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Final Paper, Prompt 1

PHIL2054, Emotion in the Arts

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The paradox of fiction was originally proposed by Colin Radford and Michael Weston in their paper “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?” The paradox of fiction consists of three statements, listed here:

1. We have emotions for fictional characters and events even though we know they are false.
2. Emotions for objects logically presuppose beliefs in the existence of those objects.
3. We do not believe in the existence of fictional objects.

These three statements all appear to be true, but cannot be true together. As for (a), anyone who has read a great novel or seen a great play has felt emotions related to the fictional characters in the work of art. If we are reading or watching a performance of *Oedipus Rex*, it is likely that we feel emotions such as pity, despair, helplessness, and possibly anger during the course of our interaction with the play. There is no immediate reason for us to suspect that these are not real emotions, so (a) appears to be true.

Radford uses several examples to illustrate (b), only one of which I will repeat here, for brevity. Radford asks us to imagine we hear a harrowing story from a man in a bar about his sister. We react appropriately to the story, and are harrowed. If the man then tells us that he does not have a sister, and the story was an invention of his imagination, our harrow at the story turns to embarrassment at having been taken in by his story (Radford 68).

It is also immediately apparent to us that (c) is true. While we watch *Oedipus Rex*, we do not believe that the characters on the stage are real. There is no point during the performance where we legitimately believe the events being depicted are actually occurring in real time before us. There are times when we may become so absorbed in the performance that we are no longer consciously thinking about the fact that we are sitting in a seat in a theater. This does not mean, however, that we are ever unaware that we are sitting in a seat in a theater, or that we legitimately believe we are in ancient Greece watching the events unfold.

Radford proposes several potential solutions to the paradox of fiction. One potential solution is the suspension of disbelief. This would reject (c) of the paradox of fiction, because we would believe that King Oedipus actually was in front of us. Even if we suspend our disbelief, however, we are still aware that the characters are not real. This means that (c) is still true, and the paradox still exists (Radford 72). Another solution proposes that we experience emotions in relation to works of fiction because they bring to mind other similar and real situations, for which we can experience emotion. Therefore the emotion is not in relation to the fictional characters, but to real situations. This would allow us to reject (b), because we are feeling emotion for something that we believe is real. Radford rejects this solution by arguing when we read *Anna Karenina*, we do in fact feel emotion for her (Radford 75). This means that (b) is still intact as well. As another possible solution, Radford proposes that there are actually two types of emotions, the real emotions we experience for real things, and a second type of emotion that we experience for fictional situations. This second type of emotion has us reacting similarly to if the situation was real, but not as severely. This proposal rejects (a) of the paradox of fiction. The problem Radford has with this solution is that we are still feeling some sort of emotion because of the fiction. This emotion seems to be the same in every way to the “real” emotion, just less extreme. If this second type of emotion is just a minor form of normal emotion, it is still emotion, and (a) is still true (Radford 77). Radford proposes several other solutions, and always has a counter for these solutions. In every case, Radford shows how even with the proposed solution, all three parts of the paradox of fiction are still intact, and therefore the paradox persists.

Radford concludes his paper by saying that the paradox is essentially unsolvable and humans are by nature simply irrational (Radford 78). According to Radford, when we read or watch *Oedipus* Rex, we feel pity and sadness for the characters, and these feelings are genuine. We also do not believe in the existence of the characters, but we should, because we are experiencing emotion related to them. We are simply acting irrationally when we experience these emotions. Radford seems to have come to this conclusion prematurely. He addresses some potential solutions, but certainly not all of them. Radford also never addresses which of the three components could be false directly. There are other ways to disprove different components of the paradox. In particular, I will focus on ways to disprove (a) and (b).

An important detail regarding how we might resolve this paradox is how we define an emotion. Two different theories that would suggest different resolutions to the paradox of fiction are Robert C. Solomon’s and William James’s theory of emotion. Solomon proposes a judgment theory of emotions, while James’ theory relates to the bodily reactions we experience in relation to emotions. Generally speaking, Solomon thinks of experiencing emotion as a *cognitive* experience, meaning some amount of thinking goes into experiencing an emotion. James conversely holds that an emotion is a *non-cognitive* experience, meaning that the emotion is a natural reaction that doesn’t require mental process on our part.

James argues that when we perceive something, our body reacts with certain changes, and feeling these changes is the emotion we recognize (James 190). For James, emotions are instinctive. The emotion is not related to any cognitive process or evaluation that we make. There may be an evaluation (there is a bear in front of me, and I am therefore in danger), but this is not related to the emotion. The emotion occurs when my body reacts to the danger (James 190). One major concern with James’ theory is that we have emotional reactions to some things which cannot be explained in terms of instinctive reactions. For example, we may fear a stock-market crash, even though there is no reason we instinctively should. James notes that there are still similar bodily reactions (James 195). A person needs to learn to fear a stock-market crash, but once they understand the potential dangers, their body reacts similarly. One may feel a drop in his stomach at the fear of a stock market crash just as he feels a drop in his stomach for instinctive fear, such as when standing near a precipice. The idea that we are able to fear abstract things such as a stock-market crash is particularly applicable to the paradox of fiction. Because James’ theory is non-cognitive, he is not concerned with what triggered the emotion in question, only the bodily reactions that occur as a result. This means that James would reject (b) of the paradox of fiction. When we are reading *Oedipus Rex*, the contents of the play may cause our bodies to go through the changes appropriate to sadness. As far as James is concerned, we are feeling genuine sadness, because the bodily changes are there. We do not necessarily need to believe in the existence of the trigger of our bodily changes.

