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## PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | CRITICAL ESSAY

# Are there some things it is morally wrong to make-believe? An examination of imaginative resistance as a measure of the morality of pretence

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the morality of make-believing deviant moral truths within the context of fictional narratives (e.g. make-believing that the killing of innocent people is a morally good thing to do). By examining popular explanations of imaginative resistance (one's unwillingness to imagine certain fictitious content), the paper assesses the extent to which reasons for our unwillingness to entertain certain forms of pretence might constitute a form of moral wisdom, and so offer insight into what a normative approach to make-believe might look like (*qua* a sufficient condition for moral proscription). The paper concludes that while imaginative resistance may provide a psychological measure of what some may find insensitive or tasteless within the realm of pretence, it does not have the resources to be co-opted as a suitable measure of moral wisdom, and therefore cannot be used to guide, morally, what we should or should not be willing to make-believe.

**Subjects:** Ethics Philosophy; Media & Film Studies; Philosophy

**Keywords:** moral deviance; moral wisdom; normative approach to make-belief; moral supervenience

### 1. Introduction

In a review of the new single-player video game, *Hatred*,<sup>1</sup> Colin Campbell describes how the trailer caused him to feel “genuine revulsion”; adding that it is “awful, awful stuff” (Campbell, 2014, p. 1). The video game, *Hatred*, is of course a fiction; a fiction with very violent content but pure make-believe, nonetheless. Now, it may be that Campbell was scathing about *Hatred* because he judged it to be a poor example of the genre; although a reasonable interpretation of his comments, particularly alongside the rest of the review, would lead one to believe that his sense of revulsion was an

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garry Young is a senior lecturer in psychology at Nottingham Trent University. His research interests include the ethics of video games and cyberspace, delusional beliefs and embodied cognition. His publications include *Transcending Taboos: A moral and psychological examination of cyberspace* (Routledge, 2012; co-author Monica Whitty), *Ethics in the Virtual World: The morality and psychology of gaming* (Routledge, 2013) and *Philosophical Psychopathology: Philosophy without thought experiments* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). The current paper is part of an ongoing research programme examining the morality of virtual (*qua* fictional) enactments of real-life taboos.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The paper contributes to the ongoing debate over the morality of virtual violence and other taboo activities, particularly within the context of video games. It seeks to establish whether it is morally justifiable to judge as morally wrong an act of make-believing a deviant moral truth. In other words, whether make-believing that “murder or rape is morally good” is in fact a morally bad thing to do. Examining whether a moral position prohibiting such make-believe can be justified has implications not only for the moral censorship or liberty of fiction in general but, of particular interest to this paper, of video game content specifically.

expression of moral disapproval. Taking this to be the case, such a response —i.e. revulsion—is perhaps pertinent to a more general question about fictional content: namely, are there some things it is morally wrong to make-believe?

Broadly speaking, I am using the term “make believe” to describe a willing act of the imagination. To make-believe in this broad sense, then, is to imagine that something one believes to be right is wrong, or believes to be true is false, or that something one believes not to exist does in fact exist; or vice versa in each case. Through an act of imagination I could make-believe that I am... pretty much anything my imagination enables me to be. Within the privacy of my own mind, I may conjure up all sorts of pretence (I intend to use the terms “make-believe” and “pretence” interchangeably). Such “private make-belief” is not of concern here, however. Instead, I am interested in the morality of make-believe that is created so that others may share in the fiction, should they be willing to do so. In a narrower sense, then, the make-believe I am interested in is a product of the imagination, as described above—a fiction produced by one person (the author, let us say)—but which invites and indeed requires others to endorse the same make-beliefs in order that they (*qua* players or audience) may engage with the pretence as intended by the author.

To illustrate, consider the following single-player video game, *Hunter Hero*, which is the product of my imagination and therefore consists of a number of make-beliefs of my own devising. In order to play the game as intended, I invite (require) the player to endorse the pretence by likewise make-believing the truth of the fictional content.<sup>2</sup> (Although this is another example of a video game, what I have to say applies equally to other forms of fiction.) Within the game, as part of their rites of passage, the protagonist—a member of the ruling elite—is required to hunt and kill arbitrarily members of the servant class during a designated period (one must therefore endorse the make-believe truth that each class of people exists and the rites of passage described above occurs, etc.). This form of killing is held by the ruling elite to be a morally good thing to engage in. Readers who are familiar with the practices of ancient Sparta (ca. 5th century BCE) may recognize some similarity here with the *krypteia*. *Hunter Hero* is, however, set in the near future rather than the distant past. The servant class within this fiction is nomadic and travels the land in search of work. Its members are referred to by the ruling elite as Breams, and those who hunt and kill them are known as Bullingdoneers or “Bullies” for short.

By presently accepted standards, the killing of Breams by Bullies constitutes the virtual enactment of a morally proscribed act: murder. In contrast, the fiction *Hunter Hero* requires us to make-believe that the killing of Breams in this way is in fact a highly moral act: for contained within the fictional narrative is an explicit invitation to make-believe that the “murder” of Breams is a morally good thing to do. If the reader is having difficulty identifying the problem with *make-believing* the moral praiseworthiness of the Bullies’ actions, consider a variation on this theme whereby the player is invited to make-believe the moral worth of an activity within the game called *ragging*: something we would recognize as sexually assaulting Bream women and their daughters, of any age. Is it morally wrong to make-believe the moral goodness of this type of action? To be clear, I am not advocating that the player is being invited, or is in anyway required, to believe that what is *represented* within the fiction is of moral worth (although see Section 4 for further discussion). It is perfectly possible to believe one thing while make-believing the opposite. Instead, I am asking whether make-believing the moral worth of some things (for example, things we would identify outside of the fiction as acts of murder or sexual assault, paedophilia or racism) in order to engage with the fiction as intended is a morally inappropriate thing to do.

