

Imagining Stories: Attitudes and Operators

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Abstract: This essay argues that there are theoretical benefits to keeping distinct—more pervasively than the literature has done so far—the psychological states of imagining that *p* versus believing that in-the-story *p*, when it comes to cognition of fiction and other forms of narrative. Positing *both* in the minds of a fiction’s audience helps explain the full range of reactions characteristic of taking in a story. This distinction also has interesting conceptual and explanatory dimensions that haven’t been carefully observed, and the two mental state types make distinct contributions to generating emotional responses to fiction. Finally, the differences between the mental states illuminate how a given story can be both shared with others and at the same time experienced as personal.

Introduction: A Puzzle About Story Cognition

Consuming a good story is, on the one hand, a *personal* experience. We feel emotions for the story characters—excitement, anxiety, relief, sadness, triumph, and even joy—as though they were our own friends, relatives, and enemies.¹ At a deeper level, one often feels (or *I* feel) as though a certain dramatic work is special *to me*; it feels like the work and I are intimately connected in a way that is hard to explain, as though the version of the story that lives inside my head and resonates with such power is in some strange way *mine*.

But stories, on the other hand, are *shared*. A story can be communicated to anyone who is capable of understanding it. And most great dramatic works have been shared by thousands of people, who are mostly strangers to one another. From this perspective, no

¹ Walton (1978, 1990) famously denies that the emotions one experiences in response to fictional works are genuine emotions; rather they, as mental states, constitute props on the basis of which one is prescribed to imagine having the genuine emotions. I needn’t for purposes of this essay, however, take a stand on the correctness of Walton’s particular position on this matter, since it is obvious that in consuming fictions one often feels *something*. I will just call that *something* “emotion,” while leaving it open that Walton (at the end of the day) may or may not be right about its ontology.

one owns a story (not even the author). A story is rather the shared property of humanity—or at least anyone who takes an interest in it. A story is *ours*.

So a dramatic story, if it works well, gives a peculiar sense of being both ours and mine—shared and personal—in a way that has yet to be made precise. This strange combination, I think, is part of what makes story cognition uniquely exhilarating. But it is also something of a puzzle, for it is not obvious how that which feels *special to me* can also be conceived by me as the *shared property* of the many. We can transform this puzzle into a psychological question: what is story cognition, such that it can result in the sense that the cognized story is *both* shared and personal? The aim of this essay is to present an architecture of story cognition that answers this question. The first key to doing this, on my view, lies in dusting off an old distinction and putting it to new use.²

There are, to begin, two main ways that humans psychologically process story contents. First, we can imagine them. That is, for a content *p*, we can have a non-belief cognitive attitude toward it and thereby mentally treat it as fictional or part of a story.³ Second, we can have an internal representational constituent that serves as a *story operator*. This operator combines with the mental representation of *p* to form a new representation of the form *in-the-story p*. One can take various attitudes toward this new representation. But one possibility is that one believes it.⁴ So the second main way to process story contents

² I don't undertake to argue here against *other* cognitive architectures that might be presented as a solution to this puzzle. Since I'm the first (as far as I know) to explore this puzzle, the main work here lies in my developing my own solution to it. I do suspect, however, that *any* good architectural solution to it will have structural features that resemble the distinction I work through here.

³ I use "fictional" in a general way throughout. I don't use it in the technical sense developed by Walton (1990) and others, according to which "it is fictional that *p*" means *it is true-in-a-certain-work-of-fiction that p*. That is a fine usage, but mine is broader (mine encompasses the technical use but isn't limited to it). When I say "humans process some contents as fictional," I mean we mentally deal with those contents in a more or less playful way that doesn't involve (though it also doesn't exclude the possibility of) believing they describe reality.

⁴ A terminological note on "believe" and "belief." In my writings on religious cognitive attitudes (2014a, 2017), I use terms of art to distinguish *religious credence* from *factual belief*, since in the context of *that* discussion, the word "belief" (or cognates) by itself would run those two very different mental states together. Here, however, I see no such risk, so I just use "believe" and "belief"

is to believe *that in-the-story p*. To take an example from Dickens, I can imagine *that Magwitch is a criminal*, or I can believe *that in-the-Great Expectations-story Magwitch is a criminal*. And I can do either or both.⁵

To have convenient notations, let “ I_a ” and “ B_a ” be attitude operators, as usual, which say that agent a imagines or believes, respectively. Let “ $\langle s-i \rangle$ ” be an *in-the-story* operator, where the “ i ” is an index to whatever story the particular operator is linked to (so one operator would be “ $\langle s\text{-}Great Expectations novel \rangle$ ”). These operators are unary connectives that can be appended to propositional expressions to form new propositional expressions.⁶ So I notate the two mental states types just distinguished like this:

$$I_a p$$
$$B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$$

Read these as follows: “ a imagines that p ” and “ a believes that in-the-story- i p .”

I wish to argue that humans regularly use both kinds of mental state in the processing, storing, and recalling of fiction and *that the roles they play are different and interestingly so*. Elucidating these different roles ultimately feeds into solving the shared-personal puzzle with which we started, but it also leads to independently interesting theses and expands our explanatory power in ways that have not been appreciated so far in the literature on imagination in philosophy of mind and aesthetics.

as most philosophers of mind and epistemologists do, which corresponds fairly well to the phrases “factually believe” and “factual belief” in those other works on religious psychology; it is the same basic attitude to which I’m referring using slightly different terminologies. In any case, the terminology I use here corresponds exactly to my terminology in other works that are more explicitly on imagining (2009, 2011, 2013, and 2014b)

⁵ As indicated, this distinction is not new to me, but many of the ways I develop it here are new. Currie and Ravenscroft (2002: 8), for example, make the distinction, but they don’t go on to develop it as I do.

⁶ Some externalists about content, like K. Taylor (2000), say that mental (and other representations) that deploy fictional (or “empty”) names don’t actually have propositional content, even if they are sentential in representational structure. I don’t hold this view, so I still refer to story contents as propositions. But note that the main *psychological* points of this essay could be translated into terms that Taylor would find germane. That is, differences in *attitude type* (belief versus imagining) toward story contents *whatever those are*, along with the presence of the in-the-story operator, will still make differences in downstream processing of the sort I discuss here.

To be precise, I argue for four theses. First, we have:

Separability: In the course of story cognition, people commonly have, for some p , $I_a p$ without $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$, even when that imagining is prompted by experiences of a canonical work that portrays a story i , and even when one's imagining is in some sense *about* story entities from the work itself.

In other words, people often imagine things in consuming a story that they do *not* also believe hold true in the official story, and even though the imaginings themselves are about story entities. The two mental states come apart.⁷

The second thesis both helps explain the truth of the first and sets the stage for the third. It goes:

Conceptual Differences: There are (at least) five significant conceptual differences between $I_a p$ and $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$, which I label Architecture, Iteration, Epistemic Correctness, Selection, and Inference Rules.

These conceptual differences should be independently interesting to philosophers of mind who, like David Hume, wish to know what makes believing and imagining distinct.⁸

The third thesis follows from the second. It encapsulates the idea that the two types of mental state play different roles in the psychological explanation of thought and behavior.

Explanatory Differences: People's $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states and their $I_a p$ states explain different downstream thoughts and behaviors, with the former contributing more to the serious side of consuming stories and the latter more to the playful side.

The phrases "serious side" and "playful side" are terms of art (which will become clear in due course) for clusters of mental and behavioral phenomena that regularly accompany story consumption and ought to be explained (at least in part) by *any*

⁷ Gendler (2000: 58 [footnote]) basically denies that they come apart in normal story cognition. I take up her view in Section 3.