Sitting contrary to James’ non-cognitive theory of emotion is Robert Solomon’s cognitive theory of emotion. Solomon’s theory of emotion tells us that an emotion is an evaluative judgment (Solomon 184), which is different than an ordinary judgment. An ordinary judgment is an assertion of a proposition. For example, I can judge that the chair is hard, or that my sweater is red. An evaluative judgment, however, is the assertion of a proposition with evaluative content. Solomon thinks that emotions are these judgments with evaluative content. Solomon’s primary argument in favor of emotions being evaluative judgments is a list of similarities between emotions and judgments. A change in a judgment causes a change in the relevant emotion. For example, I make a judgment that I have been offended, and therefore I am angry. If I later redefine my judgment, and decide that I was not actually offended, I will no longer be angry.

If Solomon’s cognitive account of emotions were true, we would necessarily need to believe in the existence of the object of our emotions. For example, the object of anger is an offense. The object of our sadness is a loss. I can be angry that Jones has damaged my car, but if I later find out that Jones did not damage my car, I will no longer by angry, because there was no real offense. Neither will I be angry if someone tells me a story that Jones damaged my car, so long as I know that it is only a story. Similarly, there is no reason for me to feel sadness on for Oedipus’s plight, because I know he is not real. I might feel sadness or distress if my real friend experienced Oedipus’s tragedy, but when the object of my sadness is not real, there cannot be any sadness. This argument closely resembles the argument used to defend (b) of the paradox of fiction. Because we still do not believe in the existence of the characters in the story, Solomon’s theory of emotion suggests that (a) is the premise we should reject to resolve the paradox of fiction. This means that we do not actually experience emotions in relation to the fictional characters from stories, because the emotion-esque feelings we experience do not actually fit the definition of emotions. These emotion-esque feelings are potentially explained by Kendall Walton.

Walton proposes that we do not feel genuine emotions, but that we imagine that we experience emotions. He likens this experience to that of children who play games of make-believe with stumps, pretending they are bears. The children can have reactions to the stumps that seem exactly the same as fear. The children are not legitimately afraid of the stumps, but imagine they are afraid of the bears. Similarly, when we read *Oedipus Rex*, we play a game of make-believe with the play and the world the play creates. We imagine the appropriate emotions, even though we are aware we are not actually experiencing them (Walton 46). Walton assumes a cognitive theory of emotion, similar to Solomon. Walton assumes that in order to experience an emotion, we need to encounter a stimulus, after which some form of mental process triggers the emotion.

The theories of Solomon and Walton go together quite nicely. Both theories reject (a) of the paradox of fiction. Solomon’s theory explains what an emotion is (which Walton simply assumes) and Walton explains the consequences of Solomon’s theory applied to the paradox of fiction.

James, Solomon and Walton, and Radford therefore stand at odds to each other regarding the paradox of fiction. Of the three, Radford has the least convincing argument. Radford comes to his conclusion without considering all the options available. Radford also fails the directly address the three parts of the paradox of fiction, choosing to instead show different examples and how they relate to the paradox of fiction. The examples he uses are not airtight either. Whenever considering a potential solution, Radford dismisses it by simply stating that the three parts of the paradox are all still satisfied. Radford’s argument is marred by the fact that he does not have a precise definition of an emotion. Without knowing exactly what an emotion is, it is nearly impossible to say if we are or are not experiencing a legitimate emotion in each of his proposed solutions. There is simply not enough information in Radford’s argument to back up such a substantial claim.

Solomon and Walton’s theory makes more sense than Radford’s. Solomon and Walton make their argument, and back it up with their resulting debate. Walton’s idea that we can imagine feeling emotions is relatable to a reader. Everyone undoubtedly played games of make believe in their childhood, and so understand the idea of experiencing an emotion without actually feeling it (because they are imagining the emotion). Readers are also more likely to accept Walton’s view over Radford’s, because we do not see ourselves as irrational. This means most people will likely be inclined to disagree with Radford’s conclusion. Even if they agree with the steps he takes to get there, most people would think some component was missing, because they still disagreed with Radford’s conclusion.

While Walton’s solution to the paradox of fiction is better than Radford’s idea that it is unsolvable, the solution implied by James’ theory of emotion is better yet. The idea that we simply can in fact have emotional reactions to fictional situations is the simplest of all the proposed solutions. If we define an emotion as James does, the paradox of fiction resolves because (b) is rejected. With Solomon’s theory of emotion, some additional argument is needed (from Walton) to handle the paradox. Ockham’s Razor would then dictate that James’ theory is most likely to be true. Additionally, when originally justifying the three components of the paradox of fiction, (b) was the most difficult to defend. Radford uses a couple examples to defend it (the man with the story of his sister, which is fictional), but these examples are again dependent on the definition of an emotion. Propositions (a) and (c) are much more intuitively correct than (b), and not as dependent on our definition of an emotion. Lastly, when we experience a great work of art, such as *Oedipus Rex*, it is apparent which of the three propositions viewers are most likely to reject. Suppose I were to question a man who was watching *Oedipus Rex*, and just at the moment of catharsis for King Oedipus, he began to cry because of pity and sadness for Oedipus. I could ask him “Are you sad for Oedipus?” Obviously. “Do you believe that Oedipus really exists right now?” Obviously not. “Do you believe in the existence of Oedipus because you are sad for him?” Also obviously not. Part (b) of the paradox is obviously the least plausible of the three, and should be rejected to resolve the paradox.