There is, of course, a sense in which the supposition I am presenting here, as with any thought experiment, is a form of make-believe. Not only am I engaging my imagination so as to make-believe a world with a moral inverse—whereby what I hold to be morally bad (in part or whole) in the actual world is make-believe held to be morally good in the “inverse” world (and vice versa)—but I invite the audience to endorse this make-believe through its own act of imagination. We each do this in order to assess the morality of engaging in such pretence. In this case, given the nature of our

moral inquiry, the use of make-believe is necessary whatever its content: for it acts as an instrument to aid in, as well as being (in this case) the object of, our moral scrutiny. Consequently, engaging one's imagination, *for the reason just given*, is not (I take as a given) an immoral thing to do.

I therefore hold the following to be true: there is nothing morally wrong with the content of make-believe per se. Such a pronouncement would seem to leave little if any room for further inquiry. What I do acknowledge, however, is the potential for a morally troublesome interaction between the content of the make-belief and the reason for engaging in it which I intend to explore further. With this in mind, a conditional clause needs to be added to the question posed earlier, so that it now reads: *Depending on the reason*, are there some things it is morally wrong to make-believe?

### 1.1. Aims

In addressing this question, we could begin by examining what might be considered by some (all?) to be a fairly benign reason: simply exercising one's ability to make-believe. If I am invited to engage in some pretence—say, read a story in which it is morally praiseworthy to be selfish—and this is something I can do (insofar as I have the cognitive ability to imagine this scenario as I read), then (a) why should I not be invited to make-believe in this way, and (b) why should I not accept the invitation? *Mutandis mutatis*, the same can be asked in relation to the fictional act of ragging. As a means of addressing these questions, I wish to focus throughout the paper on the psychological phenomenon of *imaginative resistance*. Imaginative resistance is said to denote what we are or, more importantly, what we are not *willing* to imagine even under the circumstances just described. If one engages in imaginative resistance, it is not that one lacks the ability to make-believe *p*; rather, it is that one is unwilling to do so. The overarching aim of this paper, then, is to explore the extent to which our psychological response to such pretence, in the form of imaginative resistance, could be co-opted as a moral marker and therefore as a normative measure<sup>3</sup> of what we should or should not be permitted to make-believe, depending on the reason.

What is there to be gained from co-opting imaginative resistance in this way? Well, to be clear, I am not suggesting that the mere occurrence of imaginative resistance is, in and of itself, sufficient to justify moral prohibition in the context of make-believe (irrespective of how much intuitive appeal this may have for some). What I am suggesting, instead, is that there is something to be gained from an examination of the prominent explanations of the phenomenon; not to critique their prowess at identifying the psychological mechanisms underlying imaginative resistance but, rather, to determine whether there is something present within these accounts that is able to shed light on what, if anything, should be considered a morally inappropriate reasons to engage in certain kinds of pretence: specifically those involved in make-believing the truth of deviant moral claims (i.e. that the act of ragging, taken from the fictitious game, Hunter Hero, is a morally good thing to engage in).

Understanding why we imaginatively resist certain make-beliefs has, one might theorize, the potential to inform and so help develop a normative position regarding acts of pretence; an implication of which is that on those occasions when an individual or group of like-minded individuals do not engage in imaginative resistance—in the context of the kind of make-belief described above—then we have the resources at hand to justify the claim that such resistance is nevertheless warranted. Such a claim would be based on the reasons given for why some people resist engaging in certain make-beliefs and how such reasons have been co-opted as a sufficient condition for moral prohibition. The potential utility for co-opting explanations of imaginative resistance is therefore high. All of this is possible, of course, only *if* explanations of imaginative resistance can be co-opted in this way. Unfortunately, I do not believe that they can.

I intend to show that imaginative resistance is a psychological aberration, the explanations for which lack the resources to act as a sufficient measure of what it should be permissible to make-believe. By “aberration”, I mean a deviation from an otherwise much more open willingness to imagine fictional events. That said, I accept that any psychological constraint seems to act as a reliable indicator of personal (subjective) morality (a point I will return to). Nevertheless, exploring accounts of imaginative

resistance is far from futile, even if it leads us to conclude that these explanations are unable to contribute to a moral position that is universally normative, insofar as it is applicable to any possible moral agent. First and foremost, it is important to show why this is the case, especially given the credence one might be tempted (intuitively) to bestow on imaginative resistance as a legitimate moral marker (particularly given its role as a reliable indicator of subjective morality, as intimated above); but also because the failure of these explanations to be co-opted in a more legitimate way (*qua* a universal normative position) reveals much more of the scope of our liberty when it comes to the morality of make-believe. Importantly, though, it also provides a useful segue into other issues that need to be explored when considering the morality of make-believe—e.g. evidence supporting harm and issues of taste and (in)sensitivity—which will be touched on as we progress.

More formally, the paper's aim can be presented in the form of a disjunctive syllogism:

- (1) Reasons given to explain imaginative resistance either amount to a sufficient set of criteria for moral judgements about make-beliefs, or they do not.
- (2) (I will show that) It is not the case that reasons given to account for imaginative resistance amount to a sufficient set of criteria for moral judgements about make-beliefs.
- (3) Therefore, the reasons given to explain imaginative resistance do not amount to a sufficient set of criteria for moral judgements about make-beliefs.

