

# Reply to Fisher

Andriy Bilenkyy

Some of readers' responses to fictional objects seem phenomenally indistinguishable from emotional responses to non-fictional objects. If these responses are genuinely emotional, they surely are of a strange sort, and are importantly different from emotional responses to non-fictional objects. The dissimilarity between emotional responses to fictional objects and those to non-fictional objects is problematic or at least demands explanation.

In this thoughtful and well-researched piece, Damian Fisher argues that one's explanatory options are constrained by one's position on the grounding of emotions. On Fisher's presentation, the standard map of possible positions on the grounding of emotions is tripartite and consists of non-cognitivism, cognitivism, and the hybrid view. Fisher suggests, very reasonably, that this map is too coarse-grained for the task at hand, since it risks conflating positions that offer great explanatory promise with those that look less promising. He offers a way to subdivide two of those: cognitivism and the hybrid view, according to which emotions are grounded (respectively) in cognitive states only or in both cognitive and non-cognitive states.

On Fisher's view, we can subdivide those positions by considering the ways in which objects figure in the content of emotion-grounding cognitive states. In many cases, objects surely figure in such states as bearers of some properties. Is existence among those? The view that existence is a property might strike one as metaphysically problematic. Fisher suggests, plausibly, that it is not the case; after all, existence is treated as a peculiar but legitimate property in Parsons' metaphysics. Suppose Parsons is right, and existence is indeed a property. In that case, Fisher suggests, we can fine-grain the map by dividing cognitivism and the hybrid view into (let's call it this way) Parsonsian and non-Parsonsian varieties. Parsonsian cognitivists and hybrid theorists would argue that the cognitive states that ground emotions include those in which the objects of these emotions figure as anything but existing. Non-Parsonsian cognitivists and hybrid theorists would argue to the contrary.

I agree with Fisher that the Parsonsian varieties of both positions are philosophically legitimate. But how promising are they when it comes to the task at hand? In my view, that depends on the sort of explanatory work that we expect them to do, and, in particular, on what variation of the problem of emotional responses to fiction we want them to solve. Recall that the problem arises from a dissimilarity between emotional responses to fictional and non-fictional objects. Normally, subjects do not respond emotionally to objects they believe not to exist, and when they do, it seems reasonable to describe such responses as inappropriate; with fictional objects, such responses are common and seem appropriate. What are we interested in explaining, the commonality and mechanics of such responses or their appropriateness?

Suppose we are interested in the former. In that case, we would treat the Parsonsian varieties of cognitivism and the hybrid view as positions on the *metaphysical* grounding of emotions, that is (roughly), on what explains emotional responses and has a tight modal connection to them. Then we

could claim that emotional responses to fiction are different from those to non-fiction in that the former are grounded in cognitive states in which their objects figure as anything but existing. This is a plausible claim. One of its virtues is that it preserves the intuition that the objects of emotional responses to fiction are fictional characters and not, for example, general scenarios in which fictional characters serve as placeholders, as in Dadlez (2021).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the plausibility of this claim does not depend on the correctness of Parsons' metaphysics. Perhaps existence is not a property, or the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear properties is untenable. No matter; to explain the mechanics of common emotional responses to fiction, the cognitivist or the hybrid theorist only needs to claim that readers are, as it were, folk Parsonsians, not that their folk metaphysics or its refined variants are correct. Overall, if we are interested in explaining the mechanics of emotional responses to fiction, positions presented by Fisher look quite promising.

But suppose we are interested in explaining why emotional responses to fiction are not merely common, but appropriate as well. In that case, we would treat the Parsonsian varieties of cognitivism and the hybrid view as positions on the *normative* grounding of emotions, that is (roughly), on what explains appropriateness or fittingness of some emotional responses. Then we could claim that emotional responses to fiction are appropriate insofar as they are grounded in cognitive states in which their objects figure as bearers of all sorts of properties except existence, as long as those properties are normatively relevant to emotional responses. This claim has some initial plausibility but might be problematic for two reasons. First, it seems to commit Parsonsian cognitivists and hybrid theorists to the correctness of Parsons' metaphysics, and that commitment might be difficult to sustain. Second, it seems to commit them to the appropriateness of emotional responses to all non-existents, fictional or otherwise. And that is an undesirable outcome. It is appropriate to feel pity for the wretched non-existent *fictional* Dobby. But it is hardly appropriate to feel pity for the inhabitants of the unbearably hot non-existent *non-fictional* planet Vulcan. Positions presented by Fisher might be able to address these issues, and might, therefore, help us explain the appropriateness of emotional responses to fiction. To do that, they would require further refinements, and refinements would be quite in the spirit of Fisher's nuanced and careful discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Dadlez, "Art Fear and Loathing in Fictional Worlds: Quasi-Emotion, Nonexistence, and the Slime Paradigm," in *Art, Representation, and Make-Believe: Essays on the Philosophy of Kendall L. Walton*, ed. Sonia Sedivy (New York: Routledge, 2021), 74-93.