The Philosophy of Fiction
Imagination and Cognition

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Chapter 13

Fiction and the Cultivation of Imagination

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Just like juggling or ballroom dancing, imagining is a skill.[1] And just as some people are better at juggling than others and some people are better at ballroom dancing than others, so too are some people better at imagining than others. For those people who are less skilled at juggling or ballroom dancing, there are obvious things they can do to improve their abilities. What can someone who is less skilled at imagining do to improve their imagination? This chapter takes up this question and argues that engagement with fiction can play a key role in the development of one's imaginative skills.

To some extent, this claim is no doubt a completely obvious one. The connection between fiction and imagination is firmly entrenched in our collective consciousness. Singer-turned-humanitarian Dolly Parton named her early childhood book gifting program *Dolly's Imagination Library*. From parenting blogs to *Psychology Today*, reading fiction is repeatedly cited as a key activity for the development of children's imagination.[2] And in promoting the importance of reading, the World Literacy Foundation notes that reading fiction "is one of the *best ways to foster imagination*."[3]

Interestingly, however, these claims run up against another claim that many also take to be obvious, namely, that there are all sorts of scenarios and experiences that are imaginatively out of reach to us. Shawn Mendes sings that he can't imagine what the world would be like without his girlfriend in his life, and Paul McCartney sings that he can't imagine what life would be like without the love he's currently feeling ("I can't imagine how it feels to never been in love like this before").[4] Perhaps these claims are not meant to be taken literally. But there is a whole raft of other things and scenarios that are generally reported to be unimaginable and are meant to be taken literally: that we can't imagine non-existence or infinity or non-linear time.[5] Millennials often claim to be unable to imagine life without smartphones or the internet. And, when someone is dealing with a particularly difficult situation, we often respond by saying, "I can't imagine what you must be going through."

If one can develop one's imaginative abilities by engaging with fiction, then these claims of unimaginability should not seem so obvious. Perhaps as a beginner juggler, I can't juggle very well right now, but greater success at this activity is not something that is, in principle, out of reach to me. With enough practice, I could get better at it. And something similar holds for all sorts of other skills that I currently lack or at which I have attained only a low degree of proficiency. So why wouldn't something similar be true for imagination? What seems unimaginable now may, in fact, be imaginable once we were to get better at imagining.

To my mind, many claims of unimaginability arise in part because the notion of imaginative practice is not well understood.[6] In particular, despite our strong intuitive sense, that engagement with fiction can be helpful in this regard—that reading fosters imagination, as the World Literacy Foundation says—the details of how and why this is the case have not been adequately fleshed out. Thus, this chapter aims to do just that.

Previous philosophical exploration of this question has primarily concerned a very specific kind of imagination, namely, empathetic imagination. It's thus there that I'll start—and more specifically, I'll start with the work of Martha Nussbaum. In various places across her vast corpus, Nussbaum has repeatedly relied on the claim that literature helps to cultivate our capacities for empathy and imagination. Using her work as a launching pad, I flesh out and further develop two different though complementary ways that fiction enables us to practice the skills of empathetic imagination.

Having developed the philosophical case for the connection between fiction and the cultivation of empathetic imagination, I turn in Section 13.2 to the empirical case for this connection. Though the empirical research supports the claim that engagement with fiction promotes empathetic imagination, this case is not as strong as one might have thought, and there are many open questions that remain. Perhaps most importantly, the studies connecting fiction with empathy do not explain the nature of the connection and how it is brought about. Thus, as we'll see, the empirical research sheds surprisingly little light on the main question that occupies us here, i.e., the question of fiction's role in imaginative practice and the cultivation of imagination. More work—both empirical and philosophical—needs to be done.

Following this look at the state of the empirical research with respect to empathetic imagination, I turn in Section 13.3 to a discussion of the role of fiction in imaginative practice more broadly. As I'll suggest, by drawing on our reflections about how fiction can provide us with practice with respect to empathetic imagination, we are also led to some useful reflections on how fiction can provide us with practice with respect to other kinds of imagination as well. Finally, in a short concluding section, I extrapolate a wider moral from the discussion of fiction by exploring

whether these considerations about fiction can be extended to other kinds of activities that might provide us with imaginative practice.

13.1 The Cultivation of Empathetic Imagination

In *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum argues that the cultivation of humanity consists in one's becoming a citizen of the world, i.e., someone who values human life across the entire globe. In becoming world citizens, though we might each have various loyalties that we prioritize in different ways, we nonetheless commit ourselves to recognizing the worth of human life wherever it occurs the whole world over; as world citizens, we "see ourselves as bound by common human abilities and problems to people who lie at a great distance from us" (1997, 9). In her view, there are three capacities that are central to becoming a world citizen. First is the capacity for critical self-reflection. One must be willing to subject all of one's beliefs to close scrutiny, no matter how steeped in tradition they may be. Second is the capacity to take a wide view of humanity, to see oneself as "bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" and to understand "the ways in which common needs and aims are differently realized in different circumstances" (1997, 10) Finally, one must also develop the capacity to understand "what it might be like in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (1997, 10–11).

