The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance

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THE PUZZLE OF IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE*

The puzzle that concerns me here can be traced back at least as far as David Hume, but it has received surprisingly little attention in the intervening two hundred years.[1] The puzzle is this: Given that for the most part we have no trouble fictionally entertaining all sorts of far-fetched and implausible scenarios, what explains the impediments we seem to encounter when we are asked to imagine moral judgments sharply divergent from those we ordinarily make?

Hume poses the problem in the vocabulary of sentiments and customs. He writes:

> Where *speculative* errors may be found in the polite writings of any age or country, they detract but little from the value of those compositions. There needs to be but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make

us enter into all the opinions which then prevailed and relish the senti-
ments or conclusions derived from them. But a very violent effort is req-
uisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of
approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the
mind from long custom has been familiarized...I cannot, nor is it proper
that I should, enter into such [vicious] sentiments (*op. cit.*, p. 247).

Since the puzzle that motivates Hume's remarks is independent of
his particular moral ontology, let me frame it in more neutral vocab-
ulary. Let us call it:

The *puzzle of imaginative resistance*: the puzzle of explaining our comparative
difficulty in imagining fictional worlds that we take to be morally deviant.[2]

My goal here is three-fold: to convince you that there *is* a puzzle
here (though it is not quite the one Hume seems to think it is), that
there is a solution to the puzzle (though it is not quite the one I sus-
pect you think it is), and that these together reveal something inter-
esting about the nature of imagination. Hume is right that there is
a phenomenon of imaginative resistance, but he is mistaken to think
that it arises in all and only cases of deviant morality. You are right
that the explanation of the phenomenon has something to do with
the relation between imagination and possibility, but you are mis-
taken if you think that that is the primary source of the resistance.
What I want to try to convince you is that the primary source of imag-
inative resistance is not our *inability* to imagine morally deviant situa-
tions, but our *unwillingness* to do so. I want to trace the source of
this unwillingness to a general desire not to be manipulated into tak-
ing on points of view that we would not reflectively endorse as au-
thentically our own. This unwillingness is explicable only if
imagining involves something in between belief, on the one hand,
and mere supposition, on the other. So, in order to make sense of
the phenomenon of imaginative resistance, we are going to have to
learn something about the phenomenon of imagination itself.

I. OVERVIEW OF THE PUZZLE

Let us begin by trying to get a better handle on precisely what the prob-
lem is even supposed to be. Hume's worry, I take it, is something like
the following. When we engage in the sort of make-believe that contem-
plation of fictional scenarios evokes, we are largely unconstrained by
what we take to be *factual.* We have no trouble imagining that Sherlock
Holmes solved mysteries in nineteenth-century London, that an owl and

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[2] I borrow this terminology—though not this characterization of the puzzle—
from Moran, "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," p. 95.

a pussycat went out to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat, or that a hobbit named Frodo Baggins carried a magic ring all over Middle Earth. Indeed, one might think (and I shall have more to say about this later) that we are unconstrained even by what we take to be possible. We make sense of stories where characters travel back in time, where spaceships go faster than the speed of light, where wizards turn straw into gold, and where lonely geniuses prove the continuum hypothesis. So, given that imagination is such a powerful and agile capacity, it seems extraordinary that little old morality could stop it in its tracks.

Here is one formulation by Richard Moran of the asymmetry that seems to characterize this perplexing phenomenon:

> If the story tells us that Duncan was *not* in fact murdered on Macbeth's orders, then *that* is what we accept and imagine as fictionally true. If we start doubting what the story tells us about its characters, then we may as well doubt whether it's giving us their right names. However, suppose the facts of the murder remain as they are in fact presented in the play, but it is prescribed in this alternate fiction that this was unfortunate only for having interfered with Macbeth's sleep, or that we in the audience are relieved at these events. These seem to be imaginative tasks of an entirely different order (*ibid.*, p. 95).

What Moran is pointing out is this. When an author invites us to contemplate a fictional scenario, she seems to have a great deal of freedom in how she directs our imagination. Among the things she can make fictionally true are all the sorts of things I have just described—that animals marry, that time travel occurs, that alchemy is good science, and so on.[3]

[3] The principles of generation that govern fictional truth are extremely complicated; I am inclined to think that the correct theory will be some sort of pragmatic theory of fictional truth, but this is a topic for another paper. For two of the most influential accounts of this issue, which has generated a sizable literature in recent years, see Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, especially pp. 35-43 and 138-87; and David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," in his *Philosophical Papers*, Volume I (Princeton: University Press, 1983), pp. 261-80. See also Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (New York: Oxford, 1994). For discussions of this issue in the context of literary theory which make use of the philosophical notion of possible worlds, see Sture Allén, ed., *Possible Worlds in Humanities, Arts, and Sciences: Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 65* (New York: de Gruyter, 1989); Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1986); Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (New York: Cambridge, 1994); Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991); Elena Semino, *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts* (New York: Longman, 1997); and Paul Werth, *Text-worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (New York: Longman, forthcoming). See also Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979), and *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); and Patrick Colm Hogan, *On Interpretation: Meaning and Inference in Law, Psychoanalysis, and Literature* (Athens: Georgia UP, 1996). (Thanks to Margaret Freeman and Yael Halevi-Wise for guidance concerning this literature.)

But she seems to have much less freedom in what she makes fictionally true as far as matters of moral assessment are concerned. The trick that allows an author complete freedom in dictating whether or not character *A* murders character *B* is much less effective if what the author wants to dictate is that the murder is, for instance, praiseworthy, or noble, or charming, or admirable.[4] So the puzzle is this: What explains why a trick so effective in so many realms is relatively ineffective here?[5]

II. BELIEF AND MAKE-BELIEF

A first step in understanding the phenomenon can be made by noting a certain asymmetry between belief, on the one hand, and make-belief on the other. When it comes to believing propositions that we do not think are true, we find ourselves equally stumped in the case of moral and nonmoral claims. I cannot bring myself to believe that murder is right—but I cannot bring myself to believe that the earth is flat either. When it comes to make-belief, however, we seem more inclined to find ourselves stumped in the one case than in the other. I have a much easier time following an author's invitation to imagine that the earth is flat than I do following her invitation to imagine that murder is right.[6] What could be the source of this difference?

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[4] See Moran: "Why can we not, as it seems, treat the judgments of morality and decency the same way we treat any other judgments, and accept as fictionally true what the story tells us (or implies) is true, and comfortably leave our genuine attitudes at the door? What happens to our sense of *distance* at that point, the distance between what we can imagine and what we actually believe?" —"The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," p. 97.

[5] The question of whether imaginative resistance occurs in the way I have described is, of course, an empirical one. Although ample confirmation of its existence can be obtained through informal means, Aaron Sell (Department of Psychology, University of California/Santa Barbara) and I have recently begun work on a series of empirical psychological studies designed to examine the phenomenon in some detail.

