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James, Susan (2019) Responding emotionally to fiction: a Spinozist approach. In: O'Hear, A. (ed.) Passions and the Emotions. The Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 85. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781108748049.

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## **Responding Emotionally to Fiction: A Spinozist Approach<sup>1</sup>**

Susan James

Within contemporary analytical philosophy there continues to be a lively debate about the emotions we feel for fictional characters. Our sadness at the death of Anna Karenina or fear of Dracula are thought to need explanation, because they violate a supposedly normal state of affairs in which our feelings for an object are responsive to our beliefs about whether or not it exists. When, for example, you learn with relief that your friend was not after all involved in a road accident, you cease to feel anxious about her. Once you realise that there is nothing to be anxious about, the emotion fades. Why, then, does the belief that Anna Karenina is a fictional character not prevent us from feeling sad about her suicide? Why does the belief that the figure of Dracula on the screen is an actor in front of a camera not block the fear he arouses? As Colin Radford argued in an influential article, there seems to be something anomalous and even incoherent about emotional responses such as these.<sup>2</sup>

The supposed incoherence that Radford identified is often expressed in the following paradox:

1. We experience (genuine, ordinary) emotions towards fictional characters, situations and events.
2. We do not experience (genuine, ordinary) emotions when we do not believe in the existence of the objects of emotion.
3. We do not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations and events.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful for comments and suggestions made by audiences at the Royal Institute of Philosophy and Manchester Metropolitan University. I owe special thanks to Stacie Friend, Moira Gatens, Anthony O'Hear and Quentin Skinner.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Radford, 'How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, vol. 49 (1975), pp. 67-80.

<sup>3</sup> I take this formulation of the paradox from Stacie Friend, 'Fiction and Emotion' in Amy Kind ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination* (Routledge, 2015), 217-229, p. 217.

Since these three claims are jointly incompatible, discussion has tended to focus on which should be rejected, and from this approach a descriptive question has emerged: how can fictions elicit genuine emotions? Alongside the descriptive problem, however, discussion of the paradox has also given rise to a normative question: are the emotions we feel for objects we believe to be fictional in some way inappropriate or irrational? What normative standards do or should apply to them?<sup>4</sup>

The contemporary debates surrounding these questions are undoubtedly absorbing and challenging in their own terms; but it is arguable that they are also slightly perverse. How has a phenomenon as familiar and satisfying as our emotional response to fiction become so problematic? What presuppositions have successfully derailed the everyday assumption that our emotions move easily across the barrier between belief and fantasy without becoming descriptively or normatively dubious in the process? It is not easy to articulate this sense of uneasiness from within the current debate, where the outlook that gives rise to the paradox largely holds sway. To get a clearer view of it, we may therefore do better to approach it historically. Spinoza, I shall suggest, offers an account of our emotional investment in fiction that stands at a helpful distance from the ongoing discussion. He achieves this, in part, by rejecting a widespread assumption about the agents whose emotional responses to fictional objects are held to be problematic. In much of the literature it is taken for granted that these are agents of a certain kind, who habitually distinguish real from fictional objects and whose emotions are for the most part responsive to their beliefs about whether an object exists. It is against this background that their emotions for objects they believe to be fictional show up as aberrant. But in Spinoza's view this is the wrong place to start. The ability to keep our emotions in line with our beliefs is a complex skill, and rather than simply assuming it we need to consider how it is acquired. What abilities does it presuppose and how do we develop them? According to Spinoza, the capacity to conform one's emotions to one's beliefs is parasitic on the capacity to invest emotionally in ones

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the normative and descriptive aspects of current debate see Friend, *op. cit.*; Florian Cova and Stacie Friend, 'How does Fiction Elicit Emotions?' forthcoming. ??????????????

ideas, regardless of whether they are fictions. Contrary to the assumptions underlying the descriptive question, our feelings for fiction are therefore not mysterious. They are part of our ordinary affective life, and it is by means of them that we cultivate the skill of focusing our emotions on the truth.

