Topoi
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-023-09963-w

The Paradox of the Future: Is it Rational to Feel Emotions for Future Generations?

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Accepted: 27 September 2023
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Abstract

According to some, there is a problem concerning the emotions we feel toward fictional entities such as Anna Karenina, Werther and the like. We feel pity, fear, and sadness toward them, but how is that possible? "We are saddened, but how can we be? *What are we sad about*? How can we feel genuinely and involuntarily sad, and weep, as we do know that *no one* has suffered or died?" (Radford, in: Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1975). This is the paradox of fiction which is based on the assumption that emotions, to be genuine and rational, should be directed toward existent beings. But if beliefs about existence are necessary for us to be rationally moved by something, and such beliefs are lacking when we are moved by fiction (because we do not believe fictional characters and events to be real), then our capacity for an emotional response to fiction is irrational. Consequently, our emotional attitude toward future generations should be considered as irrational as well. But is this really the case? Are there good arguments to consider future and fictional entities as similar from this point of view? Or would it be better to distinguish the two? Is there such a thing as a paradox of the future? If so, how does it relate to the more famous paradox of fiction?

Keywords Paradox of fiction · Object theory · Existence · Emotions · Future generations

1 Introduction

Take these six different situations:

(a) Helen is afraid of the lion roaring in front of her.
(b) Lisa is reading Lev Tolstoy's masterpiece, *Anna Karenina*. When she arrives at the suicide scene at the railway station, she cries.
(c) Julia is sad because she misses her grandmother who died 20 years ago.
(d) Oriana is sad for her never-born child.
(e) Olivia, conscious of the unprecedented climate crisis that is taking place, is worried for future generations.
(f) Martine is depressed and cries in bed every night.

These situations differ from each other,[1] but what they seemingly have in common is the fact of having to do with affective states (such as fear, sadness, worry, and depression). In all but the first of the above cases, the object toward which the affective response is directed does not exist in spacetime. Anna Karenina does not exist because she is a fictional character, Julia's grandmother does not exist anymore (but she existed once), future generations do not exist yet, and in the case of Martine's depression, nothing is making her feel down, nonetheless she feels listless and low.[2]

The very fact of feeling emotions toward nonexistent objects has long been considered by philosophers as somehow problematic, when not even paradoxical, especially when fictional entities are at stake, as happens in

[1] For a coherent and impressive account of emotions in all their nuances and facets, see Ben-Ze'ev (2000). This book is an up-to-date compendium on emotions, delving into both psychological and philosophical aspects of the subject. It doesn't rely on strict necessary and sufficient conditions for membership within the category of emotion.

[2] It is absolutely not my intention to simplify or disregard the phenomenon of depression, which is very complex. However, for the purposes of the present paper—aimed at identifying, in the various cases in which there is an emotional response on the part of the subject, the object toward which it is directed—the case of depression represents a borderline case, since the intense feelings are not directed at anything in particular, and that is indeed one of the reasons why depressed people have an extremely painful experience that is often difficult to heal from (Ratcliffe 2008: ch. 4; Thompson 1995).

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Published online: 29 November 2023

(b). Why does Lisa cry if there is nothing to cry for? Anna Karenina, as we all know, is a fictional character invented by Tolstoy, so how are we to explain Lisa's reaction? Is she just irrational (Radford 1975)? Or should we consider her affective response toward Anna Karenina as structurally different from the one directed toward a real entity (Walton 1978)?

Let us look more closely at the situation at hand. Lisa is reading ch. XXXI. Anna is at the railway station, and after having crossed herself, she

> "dropped the red bag and drawing her head back into her shoulders, fell on her hands under the carriage, and lightly, as though she would rise again at once, dropped onto her knees. And at the same instant she was terror-stricken at what she was doing. 'Where am I? What am I doing? What for?' She tried to get up, to drop backwards; but something huge and merciless struck her on the head and rolled her on her back. 'Lord, forgive me all' she said, feeling it impossible to struggle. A peasant muttering something was working at the iron above her. And the light by which she had read the book filled with troubles, falsehoods, sorrow, and evil, flared up more brightly than ever before, lighted up for her all that had been in darkness, flickered, began to grow dim, and was quenched forever" (Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Ch. XXXI, Part 7).

This is one of the most heartbreaking passages in the story. While reading, Lisa is well aware, of course, that things are getting worse—Anna and Vronsky have become increasingly bitter toward each other, a combination of boredom and suspicion has destroyed Anna's mental health, Vronsky is probably cheating on her, and is starting to get tired of the whole situation –, yet she couldn't imagine such a sudden and tragic end. Then she cries, thinking about how cruel life can be sometimes.

