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12 **Desire-Like Imagination**

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Imagine that there is a baby kangaroo hiding under your desk. Though presumably this isn't something that you believe, your imagining might be thought of as importantly analogous to belief, and the same holds more generally for imaginings that are attitudinal in nature. In particular, such imaginings aim to capture truths about fictional worlds in the same way that belief aims to capture truths about the actual world. Recently, however, there has been considerable interest in the question of whether there might be imaginings that are counterparts to desire in addition to imaginings that are counterparts to belief. Desire-like imagination has been thought to have the potential to elucidate several puzzling phenomena that arise in imaginative contexts. But whether desire-like imagination is really needed to explain such phenomena – and whether there really is such a thing as desire-like imagination – remains hotly contested. This essay begins by fleshing out a fuller sense of what desire-like imagination is meant to be and then considers the cases both for and against.

Imagining typically takes many forms. Consider Huali, an avid young gymnast, who is imagining competing at the 2020 Olympic Games. Some of her imaginings might be sensory or perceptual, as when she imagines her parents' smiling faces as they watch from the stands or when she imagines the roar of the crowd as she finishes her routine. Some of her imaginings might be experiential, as when she imagines performing her dismount from the beam or when she imagines how it would feel to land it perfectly. And some of her imaginings might be attitudinal, as when she imagines that she wins the gold medal for her floor exercise or when she imagines that the Americans take first place in the all-around competition.

Attitudinal mental states – also called *propositional attitudes* – consist in one's adopting a mental attitude towards some propositional content. We can take different attitudes toward the very same content: I can believe that *p*, hope that *p*, desire that *p*, intend that *p*, and so on. Attitudinal imagining is often considered to be similar to belief in important

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ways. Perhaps most significantly, attitudinal imagining mirrors the inference patterns of belief. (See, e.g., [Leslie 1994](#).) If Huali believes that she will be competing in the 2020 Olympic Games then, given her belief that those games will be held in Tokyo, she will be inclined to believe that she'll be in Tokyo in 2020. Likewise for imagining: if Huali imagines that she's competing in the 2020 Olympic Games then, given her belief that those games will be held in Tokyo, she will be inclined all else being equal to imagine that she'll be in Tokyo in 2020. Attitudinal imagining also shares with belief a mind-to-world direction of fit – though in the case of imagining, the relevant world is not the actual world but a make-believe or pretend world. While belief aims at the true, imagination aims at the fictional ([Walton 1990](#), 41).¹

Recently, several philosophers have argued that attitudinal imagining can also take a desire-like form. According to these philosophers, just as beliefs interact with desires, so too do belief-like imaginings interact with desire-like imaginings. So, for example, when Huali imagines competing at the 2020 Olympics, not only might she imagine her closest competitor falling on a difficult dismount but she might also imaginatively want this to happen. Or consider Yangjie, who is playing a game of make-believe. When imagining that her bed is a spaceship and that her stuffed animals are her copilots, Yangjie might also imaginatively want to fire the rocket boosters and imaginatively want to travel to Mars.

The existence of such desire-like imaginings is a hotly contested issue among contemporary philosophers of imagination. Proponents argue that such states are needed in order to account for varied phenomena such as pretend behavior and our emotional engagement with fiction. Opponents offer alternative explanations for such phenomena and thereby undercut the case for desire-like imagining. In this essay, I survey the state of the current debate. In the first section, I discuss in more detail what

¹ See [Gendler 2011](#) for a discussion of imagining's direction of fit. For further discussion of the ways that imagining is and is not belief-like, see [Currie and Ravenscroft 2002](#), 12–19, and [Nichols 2006](#).

desire-like imaginings are meant to be. In the second, I examine the case in favor of desire-like imaginings while in the third I examine the case against them. Finally, in the closing section, I offer a brief assessment of the strengths of these two cases and explore how future research might help to settle the debate.

1 What are desire-like imaginings?

Over the last several decades, philosophers have grown increasingly skeptical of our commonsense understanding of mental states. Eliminative materialists, who endorse a particularly extreme form of this skepticism, claim that our folk psychological theory is deeply flawed; once we achieve a more scientifically sophisticated theory of the mind, we will see that “certain common-sense mental states, such as beliefs and desires, do not exist” (Ramsey 2013; see also P.M. Churchland 1981 and P.S. Churchland 1986). A less extreme form of this skepticism is evidenced by other philosophers who claim not that our folk psychological theory is fundamentally misguided but rather that it is incomplete. Though such philosophers wouldn’t want to deny the viability of mental state categories like “belief” and “desire,” they argue that we also need to recognize various mental states that are not part of our pretheoretic understanding of the mind, e.g., *alief* (Gendler 2008a, 2008b) and *besire* (Altham 1986). Desire-like imagining would be another such state – one that is not recognized by our folk psychological theory of imagination but that is nonetheless needed for a scientifically sophisticated understanding of the mind.

