Poetic License: Learning Morality from Fiction in Light of Imaginative Resistance

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RESUMEN

La resistencia imaginativa (RI) rechaza una afirmación que es cierta dentro de un mundo de ficción. Las explicaciones que describen RI sostienen que los lectores abandonan la ficción en los puntos de resistencia. Pero si la resistencia entraña que se sale de una ficción, no se produce entonces el aprendizaje moral a partir de ella. Pero el aprendizaje moral a partir de la ficción ocurre; algunos de estos casos son ejemplos de la aceptación de una norma que anteriormente se ha negado. Rectifico las soluciones actuales a RI con la licencia poética. Cuanto más licencia poética se concede a una obra, más flexible es uno con respecto a falsedades percibidas. En lugar de abandonar la ficción, uno tiene la oportunidad de seguir participando y posiblemente aprender las normas que previamente negó.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *filosofía de la ficción, resistencia imaginativa, liciencia poética, Tamar Gendler, Brian Weatherson.*

ABSTRACT

Imaginative resistance (IR) is rejecting a claim that is true within a fictional world. Accounts that describe IR hold that readers exit a fiction at points of resistance. But if resistance entails exiting a fiction, then learning morality from fiction doesn't occur. But moral learning from fiction does occur; some such cases are instances of accepting a norm one first denied. I amend current solutions to IR with poetic license. The more poetic license granted a work, the more flexible one is regarding perceived falsehoods. Instead of exiting the fiction, one has the chance to stay engaged and possibly learn norms she previously denied.

KEYWORDS: *Philosophy of Fiction, Imaginative Resistance, Poetic License, Tamar Gendler, Brian Weatherson.*

We grant authors much freedom in the worlds they create—the entities present, the events that occur, and even the concepts that appear in their fictional worlds. But there's a limit to what readers *can* allow to be present. This notion – *imaginative resistance* – is the subject of several puzzles,

two of which are the focus of this piece.[1] An alethic puzzle is raised when an authoritative narrator asserts some claim the reader denies as true, and a phenomenological puzzle is the jarring experience felt when we encounter alethic puzzles. For example, consider 'It is morally praise-worthy that Voldemort tortures puppies for fun'. We not only reject this moral claim, but its very assertion in a narrative would be shocking.

Current imaginative-resistance theories assert that we are unable to stay engaged with a piece of fiction when we encounter an alethic puzzle; the force of the accompanying phenomenological puzzle jolts us right out of the imaginative experience. If this were true then certain types of learning from fiction – for example, learning moral prescriptions – become impossible. However, it seems that at least some cases of learning moral norms from fiction are instances of coming to hold a prescription one previously denied as true. If a story's explicit moral claims have to agree with the reader's for the reader to stay engaged, then we've no way to account for such cases.

After presenting current theories and showing them ill equipped for such learning, I will describe a solution such that imaginative resistance does not have to impede learning moral norms from fiction.

I. The Setup

I.1 *Terms and Parameters*

I assume that it is possible to learn moral truths from fiction, of the form 'one ought (not) to do *x*'. The *moral truths* in question are those assertions made by an author in a fiction that the reader initially believes are false.[2]

In line with Ken Walton, I take it that reading a fiction is tantamount to agreeing to play a game of make-believe with an author. In this imaginative activity what is fictionally true is what the reader is invited to imagine [Walton (1990), pp. 35-7]. *Imaginative resistance* is our alleged inability to continue to participate in such imaginative activities under certain circumstances. We here focus on two of the four imaginative-resistance-puzzle types.

An *alethic puzzle* is one in which it can be said that authorial authority breaks down, where an author says something is true in the fiction that the reader rejects as false. The puzzle here is that, despite the general belief that authors can make true whatever they want in their own stories, the reader sometimes *cannot* accept some particular claim as fictionally true.

The following story is a paradigmatic example of the alethic puzzle and of readers' imaginative limits [Weatherson (2004), p. 1].[3]

Death on a Freeway

Jack and Jill went up the hill to collect some stuff.
Their argument, though just a stint, got Craig all in a huff.
"This traffic jam's cuz they won't scram!" (*That isn't really true!*)
Craig pulled out his gun, now their lives are done; that was the right thing for Craig to do.

