

PUZZLING OVER IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Michael Licciardi: Puzzling over Imaginative Resistance
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On one way of understanding things, philosophical puzzles are divisible into three broad classes. The first class are easy to understand, but difficult to solve. The second class are difficult to understand, but coming to understand them places us far down the path of solving them. The third class are difficult to understand, and, even once understood, difficult to solve. The puzzle that this essay will be concerned with falls into the last of these classes. Tamar Gendler calls this puzzle the “puzzle of imaginative resistance.” This essay will be aimed at understanding the puzzle, and at making some progress towards solving it. The second of these aims will largely involve evaluating Gendler’s treatment of the puzzle, and attempting to draw some lessons from that evaluation. Gendler’s first and most direct treatment of the puzzle can be found in her essay, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance.” That essay has three primary aims: i) to characterize the puzzle of imaginative resistance, ii) to argue that one natural solution to the puzzle is unsuccessful, and iii) to present her own solution to the puzzle. In what follows, I will be arguing that Gendler does not quite achieve her second and third aims.

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1 Introduction

On one way of understanding things, philosophical puzzles are divisible into three broad classes. The first class are easy to understand, but difficult to solve.¹ The second class are difficult to understand, but coming to understand them places us far down the path of solving them.² The third class are difficult to understand, and, even once understood, difficult to solve.³ The puzzle that this essay will be concerned with falls into the last of these classes. Tamar Gendler calls this puzzle the “puzzle of imaginative resistance.” This essay will be aimed at understanding the puzzle, and at making some progress towards solving it. The second of these aims will largely involve evaluating Gendler’s treatment of the puzzle, and attempting to draw some lessons from that evaluation. Gendler’s first and most direct treatment of the puzzle can be found in her essay, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance.”⁴ That essay has three primary aims: i) to characterize the puzzle of imaginative resistance, ii) to argue that one natural solution to the puzzle is unsuccessful, and iii) to present her own solution to the puzzle. In what follows, I will be arguing that Gendler does not quite achieve her second and third aims.

2 The Puzzle

¹I take puzzles like ‘the trolley problem’ to fall into this class.

²Which puzzles fall into this class is a matter of controversy. I suspect different philosophers will give different answers about which puzzles could be dealt with easily if only we could understand them properly.

³I take questions of personal identity to fall into this last class.

⁴While this paper will discuss her second essay on the topic, I believe that essay takes a step in the wrong direction, for reasons that will be explained below.

Let's begin with an example from literature. In H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, we are told that an alien race has come to earth, with plans to conquer and destroy the human race. Our imaginations are fed vivid accounts of these aliens, their ships, and their weapons. We read of their superior powers, and of their countless acts of aggression toward our kind, and we imagine this all with a kind of shocked, and perhaps terrified, amazement. Suppose, though, that Wells had claimed, through the course of the story, that the actions of these warring aliens were both *right* and *just*, that their superior skills and weaponry made their conquering of our people a morally *good* thing. At this, our imaginations would strain, as we would be unsure of how to picture a world in which such imperialistic destruction was morally justifiable, let alone *right*.

In considering a story as fantastical as *War of the Worlds* we might start to wonder why our imaginations, so willing to go along with a tale so fantastical, had seemed to resist in the face of foreign moral claims. After all, *War of the Worlds* is only a fictional story—and, we might think, in such a story, whatever is said goes. Yet, while we can imagine these invading aliens, with their strange features, their power, and their aggression, we seem far less able to imagine that their actions are morally right.

Or, consider an example from Dermot Moran. Using Shakespeare to motivate the problem, he writes: “[S]uppose the facts of the murder [in *Macbeth*] remain as they are in fact presented in the play, but it is prescribed in this alternate fiction that this was unfortunate only for having interfered with Macbeth's sleep, or that we in the audience are relieved at these events. These seem to be imaginative tasks of an entirely different order” (Moran, p. 95). As we see, Moran is pointing out the difficulty we would encounter if we tried to imagine the murder in *Macbeth* being the object of a moral judgment with which we disagree. Imagining that such a moral judgment is true in the world of the story presents us with great difficulty.

These two examples might give the reader the impression that we are dealing with a problem involving our interactions with fiction. For sure, we are—but the problem extends further than this. After all, our own imaginative undertakings—that is, those not guided by the author of some fiction—seem to encounter the same problem. If I try, on my own, to imagine a world in which the Rwandan genocide—precisely as it happened in our own history—was a morally good thing, I encounter the same level of resistance that I encountered in our modified versions of Wells and Shakespeare. Examples of this sort could be multiplied to no end. The upshot is: we find our imaginations strained in the face of worlds in which (what we take to be) false moral judgments hold true, whether these worlds are presented to us in fiction, or whether we attempt to access them through our own imaginative efforts. (To be sure, this is, at best, a rough characterization of the problem—below, we will refine it appropriately.) This essay will deal with attempts to figure out why this is so, why our imaginations resist entering into such foreign moral territory.

In “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance,” Tamar Gendler characterizes this difficulty as “the puzzle of explaining our comparative difficulty in imagining fictional worlds that we take to be morally deviant” (180). Fully understanding this characterization of the puzzle will require us to get clear on what a morally deviant fictional world is—only then can we sensibly raise the question of why such worlds are harder to imagine than others.

I suppose we should say first what a fictional world, generally, is. As I take it, a fictional world is any world in which at least one thing which we take to be true in our own world comes out false. Our interactions with literature, television, and film give us a wealth of examples. Some of these are fairly mundane—say, those in which *Infinite Jest*'s Hal Incandenza is a prodigiously talented tennis player whose skill level is beginning to plateau. Other times, these

contain more fantastical happenings—e.g. when *One-Hundred Years of Solitude*'s José Arcadio Buendia dies, and flowers literally rain from the sky.