Nussbaum calls this last capacity "narrative imagination," but it seems to be closely intertwined with the notion of empathy—as Nussbaum herself recognizes.[7] Providing an uncontroversial definition of empathy is difficult, as it has been used in a number of different ways in both philosophical and psychological literature. To make matters worse, though we now typically distinguish empathy from sympathy, discussions prior to the 20th century tended to collapse this distinction.[8] But we can at least roughly capture the notion of empathy by saying that it requires an understanding of another's affective mental states. Though some philosophers and psychologists allow this understanding to be a purely cognitive one, many go further and require that the understanding consists in an imaginative perspective shifting that involves the sharing of states. This kind of perspective shifting comes in two different forms—one in which you put yourself in someone else's shoes and thus come to see what it would be like *for you* in their situation, what you yourself would feel, and one in which you consider what it is like *for them* in that situation, what they themselves feel.[9] Though we'll focus on the second of these kinds of perspective shifting, it's worth noting that both kinds crucially involve an affective dimension.

This affectivity is also captured by Mark Johnson's notion of *empathetic imagination*, which he takes to require "not just an ability to

intellectually conceive how others see and think about their world" but also "an ability to *feel* their moods and emotional responses to their situation" (Johnson 2016, 363). In what follows, I will understand Nussbaum's notion of narrative imagination along the lines of this definition of empathetic imagination, i.e., as a process that has both cognitive and affective dimensions.

How does one develop this capacity for empathetic imagination? In Nussbaum's view, literature plays a critical role: "Narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding" (1997, 88). As she goes on to argue, this process begins in very early childhood with very simple stories and even nursery rhymes. Asking us to consider "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," and in particular, the line "how I wonder what you are," Nussbaum notes that as children engage in this wonder, they learn to imagine "that a mere shape in the heavens has an inner world, in some ways, mysterious, in some ways like their own"—even though this inner world is hidden to them (1997, 89). Having learned to do this with the little star, they can then transfer this ability to other objects as well. As the child engages with more stories, they start to develop a broader capacity for attributing thoughts and emotions to animals and to other humans and thereby also develop a capacity for coming to understand them. Without these stories, says Nussbaum, this imaginative development would not be possible:

> A child deprived of stories is deprived, as well, of certain ways of viewing other people. For the insides of people, like the insides of stars, are not open to view. They must be wondered about. And the conclusion that this set of limbs in front of me has emotions and feelings and thoughts of the sort I attribute to myself will not be reached without the training of the imagination that storytelling promotes.
> (1997, 89)

As the young child becomes an older child and then a young adult, this training continues via encounters with increasingly sophisticated works of literature. These works allow for deeper engagement and reflection on what's familiar and for an introduction to what's not. They introduce a reader to matters poignant and to matters frightening, to true evil and wickedness but also to true goodness and heroism. They make vivid the notions of sameness and difference among experiences, and for those who have not (or have not yet) encountered any serious hardship in their own life, either firsthand or even secondhand, these works provide exposure to suffering. In reading tragedies, for example, one gains imaginative access to sorrow and trauma, to serious illness and to death, and more generally to the great variety of other kinds of ills that might befall us.

In this way, Nussbaum's discussion helpfully makes the case that literature is important for the cultivation of empathetic imagination. In fact, she seems committed to the even stronger claim that literature is necessary for the cultivation of empathetic imagination. Given my aims in this chapter, the weaker claim is enough, and that's what I'll focus on. But I need to make one important caveat before going on. Nussbaum's discussion is focused on literature—and indeed on what we might think of as *great* literature. In contrast, others have made this claim more broadly about fiction of all sorts—both high-brow and low-brow. Some of the empirical research relevant to our overall discussion here has attempted to sort out which types of narrative works are most effective in promoting empathy, but the findings have been somewhat equivocal.[10] Moreover, while there is some empirical evidence that certain aspects of literariness help to promote empathetic imagination (see, e.g., Koopman 2016), the points that Nussbaum makes about the cultivation of empathetic imagination do not seem to rely on anything particularly distinctive to engagement with great literature in particular. I'll thus worth work with a broader notion of narrative work than she does, and in fleshing out the morals of her discussion, I will switch from talk of literature in a narrow sense to fiction in a broad sense.

So what are those morals? To my mind, Nussbaum's discussion is suggestive of two importantly different ways in which our engagement with fiction helps to facilitate imaginative practice, and as I hope we will see, it's well worth distinguishing these two strands and working to develop them further. First, fiction gives us the materials that we need to work with. Second, it provides us with a specially detailed road map for using these materials. Let's take each of these in turn.

To develop one's juggling skills, one might naturally start by tossing a single small ball in one hand, then move on to using two balls with both hands, then three balls, then to other objects like clubs, and so on. Juggling practice requires materials of these sorts. To develop one's imaginative skills, one doesn't need balls or clubs, but what one does need in one's imaginative toolbox is some subject matter on which imagination can get to work. Here perhaps a better analogy than juggling would be painting, for we can think of the source materials on which imagination works as a sort of imaginative palette. By detailing a large variety of different experiences, fiction expands the set of resources available in this palette. In order to get better at empathetic imagination, it helps not to be confined just to the narrow group of individuals we confront on a daily basis, individuals who are likely to be relatively familiar to us and who go through daily experiences that are also likely to be relatively familiar to us. In fiction, we encounter a wide range of people living in a wide range of situations and who are undergoing a wide range of experiences. By presenting us with these lives, fiction enables us to stretch our capacity for empathy in new directions.[11] And even though these lives

are fictional ones, the way in which fiction models real lives provides us useful fodder for imaginative exploration and experimentation.