Jack and Jill were having an argument, Craig incorrectly attributed the traffic jam to this argument, killed the two, and we're told that his action was morally right. The alethic puzzle is found in asserting that Craig's killing people in cold blood is the right thing to do. We tend to think that killing over an incorrectly attributed infraction is wrong. The story explicitly dubs this morally deviant action praiseworthy. It is true in the story that murder is morally permissible.[4]

A *phenomenological puzzle* is the jarring experience puzzling sentences give us. It is the "Wait… *what?!*" response elicited by reading the sentence that included "that was the right thing for Craig to do."

Puzzling sentences are simply the specific sentences in which puzzles are raised by explicit claims intentionally presented in the voice of the authoritative narrator. We will not concern ourselves with implicit moral assertions. Though such explicit statements are likely fairly rare in serious literature, for illustrative purposes they shall be our focus nonetheless.

After explaining the puzzles, the next objective will be to identify *solutions* to these puzzles, i.e. give an account of all and only the cases where a puzzle is raised.

I.2 *More Stories*

Brian Weatherson (whose view is discussed in detail below) offers the following story and explication to show that the alethic and phenomenological puzzles—while related—are distinct, and therefore need distinct solutions.

The Benefactor

Smith was a very generous, just, and in every respect moral man. Every month he held a giant feast for the village where they were

able to escape their usual diet of grains, fruits, and vegetables to eat the many and varied meats that Smith provided for them.

If someone believes we are morally required to be vegetarian, then she takes it that it is morally wrong for Smith to serve the villagers meat and so Smith will therefore *not* be moral "in every respect." For those who believe we are so required this story raises a phenomenological puzzle though for meat eaters it raises no such puzzle. And if it really is true that we are morally required to be vegetarians then this story also raises an alethic puzzle without raising the phenomenological puzzle for meat eaters [Weatherson (2004), p. 21].

For my part I don't see how a phenomenological puzzle can be raised without at least the belief that an alethic puzzle has also. Vegetarians have a jarring experience *just because* they believe an alethic puzzle has been raised, whether or not the claim in the story contradicts an actual truth. Seemingly a quibble, but this will be important.
Compare the above stories to the following.

Sword Dual

She picked up the magic sword and with the sharp blade sliced through her enemy! As momentum carried her forward the blade bounced harmlessly off the fair skin of her lover.[5]

A woman cut through her enemy with a magic sword, a sword that then harmlessly bounced off her lover. However, a sword that is both sharp and dull isn't puzzling because it's stipulated as magical. Given magic, we let weird things like incompatible properties slide. There are clearly cases in fiction that cannot actually be true but that we don't find puzzling.

II. The Solutions

II.1 *Phenomenological puzzles*

Tamar Szabó Gendler's thought is that a phenomenological puzzle is raised any time a sentence makes us respond, *That's what you think* and thereby abandon the fiction. *Craig's action was morally right* – "That's what you think." By contrast, we don't experience a phenomenological puzzle in the magic-sword case. *A sword has incompatible properties* – "Sure, it's

magical." In cases where the puzzle is raised the fictional spell is broken and we exit the game of make-believe, otherwise we remain engaged.

This solution correctly predicts that there is no puzzle if *Death on a Freeway* is just an entry in Craig's diary – we will think that Craig's moral evaluation of his own action is wrong, but we won't find it puzzling.

The degree of narratorial authority (opposed simply to authorial authority) is an important factor in our ability to learn from a fiction, developed below. For now, note that as the narrator approaches omniscience the more seriously the reader takes assertions in the text.

II.2 *Alethic Puzzles*

A seemingly easy solution to alethic puzzles is that readers won't accept as true something that is (or believed to be) metaphysically impossible. However, some popular fictions contain known impossibilities but do not generate any puzzle. Some time travel stories are such examples [Weatherson (2004), pp. 8-10]. And one can easily engage a story where, without magic, the protagonist displays her artistic skill by drawing a round square [Rosenbaum (MS), p. 3]. A more sophisticated solution is needed to avoid over-generating puzzles.

Gendler's hypothesis is that our general desire is "not to be manipulated into taking on points of view that we would not reflectively endorse as authentically our own" [Gendler (2000), p. 76]. We deny morally deviant claims for *either* to imagine them *or* to accept them as true in a story is to commit oneself to their truth in actuality. How does that consequence follow?

First, note that some things are true in a story just because they are true in our world. For example we take it that 'Sherlock has a liver' is true, and that's just because human beings actually have livers. We *import* this truth into the fiction.

