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Believing Fictions: A Philosophical Analysis of Fictional Engagement

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Claremont McKenna College

Believing Fictions:
A Philosophical Analysis of Fictional Engagement

submitted to
Professor Amy Kind

by
Jack Rhein Gleiberman

for
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Works of fiction do things to *us*, and *we* do things because of works of fiction. When reading *Hamlet*, I mentally represent certain propositions about its characters and events, I want the story and its characters to go a certain way, and I emotionally respond to its goings-on. I might deem Hamlet a coward, I might wish that Hamlet stabbed Claudius when he had the chance, and I might feel sorrow at Ophelia's senseless suicide. These fiction-directed mental states seem to resemble¹ the propositional attitudes of belief, desire, and emotion, respectively — the everyday attitudes that represent and orient us toward the world. These mental states constitute our engagement with fiction, and the way in which they hang together is central to understanding our engagement with fiction. In that aim, this thesis hopes to provide an analysis of our belief-like attitudes about works of fiction.

At first glance, it seems clear that we do not *straightforwardly* believe things about fictional objects. When engaging with a work of fiction, we know that its characters and events don't exist in the same sense as everyday persons and events. Whatever the cognitive attitude we adopt toward fictions, it must be substantially different from our beliefs about common spatiotemporal objects and events. Support for these intuitions comes from a dispositionalist theory of beliefs according to which beliefs are individuated from other mental states in virtue of their functional roles.² For example, a straightforward belief about an actual entity — say, about a lurking, dangerous man — is a bona fide belief because it disposes me to adopt other states (e.g., fear about his dangerousness, a desire that he be apprehended) and to act in certain ways (e.g., by boarding up my house or calling the police). On this score, my mental states about fictions fail to be bona fide beliefs because they just don't play the right role. When

¹ Of course, this is just *prima facie* resemblance — and there are many structural respects in which our attitudes about fictions differ from our bona fide beliefs. But noting the relation between these states is a nice way to frame the problem with which this project is concerned.

² See Marcus (1990), Ryle (1949), Schwitzgebel (2002) for exposition of this theory.

reading a fiction about this dangerous man, I neither behave in a way characteristic of the belief that there is a lurking, dangerous man (e.g., I don't call the police) nor adopt states that would be appropriate were that mental state a belief (e.g., I don't desire that the police capture him).

A second reason one might suspect that bona fide beliefs are not involved in our cognitive processing of fictional objects has to do with emotional responsiveness to fiction. Suppose that a friend tells you that she is scared of this dangerous man. It seems that the question of this man's existence has already been settled in her mind — the very fact that she fears this man implies that she believes that this man exists. If she was to tell you that she fears this man while maintaining that she does not believe that he exists, you would rightly suspect that something has gone awry in either her emotional or cognitive processing.³ But we are cognitively and emotionally situated with respect to fictions in just the same way that your friend is situated with respect to the dangerous, but non-actual man. This is just to say that, when engaging fiction, we seem to feel emotions about entities that we do not believe to exist.

A third reason that we might wish to inquire into our belief-like attitudes about fictions arises when we consider the relation between such attitudes and our bona fide beliefs. Referring back to *Hamlet*, it seems that my belief-like attitudes about *Hamlet's* King of Denmark do not penetrate my thoughts about the *actual* King of Denmark. When I read a scholarly article about the 15th century Danish Royal Court, my belief-like attitudes about *Hamlet* do not play into my beliefs about the actual Danish Royal Court of that time period. If the article provides evidence that the 15th Century Monarch is praiseworthy, I should have no problem updating my beliefs about the actual Monarch in light of that evidence despite the fact that I think that *Hamlet's* Monarch is villainous. So then, my beliefs about the actual are insulated

³ See Walton (1978), Radford & Westin (1975) for classic formulations of this puzzle.

from my attitudes about the fictional. In this respect, our attitudes about fictional entities seem to differ from bona fide beliefs: we expect our beliefs to interact freely with one another, but we surely don't expect our attitudes about fictions to penetrate our beliefs. In the reverse direction, it seems that our beliefs often inform our attitudes about fictions. If I believe that members of the 15th Century Danish Royal Court customarily wore houppelande, for example, I may naturally come to adopt the attitude that Hamlet customarily wears houppelande even though no such proposition is encoded in Shakespeare's text. How this relation — characterized by our beliefs penetrating our belief-like attitudes about fictions, but not vice versa — seamlessly governs our cognitive engagement with fictions should be explained.

From this gloss, we can glean three desiderata that any theory of fictional engagement ought to meet. Let's briefly sketch them, with more discussion to follow in Chapter I:

- 1) **Functional Coherence:** the mental state involved in fictional engagement plays the appropriate behavioral and inferential roles.
- 2) **Emotional Response:** the mental state involved in fictional engagement is capable of triggering emotional responses to fictions.
- 3) **Quarantining (a) and Mirroring (b):** the mental state involved in fictional engagement is, unlike bona fide belief, governed by two norms which dictate that the state is: **a)** capable of being penetrated by our beliefs about the world, but **b)** not able to penetrate our beliefs about the world. Under the right set of circumstances, violations of these norms can occur.

Broadly speaking, two competing models have been proposed to spell out the kind of mental states involved in fiction consumption. Such models can be best understood against the backdrop of the attitude/content distinction (Van Leeuwen 2018, pars. 4-6). Mental states are made up of contents and attitudes. A state's content is just the proposition which the state is about. When I think about a cat being on the mat, the content of my thought is just the proposition, "there is a cat on the mat." An attitude, on the other hand, is the orientation one adopts toward a meaningful proposition. For example, the proposition *p* may serve as the content for any number of attitudes: I may be excited that *p*, I may believe that *p*, I may fear that *p*, etc. With this in mind, let's sketch out the two views. The first — call it the *attitude view*

— posits that we adopt attitudes in fictional engagement distinct from those adopted in our engagement with *actual* entities. Instead of believing things about Hamlet, we adopt *imaginings* about Hamlet. The second — call it the *content view* — posits that our propositional attitudes toward fiction are differentiated from our bona fide beliefs in virtue of a difference in *content*, with the attitude involved held constant across fictional contexts and those orthogonal to engagement with fiction (i.e., *actual* contexts). So, on this view, we adopt beliefs about fiction, but due to something about the content of these beliefs, this does not imply that we adopt a belief *in the actual existence of fictional entities*. This view is what I wish to defend here.

I'll close with a brief sketch of my project. In Chapter I, I will discuss our desiderata before presenting a simple content view — the standard belief view — according to which we straightforwardly believe things about fictions. Its failure motivates the imagination view⁴ — a prevalent form of the attitude view described above — which I will then present and evaluate in Chapter II. From there, I will raise the simple content view from the ashes, modifying it in ways necessary to bolster it from previous critiques. Chapter III will argue that a content-modified belief view — which introduces fictional operators into the *content* of our attitudes about fictions — better coheres with our desiderata than the imagination view. A theory of fictional engagement should therefore invoke *belief* as the primary cognitive attitude with which we engage fictions.

⁴ See Nichols and Stich (2006), Doggett and Egan (2007), Currie and Ichino (2004), and Walton (1978) for presentations of the imagination view.

I begin this chapter by examining our desiderata in more detail, before moving to present and reject the standard belief view.

I.I: Functional Coherence

Both attitude and content views presuppose a functionalist theory of mind, which is just to say that they analyze and individuate folk psychological mental categories in terms of their functions.⁵ The functions of a mental state consist in what characteristically produces the state (its inputs) and that which the state characteristically produces (its outputs). On this theory then, a token mental state *m* belongs to the mental state type *M* in virtue of its functions. For example, a simple functional analysis of pain would characterize it as: a state typically caused by bodily injury; a state disposed to produce the belief that one's body is injured and the desire that normal functioning be restored; and a state that induces pain utterances. From this example, we can see that there are both behavioral and inferential aspects to a state's functional role. The behavioral role is just the set of behaviors typically produced by the state. By inferential role, I mean the state's relation to other states in one's mental architecture. For example, the inferential role of a stereotypical belief is to "combine and interact with other [beliefs] so as to mediate between sensory inputs and behavioral outputs," (Block 1986, 93).

Our first desideratum requires that the attitude invoked to explain fiction consumption plays the right sort of behavioral and inferential role. This turns on an analysis of the characteristic inputs to our belief-like attitudes about fictions, as well as the outputs of our processing of fictional objects. So, for example, if our theory regards belief as the primary attitude with which we engage fiction, our beliefs about fictional objects ought to have similar inputs and outputs as our beliefs about actual objects — it is in virtue of their having the same

⁵ See Fodor (1968) for one of the first expositions of functionalism in the philosophy of mind; *but see* Block (1978) for arguments against functionalism.

functional profile that they can be said to be of the same type of state. And if our data suggests that the attitude with which we engage fiction is not behaviorally efficacious, for example, then such should be reflected in the functional profile of the attitude posited in our theory. This desideratum demands that the attitude with which we engage fictions plays the right causal role in our cognitive architecture.

I.II: Emotional Response

Our second desideratum requires that our theory explain the possibility of genuine emotional responses to entities that we take not to exist. I think the phenomenological data provides adequate support for the claim that we feel *genuine* emotions in response to fictional entities: there doesn't seem to be any difference, phenomenologically speaking, between our emotional responses to fictional events and actual events. My crying about the opening montage of Pixar's *Up* feels no different to me, on the inside, from my crying about an actual loss. The feeling may differ in magnitude — surely our emotional responses to fictions are often felt more ephemerally and to differing degrees as compared to our everyday affect⁶ — but not in its quality. To the extent that qualitative feels are part of what it is for a state to be an emotion, fiction-induced affective responses are bona fide emotions.⁷ That fiction-induced emotions are genuine emotions also explains the intuition that there are *standards of propriety* that govern our emotional responses to fictions. If one fails to feel grief for Ophelia, we should rightly judge that there is something faulty with either their character or their competence as a fiction consumer. Just like emotions about actual objects, our affective responses to fictions

⁶ My phenomenology may differ from that of my reader, but I am confident that my emotions about fictional entities *move me to a lesser degree* than my emotions about actual entities. To see where you stand, consider: holding all else equal, how you would feel for fictional character *P* if you *actually* lived in *P*'s world? That is, if you had the same access and bore the same relations to *P* in the actual world as you do to the fictional *P*, would you feel for actual person *P* more or less than you, as a fiction consumer, feel for fictional character *P*? More will be said on this exercise later.

⁷ See Goldie (2002), Whiting (2011), Kriegel (2014) for defenses of “feeling” theories of emotion.

can be appropriate or inappropriate in virtue of their correspondence to the events which stand as their content. This further suggests that our emotional responses to fictions are genuine.

As such, why should our emotional responsiveness to works of fiction puzzle us? Referring back to fearing non-existent entities, it seems strange to feel fear about an object that is represented as non-existent (Walton 1978, 6-7). The types of emotion with which we are most familiar are directed at actual, spatiotemporal objects and events — things we believe to exist in a robust sense. We feel angry at flesh-and-blood persons, sad about real events that did not go well, and pleased at states of affairs that cohere with our desires (Moran 1994, 77). So, this desideratum demands that we examine the mechanism by which our belief-like attitudes give rise to genuine emotional responses to fictions *despite that we believe their content to be fictitious*. This turns on an analysis of the features of the mental state invoked to explain fictional consumption; in particular, we should investigate the extent to which it resembles belief, and hence, is efficacious with respect to our emotional responses.