In an attempt to support the conclusion presented in (3), the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I illustrate what is involved in the act of imaginative resistance. I then examine popular explanations of the phenomenon, beginning with imaginative resistance as a response to a perceived violation of the supervenience relation which is said to exist between a non-moral description and moral properties (Section 3). This is followed by an account of imaginative resistance as a symptom of author ambiguity, where the author's reason for the make-belief is unclear (Section 4). The final explanation posits that the phenomenon arises from a fear (on the part of the one resisting the make-believe) of the harmful consequences that could arise from engaging in the sorts of pretence we are discussing here, even where the motivation underlying the invitation to make-believe is unambiguous and benign (Section 5). I argue that each of these reasons is ultimately unsatisfactory as a legitimately moral measure. Therefore, as things stand, make-beliefs should not be morally prohibited on account of a psychological unwillingness (on the part of some people) to engage with them and the reasons proffered to explain this.

I finish with a word of caution. Where the reason proffered for imaginative resistances stems from a fear of potential harmful consequences, given that this is an empirical issue, it is my contention that further evidence is needed to support this view, which, while unavailable now, may be forthcoming in the future. I also concede that, as a reliable indicator of personal morality, imaginative resistance is able to provide information on what different people may find intolerable to imagine (*qua* pretence), and therefore what might be found to be tasteless and insensitive if directed at a particular audience (Section 6). Such a concession does not, however, affect the conclusion I draw regarding the suitability of imaginative resistance. Before moving on to any of this, I begin by outlining the context in which imaginative resistance is said to arise.

## 2. Imaginative resistance: science-fiction but not moral-fiction

Consider the following sentences:

- (1) James T. Kirk succeeded Christopher Pike as the captain of the USS Enterprise
- (2) Ebenezer Scrooge once had a business partner called Jacob Marley
- (3) A man on a lonesome road walks in fear and dread because he knows a frightful fiend does close behind him tread<sup>6</sup>

Each sentence describes a fictional event or relationship. Yet, according to the non-predication theory of literature (see Stern, 1965), each statement is neither true nor false because the

presupposition of each statement is not taken to be true. In other words, the events/relationships described in (1)–(3) can be neither true nor false because that which would otherwise be taken for granted in the case of each of the characters described—the truth that they exist or existed—is understood not to be true. If it is understood that Kirk and Pike do not exist—have never existed and will never exist<sup>5</sup>—then the statement described in (1) lacks truth-aptness.<sup>6</sup> Yet there is a sense, within the fiction at least, in which it is true that Kirk succeeded Pike, or that Scrooge’s partner was Marley, or that a frightful fiend walks close behind a traveller on a lonesome road (see Alward, 2010). Given this, what truth is being described here?

According to Stern (1965), the information contained within statements (1)–(3) is not used to inform or even misinform; rather, it is used to *perform* the task of creating a fictional event/character/relation. The fictional narrative should therefore be viewed as a prop which guides the subject in the construction of the make-believe (Mothersill, 2006). As a consequence, while it is neither true nor false “in fact” that Kirk succeeded Pike, one is nevertheless free, although required (if the fiction is to work as fiction), to *make-believe* the truth of Kirk’s succession to the captaincy, or that Marley was Scrooge’s former business partner, or that the fiend is close at hand (Everett, 2007; Walton, 1990). Thus, in cases where a proposition lacks truth-aptness, through an act of pretence, it can nevertheless be make-believe-true that *p* (see also, Stern, 1967).

Within each of the fictions described in (1)–(3), not only is it possible to make-believe their respective truth but, as a matter of routine, it is something we are willing to do. Imagine, then, that the fiction in (1) concerning the captaincy of the USS Enterprise continued thus: Other candidates were not considered for the position of captain because, of those available, all were homosexual and it was right that they were excluded because homosexuality is morally repugnant and no starship captain should be associated with that which is morally repugnant. Or, in (2), that Jacob Marley engaged in non-consenting sexual intercourse with women and it was acceptable to do so because they were women. Or, finally, that the frightful fiend in (3) was a frightful fiend because he was a black man whose fiendishness went hand-in-hand with his (and all other black people’s) inferiority to whites.<sup>7</sup> In essence, what is being described directly or implied in each respective case is one of the following views:

- (i) Homosexuality is morally wrong
- (ii) Engaging in non-consenting sexual intercourse with women is morally right or at the very least not morally wrong
- (iii) Black people are fiends and inferior to whites

Importantly, statements (i)–(iii) are derived from a fiction. Yet, according to proponents of imaginative resistance, we are far more willing to make-believe the truth of Kirk’s succession to the captaincy of the Enterprise than the fictional truth that homosexuality is morally wrong (Gendler, 2000).<sup>8</sup> In the case of the former (non-moral) utterance, the authority of the author to present us with a fictional truth proceeds unchallenged (Stueber, 2011), whereas with the latter make-belief concerning the moral status of homosexuality, we are likely to experience what Gendler (2006) refers to as “pop-out”: a sudden disengagement with the fiction. Fictional moral claims that run contrary to our own morality are therefore likely to be resisted and the authority of the author on such matters undermined (Nanay, 2010; Todd, 2009). This *authoritative breakdown* (Gendler, 2006) occurs far less frequently in cases of non-moral fiction, even where fictional facts deviate radically from what is actually known.<sup>9</sup> To be clear, it is not that I might resist imagining that some people within the fiction believe propositions (i)–(iii), and therefore that I might resist being drawn into the fiction through their eyes (as it were); rather, I might resist imagining that the moral position *is* make-believe true (not just believed to be true by some of the characters). I might therefore resist make-believing that they (the fictional characters) are *justified* in what they believe, even in cases where what they believe reflects the moral norm within the fictional realm (Mothersill, 2006).