[6] Walton points out (personal correspondence) that my use of 'make-believing' seems ambiguous between two readings. If I make-believe that *p*, I may be: (a) accepting that *p* has been successfully made fictional (that is, accepting that the author has succeeded in presenting a story in the context of which a certain proposition is true) or (b) pretending that *p* (that is, entertaining or attending to or considering the content of *p*, in the distinctive way required by imagination). Although these are clearly two different states, I think they are connected in a way that legitimates my conflating them in certain contexts. Because I think that—very roughly stated—what is true in a story is what the author manages to get the (appropriate) reader to imagine, if (appropriate) readers are unable (or unwilling) to make-believe in the second sense, they will be unable (or unwilling) to make-believe in the first. (I return to this issue in my discussion of "doubling the narrator," in section III below.)

Let us begin by looking at the case of belief. With regard to belief, there is little contrast to be drawn between (1) and (2):

(1) I am asked to believe that P holds (where P is some nonmoral proposition that I do not believe holds).
(2) I am asked to believe that M holds (where M is some moral proposition that I do not believe holds).

Both (1) and (2) evoke resistance; in neither case am I able—just like that—to bring myself to believe the proposition in question. Of course, there are all sorts of ways that I might come to change my beliefs. I might gain certain sorts of empirical information about the world, or I might work through the implications of the propositions to which I am committed, or I might come to make sense of my experiences in terms of categories whose applicability to these circumstances I had previously denied or failed to recognize. The routes by which I might come to make these sorts of changes are many: I might look through a telescope, or read an encyclopedia, or listen to a lecture, or take a logic class, or have a series of conversations with my therapist, or enroll in a twelve-step program, or subject myself to brainwashing, or take a special kind of pill that will disrupt my normal mental functioning, or act in the way I would expect to act if I believed the proposition to be true. Depending on the circumstances, one or another of these processes might result in my actually becoming committed to the veracity of the proposition in question, in spite of my previous failure to endorse it. But despite the diversity of techniques that we have for acquiring and changing beliefs, it is important that simply deciding to believe any old arbitrary proposition is not straightforwardly among them. Why not?

Whatever one's views about the subtleties of beliefs' aims, I take it that the following, at least, is uncontested. We do not seem to be able to bring ourselves to believe arbitrary things at will, and at least one of the reasons for this is that beliefs aim—at least most beliefs mostly aim—at something that is generally independent of our wills, namely, something roughly correlated with truth. So it is a nonaccidental fact about belief that, given the sorts of things we expect beliefs to do, believing at will just could not be one of the ways that we generally come to form beliefs.[7]

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[7] See Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," reprinted with new pagination in his _Problems of the Self_ (New York: Cambridge, 1970/1973), pp. 136-51. Although (as many have pointed out) the details of his case are surely overstated, the basic insight—that "it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something" (p. 148)—seems to me undoubtedly correct. (For a recent defense of the view that belief aims at truth, see David Velleman, "On the Aim of Belief," manuscript (Spring 1999 version).) While it might be true that we do decide to believe in the sense that we decide which evidential standards to take as sufficient in a particular context, this does not show that we are indifferent to truth in the way that simple believing at will would require.

This means that it should not surprise us that perceived falsehood under-mines belief candidacy: since in general we want most of our beliefs to be mostly true, a proposition that shows up for its interview in the guise of the false is just not going to make the cut. So (1) and (2) are easily ex-plained: given the sort of thing belief is, we should expect the resistance they describe.

But the same is not true of make-belief. In contrast to deciding to believe and deciding to desire, deciding to make-believe seems to be—at least in many cases—within our repertoire of capacities. That is, in contrast to (1), where my inclination to refuse the invita-tion is tied up with the preconditions for there being such a thing as belief in the first place, (3) seems to describe an invitation for which the default is my acceptance.

> (3) I am asked to make-believe that P holds (where P is some nonmoral
>   proposition that I do not believe holds).

There are at least two reasons that this is so. The first is that belief and make-belief do not conflict; I can make-believe that P is true while believing that P is true, or while believing that P is false, or while remaining agnostic about the truth status of P.[8] So the fact that P is a proposition that I do not (prior to the invitation) believe to be true in no way interferes with my make-believing that it is true; perceived falsehood undermines belief candidacy, but it raises no problems for make-belief. But there is a second, more interesting feature of make-belief that concerns me here. The will indepen-dence of belief may be seen as a fall-out from the truth directedness of belief. But in the case of make-belief, the explanatory arrow goes the other way around. It is the will dependence of make-belief that explains its indifference to the truth of its content. Where belief is concerned with tracking states of affairs, make-belief is concerned

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[8] One might think this is because make-belief or pretense is a kind of processing which is carried out "off-line." See the articles collected in Martin Davies and Tony Stone, eds., *Folk Psychology* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), and Davies and Stone, eds., *Mental Simulation* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995)—especially those in the latter by Alan Leslie and Tim German, Currie, and Paul Harris. See also the articles col-lected in Peter Carruthers and Peter K. Smith, eds., *Theories of Theories of Mind* (New York: Cambridge, 1996)—especially those by Shaun Nichols et alia, Stone and Davies, and Currie. See also Leslie, "Pretense and Representation: The Ori-gins of a 'Theory of Mind'," *Psychological Review*, XCIV, 4 (1987): 412-26; Currie, "The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind," in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver, eds., *Emotion and the Arts* (New York: Oxford, 1997), pp. 63-77, and "Pre-tence, Pretending, and Metarepresenting," *Mind and Language*, XIII, 1 (March 1998): 35-55; Walton, "Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime: On Being Moved by Fic-tion," in Hjort and Laver, pp. 37-49; and Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, *Meeting of Minds: Thought, Perception and Imagination* (New York: Oxford, forthcoming).

with constructing scenarios.[9] So while believing at will is, in general, precluded by the aims of belief, *make-believing* at will is not merely permitted, it is what the practice is about in the first place.

   Putting things this way allows us to see why the asymmetry between (3) and (4) is at least prima facie perplexing. For just as (1) gives us (3), (2) gives us (4):

>   (4) I am asked to make-believe that *M* holds (where *M* is some moral
>   proposition that I do not believe holds).

Given what has just been said about the nature of make-belief, there seems no reason to expect that (4) should evince a reaction any different from that evinced by (3). After all, make-believing that *M* does not commit us to the truth of *M* any more than make-believing that *P* commits us to the truth of *P*. So maybe Hume is just wrong? Maybe Moran is just being stubborn? Maybe there is not really an asymmetry here after all?

III. THE ASYMMETRY

I do not think the puzzle can be dispensed with quite so easily, and I want to offer a couple of examples by way of convincing you of this. Let me start by quoting a bit of Rudyard Kipling. Here are the first and fifth stanzas of "White Man's Burden":[10]

> Take up the White Man's burden—
> Send forth the best ye breed—
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captives' need;
> To wait in heavy harness
> On fluttered folk and wild—
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child.

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[9] One might think that make-belief in the case of fiction consists in following an author's lead in constructing such scenarios. [For discussions of these issues, see, among others, the writings of Currie (including *The Nature of Fiction* (New York: Cambridge, 1990), as well as "Imagination and Simulation: Aesthetics Meets Cognitive Science" in Davies and Stone, *Mental Simulation*, pp. 151-69, and "The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind"); Walton (including *Mimesis as Make-Believe* and "Metaphor and Prop-Oriented Make-Believe," *European Journal of Philosophy*, I, 1 (1993): 39-57); Nicholas Wolterstorff (including *Works and Worlds of Art* (New York: Oxford, 1980); and the works cited in footnote 3.)] But this in no way mitigates the force of the asymmetry. For the question then becomes: Why do we follow the author's lead in cases like (3), but not in cases like (4)? This is discussed further in section VII below.

