

# Moral Persuasion and the Diversity of Fictions<sup>\*</sup>

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*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2013)<sup>†</sup>

## Abstract

Narrative representations can change our moral actions and thoughts, for better or for worse. In this paper, I develop a theory of fictions' capacity for moral education and moral corruption that is fully sensitive to the diversity of fictions. Specifically, I argue that the way a fiction influences our moral actions and thoughts importantly depends on its genre. This theory promises new insights into practical ethical debates over pornography and media violence.

The way we think and act in the domain of morality is constantly undergoing changes. Sometimes changes in our moral actions and thoughts are shaped by the products of solitary intellectual contemplation, but far more often these changes are induced by external sources. This paper is about **fictions' capacity for moral persuasion**—the power of narratives to change the way we act and think with respect to moral matters, for better or for worse.

Since Aristotle's times, philosophers have written much about the role of fictions in moral persuasion. Most contemporary theorists—Booth (1988), Carroll (2002), Currie (1995), Depaul (1988), Jacobson (1996), Kieran (1996), Murdoch (1970), Nussbaum (1990), Robinson (2005), to name just a few—focus on the use of fictions in moral education. And some of them—such as Currie (1995)—are equally aware of fictions' power for moral corruption.

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<sup>\*</sup>For helpful criticisms and suggestions, I thank Sarah Buss, Jonathan Gilmore, Daniel Jacobson, Lina Jansson, Ian McCready-Flora, Alex Plakias, Sara Protasi, Nils-Hennes Stear, Dustin Tucker, Kendall Walton, members of the Aesthetics Discussion Group at the University of Michigan, the audience at Carleton College, and an anonymous referee.

<sup>†</sup>PENULTIMATE VERSION. For citation and reference, please see the definitive and final version in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 94(2), pp. 269–289. doi: [10.1111/papq.12000](https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12000).

[end of p. 269] Despite the amount of attention devoted to the topic, I argue, philosophers have been insufficiently sensitive to *the diversity of fictions* in theorizing about fictions' capacity for moral persuasion. Following Walton (1990), fictions are simply representations that prompt imaginings. This broad conception of fiction is indifferent to a work's medium: it includes poems, plays, films, novels, comic books, and video games. It is also indifferent to a work's aesthetic worth: it includes both the classic and the kitsch. Finally, as Friend (2008, 2011, 2012) clarifies, it includes both non-fictive works, such as counterfactual histories, and fictive works, such as historical fictions. On this broad conception, fictions turn out to be a rather heterogenous bunch.

However, discussions of fictions tend to take *realism*—the kind of fictions that are morally and psychologically realistic—as the paradigm. As James Harold notes,

Philosophical discussion has therefore focused primarily on [the modern realistic novel]. In fact, it is difficult to find any sustained discussion of novels outside of this tradition (broadly conceived) in the entire philosophical literature (Harold 2007, 145)

Unfortunately, the discourse on fictions' capacity for moral persuasion is no exception.

In the context of this discourse, taking realism as the paradigm is problematic because different kinds of fictions can have different **modes of persuasion**: they influence our moral thoughts and actions in distinct ways. Thus, an account of how the realistic novel *The Golden Bowl* functions in moral education is unlikely to help us make sense of how the satirical novel *Catch-22* functions in moral education. The focus on realism makes our theories of fictions' capacity for moral persuasion incomplete. We need a theory that accounts for the diversity of fictions. On the theory I develop in this paper, a fiction's mode of persuasion importantly depends on the *genre* it is appropriately classified in.

Here is a roadmap for what lies ahead. §1 introduces the phenomenon under investigation: how fictions function in moral persuasion. §2 highlights a frequently overlooked aspect of this phenomenon, the diversity of fictions, through an examination of non-realist fictions. §3 develops a theory of fictions' capacity for moral persuasion that accounts for the diversity of fictions. §4 outlines broader implications for cognate fields.

## 1 Fictions in Moral Persuasion

[end of p. 270] To get a grasp on fictions' role in moral persuasion, it is easiest to start with the case that philosophers have primarily focused on: the mode of persuasion found in realist fictions. Roughly, on the *realist mode of persuasion*, a fiction is responsible for getting us to believe a moral (or immoral) outlook when it is responsible for getting us to imagine a similar moral (or immoral) outlook. In this section, I explain the concepts necessary for characterizing the realist mode of persuasion. First, I differentiate the *real-world perspective* that a fiction gets us to believe and the *make-believe perspective* that a fiction gets us to imagine. Second, I clarify the notion of *being responsible for*.

## 1.1 Real-World and Make-Believe Perspectives

Our task here is to draw a theoretical distinction between the moral outlook that a fiction gets us to imagine and the moral outlook that a fiction gets us to believe as a result of our imaginative engagement. Before starting on this task, it makes sense to ask why we sometimes fail to make this intuitive distinction. My answer is that the ordinary language used in the ethical criticism of art leads us astray.

When we criticize a fiction for its “moral flaws”, we do not always make the target of our criticism clear. As [Jacobson \(1997\)](#) and [Mullin \(2004\)](#) point out, there are at least two kinds of criticism that we could be making. On the one hand, we might be criticizing a fiction for being *morally troubling*, for asking us to imagine an immoral outlook. On the other hand, we might be criticizing a fiction for being *morally dangerous*, for influencing us to come to believe or accept as true an immoral outlook. Ordinary uses of the term “moral flaw” encompass both moral troublingness and moral dangerousness. Thus, ordinary language blinds us to the distinction between the targets of these two kinds of ethical criticism. In the same spirit, [Hanson \(1998\)](#) warns against confusing the outlook that a fiction *represents* and the outlook that it *recommends*, and [Giovannelli \(2007\)](#) specifically criticizes Noël Carroll for not carefully distinguishing these two kinds of ethical criticism. The fact that numerous theorists continue to emphasize this distinction, between the moral outlook that we imagine and the moral outlook that we come to believe or accept as true, underscores how easy it is to confuse them.

