

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art

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Radford, "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?"

*Suppose you read an account of some terrible suffering. This can lead you to tears and sadness. But, if you were then told that this account is false, your tears and sadness should dissipate.

Premise: "It would seem then that I can only be moved by someone's plight if I believe that something terrible has happened to him." (300)

--Next story: A drinking buddy tells you a terrible story about his sister. Then he tells you that he doesn't have a sister. Should your reaction dissipate just the same as before, since the sister is merely fictitious?

--Next case: The actor friend who simulates being in pain.

"But as long as you are convinced that he is only acting and is not really suffering, you cannot be moved by his suffering..." (301)

*Problem: It is understandable why we should be moved by reports/depictions of the suffering of real people. We feel for *them*. But should we be moved by reports/depictions of the suffering of merely fictitious people? How can we feel for non-existent people?

--Look at footnote 3, and the observed difference in response to the sufferings in paintings and in film.

*Even though we also appreciate tragedies, we nevertheless are genuinely "moved" by them as well.

*Radford proposes various solutions to the above problem:

Solution #1: *We forget* that they are not real.

--But, then, why don't we attempt to interfere (with a play's performance, for example) and stop the tragedy?

Solution #2: *We suspend our disbelief*.

--Still, we always are aware that this is only a play (otherwise, we're back to #1).

Solution #3: It's just a *brute fact* that we are so moved.

--But, in other contexts belief in the reality of the suffering is necessary for “being moved”.

Solution #4: It is simply not true that, in general, “being moved” requires the belief in real suffering (e.g., the man who thinks about his sister’s plane crashing).

--But this still involves the contemplation of suffering that a real person might experience. (Consider the more unusual cases Radford raises, on the right-hand column, p. 303.)

Solution #5: We don’t weep for Anna Karenina, but for real people who suffer, or could suffer, in similar ways.

--This is simply false—we *do* weep for Anna Karenina.

Solution #6: There are two kinds of “being moved”—emotional responses to real-life occurrences or people, and emotional responses to the fictional. Belief in the reality (or probability) of suffering is required only for the former.

“When, as we say, Mercutio’s death moves us, it appears to do so in very much the same way as the unnecessary death of a young man moves us and for the same reason.” (304)

--We (some of us at least) still really do feel sad and cry. These emotional responses don’t seem to make sense if we know that no one has been injured, wronged, etc.

*Conclusion: “I am left with the conclusion that our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very “natural” to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in inconsistency and so incoherence.” (305)