⁸ I am, of course, thinking of this great passage from the *Enquiry*, Section V, Part II: "Wherein, therefore, consists the difference between such a fiction and belief? It lies not merely in any peculiar idea, which is annexed to such a conception as commands our assent, and which is wanting to every known fiction. For as the mind has authority over all its ideas, it could voluntarily annex this particular idea to any fiction, and consequently be able to believe whatever it pleases; contrary to what we find by daily experience." I take the work in Section 2 of this paper to address Hume's puzzle, which I also address more directly in (2014b).

psychological theory of story cognition. I thus also hope that regimenting the serious and playful *explananda* as I do will also prove useful for other theorists going forward.

Next, though the explanatory roles that $I_a p$ and $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ play are different, they are both (in distinct ways) involved in generating the emotional responses that people have to stories. Furthermore, for some emotional responses, one's beliefs about the story work *together with* one's imaginings of elements of the story to generate characteristic emotional responses. This gives us my fourth thesis:

Emotions: Both $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ and $I_a p$ states help generate emotional responses to stories, and they play distinct and complementary roles in doing this.

My outline is this. Sections 1, 2, 3, and 4 argue for Separability, Conceptual Differences, Explanatory Differences, and Emotions, respectively. Once these theses have been established, we will be in a position to solve our initial shared-personal puzzle, which is what I do explicitly in the Conclusion. I also highlight in an Appendix how the theoretical work of this paper highlights open research questions for philosophers of imagination.

Section 1: Separability

Let's return to Magwitch, the criminal that Pip (the hero) helps as a boy in *Great Expectations*, who later returns as Pip's mysterious benefactor. I first saw Magwitch played by Robert De Niro in a movie adaptation.⁹ Later, encountering Magwitch as I read the novel, I constantly visualized him with a De Niro face.

As I read the novel, I believed (and still do) that in the novel *Great Expectations* Magwitch is a criminal. I feel certain of this. I also imagined Magwitch's having a De Niro face. But I did not believe (nor do I now) that in the novel *Great Expectations* Magwitch has a De Niro face. The story is not that specific—few verbal stories are—and Dickens was writing over a century before De Niro appeared on the scene. So our distinction emerges. One can have imaginings along with the processing of a story that concern fictional entities

⁹ Cuarón's (1998) adaptation.

from the story (e.g., *Magwitch has a De Niro face*) whose contents are not also incorporated into states of the form $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$.

To notate the point precisely:

$\sim(I_a \text{Magwitch has a De Niro face} \rightarrow B_a \langle s\text{-Great Expectations Novel} \rangle \text{Magwitch has a De Niro face})$

Furthermore, this denial of implication does not only hold when we give the arrow a logical reading. The denial also holds when we give it a causal reading. That is, it is not *generally* true that imagining *Magwitch has a De Niro face* characteristically causes me to believe that he does in the novel, and nor would it be correct for me to believe that in virtue of my imagining. That transition would only be likely or correct, if I *also* had other beliefs about the story and Magwitch that I do not have. It would, in fact, be an epistemic failing if I formed that belief, for I would have formed a highly specific belief without good evidence. But it was not *inappropriate* (aesthetically speaking) for me to imagine details as I read that I wouldn't believe as holding true in the story: we often imagine characters' voices, faces, postures, etc. in ways that haven't been specified by whatever fiction we're consuming. Examples can be multiplied. When reading the *Hobbit*, you might imagine Gandalf as holding his pipe in his left hand or in his right hand, without having a belief to the effect that whatever hand you imagine him holding it in is determined in the story. You just were imagining as you read and imagined it one way or another. So there is plenty of (perfectly appropriate) imagining that goes on in the consumption of stories that doesn't yield corresponding $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states and isn't required by them either. Most of these imaginings will be consistent with what the consumer of the story believes about it without being entailed by it. Modifying Walton's (1990) way of talking, let's call these *unprescribed-yet-appropriate imaginings*.

The existence of unprescribed-yet-appropriate imaginings, in absence of $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states with corresponding contents, establishes Separability.

Three points deserve mention here.

First, though mental imagery is one way to imagine, it is not the only way to imagine things one doesn't also believe to be the case in a story. To give another Middle Earth example, I can imagine Galadriel is just slightly smarter than Elrond without actually believing it's so in the official story either way. But the proposition (*Galadriel is just slightly smarter than Elrond*) cannot be captured in mental imagery, so discursive imagining is needed: that is, imagining with an abstract/symbolic representational format. So, importantly, Separability can also be shown through examples that don't rest on mental imagery.¹⁰

Second, in addition to imagining things one does not believe in a story either way, one can imagine things one believes are *not* true in a story, simply because one likes to. And this could still be a part of processing the same story. For example, I know (and believe) that in the novel *Sideways*, Miles Raymond is tall, but I imagine him being short as I read, since I like the story better that way—it seems to me to fit his character more. I then go on to imagine the other events of the story with this one adjustment made to imaginings that implicate Miles Raymond. So in addition to combined mental states of the form $(I_a p \ \& \ \sim B_a \langle s-i \rangle p)$, we can have ones of the form $(I_a p \ \& \ \sim B_a \langle s-i \rangle p \ \& \ B_a \langle s-i \rangle \sim p)$. Imagining, though it is constrained in *default* story cognition by beliefs about the story, can also depart from that default and hence be free from such beliefs at least to some extent.

Third, one might wonder whether the interplays I discuss between the two psychological structures in question—their combinations and divergences—are unique to cognition of *fiction* or also arise in cognition of other narrative forms, such as documentaries or bibliographies that have a narrative story arc. Derek Matravers (2014), in

¹⁰ Several thinkers, myself included, have argued that mental imagery can be incorporated into larger representational structures that have propositional contents. Hence, it can make sense to talk of imagining *that such-and-such is the case* also when some of the constituents of the representation are imagistic. See Kaplan (1986), my (2013), and Langland-Hassan (2015).

particular, argues that the notion of imagining cannot be made to work to distinguish fictional from non-fictional narratives (or their cognitive uptake), since (on his view) the sort of *mental models* consumers utilize in comprehending the former are the same in nature as those they use in comprehending the latter. I do not agree with Matravers on his negative point (that appeal to imagining cannot be made to work in characterizing fiction), since I am not convinced that his arguments are effective at refuting what I see as the more promising proposals along these lines (e.g., Walton, 1990; Stock, 2017). Yet I needn't take a stand on this here, since drawing the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not part of my present enterprise. However, the point I am making about Separability is compatible with Matravers's positive point, namely, his view that cognition of non-fictional narratives has much in common with (I think his "same as" is too strong) cognition of fictional narratives. To be more exact, the Separability thesis applies in modified form to cognition of non-fictional narratives as well. On reading a Lincoln biography, for example, I may imagine very specific things that theatre-goers cried out when they saw the president was shot (and ones not mentioned in the biography), without believing these exact things were cried out. Of course, I do form the belief that he was shot, but not everything I imagine as part of my "mental model" goes on to being believed.¹¹ In the usual case, the beliefs I form in cognizing non-fictional narratives will be less likely to have an *in-the-story* operator among their constituents than the beliefs I form in cognizing fiction, but there are a range of complications to that overall picture, as Stacie Friend (2008) documents: for example, ancient historians like Tacitus and Thucydides often include detailed speeches that they couldn't have witnessed as a way of conveying the character of a certain diplomatic envoy, so we end up with something like a story world (which would require an operator) that emerges from what is (mostly) non-fiction. Such complications, however, provide *more*

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

explanatory work for the psychological distinctions I draw to do, not less: analogues of all the arguments made in this section could go through for cognition of Thucydides's quasi-fictional speeches in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In any case, going forward, I will continue to use fictional stories as my examples, so just keep in mind that many of my views, suitably adjusted, will apply to cognition of non-fictional narratives as well.

To summarize these points and foreshadow my solution to the shared-personal puzzle, we can say that detailed imaginings of story entities *personalize* a story in one's mind in ways that beliefs about the story do not: my beliefs about a given story are more or less the same as the beliefs that other intelligent readers would have about it (setting aside disagreements of interpretation and differences in what people forget over time), but the imaginings I have about a story, if I'm imaginative in detail at all, are personal.