It should be noted that a fictional world is not exactly the same thing as a *fiction*. While a fictional world is one in which at least one thing that we take to be true in this world comes out false, a fiction is a story that is not true. The two are, of course, connected, given that a fiction is a story that tells us of a particular fictional world. It is important to see, though, that fictional worlds need not only be accessed through our interactions with fiction—we can access them through our individual efforts of imagination as well.

What makes a fictional world *morally deviant*?⁵ On one natural way to interpret the expression, a morally deviant world is one in which a lot of morally disvaluable states of affairs obtain—e.g. rampant deception, stealing, harm to innocents, etc. This is not the type of morally deviant world that the puzzle of imaginative resistance centers around. After all, for better or worse, such worlds are not at all difficult to imagine—examples from dystopian stories, horror stories, and tragedies abound. Moreover, one needs carry out very little investigation to conclude that our *own*, actual world is morally deviant, in this sense.

On another interpretation of the expression, morally deviant worlds are worlds in which the moral judgments we take to be true come out false.⁶ Examples of these can be easily generated: worlds in which lying is morally right, in which stealing ought to be encouraged, etc.

⁵To save space, I will often shorten “fictional world” to “world,” except where to do so would produce confusion.

⁶For this reason, I will often refer to morally deviant fictional worlds as ‘moral falsehoods’ for brevity’s sake.

Put this way, these are not the worlds that concern us either—for they can be easily imagined.⁷ It is not difficult, for instance, to imagine a world in which it is morally wrong to give money to UNICEF—we need only imagine that UNICEF uses the donations it receives for morally nefarious purposes. We can also imagine a world in which stabbing someone with a knife is morally acceptable—we need only imagine that, in this world, stab wounds are painless and, in the long run, medically beneficial for the recipient. Examining cases like these shows us that we can imagine (at least some of) our moral judgments being false, because we can imagine the things that make them true (say, stabbing’s causing hurt and harm) being false.

Along similar lines, we can imagine our moral judgments coming out false in those cases where justifications and excuses are involved. E.g. I can imagine stealing from someone being morally acceptable, even perhaps obligatory, if I can imagine that it is done in order to save someone’s life. I can imagine a person not being blameworthy for killing their friend, if I can imagine that they only did so under extreme duress.

What sorts of fictional worlds are morally deviant in the sense that produce imaginative resistance? Recall, from our last few examples, that we are able to imagine our moral judgments—for example, that it is morally right to donate money to UNICEF—coming out false in those cases in which whatever makes those moral judgments true—e.g. the good use to which UNICEF donations are put—comes out false. This can happen where the nature or consequences of the action in question has changed, where the action becomes justified, or where the agent has

⁷There is one immediate sense in which we can imagine worlds in which (at least some of) our moral judgments come out false, that I want to mention now, but leave aside. That is: we can do so by imagining that our moral beliefs themselves are (or might be) false. If I can come to believe that I might be wrong about the moral status of, say, capital punishment, then I can get myself to imagine a world in which capital punishment is always morally good or right. I want to leave this aside by focusing on cases where we are strongly confident in our moral judgments. While we can surely still doubt our moral accuracy in such cases, it seems that doing so does not come along with the ability to clearly imagine a world in which the judgment is false.

an excuse for performing the action. Trying to imagine a false moral judgment coming out true, absent any of these changes, is where the real challenge seems to lie.

Before we move on, let's get some shorthand on the table. Take the following types of facts: i) the nature of the action in question (i.e. the motives and intentions with which it was performed); ii) the consequences of the action in question; iii) the circumstances in which the action is performed—call these the 'non-moral facts' of a case. We saw above that the standard ways by which we can imagine moral falsehoods are by imagining changes of facts i) – iii) that make the false moral judgment in question come out true. This suggests the following: we can (generally) imagine any moral judgment being true, just in case we can imagine the non-moral facts of the case that would make that judgment come out true.

This, I believe, leads us to a characterization of the kind of morally deviant fictional world that gives us imaginative difficulty. A morally deviant fictional world is one in which all of the non-moral facts of some case make a given moral judgment about that case come out true, but in which, nevertheless, that moral judgment comes out false. These are the sorts of worlds that we have great difficulty imagining. That is, if the non-moral facts of some case seem to make some moral judgment come out true of that case, we will have a very hard time imagining the application of a different/contrary moral judgment to that case.

The puzzle of imaginative resistance is the puzzle of figuring out why this is so—that is, of figuring out why we can imagine non-moral facts being different than they are, but have great difficulty imagining moral facts being different than the non-moral facts of a case/world would make them.

3 The Impossibility Hypothesis

Before Gendler gives her own proposed solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance, she sets her sights on one highly natural solution to the puzzle that she believes is mistaken. She calls this solution ‘the impossibility hypothesis.’

The impossibility hypothesis is two-fold—it states: i) moral falsehoods are conceptually impossible, and ii) it is this conceptual impossibility that accounts for imaginative resistance. Gendler does not weigh in on the question of whether moral falsehoods are conceptually impossible,⁸ but she has much to say about whether such a conceptual impossibility could account for imaginative resistance.

