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The Mental Functions of Appreciating Fiction

I. OUR APPRECIATION OF FICTION

We typically think that the distinction between non-fiction and fiction is fundamental. Philosophers of fiction have suggested that our appreciating the former is different from our appreciating the latter. Derek Matravers, however, argues that what is fundamental in the philosophy of fiction is not the distinction between non-fiction and fiction but the distinction between “confrontation” and “representation.” He argues that “it is independently implausible to think that what goes on when we read fiction is very different from what goes on when we read non-fiction,” and that there is nothing peculiar about our appreciation of fiction.

There are two remarkable points in Matravers’s view. First, it questions the validity of recent debates around fiction, especially Walton’s. Matravers claims that “While I find myself in sympathy with the broad thrust of Walton’s approach, I find myself out of sympathy with much of the debate that has come thereafter.” Second, it clarifies the common point between our appreciating fiction and appreciating non-fiction, which is important to know in order to understand what it is to appreciate fiction. However, to provide a hypothesis about our appreciating fiction, I reconsider Matravers’s arguments. Matravers’s view has some problems because it has little regard for our background knowledge of fictional works. For example, Matravers thinks that background knowledge is operative in the appreciation of both non-fictional and fictional works. He also thinks it does not preoccupy us during our appreciation of these works. However, it seems reasonable to think that there are mental functions associated with recognizing the background knowledge of fictional works, and also mental functions of immersing ourselves in fiction. Because these functions work together during our appreciation, we are able to have the same emotional responses to fictional entities as we do to non-fictional entities without confusing reality with fiction.

II. MATRAVER'S CONFRONTATION AND REPRESENTATION

Matravers argues that we should abandon talk of the distinction between non-fiction and fiction. Instead, he introduces a distinction between what he calls the situation of confrontation and representation. He explains these situations as follows.

Being in a confrontational relation with an object means that we know that the object is there, and are aware of its location relative to ourselves. If we have the right “instrumental beliefs”—the beliefs that would enable us to transform our desire to act into action—we could act. Our mental states are caused by perceptual inputs from the object, and we take action towards it.

On the other hand, a situation of representation does not cause actions towards what is being represented because it lies outside of our reach. We cannot help suffering children in fictional works, and usually do not even try to do so. In a situation of representation, our mental states are not caused by perceptual inputs from the object of those states, and we do not take actions towards them. For Matravers, all fictional works are representations; but so are biographies, histories, hypothesis, suppositions and thought experiments. He does mention, however, that some cases of the representation relation can be turned into a confrontation relation. So, for example we can help suffering people seen on a live broadcast, difficult as it might be. Consequently, it is not always clear at the outset whether a situation is confrontational or representational.
Why then think that the distinction between confrontation and representation is more fundamental than the distinction between non-fiction and fiction? To answer this question, Matravers explains the relation between his argument and Walton’s theory of make-believe.

Walton argues that our appreciation of fiction is best thought of as “games of make-believe;” that is to say, “Appreciating paintings and novels is largely a matter of playing games of make-believe with them of the sort it is their function to be props in.” For example, when children are playing, they may decide to regard tree stumps as “bears.” In this case, the tree stumps are “props” for the game of make-believe. Similarly, in Walton’s view, we use a text or a picture as props when we are appreciating fictional works. When we read a novel, for example, we imagine that we receive a report from narrator who is speaking the content of that novel as truth. Thus, we make-believe some fictional truth by using the work's content as a prop. Walton argues that “Any work with the function of serving as a prop in games of make-believe, however minor or peripheral or instrumental this function might be, qualifies as “fiction;” only what lacks this function entirely will be called non-fiction.” By this argument, Walton explains our appreciation of fiction, the ontological problems of fictional characters and other problems in the philosophy of fiction.

Matravers, on the contrary, argues that “the imagination cannot bear the weight that has been placed on it by contemporary philosophers of fiction.” For him, there is no significant difference between appreciating non-fictional works and appreciating fictional works. From this point of view, Matravers criticizes Walton’s argument in the two following ways.

