

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007  
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**3 Puzzles About the Morally Wrong  
Beauty<sup>1</sup>**

*María Jose Alcaraz León, Postdoc  
researcher, University of Sheffield (UK)*

It has been acknowledged since Hume<sup>2</sup> that appreciation of certain works of art cannot be fully accomplished when they embody moral attitudes or beliefs we flatly disagree with. In turn, this issue has been considered in relation to the work's aesthetic value. We tend to think that there is a relationship between the moral aspects of works of art and their aesthetic value. Hence, it is not only that we may fail to fully appreciate a work when its moral aspect seems wrong, but also that its aesthetic value might be lessened as a result of the work's moral blemish.

In *Mimesis as Make-believe*<sup>3</sup> and in “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality”<sup>4</sup>, Kendall Walton follows this thought and approaches the issue in his own terms. Given his account of fictional works in terms of games of make-believe, we may fail to fully appreciate a work if some of the prescribed imaginings are such that we cannot imagine them or do not want to. As a matter of fact, it seems that sometimes we resist or are unable to imagine certain moral beliefs or points of view as well as aesthetic ones –i.e. we seem unable to find immoral facts as right or certain *jokes* as funny. In contrast, there seem to be less controversial cases when the imaginings prescribed involve deviances from our

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been possible thanks to the financial support from the Ministerio de Educacion y Ciencia to the research project "La expresion de la subjetividad en las artes" HUM2005-02533

<sup>2</sup> Hume, D., “Of the standard of taste”, in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987, pp. 245-9.

<sup>3</sup> Walton, K. L., *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Walton, K. L., “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 68 (1994). Reprinted in Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, *Arguing about Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Routledge, 2002), pp. 339-357.

non-moral beliefs<sup>5</sup>. Thus, if, for example, a novel requires the reader to imagine that killing somebody for fun is right we may resist imagining this or found ourselves unable to do so and, consequently, we may fail to fully appreciate the work.

But this may be too fast. Although Walton has characterized works of fiction in terms of games of make-believe, a proposition can be true in a fictional world even though the reader is unable or unwilling to imagine it. A proposition is fictional if it is one a work prescribes the reader to imagine. This is compatible with the reader being unable to fulfil such prescription<sup>6</sup>. So, he tries to distinguish between what might be called 'imaginative resistance' and resistance to the fact that p-is-truth-in-the-fiction. It is the latter phenomenon that he feels more compelled to examine.

In a recent article<sup>7</sup>, he has considered these issues again and has tried to clarify as well as distinguish three different problems he considers as related but necessarily distinct ones. In that article, he neatly distinguishes between the aesthetic puzzle, the imaginative one, and the fictional one. According to him these three puzzles have been somehow mingled in the current literature making unclear the contribution of each to fiction appreciation. The purpose of his article is, then, set their boundaries and provides some plausible answers to each.

I will shortly characterize what Walton has in mind by each of these problems. Then I will focus on what he calls the aesthetic puzzle and I will try to show that he might be dispelling this problem too quickly. In particular, I will try to hold that it is more intimately connected to the puzzle of fictional resistance. Hence, if we want to provide an explanation of how the phenomenon of fictional resistance may affect our appreciation of a work, we need to take into account the relationship between these two phenomena.

More broadly, we can appeal to Walton's own account of aesthetic value in order to show that the puzzle of fiction resistance may be one of the reasons a work may be less valuable aesthetically.

---

<sup>5</sup> "We recognize the fictionality of ordinary empirical propositions and even propositions stating scientific laws, which we consider false, far more readily than we do that of moral principles we reject. Authors just do not have the same freedom to manipulate moral characteristics of their fictional worlds that they have to manipulate other aspects of them." Walton, 1994, p. 349.

<sup>6</sup> This failing is not, however, due to an inability of the reader to engage with the game of make-believe the novel is supposed to prescribe, or his refusal to play the game for capricious reasons. There is nothing else he can do in order to follow those prescriptions. Rather, it is what is prescribed to be imagined what explains why the reader cannot do so.