Colin Radford (1975) maintains that the fact of feeling emotions for fictional characters like Anna gives rise to a philosophical paradox, the (so-called) *paradox of fiction*, constituted by three plausible premises that cannot be conjointly true at the same time:

> (b1) Lisa feels sad about Anna's tragic end and she knows Anna is a fictional character;
> (b2) Believing in the existence of x (what makes us sad) is a necessary condition for having certain emotions toward x;
> (b3) Lisa does not believe in the existence of fictional characters.

Don't we need to judge/believe that someone suffered or died to be sad for them, exactly as we need to judge/believe that a lion is or can be dangerous to us for being afraid of it? Radford sees premise (b2) as plausible and difficult to discard, just as premises (b1) and (b3).[3]

2 Emotions, Objects, and Existence

When the paradox was formulated, the cognitive theory of emotions (according to which emotional experiences are based on the subject's beliefs or evaluative judgments about the existence of the object of the emotion) was widely accepted. However soon afterward it began to be questioned[4]: doubts started being raised against (b2), i.e. the fact

[3] Levinson (1997: pp. 22–27) summarizes some solutions that have been offered to the paradox of fiction. Since the premises that constitute the paradox are mutually incompatible, any solution would inevitably deny (or at least modify) one of the three. The first (negating premise b1) is the *non-intentional solution*, according to which emotional responses to works of fiction do not fall within the intentional and cognitive dimension typical of normal emotions: in these cases, strictly speaking, we would not be dealing with emotions, but rather with less complex states such as moods or automatic reactions, which would not be characterized by the intentional and cognitive elements typical of real emotions. The second solution is the *suspension of belief* (where premise b3 is negated), originally proposed by Coleridge (1817: ch. XIV). According to it, our emotional responses to works of fiction result from a momentary suspension of belief regarding the fact that the objects of fiction do not exist. The third is the *thought-theory solution* (Carroll 1990; Lamarque 1981), which holds (modifying b2) that our emotional responses to works of fiction have as their object the descriptions, images, and thoughts presented in the work of fiction itself (instead of a belief in the object's existence). A more literal version of this approach is the *shadow-object solution* (Charlton 1984), according to which our emotional responses to works of fiction have as their object real people and events, resembling in some ways the people and events of fiction. The fourth solution is the *non-judgmental* one, which argues that it is not necessary for emotional responses to fiction to involve the strong belief in existence typical of judgment (therefore modifying again b2), as a weaker form of belief is sufficient in such cases (Morreal 1993). The fifth is the *surrogate belief solution*, according to which we respond emotionally to fiction because we believe that, in fiction, the characters are really suffering (Neill 1993). The sixth is the *irrational solution*, whereby emotional responses to fiction are classified as irrational behavior: even though one knows that certain people and situations do not exist, one feels emotions toward them. This is the solution originally proposed by Radford (1975). Rather than a solution, however, it is a sort of explanation of the paradox, which doesn't solve the problem as much as it proposes to acknowledge and accept it. Finally, the seventh and last one is the *make-believe solution* (Walton 1978; 1990), according to which the emotions we feel toward works of fiction are imaginary emotions (b1 is negated here), which are part of the same game of make-believe in which we are participating.

[4] Supporters of the idea that Radford was a cognitivist about emotions include, among others, Matravers (1998), Hartz (1999), and Wilson (2013). For an account according to which the rise of the paradox is not related to Radford's commitment to cognitivism, see Friend (2020). Even if the form of cognitivism supposedly maintained by Radford in his seminal paper has been strongly criticized and eventually dismissed, cognitivism still has supporters today—although they do not agree on what they mean by "cognitive thesis" (belief /rationality/consciousness/understanding) and "cognitive

that emotions involve judgments or beliefs concerning the object's existence, and hence the paradox itself started to falter. Objections included very naïve yet no less persuasive points. For instance, if it were true that we need to believe in the existence of something to feel emotions toward it, then what about the sadness Julia feels for her grandmother who died 20 years ago (and therefore no longer exists)? And what about the deep sorrow experienced by Oriana Fallaci for a child that was never born (Fallaci 1976)? What about Olivia's concern for the unprecedented climate crisis we are going through and the impact it will have on future generations?[5]

As Richard Moran (1994) underlines—and the cases just presented show this quite clearly—contrary to what Radford believes, it seems that we can be perfectly rational in feeling emotions toward nonexistent objects. This has been convincingly explained by Robert Stecker (2011) who insists on the fact that even abandoning (b2), the premise according to which believing in the existence of what makes us feel in a certain way is a necessary condition for having certain emotions toward it, we can still discuss valuable topics surrounding the debate on the paradox of fiction.