[10] In *McClure's Magazine*, XII (February 1899).

Take up the White Man's burden—
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard—
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly) toward the light:—
'Why brought ye us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?'

Leaving aside niceties of literary interpretation, let us take this poem as a straightforward invitation to make-believe, a proposal about something we are called to imagine without committing ourselves to its literal truth. Let us focus on the beginning of the second stanza. Among the things that Kipling is asking us to make-believe there are the following: that there are certain white characters who have taken it upon themselves to initiate a group of nonwhites into the ways of Western culture, and that their efforts in this regard have, as usual, resulted in their being blamed and hated on the part of those whom they take themselves to be improving and guarding. So far, so good; I have no difficulty following Kipling's lead. I am perfectly happy to make-believe that there are white characters to whom the things just described happen.

But there is another thing that Kipling is here asking us to make-believe, namely, that the white characters' behaviors are a fulfillment of their obligation to "better" those who, by virtue of their skin color, are their natural inferiors. Here, I find myself strangely resistant—not only to believing that this is true—but to make-believing it as well. Whereas I have no inclination to distance myself from the "plot" of the poem by saying that the events described therein are just things that Kipling thinks happened, I do have that inclination with regard to the "evaluative" parts of the poem.

A similar pattern can be observed in other cases of moral disagreement. So, for example, in discussing just these issues, Kendall Walton[11] imagines a story that includes the following sentence:

(5) "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl" (*ibid.*, p. 37).

Again, I think we find ourselves willing to imagine some things but not others. Upon hearing this sentence, I am perfectly willing to ac-

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[11] "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality/I." He acknowledges, and I acknowledge with him, the contrivance of presenting such a sentence without a larger narrative context. I beg the reader's temporary forbearance; I shall turn to this issue shortly.

cept that this is a story in which Giselda kills her baby; I do not have any inclination to say: "According to the narrator in the story, Giselda killed her baby. But the narrator could be wrong about that. Maybe the baby is still alive." But the same is not true of the rest of the sentence. Our first instinct—at least my and Walton's first instinct—is to reject the invitation to make-believe that "It was right for Giselda to kill her baby, given that it was a girl." My inclination is to respond to the invitation with something like the following: "What is right to make-believe is that according to the narrator who is telling the story, female infanticide is morally acceptable. But even in the world of the story, the narrator is wrong; infanticide is *not* morally acceptable, even in a society where everyone believes that it is."[12]

Now, as a general move, to respond to an invitation to make-believe with this sort of distancing gesture is to refuse to play the game of make-believe. There is a joke that brings out why this is so.[13] One night, a graduate student dreams that she is approached sequentially by all of the famous philosophers in history. To each in turn, she provides a devastating one-line criticism, so that the thereby devastated philosopher slinks away in humiliation to rethink his entire theory. Although she is soundly asleep, the graduate student is nonetheless able to scribble down the astonishing sentence on a pad of paper by her bedside. When she awakens in the morning, she remembers her dream. She grabs the pad of paper to behold her remarkable insight. Scrawled across the top are the words: 'That's what you think!'

The joke is funny—to the extent that it is—because 'That's what you think' *is* in fact something that could be said to every philosopher in history. But it is not a very good objection. As an ending to a conversation game, it is more like knocking over the board than like winning by the rules. So we need to have pretty good reasons for concluding a conversation with 'That's what you think'.

What I want to suggest is that imaginative resistance is a 'That's what you think' move in a game of make-believe—something which is always available as a last resort, but which, if overused, undermines the entire convention of which it is supposed to be offering local criticism. If imaginative resistance were our general response to authors' invitations to make-believe, this would be tantamount to refusing to

[12] Walton writes: "A reader's likely response on encountering the words: 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl', is to be appalled by the moral depravity of the *narrator*" (*ibid.*, p. 38).

[13] Thanks to Adam Sennet for passing this joke on to me.

play the fiction game. The analogue to 'That's what you think' is the sort of doubling of the narrator which I have just described, where from the author's inclusion of (5) in the story, we conclude not that (5) is true in the story, but that (5) is what the narrator of the story thinks is true.[14] But such unwillingness to grant the author the right to stipulate what happens in the story is tantamount to giving up on the idea of storytelling altogether. Just as the practice of philosophy would be undermined if it were normal to respond to every argument by saying 'That's what you think', so, too, would the practice of fiction be undermined if it were normal to respond to every invitation to make-believe with a doubling of the narrator.

So imaginative resistance is a phenomenon that cries out for explanation. Given that the narrator doubling must be confined to exceptional cases, why are we so ready to use it when a work of fiction depicts a world that differs morally from the way we take the actual world to be?

IV. THE IMPOSSIBILITY HYPOTHESIS

I suspect you think that you know the answer to this question. I suspect you think that just as belief is constrained by what is *true*, make-belief is constrained by what is *possible*, and the sorts of scenarios toward which we manifest imaginative resistance are scenarios that are impossible. As a result, the sorts of things that (4) asks us to make-believe—let us call them *morally deviant propositions*—are simply not make-believable, because they represent conceptually impossible states of affairs.

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[14] Moran (personal correspondence) has objected to this suggestion as follows: when we move from accepting X as true-in-the-story to attributing belief in X to the *teller* of the story, it appears as if we are saying that X itself cannot be imagined-as-true, but that we can imagine some person holding X true. But, the objection continues, if we can imagine some belief, we should be able to imagine the proposition believed; in fact, logically speaking, it seems that there ought to be stronger constraints on imagining beliefs than on imagining propositions, since doing the former entails doing the latter. Three quick remarks. First, as I shall argue below, the cases of imaginative resistance that interest me are not cases where we *cannot* imagine that X is true, but rather cases where we *will not* do so; this, however, does not address the heart of Moran's worry. So, second, there are at least two sorts of cases in which we might be interested; with regard to one of them, it is easier to imagine that X is true than to imagine someone believing X to be true (for example, infinite mathematical sentences), whereas with regard to the other, the opposite holds (for example, racist beliefs). But what makes the latter sort of case possible? Third remark: there are cases where we have a grasp on what sort of mistake a person would have to be making in order to believe some (false) proposition, without having a grasp on what a world where that proposition was true would be like; it may well be that in such cases we are holding the world to standards stricter than those to which we are holding the person, but if so, this is something we do generally in the attribution of false beliefs.

Now, because I think this is the wrong explanation, for reasons that have to do with fundamental facts about the nature of imagination and its relation to possibility, I plan to spend much of the rest of this paper convincing you that I am right. But let me first present the position against which I will be arguing.