<sup>7</sup> "On the (So-Called) Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance" Forthcoming in K. Walton *Marvelous Images* (OUP)

\*\*\*

In this section, I offer a basic presentation of Walton's distinction between three different problems. Although these distinctions seem necessary in order to accurately picture the different phenomena involved in the appreciation of fictions, I think that we also need to accurately picture the relationships between them. Only by showing that certain relationships hold, we will fully understand them.

I will start with the problem of imaginative resistance. Then, I will focus on the puzzle of resistance that *p* is fictionally true. And finally I will deal with what Walton has called the aesthetic puzzle. He is right in that these are different phenomena. He is not right, in my opinion, in the way he relates the aesthetic puzzle with the fictional one.

### **Imaginative resistance**

Works of art sometimes represent or depict certain repulsive or immoral facts. A novel, for example, can portray a murderer who enjoys causing pain to his victims or a man who thinks –and acts accordingly– that black people shouldn't be allowed to have the same rights as white people do. We find nothing especially puzzling in imagining cases like these. We may find ourselves, for example, repelled by how the murderer gets pleasure out of his evil actions, but this does not prevent us from perfectly well imagining everything the novel prescribes that we imagine: we imagine the murderer committing several crimes and we imagine him getting pleasure out of that.

However, even if it is uncontroversial that we can imagine things we find repulsive, we may resist doing so. Hence, Walton thinks that there can be a cluster of reasons why we might resist imagine something we find morally repulsive. We may fear that in imagining a moral perspective we currently find obnoxious we are somehow invited to embrace it, to accept that perspective. Sometimes, it is not the fear that some of our beliefs can be questioned or changed; rather, we try to avoid the feeling of disorientation or of our mind's being messed up. Our beliefs might be unmoved, but we may feel disoriented nevertheless. A third reason we may appeal to in order to resist certain imaginings is that they will constitute painful or uneasy experiences and we do not want to have them. We prefer to stay in peace.

However, sometimes, a novel not only presents some facts or moral attitudes that we may find repulsive, but also presents them as justified. For example, the novel may show that

enjoying murdering for fun is right. In these cases, we seem to resist imagining them, but what exactly do we resist imagining? Surely not the fact that somebody may enjoy murdering; we might consider this is a weird way of enjoyment, but surely it is something we imagine effortlessly. We resist, however, imagining that that kind enjoyment can be right. Moreover, it seems that it is not just a matter of being unwilling to imagine what the work prescribes, rather we find ourselves unable to carry on with these imaginings. Why are we unable to imagine so? Why are we unable to imagine what we currently take as an immoral perspective as right? Walton has attempted to provide an answer to this problem that I will spell out in the context of the puzzle of fictional resistance<sup>8</sup>.

Two remarks should be made before we go on. First, it is not uncontroversial that these contents can never be imagined. Something we find impossible to imagine now might be imaginable in the future. What it is impossible to imagine cannot be definitively established. Second, even if it may be the case that some contents always resist being imagined there is at least the issue whether this feature implies they cannot be fictionally true. Something can be fictionally true even though it cannot be, for whatever reason, imagined. If a writer sets that p is fictionally true and we cannot succeed in imagining it so, so much the worse for us.

But is it enough that a writer sets p as fictionally true? Could it be that there are certain constraints –logical, conceptual or imaginative- that the writer needs to respect and that, when he doesn't, ground our rejection that p is fictionally true? As Walton puts it "Can an author simply stipulate in the text of a story what moral principles apply in the fictional world, just as he specifies what actions character performs?" (1994, p. 346)

### **Resistance that p is fictionally true (FR)**

According to Walton, "a proposition is fictional if there is a prescription to the effect that it is to be imagined"<sup>9</sup>. It might be the case that we cannot fulfil the imaginative prescriptions a fiction presents to the reader, but this does not necessarily imply that we are unable to acknowledge that p is true in the fiction.

