

Imaginability, Morality, and Fictional Truth: Dissolving the Puzzles of 'Imaginative Resistance'

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there is no genuine puzzle of 'imaginative resistance'. In part I of the paper I argue that the imaginability of fictional propositions is *relative to* a range of different factors including the 'thickness' of certain concepts, and certain pre-theoretical and theoretical commitments. I suggest that those holding realist moral commitments may be more susceptible to resistance and inability than those holding non-realist commitments, and that it is such realist commitments that ultimately motivate the problem. However, I argue that the relativity of imaginability is not a particularly puzzling feature of imagination. In part II, I claim that it is the so-called 'alethic' puzzle, concerning fictional truth, which generates a real puzzle about imaginative resistance. However, I argue that the alethic puzzle itself depends on certain realist assumptions about the nature of fictional truth which are implausible and should be rejected in favour of an interpretative view of fictional truth. Once this is done, I contend, it becomes evident that the supposed problem of imaginative resistance as it has hitherto been discussed in the literature is not puzzling at all.

I. Introduction

There has been burgeoning interest in an apparently puzzling phenomenon generally referred to as 'imaginative resistance'. Tracing the original formulation of the problem to some remarks made by Hume (1993), Kendall Walton (1994) launched the modern discussion, and it has recently received a number of different attempted solutions or explanations, most recently at the hands of Stephen Yablo (2002), Brian Weatherson (2004), Kathleen Stock (2005), Tamar Gendler (2000, 2006), and Weinberg and Meskin (2006). Each of these discussions has provided some very illuminating insights, and in the process the very nature of the puzzle has evolved.

The initial problem was cashed out in terms of an apparent asymmetry holding between the imaginability of moral and non-moral fictional propositions. (Walton, 1994; Gendler, 2000). As others have since pointed out, however, the problem is rather more widespread, affecting a range of different types of concept and proposition, normative and non-normative alike. (Yablo, 2002; Weatherson, 2004; Walton, 2006; Gendler, 2006) Moreover, as Weatherson has convincingly argued, the question of the imaginability of the relevant propositions is actually different from, although intertwined with, the question of their fictional truth. That is, there is not one problem of imaginative resistance but (at least) two. How these two problems are connected and resolved will be the focus of much of this paper.¹

Throughout this evolution in the discussion of imaginative resistance there has been a common focus of the debate concerning whether the puzzle (or puzzles) consists in an *inability* to imagine or a *resistance* to imagining. In the first part of the paper (§§1-3) I shall argue that imaginability, manifested either as inability or resistance, is *relative to* a range of different factors, including the 'thickness' of certain concepts, and certain pre-theoretical and theoretical commitments. While the relativity of imaginability to these factors is itself an interesting phenomenon, I argue that it is not at all puzzling in the way assumed in discussions of imaginative resistance.

In addition to showing that there is no stark asymmetry between the imaginability of normative and non-normative concepts, I suggest that those holding certain realist

commitments may be more susceptible to resistance and inability than those who hold non-realist commitments. Indeed, I contend that the phenomenon of imaginative resistance as formulated depends upon and is motivated by certain realist commitments – in the central cases discussed, moral ones. This is important, because such commitments naturally give rise not only to (un-puzzling) problems of imaginability, but also to a certain ‘realist’ view of fictional truth that underpins what Weatherston calls the ‘alethic puzzle’. It is the apparent resistance to allowing the fictional truth of certain propositions, which, I contend, constitutes the really puzzling part of the supposed phenomenon of imaginative resistance.

In the second part of the paper (§§4-5) I examine and reject not just Weatherston’s solution to the alethic puzzle, but the puzzle itself, because the realist assumptions about fictional truth – and the questionable intuitions about the nature and appreciation of fiction more generally – on which it depends are implausible. I hold that although realist commitments may give support to a realist view of fictional truth, they do not entail such a view. This is because fictional truth is essentially interpretative in nature, and once this is recognised, it becomes evident that the alethic problem itself is a philosopher’s fiction, and hence that the supposed puzzle of imaginative resistance as it has hitherto been discussed in the literature is not puzzling at all.

Part I: Imaginability

1. Asymmetry and impossibility

The easiest way to understand the issues involved in the problem of imaginative resistance is to look briefly at its original formulation as an asymmetry that is supposed to hold between (1) and (2):

(1) Within the imaginative project of engaging with fiction F, a reader can, or is willing to, fictionally assent to p, where p is some non-moral proposition that he does not believe holds.

(2) Within the imaginative project of engaging with fiction F, a reader cannot, or is unwilling to, fictionally assent to q, where q is some moral proposition that he does not believe holds.²

It seems that we have no difficulty imagining that, in a fiction, all sorts of strange, fantastic and counterfactual scenarios hold; that people can travel backwards in time, that the earth is at the centre of the universe and rests upon an infinite number of tortoises, that pigs can fly, that magic rings can make one invisible, and so on. Yet, it is thought, we do in some sense have difficulty imagining, or we resist imagining, stories in which, for instance, slavery or genocide are presented as being good things, or certain propositions in stories, such as this: (G) “In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl.” (Walton, 1994)³

Note, the difficulty lies not in any purported resistance to imagining offensive fictional moral perspectives, entertaining in imagination alien moral sentiments, or even imagining oneself holding perverted moral beliefs. The problem concerns our *imagining the truth* of certain fictional moral *propositions*, such as (G).⁴

When confronted in a story by the proposition (G), Walton declares that a reader’s likely response is “to be appalled by the moral depravity of the *narrator*... 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." (Walton, 1994, 38) Tamar Gendler describes this type of reaction as a "distancing gesture" and argues that imaginative resistance essentially involves what she calls "narrator doubling"; namely, making a distinction between propositions *taken to be true* by the author or a fictional narrator and those which are (morally) *true of* the fictional world he is telling us of. (Gendler, 2000, 63ff; Gendler, 2006, 159ff.)

What is especially puzzling about the purported phenomenon is that normally authors appear to have complete freedom to construct fictional worlds and to establish the truths therein. Indeed, this authorial authority is a *sine qua non* of the nature and appreciation of fiction. We do not (typically) put down a book because, for instance, the author has stated that in her fictional world pigs can fly, or that one can travel back in time and affect the past. So, given that authors can normally get us to imagine various counterfactuals in fiction, why have they, apparently, no right to stipulate what is morally true *in the story*? Why can they not simply get us to imagine, of murder or genocide, say, that these are morally desirable and worthy things; that killing baby girls is a virtue and not a vice, *even in* the world of the fiction. These, so it is claimed, are things we simply cannot or will not imagine.⁵

A plausible response to the puzzle is to argue along the lines adopted initially by Walton (1994), which can be reconstructed thus:

- 1) What is conceptually impossible cannot be imagined.
- 2) The relevant moral propositions are conceptually impossible.
- 3) So the relevant moral propositions cannot be imagined.
- 4) If P cannot be imagined, P cannot be fictionally true.
- 5) So the relevant moral propositions cannot be fictionally true.⁶

Propositions that are true in a fictional world are propositions that readers of the story are to imagine. Hence, fictional truth depends on imaginability. Now, moral properties supervene on non-moral, natural properties. So, one obvious reason we resist allowing (G) to be fictionally true might be that we resist allowing fictional worlds to differ from the real world with respect to the relevant kind of supervenience relations. Something could not (as a matter of conceptual necessity) be both an act of infanticide and morally good.⁷

As other philosophers have since noted, there are a number of problems with this proposed solution to the asymmetry. First, the solution 'over-generalises', for arguably we allow all sorts of conceptual impossibilities to be true in fiction without any qualms. (Gendler, 2000; Weatherson, 2004) Time travel scenarios in science fiction abound, and the absurdities in Alice's Wonderland seem to make fictional a whole range of conceptual, logical and metaphysical impossibilities. Whether and if so how we do allow these to be fictional, and to what extent if any we can really be said to imagine them, are important issues that shall be dealt with below.