This point allows us to connect up with a line of argumentation that has been developed in the empirical literature by Keith Oatley in a series of works done both on his own and with collaborators. On Oatley's view, fiction functions as a simulation of the actual social world (see, e.g., Mar & Oatley 2008; Oatley 2012, 2016). Just as we might use a flight simulator to safely learn about piloting a plane, we might use fiction to safely learn about navigating social interactions. In this way, Oatley makes the case that thinking of fiction as a simulation helps us to understand why it is so useful for improving our empathetic skills, as well as for skills of social cognition more broadly. This adds an important further dimension to our assessment of the value of the material provided to us by fiction. Not only does fiction prove to be an especially fertile source of material for our imaginative practice, but it also provides a safe context with which to engage in this practice. Just as the stakes are much lower when one is practicing flight maneuvers in the flight simulator rather than in an actual plane, the stakes are much lower when one is practicing empathetic maneuvers with a fictional character rather than with an actual person.

So fiction exposes us to a wider range of experiences than we would otherwise have an easy opportunity to connect with, and it does so in a safe context that proves especially conducive to imaginative practice. That fiction has the ability to do this is undoubtedly a familiar one; indeed, it's taken as a basic fact in many discussions of its power. Calling fiction "an exercise in empathy," author Jane Smiley argues explicitly that it provides us with practice in empathetic skills such as "learning to see the world through often quite alien perspectives, learning to understand how other people's points of view reflect their experiences."[12] Author Ann Patchett also credits fiction with providing us exposure to alien experiences. Reading fiction, she says, "gives us the ability to feel empathy for people we've never met, living lives we couldn't possibly experience for ourselves."[13] And *New York Times* book critic Parul Sehgal forcefully makes a similar point in one of her recent reviews: "I'm of the persuasion that fiction necessarily, even rather beautifully, requires imagining an 'other' of some kind. As novelist Hari Kunzru has argued, imagining ourselves into other lives and other subjectives is an act of ethical urgency."[14]

Of course, this can go wrong in various ways. If one reads only a very narrow range of fiction, or one reads fiction that is so unrealistic it presents perspectives that it's not possible to encounter in the actual world, one won't get the kind of exposure one needs to cultivate one's imagination. Likewise, if one only engages with fiction in a very passive way, it's hard to see how our empathetic imagination would really be cultivated.[15] But while these are real dangers, they strike me as directly analogous to

the kinds of dangers one encounters when engaged in skills development and practice more generally. Breath control techniques help to cultivate one's singing skills, but if one raises one's shoulders while breathing in, then the techniques will not be effective. Moreover, if one approaches these techniques with a "passive" attitude, they also won't be effective. But just as we don't take the fact that certain kinds of engagement with (and misuse of) breathing techniques to call into question the claim that these techniques help cultivate one's singing skills, we should not take the fact that certain kinds of engagement with (and misuse of) fiction calls into question the claim that fiction cultivates one's empathetic skills.

Having explicated the first strand in Nussbaum's discussion that points to how fiction helps to cultivate empathetic imagination, I want now to turn to the second such strand in her discussion. As I briefly mentioned above, here what's important is the way that fiction builds in a specially detailed road map for how best to navigate the material it provides, i.e., fiction comes with its own user's guide. When we encounter other people in the actual world, we do not have direct access to their inner thoughts and emotions. Our access is only indirect, by way of how they act and what they say. In contrast, fiction contains detailed descriptions of the inner lives of its characters. In presenting us with the range of experiences that it does, fiction also presents us with the characters' reactions to those experiences. When a work is written in the first person, these reactions are depicted to us directly by the character, in their own words, but even when the work is written in the third person, we still get detailed descriptions from the narrator's perspective, a perspective that is often omniscient (or nearly so) about what the characters are undergoing. We also get detailed descriptions of what one character is undergoing from the perspective of another character. And in both first- and third-person works, we encounter reports of inner monologues—sometimes extensive ones. There is thus considerably less guesswork to our empathetic explorations in fiction than in real life, and our empathetic imagination is able to get a toehold that it normally doesn't have.

This nicely corresponds to what happens in practice sessions with respect to other skills. A complex skill is first broken down to component subskills, and by focusing specifically on one subskill at a time, each can be more easily mastered. Empathetic imagination can be seen as a complex skill involving various subskills such as the ability to identify someone else's emotional reaction, to understand it, and to recreate it. These abilities are often exercised jointly in a single imaginative exploration, but they can be separated from one another. Compare weight lifting. Some exercises push us to strengthen both our chest muscles and triceps at the same time, while other exercises isolate the triceps. By making explicit what usually remains only implicit in ordinary life, fiction can provide a reader with the needed emotional identification and thereby help them to isolate the other subskills of understanding and recreation.[16]