First, Matravers argues that Walton depends on “the transformation criterion,” which is the claim that “something is a fiction if the imagination is required to transform a proposition true in the actual world into a different proposition true in the fictional world.” Matravers, however, argues that the transformation criterion is never actually fulfilled. In children’s games of make-believe, for example, an actual-world proposition like “This is a tree stump” is transformed into the distinct proposition that “This is a bear” in the fictional world. But when we appreciate fictional works rather than playing fictional games, no actual-world propositions change into fictional propositions. For this reason, Matravers argues that the game of make-believe does not fulfill the transformation criterion.

The second problem with Walton’s argument is that the boundaries of the category of fiction are unclear. As mentioned above, Walton claims that any work with the function of serving as a prop in a game of make-believe qualifies as fiction. Matravers argues that the problem here is that any narrative representation will require us to make-believe. For example, when we are reading travel journals, we may imagine the landscape described in the works so that, according to Walton, travel journals are fiction. And yet when we compare this conclusion to the category of fiction in ordinary usage, it seems rather dubious. Travel journals are not usually categorized as fiction, so it seems that Walton’s distinction does not work well.

Matravers therefore concludes that the significant distinction is not between fiction and non-fiction, but between confrontation and representation. Furthermore, he argues that the process of appreciating fiction is identical to the process of appreciating non-fiction. In Matravers’ view, both fictional works and non-fictional works (e.g., histories or biographies) belong to the same category: they are representations. Matravers explains the reason why these processes are the same by appealing to studies of the psychology of text processing. The results of these studies shows that to appreciate fiction is to be engaged with representations, that is, to understand representations, to construct our mental state and to have non-inferential responses to the representations (e.g., to have emotional responses to the fictional entities).

Matravers ultimately argues that our appreciating representations does not depend on their fictionality or non-fictionality. We can appreciate a representation without knowing whether it is fictional or non-fictional: we can read books regardless of whether we believe them to be fiction or is non-fiction. These considerations, Matravers thinks, can be useful for considering our attitude toward the content of representations. If, however, fiction has certain peculiarities of appreciation which non-fiction does not, then the above explanation loses its validity.
III. SOME OBJECTIONS TO MATRAVERS’S VIEW

There is an objection against Matravers’s argument presented by Mikkonen. He claims that Matravers “does not pursue the (assumedly) different kinds of imagining involved in reading fiction and non-fiction.”14 Mikkonen argues that there are differences in the “direction” of imagination, or the “internal” and “external” perspectives on the content of a work, in reading fiction and non-fiction:

For example, in reading a work of fictional literature, we often speculate about the fictional world of the work – or truth in fiction – whereas “external considerations,” our thinking of the content of the work in terms of reality, might or might not take place. In turn, when engaging with Searle's “Chinese Room” we might not put much effort into pondering why the man was locked in the room (a perfect literary concern), as we think through the philosophical implications of the thought-experiment.15

Matravers does not explain this difference;16 in fact, Matravers’s arguments do not refer to the qualitative difference between them. In particular, the advantages Matravers claims for his approach are dubious. It is reasonable, after all, to think that the responses of appreciators who believe what they read is fiction are different from the responses of appreciators who believe what they read to be non-fiction. Certainly, we can understand the content of the work regardless of whether we believe them to be fiction or non-fiction, although the result of each reading might well be different. Nevertheless, the result of each reading might well be different. It is conceivable, after all, that an appreciator who mistakenly believes that what she reads is non-fiction then discovers it to be fiction could respond by saying “Oh, is this a fabrication? I won’t read this anymore.” If there can be a difference in her emotional responses to fiction and non-fiction, then they do not call for the same appreciation.

