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# Jonathan Gilmore, "Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind."

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**Jonathan Gilmore.** *Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind.* Oxford University Press 2020. 276 pp. \$74.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190096342).

2021 winner of the Outstanding Monograph Prize awarded by the American Society for Aesthetics, Jonathan Gilmore's *Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind* is a fascinating and invigorating book that shows the bonds between philosophy, psychology and cognitive sciences at their best. A page-turner ridden with empirical data probed with vigorous philosophical sharpness, the book promises to add substantial insights into five research areas: psychology of fiction, nature of artistic expression, artistic autonomy, art and ethical criticism and the cognitive utility of thought experiments. Underlying these domains is Gilmore's central concern: the question of how we process fictional (i.e., imaginative) representations as opposed to non-fictional. Gilmore tackles this question by comparing and contrasting norms, which regulate the rationality of our beliefs, appropriateness of our emotions and justifiability of our desires in nonfiction and in fiction. In doing so, the author relies on the substantial body of philosophical and psychological theories regarding emotions, rationality, imagination, decision-making, stimulation, theories of normativity and numerous others.

Gilmore begins (chapters 1 and 2) by relying on contemporary research from the cognitive sciences, which shows that with respect to their neural, psychological and phenomenological dimensions, our cognitive and emotional reactions are continuous across the real and the imagined contexts. This descriptive continuity, as Gilmore calls it, is well documented and supported by diverse research which shows that the same cognitive and emotional mechanisms that enable us to engage with non-fictional (i.e., real) contexts are operative in our imaginings (and other similar operations, such as predicting, thought experimenting or engaging with fictions). However, and this is where Gilmore's main interest lies, the philosophically interesting question is whether such descriptive continuity also extends to the normative domain. In other words, Gilmore wonders whether the same 'normative criteria governing the aptness, fit, or rationality of our emotional, cognitive, and conative engagements with the actual world continuous with the norms governing those attitudinal engagements with fictional works of art and objects of imagination?' (5). Gilmore's answer to this question is no, and the book is dedicated to supporting the statement that 'responses that would be irrational or inapt when directed at some state of affairs in real life may be rational or apt when formed in response to an analogous state of affairs that is imagined or represented by a fiction' (10).

The main reason for holding the position of descriptive continuity/normative discontinuity is, Gilmore argues, the fact that assessing the rationality of certain mental state requires consideration of the particular, context-specific function for which it is activated (10). In other words, since the context in which we imagine things, including our engagements with works of art, is different from the context in which we need to make sure that our beliefs represent the world properly (or in which our emotional reactions need to be both justified and correct given the state of the affairs in the world), different norms apply. Consequently, this implies that although we use the same kinds of inferential, deductive/inductive and counter-factual reasoning when we are considering imaginative content as when we are considering real world states of affairs, the imaginative context can encourage us to form beliefs that we would not otherwise hold—as when a work of fiction invites us to imagine something contrary to the physical laws, or to embrace morally problematic characters.

The same reasoning applies to evaluative emotions (examined in Chapters 3 to 5): regardless of the sub-personal continuity, i.e., the fact that the same regions of the brain fire off in real and in imaginary contexts, the norms of correctness are different. Thus, in fictional cases some emotions

can be justified even if such justification is withheld in the real world. Gilmore offers an extensive list of mechanisms through which fiction encourages the audience to develop these emotions (i.e., framing effects), including formal devices such as the soundtrack, physical appearance of characters, features of the medium etc. To support this claim Gilmore offers an extensive analysis of the philosophical literature on emotions, coupled with interesting data from psychology that explains how human doxastic and emotional processing come together.

Armed with these conclusions, further strengthened by his analysis of normative discontinuity with respect to the epistemology of fiction developed in chapter 6, in the next chapter Gilmore discusses the conative relation between our attitudes about fictions and the real world, i.e., the question of consistency of our desires for what happens in fiction with desires we have in non-fictional contexts. Crucial to this chapter is Gilmore's tackling of the paradox of fictional emotions, primarily negative ones, which he analyzes from the point of view of apparently inconsistent desires that viewers have in attending to tragedy, when they both wish Desdemona to live and the play to have tragic elements (i.e., Desdemona to die). Countering several influential theories on how to explain such apparently irrational desires, Gilmore argues that the threat of irrationality does not hold. The two desires are motivated by different sets of reasons, one related to the work (as a work of art) and the other to the content of that work. More importantly, it is the joint workings of these two sets that creates the desire to engage with certain genres (tragedy), and the fact that these desires are both generated by the work is a mark of its artistic value.

Following up on the issue of inconsistency, in chapter 8 Gilmore addresses a currently very popular question: why do we often fail to extend our moral disapproval to fictional characters who surely deserve it, such as Tony Soprano? Following Shaun Nichols, Gilmore refers to these as 'discrepant affects' and sets out to refute those theories that dismiss such affects, claiming that we do not actually hold morally problematic attitudes toward immoral characters. Gilmore argues that this is wrong; when we simulate a point of view of a fictional character, our imaginings, including our imagined evaluations, are no longer quarantined from our genuine, non-fictional evaluations. Thus, discrepant affects are genuine since the 'breach of quarantine leads us to adopt the norms to which the fiction or fictional characters subscribe' (200).

Gilmore wraps up his book by extending his research into yet another fundamental art-philosophical question, the one related to the relation of moral and artistic value in a work of art. Such apparent change of interest is much welcome since it shows how the conclusions accumulated throughout the book can be put to service of solving philosophical questions regarding values and appreciation of art. Building upon his central claim—the centrality of functions of our engagements with different domains—Gilmore falls back on his functional theories of art (defended throughout his various papers) to show that artworks' moral and artistic dimensions come inseparably together in the relation between 'the moral vision of a work of art and the point, purpose or function it was created to realize' (222). Thus, if a work sets for itself a moral end, but fails to achieve it for morally relevant reasons, that is a moral and an artistic flaw of a work.

For quite some time scholars in numerous areas highlighted descriptive continuity; Gilmore does a wonderful job of showing that it is only via the application of most well thought-through philosophical arguments that we can begin to address normative questions which have been bothering us since Plato. One of the most significant aspects of this book is its capacity to answer many of the most fundamental philosophical questions regarding the functioning of our imagination and our engagement with fiction in a manner which incorporates empirical data, but remains distinctly philosophical in its focus on normativity and value, and its dedication to the highest standards of analytical

argumentative methodology. Such a dense and complex approach to issues occasionally makes the book hard to grasp, but those who persist will be rewarded by the insights it provides.

Though Gilmore does not say much about the practical implications of his analysis, these are substantial and it will be interesting to see how philosophers, art scholars and psychologists will incorporate them into their research. Not only does Gilmore's book reveal much about our everyday cognitive and emotional processes, thus enabling us to better understand our reactions toward non-fictional entities, it has the capacity to address some of the most pressing questions regarding the cultural, educational, and ethical relevance of art and art-engagements. Even those less concerned with fiction and imagination can profit from the book, given its focus on human reasoning, belief formation and emotional experiences. Interesting, instructive and thought-provoking read that will for sure raise significant reactions from scientists in numerous areas, *Apt Imaginings* is a must-read philosophical masterpiece!<sup>1</sup>

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