Second, there are good reasons for rejecting the view of moral judgement underpinning this argument, which presupposes that persons who think that murder is right are conceptually, rather than just morally confused.⁸ (Blackburn, 1984, 183; Stock, 2005, 615; Weatherson, 2004, 10)

The third problem with Walton's solution requires a little more discussion. It is difficult to decide about the status of the relevant propositions vis-à-vis their imaginability without some context in which they would normally (as part of a fiction) be embedded. Is it so clear that no fictional story can possibly be constructed in which slavery is just, or infanticide morally justified – not just thought (wrongly) to be just or justified by all the inhabitants of this world – without some conceptual confusion arising? On first encountering (G) my only clear instinctive reaction was to try to imagine in what fictional context this claim might be coherently asserted – it certainly wasn't to *resist* imagining it in any clear sense. Indeed it might be thought unlikely that an isolated proposition like this, asserted outside of any clear context, could provoke any meaningful reaction at all, let alone strong imaginative resistance.⁹

Once we begin dwelling on possible contexts in which such propositions might be asserted, important questions surface concerning the way in which the problem of imaginative resistance is formulated. For fictional worlds in general do not consist of isolated, a-contextual single propositions, and the few that have been mustered – or rather invented – in the literature as supposed examples of the phenomenon of imaginative resistance are testimony rather to the paucity of such cases in genuine fiction, whatever the situation might be in respect of propagandistic, simplistic and straightforwardly poor creations of impoverished skill and imagination.¹⁰

The very artificiality of the problem as raised in terms of singular a-contextual propositions, I will suggest, tells us less about the nature of fiction and authorial power than it does about the nature of certain moral intuitions and commitments and the relation of imaginability to these. Moreover, it raises immediately the question of whether it really is impossible to imagine a context in which such propositions might comprehensibly be asserted.¹¹

2. *Contexts, Contingencies, and Imagining through Thick and Thin*

Kathleen Stock (2005) has argued that propositions such as (G) are not conceptually impossible at all. We need only supply the right context to make them conceptually coherent. In the case of (G), Stock herself suggests: “in the town in which Giselda lives, girl children inevitably face atrocious lives – are placed into unspeakable slavery, for instance – if they are allowed to live.”(617) The lack of a surrounding context thus entails only that the propositions at issue are “contingently incomprehensible”; contingently one may be unable to think of a surrounding context that renders a proposition true and/or comprehensible. (619) Once the right context is supplied the supposed conceptual incoherence vanishes, and hence so too does the concomitant imaginative ‘resistance’.

It is unsurprising, she contends, that moral judgements should be particularly prone to such resistance for they are especially susceptible to context. This is why it is easier to find examples of singular moral propositions which arouse imaginative failure than non-moral ones.¹² However, it should be noted that contingent incomprehensibility will affect not just moral propositions, but any propositions which are similarly sensitive to context, such as, to give just two of her examples, “His bunions were tantalizing” and “The picnic was frightening in its sunny aspect”. Hence, if there is a phenomenon of imaginative resistance in respect of singular, a-contextual propositions, it is not as puzzling with respect to authorial authority as first thought, is

not centrally a result of conceptual impossibility, and is not premised upon any strict asymmetry between the moral and non-moral.¹³

One implication of Stock's account of imaginative failure seems to be that insofar as the relevant moral propositions are not conceptually impossible, it must always be possible to imagine a context which renders *any* single moral proposition conceptually coherent and hence fictionally true, as she herself suggests. (619) If this is so, then particular cases of imaginative failure must, it seems, be at least partly explicable in contingent psychological terms; that is, my failure to imagine a context in which an apparently perplexing proposition such as (G) is true is due to my own, perhaps disappointingly limited, imaginative capabilities.

This in itself does not seem to be particularly puzzling, however, so it is important to examine whether that is really all there is to the supposed problem. Is it really always possible to avoid imaginative failure for the relevant moral propositions? This question demands more attention than Stock gives it, for as I am about to show, it seems that relative to certain concepts, and certain pre-theoretical and theoretical assumptions, the answer may well be negative. Moreover, this gives rise to the central issue which, ultimately, is not whether we can find contexts in which to embed individual propositions to render them true, but "why making some sorts of propositions imaginable takes a different *kind* of effort than making other sorts of propositions imaginable." (Gendler, 2006, n. 24, 158)

Stock is concerned with the application of moral judgements to acts specified in terms of a single *descriptive* concept. Whether the propositions comprise general or particular judgements, thin or thick moral concepts, it should apparently always be possible to imagine a context that makes them both comprehensible and fictionally true. Here are a few examples of each combination:

1a) General (proposition): thin (concept)

'Punching people is a good thing to do.'

1b) General: thick

'Saving lives is murderous.'

1c) Particular: thin

'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl.'

1d) Particular: thick

'John punched Clare, compassionately.'

It seems that all of these propositions can be given a fictional context in which they are true, by simply filling in enough determinate details, generally in terms of specifying (often peculiar) consequences that render the propositions comprehensible and acceptable.¹⁴ Propositions for which it might initially seem impossible to imagine a context in which they are true include ones involving concepts, thick or thin, applied to incompatible descriptive conditions in virtue of which it appears they cannot possibly obtain.¹⁵ Yet it seems that most of these too can be salvaged from impending incoherence once further descriptive details are supplied.

Thus, in the case of 1a), we must imagine – admittedly very odd – contexts in which, say, people want to be punched because they believe that the pain provided by it expiates sin and saves souls, and furthermore this world is such, created by some vindictive deity, that it happens to be true and the belief justified. Similarly, even statements of the form in 1b), in which the descriptive conditions given seem to conflict directly with the descriptive part of the meaning of the thick concepts in such a way that violates conceptual relations, can be made coherent. A world in which, for example, saving lives in a certain context leads to a fate worse than death, unspeakable tortures, or whatever else a gothic imagination might dream up.¹⁶

Nonetheless, there seem to be propositions for which it is much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to think of appropriate contexts in which the judgements make sense and are fictionally true. These comprise the application of moral judgements to acts specified in terms of a single *evaluative* concept, but more specifically, where these involve i) certain ‘fine-grained’ moral concepts possessing particularly ‘strong’ or ‘thick’ connections to specific conditions of application, and ii) general rather than particular propositions. Here are some examples involving the thick evaluative concept ‘murder’:

2a) General: thin

‘Murder is morally good.’

2b) General: thick

‘Murder is compassionate.’

2c) Particular: thin

‘In murdering her baby G did the right thing; after all, it was a girl.’

2d) Particular: thick

‘He murdered her compassionately.’

The difficulty here is that, being a thick concept, if we change too much the particular conditions to which ‘murder’ is normally applied, we face the problem that any context we construct may require such a revision of our views of human nature, natural needs and desires, rights and values, social norms and so on, that we *lose our grip on the meaning of the term*. The worry, in other words, is that some thick moral concepts like murder have their meanings essentially. This would resurrect the idea that imaginative resistance occurs with the relevant concepts and propositions, irrespective of context, because they are simply unimaginable *qua* conceptually incoherent.¹⁷

We have various words for the act of killing somebody which enable us to distinguish, for example, between acts of murder, euthanasia, and manslaughter. This is what I mean by ‘fine-grained’. For this reason, the concept of murder is very tightly connected to certain descriptive and evaluative conditions which, it seems, are difficult or impossible to loosen without either losing a grip on the concept altogether or transforming it into one of its near relations. This is what I mean by ‘strong’ or ‘thick’ connections. Murder simply cannot be good or compassionate, or imagined to be good or kind *in virtue of* being murder as we understand the term, *regardless of* the context. In contrast, other moral evaluative concepts, such as ‘slavery’ and ‘courage’,

are perhaps not so fine-grained and possess ‘weaker’ or ‘thinner’ connections to the descriptive and evaluative conditions to which they may be applied.