Emotions are generally considered mental states (Dixon 2003; Solomon 2008) connected with a cognitive base, bodily changes, a tendency to act, and evaluation. Let's consider the difference between (a) and (b). Take the situation described in (a), where Helen is afraid of a lion: there is a belief (that there exists a dangerous lion), a bodily modification (Helen is sweating, her heart is racing), a tendency to do something (she wants to run away, call for help, maybe try to close the cage door), and an evaluation (the roaring lion looks angry and is presumably very dangerous). An interesting question concerns the role these elements play in the emotional reaction they provoke: among Helen's appraising the lion as dangerous, her increased heartbeat, disturbing feeling, and tendency to flee, what should we consider as an essential component (Prinz 2004)? Three main ways of answering that question have been identified (Scarantino 2016): the one defining emotions as distinctive feelings, the other regarding emotions as involving a specific evaluation, and the last one defining emotions as distinctive motivational states.

Let's now consider the situation described by (b), where Lisa feels saddened by Anna Karenina's suicide: there is a belief (that there is a fictional character called "Anna Karenina" who decides to end her days by throwing herself under a train), a bodily modification (Lisa is crying, her heart is racing), a tendency to do (or not to do) something (for instance, not to go to the railway station when feeling particularly depressed), and an evaluation (Anna Karenina is unable to think clearly when she arrives at the railway station). If compared with the previous one, this situation is different indeed, but not because it is paradoxical whereas the former one is normal and acceptable. Both look like standard situations when considered from a psychological point of view since they both have to do with an emotional reaction stimulated by a specific object/event identified as the reason for that emotional response. This is what one can legitimately conclude from Stecker's remarks.

But then where does the difference between (a) and (b) lie? If not in the genuineness of the emotion felt, it has to reside in different psychological attitudes. And what is the diversity between these psychological attitudes based on? Evidently on the objects toward which the emotions are respectively directed in (a) and (b). This shows why an ontological approach such as the one offered by Object Theory[6] could prove to be extremely useful here, because it considers objects not as far as their mode of presentation is concerned (i.e. whether they exist, do not exist, subsist, or simply are) but in a more general way (which is why, according to Alexius Meinong, Object Theory has a wider field of inquiry than metaphysics, which deals only with existing things, i.e. with the entirety of the real),[7] mostly focusing on the set of properties whose object-correlates they are[8] and this independently from their possibly also being objects of a particular kind for someone in some way.

Footnote 4 (continued)

methodology" (should it involve cognitive psychology, evolutive psychology, or education?). Convincing cognitive positions have been endorsed especially in film studies by Carroll (2003), Smith (2003), Persson (2003), and Plantinga (2009).

[5] As Stecker (2011: p. 298) clearly states: "In the case of pity for those who existed in the past, the attitude is *belief* that they suffered, the same attitude that we have to those who suffer in the present. In the case of future directed emotions, the proposition is that an event might occur, and the attitude is again *belief*. Belief in these situations suffices to explain what I feel".

[6] For a historical overview of Object Theory see Nef (1998), Raspa (2002) and Bakaoukas (2003). The most famous Object Theory is undoubtedly Meinong's (1904), which I consider as a constant reference point in this paper.

[7] Meinong sees metaphysics as determined by "the prejudice in favor of the actual", whereas Object Theory goes beyond that, being characterized as an a priori science dealing with whatever can be known a priori about objects. Object Theory deals with objects as such, it "has to do with the given taken in its entirety" (Meinong 1904: §§ 2, 11).

[8] According to this definition everything that has at least one property is an object and the criterion for distinguishing what is an object from what is not is the following: Pegasus is an object because the name "Pegasus" stands for something to which certain properties correspond ("being a winged horse", "being Medusa's and Poseidon's son", "being a mythological animal"), while on the contrary wrtgfh is not an object, because "wrtgfh" does not stand for anything. On the problems potentially engendered by such a criterion, see Salmon (1999: pp. 304–308), Kroon (2003: pp. 155–157), and Caplan (2004).

Object Theory takes into account all objects, lions as well as Anna Karenina, unborn children as well as future generations,[9] i.e. existent objects as well as (variously) nonexistent ones. According to this Theory, everything that has at least one property can be considered an object: everything that is not nothing is something. It does not matter whether Anna Karenina is a fictional object we will never meet on the street, whereas the lion is a dangerous animal we can meet, escape from, or befriend (as in the 2018 French movie *Mia and The White Lion* by G. De Maistre). From this point of view, the definition of what an object is does not include its possible existence.