### **Imaginative Investment in Fiction**

Spinoza's defence of this view grows out of his account of imagination, the everyday way of thinking through which we acquire ideas of ourselves and external things. Insofar as we imagine, he argues, our ideas of external things are ideas of the ways they have affected our bodies. 'When the mind regards external bodies through ideas of the affections of its own body, then we say that it imagines' (EIIp26).<sup>5</sup> However, whereas many of his contemporaries tended to emphasise the perceptual content of such ideas, Spinoza gives priority to those 'affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections' (EIIId3). Our experiences of the way that external things affect us take the form of feelings of joy and sadness (EIIIp11). As well as perceiving a friend at the door, for example, the experience affects me with gladness, and as well as seeing her leave I am saddened. As this example indicates, imagining does not fail to acquaint us with the perceptible features of external things. Nor does Spinoza deny that some of our ideas are devoid of any affect; it is possible to perceive an object while remaining affectively indifferent to it. However, because we are attuned to the way that external things empower or disempower us, our stance to the world is not fundamentally one of affective indifference. We are oriented to experience external things as the objects of sadness or joy.

Spinoza also takes trouble to remind us that our ideas are not, as he puts it, mute images, like pictures on a panel and do not merely represent the way that things appear (EIIp42s). Rather, 'an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation', and affirms something as present (EIIp49s[II]). To have a joyful idea of a friend at the door is to affirm that this is

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<sup>5</sup> References to the *Ethics* are abbreviated to 'E'. Translations are from Edwin Curley trans. and ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

how things are - she is standing there waiting to be welcomed – and this affirmative outlook is a general feature of imagining. To quote Spinoza again, ‘if the human body is affected by a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human mind will regard the same body as actually existing or present to it ...’ (EIIp17). To have an idea of a thing or state of affairs is therefore to affirm that it exists; and when we imagine, we affirm that things are, perceptually and affectively, a certain way. Putting this point together with the last, the ideas that constitute the process of imagining are simultaneously perceptual, affective and affirmative.<sup>6</sup>

Before we turn to the role of fantasy or fiction in the processes of imagination, two further aspects of Spinoza’s philosophical position need to be highlighted. First, our ideas of the way things affect us do not occur in isolation. They are embedded in trains of thought and governed by psychological dispositions that prompt us to make particular kinds of connection between them. We organise them into increasingly finely differentiated types of joy and sadness, as when you distinguish the initial joy of seeing your friend from the joy of talking to her, or distinguish your love for her from your hope that her life will go well (EIIIp56). Equally, the occurrence of an idea sparks off associations with other ideas that have been connected with it in the past, so that a superficial resemblance between your friend and a stranger, for example, may prompt a surge of affection for the stranger (EIIp15). Dispositions such as these move our ideas along, incorporating them into a complex process of thought.

Spinoza’s second relevant claim is that our imaginative patterns of thought are manifestations of an overarching disposition to persevere in our being that he describes as an individual’s *conatus* (EIIIp6). In all our thoughts and actions, we strive to maintain ourselves as the beings we are, and our failures and successes are manifested in our sad and joyful affects. Insofar as we

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<sup>6</sup> This view contrasts with the view that ideas are belief-like as it is interpreted by Jonathan Bennett, ‘Spinoza on Belief and Error’ in *Learning from Six Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 10; Martin Lin, ‘Spinoza’s Account of Akrasia’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.3 (2006), pp. 395-414; Michael Della Rocca, ‘The Power of an Idea. Spinoza’s Critique of Pure Will’, *Nous* 37.2 (2003), pp. 200-231.