I.III: Quarantining and Mirroring

When I represent propositions, form wishes, and feel emotions about the events of *Breaking Bad*, those attitudes are not about our world. I know this because the events of *Breaking Bad* are not actual events, and my attitudes about actual entities should reflect this. That is just to say that my beliefs about actual entities are *segregated* from my belief-like attitudes about *Breaking Bad*. If this wasn't the case, we would expect this cognitive failure to affect my cognition and behavior outside of fiction consumption. When visiting New Mexico, for example, I would *believe* that Albuquerque (ABQ) is home to a popular chicken chain-restaurant which serves as an elaborate front for an international meth empire, in virtue of which I might avoid dining at any chicken chain-restaurants. This story is obviously

implausible. When I visit ABQ, my belief-like attitudes about the goings-on of *Breaking Bad* might spring to mind, but they do not enter into or otherwise affect the beliefs that I form about the *actual* city. We might mistakenly apply our attitudes about fiction to our attitudes about actual entities in special circumstances, e.g., when we mistakenly judge a fictional world to be a non-fictional one, but absent such circumstances, our cognition Quarantines our beliefs about the real from those about the fictional.

Before moving to discuss another facet of the interplay here, we should note that there are other circumstances which constitute exceptions to this norm but do not involve errors in fiction consumption. Examples for which this is true are best found in realist as well as historical fiction (Gendler 2000, 76). For these genres, it is generally acceptable for our belief-like attitudes to penetrate our actual beliefs because the authors of the fiction purposefully wove actual truths into their story. For example, suppose that, before watching *Breaking Bad*, I did not believe the proposition that ABQ is a city in NM — call this proposition p . It seems acceptable that my belief-like attitude that p penetrates my beliefs about the *actual* ABQ in virtue of the fact that Vince Gilligan, the show's writer, deliberately wrote actual facts about the relation between ABQ and NM into the world of *Breaking Bad*. Obviously, as we just saw, this consideration doesn't extend to all aspects of *Breaking Bad*. Just because Vince Gilligan included actual facts in *Breaking Bad's* fictional ABQ does not mean that we should take *all* of its features to be actual. But regardless, it is the case that some features of works of fiction are features of the *actual* world. And if so, then some of our belief-like attitudes about the fiction can appropriately penetrate our beliefs about the world: from watching *Breaking Bad*, I can come to unqualifiedly believe that ABQ is a city in NM.

But, curiously, quarantining only goes one way: belief-like attitudes about fictions don't (usually) penetrate our beliefs about actual entities, but our beliefs about the world *often*

penetrate our belief-like attitudes about fictions. The latter norm — Mirroring of beliefs in our belief-like attitudes — can be brought out by an example of make-belief. Suppose that a child makes-believe that she is a bird by flapping her arms. In order for her to do this, she must have a number of antecedent beliefs (e.g., that her arms can be moved so as to resemble wings, that birds have wings by means of which they achieve flight, etc.). When the child engages in the make-belief that she is a bird, her *actual* beliefs play an important causal role: her beliefs about her arms and the casual mechanics of bird flight explain why she flaps her arms in order to make-believe that she is a bird. If, on the other hand, the child believed nothing of bird flight, she would not be able to make-believe that she was a bird by flapping her arms. So then, we can see that make-belief relates to actual belief in that the contents of successful make-belief are limited by the conceptual space provided by our actual beliefs (Schellenberg 2013, 503-4). This norm is ubiquitous in fictional engagement. In non-science-fiction literature, for example, we commonly take the features of fictional worlds to be governed by the actual laws of physics. When these laws are violated *ex nihilo*, often just to settle a plot hole, we can see why we react with surprise and often disbelief.

In sum, an analysis of the mental state involved in fictional consumption should explain why it is governed by certain norms whose jurisdiction does not range over our bona fide beliefs about actual entities. We need to explain why fiction-directed, belief-like attitudes that *c* do not standardly produce the belief that *c*, whereas beliefs that *c* do standardly promote the adoption of belief-like attitudes about *c*. We should also account for the features of our cognitive architecture in virtue of which exceptions to these two norms occur.

I.IV: Standard Belief View

Having sketched and motivated the desiderata for any folk psychological theory of fictional engagement, I will now present the standard belief view. On this view, as you

consume Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, you become so enchanted by its world that you engage it with *belief*. The standard view tells us that engagement with a fiction consists in being rendered unaware of the fictitiousness of the fiction's content — and so it takes literally the expressions of “suspending disbelief” or “losing ourselves in a fiction” (Radford 1975, 72). As such, engaging with *Pan's Labyrinth* makes us believe new things about the *actual* world: that there is an underworld lurking beneath Spain, that insects transform into fairies, and so on. And the explanation of this is that you are *so* immersed in the fiction that you lose track of its fictitiousness — you represent and engage with its world as *actual* (Radford 1975, 71-72).

While we do find ourselves often immersed in works of fiction, immersion is not sufficient to make us lose track of the very fact that we are engaged in a fiction in the first place. It may be the case that we do not occurrently attend to thoughts that undermine immersion — i.e., while immersed in *Pan's Labyrinth*, we don't think about the fact that we are just watching a film — but this doesn't show that we are rendered unaware of the fact that we are just engaging in a fiction. An instructive parallel can be found in children's pretense. When engaged in a pretend tea-party, a child never *believes* that her stuffed-animals are talking to her — she knows that she is just *pretending* that they talk to her — but of course, she never attends to that thought because doing so would undermine her pretense. Similarly, the fact that we don't occurrently believe that we are engaging with a fiction does not mean that we actually *suspend disbelief* in the fictitiousness of the work's content. If engaging with a fiction consists in a suspension of disbelief, then it seems that we would constantly be switching in-and-out of belief at the cinema. Whenever someone interrupted the film, say, by coughing, my suspension of disbelief would be shattered — I would cease believing in the goings-on of the film — and just moments later, when I re-immersed, I would once again believe (Radford 1975, 72). This story strikes me as quite strange: our beliefs don't fluctuate in this way in standard contexts

when our attention is disrupted, so why should they in fictional contexts? I think that the fictitiousness of the fiction always looms in the cognitive background regardless of the degree to which it engulfs us.

Further concerns about the standard belief view are raised by consideration of our desiderata. The standard view fails clearly on the score of Functional Coherence. If I believed propositions about *Pan's Labyrinth* in the same way that I believe propositions about actual objects, then we should expect my beliefs about fictional object x to produce similar sorts of behavior and inferences to my hypothetical beliefs were x an actual object. But, clearly, this is not the case: when Vidal murders two innocent farmers, I feel no urge to scream or attempt to intervene in the situation. It seems that my attitudes about the events of *Pan's Labyrinth* don't motivate me to do anything whatsoever; and insofar as the characteristic role of a belief involves motivating behavior appropriate given that belief, our attitudes about fictions seem functionally distinct from beliefs.

This view attempts to address Emotional Response by affirming that we believe in the actuality of the fictional objects to which our emotions are directed. Because we come to believe *actual things* from watching *Pan's Labyrinth* on this view, our emotional responses are of an everyday sort — they are responding to, and about, entities believed to be actual. But satisfying the desideratum in this way comes with a heavy cost. It requires us to admit that, when we engage with a fiction, we form bona fide beliefs about the actual world. In fact, this view tells us that we *must* lack awareness of the fictitiousness of a work in order to properly engage it. And so, the standard belief view commits us to full-blown belief in the existence of fictional entities. But nothing could be more plain to me than the fact that we do not *believe* in the existence of fictional entities. Even when I feel for the film's beleaguered protagonist

Ofelia, I know that there does not *actually* exist such a person for whom I feel. If we wish to avoid being committed to realism about fictional entities, this view does us little good.

Finally, the standard belief view fails Quarantining and Mirroring. This view cannot account for the possibility of Quarantining because beliefs about fictions are not differentiable from beliefs about the actual world. Because there is no possible feature in virtue of which they could be individuated, there is no way to explain how beliefs about the world could come to be insulated from beliefs about fictions. When reading about Francoist Spain, I do not import my beliefs about the fantasy world of *Pan's Labyrinth* into my web of beliefs about the *actual* history of fascist Spain — and the standard view cannot account for that. While it can account for the norm of Mirroring, this matter is trivial: our beliefs about the world are reflected in our attitudes about fictions just because the latter are beliefs, and as such, they tend to interact with other beliefs! We end up with an unsatisfying story of how these norms govern our belief-like attitudes about fiction because the standard view denies that there is anything unique about such attitudes: they are just beliefs! As such, they could not possibly be governed by norms whose jurisdiction does not cover interactions between bona fide beliefs.

Our desiderata decisively weigh against the standard belief view: in refusing to differentiate between attitudes about the fictional and the actual, it cannot provide satisfying explanations of our cognitive engagement with fiction. And so, we should conclude that it does not provide the cognitive architecture needed to explain fiction consumption. This failure, as we will see in the next chapter, provides space for the imagination-based attitude view.

Responding to the failures of the standard belief view, a number of philosophers have suggested that fictional engagement is best explained by imagination.⁸ In arguing that imaginings — a functionally distinct cousin of beliefs — are the principal cognitive attitude underpinning fiction consumption, these philosophers hope to meet our desiderata using standard folk psychological mental concepts. And we have already hinted at an argument commonly advanced in favor of the claim that a distinct attitude must be invoked to explain fiction consumption. The argument, briefly put, is as follows:

1. Belief is individuated from other mental states in virtue of its functional and inferential role.
2. The belief-like attitudes involved in fiction consumption do not possess the same functional and inferential roles as beliefs.
3. Therefore, an attitude distinct from belief is involved in fictional engagement.

Later, I will push back on this by arguing that the functional and inferential data can be interpreted in a way that *does not* motivate the invocation of an attitude distinct from belief. But first, let us explore the view motivated by the argument above. We begin our discussion by investigating the nature of imagination and distinguishing various types of imagination. These preliminary distinctions will determine the nature of the attitude that is supposed to bear fruit in explaining our engagement with fiction.

II.I: What is Imagination?

Our imagination allows us to represent non-actual things — it enables us to orient our minds to worlds and things that do not exist. When engaged in practical reasoning, you might imagine the future costs and benefits of executing varied courses of action, and act on the basis of your imaginings. When children play pretend tea-time with their stuffed animals, they might imagine that their animals sip tea and gossip along with them. And when exercising on a stationary bike, you might imagine rustic scenery and a breeze grazing your face. These

⁸ For proponents, *see* fn. 4.

examples, while different in important respects, demonstrate that imagination's primary power consists, *inter alia*, in enabling mental representations of non-actual contents.

Following others, we can distinguish two relevant types of imaginings from the above cases, each of which bears on fictional engagement to varying degrees (Van Leeuwen 2013, 221-22; Currie and Ichino 2004, 337-39; Kind 2013, 146-47). Consider the proposition, "there are flying pigs." You may be doing one of two things to this proposition: you might be adopting a cognitive attitude distinct from belief toward the content *there exist some pigs who can fly*, or you might be creating occurrent images of the thing in question — of pigs flying — in your mind's eye. These two distinct modes of imagination can be respectively called *propositional* and *imagistic* imaginings.

