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MORALS IN FICTION AND FICTIONAL MORALITY

Kendall L. Walton and Michael Tanner

I—Kendall L. Walton

I

Works of art from previous ages or from other cultures may contain or embody ideas that we find strange or disagree with. We take some differences in stride, but sometimes we object—the content we disagree with ruins our pleasure and we take it to be grounds for judging the work negatively. In the final five paragraphs of ‘Of the Standard of Taste’,¹ David Hume attempts to locate this difference. We are not or shouldn’t be bothered by representations of out of date fashions, he says. ‘Where any innocent peculiarities of manners are represented’—like princesses carrying water from the spring, or ruffs and fardingales in pictures of our ancestors—‘they ought certainly to be admitted; and a man who is shocked with them, gives an evident proof of false delicacy and refinement.’ We are happy to overlook what we take to be factual mistakes. ‘Speculative errors... found in the polite writings of any age or country... detract but little from the value of those compositions.’ But moral differences are quite another matter, according to Hume. We do not, and should not, tolerate in a work ‘ideas of morality and decency’ that we find repugnant. Although ‘I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition.’ Morally reprehensible ideas constitute deformities in the work.

Hume has a point here—actually more than one. That’s the trouble. Our first task will be to disentangle them. I will begin with the simpler and more obvious strands and work toward the messier

1 David Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), pp.245–49.

and more interesting ones. Some of the strands have clear affinities with the objections to painting and poetry that Plato expressed in the *Republic*, and have been much discussed since then; others are quite different from these. Questions will arise, as we sort things out, about what exactly Hume had in mind. Often there will be no clear answer. But there is a varied landscape richly deserving of exploration, in the general direction in which he gestured.

II

If someone advocates a moral position we find reprehensible or tries to get us to feel or to act in a way that violates our moral convictions, naturally we object. We refuse to think or feel or act in the way we are asked to, and we are likely to respond to the assertion or request or demand with disgust. The assertion or request or demand may come in an ordinary statement or a lecture or sermon or newspaper editorial. But people also make reprehensible claims or demands by writing poems, by telling stories, by creating fictions.² Hume says that 'where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity.' His thought is probably that such a work in effect condones the vicious manners, that it condones behaving viciously in real life. If a story has as its moral or message the idea that the practice of genocide or slavery is morally acceptable, or that it is evil to associate with people of other races, of course we object, just as we would to a newspaper editorial that advocates genocide or slavery or condemns interracial friendships. Works of either kind will arouse disgust, and we will judge them negatively.

What kind of defect in the work is this? A moral one, obviously. But not, some would say, an *aesthetic* one. Hume doesn't speak specifically of 'aesthetic' value. But he appears to have in mind values that are not themselves narrowly speaking moral, which the presence of morally repugnant ideas in a work may undermine.

2 Hume mentions poetry specifically in these paragraphs, but his essay concerns works of other sorts as well, especially other works of literary fiction.

Morally repugnant ideas may so distract or upset us that we are unable to appreciate whatever aesthetic value the work possesses. Disgust with the celebration of the Nazi Party and its values in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* may prevent us from appreciating or even noticing the film's cinematic 'beauty'. But maybe the beauty is there nonetheless; maybe the work's moral failings merely interfere with the enjoyment of its beauty. (They might outweigh its aesthetic value, if the two kinds of value are commensurable.) If so, we should consider it unfortunate that we are psychologically unable to bracket our moral concerns in order to appreciate the work aesthetically. Given that the work exists and has the moral deformities and aesthetic merits that it has, it is too bad that awareness of the former interferes with enjoyment of the latter.

In many instances we do not take this attitude, however. Rather than regretting our inability to appreciate the work aesthetically, we may feel that we don't *want* to; we may be unwilling even to try to look beyond our moral concerns in order to enjoy the work's beauty, as though the beauty itself is tainted. Perhaps our thought, sometimes, is that we don't want to profit (aesthetically) from moral depravity. (The realization that the pyramids were built by slave labour might ruin one's enjoyment of them.) This thought will make more or less sense depending on the extent to which we think the depravity contributes to our potential aesthetic enjoyment. If a work's 'beauty' lies in the elegant manner in which it expresses certain thoughts, the thoughts provide the opportunity for the elegance, and to enjoy the beauty will be to profit from the expression of the thoughts.³ But the cinematic or formal 'beauty' of the shots of Hitler's airplane flying through the clouds, in *Triumph of the Will*, may be entirely independent of the film's moral depravity. They would be no less beautiful if they were embedded in an unobjectionable context, and a viewer who is somehow unaware of the film's message would have no difficulty appreciating them aesthetically.

In either case, the way still seems open to regard the work as *possessing* aesthetic value. But that is something we seem

3 See my 'How Marvelous!: Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, special issue on 'Philosophy and the Histories of the Arts', Vol. LI, No. 3, 1993.

sometimes to deny, precisely because of moral failings. Compare a racist joke or a political cartoon that makes a point we find offensive. We may declare pointedly that it is *not* funny—precisely because its message is offensive. To laugh at it, we may feel, would amount to endorsing its message, so we refuse to laugh. Even judging it to be funny may feel like expressing agreement. Perhaps it isn't just that our disgust with the message of *Triumph of the Will* interferes with our ability to appreciate it aesthetically. To allow ourselves to enjoy even its cinematic or formal 'beauty' may be to endorse or concur with its praise of Hitler and the Nazis, in this sense to 'enter into' the sentiments Riefenstahl is expressing. We might express our unwillingness to do this by declaring that the film is *not* beautiful.

