

Lecture 4 - I-desires and emotional responses to fiction

We often want things to happen in imaginative contexts that we don't *actually* want:

Pirates: When playing pirates, I want to cut my cousin in half with a cutlass.

Romeo: When at the theatre, I want Romeo not to commit suicide and to live happily ever after with Juliet.

Simulation: As part of simulating my partner's mental states to work out what she'll want to do this evening, I imagine liking horror movies (though I actually do not).

The way we act in these situations is puzzling. We don't believe Romeo and Juliet exist, so what is it we want to be the case? And how can I desire it when there is nothing I can do to achieve it? (Whilst usually desire is connected to, and motivates, action, here it cannot...)

1. I-desires:

Recall the “splitter” view of propositional imagination from Lecture 3. There is belief, which is taking something as true, and which motivates action in conjunction with desire. Then there is imagination, which *like* belief but slightly different. We take something as make-believe/fictionally true, and this motivates different actions – call this an *imaginative analogue* of belief, or just (propositional) imagination.

(This “splitter” view contrasts with Langland-Hassan's (2020) “lumper” view that propositional imagination can ultimately be reduced to various more fundamental mental states such as belief.)

Splitters about desire (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002, §1.4; Doggett & Egan 2007; Liao & Doggett 2014) hold that just as there is an imaginative analogue of belief – propositional imagination – there is an imaginative analogue of desire – imaginative desire or “i-desires”.

I-desires are run *offline*. Whilst regular desires combine with beliefs and motivate action, i-desires combine with imaginings and connect to action differently – they only motivate pretend actions (e.g. in *Pirates* or interactive fictions like videogames – see Van de Mosselaer 2020), or none at all (e.g. in *Romeo*).

I-desires also unify the three cases above. The same phenomenon of i-desires – imaginative, offline desires – occurs in each case, where we take on a certain desire in imagination which connects to action differently from actually desiring it.

2. No i-desires:

Lumpers (Kind 2011; Schellenberg 2013, §4) hold that we need not posit the new mental state of i-desire. We can explain cases such as *Pirates*, *Romeo*, and *Simulation* in terms of regular desire – i-desires are not *necessary*, hence can be rejected.

Take *Pirates*. Schellenberg holds that we have a regular desire (rather than i-desire) to make it true in the fiction that I want to cut my cousin in half with a cutlass.

This might seem *overintellectualised* (Doggett & Egan 2007) – surely children don't think about making things true in fiction?! But Schellenberg argues that whilst they don't need to consciously think in this way, but this can still be an accurate description of their mental states. (See Liao & Doggett 2014, 271–272 for criticism of this view.)

(A further issue is that it's not clear how this account applies to cases like *simulation*. When I simulate your mental states, I don't take on actual desires to make fictional... I-desires gave us an explanatory unity that we've now lost.)

Here are some arguments for the no i-desire view:

a. Problematic imagined desires:

In certain cases, we are worried about attitudes we take on in imagination. We want the baddie to win, but then we sit back and think maybe this reflects badly on us (Kind 2011, 431). Similarly, we criticise others for desires they have in imagination, in a way that seems reflective of how we criticise people for *actual* desires they have (Kind 2011, 436).

Kind holds that these are best explained by the attitudes being actual desires:

“In so far as I’m worried about what they say about me as a person, it’s most plausible that I’m seeing them on a par with other desires that I have. The best way to make sense of my self-evaluation and self-criticism is to see my apparent desires concerning the fictional characters as genuine desires.” (2011, 431)

Kind says we can only be worried if they’re actual attitudes, but I think that’s surely a mistake – even if they are just i-desires, they might have *effects* on actual attitudes, or we might be worried about their *leaking* into our actual attitudes.

(The latter is what people are often worried about for videogames, and other cases where we take on immoral attitudes).

b. Mistaken as to our own mental states

Furthermore, i-desires commit us to an implausible opaqueness of which mental state we have. We know whether we believe or imagine something. But with desire, we cannot tell the difference between desiring something and i-desiring it, for whether the object or our desire exists may not be something we know

(e.g. is it a documentary or a mockumentary? Sometimes it’s hard to tell. But whether or not the represented objects exist determines whether or not we desire or i-desire.)

Objection: we desire when we believe the objects exist, we i-desire when we do not. So sometimes we are mistaken and have (irrational?) desires for fictional characters we think exist, or i-desires for people who *do* exist.

(a) and (b) have argued that i-desires are *unnecessary* for explaining desire in imaginative contexts. In fact, they are better explained by regular desire. Kind (2013, 156) also argues that i-desires are *insufficient* to explain behaviour in pretence:

c. I-desires aren’t enough

Take a case like *Pirates*:

Remember, however, that the simulationists see i-desires as off-line states. It’s supposed to be important that these states are disconnected from the action generating mechanism. It is thus unclear how an i-desire could be what causes [me to swing the toy sword]. More generally, it is hard to see how i-desires could play any role in explaining action, whether in a pretend context or elsewhere. (Kind 2013, 156)

But this is only if we have the view that offline states are *completely* disconnected from action. Yet the simulationist/splitter need not say this. Why not just say that offline states have a *different* connection to action to online ones? Believing there is a spider on my face causes me to act in a certain way. But imagining I have a spider on my face also connects to action – I cringe, I buy spider repellent, etc. (Matravers 2014, 26).

3. Imaginative analogues of other mental states?

A similar question arises for other mental states which feature in imagination. Currie and Ravenscroft (2002, 189–191) say that just as there are belief-like imaginings (imagining) and desire-like imaginings (i-desires), there are pain-like imaginings (imagined sensations) and perception-like imaginings (mental imagery).

Yet they also deny that there are emotion-like imaginings. When you imagine having an emotion, you *really* have that emotion. You don’t have an imaginative analogue like for these other mental states.

Goldman (2006, 47–48) disagrees – you can imagine the experience of feeling fear or being elated when you actually are not. Note that the issue is not whether we can propositionally imagine that we are afraid, but rather whether there is some offline imaginative analogue of the state distinct to the state itself.

Walton discusses a case of this kind, where Charles sits in the cinema and sees the huge green slime on the screen oozing towards him. He trembles shakes, and when the slime is right before him on the screen, he screams.

The question is: is he *really* afraid?

Walton argues not. To be afraid, you have to believe the object of your fear exists. Charles feels quasi-fear. One way of taking this is as an imaginative analogue of fear. It connects to action differently to the emotion Charles would experience if confronted by a *real* slime – he does not run out of the cinema or call the police to report the slime threat.

Bibliography

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Past Exam Questions:

Are beliefs and desires the only mental states one needs to explain action? (2015)

Is it possible to imagine impossible objects? (2016)

Can we explain pretence in terms of beliefs and desires? (2017)

Can we only imagine what we have experienced? (2018)

Is there anything to the imagination besides mental images? (2019)

Does our capacity to imagine zombies tell us anything of interest about the nature of consciousness? (2021)

What state am I in when I want Romeo and Juliet to live happily ever after? (2021)

I have never skated, but I can imagine I am a fantastic figure skater. What, if anything, can I learn from this about my figure-skating abilities? (2022)

Lecture Feedback Questionnaire:

