

Non-cognitivism and the puzzle of imaginative resistance

Engaging with fiction involves making believe that all sorts of unrealistic and even impossible scenarios obtain: wizardry, faster than light travel, frogs turning into princes and hunters turning into stags.... But we experience a difficulty when we try, as Tamar Gendler puts it, 'imagining worlds that we take to be morally deviant' (Gendler 2000, 56). Imagine a fiction containing the sentence (F).

(F) 'Anna was wrong to share her food with the orphans; she could have sold what she didn't need and made a profit.'

Or a fiction containing (Kendall Walton's example) (G).

(G) 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl' (Walton 1994, 37)

When we read (G) we are reluctant, or unable, to make believe that it is true¹. It has also been claimed that the power of an author to make something fictional - true in the fiction - proves inadequate in the case of (G) and (F).²

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If it is only moral claims that prompt 'imaginative resistance', it is tempting to speculate that something special about moral principles means that they are not in the same boat as the factual beliefs about the world that we so readily 'suspend'³ when we engage with fiction. It has been maintained that it *isn't* only moral claims that provoke resistance. Deviant *evaluative* claims of other sorts – aesthetic claims for instance – allegedly also prompt resistance. But a solution to the 'puzzle of imaginative resistance' that invokes something special about moral principles can maintain that evaluative judgements of other types are special in the same way⁴.

There are also non-evaluative claims that we allegedly have difficulty imagining. But it is important to bear in mind that alleged cases of 'imaginative resistance' may not all be cases of the same phenomenon. My interest is in the puzzle posed by cases like (F) and (G) and I will propose that (F) and (G) are puzzling because of something special about moral claims. If there are cases of resistance to non-evaluative claims that aren't covered by my explanation of 'imaginative resistance' I have the option of dismissing these as outside its remit.

¹ Kathleen Stock (2005) suggests that if the story is filled out in certain ways we can and would imagine it is true. I won't dispute this. But it is certainly not the case that *every* filling out of the story removes our resistance to imagining that (G) is true. Stock's 'contingent impossibility' solution fails to explain imaginative resistance experienced by readers of many versions of the story of Giselda or of the story of Anna and the orphans.

² If this is true it is clearly something to do with the first phenomenon: 'imaginative resistance'. Some authors distinguish 'imaginative resistance' and 'fictional resistance'. It will become clear how my solution deals with both.

³ Of course we don't suspend these beliefs in the sense of cease to believe them. But we can successfully bracket them, allowing us to make believe that they are false.

⁴ In this connection see footnote 5 below.

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My solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance has it that the phenomenon of imaginative resistance tells us something about moral claims, but not the sort of thing it has been suggested it tells us. A popular type of solution (Walton 1994, 2006, Weatherston 2004, Stock 2005) maintains that the content of a claim like (G) is, or is believed to be, incoherent, or inconsistent with the content of other sentences that are fictionally true, or - because of 'dependence' relations that hold, or are believed to hold, between moral facts and non-moral facts - is, or apparently is, 'ungrounded'. That sounds like more than one type of solution but there is a common factor: these proposals identify the *truth conditional content* of a claim like G and its *relations* to other truth conditional contents as the source of the problem.

These proposals are underpinned by a *cognitivist* picture of moral discourse. The cognitivist picture takes moral sentences to express contents that are apt for truth and falsity (on a robust notion of truth and falsity). The acceptance of a moral sentence, according to the cognitivist picture, is authorised just if there is reason to believe it is true, and according to these proposals, there is reason to believe it is true only if there is reason to believe that certain non-moral sentences are true. The acceptance of the sentence as *true in the fiction*, on the cognitivist picture, is thus authorised just if there is reason to believe it is *true in the fiction*, and according to these proposals there is reason to believe it is true in the fiction only if there is reason to believe that certain non-moral sentences are true in the fiction. According to this sort of solution then we are authorised to accept (G) as true in the fiction only if we have reason to believe that certain non-moral sentences are true in the fiction. But we don't have reason to believe these sentences are true in the fiction.

It is not so surprising that this sort of solution is popular; what is surprising is that among solutions to the puzzle that invoke special features of *moral discourse* this type of solution enjoys what amounts to hegemony. This is surprising given the existence and credibility of *non-cognitivist* meta-ethical views. The solution I will advance in this paper invokes the non-cognitivist picture. In section 2 I will say something about the varieties of non-cognitivism. I will also say something about engagement with works of fiction, drawing on Kendall Walton's influential account. I will explain why, if engagement with fiction involves *make-believe*, as Walton urges, it isn't obvious that non-cognitivism is the key to the solution of the puzzle of imaginative resistance. However I will go on in section 3 to argue that once a key claim of Walton's account is granted, the apparent obstacle to a non-cognitivist solution disappears. I will elaborate this solution. If its assumptions, including the assumption of non-cognitivism, are granted, it is a neat and plausible solution. Of course its assumptions, especially non-cognitivism, are not uncontroversial. In section 4 I will explain where this leaves us.

2.

What is non-cognitivism? The most well-known form of non-cognitivism is *emotivism*, according to which a moral judgement expresses the subject's feelings. But this position is only one - the most crude and objectionable - of many that facilitate the 'non-cognitivist' solution I have in mind. Mark Kalderon defines non-cognitivism as the view that *acceptance* of a moral sentence is an attitude other than belief (Kalderon 2005, 118). Other definitions (see for instance van Roojen 2013) build in what Kalderon

terms 'non-factualism': the view that moral sentences don't express contents that have (substantial) truth conditions (Kalderon 2005, 100).

But the best thing for me to do is forego offering a definition and instead state the principle that my 'non-cognitivist solution' requires. The principle that my solution relies on has it that *the acceptance of a moral sentence by a subject is constituted by or depends on the subject's possession of a certain non-cognitive state*. The 'non-cognitivist solution' I will offer is compatible with any metaethical view that agrees with this principle. These views include positions that identify moral acceptance with the possession of certain non-cognitive states, and positions that identify moral acceptance with the possession of cognitive and non-cognitive states simultaneously (hybrid expressivist theories), and even Kalderon's 'hermeneutic moral fictionalism', if I understand that view.

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For the moral cognitivist the acceptance of a moral sentence is belief. Or rather, *outside of a context of pretence or make-believe*, the acceptance of a moral sentence is belief. When engaged in make-believe we can be authorised to 'accept' certain sentences that we don't have reason to believe if the rules of the game of make-believe permit us to 'accept' these sentences. For example, if we're pretending that tree stumps are bears and there is a tree stump behind a bush we are authorised to accept 'there's a bear behind that bush'. Cognitivists will acknowledge a distinction between what I will call 'N-acceptance' - acceptance outside of an acknowledged pretence/game of make-believe, and - which they equate to belief, and 'M-acceptance' - acceptance inside an acknowledged pretence/game of make believe - which they equate to make-belief.

I will use the locutions 'N-acceptance' and 'M-acceptance' without assuming (because I'm not a cognitivist) that N-acceptance is belief. The principle that facilitates my non-cognitivist solution has it that *the acceptance of a moral sentence by a subject is constituted by or depends on the subject's possession of a certain non-cognitive state*. This too has to be clarified so that it is clear what kind of acceptance is at issue. The varieties of non-cognitivism that support my solution agree that *the N-acceptance of a moral sentence by a subject is constituted by or depends on the subject's possession of a certain non-cognitive state*. Given my attitude towards gender selective infanticide, these positions agree that I don't N-accept (G). I N-accept the negation of (G). That is, I N-reject (G).

But the puzzle of imaginative resistance is not a puzzle about N-acceptance. It is a puzzle about M-acceptance: acceptance inside a game of make-believe. I am supposing the well-established hypothesis that engagement with fiction involves make-believe. When I read *Middlemarch* I make-believe that an intelligent, attractive young woman marries a dusty pedant. When I watch *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* I make-believe that Earth has been invaded by body snatchers. According to Gregory Currie 'we are intended by the author to make believe that the story as uttered is true' (Currie 1990, 18) and engagement with the fiction involves recognising and complying with this intention. According to Walton (1990) the appreciator participates in a game of 'prop-based make-believe' in which the work of fiction plays the same role as the tree stumps in the bear-tree stump game.

Walton's account is the account I will adopt. It will turn out that a feature of this account is the key to the success of the non-cognitivist solution. But on the face of it the acceptance that engagement with fiction involves participation in games of make-

believe is not conducive to a non-cognitivist solution.... Assuming the fiction containing (G) contains no indications that the narrator is 'unreliable', if engagement with this fiction involves participation in the type of game of make-believe we allegedly play when watching *Invasion of the body snatchers* or reading *Middlemarch*, participants in the *Giselda*-game it seems should M-accept (G). The rules of this game of make believe, it seems, require M-acceptance of (G). I don't N-accept (G); but why should this stop me from M-accepting (G)?

This question is hard to answer without a precise understanding of what M-acceptance is for non-cognitivists. An obvious suggestion is that if N-acceptance is the possession of certain non-cognitive states then M-acceptance should be understood as the pretend/imagined possession of those non-cognitive states. If this suggestion is adopted then the prospects for the non-cognitivist solution look bleak. For it is easy for us to pretend/imagine we feel a different way to the way we really feel. It is easy for me to pretend to be scared of the pretend-bear. It is possible to pretend that you admire someone you despise.