Let’s take a look at why something like conceptual impossibility might plausibly account for imaginative resistance. The use of conceptual impossibility to explain imaginative resistance seems to be on the right track, because we understand and reason about our world (and other possible worlds) through our concepts—as such, it might plausibly seem unclear as to how we could think in a way that would successfully involve conceptual inconsistency.⁹ Once our imagination undermines the concept at hand, we lose what it is we are talking about. Thus, when I try to imagine someone being both my father and my son, I begin, say, by trying to imagine the circumstances under which that person could be my father (say, by being the person who helped conceive me), and, in so doing, find myself imagining circumstances that make that person being my son impossible (namely, that person, again, having helped conceive me)—imagining the application of one concept undermines my imagining the application of the other. If moral

⁸Though, we will, below.

⁹I am treating conceptual impossibility and conceptual inconsistency as the same thing. For my part, I am unsure what either thing is, if it is not the other. (Of course, in other contexts, it might be true that impossibility and inconsistency are different—it is just in the case of concepts that the two seem to overlap entirely).

falsehoods *are* conceptually impossible, this reasoning goes, we have good reason to expect that we will encounter resistance in trying to imagine them.

That being said, Gendler believes that the impossibility hypothesis fails to solve the puzzle. Her argument is that the impossibility hypothesis fails to explain imaginative resistance because conceptual impossibility is not sufficient to pose difficulty for our imaginations. To illustrate, she begins with a story:

The Tower of Goldbach. Long[,] long ago, when the world was created, every even number was the sum of two primes. Although most people suspected that this was the case, no one was completely certain. So a great convocation was called, and for forty days and forty nights, all the mathematicians of the world labored together in an effort to prove this hypothesis. Their efforts were not in vain: at midnight on the fortieth day, a proof was found. “Hoorah!” they cried, “we have unlocked the secret of nature”.

But when God heard this display of arrogance, God was angry. From heaven roared a thundering voice: “My children, you have gone too far. You have understood too many of the universe’s secrets. From this day forth, no longer shall twelve be the sum of two primes.” And God’s word was made manifest, and twelve was no longer the sum of two primes.

The mathematicians were distraught—all their efforts had been in vain. They beseeched God: “Please,” they said, “if we can find twelve persons among us who are still faithful to You, will You not relent and make twelve once again the sum of two primes?” And so God agreed.

The mathematicians searched and searched. In one town, they found seven who were righteous. In another, they found five. They tried to bring them together to make twelve, but because twelve was no longer the sum of two primes, they could not. “Lord,” they cried out, “what shall we do? If You lifted Your punishment, there would indeed be twelve righteous souls, and Your decision to do so would be in keeping with Your decree. But until You do, twelve are not to be found, and we are destined forever to have labored in vain.”

God was moved by their plea, and called upon Solomon to aid in making the decision. Carefully, Solomon weighed both sides of the issue. If twelve again became the sum of two primes, then the conditions according to which God and the mathematicians agreed would be satisfied. And if twelve remained not the sum of two primes, again the conditions according to which God and the mathematicians agreed would be satisfied. How Solomonic it would be to satisfy the conditions twice over!

So with great fanfare, the celebrated judge announced his resolution of the dispute: From that day on, twelve both was and was not the sum of five and seven. And the heavens were glad, and the mountains rang with joy. And the voices of

the five and seven righteous souls rose towards heaven, a chorus twelve and not-twelve, singing in harmonious unity the praises of the Lord. The end. (190-191)

Gendler takes this story as her starting point, because she expects that at least *some* of her readers will take it to be an instance of a conceptual impossibility (a few of them, even) being imaginable. I confess I do not find myself comfortably in that camp.¹⁰ I find that I can “just read along,” but that I can no more imagine the story happening than I can imagine something’s being *both* an instance of the Rwandan genocide (precisely as it happened in our own history) *and* being a morally good thing, at the same time.

This raises the question of what the difference is between imagining what a story tells us and “just reading along.” The method of just reading along that I am meaning to refer to involves only comprehending the words, and moving forward with the story, while accepting that what one has just read may not make enough sense to fully comprehend. With this idea on the table, we can, further, ask whether we can “just read along” with moral falsehoods. I suspect that we can. This is no major accomplishment, on our parts, though, since “just reading along” is, as I intend it, the most basic level of interaction one can have with a story. The kind of imaginative difficulty that we are discussing, therefore, is not undercut by an ability to “just read along.”

Furthermore, I am a bit wary of relying too heavily on our intuitions in this example, given that it involves God’s powers. I worry that those who are able to imagine Gendler’s story are able to do so because they attribute to God powers beyond their own comprehension—as such, they will simply make themselves accept what the story tells, on grounds of believing that “nothing is impossible with God.” Now, I certainly do not know for sure that this kind of

¹⁰That camp is not empty, though: Anthony Everett (2005), at least, takes Gendler’s story to be a success.

imaginative corruption is going on in people who can follow Gendler's story, but I think that the risk that the God-factor contaminates *The Tower of Goldbach* is too great to place much weight on this story.

The case does not end there, though. Gendler turns her attention to some classic characters from TV, literature, and film—ones which we seem able to imagine with ease—suggesting that they too might be conceptual impossibilities. She writes,

Are the owl and the pussycat in the pea-green boat really an *owl* and a *cat*, or just things with owl-like and cat-like features? Is Peter Rabbit a *rabbit*? Is Frosty the Snowman a *snowman*? Is the knave of hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* a *playing card*? Whatever it is to be a playing card, or a snowman, or a rabbit, it's pretty clear that it precludes doing the sorts of things that are done by the knave of hearts, or Frosty, or Peter. Indeed, it's not clear that anything could be a snowman, where by "snowman" I mean what you mean by "snowman," and be something that sings, where by "sing" I mean what you mean by "sing." (193)

These questions/claims are nicely probative. After all, on reflection, we might decide that characters like Frosty and Peter really are *both* easily imaginable *and* conceptually impossible—this, though, would leave us at a loss for an explanation of the phenomenon of imaginative resistance. Recall that one of the two central aspects of the impossibility hypothesis is that conceptual impossibility is what explains imaginative resistance—but if, as Gendler is suggesting, we can easily imagine conceptual impossibilities, like Frosty, then moral falsehoods' being conceptually impossible cannot explain their being resistant to imagination.