Described this way, however, we might worry that fiction makes things too easy on us. One might worry, that is, that what fiction provides us with is better described not as a road map but as a cheat sheet. In a provocative recent discussion, Julia Langkau (2020) argues that the kind of empathetic practice we get from reading a novel is not as helpful as is often made out. Explicitly referencing Oatley's work on simulation discussed above, Langkau suggests that the practice made possible by engaging with fiction is not like the kind of piloting practice one gets from a flight-simulator but rather like the kind of bike-riding practice that one gets from riding a bicycle with training wheels. By practicing on a bike with training wheels, children get something of a sense of what it is like to ride a bike, but they will typically still have a very hard time riding once the training wheels are taken off. As Langkau suggests, the problem is that "the most difficult skill involved in biking is balancing, which is exactly the skill they didn't practice on their bike with training wheels" (2020, 321). Correspondingly, she notes, though we can get something of a sense of what it is like to empathize with others when we read a novel, "when empathizing with a fictional character, we don't practice a crucial skill involved in empathizing with a real person: getting the target's mental state right, on the basis of evidence available in real life" (2020, 321). Since the kind of direct evidence we get from fiction is very different from the kind of indirect evidence that we get in real life, Langkau argues that fiction makes empathizing too easy, much the way that training wheels make bike-riding too easy.[17]

This criticism strikes me as too quick for two different reasons. First, it does not do justice to the great variation we get in works of fiction with respect to evidence of characters' mental states, that is, it treats the evidence provided to us by fiction too indiscriminately. Though in many cases, we do get very direct evidence, in other cases, the evidence is less direct—even if it is more direct than in real life. This suggests an important disanalogy to the training wheels case. There, things are all-or-nothing—you have to learn to balance to ride a bike, but you don't get *any* practice at balance when you're using training wheels.[18] The case of fiction is not all or nothing. Though we may get very little practice at identification when the evidence is wholly direct, we do get some practice at it when the evidence is more indirect. And in fact, even in real life, we will not always be limited to wholly indirect evidence when we are aiming to empathize with someone.

Second, and equally importantly, Langkau's criticism also does not do full justice to the various subskills underlying empathetic imagination. Though identification of another's emotional state is indeed critically important for empathetic imagination, so too is the recreation of that emotional state.[19] The importance of the second skill is brought out by considering cases where the first is achieved without the second. Consider, for example, the science of "affective computing." While

computer assistants may be able to identify with a high degree of accuracy the emotions that their human companions are feeling, there is a hollowness to this identification absent its recreation. Without the emotional simulation, there does not seem to be any real understanding of what the human is experiencing—no affective understanding, certainly, but no cognitive understanding either. This hollowness is brilliantly depicted in the BBC show *Humans* when married couple Laura and Joe take up marriage counseling. Their counselor, a non-conscious synthetic being (or "synth," to use the parlance of the show), can make accurate judgments about what they are feeling on the basis of how they look, what they are saying, and a vast database of statistical information, but this doesn't come across as anything like empathy—either to Laura and Joe themselves or to the viewers.[20]

Ultimately then, even if Langkau is correct that Oatley's flight simulator analogy has some important limitations, the training-wheels analogy also has some limitations of its own. In short, when one is learning a new skill, one can't tackle everything all at once and all at a high degree of difficulty. Though one doesn't master the skill of juggling when one works with only one ball in one hand, starting this way allows one to build up progressively to more challenging juggling elements—and if one were to start right away with three balls, one's progress would undoubtedly be considerably slower. Starting with a single ball allows for the cultivation of this skill as part of an effort to achieve mastery of it. And this enables us to underscore a very important point: the claim made about the relationship between fiction and empathetic imagination is one of cultivation, not one of mastery. Even if one doesn't master the skill of empathetic imagination when one works only with fiction, starting this way allows for the cultivation of this skill as part of an effort to achieve mastery of it.

We've thus seen two different though complementary ways that fiction seems able to contribute to the cultivation of empathetic imagination. At this point, one might naturally wonder what the empirical literature has to say. It's to this I will turn in the next section.

13.2 Fiction and Empathetic Imagination—Some Empirical Results

Going just by the headlines in the popular press, it would be easy to get the impression that the matter of fiction's role in cultivating empathetic imagination has been decisively settled in favor of the rough line I have been developing here—from the proclamation in *Scientific American* that "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy" to the even more expansive declaration in *USA Today*: "Good news, beach readers: Fiction may make you smarter, more empathetic."[21] Unfortunately, if unsurprisingly, matters are somewhat more complicated than these headlines would make it seem.

One important complication arises from the fact that much of the research does not specifically target empathy but rather the more general category of social cognition, i.e., the way that individuals make sense of other people as part of their attempt to navigate the social world and function within it. (And this is true even of the research being reported on in the articles whose headlines I've just quoted.) But even when the research does specifically target empathy, a second complication arises from the fact that different researchers employ different notions of empathy. In a recent meta-analysis of the relevant psychological literature, Micah Mumper and Richard Gerrig note that there is no standard definition of empathy employed across the various studies on this subject (Mumper & Gerrig 2017, 110). Empathy sometimes connotes the vicarious sharing of emotions, whereas sometimes it connotes a certain kind of attitude of compassion or caring. Sometimes it is meant to pick out both of these things in conjunction, but sometimes it is meant to pick out only one and not the other—as when it is said, for example, that someone might be able to vicariously simulate the emotions felt by a serial killer, and thus empathize with them, without feeling any compassion or caring for that serial killer. And at yet other times, empathy seems to be associated less with affectivity (either in terms of the vicarious sharing of emotional states or in terms of states of caring and compassion) but instead with something purely cognitive—an understanding of another's mental state, whether or not that mental state is vicariously shared and whether or not that understanding comes with any compassion or caring.