The puzzling phenomena that we want to explain - 'imaginative resistance' and 'fictional resistance' consist in the fact that despite the apparent requirement on me to M-accept (G), I am reluctant or unable to M-accept (G), and arguably, it is not even true that my engagement with the fiction really authorises me to do so. But if M-accepting (G) involves pretending that I have a different non-cognitive attitude to gender selective infanticide than I actually have it is not at all obvious why I would have any difficulty M-accepting (G) or experience significant reluctance to M-accept (G). And it is not obvious why there couldn't be a game whose rules authorise my doing so.

3.

The non-cognitivist has options. Perhaps there are reasons why it is difficult for us in the relevant cases to pretend our non-cognitive attitudes are other than they are. And perhaps there are other suggestions as to how non-cognitivists should understand M-acceptance.

But the option I will pursue cuts through the quibbling. It does so by taking advantage of a key claim in Walton's account. According to Walton a work of fiction is a prop. It plays a similar role to that played by the tree stumps in the bear-tree stump game. If there is a tree stump in a certain location, players of the tree stump-bear game are required, by the game's tacitly understood 'principles of generation' (Walton 1990, 38) to pretend that there is a bear in that location. Other features of the stumps – their size for instance – likewise generate 'prescriptions to make believe' in certain ways.

Tree stumps as props put a heavy burden on the imaginative resources of those pretending that they're bears. Teddy bears, dolls and toy trains make it easier for us. In a different way so do books and movies: it is easy for me to imagine the obstacles to intellectual flourishing endured by a woman in early 19th century England because *Middlemarch* gives a detailed (purported) account. But fundamentally what is going on when we engage with these works of fiction, for Walton, is the same sort of thing that is going on in all games of prop based make-believe. Real features of the props, in line with 'principles of generation' generate prescriptions to make-believe.

When I engage with *Middlemarch*, the novel is a prop that generates prescriptions to make-believe. But crucially it is not the only prop. There is another prop: myself! According to Walton....

'Given my earlier conclusion that representations have the function of serving as props in games of make-believe, it can hardly be controversial that appreciators normally participate in the minimal sense of considering themselves subject to the "rules" of make-believe, constrained to imagine as the works prescribe. What is not so obvious, but of very considerable importance, is that viewers and readers are reflexive props in these games, that they generate fictional truths about themselves.' (Walton 1990, 213)

Participants in the bear tree-stump game and the other childrens' games Walton mentions clearly are themselves props. When I cower before the tree stump my department licenses participants in the bear-tree stump game, including myself, to imagine that I am afraid. But it is not just the familial relationship between engagement with fiction and more recognisable instances of prop based make-believe that encourages Walton to advance the crucial claim that when I engage with fiction I make myself a prop in a game of make-believe.

He points to the devices by which works of fiction *draw people in* (Walton 1990, 215) to games of make believe....

'*Gullivers Travels* makes it fictional of itself that it is the journal of a certain ship's physician, Lemuel Gulliver. It is almost inevitable that in reading it, one should understand it to be fictional that one is reading such a journal.' (Walton 1990, 215)

If you understand this you understand your own reading activity to mandate your imagining that you are reading a journal. Even when works of fiction forego such devices the responses they solicit in the appreciator are best understood under the assumption that the appreciator imagines herself reading about or witnessing events (though typically 'distanced' from those events and not actively participating in them) and recognises her responses as themselves generating prescriptions to make-believe.

The most famous, or notorious, example is our emotional responses to fiction, such as the 'fear' I feel when I watch a horror film. Walton's explanation of 'fearing

fictions' (see Walton 1978) is controversial because he supposes that the 'fear' I feel is not real fear. The principle that underpins this denial – that 'fear' only counts as such when accompanied by a belief that one may be in danger – is controversial. But the denial and the principle are not a crucial part of the account of what is going on when we 'fear' fictions. I have an automatic reaction when confronted with an image as of a rampaging slime monster but there is more to the experience than this automatic reaction. My experience is enriched by my recognition of my reaction in a way that is perfectly explained by Walton's suggestion that I understand myself to be a prop. I imagine my reaction to be fear of a rampaging monster. My reaction licenses this imagining just as my cowering in front of the tree stump licenses my imagining myself to be afraid of a bear.