Gendler argues that we can imagine conceptual impossibilities quite easily, provided the conceptual contradiction contained in them is kept sufficiently hidden. When we think of Frosty the snowman, we can imagine him, despite his possible conceptual incoherence, because we lose focus of him being composed almost entirely of snow while we think of him singing. Certain conceptual impossibilities can be imagined, the suggestion is, provided we focus only on the aspects of what we are being asked to imagine that *are* conceptually coherent. As Gendler puts it,

“It is the result of lots of *local* bits of conceptual coherence that the global incoherence is able to get a foothold” (192).

Let’s spell this out a bit more. Gendler tells us that conceptual incoherence gets hidden when we are able to focus on aspects of the concepts involved that do not conflict with one another. In the case of Frosty, she suggests, we can imagine him with ease, despite his conceptual incoherence, because we focus on some of his conceptual features (being shaped like a snowman, having parts that resemble human facial features) while letting others (being composed almost entirely of snow, having no vocal chords, being a non-living thing) drift into our attention’s periphery. When we focus on Frosty’s shape, and apparent facial features, the task of imagining him talking and singing becomes simple. Were we to try to imagine Frosty talking and singing, while keeping a clear view of his being composed of snow, and possessing no vocal chords, the imaginative task changes.¹¹

All of this, of course, brings up questions about what it is to focus on one or more aspect of something (say, a concept), while mostly ignoring others. I trust, however, that this process of giving selective attention to some parts of our experiences and concepts is one with which we are all familiar. The gist of Gendler’s idea seems to be: we can imagine conceptual impossibilities, provided our imaginations fail to focus on the aspects of the concepts involved that conflict with one another.

If our imaginations can step over/around conceptual impossibilities in the way Gendler highlights (namely, by imagining the combination of their conceptually coherent sub-parts), then

¹¹In case the idea of a concept having parts is unclear, let me offer a simple example. Consider the concept chair. This concept can be seen as being *composed* of more simple conceptual parts. Some of these are legs, seat, back, supports a certain minimum of weight, etc. The ability to focus on some of these, while ignoring others, is what Gendler has in mind when she claims that we can imagine conceptual impossibilities whenever (and to the extent that) we can focus on their conceptually coherent parts, while losing focus on their conceptually incoherent ones.

the impossibility theorist lands back fairly close to square one: the problem of explaining why we cannot do this with moral falsehoods. Even if moral falsehoods are conceptually incoherent, what makes it so difficult for us to only focus our imaginations on the combination of their conceptually coherent parts, as we do in the cases that Gendler offers?

4 A Rejoinder on Behalf of the Impossibility Theorist

As far as I can tell, Gendler's arguments against the impossibility theorist are unsuccessful. In this section, I will explain why.

Gendler's claim is that the impossibility theorist cannot explain imaginative resistance, because we are capable of imagining all sorts of other conceptual impossibilities without resistance. What I want to suggest is that her explanation of how such imaginative tasks can be easily accomplished should make us question whether conceptual impossibility really has no role to play in explaining imaginative resistance.

Recall Gendler's claim that we can easily imagine conceptual impossibilities, whenever we do not focus on their conceptually incoherent elements, but focus instead on their conceptual features that *are* consistent. Suppose we grant that we can easily imagine conceptual impossibilities provided their conceptually incoherent features are kept (either actively or passively) out of view. The natural question to ask, then, is: doesn't it seem like a step in the wrong direction to conclude that the (potential) conceptual incoherence of moral falsehoods has *nothing* to do with what renders them imaginatively resistant. It is as if I claimed that the color of a house had nothing to do with whether it was pretty, and justified this by claiming that one could come to find a house of *any* color pretty, provided one was able to ignore (either actively or passively) the color of the house, whenever that color was ugly. It would seem as if I had missed the point.

Similarly, the implication of Gendler's argument would seem to be that we can easily imagine conceptual incoherencies *only when (and to the extent that)* we can ignore (or fail to be attentive to the fact) that they are present, and contrapositively, that, whenever we are made explicitly aware of it, conceptual incoherence *does* slow our imaginations—a welcome implication for the impossibility theorist.¹²

The reason this reply stands open to the impossibility theorist has to do with the nature of imagination. Imagination is a phenomenologically transparent process. That is to say: if something is not the intentional object of our consciousness while we perform some imaginative task, then that thing is *not* being imagined by us. For example, if, while imagining a dog, I do not picture it as having spotted fur (either by my intention, or just by simple fact of what I happen to imagine), then I am not imagining a dog with spotted fur.

The implication is that it is not possible to imagine something that is being kept (for one reason or another) from imaginative view. Thus, if I undertake to imagine some conceptually impossible thing, but am able to do so only by the disappearance of the aspects of that thing that are conceptually impossible, then I have not, thereby, imagined a conceptually impossible thing, but merely a conceptually possible variant thereof.

This last point might not seem obviously correct, since analogical claims for standard cases of perception do not hold. Surely, I can see things without realizing that I am seeing them—and the same holds for our other sense modalities. Why should we think things are different with imagination?