This problem is not confined to the empirical literature; as we noted above, we see similar issues in the philosophical literature as well. But the problem makes it surprisingly difficult to form a clear assessment of what the empirical literature shows regarding the connection between fiction and the empathetic phenomenon we have been focused on here, what I've been calling empathetic imagination. Consider, for example, one of the most highly touted studies in this broad area (and the one directly discussed in the *Scientific American* article whose headline I quoted above), a collaboration by researchers David Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013).[22] Though Kidd and Castano's work did find that engagement with fiction led to improvement with respect to social cognition, the specific kind of social cognition on which they were focused was not empathy but theory of mind (ToM) (Kidd and Castano 2013, 377). While there are undoubtedly connections between ToM and empathetic imagination, ToM skills need not involve any affectivity.[23] Other studies focus on various kinds of helping behavior (Johnson 2012), but here again, helping behavior need not be directly correlated with empathy.

In the recent meta-analysis, I mentioned earlier, Mumper and Gerrig (2017) attempt to sort some of these issues out. Their analysis focused on 30 different studies—16 that measured correlations between fiction and empathy, 8 that measured correlations between fiction and ToM,

and 6 that measured both kinds of correlations. As they concluded, there is indeed strong support, from a diversity of empirical evidence, that engagement with fiction contributes to the improvement of social-cognitive skills such as empathy and ToM. But as they also note, it is less clear what conclusion should be drawn about the size of the effect. Thus, though they judge that fiction does seem to provide positive benefits with respect to empathy and ToM, and indeed stronger positive benefits than non-fiction, they indicate a need for further research in this regard. In their view, while there are various issues in need of additional investigation, one of the most important avenues for further research concerns the causal mechanisms responsible for the impact.

It's in their discussion of this issue that, for our purposes, the most important point emerges: The empirical research has not yet adequately tested specific hypotheses concerning the mechanisms by which fiction manages to provide the benefits that it does. Here they point specifically to Oatley's simulation hypothesis, noting that researchers need to move "toward more precise accounts of the content of those simulations" in order for us to make progress in understanding fiction's impact. Only once such research is done, they say, will we have an adequate empirical foundation about the features of fiction "that promote a positive impact on social cognition," i.e., on skills such as empathetic imagination (Mumper & Gerrig 2017, 117).

As this suggests, then, the empirical research does not provide us with an answer to the main question that interests us here, i.e., the question of how fiction can help us to cultivate imagination.[24] Indeed, it is precisely this question that Mumper and Gerrig suggest is in further need of empirical investigation.[25] To some extent, then, the philosophical inquiry of this chapter could be usefully seen as laying some needed groundwork for future empirical investigation. In line with Mumper and Gerrig's suggestion that this investigation needs to focus more directly on the mechanisms by which fiction provides the benefits that it does, the philosophical analysis offered here points to several different possible mechanisms that could be fleshed out in fuller detail and subjected to empirical scrutiny in future work.

13.3 The Cultivation of Other Types of Imagination

Having looked briefly at the state of the empirical literature, I want now to return to my overall line of argument. Our discussion in Section 13.1 suggested two different ways that fiction seems to enable the cultivation of empathetic imagination and to provide us with practice in this regard. But fiction's ability to cultivate imagination should not be seen as limited to empathetic imagination. In this section, I'll extend the discussion of fiction's role in imaginative practice to other types of imagination and thus other types of imaginative practice.

To do so, let's first note that empathetic imagination is a more specific form of what is often referred to as *experiential imagination*—the kind of imagination in which we project ourselves into an imagined situation and imagine the experiences—visual, auditory, emotional, and so on—that we would have. (It's for this reason that experiential imagining is also often referred to as *imagining from the inside*.) So, for example, I might imagine being caught up in a rainstorm and getting completely drenched. Though in Section 13.1, our discussion focused on ways that fiction might help us become more adept at imagining others from the inside, it should be fairly straightforward to extend the points we made to experiential imagination more generally.

But philosophers working on imagination often discuss two other kinds of imagination in addition to experiential imagination: propositional imagination and sensory imagination. Propositional imagination is typically understood by analogy to other propositional attitudes, i.e., as an attitude towards a propositional content. Just as I might believe that it is raining or hope that it is raining, I might also imagine that it is raining. In sensory imagination, there is not an attitude towards a content but rather a sensory presentation.[26] To imagine my rain-soaked dog, I produce some sort of sensory presentation of her. While this sensory presentation is often visual in nature (a visual image), it need not be. Instead of imagining what she looks like when rain-soaked, I might imagine what she smells like when rain-soaked (that wet dog smell is a very distinctive one). And in other acts of sensory imagination, I might use auditory or tactile sensory presentations.

In this section, we'll thus focus on propositional and sensory imagination. How can fiction help to cultivate these forms of imagination? In fact, as we'll see, the very aspects of fiction that enable it to cultivate empathetic imagination also enable it to cultivate our imagination more generally.

