

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

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## Book Reviews

*Jonathan Gilmore, Apt Imaginings, Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 276 pp.*

In his award-winning new book, *Apt Imaginings, Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind*, Jonathan Gilmore (recently named co-editor of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*) tackles the following question: is the way that we engage with fictional objects analogues to the way we engage with objects in real-life? We enjoy *The Sopranos*, taking pleasure in Tony's evading the police and outsmarting other criminals, but in reality, we very much want dangerous criminals like Tony Soprano to face justice. Such invariance between our emotional responses and rational and moral evaluations across fictions and real life is defined as continuity question and it is the central problem of the book.

In the introduction, Gilmore discusses the notion of continuity in two distinct senses: descriptive and normative. In the descriptive sense, the question concerns whether our moral and rational engagements with fictions are the same (in the relevant explanatory way) as our moral and rational engagements with real people and real life. In the normative sense, we ask whether the kinds of reasons that we use to justify those engagements are the same i.e., invariant across fictions and real life. Gilmore's main point is to affirm the continuity thesis in a descriptive sense and to deny it in a normative sense, thus defending what he calls the discontinuity thesis.

In the second chapter, Gilmore sets the bedrock of his argumentation: a cognitive theory of imagination. He defines the concept of *imagination* as an irreducible mental state which is type-identified in virtue of its functional role, not the representational content. In other words, imagination, like other mental states, is not identified by its content—propositional or perceptible—but by the functional role it plays. According to Gilmore, there are good reasons to accept the cognitive theory of imagination. Firstly, imaginings are usually constrained by our will while other similar mental states are not. We can imagine a cold sunset on our favorite beach at will, but we cannot believe that the Earth is flat without good reasons or evidence. Secondly, beliefs are usually context-independent, while imaginings are not. Thirdly, beliefs aim at the truth, while imaginings have no such normative constraint. Having defined the concept of imaginings, Gilmore elaborates on the wide body of empirical evidence that points to the conclu-

sion that there is a continuity between the way we imagine visual imagery and the way we perceive visual imagery in real life. Gilmore concludes that imaginings are invariant across fictions and real life.

In the third chapter, Gilmore discusses another crucial aspect of his account: the evaluative theory of emotions. In his words: "...an emotion is not merely identified with a bodily feeling or behavioral tendency caused by an encounter with some object (event, state of affairs, and so on) but has an intentionality, an "aboutness," vis-à-vis the thing that elicits it. (...) the emotion instantiates an appraisal of the value (to oneself or what one cares about) of that object" (45).

For example, when I am afraid of a dog, I acknowledge that the dog is dangerous. When I am proud of my son's achievements in school, I appreciate him being curious and hard working. Gilmore presents a lot of empirical evidence which suggests that emotions that we feel for fictional characters are the same as the emotions that we feel for real people, primarily with respect to their neurophysiological basis. However, there are interesting asymmetries between the emotions we feel for fictional characters and the emotions we feel for real people. Our behavioural reactions to fictions are different from our reactions to comparable situations in real life. For example, when we encounter a frightening scene in a scary movie, we do not immediately start running from danger. Despite such asymmetries Gilmore concludes that emotions that we feel are the same kind of emotions in fiction and in real life—continuity thesis stands.

In chapters four to eight, Gilmore defends discontinuity thesis, extending his scope to different domains: affective responses, truth in fiction, conative engagement (tragedy and desire) and moral evaluations. In chapters four and five Gilmore argues that some of our affective responses to fiction have no equivalent to our responses in real life. For example, we can be moved by movie's score, poetry's rhyme or novel's writing style and these things can create mood and ambient unique to engagement with fiction.

In chapter six, Gilmore states that the way we discover what is true in fiction is analogous to how we discover what is true in real life: the same kind of deductive and inductive reasoning enables us to form predictions about the events. However, some inferences valid in fictions are invalid in real life. For example, in *Oliver Twist* we can infer from the fact that Fagin is physically grotesque, that he is morally corrupt.

In the following chapter Gilmore discusses the paradox of tragedy, which states that when we engage with works such as tragedy our pleasure seems to be internally related to our distress. After considering and rejecting three prominent accounts that offer a solution to the paradox of tragedy, Gilmore offers his own: the contradictory desires are rational in the light of a third—higher-order desire.

He offers the following argument:

- "(1) a desire that a work be such that something, S, occurs in it;
- (2) a desire that S not occur; and,
- (3) a desire that one have both (1) and (2)" (173)

For example, in *King Lear*, we desire that a work be such that Cordelia dies at the end of the play, since such an ending is demanded by the genre. We

also desire that Cordelia does not die since we recognize her innocence and morality. Finally, we have a higher-order desire to have the first and the second desire, which is why we engage with tragedy. Gilmore affirms the discontinuity thesis with a claim that we engage rationally with tragedy in a way that has no equivalent in real life.

In the penultimate chapter, Gilmore argues that there is a discrepancy in how we morally value fictional characters and real people. His examples range from Dostojevski's Raskolnikov and Shakespeare's Richard III to Tony Soprano, Hannibal Lector and Tom Ripley all the way to running over pedestrians in *Grand Theft Auto* and enjoying pornography. Gilmore explores theories of simulation, mirroring and contagion and concludes that discrepancy i.e., discontinuity holds. That being said, Gilmore's argumentation in this chapter seems incomplete and lacks the persuasive force present in his other chapters.

In the last chapter, Gilmore pursues separate issue, focusing shifting his intention to artistic function and moral value.

To conclude, this is an amazing book, brilliantly written and a joy to read. It is not a surprise that the book received a prestigious *Outstanding Monograph Prize* by The American Society for Aesthetics. Gilmore uses numerous empirical research to build up his arguments and defend his thesis. He works within the argumentative framework from philosophy of rationality and philosophy of mind, which strengthens his argumentation and brings a new and fresh outlook to the philosophy of art and aesthetics. The book will undoubtedly be of interest to anyone working in these domains.<sup>1</sup>

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