

A (new) argument for i-desires

In this talk, I present a new argument for i-desires. I defend the thesis that, to explain emotional responses to fiction, *i-desire*—i.e., an imaginative analog of desire—must be posited. My argument is based on the fact that we respond emotionally to fiction not only on first engagement, but also in re-engaging with a work of fiction.

It is a well-known fact that, in reading or watching a work of fiction, we respond emotionally to the depicted events as if they were real. E.g., in reading (watching) a work that depicts an impending disaster, we feel fear, stress, suspense, etc., although we know that no real disaster is imminent. This phenomenon gives rise to the *paradox of fiction* (see Tullmann 2024 for an overview): our emotional responses to fiction are puzzling, since normally we do not respond emotionally to events we believe do not occur. Indeed, the paradox assumes that, setting aside knee-jerk or pre-cognitive emotions, emotions are explained in folk-psychological terms, or at least sensitive to beliefs and desires.

The now commonly-accepted solution of this paradox holds that: (1) we do not believe the fictional content, but *imagine* it, and: (2) attitudinal imagining—the cognitive state that arises in engagements with fiction—can generate emotions in much the same way as belief with the same content does (see, e.g., Arcangeli 2018, ch. 2; Chasid 2021). That is, folk-psychology must be revised: not only belief, but also imagining, can function as the cognitive basis of emotions.

Accepting this solution, I focus on a related question: which *desire* must be paired with imagining to complete the folk-psychological explanation? Two kinds of desires are relevant here, both are problematic. First, a desire concerning how the work of fiction unfolds—e.g., that according to the work, no disaster will happen—cannot explain the emotional responses in question. Fear or stress (e.g.) cannot be explained by the desire that the work not depict an impending disaster. Desiring that the work not say what it does, or not unfold as it does, might generate aesthetic displeasure, disappointment with the author, etc., but not fear or stress; the latter emotions normally pertain to the depicted events, not to the fact that the work depicts them.

Second, a ‘direct’ desire regarding the fictional event itself—e.g., a desire that no disaster will happen—is also problematic. Although certain philosophers accept this option (e.g., Kind 2013; Spaulding 2015), others reject it mainly on the grounds that we do not normally have desires about (what we believe to be) non-existent objects or events (see, e.g., Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Eagen and Doggett 2007; 2012). The latter argue that, since no desire can explain emotional responses to fiction, a *desire-like imagination*—an *i-desire*—must be posited to explain them. That is, we feel fear and stress since we *imagine* an impending disaster, and *i-desire* that it not happen.

At bottom, the debate over *i-desire* is about the minimal requirements for a mental state to be deemed a desire. ‘Conservatives’ argue that the profile of desire can accommodate the abnormalities of emotions in fiction, whereas ‘liberals’ argue that it cannot, hence *i-desires* must be posited. My argument falls under the latter rubric.

The argument I propose focuses on the satisfaction conditions of desire. Setting aside minor complications, a desire that *p* is satisfied if and only if *p*. Of course, one can desire that *p* without knowing that *p*, thus without knowing that one’s desire is satisfied; similarly, one can falsely believe that *p*, i.e., believe that one’s desire is satisfied, when it is not. Importantly, the psychology of desire depends on our *beliefs* about its satisfaction conditions. Suppose one desires that *p*; if one comes to believe that *p* fully obtains, one’s desire, as well as the emotions it generates, tend to vanish or become non-occurrent. E.g., I desire to avoid a certain surgery; this desire, together with the belief that I must undergo the surgery, renders me anxious, upset, etc. I then come to believe that I don’t need any surgery. Consequently, my initial desire (which I now believe to be satisfied) vanishes, and so do my anxiety and dismay.

Now consider re-engagements with fiction. Enjoying a work, we sometimes choose to re-engage with it. In doing so, we can respond emotionally in ways similar to how we responded on our first engagement. When reading the work’s early chapters, specifically those depicting an impending disaster, we feel suspense, fear, stress, etc.; and when reading the final chapter, which reveals that no disaster was ever imminent, we are relieved and pleased (Smuts 2021; note that psychological experiments confirm this fact: see, e.g., Green et al. 2008, Chun, Park & Shi 2020).

The problem is that no desire can explain these emotional responses. For in re-engaging with a work, we know that the putative desire—e.g., that no disaster will happen or is even impending—is *fully satisfied*. Conservatives are forced to hold that, despite our knowledge that our (putative) desire is fully satisfied, we nonetheless continue to have it: we eagerly desire that the imminent disaster not happen, and hence continue to feel fear, stress and suspense, all while *knowing* that the desire's satisfaction conditions obtain.

Since no desire behaves this way, I conclude that, to explain the emotional responses in question, we must posit i-desires. On my view, i-desires are mental states that, despite being capable of generating emotions (when paired with imaginings), are not responsive to beliefs about any satisfaction conditions. More precisely, i-desires *do not have* satisfaction conditions: no real-world fact can satisfy them. Like imaginings, i-desires are mere *simulations* (in a very specific sense of this term): just as imaginings do not have (real-world) *correctness* conditions, i-desires do not have (real-world) *satisfaction* conditions. Nonetheless, when suitably paired with imaginings, i-desires can generate emotions, just as belief and desire do in non-imaginative contexts.

I conclude by discussing some implications of this account of i-desires.

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