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A Puzzle about Fictional Points of View

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ABSTRACT. It is widely claimed that one way novel-reading can be valuable is by offering the experience of "taking up the perspective of" a fictional character. However, an explanation of why these imaginings are valuable has received comparatively little attention compared to the prevalence and acceptance of the claim. Accordingly, my aim is to build on existing sketches to provide such an explanation. I will argue this "perspective-taking" can be valuable in the same way as when that point of view is non-fictional. I use this observation to provide new explanations for why imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view is valuable. However, there is a challenge to doing so (this is the puzzle at the crux of my argument). I will attempt to overcome that challenge, and present two kinds of explanation. The first captures its epistemic value – it is a way of finding out what certain experiences are like and understanding the world. The second captures its interpersonal value – it is a way of improving the reader's awareness of others.

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1. Introduction

Novel-reading can be valuable as the audience is offered the valuable experience of imaginatively engaging with another's point of view. I use the phrase "imaginative engagement" as it presupposes the least about what kind of imagining the valuable experience involves, but that claim has been stated in various terms: "imaginatively inhabiting the perspective of another person" (Bailey, 2023, p. 218), "imaginative identification" (Budd, 1995, p. 7), "the occasion to shed our skin for a spell and inhabit other subjectivities" (Gibson, 2009, p. 438). Further, the point of view offered for imaginative engagement is usually fictional. That imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view is valuable "might initially strike us as obviously correct" (Bailey, 2023, p. 218). However, an explanation of why these experiences are valuable has received little attention, compared to the prevalence and acceptance of the claim. My aim is to fill in this gap.

First, I will argue that imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can be valuable in the same ways as when that point of view is non-fictional. I will use this observation to provide two explanations for the value of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view. The first captures its epistemic value – it is a way of finding out what certain experiences are like and understanding the world. The second captures its interpersonal value – it is a way of improving the reader's awareness of others. However, there is a challenge to doing so, namely that the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with appears to do important explanatory work. This is the puzzle at the crux of my discussion, which I seek to overcome.

2. Characterising "Imaginative Engagement"

First, I will characterise the "imaginative engagement" whose value I seek to explain. Borrowing Moore's phrasing, a point of view is one's "location in the broadest possible sense", which includes one's location in time, space, historical and cultural context, interpersonal relations, as well as their physical and psychological nature (Moore, 2000, p. 6). The characterisation I select is adapted from Denham (Denham, 2000, p. 206)

The Subjectivity Requirement: The imaginer imagines the experience first-personally.

The Alterity Requirement: The imaginer imagines the experience as being the experience had by another.

To motivate *The Subjectivity Requirement,* the experiences of imaginative engagement that artworks offer which are taken to be valuable are usually first-personal. In fact, first-personal imagination has been taken as a necessary condition for "perspective-taking", understood as "an imaginative process through which one constructs another person's *subjective experience*" (Coplan, 2011, p. 9, emphasis added).

To motivate *The Alterity Requirement,* I start with a common way of characterising the valuable imagining, as involving imagining "being [the other] in that situation", through "a shift in self-location and a new grasp of how things appear and feel" (Langton, 2019, p. 78). However, "shifting self-location" is conceptually incoherent, because one's "location in the broadest sense" cannot be changed via the imagination. *The Alterity Requirement* avoids this problem, as there is no incoherence in, for example, imagining the experience of hosting a party and imagining that experience as being the one that Clarissa Dalloway has in those circumstances.

3. Non-Fictionality and the Puzzle

Next, I will both motivate that imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view can be valuable in the same way as a non-fictional one and the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with seems to do important explanatory work, posing a challenge to seeking explanations of the fictional by looking to the non-fictional. I will understand a non-fictional point of view as those to belonging to a person the imaginer can have "direct sensory acquaintance with" (Matravers, 2024, p. 4).