To get a handle on what such states are meant to be, it is useful to reflect briefly on imagination more generally. In their influential book *Recreative Minds*, Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft distinguish creative imagination from recreative imagination. Someone employs creative imagination when she “puts together ideas in a way that leads to the creation of something valuable in art, science, or practical life” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, 9). In contrast, someone employs recreative imagination when she engages in

perspective-shifting, i.e., when she imaginatively projects herself into a situation different in some way from her actual current situation. As Currie and Ravenscroft argue, just as someone might shift her perspective with respect to her current beliefs and thereby imaginatively try out different beliefs, she might also shift her perspective with respect to her current desires and thereby imaginatively try out different desires.

Of course, imaginatively trying out different beliefs does not consist in the adoption of those beliefs. When Yangjie points to her stuffed penguin and says, “She’s my copilot,” she is not reporting a belief. Rather, she is reporting a state that imaginatively stands in for a belief to that effect – a state that we normally refer to simply as an imagining. Likewise, Currie and Ravenscroft suggest that imaginatively trying out different desires does not consist in the adoption of those desires. When Yangjie announces, “I want to be the one to fire the rocket boosters this time,” she is not reporting a genuine desire. Rather, she is reporting a state that imaginatively stands in for a desire to that effect. Though English does not have a word for this state, Currie and Ravenscroft introduce the term *desire-like imagining* for it.² Alvin Goldman (2006, 48), referring to the same kind of state, calls it *make-desire* (on analogy with the term *make-believe*). Tyler Doggett and Andy Egan (Doggett and Egan 2007) use the term *imaginative desire*, or *i-desire* for short, and as their terminology has subsequently been widely adopted by others, I too will frequently use it here. In doing so, however, I want explicitly to guard against a possible misunderstanding, since the term ‘i-desire’ may seem to suggest that the relevant state is a special kind of desire. This suggestion would be a mistake. An i-desire is not meant to be a special kind of desire but rather a special kind of imagining. Doggett and Egan themselves are explicit about this point. Having claimed that i-desire is “the imaginative analogue of desire,” they state unequivocally that “it’s only an analogue. The states aren’t the same” (Doggett and Egan 2012, 288).

² Currie had also previously used the term *desire*^l to pick out this kind of state (see Currie 1997, 67).

The claim that i-desires constitute a special kind of imagining is meant to be a strong claim, i.e., proponents of i-desires take themselves to be positing a novel kind of imagining that stands alongside the more familiar category of belief-like imagining. In particular, i-desires should not be understood simply as a special subclass of belief-like imagining. Yangjie's i-desire to fire the rocket boosters, for example, should not be understood in terms of a belief-like imagining that she has the desire to fire the rocket boosters – to make this identification would be, as Currie and Ravenscroft put it, to confuse the character of an imagining with its content (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, 27; see also Currie 1997, 67). Just as there is a distinction between desiring an ice cream and believing that one desires an ice cream, there is also a distinction between i-desiring an ice cream and imagining that one desires an ice cream. This latter state is a belief-like imagining *about* a desire, not an imaginative counterpart of that desire.

Our discussion thus far tells us more about what i-desires are not than it tells us about what they are. In fact, i-desire proponents do not typically offer much by way of a positive characterization of i-desires. Currie and Ravenscroft note explicitly that this should not trouble us: “Definitions of belief, desire, and perception have been hard to come by; none of those on offer seem to us secure enough to provide a basis for defining the states that are parasitic on them. Still, unless we are very troubled philosophically, most of us understand well enough what beliefs, desires, and perceptions are. If we understand these things, it should not be too much to ask us to understand their imaginative counterparts” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, 19).

As this suggests, then, we are supposed to get a handle on the notion by way of an analogy with desire (see also Doggett and Egan 2012, 287–288). Just as belief-like imagination mirrors the inferential patterns of belief, desire-like imagination mirrors the inferential patterns of desire. When I desire something, I typically desire the means to it. Likewise, when I i-desire something, I typically i-desire the means to it. Moreover, just as belief-like imagination shares the mind-to-world direction of

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fit had by belief, desire-like imagination shares the world-to-mind direction of fit had by desire – though, as with belief-like imagining, the world relevant to desire-like imaginings is a make-believe or fictional world. When a reader of *The Hobbit* i-desires that Bilbo Baggins defeats Smaug, that i-desire will be satisfied if, in the fictional world depicted by the story, Bilbo emerges victorious.