Section 2: Conceptual Differences

With Separability established, let's explore systematically what makes $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ and $I_a p$ different.

First, *imagining*, as a cognitive attitude, is a *way of relating to representations and thereby contents*. It is a manner of processing. It is not constituted by a component of any representation, as Nichols (2004) emphasizes and Hume (1777/1993) implies.¹² So in " $I_a p$ ", no representational constituent in the mind is picked out by the " I_a "; imagining, rather, is something you *do with* a representation. The *in-the-story* operator $\langle s-i \rangle$, however, *is* a constituent of representation and thereby a difference maker in the content of thought. When I internally represent that *in-the-story* Harry is in Hogwarts, the operator is a component of internal representation. In " $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ ", the " $\langle s-i \rangle$ " refers to this internal operator, which keeps agents from confusing p for being true of reality, even when the

¹² See the passage quoted in footnote 7. I am thinking specifically of this sentence: "It lies not merely in any peculiar idea, which is annexed to such a conception as commands our assent, and which is wanting to every known fiction."

attitude of belief is present. So the most basic difference between imagining p and believing *in-the-story* p is at the architectural level. They are different representational structures, in addition to being different attitudes. Let's call this difference Architecture.

Second, iteration of $\langle s-i \rangle$, in our formal notation, describes something different from iteration of I_a . And the corresponding differences in described psychology are worth noting. Iteration of in-the-story operators means that what follows describes a *story within a story*. $B_a \langle s-i \rangle \langle s-i' \rangle p$ is a belief that story i contains a story i' , where i' has p as part of its content (Hayaki, 2009).¹³ Anyone who has beliefs about the play-within-the-play in Hamlet, as I do, has beliefs of this form. That means iteration of the in-the-story operator refers to thought that is, in a sense, deeper in the world of stories. But iteration of I_a describes a mental state that represents in the first instance a state of a mind itself (it is not about a story within a story, or at least not necessarily so). That is, it describes a second-order mental state: $I_a I_{a'} p$ is an imagining about a mental state of imagining in the same or another agent (who may or may not be fictional). Read it as follows: " a imagines that a' imagines that p ." We can see this point another way too. $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ is a belief about a story that has p among its contents; $B_a I_{a'} p$ is a belief about a mind that is imagining that p (and that mind may be fictional or not), so $I_a I_{a'} p$ is an imagining about a mind that is imagining that p . Call this difference Iteration.

Iteration shows that the differences of representational structure highlighted by

Architecture make non-trivial differences to how *further* thoughts are composed.¹⁴

¹³ As an anonymous referee has pointed out, the notation " $B_a \langle s-i \rangle \langle s-i' \rangle p$ " (along with the corresponding mental state) does not involve an iteration of the exact same operator, since the index is different. A similar point can obtain for " $I_a I_{a'} p$ " and the mental state it represents, if a and a' are different. One might therefore object to calling this "iteration." I note, however, that both Nichols (2003) and Hayaki (2009)—among others—use iteration in this non-strict way for repetition of like but not identical components of pretense/imaginative states (broadly construed), so I follow their usage and trust that my notation makes it clear what I'm talking about more precisely.

¹⁴ There is one wrinkle worth noting here, though it doesn't make a difference to anything I say. I pointed out above that in " $I_a p$ " the " I_a " refers to a manner of processing and not to a thought constituent. However, that point applies without qualification only to the *outermost* attitude operator in iterated expressions. For example, in " $I_a I_{a'} p$ ", the *second* imagining operator (for a') in fact *does* describe a thought constituent of the mental state of a (though not of a'), since a is taking an

Third, $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ can be epistemically correct or incorrect in a way that $I_a p$ cannot be. A belief with false or inaccurate contents is in and of itself an *epistemic failing*, whereas just imagining inaccurate things (though it may be aesthetically inappropriate or contrary to the rules of a Waltonian game) is *not* in and of itself an epistemic failing. Imagining falsely becomes an epistemic flaw *only when* it leads to believing falsely—and then only because it so leads. We often, in fact, imagine false things just for the fun of it, without epistemic fault, and that point carries over to story cognition. If I just imagine Miles Raymond is short as I read (even though he's tall in the novel), I do not have a mental state that is incorrect in the epistemic way that a belief that he's short would be, for imagining falsely is not in and of itself contrary to knowledge, whereas believing falsely is. If I actually believe that in the novel Miles is short, my belief is simply wrong and hence an epistemic failing. So the states distinguished by Separability have normative differences, in addition to architectural ones. Falsity of content makes beliefs epistemically incorrect, but it does not make imaginings epistemically incorrect.¹⁵ This difference is also why there was nothing wrong with my imagining, as I read the novel, that Magwitch had a De Niro face, even though it was not true in the novel story that he had a De Niro face; by way of contrast, if I believed that in the novel Magwitch had a De Niro face, I would be mistaken / incorrect. Let's call this difference Epistemic Correctness.

Epistemic Correctness, importantly, does not mean that normativity and imagining are alien to one another. Rather, one significant kind of normativity that obtains for belief does not obtain for imagining, even if other kinds of normativity do obtain for imagining.

imaginative attitude toward a representation of the form $\langle a' \text{ imagines that } p \rangle$. Thus, what the operator in the formal notation refers to is not exactly the same in each case. I do not see any problem with this, though it may strike one as peculiar. The issue is, in any case, endemic to epistemic logics that use attitude operators and embed them, and it seems endemic to attitude reports in natural languages as well. I thank an anonymous referee for calling this to my attention.

¹⁵ Note that the *contents* of imaginings can still be true or false. But imagining something false is not normatively incorrect in the way that believing something false is.

We can, if we like, play various games in which specific imaginings are called for and others are inappropriate. Relative to the rules such games, certain imaginings may then be correct or incorrect, and in this sense, normativity (I would say *aesthetic* normativity) can also apply to imagining. Imagining, as I put it elsewhere (2013), is exploratory constraint satisfaction, and so there may be better and worse satisfaction of constraints of various sorts. So if I have agreed to play a game in which certain principles of generation, as Walton (1990) would put it, prescribe certain imaginings, then I may end up imagining rightly or wrongly relative to that game. But if a belief is false, it is wrong in the sense of being an *epistemic* failing regardless of what context one is in (Bratman, 1992) and not just a failing *relative to* a certain game. So the normative profiles of the two attitudes are different, and this is the point of the Epistemic Correctness conceptual difference.

Fourth, because $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states can be correct or incorrect in the sense specified, and because they are not about the actual world, the in-the-story operator must link those beliefs to something besides portions of reality to which p would otherwise pertain. In fact, the $\langle s-i \rangle$ operator brings about two linkages. Let's distinguish the *generating representations of a story from the world of the story*. The generating representations are the text, stage performance, film, sculpture, or whatever it is in the actual world that *delivers* the story. The world of the story is the totality of its fictional/story characters, places, and events (I need no more metaphysics than that for the present point). The in-the-story operator makes the generating representations the proprietary *source of evidence* for the correctness or incorrectness of beliefs in which it is embedded. And it makes the world of the story itself the semantic source of correctness or incorrectness of the beliefs.¹⁶ By way of contrast, *imagining* on its own does not bring about either linkage. Say someone has the mental state $I_a p$. The generating representations of a story may have prompted or even

¹⁶ To see how source of evidence about a story and source of correctness about a story come apart, consider an unreliable narrator, such as the self-deceived butler in *Remains of the Day*.

prescribed that imagining, but they do not provide *evidence* for its correctness or incorrectness in the sense in question, because that sense only applies to belief. Nor does the world of the story, as we've seen, make imaginings correct or incorrect in the way it makes beliefs about the story correct or incorrect, regardless of whether one's imaginings match that story world or not. So the imagining attitude *lacks* the semantic and evidence-selecting functions of the in-the-story operator. Call this difference Selection.