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The claim that appreciators of fiction are themselves props in games of make-believe, and their reactions to the fictions generate prescriptions to make believe and 'fictional truths', is an integral and very defensible part of Walton's framework. But if this claim is accepted then the non-cognitivist solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance has just what it needs!⁵

Think of the horror movie. My reaction to the depiction *as of* a slime monster generates a prescription to make believe that I am afraid of a monster. In the very same way, my reaction to (G) – the feelings prompted by a description of gender selective infanticide – generates a prescription to make-believe that I have these very feelings

⁵ It may be helpful to first think about some other sorts of alleged examples of imaginative resistance. The narrator of a movie claims that 'the beast of Bodmin' is a truly horrifying monster. It turns out to be a fluffy rabbit. You resist accepting the narrator's evaluation just because your reactions to the images on the screen are not irrelevant: they are part of the game of make believe that you are playing. Just as your reactions to a depiction as of a slime monster license you to make-believe 'the monster' is indeed scary, your reactions to a depiction as of a rabbit license you to make-believe that 'the beast' is not scary at all.

towards the actions of a woman called 'Giselda'. Part of what I am mandated to imagine when I watch the horror movie is that I fear a slime monster. Likewise part of what I am mandated to imagine when I read a story that includes (G) is that I have certain feelings regarding the actions described by (G). These are not of course the sort of feelings that constitute or authorise N-acceptance of the evaluative part of (G). They are the sort of feelings that constitute or authorise N-acceptance of its negation.

My possession of these feelings constitutes or authorises N-acceptance of the negation of (G). In line with the suggestion of section 2, my imagined possession of these feelings constitutes or authorises M-acceptance of the negation of (G). So if I'm imagining in line with the rules of the game that features me and my feelings as props I'm required to M-accept the negation of (G): to M-reject (G).

This is not the full story. The non-cognitivist solution has it that there is a prescription to M-reject (G). If there is also a prescription to make-believe that the narrator of the Giselda story is reliable then of course there is also a prescription to M-accept (G). But remember what it is that needs to be explained: *resistance* to M-accepting (G). I suggest that we find it easier to M-accept the negation of (G) than to M-accept (G) because we're not sure that we *must* make-believe that the narrator is correct. Awareness of the existence of 'unreliable narrators' means one can never be sure if one is required to make-believe that the narrator of a story is reliable. But it is certainly not a problem for my solution if we feel some pressure to M-accept (G).

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We resist M-accepting (G). It has also been claimed that the author has difficulty in making (G) 'true in the fiction'. On Walton's account a sentence is true in the fiction only if there is a prescription in a relevant game that participants in the game make-

believe that it is true (Walton 1990, 40). Walton also, for ease of explanation, speaks of the 'world' of a game of make believe and the 'world' of a fiction (Walton 1990, 57-61). This is in no way a commitment to other *worlds*: this language is eliminable in favour of talk of prescriptions to make-believe. But it helps him to draw some distinctions.

The game of make-believe I play when I engage with *Middlemarch* involves me as a prop. Insofar as my reactions generate a prescription to make-believe that I feel sympathy for Dorothea it is true in the game that I have this feeling and the world of the game includes my having this feeling. What is true in the fiction and what is part of the 'work world' (Walton 1990, 59) associated with the fiction is a subset of the game worlds of appreciators in the fiction (Walton 1990, 59-60, 215-216). It is not true in *Middlemarch* that I feel sympathy for Dorothea.

This framework allows a nuanced approach to 'fictional resistance'. I said above it is 'arguably' the case that (G) is not true in the fiction. But a case can be made that if we strictly focus just on the text we should allow that (G) is true/acceptable in the narrow world of the story, even if we find it difficult or impossible to imaginatively enter this world, as it were. Because I am unsure what 'truth in fiction' ultimately amounts to (as is Walton) I won't say more about 'fictional resistance'. But if our intuitions about what is 'true in the story of Giselda' are complicated that is grist to the mill of the non-cognitivist solution.

4.

I hope the outlines of the non-cognitivist solution are clear and that it is clear that, if its assumptions about the nature of our engagement with fiction and indeed its assumption

of non-cognitivism are granted, it neatly solves the puzzle of imaginative resistance. But we're talking about some *big* assumptions. Chiefly non-cognitivism. Insofar as non-cognitivism remains controversial so does my proposed solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance. But turn this dialectic around.... If my solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance is the best explanation of a puzzling phenomenon, this allows for an inference to the best explanation, and to the assumption that the best explanation relies on. This paper can be thought of as pointing to a new argument for non-cognitivism.

Even if my solution is not clearly the *best* solution, but is a neat and plausible (given the assumption of non-cognitivism) solution, this is helpful for non-cognitivism. Metaethical theories have the task of explaining all the uses of moral language, including puzzling uses like appearances of (F) and (G) in works of fiction. I have shown that non-cognitivism can neatly explain these puzzling uses of moral language.

In conclusion if you're a non-cognitivist, you should like this solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance. If you're not a non-cognitivist then the puzzle of imaginative resistance shows that maybe you should be.

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