¹²It seems entirely within the power of the impossibility theorist to modify their theory slightly to claim that conceptual impossibility *is* what explains imaginative resistance, but that we require a *further* theory of why it is that the conceptual incoherencies involved in moral falsehoods are *unhide-able*. A fully worked-out theory could then, perhaps, explain *any* case of imaginative resistance by explaining why the conceptual incoherence involved in the case at hand could not be hidden.

The reason, I believe, has to do with the very different nature of the objects involved. The objects of any standard case of perception are worldly, physical entities: light waves, sound waves, etc. These objects have real existences outside of my conscious interaction with them. For this reason, it remains possible that my sense organs are interacting with some properties of a thing, without my fully being aware of this. The objects of my imagination, conversely, do not have a separate existences, apart from my consciousness of them. Put differently, the objects of my imagination do not have a bunch of real properties waiting in the wings, that my imagination might be interacting with, despite my not always being consciously aware of this. Since they have no real existence, independent of my being conscious of them, failing to be conscious of any one (or any collection) of their properties leaves that property (or those properties) out of my imagination, strictly speaking.

For these reasons, I am suggesting that if Gendler is claiming that we can imagine conceptual impossibilities whenever those aspects thereof that are conceptually impossible disappear from our imaginative view, then she has not shown that we *can* easily imagine any conceptual impossibilities. Since we cannot imagine what has disappeared from our imaginative view, Gendler's account of what it takes to easily imagine a conceptual impossibility seems to undermine the very idea that we can do so.

Once we see this, it seems that Gendler's explanation of how we can imagine conceptual impossibilities is much better understood as an explanation of how we can imagine conceptually coherent, altered counterparts of conceptual impossibilities.¹³ Similarly, if Gendler is telling us that we can easily imagine conceptual impossibilities whenever they appear to our consciousness

¹³Thanks to Geoff Sayre-McCord for pointing this out to me.

as conceptually coherent, then we should be skeptical that such imaginings *really would* be successful imaginings of conceptual impossibilities.

We might wonder what we should make of the putative examples of conceptually impossible things that Gendler claims we can imagine. We might not have been swayed by the *Tower of Goldbach*, but we might have a softer spot for Frosty the Snowman. I want to suggest, though, that cases like Frosty should not detract much from the impossibility theorist's position.

The reason is: cases like Frosty, the owl and the pussycat in the pea-green boat, and countless others like them involve anthropomorphic modification. Each case this like involves an inanimate, or at least non-human entity possessing human traits—Frosty has a human face, he can talk and sing. The owl and the pussycat have faces of their own, and they too can talk. I submit that we have some sort of natural capacity to imagine nearly *anything* with facial features, and the ability to see, hear, touch, talk, and taste. The mind simply tacks on the facial features to the image of what is being imagined (e.g. a snowman), and, at once, one can imagine that thing talking etc. This capacity seems both particular and reliable enough to count anthropomorphic alterations of inanimate and/or non-human entities as a class of exceptional cases that do not, in general, show that we can imagine conceptual impossibilities.¹⁴

It should be noted, though, that even *if* we grant Gendler her claim that we can easily imagine conceptual impossibilities, at this stage, she has not so much shown that the

¹⁴The following might be objected: surely this talk of a natural capacity to anthropomorphicize cannot account for why we can imagine Frosty the Snowman—after all, I can imagine Frosty the Snow Dog, or Chicken, just as easily, and neither of those are human like characters. In cases such as these, I am inclined to believe that our imagining of Frosty the Snow Dog is a basic variation of our ability to add eyes, a nose, and a mouth, to something and have it be animated—just in Frosty the Dog's case, we add dog eyes and a dog snout/mouth. This seems like a small variation on the overall capacity.

impossibility theorist is entirely wrong about imaginative resistance—at best, she has shown that conceptual impossibility cannot tell the *whole* story.

It seems open, now, to the impossibility theorist to add to their theory, in order to make it complete. The way the impossibility theorist would do this is by giving us an account of why conceptually impossible aspects of the moral falsehoods are so difficult to keep from view (again, either actively or passively). That is, if the impossibility theorist could give us good reason why it is difficult to hide to ourselves the conceptually incoherent parts of moral falsehoods, then s/he would surely have closed the gap in her/his theory.

5 The Final Flaws with Conceptual Impossibility

While I believe that Gendler has not made a compelling case against the impossibility theorist, I nevertheless believe that there is such a case to be made. At the end of the day, the impossibility theorist goes wrong, I believe, in two different places.

The first mistake the impossibility theorist makes involves the force of her claim. The impossibility theorist, at least in her original form, argues that we experience imaginative resistance in the face of moral falsehoods, because moral falsehoods are conceptually incoherent, and conceptual impossibilities cannot be imagined. This account sits on shaky ground, though, insofar as it only seems suited to explain imaginative *impossibility*. Crucially, we are looking to explain imaginative resistance, and while it might turn out that imaginative resistance is best understood as imaginative impossibility, the impossibility theorist has not given an argument to this effect. An explanation of why something is impossible to do *cannot* explain why that thing is difficult to do—difficulty implies the possibility of success, which is ruled out by the presence of impossibility.¹⁵ For this reason, unless the impossibility theorist can successfully show that

¹⁵Thanks to Geoff Sayre-McCord for pointing this out to me.

the phenomenon in question is one of imaginative impossibility, after all, then her account runs the risk of capturing the wrong phenomenon.

Now, this first difficulty does not leave the impossibility theorist fatally wounded. After all, we saw reason, above, for the impossibility theorist to modify their theory by adding an account why it is so difficult for the conceptually incoherent parts of moral falsehoods to disappear from our imaginative view. Such an account would leave the impossibility theorist in good standing to explain imaginative resistance, interpreted as strong imaginative difficulty.