empower ourselves we are joyful, and insofar as we become less powerful we are sad. To some extent, our efforts to live joyfully are rooted in reality – for instance, we try to spend time with our friends rather than with our enemies. But they are also helped along by elements of fantasy that gain a hold in two related ways. One stems from the fact that, even when our imaginative ideas of external things are haphazardly cobbled together from our experiences of being affected, we tend not only to treat them as reliable, but to build them into fantasies of empowerment. As far as the mind is able, Spinoza tells us, it ‘strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting’ (EIIIp12). This disposition can lead us to get ahead of ourselves by fantasising about the properties of the individuals we encounter, as when you convince yourself that the stranger who resembles your friend is as intelligent and generous as she is. More dramatically, it can prompt us to fantasise about the existence of external things. In an effort to make sense of our experience and live joyfully in the light of it, Spinoza argues, we may for example imagine the existence of tree sprites, winged horses or an anthropomorphic God.

Fantasies such as these are an integral part of imagining and share its characteristic features. Spinoza is confident that an idea of a tree sprite may be as affective and confidently affirmed as an idea of a friend, and may enter in the same way into a train of thought. ‘With their eyes open’, he observes, ‘someone may imagine certain things so vividly that it’s as though they had those things before them’ (TTP ch. 1, fn. 44).<sup>7</sup> By contrast with those contemporary theorists who approach the problem of our emotional response to fiction from the standpoint of agents who have a firm grasp of the distinction between the fictional and the real, he therefore begins from an imaginative form of thinking in which fact and fiction are not clearly separated. Since our basic imaginative stance is to affirm the existence of the objects of all our ideas, our imagining at least initially lacks the resources to distinguish fiction from reality and the conditions assumed by the contemporary problem of fictional emotions are not yet in place. Purely imaginative agents, as we have so far delineated them, do not

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<sup>7</sup> References to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* are abbreviated to ‘TTP’. Translations are from Edwin Curley, ed. and trans., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

distinguish existing things from fictions, or their affects for one from their affects for the other.

One may well feel that this analysis wilfully fails to make a range of distinctions that must play a central role in any worthwhile discussion of our emotions for fictional objects. But this response arguably misses Spinoza's point. His conception of imagining is designed to draw our attention to a pre-philosophical and indeed primitive way of thinking, in which there are no clear distinctions between what are nowadays described as beliefs and fantasies. Moreover, he suggests, this is where we have to start. To understand how we learn to distinguish fictional from real objects, and our affective investments in one from our affective investments in the other, we need to ask how, given the nature of imagining, we acquire these skills. Rather than presupposing distinctions that will make our emotions for fictional objects seem problematic, we need to consider how we come by them.

Spinoza's most illuminating discussion of this process revolves around an imagined example of a boy who believes that Pegasus exists, or to put it in the terms of the *Ethics*, affirms the existence of a winged horse. 'For what is perceiving a winged horse', Spinoza asks, 'other than affirming wings of the horse?' (EIIp49s[III.B.(ii)]). In order to stop affirming the existence of the horse, Spinoza goes on, the boy must acquire some other idea that excludes the existence of Pegasus. If he 'does not perceive anything that excludes the existence of the horse, he will necessarily regard the horse as present' (EIIp49s). Perhaps, for example, someone explains to him that winged horses are mythical; but whatever the process, it must arouse ideas that undercut his capacity to affirm the existence of the winged horse. As the *Ethics* sums it up, 'the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things that it imagines to be present to it' (EIIp17c).<sup>8</sup>

By coming to affirm that winged horses are mythical, the boy becomes unable to affirm their existence. But although Spinoza describes this

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<sup>8</sup> On the difference between affirmation and belief see Diane Steinberg, 'Belief, Affirmation and the Doctrine of *Conatus*', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLIII (2005), pp. 147- 158; Justin Steinberg, 'Two Puzzles concerning Spinoza's Conception of Belief', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2017, pp. 261- 82.

process in terms that make it sound as though our ideas can be divided into two groups, those that we do and do not affirm, he in fact acknowledges a complex middle ground. When the boy recognises that the mythical character of winged horses is incompatible with their existence, there is a sense in which he ceases to affirm the existence of the horse. He may acknowledge, if directly asked, that Pegasus does not exist, and put this idea to work in some of his thinking. But to consistently embrace this view, and gain a robust and consistent commitment to Pegasus's fictionality, he must also give up his affective investment in the horse's existence and redirect the affective satisfaction that the idea produces in him. This is a further step. The boy may, for example, continue to joyfully imagine himself riding across the skies on Pegasus's back, and as long as this idea enters into his striving to live joyfully, it will block his ability to fully exclude the existence of the horse.