Fifth, there are inference patterns that normatively govern $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states that don't govern imaginings. Lewis (1978: 39) points out that truth in a given fiction is closed under implication. For example, if "In the fiction f , p " and "In the fiction f , q " are both true, then "In the fiction f , p and q " is also true (and so on). This logical point about "In the fiction f . . ." also applies to our internal mental in-the-story operator, $\langle s-i \rangle$, and to beliefs in which it is embedded, when these mental states are functioning well. So we get the following inferential rule: if $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ and $B_a \langle s-i \rangle q$, then $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p \& q$. This is a normative rule about how one ought to form further beliefs about stories.¹⁷ But if we substitute in I_a for one of the instances of $B_a \langle s-i \rangle$ in the antecedent, we no longer have a good rule. Thus, the following is *not* a normative rule for proper story cognition: if $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ and $I_a q$, then $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p \& q$. The reason this not a rule is that I may just happen to imagine some silly thing while processing a story, such as *Sherlock Holmes rides a Vespa*, but I wouldn't thereby be required to integrate *that* into my beliefs about the story. My imagining of Magwitch's De Niro face is also a (non-silly) counterexample to the mooted rule. Furthermore, if we substitute I_a for *every* $B_a \langle s-i \rangle$ in the first rule above (the mental analogue of Lewis's rule), we also don't get a good rule. I could, for fun, alternately imagine things going two contradictory ways as I process a story, without thereby being obligated to imagine things going *both* contradictory ways. It might in some sense be mentally mischievous to imagine in this way, but there are

¹⁷ Inconsistent fictions of course challenge such constraints. But here I characterize the general pattern, the challenging of which is precisely what makes inconsistent fictions interesting.

not *general* inferential rules for imagining, analogous to the ones that hold for belief, that would make such imagining an inferential failing. So the present point is an instance of a broader one: inferential patterns that normatively govern beliefs about stories are much more tightly constrained than those that govern imaginings, as we would expect, given the general normative and epistemic differences between beliefs and imaginings.¹⁸ Imaginings may, in point of psychological fact, *default* to following along with the inferential patterns that apply to belief, and it may be critical to our success at processing stories at all that imaginings have such a default. But this default can be voluntarily thrown aside, if one likes. So it does not reflect a normative *constraint* on inferences among imaginings. This difference can be called Inference Rules. It is this difference, notably, that most clearly explains Separability: imagining things in a story does *not* inferentially compel us to have beliefs about the story that are implied by the contents of the imaginings, so it is perfectly normal to have some imaginings about fictional entities that don't result in corresponding beliefs.

These considerations establish the Conceptual Differences thesis, which encompasses Architecture, Iteration, Epistemic Correctness, Selection, and Inference Rules. The work of this section has been somewhat technical, so let's step back. The broad theme here is that $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ is epistemically constrained in a way that $I_a p$ is not, and the operator in the former state indicates *which* story (and generating representations) the belief state should answer to. As a consequence of this epistemic constraint, two consumers of a given story who have well-functioning belief formation processes will come to have largely the *same* beliefs about a given story as one another (*modulo* interpretive difficulties). It is thus—to continue our work toward solving the shared-personal puzzle—our capacity for

¹⁸ See Sinhababu (2013) for discussion of this point.

forming *beliefs* about stories (and to do so in epistemically responsible ways) that explains how we can share them.¹⁹

Section 3: Explanatory Differences

One reading up to this point might suspect the following: *sure, it's true that $I_a p$ and $B_a <s-i> p$ are conceptually distinct and can in principle come apart, but they are in practice so intertwined that little would be lost in terms of psychological explanation if we decided not to carefully and continually observe the difference.*

One prominent theorist has, in fact, expressed a view much like this. Tamar Gendler's otherwise illuminating (2000) paper, which persistently uses the phrase "make-believing" to refer to mental states that (on her view) may undergo imaginative resistance, includes this passage in a footnote:

Walton points out (personal correspondence) that my use of 'make-believing' seems ambiguous between two readings. If I make-believe that p , I may be: (a) accepting that p has been successfully made fictional (that is, accepting that the author has succeeded in presenting a story in the context of which a certain proposition is true) or (b) pretending that p (that is, entertaining or attending to or considering the content of p , in the distinctive way required by imagination). Although these are clearly two different states, I think they are connected in a way that legitimates my conflating them in certain contexts. Because I think that—very roughly stated—what is true in a story is what the author manages to get the (appropriate) reader to imagine, if (appropriate) readers are unable (or unwilling) to make-believe in the second sense, they will be unable (or unwilling) to make-believe in the first. (58)

So Gendler recognizes the distinction I've been discussing ("these are clearly two different states"). But she also thinks that the two state types are so intertwined that it is sometimes fair and reasonable to lump them together under one term that doesn't discriminate

¹⁹ I should note that the conceptual differences discussed in this section hold up even if, following Walton (1990), we choose to analyze the *in-the-story* operator in terms of prescriptions to imagine in the context of a game of make-believe. This is because the relevant belief [believing that there is a prescription to imagine that p in the context of a certain game] is not identical with the relevant imagining [imagining that p]. Accordingly, all five conceptual points here can be translated into Walton's framework in fairly straightforward ways, though they do not imply that framework. In other words, the conceptual points made here should be adopted, regardless of whether or not one is a Waltonian. To put this another way, epistemic norms that obtain for beliefs about what one is prescribed to imagine do *not* automatically apply to those imaginings, since violating the prescription and violating the epistemic norms are two different things: I could violate the make-believe prescriptions all day long without thereby violating the norm of true belief (I can still believe truly that there *are* such prescriptions).

between them (“make-believing”). Separability, of course, already casts much doubt on Gendler’s final sentence, but the passage as a whole nevertheless challenges us to be specific about what explanatory rewards we *gain* by observing the distinction pervasively.

To meet that challenge, I argue here that $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ and $I_a p$ have different profiles in terms of what they psychologically explain (beyond the bare fact of Separability). Here I identify some classes of phenomena—both mental and behavioral—that are differentially explained by the two states and components thereof. I divide the phenomena into the serious side and the playful side of processing fiction, as mentioned in the Introduction. I take it as given that the seven classes of phenomena I discuss are real and show that $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ and $I_a p$ do different explanatory work in relation to them. By that I mean this: there is a range of psychological phenomena that $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states explain that, other things equal, $I_a p$ states would not explain, and *vice versa*.

What $\langle s-i \rangle$ and $B_a \langle s-i \rangle$ Explain: The Serious Side

1. *People argue about stories.* “Tony Soprano gets killed in the last episode.” “No he doesn’t!” “There’s romantic tension between Luke and Leah.” “No there isn’t!” “Catherine Tramell was the murderer.” “No she wasn’t!” Both lay people and scholars have such arguments. In so doing, they assume (at some level) one can be right or wrong about a fictional story. These arguments proceed by citing or demanding evidence. Tony made new enemies in later episodes. Luke and Leah exchanged meaningful glances. Tramell had an ice pick beneath her bed. Many of these arguments may be frivolous, but many of them won’t be. And the key psychological point is that the people having them often don’t *take* them to be frivolous, which is revealing of their underlying mental states.

Argumentation and demands for evidence are hallmarks of belief. If you said Magwitch was not a criminal in the novel *Great Expectations*, I’d argumentatively correct you and cite appropriate evidence. But if you said he didn’t have a De Niro-looking face, I

wouldn't, even though I persistently represented him with a De Niro-looking face as I read it. So why do I argue with you in the former case but not the latter? The answer is that in the former case but not the latter I have the attitude of belief: I believe that in the novel *Great Expectations* Magwitch is a criminal; I don't actually believe he has a De Niro-looking face. If you attempted to argue with me about the look of Magwitch's face, I'd say, "I know the novel doesn't say that! I just like imagining him that way!"