First, recall that we saw in Section 13.1 that fiction gives us the materials that we need to work with to practice empathetic imagination. Although much of the content of fiction deals with the inner lives of its characters, it should be obvious that its content goes well beyond that. When engaging with fiction, in addition to encountering a wider range of individuals than we might typically encounter in our day-to-day life, undergoing a wider range of experiences than we might typically encounter, we also encounter a wider range of locales, climates, and wildlife than we might typically encounter, as well as a much wider range of situations: natural disasters, wars and their aftermath, famine and disease, and so on. Fiction also brings us into contact with lots of other sorts of differences, from different ways of organizing societies and different family structures to different moral codes. As was the case with the source materials provided by fiction for the practice of empathetic imagination, the source materials provided by fiction for the

practice of imagination, in general, are much greater in scope and intensity than we would otherwise likely have available to us.[27] These source materials prove useful in cultivating skills at both propositional and sensory imagination.

Why does it help to have all this new source material? Let's focus for a moment on sensory imagination. When coming across descriptions of characters and places, readers will often form mental images of what's being described. In fact, this aspect of imaginative practice is explicitly commented on by the World Literacy Foundation, an organization we mentioned right at the start of this chapter. When commending reading for its benefits in developing imagination, they note that reading allows one to "practice imagination by letting the words describe a certain image while the reader manipulates the picture in the mind. This practice strengthens the mind as it acts like a muscle." The more elaborate the descriptions encountered, the more elaborate the mental images are that readers will likely be producing, and thus the more that imagination is stretched.

Not only does fiction provide us with new source material on which to practice, but it also gives us practice at recombining source material that we already have in new and different ways, and this too stretches our imagination. This is perhaps most evident with respect to sensory imagination. Consider, for example, the many creatures of myth, folklore, and fantasy. To imaginatively recreate the hippogriffs and griffins we read about, we have to combine the front quarters of eagles with the hindquarters of horses and lions; to imaginatively recreate Pegasus or a unicorn, we have to add a body part to horses that they don't already have, be it wings or a horn. These imaginative additions and recombinations can sometimes get quite complex. Take the manticore, a creature with the face of a human, the body of a lion, and a spiked tail like that of a scorpion. (Sometimes, manticores are also described as having the wings of a dragon.) In order to engage with this creature as one reads about it, one has to imaginatively put all of these different pieces together. In this way, fiction helps us practice these combinatorial skills and correspondingly stretches the combinatorial powers of our imagination—a process that, in other work, I have referred to as *imaginative scaffolding* (Kind 2020a).

Although we didn't talk about this aspect of imaginative practice when we talked about empathetic imagination in Section 13.1, it's worth noting that a similar point applies in that context as well. Consider the fatal school bus accident depicted in Russell Banks's novel *The Sweet Hereafter*. Perhaps you've never experienced the deep and intense grief that Billy Ansell experiences when his children are killed, but you might have experienced a milder grief, as well as deep and intense emotions of other sorts. When reading this novel, then, you draw on this source material from your own life, recombine it, and scaffold out in an effort to understand and recreate the experiences that Billy is going through.

Of course, these recombinations are not quite as trivial as I've made them sound, and the picture just presented is undoubtedly oversimplified. But it should nonetheless give at least a rough sense of how this combinatorial work would proceed.

What of the second way that fiction seems to enable the cultivation of empathetic imagination, namely, that it comes with a specially detailed road map for using the materials that it provides? How does this apply to the case of imagination more generally? Consider again the point we saw earlier in this section—that fiction presents us with all sorts of situations and scenarios that are quite different from what we encounter in everyday life. Some of these differences might initially prove difficult for us to understand. In Octavia Butler's short story "Blood Child," we encounter a civilization very different from our own, one in which an insect-like species called the Tlic governs society and forces humans into a symbiotic relationship with them, a relationship in which young human males are implanted with their eggs. The society is literally an alien one, but we are guided by Butler's careful and detailed description of it. Our imagination is thereby stretched in such a way that we come to be able to imagine various differences that otherwise might have been much more difficult for us to grab onto in imagination (whether sensory or propositional).[28]

Normally, when we travel to a foreign country and encounter a culture with which we lack prior experience, we don't get this kind of detailed depiction. Even when we are well informed by travel guides and maps, there will likely be all sorts of social norms and nuances that escape us and thereby prevent us from understanding the culture and its differences as well as we could. In fiction, however, the author has our back—cluing us in to exactly what we need to be clued in to in order to understand what's going on. Sure, these clues might not come all at once, the author might stingily parse them out as the story proceeds, but eventually, at least, we are typically provided with the exact details that we need to make sense of all the differences we're encountering. In this way, fiction not only gives us practice at scaffolding out from our own experiences but also gives us a scaffold itself. The imaginative practice that we undertake when engaging with fiction might thus sometimes prove to be more fruitful and enlightening than any imaginative practice we might undertake in actual interactions when we actually travel, interactions where a lack of understanding is likely to throw up some imaginative roadblocks.