I-desires are also often said to be similar to desires with respect to their causal roles. But here we must draw a distinction between an internal and an external causal role. There is widespread agreement among proponents of i-desires that they can play the same kind of internal causal role as desires. For example, just as desires produce emotional responses in conjunction with our beliefs, i-desires too are claimed to produce emotional responses in conjunction with our imaginings. Yangjie's excitement during her game of pretend arises from i-desiring that she reach Mars and imagining that she's gotten there. There is less agreement among proponents of i-desires as to whether they can play the same external causal role as desires. Some think of i-desires as in principle disconnected from our action-guiding systems; they are "blocked off from behavior" (Currie 1997, 68). Though a desire for ice cream might prompt me to go to the freezer, an i-desire for an ice cream won't. On this way of thinking, i-desires are often referred to as "off-line" states. Others think of i-desires as capable of causing behavior in an analogous way to the way that desires are capable of causing behavior: just as desires produce actions in conjunction with beliefs, i-desires are thought to produce action in conjunction with imaginings. Such proponents suggest that we can explain why Yangjie gets onto her bed during her game of make-believe, for example, via the conjunction of her imagining that her bed is a spaceship and her i-desire to go to Mars. We will return to the issue of the causal role of i-desires in the subsequent sections as we consider the cases for and against their postulation.

2 The case in favor

According to proponents of i-desires, these novel states are needed in order to account for several

puzzling phenomena related to the imagination. Such phenomena, they argue, cannot be adequately explained when we limit ourselves only to beliefs, desires, and (belief-like) imaginings. Once we invoke i-desires, however, we allegedly achieve a satisfying account of the phenomena in question and the apparent puzzles dissolve. Four different phenomena have featured prominently in the case for i-desires: (a) mindreading, (b) imaginative resistance, (c) emotional engagement with fiction, and (d) pretend behavior. In this section, we consider each of these in turn.

2.1 Mindreading

Since the 1980s, imagination has frequently been invoked to account for how we come to explain and predict the behavior of other people: via an imaginative simulation, we can project ourselves into another person's situation and thereby come to see why she did what she did and what she will likely do in the future (see, e.g., [Gordon 1986](#) and [Heal 1986](#)). This view, known as simulation theory, contrasts with theory theory, a view that explains our mindreading abilities in terms of the employment of a folk psychological theory (see, e.g., [Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997](#)). Given our purposes here, I will bracket off this debate (though see Shannon Spaulding, "Simulation Theory," [Chapter 19](#) of this volume) to concentrate on the role that i-desires play in the simulationists' account of mindreading.

As the simulationists' characterize their view, for someone (the "attributor") to project herself into the situation of someone else (the "target"), the attributor must imaginatively recreate the target's initial states. Given these inputs, the attributor can then in imagination reach a decision and thereby predict that the target would make the same decision. (See, e.g., [Goldman 2006](#), 19.) This means the attributor must recreate the target's desires. How does the attributor do this, especially in the case when she lacks the desire herself? I-desires are thought to offer a plausible explanation. Consider a context in which we frequently engage in mindreading, namely, while playing board games. When playing *Settlers of Catan*, Stefanie needs to predict where her opponent is going to place his

next settlement. She might start by simulating his beliefs: the spot on the left will generate wheat and ore, while the spot on the right will generate wood and brick. But this alone will not enable her to figure out what she needs to know, because the spot he will choose depends on whether he wants wheat and ore or wood and brick. It is not enough for Stefanie to consult her own desires here. The fact that she herself desires wood and brick does not show that her opponent does too – after all, he is in a different strategic situation from her. Thus, for Stefanie to be able to make any sort of effective prediction, she will have to simulate her opponent's desires along with his beliefs.³

The simulationists often refer to these simulations as instances of pretense, and they refer to the states produced by the simulation as “pretend beliefs” or “pretend desires.” But it should be clear that such pretend states are what we have been referring to as, respectively, belief-like and desire-like imaginings. Goldman, for example, is explicit about this very point. On his view, pretend states are produced by what we have been calling recreative imagination, or in his words, by *enactment imagination*: “A pretend desire is the product of enacting, or attempting to enact, desire” (Goldman 2006, 48).

Determining whether simulation theory offers us the correct account of mindreading is, as noted above, beyond our purview here. But it's worth noting that even theory theorists tend to admit that we engage in imaginative simulations of the sort postulated by simulation theorists – what's primarily at issue between the two sides in the mindreading debate is not whether we simulate but whether (and to what extent) such simulations are theory-laden. Thus, reflection on mindreading – even without a commitment to the correctness of simulation theory

³ In fact, simulation theorists often go even further than this. Goldman, for example, claims that in many mindreading contexts the use of simulation will also require the imaginative recreation of hopes, plans, and emotions in addition to the imaginative recreation of beliefs and desires (Goldman 2006, 48–9, 151). See also Walton 1997, 41–2.