Imagistic imaginings are mental representations that take the form of *qualitative images* in the mind (Van Leeuwen 2013, 222). Included in the notion of imagistic imaginings are all sensory modes of mental imagery (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile imaginings and the like). When forming a mental image of pigs flying, our imagining falls under this type. We should contrast this type of imagining with propositional imagining — imagining *that p*. This second type of imagining is the kind invoked by proponents of the imagination view. Propositional imagining consists in a mental representation of *c* that takes *c* to be the case (Van Leeuwen 2013, 222). This mode of imagination is *cognitive* in nature in that its function involves representing some world, object, or other content *as it is*. This is meant to contrast with conative attitudes (e.g., desires, hopes, wishes), which represent how one would *like* some object or world to be (Van Leeuwen 2013, 221-22). So then, propositional imaginings resemble beliefs insofar as both attitudes represent some state of affairs as it *actually is* — they are both directed to *fit* the thing being represented — rather than as we desire it.

With these distinct types of imaginings established, let's now home in on propositional imaginings and consider the role of this class of attitudes in our cognitive architecture.⁹ For my demonstration, we will represent the mind's functional groupings (i.e., states that fall under a mental type in virtue of their having the same profile of inputs and outputs) using "boxes" that interact to produce mental states and behavior (Nichols 2004, 130). For example, a common folk psychological view of action would be modelled as such:

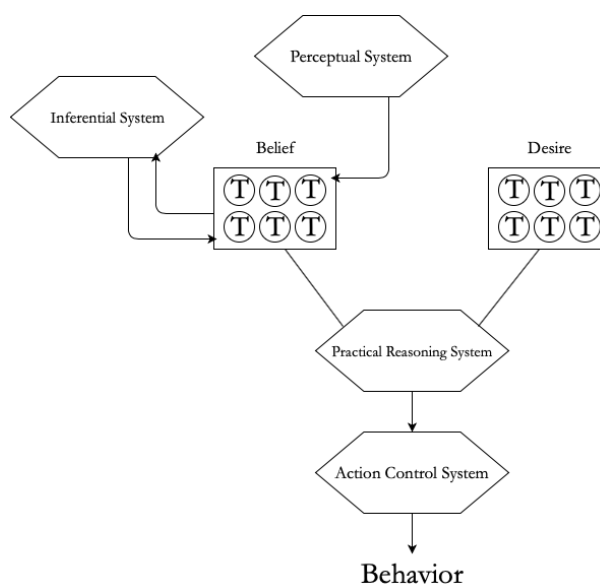


Figure A: The Belief-Desire Box Model of Action, adapted from Meskin & Weinberg (2003).

In this boxology, the circles located within the belief- and desire-boxes represent representation tokens, and the systems are black-boxes in which representations undergo intake, processing, and exportation. How these black-boxes represent is not too important; all we need to know is *that* they represent. The nature of the "arrow" relation is also unimportant, as I presume that the precise mechanisms by which representations are received, processed, and transmitted by functional systems will be spelled out by further empirical research. Even if we do not understand the precise nature of the connections between these functional boxes,

⁹ From this point on, when I refer to imaginings, I use the propositional sense of the term.

all we need to know is *that* they are connected in certain ways. From this model, our folk story of action goes something like this: through our perceptual and inferential systems, we come to represent certain propositions in our belief-box in the form of representation tokens. Tokens in our belief-box then combine with the appropriate tokens in our desire-box to input into our practical reasoning system, from which, our action control system determines behavior (Nichols 2004, 130-31).

II.II: The Imagination Model

So, with the basic gist of the boxology in place, let us now see how the modified model below can be used to explain our imaginative capacities:

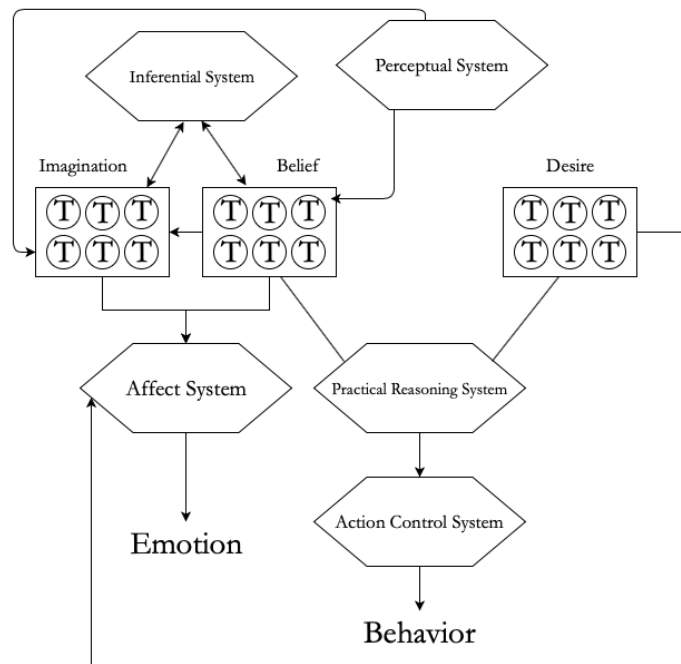


Figure B: The Imagination Box Model, adapted from Meskin & Weinberg (2003).

The imagination-box resembles our belief-box in a number of ways. Its contents are of the same kind, representation tokens, which “fill” the functional groupings in which beliefs and imaginings consist (Nichols and Stich 2003, 38). So, for example, to have the belief that Barack Obama was the 44th President is simply to have a representation token whose content

is *Barack Obama was the 44th President* stored in one's belief-box. The story is analogous for our imagination-box: to imagine that p is simply to have a representation token stored in my imagination-box whose content is p . On this view, for example, a child's cognitive engagement with pretense amounts to a myriad of representation tokens — that his stuffed animals can talk, that his bear sips tea, and so on — stored in his imagination-box in the functionally appropriate way.

Let's now see how this model explains various activities that involve imaginative engagement. If our engagement with pretense and similar activities involves imaginings rather than some other sort of mental state, then we should first demonstrate that our imaginative attitudes are functionally distinct from our beliefs. And, from the folk psychological data, we have plenty of reason to believe that *divergent functional roles* provide grounds for the distinctness of imaginings and beliefs.

I will start by taking stock of the inferential roles played by the two attitudes. Suppose that I believe that there is a Diet Coke in my fridge — call this p . It is part of the inferential role of the belief that p that, if I also believe that “if p , then I went to the supermarket recently,” then I should come to believe that I went to the supermarket recently. Generally: if I believe that both p and *if p , then q* , I am also committed to believing that q (under ideal circumstances). This is a feature that seems common to both beliefs and imaginings (Langland-Hassan 2012, 171-72). If I now imagine that p , and I imagine that “if p , then I went to the supermarket recently,” then I should also imagine that I went to the supermarket recently. Although we cannot pick out an imagining by its inferential properties — they seem to share these properties with beliefs, as our example suggests — they differ insofar as their inferential processes are segregated. That is, inferences from imaginings produce imaginings, whereas inferences from beliefs produce beliefs. From the imagining that p and the belief that “if p ,

then I went to the supermarket recently,” I cannot come to *believe* that I went to the supermarket recently — but it does seem like I can imagine that proposition. This is brought out most clearly when I believe that q while simultaneously imagining that *not* q — and this suffices to demonstrate the distinctness of our imaginings from our beliefs. When a child pretends that she is a race-car driver, she imagines that her chair is a race-car. Despite this, the child may continue on believing that the thing on which she sits is a chair — and from that belief, combined with the belief that *if it’s a chair, then it’s not a race-car*, she comes to believe that the object on which she sits is not a race-car. If, imaginings and beliefs were not inferentially segregated, this child’s attitudes would be contradictory. If her imagining could combine with his conditional belief, then she would come to believe that something is both a chair and not a chair. But, I take it that these mental states are in equilibrium — there is no problem with believing p and imagining $\sim p$ (Langland-Hassan 2012, 159-161). If imaginings and beliefs did not have distinct inferential roles, then it would be *psychologically unstable* to believe and imagine contradictory contents. But, since doing so is unlike believing p and $\sim p$, the two attitudes play distinct inferential roles in our mental architecture.

We can tell a similar story of divergence in the behavioral roles of beliefs and imaginings, starting with folk psychological explanations of action. This story says that the desire that y , combined with the belief that $\sim y$ and the belief that doing x will bring about y , will produce behavior x that tends to bring about y all else held equal (Stich and Ravenscroft 1993, 11). What about the behavioral role of imaginings? Here is yet another aspect of imaginings that differentiates them from beliefs — and this is reflected in the lack of connection between imaginings and the practical reasoning system in our model. Suppose that, while very parched and desiring of a Coke, I imagine that there is a Coke in my fridge — call that proposition p — while believing that $\sim p$. This imagining does not combine with my

desires to produce the action characteristic of the belief that p (e.g., walking to the fridge). Instead, I sit, parched as ever, without any behavior produced by my imagination; this is so because imaginings are not connected to our practical reasoning system, from which behavior flows, in the same way as beliefs. And so, because imaginings lack behavioral power, many philosophers have deemed them an ideal candidate for explaining our engagement with fiction.

II.III: Do We Imagine Fictions?

Given the functional data presented, imagining qualifies as a distinct attitude that plays a central role in folk psychological explanations of a breadth of activities, including pretense and practical reasoning. The question for us now is whether imaginings can do the work needed to explain *fictional engagement* in particular. Examining the folk psychological data, it seems very natural to attribute our engagement with fiction to imagination. When probed about our attitudes toward fictional contents, say, about Superman's height, we might say things like, "I believe that Superman is over 6 feet tall." But when asked if we believe that proposition just as we believe that Yao Ming is over 6 feet tall, we would reply adamantly that we don't. We don't believe things about Superman in the same way that we do about Yao Ming because we don't take Superman to exist, and so we only *sort-of believe* things about him. This notion of sort-of belief is needed to capture the intuitive difference in the truth-values of propositions that refer to fictional entities: it explains why we assent to the proposition that *Superman is over 6 feet tall* but not the proposition that *Superman is a Professor at CMC*. If bona fide belief was the attitude with which we engaged these propositions, we would not believe either of them because the name Superman does not refer! And to the extent that we feel that we "sort-of" believe things about fictions, imagination seems to be good candidate for us to cash out the concept of "sort-of" belief. When watching films, we commonly say things like, "when I read the book, I imagined that Katniss Everdeen was taller than her depiction in the

film,” or, “I imagined that Hamlet was going to murder his uncle, rather than renege” and so on. Our way of talking and thinking about fictions suggests that imaginings are at the center of the folk understanding of how we engage fictions.

In addition to its accordance with folk understanding, philosophers find the imagination particularly apt for explaining fictional engagement due to its lack of connection to behavior and its belief-like capacity to induce emotional responses. Insofar as imaginings are systematically severed from behavior, they are a good candidate for the attitude involved in fiction consumption. Just as my imagining that there is a Diet Coke in the fridge does not prompt me to walk to the fridge, my imagining that Hamlet is about to be killed does not prompt me to leap onstage to intervene in the play. Imaginings also seem apt to explain fiction’s capacity to produce vivid emotions in us. The mere imagining *that my sister is dead* may be sufficiently strong to bring me to tears, and perhaps imagination explains our emotional responses to fiction in much the same way.

With an eye toward Functional Coherence, we have already seen that imaginings are *behaviorally* distinguished from beliefs because imaginings are disconnected from our practical reasoning system in the model. So, the imagining that p will not tend to produce the behavior that results from the belief that p because imaginings do not serve as an input into the systems responsible for our behavior. When watching *The Wire*, I imagine that *Omar is bleeding out*, but this imagining does not combine with any of my desires to produce action. I might plausibly desire that *Omar not bleed out*, but even this desire combined with my previous imagining does not compel me to offer Omar medical treatment! This model has the conceptual resources to drive a wedge between fiction consumption and behavior — it literally disconnects the imagination-box from the systems that govern behavior — and this coheres with the data we have been discussing up until this point.

