The Paradox of Emotional Responses to Fiction is Conceptually Misguided

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The paradox of emotional responses to fiction (hereafter, PERF) is the problem of how anyone can respond emotionally to nonexistent objects or objects we do not believe to exist. Here I focus on two claims better suited for a longer format. These claims are:

> (1) (PERF) is not conceptually clear, and consequently current arguments do not sufficiently explain whether (PERF) is about the properties of an object, its existence, or both.
> (2) (PERF) is about the properties of an object, specifically the nuclear properties of an object.

1. Preliminary Remarks

(PERF) arises from the conflict of three conditions obtaining:

> (C1) *Response*: People ordinarily experience genuine emotions toward fictional characters, situations, and events.
> (C2) *Belief*: People ordinarily do not genuinely believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.
> (C3) *Coordination*: People ordinarily do not experience genuine emotions toward objects they do not believe exist.

For example, Bob and Bill enjoy watching new movies on Fridays. They tend to respond emotionally. When watching *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows*, Bob and Bill find themselves sufficiently moved to tears at Dobby's death. Bob and Bill do not believe that Dobby or house-elves exist, yet Bob and Bill experience genuine sadness at Dobby's death and the plight of house-elves. Bob and Bill meet (C1)-(C3). Bob and Bill respond with tears – (C1) – to the death of a fictional elf, Dobby, who they believe does not exist – (C2) – and Bob and Bill are crying because of an object they do not believe exists – (C3).

There are three categories of arguments for dissolving (PERF). These are Pure-Cognitivists, Non-Cognitivists, and Hybrid theories. I define each position as:

> *Pure-Cognitivists*: For any person A, if A believes that p, A's belief in p sufficiently grounds some emotion, e, such that if e obtains for A, then A believes p.
> *Non-Cognitivists*: For any person A, A's perception or feeling that p sufficiently grounds some emotion, e, such that if e obtains for A, then A perceives or feels that p.
> *Hybrid Theories*: For any person A, A's emotion, e, is sufficiently grounded in belief, perception, feeling, or some combination of these.

Pure-Cognitivists reject (C3), Non-Cognitivists reject (C2), and Hybrid theorists may reject either (C2) or (C3). Almost no one seriously rejects (C1).

The problem with these arguments is that they do not justify *why* anyone cannot feel emotions towards fictional or nonexistent objects. This stems from the problematic formulation of (PERF) which does not specify if (PERF) arises from the properties of an object, the existence of an object, or both.

2. Nuclear and Extranuclear Properties

Terence Parsons outlines a theory for objects that includes nuclear and extranuclear properties, among other relevant distinctions which I do not discuss here.[1] I provide the definitions for nuclear and extranuclear properties and provide an example to illustrate each. Given all possible worlds, nuclear properties have two principles:

(1) No two objects (real *or* unreal) have exactly the same nuclear properties.[2]
(2) For any set of nuclear properties, some object has all the properties in that set and no other nuclear properties.[3]

Planes, trains, and automobiles are real objects. Harry Potter, Sherlock Holmes, the round-square are unreal objects.

For my purposes I will focus on a fictional or unreal object. There is only one object which has all the same nuclear properties as Harry Potter, HP_1. There may be any number of other Harry Potters, HP_n, with more or fewer nuclear properties. Take Harry Potter, HP_1, for instance. HP_1 will have only those nuclear properties that correspond to HP_1:

{*being Harry Potter, being pitiable, being scarred, …*}.

Now if there is another Harry Potter, HP_2, then HP_2 will necessarily have different nuclear properties. We can say HP_2 has the nuclear properties:

{*being Harry Potter, being pitiable, being scarless, …*}.

Following from (1)-(2), HP_1 is distinct from HP_2 in virtue of their distinct sets of nuclear properties. But it is not necessary that HP_1 or HP_2 exist, in part because existence is an extranuclear property.

Extranuclear properties are not nuclear properties. There are four categories of extranuclear properties: (i) ontological, (ii) modal, (iii) intentional, (iv) technical.[4] Some predicates (e.g., extranuclear predicates)[5] attribute extranuclear properties to objects and these fall into the categories above. For example: (i) "exists," (ii) "is possible," (iii) "is thought about by *x*," (iv) "is complete."[6]

This theory has strong explanatory appeal regarding (PERF). Regarding the extranuclear property, *being existent*, this theory treats the nuclear properties of real or unreal objects as primitive. If *being pitiable*, *being miserly*, etc. are primitive nuclear properties, this suggests (PERF) is about the nuclear properties of an object—*not* the existence or extranuclear properties of an object. If this holds, then (PERF) likely arises from the conflation of nuclear and extranuclear properties. This suggests (PERF) should be reformulated. I suggest that a Parsons style metaphysics is apt to reformulate (PERF) and

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[1] Terence Parsons, "Nuclear and Extranuclear Properties, Meinong, and Leibniz," *Noûs* 12, no. 2 (May 1978): 137-51; Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980).
[2] Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 19.
[3] Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 19.
[4] Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 23.
[5] Nuclear predicates are those predicates that pick out nuclear properties.
[6] Parsons, Nonexistent Objects, 23.

sufficiently ground emotional reactions to nuclear properties of an object, rather than extranuclear properties.

3. Final Remarks

If this argument holds, then (PERF) is not precise in its current formulation, and I think this suggests two options for moving forward. One is to develop a longer argument with this Parsons-Meinongian metaphysic to dissolve (PERF). This should distinguish between characters, situations, and events and their respective possibility *and* obtaining. If not this, then sufficient argumentation for why these should stay conflated needs to be given. The other option is to develop an epistemology which sufficiently justifies (C1)-(C3) as currently formulated. For this type of approach work in group epistemology seems sufficient to handle this task.

Whether my argument for how to solve (PERF) is accepted or not, it should be clear that (PERF) is not clearly outlined in its current formulation and consequently current arguments seeking to address (PERF) are insufficient for the task.

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References

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