So arguments about fiction are in part explained by (i) people's beliefs about stories and (ii) people's sensitivity to *other* people's beliefs about stories. This shows that people who argue are implicitly aware of the Epistemic Correctness difference: beliefs can be epistemic failures in ways imaginings can't be. Moreover, the fact that we might re-watch scenes from *Star Wars* to settle a dispute about Luke and Leah, if we had one, as opposed to looking for real people named Luke and Leah, is explained by the presence of the story operator, *<s-Star Wars>*, among the constituents of our beliefs. The in-the-story operator changes the point of evaluation from the actual world to the world of *Star Wars*, and it changes the source of evidence to the generating representations of that world—that is, to the *Star Wars* movies—as the Selection difference implies.²⁰

2. *People distinguish multiple fictional worlds.* Adults know that Frodo and Sherlock Holmes inhabit distinct fictional worlds. Deena Skolnick and Paul Bloom (2006) show that children as young as four distinguish multiple fictional worlds as well. So not only—contrary to popular myth—do children reliably distinguish *reality* from make-believe, as developmental psychologists such as Alan Leslie (1987), Marjorie Taylor (2001), and Deena Skolnick Weisberg (2013) emphasize; they also distinguish one story world from another. In their second experiment, Skolnick and Bloom ask young children questions such as, "Can

²⁰ See Predelli (2008) for an even more elaborate set of distinctions concerning the fictional operator.

Batman talk to SpongeBob?” Even young children are likely to say “no.” But to “Can Batman talk to Robin?” their answer is much more likely to be “yes.”

Beliefs with in-the-story operators are needed to explain this result. Imaginings alone can't. Children, I take it, *can imagine* Batman talking to SpongeBob. Many of them probably *do*, as soon as they hear the question, so what they do or don't imagine doesn't explain the pattern of responses. Rather, their “no” answers express *beliefs* about story worlds, with two separate operators to track these worlds: $\langle s\text{-Batman} \rangle$ and $\langle s\text{-SpongeBob} \rangle$. Each operator is linked to different generating representations and worlds of evaluation. Beliefs that incorporate these operators combine with genre truths and knowledge of story conventions to yield further beliefs, such as: $B_a \langle s\text{-Batman} \rangle$ *there are no talking sponges*.

3. *People hypothesize about stories*. As I first read *Brothers Karamazov*, I hypothesized Ivan was the killer of the father (was I right?). Such hypotheses are common: Gatsby will be with Daisy in the end; Liz will marry Darcy; Harry will defeat Voldemort; Nick killed Amy. We're surprised if our hypotheses are disconfirmed, and we say (misleadingly) “I knew it!” if they're confirmed. Our usual verbal expressions of such hypotheses don't make the in-the-story operator explicit. We rather say, “I think Ivan was the killer.” But the mental states so expressed do have an $\langle s\text{-}i \rangle$ constituent: they have the form $H_a \langle s\text{-}i \rangle p$. You don't look for evidence about an *actual* guy named Gatsby in the actual world, as one would if one's internal hypothesis had no such operator; rather, you look at the sentences that constitute the text of the story. The presence of the operator shifts the hypothesis's evidential base to the generating representations of the story, as discussed.

This point becomes clearer through contrasting the following pair of examples. Archeologist Andie hypothesizes Troy traded with Mycenae. Literary Critic Larry *prima facie* hypothesizes the same thing, namely, Troy traded with Mycenae. But Andie is concerned with the actual city that Frank Calvert and Heinrich Schliemann rediscovered

and excavated in the 1860s; Larry is concerned with the story of Homer's *Iliad*. So Andie turns to the archaeological record and Linear B tablets from Mycenae, while Larry scours the text of the *Iliad*. The *Iliad* is only weak, inconclusive evidence for Andie, while it's of highest importance for Larry; *vice versa* for the Linear B tablets. Furthermore, Andie's hypothesis can turn out right, even if Larry's is wrong, and *vice versa*. So Andie's and Larry's respective mental states are different, though the attitudes (hypothesis) and topic (whether Troy traded with Mycenae) are the same. The difference is that Larry's internal mental hypothesis has an in-the-story operator, $\langle s\text{-}Iliad \rangle$, embedded in it. Formally put:

H_{Andie} *Troy traded with Mycenae*
 H_{Larry} $\langle s\text{-}Iliad \rangle$ *Troy traded with Mycenae*

The hypotheses people have about stories are also explained partly by our potential for $B_a \langle s\text{-}i \rangle p$ states, since people have hypotheses with the *aim* of eventually having beliefs. But we also have to posit *another* attitude in addition to imagining (as I use that word here) and belief, namely, $H_a \langle s\text{-}i \rangle p$. The attitude of hypothesizing gets linked via the in-the-story operator to the world of the story and to the generating representations of the story, as Selection implies.²¹ These considerations reveal two interesting points. First, the $\langle s\text{-}i \rangle$ operator earns its keep, since it works as an explanatory posit in more than one attitude type (not just belief). Second, the range of cognitive attitudes one can have about stories mirrors the range one can have about the actual world. There is no reason to limit ourselves to just belief and imagining when it comes to theorizing about cognition of fiction (call this view *Attitude Pluralism*). One can suspect that in-the-story p , doubt whether in-the-story p ,

²¹ Hypothesizing is different from imagining in the sense under discussion, since hypothesizing aims at the eventual formation of belief, whereas imagining in the sense identified so far does not (I am not trying to *figure out* whether Magwitch had a De Niro face; I *just* imagine it). One could, of course, use "imagining" as a more general term that encompasses *both* the attitude of hypothesis and the attitude of imagining in a fictional / playful way, but then one would just need *other terms* to mark the differences between those two things. In any case, using "imagining" that way is not the terminology I've chosen. Rather, I call the larger category "non-belief cognitive attitudes" and use "hypothesis" and "imagining" for two distinct mental phenomena within this larger category.

in the context of a debate assume for the sake of argument that in-the-story p , suspend judgment whether in-the-story p etc. The fact that we have this range of cognitive attitudes as a story unfolds in our minds is a large part of what makes a storyline intellectually engaging as an epistemic drama: we want to know what happens, so we employ our epistemic resources, including multiple cognitive attitudes, as tools to help us arrive at the knowledge we seek—even if it's only knowledge of a fictional story.

* * *

These serious side phenomena all involve people's wanting to get stories *right*. Relative to them, belief and the in-the-story operator play an explanatory role that imagining does not. Mere imagining (without belief) doesn't explain the why people argue about fictions in ways that presuppose one of them will be right and the other wrong, and it doesn't explain how we keep track of (and why we insist on) the differences between fictional worlds. We also need to posit in-the-story operators in people's minds to explain various evidence-seeking behaviors, like looking to texts and movies, as opposed to what would be the relevant bits of reality, for evidence of the truth of certain beliefs and hypotheses. The conceptual differences identified in the last section, Epistemic Correctness and Selection, make $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ and $\langle s-i \rangle$ suitable posits for explaining this serious side.

What $I_a p$ Explains: The Playful Side

Though we form beliefs about stories, in many ways we are much freer in how we cognitively handle stories. Imagining explains these freer ways.

4. We internally represent embellishments in stories beyond what we believe happens in them. This phenomenon emerged in my representing Magwitch as having a De Niro face. We often represent in our minds *more* than is officially specified or implied by the generating representations of the story. A fictional story might specify that a character shot a handgun. Yet you might mentally represent this as happening with a revolver—or a Glock.

