

Last time we considered the question whether the phenomena of imagination required us to expand our mental ontology with respect to belief-like states. The question we looked at was: do we need to posit an additional mental attitude, i.e. an imagination box over and above a belief box? Or can we account for the relevant phenomena just in terms of the *contents* of the beliefs.

A similar question arises also for desires.

Pretense:

In an experiment with two and a half year-olds, Leslie set out two cups on a table and invited children to take part in a tea party with him. He then made pouring motions with an (empty) pitcher over the two cups. Next he lifted one of the cups, turned it upside down, shook it, and set it back right side up on the table. Then he asked the children which cup was empty and which was full. His young participants had no trouble identifying the one that had been overturned as “empty” and the other as “full.”

A child might carefully balance the “full” tea cup. She might “pour some more tea”. She might “drink the tea”.

Affective Engagement:

“Watching the end of a performance of Romeo and Juliet, we were anxious. Romeo was mourning Juliet’s apparent death, and starting to talk about suicide. But Juliet was only unconscious! She could wake up at any moment, and all would be well... Our hearts were racing, our palms were sweating, and we were experiencing a distinctive and uncomfortable fearful anticipation.” (Doggett & Egan, 2012)

While playing cops and robbers, one child points her finger at another and says ‘bang.’ Part of what motivates her action is that she imagines him to be a robber. What’s the rest of the story? Is it that she wants to shoot him? (Kind, 2011)

Suppose we accept a view, on which beliefs and imaginings are *distinct* mental attitudes. Suppose we also accept a broadly Humean picture of motivation:

- what gives rise to an action is a combination of cognitive and conative attitudes.
- what gives rise to affective responses is a combination of cognitive and conative attitudes.

Desires behave strangely in imaginative contexts.

Problem of Conative Engagement: In engaging with fiction we have desires that it’s difficult to explain, given our ordinary understanding of desires.

Problem of Motivation: When pretending we take actions that it’s difficult to explain, given the traditional Humean picture.

Conative Engagement: The Case for i-Desires

The issue is the following: when I watch Romeo and Juliet, I want them to live happily ever after. But I know they are merely fictional. How can I have desires about them?

Perhaps, my desires in this case is not really about Romeo Juliet but rather about the fiction. I desire that the story turn out differently from how it turns out. Or I desire to be moved by the play. But suppose I watch a play together with my child. Both my child and I may have desires about the characters on stage. My child does not want Tinker Bell to die. I also don’t want Tinker Bell to die.

It seems that we share the same mental state. But my child might be immersed in the play, she may not have the concept of pretend desires.

These cases motivate three considerations in support of i-desires:

1. i-desires do not obey the same normative constraints as regular desires.
2. i-desires do not motivate actions in the way that ordinary desires do.
3. We cannot account for the content of these desires, unless we understand them to be i-desires.

(1) Normative Constraints

Currie: "Desires can be shown to be unreasonable, or at least unjustified, if they fail to connect in various ways with the facts." (Currie 2002, 211)

(2) Motivation

Desires dispose us to action. If our imaginings really led us to have real desires, this might lead us to act in dangerous or inappropriate ways. (For example, I might leap on stage to prevent Juliet from drinking the medicine.) And insofar as we don't act in these ways, it's a puzzle how to reconcile us having genuine desires with inaction.

Postulating i-desires helps here because i-desires have a different functional profile from ordinary desires.

(3) Content

Suppose I desire that Romeo and Juliet live happily ever after. On pain of irrationality, I thus have to desire that the content of the fiction differ from what it actually is:

"Having the desire about the fictional character entails, or at the very least rationally requires, that one have the corresponding desire about the content of the fiction, since the only way for the fictional character to have the property that we desire him to have is for the content of the fiction to make it so." (Doggett and Egan 2007, 14)

But I don't want the fiction to be different from what it actually is. A happy ending would make for a tacky play and I don't want to see a tacky play.

How strong are these reasons? There are ways to resist them.

Against (1): We have desires about counterfactual scenarios. Is fiction that different?

Against (2): Do desires really need to dispose us to action? What about desires about the past, about counterfactual scenarios or about things we cannot change?

Against (3): Why not think that in this case we simply have conflicting desires?

Conative Engagement: The Case Against i-Desires

One consideration is, of course, mental economy. But there are other reasons to be suspicious of i-desires, too.

Systematic Error: I-desires commit us to attribute systematic error about our own mental states when engaging in fiction. We readily differentiate between believing and imagining. But we do not typically differentiate between desiring and i-desiring. When engaging in fiction, we take ourselves to have ordinary desires about the fiction.

Self-criticism: We are often bothered by our desires when engaging in fiction. When watching the Sopranos, I might want Tony to get away with killing one of his associates. Later on, this worries

me. What does it tell about me that I so readily take the side of a psychopath? But this kind of self-assessment takes for granted that we take ourselves to have ordinary desires in response to fiction.

Seriousness: Not only do we take our own attitudes and desires towards fiction seriously. We also take others to task for them.

The Problem of Motivation: The Case for i-Desires

When engaging in pretense, we are motivated by what we imagine. How is that possible?

Nichols and Stich argue that our action in pretense is explained by the following:

- (1) a desire to behave similarly to how one would behave if the imagined situation was actual
- (2) a belief about how one would behave if the imagined situation was actual.

But Doggett & Egan argue that this cannot be right. We don't always need to have determinate beliefs about how to behave in the relevant situation. We can pretend to be one of the undead without believing that this is how the undead behave. We just follow an accepted script.

Second, Doggett & Egan argue that this explanation cannot make sense of imaginative immersion. When being immersed we don't just want to pretend; we aren't just like actors acting out a script. This over-intellectualizes pretense.

How strong are these reasons? Again, there is some reason for skepticism:

First, why think that we need to give a unified explanation of all pretense? Perhaps in some cases pretense is explained by the Nichols-Stich schema, in others we need to make reference to conventions.

Second, the relevant beliefs need not be conscious. This seems to go a long way to addressing the worry about over-intellectualization.

The Problem of Motivation: The Case Against i-Desires

Proponents of i-desires face a dilemma about the content of i-desires. A child flaps her arms, pretending to be a bird. What's the content of her i-desire?

Option 1: the content is to flap her arms. But why would she limit herself to such a boring desire?

Option 2: the content is to fly. But why would she then limit herself to merely flap her arms?

Second, we hold people accountable for the conative attitudes that motivate their pretend behavior. But we don't usually hold people accountable for what they imagine.

Readings:

Doggett, Tyler, and Andy Egan. "Wanting things you don't want." *Philosophers' Imprint* 7.9 (2007): 1-17.

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