Perhaps it will be easier for us to remember this distinction if the two targets have simpler names. Call the moral outlooks that various fictions ask us to imagine **make-believe perspectives**. Call the moral outlooks that we in fact have, and the moral outlooks that fictions influence us to believe or accept as true, **real-world perspectives**. (That these perspectives have to do with morality is hereafter implicit.) To truly capture what we mean by “moral outlook”, one more refinement is necessary: the notions of make-believe and real-world perspectives must be broadened beyond, respectively, imaginings and beliefs.

Moral outlooks influence the judgments we make and the actions that we take. Beliefs are undoubtedly important. Still, personal experiences and psychological research give us ample reason to think that our judgments and actions do not always cohere with our professed beliefs.<sup>1</sup> In thinking about the psychological influences on how we judge and how we act, we must also consider other components of the mind, such as desires, emotions, and dispositions. In general, our real-world perspectives include non-cognitive morally-relevant attitudes in addition to beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the moral outlooks that we adopt during imaginative engagements with fictions are more than just collections of propositional imaginings. Consider the familiar example of *Triumph of the Will*, which asks us to adopt a moral outlook that glorifies Nazism. The film does not mandate us to only propositionally imagine certain

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<sup>1</sup>See [Gendler \(2008a\)](#) and [Gendler \(2008b\)](#) for philosophical discussions of, and references to, the relevant empirical studies.

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, if expressivists are right, then our moral perspectives consist entirely of non-cognitive attitudes. I thank an anonymous referee for noting this complication.

moral claims, such as that Nazism is morally praiseworthy. The film mandates us to also imaginatively adopt non-cognitive attitudes that comport with the relevant propositional imaginings, such as positive affective responses toward Nazism. In general, make-believe perspectives include non-cognitive morally-relevant attitudes in addition to imaginings.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, make-believe perspectives can include both the moral worldview of the fictional world and the moral outlooks adopted by characters whom the fiction depicts sympathetically.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 What a Fiction is *Responsible For*

The topic of moral persuasion is neither straightforwardly causal nor straightforwardly normative. On a rough characterization of fictions' role in moral persuasion, a fiction is responsible for what a normal audience would come to believe and come to imagine as a result of imaginatively engaging with the fiction. What morally educative or corruptive effects that fictions can be said to **be responsible for** includes both a causal element, concerning imaginative engagement's influence on the audience, and an evaluative element, concerning what is normal—specifically what counts as a normal audience. We can get a grasp on the (admittedly elusive) notion of being responsible for through a brief thought experiment.

Suppose that there is a fiction that is, content-wise, just like the Harry Potter books. This fiction has only one reader. As a matter of fact, this fiction influences the reader to come to have strong negative emotions toward boys with scars on their foreheads and accompanying desires to murder them. The real-world perspective that this fiction actually gets the reader to have is, safe to say, rather immoral. Yet, it seems unfair to call this fiction morally corruptive. Intuitively, the reader has misunderstood the fiction in important respects. A normal audience would not respond to this fiction in the same way. In assigning moral blame for the immoral real-world perspective that actually results from imaginative engagement, we place the blame squarely on the eccentricity of the reader and not on the content of the fiction.

In thinking about the morally educative or corruptive effects of a fiction, what matters are not the effects it actually has, but the effects that it is responsible for—in just the elusive sense that we are pursuing. A fiction is only responsible for the effects that it would have on a *normal* audience.<sup>5</sup> Normality, in the sense I want to endorse,

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<sup>3</sup>It is debatable whether we need to posit imaginative analogues of non-cognitive attitudes in order to explain certain phenomena peculiar to fictions. Walton (1978) argues for imaginative analogues of emotions. Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) and Doggett and Egan (2007, 2011) argue for an imaginative analogue of desire. My own view is that we do not need to posit distinctive non-cognitive attitudes to account for the relevant phenomena, but this paper is officially neutral on these debates. What is important is that the desires, emotions, and dispositions—or their imaginative analogues—that we have in response to fictions could have different *warrant* conditions, or conditions about when they are fitting.

<sup>4</sup>There is a complication: many fictions present conflicting make-believe perspectives. To properly assess the moral effect of a fiction, we must assess the relative contributions of all the various make-believe perspectives that a fiction presents.

<sup>5</sup>There is a complication: some fictions, such as pedophilia fantasies, target audiences that we might antecedently consider psychologically abnormal. To properly assess the moral effect of such fictions, the notion of normality needs to be relativized accordingly.

is essentially evaluative.<sup>6</sup> One standard of correctness that informs our evaluation is whether the audience has correctly understood the work. In other words, normality is not synonymous with or reducible to statistical typicality. In the thought experiment above, the statistically typical effect—by stipulation—just is the effect on the reader’s real-world perspective. Since we do not think that the effect on the reader is the normal one, the relevant sense of normality must differ from statistical typicality. As a practical matter, we might use statistical typicality as an imperfect proxy for evaluative normality, but we must also recognize the theoretical distinction between the two. [end of p. 272]

With the central concepts clarified, I can now sketch a picture of fictions’ role in moral persuasion, focusing on the realist mode of persuasion. A fiction is responsible for getting us to really adopt a moral (or immoral) real-world perspective when it is responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt a moral (or immoral) make-believe perspective. The exact mechanisms remain controversial.<sup>7</sup> But what is incontrovertible is that there exists a relationship between what a fiction gets us to imagine and what a fiction gets us to think about reality. Let us turn our attention to the nuances of that relationship.

