

Rational fear of monsters

Richard Joyce

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Colin Radford must weary of defending his thesis that the emotional reactions we have towards fictional characters, events, and states of affairs are irrational.¹ Yet, for all the discussion, the issue has not, to my mind, been properly settled—or at least not settled in the manner I should prefer—and so this paper attempts once more to debunk Radford’s defiance of common sense.

For some, the question of whether our emotional responses to fiction are rational does not arise, for they are inclined to doubt that we have them at all.² Emotions, on this view, are fundamentally linked to belief states, as in the following thesis concerning the emotion of fear:

- 1) We fear for ourselves only if we believe ourselves to be in danger; we fear for others only if we believe they actually exist and are in danger.

When we typically engage with fiction we do not ‘suspend our disbelief’, in the sense of coming to believe that the fiction is non-fiction. No matter how engrossed I become in a Dracula movie, I do not begin to believe that I am seeing actual vampires.

- 2) When we watch a horror movie, we do not believe ourselves, or anyone actual, to be in danger.

And so these theorists, endorsing (1) and (2), are obliged to deny the intuitive (3):

- 3) We are sometimes frightened when watching a horror movie.

These three propositions are a version of what is sometimes called ‘The Paradox of Fiction’. For my money, since the denial of (2) is foolish, and the denial of (3) deeply counter-intuitive, it is (1)—being a substantive philosophical thesis—that is most likely the culprit. Radford agrees, yet maintains that there is *some* intimate connection between belief and emotion. For him, the dependence is not the existential one stated in (1), but a normative one: we do not *rationally* feel fear unless we believe ourselves (or someone actual) to be in danger.³ This revision of the connection allows the construction of a quite different inconsistent triad:

- 4) We are not rationally frightened unless we believe someone actual to be in danger.
- 5) We do not believe anyone actual to be in danger when we watch a horror movie.
- 6) We are sometimes rationally frightened when we watch a horror movie.

And faced with this new choice, Radford simply rejects (6). Thus, when we are frightened by fiction, that fear must be irrational.

Since Radford accepts that we do feel emotions (however irrational) towards fiction, one might expect that he owes us an account of how and why we do—after all, the phenomenon

is extremely widespread. Yet he doesn't embark on this project, and is seemingly far more interested in branding us all 'incoherent'. The 'how' question is answered quite plausibly by Peter Lamarque, as I shall outline below, but he doesn't tackle the question of whether the emotions we feel in response to fiction are rational or irrational.⁴ Radford finds this a great failing in Lamarque's thesis: even if the latter's account of the mechanism of fearing fictions were correct, Radford claims, we still haven't been shown that these responses are anything other than utterly irrational. It is this claim that I will address in the present paper. In doing so I shall try to develop Lamarque's answer to the 'how' question and supplement it with an answer to the 'why' question. But this question is not 'Why do we have irrational emotional responses to fiction?' but rather 'Why do we want to have emotional responses to fiction?' A proper answer to this question, I contend, is sufficient to dispel the accusation that these responses must be irrational.

Lamarque presents a version of what has been called 'the thought theory': when we have a response of fear at a horror movie, we are frightened by our *thoughts*. He thinks that many encounters with fiction involve an act of make-believe on the part of the audience, and a large part of make-believe is the holding of the appropriate thoughts in one's mind. When a child pretends that the dining room table is a castle, the propositional content 'The table is a castle' is entertained. Being make-believe, no attitude is taken towards that thought-content—the child doesn't believe it (desire it, dread it, etc.). Similarly, when I watch Dracula approach his sleeping victim, I pretend that there is someone actual who is in danger, but I do not—not even for a moment—suspend my disbelief in the proposition 'She exists and is in danger'. With adequate imaginative attention, the thought may produce the emotion of fear—real fear. Though it doesn't prompt the actions that fear produced by the *belief* that someone is in danger would prompt (rushing from the cinema to phone the police, for instance), it is the same kind of emotion in both cases.

If it is the thought of monsters that I am scared by, it is not the thought of monsters that I am scared *of*. Lamarque makes the useful distinction between these two relations. A thought may be individuated either as a brain event or intentionally, as a representation. The thought considered as a brain event has causal properties, one of which may be that it prompts an emotion of fear; in such a case we may say that I am scared *by* the thought. The content of the thought provides the content of my fear—it provides the item I am scared *of*. Thus if I hold in my mind the thought 'My house is burning down' with enough vivid attention, an anxious emotion might arise within me. The thought as a brain event is what has caused the anxiety, but the content of the thought is what I am anxious *about*.

Radford admits that Lamarque may have accurately described the mechanism whereby we feel fear when *reading* fiction, but he doubts that it could be correct as a general account of fearing fictions. He writes: 'Why is it false to say that it is because the moving picture of the slime looks so real and horrible that, when it suddenly appears, I involuntarily flinch, recoil, thrill in fear and horror?'⁵ The import of this rhetorical question appears to be that it is the *image* that we are frightened by, not the thought. Radford's focus on the 'moving image' is probably prompted by his defence against H.O. Mounce,⁶ who claimed that we respond with fear to a representation of a vampire because it is in many ways similar to a real vampire, and a real vampire would terrify us: 'Like objects evoke like reactions' (p. 188). Radford's complaint is again motivated by the goal of making us out to be irrational: 'The fact that the similarity of A and A¹ *may* 'causally' explain why some of our responses to A¹ resemble our responses to A, does not mean ... that that response to A¹ is thereby *warranted* ... [It] does

absolutely nothing to show that the response is not irrational, problematic, incoherent, etc.’⁷ Radford will argue in the same way against Lamarque, but here he has an additional argument: that Lamarque’s account even of the ‘causal mechanism’ of fear cannot be generally correct, since it is the image, and not the thought, that we are frightened by.

