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Emotion in the Appreciation of Fiction

- Full-length article in: *JLT* 12/2 (2018), 204–223.

Why is it that we respond emotionally to plays, movies, and novels and feel moved by characters and situations that we know do not exist? This question, which constitutes the kernel of the debate on »the paradox of fiction«, speaks to the perennial themes of philosophy, and remains of interest to this day. But does this question entail a paradox? A significant group of analytic philosophers have indeed thought so. Since the publication of Colin Radford's celebrated paper »How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?« (1975), the number of proposals to solve, explain, reformulate, dismiss or even revitalize this apparent paradox has continued to proliferate. In line with recent developments in the philosophy of emotion, in this paper I will argue against the sustainability of the paradox, claiming that the only reasonable way to continue our discussions about it consists in using it as a heuristic tool to shed light on problems regarding our involvement with fiction. Against this background, I will then focus on one of the problems related to how our emotional responses to fiction contribute to our appreciation of it.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section shows the parallel evolution of the paradox of fiction and the analytic philosophy of emotion. Here I claim that, although the paradox is epistemically flawed, since one of its premises is rooted in a limited view on the emotions typical of early cognitivism, the discussions it provokes are still epistemically useful. As Robert Stecker (2011, 295), among others, has pointed out, the paradox was formulated during the heyday of cognitive theories of the emotions in which emotion necessarily requires belief. Today, however, only few authors would endorse this premise. If emotion does not always require belief (as the majority of authors in the contemporary debate admit), let alone belief about the existence of the object towards which it is directed, then there is no reason to speak of a paradox. From this first conclusion, however, it does not follow that the paradox is completely without use from the epistemic point of view. A glimpse at the topics touched on during the discussions about how to solve, reformulate, or negate the paradox reveals their value in shedding light on the interrelation between emotion and fiction.

The second section elaborates a phenomenologically inspired cognitive account of the emotions by focusing on their cognitive bases, their influence on cognitions, and their cognitive function. In this model, emotions are responsible for indicating values, for showing what matters to us, and for being appropriate to their objects. My claim is that this view applies not only to reality, but also to our involvement with fiction.

In the final section I draw on this account to focus on one kind of appreciation of fiction which necessarily requires our emotional involvement. Following an idea put forward by Susan Feagin (1996, 1), I employ the concept of »appreciation« to refer to a set of abilities exercised with the aim of extracting value from the work. There is a long tradition in aesthetics that condemns any focus on the emotions in the appreciation of art and fiction, and defends the necessity of aesthetic appreciation without emotional influence. To refer to this negative attitude towards the emotions, I will borrow an expression coined by Susan Feagin (2013, 636), who refers to »the intellectualized view of appreciation«. Against this widespread view, I will argue that some aspects of the fiction can only be appreciated with the help of our emotions. The cognitive approach developed in the previous section can explain how the emotions might in fact play a

significant role in the appreciation of art and fiction. Attention will be paid to three activities involved in appreciation, for all of which emotion is crucial: processing relevant information about the fictional world, understanding aspects of it, and becoming acquainted with the values it presents. My aim here is to argue that there are particular aspects of the fictional world that can only be appreciated if recipients have the appropriate emotions.

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2018-09-16

JLToonline ISSN 1862-8990

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How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Ingrid Vendrell Ferran, Emotion in the Appreciation of Fiction.

In: JLToonline (16.09.2018)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003997

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003997>