Although the model is successful in explaining why we don't intervene in fictions as we would if we *believed* their contents — by virtue of the disconnection between the imagination-box and the systems responsible for our behavior — some kinds of behavior are not so easily explained by the view. First, the view does not adequately explain a particular class of non-voluntary, automatic behavioral responses to fictions — like squeezing the hand of your viewing partner, making fearful utterances, turning away from the screen, an increase in your heart-rate, and the like.¹⁰ Given that imaginings do not populate the systems responsible for behavior, it is not clear how the view is supposed to handle these kinds of behavioral responses to fiction. More importantly though, the separation between the systems responsible for behavior and the imagination-box seems much too ad hoc. When we described the imagination model in the context of pretense and practical reasoning, imaginings were invoked explicitly for the purpose of explaining behavior. In these activities, our imaginings necessarily bring about action; if they did not, then we would not be engaged in these imaginative activities to begin with, as certain behaviors constitute those activities. But if imaginings are behaviorally efficacious in these activities, what renders them behaviorally inert in the activity of fiction consumption? If we are correct in assuming that the imagination model sketched above is supposed to explain the diverse range of activities that involve imaginings, then there is no principled reason as to why imaginings should cause behavior in some imaginative activities but not others.¹¹ So, it turns out that one of the supposedly distinctive

¹⁰ Some of these behaviors (e.g., increased heart-rate) seem more automatic than others (squeezing your partner's hand). This point will be addressed later.

¹¹ Maybe imagination is essentially heterogeneous, as suggested by Kind (2013), and so some imaginings are motivational while others are not. I think that proposal is right, but the above considerations still tell against the imagination view. To the extent that we want to explain why *fiction consumption* does not produce behavior in us, it seems that imagination is no better suited for the job than simple belief; if some theoretical tinkering can render imaginings behaviorally inert in the particular context of fiction consumption, we might be able to do the same thing to beliefs. And, as I

virtues of the imagination view does not cohere with our understanding of how imaginings work outside of fictional contexts. This alone gives us some reason to worry that the imagination view does not properly characterize our engagement with fiction.

So, then, on the issue of behavioral responses to fiction, the score for the imagination view is mixed. On one hand, it satisfactorily explains obvious cases in which imaginings fail (and should fail) to produce behavior — like that of jumping onto the stage or screen in order to prevent a fictional state of affairs that one deems to be undesirable. But for other behaviors, the imagination view does not neatly explain how our imaginings about fictions give rise to behavior. And most importantly, it does not explain why our imaginings about fictions *in particular* have behavioral profiles distinct from those imaginings that are engaged in activities outside of fiction consumption (e.g., pretense and practical reasoning).

In order to finish our discussion of Functional Response, I now consider the inferential roles of imaginings. A different explanation is needed to account for the *inferential* similarities between beliefs and imaginings. Suppose that I believe that *p*, it is raining on the road, and I also believe that, if *p*, then the road is wet. If I have these beliefs, then I will obviously infer that the road is wet. So too it goes for imaginings: when watching a film, if I imagine that *p*, and I imagine that if *p*, then the road is wet, I ought to imagine that the road is wet. Indeed, fictional engagement seems to be characterized by inferential orderliness, much like our beliefs (Weinberg and Meskin 2006, 178-79). From the imagining that *Hamlet is a prince*, I am disposed to imagine that *Hamlet is not a member of the commoner class*; from the imagining that *Ophelia drowned*, I tend to imagine that *Ophelia's lungs have filled with water*; and so on. These inferences closely track the sorts of inferences I would make if I actually *believed* that Hamlet

hope to later show, I think there are good reasons to think that beliefs can be rendered behaviorally inert in cases of fiction consumption.

is a prince and a flesh-and-blood person named Ophelia drowned. And we can explain this inferential similarity by looking to the relation between our inferential systems and our belief- and imagination-boxes. Representations, be they contents of the belief- or imagination-boxes, are governed by the same inferential mechanisms by virtue of the fact that our representation tokens are fungible across functional groupings (Van Leeuwen 2013, 227). So, we have a nice explanation of the inferential side of Functional Coherence.

Our discussion of functional individuation of beliefs and imaginings should also give us a sense of how an imagination view accounts for Quarantining and Mirroring. Because imaginings run “off-line” in the sense that their functions are different from those of our standard mental states, we can successfully quarantine our imaginings about fictions from our beliefs about the world, and import such beliefs into our imaginings. The asymmetric connection between the belief-box and imagination-box explains Mirroring: the contents of the imagination-box are populated by the contents of the belief-box, and so our beliefs are represented in the imagination-box as premises from which imaginings are formed (Nichols and Stich 2000, 123). In other words, the representations contained in the belief-box are *imported* into the imagination-box, a process through which our imaginings come to mirror our beliefs. This norm is made possible by virtue of the fact that the kinds of representations produced by our belief and imaginative systems are one and the same — the tokens are in “the same code” to use a computational analogy (Nichols 2004, 131). So, we can make use of the contents of our belief-box in order to explain how our imaginings come to mirror our beliefs.

By similar reasoning, Quarantining obtains because the relation between the belief- and imagination-box only goes one way — our beliefs feed into our imaginings, but not vice versa. So, I may form imaginings on the basis of inferences or perceptions involving antecedent beliefs, but I may not form beliefs from antecedent imaginings. For the sorts of

imaginings that obviously ought to be quarantined from our beliefs — like the imagining that Albuquerque is home to an international meth trafficking empire run in a chicken shop — this model gets things right. But what can it say about permissible violations of the quarantining condition, like when I come to believe that ABQ is a city in NM from watching *Breaking Bad*, without believing anything about ABQ prior to my engagement with *Breaking Bad*? More broadly, how does this model discriminate between my attitude that Albuquerque is a city in NM from my attitude that ABQ is home to an international meth trafficking empire. Even if they belong to the same type of state, they are importantly different in that only the former can permissibly give rise to a bona fide belief that ABQ is a city in NM.

Unfortunately for proponents of the imagination view, the model as stated lacks the resources to explain how some special class of imaginings is able to give rise to bona fide beliefs. In fact, due to the asymmetrical relationship between the belief- and imagination-boxes, the model prohibits the exportation of representation tokens from the imagination-box to the belief-box. For this reason, we lack an explanation of how we could ever come to believe that *c* from an imagining that *c*. In order to remedy this, we might bolster the model with the addition of a two-step mechanism: first, that export-apt representation tokens in the imagination-box (e.g., *that ABQ is in NM*) are discriminated from those that are not appropriate for export (e.g., *that ABQ is home to an international drug empire*); and second, that the connection from the imagination-box to the belief-box is regulated to only allow exportation of the proper class of representation tokens.¹²

We can flesh out the first part of this explanation by positing that our imaginings are governed by our higher-order beliefs about the fictional world. These higher-order beliefs are

¹² This explanation resembles Gendler's appeal to *narrative as clearinghouse* as a regulator of exportation from imaginings into beliefs (Gendler 2000, 76).

about propositions having to do with the fiction *qua* a work of fiction, whereas our imaginings are about propositions *directly encoded* in the fiction's content itself. With that structure in place, we can posit that an imagining is export-apt only if it is governed by the appropriate higher-order belief. For example, if I have the higher-order belief that the creators of *Breaking Bad* intended the show to realistically depict some features of Albuquerque, then my imaginings about such features are permitted to penetrate my beliefs about the world. All we need to account for exceptions to the norm of Quarantining are higher-order beliefs about the fiction *qua* work of fiction, and a regulatory mechanism that determines which imaginings fall under our higher-order beliefs and exports such tokens into our belief-box.

Even if proponents of the imagination view can address this issue with some tinkering, consider how the view handles cases of confused fiction consumption. Suppose that you tune in to what appears to be a 1960s telecast of the war in Vietnam. On the program, you watch a number of American G.I.'s interviewed about their experiences in the war, and as a result, you develop a number of beliefs about these soldiers. You're shocked at the ignorance of the American GIs and disgusted by their use of racist epithets. But soon, the credits roll, and you realize that Stanley Kubrick directed the production. It turns out that, unbeknownst to you just moments ago, you had been watching his *fictional* film, *Full Metal Jacket*, all the while.

In a case like this, should the imagination view tell us that you *believed* the contents of the film or *imagined* them? Prior to the credit scene, you would certainly report that you had come to believe new things about the Vietnam War due to your engagement with the film. So why should some external matter of fact — that the film is in fact, fictional, rather than non-fictional — undermine your sincere belief-report here? A proponent of the imagination view can say one of two things here. They might first defer to your propositional attitude report and explain it away as a confused, false belief. Because you mistakenly cognized the content

of the fiction, you can be said to have adopted false beliefs and nothing more. This reply isn't very satisfying though, as it seems that your belief-like attitudes about the fiction are veridical in the sense that they accurately represent features of the film's content. Sure, you develop false beliefs about the world, but it also seems like *you're getting something cognitively right*: you are tracking the content of the fiction in an appropriate and veridical way. But if we say that the only attitudes you adopt are false beliefs, then we have no way to account for the apparent veridicality of your attitudes.

Instead, I think proponents of the imagination view should say that imaginings are the only attitude adopted in this case. Strange consequences fall out of this interpretation. First, this implies that imaginings are the primary attitude with which we engage all different sorts of narratives. Even if we cognize the content of the narrative as non-fictional, as we did before learning that it was a fictional film, we are *imagining* that content. But to the extent that we feel that there is a difference between our cognition of fictions and non-fictional textual works — that some difference in the mental allows us to separate the real from the fictional — this reply is unacceptable. If there was no difference, how could we come to *believe* something about the content of a news report from our initial imaginings? Our imaginings about a news report (e.g., its possible implications, how it must feel to be involved, etc.) do not affect the propositions that we come to believe as true from reading the report. But even if they did, there is no way to tidily explain this with the view's resources. If imagination is engaged in the representation of all narratives, then it is not clear how a theory that appeals to it will give us a proper psychology of *fiction*. If, instead, it produces a psychology of narrative engagement in general, then it is difficult to see how we can segregate our imaginings about the real from our imaginings about the fictional — and so Quarantining is thrown into question by cases like this one.

Turning now to Emotional Response, we have already seen that our affective system responds to beliefs and imaginings in much the same way as does our inferential system. That is, with respect to both the inferential and affective systems, the two attitudes are non-differentiable, and so contents of these boxes are processed by such systems in exactly the same way. A representation token will be processed by our affect in the same way regardless of whether that token comes from the belief- or imagination-box (Nichols 2004, 131). Because our affective system does not discriminate among the source of its inputs, we should expect the imagining that *c* to produce emotions parallel to the belief *that c*. When we engage in a fiction featuring a monster, imagining that the monster is scary, we feel fear and exhibit physiological indicators of fear because our affect processes imaginings in the same way as it does beliefs (Nichols 2004, 132). We fear our imaginings of a fictional object *as if* we believed that the object of our imaginings was actual.