So which are we frightened by—the moving image of the vampire or the thought of the vampire? It seems to me that Lamarque should answer ‘Both’. The issue of what we are frightened *by* is a causal matter, and a single event (fear) may be caused by many things. In the causal chain leading up to the manifestation of the emotion, many events figure—each of them such that had it not occurred, nor would have had the fear. Among the most ‘salient’ are the image on the movie screen, and the thought in the fearful audience member’s mind. To single out one of these as *the* cause is as pointless and problematic here as it is in any other case. This said, Lamarque is correct to focus on the thought rather than the image, since he is attempting to explain a general phenomenon—one that can occur when watching movies, reading books, day-dreaming, etc.—and in all cases a thought will appear in the etiological sequence.

The heart of Radford’s case is thesis (4). Why should we believe it? It is instructive to note that there is a kind of reason one might have for believing the existential thesis (1) which is unavailable to Radford. One might maintain (1) because it follows from a plausible theory of what an emotion *is*. According to the cognitive theory of emotions, to have an emotion is to hold one or more evaluative beliefs (e.g., ‘I am in danger’), plus have some kind of physiological agitation caused by the belief(s).⁸ Since Radford rejects (1)—holding that we *do* have emotions without the appropriate beliefs—he cannot make such an appeal. This puts him in a potentially weak position, making bold claims at odds with what may be considered the ‘orthodox’ theory of emotions, without providing an alternative understanding of the emotions.

Adherence to the cognitive theory of the emotions appears to commit one to something plainly counter-intuitive: that we do not have emotional responses to fiction. This is a serious theoretical cost, and it is desirable to adjust the theory, if possible, to accommodate the intuition. Interestingly, the obvious way of ‘tweaking’ the cognitive theory of emotions in order to account for fearing (etc.) fictions, is generally favourable to Lamarque. It can be argued that to have an emotion such as fear is to have an evaluative belief that *p* (such as ‘I am in danger’) *or the thought that p*, plus having that belief or thought cause physiological agitation such-and-such. This is how Noël Carroll argues in *Philosophy of Horror*, and it seems a plausible and desirable amendment.⁹ Endorsing such a theory would require that, when speaking strictly, one does away with the locution that the thought *causes* the emotion; rather, the thought, in part, *constitutes* the emotion.¹⁰

The thought causes the physiological agitation, and the obtaining of both these events, causally connected, *is* the emotion.¹¹ Whatever is counter-intuitive about overturning the idea that the thought *causes* the emotion, it is no more so than anything the standard cognitive theory of emotion faces: we frequently say that my belief that I was in danger *caused me* to get frightened, but if the cognitive theory is correct such talk is sloppy. Rather, the belief causes a physical agitation, and the two together constitute fear.¹²

Thus modifying the cognitive theory in order to accommodate Radford’s reasonable denial of (1) will require revising some of what Lamarque says: it is not a *causal* relation that exists between the thought and the emotion, but a constitutive one. If, therefore, we wish to maintain that ‘being frightened by’ is a causal relation, it will not do to say we are frightened

by thoughts. We may still say that we are frightened *in virtue of* thoughts, but it would be a mistake to read this as ‘being frightened by’, for according to the revised cognitive theory we are also frightened in virtue of having physiological agitations, like tingling and shakiness, but it would be silly to say that I am frightened by my tingling and shakiness. Going this route, then, ultimately favours Radford’s rather offhand comment against Lamarque, that we are frightened *by* the image on the movie screen and not our thoughts.

But the heart of the matter goes to Lamarque. The ‘frightened by’/‘frightened of’ locution was never in a position to bear much weight in his account, since it ill-fits so many other emotional reactions. We feel pity *for* Anna Karenina just as we are frightened *of* Dracula, but what, in the former case, is the analogue of what we are frightened *by*? Lamarque will say that we have a thought about Anna’s suffering and this thought causes us to have an emotion; the fact that this explication cannot be forced into the ‘We are fed by Anna’ mould isn’t important. But Lamarque, like Radford, is silent on what the emotion *is*—I suspect they both give undue weight to *feelings* in emotions.¹³ However, the revised cognitive theory that I favour (following Carroll) is not terribly far from Lamarque’s position: when we are frightened of Dracula, or feel pity for Anna, the most salient explanatory item is a *thought* that we are having. And his conclusion still goes through: ‘[W]hen we respond emotionally to fictional characters we are responding to mental representations or thought-contents identifiable through descriptions derived in suitable ways from the propositional contents of the fictional sentences.’¹⁴

Whether emotions are ‘feelings’, or (as I prefer) evaluative beliefs or thoughts (coupled with caused agitations), Radford’s attempt to cast doubt on Lamarque’s provision of the mechanism does not succeed. But this is not his primary attack anyway. As when dealing with Mounce, Radford’s main concern is to argue that even if this *were* the right mechanism, Lamarque still ‘has not succeeded in showing that these responses are not irrational, do not involve us in absurdity and inconsistency.’ I will now take up this challenge.