---

<sup>8</sup> The reason to postpone Walton's explanation of this puzzle is that, as we will see, inability to imagine what the work prescribes grounds the fictional puzzle, i.e., resistance to accept that a certain proposition is true in the fiction.

<sup>9</sup> Walton, 1990, p. 61.

However, since works of fictions have been characterized by Walton as props of make-believe, failing to imagine that *p* is true in the work when it is so prescribed amounts to failing to fully appreciate the work in question; we cannot really participate in the game of make-believe the work presents to the reader, though we can at least know what the work prescribes the reader to imagine. Although Walton has claimed that this may be an unfortunate circumstance that affects our appreciation we need to be cautious in concluding that something cannot be fictional because we cannot imagine it. We may note that "the story *calls* for imagining this. We do not have to go ahead and actually do the imagining" (1994, p. 350)

However, as has been noticed above, it seems that we sometimes reject that something can be true in the fiction; moreover, this rejection seems to be internally linked with a certain kind of imaginative resistance. Our resistance to acknowledge that some moral principles may be true in the fiction is not one, however, that relies on our finding these principles obnoxious. We have already seen that this may be a reason to resist imagining them, but we have also noticed that that does not necessarily preclude that we accept them as fictionally true. That we find them morally repulsive is not, then, the reason we cannot imagine them being fictionally true<sup>10</sup>. What is it then?

Moral and aesthetic properties are supervening properties: they supervene on natural properties of the world<sup>11</sup>. The reason why we resist imagining certain moral principle as right when in the real world we do not take it so is that we cannot imagine the world being in a certain way and that certain supervening relationship does not hold.

"My best suspicion" Walton writes "as to why we resist allowing fictional worlds to differ from the real when we do,..., is that it has something to do with an inability to imagine (certain kinds of dependency relations) being different from how we think they are, perhaps an inability to understand fully what it would be like for them to be different" (2005, p. 13)

So, it is not that we morally object to the moral principle prescribed by a work and that this fact also manifests itself in certain resistance to imagine something as true. Rather, it

---

<sup>10</sup> As Walton puts it: "It is not clear that moral objections to imagining moral principles we find repugnant have anything to do with the resistance I think most of us feel to recognizing such principles to be fictional." Walton, 1994, p. 350.

<sup>11</sup> Walton has endorsed a supervenience model of moral and aesthetic properties; hence, he says: "Moral properties depend or supervene on "natural" ones and, I believe, in the relevant manner (whatever that is); being evil rests on, for instance, the actions constituting the practices of slavery and genocide. This, I suggest, is what accounts (somehow) for the resistance to allowing it to be fictional that slavery and genocide are not evil." Walton, 1994, p. 351.

is that we seem to be unable to imagine certain dependency relationships as being different from the way we take them to be in the actual world. This, however, needs not be understood as a *moral* flaw of the work. Walton thinks rather of it as an *aesthetic* flaw<sup>12</sup>.

A remark should be made before looking at this problem. Although Walton has examined the fictional puzzle as arising mainly out of our inability to imagine certain morally obnoxious principles as justified, the fictional puzzle does not limit itself to these cases. Walton himself provides some examples of parallel aesthetic cases. For example, he thinks there is no way he can imagine certain sentences as a joke or as being funny. Thus, he says: "It is not easy to see how it could be fictional that this joke is hilariously funny (...), how one could reasonably allow it to be hilarious in a fictional world, while thinking that it is actually dumb. The same goes for a nonjoke like "A maple leaf fell from a tree" (said in no special context)" (1994, 350).

### **The aesthetic puzzle**

As Walton describes it, the aesthetic puzzle consists in cases in which a work's aesthetic value seems underrated or affected by the work's moral flaws or due to our objections to the work on moral grounds. He is sceptical about there being a necessary relationship between the presence of a moral flaw and the lessening of the work's aesthetic value. However, he acknowledges that it can sometimes be the case that a moral flaw of a work grounds our judgement of the work as being less valuable. It is a matter of empirical research to know in what cases this is so.