## 2 The Diversity of Fictions

The realist mode of persuasion is a fine starting point for getting a grasp on fictions’ role in moral persuasion. However, philosophers’ typical focus on realism is dangerous because it tempts us to carelessly slide from this starting point to a problematic theory of fictions’ capacity for moral persuasion. On this theory, **persuasion invariantism**, all fictions function in moral persuasion in the same way: they are responsible for getting us to really adopt a moral (or immoral) real-world perspective when they are responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt a similar moral (or immoral) make-believe perspective. In other words, the realist mode of persuasion applies to all fictions. Showing where persuasion invariantism goes wrong exposes the dangers of taking realism as the paradigm in theorizing about fictions’ role in moral persuasion.

In this section, I argue that once we step outside of the comfortable confines of realism, persuasion invariantism begins to look implausible. The problem is **the diversity of fictions**: specifically, different fictions have different modes of persuasion. As theorists, we want to furnish a general account of how fictions morally educate and corrupt. To do

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<sup>6</sup>An example from [Lance and Little \(2004\)](#) can help us understand this essentially evaluative sense of normality. A *normal* soccer game, we say, is played between two teams of 11 players. We could say this while acknowledging that many variants—such as “little league” soccer that is played by two teams of 20 players—exist, and that these variants statistically predominate. What makes 11-on-11 soccer normal, then, cannot be statistical typicality. Rather, 11-on-11 soccer is normal because we understand the variants by referring to and recognizing deviations from it.

<sup>7</sup>For example, [Currie \(1995\)](#) says that fictions get us to have certain *values* through the secondary imaginings they prescribe, [Jacobson \(1996\)](#) says that fictions give defeasible *warrant* for what would be fitting to feel through the feelings they prescribe, and [Kieran \(1996\)](#) says that fictions grant us *appropriate* imaginative understandings to be deployed in moral assessments. Notice that each of these proposals contains a normative element, which is captured by the notion of being responsible for.

so, we must attend to *all* fictions and examine the ways in which they morally persuade. (Or, if they do not morally persuade, we must examine why this is so.)

[end of p. 273] First, I consider the satirical novel *Catch-22* and multiple interpretations of how it functions in moral persuasion.<sup>8</sup> All the interpretations show that satires do not have a mode of persuasion that is the same as realist fictions'. Second, I consider the horror comedy film *Evil Dead 2* to further illustrate the diversity in modes of persuasion and to respond to an empirical objection to positing non-realist modes of persuasion.

## 2.1 Satires: the Case of *Catch-22*

*Catch-22* persuades readers to question and challenge the moral absurdities that are associated with wars, militaries, and bureaucracies. What makes it an interesting case in theorizing about fictions' capacity for moral persuasion is that it morally educates in a way that is distinct from the way that realist fictions do. On my preferred interpretation, *Catch-22* is responsible for getting readers to really adopt a moral real-world perspective because it is responsible for getting readers to imaginatively adopt an *immoral* make-believe perspective. Let me spell out this interpretation in more detail.

The fictional world of *Catch-22* is importantly unlike ours with respect to morality. As Harold notes in his discussion of the novel:

First, there are cases ... where the narrator baldly claims that something that is clearly immoral was in fact justified: "Clevinger was guilty, of course, or he would not have been accused, and since the only way to prove it was to find him guilty, it was their patriotic duty to do so." Second, sometimes characters advocate horrifying moral views, which go unchallenged by the other characters. In these cases the implication is that in the world of the novel, these ideas are not reprehensible. (Harold 2007, 149–150)

When engaging with this fiction, we readers are prescribed to imaginatively adopt a make-believe perspective that treats the morally absurd as normal and sensible. Perhaps we imaginatively adopt this perspective in order to be immersed in this morally odd fictional world. Perhaps we imaginatively adopt this perspective in order to empathize with the morally odd characters who have similar views. What matters is that, at some point in reading the novel, we imaginatively adopt an immoral make-believe perspective as the fiction prescribes us to do.

Despite being responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt a make-believe perspective that treats the morally absurd as normal and sensible, *Catch-22* is *not* responsible for getting us to really adopt a real-world perspective that treats the morally absurd as normal and sensible. In fact, it does the opposite. It persuades us to really adopt a real-world perspective that questions and challenges the moral absurdities that are associated with real wars, militaries, and bureaucracies. *Catch-22* thus constitutes a counterexample to persuasion invariantism. Persuasion invariantism would tell us that

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<sup>8</sup>This section owes a great deal of intellectual debt to Harold (2007), which, in addition to providing a careful case study of *Catch-22*, emphasizes the importance of non-realist fictions for theorizing about fictions in general.

*Catch-22* is morally corruptive because it is responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt an immoral make-believe perspective. Accepting persuasion invariantism would therefore lead us to seriously misunderstand *Catch-22*'s moral achievement.

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That is how I interpret *Catch-22*, at least. Importantly, even if my interpretation were to turn out to be actually incorrect for *Catch-22*, we could still conceive of an artwork for which my interpretation would be correct.<sup>9</sup> The possibility of such an artwork is sufficient for challenging persuasion invariantism. Hence, my foregoing interpretation illustrates one way that a fiction can educate us that is distinct from the way that realist fictions do.