Spinoza is confident that the process of excluding or ceasing to affirm an idea is as affective as it is cognitive (EIIIp19). Affects, he argues, can only be countered by affects (EIVp14). So until the boy gets some affective benefit from accepting that there are no winged horses, he is liable to hang on to the idea that they exist. Only once some compensating satisfactions have been established will he be able to let go of the joy he derives from believing in the winged horse and take pleasure in ideas that are consonant with its fictionality. Even then, as Spinoza argues with the help of a different example, his original affects will not completely disappear. Our knowledge that the sun is far from the earth does not entirely prevent us from affirming that it is, as it appears to be, relatively close (EIIp35). Nor does our knowledge that it is far off entirely exclude the satisfactions we gain from the way it appears. We still take pleasure, for example, in the story of Icarus. In the same way, the boy's initial, unequivocal affirmation of the winged horse's existence will retain a place in his memories, patterns of association and fantasies, and will continue to play a role in his striving to live joyfully. He may continue to imagine himself riding joyfully through the skies, and the fantasy may remain a source of emotional comfort.

With this analysis, Spinoza delineates some of the workings of imagination that fall between wholehearted affirmation of an idea and a firm commitment to its fictionality. As we learn to exclude or marginalise ideas, we

grasp the distinction between things that do and do not exist, and move beyond the primitive imaginative condition in which the difference between fiction and reality has no traction. But learning to apply this distinction consistently is a further skill. It is a matter of learning how to manipulate our conscious and unconscious disposition to affectively affirm ideas of objects whose existence, whether real or fantasised, makes us joyful, by modifying the emotional responses that are integral to imagining. We do this not only by excluding ideas, but by learning the social skill of confining them within specific practices such as storytelling or daydreaming.

Most people, Spinoza urges us to see, only have an imperfect grasp of this skill. To return to our example, the boy who is initially unable to control his idea of the winged horse - who sometimes affirms it, sometimes excludes it as his other ideas take him - may become more adept at compartmentalising or quarantining his ideas, together with the satisfactions they embody. At school, in biology lessons, he may unhesitatingly affirm that winged horses do not exist, while continuing to glory in his adventures on the back of Pegasus at home. At school he may be able to give reasons for his claim and take pleasure in his knowledge; but at home these reasons may continue to be easily supplanted by a world of fantasy. As Spinoza points out, learning how to apply one's grasp of the distinction between objects that do and do not exist within one's ordinary imaginative thinking, and shaping one's affects accordingly, takes application and skill (EIV Appendix xiii). Because our imaginative dispositions are continually at work, our capacity to differentiate our affects for things we believe to exist from our feelings for those we believe to be fictional remains to some degree unsteady, so that our affects are not, as the contemporary paradox seems to demand, invariably responsive to our beliefs. We therefore should not be surprised that we respond emotionally to fictions, nor should we view this disposition as anomalous. Instead of wondering how such responses are possible, we should reverse the descriptive question and pose it the other way round. What does it take to make our affective responses follow our beliefs? Rather than being an exception to a general rule, our emotional responses to objects we believe to be fictional are for the most part a manifestation of the

inescapable and wholeheartedly affective mode of thinking that early-modern philosophers call imagination.

