So much has already been written about Kendall Walton’s account of make-believe in general, and of his account of quasi emotion in particular, that it is difficult to know how to launch into yet another account without merely repeating what has gone before. So I will ask the reader to put up with an initial and abbreviated rehearsal of the discussions and disagreements related to the quasi-emotion issue. I will then canvas some of the reasons for believing that problems raised in the course of these philosophical exchanges have not been entirely resolved, and conclude by making a few proposals of my own.

I am largely on board with respect to Kendall Walton’s account of make-believe as an explanation of our encounters with fictions. However, I am not at all on board (indeed, I am over the side and swimming for shore) with respect to the part of it that deals with quasi-emotions. Walton offers an account of our imaginative immersion in fiction as participation in a game-of make-believe. He presents us with a set of nested fictional worlds. The world of the work serves as a prop in the world of our game. What is true in the world of the work is true in the world of the game. Moreover, things are true of us in the world of our game that aren’t true of us in the actual world. In the world of the particular game I play with my favorite television series *Stranger Things*, it is true that young Will Byers is trapped in the Upside Down, a dark and terrifying mirror image of the ordinary world. But my game of make-believe also makes things fictional of me, at least insofar as some of my responses to the work are involved. For instance, it is true in the world of my game that I am aware of Will’s plight, that I believe he is in danger, that I fear for Will’s life and hope that his friends (Mike, Lucas and Dustin) can save him. Certain conventions govern what turns out to be true in the world of my game. While Walton
does not go into great detail respecting these, the limits of what such a game can make fictional of me are pretty clear. For instance, while it is true in the world of my game (that is, fictionally or imaginarily or make-believedly true) that I notice Will’s sickly appearance as residence in the Upside Down leeches his life force, it is not true in the world of the game that I occupy the same space as Will, that light bounces off his pale visage and strikes my retina, that he is as aware of me as I am of him. And while it is true in the game that I shout hints to the estimable Dustin, it is never true in it that he hears or heeds them, despite my affection and concern. Walton’s account of the nature of mimesis in the arts issues in a story that is so faithful to the reasons many of us love fiction as we do, so reflective of our fascination, and so accurate about the extent of our imaginative entrancement, that its popularity and wide scale adoption are not at all surprising.

I

Of course, having acknowledged this, I am bound to move on to the one area of disagreement I have with this account, specifically, with Walton’s account of quasi-emotion. Walton has it, roughly, that while what I describe as my fear for Will is emotional and phenomenologically similar to fear for a real person, I cannot really fear for Will. Fiction can also give rise, of course, to authentic fears concerning things we believe true of the actual world, as when the monstrous Demogorgon leads us to contemplate threats posed by well-known political figures. But just as I do not really believe a boy named Will Byers is endangered but only imagine that this is the case (making it fictionally or make-believedly true that I believe it), so, Walton would say, I do not really fear for Will, but only imagine doing so (making it fictionally true that I fear for him). This kind of a response is called quasi-fear because it lacks the kinds of epistemic underpinnings and motivational and behavioral characteristics that fear
typically involves. Questions have been raised (by me, as well as more celebrated others) about what Walton means when he maintains that

…we are genuinely moved by novels, films and plays, that we respond to works of fiction with real emotion,…. our responses to works of fiction are, not uncommonly, more highly charged emotionally than our reactions to actual situations…. My make-believe theory was designed to help explain our emotional responses to fiction, not to call their very existence into question. My negative claim is only that our genuine emotional responses to work of fiction do not involve, literally, fearing, grieving for, admiring fictional characters (Walton 1997, 38).

Christopher Williams has recently suggested that Walton means to include quasi-fear and quasi-grief under the umbrella of emotion but insists on a distinction between these epistemically emancipated responses and the kind of fear and grief to which our existential commitment is unproblematic (Williams 2019). That is, quasi-fear and quasi-pity belong to the genus emotion, but are of a different species than fear and pity. This is an ingenious explanation and may capture some of what Walton had in mind in the preceding passage. Walton’s response to Catherine Wilson’s interesting challenge to his account of make-believe in her “Grief and the Poet” (Wilson 2013) suggests Williams’ characterization is correct:

That the aroused emotions are ‘no less than entirely real’ is uncontentious and uncontested. Of course they are real, and are really emotional—‘they’ being, for instance, the responses we describe as Charles’ ‘fear of the slime’…. The only question is what sort of emotional experiences they are, whether these descriptions, taken straightforwardly and literally, accurately characterize them…. There are good reasons to take it to be fictional that Charles fears the slime … quite apart from the question of
whether these propositions are (literally) true…. Charles’…experiences are emotional, affectively charged, in any case. And it is perfectly appropriate to describe them as ‘fearing the slime’ and ‘pitying Anna’ (respectively), since it is fictional that they do. (Walton 2013)