The impossibility theorist's second error, however, is more severe. The impossibility theorist fails to explain imaginative resistance in the face of moral falsehoods, because many moral falsehoods are not conceptually incoherent.¹⁶ Consider an instance of stealing, where the non-moral facts of the case would lead me to judge the instance to be morally wrong. Now consider someone who claims that this instance of stealing is morally right. What should I think about my disagreement with this interlocutor? Should I think that she is confused in her basic competence with the words "morally right"? That seems wrong. My interlocutor and I disagree *because* we are using the same concepts. A much better description of the conflict is that she takes the property of moral rightness—the same one that I share—and applies it to something to which I believe it does not apply. This is generalizable to many moral falsehoods that are imaginatively resistant.

Since the sorts of ethical disagreements we can be said to have with morally deviant fictional worlds are not conceptual disagreements, and since someone who claims that killing is always morally right is not confused about the concept "morally right", we can safely conclude

¹⁶Sure, claims like "cruelty is good" and "murder is right" are likely conceptually incoherent, but these (and those like them) do not come close to exhausting the range of moral falsehoods that are imaginatively resistant. Again, thank you to Geoff Sayre-McCord for pointing this out to me.

that many moral falsehoods are *not* conceptual errors, let alone conceptual impossibilities. The impossibility theorist seems to have a solid explanation for why *conceptual impossibilities* are imaginatively resistant (provided she amends her theory in the way described above), but this explanation is simply inapplicable to the relevant cases of moral falsehood.

With this point, the impossibility theorist fails. It might be open to the impossibility theorist to point to some *other* sort of impossibility that attaches to moral falsehoods, but this other sort of impossibility would need to be carefully characterized and defended as applicable to moral falsehood. Further, even if the impossibility theorist could accomplish this, it would remain her task to explain why this kind of impossibility slows our imaginations, when other kinds of impossibility (say, impossibility given physical laws) do not.

6 Gendler and Imaginative Reluctance

According to Gendler's own account, it is not that we have such a hard time imagining moral falsehoods—it is that some part of us refuses to imagine them. Explaining exactly why this is so will require some background.

Understanding Gendler's account of imaginative resistance will first involve coming to understand what she calls “the laws of import and export” (75) in story-telling. These are the conventional rules that govern how we imaginatively interact with fiction. According to Gendler, fictional story-telling (the kind that asks us to imagine things that are not true) has the primary function of telling us about the fictional world that the story creates—but in order to do so, it will often require that the reader *import* into the story certain facts about the world, in which s/he lives. Thus, when we are told that the villain shot the victim in the chest, thereby killing him, we cannot understand or enter into the story if we do not first know what a gun is, what shooting someone with a gun does, and that a massive wound to the heart (or nearby region) will almost

certainly cause someone to die. We *import* these facts about our world into the story, in order to understand what the story is telling us. Importing in this way is essential to imaginatively entering into any fictional story, for the simple reason that an author cannot include every fact about the fictional world at play—filling in the details is our job, and our resources come from what we know about *our* world.

The export process is a bit more complicated. A fictional story exports facts from its own world into ours, whenever what happens in the story is meant to be illuminating or informative about our own world.¹⁷ The easiest examples of fictional exportation are found in fables. Fables, while both fictional and (at least biologically) impossible, are meant to teach the reader an important—primarily moral—lesson. Any story, in fact, where the protagonist (or perhaps some other character) ‘learns a valuable lesson’ of some kind, is one in which a certain prudential or moral principle/adage is being exported to the reader. The story might be fictional, but the lesson is meant to apply just as much to the real world as to the fictional one.

It is this export-process, Gendler claims, that gets us into hot water in cases of moral falsehood. “Fictional moral truths,” she writes, “clamor for exportation, in a way that other sorts of fictional truths do not.” Her hypothesis is that “cases that evoke genuine imaginative resistance will be cases where the reader feels that she is being asked to export a way of looking at the actual world which she does not wish to add to her conceptual repertoire.” In other words, we imaginatively resist moral falsehoods because we are resisting their being offered as exports into our own world—specifically because accepting such an export, Gendler suggests, will lead us to view the world in ways of which we do not approve. I will refuse to imagine a story that claimed that the Rwandan genocide (or some appropriately similar fictional alternative) was a

¹⁷This is likely the result of a combination of authorial intent and social convention. Thanks to Geoff Sayre-McCord for pressing me on this point.

morally good thing, because I want to resist that judgment of goodness from being exported into my world—allowing such an export in, the thought goes, would open me up to some degree of moral corruption, which I am keen to avoid.

Gendler takes the following to be a positive mark for her account: when we are simply asked to ‘suppose, for the sake of argument’ that some moral falsehood is true, our imaginative resistance starts to give way. The thought, here, is that, while being asked to imagine something’s being the case can force certain moral exports on us, merely being asked to *suppose* that something is the case does *not*. The process of mere supposition, therefore, is thought to be safely non-committal, and, for that reason, pose no risk of export.¹⁸ If mere supposition (especially mere supposition for the sake of argument) does *not* ask us to export anything from the supposition into our own world, then, the thought is: in cases of mere supposition, we are given enough of an indication that no morally false exports are being offered, and, for that reason, we relax a bit, and our resistance eases up.

At this stage, we have a plausible account of imaginative resistance (that we are reluctant to allow moral exports with which we do not agree, and this reluctance, in turn, manifests as imaginative resistance), along with a test (that of removing the export process by switching to mere supposition and seeing if our resistance gives way) that said account seems to pass.

