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# Imaginative resistance as imagistic resistance

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**ABSTRACT**
When we are invited to imagine an unacceptable moral proposition to be true in fiction, we feel resistance when we try to imagine it. Despite this, it is nonetheless possible to suppose that the proposition is true. In this paper, I argue that existing accounts of imaginative resistance are unable to explain why only attempts to imagine (rather than to suppose) the truth of moral propositions cause resistance. My suggestion is that imagination, unlike supposition, involves mental imagery and imaginative resistance arises when imagery that one has formed does not match unacceptable propositions.

## 1. Introduction

According to a popular platitude, imagination has no boundaries: while we are constrained in what we can perceive or believe, we are supposedly able to imagine anything we want. Like all platitudes, it calls for important qualifications, however. One notable, although disputed, exception to this is that we seem to be incapable of imagining logical impossibilities. Another putative limitation to the freedom of imagination shows itself in the phenomenon of imaginative resistance. This is most apparent in the case of moral propositions.[1] It seems that when we are invited to imagine a morally reprehensible proposition to be true or acceptable in fiction,[2] we feel resistance towards imagining it. This contrasts with many non-moral propositions which can be imagined even if they are clearly false or unacceptable in the actual world. Take Gendler's example:

> *Killing Babies (KB)*. In killing her baby, Giselda did a right thing; after all, it was a girl. (Gendler 2000, 62)[3]

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It seems that although we have no difficulty imagining Giselda killing her baby girl, we feel resistance when we try to imagine that she did a right thing. We have no difficulty imagining far-fetched scenarios which are depicted in fairy tales and fantasy literature, for instance, but if such a moral proposition is stated in a fiction, our imaginative endeavour is brought to a halt. In other words, such passages produce a pop-out effect (see Gendler 2006).

Take another example, this time from Weatherson:

> *Death on a Freeway (DF)*. When Craig saw that the cause of the bankup had been Jack and Jill, he took his gun out of the glovebox and shot them. People then started driving over their bodies, and while the new speed hump caused some people to slow down a bit, mostly traffic returned to its normal speed. So Craig did the right thing, because Jack and Jill should have taken their argument somewhere else where they wouldn't get in anyone's way. (Weatherson 2004, 1)

Again, although the scene is otherwise easily imaginable, it is the moral proposition expressed by the sentence 'Craig did the right thing' that causes resistance.

Imaginative resistance has received quite a bit of attention by philosophers working on philosophy of mind and aesthetics. The gist of the idea can be traced back to Hume's brief remarks in his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' (Hume 1965 [1757]) but it has been put into its modern form by Walton (1994) and Gendler (2000). Despite the attention, there is no consensus on how to characterise the phenomenon or how to explain it. For instance, while one may take the resistance to derive from a genuine inability to imagine certain propositions, some have taken it to involve only unwillingness (Gendler) or difficulty (Hume). In this paper I will explore the prospects of explaining imaginative resistance (IR) in terms of mental imagery setting constraints on what we are able to imagine. I will claim that imagination, as opposed to mere supposition, requires mental imagery and argue that IR arises due to the fact that, in certain contexts, mental images that we have formed of a fictional situation do not MATCH (a technical term that I will introduce in the paper) the proposition that we are supposed to imagine. By claiming this, I will side with those authors who take the IR to be about a genuine inability to imagine, not a mere unwillingness or difficulty.

I will proceed as follows. First, in Section 2, I will clarify what I mean by imaginative resistance and argue that we should draw a sharp distinction between engaged imagination and mere supposition, given that IR arises only when we are invited to imagine a proposition in an engaged manner, but not in the case of supposition. In Section 3, I will argue that the best way to make sense of the distinction between engaged imagination and supposition is to conceive of the first as requiring imagistic content which MATCHES the imagined proposition. I will use this idea to explain imaginative resistance in Section 4, and argue that imaginative failure derives from the fact that the mental imagery that we have formed does not MATCH the proposition that we are invited to imagine, and we thus fail to imagine such a proposition in an engaged manner. I will conclude the paper in Section 5 by comparing my account with others.

## 2. Clarifying the explanandum

What *kind* of imaginative failure are we talking about when we are talking about IR? I agree with Brian Weatherson that we should distinguish between alethic, phenomenological, imaginative and aesthetic puzzles (Weatherson 2004). The alethic puzzle is this: why cannot propositions like <Giselda did the right thing [by killing her baby]> (KB) and <Craig did the right thing [by shooting Jack and Jill]> (DF)) be true in fiction (assuming that they cannot be, of course)? It seems that the authority of authors with respect to what is true in fiction breaks down in the case of particular moral propositions.[4] The phenomenological puzzle is about explaining the feeling of resistance that we have when reading propositions like KB or DF. The imaginative puzzle concerns our inability to imagine that such propositions could be true. Finally, the aesthetic puzzle is about the question of why such propositions cause negative evaluation of the fictions in which they figure.

In this paper, I am primarily concerned with the imaginative puzzle, explanation of which should be psychological in nature, appealing to the limitations of our imaginative and representational capacities. Naturally, the answer to the imaginative puzzle should also say something in response to the phenomenological puzzle. It is plausible that the feeling of resistance arises from the fact that our psychological faculties face an obstacle to their normal functioning. It is unclear whether the solution to the imaginative puzzle has any implications for how to solve alethic or aesthetic puzzles, and I can be agnostic about this.

One might also ask what is it about resistance-causing propositions that makes them different from propositions that do not cause resistance. Thus far we have only considered two examples, KB and DF. Is there any common characteristic to propositions that cause IR? At this point I want to leave this question open and assume that we can fix the phenomenon of interest by simply pointing out paradigm cases. A claim that there are cases of IR seems to be less contentious than any characterization of the common core of propositions that cause it. For instance, while one could ask whether propositions that cause IR are such that we believe them to be false only in the actual world or such that we believe them to be necessarily false, I find it doubtful whether we can give a definite answer to this. What is more, since I want to leave open the possibility of moral anti-realism, I am not even sure if we should give an answer in the present context.