3.1. Shared Value with Non-Fictional Cases

My motivation for the claim that experiences of imaginatively engaging with a fictional and non-fictional point of view can be valuable in the same way is:

1) The experiences of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view of imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view share the same kind of content.
2) If experiences share the same kind of content, then they can be valuable in the same ways.
3) Therefore, the experiences of imaginatively engaging with a fictional and non-fictional point of view can be valuable in the same way.

There is a worry one might have with (1). The details of a fictional point of view are not specified to the extent that the details of a non-fictional one are specifiable; a fictional point of view is only specified to the extent to which the text contains information about it, whereas all the details of a non-fictional point of view, which belongs to a person, are fixed. Therefore, it may seem that the content of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view cannot be the same kind as when the point of view is non-fictional. However, the worry can be addressed by noting that novel-readers supplement the text with the following principle:

> *The Principle of Verisimilitude:* Fictional states of affairs can be assumed to be like ordinary states of affairs, failing indications to the contrary (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 94).

Although the reader is given limited information about the fictional point of view, they are not given any indication that the fictional point of view is *not* physically and psychologically akin to a non-fictional point of view. So, there is no reason to think that imaginatively engaging with a fictional and non-fictional point of view differ with respect to their content, and (1) holds.

3.2. The Puzzle

The puzzle is that the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with appears to do important work in the standard explanations. To see the challenge, consider the explanations typically appealed to for the value of imaginatively engaging with a *non*-fictional point of view: epistemic and interpersonal explanations. The epistemic explanations hold that imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view is *epistemically* valuable, because it is a way of finding out what certain experiences are like (Matravers, 2011, p. 26), and of improving our understanding of the world (Denham, 2001). The interpersonal explanations hold that imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view is *interpersonally* valuable, because it improves the imaginer's awareness of other people as having minds of their own (Cavell, 1999, p. 421). The non-fictionality of the point of view does important work in explaining the epistemic and interpersonal value of imaginative engagement. In the epistemic explanations, that the point of view is non-fictional appears necessary for it to be related to the actual world, such that imaginative engagement with it can be a way of learning what certain experiences are like and about the world. In the interpersonal explanation, that the point of view is non-fictional appears necessary for it to be related to the reader such that imaginative engagement with it can be a way of illuminating the nature of interpersonal relations they stand in. Throughout, I will attempt to resolve this puzzle.

4. The Epistemic Explanations

I will present two epistemic explanations for the value of imaginatively engaging with a non-fictional point of view, a *Phenomenal Knowledge* explanation, and an *Understanding of the World* explanation.

4.1. The Phenomenal Knowledge Explanation

First, I will examine the *Phenomenal Knowledge* explanation. This explanation is commonly appealed to as a way of explaining the value of imaginatively engaging with both fictional and non-

fictional points of view, as imagining an experience is "naturally connected" to "[truths] concerning what other people's experiences of the world are like" (Bailey, 2023, p. 218).

4.1.1. Sceptical Doubts about Phenomenal Knowledge

First, I will give two reasons to doubt that imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can afford the reader with phenomenal knowledge. The first worry is that imaginative engagement "distorts" the experience imagined (Goldie, 2011, p. 309). When the imaginer and the point of view they imaginatively engage with have different dispositions (for example, being claustrophobic or not), the imaginer's imaginative approximation will have to attempt to accommodate for that difference, which requires consciously attending to what those dispositions are and how they shape the target experience (panicking in a tunnel). But, that is not how those dispositions feature in the target point of view's own experiences, so, there are limits on how well the imaginer can approximate the relevant experience.

The second worry is an iteration of the puzzle mentioned above. Gibson states the worry as follows: there is "no *real* experience the what-it-is-like of which [fictional points of view] could inform us", since being fictional, those points of view have never experienced anything at all (Gibson, 2008, p. 583, emphasis in original). The assumption here is that imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can only provide epistemically valuable phenomenal knowledge by providing the reader with knowledge of what "real peoples' experiences" are like (Bailey, 2023, p. 220). However, it is hard to see how mere approximation of a fictional experience can afford the imaginer with phenomenal knowledge of what real experiences are like.