– provides a forceful argument for the existence of i-desires.⁴

2.2 Imaginative resistance

The puzzling phenomenon of imaginative resistance, which seems to have been first noticed by Hume, has recently been much discussed in the literature on imagination (see, e.g., Walton 1994 and Gendler 2000; for an overview of the issue, see Kengo Miyazono and Shen-yi Liao, “The Cognitive Architecture of Imaginative Resistance,” **Chapter 17** of this volume). When we engage with fiction, we readily imagine all sorts of claims that we know to be factually mistaken or even factually impossible. But when confronted with a claim that seems to us to be morally mistaken or impossible, we tend to resist. We have no trouble engaging with a story that asks us to imagine a foreign militia taking over the island of Nantucket after slaughtering all of its present residents. But now suppose the author were to add an additional claim: “Of course, the militia did the right thing; after all, Nantucket has long been an enclave for wealthy snobs.” Confronted with this sort of deviant moral claim, the typical reader is likely to experience some bewilderment. More to the point, she’s likely to have difficulty going along with the story. Instead she’ll resist what she’s supposed to be imagining.

Among the many explanations of imaginative resistance that have been offered is an account in terms of desire-like imagining. On this view, one that has been developed by Currie, both singly (**Currie 2002a**) and in conjunction with Ravenscroft (**Currie and Ravenscroft 2002**), engaging with fiction involves both belief-like and desire-like imaginings. But, says Currie, there is a striking asymmetry between our willingness to take on certain kinds of belief-like imaginings and our willingness to take on certain kinds of desire-like imaginings: “We tolerate astonishing amounts of cruelty and suffering being represented in fictions, and are very willing to imagine that innocent people

⁴ Simulation theory is often extended to account for empathy in addition to mindreading. If this is right, then i-desires would be invoked to explain empathy as well. See **Currie 1997**, 66–68.

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like Desdemona are murdered for no good reason, as long as we are not asked to take on in imagination the desires of the characters who bring about and delight in that suffering” (Currie 2002a, 217). Though we have a very high threshold for what we’re willing to imaginatively believe, we have a much lower threshold for what we’re willing to imaginatively desire. Thus, deviant factual claims in fiction don’t raise our hackles the way that deviant moral claims do because the latter cases pose special problems with respect to our desire-like imaginings.

As part of an attempt to explain this asymmetry, Currie invokes the notion of the ideal spectator: “someone who is sufficiently rational, well-informed about, and disinterested in the action she surveys for it to be the case that, were she to think a certain outcome to the action morally right, she would desire that outcome, and were she to think that outcome morally wrong, she would desire its non-occurrence” (Currie 2002a, 217). In our engagement with fiction, we frequently approximate the ideal observer, so the moral claims we encounter activate our desire-like imaginings in a way that factual claims do not. In cases where the moral claims are deviant, we either resist directly the desire-like imaginings or our desire-like imaginings come into tension with our belief-like imaginings. In these latter cases, this tension explains the resistance that we feel. In short, then, Currie argues that once we recognize the existence of desire-like imaginings, imaginative resistance no longer seems puzzling.

2.3 Emotional engagement with fiction

Our engagement with fiction often engenders strong emotional responses – we’re heartbroken when Charlotte dies at the end of *Charlotte’s Web*, we’re terrified by the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*, and we’re disgusted when watching a politician forced to have sexual intercourse with a pig in *Black Mirror*. But such emotional response is puzzling, given that we know that the characters and events depicted are merely fictional. Why do we have emotional responses to things that are only imagined to be true?

This question has several aspects. First, insofar as we're inclined to think that we can only be rational in having emotional responses to events if we believe in the reality of such events, we might worry that our emotional responses to fiction cannot be both genuine and rational. This issue – often referred to as the *paradox of fiction* – has been much discussed in the literature on aesthetics. (For an overview, see Stacie Friend, “Fiction and Emotion,” Chapter 16 of this volume). But second, there is a related issue lurking in the vicinity. Insofar as we're inclined to think that emotional responses are typically generated by beliefs and desires, we might wonder how our emotional responses to fiction can even get off the ground in the first place – after all, the reader doesn't believe that Charlotte exists. So what mental states bring about reader's sadness?

Here it seems natural to claim that imagining plays the role of belief. Though the reader doesn't believe that Charlotte is dying, she imagines it, and this imagining contributes to the production of her affective response. But some conative state is also needed, and there doesn't seem to be a relevant desire that would fit the bill. Three different reasons tend to be offered to support this claim: (1) any such conative state would violate the normative constraints governing desire. As Currie notes, “Desires can be shown to be unreasonable, or at least unjustified, if they fail to connect in various ways with the facts” (Currie 2002a, 211). But here the reasonableness of my conative state is not threatened by the fact that Charlotte doesn't exist. (2) Any such conative state would not motivate action in the way that desires normally do. After all, when engaging with fiction we don't intervene in the unfolding events and try to take matters into our own hands. (See Currie 2002a, 211.) (3) There is no adequate way to understand the content of the conative state if it is a genuine desire. You can't have a desire about Charlotte herself – no such spider exists. (See Doggett and Egan 2007, 13–14.) Thus, philosophers such as Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) and Doggett and Egan (2007) have argued that the conative state in question must be an i-desire. A reader's sadness at the end of *Charlotte's*

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Web, for example, can be explained in terms of imagining Charlotte's death and i-desiring that Charlotte survive.