Proponents of imaginative resistance accept, somewhat intuitively it would seem, that we typically resist imagining the sort of deviant moral claims outlined in (1)–(3). Walton (2006), for example, while acknowledging that assertions about imaginative resistance should be subject to empirical verification, nevertheless seems unsurprised by *the idea* that people show the kind of resistance discussed. Yet if I am willing to make-believe that there *is* a world where Kirk succeeded Pike as the captain of the USS Enterprise and not just make-believe that this is *believed* to be the case by some within the fiction, then should I not be equally willing to make-believe that there is a world where homosexuality *is* morally repugnant, in some categorical sense, and not just *believed* to be so (again, by some within the fiction)? Equally willing, that is, to *make-believe* that categorical truths exist which denote the immorality of homosexuality or that engaging in non-consenting sexual intercourse with women is morally good or that the colour of one’s skin determines one’s moral character. After all, we are “not more convinced of [for example] the evil of slavery than we are of the non-existence of dragons and fairy godmothers” (Mothersill, 2006, p. 76), so why is it that we are more willing to imagine the existence of the latter than the moral goodness of the former? As Walton (1994) asks: If we embrace science-fiction, why not moral-fiction?

*Prima facie*, imaginative resistance is a *psychological* measure of our unwillingness to engage with certain make-beliefs; nevertheless, given the context in which imaginative resistance is said to occur, it seems reasonable to explore the extent to which it could be co-opted as a way of morally validating what, if anything, one should not be willing to make-believe, and so act as a *normative* measure of fictional content. To test imaginative resistance’s normative credentials, in the sections to follow I examine explanations of the phenomenon to assess whether any of these provide a coherent basis for moral differentiation in the context of make-believe. I aim to show that they do not.

### 3. Explanation 1: violating the supervenience relation

Gendler (2000) argues that moral claims are commonly believed to be categorical insofar as what is held to be morally good or bad in one world is equally so in all possible worlds. Consequently, if it is wrong to murder or rape or discriminate in one world then this should be true of all worlds, including fictional ones. Supporting Gendler’s explanation is the widely held view among moral philosophers that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties (Blackburn, 1985; Depaul, 1987; Meyers, 2012). Where A and B share the same non-moral properties, A and B share the same moral properties. This supervenient relation is famously illustrated by Hare (1952):

Suppose that we say “St. Francis was a good man”. It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed exactly in the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in exactly the same way, but who differed from St. Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man. (p. 145)

The relationship between the moral property of “goodness” and the non-moral or physical properties that constitute St Francis—his physical description—is such that there can be no moral change in the absence of a physical/behavioural change. This, of course, does not mean that *any* physical difference necessitates a moral difference. If a physical duplicate of St Francis were suddenly to find that his hair had gone grey overnight or that he had suddenly become short-sighted, then it is unlikely (or certainly would not necessitate) that this would have any impact (detrimental or otherwise) on his “goodness”. Any physical difference between the duplicate saints, if it is to be cited as the reason for a moral difference between the two men, must constitute *reasonable grounds* for this difference (Sidgwick, 1874/1981); it must be a physical difference of the right kind. As an aside, the precise nature of the supervenient relation is also dependent on whether it is held to be local/global, weak/strong (Kim, 1993). This difference is not of major concern here, although I will touch on it briefly below.

Walton (1994) argues that imaginative resistance in the face of deviant fictional morality occurs because our required make-belief about such morality contravenes this supervenience relation (see also Weatherston, 2004). Where the property of moral goodness supervenes on, say, the non-moral act of

generosity, if A and B are identically generous then A and B should be judged equally good. When we are told in the fictional world that A is generous, which matches our understanding of the term “generous” when used outside of the fiction, then it should follow that A is good given the supervenience relation just described. Should we be asked to make-believe that A is bad, however, then given what we understand about generosity and its relation to goodness, the fictional claim that A is bad should appear manifestly incomprehensible to us. It should be difficult for us to understand how two identical actions—one from the fictional world and the other non-fictional—can be described as good in one world but bad in the other (Gendler, 2006). For this reason, we are reluctant to engage with the fiction’s moral utterance.

In short, for fictional  $p$  to be morally good, where non-fictional  $p$  is morally bad, the concept of supervenience requires that the fictional and non-fictional descriptions of  $p$  differ in some way that constitutes reasonable grounds for this difference. Where they do not differ, logic dictates that the moral status of  $p$  must be the same. Of concern, however, is not whether  $p$  is morally bad (in some categorical sense that transcends worlds) but whether I (perhaps in accordance with the moral norm) believe that  $p$  is morally bad or even believe that the moral status of  $p$  transcends worlds (which is to be contrasted with what I make-believe). In accordance with the concept of supervenience, then, one can accept that, where two physical descriptions of  $p$  are identical, what one believes about the moral status of  $p$  must be consistent. But in the case of fictional and non-fictional  $p$ , the descriptions do not share all the same properties and so, strictly speaking, are not identical.

As was discussed in Section 2, the fictional description of  $p$  does not have the property of truth-aptness, whereas non-fictional  $p$  does. The fact that fictional  $p$  lacks truth-aptness reflects my altered epistemic relation to it (compared to non-fictional  $p$ ): I only *make-believe* its truth. The differing property of truth-aptness evident in the case of fictional and non-fictional  $p$ , and the altered epistemic relation that subsequently follows, means that I can believe that  $p$  is morally bad while make-believing its moral goodness without violating the concept of supervenience (we have, here, reasonable grounds for a difference, as Sidgwick might say).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in the case of make-believe, it is my contention that the supervenient relation is sufficiently local and weak (Kim, 1993) to require only “same world” consistency in make-belief. If, within the same fiction, two identical descriptions of  $p$  are presented then the make-believe truth of the same moral status must supervene on  $p$ . Where two separate fictions describe  $p$  in the same way, the make-believe truth of the moral status of  $p$  need not be consistent across these fictional worlds. One is free to make-believe that  $p$  is good in one fiction and bad in the other without violating the (weak and local) supervenience relation.