4.1.2. The Subjectivity Requirement

I will now consider what role The Subjectivity Requirement plays in explaining how it can improve the reader's phenomenal knowledge. I will argue that, given the above worries, imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view is better thought of as providing the reader with phenomenal understanding, rather than phenomenal knowledge proper. I suggest that The Principle

of Verisimilitude can capture how the reader can come to an improved understanding of what "real people's experiences" are like. When the reader first-personally imagines the experience of a fictional character, what is imagined is an experience of a fictional scenario which is relevantly like a non-fictional one. For example, when the reader of *Mrs Dalloway* imagines as subject the experience of hosting an awkward fictional party, they take the fictional party to be relevantly similar to a non-fictional one, such that the psychological and social facts which determine the obligations of the host and the rules of social etiquette are taken to be the same in the fictional and non-fictional case. Through their imagining, the reader can observe what an experience of the events described might look like. Therefore, even if there are no "real experiences" that a fictional character has, imaginatively engaging with them is a way the reader can improve their phenomenal understanding of what "real experiences" are like, as they can observe how the experience they imagine relates to the fictional scenario described, which they take as relevantly similar to a non-fictional one. Further, there are certain features of fiction which can address the "distortion" worry. For Bailey, "fiction can also manipulate our attention in ways that temporarily nudge us away from our home [dispositions]" (Bailey, 2023, p. 233). So, by manipulating the reader's attention, the novel can direct it in such a way that mirrors the attention of one that someone with that disposition would have – such as the fretful disposition of Clarissa Dalloway. Therefore, the reader can come to an improved phenomenal understanding of what the imagined experiences are like, by imagining that experience whilst partly sharing the fictional character's relevant dispositions.

4.1.3. The Alterity Requirement

To see the role *The Alterity Requirement* plays, I will further clarify the nature of the phenomenal knowledge (or understanding) that novel-reading is taken to provide. For Denham, artworks "express" the "general form" of an experience; for example, Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* "expresses awe before the infinite itself, in its general form, and we see it as such", rather than just "one particular occasion" of it (Denham, 2001, p. 625). That artworks express the "general form" of an experience is a claim also made tempting by Lamarque and Olsen's account of literature – that it has "something to say about the 'human condition'" (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 275). I

suggest that *The Alterity Requirement* is necessary for the improved phenomenal understanding that the reader acquires to have a character akin to acquiring knowledge of a kind of experience's "general form." Denham also takes it that "we see it as such", as having that general form. So, I suggest that *The Alterity Requirement* is necessary to draw the reader's attention to the generality of the phenomenal understanding they have acquired. Suppose that the reader has experienced a guest awkwardly arriving at a party. When they imaginatively approximate to Clarissa Dalloway's experience of the same kind, that approximation involves them determining which features of their experience to hold steady, and which to modify in the imagination. The process of imaginatively approximating to an experience imagined being one had by another draws their attention to the features of the experience which are independent of their specific circumstances.

4.2. The Understanding of the World Explanation

Next, I turn to the *Understanding of the World* explanation, which holds that imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view is a way for the imaginer to improve their understanding of the world. Denham and Moore assume that each point of view has "unique access" (Moore, 2000, p. 3) to certain "aspects of reality" (Denham, 2001, p. 606). Suppose that the imaginer's friend has decided to withhold from their mother that she is dying. Standing in a relationship to someone provides us with "the power to illuminate [of that person] qualities which are not otherwise evident" (Denham, 2001, p. 606). So, as the imaginer does not stand in a familial relationship to the mother, certain qualities of her situation may not be otherwise evident to them, such as her serenity of mind or the true extent of her physical decline. In approximating the other's subjective experience, the imaginer also approximates the other's unique access to certain aspects of reality. So, imaginatively engaging with the friend's point of view is a way of coming to understand the peacefulness that dying in ignorance may bring.