### **The Value of Imaginative Investment in Fiction**

Within the contemporary debate, the descriptive question on which we have so far been concentrating tends to be distinguished from the normative issue of whether our emotional responses to fiction fall short of rationality or are in some other way inappropriate. For Spinoza, however, the two questions cannot be separated, and some of the normative features of his argument have already come into play. We gain our initial grasp of normativity, he argues, from the operations of our *conatus*. When we strive for objects and ways of life that we think will make us joyful, we are simultaneously striving for things that we desire; and to desire or want something is to conceive it as good (IIIp9s). The goodness under consideration here is wide-ranging and encompasses the many forms of satisfaction and joyfulness that we strive to cultivate. Nevertheless, it forms the basis of the more specific norms we subsequently develop, for example by distinguishing ethical from aesthetic joys and sadnesses. Since all our imagining, and indeed of all our thinking, is a manifestation of our *conatus*, it is invariably oriented towards things we find good and to this extent is bound to be normative. Judged from this viewpoint, our emotional investments in fiction are an integral part of our efforts to cultivate ways of life that we find joyful or good.

In order to live well or joyfully, Spinoza contends, it is vital to learn to distinguish reality from fiction. A person whose grasp of the difference between the two is non-existent or weak will be dangerously vulnerable to sadness and is liable to be classified as mad. However, learning to handle this distinction is not simply a matter of learning to exclude fictions and the affects they embody from one's thinking. Instead, we learn to live as joyfully and powerfully as possible by learning to integrate the satisfactions we gain from fantasy and the pleasure of distinguishing truth and fiction into our ways of life.<sup>9</sup> To illuminate this

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<sup>9</sup> For powerful discussions of this view see Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings. Spinoza, Past and Present* (Routledge, 1999); Moira Gatens, 'Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Elliot on Imagination and Belief', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 20.1 (2012), pp. 74–90.

developmental aspect of Spinoza's position, it is useful to compare it for a moment with a psychoanalytic account of the uses of fantasy. Donald Winnicott's analysis of transitional objects is chronologically remote from Spinozist philosophy, but he unselfconsciously echoes the view we have been tracing when he contends that very young children do not have the means to distinguish external objects from the internal objects they imagine.<sup>10</sup> So much so, that a child may not recognise that its mother figure is a separate individual who comes and goes of her own accord, imagining instead that she is under its control.

As children mature, they have to come to terms with the difference between inner and outer objects and learn to live with the loss of control that this involves, and one manifestation of this process is their emotional attachment to what Winnicott called transitional objects such as an old piece of blanket or a teddy bear. Although an adult will view the blanket as an ordinary external object, it functions for the child as the repository of its idea of its mother-figure, and is not clearly allocated to the inner or the outer realm. Moreover, by straddling this boundary, the blanket enables the child to blur the division between the real and the fantasised until it is emotionally capable of living with it. Eventually, in the normal course of things, children abandon their blankets and affirm their separateness from their mother figures. But according to Winnicott this process of emotional differentiation is never complete, and the feelings of loss it involves remain in play. In our adult lives we continue to suffer from our inability to omnipotently control the world, and need outlets in which our sadness can be allayed. Practices such as art, religion and daydreaming answer to this need. Within them, we can invest our affects in transitional objects, without having to confront the question of whether they are inner or outer, fictional or real.

Imagined fictional objects, as Spinoza conceives of them, function like a child's blanket. As we make the transition from a primitive form of imaginative life in which real and fictional objects are not distinguished to ways of life in

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Tavistock Publications, 1971; repr. Routledge, 1991).

which this distinction plays a role, and as we gradually revise our ideas of what is and isn't fictional, we - like Winnicott's child - must forego some forms of joy. At all stages, this loss arouses affective resistance and has to be affectively compensated for, so that practices of compensation are themselves integral to our imaginative way of life. When Spinoza implies that childhood is a less perfect condition than adulthood (EIVp39s) one can see what he means. From the point of view of a philosopher who is set upon attaining an active way of life informed by understanding, the powerlessness of a young child has nothing to recommend it. But as Winnicott helps us to appreciate, Spinoza also acknowledges a sense in which we never completely leave childhood behind. The delights of an imaginative outlook in which we do not have to come to terms with the otherness of external objects continue to fuel our affective investment in the individual and collective fictions that are part of our imaginative lives.