Whether allegedly violating the supervenience relation is a satisfactory explanation of imaginative resistance as a psychological phenomenon is not of concern here. Even if (for the sake of argument) it is satisfactory—insofar as resistance is caused by the fact that one believes that the two non-moral descriptions are the same and therefore that the two moral descriptions must be the same—closer inspection of the fictional and non-fictional descriptions reveals a pertinent difference that affects the supervenient relation. Irrespective of its worth as an explanation of the underlying psychology, then, in relation to the normative position I am seeking, here, given that there is no violation of the supervenience relation, this cannot be used as a measure of what it should be morally permissible to make-believe. Perhaps this is for the best, as the idea that I should be morally prohibited from make-believing that intentionally killing an innocent person or engaging in non-consenting sexual intercourse are each morally good things, simply because doing so violates the concept of supervenience (which, as it happens, it does not), seems to somewhat understate the moral controversy involved in such pretence.

The next explanation focuses on the ambiguity caused by violating fixed norms within the fiction: specifically, regarding the author’s motivation for doing this and/or how the violation may be construed by others. As before, the extent to which this approach provides a satisfactory account of the psychological phenomenon of imaginative resistance is not of concern. What is of interest is whether this explanation gives any indication of what a normative approach to make-believe might look like. Again, it is my contention that it fails in this task.

#### 4. Explanation 2: author ambiguity when violating fixed norms

When directed towards fiction, our moral beliefs appear to have a transcendent quality that is lacking (perhaps through willing abdication) in cases of non-moral beliefs. Booth (1988), for example, talks of fictional narratives containing *nonce beliefs* which we are required to hold for the duration of the fiction (e.g. zombies walk the Earth in ever increasing numbers). They are not intended to be exported from the fictional world and so transcend this domain. *Fixed norms*, on the other hand—such as being honourable, treating people with respect, good triumphing over evil, and so on—are said to provide the backdrop against which we judge the exploits of the protagonist (and others); they provide the moral of the story, and are what we are expected to take away from the fiction. Fixed norms are therefore meant to possess a transcendent quality. As Malliet (2006) notes: Darth Vader is unlikely to be representative of that which is authentic, and so is understood to be part of the fiction; but the estranged relationship he has with his son, Luke Skywalker, might be considered by many to have a level of authenticity that transcends the fictional domain.

Now, it may be that the author, when inviting us to make-believe, attempts to provoke us by subverting these fixed norms and so challenge our traditional moral values. Where  $p$  is morally bad in our world, let us say that the fiction holds that  $p$  is morally good. But by inviting us to make-believe the moral goodness of  $p$ , and thereby subverting a moral norm as part of the pretence, we cannot be sure that the author is not making simultaneous claims about both the fictional and non-fictional worlds (Gendler, 2006). In other words, “when we encounter fictional truths that concern deviant morality, we cannot assume that their deviance is an indication that the author does not wish them to be exported” (Gendler, 2000, p. 78).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if we feel that the author’s invitation to make-believe is designed to manipulate us into re-thinking our moral beliefs then we may hold that we are no longer willing spectators (or even participants) in the pretence but, rather, victims of a manipulation. I may, for example, come to realize (or merely suspect) that I am being manipulated into make-believing that  $p$  is good in order that I might eventually come to believe that  $p$  is good, rather than simply continuing to make-believe it.<sup>12</sup> Under such circumstances, Moran (1994) informs us, it is likely that we will refrain from engaging with the fiction further.

As part of the fictitious game, Hunter Hero, for example, when one is invited to make-believe the moral worth of ragging, is this simply part of the pretence or is the author (me, in this case) expressing their belief about the morality of what is represented by this virtual act, at least when directed towards groups of a certain socio-economic status or ethnicity? Should it be the intention of the author to commend us to delight in what the make-belief represents (in this case, actual sexual assault) then it is likely that the author is using the fiction deceptively as a means of achieving this aim.<sup>13</sup> Where an ulterior motive is revealed—say, the hope that we might actually come to believe the morally deviant claim (rather than merely make-believe it)—then there exists a case for moral condemnation based on the fact that “make-belief” is being used deceptively as a platform to express an actual immoral belief; most likely as a tool of persuasion not necessarily apparent to those invited to go along with the supposed pretence. But even if one holds that both the deception (*qua* ulterior motive) and the content of the putative make-belief are morally problematic, one must nevertheless recognize their mutual independence.<sup>14</sup> It is not therefore contradictory to proclaim that the deception is immoral whereas the content of the putative make-belief (when evaluated as a make-belief) is not (although see Section 4.1 for further discussion).

Where the author is using (putative) make-beliefs as a means of conveying actual beliefs then the author is not make-believing the truth of the moral value of ragging (*qua* sexual assault) at all but, rather, expressing a belief to that effect under the façade of make-believe. In such a situation, one cannot be invited to engage with the make-believe as intended because there is no make-believe (at least concerning ragging). If there is no make-belief then there is no genuine pretence to judge, morally. Yet even where the author does not have an ulterior motive, one might still wish to claim that such pretence is vulnerable to (a) misunderstanding, and/or (b) negative consequences. I will consider each in turn.