Having thus stated that the primary puzzle concerns the question of why we are unable to imagine propositions like KB and DF, a more basic question arises: what is this imagination we are talking about when we talk about IR? The first suggestion is that imagining that *p* is an activity that involves taking *p* to be true in fiction, or that it involves taking the situation represented by *p* to obtain in the story-world. An uncontroversial case of imagining could then include taking Sherlock Holmes to live on the Baker street when reading Conan

Doyle's stories, for instance. That being said, in the literature on IR and on imagination more generally, people distinguish between (engaged) imagination and supposition (Arcangeli 2014; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Doggett and Egan 2007). What both of these mental activities have in common is that they involve taking certain situations to obtain in non-actual world. There are differences, however, when it comes to IR. We can presumable consider any comprehensible proposition as true (i.e. suppose that it is true) in order to see what follows from it. Supposition cannot be the type of activity that is involved in causing IR, because we can suppose for the sake of the argument, for instance, that a proposition is true (Gendler 2006). There must be a thicker notion of imagination which seems to fail in the case of IR. This intuition has been expressed by Gendler by saying that when we imagine we participate in the imagined world (Gendler 2000, 80). Another way to put the difference between engaged imagination and supposition[5] is that while IR arises only during engaged reading of fiction, there is no problem with assuming the truth of moral propositions when we detach ourselves from the narrative (Stueber 2011, 161). Fleshing out the notion of engaged imagination has proven to be difficult, however.

It should be helpful to bring out characteristic features that make engaged imagination distinct from supposition. Weinberg and Meskin, for instance, bring out various markers for distinguishing between the two in our folk practice: (1) imagining allows for embellishment of its content, *p*, while supposing only follows the consequences of *p*; (2) the truth of almost any proposition can be supposed, but not imagined; (3) the typical epistemic role of supposing is in hypothetical and reductio arguments, while the main epistemic role of imagining is in demonstrations of possibility; (4) supposing is almost always used for epistemic purposes, while imaginings have various purposes (Weinberg and Meskin 2006, 193). They argue on the basis of this list that these markers point towards the fact that imagining and supposing are activities which involve different cognitive processes. For instance, imagining, unlike supposing, engages our affect systems and allows for open elaboration (195).

Alvin Goldman maps the distinction between imagination and supposition onto enactment- and supposition-imagination (E-imagination and S-imagination), respectively: while enactment-imagination recreates or enacts a selected mental state, supposition-imagination simply entertains the truth of a proposition for the sake of hypothetical reasoning (Goldman 2006, 47). Margherita Arcangeli brings out in addition that imagination, as opposed to supposition, is not entirely under our voluntary control (Arcangeli 2014, 615). Finally, Brian Weatherson distinguishes imaginings from supposings by taking the content of the first to be fine-grained and detailed. For instance, if we imagine chair in an engaged manner, we imagine a specific kind of chair, not simply a chair as such (Weatherson 2004, 20).[6]

From this brief overview we can already see that the question of what is the distinction between imaginings and supposings has not received a uniform

answer. It is not even clear whether imagining and supposings constitute two distinct types of mental activity. Weinberg and Meskin, for instance, are willing to admit that there are in-between cases (Weinberg and Meskin 2006, 197); while Goldman thinks that S-imagination can in principle be reduced to E-imagination (Goldman 2006, 48). This does not mean, however, that the distinction cannot be useful. In fact, in order to make sense of IR, we need such a distinction because, as already noted, we can suppose that propositions like KB and DF are true and do not face any resistance.

Imagining that we are seemingly unable to perform in the case of IR-causing propositions, then, is a mental activity which involves considering the situation described by KB and DF to obtain in the story-world in an engaged (not merely suppositional) manner. As a shared intuition, we can assume that imaginings, as supposed to supposings, are in an important sense participatory. From Weinberg and Meskin, we can take on board the relatively uncontentious features of that kind of imagining: it allows for embellishments on the imagined proposition and disposes us to affective responses. From Arcangeli, we can take the idea that supposings are more fully under our voluntary control. We can also agree with Weatherson that the content of imaginings is filled with detail.[7] Admittedly, this is quite vague. In the next section, I will argue how to flesh out the notion of engaged imagining more fully.

The question of IR in this paper is, then: why are we seemingly unable to imagine, as opposed to suppose, that in the world of the respective stories, Giselda and Craig did the right thing, while, in contrast, we do not have any difficulties of imagining that other things happened in the story (Giselda killing her baby, Craig killing Jack and Jill)? To put it in more general terms: why cannot we imagine the truth of some moral propositions (and possibly some other types) in story-worlds, while we do not have difficulty supposing the truth of even the most ridiculous non-moral propositions? To answer this question, we have to explain the difference between engaged imagination and mere supposition, and why one is conducive to IR while another is not.

## 3. Engaged imagination and mental imagery

Both engaged imaginings and supposings have been taken to be activities that relate agents to propositions: by imagining or supposing one assumes the truth of a proposition in a specific manner. Under this view, the difference between imagining and supposing seems to boil down to the difference in their functional role, not content, which can be the same for both. There is also an intuition, however, brought out by Weatherson, that imaginings are more fine-grained and detailed than supposings, and this seems to be a difference in content. In this section I am going to argue that this intuition about the difference in content allows us to explain the imagination-supposition distinction and the characteristic features that engaged imaginings are taken to have.

One way to think about the fine-grainedness of content is to use a perceptual analogy. It seems that there is a difference between merely thinking about something and actually perceiving it. The latter is more detailed than the first.[8] For instance, if I think that there is an apple under a tablecloth, I token a thought about the property of being an apple and that of being a tablecloth, but when I see, taste, touch and/or smell the apple, I am presented with an abundance of fine-grained properties, unlike the properties I was merely thinking about. As it is one thing to suppose that something is the case and another to genuinely imagine it, it is one thing to think about something and another to perceive it. Can we use this analogy to throw some light on the supposition-imagination distinction? I think we can, because there is an imaginative counterpart to perception, namely, mental imagery.