Neither choice would be right or wrong. And you may know that neither is right or wrong, but such embellishing details come to you nevertheless (sometimes spontaneously, sometimes deliberately). Since you represent embellishments *without* believing them to hold in the story one way or another—and without hypothesizing or *aiming* to believe them—your attitude toward the embellishing representations is imagining. You become—often inadvertently—an imaginative co-creator of the version of the story that unfolds in your mind.²²

5. *We daydream in ways that incorporate characters, places, and events from the story.* Daydreaming is spontaneous story creation or continuation. But when we daydream, we don't take ourselves to be getting something independent of the daydream right or wrong. So daydreams aren't *beliefs* about a story or anything else.²³ The attitude by which we relate to daydreams is rather imagining.²⁴

But though daydreams are not (in a belief-like way) correct or incorrect as representations of a story, they often have lots to do with the denizens of antecedently existing stories. We can daydream events happening with the story characters that go beyond what is described in the official generating representations of the story. We can even daydream *ourselves* interacting with characters in the story. I used to daydream, for

²² Some claim that they don't have rich imaginings as they read along with novels. But that doesn't change the present point, which about the difference in explanatory value between belief and imagining. Imaginings explain mental states of the people who *do* represent further embellishments in ways that beliefs don't. Furthermore, there is reason to suspect that people who deny it might be imagining more than they realize. The psychologist Adam Zeman (email communication) has discovered that people with *aphantasia* (inability to have mental imagery) can lose their interest in novels without losing interest in movies. A good explanation for this is that some low-grade imagining goes on for just about everyone who likes reading stories, even if they don't always have good metacognition of this fact, and once that goes away the text loses interest.

²³ Ichikawa (2009) argues that sleeping dreams are imaginings. I don't know if that's true, but I'm certain that daydreams are.

²⁴ Compare: if I believe *<s-i>* I own a spaceship, I take there to be some independent story *i* in which I have a spaceship; that belief is incorrect if it's not the case that I own a spaceship in the world of story *i*. But daydreaming I own a spaceship involves no such commitment to an independent story world when it comes to the truth of the contents of the daydream. Now, *contents* of a daydream can be true or false. Most daydream contents are probably false. But having false contents doesn't make the *daydream* itself, or any component of it, incorrect in the way that it makes a belief incorrect.

example, that I was traveling along with Bilbo, Gandalf, and the dwarves through the Misty Mountains, as I read the *Hobbit*.²⁵ And all this daydreaming is imagining, not belief, for reasons that the Conceptual Differences thesis makes clear.

Interestingly, there's no firm boundary between imaginative embellishments (phenomenon 4) and daydreams that extend the story in more elaborate ways (phenomenon 5). They are on a continuum. The more additional details one imagines, the more one's embellishments turn into daydreams. Daydreams are just toward the more elaborate end of the continuum of imaginative co-creation of the version of a story that lives inside one's head.²⁶

6. *People generate external, non-canonical representations of stories through fan fiction and play acting.* Daydreaming in relation to a story world involves internally coming up with further developments involving the denizens of the story. But people often produce *external* representations as well.

First, there's fan fiction, a genre of writing (usually) that extends the events of a given story. And unless she's delusional, it's not usually the case that the fan fiction writer believes that what she writes actually happened in the original stories. Rather, she comes up with what she knows to be additional developments. The mental generation of fan fiction is deliberate and controlled daydreaming, which is to say imagining. (Once the fan fiction exists, one *can* have beliefs about what happens in those new stories, but that is immaterial to the present point: imagining [that goes beyond belief about what happens in the original story] explains the *generation* of the fan fiction.)

²⁵ M. Taylor (1999) points out that imaginary friends can be based on pre-existing fictional characters.

²⁶ At what point has one stopped imagining embellishments to the same story and just started creating a new story? Answering this question requires solving the dishwasher problem, which I raise in the Appendix. The dishwasher problem is difficult and wide open. But it is at least progress that we can pose it clearly.

Second, consumers of fiction sometimes act out stories and use *props* in the acting. “You be Magwitch and I’ll be Pip, and these headphones will be the shackles!” In such a case, one imagines the headphones are shackles. One does not believe that (in the story of *Great Expectation* or otherwise) headphones are shackles. So beliefs about the story can’t do the explaining here. Beliefs about the story explain my choices of the names “Magwitch” and “Pip.” But they don’t explain our ability to use props in play acting a story. An imagining is what links the thing that doesn’t exist in the story (headphones) to the thing that does (shackles). Nor, if we see ourselves as creating a new story, is it the case that headphones are shackles in the new story. Headphones are not shackles in any story, nor does either of us believe they are. Rather, we imaginatively cast them that way to pretend a scene from a story we know. So the choice of props in creating new, play-acted representations of a story is explained by imagination.

7. *People choose what to put in stories from multiple imagined options.* The main topic of this essay is story cognition on the consumer side. But we’re moving across a blurry line into the territory of mental states involved in story *creation*. That is no accident, since imagining is an attitude that occurs in the minds of both story creators and consumers.

If I write fan fiction, I might imagine multiple ways the story might go, without yet having beliefs about how it does go (since it doesn’t exist yet), and then *choose* from multiple imagined story developments the one that will make the best fan fiction²⁷. I let my daydreams (imaginings) run and then *pick* which one to make the official fan fiction story. So in fan fiction creation, as with original fiction creation, imagining *temporally* precedes beliefs about the story. And since creators can represent multiple ways for the story to go without being guilty of inconsistent beliefs, these initial imaginings can’t be modeled as beliefs (note how this point is explained by the Inference Rules conceptual difference). The

²⁷ See Weisberg and Goodstein (2009) and Weisberg *et al.* (2013) for experimental paradigms that show that young children already can choose from more than one storyline.

same goes for play acting a storyline: I might imagine multiple ways that the scene might go and then pick *one* to act out.

* * *

What's striking in these playful phenomena is the continuity between story consumption and story creation. One might think there could be a "pure" consumer of fiction who attempts to have *only* beliefs about a story, without having unprescribed-yet-appropriate imaginings along the way. Someone who reads novels just to win at Jeopardy *might* be such a person. But it is at least *usual* for people to do more—to have imaginings that outstrip what they believe the official story to be, like my imagining of Magwitch's face. These daydream-like imaginings take on a life of their own, giving rise to fan fiction, which takes as its starting point beliefs about the original story and develops them imaginatively into a new story or story extension. Original story creation, finally, is just like the last step, except without a pre-existing story on which to rely. This continuum of creative states and processes gives us an explanatory burden that can't be met by $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states alone. Positing imagining meets that burden. It is a cognitive attitude shared across the spectrum from the modestly creative story consumer to the prolific story creator. And this is why story consumption has a playful side: from a psychological standpoint, the use of imagination in story consumption is continuous with story creation.

Taken altogether, these considerations show that we should posit $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states and $I_a p$ states in order to explain psychological phenomena involved in processing stories. $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ explains 1-3 (or more serious phenomena) in ways that $I_a p$ doesn't, and $I_a p$ explains 4-7 (or more playful side phenomena) in ways that $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ doesn't. So we should appeal alternately to both. And these differences in explanatory roles make sense in light of the Conceptual Differences identified in the last Section. All this suffices to establish the Explanatory Differences thesis—and to dislodge the tempting thought in favor of conflation

put forth by Gendler. We also see a certain alignment in relation to our shared-personal puzzle: the serious side (the “getting it right side”) is a cluster of behaviors and thought patterns that enable one to share a story with others so that all parties are on the same page; the serious side phenomena, in a deeper sense, are all aimed at enabling us to share the *same* story with one another. The playful side, however, which is not constrained by getting things right, is a cluster of ways of relating to a story that are, at least at first, personal and idiosyncratic to each individual (or perhaps small group).

Section 4: Emotions

But which cognitive states generate the *emotional responses* we have to fiction? We are shocked and sad when Othello goes through with murdering Desdemona; we are anxious when we find out that Magwitch is Pip’s mysterious benefactor; we are joyous when the Eagles come to save Frodo and Sam; etc. We have to have cognized the relevant story events in *some* way in order to have such emotional responses. Are the relevant cognitions $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ or $I_a p$ states—or both? Here, most importantly, we must beware of sinking into a false dichotomy.