#### 4.1. The problem of misconstrued meaning

One might argue that where the *likelihood* exists that the make-belief could be misconstrued as commending us to delight in the morally prohibited, or even lead to this conclusion based on a reasonable interpretation of the fictional content, then this is sufficient, morally, to condemn the make-belief. The problem with this argument is twofold. First, is it *morally* wrong to create something if one believes there is only the *possibility* that what one has created may be misconstrued as endorsing the morally reprehensible (even if the audience consider such misconstrued belief to be based on a reasonable interpretation of the depiction)? A slightly different and perhaps morally more forceful way to ask this would be: Is it morally wrong to allow make-beliefs to be misconstrued in this way? The latter question implies a situation in which, at the very least, through the omission of clarity one creates a situation where misunderstanding does or is likely to occur. Here, moral condemnation may be framed in terms of the level of wilful intent. Is it the intent of the author to foster misunderstanding? If so, then there is a moral case to answer based on a weaker form of deception. But what moral position should one adopt in the former case where one believes only that there is a *possibility* that the meaning may be misconstrued, even when one does not wish for this to happen? What should “possibility” be taken to mean here? Does it mean: although unlikely, there is nevertheless a slim chance that someone may misconstrue the meaning of the representation? Or does it allow that almost certainly *someone* will? Perhaps it means something in-between.

Theorists such as Patridge (2011) and Powers (2003) have argued that fictions are capable of conveying morally meaningful messages. When one virtually enacts rape, for example, then this make-believe is in danger of conveying a socially significant message such as “rape is ok” (even if this is not the intention), or it could be construed as supporting historical positions concerning the subjugation and exploitation of women. Certainly fiction may be used to send such meaningful messages (this was partly touched on above when considering the author’s motives) but there is nothing within the content of the make-belief per se, even if the content consisted of Jacob Marley engaging in non-consenting sexual intercourse in a world full of approving onlookers, that *entails* the message “rape is ok”. Nor does one *necessarily* have to endorse what the make-believe *represents* in order to engage with the fiction.

Yet, even *if* one allowed that it is morally problematic to engage in a fiction that may be misconstrued (and this should not be considered a given), then the focus of the moral judgement becomes the morality of one’s *reason* for creating and engaging with a fiction that could be (is being?) *misconstrued* and not the content of the make-believe itself (see Brey, 1999). For the sake of argument, if make-believing that *p* is morally good does not carry with it the risk of being misconstrued (as, say, promoting the moral goodness of *p* and even commending us to *believe* that *p* is morally good) then why should one not be allowed to engage in such an unambiguous *untruth*?<sup>15</sup> After all, untruth is what all make-belief is. Such a question perhaps reveals a certain idealization on my part, although some may say naivety; nevertheless, I feel a legitimate response is required which needs defending. Otherwise, it would seem that any accusation of naivety is rooted in the need to err on the side of caution and not risk offending others. One possible response, and perhaps reason to err on the side of caution, concerns the question of sensitivity or taste: that some make-beliefs, however benign and unambiguous one’s intentions to engage with them are, may at best be considered insensitive/tasteless in certain contexts, or at worse be misconstrued as deliberately provocative and designed to cause offence. I will return to this point in Section 6.

Before moving on to discuss this issue, however, let us first examine the final account of imaginative resistance. As previously, I aim to show that this approach lacks the resources (by way of sufficient *evidence*, in this case) to inform a normative position.

#### 5. Explanation 3: the danger of negative effect

If we are invited to make-believe the truth of a morally deviant claim, irrespective of any ulterior motive on the part of the author, or even in the full knowledge that the intention is benign, then imaginative resistance may still be a means of expressing our unease at the pretence, insofar as it

may be symptomatic of the fact that we *fear* that it will lead to our becoming morally corrupted, such that we might come to believe and even delight in what we had previously only pretended was true (see McCormick, 2001). Now, make-believing that *p* is good is unlikely to result in an *immediate* weakening of my conviction that *p* is in fact morally bad; it may not weaken my conviction at all; but I may fear that it will lead to a gradual change if I persist in the make-belief. Either way, the make-belief may unsettle me, perhaps causing moral “disorientation” (Walton, 1994) which I will likely find unpalatable, again causing me to resist the pretence. If someone feels uncomfortable engaging with a deviant moral fiction then, *ceteris paribus*, that is reason enough for *them* not to do it, and so reason enough to exhibit imaginative resistance. But it is not reason enough to claim that it should not be done, *qua* some form of normative pronouncement. Consequently, it is not reason enough to prohibit morally those who are willing to make-believe deviant moral truths.

In relation to this last point, consider the actions of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) who, in 2011, refused to issue a classification for the film *Human Centipede II* (Shoard, 2011) because, in their view, the film focused on: “the sexual arousal of the central character at both the idea and the spectacle of the total degradation, humiliation, mutilation, torture and murder of his naked victims” (p. 1). The BBFC felt that the film posed a real, as opposed to a fanciful, risk that harm would be caused to viewers. In the BBFC’s considered opinion, *Human Centipede II* not only commends the viewer to delight in the morally proscribed but runs the risk of *causing* them to do so (see Kieran, 2002; Young & Whitty, 2012).