Mental imagery is the redeployment of our perceptual capacities endogenously, without a perceptual stimulus being present, in order to create mental images which have some of the characteristic properties that the corresponding percepts have (Kosslyn, Thompson, and Ganis 2006, 4). In other words, mental imagery is simulated perception.[9] It is noticeable that in their discussions of the difference between imagination and supposition, at least in the context of trying to explain IR, philosophers have generally ignored mental imagery. This is not surprising, given that the puzzle is about imagining the truth of certain propositions and the latter are taken to be non-sensory and non-perceptual. However, given that we take the content of engaged imaginings to be more fine-grained than that of supposings and that mental imagery mimics perception whose fineness of grain is uncontroversial, it might be promising to consider the possibility that mental imagery is required for such imaginings. But first we have to look more closely at similarities between perception and imagery to see how the second mimics the first.

So what are the similarities? Perception divides into various sensory modalities and so does imagery. We have visual imagery, for instance, which simulates visual perception, and we also have auditory, olfactory, gustatory and motor imagery, among others, which simulate corresponding perceptual modalities. Since visual imagery is the most well-researched area, I will focus on it. First, there are phenomenological similarities. Visualizing something, for instance, is taken by many to be seeing something 'in mind's eye'. There is more to the similarity than simply the metaphor, however, because we also have experimental evidence that in certain conditions, people are not able to discriminate between seeing and visualizing (Perky 1910; Segal 1972). Aside from phenomenology, there is also neuropsychological data which indicates similarities between seeing and visualizing. For instance, the visual cortex is topographically organised and shows similar pattern of activation both in the case of seeing shapes and visualizing them (Klein et al. 2004) so that the activation in the visual area mirrors the configuration of points in the external world (Kosslyn, Thompson, and Ganis 2006, 104). Visual imagery and visual perception also have similar processing

constraints. For instance, people face the oblique effect – the relative difficulty in visually processing oblique lines, as opposed to horizontal and vertical ones – both in the case of perceiving and imagining (Kosslyn, Sukel, and Bly 1999). There is thus quite a bit of evidence in support of the idea that the two are relevantly similar (see also O'Craven and Kanwisher 2000).

Most importantly for the present concerns, perception and mental imagery seem to share representational properties. It is plausible that properties that can be perceived within one sensory modality do not transcend those that can be imagined within the same type of sensory imagery. Given that imagery within one modality is about redeploying the perceptual capacities within that same modality, the representational scope of the first is constrained by the latter. Just as perception attributes various properties to the perceived scene, so does imagery attribute various properties to the imagined scene, and the types of properties that the first attributes is limited to those that are attributed by the latter (for further argument in support of this assumption, see Nanay 2015). It is true that we can imagistically imagine unicorns and other fantastic creatures which presumably cannot be perceived in reality, but the features from which these creatures are 'built up' have to be perceptible features such as shapes and colours.[10]

Coming now back to the distinction between supposition and engaged imagining, my suggestion is that the second can be distinguished from the first by the fact that engaged imagination requires mental imagery while supposition does not. Although both types of imagination are about accepting *p* in fiction, engaged imaginings also require mental imagery which is used to represent a fictional situation, thus endowing these imaginings with more fine-grained and detailed content than supposition. This way of drawing the distinction between supposition and engaged imagination should also capture our pretheoretical intuition that genuine imagining is participatory: there is a sensuous involvement with the imagined events which is lacking in the case of supposition (Gendler 2000, 80). Given that engaged imagination is more perception-like than supposition, we feel that we are experiencing the imagined happenings.

What do I exactly mean by engaged imagining *requiring* imagery? I draw here inspiration from a dual-component view of imagination, according to which our imaginings combine assigned and qualitative content (Kung 2010; see also Langland-Hassan 2015). Qualitative content is provided by a mental image which is a proper part of the imagining. According to Kung, assigned content is the conceptual component of the imagining which consists of labels and stipulations. Labels identify particular objects and stipulations are propositional contents which provide more information about the imagined situation than the image can (Kung 2010, 625). The need for non-image content to specify the content of sensory imaginings was already noted by Christopher Peacocke: in order to distinguish between imagining a suitcase and imagining

a cat behind the suitcase, the image itself is not sufficient (Peacocke 1985, 19). Since the content of mental images is limited by what can be perceived in an imagined world, one usually needs assigned content to disambiguate what is represented by the image. On the present picture, I take assigned content to be what is contributed by the suppositional component of engaged imaginings.

It should be noted that the dual-component view is intended simply as a theory of imagination, not as an account of how to distinguish engaged imagination from supposition. I do not think that this creates any problem for the present use of it though. Instead, the present application should show an additional theoretical use for the dual-component account. What may seem more problematic for my account is that Kung actually distinguishes stipulation from supposition by claiming that the first is subject to imaginative resistance because we are not able to stipulate the truth of propositions the falsity of which we find certain (Kung 2010, 629). He does not really explain, however, why stipulations are like that and suppositions are not. Since he does not have a substantive explanation of why stipulations are constrained by certainty while suppositions are not, there is no strong reason to draw a strict distinction between them.

Given that assigned content and qualitative content are of different formats, how do they exactly combine together in an act of engaged imagining? Saying that the image is a proper part of such imagining might not satisfy everyone as a sufficient explanation. Here is my proposal. Let's begin with the idea that a mental image (with qualitative content) presents us with an array of spatiotemporally ordered sensible properties, ranging across different modalities (see Matthen 2014). Images can also be dynamic and represent an imagined perceptual scene unfolding in time (Gauker 2011, 159). I leave it open whether the qualitative content also presents us with particular objects or whether it is up to the assigned content also to identify objects on the basis of sensible properties. Moving now to the heart of the matter, when we imagine the truth of a proposition in an engaged manner, we also imagine a fine-grained sensory array or various arrays that are meant to correspond to how the state of affairs represented by the proposition would appear to us. For instance, if I am invited to imagine that there will be a war tomorrow, I suppose the truth of the respective proposition, but if I am to imagine it in an engaged manner, I also form mental images of perceivable properties which would correspond to the appearance of tanks crossing the border and/or to the president making an announcement. Such images provide much more detail to the rather general proposition, but the suppositional element is still needed to specify what is happening.[11] The supposition that there will be war tomorrow allows us to form images of various events that would be unfolding if that supposition were true and the supposition together with these images constitutes an activity of engaged imagining.