Once we have an object corresponding to a set of properties, we might of course need to know what kind of object it is: is it existing, fictional, past, future, or imaginary? Indeed, the kind of object it is will not only arouse a specific emotional response, but also influence our behavior toward it. In relation to Anna Karenina, Lisa knows her emotions are directed toward a fictional literary entity created by Lev Tolstoy in the homonymous novel published in 1877 and accepted (i.e., recognized as such) by a community of readers and critics.[10] Therefore, all she needs to have a genuine emotional response is to believe in the properties characterizing Anna Karenina together with the events she is involved with. Furthermore, given the properties Anna has—i.e., the property of being desperate and abandoned, the property of being rejected by her friends, and the property of being crushed by a train—it is not difficult to understand why Lisa is brought to tears. Moreover, it is precisely because she recognizes the nature of the object making her feel that way—a fictional object—that Lisa does not even try to prevent Anna from committing suicide at the railway station that day. After all, she knows that we have no causal power over such entities, unless one happens to be the author of the fictional entity. Tolstoy, for instance, could have decided to "save" Anna somehow,[11] but Lisa, like the rest of us, unfortunately, cannot.

The same principle applies, from a strictly ontological standpoint, in the cases of Helen's fear of the lion, Julia's longing for her grandmother, Oriana's sorrow over her never-born child, and Olivia's concern for future generations. In each instance there are *objects to which emotions are directed*, even if they are objects of different kinds (and when we analyze the different emotional reactions they engender, their diversity becomes evident). Being terrified by a lion, for example, is different—and therefore elicits a different behavior—from being terrified by a dragon: whereas Helen believes the lion is in front of her, she does not believe the dragon is, and whereas she believes the lion is dangerous to her, she does not believe the dragon is (or could be), even if the dragon is characterized by the property of being dangerous (Helen knows that fictional entities are ontologically separated from us, hence cannot harm us in any way). That's why she would run from the lion but not from the dragon. Analogously, ontological considerations will also explain why being sad for one's dead grandmother (as happens to Julia) and being worried for future generations (as in Olivia's case) elicit distinct behaviors: a supposedly controlled (and more or less intense) sadness in the first case, together with the conviction that there is nothing to be done but keep the memory of the beloved grandmother alive; an active concern in the second case, in the certainty that the future has to be prepared in the present, and therefore that the best thing is to act and change today if we want to do something for the generations of tomorrow.

A different case from the situations described in (a)–(e) is (f), concerning Martine's depression: in that case, there is no object at all to be sad for, there is instead a medical illness affecting her feelings, thoughts, and acts. Martine's depressed mood—losing interest in activities she once enjoyed, having trouble sleeping, losing energy or experiencing more fatigue, feeling worthless, finding it difficult to think, concentrate or make decisions—has no direction and no intentional object whatsoever (not even a nonexistent one).

3 A Solution to the Paradox

Let's go back to the paradox of fiction as set forth by Radford. According to him, there would be a problem with our emotional response to Anna Karenina because in that situation there is seemingly no object (where "object" equals "existing object") to which our emotions are directed. "We are saddened, but how can we be? What are we sad about? How can we feel genuinely and involuntarily sad, and weep, as we do, knowing as we do that no one has suffered or died?" (Radford 1975: p. 77). By making ontological considerations in line with what has been suggested by Object Theory—hence by underlining the plausibility of the distinction between being an *object* and being an *existing object*—it

[9] According to the definition of future generations given by Andina (2022: pp. 87–88), "From an ontological point of view at least, future generations are something similar to fictional entities". Therefore, we could consider kinds of objects we have thus far kept distinct as belonging ontologically to the same category.

[10] According to the metaphysical version provided by Thomasson (1999: pp. 139–145), fictional entities are to be seen as abstract artifacts recognized as such by a literary community.

[11] This point is perfectly clear to Annie Wilkies, the protagonist of Stephen King's novel *Misery* (1987), who rescues and then takes Paul Sheldon, the author of her favorite book series *Misery*, prisoner in order to force him to resurrect the character by writing *Misery's Return*, a story in which it turns out that the main character was buried alive while comatose.

can be maintained that some things (like Anna Karenina,[12] dead people, never-born children, future generations) may be objects even without being existing ones. From such a perspective the paradox does not arise in the first place:

(S1) X feels sadness/worry for Anna Karenina/their dead grandmother/their never-born child/future generations and X knows that Anna Karenina /their dead grandmother/their never-born child/future generations are fictional/possible/past/future objects (and therefore that they *do not exist*);

(S2) Believing that *there is* (and not that there *exists*) an object exhibiting some of the *emotion-inducing properties* specific to sadness/worry is a necessary and sufficient condition for experiencing sadness/worry about it (i.e. the emotion has to be directed toward something);

(S3) X does believe that *there is a* fictional/possible/past/future object exhibiting emotion-inducing properties.