Here is Walton's discussion of this view, which he goes on, at least tentatively, to endorse.[15] He writes:

> Moral properties depend or supervene on 'natural' ones...being evil rests on, for instance, the actions constituting the practices of slavery and genocide.... This...accounts...for the resistance to allowing it to be fictional that slavery and genocide are not evil.... Our reluctance to allow moral principles we disagree with to be fictional [that is: true in the world of some fiction] is just an instance of a more general point concerning dependence relations of a certain kind.[16]

So the first part of the orthodox answer involves pointing out that moral facts supervene on natural facts, and that morally deviant scenarios are scenarios that involve the imaginative disruption of these supervenience relations. But this is only the first part of the answer. The question remains: Why should we be resistant to imagining that the supervenience relations might be other than we take them to be? We are, after all, willing to allow that we may be wrong about certain of our moral judgments, that we might be incorrect in our assessments of certain of these supervenience relations. While we may think that, if we are correct, it follows that the relation we are correct about is a relation that holds necessarily, we have not thereby shown that we could not *imagine* it being otherwise.

Walton's suggestion seems to be that our conviction in these cases is a consequence of our recognition of a certain sort of conceptual impossibility. He writes:

> We need an explanation of why we should resist allowing fictional worlds to differ from the real world with respect to the relevant kind of dependence relations. My best suspicion...is that it has something to do with...an inability to understand fully what it would be like for them to be different (*ibid.*, p. 46).

What does the "inability to understand fully what it would be like for them to be different" amount to? The idea, I take it, is something

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[15] In his brief remarks in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Walton connects the phenomenon to the problem of truth in fiction (p. 154). In his extremely rich "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality/I," Walton provides a number of suggestive explanations, ultimately endorsing this one, which he calls his "best suspicion at the moment" (p. 46).

[16] "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality/I," pp. 43-46.

like the following. We just cannot make sense of what it would be for something to be both an instance of genocide *and* an instance of something that is nothing morally worse than a failure in manners, or both an instance of murder *and* an instance of something that is morally right. Or, more precisely, we cannot make sense of what it would be for something to be both an instance of murder and an instance of something that is morally right, and for it to be morally right *because* it is an instance of murder. So our resistance arises from the feeling that at a certain point, we simply lose a handle on what it is that we are even supposed to be imagining.

Let us call this view:

> *The impossibility hypothesis*: imaginative resistance is explained by the fol-
> lowing two considerations: (1) the scenarios that evoke imaginative re-
> sistance are conceptually impossible; (2) the conceptual impossibility of
> these scenarios renders them unimaginable.[17]

If it were correct, the impossibility hypothesis would certainly explain the phenomenon of imaginative resistance. If there are things that are unimaginable, then we certainly cannot imagine them, so we should not be surprised that our capacity to make-believe at will runs out at precisely those points. But I think the impossibility hypothesis offers the wrong sort of explanation. In fact, I think both parts of the impossibility hypothesis rest on mistaken assumptions. I do not think that the sorts of situations that evoke imaginative resistance need to be situations that we judge to be conceptually impossible, and I do not think that, in general, a judgment of conceptual impossibility renders a scenario unimaginable. But more importantly, I do not think that the impossibility hypothesis offers the right sort of explanation of the phenomenon of imaginative resistance. So let me try to show you why not.

V. IMAGINABLE CONCEPTUAL IMPOSSIBILITIES

Let us start by considering some statements which seem offer even more extreme instances of conceptual impossibility than those with which we have been concerned so far.

(a) twelve is not the sum of five and seven.
(b) twelve used to be the sum of five and seven, but is no longer the sum of five and seven.
(c) twelve both is and is not the sum of five and seven.

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[17] For an intriguing discussion of these issues, see Graeme Marshall, "Intelligibil-
ity and the Imagination," in Raymond Gaita, ed., *Value and Understanding: Essays for
Peter Winch* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 13-31, and the Winch texts referred
to therein.

We are so clear that these statements are conceptually impossible that the principle of charity seems to require that we credit someone who utters them with having changed the subject. If someone comes up to me and says "Twelve both is and is not the sum of five and seven," it seems that I have no choice but to reinterpret one or more of her terms. Whatever she is talking about, she cannot mean by 'twelve' and 'both' and 'is' and 'and' and 'not' and 'sum' and 'five' and 'seven' what we mean by those terms. It just does not make sense to say that twelve both is and is not the sum of five and seven; and since I cannot make sense of what it would be for twelve both to be and not to be the sum of five and seven, I surely cannot imagine a story in which it is true that twelve both is and is not the sum of five and seven. Such a story is bound to evoke imaginative resistance on my part. Or so the impossibility hypothesis predicts.

So sit back, relax, and let me tell you a little fable:

The Tower of Goldbach

Long long ago, when the world was created, every even number was the sum of two primes. Although most people suspected that this was the case, no one was completely certain. So a great convocation was called, and for forty days and forty nights, all the mathematicians of the world labored together in an effort to prove this hypothesis. Their efforts were not in vain: at midnight on the fortieth day, a proof was found. "Hoorah!" they cried, "we have unlocked the secret of nature."

But when God heard this display of arrogance, God was angry. From heaven roared a thundering voice: "My children, you have gone too far. You have understood too many of the universe's secrets. From this day forth, no longer shall twelve be sum of two primes." And God's word was made manifest, and twelve was no longer the sum of two primes.

The mathematicians were distraught—all their efforts had been in vain. They beseeched God: "Please," they said, "if we can find twelve persons among us who are still faithful to You, will You not relent and make twelve once again the sum of two primes?" And so God agreed.

The mathematicians searched and searched. In one town, they found seven who were righteous. In another, they found five. They tried to bring them together to make twelve, but because twelve was no longer the sum of two primes, they could not. "Lord," they cried out, "what shall we do? If You lifted Your punishment, there would indeed be twelve righteous souls, and Your decision to do so would be in keeping with Your decree. But until You do, twelve are not to be found, and we are destined forever to have labored in vain."

God was moved by their plea, and called upon Solomon to aid in making the decision. Carefully, Solomon weighed both sides of the issue. If twelve again became the sum of two primes, then the conditions according to which God and the mathematicians had agreed

would be satisfied. And if twelve remained not the sum of two primes, again the conditions according to which God and the mathematicians had agreed would be satisfied. How Solomonic it would be to satisfy the conditions twice over!

So with great fanfare, the celebrated judge announced his resolution of the dispute: From that day on, twelve both was and was not the sum of five and seven. And the heavens were glad, and the mountains rang with joy. And the voices of the five and seven righteous souls rose toward heaven, a chorus twelve and not-twelve, singing in harmonious unity the praises of the Lord. The End.

Now, you may not be totally convinced by the Tower of Goldbach story. You may not think that I have succeeded in telling a story at the end of which there both are and are not twelve righteous souls. You may not even think that I have succeeded in telling a story in which twelve ends up both being and not being the sum of five and seven. But unless you are in the grip of some philosophical theory that tells you that you should not make such a concession, I think you need to accept that I have told a story where at least something which if it were stated barely would be conceptually impossible is, in the context of the story, true. That is, contrary to what clause (b) of the impossibility hypothesis predicts, the conceptually impossible proposition that (say) twelve suddenly ceases to be the sum of two primes becomes—for the moment at least—imaginable.[18]

The reason the story can do this, of course, is that it focuses our attention on certain *aspects* of the things that it asks us to imagine.[19]

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[18] While I do not think that we fully make sense of what it would be for twelve suddenly to cease to be the sum of two primes, I think we do something more than merely assent to the sentence 'Twelve used to be the sum of five and seven, but is no longer'. The meanings of the individual terms and the way they are combined play a significant role in fixing what we take ourselves to be assenting to. I return to this issue in the next footnote. For a more comprehensive taxonomy of the sorts of assent which may be involved in cases such as these, see John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Longmans, 1909), as well as the discussion in Marshall. (Thanks to Michael Stocker for these references.)