She goes on to explain the flipside, *exportation.* In short, "if something is true in the fictional world, it will be true in the actual world." Her claim is that there are many things that we know are true in the fiction that are also true in the actual world, truths that were not meant by the author to be merely true in the story; for example the lesson of "the painfulness of unrequited love" [Gendler (2000), p. 76]. The more realistic the fiction, the more truths we are free to export from it.
Call this the:

> *Import-export Principle* – moral norms are true in a story just in case they are true in the actual world.

Gendler's *Import-export Principle* offers an explanation for how it is we learn moral norms from fictional works. When I read some assertion in a fiction (i) that I had not previously considered but (ii) that I don't think is false, together with the *Import-export Principle*, I simply export the prescription from the fiction into the actual world and endorse it as my own.

When it comes to puzzling assertions Gendler's principle handles it in the following manner. Consider:

> 1. Moral norms are true in a story just in case they are true in the actual world.
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> 2. Murder is morally permissible in *Death on a Freeway*.
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> 3. So, murder is morally permissible in the actual world.

According to Gendler's view – given the *Import-export Principle* as our default fictional interpretation principle (premise (1)) – we are forced to deny (2) to avoid accepting the puzzling conclusion that murder is actually morally permissible. But by stipulating an omniscient narrator it will simultaneously be true and false that murder is morally permissible within the fictional world of *Death on a Freeway*. To avoid contradiction I deny (1).

Gendler says in response to something like the above argument that we as readers are aware that the author does not offer for export "bizarre" moral norms. The less realistic the story (the more bizarre or more frequent the claims), the less seriously we are meant to take the author's assertion of those claims. Since "there is no straightforward export being offered... [our] inclination to resist diminishes," i.e. we impose export restrictions on the story for the truths the author didn't intend for us to export, in this case premise (2) [Gendler (2000), p. 76].

An initial concern asks how we are supposed to know what the author intends for us to take as serious assertions. Unless the author makes it explicit which assertions fall into which category the realistic nature of the story is a poor guide. *Harry Potter* contains some bizarre physical truths by realistic standards but contains moral truths that are consistent with ours. On the other hand – filling in the story in the relevant ways – the physical facts of *Death on a Freeway* are on par with ours, but the morality of that world is clearly different.

However, just as sophisticated language users are able to pick out sarcasm or hyperbole, so, too, they should be able to pick up on the bizarre nature of any puzzling assertions.

A second, more troublesome concern is what if – instead of considering it a bizarre claim – the author *does* intend for her readers to export the norm in question, and makes it clear that this is so? What if there is a straightforward export being offered? Then our inclination to resist shouldn't diminish for we are meant to take these bizarre-to-us assertions seriously.[6]

In light of the foregoing premise (1) is false and the relevant prescription is avoided.

I opt for Brian Weatherson's solution to alethic puzzles, from *Morality, Fiction, and Possibility*. His idea is that an alethic puzzle is raised when a violation of the *Virtue Principle* obtains. First he defines the *in-virtue-of relation* as follows:

> *The In-virtue-of relation*—If *x* isn't a real property of a thing, but there are *x* facts, then those facts must hold in virtue of more fundamental facts.

Call the non-real property or fact that obtains the *higher-level fact* and the more fundamental facts (those in virtue of which the high-level facts obtain) the *lower-level facts*. For example, regarding *language-meaning* facts: the Spanish "Soy el rey" means "I am the king" in English (the high-level) in virtue of a pattern of usage of those words by Spanish speakers (the low-level). That Isabella Woodhouse is more like Mr. Woodhouse than is Emma obtains in virtue of – down the line – the actions of the three. Their similarity or dissimilarity is not fundamental or primitive, but obtain in virtue of the physical features of the actions of the individuals [Weatherson (2004), p. 16].

Next, Weatherson gives us the *Virtue Principle*:

> *The Virtue Principle (or Virtue)* – If *p* is a high-level claim, and if the story is about the relevant low-level facts, then it must be true in the story that there is some true proposition *q* that is about those low-level facts such that *p* is true in virtue of *q* [Weatherson (2004), p. 18].

If the story claims 'this is a good mug' and the story is about the mug's more fundamental properties (e.g. its size and thermal capacity), then it must be clear that 'this is a good mug' is true in virtue of the assertions

about those fundamental properties. For example, "this is a good mug because this mug is travel-sized and maintains my drink's temperature for extended periods."