So, it could be argued that ‘murder’ has ‘badness’ built into its very meaning and this is what explains the apparent impossibility, if it is impossible, of imagining an act of murder that it is morally right or good *qua* murder. Hence, imaginative resistance may result, as it were, from the particular *thickness* (and fine-grainedness) of some thick evaluative concepts regardless of any contextual reconstruction we might attempt.

In fact, however, even the thickness of such thick concepts is itself relative to a range of further factors, a consideration of which brings into sharp relief the fundamentally relative nature of imaginability and the underlying assumptions that motivate the puzzle of imaginative resistance.

3. *Imaginability, relativity, normativity*

Consider that although our concepts involving different acts of killing are more or less fine-grained, there may be an indefinite range of reasons for any particular act of murder, and there are more or less *justified* cases of murder as such – cold-blooded, revengeful, dispassionate assassination, and so on. If one could journey back in time and kill Hitler this would be murder – or perhaps assassination, if there is a relevant evaluative difference – but it might not be thought to be unconditionally bad. Indeed, it might even be thought compassionate. But it is clearly neither a case of euthanasia nor manslaughter, nor obviously anything more aptly described than by the concept ‘murder’.¹⁸ This demonstrates not only the effect that context can have on even the thickest of thick concepts, but that the determination of context itself is relative to various factors; in particular, actions and motives may be perceived differently from different perspectives. What one person perceives as an act of compassion, for instance, may be perceived by another as callous selfishness.

This, I take it, is simply an ineliminable feature of moral judgement and it has important implications for our imaginative capabilities. For example, consequentialists might have fewer qualms than some Kantians about going back in time to assassinate Hitler, if such an act were possible, whereas many Kantians might hold that no act of murder *qua* murder is ever justified. This suggests that our imaginative capabilities are relative to, or dependent on, not merely particular, individual psychological capacities, but also to some extent on certain theoretical and pre-theoretical moral presuppositions and principles.

This in turn raises the prospect that those with fixed, articulated moral positions, such as professional philosophers, may be more prone to imaginative resistance of the type under discussion than non-philosophers. More specifically, and more pertinently, philosophers with certain moral views may be more prone to imaginative resistance than those lacking such views, as in the case of the Kantian versus consequentialist just given. Hence, whether one is able to or resists imagining a given moral proposition will depend *in part* on what one’s actual moral commitments or principles are and, if relevant, on what one’s theoretical views of them are.

Can one *imagine* that murder really is good, if one does not *believe* it really is? Well, if one also believes that certain thick moral concepts have their meanings essentially,

and/or one is a strong internalist and realist about moral judgement, if one holds that certain, or even perhaps all, general moral principles are unconditionally and necessarily true, such that nothing could legitimate claims like ‘murder is good’, then perhaps one will be unable to imagine or will more readily resist imagining that murder *qua* murder could *ever* be good or justified. Moreover, holding such a view would suffice to invoke imaginative resistance in respect of singular a-contextual propositions. For such propositions unimagability looks like a function of a kind of conceptual impossibility.

If, however, one holds certain expressivist positions, or is a subjectivist, or a relativist about moral truth, then there seems to be no reason why one should not find it possible to imagine a world or a context in which it is true that murder is good or can be good – although it may be very difficult, and one may actively resist imagining. In the world of the Icelandic sagas, for instance, the revenge killings involved in vendettas are seen not only as justified but as moral obligations that attach to the honour of the participants in these frequent blood-baths, where upholding honour is one of the highest moral principles. If one shares the world view of Njal in Njal’s Saga, or if one is a moral relativist, one should thus have little difficulty imagining an entire society in which revenge is a moral obligation and hence that murder really can be (at least sometimes, in some contexts, for some reasons) good.

So, the imaginability of moral propositions appears to be relative to a number of factors in addition to mere psychological capacities; these include the thickness of certain evaluative moral concepts and certain theoretical and pre-theoretical commitments (which may in turn determine how thick we take the relevant concepts to be).¹⁹ Moreover, this relativity concerns cases both of inability to imagine and resistance to imagining, and it is not limited merely to moral propositions.²⁰

In terms of ‘resistance’, one may simply not *want* to imagine in a full-blooded way the sexual torture described by the Marquis de Sade, or the horrors of the World War II concentration camps depicted in numerous films, even if one *can* imagine this. Imaginative resistance might then arise for any individual who, for psychological, moral or other reasons was simply unwilling to imagine what a fictional scenario calls to be imagined. Moreover, such resistance, like the imagination itself, will also admit of various degrees, depending, for example, on how imaginative one actually is, how much imaginative effort is required for understanding or appreciation, and, importantly, how a particular fictional world is constructed. We should not underestimate the ingenuity of authors, nor lose sight of the many ways in which fictional contexts can differ from real world contexts.

This kind of relativity is an interesting feature of imagination, but it is not particularly puzzling and is certainly not confined to moral propositions – for example, I may not want to imagine going spelunking if I am claustrophobic, or eating raisins if they actually make me nauseous.

Cases of genuine ‘inability’ to imagine, on the other hand, may not be subject to degree – perhaps one is simply either able or not to imagine *x* – but they too will, I suggest, be relative to the range of factors considered above. Indeed, it seems that cases of inability might arise more readily for those with strong, realist moral commitments, whether fully articulated or not, for the reasons outlined above. That

would also explain why one might think that one could not imagine the relevant moral propositions being even fictionally true. But nor are cases of inability restricted to moral propositions. Whether we are able, for example, to imagine that a particular joke is funny in a story, or whether a poem claimed in the story to be good is good, will depend on such factors as our sense of humour or our aesthetic taste, and it may also depend, for example, on whether we think aesthetic judgements are objective or whether humour is subject to moral or other constraints.

Is there then anything left of our original, stark asymmetry between the imaginability of moral and non-moral propositions? These observations suggest not, but they also suggest that, on the one hand, the imaginative projects of those holding realist commitments *may* be more susceptible to resistance and inability than those holding non-realist commitments, and those holding articulated theoretical commitments yet more susceptible than those possessing less articulated pre-theoretical ones; and on the other hand, that the imaginability of normative concepts and propositions may be *more* relative to the factors discussed than non-normative, and hence more susceptible to resistance and inability.²¹

If pressed to give a more general explanation of this, I can say only roughly that, if the above discussion is right, the views and commitments of those more susceptible to imaginative inability or resistance in the relevant cases are somehow less ‘flexible’ in what they will allow to be likely, possible, or desirable alternatives to the relatively ‘rigid’ and well-articulated commitments they hold to be true. Normative concepts and propositions (in particular certain ‘thick’ evaluative concepts) may be more susceptible here, I suspect, and more relative to the range of factors mentioned, partly because they are essentially or very tightly tied to certain conditions, and to the evaluative stances or world-views of those holding them, such that there is, as it were, (felt to be) more at stake in the imaginative projects involving them.

It is, however, difficult to make these rather tentative claims any clearer or stronger than this. For instance, even the imaginability of non-normative claims – such as, for example, that in the story the hero refuted Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem – may be relative to certain further (mathematical) beliefs, abilities and commitments. (Currie, 1990; Weatherson, 2004, 25)²² It is also difficult to state with any confidence that realist commitments (theoretical and pre-theoretical) will *ceteris paribus* be more prone to resistance and inability to imagine than non-realist – one might, for instance, be an expressivist about morality with very strong moral principles that make it at least psychologically difficult to imagine certain claims. Conversely, one might be a ‘relaxed’ moral realist and able to imagine certain claims one does not think are actually true. It is simply not clear what relations *ceteris paribus* considerations should include or exclude.²³

In any case, we need not decide these issues now, for all I wish to claim here is, firstly, that if imaginability – manifested as resistance *or* inability – is relative to the range of factors discussed, then in so far as the puzzle of imaginative resistance concerns imaginability there is no real puzzle. For, although psychologically interesting, it appears to be a ‘natural’ and entirely un-puzzling feature of imagination *that* it should be so relative; where by ‘natural’ is meant merely that imagining just is a capacity that is subject to degree, and dependent on and relative to a range of further beliefs, commitments, values and so on.²⁴

Secondly, regardless of the precise relationship between imaginative inability and realist commitments, it is important to realise that the phenomenon of imaginative resistance as formulated clearly depends on and is motivated by certain (moral) realist commitments and assumptions. This is important, because such commitments naturally give rise not only to problems of imaginability, but also to a certain ‘realist’ view of fictional truth, and it is here I think that the real puzzle underpinning the puzzle of imaginative resistance is to be found. Indeed, the imaginability problem of imaginative resistance is importantly different from the problem of fictional truth, as we shall now see.

