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Desires and Fiction

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It is often claimed that we cannot desire fictional states of affairs when we are aware of the fact that we cannot interact with fictional worlds. But the experiences we have when we read an engaging novel, watch a horror film or listen to a gripping story are certainly very similar to desires: we hope that the lovers get together, we want the criminal to get caught, we long for the hero to make his fortune. My goal in this paper is to outline the reasons why we might find it difficult to call these experiences genuine desires and to argue that they are not good reasons. In the second section I look at three reasons in particular: first, the reason that, if we genuinely desired fictional outcomes, we would act in silly or dangerous ways; second, the reason that, if we genuinely desired fictional outcomes, we would change plot lines if we had the chance, which in fact, however, we would not; and third, the reason that, if we genuinely desired fictional outcomes, we would not think it impossible to interact with fictional worlds, which, however, we do. I will dismiss the first two reasons right away: depending on how we interpret the first reason, either it does not have much weight at all, because we have many desires we never act on, or it rests on a functionalist definition of desires that wrongly takes it to be the functional role of desires to bring about action. I will dismiss the second reason by arguing that, if we desire a particular fictional outcome that we could bring about by changing the plot line, whether or not we would do it turns on our assessment of the cost of interference; and this, in turn, depends on the perceived quality of the literature. There is nothing that speaks against taking both the desire for a particular fictional outcome and the desire for a work of literature to remain what it is as genuine desires. I turn to possible ways of dealing with the third and strongest reason in the third section. The claim that, if I desire that *p*, I must not think that there is nothing I could possibly do to bring it about that *p*, is plausible. And of course, I do think that there is nothing I could possibly do to bring about a fictional state of affairs. I will argue that there are three possible ways of dealing with this problem. The first is to point to partners in crime such as the desire that one is reunited with a loved one who has recently passed away. I take these to be genuine and ordinary desires, even though they are accompanied by thoughts, indeed agonising thoughts, that there is nothing we could possibly do to bring about the desired end. Secondly, I will look at Maria Alvarez's recent account of desires as multi-track dispositions. Alvarez claims that desires are dispositions not only to actions, but also to certain thoughts, feelings, and expressive behaviours and that they need to have had at least one manifestation in order to exist. Modifying this view a little, I argue that desires need to have manifested at least once in action preparations and show how, on this picture, the thought that I can do nothing to bring about the desired end is not in unbearable tension with the existence of the desire. Finally, I will point to the distinction between physical and metaphysical possibility and argue that, even if we accept the claim that a mental attitude cannot be a desire if it is accompanied by the thought that there is nothing one could possibly do to bring about the desired end, then this is only a problem for desires about fictional states of affairs if we think that metaphysical possibility is at play. However, there is no problem for desires about fictional states of affairs if they are accompanied by thoughts about the physical impossibility of bringing them about. I begin the paper by describing in the first section how desires enter into the controversies surrounding the classic Paradox of Fiction, which is the puzzle about whether and how we can have emotions about fictional characters, and by providing some

examples designed to feed the intuition that we do, indeed, have genuine desires about fictional states of affairs.

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