While the model explains why the *kinds* of emotions produced by imaginings closely track those *kinds* produced by beliefs, that emotional responses to fiction differ in degree from our everyday emotions is something unexplained by the model. When compared to our emotional responses to everyday affairs, and all other things held equal of course, our emotional responses to fictions seem to be of different magnitudes: at the very least, they are more temporally fleeting, and oftentimes, they are of lesser intensity. The hedonic satisfaction which washes over me at the happy ending of a romantic comedy is lesser in duration *and* lesser in intensity than my reveling in experiencing a real-life romance. We feel genuine grief at the death of Ophelia, but surely this grief cannot compare, in terms of both intensity and duration, to the grief I feel toward a tragic *and* actual suicide of someone with whom I am familiar. And, because the model has it that the imagining *that c* produces emotions in the exact same way as the belief *that c* — which is to say that the systems responsible for our affect do

not discriminate between imaginings and beliefs — there does not seem to be any way to explain this apparent difference in magnitude.

Proponents of the imagination view might respond by saying that, because we only familiarize ourselves with fictional characters for a short period of time, we simply don't *know* them well enough to be moved by them to the same degree as we are moved by actual persons. I only know Ophelia for two hours, and so my imaginative engagement with her is too fleeting to give rise to the breadth of imaginings that would be needed to cause a full-fledged emotional response to her passing. While this is a tempting response, I think that, at least in principle, we could be afforded sufficient access to a fictional character and yet still fail to feel for that character to the same degree as we feel for actual entities. When watching *Breaking Bad*, we relate to Walter White through many years of his life — we are afforded imaginative access to him through five seasons of the show! — and yet, his death does not move us to the same degree as the death of an *actual* person. If our world was just the world of *Breaking Bad*, and I related to the *actual* Walter White in just the same way that I, as a viewer, relate to the fictional Walter White, I think that I would be more moved by the passing of the *actual* Walter White. Indeed, the fact that fictional characters are usually more moved by the events of their world than are we — as viewers looking in from the outside — suggests that our emotional responses to fictions tend to be muted. Even if this can be partially explained by considering the limited degree of our access to fictional characters, this cannot be the whole explanation. So, for Emotional Response, the score is again mixed. The model easily explains one aspect of our emotional responsiveness to fictions, while it falters in its account of another aspect.

II.IV: Taking Stock

Before moving to consider alternatives to the imagination view, let's do some accounting of the view's theoretical virtues and vices. First, its explanations do not perfectly

meet our desiderata. On the count of Functional Coherence, it only explains some classes of behaviors and not others, and does not give a convincing story about why imaginings lack motivational power in the context of fiction consumption, but motivate behavior in other contexts in which imaginings are invoked. For Quarantining and Mirroring, the explanations generated are satisfying, but require the invocation of beliefs to deal with mirroring and higher-order beliefs to deal with exceptions to these norms. The view also can't easily handle cases of mistaken fiction consumption. Finally, for Emotional Response, the view accounts for imagination's power to produce emotions similar in kind to those produced by belief, but neglects differences in magnitude and lastingness. Clearly this view is better than the standard belief view presented, but for the above reasons, it leaves a bit to be desired.

Therefore, in the interest of determining whether imagination is the attitude that should do the cognitive work in our theory of fictional engagement, we should survey the conceptual space for a view that offers up more satisfying explanations. It is in this aim that we now turn to a sophisticated content view, which aims to explain fictional engagement by modifying the *contents* of our everyday cognitive attitudes, thereby doing away with the proposal that we cognize fictions through an attitude distinct from belief.

I start this chapter by reviewing the argument that motivates the imagination view:

1. Belief is individuated from other mental states in virtue of its functional and inferential role.
2. The belief-like attitudes involved in fiction consumption do not possess the same functional and inferential roles as beliefs.
3. Therefore, an attitude distinct from belief is involved in fictional engagement.

In the coming section, I will frame my version of the content view by arguing against P2. We have seen that some of the most compelling evidence for the imagination view centers on our (lacking) behavioral responses to fiction: when I desire something in a fiction, I do not try to satisfy my desire; when I resent some fictional character, I do not act in a way characteristic of a resentful person; and so on. But these facts, in my view, are insufficient to motivate the imagination view. I think the functional data is less definitive than proponents of the imagination view have thought; it does not give us reason to posit that an attitude distinct from belief must be involved in our theory of fictional engagement. From a careful accounting of the functional data, I will first argue that the attitude with which we engage fiction resembles belief in its functional role to a greater degree than suggested by the imagination view. In fact, we will later encounter reasons to think that our attitudes about fictions *are just* beliefs!

There's an obvious sense in which our attitudes about fictions are behaviorally efficacious. When we read a fictional novel that alludes to the catastrophic impacts of climate change, for example, we expect that our future behavior will be affected by this experience: we might conserve and recycle more, lobby our governments to act, and engage in protest ourselves. This, however, misses the point of the discussion at hand: characterizing the behavioral profile of our attitudes about fictions *in the context of fiction consumption*. The above behaviors aren't responsive to the novel *qua* fiction. Instead, those behaviors occur when we judge that our world is analogous to some fictional world, and then bring our imaginings about the fiction to bear on the actual world. Strictly speaking, they are responsive to *what we have*

learned from fictions; they are not behavioral responses to the fiction itself. As our previous discussion should suggest, it might seem hard to come by examples of behavioral responses to fiction *qua* fiction. No matter how much I dislike Omar's dying, I am not motivated to stop it. Never do I find myself trying to talk Hamlet out of suicide. And as we've seen, this data is taken to strongly suggest the involvement of an attitude distinct from belief in our engagement with fictions.

Pushing back on that, I think a reexamination of the data reveals that our belief-like attitudes about fictions have behavioral implications. Consider first the class of behavioral responses that I have previously dubbed automatic behaviors. When watching *The Ring*, I might grimace, cover my eyes, avert my glance, or even scream out in terror. When reading *Hamlet*, I might weep for Ophelia in much the same way as I would if I heard about the suicide of an acquaintance of mine. All of these responses are behaviors — and these behaviors occur in spite of the fact that I confidently believe that there are no such persons named Samara or Ophelia. My behavioral responses might not exactly reflect the magnitude of those responses that would occur if I believed in their flesh-and-blood existence — with Samara, I don't run out of the theatre in terror, and with Ophelia, I don't break down into a depressive state — but this does not mean that our attitudes about fictions give rise to *no* behavior. That some behaviors are produced by our attitudes about fictions is one piece of data we ought to accept. Our previous accounting of the functional data was incomplete, and so, the claim that our attitudes about fiction characteristically fail to produce behavioral outputs was mistaken.

We now have a bit of a puzzle on our hands. When we engage fictions, it seems that some behaviors naturally flow from our attitudes about the fiction, while others do not. Why do my attitudes about *The Ring's* Samara motivate me to act in some ways (e.g., trembling, covering my eyes, and so on) but not others (e.g., running out of the theatre)? The solution,

in my view, is to say that all our attitudes about fictions have some motivational power. They dispose us to act, and in this respect, the attitude with which we engage fiction resembles belief in its functional role. Obviously, these dispositions might be so weak as to fail to manifest in actual behavior. But this isn't controversial: that I am *disposed* to act in x ways does not mean that I will, in fact, do x (Levi and Morgenbesser 1964, 222-3). Some of my other mental states may undercut or conflict with a disposition to act such that I do not act in the way to which I am disposed.

We can observe the divergence between dispositions to act and action itself in all sorts of cases. Upon smelling cookies, I might form a belief that there are tasty chocolate chip cookies nearby, which often disposes me to promptly gobble down as many cookies as possible. This disposition is revealed through my salivation, my longing gaze at the cookies, and my tendency to follow around their smell. But, more often than not, I do not *act* on that disposition — that is, my disposition to gobble does not translate to my actually gobbling — due to its being overridden by my other beliefs. My strongly-held belief that chocolate chip cookies are unhealthy, for example, is such as to neutralize my disposition to eat the cookies — and so no action occurs. So, especially for cases in which some of our beliefs may neutralize the motivational force of some of our other beliefs, I think we can tease apart dispositional states from action itself.

Applying this discussion to the case of fiction, hopefully we can now see why our attitudes about fictions motivate some kinds of behavior but not others. My cognitive attitudes about *The Ring's* Samara dispose me to act in certain ways. The attitudes I adopt about her are causally efficacious in giving rise to various bodily events (e.g., increased heart rate, perspiration, and the like), as well as cognitive and mental ones (e.g., a feeling of fear, a gasping

utterance, and so on¹³). So, from all the data we have, we should say that our attitudes about Samara have at least some power in motivating us to act, and to that degree, they resemble belief. But with respect to more substantial classes of behavior, our attitudes about fictions do not translate to action: I do not look for the nearest knife with which to defend myself simply because I do not believe that Samara exists! I may be disposed to do so, but my higher-order belief in Samara's unreality is so powerful as to override this disposition. Much more will be said on this later, but at this juncture, we now see a way to resist the functional argument that allegedly tells against the belief view. In fact, careful examination of the data suggests that our attitudes about fiction more closely resemble beliefs in terms of behavioral power than we initially thought. Our fiction-directed attitudes may often fail to result in action, but this gives us no reason to think that the attitudes in question are not beliefs.

III.I: Fictional Operators

We have just seen that the mere fact that we don't run on stage to stop Ophelia's suicide is no reason, in and of itself, to think that we don't *believe* things about *Hamlet*. Though this gives us some reason to reconsider the standard belief view, we have already seen its dramatic failure. If we did straightforwardly believe things about fictions, then we would have no way to discriminate the fictional world from the actual world, and we would be committed to the full-blown existence of fictional entities. Such worries underlie the standard view's failure to meet our desiderata. But these problems are made tractable by tinkering with the *content* of our beliefs about fiction; in particular, we ought to posit that the content of our beliefs about fictions are modified by fictional operators.

¹³ This sort of behavioral response might strike my reader as less automatic than those that are physiological in nature (e.g., increased heart rate). This is a point to which I return when evaluating the belief view.

On this more sophisticated view, when we think and talk about fictions, we employ fictional operators that modify the contents of our thoughts and talk about the fiction (Kripke 2011, 62-64). Fictional operators semantically contribute to propositions by marking them as expressive of a *fictional* state of affairs; as such, fictional operators shift the conditions under which propositions are to be evaluated (Lewis 1978, 39). When we think that Hamlet is cowardly, we actually think that Hamlet is cowardly <in Shakespeare's fiction>. When we say that Ophelia is being manipulated by the men around her, we mean to say that we believe that Ophelia is being manipulated and dominated by the men around her <in the fiction>. Our cognition of fictional objects is such as to reflect our recognition that they don't exist in our world, but that they are actual *in the fiction*. Built into our mental representation of fictional objects, then, is their figuring into some merely fictional, rather than actual, state of affairs.

One consequence of this proposal is that it is not possible for our attitudes about fiction to take on the exact same content as our beliefs about actual entities. So, if by some sheer force of luck, I encounter a real individual named Walter White who is qualitatively identical to the Walter White of *Breaking Bad*, the mental states I adopt toward this individual cannot be the same states I adopt toward the fictional character (Lewis 1978, 39). Specifically, the latter states are about Walter White *in the fiction* and the former states are about the flesh-and-blood Walter White — and a difference in content means a difference in my mental state tokens. If fictional and actual states of affairs can never give rise to the same mental contents — simply in virtue of fictional operators being attached to our beliefs about fictions — then we have a tidy explanation of how we discriminate between the real and the fictional. When consuming a fiction, our mental states are about entities whose existence lies only in the fictional world, and this ontological fact is incorporated into the representational structure of our beliefs about them. That a single standard attitude, belief, is capable of taking on two

independent types of representations — of the actual world and of the fictional world — might be exactly what we need to explain our cognitive engagement with fiction.