Part II: Fictional Truth

4. Fictional Truth and Imaginability

The problem of imaginative resistance has been formulated in terms of an inability or resistance to imagining the truth of certain fictional propositions, and we have been proceeding on the assumption that imaginability and fictional truth are somehow very closely connected, that fictional truths are those things that are to be imagined in relation to a fiction. But in fact, this assumption is questionable, for it does not follow that because imaginability is relative to imaginers in the ways discussed that fictional truth is similarly relative.

It seems that some unimaginable things can be fictionally true. There is a general consensus amongst philosophers, for example, that metaphysical, conceptual or logical impossibilities can be fictional, such that in a story it can be the case that $7+5=13$, that Gödel’s theorem is refuted, that talking eggs make words mean whatever they wish, or that one can frequently dine well at the end of the universe. Even if we cannot imagine these in any clear sense – and their imaginability is a matter of dispute – we seem to accept them as parts of fictional stories with which we readily engage, and hence to accept them as fictionally true. Conversely, we might resist imagining things that are nevertheless fictionally true.

In other words, fictional truth is not obviously dependent upon imaginability in the way assumed by the initial formulation of the puzzle of imaginative resistance, and if that is so then the scope of the problem becomes unclear. Does it arise with respect simply to imaginability – which I claimed in the last section to be an unproblematic result of the relativity of imagination – or also (or only) with respect to the establishment of fictional truth?

Of course, one might resist this separation of fictional truth from imaginability by simply denying that, despite the apparent consensus (at least amongst philosophers), what is unimaginable can be fictionally true. If we cannot imagine someone refuting Gödel’s theorem then it cannot be fictionally true no matter how skilful the author and how otherwise realistic the story. In this case, we would be back where we began. There are, however, two serious problems with this position.

First, as has been discussed, it seems to deny authors the very power that makes fiction possible in the first place. One who refused to read a work of fiction because it violates all sorts of metaphysical, logical and conceptual ‘truths’ which one could not

fully imagine would manifest at the very least a very odd attitude to fiction. Refusing to allow that a work can make it fictional that the pig in the restaurant at the end of the universe tries to persuade the guests in perfect English that he desires to be eaten would be an indictment of the reader's view of fiction, not of the fiction itself.

Second, if fictional truth depended on imaginability, the former would be relative in the same way as the latter was argued to be in the previous section, but this leads to counterintuitive implications about the nature of fictional truth. For example, if an author is more knowledgeable about something than a particular reader, say about the atomic structure of certain chemicals, just because a reader may not be able to imagine these does not entail that the author cannot make fictional truths about them in the story. And of course, it seems desirable to allow that there can be implied fictional truths in a story of which readers may be unaware, and hence which they fail to imagine, such as the background geography in an historical fiction, and for which any plausible account of fictional truth must allow. (Lewis, 2002) For these reasons, it seems that fictional truths are not simply dependent on, nor to be cashed out solely in terms of imaginability, and hence that the problem of 'imaginative resistance' is slightly different in respect of each.

A further way of keeping fictional truth and imaginability together is to understand imagination in a merely 'suppositional' sense. (Gendler, 2006) At one end of the imaginative spectrum, imagination may involve entering dramatically into a character's point of view, imagining in a 'full-blooded' way 'from the inside' what it would be like, for instance, to go spelunking, to kill one's father or sleep with one's mother. Or, at the 'thin-blooded' end of the spectrum, a work might demand of us merely that we *suppose* in a more or less detached way that $7+5=13$ or that someone went back in time and killed their parents. This is the well-known sense of 'imagine' as equivalent to 'entertaining a proposition before the mind'. (Gendler, 2006; Weinberg and Meskin, 2006)

In between these opposing ends of the imaginative spectrum will be an indefinite number of degrees of imaginative engagement, requiring different amounts of 'effort' or different amounts of detachment. What is important is that there are no obvious constraints on what we can merely suppose, and hence mere supposition seems able to encompass even conceptual impossibilities in a way that fuller states of imaginative engagement cannot.²⁵

However, proper engagement with and appreciation of all but the most bizarre and impossible fictional stories generally requires more than mere supposition. Were one to approach fiction in a merely suppositional manner we would remain disengaged or detached in ways that would undermine much of the value of fiction, which after all generally requires deep emotional and full imaginative engagement in order to be understood and appreciated. There is a world of difference between understanding Anna Karenina's tragedy in a way that requires one to feel sympathy for her, and merely supposing that she threw herself under a train for the reasons that explain her actions. It is thus important to note that the imaginative puzzle arises only where imagining a proposition is more than merely entertaining or supposing it. For if imagining meant no more than this, anything the author said would be 'imaginable'. (Gendler 2006)²⁶

Brian Weatherson (2004) has for these reasons rightly drawn an important distinction between what he dubs the ‘alethic’ and ‘imaginative’ puzzles.²⁷ The alethic puzzle concerns why there are some sentences that authors cannot make true in their stories given that fictional truth is normally established merely on the author’s say-so. So the alethic puzzle concerns the breakdown of authorial authority, which, as noted earlier, is generally a *sine qua non* of the nature and appreciation of fiction. Here is a putative example, a story (‘Death on the Freeway’) created by Weatherson to illustrate this breakdown problem and which concludes with the following sentences:

When Craig saw that the cause of the [traffic] bankup had been Jack and Jill, he took his gun out of the glovebox and shot them. People then started driving over their bodies, and while the new speed hump caused some people to slow down a bit, mostly traffic returned to its normal speed. So Craig did the right thing, because Jack and Jill should have taken their arguments somewhere else where they wouldn’t get in anyone’s way. (1)

Weatherson states that, intuitively, it is not true, even in the story, that Craig’s murder was morally justified and given normal authorial authority this is puzzling. So, “the alethic puzzle arises only when it is clear that the author intends that *p* is true in her story, but we think that *p* is not true.”(6) The ‘imaginative puzzle’, on the other hand, arises only when the author invites us to imagine *p*, but we cannot, or at least do not. Weatherson’s explanation of both puzzles is that authors cannot easily violate what he calls ‘*Virtue*’, which is a strong default principle of fictional interpretation, nor can we easily imagine such violations:

Virtue:

If *p* is the kind of claim that, if true, must be true in virtue of lower-level facts, and if the story is about those lower-level facts, then it must be true in the story that there is some true proposition *r* which is about those lower-level facts such that *p* is true in virtue of *r*. (18)

Authors, he argues, cannot easily violate *Virtue*, even though there is “no general bar to making impossibilities true in a story”, for the following reason. Authors are free to stipulate which fictional world is at issue insofar as they can establish the “underlying facts”. However, once that has been done, once we have, according to Weatherson “locked onto the world being discussed, the author has no special authority to say which concepts, especially higher-level concepts like RIGHT or FUNNY or CHAIR, are instantiated there.”(22)²⁸

There is an imaginative problem because we cannot imagine these violations in fiction because “we can imagine the higher-level claim only some way or another...and the instructions that go along with the fiction forbid us from imagining *any* relevant lower-level facts that would constitute the truth of the higher-level claim.”(20)

It is important to be clear about the nature of this claim. We might not be able to imagine certain impossible scenarios in all their detail but this does not preclude us imagining them in an attenuated way, as in merely supposing. To take Weatherson’s example, we can imagine the restaurant at the end of the universe to some extent, but “if we were, foolishly, to try to fill in all the details of the impossible ... cases, it would be clear that they contained not just impossibilities but violations of *Virtue*, and then we would no longer be able to imagine them.”(20).

