Accounting for Problems in the Philosophy of Fiction: Is it necessary to posit idesires to solve the paradox of fiction and the puzzle of imaginative resistance?

Why do I experience sadness at the death of fictional characters? Why do I resist accepting certain imagined scenarios? Ultimately, why do I hold desires about scenarios, which I am aware are completely fictional? These questions have surely been considered by many of us at some point in our lives, and are therefore deserving of in-depth analysis. A popular proposal is that our responses to imagined scenarios rely on 'imagined' rather than 'truly-held' desires. However, this position is weak at best, incoherent at worst. In this essay I provide a critical assessment of contemporary theories of imagination, and ultimately propose an original position to take on the matter, modifying existing theory in line with applied evidence, allowing real-life emotions to interact with our desires.

1: Overview

The philosophy of fiction raises an interesting debate on the roles of belief and desire in imaginative pretence. In this essay, I will specifically address the paradox of fiction and the puzzle of imaginative resistance as two key problems galvanizing this debate. Following brief analysis, I will present the conative account of imagination (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002) which proposes i-desires as a solution. Due to the inconsistencies and failures in the nature of i-desires, I reject this theory, proposing the alternate cognitive account of imagination (Nichols & Stich 2000), while advocating for further, original improvements to be made on the suggested cognitive architecture. From this I will have shown that the targeted problems in the philosophy of fiction can be sufficiently resolved without appeal to incoherent i-desires.

The titular puzzles test the engagement of the above theories with imagination; however, before expanding on this debate, it is important to address some key terminology and notions discussed in the philosophy of fiction. 'To imagine' and 'to pretend' are here used interchangeably to mean that where p is a fictional proposition, 'imagining p' is equal to 'entertaining the thought that p, without asserting or truly believing that p in reality' (Scruton 1998). This is sensory imagination, generally the target of philosophy of fiction, the experiential, recreative form of imagination which shifts our perspective (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002) to construct imaginings of future events, evoke empathy, and most obviously cause perceptual sensory imaginings such as sight and smell. Pretence is easily accessible to most humans, even observed in children as young as two years old (Leslie 1994).

Imagination is a cognitive attitude, much like a belief or desire, a component of basic cognitive architecture, which interact to form our mental processing as in the model of figure 1 (Nichols & Stich 2000). Perceptual processes cause beliefs, while body monitoring systems cause desires, together functioning to perform practical reasoning and motivating behaviour. Cognitive attitudes typically: (i) provide motivation to action, (ii) have satisfaction conditions, and (iii) interact with our environment (Currie 2002; Nichols 2006). It is important to note that despite often similar content, imagination and belief are distinct; I do not believe I will find a lion in my kitchen simply on the basis of my having imagined it. Pretences differ from beliefs

by their function; not by content, but in cause, interaction, sustained observation, and rationality (Currie 2002; Nichols 2006).

Having established generally accepted cognitive features, I will briefly present the notion of imagined cognitive attitudes. An i-desire or an i-belief is an imagined cognitive attitude, possessing the same character as their counterpart cognitive attitudes (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002) in a fictional context. I-beliefs are traditionally invoked in pretence play; in Leslie's Tea Party Experiment (1994), two cups are 'filled' with pretend tea; one cup is upended and 'emptied', and the child observing successfully distinguishes between the 'full' and 'empty' cup in the context of the pretence. The child possesses an i-belief that the cup is 'full' of tea; they do not have a genuine belief that it contains tea, but it is believed within the context of the pretence. The titular i-desire is a more disputed notion, of a desire-like imagining which is not actually possessed external to the imagined scenario. Before discussing i-desires further, I will raise two problems in the philosophy of fiction.

<u>2: Problems of Fiction</u>

Problems raised in the philosophy of fiction are important tests for proposed theories of the cognitive architecture of imagination, raising questions about imaginative function and the interaction between components of cognitive architecture. This essay will focus on accounts of imagination reaching a solution to the following two problems: the paradox of emotional responses to fiction and the puzzle of imaginative resistance.

First, the paradox of fiction – also known as the paradox of emotional response to fictions – highlights the seemingly illogical emotional reactions to fictional entities (Radford & Weston 1975; Walton 1978; Friend 2016). As first questioned by Radford and Weston (1975): how can we possibly be moved by the fate of Tolstoy's fictional Anna Karenina? I feel genuine emotions in response to imagined events, such as experiencing sadness when I read that Jay Gatsby is shot, despite believing that this did not actually occur. Friend (2016) phrases this in three conditions. Firstly, the response condition states that we experience genuine, everyday emotions towards fictional occurrences or characters. Second, the belief condition states that the reader or spectator does not ordinarily believe in the actual existence of these characters or episodes, well aware that they are not genuinely occurring in reality. Finally, the coordination condition explicitly explains how the paradox arises. People do not experience such intense emotional responses if they do not believe in the existence of the objects of their emotion. Surely feeling these acknowledged emotions requires believing that the emotional trigger is genuinely taking place? For example, it seems that to feel sadness at a spouse committing adultery entails that I believe I have a spouse; to feel genuine fear of a lion entails that I believe there is a lion in my vicinity. These conditions (Friend 2016) all appear intuitively true, yet when taken together, clearly inconsistent. We do not believe in the genuine occurrence of fictional events, and we do not ordinarily experience emotional responses to an object we do not believe exists; yet in the case of fiction we undeniably do.