However, there is a further iteration of the puzzle, that the non-fictionality of the point of view imaginatively engaged with appears to do important explanatory work. Here, the challenge lies in the fact that the "aspects of reality" that a fictional point of view has "unique access" to are the aspects of a fictional scenario. So, if imaginatively engaging with another's point of view can

reveal aspects of reality that the other has unique access to, imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view can only facilitate access to aspects of a fictional scenario, making it unclear how it could improve one's understanding of the world.

4.2.1. The Subjectivity Requirement

Lamarque and Olsen consider the following account of how the reader of a literary work may learn about the "human condition" from literature:

> *The Propositional Theory of Literary Truth:* The literary work contains or implies general thematic statements about the world, which the reader as part of an appreciation of the work, has to assess as true or false (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 325).

A work "implies" thematic statements in so far as appreciating the work involves using those propositions to "organise into an intelligible pattern the events and situations described literally in a work" (Lamarque & Olsen, 1996, p. 327). For example, consider Isabel Allende's *Violeta,* which follows the course of the eponymous narrator's life. As she ages, many of her friends and relatives die in quick succession. At first, that series of events may appear to be a coincidence, however, to organise these events into an intelligible pattern, the reader may use the proposition that "as one ages, the deaths of people you know become more likely." Consequently, that proposition is implied by *Violeta*.

I will consider whether the subjectivity of that imagining affects the reader's understanding of that implied statement. Violeta has unique access to various aspects of the fictional scenario, including the suffering, peacefulness, untimeliness or poignancy of each loss. When the reader imaginatively engages with Violeta's point of view, they imaginatively approximate the unique access she has to those aspects of the fictional scenario. So, if the reader subjectively imagines each death, the proposition that "as one ages, the deaths of people one knows becomes more likely" is implied by the organisation of events which the reader imaginatively approximates Violeta's experience of. An improved phenomenal understanding of Violeta's experiences means that the

reader has an improved phenomenal understanding of the pervasive sense of loss that surrounds her as she ages, giving their grasp of the proposition an experiential character. Therefore, the reader's grasping of the proposition has an experiential character, rather than merely involving entertaining its truth. Further, by *Principle of Verisimilitude,* when reading *Violeta*, the reader takes all the background details of the fictional events as being like actual ones, and when they imaginatively approximate Violeta's access to those events, they take her experiences to be of events which mirror non-fictional ones in certain ways. For example, they take facts about human biology, ageing, the kinds of events which can cause death in humans, and so on to be the same as in non-fictional scenarios. So, when they are struck by the proposition that death becomes increasingly prevalent throughout one's life, they are struck by it being true in circumstances which are relevantly similar to the actual world, such that the reader can learn that it is true in the actual world – resolving the puzzle here.

4.2.2. The Alterity Requirement

The Alterity Requirement is necessary for the reader to become aware of the implied statement's generality. Prior to reading *Violeta*, the reader may "vaguely know" that "as one ages, the deaths of people one knows becomes more likely", and the process of organising the events of the text into an intelligible pattern may draw their attention to what they "vaguely knew […] but never saw before" (Murdoch, 1997a, p. 12). That general thematic statement could also be learnt by reading census statistics. Both offer the reader the chance to renew awareness of a proposition they already know, and of emphasising that the proposition is *generally* true – that it tends to be true for others. However, in studying statistical information, the reader merely comes to see *that* the increased likelihood of the deaths of close friends in old age is true for others. In contrast, when reading *Violeta,* the reader's awareness of that proposition is renewed via experiences which they are aware of as being had by *another*, allowing the reader to grasp the statement's generality. Therefore, an imagining's satisfaction of *The Alterity Requirement* is necessary for the reader to have a renewed awareness which involves grasping its generality in a certain way.