We must not simply assume that this declaration is to be taken literally (although I doubt that much is to be gained by deciding this question). One could hold that the film *is* beautiful and the cartoon funny, but that *admitting* this, as well as allowing ourselves to enjoy the beauty or the humour, amounts to subscribing to the work's evil message—so we don't admit it. Even so, there is a closer connection between moral and aesthetic value than some would allow. No amount of squinting or compartmentalizing could make appreciation of the aesthetic value morally acceptable. If the work's obnoxious message does not destroy its aesthetic value, it nevertheless renders it morally inaccessible. That must count as an aesthetic as well as a moral defect.

What about the contrast that Hume insisted on between ideas concerning morality and ideas of other kinds, in works of art? Maybe works serve less frequently as vehicles for assertions about 'factual' matters than moral ones. To describe 'vicious manners' in a story without 'marking them with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation' is not always to condone them, of course, but in stories of some kinds it is likely to be. Stories about fairy godmothers or time travel, however, rarely have as their messages the claim that there actually are fairy godmothers or that time travel is a real possibility, even if the story does not mark such ideas as not to be believed. Perhaps readers are more in the habit of looking for moral messages than for nonmoral ones in literature.

But fictions do sometimes serve to assert or convey information about nonmoral matters. An historical novel may be expected to get

the historical events right, at least in broad outline, and it may have as one of its objectives informing readers about them. If it gets things wrong we may complain. And we will not necessarily object less strenuously than we would to a work we take to be advocating a moral attitude we disagree with. The assertion of 'factual' falsehoods is sometimes a serious matter (sometimes for moral reasons, sometimes for reasons that are not clearly moral). And we won't mind winking at what we take to be a relatively trivial moral claim with which we disagree.

The assertion of 'factual' falsehoods in a story, when it matters, may distract us from appreciating the work aesthetically. I am less confident that appreciating the work aesthetically or judging it to be aesthetically good will often be felt as endorsing whatever factual claims we take it to be making.

III

Not all works have messages or morals (even on rather generous construals of these notions). Many contain or embody or express, in one way or another, ideas we may find morally repugnant, but without going so far as asserting or advocating them. The response some works call for is more one of imagining than one of acceptance or belief. A story might encourage or induce appreciators to imagine taking up a certain moral perspective or subscribing to certain moral principles without recommending that they actually do so. One obvious way to induce such imaginings is by portraying sympathetically and with understanding a character who accepts the perspective or principles in question. The story might at the same time encourage readers to disagree with the character; the author may make it clear in her story that she rejects the moral views her character subscribes to.

If we find the perspective presented in a story offensive enough, we may object even to imagining taking it up. We might refuse to empathize with a character who accepts it, to put ourselves imaginatively in her shoes. We usually don't flinch at imagining accepting as true nonmoral propositions that we firmly believe to be false: the proposition that there is a ring that makes its wearer invisible, or that a village in Scotland appears and disappears every hundred years. But the difference is not as large as it appears to be.

Why should we resist merely imagining subscribing to a moral perspective we consider offensive? One familiar explanation is that such imaginings may, subtly or otherwise, tend to encourage one actually to subscribe to it. I am sure there is some truth to this. Suppose I am taken to a cricket match. Finding the event disappointing as ballet, I think I would enjoy it more if I rooted for one team or the other. But I have no reason to prefer either team. Still I want to have a desire about the outcome. So I pick one of the teams arbitrarily, by flipping a coin, and then set out to *imagine* wanting it to win—pretending to myself that it matters. At first this isn't very satisfying and it doesn't help much to make the match exciting. My imaginings are too deliberate and artificial, and I am too vividly aware that I have no real reason for my imagined preference and that only a coin toss sent me in one direction rather than the other. But I follow the same team throughout the season, and my imaginings become less deliberate and seem more natural. Eventually, I find myself *actually* wanting my chosen team to win, and rather unaware of the fact that I have no good reason for wanting it to (although I may admit this if asked).⁴

If in an ordinary case like this, imagined experiences of believing, desiring, and feeling can, over time, lead to the real thing, one should expect that, whatever combination of beliefs, desires, and feelings, or dispositions thereto, constitute accepting certain moral principles or a certain moral perspective, imagining accepting them can have some tendency to induce one actually to do so. So if a story presents, even just for imaginative understanding, a moral perspective we consider repugnant, we may rightly be wary about entering into the imagining.

We still do not have a very substantial difference between moral ideas in works of art that we disagree with and nonmoral ones, however. Advertisers and political propagandists know that getting people to imagine believing a factual proposition can nudge them toward believing it. We won't resist much if the matter is of little importance to us. It won't hurt me much to believe falsely that Brand A paper towels are softer and more absorbent than Brand X (if they are in fact comparable in quality and price). But when it

4 David Lewis suggested to me that he had an experience something like this.

does matter I do resist. I may want not to imagine that people of one race are genetically less capable in a certain respect than people of another. And I may object to a novel in which it is fictional that this is so, one that asks readers to imagine this. My objection in this case is based on moral considerations, although the proposition I avoid imagining is not itself a moral one. In other cases my concern is prudential. I might avoid reading an historical novel I know to be inaccurate, while preparing for a history examination, for fear it might confuse my knowledge of the historical events.