In respect of the imaginative puzzle, I think that Weatherson is broadly right. We cannot imagine (in any interesting sense of the term) some higher-level claim in a context that renders it impossible to obtain; or to put it more precisely, that forbids us from imagining *any* relevant lower-level facts that would constitute its truth.

However, when viewed in light of the conclusions of the previous section, it must be recognised that how we perceive any such context, whether we can imagine the higher-level claims in virtue of the lower-level claims, and ultimately whether we take there to be (unimaginable) violations involved, will be dependent upon the range of factors discussed above to which imaginability is itself relative. This is a crucial point, because if violations are unimaginable only relative to further commitments, then the *Virtue* principle may not be as difficult to imagine being violated as Weatherson appears to think. What counts as a violation will, for instance, differ depending, amongst other things, on one's moral commitments and on the particular evaluative concepts at issue.

For example, whether we can imagine that an act of killing depicted in a fiction is properly described as 'good' or 'compassionate' will depend, amongst many other things (see below), on the precise nature of other aspects of the context, as well as on what our moral views are, how well these are articulated, and how 'thick' the relevant evaluative concept is, or is taken to be. Moral philosophers with highly articulated and robustly supported Kantian views of the nature of moral principles may well struggle to or resist imagining such a scenario, though perhaps even they will be able merely to *suppose* 'for the sake of argument' that such an act could be good or compassionate. Utilitarians, on the other hand, with equally well-articulated and supported views, may have no such problems imagining this, though they may have more difficulties imagining that a thicker evaluative concept such as 'murder' could be described as compassionate.²⁹

Those with less robust, pre-theoretical commitments may be less sure about what to think, and whether they can imagine it or not will depend partly on their individual psychological/imaginative capacities, current intuitions, other evaluative stances and so on. Their current intuitions, if they have any, may hinder their ability or willingness to imagine, or alternatively these intuitions may themselves change in light of the persuasiveness with which the author depicts the events in the fiction.

Indeed, even the nature of the lower-level claims themselves may be open to interpretation, relative to these factors. Whether an act of abortion, for example, is described as an act of killing – whatever the higher-level evaluation of it will be – will depend on one's views about, for instance, the criteria for being alive or human, and/or perhaps on one's current linguistic intuitions.³⁰

As suggested in the previous section, the relativity of imaginability to these factors is inevitably complex and messy and subject to degree and precludes any one right answer to what will be imaginable in any particular case. But even if it is the case that for some people, some violations are unimaginable; even if, for example, one has strong moral realist commitments, why assume that *authors* cannot violate *Virtue* in respect of fictional truth? The *Virtue* principle relies upon two key ideas: 1) that authorial authority does not extend to saying which concepts are instantiated in a fictional world, and 2) that we can readily distinguish higher and lower-level claims. 1

rests partly on 2, but both, and hence the *Virtue* principle they support, rest on certain realist assumptions about the nature of fictional truth which, I shall now argue, are not just counterintuitive but false.

5. *Fictional Truth: fact or fiction?*

i) Realist assumptions

Weatherson argues that the alethic puzzle differs from the imaginative puzzle because “ultimately it depends on what the moral and conceptual truths are, not on what we take them to be”. He creates another story to show this, in which it is stated that “Smith was a very generous, just, and in every respect moral man” who provides a feast of meat for the village. Now, he claims, if we assume that it is really true that meat-eating is morally wrong, then even though non-vegetarians may be able to imagine that Smith is a morally good man in all respects, it will not be fictionally true. (21)

It may appear as though moral realism leads inevitably to a kind of realism about fictional truth. For if we allow that our moral views can in general be true or false, and that some of them will as a matter of fact be wrong, we should not allow fictional worlds to differ in this respect from the actual world. As Stephen Yablo (2002) has argued, for instance, moral concepts, like shape concepts, may be ‘response-enabling’ – their extension is determined in relation to the relevant responses in the actual world, no matter in what other possible world they might be employed. This amounts to a realist view of fictional truth because there will be facts of the matter about fictional truth, and moreover, these facts could outstrip our ability to know them. It is possible that whatever we happen to think about, say, some moral fact, we could be wrong and hence we could be wrong about the fictional truth of such facts.

There are some immediate problems with the idea that fictional truths are governed by the actual moral and conceptual truths, even leaving aside the debatable realist assumption that there are such things as, for instance, moral truths.³¹ First, it is unclear how this is supposed to explain the fictionality of conceptual impossibilities, which Weatherson himself allows. Second, it appears to undermine Weatherson’s claim that a story consisting entirely of this (surely morally false?) sentence – “Nobody ever discovered this, but it turned out all along their overriding moral duty was to maximise the amount of nutmeg in the world” – could be fictionally true, even if it is not imaginable. (24)

The response to these charges can only be that in such cases there are no violations of *Virtue*, because no lower-level claims are made. So, Weatherson’s complete position, it seems, is that fictional truth depends on what the moral and conceptual truths are *unless* they are located within a story in some way that does *not* violate *Virtue*; in which case they can be whatever the author says. Again, they cannot violate *Virtue* because, roughly, concept application is not the sole preserve of authors – readers of fiction get a say in what concepts apply to a fictional world once the lower-level claims have fixed that world. So, authors can in principle get away with any sort of higher-level conceptual claims so long as these are not violated by the lower-level claims made, if any are made.³²

ii) Authorial Intentions and Authoritative Breakdown

Gendler (2006) has recently argued that cases such as Weatherson's story 'Death on the Freeway' are cases of 'authoritative breakdown'. Such cases, she claims, exhibit 'pop-out' passages where "instead of taking the author to be asking her to *imagine* some proposition *p* that concerns the fictional world, the reader takes the author to be asking her to *believe* a corresponding proposition *p*' that concerns the actual world [and which the reader believes to be false]." (159)

However, I do not think it is at all obvious that authorial authority breaks down in such cases, and that the problematic propositions 'pop-out' in the way Gendler imagines. Nor, even if we were to grant some such phenomenon, is her explanation of such cases convincing, as I discuss in the next sub-section. Do we really somehow resist or find ourselves unable to imagine that even in the fiction Craig's murder was morally the right thing to do? I suggest that our initial intuitions here are not at all as clear as they are purported to be. Confronted with this story, my initial reaction, at least, is simply to be slightly baffled as to *why* the author has stated that; to wonder what the *intention* behind such an initially counterintuitive statement could possibly be.

It is important to recognise, however, that this is not just mere intuition bashing, a conflict between what I and others happen to find puzzling. Indeed, were it just that, my counter-intuitions should be enough to cast serious doubt on the discussions of imaginative resistance offered, because I see no problem in allowing that the supposedly problematic propositions are fictionally true, if at first rather baffling. Rather, it goes to the heart of the (normative) issue about how we should and do interpret fictional narratives in order to understand the fictional truths they contain.

It is in this light highly significant that the puzzles Weatherson and others discuss are restricted to paragraph-long examples and 'detachable parts' of longer stories, all of which are made-up in order to illustrate the puzzle. Perhaps it would be more baffling if the sentence had been written in the middle of a long and well structured work of realistic fiction. In fact, it is actually quite difficult to imagine such a work or to produce any real example of one, which at least shows the limitations of the problem in respect of genuine fiction.³³

But even if we could produce such a case, although this would suffice to embed the problematic proposition into a surrounding context, it should not (and in practice generally would not) stop us searching for a wider context – which takes into account, amongst other things, authorial intentions and certain principles of interpretation – to try to make sense of what is going on. Returning to the earlier discussion of contingent incomprehensibility, we might say that this extends not just to isolated propositions, but also to the puzzling contexts themselves in which they might be embedded.

