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The Paradox of Fiction – A Brief Introduction into Recent Developments, Open Questions, and Current Areas of Research, including a Comprehensive Bibliography from 1975 to 2018

Exactly forty years ago, readers of the *Journal of Philosophy* first heard about a certain guy called Charles who was sitting in his chair watching a movie. At some point during the film, a green slime started approaching the camera. Charles' pulse quickened, his palms started to sweat, and he clutched the arms of his chair. After the movie, he reported that he was really afraid of the slime. Apart from the observation that both monsters and moviegoers have come a long way since the seventies, nothing about this case seems to be particularly interesting. Charles, however, has become famous – at least among philosophers, aestheticians and literary critics. The reason is, of course, Kendall L. Walton's seminal paper »Fearing Fictions« in which he both doubts that Charles' judgement about his affective state is correct and raises the general question of whether affective responses which are directed towards fictional entities (we will call them »fictional emotions« from now on) are structurally identical to emotions directed towards real entities (cf. Walton 1978). Together with Colin Radford's article »How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?« Walton's paper led to a debate about fictional emotions that still goes on today, and in particular about a problem which is often referred to by the term »paradox of fiction«. The paradox is constituted by three apparently plausible premises that cannot be *conjointly* true at the same time:

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(1) We have (genuine/rational) emotions towards fictional entities.

(2) To have an (genuine/rational) emotion towards an entity, we must believe that this entity exists.

(3) We do not believe that fictional entities exist.

This special issue presents a collection of essays which deal with this paradox, or, more generally, with problems surrounding fictional emotions. In our brief introduction, we want to pose some questions that we think are still up for debate, survey recent developments in the discussion, and outline areas of research that are currently developing.

The focus of the debate has witnessed a clear and considerable shift since Radford's and Walton's first contributions. The central reason is simple: Walton and Radford are cognitivists in the sense that, for them, emotions involve judgements or beliefs. My anger at somebody, they would argue, involves the judgement or belief that I have been wronged by that person. For cognitivists like Walton and Radford, premise (2) is *prima facie* just as plausible and difficult to reject as premises (1) and (3). They are dealing with a real *paradox*, and finally dissolve it by rejecting premise (1).

Today, however, there are only a few proponents of cognitivism left. Most philosophers, literary critics and psychologists advocate, for example, appraisal theories (cf. Frijda 1986; Scherer/Schorr/Johnstone 2001; Robinson 2005), perceptual theories (cf. Döring 2003; Prinz 2004; Kauppinen 2013; Tappolet 2016), feeling theories (cf. Goldie 2009) or construal theories (cf. de Sousa 1987; Roberts 2003). According to these theories, emotions do not involve judgements or beliefs. For them, premise (2) is simply false. The consequence is as obvious as radical: there is no paradox of fiction, and there has never been.

Does that mean that the debate is over? Should we cease talking about a paradox that doesn't even exist? We do not think so, and neither do the contributors to our volume. Why not? Even if one supposes that there is no paradox (anymore), one can still learn much about the various other topics that surround the discussion of the paradox. This point has been made by Robert Stecker (2011, 308), among many others: »The paradox of fiction has been a valuable tool for exploring the nature of both imaginative and emotional responses to fiction.« In accordance with Stecker, we think that there were, and there still are, a number of questions raised in the context of the paradox of fiction (some of them already posed by Walton and Radford) which are of equally vital interest for cognitivists and non-cognitivists.

One of these crucial and complex questions, initially raised by Walton, concerns *the nature of fictional emotions*. Whether fictional emotions are genuine emotions or not depends on the definition of the term »genuine emotion«. Emo-

tions are typically considered to be mental phenomena associated with a cognitive base, action tendencies, bodily changes, affectivity, and evaluation: A person who is afraid of a lion in front of them will typically have certain beliefs about the lion (e. g. that the lion is in front of them), they will have a tendency to act or behave in a certain way (e. g. to flee from the lion), they might have an increased heart rate and tensed muscles, they will have a certain feeling of unpleasantness and evaluate the lion as dangerous. Whether these features are components or mere companions of emotions is a hotly debated question, and the corresponding answer will have an impact on the evaluation of fictional emotions.

Additionally, there are differences between the fear of a real entity like a lion and the fear of a fictional entity like a dragon with respect to the aforementioned features which need to be considered: fictional emotions are not accompanied with or do not entail beliefs or judgments about the real world (we do not believe that the dragon is in front of us) and therefore differ from emotions directed at real entities with respect to the cognitive base. Moreover, we do not evaluate the dragon as dangerous to us. Also, fictional emotions do not lead to specific actions, namely actions directed at the object of the emotion like fleeing from the dragon or kissing the heroine. Further features of difference concerning the affectivity are the intensity and duration of fictional emotions, and that they are out of character with respect to the bearer's usual or everyday emotional responses. Only bodily changes do not seem to differ in the fictional and the non-fictional case: We can observe tensed muscles and increased heart rate in both those who are afraid of a real lion and those who are afraid of a fictional dragon. Since the assumed differences on the one hand and a general theory of emotions on the other hand are still up for debate, there remains a lot to be said about the question of whether fictional emotions are genuine emotions.