Distinguishing between *being* and *existing*, Object Theory makes it possible to identify an object (a fictional/possible/past/future object, in the aforementioned examples) causing a specific emotion (sadness/worry), even if that object does not exist.[13] That is how the paradox disappears: an emotion directed toward a (fictional/possible/future/past) object is clearly directed toward something. Therefore, one doesn't have to *believe* in the existence of Anna Karenina/one's dead grandmother/one's never-born child/future generations to be concerned for them. To explain why we act in a specific way rather than in another, i.e., to explain psychological differences and subsequent behavior[14], it is enough to *disbelieve* in their existence (we are well aware that our causal powers, active in reality, are suspended when it comes to the realm of the fictional/possible/future/past). By focusing on the disbelief in the actual existence of the object at stake, it is possible to explain not only why such emotions can be considered genuine and rational, but also why they may differ from one another (sadness for Anna Karenina and a never-born child are not the same, since they are directed toward two ontologically different objects), why they motivate different behaviors (while my fear of the dragon has, most likely, no effect on my daily actions, my concern for future generations may and should cause me to behave differently in my present), why they can be appropriate or inappropriate to their objects (I can cry for a while for Anna Karenina, but it would be inappropriate to cry a whole night for her suicide, whereas that would be appropriate in the case of a friend who died yesterday), and why they are involved in distinctive subjective psychological experiences (showing a different phenomenology in each case).

Such an approach is also useful when dealing with relations involving non-existent objects: how else to explain that

[12] According to Object Theory, Anna Karenina can be considered an object for all intents and purposes. This is notoriously the view defended by Meinongian theories of fictional entities (Parsons 1980; Zalta 1983; Barbero 2005; Berto 2011). The debate on the metaphysics and ontology of fictional entities goes far beyond the Meinongian view: it is articulated by *eliminativists* (especially Walton 1990) according to whom fictional entities are not objects (or rather they are something only within a game of make-believe); *possibilists* (Lewis 1978) who see fictional entities as possible objects; *artifactualists* (Thomasson 1999), who maintain that fictional entities are abstract artifacts similar to laws and games; and finally *syncretists* (Voltolini 2006), who defend a combination of neo-Meinongianism and artifactualism. For a general overview on the debate see Voltolini (2006: ch. 1, 2, 5).

[13] This solution to the paradox could be seen as complementary to the Thought Theory solution defended by Peter Lamarque (1981) according to which while reading fiction we experience *real emotions* caused by *thoughts* brought to our mind by the novel (therefore involving a modification of b2). The idea is that vivid imagining can be a good substitute for belief: indeed, bringing to our mind fictional characters and events seems to be enough to feel genuine emotions toward them. According to Thought Theory, we are frightened *of* the dragon (in an intentional sense), not *by it* (in a causal sense): the objects of our emotion are thoughts (instead of non-existent objects/individuals), and bringing a thought to one's mind does not mean *believing* a proposition to be true, but simply *entertaining* the thought. Distinguishing between the *real* object of our fear (which is missing in the case of the dragon as it does not exist: that's why we cannot be frightened *by* it) and the *intentional* object (what we are afraid *of the dragon*, experiencing dragon-fear), Thought Theory is successful in capturing the object of our emotion without being compelled to admit emotions caused by nonexistents. Thought Theory satisfactorily solves the paradox of fiction by giving a persuasive answer to questions concerning what happens *to people* feeling emotions toward nonexistents such as dragons, Anna Karenina, and the like. That is why it can be considered as a solution *parte subjecti*, whereas Object Theory, by focusing on ontology, is *parte objecti*. We may be, and actually are, frightened by thoughts and images as

Footnote 13 (continued)

Thought Theory maintains, but—and here the inevitability of the ontological question becomes clear—what are they thoughts and images *of*? Object Theory says that there is *something*, a dragon, characterized by, among others, scary properties, which are the ones causing us to feel afraid. This is the *parte objecti* solution offered by Object Theory. When responding emotionally to something, our emotions always have a formal object which is a property implicitly ascribed by the emotion to its target, in virtue of which the emotion can be seen as intelligible. For example, my fear of a dog construes a number of the dog's features (its salivating maw, its ferocious bark, its brutality) as being frightening, and it is exactly my perception of the dog as frightening that causes me to feel fear, rather than some other emotion. The formal object associated with a given emotion is essential to the definition of that particular emotion.

[14] As far as fictional entities are concerned, and as Brock (2007: p. 217) convincingly underlines, we do not experience emotions such as shame, embarrassment or remorse, and this happens precisely because we are aware of the kind of ontological status fictional characters have. For instance, to regret our actions toward someone is tantamount to somehow believing that there is an existent person toward whom we might have acted differently, but when fictional entities are concerned, we do not believe anything of that sort. We couldn't have acted differently toward any fictional entity for the simple reason that we *do not act* toward any such entity (hence we cannot regret or be ashamed of our actions toward any of them). We are ontologically cut-off from having such interactions with fictional entities.