However, as an inveterate supporter of the thought theory (to be found in the work of Noel Carroll, Richard Moran, and early Peter Lamarque), I still cling to my objection to the quasi-emotion hypothesis. For one thing, as Walton himself concedes, fears that he would not regard as quasi-fears may lack a belief component, as in the case of phobic reactions (Walton 1990, 245 Mimesis). Walton immediately follows this concession by stressing that he wants to “think of fear in general as a state akin to that of a certain belief-desire complex, in its motivational force at least” (Walton 1990, 245). But, in the same work, Walton also maintains that while “we cannot be said actually to pity Willy [Loman] or grieve for Anna [Karenina] or admire Superman,” (Walton 1990, 204) “Emily Dickinson, being an actual person, can be an object of actual pity. One may really feel disgust for Ivan the Terrible or empathize with Julius Caesar” (Walton 1990, 252). Yet if we can feel real pity and disgust for historical figures, it must be absent most kinds of motivating impulses, since these individuals are long dead and cannot now directly affect our lives any more than we can affect theirs. Pity for Emily Dickenson cannot depend on an impulse to alleviate her pain, nor can disapproving disgust toward Ivan the Terrible be part of some motive to bring him to justice. Granted, we can wish that Emily Dickenson had met a fellow-INTP with whom she could happily consort, or that Ivan’s unfortunate daughter-in-law had managed to bat him over the head with some sturdy object. That is, we can talk about what we wish had been, but now cannot be the case. But this applies to fiction as well – I can wish that Will had not been trapped in the Upside Down, or that Dustin’s bullies had received
their comeuppance sooner than they actually did. In both historical and fictional contexts we can wish for things which we are in no position to affect. My wishing that Will not be endangered doesn’t mean that I want the story to have gone differently, but, as Alex Neill once pointed out, something’s being a necessary condition of what I wish for does not make it the case that I wish for it in wishing as I do (Neill 1995, 190). Studying hard is a necessary condition for receiving an A in my class, but my students wish for that A without any conspicuous desire to study.

Further, empathetic reactions - since Walton says it is possible really to empathize with Julius Caesar - can lack both parts of the belief-desire/motivation complex to which Walton refers in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. I believe that Julius Caesar existed, of course, but empathizing with that historical figure would involve, for instance, imagining what it was like to be betrayed. That is, I undergo an experience of feeling betrayed when I am, in fact, not betrayed and do not believe I’ve been betrayed. I may believe that Caesar was betrayed, but I don’t believe that I am experiencing the betrayal with which I empathize. The empathetic nature of the emotion situates me as the target of treachery. Neither of Walton’s conditions are met in this case – my motivations are not activated, and those I regard as betrayers and feel betrayed by haven’t betrayed me. Empathizing imaginatively places us in a situation that isn’t our own. According to Walton, it “involves imagining oneself in the shoes of the person identified with” (Walton 1990, 255). Thus, neither of Walton’s criteria applies. The person empathized with cannot be the object of our emotion. Instead, his or her apprehension of danger or treachery is adopted by us. Since we do not believe we’re threatened or endangered, the epistemic condition cannot be met in cases of empathetic emotion and, as indicated, our motivation to act and our desires are similarly derailed. Now this could mean that all empathetic emotions are quasi-emotions for Walton, and much of what he writes in a later article (Walton 1997) suggests as much. If empathizing
involves simulating an experience one knows one isn’t actually undergoing then perhaps, in a
reversal from the era of the Julius Caesar claim, all empathetic fear or distress are quasi-fear and
quasi-distress so far as Walton is concerned. While this treatment of empathetic emotion need
not be regarded as a deal breaker, it should be acknowledged to appear counter-intuitive in
certain lights, and to be at odds with Walton’s earlier position.

II

It is worth mentioning in passing that there is some confusion about whether the belief in
Walton’s belief-desire complex is thought to cause the emotion or to be a constituent of it. Most
cognitivists about emotion, who regard emotions as akin to judgments, take the latter course. The
intentional object of the emotion is an epistemic object. Thought theorists (like Noel Carroll)
who challenge the quasi-emotion account merely allow that the intentional object could equally
well be an imagined one – the content of a thought that is entertained in imagination and not
believed, as is the case when we entertain hypotheticals. Whether it is supposed that the thought
in question is a construal, as Robert C. Roberts maintains (Roberts 1988), or whether it is
considered a state of object-directed affect with evaluative propositional content, as Patricia
Greenspan suggests (Greenspan 1988), both philosophers concede that such states can sometimes
fall short of belief.