IV

Concern about being influenced to believe what we want not to believe does not explain very much of the resistance we feel to imagining contrary to our beliefs. Even when our convictions are so secure that there can be no real danger to them, we may strenuously resist imagining them to be mistaken. Hume seems to suggest that it is when we are sure of our moral convictions that we reject works containing contrary ideas.⁵ Imaginings can have undesirable and even dangerous effects which, although cognitive in character, are not happily characterized, in ordinary folk psychological terms, as inducing false beliefs. Here is a distinctly nonmoral example.

I am lost in the woods and mistaken about which direction is which. A look at my compass sets me straight. But I am still *turned around*; it still seems to me that *that* direction is north, even though I know it is not. Let's say that I remain *disoriented*. In order to correct my orientation, to bring it into line with my knowledge and belief, I actively imagine north being the direction I know it to be, I picture to myself my house, New York, the Pacific Ocean where I know they are. Eventually my orientation, my 'picture' of my surroundings, turns around to match reality.

Although one's orientation is distinct from one's beliefs and can vary independently of them, it has a lot to do with the organization, salience, and accessibility of what one believes. It is much easier

5 'Where a man is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard, by which he judges, he is justly jealous of it, and will not pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment, in complaisance to any writer whatsoever.' ('Of the Standard of Taste', op.cit., p.247.)

for me to figure out which road leads home when I am correctly oriented than when I am not, even while I am looking at my compass. And if I walk without thinking when I am disoriented, my feet may take me in the wrong direction. So it is important that my orientation, as well as my beliefs, be correct.

Perhaps orientation is a matter of imagination, of possessing a certain imaginative picture or map of one's surroundings. In any case, explicit imaginings can affect one's orientation; it was by imagining things as they are that I corrected my orientation. Imagining what I know to be false can have the opposite effect. I may avoid imagining north to be where I think east is for fear doing so might disorient me, even if there is no danger to my knowledge of which direction is which.

We may have similar reasons to resist imagining accepting moral principles or perspectives which we consider mistaken or wrong. Even if we are entirely confident in our judgment and see no real possibility that any imagining will change our minds, we want our instincts to be in line with our convictions. That makes it easier to decide what actions accord with our convictions, and more likely that, when we act without thinking, we will do what we believe to be right. Adopting even in imagination a moral view that I reject in reality, allowing myself to think and feel in imagination as though my convictions were different from what they actually are, might change my moral orientation; it might in this sense 'pervert the sentiments of my heart', even if it doesn't change my convictions. The more confident I am of my convictions, the more strenuously I will resist anything that might pry my moral orientation away from them.

Works of art may evoke imaginings which can affect one's orientation. If they threaten to induce an orientation that conflicts with what we believe concerning some matter we take to be important, we object. (We sometimes object to metaphors for similar reasons.⁶)

6 For an account of what a perspective induced by a metaphor might consist in, see my 'Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-Believe', *The European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. I, No. 1, April 1993. See also Richard Moran, 'Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image and Force', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. XVI, Autumn 1989.

It is possible that this concern is especially important in the moral realm. I can certainly engage in a lot of imagining about fairies and goblins and time travel and magic rings without having to worry about my 'orientation' with regard to these matters being distorted. (I suppose the child who finds himself afraid to walk home at night after watching a horror movie, though he knows full well that the monsters he saw are confined to the world of the movie, suffers such a distortion.) But the example of one's sense of direction shows that it is not only in moral instances that concerns about orientation apply.

V

It has not been hard to find explanations for appreciators' objections to works of art that contain ideas about morality they consider repugnant; the reasons I have mentioned are neither surprising nor unfamiliar. But we have not made much progress in validating the asymmetry that Hume insisted on between the moral and the nonmoral content of works of fiction. In *Mimesis as Make-Believe*⁷ I suggested that such an asymmetry obtains at the level of mere representation, i.e. when it comes to ascertaining what is true-in-the-fictional-world, quite apart from what we might take to be the work's message or moral or any ambition or tendency it might have to change or reorganize our beliefs or attitudes or behaviour or instincts. My suggestion was, very briefly, that when we interpret literary and other representational works of art we are less willing to allow that the works' fictional worlds deviate from the real world in moral respects than in nonmoral ones. I associated this point with Hume's remarks in the paragraphs before us. But I have since come to think that, although some of what Hume says can be construed as aiming in this direction, my point in *Mimesis* is distinct from and independent of much of what Hume seems to be getting at. I suspect, however, that Hume had something like this point vaguely in mind when he contrasted objectionable moral ideas in literary works with nonmoral ones.

7 *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 154-155.

We go about deciding what is fictional, or true-in-a-fictional-world, in many instances, in much the way we go about deciding what is the case in the real world. We make similar inferences, utilizing much the same background information and exercising similar sensitivities and intellectual abilities. We often judge characters' feelings, motivations, and personalities on the basis of what they do and say, for instance, as though they were real people. We make use of whatever knowledge of human nature we may think we possess, and any relevant life experiences we have had. We sometimes put ourselves into characters' shoes to understand from the inside what they may be feeling or thinking, as we do in the case of real people.

This is what one would expect insofar as the construction of fictional worlds is governed by what I called the *Reality Principle* (RP). Crudely glossed, RP says that we are to construe fictional worlds as being as much like the real world as possible, consistent with what the work directly indicates about them. We are entitled to assume that fictional characters, like real people, have blood in their veins, that they are mortal, and so on—unless the story contains explicit indications to the contrary. On reading a story we note what it says explicitly about characters and events, and—insofar as the Reality Principle applies—ask what would be the case in the real world if all this were true.