So then, an alethic puzzle arises in a sentence where the in-virtue-of relation is violated, where the proposition about the low-level facts contradicts the high-level application. In *Death on a Freeway* the lower-level facts are such that Jack and Jill are innocent of the crime Craig thinks they are guilty of, but Craig's false belief in their guilt is enough to justify their murder (according to the stipulated-as-omniscient narrator). Since a false belief of guilt does not justify murder, the evaluation ("that was the right thing for Craig to do") contradicts the facts on the ground, and the sentence contains an alethic puzzle.

Weatherson asserts *Virtue* is our default principle of fictional interpretation, and an author cannot cancel it just by saying so [Weatherson (2004), p. 17]. Also, there is no opportunity for a violation of *Virtue* without explicit low-level facts – to the extent a story introduces lower-level details, higher-level claims must match up with them in order to avoid a puzzle. If low-level facts aren't mentioned, then there is no opportunity for a puzzle to obtain. For example, if the claim 'this is a good mug' is made in a story that makes no reference to the mug's more fundamental properties then there is no opportunity for that claim to be puzzling.

While *Virtue* seems to create a huge restriction on what an author can include in her own story, this is false. The author says which world a fiction is in and can claim any and all sorts of concepts at her world (including contradictory ones) until she locks in on a *description* of that world. At that point our default *Virtue* interpretation kicks in and regulates the relations between those descriptions and the concepts. "Authorial authority extends as far as saying which world is fictional in the story; it does not extend as far as saying which concepts are instantiated there" [Weatherson (2004), p. 23].

When alethic puzzles arise there are two ways we might deal with it. One way might be to change the lower-level facts, for example, to add extra details to justify Craig's actions. However, that could be tantamount to changing the story, which likely explains why that is not how we deal with alethic puzzles. If an alethic puzzle arises we in fact resolve the tension in favor of the lower-level details. We don't imagine that Jack and Jill were about to bust out machine guns and that Craig stopped them in order to save the townspeople. We maintain the author's descriptive facts but deny the author's evaluation of those facts.

II.3 *Inability to Learn*

Gendler's *Import-export Principle* gives us some positive way of drawing moral norms out of fictions. However it faces at least one problem I can't resolve, so I must abandon it as a solution to alethic puzzles. Weatherson's *Virtue Principle* gets the right results regarding alethic puzzles. However, the relationship between the alethic and phenomenological puzzles in his account raises its own issue, *viz.* that if an alethic puzzle obtains, a phenomenological puzzle is experienced. It is this implication that subverts our ability to learn moral norms from fiction.

If Weatherson is right, then we can make this argument:

1. If agent *S* believes an alethic puzzle has been raised regarding moral norm *M*, then *S* experiences a phenomenological puzzle regarding the in-virtue-of relation between *M* and the relevant low-level facts *F*.

2. If *S* experiences a phenomenological puzzle regarding the in-virtue-of relation between *M* and *F*, then *S* rejects *M* as related to *F*.

3. If *S* rejects *M* as related to *F*, then *S* cannot learn *M* from the fiction.

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4. So, if *S* believes an alethic puzzle has been raised regarding *M*, then *S* cannot learn *M* from the fiction.

Premise (1) is the implication drawn out from Weatherson's *The Benefactor:* an alethic puzzle leads to the jolting experience of a phenomenological puzzle. Premise (2) is the spelling out of *That's what you think*, the solution to the phenomenological puzzle – a rejection of the relevant in-virtue-of relation. Premise (3) describes what rejecting the in-virtue-of relation amounts to: not learning the relevant norm.

To spell it out more thoroughly, by Weatherson's light I come into a fiction with my preconceived ideas of what *selfishness* is or what it takes for a thing to be a good mug. An author gives me a string of lower-level facts and applies a high-level evaluation that I don't *already* agree applies to the relevant facts, in other words, I believe an alethic puzzle is raised. So then I experience a phenomenological puzzle and exit the imaginative game at that particular point. (This isn't to say that I am unable to re-enter the fiction immediately succeeding the puzzling sentence.)

But learning doesn't happen only when we already subscribe to the claim nor is it confined to cases in which we accept the claim without resistance. Sometimes a moral norm is puzzling to us but we come to learn

it anyway. In fact, sometimes a jarring experience is just what we need *in order* to learn it.[7] That is, a jolt can bring a normative claim to one's attention for consideration (or reconsideration, as the case may be). Weatherson's view, however, leaves us stuck in a state of rejection.