As noted earlier, (1) may be supported by a theory of what an emotion is (which may be independently corroborated), but not so Radford’s (4). So let me ask again: Why should we believe (4)?

Radford’s support appears to come largely from observing the reactions we have to cases that are putatively similar to fearing (etc.) fictional characters. When Radford was a child, he was scared of a stuffed tiger in the museum, and his mother told him not to be ‘silly’.¹⁵ After seeing *The Birds*, we might feel strangely nervous of the crows gathering at the roadside. We admonish ourselves, saying ‘Don’t be so absurd—there’s nothing to be frightened of’.¹⁶ Arachnophobes know that the little spider in the bathtub poses no threat, yet they are gripped with fear. We do not hesitate (and nor do they) in labeling their fear ‘irrational’.¹⁷

My worry is with the assumed connection between the above cases and the cases of having typical emotional reactions to fiction. It is noteworthy, to begin with, that this kind of ‘Don’t be silly’ reaction does *not* characterize our encounters with fiction. If I am moved to tears by Puccini, I am not told that I am being absurd. If I can’t concentrate on a task at hand because I’m reaching the end of *Anna Karenina* and I’m worried about what’s going to happen to her, I am not treated as silly. If I am deeply disturbed at my first viewing of *The Exorcist*, I am not reproached—on the contrary, I would be treated as odd if the movie left me cold.

I am not arguing that these reactions cannot be irrational because we don’t treat them as such. If they are to be defended as ‘rational’ it will not simply be on the grounds of their

statistical normality or their widespread acceptance (this is how Mounce criticized Radford, leaving the latter unmoved). But the fact that we don't treat fear at *The Exorcist* as licensing a 'Don't be silly' response, whereas we do treat a child's fear of stuffed tigers as permitting that response, should cause suspicion of the claim that the cases are relevantly analogous. Our reprimand of the arachnophobe for having 'irrational fears' reveals a capacity to recognize irrational emotions, and yet far from acknowledging them in the case of fear during *The Exorcist*, we tend stoutly to resist Radford's analysis. Moreover, if the person frightened by *The Exorcist* continued to be terrified, was still shaking days later, was unable to go to work, etc., *then* we'd describe him as having an irrational fear. This suggests that we recognize irrational fear when we see it, and, in the case of the normal person whose horror quickly wears off, we do not see it.

My contention is that Radford has misdiagnosed *why* we call phobics' fear 'irrational'. It is not simply because they lack the appropriate belief (indeed, I doubt that they do always lack the belief appropriate to the emotion). More importantly, their emotion is *obsessive*—it is beyond their control and self-destructive. If it were within their control—as, I will argue, our emotional reactions to fiction typically are—then it would be normatively appraised according to a different framework. That rational framework, I believe, is straightforward instrumentalism, which I shall understand as follows. A person has interests, and if there is something she can do to help satisfy those interests, we may say that she has an 'objective reason' to do that thing. When she is justified in believing herself to have an objective reason, then she has a subjective reason. She is rational in so far as her actions are guided by her subjective reasons.¹⁸ The nub of my argument is that the familiar emotional responses to works of fiction are of immense value to us, they are something which we can often choose to have, and therefore to have these emotions may be in complete accord with rationality. I will postpone till the end of this paper the defence of the claim that having emotional responses to fiction is instrumentally valuable; the more controversial point is that when we are justified in thinking that having emotions is in our best interests, and we are able to control those emotions, then having them is rational.

Interestingly, Radford seems almost to grant this, writing that when we obtain value from our 'problematic responses' we won't try to eliminate them 'and it might even be said to be irrational, etc., to do so'.¹⁹ But the *emotion itself*, he insists, is still irrational. Apparently there is one kind of irrationality that the emotion suffers from, and a different norm which applies not to the emotion, nor the 'having of it', but the performing of actions designed to rid oneself of it.

This distinction brings to the light something which may well have been troubling readers by this point. The kind of instrumental rationality that I favour pertains to *actions*—it is an account of practical rationality. One might simply complain that emotions are not actions, and so are not subject to this criterion of rational appraisal. After all, we are familiar enough with non-instrumental norms of (ir)rationality: instrumentalism is (generally) not maintained for theoretical rationality, the principles of doxastic assessment. The intriguing predicament described by Radford—that my token emotion may be irrational, but it would be irrational for me to try to eliminate it—must derive from the dictates of two distinct normative frameworks. What I can 'try to do' to dissipate the emotion concerns my actions, which fall under an instrumentalist principle (I would argue); the emotion itself answers to a different norm.

An important reason one might have for considering emotions to lie outside the jurisdiction of instrumentalism is the (putative) fact that they are not within our autonomous control. They share this feature with beliefs: if I am told that infinite utility rewards my adopting a belief in God, it is far from clear that I will, simply on these grounds, be able to adopt the belief.²⁰ Thus if one identifies emotions with beliefs—as does the orthodox cognitive theory—then the lack of autonomy and non-instrumental rationality of beliefs will transfer directly to the emotions.