Anna Karenina was disappointed in her married life in a similar way to Lady Diana? Or that a given war will lead to a very complicated socio-economic period for future generations? To make sense of such matters, we need to ontologically admit both relata, even those that are not present and existent.

4 A Paradox of the Future?

So far, we have tried to explain how the paradox of fiction can be dismantled and why the emotions we feel for fictional/past/possible/future objects can be considered genuine and rational. Let us now focus specifically on emotions concerning future generations, as seen in (e).

As an example, consider the following statement from the main webpage of Save the Children under *The Climate Crisis. Climate Change Is a Grave Threat to Children's Survival*[15]: "Right now, in the U.S. and around the world, children's lives are under threat due to climate change. Nearly 710 million children are currently living in countries at the highest risk of suffering the impact of the climate crisis. However, every child will inherit a planet with more frequent extreme weather events than ever before". Do we feel sad and worried about future generations who will inherit a world where frightening events such as floods and hurricanes will be normal? Do we feel anxious considering how hotter temperatures, air pollution, and violent storms will constitute life-threatening elements for tomorrow's children? Or would it be irrational to feel that way, since the future, by definition, is something that is not present yet? Those maintaining that only the belief in something currently existing justifies our emotional involvement should say that in such cases we are faced with a paradox not too dissimilar to that of fiction set forth by Radford:

(F1) We feel sad/worried/anxious about future generations who will inherit a world where frightening events will be normal;
(F2) Believing in the existence of x (what makes us feel worried) is a necessary condition for having certain emotions toward x;
(F3) We do not believe that future generations and the world they will inherit currently exist.

Nonetheless, by adopting the view suggested by Object Theory, I have underlined how it is possible to identify an object causing specific emotions (sadness, worry, anxiety) even if that object does not exist. Therefore, no paradox of the future has reason to arise, since what we have are the following three premises:

(F1*) We feel sad/worried/anxious about future generations, even though we know that future generations and the world they will inherit currently do not exist;
(F2*) Believing that future generations will inherit a world where frightening events will be normal is a necessary and sufficient condition for experiencing sadness/worry/anxiety about them;
(F3*) We do believe that future generations will inherit a world where there will be inequality, poverty, migration, and disease due to the climate crisis.

Moreover, and differently from what happens to fictional or merely possible entities, future generations are *expected to exist* in the future. This is quite an important point that Object Theory overlooks, being mostly interested in presenting objects in their absolute generality and independently from their various ways of being. But this is not something to be sidelined, as it allows us to highlight an important distinguishing feature of certain objects such as future generations over fictional ones such as Anna Karenina and the like. As Andina (2022: p. 94) extensively explains, "[this] is an important point that should be noted, a point which is similarly of an ontological nature: while fictional entities are and always will be abstract entities, as they do not and never will exist in space–time, sooner or later future generations—barring unpredictable and certainly undesirable catastrophes—will exist. In other words, as the name itself suggests, future generations are an entity that envisages a passage of status from being potential to being actual. Thus, they are destined to become present generations, which changes things quite considerably".

Hence, even if both future and fictional objects are similar (Andina 2022: p. 94) when considered from an ontological point of view, it may be useful to try to reach a further level of analysis. Are there perhaps good arguments for considering both as possible objects? Put differently, what about considering both fictional and future objects as *possibilia*? In the debate concerning the ontology of fictional entities, it has been suggested to regard fictional entities as possible ones, i.e., as entities that are nonexisting in the actual world, but located in some other possible world.[16] The idea is that, for whatever is told as a fictional story in our world, there is at least one possible world in which that event subsists as a state of affairs. In such a world the story is told as a known fact and is therefore no longer fictional (Lewis 1978). For

[15] https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/emergency-response/climate-change.

[16] A historical possibilist account of fictional and, in general, nonexistent objects is the one provided by Russell (1903) and Lewis (1978). For a discussion of this topic, Orilia (2002: ch. 7).

such an account, fictional characters do have the properties attributed to them in the work of fiction. For instance, Sherlock Holmes is a human being existing in some possible world and has all the properties Conan Doyle's stories ascribe to him, such as being a brilliant detective, the friend of a man called "Watson", the enemy of another man called "Professor Moriarty", and so on. Moreover, since Sherlock Holmes is described as a concrete entity with spatiotemporal existence, he is a concrete entity in the world in which his story is true. A classical objection against such a possibilist view is the one raised by Kripke (1980) based on the so-called problem of ontological indeterminacy: how could we choose the right Sherlock Holmes among the many (perhaps infinite) possible concrete individuals possessing all the properties ascribed to Sherlock Holmes in Doyle's stories, but differing in other crucial ways (height, weight, eye color, etc.)? Moreover, what prevents a single possible world from containing many distinct individuals, each of them satisfying all the relevant properties of Sherlock Holmes? It is far from easy to try to find convincing answers to such questions.