I suggest that the cases presented are merely 'baffling' rather than 'puzzling', where by the former I mean that they raise questions about context, about authorial intention and interpretation, and it is to these issues that we must look to find a plausible notion of fictional truth. In effect, I contend that there is no alethic puzzle because our reaction to the supposedly puzzling cases should not be (and in practice generally is

not) to question *why* the author somehow fails to make the relevant propositions fictionally true given default assumptions about their authority, but rather, to ask *why* the author actually *is* saying just that. Indeed, I think that in practice our reactions to such puzzling cases generally *are* like this (or would be if any could be found outside the philosophical literature), unless certain philosophical realist presuppositions are illegitimately allowed to overwhelm the default presuppositions that normally do and should govern our engagement with fiction.

Thus, when confronted with Craig's action and the moral judgement of the narrator we should not (and generally would not) immediately strip the author of her authority in the establishment of fictional truths in the story. Rather, we try to make the best sense of what is going on – is it the judgement of the narrator or the author? Is the narrator reliable? Is the author really so lacking in basic moral judgement or principles? Or is the statement supposed to be provocative? What is the author's intention and how are we supposed to interpret it?

It is, of course, just such questions that have led philosophers to claim that cases of 'imaginative resistance' involve 'narrator doubling' and 'pop-out' passages. But these phenomena are not symptoms of some puzzling breakdown of authorial authority. They are simply intrinsic features of the interpretive process we engage in when trying to make sense of a fictional work and hence the fictional truths it contains. Indeed, unless we think the author has simply made some unintentional mistake, the author's views and intentions *as interpreted* in the fictional work are crucial to (if not by themselves solely determinative of) establishing the fictional truths it contains. They are never discarded simply because we either disagree with them or think that they are making claims about the actual world. These concerns have, in fact, little or no bearing on the establishment of fictional truth.

For these reasons, I think the supposed alethic problem is basically a philosopher's problem. Although, as we have seen, realist (moral) commitments might readily engage imaginative resistance (and inability), and may give some support to a realist view of fictional truth, they do not entail such a view. This is fortunate, because whilst moral realism is a plausible position, realism about fictional truth is not – it is merely a philosopher's fiction. We can see this, finally, by examining some of the shortcomings of such a view of fiction as presented in David Lewis's well-known account of fictional truth.

iii) Relativism, holism, interpretation

Lewis (2002) provides an analysis of truth in fiction that depends on comparing the world explicitly given in some fictional text with a background world which consists of one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of the text:

A sentence of the form "in fiction f , Φ " is non-vacuously true iff, whenever w is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of f , then some world where f is told as known fact and Φ is true differs less from the world w , on balance, than does any world where f is told as known fact and Φ is not true. It is vacuously true if there are no possible worlds where f is told as known fact. (126)³⁴

This kind of account of fictional truth has its attractions, not least of which is its separation of fictionality from imaginability. It also allows us to infer fictional truths that are not actually stated in a story – for example, it is fictionally true that Sherlock

Holmes is a human being rather than a hedgehog in disguise, even though Conan Doyle never bothers to state this explicitly. However, as Peter Lamarque (2002) has pointed out, it “excludes entirely the *intentionality* of fictional content and the *interpretive* nature of our reasoning about that content.” Indeed, Lamarque contends, Lewis introduces a “realist assumption into the reasoning – that is, an assumption that there are “facts” about the fictional world waiting to be discovered – and thus a certain kind of determinacy...” (156)

Lamarque’s overt point is that the purely logical interest expressed in an account of fictional truth such as Lewis’s is incompatible with and fails as an account of critical, literary reasoning. The critic, Lamarque argues, is not so much “exploring *facts* as uncovering *meanings*: not chronicling a *world* so much as constructing an *interpretation*.”(156) In fact, I think his argument implies the stronger, and for our purposes more significant claim that any logical account of fictional truth built on realist assumptions simply misconstrues the very nature of fictional truth, which just *is* a product of literary reasoning and critical interpretation. It is not just that the logician is interested in a different notion of fictional truth, but that this notion is simply a logician’s fiction.

Lewis’s account relies on worlds in which stories are told as known fact, but the problem is that determining what is known fact, and hence what is fictionally true, even at the level of what is explicitly stated in the text, is a matter of interpretation by the reader that takes place against a complex variety of factors including recognition of genre, authorial intentions, aesthetic or formal considerations, historical context, connotative, implicit, or symbolic meaning, and in general *how* what is said, is said. Information about fictional worlds is thus presented through a series of ‘narrative filters’, even at the level of explicit content. (Lamarque, 2002, 156-7) And when we move beyond explicit content to make further inferences about what is true in a fiction things become a great deal more complex and indeterminate.

Fictional worlds can distort our moral views to varying degrees, and the moral judgements and attitudes portrayed in a novel cannot always, or even often, be identified apart from the *way in which* the facts are depicted as part of the world-view or overall perspective of the work, and our overall perspective of *it*. It can, for these reasons, be extremely difficult in practice to distinguish between, say, what an author intends to be true in the story and what is being reported as what some character thinks is true; to distinguish between the views of the narrator and those of the author, or to determine whether the narrator is trustworthy, and so on.³⁵

Much of our reasoning to what is true in a fiction will be hypothetical, due partly to the factors just discussed in relation to explicit content, but also to the ineliminable indeterminacy that infects our judgements about the actions, motives, intentions and attitudes of authors, narrators, and fictional characters alike, much of which will have to be inferred from the explicit content. But many of the hypotheses formed – for example about the reliability of the narrator or authorial intention – will in turn determine what we take the fictional truths to be.³⁶

In this light, recall Weatherson’s claim that once we have locked onto the world being discussed the author cannot simply stipulate what the higher order concepts are. But now, what exactly is the world in which Craig does the right thing? First, because the

story consists of only one paragraph it is difficult to know how and what we should lock onto. Second, irrespective of the length of the story, the world looks like our world except for the problematic sentence, but rather than simply rejecting or resisting this sentence, it surely affects our interpretation of what otherwise seems to be a realistic story; it affects the ‘world’ we supposedly lock onto.

The higher-level concepts stipulated in the story are themselves a matter of interpretation; and this in turn affects our interpretation of how they relate to the lower-level facts, and perhaps even what these lower-level facts are. Thus if – and this is a big ‘if’ – there is a clear distinction to be drawn between low-level and higher-level conceptual ‘facts’, how they are related in a particular fiction will be subject to a range of interpretive factors and the complexity of these, and the ingenuity of authors, suggests that it is by no means clear that authors should not be able to violate *Virtue*.³⁷

We do *not* (*contra* Weatherson) simply have as much say in concept application as authors once a world is established, because what is established is itself a matter of interpretation that will depend partly on what higher-level concepts we take to have been stipulated by authors.

In other words, *Virtue* and the alethic problem it is supposed to explain/solve depend on a simplistic and counterintuitive ‘realist’ view of fiction and fictional truth in which worlds are fully established in lower-level terms by authors who then apply higher-level concepts to it which we, so to speak, monitor for violations. The result is a determinate fictional world and set of fictional truths. But what counts as higher or lower-level may not always be clear or determinate, and in any case will itself depend on what world we think has already been/is being established; and this is fundamentally a matter of interpretation.