The Reality Principle applies much less frequently than one might have supposed, and it is easy to underestimate the extent to which considerations special to the interpretation of works of fiction or certain genres of fiction, considerations without analogues in investigations of the real world, come into play when we decide what is fictional. Some exceptions to the Reality Principle occur when the author held beliefs about reality which we know to be mistaken. A medieval storyteller describes a character as recovering from disease after being treated by bloodletting, and expects listeners or readers to assume that (fictionally) the treatment cured him. Shall we disagree, since we know bloodletting to be ineffectual? I think we may well prefer to go along, to understand the story as we know the teller meant it to be understood. Otherwise it may lose its point. We may allow that, in the fictional world, bloodletting cures disease (even though the story does not directly

or explicitly establish that this is so), despite our certainty that this is not so in the real world.⁸

When it comes to moral matters (moral principles anyway), however, I am more inclined to stick to my guns, and it seems to me that most interpreters are also. I judge characters by the moral standards I myself use in real life. I condemn characters who abandon their children or engage in genocide, and I don't change my mind if I learn that the author (and the society he was writing for) considered genocide or abandoning one's children morally acceptable, and expected readers to think this is so in the world of the story. If the author is wrong about life, he is wrong about the world of his story. I don't easily give up the Reality Principle, as far as moral judgments (moral principles) are concerned.

Can an author simply stipulate in the text of a story what moral principles apply in the fictional world, just as she specifies what actions characters perform? If the text includes the sentence, 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl' or 'The village elders did their duty before God by forcing the widow onto her husband's funeral pyre', are readers obliged to accept it as fictional that, in doing what they did, Giselda or the elders behaved in morally proper ways? Why shouldn't storytellers be allowed to experiment explicitly with worlds of morally different kinds, including ones even they regard as morally obnoxious? There is science fiction; why not morality fiction?

I am sceptical—sceptical about whether fictional worlds can ever differ morally from the real world. Of course people in fictional worlds can subscribe to moral principles we recognize as repugnant. Evil characters—characters who have by our lights twisted notions of morality—abound in the pages of fiction. An entire society in the world of a novel, the entire population of a planet, might accept the practice of genocide as legitimate or condemn interracial marriage as 'contrary to nature'. But can it be fictional that they are right? Can we reasonably judge it to be fictional that genocide is legitimate or interracial marriage a sin,

8 One might in this case prefer what I called the *Mutual Belief Principle* (which follows suggestions of David Lewis and Nicholas Wolterstorff). There is an enormous range of cases in which nothing even approximating either of these principles seems to apply. See *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, pp. 161–169.

while insisting that the real world is different? Can we accept that what would be virtue in the real world is, in a fictional world, vice, or *vice versa*?⁹,¹⁰ I have learned never to say never about such things. Writers of fiction are a clever and cantankerous lot who usually manage to do whatever anyone suggests can't be done, and philosophers are quick with counterexamples. But in this instance counterexamples are surprisingly difficult to come by.

A reader's likely response on encountering in a story the words, 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl', is to be appalled by the moral depravity of the *narrator*.¹¹ The sentence probably serves to express the narrator's moral sentiments, not the moral reality of the fictional world. If it were fictional that infanticide for the purpose of sexual selection is morally acceptable, readers would be called on to imagine that the sentiment expressed is proper, that Giselda did indeed do the right thing. They would be barred from imaginatively condemning either her or the narrator, although they might be aware of the repulsion they would feel concerning such practices in the real world. (A reader of science fiction may remind herself that demonic geniuses from outer space are not actually invading the earth and that travel in time is not possible, while imagining otherwise.) This strikes me as a seriously inadequate characterization of the experience a reader would be likely to have. The reader will imaginatively condemn the narrator's endorsement of infanticide, not allowing that he is right even in the fictional world in which he exists.

9 Some may take the position that one has no right to pass judgment on the moral principles accepted in another society, that anthropologists, for instance, should not condemn practices that accord with the moral code of the agents' culture even if they conflict with the anthropologist's own moral code. Extending this tolerance to fictional as well as actual societies does not make the fictional world different morally from the real one.

10 I am using the language of moral realism here, but I do not mean to beg any questions in its favour. Anti-realists may insist on reformulating the problem, but that won't make it disappear. If there are no such things as moral propositions, it won't be fictional either that slavery is just, or that it is unjust. But anti-realists will have to explain what look like judgements readers make about the moral qualities of the actions of fictional characters. And they will have to make sense of the embedding of sentences expressing moral judgments in larger contexts, including 'In the story...' contexts, as well as conditionals, etc. I do have hope that some variety of anti-realism will make the problem more tractable.

11 By 'narrator' I mean a character in the work world who, fictionally, utters the words of the text. I have in mind what in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* I called *reporting* narrators, as distinguished from *storytelling* narrators.