Before bringing our desiderata to bear on this proposal, we should consider a number of objections that have been raised against it. I start by describing and motivating these worries, before launching a *tu quoque* argument against opponents of this view: the imagination view also needs to include content-modifying fictional operators. Later, I will argue that the sophisticated version of the content view presented above — dubbed the *content-modified* belief view — can satisfactorily handle challenges to the posit of fictional operators.

III.II: Operator, Operator, This Is an Emergency!

The first challenge centers around the following principle: that competent consumers of fiction need not know what goes on in their minds in order to appropriately adopt attitudes about and respond to fictions. In other words, competent engagement with fiction does not require one to have a concept of the attitudes constitutive of fictional engagement. The principle — let's call it conceptual naivety — says that we can be both a) naïve of the mental concepts that explain fiction consumption and b) capable of cognitively connecting to fictions in the right way (Langland-Hassan 2012, 160). This principle is called into question when we add fictional operators into the mix because they make fictional engagement a cognitively demanding endeavor. If fictional operators fix the reference of our thoughts about fictions, then it seems like we must have a cognitive understanding of what it means for something to be the case *in the fiction*. But many competent fiction consumers lack such an understanding. For a particularly stark presentation of the problem, consider that children younger than three, for example, may lack the conceptual resources to distinguish between reality and fiction (Weisberg 2013, 76). But this conceptual naivety does not appear to prevent them from appropriately engaging with pretense games around age two; and insofar as pretense and

fiction consumption are to be explained using the same basic cognitive architecture, we should expect such children to have a similarly competent grasp of fiction (Weisberg 2013, 75). This problem applies more generally when we consider that even adult consumers of fiction lack the concept of fictional operators, and without this, it seems that they could not know what their beliefs about fictions are really about! So, the heart of the worry is that if our beliefs about fictions are distinctive from our everyday beliefs in virtue of their contents, then we have made fictional consumption too cognitively demanding.

The second worry is somewhat similar in that it centers around the unpalatable cognitive demands imposed by fictional operators, and the subsequent problem of accounting for fictional immersion. When fictionally immersed, it feels to us as if we have been transported to the world of the fiction. We often forget that we are even engaging with a fiction; loosely speaking, it seems that our cognitive connections to the actual world have been severed and supplanted by those that connect us to the fictional world. But if we cognitively attend to fictions with beliefs about the fiction *as a fiction*, it is hard to explain fictional immersion. It is not enough to believe that Omar is brave in *David Simon's fiction*; immersion requires that we have an attitude toward Omar himself and his qualities (Velleman 2000, 257-58). In order to be immersed, says this objection, we need to cognize fictions in an unmediated way. The move to modify the content of our beliefs about fiction make this direct sort of engagement with fictional objects impossible: it says that all our thoughts when we immerse in a fiction are thoughts *about the fiction* (Kind 2011, 424). And so to the degree that immersion can only be explained by direct representation of fictional objects, a view that specifies that our representations of fictions are mediated by operators falls short.

From this discussion, we can see why many philosophers think that offering up a content-modified belief view of fictional engagement is problematic. In due time, I will address

these problems. But before doing so, I now argue that even the imagination view must incorporate fictional operators in order to satisfactorily explain fictional engagement — and so the competing models are even on this score.

III.III: *Tu Quoque*

Suppose that it is a rainy Sunday and you have decided to stay in for a movie or two. You decide to watch Douglas McGrath's *Infamous*, a biopic on the American novelist Truman Capote. As you watch, you notice that the film centers around Capote's nuanced queer identity — and so, the intimate and honest relationship Capote forms with the accused murderer, Perry Smith, of whom he is writing his novel, makes a lot of sense to you. You feel sympathy for the both of them, and imagine that Capote is virtuous — call this imagination token imagining_v . Satisfied by the film, you decide to go on to watch *another* Capote biopic — this time, Bennett Miller's *Capote*. Your experience while watching this film is markedly different. You view Capote as exploitative and opportunistic, looking to exploit the misery and grief of a small Kansas town for the sake of writing a best-seller that will ultimately catapult him into American notoriety. You come to imagine him as vicious — call this token $\text{imagining}_{\sim v}$.

Let's suppose that the imagination view is true, and so, you engage the content of these films with imaginings. If so, it seems that your imaginings are in tension: that Capote is virtuous and worthy of sympathy from the first film, and from the second, that Capote is vicious and unworthy of sympathy.¹⁴ How is the imagination view supposed to make sense of this case? It seems problematic that at the same time you both imagine that Capote is both v and $\sim v$, and in fact, we have good reasons to deny that imaginings can be contradictory. To me at least, it seems impossible to synchronically imagine that something is both v and $\sim v$ — square circles,

¹⁴ See Langland-Hassan (2018), which uses a similar case but centers around contradictory desires about fiction.

extensionless matter, and the like all seem to escape my imagination.¹⁵ Moreover, I take it we need our imaginings to be internally consistent, much like beliefs, in order to explain why imaginings are inferentially similar to beliefs (Stock 2003, 118). If similar rules of inference (including non-contradiction) did not govern our imaginings, then they would not exhibit the inferential orderliness characteristic of beliefs — and so the imagination view would fail on the score of properly characterizing the inferential role of our attitudes about fictions.

To prevent the contradiction, an initial response might be to deny that our imaginings about Capote are inconsistent, and instead characterize the case as one of a change in the contents of our imaginings about Capote. Our beliefs may change in response to new evidence, and given their functional similarities, the same should be true of our imaginings. So, on watching the first film, you developed an imagining that he is virtuous, but in response to the second film, your original imagining perishes and you adopt a new one with the content that Capote is vicious — and so, there are no contradictory imaginings to be found.

The success of this reply depends on the claim that our imaginings persist only if one is contemporaneously engaged in the fiction which they are about. And there is plenty of reason to dispute this claim. If our imaginings persist only when we occurrently engage them, it is difficult to see how anyone could return to a book and pick up from where they left off. Doing so would require a reader to *reimagine* the entirety of the book's content; and such a laborious endeavor, in terms of both cognitive resources and time, does not seem to accurately characterize our experience as readers of fiction. As with beliefs, it seems that imaginings can be found in standing forms — perhaps, analyzed as dispositions to imagine or tacit imaginings — that are stored in one's memory and available for immediate inference and recall under the

¹⁵ This point is contentious, as exemplified in Gendler's *Tower of Goldbach* case, which she takes to show that readers can imagine contradictions (Gendler 2000, 67-68). For reasons stated though, I have my doubts about this proposal.

appropriate circumstances (Walton 1990, 16-18; Nichols 2004, 136). Because imaginings don't perish as soon as we turn away from fictions, we are able to reengage a novel after having set it aside or settle back into a play after its interlude. If the foregoing is true, when you are presented with the second film, your disposition to imagine Capote as virtuous is activated by your current imaginings (e.g., the imagining that Capote exists) (Nichols 2004, 136). Under this set of circumstances (i.e., your seeing Capote), your inferential mechanisms produce imagining_v from your disposition to imagine that content; but that imagining comes into conflict with your concurrently imagining_{-v} . So long as you can be said to adopt these two imaginings at the same time and with respect to the same object, Capote, then our problem resurfaces.

Properly understood, this case should pose no deep problem: we just feel that the presentation of Capote in one film is such that he is virtuous, and the presentation in the other film is such that he is vicious (i.e., not virtuous). But if our imaginings take on the same type of content as our everyday beliefs, i.e., they represent contents directly, rather than contents *situated in the fiction*, then we have no way to explain this result. Our representation tokens, imagining_v and imagining_{-v} about Capote, are exactly the same mental state in virtue of the fact that they are both about one and the same thing: *the actual* Truman Capote. So, when asked to describe your imaginings about Capote, you would not know what to say — you imagine him as both virtuous and not-virtuous! So long as these mental states are adopted at the same time, the imagination view renders this case one of contradictory imaginings, which we should expect to lead to psychological instability.

To the extent that we feel that our imaginings are not in tension — just because they are *about* different Capotes in different films! — we need to tack on an operator to the content of our imaginings to make sense of this case. This move allows for the individuation of

imaginings at the right resolution. Indeed, there is obviously no problem involved in the co-existence of my imagining that Capote is virtuous *according to Infamous* and my imagining that Capote is not virtuous *according to Capote*. When asked of my attitudes toward Capote, I would say something along those lines: that I imagined Capote in one film as virtuous, and in the other, as non-virtuous. In order to get this result, we need the content of our imaginings to be tethered to the particular fiction in which we are engaged. And so, fictional operators must modify the contents of imaginings so as to reflect the particular fiction they are about. Without this posit, the contents of our imaginings must range over all activities with which our imagination is involved — rendering them unable to represent “one [particular] fiction versus another” (Langland-Hassan 2018, pars. 9-11).

Now, we see that even the imagination view must modify the contents of imaginings with fictional operators in order to allow for their specification and individuation. So, the charge that fictional operators are an unacceptable posit cannot count against my view in particular. Many philosophers think that one of the distinctive virtues of the imagination view is that it explains fiction consumption without fictional operators — and so, it is both simpler and more coherent with folk psychology than my view. But having shown that it cannot do so, we have undermined one critical basis of support for the imagination view. Because all views have reason to posit content-modifying fictional operators, the imagination view has no advantage on that front. With the score on this issue tied, I now hope to show that the belief view better handles our desiderata than the imagination view — and so it wins on the battleground of most importance to a theory of fictional engagement.

III.IV: Meeting Desiderata

I start by discussing how my content-modified belief view handles our desiderata, before moving to consider the objections raised earlier in this chapter. As we began to see in

our earlier discussion, we have reason to believe that the attitude with which we engage fictions is behaviorally efficacious. Without a behavioral profile, it is hard to see how this attitude could induce even the most automatic responses to fictions. In that discussion though, we encountered a puzzle: our attitudes toward fiction seem to provoke some classes of behavioral responses, but not others. And it is now time to demonstrate how the sophisticated, content-modified belief view is up to the task of meeting Functional Coherence.