Of course, what counts as a moral flaw is not a simple matter. There are many different reasons why we consider that a work might be morally flawed. Let's see some examples.

(i) A work may represent a moral perspective we reject. This, however needs not be necessarily considered as a moral flaw of the work. The work itself may simply present an evil character without asking the reader to sympathize with him; hence, surely showing something bad is not bad in itself. In fact, despite the work's content, we do not

---

<sup>12</sup> "Refusing to understand it to be fictional that slavery is morally acceptable is not in itself to find the work defective. But if the author meant this to be fictional, her failure to make it so may be responsible for failings in the work. The very fact that an author tries to do something she can't bring off, if the attempt is evident in the work, can be disturbing or disconcerting to the appreciator. And insofar as other objectives the author meant to accomplish in the work depend on its being fictional that slavery is legitimate, she will have been unsuccessful in accomplishing them. (...) These are not moral defect in the work, however, but aesthetic ones" Walton, 1994, p. 352.

usually morally object to this kind of work. (ii) A work may convey a moral view we ourselves endorse, but in a distorted manner. It may be too sentimental or self-indulgent; (example, sentimentalized poverty). Typically, we object to these works because we are aware of the work's intention to trigger certain emotions in the audience in a cheap way. It is too obvious that they aim at triggering certain emotions that we object to feeling the way we are expected; rather we feel we are being manipulated. (iii) Also related to the prescribed response of a work we find cases in which a certain emotion is demanded by the work but that, for whatever reason, we take it as undeserved by the work. For example, a novel may present a character as deserving pity –his death is painful- but he is so evil –he deserves that death so much - that pity is not really appropriate<sup>13</sup>. (iv) Another case: one in which the emotion or response prescribed by the work is adequate but immoral (laughing at a funny thing is a correct response, but it can also be immoral)<sup>14</sup>. (v) Finally, a work may not only present a moral point of view we plainly reject, but also it may present it as true or justified. It may present the view in a way that demands the reader to accept it as true in the fiction. For example we may find something like the following: "In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl."<sup>15</sup> That cases like these constitute moral flaws is controversial, though. I think that we may have intuitions that support both the claim that a work's prescribing imagining a moral principle we reject as holding is a moral flaw of the work, and the view that it is simple a case of FR –without making any judgement at all about its moral status. Walton, if I have not misunderstood him, would say that although these cases imply FR, they do not constitute moral flaws of the work. I will try to motivate the view that they can also be understood as moral flaws.

Much has been written about the relationship between the moral flaws of artworks and their overall aesthetic evaluation. Different positions have been offered concerning the contribution the moral evaluation of a work makes to its aesthetic value. There is a wide range of views: from those who claim that moral concerns are irrelevant for aesthetic evaluation to those who think the link is more intimate. Within those who think that moral flaws of works of art make some contribution to their aesthetic value, some think

---

<sup>13</sup> I take these are the cases upon which Berys Gaut's critical ethicism fundamentally relies. See his "The ethical criticism of art" in Levinson, J., *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> This example is due to Matthew Kieran in his "Forbidden Knowledge. The Challenge of immoralism" in Jose Luís Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner eds., *Art and Morality*, London & New York, 2003, pp. 56-73.

<sup>15</sup> This example is chosen by Walton in order to illustrate precisely this point. See Walton, 1994, p. 347.

moral flaws always lessen the work's aesthetic value, others think they can sometimes do so, and others think it can even be the case that a moral flaw contribute positively to the work's aesthetic value. I will not spell these views here. My aim in this paper is to approach this relationship from a different angle. I will focus on a particular case that concerns the fictional puzzle examined above.

My purpose is to examine the extent to which failing to accept fictionally that  $p$ , when  $p$  is a moral principle we currently reject, affects the aesthetic evaluation of the work; not only because FR can be considered an aesthetic flaw but also because it is a moral flaw. In short, how the fictional puzzle relates to the aesthetic one when the former involves a moral proposition.