[19] What happens as we read through "The Tower of Goldbach" is that we focus now on this aspect of what it is to be twelve, now on that aspect, in a way typical of fictional understanding in general—indeed, in a way typical of nonfictional understanding as well. (This theme is emphasized in the literature on "conceptual blending"; for representative discussions, see Mark Turner, "Conceptual Blending and Counterfactual Argument in the Social and Behavioral Sciences," in Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics* (Princeton: University Press, 1996); Gilles Fauconnier and Turner, "Conceptual Integration Networks," *Cognitive Science*, XXII, 2 (1998): 133-87; Fauconnier, *Mental Spaces* (reprint, New York: Cambridge, 1994); Fauconnier and Eve Sweetser, *Spaces, Worlds, and Grammar* (Chicago: University Press, 1996).)

When we imagine the things that, on reflection, we realize to be conceptually impossible, we imagine them in ways that disguise their conceptual impossibility. So when God gets angry and causes twelve no longer to be the sum of two primes, we are considering 'Twelve is the sum of two primes' primarily with regard to one of its features, namely, that it is a proposition of which human beings are categorically certain only as a consequence of their hubristic arrogance. When the mathematicians' search concludes with their having found five righteous souls in one town and seven in another, we are willing to accept that this does not give us *twelve* righteous souls because we are thinking of it as: "number of righteous souls required for God to lift the decree." It is as a result of lots of local bits of conceptual coherence that the global incoherence is able to get a foothold.

So conceptual impossibility does not preclude imaginability. As long as they are properly disguised, we are able to imagine all sorts of impossible things. But it does not take the Tower of Goldbach story to show us this. Even if one holds that conceivability under ideal rational reflection tracks conceptual possibility, possibility tracking is clearly a nonstarter when the issue is imaginability of the sort we are concerned with in games of make-believe. For unlike ideal rational reflection, make-believe depends upon precisely the sort of abstraction that may well leave out conceptually relevant features of the situation at hand. Indeed, one of the main points of pretense and make-believe and reading fiction and viewing art is to take on various ways of seeing things—ways that focus on certain elements of the situation, while ignoring others.[20]

Thinking about literal games of pretense will help me make my point even more clearly. Such games involve exactly this sort of exploitation of our capacity for selective attention. When we pretend that a banana is a gun, we focus on certain similarities, such as shape, while ignoring others, such as internal complexity. The principles of generation that determine what is true in a game of make-believe may be quite compli-

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[20] See Arthur C. Danto: it is "one of the main offices of art less to represent the world than to represent it in such a way as to cause us to view it with a certain attitude and with a special vision"—*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981), p. 167.

cated.[21] Generally speaking, the edibility of bananas does not make it make-believe that play guns are edible, nor does their yellowness make it make-believe that play guns are yellow. While the location of the stem may fix the direction of the muzzle, nothing in the banana seems to correspond to the bullets, nor does anything in the gun correspond to the peel.

As Walton[22] has argued persuasively, the interpretation of fiction may be helpfully seen as a similar sort of prop-oriented game of make-belief. Even without a general theory of truth in fiction, it is evident that the principles of generation will be at least as complicated for novels as for banana guns. Is it true in "The Tower of Goldbach" that the mathematicians proved Goldbach's conjecture? Well, the story *says* that that is what happened. But is that really Goldbach's conjecture, or just something with Goldbach-like features?

I am not quite clear on what grounds we would be able to answer such a question. At least, I do not have sufficiently fine-grained intuitions about concept individuation, nor do I see how I could acquire them. But I also do not think they matter for understanding the story. Are the owl and the pussycat in the pea-green boat really an owl and a cat, or just things with owl-like and cat-like features? Is Peter Rabbit a rabbit? Is Frosty the Snowman a snowman? Is the knave of hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* a playing card? Whatever it is to be a playing card, or a snowman, or a rabbit, it is pretty clear that it precludes doing the sorts of things that are done by the knave of hearts, or Frosty, or Peter. Indeed, it is not clear that anything could be a snowman, where by 'snowman' I mean what you mean by 'snowman', and be something that sings, where by 'sing' I mean what you mean by sing. So, which is it: Is Frosty not a snowman, or does he not sing? Or perhaps he sings only insofar as he is

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[21] For an overview of some of the philosophical issues involved, see Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, chapter 1; and Currie, *The Nature of Fiction, passim.* Among the most helpful of the many empirically based writings on the subject are Currie, "Imagination and Aesthetics," in Davies and Stone, *Mental Stimulation,* and "Pretense, Pretending, and Metarepresenting"; Leslie, "Pretense and Representation: The Origins of a 'Theory of Mind'"; Paul L. Harris, "Understanding Pretence," in Charles Lewis and Peter Mitchell, eds., *Children's Early Understanding of the Mind* (New York: Erlbaum, 1994); Angeline Lillard, "Making Sense of Pretence," also in Lewis and Mitchell; Joseph Perner et alia, "Prelief: The Conceptual Origins of Belief and Pretence," also in Lewis and Mitchell; and Jacqueline Woolley, "Young Children's Understanding of Fiction vs. Epistemic Mental Representations: Imagination and Belief," *Child Development,* LXVI (1995): 1011-21.

[22] *Mimesis as Make-Believe,* as well as his numerous articles before and after.

something other than a snowman. But then: Is he both a snowman and not a snowman at the same time? Or perhaps being a snowman is some sort of phase sortal? Or maybe being-a-snowman is just a way of describing some more fundamental property upon which snowmanness supervenes?

To ask these sorts of questions is to demonstrate an ignorance of what it is to engage in games of make-believe; and the phenomenon in question is not limited to cases of fiction involving things like talking snowmen or mathematical absurdities. Consider what might be called the *that thing with the cup* problem. In the realistic novel *A Man in Full*, Tom Wolfe[23] describes a sexual encounter in a motel between the sixty-year-old protagonist, Charlie Croker, and his soon-to-be-wife, the beautiful twenty-something Serena. Wolfe relates Croker's memories of the events as follows:

> Once they got into the room, she produced that little cup from her handbag, and they did the thing with the cup, something he had never heard of in all his life. He had lost his mind to her demented form of lust. Danger! Imminent exposure! That thing with the cup (*ibid.*, p. 228)!

Like Croker himself, many readers have "never heard of [that thing with the cup] in all [their] li[ves]," so a reporter from *The New Yorker* took it upon herself to ask Wolfe precisely what this lascivious act was supposed to have involved. She reports the following reply:

> When Tom Wolfe was told last week that no one has the faintest idea what that thing with the cup is, he said, "As a matter of fact, neither do I. I concocted the phrase to somehow give you a vision of some unmentionable perversion. It sounded so simple, yet so dreadfully titillating, but I never even had a glimmer of a notion what it might be."[24]

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[23] New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998.