A lack of understanding might not be the only source of roadblocks in our imaginative practice. Engaging in extended imaginative practice—as is the case of extended practice of any skill—can be difficult work. It takes concentration and focus. And so, just as people often find themselves unable to get motivated to practice juggling or piano or ballroom dancing or to keep their minds from wandering while doing so, people

might have difficulty getting motivated or keeping focused with respect to the cultivation of their imagination. This suggests a further way in which fiction proves to be especially useful fodder for imaginative exploration and experimentation. Insofar as fiction provides us with a pre-set practice routine, and one that is likely to be especially engaging, it can help us overcome the problems of motivation and focus that we might otherwise face.

Finally, another apparent problem that we might face in engaging in imaginative practice is the solitary nature of that practice. Working to become a better imaginer can be a lonely enterprise. Although fiction is not typically a collective activity, engaging with it can nonetheless make us feel less alone. Even just thinking about fictional narratives can help to alleviate loneliness (see Derrick et al. 2009).[29] In fact, many people who engage with fiction come to think of fictional characters as friends and respond to them as they would respond to a real-life friend (see, e.g., Broom et al. 2021 for relevant neuroscientific evidence in this regard). By using fiction as a tool in our imaginative practice, we have the characters to keep us company.

Before closing this section, it's worth noting that all of the ways that fiction helps us with imaginative practice discussed in this section work together in tandem. It's also worth noting that it would seem that we can reap the benefits of this imaginative practice from fiction even when such practice is not our deliberate aim in picking up a book. Even when we're just reading for fun, engaging with fiction can still stretch our imaginative capacities.[30] This again connects up nicely with the way practice works for other skills, i.e., one can improve a skill by way of certain activities even when one is not deliberately aiming at the improvement of that skill. Just as these other skills often require deliberate practice for significant improvement, we might naturally expect something to be true in the case of imagination as well, i.e., attending in some way to one's imaginings while reading may well be necessary in order to fully reap the benefits that this activity can provide with respect to imaginative practice.

13.4 Concluding Remarks

Over the course of this chapter, I have explored various ways in which fiction can help to cultivate our imaginative skills—skills not just of empathetic imagination but of other types as well. At this point, however, a natural question arises. How much of this is specific to fiction? In addressing this question, it will be useful to separate two ways that it might be unpacked. First, one might wonder whether we couldn't just as easily engage in this kind of imaginative practice with works of non-fiction. Second, one might raise this point with respect to other kinds of imaginative activities, activities that don't involve texts at all.

Some of the empirical research that we discussed in Section 13.2 takes up the first of these questions. For example, in work done by Kidd and Castano (2013), some study participants received non-fiction passages, and some study participants received passages from fiction. The fiction passages were divided into two: some were from literary fiction and some were from popular fiction. Though Kidd and Castano's results suggest that engagement with literary fiction has benefits that engagement with the other two types of works does not have, as we mentioned above, this study seems more focused on ToM than on empathetic imagination. Moreover, when we recall that one of the shortcomings of the existing empirical literature on this issue consists in its lack of explanation of *how* engagement with fiction manages to cultivate empathetic imagination, i.e., on what the relevant mechanisms are, we can see that the question thus remains open whether that mechanism is one that could apply in engagement with non-fiction. As for the philosophical reflections that I have offered throughout this paper, it's clear that some of the ways in which fiction provides a helpful context for imaginative practice could be applied to non-fiction as well—particularly literary non-fiction. But insofar as imagination is typically more forcefully stimulated by fiction than by non-fiction, there may be some unique benefits to engaging with fiction as opposed to non-fiction.

But what about other imaginative activities altogether, ones that don't involve engaging with texts at all? Perhaps the most obvious activity to consider is pretense. Games of pretend clearly share some of the features of fiction that enable it to cultivate our imaginative skills. First, like fiction, games of pretend enable us to engage in extended imaginative practice—they help us keep our focus. Second, since we typically engage in games of pretend with others, they can help us solve the problem of loneliness; indeed, they seem even better suited than fiction to help us solve this problem. So, some of the morals we have seen about the role of fiction in imaginative practice will apply to pretense as well.

But others of these morals will not—or at least, not as easily. Unlike fiction, games of pretend do not come with built-in source material, and they don't come with built-in roadmaps. Given that we play games of pretend with others, one gets help with the development of source material, but not nearly as much help as one gets from fiction. Moreover, while games of pretend will involve imaginings of all the types that we earlier discussed, the kind of experiential imagining involved will likely not be empathetic in nature. Though one might imagine being chased by lions or captured by pirates and thereby come to have and understand various affective states, there isn't the kind of perspective-shifting involved that is involved in empathetic imagination—or at least, not nearly as much of it.

Thus, while it seems clear that pretense, like fiction, is useful in the cultivation of our imaginative skills, it also seems clear that fiction has

some benefits in this regard that pretense does not—and likely this point applies to other imaginative activities as well, e.g., thought experimentation. To return to the quotation we started with, then, it seems that the World Literacy Foundation has indeed been vindicated. Reading fiction is certainly not the only way to foster imagination, but it does seem to be one of the best ways to do so.[31]