### **FR and aesthetic evaluation**

There are at least three different characterizations of this relationship we may adopt. We may think that failing to imagine what the work prescribes does not affect its aesthetic value. A work's aesthetic value may be assessed independently of our limited abilities to imagine what the work prescribes us to imagine. We may note that the work prescribes certain imaginings; also that these prescriptions are structured in a certain way, and that certain aesthetic properties can be truly ascribed to the work as a result of that structure. We can do all this without considering our inability to imagine those prescriptions as interfering in the aesthetic value we attribute to the work. The work will have a certain aesthetic value that can be assessed regardless our abilities to fulfil the imaginative prescriptions. I may not be able to imagine that killing one's parents for fun is right but I may acknowledge that this fictional proposition together with other features of the work provides me with the necessary grounds to assess it aesthetically.

A second possibility is that, the inability to accept as true in the fiction a certain proposition can in some cases contribute to its aesthetic value (normally negatively) while in some others just be indifferent to it.

That I cannot imagine what the work prescribes to be imagined may be an unfortunate fact of the reception of the work, but one that has no bearing on the work's assessment. I may fail to imagine that Hitler is a great man who will make the world better by improving the Aryan race; however, that does not lessen at all my admiration for the beauty displayed in *The Triumph of the Will*. Or, to use the same example, it can happen that the prescribed imaginings in *The Triumph of the Will* regarding Hitler's grandeur are

not ones that I can successfully carry on and that this, in turn, becomes a reason to lessen my evaluation of the film. After all, the work has not succeeded in one of its internal purposes -and this lack of success is not surely just due to an idiosyncratic inability that I have in imagining certain things. I find it more difficult, however, to provide an example in which a work when the fictional puzzle arises becomes a better work because of that.

Finally, we might consider a third possibility. We might claim that any time the fictional puzzle arises when appreciating a work of art we have a case in which our aesthetic evaluation of the work lessens necessarily. Walton himself has made the point that when the fictional puzzle arises in the process of appreciating a work of art it can count against its aesthetic value. However, sometimes he holds that FR can be compatible with our ability to assess the work aesthetically; or at least he has claimed that we can be perfectly aware of other aesthetic properties of the work regardless of our inability to imagine certain moral perspectives as right. Thus he claims: "If we disagree with the perspective, we might consider reliance on it to be a defect in the work, even an aesthetic defect, but this doesn't always prevent us from recognizing and appreciating the aesthetic qualities that result" (Walton, 1994, p. 349)

Let's assume FR usually amounts to an aesthetic defect, one that results for the work's own internal inconsistency, as it were. I would like to show that when the fictional puzzle arises because a prescribed moral proposition cannot be imagined it is a *moral as well as an aesthetic flaw* of the work. If I am right, there is room for a deep relationship between the FR puzzle and the AP. Cases of FR constitute ones in which the aesthetic value of a work necessarily lessens due to both an aesthetic failure and a moral one. So, at least in some cases - those in which the moral flaw is a matter of the work's inviting to imagine a moral proposition that we cannot imagine -, moral flaws of artworks always contribute negatively to their aesthetic value. But maybe I should provide an explanation of in what sense cases of FR in which moral propositions are involved constitute moral flaws of artworks.

Is a work morally flawed when it prescribes imagining a moral principle we are unable to imagine? At first sight, it seems that it does not necessarily have to be so. Prescribing a certain imagining that cannot be fulfilled because it undermines one moral principle we seem unable to put into brackets does not seem to be itself an immoral demand. Rather, as Walton has noticed, it seems an aesthetic defect not a moral one. As Walton puts it: "[I]f the author meant this to be fictional, her failure to make it so may be responsible for

failings in the work. The very fact that an author tries to do something she can't bring off, if the attempt is evident in the work, can be disturbing or disconcerting to the appreciator. And insofar as other objectives the author meant to accomplish in the work depend on its being fictional that slavery is legitimate, she will have been unsuccessful in accomplishing them. ... This may not only destroy the story's excitement and dull our interest in it; it may also ruin the story's formal properties, the shape of the plot." (1994, p. 352)