Here I introduce a new term, 'MATCHING', to characterise such a process of image-formation. An image MATCHES a supposed proposition if it represents a

situation which is taken to obtain when the proposition were true. MATCHING is necessary for an act of engaged imagining to take place because image-formation has to respect the truth of the supposed proposition, relative to the imagined world. After all, mental images function to give more fine-grained content to the supposed proposition and in doing that they should be consistent with (i.e. MATCH) the proposition. In addition, without MATCHING, there would be no unitary act of engaged imagining but simply an act of supposition and a separate process of generating mental imagery which develops independently of that act. An implication of this is that an agent cannot pick whichever image she likes to MATCH with a proposition: if an image does not represent anything that could appear to be the case if the imagined proposition were true, it cannot be MATCHED with the proposition.

The postulation of MATCHING-relation, then, implies that there are constraints that the exercise of engaged imagination puts on an agent. When imagining something, one cannot just arbitrarily associate *any* imagistic content with a supposition. Somewhat speculatively, there is also a functional consideration why engaged imaginings have such constraints. It is plausible that imagination is used to construct at least somewhat realistic future scenarios that could be taken into account in one's decision-making. If the imagistic content that is generated during engaged imagination is not constrained, then the imagined scene may unfold in completely unrealistic ways. But when imagery has to MATCH the supposed proposition, an agent can rely on the imagining to learn about the ways in which things could turn out to be. Engaged imagination, in order to be geared towards action, should have at least some constraints for it to do its work.[12]

But what is the source of such constraints? What makes it the case that certain kinds of imagistic contents MATCH certain kinds of propositions and others do not? My proposal is that the application of concepts that the supposed propositions consist of is grounded in paradigmatic perceptual situations to which they are taken to apply. An imagistic content MATCHES a supposed proposition only if it is *not too distant* from paradigm situations that ground the concepts which make up the proposition in question.[13]

By assuming the perceptual grounding of the relevant concepts I am not committed to empiricism about concepts which identifies concepts with a kind of perceptual representation (Barsalou 1999; Prinz 2002). I am only appealing to the less contentious, although still controversial, idea that the application of our commonsense concepts is governed by associations with certain perceptual paradigms. In engaged imagination these associations continue playing their role by excluding perceptual scenarios which are too distant from the paradigms that are associated with the employed concept. If there is such an exclusion, there is no MATCH. Thus, although the application of concepts in imagination is more free than in belief and judgment, images that can MATCH the supposed proposition cannot be picked entirely arbitrarily.

Plausibly, the relevance of perceptual paradigms for concept application extends also to moral concepts, which are the main focus of this essay. I am here suggesting a view according to which moral judgments are a form of pattern-recognition, made possible by the encounter with moral examples which constitute paradigm situations (Sterelny 2010, 287; 2012, 162). If our ability to make moral judgments has developed by exposure to paradigm cases, then it is reasonable to assume the similarity to those cases determines the correctness-conditions of applying the moral concepts. Also in the context of imagining where imagistic content is involved, the imaginative process is still controlled by the similarity of imagistically represented situations to paradigm cases, associated with the concept that is applied. If an imagistic content represents a situation which is too distant from the paradigm cases, then the moral concept is not taken to be applicable even in imagination. The relevance of this for IR will become apparent in the next section.

The term 'MATCHING' might be somewhat misleading, however, because I do not mean to imply that an image always *accurately* represents what would be the case when the respective supposition were true. It suffices for MATCHING when an image *seems* for the imaginer, given the paradigms that she associates with a concept, to represent a situation that corresponds to the truth of a supposed proposition, even if the image is not accurate. In fact, there are numerous and varied ways in which a proposition can have MATCHING imagery, depending, among other things, on a person and her idiosyncrasies. A failure to MATCH imagery with supposed propositions, i.e. a failure to imagine in an engaged manner, should thus be relatively rare because it only occurs when a supposition that $p$ and generated imagistic content exclude one another.

The proposed view can explain the features of engaged imaginings which are taken to be characteristic to them. We have already noted how the involvement of mental imagery explains the intuition about the detailed content of engaged imaginings: the content of mental images replicates the fine-grained content of respective perceptual representations. There are other aspects of engaged imagining that the present view explains. First, it explains why engaged imaginings are open to free elaboration. Since sensory imagery is rich in content, it allows for further descriptions, not merely a limited set of inferences that can be drawn from a proposition. Take the example of imagining war taking place tomorrow: the formation of mental images to represent the situation unfolding is an open-ended process, only constrained by MATCHING, and these images can provide fodder for further propositional assumptions about what would happen in the case of war. Second, it makes it explicit why imaginings, as opposed to suppositions, are affectively more engaging. It is plausible that imagistic imagination can cause emotions automatically, without any cognitive mediation (LeDoux 1996). The mental imagery which is generated in the course of engaged imagining that $p$ can thus automatically bring about affective responses and this is why imagination feels much more affect-laden than supposition. Third, the

dual-component view explains why engaged imaginings are not fully under our voluntary control: MATCH between an imagistic content and a supposed proposition is not something that the agent can simply decide. Fourth, the present view helps to make sense of the idea that engaged imaginings are a form of recreative perspective taking: by forming MATCHING images we are recreating experiences of what it would be like if supposed propositions were true. Finally, the present view enables us to understand why we can suppose the truth of almost any proposition, but why we cannot always imagine it. The representational limits of engaged imagination are the limits of the ability to find MATCHING mental images for supposed propositions. In the next section, I will elaborate on this and argue that imaginative resistance can be at least partially explained in terms of those limits.