The discussion might end here were it not for the fact that in order to accommodate the claim that we can feel emotions without the associated beliefs, I found need to amend the cognitive theory. An emotion, I suggested, may obtain in virtue of having a *thought* which causes the appropriate physiological disturbance. And what is striking is that *to think* about X looks an awful lot more like an action within one's autonomous control than to form a belief about X. I can *choose* to think about Anna Karenina, and to a large degree the vividness of that thought is also up to me. I can bring that thought to mind, and ban it from my mind, more or less when I wish to (barring hindrances and distractions). In all the respects that interest us here, entertaining thoughts of Anna or Dracula are as much actions, are as much subject to the norms of practical rationality, as entertaining guests for dinner.²¹ (And if entertaining thoughts is not always like this, it is frequently, which is all my case requires.)

But thinking about Anna's suffering is not sufficient for feeling pity for her. There is also the matter of the physiological agitation which the thought must cause. This causal link, I grant, is not a matter of choice, which explains why, at a horror movie, one might feel more fear than one wants to: one indulges the thoughts of Dracula but isn't ready for the extent of physiological disturbance that results. Let me put that case aside for a moment. It is far more usual that when I go to a horror movie I know what to expect, within broad limits, both from the movie and from myself. When I start a new novel I am aware of the range of emotions that might result. Of course, the book might be sadder than I was expecting, but, generally, I expect that books will sometimes be sadder than I expected. I do not expect them to leave me stunned with grief, traumatized, or seething with jealousy.

It is easy to generate examples where emotional reactions to fiction pass from our control; nevertheless, I believe that it is a mistake to generalize too quickly. Much more often than not, I submit, we are in firm control of our emotional states when embroiled in a fiction. Usually, the music makes me cry because I am *letting it*; the ghost story makes me fearful because I am *encouraging it*. Much more often than not, if it suits our purposes we can expel such emotions very quickly. Someone who sheds a tear during a tragedy is not typically called 'irrational' and nor are his emotions called 'uncontrolled'. We reserve these labels for the statistically unusual case of the person who cannot eliminate the emotion when the credits roll (or shortly thereafter), the person who doesn't sob a little but howls with grief. Lest we are distracted by 'control' pertaining, as it often does, to the *behaviours* associated with emotions, imagine two movie-goers who are outwardly identical: perhaps they sniffle a little at the sad bits. Afterwards, one reports, as we would usually expect, that the movie made her feel sad. The other, however, reports that he was, inwardly, overcome with grief—that it was just 'out of control'—that he remains in anguish, despite attempts to put the emotion aside. The mere fact that this statement is not in the least puzzling—that we circle off such cases and label the emotional episodes therein 'out of control'—creates a strong presumption in favour of the claim that the ordinary cases of pity, sadness, etc., felt in response to fiction are *not* uncontrolled.

Assuming that having a thought (of myself in danger from a vampire) is a rational action that I perform, and I may be justified in expecting a certain amount of physiological agitation to result (which provides the intensity of the emotion), I do not cease to be rational if the extent of the agitation is more or less than anticipated. By analogy, suppose I am wondering whether to invite Mme. K. as a dinner guest; she's a risky choice—sometimes the soul of the party, but she's been known, once in a blue moon, to upset other guests with her brusqueness. Given my preference for a smooth yet entertaining party, I must weigh probabilities and come to a decision. If I'm justified in believing that Mme. K. is only rarely rude (and her wittiness would be very desirable), then inviting her may be rational. Assuming this is so, it is no less rational if she happens to turn up (horrors!) in a foul mood.

In such a case, of course, I would not be *responsible* for Mme. K's ill temper, and her rudeness is certainly not an action that I perform simply because it is a foreseeable consequence of something that I did perform. Between my choosing to invite her, and her unpleasantness, is *her* agency. But in cases uninterrupted by another's agency, the following principle might seem unobjectionable:

- 7) If a person performs action *f*, believing that *y* will likely result—and no other agency is involved—then, if *y* does result, that person is deemed not merely responsible for *y*, but to have performed the action *y*.

If I cut down a tree, knowing that the birdhouse in its branches will likely be damaged—and it is—then I have performed the action of damaging the birdhouse. Were we to uphold principle (7), it could be argued that not only is the thought one purposely entertains an action, but so too is the predicted physiological response; hence *the emotion* as a whole is an action, subject to ordinary norms of practical rationality.

I would not claim that emotions are *in general* actions.²² Emotions are often outside our control, in particular when they are based on a belief—I am not in control of my sadness if I believe that a friend has just died. But compare the case of sitting quietly, vividly *imagining* the death of a loved one. Doesn't this process seem very much in the realm of *action*? If so, then on such occasions one is being 'irrational' if the whole process fails to serve one's purposes (and one has evidence that this is the case). That a different token of the same emotion may *not* be an action is untroubling. Sometimes the raising of my leg is an action that I perform (subject to the norms of practical rationality); sometimes it is the result of the doctor tapping my knee with a hammer (such that the instrumentalist principle is inapplicable).