5. The Interpersonal Explanation

Next, I will present a further explanation of why imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view is valuable. It has "interpersonal value" – it is a way of seeing other people *as people.* With respect to non-fictional points of view, for Cavell, the process of "empathic projection" is how one comes to take other people as other people with minds of their own, rather than as mere objects (Cavell, 1999, p. 421). For Cavell, the significance of "empathic projection" lies in the fact that "if there are no other human beings, then […] my soul […] cheats me […] into taking it that it has company" (Cavell, 1999, p. 424), and how it waylays concerns about the risk of "isolation from the other" (Avramides, 2023, p. 320). However, "empathic projection" with a fictional point of view cannot have the same significance, as being made aware of the mind of a fictional character cannot show the reader that they have "company" and are in a position to be known by others – a fictional character cannot know of the reader, nor do they stand in interpersonal relations to them. However, I will argue that the "empathic projection" explanation can explain the interpersonal value of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view. Murdoch appears to attribute interpersonal value to novel reading, she states: "in the case of the novel, the most important thing thus to be revealed, […] *is that other people exist*" (Murdoch, 1997b, p. 282, emphasis added). I will focus on developing a comparison between Murdoch and Cavell to provide a further explanation.

5.1. The Subjectivity Requirement

I will first consider the role of *The Subjectivity Requirement*. First, for Murdoch, what it is about other people which might require "revealing" to us is the "unutterable particularity" of their mental lives (Murdoch, 1959, p. 52). Grasping the "unutterable particularity" of the other's mind involves "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than yourself is real" (Murdoch, 1959, p. 52). It is a matter of grasping their otherness, or the separateness of their mental life. Similarly, Cavell takes "empathic projection" to illuminate the other's "unutterable particularity". He is concerned with one's ability to see the other's mental life as it exists in "confinement from [them]"

(Cavell, 1999, p. 423). To say that novel-readers doubt or do not know that others exist in this way prior to reading a novel is too strong a claim. Instead, the "revelation" provided by the novel here is best thought of as another case of "renewed awareness", of coming to grasp something that "we vaguely knew was there but never saw before" (Murdoch, 1997a, p. 12).

For comparison, Schier takes watching theatrical tragedy to be interpersonally valuable, as it reminds the audience that other people are like them, in the sense that they are interested in possible fates that may befall them (Schier, 1983, p. 84). This explanation cannot work for novels, as it hinges on being in the presence of others who are also engaging with the play (Goldie, 2008, p. 192). But, there is one claim of Schier's interpersonal explanation which could be adapted to novel-reading, that the audience is put "on the most intimate footing" with the point of view imaginatively engaged with, which is necessary for there to be interpersonal value (Schier, 1983, p. 84).

Consider Clarissa Dalloway again. The details of her mental life could be learnt propositionally – that she has worries, past regrets, anxiety about the course of her life, the urge to perform a certain social role, and so on. However, the reader does not merely propositionally entertain those details, but instead they further attempt to take on those details of her mental life in the imagination, such that they come to grasp the phenomenology of her experiences and what she has "unique access" to. So, through their approximation, the reader is put "on the most intimate footing" with Clarissa Dalloway. Even if the reader can only have an improved phenomenal understanding of her experiences and what she has "unique access" to, that imaginative approximation nonetheless puts them "on the most intimate footing" which is available, given their separateness. Further, that close contact renews the reader's awareness of the fact that (non-fictional) others exist as "unutterable particulars" in the second sense. Again, given *The Principle of Verisimilitude,* in grasping the intricate details of Clarissa Dalloway's point of view, the reader is taking her point of view to be of the same kind as a non-fictional point of view, thereby renewing their awareness of the fact that other (non-fictional) points of view are "unutterably particular" in this way. However, Clarissa Dalloway's lack of confinement from the reader only serves to emphasise the confinement of these other, non-fictional, points of view. So, I agree that being placed "on the most intimate footing" with respect to the point of view imaginatively engaged with

is necessary for it to renew the reader's awareness in the other's "unutterable particularity", in the sense of their "confinement".

5.2. The Alterity Requirement

Next, I will consider the role of *The Alterity Requirement*. For both Murdoch and Cavell, the awareness of the other's existence is non-cognitive. Grasping the other's "unutterable particularity" is a matter of "love", which is "the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness" (Murdoch, 1959, p. 52). Similarly, for Cavell, to appropriately grasp the other's existence requires "acknowledgement" rather than just knowledge, which is a matter of "recognizing what I know" (Cavell, 1969, p. 257).