## 4. Moral propositions and imagery

Given that engaged imagination requires mental imagery, what problems do moral propositions pose for our attempt to image them in an engaged manner? In this section, I will consider two possible explanations of IR. The first relies on the idea that moral propositions cannot be imagined in an engaged manner at all, thus creating IR. The second takes IR to generalise to those moral propositions which do not stand in a MATCHING-relation to already formed mental images. I will reject the first proposal and defend the second explanation, but a consideration of the faults of the first can show why we should accept the second.

The first suggestion is that moral propositions cannot be imagined in an engaged manner because *no* image can represent moral properties. Take KB again and consider the phenomenology of imagining the scene that is depicted there. Having read that Giselda killed her baby I (unfortunately) form a visual image of a woman killing a baby, possibly accompanied by imagery of other sensory modalities. However, when I read that she did a right thing, I face an obstacle and I am not able to continue the process of image-formation because I cannot form a mental image that depicts the moral property.

Why would one think that it is not possible to form an image of a moral property? One suggestion could be that since mental imagery inherits its representational scope from respective perceptual modalities and moral properties are not perceivable, they are not imagistically representable either. It does not matter for our purposes where the line between perceivable and non-perceivable properties exactly runs. It sufficed if one could show that moral properties are not suitable for being imagistically represented.

The fatal problem for this explanation is that it overgenerates. It implies that *any* fictional description which attributes imperceivable properties should face IR. For instance, since it is doubtful that we have immediate sensory access to certain types of mental property, this explanation seems to have the consequence

that IR arises also when we try to imagine propositions in which mental states are ascribed to persons.[14] Yet it seems that we usually do not feel any resistance when we're invited to imagine someone believing, wanting or feeling something. The representational scope of engaged imaginings is broader than the present explanation of IR suggests. A satisfactory account of IR should allow for moral propositions to be imaginable in certain contexts and explain why IR is limited to moral propositions with particular contents.

So how is engaged imagining of properties that cannot be perceived possible? Let us consider mental properties first. We can treat observable behaviour as *expressive* or *indicative* of a mental property: although no image is formed which represents the mental property directly, it is sufficient to imagine corresponding behaviour, as long as the imagined behaviour is sensitive to changes in mental properties, i.e. as long as it MATCHES them. We can speculate that the suppositional aspect of an engaged imagining specifies what mental properties are to be (non-imagistically) imagined, while mental imagery depicts behaviour which is not too distant from the behaviours that are associated with the mental properties in question. Although no mental state is imagistically represented, images of behaviour still MATCH the supposed mental properties and there is no resistance. We can imagine propositions about mental properties in an engaged way *by* imagistically imagining the corresponding behaviour.[15]

If propositions about mental properties can be imagined in an engaged manner by MATCHING images of behaviour with them, the same can be done with moral propositions. There are surely paradigmatic actions which are performed in situations where the properties of rightness and wrongness are applicable and these actions can be imagistically represented. As long as an imagistic content is not too distant from such paradigmatic actions associated with a concept, it can MATCH the proposition involving that concept. When incorporated to the act of engaged imagining it should be possible to imagine the truth of most propositions in an engaged manner, as long as there is a MATCH between mental imagery and the proposition imagined.

These observations allow us to reach the second, more promising explanation of IR. We should accept that we can imagine propositions about moral properties and non-perceivable properties in general by MATCHING imagistic representations with such propositions. This does not mean, however, that this process does not have its limits. There are still cases when MATCHING fails. This happens when we are invited to imagine the truth of a proposition but the mental imagery that we have formed does not MATCH the proposition in question. My second proposal, then, is that we cannot genuinely imagine a truth of some propositions because in the context in which such propositions are presented, the mental images that we have formed do not MATCH them. From this imaginative resistance follows. Although the representational scope of engaged imaginings is impressive, in certain cases we are still unable to MATCH our mental images with the imagined proposition. Invitations to imagine unacceptable

moral propositions present us with such cases. If one grants that the property of rightness has a sensory profile, a scene of killing a baby (KB) or of a sudden shooting of an arguing couple (DF) are excluded from it, at least for most of us. One thus fails to imagine the truth of resistance-causing propositions in an engaged manner due to the imagery not MATCHING it. On the other hand, since one can easily MATCH scenes of killing babies and shooting people with propositions which attribute wrongness to these actions, there is no resistance in the case of imagining such propositions.

I call this proposal of how to explain IR 'the MATCHING Hypothesis'. To put it bluntly, according to the MATCHING Hypothesis, the resistance derives from our inability to MATCH our mental imagery with some moral propositions. Unlike the first proposal, the second explanation does not assume that moral properties cannot be genuinely imagined: although they are not strictly speaking imagistically representable, they can be imagined by combining suppositional content with imagistic content. This combination fails, however, when we are invited to imagine the instantiation of moral properties in situations where imagistic content does not MATCH the assumption that such properties are instantiated.

By saying that we are not able to do this, I am relying on the idea, articulated in the previous section, that our use of moral concepts is based on paradigmatic actions and situations to which we take these concepts to apply. If moral judgments require the ability to recognise paradigmatic sensuous patterns to which moral concepts apply, it is also plausible to think that such patterns are also relevant during moral imaginings. There are certain actions and situations which are too distant from those paradigms, and the cases that cause IR involve imagining exactly such actions and situations. This generalises to propositions involving thicker moral concepts. Try to imagine, for instance, the following cases:

(1) By running away from battle, Nick did a brave thing.
(2) By screaming loudly in public, Sarah acted modestly.
(3) By slaughtering the peasants, the king acted mercifully.
(4) By peeing on the church wall, Michael acted piously.