In anticipation of this line of argument, Matravers cites evidence from psychology of text processing as indicating that there is no such difference between appreciating fiction and appreciating non-fiction. Sarah Worth, however, argues that Matravers’s account in his use of fiction “is primarily bounded by literary fiction and not the representational arts more generally.”18 The evidence which Matravers cites does not include the way we appreciate fictional movies and comics, for example, and his arguments do not seem equally applicable to these cases. Moreover, even the evidence which Matravers cites seems to acknowledge that there is a difference between reading fiction and non-fiction. Matravers reports, for example, that “Potts and colleagues also found that information from what readers believed were non-fictional representations were assimilated more easily into existing memory structures than information from what readers believed were fictional representations.”19 It therefore seems that there is a qualitative difference between appreciating fiction and appreciating non-fiction.

From this point of view, it is problematic to introduce Matravers’s argument without modification. So what kinds of explanations for appreciating fiction could there be? Walton’s theory has an explanation for the qualitative difference between appreciating fiction and non-fiction, but as we saw it has trouble distinguishing between them in the first place (to say nothing of the controversial role of “quasi-emotions”).20 On the other hand, Matravers’s view does not need the explanation for appreciating fiction that Walton’s does, but it cannot explain the qualitative difference between appreciating fiction and appreciating non-fiction.

The result, I think, is that we should construct a new outlook for appreciating fiction. The two positions at stake—that we can distinguish between the functions appropriate to fiction and non-fiction, and that we cannot—showcase some of the different mental functions of our consciousness. In the rest of this paper, I propose that appreciating fiction is possible because two distinct mental functions work together.
Before considering our appreciation of fiction, it is necessary to mention the background knowledge appreciators bring with them to a story. The word “background” was introduced by Lewis,21 and Matravers agrees that background is required for appropriate readings.22 I will argue, however, that there are two types of background knowledge: the background knowledge we need to understand the content of the work, and the background knowledge we need to understand the context of the work. The “backgrounds” Lewis defines are included in the former, but he pays little attention to the latter kind of background knowledge. In what follows I will argue that contextual background knowledge is peculiar to appreciating fiction, and plays an important role in our appreciation of fiction. Without it, we cannot recognize fiction as fictional.

Lewis defines “background” as the beliefs and facts about our world which would have been true in the story-world if the story had been told as known fact rather than as a fiction.23 For example, it is true in the Holmes series that “Holmes does not have a third nostril,” though it is not explicit. That is because it is a fact that ordinary people have two nostrils, and we have no reason to doubt that the Holmes stories feature ordinary people. Likewise, everyone who lived when the Holmes series were written “knew roughly where the principal stations of London were,” and “disbelieved in purple gnomes.”25 These are the beliefs overt in the text’s community of origin, and we read the Holmes series keeping this background in mind. Another kind of background are the truths that “carry-over” from other fictions.26 For example, the dragon “Scrulch” described by Lewis breathes fire even if the story does not say so explicitly because dragons in most other stories breathe fire. This is the carry-over from what is true in other fictional stories, and the background knowledge to understand the content of the work.

As Matravers acknowledges, background knowledge is operative on both fiction and non-fiction. For example, when we read a travel journal written in the nineteenth century, we know that the people in this book do not have a third nostril, and we know where London is located; we assume as much because of how background knowledge operates. Background thus help us to understand the content of the work.