Gendler’s account also has the virtue of being able to explain imaginative resistance *either* as strong difficulty *or* impossibility. If we are merely very reluctant to imagine a moral falsehood, then we face mere imaginative (strong) difficulty—but if we are entirely reluctant, we experience imaginative impossibility. In this way, her account is both neutral between the two

¹⁸Given how she is using the idea in her argument, I take it that Gendler is conceiving supposition in fiction in much the same way that I am conceiving of ‘just reading along.’

readings of ‘resistance’ *and* is capable of explaining what would make either reading be correct if it were.

However, I believe that Gendler’s account faces serious difficulty. I will spend the next section explaining why.

7 Resisting Reluctance

Gendler’s account encounters trouble, I believe, for four primary reasons.

First, her account seems too narrowly focused on cases involving our interactions with fiction. Her claim is that moral falsehoods offer themselves as exports that we do not want to accept, in the interest of avoiding some degree of moral corruption. This export process, though, is one that she takes to be tied to our interaction with fictions (i.e. fictional stories). This account fits nicely with our difficulty in imagining moral falsehoods that we might encounter in TV, literature, and film. How, though, is this account supposed to work in cases of individual imaginative exploration. Sitting by myself, attempting to imagine a world in which torture (as it is understood in our world, and in non-justificatory/non-exculpatory circumstances) is morally right, I find I encounter just as much difficulty as if I had read of such a falsehood in a book. That being the case, though, I find it hard to believe that the kinds of laws of import and export that Gendler discusses govern my own individual efforts of imagination. I am not sure what it would *be* for my imagination to offer me exports of the sort Gendler has in mind. Her account seems to work—if it does—for fiction, but not obviously for plain old ordinary imagination.

Even if Gendler could respond to these difficulties, her account still misses the mark. This is because, I want to suggest, imaginative reluctance is just not the kind of thing that could account for imaginative resistance in all cases. To see this, let’s take a look at what the difference between these two ideas amounts to. Imaginative reluctance, so far as I can tell,

happens when some part of my will interferes with my ability to imagine something. A good example of this seems to be a son who is reluctant to imagine his mother coming to harm, on the grounds of its being upsetting to do so. Here, imagination is actively blocked by one or more desires or aversions of the imaginer. Imaginative resistance, on the other hand, is the clearly different phenomenon of having great difficulty imagining something. Unlike the first phenomenon, the second does not have any essential tie to the volitions of the imaginer.

Now, while it is clear that being reluctant to imagine something will put up an obstacle to our imagining it, it is also clear that being reluctant to imagine something is not the only way in which we might encounter imaginative difficulty (mathematical absurdities—round squares, etc.—provide nice examples here). Therefore, we need to figure out whether reluctance might be the kind of thing that is pushing against our imaginations in cases of moral falsehoods.

I actually believe that there *are* cases of imaginative resistance involving moral falsehoods that are traceable back to some form of imaginative reluctance. Suppose my child has been harmed, and I am certain that his being harmed is morally bad. Here, if someone asks me to try to imagine its being the case that my child's being harmed was *not* morally bad, I will be have great difficulty doing so (I believe), because I will be strongly reluctant to take on some perspective in which my child's being harmed was not morally bad.

I am confident, though, that cases like this do not exhaust the terrain of imaginative resistance to moral falsehoods. The reason for this is that once I am made aware of my reluctance to do something (say, perform some imaginative task), if that reluctance truly is the sole source of my difficulty, it should feel as if I *could* do that thing, if only I were less reluctant. That is, there is a specific feeling involved in having your will be the only thing standing in your way of doing something. This feeling is not, however, the feeling we get with many cases of

trying to imagine moral falsehoods. The feeling is not that we could if only we were not reluctant to do so—the feeling is that our difficulty comes, at least partly, from somewhere outside our wills. I do not feel as if I could imagine the Rwandan genocide being a morally good thing *if only I could overcome my reluctance to do so*—perhaps overcoming my reluctance will be part of the battle, but even having done so, I can feel the difficulty that remains in my way.

The more general way to put all of this is: reluctance and resistance are phenomenally distinct. I might be able to see that my reluctance to imagine a moral falsehood will make it difficult for me to do so, but this often does not feel like the sole source of the difficulty.

Furthermore, the reluctance explanation is not helped by the fact that we can experience imaginative resistance in the face of what we might call ‘wishful thinking.’ Consider a morally conscious kleptomaniac. He knows full well that his acts of stealing are wrong, but, given his kleptomania, wishes badly that they were not. Nevertheless, such a person would have just as hard a time imagining that their stealing was morally right.¹⁹

Or consider some futuristic ultra-moral culture, wherein people are punished for committing acts that they know to be immoral (say, at the time of questioning). People in such a society who commit moral wrongs would have it in their best interest to adopt all sorts of false moral views—they would, it would seem, have actual desires to be morally corrupted in the sense that Gendler discusses. Nevertheless, it seems such people would have just as hard a time imagining moral falsehoods as people in our actual society do. Wanting it to be the case, or wanting to *believe* it to be the case that something is not morally wrong is just not enough to make it easy to imagine that it isn’t.

¹⁹This is, at least, my own introspective finding, regarding my own moral vices.

These considerations should make it clear that Gendler's account of imaginative resistance is, at best, incomplete. Imaginative reluctance simply cannot be the entire cause of imaginative resistance.