Since I do not want to stake too much on one particular interpretation of *Catch-22*, I will examine two alternatives next.<sup>10</sup> The upshot is that, on these alternative interpretations, *Catch-22* still requires us to imaginatively accept norms different from the norms that we really accept. No matter which of these interpretations turns out to be correct in the end, satires such as *Catch-22* have a mode of persuasion distinct from that of realist fictions. So persuasion invariantism remains implausible when it comes to satires.

Consider Harold's *imaginative resistance* interpretation. Harold claims that engaging with *Catch-22* mandates us to resist imagining the morally outrageous and contradictory claims that the novel makes. Mandating imaginative resistance, he says, is what makes the work aesthetically valuable and successful:

In *Catch-22*, however, imaginative resistance serves to engage the reader more fully with the events and ideas of the work. The book is filled with contradictions, and with morally outrageous propositions, which escalate as the book goes on. Our inability to imagine these propositions contributes to the work's value and success. (Harold 2007, 149)

Initially, Harold appears to have a strong case. Imaginative resistance is associated with a jarring phenomenology, and many of the claims in *Catch-22* certainly evokes that "what-is-going-on" feeling.<sup>11</sup>

However, we can see important differences between *Catch-22* and paradigmatic imaginative resistance cases. *Imaginative resistance*—as I understand the phenomenon—

<sup>9</sup>I thank Jonathan Gilmore for pointing out this dialectical move.

<sup>10</sup>By no means are these the only other alternative interpretations available. For example, another interpretation may incorporate the notion of an *implied author*. On this interpretation, *Catch-22* is responsible for getting us to question and challenge the moral absurdities that are associated with wars, militaries, and bureaucracies because it is responsible for getting us to imaginatively identify with the implied author, who also questions and challenges the moral absurdities that are associated with wars, militaries, and bureaucracies. Since the notion of an implied author remains controversial in both philosophical aesthetics and literary criticism, adequately presenting and evaluating this interpretation would take us far beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, this interpretation remains a radical departure from the realist mode of persuasion. The upshot for this interpretation is thus the same as for the alternative interpretations considered below in text. I thank Sarah Buss for suggesting this interpretation and Daniel Jacobson for further discussion.

<sup>11</sup>Weatherson (2004) notes that sentences that evoke imaginative resistance tend to generate a striking, jarring reaction. Gendler (2006)'s "pop-out" terminology, as applied to these sentences, suggests a similar phenomenological characterization.

involves more than just the jarring phenomenology. Readers must also *persistently* resist imagining and accepting as fictional the claims that the work makes. There is a nearby phenomenon, *hermeneutic recalibration*, that shares the phenomenology of imaginative resistance but differs in that readers' resistance is only *temporary*. It is a common literary technique to evoke hermeneutic recalibration; we frequently see it in, amongst other places, magical realist novels. In cases of hermeneutic recalibration, the jarring phenomenology is employed by the author to prompt readers to reconsider and reinterpret the work. For example, if one were new to magical realism, one might initially find jarring the claim that a character was literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears. However, after realizing that magical realist worlds come with their own sets of rules, claims like this cease to be jarring. This example would thus be a case of hermeneutic recalibration rather than a case of imaginative resistance. In contrast with paradigmatic imaginative resistance cases, in hermeneutic recalibration cases readers are able to come to a relatively stable reading of the fiction on which the initially jarring claims cease to be so.

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*Catch-22* seems to evoke hermeneutic recalibration rather than imaginative resistance.<sup>12</sup> We are able to imagine the morally outrageous and contradictory claims once we recognize that the fictional world is importantly unlike ours. What is morally outrageous in our world could be perfectly sensible there. The rules that apply in our world need not apply there. On the relatively stable reading of the work, the morally outrageous and contradictory claims do make sense—not according to the norms that apply in the real world, but according to the norms that apply in the fictional world. Engaging with *Catch-22*, on this reading, mandates us to not only imagine the propositions asserted, but also to imaginatively adopt some norms that are opposites of the ones that we really hold.

Consider now the *ironic assertions* interpretation.<sup>13</sup> On this interpretation, all the moral absurdities and contradictions in *Catch-22* are only instances of verbal irony. As is the case with ordinary ironic assertions, the fiction asserts absurdities and contradictions only to bring out, to the readers, how ridiculous its subjects—including wars, militaries, and bureaucracies—really are. Does this interpretation entail that audiences need not imaginatively adopt immoral make-believe perspectives while engaging with *Catch-22*?

To answer this question, we must consider the cognition of ordinary ironic assertions. While the matter remains controversial, there are plausible pretense accounts of figurative language in general, and irony in particular.<sup>14</sup> In psychology, Clark and Gerrig (1984) argues for a pretense theory of irony. Drawing on Clark and Gerrig's account, Walton provides the following general account of irony:

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<sup>12</sup>Harold could also be using the term "imaginative resistance" to refer to the emotional distance that *Catch-22* mandates readers to maintain. As is the case with hermeneutic recalibration, it is a common literary technique to emotionally distance readers where appropriate. More importantly, as is the case with hermeneutic recalibration, emotional distance does not entail the lack of imaginings. I thank Daniel Jacobson for discussion on this point, and for coining the term "hermeneutic recalibration".

<sup>13</sup>I thank Kendall Walton for suggesting this alternative interpretation.

<sup>14</sup>Walton (1993) and Egan (2008) defend pretense theories of, respectively, metaphor and idiom.