But it is possible, I think, to offer an analysis of emotional responses directed toward
fictional objects without committing to the kind of fully Meinongian approach that Walton
deplores. First, any affective response to fiction will necessarily depend on an array of broad
conceptual beliefs that we already possess (Boruah 1988, 114). Fearing for a character, for
example, depends on our believing that the kind of situation he is depicted as experiencing is
dangerous. This applies even in the case of Will’s sojourn in the Upside Down. The fear of those who say they fear for Will is buttressed by any number of general beliefs about what can constitute danger: the belief that being trapped in hostile territory inhabited by powerful predators is dangerous and unpleasant, or the belief that facing attack without the support of allies is risky. Our beliefs about what is or can be dangerous partly determine whether we will feel fear, in both fictional and real world contexts. These broad beliefs – beliefs about danger in the case of fear or suffering in the case of pity – are usually dispositional, and become occurrent when the emotion is triggered. They are necessary but not usually sufficient for an emotional response. And, of course, fictions or new situations in our real lives can occasionally lead us to expand or change our beliefs by offering exceptions to generalizations or new perspectives. The claim here is only that affective reactions that aren’t cases of contagion clearly build on conceptions of what constitutes danger when we respond fearfully, or on conceptions of what constitutes suffering when we respond with pity. One wouldn’t pity someone for undergoing an experience one thought pleasant or fear for a person one thought safe. Such beliefs are tapped into in our response to fiction. They are perfectly authentic beliefs, albeit existentially uncommitted. So there are, in fact, underpinnings to our affective responses to fictional entities and events that are firmly grounded in our doxastic repertoire, just as Walton’s approach would require of fear and pity to which the ‘quasi-’ prefix did not apply.

Next, consider the kinds of nonidentity cases discussed by Derek Parfit (1984, 2011), and others (Boonin 2008). These address our moral obligations to not-yet-existing future people and/or generations, as well as questions to which such considerations give rise. Some of the latter involve an important distinction between making existing people better or worse off than they might otherwise have been on the one hand, and acting so as to impact whoever comes to occupy
a certain position (or experience a certain kind of situation) on the other. So, for instance, imagine a scenario in which a woman could conceive an unhealthy child in the coming month or conceive a perfectly healthy child if she waits a year. If she declines to wait, she hasn’t wronged her existing child, which presumably has a less-than-optimal life that is nonetheless worth living. She wrongs a kind of office- or position holder – an office that will be filled by whoever the child turns out to be (Dadlez and Haramia 2015). Such offices generate genuine obligations on the part of office caretakers, independent of particulars concerning those who come to fill them. Parents have obligations toward future children who do not yet exist, pet owners toward not-yet-adopted pets, teachers toward future students. “Just as the relation between…office caretakers and the offices themselves…generates and justifies general obligations even without the existence of an actual person, the relation between a fiction’s audience and the beliefs that are tapped into by the fiction…can also generate and justify general obligations absent the belief that the person in question exists” (Dadlez and Haramia 2015, 10).

General beliefs about what can constitute danger in a situation are analogous to what has been described as a “position” or “office.” Indeed, Ronald de Sousa maintains that we come to know “the vocabulary of emotion by association with paradigm scenarios… reinforced by the stories, art, and culture to which we are exposed…. Paradigm scenarios involve two aspects: first, a situation type providing the characteristic objects of the specific emotion type…and second a set of characteristic…responses to the situation” (de Sousa 182). Fictions can act as just such paradigm scenarios, vividly illustrating situation types concerning which we have usually already made evaluative judgments -- about what it is for a situation to be tragic or dangerous or unjust. Works of fiction that arouse affective response instantiate such situation types or possible experiences in their descriptions or depictions and thereby in the imaginations of their audiences.
The fictional catalyst can be held to situate and direct a genuine emotional response arising out of our evaluative belief.

We can have obligations to position holders or the experiencers of situations as well as to individuals in whose existence we believe. Many evaluative beliefs that underlie affective response to fiction - say those about the kinds of situations we regard as unjust or oppressive - isolate and focus attention on positions and offices: on dreadful situations that could be experienced or inappropriate conduct that could be exhibited. This is certainly comparable to talk of office holders in other contexts. So, for instance, we are outraged by Dr. Brenner’s treatment of Eleven (in *Stranger Things*) as nothing more than a lab rat and of the citizens of Hawkins as mere cases of collateral damage. We pity and fear for Eleven and worry about the fate of the denizens of Hawkins. Such reactions arise from a set of interrelated dispositional beliefs that the fiction has brought to the forefront of awareness. Our reactions stem from beliefs we may have about using people as means to ends, about when it is and is not permissible to put communities at risk, about obligatory disclosure and informed consent. These are beliefs about actions that could be performed or experiences that could be undergone – they are about *offices*, the filling of which is illustrated in fictional depictions. They reflect something about the obligations that exert a force on us both emotionally and morally: obligations not to use people as means to ends, not to abuse power, not to place innocent communities at risk.

So it appears that emotional responses to fiction depend in a fundamental way on perfectly authentic evaluative beliefs and that they are also (especially in the case of emotional approval and disapproval) clearly affiliated with obligations that can exert pressure on us in the broader arena of our lives. Necessary concomitants of our emotional response to fiction have both the epistemic respectability and the motivational force that Walton requires, and can lay
claim to both without resorting to any commitment whatsoever to the existence of the emotion’s object.

References