If the preceding discussion was introduced in the subjunctive mood, it is because (7) does *not* seem in general correct. Suppose *y* in (7) were a belief.²³ And suppose there were a pill I could take which would cause me to form the belief that Napoleon won Waterloo (*f* is the taking of the pill). The conclusion—that believing that Napoleon won Waterloo is an *action* that I perform—is unpalatable. More importantly, even if (7) were true—even if I did take the pill, thus performing action of forming that belief—and even if I did so because I could see that believing that Napoleon won Waterloo was going to be, in some fashion, of immense instrumental value—none of this would suffice to make that belief rational. No matter that believing that *p* may be to my benefit, no matter how much I can control belief formation, whether the belief is *rational* depends upon other factors: roughly, whether it accords with the evidence that is available to me.

I take it that this is what Radford is getting at when he appears to allow that an emotion might be irrational while my performing actions to encourage that emotion is rational. It would be like my being rationally justified, on instrumental grounds, in taking the belief-pill, while the belief thus formed remains irrational (due to my being exposed to plenty of evidence implying the falsity of that belief). It is interesting to wonder what we would say, of the latter imaginary situation, concerning whether *I* am rational. Consider the following:

- 8) If a person, P, performs action a, justifiably believing that b will likely result, and justifiably believing that b will serve his ends, then (i) a is a rational action, and therefore (ii) P is (*ceteris paribus*) rational.

What if a is ‘taking a belief-pill’, and b denotes the formation of a belief—one for which P has been exposed to masses of counter-evidence? I do not think this shows that (8) is false; it simply shows that we need to disambiguate: in a sense P is rational, in another sense P is not. This, I believe, is the *strongest* thesis that Radford could feasibly adopt. If Mary’s having of emotions is to her benefit (and she knows it), and if there are actions she can perform in order to have those emotions (which there are, in the case of fiction), then, even if there are grounds for asserting that her emotion itself is irrational, it cannot be that *she* is irrational *simpliciter*. According to one set of norms she is rational; according to another she is not. (Whether Mary is, in addition, ‘incoherent’ or ‘childish’ or ‘silly’ is entirely another matter. What would be *incoherent* about someone’s taking a belief-pill, thus forming a beneficial but irrational belief?)

According to (8), a person feeling emotion in response to fiction is rational according to the following reasoning. P is free to think about monsters (as dangerous, etc.). P is justified in believing that thinking about monsters in this way will result in tingling, shivers, etc.—in short: agitations. Thus P is justified in believing that thinking about monsters in this way will result in fear.²⁴ P is also justified in believing that fearing monsters (on this occasion) is an efficient means of securing benefit B (to be elaborated later). Thus P’s thinking about monsters is rational; P is rational (*ceteris paribus*).

Two things to note. First, this reasoning does not rely on making the physiological element of the emotion an *action*, as previous thinking essayed. Second, it does not entail that P might not also be *irrational* according to a different set of norms. So, in response to the latter, we now need to ask: ‘Is there another set of norms according to which P might be irrational?’ In the case of *beliefs* (if b in (8) denotes a belief) we can be reasonably comfortable that there is. We have an established theory of doxastic rationality, distinct from our way of rationally appraising action, and it is clear why: having a belief system fulfills a purpose that acting does not. We form beliefs in order to have an accurate representation of the world, and to do so successfully requires sensitivity to available evidence. If a person starts forming beliefs while ignoring available evidence, then something has gone badly wrong; such a tendency will encourage a disastrous doxastic policy—what Peirce described as ‘a rapid deterioration of intellectual vigor’²⁵—undermining the very purpose of belief-formation.

Might there be matching reasoning if b in (8) denotes *an emotion*? It is clear that we do call emotions ‘irrational’, and so it seems reasonable to hold that there is a special framework for their rational assessment. But what grounds are there for thinking that a person feeling sad while reading a novel, or frightened when watching a horror movie, is erring according

to this framework? *Insisting* on thesis (4) is simply that: insistence. All Radford has is a tenuous link to a paradigm case of irrational emotion—phobias. We can agree that phobic responses are irrational, but I am yet to be persuaded that thesis (4) comes close to capturing *why* they are.²⁶

For a start, it is not obvious that a phobic response is emotion had in the absence of appropriate belief. Perhaps, in a sense, the arachnophobe does believe that the spider in the bathtub is dangerous. It is not unnatural to say that someone with a fear of flying believes obsessively that the plane is going to crash. We can still call such persons ‘irrational’, but it is their *beliefs* that are irrational, for they are held on to in the presence of solid discrediting evidence. The emotions that such persons experience may also be called ‘irrational’—not because they are had without the right belief, but because they are tied to a belief that is itself irrational. When we admonish a child frightened of a stuffed tiger, we point out to him ‘It can’t hurt you,’ rather than ‘You believe that it can’t hurt you.’ This suggests that we’re primarily correcting his belief, not his emotion—he’s silly because he’s been exposed to adequate evidence that the tiger isn’t real and therefore is not dangerous, but fails fully to believe it.²⁷

Radford will retort: ‘But the arachnophobe *knows* the spider isn’t dangerous!’ (‘she sincerely acknowledges, perhaps after counseling and a quick but effective series of lessons on the natural history of spiders, that ... there is nothing to fear’²⁸). I dare say for some types or tokens of phobias this is true enough, but there is no reason to think that it generally is (does the taphephobe know that he’s not going to be buried alive, or does he irrationally believe that he is? does the pathophobe know that disease is not dangerous, or does she irrationally believe that she’s about to fall ill?), and therefore the range of disorders we call ‘phobias’—all of which seem to be characterized by irrationality—do not uniformly acquire their irrationality by falling foul of (4).²⁹ This fact should cause us to wonder if there is not some different feature in virtue of which phobias are irrational.