The view described above is reminiscent of what Patridge (2011) calls *virtue consequentialism*<sup>16</sup> insofar as (in this case) it suggests that engaging in such make-belief has the potential to cause moral corruption (i.e. promote a character with vice-like traits rather than virtuous ones) that will lead to negative utility outside of the fictional space; perhaps in the form of deviant moral behaviour in the real-world. Such speculation is dependent on a posteriori support: say in the form of documented cases verifying the negative effects of engaging in the kind of pretence discussed. To date, there is a paucity of research on this specific issue and what research has been done typically focuses on exposure to violent media (including video games) and aggressive or otherwise anti-social behaviour/cognition (Anderson, 2004; Anderson et al., 2010). Findings are far from conclusive, however. What evidence is available has not been unanimously received, meaning that a consensus on the (alleged) negative effects of such make-belief has not been achieved (Bensley & Van Eenwyk, 2001; Bushman, Rothstein, & Anderson, 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010; Huesmann, 2010).

For an a posteriori argument of this kind to carry weight, further incontrovertible evidence (i.e. that is, evidence that is not vulnerable to plausible alternative interpretations or challenges to the methods used) would need to be provided which shows a connection between one’s make-belief and one’s behaviour outside of the fiction. But one does not act on one’s *make-beliefs* outside of the fiction. Therefore, what one needs to show is:

- (A) That engaging in make-belief can cause one to form beliefs with the corresponding content (minimum causal connection) and that these newly acquired beliefs contribute to a change in behaviour (a more causally forceful requirement).
- (B) That engaging in make-belief can cause a change in behaviour even when no change in belief occurs (perhaps as a result of feeling compelled to act such that I behave in a morally proscribed way even though I believe this to be morally wrong).

Should compelling evidence for either (A) or (B) be forthcoming then one would have the grounds for an argument, based on negative effect, for the moral prohibition of make-belief with deviant moral content. Further research is therefore welcomed and needed. As things stand, there is no legitimate (insofar as it is uncontested) a posteriori basis for the moral prohibition of make-believing the truth of deviant moral claims.

## 6. Some concluding remark and a question of taste

What I hope to have shown is support for the conclusion to the disjunctive syllogism presented in Section 1.1: that the reasons given to explain imaginative resistance do not amount to a sufficient set of criteria for moral judgements about make-beliefs. At best, aspects of the explanations tap into our intuitions/fears about ulterior motives and negative effects, but these ultimately need empirical confirmation. Perhaps, then, what imaginative resistance is providing, should it occur, is a measure of personal taste and sensitivity rather than the basis for a universal normative position.

Patridge (2011) (introduced in Section 4.1) presents an a priori argument for why certain fictional content should be prohibited: namely, that which has *incorrigible social meaning*. By this, she means that some content may represent an association that has deep-rooted (actual) social meaning, even if only localized to a particular society, which may be deemed offensive to certain members of that society, and/or even be morally and legally proscribed. She illustrates this with a fictitious example of a video game in which an African-American has to navigate their way through a watermelon field. The association of an African-American with watermelons, we are told, has “been used as a mechanism to insult and dehumanize African-Americans, and to bind racist Americans together through the practice of telling racially demeaning jokes” (Patridge, 2011, p. 308). In such a context, anyone aware of the incorrigible social meaning underlying the fiction described would no doubt recognize the offence it may (or would likely) cause, and therefore the likely accusation of insensitivity and/or tastelessness that would be directed towards the make-belief, even if the reason was simply to have fun with the pretence; or perhaps the accusations would be deemed more forceful because of this reason. Here, I would suggest, imaginative resistance more easily fits the role of expressing one’s resistance to such insensitive make-believe or tastelessness, and so provides a *reliable indicator* of what a particular society/culture may find insensitive or tasteless at a particular time. By way of a recent illustration, consider the withdrawn Apple iPhone game, *Baby Shaker* (a game that involved shaking a noisy baby in order to stop it crying; allowing that one could potentially shake it until it died: an outcome represented by Xs over the baby’s eyes; see Roberts, 2009).

If one were to resist engaging in the kind of make-believe described by Patridge or made available for a short-time (until withdrawn) on the iPhone, or were to resist make-believing the moral goodness of ragging, (as presented in *Hunter Hero*), then such a psychological response would, I maintain, be a reliable indicator of one’s awareness of the insensitivity and tastelessness of the fiction (either based on one’s own standards and/or a recognition of the standards within one’s society/culture). Nevertheless, should one wish to engage in any of the aforementioned make-beliefs, while there may be grounds for a charge of insensitivity or tastelessness (should it be shown that one knew of the potential for incorrigible social meaning, say), one’s lack of imaginative resistance is not sufficient for a charge of immoral practice. Such a view is compatible with a position adopted by Brey (1999):

[W]hether immoral behavior in virtual reality may become acceptable to the offended party may well depend on his or her assessment of the intentions, values and beliefs of the actor. What may have to be re-established for the offended party is a basic trust that the desire to act immorally in virtual environments does not reflect a fundamental disrespect for the real-life equivalents of the virtual beings or things that are harmed or desecrated in VR [virtual reality]. (Brey, 1999, p. 9)

Distinguishing moral taste and sensitivity from a normative position of the kind I have been discussing throughout this paper is not an uncommon practice. A somewhat cursory examination of the distinction between these different “elements” reveals moral taste, conventionally, to refer to one’s moral preferences in a sense delineated by (among others) Hume’s sentimentalism (Hume, 1739/1978). Likewise, convention dictates that moral sensitivity is the ability to recognize how our actions/attitudes will affect others, or the moral features of a given situation (Lovett & Jordan, 2010). One could therefore concede that one’s willingness to engage with certain make-beliefs denotes a particular moral preference (described as taste), and even the degree to which one is sensitive to how the presence of

such pretence will affect others, but nevertheless maintain that neither is sufficiently robust, or indeed necessary, to act as the basis for a legitimate normative position. As Patridge herself concedes, with reference to typical violent video game content, one “might find such games juvenile, or in bad taste, or even boring, but not morally objectionable” (2011, p. 306).