If you ask the literature on this topic, you’ll find that the most common response is that imagining is “the” cognitive input into emotional responses to fiction. This passage from Tyler Doggett and Andy Egan (2012: 278) seems representative²⁸: “We propose, again, the origin of our anxious affect had a cognitive and a conative component. But the cognitive component wasn’t a *belief*—it was an *imagining*, a cognitive state analogous to belief” (their italics). Notice the false dichotomy? And the standard view on the origins of emotional responses to fiction does little to correct it. On the standard view, as I understand it, imaginings can be in the same representational formats as beliefs (or “codes,” as Nichols (2006) would put it), so they can trigger emotional systems in the same ways that beliefs

²⁸ See Meskin and Weinberg (2003), Spaulding (2015), Nichols (2004, 2006), and Currie (2014) for similar statements.

do, albeit in attenuated ways. So since fictions generate imaginings, they trigger emotions that are similar to the emotions beliefs with the same contents would trigger. This view, to me, seems correct as a partial explanation for how imagining helps generate emotions, and I have even defended versions of it myself. But that standard view about imagining doesn't resolve the issue of whether $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ enter into the profile of cognitive states that are causally responsible for emotional responses to stories.

So Doggett and Egan's "the" in "the cognitive component" is misleading, since there might be more than one kind of input, and I think they are also wrong to imply that belief isn't involved. So my task in this section is to argue that *both* $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ or $I_a p$ states are involved (in different ways) in generating emotional responses to fiction. What follows are three arguments for thinking this is so, all of which are inferences to the best explanation: some emotional responses to fiction are best explained in ways that refer to beliefs people come to form about the stories; other responses should be explained in ways that appeal to imagining; and many emotional responses are best explained in ways that appeal to *both* kinds of mental state working together.

First, let's consider the famous example of Little Nell, who was at death's door in Dickens' serial *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Readers who were reading the installments as they came out begged Dickens not to let her die, and then wept profusely when they learned she did die. Can imagining *alone* provide the cognitive side of the explanation of these tears? It seems not, even though those readers no doubt imagined many things about Little Nell. Presumably, the people who wrote to Dickens begging him not to let her die had *already imagined* Little Nell dying prior to reading the fatal installment. How would it occur to them to write Dickens about it had they not imagined it? And perhaps they cried a little when they imagined Nell dying as they wrote their letters to Dickens, but that imagining was not what triggered their profuse tears. The profuse tears came when people *read* the

installment. That is, the tears came when the readers finally *learned* and hence believed that in *The Old Curiosity Shop* Little Nell was dead.²⁹

The reason for this is that belief, properly understood, is a *constraint* on how things are for you in a way that imagining is not. And many emotional responses, even to fictions, depend on (or are greatly magnified by) that cognitive constraint: for many types of emotional reaction, one does not respond as powerfully to represented contents that are regarded as *optional* or *uncertain*. This is obvious for beliefs versus imaginings about reality: believing one won the lottery engenders far stronger emotions than merely imagining one did. The interesting point here is that something similar is true about the mental representations that encode story lines: for many (though probably not all) story contents, belief that the content is true in the story (“Oh no! She died!”) engenders a stronger emotion than merely imagining the content without (yet) believing it.

At the very least, believing certain events happen in a story *adds* something to whatever one imagines, and this addition is often emotionally efficacious. Suppose that someone had a paper with smudged text and so, despite imagining almost all the same things as the other readers, wasn’t sure whether or not Little Nell “really died.” That reader would be eager, even desperate, to learn (hence form beliefs about) what happened, and that learning would make a difference to her emotional experience in relation to the story. In sum—*pace* Doggett and Egan—the beliefs one has about what happens in a story affect emotional responses.³⁰

²⁹ Peter Langland-Hassan has independently put forward similar arguments on the scholarly blog about imagination called *The Junkyard*. See his “Choosing Your Own Adventure?”: <https://junkyardofthemind.com/blog/2019/10/18/choosing-your-own-adventure>

³⁰ I doubt Doggett or Egan would disagree with most of the points I make about belief and emotion. Rather, I suspect they just didn’t think of deploying the distinction I make in a way that is relevant to explaining emotional responses to fiction. So I take myself to be correcting an oversight (which is also common in the literature), rather than saying something with which they would disagree.

But beliefs about the story are not the only cognitive state that matters to emotional response, and Doggett and Egan were right, after all, to point to imagining.

So, second, here's an argument to show that imaginings matter too (even where there are not beliefs with corresponding contents). There is much reason to believe that mental imagery is crucial to the generation of emotional responses to fiction, as Timothy Schroeder and Carl Matheson (2006) argue and as I argue (2011, 2016) on the basis of considerations about neural and cognitive architecture. Furthermore, the psychologist and neuroscientist Adam Zeman (email communication), who is widely known for his research on *aphantasia* (inability to have mental imagery), has found that some people who develop this condition lose their interest in novels, while still maintaining their interest in movies. The most plausible explanation for that fact is that mental imagery (in absence of imagistic perceptual inputs) is important to the emotional engagement that fictional works generate. But for reasons given in Section 1, much of the content of this imagery won't be believed as being true in the official story (such as the *exact* imagined shape of Little Nell's face, postures, etc.). So the generation of emotional responses to fiction is heavily influenced by the rich, detailed *imagined* internal representations that the generating representations of the story prompt, over and above beliefs about the basic elements of the story. A related (bonus) argument is that the phenomenology of caring about fictional characters involves seeming to care about *them* directly—personally—and not indirectly via what the story says about them. So it seems that some of our emotionally charged representations of fictional entities and event must lack the *in-the-story* operator, since the presence of the operator in the representing structure would thwart the directness of the caring. But then—since people are not confusedly thinking the story characters and events are real—the

cognitive attitude portraying the characters and events that are directly (operator free) cared about must be imagining (not belief).³¹

Third, there is an argument to be made that imaginings and beliefs work *together* in the generation of emotional responses to fiction. More precisely, *which* beliefs one has about a given story *while* consuming the fictional work in which it's presented make a difference to *whether* and *how* the imaginings one has impact one emotionally.

To see this, ask yourself: why do people hate spoilers? A spoiler, of course, is something you encounter that presents information about crucial story events *before* you go through the official generating representations of the story in the intended order. And what gets spoiled are the *emotional responses*, like excitement and suspense, that you would have had in absence of the spoiler. But how do spoilers work? Here's what I take to be the most plausible explanation. A spoiler gives you beliefs about crucial story events before you're ready. More precisely, when you encounter a spoiler, you form beliefs about crucial story events without having been led by the generating representations of the fiction through all the details that lead up those events. That is, you form $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states about the main events of the story *without* having had the generating representations of the story spark your more detailed (often imagistic) imaginings of the relevant characters, places, and events that led up to those main events. And your imaginings of those details do not generate the same emotions as they otherwise would have, had you had a different profile of beliefs about the story as you consumed it. If, for example, you are caused by a spoiler to believe that a certain outcome is *bound to happen* in a story, imagining (including with mental imagery) the events in detail that lead up to that event won't be nearly as suspenseful, exciting, joyous, fearful, etc. as they otherwise would be. And that's why we hate spoilers. By giving us pivotal beliefs before we're ready (we already know how it turns

³¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this bonus argument.

out), spoilers deprive our imaginings of their characteristic emotional power. Thus, the hatred of spoilers—assuming we’re right to hate them—shows that imaginings matter *along with* the relevant beliefs to the emotional engagement of a story and that the sequencing of the mental states in relation to one another matters too. The pivotal beliefs about what “actually” happens have to hit at the right time, once the imaginings, other intermediary beliefs, and other mental states have all been sequenced; *that* is when you get the emotional electricity. There is—from a research standpoint—much more work to be done in spelling out the dynamics of *how* the relevant beliefs and imaginings do or don’t interact, but *that* there are important and interesting interactions should by now be clear.³²

These arguments, if they’re right, establish the Emotions thesis. To be exact, if the first two are right, they are sufficient to establish it even without the third. And if the third argument is right, that establishes the thesis on its own. If all three are compelling, so much the better.