What characterizes phobic responses is an absence of control and a kind of counter-productiveness. My fear of an actual bull which is actually chasing me is involuntary but is not counter-productive—on the contrary, it is doing what an emotion is supposed to do. But an involuntary fear of the placid cow on the distant hillside is an emotional response that has somehow ‘gone wrong’. I am not in a position to venture a thesis of what, in general, emotions are ‘supposed to do’, but I ask the reader to recognize that, in so far as we have such a notion—however unformed and vague—we understand phobias as irrational responses that are undermining of that purpose. They are maladaptive responses that interfere with normal living patterns. It is in this respect that irrational emotions match irrational beliefs: they undermine the very purpose of the system.

I said that an uncontrolled productive fear is not a phobia; what about a controlled counter-productive one? Here my previous arguments return. If the fear is *controlled*, then (A) it is not a phobia, and (B) it answers to a different normative framework—namely, practical rationality. If it is counter-productive, and the agent is justified in taking it to be, then indeed it will be irrational, as is any knowingly self-sabotaging action. But if, instead, it is under control and the agent is justified in thinking it productive towards her ends, then it is a rational action. By principle (8) we may conclude that a person having such an emotion is rational. Might the person in addition be *irrational* according to a different set of norms? Well, if the emotion is controlled and productive, then it cannot be a phobic response—and what other reason might there be for doubting that the agent is rational *simpliciter*?

None, I contend. In other words, phobic emotions are irrational—paradigmatically so—but Radford's (4), we have seen, does not capture why they are. And so there is no reason left for thinking that emotional responses to fiction are also irrational. Once their similarity to phobias is severed (or at least shown to be unremarkable), what argument is left? A mere insistence upon (4)? Radford has a couple of other stock examples up his sleeve: he describes, for example, the tennis player's 'lifting' the ball over the net with a gesture as irrational. But, without further argument, one is no more inclined to call this 'irrational' than one is to so label pity for Anna Karenina. The best hope (indeed, I think, the only hope) was to establish that some paradigm case of irrational emotion is irrational in virtue of having attribute X, and then argue that responses to fiction also have X. Radford locates a property that emotional reactions to fiction share with *some* phobic responses, but fails to establish that this property accounts for the irrationality of phobias.

The proposition that I have endeavoured to present with plausibility is that in certain circumstances—those corresponding roughly to our emotional encounters with fictions—the mechanism underlying emotions is within our control. In other circumstances, no doubt, emotions are outside our control, but fiction seems a model example of where we can, within rough limits, command them (indeed, it might well be argued that this is the whole point of our interest in fiction). If, when we have these emotions, it is the norms of instrumental practical rationality that hold sway, then all that remains to be shown is that there are circumstances in which a person can be justified in thinking that having such an emotion will be to her good.

I will be brief with this premise, since my thoughts are not original, and, moreover, Radford appears to grant the claim. Not only, he says, do we not want to 'dissipate' our fiction-prompted feelings of fear, pity, etc., but it is quite understandable, and even justifiable, that we should not. His father, Radford tells us, remained stoically unmoved by fiction, and thus was denied some of the 'greatest experiences' a person can have.³⁰ Elsewhere we are told that reading *Anna Karenina* is something from which we 'derive enormous pleasure' and 'enormous instruction' and that we see such works 'quite properly, as the expression of what is most worthy, impressive and rare in human beings'.³¹

I lean towards the 'cognitivist' school of thought, which holds that a large part of the value of art lies in how it advances our understanding of ourselves and the world, as opposed to the pleasure that it brings.³² I am inclined to think, further, that the having of emotions is frequently an important element in gaining proper understanding from the artwork. Consider the things we might learn from *Anna Karenina*—we stand to acquire all manner of truths, both obvious and subtle. For simplicity's sake, let's stick with the crudely obvious lesson: that passion can be destructive. Tolstoy could just *tell us*, on page one, 'Passion can be destructive', and save a lot of time and bother, but this would be inadequate. Its inadequacy would lie not merely in the fact that reading that one sentence is not so *pleasurable* as reading the whole novel, but in the fact that we would not *learn* the lesson. By immersing ourselves in the novel—emotions and all—we undergo a limited version of living the narrative ourselves, thus gaining experience. Merely being told that a certain kind of relationship will end in disaster has little impact on me. Watching a close friend go through the whole drama brings it home rather more. Going through it all myself, experiencing the hope and the agony, will, if I'm sensible, teach me not to do it all again in the future. The value of fiction often lies in its ability to give me life experience on the cheap. And having the appropriate emotions in response to the fiction is an important element of the process.