I accept that the debate between taste/sensitivity and morality continues, but would resist erring on the side of caution by promoting moral taste and the *need* for sensitivity to the lofty height of a necessary or sufficient condition for a universal normative position. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this relationship further.

In conclusion, then, while accepting that imaginative resistance is able to reliably indicate one’s personal morality, which likely correlates with one’s awareness of certain socially demarcated boundaries regarding taste and sensitivity (but not necessarily), such a relationship (should it occur) is not sufficiently robust to inform and so help develop a normative position regarding the morality of make-belief.

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#### Notes

1. Developed by *Destructive Creations*.
2. To say that one must endorse the make-believe truth (of  $x$  or whatever) is not to demand that one avow it; rather, one’s endorsement can be and typically is tacitly obtained.
3. The normative measure I have in mind is congruent with the commonly held view that it must be universally normative, insofar as it must be a measure applicable to any possible moral agent (see Vogelstein, 2011).
4. Adapted from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Part VI.
5. Even if persons named Kirk and Pike existed in the past or will exist in the future, it is understood that these persons are not being referred to here.
6. A sentence is truth-apt if it expresses a proposition capable of being either true or false. The sentence “London is the capital of England” is truth-apt, as is the sentence “London is the capital of France”. Both of these sentences can be contrasted with “Hurray for Dixie” which lacks truth-aptness. Likewise, the sentence “Harry Potter is wiser than his years” would be truth-apt if referring to some non-fictional person but is not truth-apt, in this case, because Harry Potter refers to the fictional character created by J.K. Rowling.
7. Example borrowed from Young (2013).
8. Weinberg and Meskin (2006) distinguish between imaginative resistance as *imaginative refusal* and *imaginative blockage*: the former equates to an unwillingness to imagine, the latter an inability to imagine. It is imaginative resistance as refusal rather than blockage that is of interest here. Similarly, Gendler (2006) distinguishes between imaginative resistance as *imaginative barriers* (similar to imaginative blockage) and *imaginative impropriety*. It may be that my unwillingness or refusal to imagine “that  $p$ ” is because I consider doing so to be improper.
9. Our willingness to imagine non-moral deviation is not totally unconstrained. Yablo (2002) and Weatherston (2004) each discuss examples of non-moral deviation that encounters resistance: finding a five-fingered maple that is oval shaped, for example, or a television and arm-chair that are indistinguishable from a knife and fork.
10. The lack of true-aptness provides reasonable grounds for a difference in the epistemic relation with the moral property (e.g. *believing  $x$  is morally good*), irrespective of moral content. This means that I could believe that  $p$  is morally good while also make-believing that fictional  $p$  is morally good, or believe that  $p$  is good while make-believing that it is bad. The fact that there is a difference in the non-moral description/properties of  $p$  and fictional  $p$  (truth-aptness) means that there is a difference between the non-moral description and my *epistemic relation* to the moral properties that supervene on  $p$ : belief in the former case and make-belief in the latter. What I choose to make-believe can be the same or different in terms of moral content to what I choose to believe. The important difference is not the moral property but my epistemic relation to it.
11. Such a position contrasts with Eagle (2007) who maintains that what we learn about fiction is that the author is not trying to convey the literal truth. It may be, then, that imaginative resistance denotes that this lesson has not been learned or that Eagle’s comment applies more to non-moral claims.
12. Compatible with explanation 2 and, to some degree explanation 1, is Stueber’s (2011) view that what we believe and what we are required to make-believe regarding a given moral position may appear incompatible simply because we are not provided with sufficient information about the reasons for the fictional moral-truth. We may resist the pretence, even if we do not perceive authorial manipulation, simply because the fiction’s incomplete narrative results in a sense of incoherence. The absence of detail could leave unclear the extent to which the supervening fictional property (say, generosity) is identical to that evident in the non-fictional world and therefore whether the supervening fictional property should realize the same moral property as that purported in the non-fictional case (e.g. “goodness”). This failure to articulate the reasons for the moral position adopted within the fiction, Stueber continues, makes it difficult for the

- reader to empathized sufficiently (if at all) with the protagonist when acting in a way that contravenes our moral values. The lack of detail makes it difficult for us to understand why we should put aside our own moral values in this instance, or at least quarantine our requested make-belief from them (as Stueber puts it) when imagining such deviant morality. It is not that we do not understand that someone (the protagonist in the fiction) may believe  $p$  (where  $p$  contravenes an accepted moral standard) and even have a reason for this belief; rather, it is that we do not understand—perhaps owing to the limited information available—how the protagonist's reason(s) could be considered within the fiction to be cogent and therefore justified. We resist the make-believe, Stock (2005) argues, because we fail to understand the protagonist's claim "from the inside".
13. It may be that the author is being overt and honest in expressing his/her intention. If so, then the author would be openly inviting us to share certain beliefs, not make-beliefs.
  14. It may be that the content of the fiction is of someone delighting in murder. Even if this is so, one could present the same content in a context in which we are invited to judge the perpetrator of this act as morally wrong. Here, the content itself—namely, depicting the act of delighting in murder—is not morally wrong.
  15. By "untruth" I mean that the nature of the make-belief is such that one must believe it to be untrue, irrespective of whether one understands it to lack truth-aptness.
  16. Patridge (2011) uses the term to refer to players making choices that will promote the development of their virtuous character, where having such a character is seen "as something to be maximized, promoted, or aimed at in some way" (p. 304). Certain other actions could, of course, promote vice rather than virtue.
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