Living in Fiction

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Wittgenstein makes two rather brief comments on persuasion in *On Certainty*:

> I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and been taught that the earth came into being 50 years ago, and therefore believed this. We might instruct him: the earth has long… etc. – We should be trying to give him our picture of the world. This would happen through a kind of *persuasion*. (Wittgenstein 1972, §262).

And

> … At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert Indians). (Wittgenstein 1972, §612).

In these comments, Wittgenstein seems to think of persuasion as having to do with a change in one's picture of the world that is *not* brought about by the giving of reasons and arguments. Fiction comes to mind as a possible vehicle of such a change. I would like to explore some of the features of our encounter with fiction, and the manners in which that encounter can persuade and convert us.

The paper has three parts: In the first, I shall make a few general comments about fiction and its defining characteristics, using Kendall Walton's work on representation in the arts. (Walton 1990). In the second part, I shall discuss two types of transformations that can be brought about by means of our encounter with fiction: one involving our emotions, and the other involving our beliefs. In the third part, I shall discuss a third type of transformation, in which fiction becomes subversive and functions as a vehicle of persuasion or conversion. I shall thereby show that conversion does not require a philosophical argument for God's existence or probable existence, nor does it require a belief in the historicity of the biblical narratives. Imagining them may suffice.

1. Fiction

Our experience of fiction as a vehicle that may challenge us in various manners, and may bring about a transformation in the ways in which we perceive the world and ourselves is a familiar one. However, the nature of such a change, and the manners in which it depends on our beliefs, emotions, and on our imagination are far from being clear. In his illuminating book, *Mimesis as Make Believe*, Kendall Walton explores some of the characteristics of representation in the arts in a manner that can help us understand how the fictional can affect and transform what we take to be real.

Walton construes fiction as continuous with children's games of make-believe. He argues that works of fiction serve as props in games of make-believe, i.e., they generate or prescribe imaginings, similarly to the manners in which dolls and teddy bears generate imaginings in children's games of make-believe. The imaginings are generated by means of conditional principles of generation, e.g., "let's say that a rag doll is a baby"; these can be either implicit or explicit. Thus, when we read Anna Karenina, the novel prescribes that we imagine a certain woman with various characteristics, who has an affair, is unhappy and commits suicide. Propositions whose imaginings are prescribed are fictional and the fact that a given proposition is fictional is a fictional truth. Thus, it is fictional in Anna Karenina that Anna has an affair with Vronsky; it is fictional that they have a daughter; it is fictional that she commits suicide.

Walton distinguishes fictionality from truth, but does not construe it as necessarily contrasted with it: "fictionality has nothing essentially to do with what is or is not real or true or factual" (Walton 1990, 102). He points out that works of fiction may be about real things and they may say true things about them. What characterizes works of fiction over and against non-fiction is that they prescribe imaginings and generate fictional truths. Histories and biographies, on the other hand, do not characteristically prescribe imaginings, nor do they generate fictional truths.

What is fictional is fictional in a given fictional world. Fictional worlds are associated with collections of fictional truths. Walton distinguishes the fictional world of a work of art from the fictional *game* world of its appreciator. The work world includes the fictional truths that are generated by the work alone. The game world of the appreciator includes, in addition to the fictional truths generated by the work, fictional truths about the appreciator and his/her relation to the work. Thus, the appreciator's game world of Anna Karenina includes fictional truths about Anna having an affair and being unhappy, as well as fictional truths about the appreciator perceiving her, worrying about her, and feeling sorry for her.

Walton emphasizes that our characteristic relation to fiction is that of participants rather than that of distant onlookers:

> We don't just observe fictional worlds from without. We live in them (…) together with Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary and Robinson Crusoe and the others, sharing their joys and sorrows, rejoicing and commiserating with them, admiring and detesting them ... It is this experience that underlies much of the fascination representations have for us and their power over us. (Walton 1990, 273).

Works of fiction, according to Walton, prescribe imaginings and draw us to participate in worlds of make-believe. It is by means of our participation in worlds of make-believe that we can come to feel, think and perceive differently. In the next section, we shall look at two dimensions of our participation in games of make-believe and at two types of transformations that our encounter with fiction may bring about.

2. Transformations

In imagining Anna Karenina, we are drawn into her world and characteristically imagine ourselves in relation to her: we may imagine hearing her, seeing her, or talking to her. In imagining ourselves in relation to her, we come to participate in her world. Participation in Anna's world has a psychological component: we are moved by her sorrow and despair; we feel for her.

How can we feel for a fictional character? What is the nature of such feelings? We must, first, distinguish between a fictional character and a fictitious one. A fictional character is one that we are to *imagine* by means

of conditional principles of generation, in the context of a game of make-believe. A fictional character may or may not exist. A fictitious character, on the other hand, is one that does not exist. A fictitious character is an illusory being that is mistakenly *believed* to be real. While feeling for a fictitious character is either an epistemic error or a psychological pathology, feeling for a fictional character is one of the characteristic manners in which we engage with art. We can feel for a fictional character, e.g., Anna Karenina because we do not merely entertain the possibility that she existed and had undergone certain experiences. We can feel for her because we share her world by means of our imagination. We are moved by fiction because we participate in it rather than merely observe it from the outside.