Weatherson's solution is too cut-and-dried – either your high-level concepts match up with the author's or you get kicked out of the game by the force of the puzzle. But that's not my experience when interacting with a fiction. The best-case scenario with Weatherson's view is that each fiction becomes a thought experiment where we can test our intuitions and concepts against new and different sets of descriptive facts. This perhaps allows for learning by negation, narrowing down the range of lower-level facts one believes can satisfy some concept; but this gives one no chance to be convinced by the author and learn something one previously denied.

The weak point is at (1). We need to modify Weatherson's account of the relationship between alethic puzzles and phenomenological puzzles to account for learning moral norms from fiction.

III. Poetic License

Weatherson's view is that *Virtue* is our default interpretation principle, and we cannot simply abandon at an author's request. Assuming we have no control over what we believe, then a consequence of Weatherson's account is that if an alethic puzzle obtains for us we cannot force ourselves through the phenomenological puzzle just to accept the new evaluation. The phenomenological puzzle forces us out of the fiction (at least at that puzzling sentence). But this isn't always the case. Sometimes we can stay engaged with a fiction despite recognizing an alethic puzzle. So we need a way to account for our ability to sometimes bypass the phenomenological puzzle. Poetic license is just such a means. First I give some background to poetic license, then I describe how it actually works.

III.1 *Background*
It is false that every time a reader is aware of an alethic puzzle she experiences a phenomenological jolt. Sometimes a reader comes across a normative evaluation that she rejects – and is aware of it and her rejection of it – but she can glide right past the phenomenological puzzle. This is due to her coming to the work of fiction with a high degree of poetic license.

Poetic license is the freedom we grant an author regarding her use of the in-virtue-of relation, and her violations thereof. In short, the relationship between the *degree of phenomenological puzzlement* (Z) one experiences and poetic license is inverted, i.e. the more poetic license granted, the smaller the degree of phenomenological puzzlement experienced. The relationship isn't perfectly inverted, as we'll see in section IV.

Poetic license is the function through which different facets of the reader, author, text, and genre play a role in determining how strongly (if at all) the reader feels the jolt of a phenomenological puzzle.

For example, consider cases where it's known to the reader that the author tends to make outlandish evaluations. In such cases the reader can be perfectly aware that an alethic puzzle is raised yet take it in stride. That is, the reader can avoid being shocked altogether. More likely, she'll be shocked to some noticeable degree, but she needn't feel the shock at all. Either way, we have what we need to deny premise (1) of the above argument.

Before describing more clearly what's going on with poetic license, I want to enumerate some of the various components that go into it. This will make describing the details of poetic license's operation easier.

Authorial Authority is the amount of authority we grant the author, typically based on our own readings of the author, how well (we think) the author knows the subject matter or is experienced with the present genre, reviews we've heard praising or criticizing the author, etc. The more we trust the author to get things right, the more poetic license we grant, the lower Z. (The inverse is true, too: the more alethic puzzles we see the author raise, the less we trust the author to get things right, the less poetic license we grant.) For example, I've loved the Jane Austen novels I've read so far. If, in the next Austen novel I read, she indicates that a certain character is vicious who I initiallly thought to be nice, then I like or trust Austen enough not to be (too) shocked at her evaluation.

This isn't to say that I will buy into Austen's claim without reflection just because it's Austen that makes it. In that case I don't see an alethic puzzle arising at all. Rather, assuming it's a situation in which I don't question Austen's description of the antecedent fictional state of affairs, I can trust Austen's moral sensibilities enough to do one of several things. First, I might be suspicious of my own evaluation of the lower-level facts and provisionally accept Austen's evaluation (that is, until I see how this character and the relevant events play out in the larger story). Second, I might simply suspend judgment on whose evaluation is correct. Finally, I might reject this particular evaluation but simply let it slide

just so I can stay engrossed in an Austen novel. After all, we all get something wrong eventually and I trust her to get most everything else right.

Arguably alethic puzzles arise with the first two of these options. For, though I don't abandon my own evaluation of the lower-level facts, neither do I accept the author's evaluation wholesale. However, in the third case an alethic puzzle has been raised. And so here is a case in which authorial authority has kept me from experiencing at all – or experiencing too strongly – a phenomenological jolt at reading an alethic puzzle.