Let's start by considering the analogous case of modal beliefs. When reading a news report about Southern California's San Andreas fault, I may form the belief that *possibly*, everyone I know and love will die tomorrow in a catastrophic seismic event. This modal belief may be sufficiently powerful to produce in me emotional and behavioral responses — my heart may start racing, I may start sweating, and I may even start researching how to prepare for the next big one. Proponents of the imagination view might object here, saying that these responses are not produced, properly speaking, by my *beliefs* about that proposition, and so my explanation is wrong.¹⁶ Rather, they think, my mind does *something more* to this proposition: imagining must be the attitude encoding that proposition because modal beliefs aren't powerful enough to produce affect and behavior. While it's difficult to address this issue directly with a case — what we need is a modal proposition which can be believed but not imagined, which seems hard to come by given the flexibility of imagination — we can overcome this worry indirectly through two lines of reasoning. One, it seems that my responses to that proposition above are fairly instantaneous and thoughtless — and so, to the

¹⁶ Support for this comes from a certain type of fiction: thought experiments (Moran 1994, 94). Thought experiments in philosophy often have morally horrifying content (e.g., trolley-style cases), and yet, we seem to engage them dispassionately and without any affective responses. Many think this can be explained by the fact that we are merely believing conditionally their contents (or supposing), rather than imagining, and that the former kinds of mental states are not sufficient to induce emotional responses.

extent that imaginings take cognitive work and time to develop, those responses are best explained as being produced by my belief about that modal proposition. For another argument, suppose a beleaguered student considers the following proposition “possibly, I am able to avoid studying for my exam by cheating on it.” When he entertains this proposition with the attitude of belief, we might expect him to feel relief, and he might be disposed to stop studying then and there and form the intention to cheat on his exam. But when he *imagines* this proposition, we might expect a different set of responses from him. He might come to realize that it is wrong to cheat and feel shame that he even seriously considered the proposition, or he might feel anxiety at the prospect of possibly getting expelled. Because we get two different sets of responses from the two different attitudes through which the proposition is encoded, there is some reason to think that beliefs about possible states of affairs are capable of producing behavioral and affective responses in their own right

Even if I am right with respect to the behavioral and affective force of our modal beliefs, why do such beliefs only produce some sorts of behavior but not others? My having a belief about the possibility of seismic apocalypse does not make me act in a way characteristic of someone who *believes* that it is actually the case that everyone they love will die tomorrow. This is so because I do not believe that the state of affairs *my loved ones being dead* is actual — I merely believe that such state of affairs is a possible one. I do not follow through on those actions because I recognize that my belief is not about some actual state of affairs, but merely a possible one. And so, my higher-order beliefs (i.e., my beliefs about the modality of the contents of my lower-order beliefs) are such as to preclude the possibility of some behaviors.

When we consume fictions, something very similar is going on. Although my beliefs about the fiction are sufficiently powerful to dispose me to act, they are not powerful enough to override my higher-order beliefs (i.e., my belief that the content of my fiction-directed belief

is not constituted by an actual state of affairs). When I watch *The Ring's* Samara emerge from the well, I am undoubtedly disposed to do all the things one does when terrified, including run out of the theater in terror. But, this disposition does not translate to action proper because my higher-order beliefs prevent such a disposition from generating action. In the process of my forming a belief about Samara's dangerousness *in the fiction*, I also gain a higher-order belief that Samara is not real, and for that reason, cannot be *actually* dangerous. The idea here is that the belief that Samara is dangerous *in the fiction* is not sufficient on its own to generate behavior characteristic of the belief that Samara is dangerous simpliciter. When we add a higher-order belief in Samara's flesh-and-blood existence to the functional equation, obviously the belief that Samara is dangerous will produce the right sort of behaviors (e.g., running in fear). But the presence of fictional operators in our beliefs about fictions means that we also possess higher-order beliefs that deny the reality of the contents of our lower-order beliefs about fiction. The higher-order belief that Samara is unreal comes along with my belief that Samara is dangerous *in the fiction*. And it is these higher-order beliefs that explain why fictions do not produce the full spectrum of behavioral responses in us.

Now, to solve the puzzle, we should note that the limited class of behaviors capable of being produced by fictional engagement are, for the most part, causally mediated by our affective systems. We gasp at Samara because her appearance produces fear in us and we cry for Ophelia because her death produces grief in us. Because these behaviors are responsive to our emotional states — states that are insulated from higher-level cognition — they are not the sort of states which usually fall under the regulatory power of our higher-order beliefs. No matter how undesirable one views an emotional state to be, it seems difficult to directly regulate these states. The higher-order belief that crying is inappropriate, for example, is not usually sufficient to make us stop crying; nor is the higher-order belief that it is undesirable to

wring our hands sufficient to stop our hand wringing. And so too for fiction: our higher-order beliefs cannot neutralize those affect-laced behaviors caused by our lower-order beliefs about propositions *in the fiction*.

This gives us a tidy explanation of automatic behaviors — but what about the more substantive behaviors produced by fiction consumption, like reaching for one’s partners hand, gasping, or averting one’s glance? While these behaviors don’t strike me as *voluntary* ones, they seem importantly different than the purely physiological sorts of behavioral responses to fiction. Why does our higher-order belief about the unreality of Samara preclude our running out of the theatre, while allowing behaviors like gasping, turning away from the screen, and squeezing the hand of our partner? To answer this, I will resort to the sorts of explanations we have previously considered. When watching *The Ring*, I exhibit behavioral responses to Samara because my beliefs about Samara *in the fiction* evoke fear in me. When our higher-order beliefs about Samara come into conflict with our lower-order beliefs — when we fear Samara by virtue of our belief that she is dangerous *in the fiction*, while denying her *actual dangerousness* in our higher-order beliefs — I think that this tension naturally gives rise to behaviors expressive of our higher-order belief *that we are just engaged in a fiction*. Behaviors like averting our glance or squeezing our partners’ hand have the effect of distancing ourselves from the fiction, and so they might be plausibly said to be caused by our higher-order beliefs in the unreality of the fiction’s content.

This explanation resonates with data from the context of pretense. In a series of fascinating experiments, children who pretend that a monster lives inside a box — while maintaining the higher-order belief that they are just pretending and there exists no such monster — exhibit behavioral responses characteristic of the belief that there is in fact a monster under the box (e.g., they exhibit fear and look under the box to verify that there is, in

fact, no monster) (Harris et al., 1991, experiment 4). Just as children's higher-order belief in the unreality of the monster — combined with an affective response suggesting that there *is* a monster — might cause them to act in ways that *remind* themselves of the unreality of their pretense, some of our behavioral responses to fiction serve to affirm our higher-order beliefs by distancing ourselves from engagement with the fiction. We avert our eyes and latch on tightly to our partners by virtue of the need to remind ourselves of our higher-order beliefs in the unreality of the fiction. Now, we have a full story as to why only some sorts of behaviors, previously cast aside as automatic, are generated by our beliefs about fiction and our higher-order beliefs about the fiction *qua* work of fiction.

I think this analysis gives us a tidy explanation of the behavioral side to Functional Coherence. We exhibit behavior in response to fictions only insofar as our affective systems mediate between the inputs of the fiction and our behavioral outputs. So, we should modify our boxology to include behavior as a direct output of our affective response systems — and of course, these affectively-induced behaviors are caused by different mechanisms than the behavioral outputs of our practical reasoning system. This modification does not strike me as controversial. Whenever our affect compels us to act against our better judgment, our behavior can be said to be an output of our affective response systems — and outputs of that sort do seem functionally distinct from the behaviors produced by practical reasoning. And so too with fictions — our beliefs about fictional contents can give rise to emotional responses, which in turn dispose us to act in various ways. When we do not exhibit a response to *x in the fiction* that would be characteristic of the belief that *x*, we can look toward higher-order beliefs — that *x* is not real, that *x* poses no danger, etc. — in order to explain why our dispositions to act do not generate actions.

I think that fictional operators are similarly useful for explaining segregation in the inferential patterns of our beliefs about fictions and actual entities. Because my view centers on content-modified beliefs, there remains little question as to how our fiction-directed attitudes mirror the inferential patterns of our beliefs proper. As beliefs themselves, the inferential roles of our attitudes about fictions can be explained in the exact same way as the inferential roles of our beliefs about everyday objects. And finally, our beliefs about fictions are inferentially segregated from our beliefs about actual things because these two states systematically represent different types of content: everyday beliefs represent actual content and beliefs about fiction represent content *in the fiction*. My belief that *there is <possibly> a Diet Coke in my fridge* and my belief that *if there is a Diet Coke in my fridge, then I went to the supermarket recently* cannot combine to produce the inference that I went to the supermarket recently — from those beliefs, I may only infer that *I <possibly> went to the supermarket recently*. And so too it goes for our beliefs about fiction, whose content is always represented as fictional. Because our mental states about fiction have different contents than our states about actual objects, i.e., the meaning of these states can never be the same, we should expect them to be inferentially isolated from one another.

Building up from our discussion of affectively-induced behaviors, I now consider Emotional Response. Insofar as our attitudes about fictions are bona fide beliefs about propositions *represented as fictional*, they are capable of generating emotional responses to fictions by virtue of the same mechanism that explains our everyday emotions. Just as our belief about the dangerousness of *p* causes fear of *p*, we may say that our belief about the dangerousness of *p in the fiction* causes fear of *p*. That we don't believe that *p* actually exists is no problem for my view. We often feel emotions directed at future, past, and counterfactual objects and events, i.e., things that we take to not exist in an everyday, spatiotemporal sense

(Moran 1994, 77-78). Young people might feel grief that their yet unborn grandchildren will suffer due to climate change, a classicist might feel resentment toward Athens for executing Socrates, and an anti-abortion activist might feel sad about the people who will never come into being due to permissive abortion policies. Before reflection, most would not say that they believe that past, future, and possible objects exist in the same way as do present objects, but we exhibit emotional responses to these lesser categories of entities all the same. Similarly, our higher-order beliefs about the fictitiousness of a work's content do not preclude emotional response because our affective systems are directly responsive to our beliefs about propositions *in the fiction* — just as they are responsive to our modal beliefs. While engaging a fiction, our affect system does not receive take in representations of our cognitive perspective *outside of the fictional world* (i.e., our higher-order beliefs), and so they are not governed by our higher-order beliefs about the unreality of the fiction (Harris 2000, 66). We are capable of being moved by entities that are believed to exist only *in the fiction* because such beliefs are received by our affective systems just like our beliefs about actual entities, thereby rendering our emotions responsive to fictional events (Harris 2000, 66).

Some worry that this explanation is too quick: we want to say that we feel grief for *Ophelia herself*, but the belief view lacks the resources to say this. The addition of fictional operators to our beliefs makes our emotional states responsive to fictional states of affairs: when we say that we feel grief in response to Ophelia's death, we must analyze this emotion as a mental state responsive to Ophelia's death *in the fiction*. But our grief doesn't seem to be about the state of affairs in the fiction *Ophelia's being dead*; it is about Ophelia herself! In fact, we might want things to go a certain way for Ophelia, but might not want that with respect to the the fiction at large (Doggett and Egan 2007, 14-15). We might feel grief about Ophelia's dying, for example, but we might also be happy that she dies *in the fiction*, because the best

fiction is one in which she dies tragically. The charge then is that the belief view is not able to accurately characterize the objects of our fictionally-directed emotions.

Let's respond to this argument first by considering a familiar analogy. When I occurrently entertain the belief that it is possible that all loved by me have died in a catastrophic earthquake, this belief is sufficiently powerful to stir up an emotional response in me. It doesn't seem to me to be improper to say that my emotions are directed toward my loved ones themselves, rather than some possible state of affairs. I think we can say a very similar thing in the case of fictionally-induced emotions. When we feel an emotion about x *in the fiction*, our affective systems are responding to some feature of the fictional state of affairs. This should not be taken to mean that our emotions are about the fiction — about the body of text or the film — rather than about x . Just because our emotional response is *caused* by some appraisal of a fictional state of affairs does not mean that the object of our emotions is not the fictional character herself. A proper analysis of fictionally-induced emotions would go like this: a subject S feels emotion E about fictional object or event X in virtue of S 's affective systems appraising a state of affairs containing X <in the fiction> as something warranting E . So, we can accurately be said to feel grief *for Ophelia herself* by virtue of the fact that our affective systems process the fictional state of affairs in which she dies as warranting a grief response. We might feel emotions about the fiction *qua* work of fiction, but this is compatible with our *being moved by* the very characters and events constitutive of fictional worlds.