However, I would like to draw an analogy in order to show that prescribing this kind of imagining can also be regarded as a moral flaw of the work. I assume Walton's point that FR can well ground our bad evaluation of the work in the sense that it is an internal flaw of the work—especially when the prescribed imagining is necessary for other features of the work to make sense. However, it is not only that our failing to imagine what the work prescribes precludes its full appreciation. If we acknowledge those prescriptions as being intentional we may regard the work as trying to deceive or confuse us. That we cannot successfully fulfil those prescriptions does not imply that they are not there in the first place. Hence, we ask what role these prescriptions have in the work and we assess them as part of our overall evaluation of the work. Actually if we notice that they are unfit with respect to the aesthetic dimension of the work, why can we not say something similar as far as their moral aspect is concerned?

Nevertheless, we need to be cautious here. It may be the case that the work is defective because the author is not very skilled and has not noticed that his work contains such unrealizable imaginings, maybe he is just playing with funny ideas about how moral issues would be if we accepted certain weird principles as true. He might not be aware of the fact that our inability to imagine them as justified may ruin his whole experiment but that does not make it a moral flaw in itself; one can be a bad author not only due to one's defective aesthetic skills. So, prescribing imaginings that cannot be fulfilled is not in itself a moral flaw of the work; only when these prescriptions can be regarded as intentionally misleading, has the reader enough evidence to think the work is morally flawed.

When he plays the role of confusing the reader, we have sufficient reason to consider FR as a moral flaw of the work as well as an aesthetic one. If the author honestly thinks the principles to be imagined hold as true, we may think he is from another planet, but not that he is doing something wrong in prescribing imagining them in his work.

However, I would like to push the issue a little further. Works of fiction are, at least for Walton, props in games of make-believe, prescribed imaginings. These games have certain rules of production and are usually governed by certain conventions. Although normally both the rules and conventions that govern a game of make-believe need not be explicit, we can come to realize their importance when, for any reason, they become undermined. Thus, for example, there are certain responses to the prop that are forbidden because they will destroy the game. In a sense, engaging with games of make-believe is something like acquiring and using a language; and in this sense, prescribing imaginings that cannot be fulfilled is something like misusing a language, as if we deliberately undermine the conventions that ground it. I think that the force of this analogy, if it has any, is that in both cases –those in which a work prescribes unrealizable imaginings and those of linguistic exchange where we disregard one of its basic conventions- we find a similar phenomenological aspect. Both in language and in fictions we feel as if some precondition of the process that constitutes each of these activities has been broken or fallen out of the picture.

We recognize that a certain game of make-believe is there to be played but at the same time something is wrong with it and we cannot fully interact with it. Moreover, since works of fiction are subject to certain conventions or rules and respecting those rules are necessary in order to provide an artefact the appreciator can interact with, a deliberate undermining of them can be taken as a moral flaw. The author is somehow pretending he is honestly providing a prop for a game of make-believe; he demands that we respond and interact with the work as usual, but, at the same time, he is prescribing imaginings that cannot be fulfilled. Acknowledging that an author has intentionally prescribed something that is incompatible with fully engaging with the work may be analogous to somebody's using language while undermining some of its conventions. Recognizing his intention might be enough to negatively judge the work on that ground.

If this is so, when we have both FR and a moral principle involved we will have enough grounds not only for our finding the work aesthetically defective, but also morally so. Moreover, at least in these cases, the relationship between FR and what Walton calls the aesthetic puzzle seems stronger, for the misleading intentions that lie behind the attempt to prescribe imaginings that cannot be fulfilled are both an aesthetic and a moral flaw of the work.

Maria José Alcaraz-León

[M.Alcaez-Leon@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:M.Alcaez-Leon@sheffield.ac.uk)