In all these cases, something akin to IR seems to arise when we are invited to imagine these situations. The MATCHING Hypothesis explains the resistance by pointing out that the actions in question do not have an appearance which could MATCH the virtue-attributing propositions in question. Note that these cases do not present us with conceptual or metaphysical impossibilities: running away from battle could in some conditions be a brave thing, for instance. However, running away from battle is far from paradigmatic exemplars of brave action, and an image of it does not MATCH the proposition that Nick did a brave thing. It is important to point this out because one might raise a concern that the MATCHING Hypothesis actually boils down to an idea that IR arises from our inability to imagine conceptual or metaphysical impossibilities. This concern is

not justified because the MATCHING Hypothesis claims IR to be about a lack of fit between sensory representations and suppositions in certain imagined situations, whether such situations are taken to be impossible or not.

By looking at the examples (1)–(4) alongside with KB and DF we can also flesh out what it means for an imagistic content to be too distant from paradigmatic cases associated with a concept, i.e. for imagistic and assigned contents to exclude one another. Concepts of rightness, bravery, modesty, mercifulness and piety are not acquired in isolation but together with concepts of wrongness, cowardice, immodesty, mercilessness and impiety, which are associated with their own paradigmatic situations. The paradigms associated with a concept and its opposite, however, are mutually exclusive. An imagistic content is too distant from paradigmatic situations associated with a concept if it is more similar to the paradigms associated with its opposite. For instance, in the case of KB, one has to MATCH the assigned content that Giselda did the right thing with an imagistic content that is paradigmatic of the concept of moral wrongness instead of rightness. And in the case of (1), what one imagistically represents is closer to the paradigms of cowardice than those of bravery.[16]

Can the MATCHING Hypothesis also explain our resistance to imagining certain non-moral propositions? Some have taken IR to extend to aesthetic and epistemic evaluations, attributions of mental states and attributions of content, shape-ascribing propositions, ontological claims, etc. (Weatherson 2004) If IR is such a general phenomenon, one might think that not all cases are amenable to the MATCHING Hypothesis and that I have been cherry-picking my examples.

There are examples which it handles well. For instance, an attempt to imagine a story of people taking a maple leaf to be of oval shape (Yablo 2002, 485) causes resistance because an image of one holding a maple leaf does not MATCH the proposition that one has found something that is of oval shape. The same can be said about the story of *Quixotic Victory*, for instance, in which a television and an armchair are said to have appearances of a knife and a fork (Weatherson 2004, 5). There are other examples, however, which are seemingly more problematic. Take, for instance, an invitation to imagine that a knock-knock joke is hilariously funny, which also seems to cause resistance and puzzlement (Walton 1994, 43f). Does the puzzlement really come from our inability to MATCH an image of a knock-knock joke with a supposition that the joke is funny?

I think that it is not at all ridiculous to assume that funniness has a paradigmatic perceptual shape: for instance, it may include one having internal sensations when one is amused and which are associated with funniness. One could then argue that if I imagine a knock-knock joke being told, then the imagistic content I have formed of hearing a knock-knock joke does not MATCH the supposition that the joke is funny. It does not MATCH it because the concept of being funny is associated with the imagery of feeling amused but imagining hearing a knock-knock joke fails to involve anything like it. If anything, the imagistic content which I form involves feelings of annoyance which are too

distant from the paradigms of funniness. Although I may be able to imagine others having the sensations, I cannot imagine *myself* having them and thus I cannot apply the concept of being funny even in my imagination. This should apply to most of us who have been exposed to other, presumably more sophisticated types of humour. On the other hand, a person who tends to feel amused when exposed to simple and repetitive humour might be able to imagine that a knock-knock joke is hilariously funny. For her, hearing a knock-knock joke is close enough to, or perhaps even paradigmatic of, situations which she associates with funniness.

There is probably an indefinite amount of possible counterexamples to the MATCHING Hypothesis which I have not considered. Given that it is an empirical hypothesis, which relies on the dual-component account of imagination and on the view that concept-application is basically a form of pattern-recognition, it is also vulnerable to empirical disproof. The defense of these two assumptions will have to wait for another occasion, however. I hope that my current efforts suffice to give to the MATCHING Hypothesis at least some plausibility. Before concluding this paper, I will consider two other theories of IR, which I take to be the most promising ones in the literature, and see how they compare with the MATCHING Hypothesis.

## 5. Comparisons

### 5.1. Dependency-based explanation

Some authors have argued that metaphysical dependency relations between moral properties and more basic properties obtain also in fictional worlds and authors cannot arbitrarily change those relations. The resistance arises from the fact that the reader takes the fiction to present higher-level facts in a way that they cannot obtain, given the lower-level facts. This idea can be expressed in terms of supervenience: moral properties are supposed to supervene on certain lower-level properties, so that if the facts involving the latter are specified then moral facts are also fixed. Kendall Walton, for instance, has suggested that we resist imagining propositions which violate accepted supervenience relations (Walton 1994, 44). Such an account also explains why we face similar resistance in the case of imagining many non-moral propositions which do not respect the appropriate supervenience relations: according to Walton, these relations also determine other higher-level facts such as facts about what is funny or what is graceful or elegant (45).

Walton's quite tentative suggestion has been developed further by Brian Weatherson. He does not think of the dependency of higher-level facts on lower-level facts in terms of supervenience, however. Instead, Weatherson takes the relevant dependency-relation to be what he calls *Virtue*:

> If *p* is the kind of claim that, if true, must be true in virtue of lower-level facts, and if the story is about those lower-level facts, then it must be true in the story that

there is some true proposition *r* which is about those lower-level facts such that *p* is true in virtue of *r*. (Weatherson 2004, 18)

Weatherson does not provide much information as to what *Virtue* involves but takes it to be an intuitive notion. It does seem plausible that actions are not morally right in virtue of being acts of killing babies or murdering others for insignificant reasons. As with Walton, Weatherson also thinks that resistance that can be explained in terms of *Virtue* arises in the case of propositions other than moral ones.