Here it might be worth taking a slightly closer look at (3), since there are a couple of obvious ways we might try to specify the content of a desire that the reader might have. Perhaps the most plausible candidate desire would be the desire that *in the fiction* Charlotte not die. Currie (2010) calls this the change-of-content solution, since it changes the content of the reader's desire from a desire about a fictional spider to a desire about a piece of fiction. The problem with the change-of-content solution is that the reader need not have a desire with that content. In fact, she might very well recognize that Charlotte's death is an important part of the story, that it's necessary to teach Wilbur (and young readers) about the cycle of life, death, and renewal. She might not want the story to have a saccharine ending. Or she might simply trust that E.B. White knows better than she does how the story should end. It seems just as unlikely that we explain the reader's emotional response by relying on her desires about real-life spiders. Even absent the desire that real-life spiders have extended lifespans, a reader will still experience sadness at Charlotte's death. Thus, as Doggett and Egan conclude, the only way to account for our emotional responses to fiction is to "expand our mental architecture beyond beliefs and desires" (Doggett and Egan 2012, 282), that is, to postulate the existence not only of imaginings but also of i-desires.

Before moving on, it's also worth noting that while Doggett and Egan take our engagement with fiction to support the introduction of i-desires because of the need to explain our affective responses, a related source of support arises directly from consideration of our conative responses. To redeploy one of their examples, consider a viewer's responses to the characters and events depicted in *The Sopranos*, an American television series that aired on HBO from 1999 to 2007 and centered around Tony Soprano, the head of a New Jersey mafia family. At the end of Season 5 when Tony is forced to flee from police on foot after he's caught up in a raid of a fellow mob member's home, a viewer will undoubtedly be

rooting for Tony to escape capture – this is something towards which she has a conative attitude. But, as we saw above, the relevant conative attitude doesn't seem to be desire – she knows Tony Soprano is a fictional character, and so to have real desires about what does or doesn't happen to him would seem to require irrationality. Moreover, we can't understand her conative attitude in terms of general desires about mob bosses, because the typical viewer probably doesn't have any sort of general desire that mob bosses evade capture by the police. So this is a case where the viewer seems to want something that she doesn't want.⁵ Proponents of i-desires have a nice explanation of this puzzling situation, since they take the conative attitude in question to be an i-desire rather than a desire.

2.4 Pretend behavior

When children play games of pretend, they engage in all sorts of unusual behavior. Aadhya, who is pretending to be a puppy dog, might say “woof woof” while crawling on all fours and licking her left hand. Imani, who is pretending to be a witch-in-training at Hogwarts, might wave around a tree branch while saying “Wingardium Leviosa.” And Mirabel, who is pretending to be a mother, might rock a doll in her arms while making soothing sounds.

But what explains these pretend actions? Even as preschoolers, children do not actually believe themselves to be the characters they have adopted, nor do they take the props they employ to be the actual things they are pretending them to be. (See Deena Skolnick Weisberg, “Imagination and Child Development,” [Chapter 22](#) of this volume.) Imani, for example, knows that what's in her hand is a tree branch, not a wand, and she's not under any sort of delusion that she's really a witch. This means that an explanation of her actions in terms of beliefs and desires alone seems unlikely to be sufficient. In order to make sense of what pretenders are doing, it's generally accepted that we have to invoke

⁵ This way of characterizing the situation is employed in the title of [Doggett and Egan 2007](#) – “Wanting Things You Don't Want.” [Currie \(2002a, 211\)](#) also talks of desiring something you don't actually desire.

belief-like imaginings: Imani imagines that she's a witch-in-training, and she imagines that the tree branch is a magic wand.⁶ Even having posited these belief-like imaginings, however, it seems that we still lack the resources to achieve an adequate explanation of her actions. Rather, we are forced to offer an explanation that – as David Velleman has complained – casts the pretenders as “depressingly unchildlike.” We'd have to say something like: Imani imagines herself to be a witch-in-training, she believes that a witch-in-training would wave around a wand, she is imagining the tree branch to be a wand, and she wants to behave like a witch-in-training would behave. This kind of explanation puts Imani at a considerable remove from her game of pretend. In Velleman's terms, if Imani were motivated in this way then she “would remain securely outside the fiction, thinking about it as such” (Velleman 2000, 257). Moreover, in some cases of pretending, this sort of explanation seems to go even more fundamentally awry. For example, dogs don't really say “woof woof,” so if Aadhya wants to behave like a dog behaves, why would this be what she says? Perhaps we can explain her utterance by saying she wants to behave as one behaves when one is pretending to be a dog. But this builds the concept of pretense into her desire in a way that makes her mental states highly conceptualized – perhaps even overconceptualized – especially when we remember how young a pretender might be.⁷

