

FICTIONAL ENTITIES AND REAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

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Is it possible to respond with real emotions (e.g., fear, pity and sorrow) to characters or situations that are known to be fictional? I will attempt to show the difficulty inherent in maintaining that it is. How one responds to this question will inevitably be guided by what one regards an emotional response as consisting in. For example, if one takes the view that in order for a response to count as emotional it must be directed towards a real person or situation, then one will take the view that responses to fictional entities cannot consist of real emotions. In other words, the conditions one takes to be necessary for the having of real emotional responses will guide one's response to the issue of how we respond to fictional entities. I will attempt to show that it is highly problematic to hold that belief in the actuality of something (a situation, or a person's suffering, say) is not a necessary condition for having an emotional response to that thing.

I.

Imagine that we are watching Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, a horror film about a group of teenagers who are terrorised in their dreams by a demon with knives for fingers. As if this were not terrifying enough, if said demon (Freddy Krueger) catches and kills any of the teenagers in their dreams, they die in real life. It seems fair to say that if we respond with fear (be it for our own, or a character's safety) to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, this is not due to our believing that Freddy Krueger is real; the story is too far-fetched for us to confuse the film with a documentary. Still, the intuitive answer to the question of whether the response elicited by *A Nightmare on*

Elm Street is one of real fear or not is to answer in the affirmative. It really seems like we are afraid whilst watching this film; we wince at the particularly harrowing parts, close our eyes and squirm in our seats.

One may ask: “Why should we not just accept that these are real emotions we are experiencing?” granted it seems like they are. The problem, I think, is that as Colin Radford suggests, in maintaining that we experience fear whilst watching *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, our response becomes totally irrational.¹ To take our seat in a cinema fully aware that we are about to experience a work of fiction, and then to undergo the same response (e.g., fear) that we would if the events portrayed were actual is, at the very least, peculiar.

This discussion raises an interesting point regarding what it is to have a real emotional response to something. It seems that an integral part of feeling emotions towards something is that we believe in the actuality of that thing. For example, if a friend is having a particularly hard time, we feel sadness for them on the basis that we believe their plight is actual. There are countless other conditions that may be necessary for an emotional response. For example, real emotional responses can last a long time and may affect both our behaviour and view of the world. We feel the pangs of sadness many years after the death of someone close to us. If attacked by a real life Freddy Krueger the fear undergone may affect our personality indefinitely and never truly leave us. It is not possible to maintain that we respond with real emotions to fictional entities if we take the above conditions to be necessary for having an emotional response. For the response to Freddy Krueger evaporates when we leave the cinema; unless particularly fragile, we are not going to have nightmares for weeks to come like we would following a real life attack.

It seems that there are only three paths available to escape the conclusion that responding with emotion to fictional entities is irrational. The first simply accepts the irrationality of our responses to fictional entities. This seems to me to be the least attractive option. The second, and in my view more favourable, holds that when we respond to fictional entities we do not respond with real emotions, so the problem of irrationality does not arise. The third holds that we can respond with emotion to fictional entities, all the while being aware of their fictional status, without being

¹ Radford (1975), p.78. Radford uses the terms, ‘inconsistent’ and ‘incoherent’.

irrational. This latter view will be discussed in Part II after a brief discussion of an important point made by Kendall Walton, who defends the second option.

Returning to the question of what counts as an emotional response, Walton makes an interesting point regarding how far the strength of certain physical and physiological factors can be taken as indicators of a response consisting of real emotion. Walton argues that responding to a horror film by wincing, closing our eyes and so on, does not warrant concluding that the response is one of real fear.² Let us consider an example where we can be certain we would experience real fear. Say we were being chased by a real life Freddy Krueger, a person who intends to take our life; our response differs vastly from that elicited by the fictional Freddy Krueger. We would be (literally) running for our lives, screaming for help, and manically punching the emergency services number into our mobile phone. There is an obvious difference between these responses and wincing and squirming whilst watching *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. In the real life example we believe ourselves to be in danger and threatened. Whilst watching *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, however, we do not believe that the well-being of any real person is under threat. This, I hold, explains the vast difference in behaviour in the two examples. Walton, who discusses this point, argues that it indicates that, in the latter example, the response cannot be one of real fear, but only ‘quasi-fear’; it is ‘make-believe’ that we are afraid.³

The above indicates that for a response to be deemed one of real fear it must involve not only a behavioural element, which responses to fiction sometimes do (e.g., when we wince and squirm), but also the belief that we are threatened, and this entails believing in the existence of that which threatens us. So in the case of fiction, to undergo real emotion requires us to believe that a fictional character threatens us and that they are real. But this has counterintuitive consequences that were hinted at earlier; for we enter a cinema fully aware that we are about to experience a work of fiction. But then, once the picture starts, we would be required to suddenly believe that what we are watching is real. How could this work for something like *Alien*, a work of science fiction which depicts situations that are wholly foreign to us? The point extends to all seemingly emotional responses to fictional entities; since we

² Walton (2004), p.308.

³ Ibid.

believe the entities to be fictional and not actual, any response they elicit cannot be a genuinely emotional one.