[24] Rebecca Mead, "Fuller Explanation Department: Tom Wolfe Decodes the Naughty Riddle That Has His Readers Stumped," *The New Yorker* (January 25, 1999): p. 26. One might think, as Wolfe himself sometimes suggests, that "that thing with the cup" is metaphoric. But even if this is the correct diagnosis of the cup case (which I think it is not), it will not do as a general solution to the problem. There may be no way to spell out fully how Frosty is both a snowman and a thing that sings, but it does not follow that it is a metaphor that Frosty is a singing snowman. To repeat: make-believe allows us to consider aspects of complexes in a selective way, attending to bits of local coherence even though the whole may be incoherent.

The that thing with the cup problem is this: there is *nothing* that counts as doing that thing with the cup—nothing at all. It is not like the question of whether Sherlock Holmes's mother had blue eyes—which is a case of underspecification that could be precisified in any number of ways. The problem with that thing with the cup is that there is nothing that it is to be that thing with the cup in this (the actual) world, and there is nothing that it is to be that thing with the cup in the world of Serena and Charlie Croker. There are no extra body parts, no extra positions, no extra ways in which something that is not arousing in this world is arousing in that world (doing you-know-what with the cup, for instance). But despite this, it is nonetheless true in *A Man in Full* that Charlie Croker and Serena did that thing with the cup, and that they enjoyed it. Similarly, even though there is no way that any world might be such that seven and five both do and do not equal twelve in it, it is nonetheless true in "The Tower of Goldbach" that seven and five both do and do not equal twelve.

What this shows is that clause (b) of the impossibility hypothesis is wrong for deep and not shallow reasons. It is not that our stupidity or finitude occasionally leads us to mistake conceptually impossible situations for conceptually possible ones, resulting in an ability to imagine what our best theory tells us we should not be able to imagine. It is that the constraints that possibility places on the imagination are not the sort of thing that could explain imaginative resistance. They are too easily disguised, and too easily overcome if disguised, to provide the right kind of explanation.

VI. OTHER SOURCES OF IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

But surely, you want to object, the sort of conceptual impossibility that confronts us when we are asked to imagine that murder is right is a different sort of conceptual impossibility than that which confronts us when we are asked to imagine that Frosty is a singing snowman. Our grasp on moral terms is too tightly connected to their applicability to certain sorts of actions for us to understand what it would be for these to come apart. We just do not have a handle on how something could be enough like murder for us even to be tempted to call it "murder" if at the same time it is supposed to be something that we could understand as being right. So whereas the conceptual impossibility of the Frosty case is a philosopher's problem, the conceptual impossibility of the murder case is not. This suggests that the impossibility hypothesis might still be right in spirit, even if it is wrong in letter. The source of imaginative resistance might be attributable to our difficulty in making sense of the scenario, even though conceptual impossibility as such does not guarantee unimaginability.

But though there is certainly something right in that analysis, I am convinced that it is not the full explanation.[25] My reasons for thinking so are two-fold. The first is that there are scenarios which are clearly not impossible which seem to evoke precisely the same sort of imaginative resistance as those cases which purportedly are. The second is that there are certain sorts of changes that seem to make imaginative resistance evaporate, even though they make no difference to the conceptual coherence of the scenario in question. So, even if we allow that the sorts of scenarios that generally evoke imaginative resistance *are* conceptually impossible, and in a more central way than the way in which a singing snowman is, there are reasons to think that even so, *this* is not going to give us the full solution to our puzzle. Rather, I shall argue, whether or not we are inclined to respond with imaginative resistance is going to turn out to depend on *why* we think we are being asked to imagine them.

So let us begin with a case that I think shows that we can have imaginative resistance without conceptual impossibility. It is another story, a bit shorter this time.

The Mice
Once upon a time there were a bunch of mice. The mice who had white fur were hardworking and industrious, but the mice who had black fur were slothful and shiftless. A huge number of them were addicted to some kind of drug, and the rest of them just spent their days hanging out on the streets and eating watermelon. Their nests were unkempt, filled with cast-off bits of string and old sunflower seed shells. So it was not surprising that the mice with white fur tended to be much better off than the mice with black fur—shinier coats, better food, and so on.

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[25] The cases where explanation on the basis of inability seems most plausible are those where our grasp on the concept in question is via a single feature which we are asked to imagine away (see Hilary Putnam's discussions of "one-criterion concepts"), or where the text involves the deliberate juxtaposition of two obviously contrary features in a way that is *intended* to produce something unimaginable (as in the children's rhyme: "One bright day in the middle of the night, two dead men got up to fight. Back to back they faced each other, drew their swords and shot each other. The deaf policeman heard the noise, and came and shot those two dead boys. If you don't believe this lie is true, ask the blind man—he saw it too"). I am not denying that sometimes a phenomenon akin to imaginative resistance arises where we are unable, rather than unwilling, to make sense of what the narrator seems to be asking us. Nor am I denying that the (conceptual) impossibility of a situation may make it more difficult to imagine than one that is not (conceptually) impossible. But, for the reasons I discuss above, I do not think this could be a full explanation. (Thanks to the audience at Rutgers University, and especially to Matthew Phillips, for pressing me on the need to make this concession.)

Even so, the mice with white fur were very generous to the mice with black fur. They gave bits of cheese to the black mouse babies. They left piles of nuts and seeds in the black mouse neighborhoods. And obviously, they provided the black mice with role models of diligence and industry. But the mice with black fur just kept to their old ways. They seemed constitutionally incapable of changing. They sat around as if they expected the white mice to *give* things to them—just like that! More more more, that's what they seemed to expect. Some of the white mice kept providing the black mice with food and other necessities, but most did not. And that was the right thing to do. For the distribution of resources in the mouse world reflected the relative merits of the two mouse groups. All the mice got what they deserved. The End.

Now, I take it that there is nothing about the concept of "mouse" that makes it conceptually incoherent that there should be one group of mice which is socially superior to another group of mice. So what makes the story so hard to swallow? What makes it so difficult to accept not only that the white mice deserve more goodies than the black mice (for reasons of industriousness or fur color), but—in certain moods at least—to accept even the basic outlines of the plot (were the black mice really slothful and shiftless? did they really just sit around expecting the white mice to give them things?)?[26]

The problem, of course, is that it is virtually impossible for us to take "The Mice" as anything but an extremely crude allegory for race relations. As such, the story evokes the sort of imaginative resistance that is evoked by Walton's Giselda case. My inclination in hearing the mouse story is to say: "It is not true in the world of 'The Mice' that white mice are better off than black mice because they deserve to be; that may be what the *narrator* of the story thinks, but she is obviously mistaken; surely, there are relevant features of the relation between black-mouse and white-mouse culture that she has simply not attended to."

But in this case, my reasons for narrator doubling have nothing to do with my *inability* to make-believe that there is world in which white mice and black mice have the features described in the story, and in which white mice are better off than black mice because they deserve to be; they have to do with my *unwillingness* to do so. And my unwillingness to do so is a function of my not wanting to take a particular perspective on the world—this world—which I do not endorse.