Notes

1 For an extended development and defense of this claim, see Kind (2020b).
2 See, e.g., https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/imagine/201011/reading-imaginative-play
3 See https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/reading-enhances-imagination/
4 In "Can't Imagine" and "I Can't Imagine," respectively.
5 I'm setting aside claims of unimaginability relating to impossible states of affairs.
6 See Kind (2022) for further discussion of imaginative practice.
7 At times Nussbaum refers to narrative imagination as "sympathetic imagination" (1997, 85), and she also refers to narrative imagination as a process that develops the habit of empathy (1997, 90).
8 See, e.g., the influential 18th-century discussion by Adam Smith (1790/2009).
9 See Goldie (2011). In other passages, Smith seems attuned to these two different kinds of perspective shifting, e.g., "When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief, I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die: but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters" (Smith 1790/2009, 373).
10 See Mumper and Gerrig (2017). We return to this in Section 13.2.
11 For a related discussion, see Smith (2017, 191–2). As Smith notes, both the *scope* and the *intensity* of the material provided to us by fiction are different from what we encounter in ordinary life.
12 See https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/06/06/is-fiction-changing-for-better-or-worse/fiction-is-an-exercise-in-empathy.
13 See https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123214794600191819.
14 This passage comes in a review of *American Dirt*, a book that provoked controversy precisely in this regard; after noting the ethical urgency of imagining ourselves into other lives, Sehgal adds: "The caveat is to do this work of representation responsibly, and well." She then goes on to question whether *American Dirt* meets this standard. See https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/books/review-american-dirt-jeanine-cummins.html.
15 Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising these worries.
16 Interestingly, even when fiction does not make these things explicit—that is, when it leaves things open-ended and not fully described—it might provide us with a different kind of imaginative practice, one that requires us to work harder to figure things out. Compare Michael Stuart's discussion that thought experiments can be especially effectively in increasing understanding when there is "enough information to set the agent on the right track, but not so much that the information can be accepted without developing any of the desired cognitive control" (Stuart 2017, 537).

17 Currie suggests a similar line of criticism, noting that empathizing with fictional characters may have no significant effect on our ability to empathize with real people given that "the stimuli in fictional cases, with direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the character, is so much richer than the stimuli available in real life." On his view, we have reason to worry that even if we have robust and repeated empathetic responses to the richer stimulus we encounter in fiction, this will not make us more likely to have empathetic responses to the weaker stimulus we receive from ordinary encounters with other people. See Currie (2016, 58).

18 One might think that in putting it this way, I am granting Langkau too much. As was suggested in discussion when I presented this paper to the LOGOS Barcelona group, one might push back against what she says about training wheels by noting that they are often wobbly, allowing one to get at least a little practice at balancing.

19 For one example of an explicit separation of these two subskills, see Pino and Mazza (2016, 1). What they call "mentalizing" corresponds to the subskill I have called identification; what they call "emotional sharing" corresponds to the subskill I have called recreation.

20 As one reviewer said, "I also don't understand why any human being would want a synth therapist. How can you parse out human emotions when you don't have any of your own?" See https://www.vulture.com/2017/02/humans-recap-season-2-episode-1.html

21 For the piece in Scientific American, see https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/novel-finding-reading-literary-fiction-improves-empathy/. For the piece in *USA Today*, see https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2016/07/31/beach-reading-fiction-empathy-mind/87523446/

22 Panero et al. (2016) raise worries about the replicability of Kidd and Castano's work; Kidd and Castano (2017) offer a response.

23 Some studies have suggested correlations between fiction, ToM skills, and empathetic imagination, but it's worth noting that those other studies are based on self-reported empathy rather than objective measures. For discussion, see Kidd and Castano (2013, 377) and Currie (2016, 56–7).

24 A recent literature review by Oatley gives a much more optimistic assessment of the state of the empirical research; as he summarizes the current "trends," in various experiments, "engagement in fiction, especially literary fiction, has been found to prompt improvements in empathy and theory-of-mind" (2016, 618). Even in this optimistic assessment, however, it's clear that there is still work to be done with respect to how engagement with fiction is able to bring about these improvements. Oatley discusses several different possible accounts/hypotheses to explain "the basis for effects of improved empathy," but it's clear that all of these are still in need of further testing (see esp. 2016, 621–2).

25 See Currie (2016; 2020) for further discussion of the limitations of the current empirical research into empathy.

26 I myself believe that *all* acts of imagination involve sensory presentations, i.e., that these will be involved even in cases of propositional imagination. (See Kind 2001.) But this point is not crucial for our discussion here, and so I will not presuppose it.

27 See footnote 11.

28 Interestingly, the story also prompts new imaginings about our own society, as we come to see various human relationships in a new light. This connects to a different aspect of imaginative practice.

29 The cited study by Derrick et al. concerns fictional narratives via television rather than books, but their general hypothesis is broader: "technologies

such as television, books, music, and video games may afford the experience of belonging, via one-way *parasocial* relationships" (Derrick et al. 2009, 353).

30 The empirical literature has not attended well to this issue, i.e., separating out the effects of longtime reading habits vs. the immediate effects of reading a passage of fiction.

31 In 2021, I presented this paper at online colloquia arranged by the Mind and Perception Group at Washington University, St. Louis, LOGOS Barcelona, and the University of Missouri Department of Philosophy. I am grateful to those audiences for the productive discussions. Thanks also to Julia Langkau and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on a previous draft. Finally, I had the pleasure of having Julia Garbee as a student research assistant during the spring and summer of 2021, and her help with background research proved invaluable as I was writing this paper.

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