Some narrators are said to be 'omniscient'. This usually means that whatever, fictionally, they say is, fictionally, true. (It is usually *not* fictional that they are omniscient.¹²) Why shouldn't narrators sometimes be omniscient, in this sense, about morality? Then from the fact that fictionally the narrator declares infanticide or ethnic cleansing to be permissible we could conclude that, fictionally, it *is* permissible. In real life some people do sometimes accept another person's judgments about morality—children believe their parents, occasionally, the faithful trust religious leaders, disciples follow gurus. Why shouldn't there be conventions allowing a narrator this authority in certain instances? I am happy to go along with an 'omniscient' narrator who informs me that there are griffins or fairies or that someone travels in time. But I jealously guard my right to decide questions of virtue and vice for myself, even in a fictional world. It is as though I would be compromising my actual moral principles, should I allow that different moral principles hold in a fictional world. The moral sentiments expressed by narrators are just that, it seems, their own personal moral sentiments; we are free to disagree, even though it is the moral nature of the fictional world, not the real one, that is in question.

Is there always a narrator to take the rap? If a literary fiction containing a statement in praise of ethnic cleansing has no narrator whose sentiments it can be understood to express, will there be any alternative to understanding it to characterize the fictional world itself? I do not rule out the possibility of narrator-less literary fictions, but it is not easy to find clear instances, even hypothetical ones. And the very fact that a text expresses a definite moral attitude may give us reason to recognize a narrator. Words expressive of praise or blame cry out to be attached to a (possibly fictional) person—anything, it seems, to avoid allowing them to characterize the moral nature of a fictional world.

A better place to look for narrator-less fictions is in pictorial representations. Pictures do not generally present someone's (fictional) report about events or states of affairs; they portray the events or states of affairs themselves. The spectator, typically, imagines perceiving the events or states of affairs for herself, not

12 See *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, §9.3.

being told about them (or even shown them) by someone. (There are exceptions, of course.) But how can a picture portray moral facts, the obtaining of certain moral principles, explicitly or directly? These aren't the sorts of states of affairs one perceives. A picture may depict a mixed race couple walking arm in arm, or a slave master beating a slave. But then it is up to us, the spectators, to decide on the moral attributes of these actions. I go by my own moral sense, the one I use in real life. I take it to be fictional that there is nothing wrong with the interracial friendship, and that the beating of the slave is abhorrent.

Suppose the picture of the interracial couple is titled 'Shame!' or 'Sin!' Here, finally, we have words in a work which probably are not to be attributed to a (reporting) narrator. The words of the title are not themselves part of the fictional world; it probably isn't fictional that anyone is using them to characterize the behaviour of the couple. But there is a tradition of allowing titles to contribute to what is fictional in the world of a picture. Paul Klee's 'Singer of Comic Opera' (1923) depicts a woman, but the image itself doesn't establish that she is a singer, let alone a singer of comic opera. Only the title makes this fictional. Does the title of the picture of the interracial couple establish that it is fictional that the couple's behaviour is shameful or sinful? I doubt it. Maybe the artist, in giving the picture its title, intended or expected this to be fictional.¹³ Even so, I will insist that it is not, that fictionally there is nothing shameful or sinful in what the couple is doing. The title amounts to an interpretation of the picture which we are free to disagree with, not an authoritative pronouncement establishing a feature of the fictional world. The disgusting sentiment expressed in the title can be attributed to the artist who chose it, or possibly to an implied or apparent or fictional artist (a storytelling narrator), rather than taking it to establish the moral reality of the fictional world.

¹³ This may be clear even if there is no title. Activities may be depicted in a glorified manner indicating the artist's approval, her belief that it is fictional that they are admirable, and her approval of similar behaviour in the real world. (Compare social realistic styles of depiction.)

VI

If fictional worlds ever differ morally from the real world, I suspect that this will be so when the moral character of the fictional world is presented implicitly or indirectly rather than by explicit stipulation, and when it is part of the background rather than the focus of the work.

I appreciate and value many works that in some way presuppose or are based on moral perspectives I don't entirely share. I think all of us do; otherwise there would be little for us to appreciate. Unlike *Triumph of the Will*, whose obvious main purpose is to further an obnoxious moral and political agenda and can inspire only disgust, some works merely presuppose or take for granted certain moral perspectives without addressing or even intending to raise the question of their propriety. These moral perspectives then serve as a resource, as part of the setting in which the author pursues other, more specifically aesthetic objectives. If we disagree with the perspective, we might consider reliance on it to be a defect in the work, even an aesthetic defect, but this doesn't always prevent us from recognizing and appreciating the aesthetic qualities that result.¹⁴

I may understand a fictional event to be tragic, or ironic, or absurd, or poignant. I may think of a character as noble, or as ridiculous. The ending of a story may strike me as a happy one,¹⁵ or as one of unmitigated tragedy, or as uncomfortably ambiguous, or as constituting a fitting denouement to the events that preceded it. I may think that a character does, or does not, in the end, get her comeuppance. Such aesthetically important perceptions are inevitably linked to certain values, often certain moral principles or perspectives; it is in light of a particular moral attitude that an event strikes me as tragic, or a character ridiculous, or an ending fitting.

The nature of the link is hard to pin down. Does it have to be fictional that the relevant moral principles are true in order for it to be fictional that certain events are tragic or ironic? Does appreciating the tragedy or irony commit us to recognizing the fictionality of

¹⁴ I am indebted here to David Hills.

¹⁵ This doesn't mean simply that the characters end up happy. An unhappy villain doesn't prevent the story from ending happily.

those principles? If so, when we disagree with the principles we may have to judge that the fictional world differs morally from the real one. But there are other possibilities. The tragic or ironic nature of fictional events might derive from the fact that fictionally some or all of the characters (perhaps including the narrator) accept moral principles with which we disagree, without its being fictional that they are true. Appreciation might require respect or sympathy for the characters' moral attitudes. It might even require that we imagine agreeing with them, that we imagine sharing these attitudes ourselves without requiring us to judge it to be fictional that they are true. Perhaps we needn't even take it to be fictional that the events *are* tragic or ironic; it may be enough to realize that the author (or storytelling narrator) meant them to be so taken, and to respect or sympathize with him.