II.

It would be hasty to conclude that we can now lay this issue to rest, as there are a number of objections to this conception of responses to fiction as non-emotional. These objections inevitably ask us to consider a different set of necessary conditions for having an emotional response. I will now discuss what was marked out above as the third position on the issue: the idea that it is not necessary to believe in the actual suffering, say, of a person in order to have an emotional response to them.

Alex Neill holds that it is a mistake to prize belief in the actual obtaining of some situation as a necessary condition for our responding to it with real emotions. He argues that, even if belief is a necessary condition for our having an emotional response to something, this does not entail we cannot have real emotional responses to fictional entities, because he thinks believing that something is fictionally the case is enough to elicit a real emotional response. He writes:

[I]f one takes belief to be the crucial factor in the production of emotion, there is no reason to suppose that our beliefs about what is fictionally the case will be any more causally impotent with regard to emotion than our beliefs about what is actually the case.⁴

Consider, for example, *The Sea, The Sea*. Neill suggests that whilst reading this book we generate beliefs about what is fictionally the case for its characters (i.e. that, fictionally, there is a retired actor named Charles Arrowby who moves to the sea), and there is no reason why beliefs of this sort cannot evoke real emotions just as beliefs about what is actually the case similarly do. If right, this indicates it is a mistake to take belief in the actuality of something as the “crucial factor” in evoking an emotional response to that thing.

In dropping belief in the actuality of something as a necessary condition for our responding to it with real emotion, Neill makes it difficult to explain how it is that we respond with emotion to fictional entities all the while being aware that they are fictional. Neill makes a number of suggestions on this score, arguing in particular that

⁴ Neill (1993), p.3.

“the crucial factor in the generation of emotion is something like the adoption of certain sorts of perspective.”⁵ So a necessary condition for our having an emotional response to a character is that we take that character’s perspective, we place ourselves in their shoes. Taking the example of *The Sea, The Sea*, what makes it the case that we respond emotionally to Arrowby’s loss of his true love is that we imagine what it is like to be in his situation. The fact that we are aware of the fictional status of his situation is irrelevant; we respond with real emotion by taking his perspective. But, it seems to me that whilst this may explain *how* we might respond in general to fiction sometimes, particularly if the characters suffer a similar plight to our own, the adoption of another’s perspective does not explain why these responses consist of *real* emotion. This seems especially true if we take real emotions to be those that arise out of ordinary, real life situations. The ‘taking of perspectives’ idea falls short of explaining why belief in the actuality of a person or situation should be taken as not a necessary condition for having a real emotional response. Even if we do take Arrowby’s perspective, we are still aware that he is fictional and, as argued above, this blocks our response from equating to a full blown emotional one. Taking the perspective of a fictional character only affords a more robust understanding of what is happening in the novel.

Furthermore, the ‘taking of perspectives’ idea, even if it is capable of rendering some responses to fictions genuinely emotional, cannot explain all responses that Neill wants it to. Taking *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, because their plight is so obscure it cannot be right that we respond to this film with real fear by taking the perspective of the characters therein; we cannot possibly imagine ourselves in the situation of being murdered in our dreams by a demon and consequently dying in real life. Neill rightly makes this point, and infers that not all emotional responses can be treated in the same way, notably fear.⁶

Neill argues that where the taking of perspectives is not possible, we in fact respond to “actual counterparts of what is represented in the fiction.”⁷ What we experience when we watch *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is fear directed at an “actual counterpart” in that we fear that we ourselves may be murdered. This seems plausible for some, but cannot explain all, cases. Neill would presumably want to say it is fear

⁵ Ibid, p.3-4.

⁶ Ibid, p.5.

⁷ Ibid.

experienced whilst watching Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, but how could we fear "actual counterparts" in this case? What actual or real life counterpart of a Tyrannosaurus Rex could we possibly be afraid of?

The problematic nature of the above examples serves to illustrate the difficulties that come with denying that belief in something being actual is a necessary condition for having a real emotional response to that thing. It has been shown that attempting to do so, with the purpose of being able to hold that we can respond with real emotions to fictional entities, entails the need to explain exactly how these emotions arise in terms of imagining ourselves to be involved. This seems to illustrate that the only time our responses to fiction can be said to consist of real emotion is when we are imagining the plight if we experienced it, or imagined it *really happening* to us (the taking of perspectives fits this particularly well). And this, I claim, illustrates that these instances where responses to fiction appear to consist of real emotions are fundamentally underpinned by our own lives and imaginations. The view therefore faces questions about whether such responses can be said to be responses to fiction at all. I can imagine all sorts of terrible things that may happen to me, and this can evoke real emotions, but if this is what it takes for me to respond to fiction with real emotions, I am not responding to fiction at all.

III.

There is another interesting attempt to show that belief in the actuality of something is not a necessary condition for having an emotional response to it. Colin Radford offers the example of phobia.⁸ A close relative of mine suffers from Scoleciphobia; when she discovers a worm whilst gardening her reaction is one of pure fear, characterised by a need to get as far away from the tiny creature as possible! However, she is under absolutely no illusion that the worm can harm her; she does not believe she is threatened. This example might be taken to indicate that we do not have to believe we are actually threatened by something in order to feel real fear towards it.