On the other hand, the background knowledge needed to understand the context of the work reinvokes the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, and the conventional or appropriate attitude for appreciating fiction. It often happens that, before seeing a movie, we already know whether what we are going to see is fiction or non-fiction.27 If the genre of the movie is science fiction or fantasy, for example, it is easy to determine that it is fictional. Or, if there is a word “biography” on the cover of a book, the content of that book is (usually) non-fictional. Moreover, authors and editors often clarify the nature of their works themselves: many novels, comics, and movies, for example, contain a sentence like “The story, all names, characters and incidents in this work are fictitious.” What is important here is that, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction supervenes on our background knowledge. As Davidson has argued, “If Homer intended his audience to take his “Troy” to refer to a real place, his intention misfired for many centuries until Schliemann came along.”28 So it is a necessary and sufficient condition for appreciating fiction that an appreciator can distinguish fiction from non-fiction. Accordingly it is an important function of background knowledge to clarify the distinction between fiction and non-fiction.29 Note also that there are criteria or rules for appreciating fictional works. For example, although we can accept the existence of a witch in a fantasy novel, we do not accept her existence in hard-boiled fiction. Each appreciator requires her own level of coherence or conformity with reality, but it is by these criteria that we understand, judge, and criticize fictional works. These criteria all concern the background knowledge needed to understand the context of the work, and this kind of background knowledge is operative only on fictional works.30

We can thus distinguish between two mental functions at work here. We have the mental function of immersing ourselves in fiction (the im-function). By this function, we can suspend the background knowledge to understand the context of fictional works and be engaged with the works. But at the same time, we have another mental function which recognizes the background knowledge needed to understand the context of the works (the bk-function).
The relation between these two functions can be explained by the following example. When we are doing something, sometimes we devote ourselves to that task without caring about others, but sometimes we stop what we are doing when we notice a noise, or when a pressing matter comes up. That is because there is a mental function of watching the situation around us. This mental function controls the other mental function which is devoted to that work. The functions mentioned above work in a similar manner.

Our appreciation of fiction includes interpreting content with the same attitude we deploy towards interpreting non-fiction, as Matravers argues. Appraisers activate the im-function, so that they can understand the contents with charity, while suspending the background knowledge needed to understand the work's context, i.e., without thinking that these are mere fabrications. In consequence, they have emotional responses to the work. However, by activation of the bk-function, we can interpret the representations without confusing reality with fiction. Moreover, by the bk-function, we would not forget that we are appreciating fictional works, however deeply we immerse ourselves in them. On the other hand, when we appreciate non-fictional works, we only use background knowledge to understand their contents. Certainly, we often immerse ourselves in the contents of non-fictional works; there is no suspending background knowledge, however. So the interaction of the im-function and the bk-function is peculiar to the appreciation of fiction.

We use both the im-function and the bk-function during the appreciation of fiction. We can appreciate fiction from the internal and external perspectives on the content of a work. The internal perspective designates an appreciator’s perspective on the content of the work or the truth in the work; the external perspective designates an appreciator’s perspective which compares the content of the work with reality, or to other situations surrounding the work. We appreciate fiction by using both perspectives.

This could be exemplified by the following situation. Suppose that, in a novel, a character named 'Alice' acts selfishly. For this depiction, it is plausible for an appreciator to have the following impressions:

(A) Alice is selfish.
(B) In this novel, there is a depiction that the character named Alice acts selfishly.

In this situation, (A) is an impression from the internal perspective, and (B) is an impression from the external perspective. In other words, (A) is an impression of immersion in the work, and (B) is an impression of criticizing the work. When we have the impression (B), we use our background knowledge to understand its context. Both impressions work, but the stances they generate on the same work are different.

Walton’s and Matravers’s arguments cannot explain why an appreciator can have both impression (A) and impression (B). Nor can their arguments explain the reason for the difference between (A) and (B). In Walton’s theory, (B) can be thought of as a statement from the external perspective. However, both the objects referred to by the name “Alice” in (A) and (B) are included in the game of make-believe. They are the same in the category of make-believe, and we cannot explain why our immersion in the work under impression (A) is deeper than it is under impression (B). So we cannot clarify the differences between two objects by Walton's theory. Similarly, as Mikkonen mentions, Matravers’s theory does not distinguish between the internal and the external perspectives we take on the content of a work, so it cannot explain why the above two impressions are possible.