These commitments emerge most clearly from Spinoza's treatment of religion. Some religious people, he argues, resemble the child who straightforwardly affirms the existence of a winged horse. Since none of their ideas exclude the existence of an anthropomorphic God, they affirm the existence of such a deity on the basis of the narratives contained in the Bible, and make him an object of their affects, without realising that no such God exists (TTP II.52). But there are also people, including many seventeenth-century theologians and Spinoza himself, who believe that many biblical narratives were written for ordinary as opposed to learned people and are adapted to their beliefs (TTP XIV.1). Rather than describing God as he truly is, they describe him in fictional, anthropomorphic terms as a lawmaker, ruler and judge. For people who read this account literally, the question of whether its representation of God is fictional does not arise; but for the theologians it does. They believe that God has no anthropomorphic properties, yet many of them also derive religious strength from ceremonies in which God is represented in just these terms.

Are such theologians to be condemned as irrational for failing to bring their affects in line with their beliefs? This is not Spinoza's considered view. The aim of religion, he argues, is not to teach the truth, but rather to foster a co-operative way of life organised around the commitment to loving one's neighbour, and learning how to use the biblical narratives to promote this goal in

oneself as well as others is part of what a Jewish or Christian religious life involves (TTP XIV.37; XV.11). For those who wholeheartedly affirm the God of Scripture, this will be a matter of learning to love or fear him; but for the theologians and others like them the process will be more complicated. They must learn how to use ceremonial invocations of an anthropomorphic deity to strengthen their affective commitment to a religious way of life, while also using their greater understanding of God for the same end. To put the point another way, they must cultivate the skill of integrating an affective commitment to a critical biblical hermeneutics aimed at truth with an affective commitment to a transitional religious practice that does not press the question of whether or not an anthropomorphic God exists. Once again, this skill comes in degrees. Some theologians, like the boy who has very little control over his affirmation of the winged horse, may struggle to keep the two practices apart. They may, for example, be emotionally drawn to a theology imbued with anthropomorphism. Others, like the boy who has learned to confine his daydreams about Pegasus, may be adept at incorporating the pleasures of theological understanding and biblical narrative into joyful and co-operative ways of life.

Spinoza encourages the readers of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* to cultivate this skill for themselves, urging them to discover which biblical narratives speak to them and how they can most effectively use them to strengthen their commitment to religion (TTP XIV.32). They should ask themselves, he suggests, whether it is more inspiring to concentrate on Genesis or Joshua, whether it is more moving to listen to the text read aloud or read it to oneself, and develop forms of religious observance that answer to their affective characters. This is in effect a recommendation to create transitional objects and employ them within their own religious practices. But there is a point at which Spinoza seems to withdraw this advice. He also claims that people who fully understand that there is no anthropomorphic God, but nevertheless attempt to affectively affirm his existence, would be guilty of something like bad faith. 'I ask you, who can embrace something in his mind in spite of the protests of reason? What else is denying something in your mind but the fact that reason protests against it?' (TTP XV.10) Here, at last, he seems to voice a version of the normative worry so prominent in contemporary discussion. Cultivating the skill

of moving between an idea of God that one believes to be true and an idea of the deity that one knows to be fictional is a self-indulgent refusal to live up to the demands of rationality.