Narratorial Authority is the aforementioned degree of narratorial knowledge, or how much about the goings-on in the text the narrator is portrayed as knowing infallibly. The more omniscient the narrator is supposed to be, the higher the value of narratorial authority, the higher Z. As explained above, the more the narrator is *supposed* to know the more likely we will respond with "That's what you think" at apparent violations of *Virtue.*

Another major factor to consider is our *quality expectations*, or *quality*. Quality is comprised of our considerations of the overall work. A couple examples will elucidate the notion. First, the *action-movie mishap*: my wife wants us to spend the evening watching *Face Punch*, an action movie of very low quality.[8] Or at least, that is the expectation I hold, based on the trailer. Expecting low quality, I grant the film a high degree of poetic license, even allowing the hero to kill intentionally the defeated main villain. I wouldn't let a high-quality movie's hero get away with it for I don't consider that behavior heroic. However, in low-quality stories there is no phenomenological puzzle though I clearly acknowledge the alethic puzzle.

One possible explanation of this freedom is because I simply don't care enough about the story or its characters to be bothered by infractions of the in-virtue-of relation. Or maybe it's because I walk into the movie expecting the absurd and so I take it in stride when I get it. Either way, alethic puzzles in low-quality works need not be shocking.

Note that it's not that avoiding a phenomenological puzzle makes one more likely to adopt the relevant moral claim, nor does it make moral learning easier in a nontrivial sense. No, the evaluation will still stand or fall by its own merits. It's just that, by not being shocked by the higher-level claim, it's *possible* for the reader to evaluate the claim for herself from within the fictional game. (By making moral learning possible it makes moral learning easier, albeit in a trivial sense.) For poetic license just accounts for how it is we stay engaged in a fiction despite alethic puzzles. Recall that if Weatherson is correct, an alethic puzzle entails a phenomenological jolt. And that jolt entails exiting the fictional world,

whatever the reader's quality expectation. And exiting the fictional world entails no moral learning at that point in the fiction. But such moral learning is possible, and low-quality expectations are one way to make it possible (though – likely – ineffective).[9]

Compare the above to my expectations that give rise to (one aspect of) the *Star Wars Problem*. I'm what some might call a super-fan of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. My expectations for the so-called prequel stories were high. When they came out I didn't let George Lucas get away with anything – e.g. I'd give up philosophy before granting that Jar Jar Binks is in any way cute.[10] With high expectations for the franchise I am hypersensitive to alethic puzzles and am in an almost constant state of phenomenological agony watching (what it take to be) low-quality films.

The final component to poetic license I want to consider is how *closely held* a view is for the reader, or *closeness*.[11] The more important the relevant in-virtue-of relation is the less flexible we will be with it. That is, an increase in closeness is an increase in Z, though the inverse isn't true (i.e. shock does not by default make one hold the moral norm less closely). For example, readers might let an author be free and loose with attributing veganism to a character whose actions (the low-level facts) aren't consistent with veganism. Or those who disagree with the claim might let the author assert 'veganism is morally obligatory' without finding it puzzling. I'll never have poetic license enough to grant that Nazism is morally permissible nor will I let a work attribute permissibility to those horrendous actions that stem from a character's commitment to Nazism. For Nazism's not something I take lightly (unless Mel Brooks is involved).

III.2 *Poetic License in Practice*

With the details in place, I now describe how poetic license works in practice.

Some of the components of poetic license are filled out before I pick up the novel, e.g. authorial authority and quality expectations. Others I determine as I read the text, e.g. narratorial authority. These factors (and others not listed) tie together in such a way that I grant the work some general degree of poetic license. Then, when I come across an alethic puzzle, my level of poetic license takes a hit. The more closely held the relevant normative claim, the harder the hit to poetic license. However, if poetic license is high enough before the alethic puzzle, it can absorb the hit and either lessen the degree of phenomenological puzzlement or even avoid puzzlement altogether. Of course, if there was some puzzlement then poetic license is now lower than when it started.

In this case, if further alethic puzzles arise, I'll be more sensitive to phenomenological puzzles and be more likely to exit the fiction at subsequent alethic puzzles.

Poetic license is how we bypass what would normally be a puzzle, and thereby learn something we would otherwise miss. This model illustrates how it is I am able to give the work license to expand my conceptual applications. The more poetic license, the more I give the author the benefit of the doubt, and so a perceived violation of the *Virtue Principle* isn't so jarring that it results in an automatic exiting of the game and rejection of the author's higher-level evaluation. I have the chance to try on the author's perspective, to wear her morality goggles, and see if I like it or if her claim is going to remain a puzzle. In short, premise (1) – that an alethic puzzle requires a phenomenological puzzle, full stop – is false and the conclusion is avoided.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

In this section I address potential objections. In the process I clarify certain aspects of what poetic license is and how it works. Finally, I raise some questions of my own regarding further applications of poetic license.