According to the proponent of i-desires, an adequate explanation of pretense actions thus demands the postulation of i-desires. Just as regular behavior is generated by belief in conjunction with desire, there are a variety of cases in which pretense behavior is generated by belief-like imagining in conjunction with desire-like imagining. But, as we noted above, imagination and belief come apart in various ways.

⁶ It's worth noting that not everyone agrees that belief-like imagination can play the same motivational role as belief; see, e.g., O'Brien 2005 and Funkhouser and Spaulding 2009.

⁷ For additional considerations against explaining pretense-behavior in belief-desire terms see Doggett and Egan (2007, 5–12).

In particular, belief aims at the true while imagining aims at the fictional. Thus, as Doggett and Egan summarize their account: “People who believe that *P* are disposed to act in ways that would, if *P* were true, be likely to make the propositions that they desire true People who imagine that *P* are disposed to act in ways that would, if *P* were fictional, be likely to make the propositions that they i-desire fictional” (Doggett and Egan 2007, 10).

3 The case against

As the discussion of the previous section showed, proponents of desire-like imagination primarily make the case in favor of i-desires by arguing that several phenomena related to imagination can be explained only by the invocation of an imaginative analogue to desire. It's thus perhaps unsurprising that opponents of desire-like imagination primarily make the case against i-desires by showing that we can explain the phenomena in question in other ways, ways that do not involve the invocation of i-desire. Thus far in philosophical discussions of the issue – and remember that the debate about desire-like imagination is still a relatively new one, having started to receive serious attention only in the last decade – opponents of i-desires have focused their attention on the second two of the four phenomena that we considered in the previous section. My discussion here will thus largely be confined to the case against i-desires that stems from considering our emotional engagement with fiction and pretense behavior.

3.1 Emotional engagement with fiction

In a sense, the proponents of desire-like imagination have issued a challenge to their opponents: find me a desire that can adequately explain our engagement with fiction. The case for i-desires is built by offering reasons that this challenge cannot be met. In response, however, the opponents of desire-like imagination typically claim that such reasons appear plausible only if we assume an unreasonably strict conception of desire. Once we adopt a more suitable understanding of desire, the challenge can indeed be easily met.

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Recall the three reasons that proponents of desire-like imagination offer to suggest that the conative state at work in producing affective response cannot be a desire: (1) any such conative state would violate the normative constraints governing desire; (2) any such conative state would not motivate action in the way that desires normally do; and (3) there is no adequate way to understand the content of the conative states if they are genuine desires.

Building on an influential discussion by Richard Moran (1994) in which he suggests that we can have all sorts of emotional responses to nonactual situations, Amy Kind argues that we can also have all sorts of desires concerning nonactual situations:

We have all sorts of genuine desires about things that are not actual: desires about past events and existents, desires about future events and existents, desires about counterfactual events and existents, and so on. I might desire that I could introduce my children to their grandfather, who is no longer living; I might desire that my (not yet existing) grandchildren have healthy and happy lives; I might desire that a certain ballot proposition had been defeated in a recent election. In none of these cases is the reasonableness of the desire undercut by the fact that the object of the desire is non-actual.

(Kind 2011, 425)

In this way, Kind argues that the plausibility of (1) depends on a mistaken account of the normative constraints governing desire. By reminding ourselves of the many different sorts of cases in which we have desires about nonactual entities and events, “we can more easily see that our desires about fictional entities and events are not especially peculiar; they simply lie along the same continuum as our desires about the past, the future, and the counterfactual” (Kind 2011, 425).

Responding to (2), Kind (2011) argues that the proponent of desire-like imagination mistakenly supposes that there must be a very tight connection between desire and its motivational tendencies. In

actuality, however, there are cases (even if rare) in which desires are motivationally inert. The literature on desire contains a variety of examples: someone might want it to be a nice day (Marks 1984), someone heading to the airport to pick up her spouse might desire that his plane left on time (Mele 1995, 394), while someone else might desire that she had never been born, or that her parents had never met, or that a committee make a decision in her favor without her having to intervene (Schroeder 2004, 16–17). In none of these cases does the desire dispose the individual to any action. Another important consideration comes from Peter Carruthers, who has suggested that we don't act to stop fictional danger because "real desires will normally lead to real action only *when interacting with real beliefs*" (Carruthers 2006, 99). With respect to fictional danger, danger that has been imagined, we lack such real beliefs.