In raising this objection, Spinoza is not, however, casting doubt on the value of the transitional practices we have so far discussed. Rather, he is drawing attention to the difference, as he construes it, between philosophy and other forms of knowledge, and reminding philosophers of one of the implications of their practice. Philosophical understanding puts the issue of existence centre stage. In its ideal form, it deals in true or adequate ideas and affirms the necessary relationships between them. To have a completely adequate idea of a triangle, for instance, would be to affirm all the ideas it necessarily presupposes, together with all the ideas that necessarily follow from it, and to wholeheartedly exclude all ideas that are conflict with them (EI ax. 4). Equally, someone who has an adequate idea of a horse will wholeheartedly affirm the impossibility of a horse with wings, and wholeheartedly exclude its existence. In its ideal form, philosophical reasoning therefore leaves no room for probabilistic, partial or compartmentalised affirmations of the kind that characterise imagining. It rules ideas in or out, and the more adequate one's ideas become, the more difficult it is to affirm anything they exclude. As Spinoza illustrates the point in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the better one understands that bodies are finite, the harder it will be to affirm the existence of an infinite fly (TIE.58).<sup>11</sup>

As well as depending on a range of cognitive capacities, the exercise of understanding presupposes certain affects. Adequately understanding an idea – for example the idea that it is impossible for a winged horse to exist – is not only a matter of appreciating that it is excluded or ruled out. It is also a matter of wanting to put the idea to work by employing it in one's attempts to increase one's adequate ideas and by refraining from affirming ideas that contradict it. Philosophical understanding must incorporate the desire to use and cultivate this form of knowledge. To pursue it wholeheartedly, a philosopher must take

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<sup>11</sup> *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (abbreviated to TIE) in Edwin Curley ed. and trans., *The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. I. (Princeton University Press, 1985).

pleasure in increasing the adequacy of his ideas, and as this joy grows, Spinoza argues, the pleasures of fantasy will pale into insignificance (EVp20v).

In its purest form, philosophical understanding therefore seems to remove our power to respond affectively to fictions by cancelling our ability to affirm them. The better we appreciate that an object doesn't exist, the less affective hold it will have over us. Moreover, as we approach this state of enlightenment, attempting to cultivate affects such as love or fear for an anthropomorphic deity will become increasingly difficult. The more adequately one understands that God does not have anthropomorphic properties, the less capable one will become of loving or fearing him for these traits. To attempt to do so would then be to try to fly in the face of ideas that one cannot but affirm. Epistemologically, it would be a failure to embrace one's philosophical knowledge and live in the light of it; ethically it would be a failure to embrace what Spinoza regards as the best way of life, informed as far as possible by understanding. Together, these weaknesses would display a lack of the virtue that Spinoza calls *fortitudo* (translated by Curley as 'strength of character'), the power to live as one's understanding dictates (EIIIp59).

It seems, then, that the perfect philosopher would meet the expectation assumed by the contemporary problem from which we began, and would possess the skill of keeping his emotional responses in line with his beliefs. His desires would reflect what he knows to be true, and he would no longer derive joy from fictions. However, while this power may be one feature of the transcendent form of knowledge that Spinoza introduces at the very end of the *Ethics*, the intellectual love of God, it is not clear how far he thinks we can achieve it. In the *Political Treatise*, for example, he explains that no one, however wise, can practise *fortitudo* all the time (TP VI.3).<sup>12</sup> By implication, philosophers will for the most part retain desires that can only be satisfied within transitional practices, and will need to continue to cultivate the skill of using them. To this extent, they will continue to resemble the boy who quarantines or compartmentalises his affects by moving back and forth between his knowledge of natural species and his daydreams. But in their case, the relevant skills will

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<sup>12</sup> *Political Treatise* in Edwin Curley trans. and ed. *The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp.

consist in compartmentalising the practice of philosophy from a range of imaginative practices in which fictions play a role, thus enabling themselves to experience a range of forms of joy. As we have seen, religion is one of these.<sup>13</sup> But as Spinoza indicates, the wise man also knows how to rejoice in transitional practices such as going to the theatre (EIVp45s) or imagining exemplary actions and characters (TTP, XIX.21). Each of these practices is governed by its own social norms, and in each case these norms have to be learned, so that the wise man, like anyone else, must cultivate a range of skills. He must learn how to integrate his emotional responses to various kinds of fiction into an existence dominated by the pursuit of understanding, by employing transitional practices to maintain and advance the joyfulness of his life.