Another important question, originally raised by Radford, concerns *the rationality of fictional emotions*. Fictional emotions seem to have a lot in common with emotional responses we typically evaluate to be irrational. In both cases, there is a certain tension between the emotional response and the evaluation of the object of the emotion. Just as a lot of people are afraid of spiders despite their belief that spiders aren't dangerous (at least if they live in northern Europe), readers and viewers don't believe that fictional monsters are dangerous, and yet they respond affectively. Nevertheless, the two cases are not completely similar: Since fictional monsters are dangerous in the world of fiction, fearing them seems to be at least a more rational response than, for example, being jealous of them. It remains an open question, however, how (or even if) a true belief or judgement about the world of fiction could justify a fictional emotion.

A related topic in need of further elaboration concerns the question of *why we are moved by fiction*. What is especially puzzling is the odd difference between

our emotional reactions to real-life and to fictional situations, also mentioned by Radford: When someone tells us a moving story about a dog she once had who was run over, we certainly pity the dog and the narrator as well. But if we discover that the whole story was made up, our emotional reaction of pity would immediately stop. Readers and viewers of fiction, in contrast, know right from the beginning that the fictional characters do not exist and that the whole story is made up – and yet this does not prevent them from reacting affectively. Both those who claim that fictional emotions are quasi-emotions and those who claim that fictional emotions are genuine emotions have to explain these different effects of the negative existential belief in the fictional and the non-fictional scenario: Why does the emotional reaction in the non-fictional scenario stop although it persists in the fictional scenario? Or against the background of the assumption of quasi-emotions: Why do genuine emotions not turn into quasi-emotions and persist as such in the non-fictional scenario? Why does a negative existential belief in the fictional scenario not prevent *any* emotional reaction, whether these reactions are categorised as genuine or non-genuine emotions? To explain why readers and viewers are moved by fiction, a theory about the psychological processes that take place when we read fictional stories or watch fictional films is necessary. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the above-mentioned example works with any kind of emotional reaction. It seems true that the sadness caused by a story about a dog which was run over by a car does not persist once we are informed that the story was just made up. But what about a case in which we are amused by a funny story about a dog stealing a sandwich? One could argue that the affective state of being amused would probably not stop (at least not as abruptly) if we found out that the story was just a made-up joke. This example leads to the question of whether emotions of different kinds, like fear and amusement, need to be approached differently, in particular with respect to fictionality.

Several papers in this volume take up these open questions or use the ongoing debate about the paradox of fiction as a point of departure for their discussion of related topics in the area of fictional emotions. Essays collected here concern themselves with our appreciation of fiction (Ìngrid Vendrell Ferran), the difference between our real-life and fiction-based empathic reactions (Anja Berninger), desires about fictional states of affairs (Eva Maria Düringer) and the relation of emotions towards fictional entities and towards situations of the reader's life (Christoph Demmerling).

Another reason for our continued interest in the paradox of fiction is the observation that there are some *specific areas of research which are currently developing*, or have been neglected until recently. Researchers working in these fields have been encountering entirely new problems that might shed new light

on some »old questions« and that have yet to be addressed. Think, for example, about videogames: To what extent do they challenge the apparent truism that readers or viewers cannot interact with fictional characters? Are emotional reactions to characters in videogames different from emotional reactions to characters in traditional fiction? In the context of our volume, Nele van de Mosselaer takes up these and related questions and ponders the ramifications of a potential *paradox of interactive fiction*. Benjamin Gittel focusses his attention on the special case of a *paradox of fiction for moods*, while Frank Zipfel considers the broader *paradox of mimesis* that deals not only with emotional reactions to fiction but with emotional reactions to representations of objects of emotions in general.

We conclude our brief introduction with a comprehensive bibliography of research literature on the paradox of fiction. The term »comprehensive« has to be taken with a grain of salt. We concentrate on the »modern debate« that started with Radford and do not consider any literature that was published before 1975. Of course, there are important predecessors, and the historical dimension of the debate has been much neglected until now. Furthermore, we listed only works (in English or German) which placed their main focus on the paradox of fiction. There are many books on related topics that include a small section about the paradox. Since we wanted our bibliography to have a strong focus on the core issues of the paradox of fiction, our decision was not to list them. Josefine Plachetka and Sara Köthemann were of great assistance to us in collecting the bibliographical data listed below.

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