And what about considering future objects as possible ones? This wouldn't be a good move either, because whereas possible objects are, say, logically admissible entities in the sense that their characteristics are such that they could exist in the world (even if they do not currently exist), future objects are *predicted* or *expected to exist* in the future. Hence, differently from future objects that are definite and determined objects/events and will come to pass, possible objects are somehow "potential" and could in principle be actualized under certain circumstances or conditions, but at the moment are not expected. An example of a possible object is that of a new species arising on Earth, whereas an example of a future event is a solar eclipse, which will occur next time the Moon will pass between the Earth and the Sun, thereby obscuring the view of the Sun from a (bigger or smaller) part of the Earth (this happens approximately every six months). It is therefore important to distinguish possible objects from future ones: "future generations have a form of existence that is destined to move from the possible to the actual, or from potential being to being. Thus, we are dealing with abstract artefacts that will become concrete groups, namely generations that live in a specific time and space. The metaphysically interesting point is that the concrete group (the future generation that occupies certain space–time coordinates) shows a dependency on the abstract artefact that is both historical and genetic, such that the abstract artefact determines the characteristics and possibilities of the concrete group" (Andina 2022: p. 103).

5 Empathy for Nonexistents

We have seen how, by following the solution offered by Object Theory, we can consider objects in a general way, focusing on the set of properties whose object correlates they are, independently from their possibly also being objects of a particular kind for someone in some way. Thus, the paradox of fiction has been solved thanks to an ontological argument.

But a legitimate question arises at this point: when dealing with nonexistent entities such as Anna Karenina, a dead grandmother, a never-born child, or future generations, how can we explain our emotional involvement? When we are sad to the point of tears for Anna Karenina or feel worried for future generations, what happens is that we see both as *other people*, *others than us*, hence as something we can feel a sort of "*Einfühlung*" or empathy for. In fact, the other is constituted by *appresentation*, as other than myself (Husserl 1950), but also as *similar* to me: the step from the issues raised by the paradox of fiction to those typical of empathy is a short one.

The literature on this subject is very extensive and no satisfactory definition of empathy has been reached: indeed, the term "empathy" is used to describe a broad range of psychological abilities—considered essential to what makes humans social beings—that enable us to understand what other people are thinking and feeling, to emotionally connect with them, to share their thoughts and feelings, and to be concerned about their well-being. However, we can intuitively consider as empathy the ability to grasp the mental states (particularly the emotions) of other people.[17] So what happens with the special kind of objects we are considering here? How is it possible to grasp someone's mental state when that someone does not exist (being fictional or a future entity)? Can we be said to truly perceive those mental states? Or do we merely *imagine* them? Should empathy for non-existent beings be distinguished from empathy for real people categorically or only by degree?

Let's take three steps back and try to briefly address these questions. According to the supporters of Theory Theory (Carruthers, Smith 1996; Fodor 1987; Gopnik and Wellman 1994), empathy presupposes that the one who feels empathy has a sort of folk psychological theory of mind about the person with whom one empathizes. From this point of view, empathy could be seen as a cognitive way of reading and understanding other people's minds. We would then make law-like generalizations that imply concepts of mental states needed to understand others and their reasons for

[17] According to the seminal definition given by Lipps (1979), then debated by philosophers such as Prandtl (1910), Stein (1989), and Scheler (1954).

acting, as well as to predict their future behavior.[18] Roughly speaking, if I see somebody crying, I infer that they are sad because I know the connection between the two phenomena, crying and sadness. In other words, since the mind is not observable, what happens—Theory Theory maintains—is that we perceive and interpret others only *indirectly*. This way of understanding human behavior would be similar to the way we usually interpret natural phenomena; therefore, empathic mind reading could be considered almost scientific, as it seems possible to use laws and theories to explain and understand the human domain. A potential objection to such a view is that we do not always apply a theory when we meet and try to understand other people, nor do we always cognitively infer concrete behavior from general laws.

Another approach is the one defended by Simulation theorists (Goldman 2006; Gallese 2001) according to whom empathy does not imply a theory but rather a simulation mechanism: we imagine how we would feel if we were in that person's shoes, i.e., we simulate the other's state in our mind and then arrive at how the other feels by imitating their behavior in our mind, projecting our own mental process onto theirs. Unlike Theory Theory defenders, always insisting on a third-person perspective, those maintaining Simulation Theory claim that we simulate the other person's situations from a first-person perspective and use our mental apparatus to generate thoughts, beliefs, desires, as well as emotions. On the one hand (according to Theory Theory) understanding others would mean being able to grasp their reasons (purely observational, third-person perspective), emotions, and desires; on the other (according to Simulation Theory), it would mean looking at things as if we were the others (first-person perspective). Both these theories assume that there is no direct perception of the other and that the only way to access other people is either to try to understand how they feel from how they behave, or to imagine being them and then feeling and thinking from their specific standpoint. Therefore, when trying to empathize with someone else, we infer their state of mind from our own (Maibom 2017).