The trouble deepens when we try to test Gendler's theory. Recall that she suggests we test her theory, by seeing if we can merely *suppose* some moral falsehood, rather than having to fully imagine it—and she believes that our ability to do so supports her idea that exports which we are resistant to be corrupted by are causing our imaginative resistance. Nevertheless, since the exact relation between the two is difficult to nail down it would be better to try something more direct. To my mind, the following test naturally suggests itself: look at cases where we are asked to imagine moral falsehoods, where we are explicitly (in one way or another) told that no export is being attempted. If Gendler's account is on target, these kinds of cases should give us no resistance—or, at very least, much less resistance than cases where export seems to be involved.

Take the following case:

Suppose that I tell you that, in some very distant possible world, the Rwandan genocide still occurs, with the same non-moral details as those from reality, and *further* that such a genocide was a morally good thing. In every other possible world, including our own, the Rwandan genocide was/is a morally bad thing—but in this one particular possible world, it was/is morally good.

Now we can ask: can we imagine the possible world that this story describes? The answer seems clear: definitely not. Once I try to imagine there being some world, *even if it is assuredly not my own*, in which the Rwandan genocide is a morally good thing, I experience strong resistance. I find I am unsatisfied by hearing that my own world is no different, morally, than I believe it to be—hearing so gets me no closer to imagining the Rwandan genocide being a good thing.

But, *by stipulation of the story*, morality is exactly the same in our world as we take it to be. No export is being offered. In fact, exports are being explicitly withheld. If Gendler's account is correct, we should expect to find it little or no trouble to imagine the scenario just presented—but this is clearly not the case.

While this story explicitly denies that it is offering any exports, Gendler might reply that this explicit denial is not enough to halt our feeling that exports *are*, in fact, being offered. I do not know how easy this kind of claim would be to support. It seems reasonable to believe that if an author gives us explicit reason to believe that no exports are being offered, then we should be able to accept this—but perhaps greater understanding of the nature of the export process could suggest otherwise.

One definite thing that Gendler tells us about exports gives us more reason to be dissatisfied with her account. Recall that she claims that we resist moral exports because we wish to avoid being morally corrupted by them. The drive to avoid moral corruption seems like a reasonable motivating factor for why we might resist the kinds of exports that Gendler suggests are offered by moral falsehoods. This explanation, however, seems to break down when we consider a couple of other examples.

Consider the following story, structurally analogous to our last one:

Suppose that I tell you that, in some very distant possible world, the statues sculpted by Michelangelo still exist, with the same non-evaluative features as those from reality, and *further* that such statues are aesthetically hideous. In every other possible world, including our own, the Michelangelo's sculptures are beautiful—but in this one particular possible world, they are ugly.

Here, I find the same imaginative resistance I find with moral cases.

Or, consider:

Suppose that I tell you that, in some very distant possible world, the IRS tax code, just as it stands in our world, is extremely funny. In every other possible world, including our own, the IRS tax code is excessively boring—but in this *one* world it is hilarious.

Again, I find this story very difficult to imagine.

Crucially, though, neither of these last two stories puts the reader at risk of any sort of corruption. I have no aversion to being ‘corrupted’ by exports involving beauty or humor with which I disagree.²⁰ Given that the imaginative resistance we face with these three stories presents itself in the same way, Gendler’s explanation of imaginative resistance—that we are reluctant to accept exports offered by moral (or, as we have seen, aesthetic) falsehoods because we want to avoid being corrupted—cannot be the whole story.

8 Resistance Revisited

While Gendler does not address the difficulties presented in the last section, she does have a second essay on imaginative resistance—“Imaginative Resistance Revisited”—in which she sets out to strengthen her account. Unfortunately, this essay takes a step in the wrong direction, or so I will now argue.

In “Imaginative Resistance Revisited,” Gendler recasts the puzzle of imaginative resistance as what she calls “the problem of authorial authority.” It is difficult to characterize exactly what authorial authority is supposed to be—and she does not offer us much assistance, here—but, roughly, it seems to be the authority an author has in leading her/his reader through the story, as the accurate and trustable describer of the story’s events.

Now, it seems correct that this kind of authority can break down in cases involving imaginative resistance: at certain times, if we experience too much difficulty imagining what the author of a story is telling us, our faith in that author as an authoritative storyteller, and our

²⁰To be sure, there are cases that would threaten us with corruption if we found them beautiful or funny (moral atrocities, for instance), but the ones presented above are not of this sort.

willingness to follow her/him further into the story, and with confidence, might strain.

Nevertheless, as I have already suggested, restricting the puzzle of imaginative resistance to those cases that involve our interactions with fictions seems to be a mistake, as the puzzle's scope seems clearly wider than this.

Furthermore, even if we ignore these problems of scope, it is clear that the problem of authorial authority cannot be the same as the puzzle of imaginative resistance. The reason is that the bounds of our imaginative abilities (or of our easy imaginative tasks) do not seem to exhaust the bounds of authorial authority. Stephen King's *It* provides a nice example, here. Therein, we are told that the story's monster is made of "darklights" (a surely unimaginable thing, if there ever was one), and its true form is one far too terrifying for the human mind to comprehend or imagine. Here we have a definite breakdown of our imaginative capacities, but, it seems, on any plausible reading of the expression, authorial authority is still clearly intact. This example shows, I believe, that the problem of authorial authority simply cannot be the same as the problem of imaginative resistance.

For these reasons, Gendler's second attempt to solve the puzzle of imaginative resistance misses the mark.

9 Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to give a clear characterization of the puzzle of imaginative resistance and to evaluate a couple of attempts to solve it. I hope that I have shown that both the impossibility hypothesis and Gendler's own account(s) face significant difficulties in this regard.

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