Poetic license gives us a solution to a question raised by Emily Beszhak, viz. why is it we tend to allow the magical manipulation of physical properties but tend not to allow the magical manipulation of moral properties? In reply, maybe we will allow some moral fictions, e.g. after waving a wand veganism is true.[12] But some moral fictions we can't allow for they are just held too closely to the chest. No amount of wand waving will make what Craig did in *Death on a Freeway* morally permissible to me because that's an in-virtue-of relation I won't abandon.

Another possible solution, though independent of poetic license, is that we can grant incompatible properties because we don't always have to fill in the gaps with lower-level details (again, an author can apply any concepts to a world without our resisting it until the author gives a description of the relevant part of that world). But maybe certain moral concepts are just tied too closely to lower-level facts for us *not* to fill them in. If I read that a certain character is evil I automatically attribute to him certain low-level facts – perhaps of having committed murder – and so the high-level/low-level relation is forced. (This is mere conjecture about empirical and psychological facts, and is not something I am asserting.)

Here's a more general objection, using a related problem. Given the definition of poetic license as the inverse of Z, it is puzzling how poetic license can explain the reduction of imaginative resistance. For whatever question one raises about one concept, one can raise about the other, definitionally related concept. Consider: one standard question asked about imaginative resistance is why we experience imaginative resistance more with morally deviant propositions and less so with descriptively deviant propositions. Invoking the technical concept of poetic license doesn't help, because we can simply restate the question in reverse: why do we grant more poetic license with descriptively deviant propositions than with morally deviant propositions?

Above I admit that an answer to that question will involve specifying which in-virtue-of relations we hold closely. But if that's the answer – the objection goes – then we do not need poetic license at all in answering the original question about imaginative resistance. Why do we experience imaginative resistance more with morally deviant propositions and less so with descriptively deviant propositions? It is because we hold the relevant in-virtue-of relations more closely.[13]

In reply, yes, closeness is doing the work in this case. A moral view can be held so closely that, no matter how much the reader trusts the author, she will be so shocked by an omniscient narrator incorrectly ascribing it to lower-level facts that she exits the fictional game. She might hold it so closely she is even shocked by incorrect ascriptions uttered by a non-omniscient narrator or some other character. (Compare this to that rare person who can't abide *The Lord of the Rings* since orcs and magic aren't real.)

But closeness is not the only factor that does work related to one's reactions to alethic puzzles, as noted above. For example, concerning moral norms that are held only moderately closely, one's trust in the author can be the pivotal factor in determining whether or not one experiences a phenomenological jolt. In short, poetic license is simply a common function through which these diverse components interact and do their work. For the components I list (and others I don't) all play a part at some time or other or to some degree or other in determining our sensitivity to phenomenological puzzlement.

This also explains why poetic license and Z aren't perfectly inverted. While an increase in poetic license leads to a decrease in phenomenological puzzlement, the inverse isn't always true. For some components of poetic license are perfectly inverted, and some aren't. Consider these asymmetrical cases. Trusting the author makes me inclined to give the author the benefit of the doubt in cases of alethic puzzles. Inversely,

coming across alethic puzzles picks away at the degree of authority I attribute to the author. "Enough claims like this and I won't be able to trust this author anymore!"

However, such inverse proportion isn't present with regard to closeness. Holding a moral norm closely makes me sensitive to alethic puzzles. But coming across alethic puzzles doesn't by default make me hold onto the moral norm less closely. Perhaps I'll come to accept the author's application of this norm to those low-level facts. And perhaps I'll then learn to hold this norm (or others) less closely. But this chain of events is far from guaranteed, no matter how many related alethic puzzles I come across.

I've spoken of poetic license limiting the degree of the effects of the phenomenological puzzle, but one may ask why poetic license does not just limit the probability of a phenomenological puzzle obtaining? It seems that I am either going to reject an author's evaluation or I am not. In this case, phenomenological puzzlement is binary. Consider authorial authority: the more I trust an author, *ceteris paribus*, the less likely I am to take issue with her assertions.

Two things suggest poetic license reduces the degree of phenomenological puzzle as opposed to the likelihood of it. First, our experiences of shock are consistent with the 'varying degree' analysis. The claim that Mr. Collins is kind and considerate would be slightly shocking compared to the claim that Voldemort is.