To speak ironically is to mimic or mock those one disagrees with, fictionally to assert what they do or might assert. ...One shows what it is like to make certain claims, hoping thereby to demonstrate how absurd or ridiculous it is to do so. (Walton 1990, 222)

On Walton's account, ordinary ironic assertions involve mini-games of make-believe. A speaker *pretends* that some absurd claim  $\varphi$  is not absurd in order to *really* convey that  $\varphi$  is absurd. In order to understand what is conveyed, a listener *imaginatively* judges that  $\varphi$  is not absurd in order to *really* recognize that  $\varphi$  is absurd. The centrality of imaginative perspective-taking to irony recognition is evidenced by psychological research. Individuals with deficits in imagination, such as autistics and schizophrenics, tend to have difficulties with recognizing and comprehending irony.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, recognition of ordinary ironic assertions plausibly requires the use of imagination: to really recognize an absurdity as such, one must imagine as if it were not so.

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If ironic assertions in fictions function like ordinary ironic assertions, then imaginative perspective-taking is central to understanding them too. Hence, even if the moral absurdities and contradictions in *Catch-22* are best characterized as instances of verbal irony, readers are nevertheless required to exercise their imagination—specifically, they must imaginatively adopt different norms—in order to engage with the fiction. In fact, the pretense account of irony shows that persuasion invariantism is fundamentally misguided because it disregards the possibility that we learn about what-it's-like by pretending what-it's-*not*-like.

## 2.2 Horror Comedies: the case of *Evil Dead 2*, and an Empirical Objection

Consider another case that further illustrates the diversity in modes of persuasion. Sometimes, despite being responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt an immoral make-believe perspective, a fiction is not responsible for getting us to really adopt a similar immoral make-believe perspective. For example, the fitting response to a decapitation scene in the horror comedy film *Evil Dead 2* is to laugh rather than be morally outraged. Laughter is the fitting response because a decapitation scene in a horror comedy is fictionally worthy of laughter. Of course, *Evil Dead 2* does not get us to really think that a decapitation is any more really worthy of laughter than we thought before watching the film. Despite getting us to imaginatively adopt a make-believe perspective from which laughing at a decapitation is fitting, *Evil Dead 2* is not responsible for—contrary to what persuasion invariantism says—getting us to really adopt a real-world perspective from which laughing at a decapitation is fitting. Similar

<sup>15</sup>Happé (1991) documents the difficulties with irony recognition that individuals with Asperger's syndrome encounter. Langdon et al. (2002) surveys the literature on schizophrenia and difficulties with irony recognition. To be precise, these psychologists have attributed difficulties with irony recognition to deficits in meta-representation and theory-of-mind, respectively. However, there is an extensive literature in both philosophy and developmental psychology, as surveyed in Liao and Gendler (2011), on the close ties between imagination, pretense, theory-of-mind, and meta-representation. The differences in details therefore do not threaten the present claim that imaginative perspective-taking is central to irony recognition.

cases are easy enough to find once we know where to look: fictions that are morally and psychologically non-realistic.

However, the excessive violence in horror comedies also seems to invite an empirical objection for positing non-realist modes of persuasion.<sup>16</sup> On the face of it, the emerging consensus in the empirical literature on violent media is that the consumption of violent media in fact influences people's violent behaviors and attitudes. In philosophy, Hurley (2004) provides a review of this literature. In addition, Hurley draws on the cognitive psychology literature on imitation to argue that violent media affect audience's attitudes, desires, and dispositions in largely automatic and unconscious ways. So, the worry is that, even if we do not consciously think *Evil Dead 2* morally desensitizes us to real-world decapitations, it in fact does. Of broader significance, the empirical literature on violent media appears to support applying the realist mode of persuasion to fictions outside of realism.

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The flaw of this objection is the empirical literature that serves as its basis. Researchers of violent media themselves tend to be insensitive to the diversity of fictions. The stimuli used in their research thus tend to be the same kind of fictions on which philosophers have focused in theorizing about fictions' role in moral persuasion: morally and psychologically realistic fictions.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, we cannot expect the results that these stimuli generate to be straightforwardly applicable to theorizing about non-realist fictions' role in moral persuasion.

In fact, when researchers do take perceived realism into account in their studies, their findings suggest that horror comedies like *Evil Dead 2* are unlikely to be responsible for getting us to really adopt a real-world perspective from which laughing at a decapitation is fitting. Even psychologist Rowell Huesmann, who has consistently argued that violent media has dangerous real-world effects, acknowledges the importance of recognizing differences in perceived realism:

Observational-learning theory suggests that children who identify fairly strongly with an aggressive character or *perceive a violent scene as realistic* are especially likely to have aggressive ideas primed by the observed violence, to imitate the character, or to acquire a variety of aggressive scripts and schemas. ...Also, realistic portrayals are more likely to increase viewers' aggression than those presented in a more fictionalized or fantastic fashion. (Huesmann and Taylor 2006, 404)<sup>18</sup>

However, it is important to note that the differences between perceived realism that Huesmann and colleagues highlight are between individuals. So, while these differences suggest that the current empirical literature presents no challenge to positing different modes of persuasion for different kinds of fictions, they do not support positing

<sup>16</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for advancing this objection.

<sup>17</sup>Liao and Gendler (2011) press this point further in a related context, the empirical literature on the relationship between *transportation* (into fictional worlds) and *persuasion*.

<sup>18</sup>The basis for these claims is the longitudinal research presented in Huesmann et al. (2003), which provides more details on the role of perceived realism in mediating violent media's influence on violent behaviors and attitudes.

different modes of persuasion either. Simply put, there is a need for further research on potential differences in realism between different kinds of fictions by empirical researchers of violent media and related topics. Sensitivity to the diversity of fictions is indispensable to fulfilling this need.