One could ask if the MATCHING Hypothesis is not simply a version of a dependency-based explanation, à la Walton and Weatherson? The reasoning behind this could go as follows. I have been relying on the idea that in some situations, images that we form do not MATCH imagined propositions. What determines the limits of what images we can MATCH with supposed propositions? One might argue that the limits are determined by the relevant supervenience- or *Virtue*-principles. For instance, perhaps the reason why I cannot MATCH an image of killing a baby with the proposition that Giselda did the right thing is that I do not take the property of rightness to supervene on that of killing babies. If that were the case, my 'imagistic' explanation of IR would basically boil down to the dependency-based explanation. At least the latter would provide a deeper explanation of why we feel resistance.

However, I already pointed out above that it is plausible – although certainly open to further scrutiny – that our moral thinking and concept-application in general is not solely based on principles, but relies on paradigmatic perceptual situations as well (see again Sterelny 2010, 2012). Thinking of an action as being right or wrong does not require one to follow a *Virtue*- or supervenience-principle about the relation between higher-and lower-order properties, not even implicitly. One can bypass this by considering how similar the action is to paradigmatic types of action which we consider to be right.[17] If it is sufficiently similar, the concept of rightness can be taken to apply to the action in question. This is not to say that we never rely on principles in our moral judgments. However, given that following a principle is not necessary for judging something to be right or wrong, the dependency-based explanation cannot account for all the cases that the MATCHING Hypothesis can explain. The second cannot be reduced to the first.

In addition, the dependency-based explanation has a limitation which the MATCHING Hypothesis does not have: it is not clear how Weatherson or Walton can explain why IR arises only in the case of engaged imagining and not in the case of supposing. Why does imagining that *p* have to respect the *Virtue*-relation between lower- and higher-level properties while supposing that *p* does not? As noted above, this distinction, although murky, has to be assumed in order to distinguish between cases in which taking *p* to be true in a fictional context causes IR and cases in which it does not.

Weatherson is actually mindful of the distinction between imaginings and supposings. As I have already noted in Section 2, he has suggested in a footnote

that imagination, as opposed to supposition, must be fine-grained. By this he means that imaginings have to be significantly detailed (Weatherson 2004, 20). Given this distinction, an explanation of why imaginings, unlike supposings, can cause resistance could go as follows. Since imaginings are filled in with detail, they also represent quite specific lower-level properties. In cases like KB and DF we are are asked to imagine protagonists doing the right thing in a particular way. What Giselda and Craig did, however, are not particular ways in which people can do a right thing, hence IR. In the case of supposition, however, we do not have to suppose a particular way in which the property of rightness is to be entertained, so that no incompatible lower-level property will be invoked.

If this is the envisioned explanation, the MATCHING Hypothesis actually does something similar, because by MATCHING imagined propositions with mental imagery, we are also imagining the truth of those propositions in a particular way. Unlike the dependency-based explanation, however, the MATCHING Hypothesis explains why engaged imaginings, unlike supposings, have fine-grained content in terms of MATCHING and mental imagery. It thus has explanatory depth which the dependency-based approach lacks.

As another advantage, the MATCHING Hypothesis does not assume that a sense of one set of properties being incompatible with another set suffices to create IR. The dependency-based explanation seems to be committed to this assumption. This is a problem because also in suppositional contexts we are able to recognise incompatibilities between properties. If we could not, conducting reductio arguments would be impossible, for instance. But in such contexts, there is no IR. The MATCHING Hypothesis does not face this problem because it confines IR to cases where there is a failure of MATCHING.

Finally, although the dependency-based approach might be in a good position to explain the alethic puzzle, this does not imply that it can also explain the imaginative puzzle. It is not clear that imaginative and alethic puzzle are so tightly related. Limits to my imagination are not identical with the limits to what can be true in fiction. To be fair to Weatherson, the alethic puzzle is actually his main concern in the 2004 paper and he does not think that the facts about *Virtue* are sufficient to explain the imaginative puzzle. As I indicated above, the solution to the imaginative puzzle should be psychological in nature. The MATCHING Hypothesis provides such a solution, while Weatherson appeals to metaphysical relations between properties.

In the next section, I will consider one more approach to IR and see how it compares with the MATCHING Hypothesis.

## 5.2. Contextualism about IR

There are some philosophers who have taken IR to derive from the awkwardness of the examples which have been used to illustrate it. Kathleen Stock has argued that the problem with cases like KB is that we are not offered enough context to

make the proposition even comprehensible, and that explains why we cannot imagine it. If we added, for instance, that in the society were Giselda lives, the life of a female is so horrible that it is better not to be born, the rightness of Giselda's action might become intelligible, and we can then imagine it: we might be able to take it to be true that in such a world Giselda did the right thing. The problem with IR, then, is that the propositions we are invited to imagine are simply incomprehensible to us without any further context, not that there is something intrinsically unimaginable about them (Stock 2005). So, in a sense, Stock agrees that trying to imagine IR-causing propositions involves a genuine inability, but her point is that this inability depends on the fact that the context for these propositions, which is required to understand them, is underdescribed in the narrative. By the term 'context', Stock does not seem to have in mind the technical notion of context from philosophy of language, but something more loose. It is the surrounding narrative (other propositions) that is missing in the case of propositions which cause IR, according to Stock.

Cain Todd has presented similar concerns by suggesting that perhaps IR is a philosophers' invention which is due to a narrow focus on sentences divorced from the context (Todd 2009, 191). What he adds to Stock's objections is that the comprehensibility of a proposition that we are invited to imagine depends on our background commitments. He notes, for instance, that the seeming inability to imagine could arise for those with realist moral commitments who are not able to comprehend propositions like KB and DF, while those of an expressivist or anti-realist bent might find those propositions imaginable (197). If that were true, the failure to imagine such propositions would only be a contingent failure (Stock 2005, 619). For a lack of a better word, I call both Stock's and Todd's explanations 'contextualist'.

There is something to agree with the contextualist accounts overall. They teach us that the limits of IR are actually much more flexible than many philosophers might think. The MATCHING Hypothesis also allows for individual differences (something that is stressed by Todd) with respect to receptiveness to IR, given that some people may be able MATCH their imagery with morally problematic propositions more easily or be more inclined to take the suppositional stance towards an imagined proposition.