Walton, however, denies that we are afraid of fictional characters, or pity fictional characters, since fictional emotions lack the characteristic motivating behavior that he takes to be fundamental to the emotions. Fearing someone fictionally, for example, does not motivate the participant to run away, or to call the police. It merely causes various involuntary responses such as sweating and an increased heartbeat, which Walton takes to be insufficient for the ascription of fear. Thus, for Walton, being aware of various fictional truths concerning Anna raises *fictional* pity, but not real pity; we do not pity Anna; it is *fictional* that we pity her. From within the game, we can talk about pity. From outside of the game, we can characterize such an emotion as "quasi-pity".

Whether or not we subscribe to Walton's conception of the emotions, whether it is pity that we feel for Anna, or quasi-pity, it is clear that we feel for her, and that we come to feel for her by means of the imagination that draws us to participate in a game of make-believe that consists of Anna and ourselves. Our encounter with fictional characters has a psychological component. Fiction often transforms the way we feel.

The transformation that we may undergo by means of our participation in a game of make-believe may extend beyond an affective change in our emotions; it may involve our beliefs too. It may have an epistemic component and may be described in terms of the acquisition of a new or a deeper kind of understanding.

How can imaginary characters and imaginary sequences of events deepen our understanding of reality? How can they teach us anything new? Even if they expose us to propositions, concepts, or ideas, which are valuable or true, what power do they have to lead us to accept those concepts and ideas? What justification do they provide for treating such ideas as true? After all, fictional narratives do not provide their own justification. Without justification, however, they cannot be counted as knowledge. (Lamarque and Olsen 1994).

Once we distinguish conceptual knowledge from empirical knowledge, and the respective procedures for the acquisition of each, we may begin to see why "imaginary cases suffice to get the mind moving over its conceptual map" and why "actual cases are not required to produce conceptual knowledge."(Carroll 2002, 8). We may then appreciate the manners in which works of fiction, like the thought experiments that are used in our philosophical thinking, can deepen our conceptual understanding. (Carroll 2002; John 1998).

Thus, imagining and participating in worlds of make-believe may transform our emotional dispositions as well as our ways of thinking. It may "cultivate our grasp of what is known with finer distinctions", and lead us to make new ones. (Carroll 2002, 11). *Anna Karenina* may transform a peaceful reader into a deeply agitated one. The book may bring one to tears. It may also challenge and perhaps even deepen the reader's conceptual understanding of the relation (or lack of which) between various concepts, such as love and commitment.

In the next section, we shall look at the manner in which participation in a game of make-believe can transform completely one's picture of the world, and lead one to adopt a new set of concepts, new patterns of behavior and a different way of life.

3. Conversion

The Jesus story is a complex one. Appreciating the story characteristically involves imagining Jesus doing various things: walking around the Galilee with his disciples, healing the sick and the possessed; it also characteristically involves imagining ourselves in relation to Jesus: hearing him give his sermon, watching him go up to Jerusalem, hearing him pray to God, watching him being crucified, and hearing his final despairing words on the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus' story can transform the reader's emotional dispositions. It may elicit a variety of intense emotions (or quasi-emotions), e.g., pity, anger, and despair. Moreover, the story may deepen the reader's understanding. It may challenge and transform the reader's understanding of the manner in which concepts such as "savior" and "salvation" can be used. Over and against the conception of the savior as the one who brings relief, victory, peace and prosperity, it presents a suffering man (rabbi/ prophet/ miracle-worker) who dies in shame and despair; over and against the notion of "salvation" as peace and glory, the story presents the crucifixion. The question whether the concepts "savior", and "salvation" can be meaningfully applied in such a manner is a deep conceptual question, which the story raises and makes salient.

Being transformed by the image of the suffering, humiliated, despairing man Jesus, on the cross, and by the conception of salvation that is represented by means of this image, one's picture of the world may be utterly changed. What previously has been perceived to be real, what previously has been conceived of as valuable: freedom from pain, social status, the quest for knowledge, life itself, may now seem empty and meaningless. The pursuit of happiness, health and wealth may be replaced by a surrender to suffering, which may now be conceived of as a medium for salvation, and as the primary means of self-improvement that is available to human beings. Participation in the Jesus story may, therefore, lead one to feel differently and think differently, to pursue a different way of life, to engage in a different set of practices, and to employ a different set of concepts.

Thus, the Jesus story, and the conception of salvation that it recommends can become subversive. Participation in this game of make-believe may rob the participant of a certain conception of reality or picture of the world around which her life has been previously arranged. In making this story her-story, the participant may deem fictitious what she has previously taken for real. The participant may come to see things in a new way. In other words, she may be persuaded or converted by the story.

The transformative power of the Jesus story, like other stories, rests on the imaginings that it prescribes. It does not rest on the historicity of its characters or events; it does not depend on whether the events represented are

believed to have taken place or not. When a story becomes subversive, it becomes subversive, first and foremost, by means of one's imagination. Belief may or may not follow.

Since preachers do not ordinarily use arguments for God's existence or probable existence that prescribe beliefs, but tell stories that prescribe imaginings, we may conclude that coming to faith is first and foremost coming to imagine, and coming to participate fully in a game of make-believe, or in other words, coming to live in fiction. Whether the fictional game of make-believe that is imagined is a fictitious one is a further question that I cannot answer.

Literature

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