Last, I now address how the view stacks up to Quarantining and Mirroring. The first task involves showing that content-modified beliefs about fictions are capable of being quarantined from our beliefs about the real world. From our preceding discussion, I think getting there is easy enough. The entities represented in my beliefs about a fiction must be represented as fictional. When we encounter seemingly everyday objects in the course of

consuming a fiction, the beliefs we form about them are not beliefs about everyday objects simpliciter — they are about such objects *in the fiction*. And so, because our beliefs about fictions and our everyday beliefs are differentiated by their content — which is just to say that they are beliefs about different things — this theory gives us a very natural explanation of Quarantining. When we consume a fiction, we develop beliefs about that fiction world itself; and given that the objects of these beliefs are confined to the fictional world of which they are a part, they do not penetrate into our beliefs about the actual world. On this explanation, we believe things about fictions in much the same way as we believe things about other worlds. My beliefs about XYZ in Putnam's *Twin-Earth* world, for example, are not confused with my beliefs about H₂O in our world by virtue of the fact that they are beliefs about different things in different worlds! Cognitively, our engagement with works of fiction amounts to the representation of a world completely independent from ours — the world encoded in the fiction's content — and this gives us a nice explanation of Quarantining.

We may also explain violations of this desideratum when we consider the role of higher-order beliefs in our cognitive architecture. The various higher-order beliefs we hold about a fiction *qua* work of fiction — e.g., its genre conventions, its creator's intentions, etc. — have the power to modify the contents of our beliefs about that work. Returning to our example, we may start with the belief that ABQ is a city in NM *in the fiction*, but through reflection on our higher-order beliefs about the work, the fictional operator modifying that content may be removed by some mechanism — whose function is to modulate between our belief that *p* in the fiction and our higher-order beliefs — so as to make us *actually* believe that content (i.e., believe the content under the truth-conditions of the actual world). When we consider our higher-order beliefs that *Breaking Bad* is a realist work of fiction, that Vince Gilligan intended to sprinkle worldly truths into the truths of *Breaking Bad*, and so on, some

of our beliefs about things in the fiction may rise to the status of beliefs about the actual city, Albuquerque. Structurally speaking, this strategy is quite similar to that employed by the imagination view to deal with this very issue.

We may, of course, err in this process if our higher-order beliefs do not properly regulate those lower-order beliefs through which we directly engage fictions. For example, if I have the false belief that *Breaking Bad* was intended by Vince Gilligan to perfectly chronicle events that actually occurred in Albuquerque, then my beliefs about the world will not be properly quarantined from my beliefs about the fiction. This distinction — between beliefs that *p in the fiction*, and higher-order beliefs about the fiction *qua* work of fiction — gives us a proper diagnosis of our *Apocalypse Now* case. There, our higher-order judgments about the ontological status of the work's content were false — we engaged with the work as a non-fictional news report, when in fact it was a fictitious film — and on that basis, we ended up adopting false beliefs about our world. But, in some sense, these beliefs accurately represented: their contents were veridical with respect to the evaluative standpoint of the fictional world. So, when the credit screen rolled and we realized our mistakes, the content of our previously adopted beliefs were updated with a fictional operator so as to reflect their content being situated *in the fiction*. Our beliefs about the Vietnam War were converted into beliefs about the Vietnam War *in the fiction*. And so, in virtue of our having the appropriate higher-order beliefs to regulate the process of quarantining, our beliefs about fictions may appropriately be rendered beliefs about the actual world.

A different explanation is in order to explain how the belief view handles Mirroring, which demands that our beliefs about fictions tend to reflect our beliefs about the world. First, note that the works of fiction which Mirroring is supposed to cover are constituted by states of affairs that are “close” to actual states of affairs. We can analyze the notion of “closeness”

by examining the degree to which the propositions true of some possible state of affairs (i.e., one represented by a fiction) are also true of the actual state of affairs (Stalnaker 1968, 34-35). For example, a possible world that is isomorphic to our world in all respects, except that p is true of the possible world and not of our world, is a world quite close to the actual world. Returning to fiction, the world of *The Wire*, for example, is a possible world close to the actual world, and so, many propositions that are true of *The Wire* are also true of our world. We can account for Mirroring then by saying that many of our beliefs about the actual world are also cognized as beliefs about the fiction. When we engage a “nearby” fiction, some mechanism duplicates our beliefs about the world and modifies their content so as to reflect that they now have the function of representing things *in the fiction*. From our belief that all human blood contains iron and hemoglobin, plus a quick inference, we may come to believe that Omar’s blood contains iron and hemoglobin *in the fiction*. As I watch Omar bleed out, I can be said to believe that proposition because what is true of blood in our world fixes what is true of blood in *The Wire*. We satisfy Mirroring, and explain exceptions to the norm, by examining the extent to which fictional operators shift the context of propositions about fictions: to the degree that the world of the fiction is close to our world, our beliefs about the fiction will tend to mirror our beliefs about the world.

We should now see how to account for exceptions to this desideratum, especially in cases of fictional worlds that diverge greatly from that of the everyday. When engaging with the world of *Game of Thrones*, for example, many propositions that are true of our world are not true of that world (e.g., that dragons do not exist). In order to adequately engage with a distant possible fictional world, for example, I must not import my beliefs about the unreality of dragons into my beliefs about such creatures *in the fiction*. The mechanism responsible for this operates on the following simple principle: our beliefs about the fiction cannot be filled

in by our actual beliefs iff the world of the fiction is distant from our world. The belief that $\sim d$ in our world never comes to our minds when watching *Game of Thrones* because the world constituting that fiction is too distant from our world; and so, when it directs us to believe that d in the fiction, that belief does not encounter conflict with our beliefs about the real world.

III.V: A Concluding Note

All we need to generate these explanations is the posit of content-modifying fictional operators. While fictional operators might be problematic, there is reason to think that the imagination view cannot do without these very operators; and therefore, to the extent that they count against my view, they should also count against my opponent. Although this reasoning is sufficient to overcome the worries raised earlier, I think the belief view has sufficient resources to quash these objections altogether. We have already dismissed the worry that the belief view characterizes the objects of our emotions incorrectly; so what about the view that fictional operators make fiction consumption too demanding? First, empirical evidence suggests that even children are capable of discriminating between different fictional worlds, and this seems sufficient to establish that fictional operators are not conceptually demanding (Skolnick and Bloom 2006, 12-13). Second, it seems that folk consumers of fiction should be able to distinguish between the following sentences:

- 1) Audiences believe that *The Wire's* Bubbles is endearing.
- 2) *The Wire's* Bubbles is endearing.

Insofar as we would assent to belief in both these propositions, it is not difficult to understand that these beliefs are made true by two different set of facts (Kripke 2011, 63). If asked to consider whether both propositions would be true in a world in which no audiences have ever seen *The Wire*, we would say that 2) remains true: it is a consequence of truth-makers in the fictional world, not our world, that 2) is made true. Indeed, it should be plain to all that the first proposition is true in virtue of facts about our world, whereas the second is true in virtue

of facts about the fictional world of *The Wire*. And the only way we could make these observations is if we had some understanding of how fictional operators modify the content of propositions about fictions. For that reason, the addition of fictional operators does not render a belief-based analysis of fictional engagement too cognitively demanding.

When we modify the contents of our beliefs about fiction so as to reflect their being situated in a fictional world, the belief-based approach to a folk psychological analysis of fiction emerges as an appealing proposal. Inferential segregation is explained in virtue of the fact that our beliefs about fictions are different in meaning than our everyday beliefs, and so, the two types of beliefs do not usually enter into inferential chains together. We also get a tidy explanation of why we do not leap onstage to prevent Ophelia's suicide: my higher-order belief that Ophelia is not real overpowers the dispositional profile of my belief that she is about to commit suicide *in the fiction*. It also explains the mechanism by which some behavioral responses are generated, but not others: we can expect behavior in response to fiction so long as that behavior is mediated by our affective systems, and thus, not governed by our higher-order beliefs. And on this view, explaining fictionally-induced emotions is straightforward: because such emotions are caused by beliefs proper, they can be explained by any standard theory of emotion. These emotions are often weaker than our emotions about actual events because the beliefs that cause them are beliefs *about fictional contents*. Just as our beliefs about merely possible states of affairs give rise to emotions of differing intensities as compared to our beliefs about the actual, our beliefs about fictional entities don't usually produce emotions that move us to the same degree as our everyday emotional responses. Last, the relation between our attitudes about fictions and our beliefs about the actual world is elegantly explained by my model. We do not confuse fiction with reality because our beliefs about fictions take on content that reflects their fictional meaning — believing about fiction is much

like believing about some other possible world. A difference in representational content is all we need to distinguish the real from the fictional. Depending on the closeness of a fictional world, we are also able to mirror relevant beliefs about our world into beliefs about the fiction by adding on an operator to the former class of beliefs. And so, a belief view with fictional operators can do the work desired of our theory of fictional engagement without the invocation of imaginings.

From our discussion, we have seen that a content-modified belief view is preferable to the view that invokes an attitude distinct from belief to explain fictional engagement. My content-modified belief view more naturally explains our behavioral responses to fiction, including automatic responses. We respond behaviorally to fictions in virtue of the fact that our beliefs are motivational; this is true regardless of whether a belief's content is represented as fictional or actual. When we don't exhibit behavioral responses to fiction — when motivation doesn't generate action — this is due to the neutralizing power of our higher-order beliefs about the fictitiousness of the contents of our beliefs about fictions. Whenever the functional role of our beliefs about fictions seem to diverge from the role played by everyday beliefs, we can explain this away by looking to facts about our higher-order beliefs. While the imagination view can explain why our behavior is unresponsive to fictions, it does not do so tidily. For one, it cannot adequately explain automatic behavioral responses to fiction. Most importantly, it does not give us an adequate answer to the question of why imaginings are behaviorally inert. In other contexts, imaginings are often called upon to explain behavior, and I have argued that there is no principled way to separate these contexts from fictional ones: we can't say that our imaginings are behaviorally inefficacious in the context of fiction consumption but behaviorally inert in the context of pretense and practical reasoning. On the score of the affect, both views give us a decent story. For the imagination view, we feel emotions in response to fictions because our imaginings are connected to our affect system; on my view, we feel emotion in response to fictions because we straightforwardly believe things about fictions, and so we are moved by the goings-on of fictions. My belief view also allows us to discriminate between the real and the fictional by rendering our fiction-directed beliefs about the fictional world — because we can represent two worlds in belief, the actual and the fictional, we should expect quarantining and mirroring on the basis of this difference in content. This view more

easily explains violations of the norms of quarantining and mirroring than the imagination view, as well as cases of mistaken fiction consumption.

At the onset of our discussion, we thought that imaginings would be a necessary component of any adequate theory of fictional engagement. Having shown that this is not so, I think we now have sufficient reason to accept my version of the content view. Combing through our intuitions one last time, it doesn't feel as if we dictate our attitudes about fictions, like children using their imaginations to conjure up characters and plotlines in a game of pretend. Rather unlike our imaginings, it feels to us that we are *subject* to our attitudes about fictions, and that we cognize fictional objects with no effort, thought, or creativity. In this respect, our attitudes about fiction have the character of beliefs — and the view defended here does justice to this phenomenological aspect of our experience of fictions. Through our discussion, I hope to have shown that belief is the cognitive attitude with which we represent fictional objects. A complete theory of fictional engagement therefore ought to center belief in its explanations of how we think about and respond to works of fiction.

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