Second, a decrease in degree is a more accurate analysis because a mere decrease in probability would maintain the all-or-nothing aspect of Weatherson's view that we seek to avoid, if for no other reason than an all-or-nothing response to conceptual evaluations presents a false dilemma. It's not the case that for every in-virtue-of relation we face we either accept it or reject it. There is always at least the option of suspending judgment.

Another potential worry goes like this: "Component *x*, according to this account, adjusts poetic license in one direction; but in my experience *x* adjusts poetic license in the other direction." Here's the most common example offered. As I've described one's quality expectations, a superfan of a franchise is disinclined to grant poetic license. But some think that one's love of a franchise makes one *inclined* to give the author freedom to bend the rules or push the limits, and therefore makes one less inclined to experience a phenomenological puzzle.

In reply, first note that *quality expectation* is a broad category. There are many parts of a story, both in regard to content and to form, and so

maybe, if we were to parse out more fully which aspect of the story on which we're placing the relevant expectations, we might find that our dispositions for adjustment coincide.

And even if we weren't to come to agreement, this is still consistent with my account of poetic license. The material point is that facts in and about the text – together with psychological facts about the particular reader – affect the reader's sensitivity to phenomenological puzzles.

Poetic license accurately predicts that different readers are puzzled by different sentences. Since each reader comes to each reading with her own set of values for each component of poetic license, we can see how it is that what's puzzling for one might not be puzzling for another. And this, as far as I can tell, also carries into how we react to each component in terms of the direction we adjust our phenomenological sensitivity.

After seeing the general success of poetic license in learning from literature containing explicit puzzling sentences, the next logical step is to try poetic license out on implied moral norms in literature, or even in other forms of fictional media like film. If one were to make explicit the facts of a movie and analyze the relevant in-virtue-of relations I see no reason why, for any puzzles that are raised, poetic license couldn't handle them. It would be interesting to see if implied normative evaluations elicit puzzles and, if so, can poetic license handle them?

V. Conclusion

Current imaginative resistance theories do not account for learning moral norms from stories in cases of resistance. Poetic license accounts for our ability to diminish the degree of the phenomenological jolt that accompanies alethic puzzles, allowing us to learn some higher-level evaluation from a fiction.[14]

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Notes

[1] The concept of imaginative resistance was first popularized by Ken Walton (1990), with Greg Currie (1990) quickly chiming in. The constituent puzzles

were parsed out by Brian Weatherson (2004). Solutions to the puzzles split into two main branches, (i) author/text-based solutions (championed by Tamar Gendler (2000), Weatherson, and Yablo (2002)), and (ii) reader-based solutions (the key contenders being Currie (2002), Matravers (2003), and Nichols (2006)).

[2] The question of necessary moral truths is here irrelevant—each reader has his or her own set of moral beliefs so each reader has the potential to be puzzled by different assertions. More on this below.

[3] I adapted Weatherson's story to be a limerick.

[4] There are some theories, e.g. Tamar Gendler's (2000) that deny that it is true in the story that murder is morally permissible. Her view is discussed in detail below.

[5] This story is a variation of John Phillips's (1999), who attributes the example to Greg Currie (1990).

[6] Weatherson objects to Gendler's solution along similar lines [Weatherson (2004), pp. 12-3].

[7] A point made by Frances Howard-Snyder.

[8] There is a distinction between expectations of quality and expectations of genres. My character-development expectations for actions stories are unlike my expectations for romances. This is an important distinction, but action-movie mishap simply highlights the distinction between what we expect from a so-called B-movie versus from a Hollywood blockbuster.

[9] Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging me to elaborate on these last couple points.

[10] This is to say nothing of the storyline inconsistencies between the original and prequel trilogies.

[11] There are other components that might play a role in determining one's phenomenological sensitivity. For example, *genre expectations* – a sci-fi piece might get away with more physically deviant claims than a romance novel. Also there is *historical distance* – a reader might let an ancient Greek tragedy posit that slavery is permissible, but she'd be loath to let a modern story assert the same.

[12] Poetic license gets the right results in light of views that allow for shifting moralities – denying there are necessarily true moral norms gives one an easier time accepting moral shifts than holding that there are such necessary truths. Those in the latter camp will, I imagine, either believe the narrator is mistaken on the relevant point or be jolted out of the fiction.

[13] Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

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