Finally, with respect to (3), opponents of i-desire might suggest that the relevant desire be about a fictional character – my desire that Charlotte survive is a desire that *the fictional character Charlotte* survive. Proponents of i-desires tend to dismiss this suggestion because they take it that having such a desire about the fictional character Charlotte "entails, or at the very least rationally requires, that one have the corresponding desire about the content of the fiction, since the only way for the fictional character to have the property that we desire [her] to have is for the content of the fiction to make it so" (Doggett and Egan 2007, 14). And as we have seen, a reader might desire that Charlotte survives without having this desire about the fiction.

In response, opponents of i-desire question the entailment. Such an entailment seems plausible only if one smuggles in a consistency requirement on desires. But given the frequency with which we all experience conflicting desires, it seems unlikely that we should accept such a consistency requirement. I might want to get some work done on Saturday and yet also want to spend the entire day with my children; I might want my elderly dog to live a long time and yet also want to put an end to his suffering. Thus, the reader of *Charlotte's Web* too might have

conflicting desires – she desires one thing about Charlotte and yet another thing about the fiction. As Kind notes, “part of what’s so hard about having desires is that we don’t get to satisfy them all” (Kind 2011, 429).

3.2 Pretense

How might we account for pretense if we eschew desire-like imagination? One particularly influential account owes to Nichols and Stich (2003). On their view, we can explain pretense behavior in terms of (i) a desire to pretend, i.e., a desire to behave similarly to how one would behave were an imagined situation to be actual; and (ii) beliefs about what the relevant behavior would be in an actual situation. So, for example, a child who wants to pretend that she is a dog calls upon her beliefs about doglike behavior and behaves “more or less” as she would if she were a dog (see 39). Proponents of desire-like imagination fault this picture for several reasons, but we will here focus on three.⁸

First, Doggett and Egan (2007; see also Velleman 2000) worry that a pretender need not have any beliefs about what she’s pretending to be. We can pretend to be undead even if we don’t have any beliefs about how the undead really behave, and a child who doesn’t know anything about cats might still pretend to be a cat. For many cases of pretending, however, this claim seems implausible. As Kind (2011, 433) notes, can someone pretend to be a vervet absent any beliefs about vervets? Perhaps the objection has more force with respect to the example of pretending to be undead. Here the pretender might really lack any beliefs about how the undead behave – rather, she calls upon her beliefs about the conventions for pretending to be undead. But this does not suggest that the Nichols-Stich schema for explaining pretense should be altogether discarded. Rather, it simply suggests that in some cases of pretense, slightly different belief-desire pairs might be operative.

The second objection often leveled against the Nichols-Stich schema – and one we encountered

⁸ See Funkhouser and Spaulding (2009) for a detailed rebuttal of a more comprehensive set of worries that might be raised by the proponent of desire-like imagination.

briefly in [Section 2.4](#) above – is that it requires pretenders to have the concept of pretense, a requirement that seems especially implausible when we consider that children begin to engage in pretend play at a very young age. Responding to this worry, Funkhouser and Spaulding argue that a proper understanding of the desire to pretend – as specified in (ii) above – requires only a behavioristic and not a mentalistic understanding of pretense: “Children have a behavioral understanding of pretense in that their desire to pretend that p is simply a desire to behave, loosely, as if p were the case” (Funkhouser and Spaulding 2009, 300; see also Nichols and Stich 2003).

Finally, recall Velleman’s worry that a belief-desire explanation of pretense requires us to see the child engaged in pretend play as “depressingly unchildlike.” The worry seems to be that, once we explain pretend behavior by postulating a motivation to pretend, we are forced to view the pretender as situated outside the pretend world. In response to this worry, both Funkhouser and Spaulding (2009) and Kind (2011) have argued that the relevant desire need not be a conscious one. Since the pretender need not be cognizant of her own motivations, she need not remain at a distance from what she is pretending. As Funkhouser and Spaulding also note, the fact that we distinguish pretend behavior from delusional behavior offers another reason in support of relying on a desire to pretend in explanations of the former (Funkhouser and Spaulding 2009, 301).

3.3 Other considerations

It is worth noting two more general considerations that have been raised as part of the case against desire-like imagination. The first is a phenomenological consideration. Typically, we can tell whether we are believing something or merely imagining it – we don’t mistake our belief-like imaginings for beliefs. But we don’t seem to have any way to tell whether we are desiring something or merely i-desiring it. Perhaps this should not bother the proponent of i-desires too much, i.e., perhaps it’s just the case that i-desiring feels phenomenologically just like desiring. But since we normally take ourselves to be having genuine

desires while, say, engaging with fiction, the postulation of desire-like imagination requires that we are systematically mistaken about our own mental states. (For further discussion, see [Kind 2011](#), 429–430.)

