting on the desire is practically irrational. This is one way to capture the apparent inappropriateness of arbitrary desires, like the desire in Parfit's example.

Being justified is not a plausible rationality constraint on desires. Importantly, though, even if this were a rationality constraint on desires, the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts would not be in trouble because they do not attribute to consumers of fiction arbitrary and *ad hoc* desires.

III.4. Possibility. One may argue that it is irrational to desire *impossible* states of affairs. Again, a comparison with beliefs is instructive. It is irrational knowingly to believe something impossible, irrespective of the kind of possibility involved, such as logical, conceptual, epistemic, metaphysical, or physical possibility. Beliefs aim to be true, and believing something you know to be impossible is irrational because you know it cannot be true.³⁴ However, desires do not aim to be true. Desires have a different functional role than beliefs. Thus, desiring something impossible may not be irrational.

One could argue that, nevertheless, desiring a state of affairs that you *know* is impossible is irrational because you know that your desire cannot be satisfied. Doggett and Egan assume that this is a rationality constraint on desires. In characterizing the difference

³³ Moreover, what seems from the first-person perspective to be an unjustified desire may not be. In some cases we may have no idea why we desire certain things. However, simply because we are not consciously aware of, or cannot articulate, the reason for a desire does not imply that there is no justification for the desire.

³⁴ In the terminology of Easwaran and Fitelson, "Accuracy, Coherence, and Evidence," *op. cit.*, it is irrational to believe a set of propositions, B, if there is no possible world in which all of the propositions in B are true.

between i-desire and desire, they say, “The content of i-desires is less restricted than the content of desires. You can (rationally) have i-desires towards things you know you can’t have: impossible things, things that have already happened, things that don’t exist. Such i-desires wouldn’t be irrational but desires with such contents would be.”³⁵ Let us set aside cases where you do not *know* that a state of affairs is impossible and discuss only examples where you know that what you desire is not possible.

If this were a rationality constraint on desire, we would be irrational *all the time*. People often have desires for impossible states of affairs. For example, I desire that the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election had turned out differently. I desire that I had remembered to pack a lunch this morning. I desire to be sitting on a sunny beach in Hawaii *right now*. In each of these cases, I know that the content of the desire is an impossible state of affairs. I know that I cannot change the past, and I know that I cannot be in a different location right now. Nevertheless, I really have these desires. People often have desires about the past, the future, counterfactuals, and impossible states of affairs.³⁶ Given the assumption that attributions of widespread irrationality are implausible, we should not regard desiring impossible states of affairs as irrational.

In addition to the consideration about attribution of widespread irrationality, it simply is not clear what is irrational about desires for impossible states of affairs. Consider, for example, desiring to square a circle. If I *believed* that square circles are possible, that may be irrational. But I do not. If I *attempted* to square a circle knowing that it is impossible, that may be practically irrational insofar as my intention is incompatible with my beliefs. But neither of these is the case. It may seem *strange* to desire to square the circle given that I know that it is not possible. However, as we established in the last section, strange desires are not necessarily irrational. The claim that I desire to square the circle just means that *if* there were a world in which squaring the circle were possible, I would be motivated to square the circle in that world. Similarly, if there were a way for me to go back in time and pack my lunch for today, I would be motivated to do it.

We have good reasons to reject possibility as a rationality constraint on desire. Thus, it is not irrational to desire that the fiction be such that some event, E, not occur in it despite the fact that you *know* that E will occur.

³⁵ Doggett and Egan, “How We Feel about Terrible, Non-existent Mafiosi,” *op. cit.*, p. 288.

³⁶ This point has been argued persuasively by Amy Kind, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Desire,” *op. cit.*

IV. CONCLUSION

Proponents of the *imagination + i-desire* account argue that it is the best explanation of our affective responses to fiction. Currie, Doggett, and Egan argue that the alternatives to *imagination + i-desire* imply that consumers of fiction are irrational. I have argued that the *imagination + i-desire* account faces a number of serious problems. These problems undermine the claim that *imagination + i-desire* offers an adequate explanation of our engagement with fiction. Moreover, I argued that the alternative accounts, *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire*, do *not* imply that consumers of fiction are irrational. I considered several possible principles of rationality for desires and argued that there are no plausible principles of rationality according to which the *desire + desire* and *imagination + desire* accounts imply that consumers of fiction are irrational. In fact, these alternatives face *fewer* difficulties than *imagination + i-desire*.

The *imagination + desire* account, in particular, is a very good account of our engagement with fiction. It explains our affective responses to fiction: we imagine that Othello is about to murder Desdemona, and we desire that he not do this, which generates in us anger and sadness. It explains the fact that the objects of our desires and emotions are the fictional events, not the fiction itself or the mental states of some hypothetical observer. This account explains why we do not jump on stage and try to change the course of the events: we merely *imagine*—not believe—that Othello is about to murder Desdemona, and we do not act on imaginings the way we act on beliefs. It explains why sometimes imagining involves pretense and sometimes it does not: when we pretend we have a desire to act out our imaginings, and without this desire we do not pretend. In the context of fiction, we often do not desire to act out our imaginings, and thus we often do not pretend in that context. Finally, *imagination + desire* explains our engagement with fiction without positing new, controversial mental state types, such as *i-desire* and *i-emotions*. Thus, *imagination + desire* explains many features of fictional engagement without the problems other accounts face.

My defense of the *imagination + desire* account is far too abbreviated to establish decisively that it is the *best* account of our engagement with fiction. However, the arguments presented in this paper at least suffice to undermine the abductive argument for *imagination + i-desire*.

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