### 3 Persuasion Variantism

The implausibility of persuasion invariantism shows that a theory of fictions' capacity for moral persuasion must be sensitive to the diversity of fictions. In this section, I argue that *genre* is the key: a fiction's mode of persuasion importantly depends on its genre. The resulting theory, *genre persuasion variantism*, is an attractive position because it both captures the variations that exist in the landscape of diverse fictions and preserves the explanatory power necessary for philosophical theorizing.

First, I present an alternative development of persuasion variantism. As a foil, it shows why genre is useful for theorizing about fictions' capacity for moral persuasion. Second, I give an overview of genre persuasion variantism before developing it in greater detail. Third, as a proof of concept, I show that genre persuasion variantism adequately explains the moral achievement of *Catch-22*.

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#### 3.1 Anti-Theoretic Persuasion Variantism

Persuasion variantism, as the name indicates, is a broad family of theories that are opposites of persuasion invariantism. It denies that all fictions function in moral persuasion in the same way. And that is all that can be said, according to one possible development of persuasion variantism; **anti-theoretic persuasion variantism** says that different fictions have different modes of persuasion but there are no *principles* for capturing these differences. Although we can say true things about particular fictions' capacity for moral persuasion, no true *theory* exists.<sup>19</sup>

As theorists, we should find anti-theoretic persuasion invariantism unsatisfying. In trying to understand fictions' capacity for moral persuasion, we want to understand more than what happens in individual cases. We want to say, for example, that *Triumph of the Will* and *Birth of a Nation* morally corrupt in similar ways, and understand where the similarity lies. We want an explanation of the difference between the ways that realist fictions like *The Golden Bowl* and satires like *Catch-22* morally educate, and not merely acknowledging that there is a difference. Explanatory considerations thus place a presumptive demand of generality on the accounts that we develop. Anti-theoretic persuasion variantism's lack of explanatory power prompts us to search for a better alternative. Such an alternative can be had, I argue, if we bring genre into the picture. (Of course, at the end of the day, it is possible that other considerations will tilt the cost-benefit analysis in favor of anti-theoretic persuasion variantism. My aim is only to motivate the need to consider an alternative, not to make a full comparison.)

<sup>19</sup>I borrow this characterization of anti-theoretic persuasion variantism from Jacobson (2005)'s characterization of his anti-theoretic position in the ethical criticisms of art debate. This position is also inspired by particularism in ethics.

### 3.2 Genre Persuasion Variantism: An Overview

I take a **genre** to simply be a special grouping of fictions that is recognized by a community as such.<sup>20</sup> Walton (1970)'s account of perceptually-distinguishable categories suggests one, but by no means the only, way of filling out this minimalist conception of genre.<sup>21</sup> On Walton's account, a fiction's appropriate classification in a genre depends on factors such as its relevant resemblance to other fictions in that genre, the artist's intentions, critical judgments, and that genre's propensity for aesthetic pleasure.

[end of p. 279] The picture of genre space that falls out is rather messy.<sup>22</sup> There exist relatively broad genres, such as drama, and relative narrow genres, such as Victorian romance. Some fictions may be the only actual exemplar of its genre, as is the case with first works of new genres.<sup>23</sup> Typically, a genre will overlap with and stand in hierarchical relationships to many other genres. Typically, a fiction is appropriately classified in multiple genres, some of which may be particularly salient for a given aim or context. All these features of genre space introduce complications for assessing particular fictions' capacity for moral persuasion. But for now, let us set these complications aside to focus on the theoretical role that genre plays in explaining fictions' capacity for moral persuasion.

Even though there are a variety of fictions, we have ways of grouping them sensibly that allow us to recognize theoretically-important similarities and differences amongst the diversity. That is what we do when we use terms like "horror comedies", "satires", and "realist fictions". The groupings that these terms pick out allow us to both recognize the diversity of fictions and preserve some theoretical unity. According to **genre persuasion variantism**: *ceteris paribus*, a fiction's mode of persuasion depends on the genre(s) in which it is appropriately classified, for a given aim or context. In other words, a particular fiction's genre offers *pro tanto* reasons for assessing its mode of persuasion.

Next, I develop a version of genre persuasion variantism that takes the realist mode of persuasion and my interpretation of *Catch-22* as starting points. On this development of genre persuasion variantism, the relationship between the real-world perspective that a fiction is responsible for getting us to really adopt and the make-believe perspective that it is responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt *partly depends* on the genre of the fiction. It takes two steps to see how genre can vary the relationship between the make-believe and real-world perspectives that are appropriately associated with a fiction. First, we must recognize the symmetry that exists between *import*, or what we put into imaginative engagements with fictions, and *export*, or what we take away from imaginative engagements with fictions. Second, we must recognize genre's influence

<sup>20</sup>Context plays a role in specifying who the community includes. Which groupings are special for a given community is an empirical matter, and why they are special may require us to look to sociology or literary theory for a non-philosophical explanation.

<sup>21</sup>In contemporary philosophical aesthetics, Currie (2004) and Laetz and Lopes (2008) suggest other ways of filling out our minimalist conception of genre.

<sup>22</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for urging me to acknowledge the following complications.

<sup>23</sup>As an anonymous referee notes, this is a particularly contentious claim, but not without contemporary defenders. Carroll (2000) appears to defend the completeness of genre classifications—every work belongs to at least one genre—in his extension of Walton's account to film criticism. In a rather different tradition, Derrida (1980) asserts that "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text" (65).

on import: it partly determines what is warranted to be fictional and what we ought to imagine. I now elaborate on these two steps that connect genre to export.