Both these theories have been criticized (Gallagher 2012; Zahavi 2014) for being too cognitive and theoretical, and not reflecting our relations with other people considered as embodied minds. Such a remark, even if undoubtedly relevant when existent individuals, which are embedded and embodied, are at stake, seems to be less urgent (or even to miss the mark) when nonexistent beings are concerned. And here it is nonexistent beings we are focusing on.

In the case of fictional, past, possible, and future beings—which are not physically and emotionally connected companions we can see face to face while interacting in shared contexts—by definition we can never perceive them directly; hence, the only way to "reach" them somehow would be through the mediation of a theory or simulation (Currie 2006). Neglecting the difference between existent and nonexistent entities as far as empathy is concerned wouldn't be a good idea[19] since, as I have extensively explained, the respective targets of empathy do not have the same ontological status (Petraschka 2021). Persons exist, whereas fictional characters, past, possible, and future individuals do not.

When sitting in our armchair at home watching Hitchcock's *Psycho*, we get scared and are potentially inclined not to shower that night (whereas, of course, we are not motivated to call the police or anything like that because *we know* the kind of object Marion Crane is—a fictional one—and therefore we know *there is nothing we can do* to prevent that crime taking place at the Bates Motel). Analogously, when we read *Exit West* (2017), by Mohsin Hamid,—which tells the story of Nadia and Saeed living between checkpoints, roundups, mortar launches, and shootings, in a place where death appears to be the only horizon, and where a strange rumor circulates about mysterious doors that if passed through, by paying and at the risk of one's life, transport people somewhere else—our emotional engagement and empathic understanding might motivate us to change our opinions on the matter or to donate money to a refugee aid organization. This happens precisely because non-actual worlds (imaginary, fictional, or just not present ones), are always connected to the real world,[20] even if they are explicitly defined as nonexistent.

6 Conclusions

I started by analyzing six different situations describing emotional engagement (a–f). In all but one case (f), the situation concerned an emotional response toward an object, although only in one case (a) could the object of the emotion be said to exist. I then adopted Object Theory to solve the so-called "paradox of fiction", explaining how emotions can be considered genuine and rational even when directed toward nonexistents. Such a solution has also proven useful to avoid a possible paradox of the future, since future objects are essentially nonexistent – similarly to past, possible, and

[18] For criticism of this position (considered too theoretical and general), see Zahavi (2014).

[19] Unless one is only interested in the psychological processes involved in empathy, whereby any ontological difference is irrelevant, as is the case in Currie (1997) and Robinson (2010).

[20] For further reasons about whether both fictions and nonfictions should be considered as related to the real world, see Friend (2017).

fictional ones. Nonetheless, I have also emphasized the differences between future objects and nonexistent ones.

In fact, differently from Anna Karenina, Julia's dead grandmother, and Pegasus, even if future generations do not exist presently, they *will* exist in a more or less remote future. That is why, distinguishing future entities from mere possible ones, we should motivate our behavior accordingly.

We know that Anna Karenina does not exist, as she is a fictional entity created by Tolstoy, therefore we do not even try to save her at the railway station that day. Nonetheless, we feel sad and cry when we think about the madness caused by jealousy and mental obfuscation. Hence, we take Anna Karenina's story as a reminder not to let a mixture of despair and loneliness play tricks on us. Similarly, when thinking about future generations and the unprecedented climate crisis that is taking place, we feel sad and anxious, in a way that is both rational and genuine. But—and here comes the difference between fictional and future objects—we do even more than that. For we are well aware that today, when those generations do not exist (yet), we are preparing the world they will live in tomorrow: that is why our concern for them should be neither sterile nor static, but rather projected forward. We must try to figure out what we can do for future generations, even if we know that (because of their ontological status) they have not done a thing for us. Moreover, we have seen how it is possible to activate something like empathy even for nonexistents, i.e., a way of *understanding* others by grasping their mental states. Therefore, it is possible for individuals to be rationally and genuinely emotionally connected to the well-being of future generations, ensuring the potential development of transgenerational justice in principle.[21]

Funding Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Torino within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

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[21] I would like to thank the editors of this Special Issue, Tiziana Andina and Giulio Sacco, for discussion of earlier versions of this paper: their critiques, suggestions and advises have been extremely useful. I am very grateful also to the two anonymous referees of Topoi for their careful reading, serious objections, and suggestions.

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