The second consideration concerns our evaluative practices. We typically hold one another accountable for the kinds of responses we have to fiction. We are horrified if someone is rooting for Charlotte to die or for Bilbo to be viciously attacked by Smaug. We also hold ourselves accountable in the same way. Given that I am not generally sympathetic to mafia members, I thus might be puzzled as to why I want Tony Soprano to escape capture by the police. We likewise often hold people responsible for actions that they take when they are engaged in games of pretend. We would likely find it disturbing if Mirabel were to smother her doll, or if Imani were repeatedly to cast the unforgiveable curses on her siblings. (See Aaron Smuts, “The Ethics of Imagination and Fantasy,” [Chapter 28](#) of this volume.) In making their case against i-desires, opponents have charged that such evaluative practices make little sense unless the conative states we are evaluating are instances of genuine desire. (See [Moran 1994](#) and [Kind 2011](#) for further discussion.)

4 The state of the debate

As we have seen, the debate about i-desires has tended to focus on their potential explanatory role in several specific imaginative contexts. That said, there are some more general considerations that can be brought to bear on the debate – considerations that, on the whole, cut both ways. First, proponents of i-desires might note an instability at the heart of their opponents’ position. In general, philosophers are more than willing to postulate an imaginative analogue of belief.⁹ But then why shouldn’t there be an imaginative analogue of desire? As [Liao and Doggett \(2014\)](#) put this point, there is a certain

⁹ One notable exception is [Langland-Hassan \(2012\)](#), who argues for a “single attitude” account of imagination according to which imagination is just a form of believing.

tension between being a “cognitive splitter” (someone who thinks that our cognitive states are split between belief and imagination) while also being a “conative lumpner” (someone who thinks that our conative states are lumped in a single category). Thus we might think that the burden of proof is on the opponent of i-desires to show why there should be an important disanalogy between the belief/imagination relationship and the desire/imagination relationship. As yet, the opponents of i-desires have failed to carry this burden.

On the other hand, opponents of i-desires might note a different instability that threatens the case for i-desires. Here the problem stems from the motivational role that i-desires are supposed to play. In some contexts – as with simulation and our engagement with fiction – i-desires are supposed to help explain why we don’t see the kind of action that we would expect were there a comparable desire in place. Consider the events that unfold in the second act of the musical *West Side Story* when Chino sets out to find Tony in order to avenge Bernardo’s death. Normally, if we were to see someone with a gun heading out to kill somebody else, and we were to desire that the targeted individual stay safe, we would do something – warn that individual, call the police, or even (if we felt particularly brave) try to stop the shooting ourselves. But the theatergoers, despite pulling for Tony’s safety and feeling distress about the unfolding action, don’t do any of this; rather, they just stay in their seats. The invocation of i-desires is supposed to provide us with a nice explanation of their passivity: since the theatergoers do not desire that Tony stay safe but only i-desire it, we can explain why they are not motivated to take action. A similar explanation is offered to explain why, when simulating someone who desires revenge, the person doing the simulating isn’t motivated to seek revenge herself. The mental states produced by the simulation are i-desires, and as such, they are blocked off from the action-generating system. As we have seen, however, there are other contexts such as pretense in which it is crucial to the explanatory power of i-desires that they not be

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blocked off in this way. We are supposed to be able to explain why Aadhya says “woof woof” and why Imani waves her tree branch in terms of their respective doglike and witchlike i-desires. In this context, it is critical that i-desires be connected to action. There is thus a tension at the core of the very concept of i-desire, a tension that proponents of desire-like imagining have so far not adequately addressed.

As noted above, the debate about desire-like imagination is still a relatively new one, and the next decade will likely bring increased attention to this issue. So how might we thus make progress in moving the conversation forward? Some have suggested that empirical research will help. There are various ways in which such research could be relevant. As we continue to achieve a better understanding of the neurological structures of the brain, this will undoubtedly prove relevant to the debate about cognitive architecture and, relatedly, to our understanding of the interactions between mental states and action. Alternatively, given the connections between counterfactual reasoning and imagining, further psychological research in this area could shed light on the role of imagining in both pretense and our engagement with fiction (see Liao and Gendler 2011, 90; see also Ruth M.J. Byrne “Imagination and Rationality,” [Chapter 25](#) of this volume). But in addition to the insights that we might gain from future empirical studies, it seems clear that there is also considerable philosophical work to do. In recent years, research in aesthetics has increasingly been brought into contact with research in philosophy of mind, and vice versa. Given that the debate about desire-like imagining is a wide-ranging one – concerning issues ranging from simulation to fiction to pretense – it will be important that such contact continue.

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