### 3.3 The Symmetry between Import and Export

The terminology of import and export is introduced in Gendler (2000) to capture two important aspects of our interactions with fictions: what we put in and what we take away. To grasp these notions, we first consider a realist fiction case and focus on propositions that are believed and imagined. As we will see later, however, import and export involve more than just the contents of beliefs and imaginings, and the symmetry between import and export holds for non-realist fictions too.

[end of p. 280]

Start with import. Fictional worlds are rich entities: the propositions that are true in a fiction often outnumber the propositions that are explicitly expressed. We have rules about which of the non-explicitly-expressed propositions are allowed to be added to a fictional world outright, and which inferences we are allowed to make from what is explicitly expressed.<sup>24</sup> These are the **import** rules that tell us how to construct rich fictional worlds from the relatively few propositions explicitly expressed by words on a page or images on a screen. As an illustration, we can see import rules at work in our imaginative engagements with *Pride and Prejudice*. Even though Jane Austen never explicitly states that pride is a vice, we are nevertheless allowed to think so in the fictional world. We are allowed to think so because the fictional worlds of realist fictions are, for the most part, like ours. Since *Pride and Prejudice* reasonably counts as a realist fiction, we can import much of what is true in our world (with some exceptions) into the fictional world, including the fact that pride is a vice.<sup>25</sup> Import rules of a realist fiction thus warrants us to imagine much of what we believe.

Similarity is a symmetric relation.<sup>26</sup> If we have good reasons to think that, in a given domain, a proposition is fictional if and only if it is true, then we have good reasons to both judge a proposition to be fictional once we know it is true (import) and judge a proposition to be true once we know that it is fictional (export). So the similarity between the fictional world of *Pride and Prejudice* and ours tells us more than what we can import; it also tells us what we can export. Specifically, the export rules of realist fictions warrant us to believe much of what we imagine, at least the relatively general propositions.<sup>27</sup> Gendler outlines two ways that export can happen:

<sup>24</sup>Walton (1990) calls these rules *principles of generation* and discusses their central role in make-believe. See also Lewis (1978, 1983) and Currie (1990) for further discussion.

<sup>25</sup>I do not want to stake too much on this particular example. Although Gendler (2000) calls *Pride and Prejudice* a realist fiction, the novel does contain parts that are melodramatically saccharine as well as parts that satirize societal norms. Perhaps the Henry James novels that Nussbaum (1990) invokes are better examples of the kind of works that I have in mind.

<sup>26</sup>Note that the symmetry here is *epistemic*, not *metaphysical*. Metaphysically, the fictionality of imported propositions depend on their actual truths, but the truth of exported propositions clearly do not depend on their fictionality. I thank Kendall Walton for pressing me to clarify the nature of the symmetry.

<sup>27</sup>What exactly are we warranted to export? Obviously, we should not export propositions regarding the existence of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. As I suggest earlier, plausibly we should export psychological generalizations and broad moral norms. While it is difficult to give any precise answer, a good rule of thumb is that we are not warranted to export the particulars but we are warranted to export the generalities.

The first sort are those which make use of the *narrative as clearinghouse*: export things from the story that you the storyteller have intentionally and consciously imported, adding them to my stock in the way that I add knowledge gained by testimony. ... The second sort are those which make use of the *narrative as factory*: I export things from the story whose truth becomes apparent as a result of thinking about the story itself. These I add to my stock the way I add knowledge gained by modeling. (Gendler 2000, 76–77)

Using *Pride and Prejudice* as clearinghouse, we might come to believe the facts about social norms of the period that we also imagined. Using *Pride and Prejudice* as factory, we might come to believe that it is unwise to judge people by their first impressions because we imagined so in response to Elizabeth Bennet's initial assessment of Mr. Darcy. There is a symmetry between the import and export rules of realist fictions because they are both ultimately grounded in the symmetric relation of similarity that exists between realist fictional worlds and ours.

[end of p. 281] It is worth emphasizing that import and export are about more than the contents of beliefs and imaginings. Hazlett (2009) and Hazlett and Mag Uidhir (2011), for example, adopt Gendler's terminology but narrowly construe import and export only in terms of propositions. However, as Gendler (2006) clarifies, import and export also apply to other components of the mind: "When we imagine, we draw on our ordinary conceptual repertoire and habits of appraisal, and as the result of imagining, we may find ourselves with novel insights about, and changed perspectives on, the actual world" (150–151). Conceptual repertoire and habits of appraisal are not reducible to beliefs; they involve our non-cognitive attitudes such as desires, emotions, and dispositions. So, import and export apply to all components of real-world and make-believe perspectives, not just beliefs and imaginings.

It is also worth emphasizing that the symmetry between import and export holds for non-realist fictions too. What matters is that there exists some symmetric relation or relations between a fictional world and ours that grounds both import and export. Consider the fictional world of a science fiction that is similar to ours with respect to morality but not with respect to physics. The import rules are thus such that we are allowed to add real-world moral norms to the fictional world, but not allowed to add real-world physical laws to the fictional world. Consequently, we are allowed to take away what the fiction tells us about moral permissibility, but not allowed to take away what the fictions tells us about physical possibility. In this case, the symmetry between import and export is grounded in the similarity *and the dissimilarity* between the fictional world and ours.