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[26] Thanks to Walton for pressing me on the need to clarify the sort of resistance that I take the story to evoke.

This brings me to the final step in my argument, which is to show that there are certain sorts of changes that seem to make imaginative resistance evaporate, even though they do not affect the coherence or incoherence of the case in question. So let us try varying Walton's Giselda story in ways that presumably do not affect the coherence or incoherence of the scenario described, but that do affect our sense of distance from the narration.[27]

Suppose that instead of:

(5) "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl."

we had:

(6) "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was born on January 19."

or:

(7) "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a changeling."

For me at least, neither (6) nor (7) evokes the same sort of response that (5) does. I said above that in reading (5), my and Walton's first instinct was to reject the invitation to make-believe that "It was right for Giselda to kill her baby, given that it was a girl," responding instead with a narrator-doubling move. But this is not my first instinct with regard to (6) or (7). There my first instinct is to say: "How interesting! I wonder what this world is going to turn out to be like, this world in which killing one's baby is the right thing to do, so long as the baby is born on January 19, or is a changeling." In fact, in light of (6) and (7), I can almost feel my imaginative resistance to (5) evaporating. So long as I am not inclined to take (5) as making a claim about the way this world is, I am perfectly willing to grant it the autonomy that I grant to other sorts of make-believe.[28]

VII. GENRE AND THE LAWS OF IMPORT-EXPORT[29]

But how could describing a fictional world be a way of making claims about the way this world is? The explanation lies in recognizing that like conversation in general, storytelling makes use of standard as-

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[27] Thanks to Zoltán Gendler Szabó for suggesting this way of looking at the problem.

[28] Tanner observes (though does not argue for) this. He writes: "We are not, then, in any serious way challenged or offended in those cases where we can't make reasonably strong connections between a fictional world we encounter and our own"—(*op. cit.*, p. 63).

[29] Special thanks to John Hawthorne for discussion of the ideas contained in this section.

sumptions about common knowledge and presupposition. The nar-
rator needs to assume that the listener shares a wide range of back-
ground beliefs about the world, and the listener needs to assume
that the narrator assumes this, and so on, in familiar Gricean fash-
ion. To see how this connects up to the problem of imaginative re-
sistance, let us start with the following simple case.

Suppose you are an author who has written a work of realistic fic-
tion—like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Anna Karenina.* The store of fictional
truths that are generated by the story will include not only all of the
explicit statements you make about what happens to Elizabeth or
Darcy or Anna or Vronsky, but also a tremendous number of actual
truths that are *imported* into the story. Some of these will be explicitly
stated; others will be generated by whatever turns out to be the correct
principle for generating fictional truths in this context. But because
the story is a work of realistic fiction, regulations concerning imports
will be extremely lenient: in general (though there will be numerous
exceptions), if something is true in the actual world, it will be true in
the fictional world. Some of these fictional truths will concern what X
said to Y on Tuesday, some will concern how the quadrille is danced,
and some will concern the painfulness of unrequited love. Those di-
rectly tied to the specifics of the story will be merely true in the fiction.
But there will be a tremendous number of things which are true in the
fiction which are also true in the actual world.

Now, if I as a reader know this, then I shall feel free to *export* from
the fictional world fictional truths that I take to be not merely truths
in the story. Because this is a work of realistic fiction, regulations
concerning exports will be extremely lenient: in general (though
there will be numerous exceptions), if something is true in the fic-
tional world, it will be true in the actual world. From among the in-
ventory of fictional truths that the story provides, I shall thus have
access to at least two sorts of proposition that I may come newly to
accept as true. The first sort are those which make use of the *narra-
tive as clearinghouse*: I export things from the story that you the story-
teller have intentionally and consciously imported, adding them to
my stock in the way that I add knowledge gained by testimony. In
this way, for instance, I might learn how women wore their hair in
nineteenth-century France, or when the serfs were emancipated, or
how far away a particular village is from London. The second sort
are those which make use of the *narrative as factory*: I export things
from the story whose truth becomes apparent as a result of thinking
about the story itself. These I add to my stock the way I add knowl-
edge gained by modeling. In this way, for instance, I might learn

that the relation between loyalty and adultery is more complicated than I had suspected, or that the deleterious effects of a rigid class structure are (un)equally distributed among the classes.

Let us call fiction that is realistic in the way I have just described *nondistorting* fiction; and let us contrast it with what we might call *distorting* fiction, where the mirroring between the fictional and the actual world is more complex. An extreme example of distorting fiction is the sort of backward story that one finds in the Addams Family, where, at least for wide range of things, what is good is bad and what is bad is good—but where the point of the story is precisely that the reader be aware of these inversions, and alter the laws of export accordingly. The distancing mechanisms invoked in the last section exploit precisely this phenomenon. When I read (7)—that "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a changeling"—I have no inclination to think that this is meant to be an instance of nondistorting fiction. The bizarreness of the example cues me into the fact that there is no straightforward export being offered—and as I realize this, my inclination to resist diminishes.[30]

So my hypothesis is that cases that evoke genuine imaginative resistance will be cases where the reader feels that she is being asked to export a way of looking at the actual world which she does not wish to add to her conceptual repertoire.[31] Why should this raise particular problems for

[30] This hypothesis is supported by research in cognitive psychology (by Judith Smetana and later by James Blair), which suggests that moral-rule violations are judged problematic in cases where a mechanism which Blair calls VIM (*violence inhibition mechanism*) is set off. For nonpsychopaths, VIM is activated when there is a victim (someone in distress) whose presence as a victim is conspicuous to the subject. The cognitive science research predicts that a person will "morally react" to a situation when (1) there is a salient victim, and (2) there is no overriding consideration, such as justice, which alters the subject's assessment of the circumstances. Cases where violent (and pornographic) movies fail to evoke the expected degree of imaginative resistance in nonpsychopaths can be traced to these considerations. Either (1) the objects of violence are systematically not focused on (Rambo's victims), represented as unharmed (Wile E. Coyote) or portrayed as enjoying their treatment (pornography) or (2) considerations of revenge, justice and deserved punishment are presented as overriding (such as in cowboy films, sadomasochistic pornography). For further discussion, see R. J. R. Blair, "A Cognitive Developmental Approach to Morality: Investigating the Psychopath," *Cognition*, LVII (1995): 1-29; and J. G. Smetana and J. L. Braeges, "The Development of Toddlers' Moral and Conventional Judgments," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, XXXVI (1990): 329-46, as well as references contained in each. (The insights and references in this footnote are a direct consequence of a series of extremely fruitful e-mail conversations with Ron Mallon.)