However, the MATCHING Hypothesis has certain advantages over the contextualist proposal by explaining features of IR with which contextualism has difficulties. The first problem for contextualists is that they do not fully capture the phenomenology of imaginative resistance. Although I consider myself both intuitively and reflectively to be very sympathetic towards non-realism, as Todd describes it, I still feel resistance when invited to imagine propositions like KB and DF with or without a context. Especially in the case of DF, there is a clear contrast between the moral proposition about Craig doing the right thing and the rest of the narrative: while one can easily follow the flow of unravelling events and imagine the overall scene, the moral proposition brings the imaginative

process to a halt. There is something right about the idea that such propositions produce a pop-out effect, then, as Gendler claims, and it does not go away simply by adding more descriptive content to the story. Doing the latter can sometimes make the moral proposition even more salient and awkward.

There is an additional problem for contextualism. If contextualists were right, the problem of IR would basically be a problem of comprehension: the idea would be that we cannot fully comprehend a proposition without further context. It is highly plausible, however, that in order to suppose that a proposition is true, one has to be in a position to comprehend the proposition, i.e. to understand its truth-conditions. Also disagreement with the claim that Giselda did the right thing – and I presume that people tend to disagree with it – seems to presuppose an understanding of that claim. Otherwise one would not be able to follow its implications and the suppositional act would lose its point. Given that the supposition of propositions like KB and DF is possible, so should they be comprehensible, *pace* contextualists. If that is the case, the contextualist needs to claim that in the case of genuine imagining resistance-causing propositions somehow lose their intelligibility which they had when their truth was supposed. Such a claim lacks proper motivation and sounds ad hoc. The MATCHING Hypothesis, on the other hand, does not assume that the propositions that cause IR are incomprehensible, thus avoiding this particular challenge that contextualists face.

## 6. Conclusion

Mental imagery pervades our imaginative engagements with fiction. It should not be surprising, then, that such engagements have their limitations. If we are to imagine a proposition being true in an engaged manner, we need to have mental images which would fill in the details of the imagined situation. The cases which cause imaginative resistance are those in which the images we have formed do not MATCH all the propositions that we are invited to imagine. Imaginative resistance is a form of imagistic resistance.

## Notes

1. In this paper I will leave it open whether the putative inability to imagine logical impossibilities is the same phenomenon as imaginative resistance.
2. Since I want to leave open the possibility that moral anti-realism is true, imagining a moral proposition may either involve taking that proposition to be true in fiction or just accepting it in fiction. The second allows for the possibility that moral propositions lack truth values (i.e. anti-realism). For brevity's sake, I will use the first, realist reading throughout the paper, but one should keep in mind that I am open to the second.
3. The example is originally from Walton (1994). Here it is presented in an abbreviated form.
4. For a classic account of truth in fiction, see Lewis (1978).

5. Since I take supposition to be a type of imagination, it is a bit confusing to say that supposings should be distinguished from imaginings. That is why I sometimes use the term 'engaged imagination' to make the distinction explicit.

6. Currie and Ravenscroft have proposed that, unlike mere supposition, imagination involves also desire-like imaginings (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, 34). I only mention their account but will not address it in this paper because I think that the hopelessness of this approach with regard to explaining imaginative resistance has already been proven by Stock (2005, 611).

7. As for Goldman's distinction between S-imagination and E-imagination, I do not think that it adds much to addressing the present question about IR. The idea seems to imply that imagining that p is in some sense belief-like. But notice that supposing is also belief-like: when it comes to interacting with our ordinary inferential mechanisms, imagination and supposition do not behave differently: both are well-integrated with the ordinary inferences we make. One could, of course, say that imagining is *especially* belief-like because it also is integrated with our affect systems and allows for free elaboration but notice that the latter features distinguish imagining from supposing independently of the distinction between E-imagination and S-imagination.

8. The case for this difference can be made independently of whether perception has non-conceptual content.

9. This coheres with Goldman's notion of enactment-imagining according to which perceptual states of different modalities are recreated or enacted.

10. There are also certain gray areas between in which case it is unclear whether a capacity is perceptual or non-perceptual, and thus it is unclear whether there is also an imagistic counterpart to the capacity in question. These include the ability to discriminate analog magnitudes (Carey 2009), identify causes (Scholl and Tremoulet 2000) and recognise emotions (Kanwisher, McDermott, and Chun 1997). See also Shea (2014). I leave it here open whether these abilities have their imaginative counterparts.

11. Keep in mind that the present view of engaged imaginings is not committed to the idea that mental images individuate the content of imaginings. It only assumes that engaged imaginings essentially involve images (cf. Kind 2001).

12. Compare this with the claim that, in order to be used for decision-making, imagination must be reality-oriented (Williamson 2016, 114).

13. The treshold for being too distant is to be determined by empirical investigation.

14. It is not obvious that mental properties are not sensorily accessible. Whether or not mental properties are observable is still an open question. For instance, one could argue that actually mental properties are immediately perceivable and the contrary intuition is simply theory-laden prejudice (see Gallagher 2008). Or, one could adopt a version simulationism and claim that the attribution of mental states, also in fictional contexts, involves simulating others' mental states, in which case the attribution may require (quasi-)perceptual access to those states which mediate the simulation process (see Goldman 2006). That being said, this perceptual approach still does not seem to apply to propositional attitudes, whose connection with observable behaviour is tenuous.

15. A perhaps surprising implication of this is that imagining a paradigmatically unobservable mental state, such as belief, is easier than imagining a state which is more closely associated with observable behaviours, such as fear or joy. For the first, having an image of almost any kind of behaviour will provide a MATCH because, arguably, having a belief is consistent with almost any kind of behaviour. For the second, there are paradigmatic expressive behaviours associated with

the mental state in question, considerably constraining the range of MATCHING images.

16. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.

17. Since the similarity which is being evaluated here is similarity between images, one might ask whether images are in fact comparable in terms of their similarities. For a proposal of how to do this, see Gauker (2011, Ch. 6).

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## Notes on Contributor

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