For Murdoch, the apprehension of "unutterable particularity" is a sublime experience, which is characterised by a conflict between reason and imagination, sparked by what is "vast, powerful, and terrifying" (Murdoch, 1959, p. 45). As the imagination cannot "compass what is before us", 'reason imposes upon us as a law the comprehension of what is before us is a totality" (*Ibid.*, p.45), where a "totality" is a "total complete ordered picture" (Murdoch, 1997b, p. 263). Murdoch is unclear about what the process of "imposing" a totality involves, but it will be sufficient for my purposes to recall again *The Principle of Verisimilitude,* that unless given indications to the contrary, the reader takes fictional events to be like non-fictional ones, and that the reader takes a fictional point of view as being fully specifiable, rather than as a scattering of location coordinates. The typical thought is that what sparks sublime experiences is vast formlessness, such as nature, but Murdoch pits herself against that picture with her suggestion that what sparks the sublime experiences is instead "unutterable particularity, and the most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man" (*Ibid.,* p. 52). I will argue that adopting this eccentric account can explain the interpersonal value of imaginatively engaging with a fictional point of view.

To see the role of *The Alterity Requirement*, consider *Violeta* again. The reader might attempt to "compass" the details of Violeta's point of view, by attempting to include in their imaginings all the details of Violeta's mental life which colour her experiences. For example, they might attempt to imagine the experience of trekking on a horse through Patagonia, for a young

woman, in the 1920s, but one who has been driven reluctantly out of the city due to great financial loss and is subsequently experiencing a fall in social status and living quality, who is attempting to relate to the locals, and so on. By struggling to imaginatively "compass" Violeta's point of view, the reader imposes that Violeta's point of view is a "totality", which is to say, that there is a "total complete ordered picture" of her point of view, that all these details fit together such that they can form her point of view. Note, as it is the struggle to imagine Violeta's experiences in fully detail which leads to grasp her "totality", it is no problem for this explanation that the reader can only achieve phenomenal understanding of her experiences, rather than complete phenomenal knowledge.

If the imaginative engagement satisfies *The Alterity Requirement,* then what the reader imposes a "totality" onto is experiences imagined as not being their own, thereby creating the impression of a fictional totality existing separately to them. Further, *The Alterity Requirement* can draw the reader's attention to the generality of the claim, where "generality" is understood in the sense of being a universal claim about how humans ought to be viewed. When the reader imposes a "totality" onto Violeta's mental life, the reader takes their pre-reflective understanding of the nature of other people to their reading of the novel, via *The Principle of Verisimilitude*. Therefore, by imagining the experience as being had by another when imagining a fictional character's experience, the reader's attention is also drawn to that other, non-fictional, points of view may be such that they can exist as having their own experiences and being "unutterably particular". The reader has their awareness of the existence of others renewed via experiences they imagine as being had by another, who they take to be relevantly similar to non-fictional points of view. Any non-fictional person may well have the morally significant existence of "unutterable particularity" that the reader pre-reflectively takes them to have and so is due "respect" and "acknowledgement" accordingly, bringing the generality of the claim to the reader's attention.

6. Conclusion

I began with the observation that imaginative engagement with a fictional point of view is often taken to be one valuable experience artworks offer, but that the explanation of why these

imaginings are valuable as received little attention. To address that gap, I argued that it can be epistemically valuable as a way of finding out what certain experiences are like, and improving one's understanding of the world, and interpersonally valuable as a way of renewing one's awareness of the nature of others. My discussion may feed into a wider one, concerning whether there is any useful work that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction may do. Compared to some, I am inclined to give more room to the suggestion that there is an important distinction which raises various challenges, but, at least when it comes to explaining the value of imaginatively engaging with a point of view, the distinction is of little significance.2

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[2] An example of the denial that there is a distinction of much significance is: (Matravers, 2024).

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