These are subtle and difficult questions which call for careful critical attention to examples of many different kinds. But we have a mystery on our hands in any case. Whether or not fictional worlds can ever differ morally from the real world, it seems clear that they don't as easily or as often as one might expect. We recognize the fictionality of ordinary empirical propositions and even propositions stating scientific laws, which we consider false, far more readily than we do that of moral principles which we reject. Authors just do not have the same freedom to manipulate moral characteristics of their fictional worlds that they have to manipulate other aspects of them. Why is this? The reader will not find a definitive answer in this essay. But progress can be made by ruling out some kinds of explanations which might initially seem plausible, and we will come to understand the puzzle better in the process.

VII

Propositions that are 'true-in-the-world-of-a-story,' ones I call *fictional*, are (in a nutshell) propositions readers of the story are to imagine.¹⁶ We may find it distasteful, morally objectionable, to imagine that interracial friendships are sinful or that slavery is morally acceptable. I noted our resistance to imagining accepting

16 *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, §1.5.

moral principles we disagree with or disapprove of. Surely we would resist imagining those moral principles themselves, imagining them to be true. So we are unwilling to imagine what we are called upon to imagine, if it is fictional that interracial friendships are sinful or slavery acceptable.

This doesn't help. It does not explain why anyone should resist allowing that these propositions are fictional. To recognize it to be fictional in a story that slavery is morally acceptable would be merely to recognize that the story *calls for* imagining this. We don't have to go ahead and actually do the imagining. We might decide not to go along with the story, or not even to read it, precisely because it *does* ask us to imagine that slavery is acceptable, because it makes this fictional. A person who objects to imagining that the holocaust was a hoax, or that Abraham Lincoln was secretly a slave trader, may be unable or unwilling to appreciate a story in which this is so. But this won't prevent her from recognizing that it *is* fictional in the story that the holocaust didn't occur or that Lincoln traded in slaves. We might as well suppose that one cannot allow that a newspaper editorial advocates ethnic cleansing if one finds the practice of ethnic cleansing disgusting. It is not clear that moral objections to imagining moral principles we find repugnant have anything to do with the resistance I think most of us feel to recognizing such principles to be fictional.

VIII

Is this resistance essentially moral in character at all? Do we object *morally* to recognizing it to be fictional that slavery is morally acceptable? The resistance is of a piece, it seems to me, with an unwillingness to recognize the fictionality of certain propositions about matters we don't feel strongly about, including ones that do not involve morality.

Consider a really dumb joke, like this one: 'Knock, Knock. Who's there? Robin. Robin who? Robbin' you! Stick 'em up!'¹⁷ It is not easy to see how it could be fictional that this joke is hilariously funny (in circumstances just like ones in which, in the real world,

17 Thanks to Jenefer Robinson.

it would be dumb), how one could reasonably allow it to be hilarious in a fictional world, while thinking that it is actually dumb. The same goes for a nonjoke like 'A maple leaf fell from a tree' (said in no special context). This isn't funny in the real world, and it is not clear how one could create a fictional world in which it is funny (without supplying a special context which would make it funny in the real world as well). If in a story a comedian tells one or the other of these jokes and the author simply writes explicitly in the text that it is hilariously funny, I expect that I would attribute a juvenile or an incomprehensible sense of humour to the narrator, and stick with my own judgment that the joke is *not* funny. I insist on applying my own sense of humour, the one I use in the real world, to the fictional world, as I do my own standards of morality. It may be fictional that the comedian's audience and other characters in the fiction are amused, of course; they may be rolling in the aisles. I can admit that it is funny *for them* while judging that their reaction is inappropriate. I don't rule out the possibility of fancy counterexamples, cases in which there are special reasons for allowing fictional worlds to differ from the real one with respect to what makes for humour, but the fact that the counterexamples would have to be fancy needs explaining.

Whether either the dumb joke or the nonjoke is funny is hardly a question that arouses the passions or that we much care about, and it needn't have anything much to do with morality (although some jokes do). It is not passion, moral passion or any other kind, that drives my reluctance to let it be fictional that it is funny. I have no moral objection to recognizing this to be fictional. What is crucial, I believe, is that being funny or not funny supervenes or depends in a certain way on the 'natural' characteristics of what is or isn't funny (the words of a joke and their meanings, the background and context, the joke teller's delivery); 'natural' characteristics determine what is funny and what is not. I suspect that it is particular relations of dependence, which properties determine in the relevant manner which others, that cannot easily be different in fictional worlds and in the real one. Why this is so, and what kind of determination or dependence is involved, is still a mystery.

I invite readers to experiment with their intuitions about various other examples. Can different 'aesthetic' principles obtain in fictional worlds as compared to the real one? Can what counts in

the real world as a jagged or angular or awkward line be flowing or graceful in a fictional world (when relevant aspects of background and context are the same)? Can what in the real world makes for elegance or profundity or unity or bombast or delicacy be different in a fictional world? Those who take the mental to supervene on the physical may consider whether one might judge it to be fictional that a given mental state supervenes on certain physical ones, if one does not think it actually does.