These problems similarly undermine Gendler’s (2006) explanation of ‘pop-out’ effects:

Passages exhibit pop-out effects whenever they express *appraisals* (some sort of decision about concept application) that are either *mandated by* (required by all of) or *prohibited by* (permitted by none of) the principles of generation that the reader has tacitly been taking to govern the generation of fictional truths, in conjunction with whatever else she takes to have been mandated as true in the story. (162)

The basic idea here is similar to Weatherson’s *Virtue* principle. Although authors have power in establishing the basic, lower-level facts of a fictional world, they share control with the reader over the principles of generation that govern what is fictionally true. The final sentence of ‘Death on the Freeway’ pops out because “its truth is prohibited by the truth-in-fiction principles that the reader has tacitly been taking to govern the generation of fictional truths in the story, in conjunction with whatever else the reader takes to have been made true in the story”. (165)

However, if what has been said above is right, these principles of generation must themselves be a matter of interpretation, and this will be affected by, amongst other things, what we hypothesise the author’s intention(s) to be. So when we are confronted by such puzzling sentences or passages, we do not and should not take them to be immediately ruled out by some authoritative list of the established principles of generation. Rather, what we take the principles of generation to be will

typically be affected by, and perhaps change to accommodate, the puzzling sentences. The distinction between lower-level and higher-level facts or appraisals is not as rigid as Gendler's account of 'pop-out' requires, and is itself subject to those interpretive constraints mentioned.³⁸ Moreover, in certain cases part of the reason for this will be that what the lower-level facts are, on which these putative principles of generation depend, may itself be a matter of interpretation

In fact, Gendler herself, in a footnote, acknowledges that her account utilizes an idealized, 'linear' view of fictional interpretation, proceeding from a fictional acceptance of some clear low-level facts to accepting or rejecting appraisals of them. She admits that "the interpretative process is far more holistic" than this, "complicating the distinction between lower-level and higher-level facts." But she nonetheless insists that the idealization is a useful one. (n. 31, 162). If I am right, however, this idealization is not just far less useful than supposed, but is a thoroughly mistaken view of the nature of the interpretative, thoroughly holistic process through which fictional truths are established.³⁹ Indeed, this process, I think, casts doubt on the idea that there are *principles* of generation governing fictional truths, as opposed to there being constraints on interpretation which help determine fictional truths relative to some interpretation or other.

Many fictional truths will be determined by whatever is required – and this will include certain imaginative engagements – to make best sense of some fictional world, where 'best' refers to whatever constraints we wish to put on interpretation. On any plausible view, there must be constraints of some sort on interpretation, and these may be difficult to specify precisely.⁴⁰ But they do not preclude the possibility that there need be no single interpretation and hence single set of fictional truths that lock correctly onto *the* world of the text, because there will be as many 'worlds' as there are plausible interpretations.

If we cannot make sense of what is going on we may conclude a number of different things: that the story is intentionally bizarre or deliberately elusive or intricately playful; the author's intentions are obscure or ambiguous, fascist or propagandistic; the author's understanding of human psychology simplistic, shallow or sentimental; the structure incoherent; the writing poor, and so on. Some stories – such as Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* – wear their fictionality openly, playing with the very nature of interpretation and with the normal conventions governing the relationships between author, reader, and text.⁴¹ There is an indefinite number of ways in which fiction can be written and in which authorial intentions can be manifested. It may be difficult in many of these cases to be sure not just of what the fictional truths are, but to differentiate what is supposed to be fictional from what is not; indeed, the intention may be to blur this very boundary.

At issue here may be various types of authorial failings and successes – moral, aesthetic, psychological – and these might affect our ability to imaginatively engage with a work. Stories can be well or badly told, characters poorly or insightfully drawn, scenarios plausibly or clumsily rendered. In all of these ways fiction may be puzzling, but in none of these cases, I contend, do we have an alethic problem as such – there is no puzzle about the failure of authorial authority to make something true in a fiction. There may be problems to do with the ways in which that authority is used or abused, can make a work fail or succeed. But these are fundamentally problems and puzzles

of interpretation and evaluation, not failures of authorial authority that can be explained in terms of violations of *Virtue* or some clear set of principles of generation

Indeed, in so far as interpretation in fiction will often depend partly on what we can and do imagine, we can to some extent put fictional truth and imaginability back together. Where interpretation requires imaginability, fictional truths will themselves be partly relative to the whole range of complex factors governing imaginability, as well as to the interpretive principles and constraints governing our engagement with fiction. It may be, therefore, that strong realist commitments will affect the interpretation of some fictional truths, but this does not entail ‘realism’ about fictional truth – the fictional truths do not depend on what the moral and conceptual facts are, since they are not ‘facts’ in this sense at all.⁴²

So, imaginability and fictional truth remain connected in important, but far from neat, ways, and I have argued that neither gives support to the problem of imaginative resistance that has so taxed the minds of recent thinkers. If the very notion of fictional truth (and indeed imaginability) now appears to be worryingly nebulous, slippery, and relative, this is because fiction just is more complex than the assumptions underpinning discussions of imaginative resistance allow. One this is acknowledged, there may remain philosophically puzzling aspects to fictional truth and imaginability, but the so-called puzzle(s) of imaginative resistance should no longer seem puzzling at all.

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Notes

¹ In fact, Weatherson (2004) identifies four different puzzles. I will be concerned only with his discussion of the alethic and imaginative puzzles.

² This formulation is due to Matravers (2003) but I have added 'is willing/unwilling' to the respective propositions to reflect the current debate.

³ This example recurs throughout his paper and throughout the literature on the topic.

⁴ I shall not be concerned to explore the differences between these various imaginative projects, and there may well be overlaps between all of them. For an important discussion of these issues and their interrelations see Moran (1994).

⁵ Explanations of imaginative resistance in terms of unwillingness to imagine can be found in Gendler (2000) and Matravers (2003). Those who offer explanations based on inability to imagine include Walton (1994), Mothersill (2002), and Weatherson (2004). For extensive discussion of the debate on both sides see Weatherson (2004), Stock (2005), Walton (2006), Gendler (2006).

⁶ This response is rejected by Walton in his recent paper (2006).

⁷ As Stock (2005) puts it, the unimaginable propositions are thus conceptually impossible in the sense that they: 'seek to relate a morally evaluative judgement to (a) descriptive proposition(s), where the respective governing conditions of at least one of the moral concepts employed in the judgement are such that manifestly they would be violated by such a relation, so that the judgement is incoherent.' (617).

⁸ That is, Walton's argument assumes that the principle of supervenience governing moral propositions must be a very strong one, namely, the natural facts must *necessitate* the moral facts: in every possible world where the descriptive facts are the same, the moral facts are the same. From this it would follow that moral judgements cannot be imagined to be different on pain of conceptual confusion, or without a change in the meaning or extension of the terms at issue. But this looks too strong. For moral argument to be possible, we need to allow that the opposing view is both comprehensible and possibly right, and hence cannot be subject to conceptual confusion. There are also good grounds for scepticism about any supposedly clear divide between 'natural' or 'base' and 'supervenient moral' facts. See Moran (1994), and Tanner (1994) for illuminating discussion of these issues. I shall argue in section 5 below (against Weatherson (2004) and Gendler (2006)) for a parallel scepticism about any clear distinction between lower-level and higher-level facts on which a solution to the puzzle might be thought to rest.

⁹ A point made forcefully by Tanner (1994) and Mothersill (2002).

¹⁰ In fact, this hints at an explanation for at least some types of imaginative resistance, as a response to what we might term 'aesthetic flaws' in a work. I shall return to this issue briefly later, but such cases of resistance are not particularly puzzling.

¹¹ An alternative solution is proposed by Gendler (2000) who argues that cases of imaginative responses concern an unwillingness, rather than inability, to imagine. Partly for reasons of space I cannot treat her original views here, but will briefly discuss her most recent account in section 5 below. For persuasive criticisms of Gendler's original position see Weatherson (2004) and Stock (2005).

¹² Whatever particular view of moral judgement one holds, whether one is a particularist or generalist, and irrespective of whether a proposition concerns thick or thin moral concepts, 'whether it is appropriate to relate a given moral judgement... to an act, described in terms of only a single descriptive proposition, will depend on what other descriptions are also posited as true of the act'. (Stock, 2005, 617-18)

¹³ Stock does not exclude cases of resistance explicable in terms of conceptual impossibility where this entails unimaginability; she merely holds that this does not explain the cases discussed in terms of singular, a-contextual moral propositions.