Now—to step back and see the big picture—the serious (belief) side of fictional cognition *and* the playful (imagining) side both matter to our emotional responses. But they matter in different ways. The serious side is the constraint: did that really just happen? did she really die? We want to know these things, and we thus bother to form and even argue about beliefs about the story that are constrained by its generating representations. But with our imaginings—the playful side—we make the story our own and give it rich imagery and non-imagistic details beyond what bare beliefs would support. And those personalized

³² We can also come at this from a different angle. Suppose you happen to guess the outcome of a story in advance of getting there. Going through the story in this case will still be more suspenseful than if you had had a spoiler that just *tells you* the outcome. And the reason for this is that spoiler-induced beliefs about what will happen kill suspense, fear, excitement, etc. much more than guesses do. So it is important to view spoilers as inducing beliefs. So insofar as spoilers make an emotional difference to the story experience, they do so by way of beliefs about the story. So a belief that in-the-story *p* can make a difference to emotional experience of a story that imagining that *p* or guessing that in-the-story *p* just wouldn’t make; the latter two states aren’t spoiling (or aren’t so to nearly the same extent).

details matter. I doubt any two readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* imagine Little Nell in *exactly* the same way. So imagining makes us co-creators of the version of the story in our heads whose exact details belong to each of us alone. So it is not just any Little Nell who dies. It is *my* Little Nell. Or so it is experienced by the weeping readers.

Conclusion: A Solution to the Shared-Personal Puzzle

Let's review the arc of this essay. My frequently invoked example was how I represented the criminal Magwitch as I read the novel *Great Expectations*. I noted that I had an imagining that he had a De Niro-looking face, even though I didn't believe that this was true in the novel story. That observation supported the thesis that, in story cognition, $I_a p$ can occur without $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$, which gave us the Separability thesis. Separability, in turn, was explained by the Conceptual Differences that obtain for the two mental state types (Architecture, Iteration, Epistemic Correctness, Selection, and Inference Rules). Those Conceptual Differences—especially Epistemic Correctness and Selection—also revealed that the two mental states have different profiles in terms of the phenomena they explain. $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ explained more serious side phenomena, like arguing over which interpretation of a story is correct. $I_a p$ explained the more playful side phenomena, like daydreaming about story entities, fan fiction, and acting out story scenes with props.

Most importantly, the arguments and theses here constitute independent support for an overall theoretical picture that, as should be clear by now, solves the shared-personal puzzle with which this essay began. It is our capacity to have beliefs about stories that enables us to share them, and we evidently do care about sharing them. Otherwise, why would we *argue* about what happens *in a fiction*? But at the same time, each of us dresses up that skeleton of beliefs about the stories with vivid and rich imaginings *that are entirely one's own*. And the fact that these vivid and rich representations are imaginings and not beliefs means that no one in the entire world can tell *me* I'm wrong about them. *We*

audience members may share the skeleton of belief—and enjoy the fact that we do—but clothing it beautifully in the imagination as I myself do is something that belongs to *me* personally. And you, of course, can say the same.

This combination of shared and personal, I think, is the deeper phenomenon that this essay illuminates about story cognition. A good story has the peculiar joy of being both *ours* and *mine*. This, however, is only possible in light of our psychological make up, which includes the cognitive flexibility to bring more than one attitude to bear on the stories that enchant us.

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Appendix: Three Open Research Questions for Philosophers of Imagination

One additional virtue a theoretical perspective can have is that it opens up further interesting questions for inquiry, beyond those that had to be addressed in arguing for it. A solid theory gives resources not just for answering some questions but also for asking others more clearly or even at all. So as further advertisement for the theoretical views in this paper, I offer here three questions that they open up.

First, does *imaginative resistance*, whatever that turns out to be, concern resistance to having (or inability to have) certain $I_a p$ states, $B_a \langle s-i \rangle p$ states, or both? The literature on imaginative resistance generally talks in terms of what people can't or won't "imagine" and, for the most part, doesn't distinctly ask what might be going on with beliefs about the stories that induce resistance. And Gendler, as we saw, uses "make-believing" in a way that conflates things. But it is at least a reasonable hypothesis that the resistance-inducing stories affect beliefs about stories and imaginings differently. It is an open question whether this hypothesis is true.

Now to be fair, some parties in the literature, e.g., Kengo Miyazono and Shen-yi Liao (2016), do draw the relevant distinction between resistance on the part of imagining and resistance on the part of belief. Characterizing the "Fictionality puzzle" they write: "Why does the reader have difficulty accepting that it is *fictional*, or true in the story world, that Giselda [who in the story killed her baby because it was a girl] did the right thing?" I take it that by "accepting" they mean something close to *believing*, and they differentiate this puzzle from the "Imaginative puzzle," which is about why one has difficulty imagining such things. But it is fair to say that it is not common in the literature to draw the relevant psychological distinctions so clearly, and the few authors that do have not fully answered the question. So it is open. Note also that their Fictionality puzzle, as Miyazono and Liao describe it, is different from Weatherston's (2004) "alethic puzzle," which he describes like

this: “The first puzzle, the **alethic** puzzle, is why authorial authority breaks down in cases like *Death on the Freeway*. Why can’t the author just make sentences like the last sentence in *Death* true in the story by saying they are true?” (Weatherson’s bold text). This is a puzzle about metaphysical limits on what authors can make fictionally true, whereas as the Fictionality puzzle is a puzzle about the psychological limits on what story consumers can believe/accept—one puzzle is metaphysical and the other psychological. Perhaps the alethic puzzle and the Fictionality puzzle at the end of the day stand and fall together. But we cannot just assume this, so I hope the work of this essay makes it possible to address the Fictionality puzzle with greater clarity.

Second, do we get Separability in the other direction? We saw that it is perfectly normal, for a given p , for one to have $I_a p$ while consuming a story without also having $B_a < s-i > p$. But is it also normal or even possible, for a given p , for one while consuming a story to have $B_a < s-i > p$ without $I_a p$? That is, can one believe that something is true in a story without also imagining it? Potential examples include cognition of stories, like in the poem “Jabberwocky,” in which many of the words, like “brillig,” are remembered but not understood. So perhaps we can believe that in-the-story it was brillig without imagining this. But—to put it mildly—*many* other issues must be sorted out before such a conclusion can be reached. So this is another open question.

Third, a question comes up that has been labeled in one circle (people who read earlier drafts of this essay) “the dishwasher problem.” When I wash the dishes, I imagine many things (places, conversations, etc.). And these imaginings have nothing to do with my dishwashing. So when I cognize a story and form beliefs about what happens in it, why is it the case that various imaginings I have as I’m doing this count as being at all linked to the story? Why isn’t it the case that my imaginings, *especially* the unprescribed-yet-appropriate ones, are as irrelevant to the story cognition as my imaginings during dishwashing are to

the dishwashing? What is it that *binds* my imaginings to the story? Having done some preliminary work on this issue, I can say it is not as easy as it at first seems (and note also the echo here of Wittgenstein's example of imagining King's College on fire: how do you know it's King's College you're imagining?). So this is another open question.

The dishwasher problem also arises in the background of the daydreaming, fan fiction, and play acting *explananda* discussed earlier. Presumably, when one takes enough liberties, what one is daydreaming, writing fan fiction about, or play acting is altogether a different story from the one that initiated the fantasy. So there is a psychological question here and a metaphysical question. The psychological one is: what psychological structures bind my imaginings (in imaginative elaborations of a story) to beliefs about the initial story? The metaphysical one is: what makes distinct representations all representations of the *same* story? The dishwasher problem is the psychological question; if it can be answered, that might go some way to answering the metaphysical question as well.