[31] I have been helped in my thinking about these issues by Michael DePaul's work on moral corruption—see especially "Argument and Perception: The Role of Literature in Moral Theory," this JOURNAL, LXXXV 10 (October 1988): 552-65, and *Balance and Refinement : Beyond Coherence Methods of Moral Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also Judith Lichtenberg's work on moral certainty, especially "Moral Certainty," *Philosophy*, LXIX (1994): 183-206. (Thanks to Lynne McFall for this last reference.)

morality? The answer, I think, is two-fold. The first is that moral claims are often taken to be categorical, in the sense that, if they are true at all, they are true in all possible worlds;[32] while purported facts about Sherlock Holmes and Gandalf are easily understood as being merely fictional, purported facts about the morality of murder are not. So the first part of the explanation is that fictional moral truths clamor for exportation, in a way that other sorts of fictional truths do not. But this cannot be the whole story, for the export regulations may be such that—as with the Addams family case—the product is radically altered as it crosses the border from fictional to real. So a further explanation is required; and I think it is this. For a story even to make sense, a great number of things that are held to be true within the fiction must be held to be true outside it, and vice versa. The moral principles that govern the world in question are generally among these, as are the truths of logic, mathematics, and—in most genres—the laws of physics and psychology and even etiquette. When a story explicitly cancels one of these presuppositions—as, for instance, in the case of "The Tower of Goldbach"—we are generally inclined to take the cancellation as governing only the fictional world; I was not trying to get you to export the belief that twelve both is and is not the sum five and seven, just as I was not trying to get you to export the belief that there is something that is both a snowman and a thing that sings. In most cases, the very fact of deviance is sufficient indication that literal export is not the intention.

But because we recognize that there are instances of *actual* moral disagreement, when we encounter fictional truths that concern deviant morality, we cannot assume that their deviance is an indication that the author does not wish them to be exported, or that she wishes them to be exported in altered form. There may be indications that this is all that is intended—as in (6) and (7)—and then the imaginative resistance disappears. But when, as is the default, we understand the story as demanding that we take on a certain way of looking at the actual world, we are inclined to resist.[33]

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[32] I thank Barry Loewer for this insight.

[33] How does this explanation fare with other—nonmoral—cases that seem to evoke something akin to imaginative resistance? For instance, Walton (in "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality/I") points out that it is difficult to imagine something that would be a bad knock-knock joke in the actual world being hilariously funny in a fictional world, or something that would be a jagged and angular in the actual world being graceful and flowing in some fictional world. Carl Ginet has suggested in conversation the same in cases of being asked to imagine, for instance, that sour milk smells good or that a piercing shriek sounds soothing. I think these

VIII. CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by tying what I have been saying to some more general issues concerning the nature of imagination as such. I noted above that, in general, we want what we *believe* to track what is true in the actual world. We might say that, in parallel fashion, we want what we *make-believe* to track what is true in a given fictional world. What is fictionally true in a given world is largely—though surely not entirely—up to the author of the narrative. So we can say, roughly, that to engage in imaginative resistance is to fail to follow the author's lead in make-believing what the author wants to make fictional. What is the source of this failure?

The impossibility hypothesis traces the failure to a problem with the *fictional* world. It says essentially: we are *unable* to follow the author's lead because the world she has tried to make fictional is impossible. My alternative proposal traces it to a problem with our relations to the *actual* world. It says essentially: we are *unwilling* to follow the author's lead because in trying to make that world fictional, she is providing us with a way of looking at *this* world which we prefer not to embrace.[34]

If I am right, we should expect to find parallel cases of something akin to imaginative resistance whenever we feel that we are being asked to add to our repertoire of schemata a way of looking at the world which we prefer not to have available; and we should expect

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cases can be dealt with in one of two ways. (a) In the Walton cases, I think that where it is clear that no export is intended, we are often able to accept that it is true in the story (and not just that it is thought by the characters in the story to be true) that, for instance, knock-knock jokes are the highest form of wit. To the extent we resist in such cases, I think it is because we take the author to be claiming something about the status of knock-knock jokes (or rock music, or the combination of orange-and-pink) in *this* world. (b) In the Ginet cases, there are two possibilities for what we are being asked to imagine. Either we are being asked to imagine that something that shares (most of) the features of sour milk does not smell unpleasant, which strikes me as straightforwardly imaginable, or we are being asked to imagine something that has the odor that sour milk has (that particular *quale*) but that does not smell unpleasant. In this latter case, we seem to be dealing with something analogous to a one-criterion concept. The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that we are dealing with phenomena that operate at a subcognitive level. Part of the difficulty involved in imagining that sour milk smells appealing (on either reading) is—in my case at least—purely physiological; the same seems to be true for imagining that, for instance, having one's teeth drilled is pleasurable. (It seems easier to imagine that a backrub is painful than to imagine that having one's thumb crushed is pleasant.) In these cases, we may have too "direct" a grasp on this feature of the subject matter to abstract away from it in imagination. (Note that this tells in favor of my larger point—that imagination is not just supposition.) See also the discussion in footnote 24 above.

[34] Thanks to Currie for suggestions that led to a refinement of this paragraph.

imaginative resistance to evaporate as the lines between belief and
make-belief are made more and more explicit.

Both predictions are borne out. If you say to me: "Don't you see
how Aunt Ruth looks just like a walrus!" I may resist following your
suggestion; I may simply not want to notice the way in which her
forehead juts forward like that, or the way that her eyes bug out, or
the fact that those lines beneath her nose do look a bit like tusks.
Similarly, a parent concerned with gender equality may resist calling
the strong chair the "papa chair" and the weak chair the "mama
chair." The advocate of abortion rights speaks of himself as "pro-
choice" and not "antilife;" his opponent adopts the opposite termi-
nology. And so on.[35]

The source of this resistance can be traced to the way in which
imagination requires a sort of participation that mere hypothetical
reasoning does not.[36] If instead of embedding P and M in (1) and
(2), which ask us to believe, or (3) and (4), which ask us to imag-
ine, we embed them instead in sentences, such as (8) and (9),
which ask us to suppose for the sake of argument, then the asym-
metry again disappears:

   (8) I am asked to *suppose for the sake of argument* that P holds (where P is
        some nonmoral proposition that I do not believe to hold).
   (9) I am asked to *suppose for the sake of argument* that M holds (where M is
        some moral proposition that I do not believe to hold).

As long as I take myself to be in no way implicated in the way of
thinking that M presupposes, and as long as I take the claims of M to
be restricted to the realm of the merely hypothetical, I feel no more
resistance in supposing M than in supposing P. What this suggests is

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[35] See Moran: "We may resist making a certain comparison, or the appropriate-
ness of some metaphor, even when we are not rejecting something we have been
given to believe. In such a case, one is rejecting a point of view, refusing to enter into
it"—"The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," p. 105. These issues are discussed
in detail in his "Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image and Force," *Critical Inquiry*,
XVI (1989): 87-112. See also Walton, "Metaphor and Prop-Oriented Make-Believe,"
where, in discussing the practice of plumbers and electricians in distinguishing be-
tween 'male' and 'female' plumbing and electrical connections, he writes: "The
plumbing and electrical connections invite scarcely any participation in the game in
which they are understood to be props. The conscientious plumber does his job
without, fictionally, leering at the fixtures. (The plumbing terminology can be
vaguely titillating, however, and it might cause embarrassment, especially when one
comes across it for the first time. These reactions suggest that a certain perhaps im-
plicit participation in the game will be likely, perhaps even inevitable" (p. 40).)
[36] See Moran's distinction between hypothetical and dramatic imagination, dis-
cussed briefly in "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," pp. 104-05.

that imagination is distinct from belief, on the one hand, and from mere supposition, on the other. It is this which explains both our general capacity to imagine morally deviant situations, and our general unwillingness to do so.

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