Susan Feagin presents a cogent theory of the value of tragedy, explaining the pleasure we take in it as a ‘meta-response’.³³ Consider Tom, whose basic response to the woes of Oedipus is pity. Noting that he feels pity, he has a second (simultaneous) emotional response—one that takes the basic response as its object: he takes pleasure in the fact that he is the kind of person who feels pity for a person in Oedipus’ situation. Feagin writes: ‘This discovery, or reminder, is something which, quite justly, yields satisfaction. In a way it shows what we care for, and in showing us we care for the welfare of human beings and that we deplore the immoral forces that defeat them, it reminds us of our common humanity.’ She accounts for the pleasures of horror in a similar fashion.³⁴ Tom’s basic emotional response to the sight of a fictional monster is fear. There are various alternatives for the pleasure-bringing meta-response. Believing that fear is the appropriate response, he observes himself having that response and so feels satisfaction. He may take further pleasure in the fact that he is able to take pleasure in something so basically fearful—it reveals him (to himself) to be ‘psychologically flexible’, to have the capacity to control, develop, and exercise abilities. Feagin thus accounts for the mechanism of gaining pleasure from fear, sadness, horror, etc. It doesn’t follow that Tom is aware how the mechanism works—all he believes is that he will probably gain pleasure, and, believing this, it is (*ceteris paribus*) rational for him to pursue the means to that pleasure. My argument is complete at this point, but I would add just one more layer to the picture. The value of B-grade horror movies as well as Sophoclean tragedies may lie in their power to instruct as much as in any hedonic pay-off. I doubt one learns much from the manifest content of such movies, but one may learn a lot about oneself. By exercising her capacities for fear and pity (etc.) at appropriate objects, a person learns about those capacities, she learns about and reinforces her natural sympathy, she finds out about situational subtleties and the responses they engender, she gains sensitivities, and she is (one might go so far as to say) morally improved. Though it is surely false that such lofty ends are what most horror movie fans aim at, it would not be unreasonable for someone to frequent horror movies with such a purpose in mind. A theory that entails that such a person would be *irrational* in purposely pursuing such highly valuable ends is an odd one indeed.³⁵

NOTES

1. First presented in C. Radford, ‘How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supp. Vol. 49 (1975). Defended in ‘Philosophers and Their Monstrous Thoughts’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 22 (1982), ‘Stuffed Tigers: A Reply to H.O. Mounce’, *Philosophy* 57 (1982), ‘Replies to Three Critics’, *Philosophy* 64 (1989), ‘Fiction, Pity, Fear, and Jealousy’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995), and at least five other articles. Hereafter, respectively: Radford (1975), (1982a), (1982b), (1989), (1995).

2. See A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and the Will*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 49; M. Budd, *Music and the Emotions*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 128. The view is frequently attributed to Kendall Walton—‘Fearing Fictions’, *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978), *Mimesis and Make-Believe*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990)—but he appears to reject it in ‘Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime’, in M. Hjort and S. Laver (eds.), *Emotion and the Arts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. In 'The Paradox of Emotion and Fiction' (*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 75 [1994]), Robert Yanal has Radford endorsing (1) through (3), and thus concludes that Radford commits himself to an incoherence not in us but in the *universe* (p. 55). But Radford never endorses the existential thesis (1)—he endorses the normative thesis (4).

4. P. Lamarque, 'How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21 (1981) and 'Essay Review of *Mimesis and Make-Believe*', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (1991). Lamarque is criticized in Radford (1982a).

5. Radford, (1982a), p. 261.

6. Radford, (1982b). Mounce's article is 'Art and Real Life', *Philosophy* 55 (1980).

7. Radford, (1982b), p. 530. I find myself wondering just how long a list of pejorative terms Radford's 'etc.' represents. A quick glance at his numerous papers finds him willing to employ all of the following (seemingly interchangeably) to make the point: 'puzzling', 'worrying', 'unintelligible', 'irrational', 'incoherent', 'silly', 'unjustified', 'paradoxical', 'absurd', 'childish', 'unreasonable', 'inconsistent', 'unwarranted'.

8. See, for example, W. Lyons, 'Physiological Changes and Emotions', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1974) and *Emotion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); R. Peters, 'The Education of the Emotions', in M. Arnold (ed.), *Feelings and Emotions: The Loyola Symposium*, (New York: Academic Press, 1970); I. Scheffler, *In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), chapter 1. Readers must note that I am side-stepping many of the subtleties and details of the cognitive theory of the emotions (and all its variants) because they are not required in this paper.

9. New York: Routledge, 1990; pp. 24-6.

10. See I. Thalberg, 'Constituents and Causes of Emotion and Action', *Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1973) and R. Aquila, 'Causes and Constituents of Occurrent Emotion', *Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1975).

11. To pinch a phrase from John Mackie, the thought, on this story, is an *inus condition* for having an emotion: an insufficient but necessary part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition. Explicated: the thought-agitation pair is sufficient but, because a belief-agitation pair would also suffice, unnecessary; of the former pair, the thought is necessary but, since the agitation is also required, insufficient. See his *The Cement of the Universe*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), chapter 3. [AUTHOR'S LATER NOTE: This footnote is incorrect.]

12. J. Neu, in *Emotion, Thought and Therapy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), suggests that we may keep the 'causal talk' after all: 'If E consists of P, Q, R ... and P causes Q, R ... then one can say, quite properly, that P causes E.' One of his examples is the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour: a constituent of the war in the Pacific, but also the cause of it. I remain doubtful for inchoate reasons, so don't appeal to this possibility.