Moral properties depend or supervene on 'natural' ones and, I believe, in the relevant manner (whatever that is); being evil rests on, for instance, the actions constituting the practices of slavery and genocide. This, I suggest, is what accounts (somehow) for the resistance to allowing it to be fictional that slavery and genocide are not evil.

If I am right about this, the present point is very different from those I discussed earlier. We may judge a work to be morally defective if it advocates moral principles we find repugnant, or if it invites or has a tendency to induce us to imagine accepting them. (This moral failing might constitute or contribute to an aesthetic one.) If a novel endorses slavery or encourages even imaginative acceptance of it we will loathe it with something of the loathing we have for the institution of slavery. The more we abhor moral principles which a work promotes, the more objectionable we find it.

Refusing to understand it to be fictional that slavery is morally acceptable is not in itself to find the work defective. But if the author meant this to be fictional, her failure to make it so may be responsible for failings in the work. The very fact that an author tries to do something she can't bring off, if the attempt is evident in the work, can be disturbing or disconcerting to the appreciator. And insofar as other objectives the author meant to accomplish in the work depend on its being fictional that slavery is legitimate, she will have been unsuccessful in accomplishing them. We may be unable to regard the hero of the story as heroic or his downfall tragic if, contrary to the author's intentions, we judge him to be morally despicable.¹⁸ This may not only destroy the story's excitement and

18 'We are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes:... And... we cannot prevail on ourselves to... bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable.' 'Of the Standard of Taste', *op. cit.*, p.246.

dull our interest in it; it may also ruin the story's formal properties, the shape of the plot.

These are not *moral* defects in the work, however, but aesthetic ones, and we don't loathe it for failing to make it fictional that slavery is legitimate, with the loathing we direct toward slavery. Indeed, this failure is if anything a point in the work's favour, from a moral perspective. (But we may condemn the *author* for attempting to make this fictional in the work.) Our negative feelings about slavery do play an indirect role in the recognition of these aesthetic failings; it is because we find slavery repugnant that we judge it to be evil, that we recognize being evil to supervene on the practice of slavery. And that, I am suggesting, is why we disallow its being fictional that slavery is not evil.

Where do we stand in the attempt to find something special about our reaction to moral ideas that we disagree with in works of art? Our reluctance to allow moral principles we disagree with to be fictional is just an instance of a more general point concerning dependence relations of a certain kind. But it does distinguish moral principles from propositions about ordinary empirical matters of fact and also from scientific laws, which (usually) do not state dependence relations of the relevant kind.

IX

We still need an explanation of why we should resist allowing fictional worlds to differ from the real world with respect to the relevant kind of dependence relations. My best suspicion, at the moment, is that it has something to do with an inability to imagine these relations being different from how we think they are, perhaps an inability to understand fully what it would be like for them to be different.

This seems, initially, a most unpromising proposal. Some say that contradictions, logical or conceptual impossibilities, are unimaginable. Imaginability is supposed to be a test for possibility. But the propositions that slavery is just, and that the two jokes mentioned earlier are hilariously funny, are surely not contradictions. Moreover, even contradictions can apparently be fictional, although it takes some doing to make them so. The time travel portrayed in some science fiction stories is contradictory; there are

pictorial contradictions in William Hogarth's *False Perspective*, in etchings of M.C. Escher, and in an assortment of familiar puzzle pictures.

How can contradictions be fictional? Sometimes a work makes it fictional that *p* (prescribes the imagining of *p*), and also makes it fictional that *not-p*. Then the conjunction, *p and not-p*, may be fictional by virtue of the fictionality of its conjuncts.¹⁹ It is not clear that a similar strategy will work for the proposition that the institution of slavery is just and proper, that this can be separated into distinct components, each of which can unproblematically be made fictional. It might be fictional that a person's behaviour on a given occasion was morally acceptable, and also that her behaviour on that occasion consisted in beating a slave (just as it might be fictional that a person was simultaneously living in 20th century Chicago and in 16th century Italy). But this doesn't make it fictional that she was behaving morally *by virtue of* the fact that her behaviour consisted in beating a slave. It still may be difficult or impossible for *that* to be fictional, because it is difficult or impossible to imagine its being true.

Do contradictions or obvious conceptual impossibilities get to be fictional in other ways? If a work portrays Philip II of Spain and the Guises as a three-headed monster, or fascism as an octopus, it would not seem that the fictionality of these impossibilities derives from the fictionality of their components. But are these conceptual impossibilities fictional at all; are we to imagine that Philip and the Guises are (literally) a three-headed monster, or that fascism is an octopus? Perhaps what is fictional is merely that there is a three-headed monster, or an octopus, and in making this fictional the work expresses a thought about Philip and the Guises, or fascism—a thought one would express in uttering the obvious metaphor.

Is it difficult or impossible, for those of us who abhor slavery and genocide, to imagine engaging in these activities to be morally proper? We are capable of imagining *accepting* or *subscribing to* moral principles that in fact we reject, it seems. And we can imagine

¹⁹ There may then be a prescription to imagine the conjunction, even if that can't be done. Some might prefer not to regard the conjunction as fictional at all, but the fictional world will still be contradictory in the sense that the conjunction of what is fictional is a contradiction.

experiencing the feelings—feelings of disgust, or approval—that go with judging in ways we think mistaken. Most of us remember holding moral views we have since come to renounce. We know what it is like to subscribe to them, and we can still imagine doing so. A person who has undergone a conversion from one moral perspective to another may not *want* to put herself in her previous shoes; she may find it painful even to imagine thinking and feeling in the ways she previously did. She may be unable to *bring herself* to imagine this; it may require a ‘great effort’ in this sense, just as sticking pins into a photograph of a loved one does. But certainly she could imagine this if she wanted to; otherwise why would she dread doing so? Sometimes we are able to understand and empathize with people who hold moral views we have never held or even been seriously tempted by, and this empathy is likely to involve imagining subscribing to these moral views ourselves. An important function of literary works is to facilitate such empathy by presenting characters with various moral perspectives in a sympathetic light.