In its middle reaches, philosophical understanding offers us ways to strengthen and direct these skills. Whereas Spinoza's boy has an imperfect and unselfconscious control over his daydreams, Spinozist philosophers come to understand a good deal about themselves. They come to know, for example, how their affective responses are organised and how individuals and societies can manipulate them. Equipped with this knowledge, they are individually and collectively better placed to understand the imaginative mechanisms governing our emotional responses to fictions, and can to some extent train themselves and others to use them productively. They can self-consciously consider how to develop a particular skill, reflect on their progress, or critically assess the effects of an existing transitional practice. Under this kind of scrutiny, our emotional responses to fiction become an object of understanding and our transitional practices grow in sophistication. The counterparts of the blanket to which Winnicott's child unselfconsciously resorts include things like plays, religious narratives and political ideologies, each of which assumes a complex set of individual and social skills and is subject to critical reflection. (The skills of actors and artists differ from those of even the most discerning audiences.) Such practices are transitional in the sense that they license us to stand back from the

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<sup>13</sup> On this aspect of religion see Michael Rosenthal, 'Tolerance as a Virtue in Spinoza's Ethics', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39.4 (2001), pp. 535-57. ON the relation between religion and artistic practices see Moira Gatens, 'Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty and the Prophet and the Artist'. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 23(1), 1-16.

demands of exclusively pursuing understanding, implicitly acknowledging the strength of the joy we derive from our affective investments in fiction. For the most part we cannot do without them, and except at the very limit they therefore remain integral to philosophical forms of life. Part of the philosopher's task is to learn to reconcile the joy he derives from fictions with the project of pursuing understanding, by learning to move deftly between different practices, transitional or not. In doing so, however, he must also accept and learn to handle a certain degree of risk. However habitual the ability to compartmentalise becomes, the danger of losing control always remains, whether because the force of imagination temporarily increases under physical or psychological stress, or because the capacity to distinguish truth from fiction is permanently destroyed. We never lose the disposition to invest affectively in all our ideas, fictional or not, and our power to control it is always less than perfect.

## **Conclusion**

Spinoza's analysis of the imagination allows us to reconsider the view that our emotional responses to fictional objects are in some way aberrant because they fail to live up to norms of rationality or appropriateness that are otherwise within our reach. Current debate distinguishes a descriptive question – how do we break with our usual habits and respond emotionally to objects we believe to be fictional? – from a normative one – how should we assess this capacity? In Spinoza's work, I have argued, the two questions are not distinct, but we can nevertheless reconstruct an answer to each of them. Responding to the first, Spinoza urges us reconsider the presupposition that we normally keep our emotions in line with our beliefs. This capacity is a skill that we have to develop, and one that we exercise to varying degrees. The question we should ask is therefore not, 'How do we manage to deviate from it?', but 'What does it take to exercise such a skill?' While Spinoza's account of the processes by which we both compartmentalise and integrate our affects is not as detailed as some contemporary proposals, it provides a comprehensive epistemological and psychological framework within which the issue can be addressed.

Turning to the normative question, Spinoza examines the circumstances in which our emotional investment in fiction is and is not

normatively defensible. There are, he allows, circumstances in which affective investment in fiction violates the epistemological and ethical standards of philosophical understanding and can rightly be described as irrational. But these circumstances are relatively rare. For most people, including most of those committed to a philosophical way of life, affective investment in fictions, and in the transitional practices in which they are embedded, is a continuing and empowering source of joy and a vital element of living well. To suppose that we are only rational when we bend our affects to what we believe to be true is vastly to underestimate the value of our imaginative powers and distort the character of philosophical understanding. Anticipating some current work on the norms governing our emotional responses to fiction, Spinoza urges us to see this as a skill we have every reason to cultivate.