In reply to this example, it could be argued that the response to the worm is simply not real fear. As discussed earlier in relation to Freddy Krueger, our behaviour towards a real life Freddy (running, phoning the police) would differ vastly from our behaviour to *A Nightmare on Elm Street's* Freddy (wincing, closing our eyes). But

⁸ Radford (1995), p.72.

that is exactly Radford's point, the worm is real, and my relative's reaction to it is more akin to that of a real life threat: she runs away, screaming for help. So it is unfair to simply argue that phobia fear is not real fear. However, this example can be dismissed on the basis that it is simply not compatible with emotional responses to fiction. An online medical dictionary defines phobias as "Anxiety disorders in which the essential feature is fear of a specific object, activity, or situation that the individual feels compelled to avoid."⁹ If we take Radford's example to be one of fear, then for responses to fiction to count as emotional they must arise in a way akin to phobic responses. But this cannot be right. To suffer from a phobia is a *medical condition*; this is why the phobic feels real fear towards something they are not threatened by. The circumstance the phobic finds herself in is nothing like the circumstance of a cinemagoer responding to Freddy Krueger. We seek out films to watch in the cinema because we enjoy the experience, we do not feel 'compelled to avoid' films like the phobic avoids the object of their fear. Furthermore, there is a key difference between the object of a phobic's response (e.g., a worm) and that of cinemagoers (e.g. fictional entities), the former is actual whilst the latter fictional. So appealing to the real fear elicited by an actual entity has limited power in establishing that responses elicited by fictional entities can be one of fear. I think Radford takes an unfair step by bringing the two together.

Walton makes the illuminating point that we should regard our experience of fiction as being like a game of make-believe, in the way that a father plays a game of make-believe when he pretends to be a monster chasing his son. The 'fear' the child experiences is make-believe, it is not real fear, for the child never believes that his well-being is under threat.¹⁰ So when we wince and squirm whilst watching *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, we do so in the knowledge that Freddy Krueger is not real and cannot harm us because we are similarly playing a game. This explains why people seek out horror films; they enjoy the game of make-believe and want to have an experience that, because they never believe they are threatened, is close to, but not quite, one of real fear. It seems to me that if our experience of horror films were one of real fear people would not seek them out, just as the phobic avoids the object of their fear like the plague. This example can be applied with equal force to other

⁹ See <http://www.online-medical-dictionary.org/omd.asp?q=phobia>

¹⁰ Walton (2004), p.311.

emotions. If we responded to *The Sea, The Sea* with real sadness we would close the book.

One could argue here that, if we were to accept that our responses to fictional entities are make-believe emotions (or quasi-emotions), then surely the criticism earlier levelled at Neill, that real emotional responses to fiction are the work of our imaginations and are therefore not responses to fiction at all, could be equally applied to Walton's account. If responding to fiction is all about make-believe, like playing a game, then perhaps our responses to fiction are fundamentally underpinned by our own lives and imaginations, so Walton's account hasn't got us any further. I think that even if responses to fiction are inevitably driven by how far we throw ourselves into the game of make-believe, and are therefore partly the result of our imaginations and not the fiction we are responding to, Walton's account is still the most preferable of those considered here for a number of reasons. First, it explains how we respond to all types of fiction. It was shown earlier that Neill's account could not explain how we respond to science fiction because we have no way of identifying with the entities in this genre. On Walton's account we can see how we might respond to Ridley Scott's *Alien*, for example; because our response is one of make-believe emotion we are not required to come even close to believing in the plight of the characters therein as actual. We respond to *Alien* by engaging ourselves in a game of make-believe with the images and sounds presented on the cinema screen, and not by placing ourselves in the unfamiliar and foreign situation depicted. Second, it was earlier shown that there is a massive difficulty inherent in denying that belief in the actuality of something is a necessary condition for our having an emotional response to it. Walton's account avoids the insurmountable dilemma faced by this position by maintaining that we do not, in fact, respond with real emotion to fictional entities. Third, there is still something rather peculiar about the notion that we respond to fiction with real emotions, as Radford maintains,¹¹ because this is inconsistent with our knowledge that these entities are fictional.

To sum up: It is very difficult to maintain that our responses to fiction consist of real emotions without grounding these responses in something real rather than fictitious (such as the taking of perspectives and real life counterparts) and it then becomes questionable whether such responses can be said to be responses to fiction at

¹¹ Radford (1975), p.78.

all. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this article to provide compelling evidence for the claim that belief in the actuality of something is a necessary condition for having an emotional response to that thing, it has been shown that denying the necessity of belief here is an arduous task; one that has not been successfully completed. I therefore suggest we take something like Walton's view to be correct. If we think of our responses to fiction as arising akin to a game of make-believe we can regard them as being valuable in the sense of being part of an aesthetic experience we enjoy and this makes sense of why, even in cases of horror, they are sought out. The fact that those responses do not consist of real emotions is unimportant.

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