In addition to similarity and dissimilarity, another symmetric relation is opposition. Consider a fictional world that is the opposite of ours with respect to morality. Such a fiction might be responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt a make-believe perspective that is the opposite of what we really hold. Since opposition is symmetrical, we are thus to export the opposite of what the fiction tells us to make-believe. Indeed, these are plausibly the import and export rules that govern the satirical parts of *Catch-*

22. Understanding the symmetry between import and export, and the relations that ground the symmetry, is thus an important step toward understanding how *Catch-22* morally educates. More generally, it is also an important step toward understanding how genre influences export.

### 3.4 Genre and Import

We now consider the other important step: how genre influences import. The conventions that are associated with a genre constrain which implicit propositions are warranted to be fictional and which inferential patterns are appropriate. In turn, genre conventions inform our expectations about the appropriate ways to approach a fiction, such as what we are warranted to imagine.

Outside of philosophy, writers, literary theorists, and psychologists have all recognized the significance of genre. Writer Henry James claims that our imaginative engagements with fictions are informed by our recognitions of genre conventions: “‘Kinds’ are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them, from abounding to the utmost in their respective senses and sinking deep into their consistency” (James 1899, xvii). Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov extends James’s insight and characterizes genre as having dual functions: “as ‘horizons of expectations’ for readers and as ‘models of writing’ for authors” (Todorov 1990, 18). Genre partly determines what is true in a fictional world and what our expectations during imaginative engagements should be. Finally, psychologists have found that genre influences the way that audiences’ engage with fictions and the claims that they accept as fictionally true (Bilandzic and Busselle 2008; Woolley and Cox 2007; Zwaan 1994). The convergence of opinions attests to genre’s influence on our imaginative engagements with fictions.

[end of p. 282]

As systematizations of the features common to works in a given genre, *genre conventions* do not merely catalogue the common features, but say something about the relationships between them. As a simplistic example, a convention of the science-fiction genre is that physical laws of the real world need not hold in the fictional world. In one sense, this convention is descriptive: it is in fact typical for works that are appropriately classified in science-fiction to include violations of real-world physical laws. In another sense, this convention is also normative: being appropriately classified in science-fiction warrants a work’s inclusion of violations of real-world physical laws. Considered in the normative sense, genre conventions constrain the nature of relevant fictional worlds by contributing to the relevant import rules.

Genre influences our responses to fictions because it influences the extent to which we bring our real-world perspective to bear on make-believe. The example above shows that there are variations in the extent to which fictions demand us to bring our physical beliefs to bear on make-believe; realist fictions demand us to do so, but science fictions do not. There are similar variations in the extent to which fictions demand us to bring our moral outlooks to bear on make-believe. For example, the conventions of horror comedies allow fictional worlds to morally deviate from the real world in the same way that the conventions of science-fictions allow fictional worlds to nomically deviate from the real world. Consequently, while we must bring our moral outlooks to bear on realist

fictions, we need not do so with horror comedies.

### 3.5 A Test for Genre Persuasion Variantism: Back to *Catch-22*

[end of p. 283] Finally, we can put the previous two points together: genre partly determines the export rules that govern a fiction because it partly determines the import rules that govern a fiction. As a proof of concept, let us reconsider the case of *Catch-22*. What persuasion invariantism fails to explain is how a fiction can have a non-realist mode of persuasion. Genre persuasion variantism can easily explain how.

As a fiction in the genre of satire, *Catch-22* does not ask us to import our moral perspectives into make-believe. Instead, we are to import the opposite: what we really find morally reprehensible, we are to imaginatively find it morally unproblematic. Given the symmetry between import and export, we are warranted to export the opposite of what we make-believe. Hence, even though the fiction is responsible for getting us to imaginatively adopt an immoral make-believe perspective, the fiction is responsible for getting us to come to really adopt a moral real-world perspective.

Undoubtedly, even this is a simplification of how *Catch-22* morally educates. We need not come to really adopt a real-world perspective that is the exact opposite of the make-believe perspective imagined. For some, the novel simply challenges them to examine more carefully their existing attitudes toward wars, militaries, and bureaucracies. The symmetry between import and export is only an imprecise heuristic, and genre's contribution to import and export rules is only partial.

Still, simplifications have theoretical worth: they illuminate interesting general relationships that hold. Although genre persuasion variantism may only constitute a partial explanation of fictions' role in moral persuasion, it highlights the importance of genre in constructing a complete theory. A promising way to account for the diversity of fictions, I argue, is to recognize that genre gives *pro tanto* reasons for understanding fictions' capacity for moral persuasion.

## 4 Broader Implications

I have presented a problem for theorizing about fictions' capacity for moral persuasion, the diversity of fictions, and produced a solution to it, genre persuasion variantism. In closing, let me draw attention to two broader implications of the problem and solution this paper develops.

*Practical ethics.* Fictions' capacity for moral persuasion serves as the basis for a multitude of claims in everyday ethical debates. It comes up in campaigns for including "great books"—the classics of Western literature—in primary education curricula. It comes up in criticisms of violent video games' effects on the teenagers that play them. It comes up in criticisms of pornography's negative impact on its consumers and women in general. A nuanced theory of fictions' capacity for moral persuasion thus gives us a more informed perspective for engaging in these debates.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Liao and Protasi (2013) applies the theoretical work in this paper to refine Eaton (2007, 2008)'s feminist criticism of inegalitarian pornography.



*Moral and aesthetic psychology.* Besides philosophers, other researchers interested in the real-world impact of narratives should also be sensitive to the diversity of fictions. [end of p. 284]  
For example, violent media researchers in psychology and communication studies should use stimuli from non-realistic genres in their assessments of violent media's influence on people's violent behaviors and attitudes. A diverse range of stimuli from different genres promises to help us gain new insights into the intersection of moral and aesthetic psychology.

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