13. In Radford, (1995), p. 72, the following evidence is mustered that an arachnophobe experiences *fear*: that ‘she experiences feelings that she would describe as those of “being frightened,” “panic,” “horror,” etc. Even the mere thought of spiders may elicit these feelings of panic, and her sincere avowals that this is what she feels may receive confirmation and corroboration from physiological tests of her pulse rate, blood pressure, and respirations, as well as from disinterested lay observers.’ For criticism of the thesis that emotions are feelings, see Daniel M. Farrell, ‘Recent Work on the Emotions’, *Analyse & Kritik* 10 (1988).

14. P. Lamarque, (1981), *op. cit.*, p. 302.

15. Radford, (1982b), p.529.

16. Radford, (1982a), 261.

17. Radford, (1995), p. 72.

18. These relations are derived from G. Cullity and B. Gaut’s introduction to G. Cullity and B. Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 2.

19. Radford, (1982a), p. 261.

20. See Bernard Williams, ‘Deciding to Believe’ in *Problems of the Self*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), and D. Scott-Kakures, ‘On Belief and the Captivity of the Will’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994).

21. In this I am in broad agreement with the work of Harry Frankfurt, who argues that on certain occasions we are ‘active’ with respect to our desires (when we ‘identify with them’): ‘Turning one’s mind in a certain direction, or deliberating systematically about a problem, are activities in which a person himself engages’, ‘Identification and Externality’, in A.O. Rorty (ed.), *The Identities of Persons*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 240.

22. In this my position diverges importantly from that of Robert Solomon, who argues that all emotions are purposive judgments (i.e., actions). Needless to say, if Solomon is correct then my general arguments go through *a fortiori*. See his *The Passions*, (New York: Doubleday, 1986), ‘The Logic of Emotion’, *Noûs* 11 (1977), ‘On Emotions as Judgments’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), etc. The thesis that we actively choose all of our emotions was championed, of course, by J.P. Sartre, in *Esquisse d’une Théorie des Emotions*, (Paris: Vrin, 1939).

23. I’m much indebted to David Owens for drawing my attention to this possibility.

24. It is not that the tingling, etc., *is* the fear. Rather, the thought of monsters will cause tingling, and the combination of both these events constitutes the fear. Thus having the thought *results in* the fear, where ‘results in’ is partly a constitutive relation.

25. C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds.), (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), Vol. 1, paragraph 58.

26. In her paper 'Fiction, Emotion, and Rationality', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996), E. M. Dadlez argues in a similar vein against Radford—maintaining that the analogy between phobias and responses to fiction is a weak one. Though in agreement with a great deal of what she says, I'm hesitant that she's located the source of disanalogy. She argues that (unlike fear of Dracula) X-phobia is imagining that *actual* Xs are dangerous, coupled with the belief that they are not. In other words, phobias involve a 'projection of the imaginary onto the real' (p. 298). But consider taphephobia (fear of being buried alive): the feared event—my premature burial—does not exist. I have similar concerns about phasmophobia (fear of ghosts), demonophobia, etc. Another writer who persuasively dismisses phobias as an appropriate model is A. Neil, 'Emotional Responses to Fiction: Reply to Radford', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995).

27. The proper analogue of emotional responses to fiction is the child who purposely and vividly imagines the tiger's being dangerous in order to gain a frisson of fear, in order to catch a glimpse of primal terror. It may simply be the pleasure of the fearful shiver that he seeks, or, more likely, by experiencing a hint of terror he reinforces the comfort and security of his actual existence. This seems to me to be (*ceteris paribus*) perfectly rational behaviour.

28. Radford, (1995), p. 72.

29. There is good empirical confirmation that many phobias stem from irrational beliefs. Albert Ellis' 'rational-emotive theory' of anxiety disorders (*Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy*, [New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962]) hypothesized that people suffering from social phobia have distorted beliefs about the importance of social approval, elevated negative self-image, even such worries as 'My mind will probably go blank', etc. This hypothesis was supported in C.S. Newmark, R.A. Frerking, L. Cook, and L. Newmark, 'Endorsement of Ellis' irrational beliefs as a function of psychotherapy', *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 29 (1973). See also G.C.L. Davey (ed.), *Phobias*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), chapter 1. It should be noted that social phobia is the second most common form of phobia (after agoraphobia)—see I.M. Marks, *Fears, Phobias, and Rituals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 363-4.

30. Radford, (1989), p. 97.

31. Radford, (1982b), p. 532.

32. This use of 'cognitivism' refers to a theory concerning the value of art, and is not to be confused with the cognitive theory of the emotions discussed earlier. For a defence of cognitivism, see G. Graham, 'Learning From Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995). I see no need for a unified theory of 'the value of art', so if cognitivism sometimes breaks down—concerning the value of music, say—so be it.

33. Susan L. Feagin, 'The Pleasures of Tragedy', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983). The idea that tragedy (and the realist novel) can *educate* the emotions has been developed by Martha Nussbaum: see *The Fragility of Goodness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), *Love's Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

34. See her 'Monsters, Disgust, and Fascination', *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992), p. 83.

35. I should like to thank Peter Lamarque and David Owens for very helpful comments on an earlier draft.