¹⁴ For instance, John punched Clare in order to save her from a worse beating (hence, compassionately), or Giselda killed her daughter to save her from a worse fate.

¹⁵ Or ones involving concepts, thick or thin, applied to bizarre descriptive or evaluative conditions in virtue of which it is difficult (in some yet to be specified way) to imagine their obtaining. For example: 'Nutmeg is the *summum bonum* and one's highest/only obligation is to maximise the quantity of nutmeg in the universe.' (Walton, 1994, 48).

¹⁶ Naturally, many of these contexts will inevitably involve various labyrinthine flights of fancy, and it is worth emphasising again that this oddness to a large extent merely reflects the artificial use of single propositions outside fictional contexts. But the powerful and valuable suggestiveness of language should not be underestimated, and the connotations and allusions and imagery with which writers imbue their work often require combinations of *prima facie* incompatible elements for their effect: 'her lewdness was delicate'; 'she enjoyed the freedom of her slavery'; 'his act of cowardice was brave'; 'he stayed by her side throughout the ordeal thereby demonstrating his treacherous nature'. Here, with

more or less skill and imagination, we ‘simply’ fill out ‘treacherous’, ‘kind’, ‘brave’, ‘wrong’ or ‘lewd’ in terms of certain other contextual conditions obtaining. I leave the reader to indulge their imagination by doing so.

¹⁷ For further detailed discussion see Blackburn (1992), who argues that no thick concepts have their evaluative meanings essentially. The opposing view is propounded by Gibbard (1992).

¹⁸ Of course, we could perhaps invent more fine-grained words here to describe specific acts of murder, but for the present we must work with the language we have.

¹⁹ The term ‘commitments’ should be understood broadly, to encompass a range from mere intuitions to highly articulated philosophical positions.

²⁰ Importantly, as I will argue below, it also concerns various interpretative aspects of the fictional context itself which determine what we take to be fictionally true. See section 5.

²¹ It may also be that *certain* normative claims are more susceptible to resistance, such as Gendler (2000) argues, and that *certain* non-normative claims are more susceptible to inability, but pursuing this issue further here would take us into murkier waters than I’m ready to enter.

²² For detailed discussion see Gendler (2000, 67); Stock (2003); Weatherson (2004, esp. 9-11, and 25). Intuitions about such cases are not very clear or fine-grained, and the imaginability of conceptual, logical, mathematical and other types of impossibility is a highly disputed area. Partly, the problem in determining this issue hinges on what is meant, in any particular case, by ‘imagine’, for imagining comes in many guises and degrees. More on this below.

²³ It seems likely that the relativity of imaginability will be affected by, for instance, what sort of meta-ethical position or commitments one holds, and given the complexity and variety of such views it is unsurprisingly difficult to say anything precise about the imaginability of the relevant claims.

²⁴ Perhaps some kind of naturalistic account of these features of imagination could be given along the lines suggested by Weinberg and Meskin (2006) in terms of the interaction of different cognitive systems. I remain neutral on this, but see note 42 below.

²⁵ ‘Supposing can be coarse in a way that imagining cannot.’ (Weatherson, 2004, 20). This seems to be what Walton (2006) has in mind when he claims that a proposition is fictional if we *ought* to imagine it, but where this does not imply that we *can* imagine it.

²⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of the differences and similarities between imagination and supposition see Weinberg and Meskin (2006, 191-202). Although their account is compatible with the general point being made here, they also stress that there will be intermediate cases that do not fit squarely into either category.

²⁷ This distinction has since been discussed by Walton (2006) and Gendler (2006).

²⁸ Gendler’s (2006) position is in some respects similar to this, as I shall discuss in section 5.

²⁹ That is, if supposition really is subject to no normative or even epistemic constraints. However, if it is the case that certain evaluative concepts have their meanings essentially, then there might be limits to what we can even merely suppose about them, without losing our grip on the very concept itself. See Weinberg and Meskin (2006) for further discussion of the nature of supposition, though it is unclear to me what the implications of their account are for such essential meanings, if there are any. Cf. n. 26 above.

³⁰ There is no doubt a great deal more to be said about these issues, and perhaps one could even develop a taxonomy of imaginability, describing the general principles governing the interaction between (a) realist/anti-realist views, (b) thick and thin normative concepts, and (c) full-blooded imagining and thin-blooded supposition. Unfortunately this takes us too far beyond the scope of the present discussion and must be left for another paper.

³¹ A quasi-realist, for example, will reject the idea that moral concepts are response-enabling. See Stock (2005, 615) for discussion.

³² For further discussion of these issues regarding Weatherson’s view, see Weinberg and Meskin (2006, 187-8). In particular, they argue that Weatherson cannot explain cases where imagining a conceptual impossibility with respect to the lower-level claims that constitute it is crucial to the appreciation of fiction.

³³ In fairness, Weatherson (2004, 7) himself seems to acknowledge the limitations of his account in this respect.

³⁴ This is the second analysis Lewis offers which, I think, is more plausible than the first, and in any case is the one discussed by Lamarque (2002).

³⁵ For an excellent discussion of many of these complexities see Moran (1994) and Tanner (1994).

³⁶ Indeed, as Lamarque (2002, 159) points out, the relationship between fictional truth and interpretation forms a hermeneutic circle: ‘A general interpretive scheme will determine many of the

truths within a fictional world, but these truths will in turn give support to the interpretation. There is no neutral ground from which to judge the truth of such propositions.’

³⁷ In fact, both Weatherson (2004) and Gendler (2006, p. 158, n. 24) suggest in places, without further elaboration, that it may be a question of relative difficulty rather than absolute impossibility, but my argument against their overall accounts of how fictional truths are established remains unaffected by this.

³⁸ Gendler (2006) holds that insofar as ‘appraisals’ concern whether certain concepts could be legitimately applied to certain sets of facts, ‘this is a concern that transcends the bounds of the fictional’. (163) But if the interpretative process is thoroughly holistic in the way I suggest, this statement is far from obviously true.

³⁹ It is worth noting that Gendler’s (2006) account is in many respects far more nuanced and insightful than the brief picture given of it here might suggest. Moreover, she takes her account to be primarily concerned with the imaginative rather than the alethic problem. Nonetheless, insofar as her positing of the phenomenon of ‘pop-out’ and her explanation of it depend on a false understanding of fictional truth and interpretation, her account is substantially weakened.

⁴⁰ They might include ‘epistemic’ constraints, such as a *presumption of verisimilitude* and a *presumption of truthfulness*. But they may also include certain ‘aesthetic’ constraints determining that we interpret the work (charitably) in the best evaluative light. For discussion of these see Lamarque (2002, 157).

⁴¹ Gendler (2006, n. 25, 158) makes a similar point.

⁴² It is worth briefly mentioning here the account given by Weinberg and Meskin (2006) of what they call the ‘puzzle of imaginative blockage’. They offer a naturalistic explanation of what happens in such cases in terms of our cognitive architecture, which appeals to a conflict between types of content produced by different cognitive mechanisms or systems. On the one hand the ‘Inputter’ is responsible for stipulating in our engagement with fiction, for example, a morally abhorrent proposition A, while on the other hand our ‘moral judgement system’ stipulates not-A. It is not clear to me that their account offers a solution to the problem of imaginative resistance, so much as an explanation of the underlying cognitive mechanisms that might explain how it arises in the form of an inability to imagine in certain cases. In any case, if I am right about the interpretive nature of fictional truth, their account has no obvious implications for my dissolution of the alethic problem. Although, in light of my account, it should be acknowledged that Weinberg and Meskin do allow that authors can use a range of ‘tricks’ that can prevent the relevant conflicting cognitive systems from doing their usual job.