But there are limits to our imaginative abilities. It is not clear that I can, in a full blooded manner, imagine accepting just any moral principle I am capable of articulating. I can’t very well imagine subscribing to the principle that nutmeg is the *summum bonum* and that one’s highest obligation is to maximize the quantity of nutmeg in the universe. (Some will put this by saying that I don’t know what it would be like to hold this moral view.) I can *entertain the supposition* that I accept this principle, as one would in thinking about conditional propositions or in using *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. But I have argued that fictionality involves a more substantial sense of imagining than this.²⁰ I have no difficulty imagining finding the ‘Knock Knock’ joke related earlier funny. It is the sort of joke I once appreciated, and I know and empathize with people now who would appreciate it. But I have trouble with the nonjoke about the maple leaf. Perhaps with effort and ingenuity I could dream up a way of thinking about it in which it would strike one as funny. But there is a sense in which I can’t now imagine

20 *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, pp. 19–21.

finding it funny. People who do laugh at it would mystify me in a way that people who laugh at the ‘Knock Knock’ joke do not.

I know what it is to be amused. Can’t I just put that notion together in imagination with the idea of the story about the maple leaf, and imagine being amused by the story? I am suggesting that full blooded imagining of this may require not just conjoining these two thoughts but imagining a *way* in which the story amuses me. (Compare: a person may be incapable of imagining an instance of justified true belief which is not an instance of knowledge—until having read the Gettier literature he learns *how* this can be so, how to imagine it. And he might know, on authority, that this is possible and still not be able to imagine it. A contemporary of Columbus may be unable to imagine travelling west and arriving in the east, until she thinks of the possibility that the earth is round.)

We are still very far from the explanation we are after. For it is not only those propositions concerning morality or humour I have difficulty imagining accepting, that I am reluctant to recognize as fictional. I resist allowing it to be fictional that the ‘Knock Knock’ joke is funny, or that moral principles I can, apparently, imagine accepting are true.

But can I imagine not only accepting or believing a moral principle which I actually disagree with and feeling appropriately—can I imagine being *justified* in accepting or believing it? Can I imagine its being *true*?²¹ A work in which it is fictional that genocide is morally permissible would be one that calls for imagining that genocide *is* morally permissible, not just imagining accepting this to be so. I find myself strangely tempted by the thought that although I might imagine the latter, I cannot imagine the former.²²

Alternatively, we might reconsider the idea that I can imagine believing, accepting as true, moral propositions I now reject. Maybe the attitude I imagine having, when I remember my earlier moral self or empathize with others, falls short of belief or acceptance. A

21 Again, I am not committed to the propriety of this realist formulation.

22 Richard Moran raised this possibility in ‘Art, Imagination, and Resistance’. Maybe it isn’t quite as strange as it seems. It is arguable that I can imagine believing that Orcutt is not identical with Orcutt, or that water is not H₂O, but that, knowing what I know, I can’t imagine either of these propositions being true.

sensitive portrayal of the Mafia or of colonial plantation owners might enable me to imagine desiring and feeling in many respects as they do. And I can imagine being amused by the Knock Knock joke. (This already distinguishes it from the maple leaf story.) But (first order) desires and feelings don't constitute moral commitments, and being amused does not itself amount to understanding the joke to be funny. On some accounts one needs to take a certain attitude toward one's desires or feelings or amusement, to endorse or desire them or regard them as proper or appropriate.²³ Perhaps one must also take an attitude of endorsement toward the second order attitudes, or at least not take a negative attitude toward them. At some point in the series one may find oneself able to imagine refusing to endorse an attitude but unable to imagine endorsing it; maybe this happens when I in fact reject the moral principles in question or consider the joke not to be funny. This inability may be akin to my inability to imagine being amused by the tale of the maple leaf. And perhaps it amounts to an inability to imagine accepting a moral position that I actually reject.

There are loose ends in this sketchy story, and insecure links. I don't know whether it can be made to work. And even if it were to succeed in establishing that people are, always or sometimes, unable to imagine, in a significant sense, accepting moral positions they reject, it may not be obvious how this explains our—or anyway my—reluctance to allow moral principles I disagree with to be fictional. The line of thought I have just outlined is worth pursuing, I believe, but I won't be too surprised if we find ourselves back on square one.

Hume had no idea how many worms lived in the can he opened. I have left most of them dangling, but at least I have begun to count them. That, I hope, is progress.²⁴

23 See for instance Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 68, No. 1, January 14 1971; Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and David Lewis, 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 63, 1989.

24 I am grateful for conversations with Allan Gibbard, Daniel Jacobson, Eileen John, Richard Moran, Peter Railton, Gideon Rosen, Alicyn Warren, and especially David Hills. A talk by Richard Moran at the meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics in 1992, 'Art, Imagination, and Resistance,' on which I commented, was also very helpful, in addition to renewing my interest in this topic.