Our conclusion can explain these situations, however. (A) is the impression under the activation of the im-function, while (B) is the impression under the activation of the bk-function. The deeper an appreciator immerses herself in a fictional work, the more she depends upon an internal perspective. That is to say, her emotional responses become increasingly similar to a reader's emotional responses to non-fiction, or Matravers’s 'confrontation' situation. However, as mentioned above, the reason why we would not confuse reality with fiction depends on the bk-function.

We must consider both the similarities and the differences between the process of appreciating fiction and that of appreciating non-fiction. If any one of these elements are missing, we cannot
understand the essential point of our engagement with fiction. This is where Matravers’s and Walton’s arguments are unsuccessful: we can understand the peculiarity of fiction by recognizing the background of our appreciation.

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Bibliography


The term “appreciation” here means taking a proper stance towards the content of the work, and reading or watching it.

See Lamarque and Olsen (2004: 4-5).


Ibid., 2.

Ibid., 35.

Ibid., 83.

Ibid., 48.


Ibid., 72.

For example, Walton tries to answer the ontological problem of fictional entities by assuming the reference to them to be in the game of make-believe (390-404). Moreover, he explains the problem of inconsistency of fiction by his theory (174-183).


Ibid., 13.

Ibid., 57.

Mikkonen (2014).

Ibid.

Mikkonen also claims that “it is problematic to assimilate fiction and non-fiction under the broad category of “narrative” (2014). We would have different expectations when reading fiction and non-fiction.

Similar objections to Matravers’s argument can be found in Kajtár (2015: 2). Kajtár says that “it is accepted that there are various salient markers that signal fictionality. Might not these markers influence the mental models that readers build? And if they do, might not their influence be related to the imagination?”


Paskow, for example, claims that Walton does not explain “what enables us to take our imaginings in any way seriously” (2004: 51). Moreover, the word “quasi” causes a misunderstanding, because it can be heard as if Walton argues that the emotion we have during appreciating fiction is not real, but a fake one. Walton tries to clear up this misunderstanding in his (1997).

Lewis (1978).

Matravers (2014: 82-83).

Lewis (1978: 45). Also, Walton argues this as “the reality principle” to explain make-believe. Walton (1990: 144).
24 Lewis (1978: 41).

25 Ibid., 44.

26 Ibid., 45.

27 The terms “fiction” and “non-fiction” used here are not in philosophical, but in ordinary, uses.


29 There are some cases when an author misguides the appreciator. She may parody categorical/generic conventions, or in some cases deliberately deceive. Also, there are many works which deliberately blur the standard categories of fiction and non-fiction. In these cases, we appreciate such works after estimating their category. We can therefore comprehend and appreciate such works without knowing whether they describe real or invented events.

30 There is disagreements over the background knowledge needed to understand the context of a work. For example, Currie mentions that our response to a work depends on our perception of its genre: “Perception that the work belongs to a certain genre will influence our expectations about plot development and our recognition of certain elements within it as having salience” (Currie 1990: 118). The “perception” which Currie mentions is the same as the bk-function. Moreover, he argues that “The response to fiction is a complex product of make-believe and judgements about the work that do not occur within the scope of the make-believe at all” (119). Although his theory overlaps with our conclusion, it is not the same. Currie does not argue that background knowledge is essential to appreciate fictional works. Likewise, Davidson argues that “a meaning which can be grasped without knowledge of whether it was generated in the context of history or of fiction cannot depend on that context” (Davidson 1993: 175). He also observes that “our response to a work may differ according as we think of it as fact or fiction, and it may differ according as we think of it as intended as fact or fiction” (175).

31 The “charity” in this paper comes from Donald Davidson’s usage of the “principle of charity.” Davidson says that “just as we must maximize agreement, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about, so we must maximize the self-consistency we attribute to him, on pain of not understanding him” (1984: 27). Accordingly, I claim that we cannot appreciate fiction unless we maximize agreement with the content of fictional works.

32 Matravers also observes that film audiences “are able, if so inclined, to see the actor as the actor” (Matravers 2014: 153). But he also argues that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction “typically does not show up in the experience of the audience” (152).