The second – perhaps more disputed – problem is the puzzle of imaginative (or fictional) resistance. Recently debate has arisen on whether this is actually multiple puzzles falling underneath one characterisation (Walton 2006), but let us focus on the main strand of concern put forward by this problem. Through exercising our imagination, we seem capable of – and

willing to - imagining any number of ordinarily impossible, strange things. For example, in reading the Harry Potter series I am able to imagine the existence of magic, with characters casting bizarre spells. However, when faced with imagining certain propositions, it appears we are met with an unwillingness or incapacity to participate in imagining certain situations (Gendler 2000). Such imaginative resistance is caused by fictional propositions with which one does not imaginatively engage as the author had intended (Stock 2005). My focus is on resistance in imagining morally deviant worlds. In this case, we resist imagining alien moral truths which diverge from our own moral views. Walton (1994) presents the scenario 'In killing her baby, Griselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl', putting forward an unrecognisable fiction in which female infanticide is morally correct. Alternatively, imagine a fiction (many contexts of which do in fact exist in reality) in which mutilation of female genitalia was ethically right. Based on subjective moral education and environment, I do not typically take this is to be permissible. While I may easily be able to imagine people undertaking these acts - or that even the narrator and characters believe it to be morally permissible - I resist imagining that as objectively the morally right thing to do (Gendler 2000). Rather than taking these moral facts to be true in the story, we attribute the judgement to the participants of the fiction or the culture of the setting. The puzzle of imaginative resistance can perhaps be reduced to two questions: why do we refuse to, or why are we unable to, engage with these imaginings? A successful theory must account for this resistance.

3: The Conative Account

Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) propose the conative account of the imagination, presenting the case for the existence of i-desires (though this concept has been developing in Currie's work since 1990). The theory aims to solve the problems of fiction by appealing to the role of desire in imagination, arguing for a cognitive architecture of interaction between beliefs and desires (standard cognitive attitudes functioning as expected), and i-beliefs and i-desires. As previously stated, these imagined 'like' states figure as components of cognitive architecture, as products of the 'pretend belief and desire generator' as suggested in figure 2 diagram (Nichols & Stich 2000). They share the character of and perform a functional role analogous (but not identical) to their non-imagined counterpart. They are not real beliefs or desires, and need not be genuinely held outside the fiction or pretence; if I imagine I am a cat, I only i-desire to act out licking my paw within the pretence play, rather than genuinely desiring that I had a paw to lick (Doggett & Egan 2007).

The distinction of desire-like as opposed to belief-like imagination must be emphasised for the success of this account. Unlike the relationship between beliefs and i-beliefs, i-desires are not embedded within, nor interact with, genuine desires. Desire-like imagination may or may not contain the same content as a genuinely held desire (Doggett & Egan 2007) but is argued to be constrained (unlike an i-belief) responsive to an internal higher-order ethical code integral to one's moral character (Currie 2002). This is not easily swayed even in imagination. Furthermore, as i-desires are not real desires, they do not necessarily motivate action to intervene or act on a fantasy; if I truly desired Shakespeare's Romeo to not commit suicide, I would surely leap onto the stage and explain Juliet's sleeping potion to him. As it is, I do not feel the urge to intervene because the desire I possess for Romeo to not kill himself is in fact merely an i-desire within the context of the fiction. This is prompted by an i-belief that he will

commit suicide; just as beliefs prompt a desire in reality, so do i-beliefs prompt something I want in the imagined scenario. In terms of satisfaction conditions, perhaps i-desires can be satisfied via an imagined fulfilling of the want? If I desire chocolate it is satisfied by eating chocolate, while an i-desire for chocolate is satisfied by simply imagining I am eating chocolate. Therefore i-desires are argued to be a distinct and a uniquely important facet of imaginative cognitive architecture.

Having established the nature of i-desires, consider their validity in the required resolution of the problems of fiction. To approach the paradox of emotional responses to fiction requires appealing to both i-beliefs and i-desires in tandem, and drawing on the connection between the character of desire and i-desire. As i-belief and i-desires are taken to be so similar in character to genuine beliefs and desire, the conative account proposes that within fiction they interact and behave the same, allowing for i-desires to produce affective responses in the same way as genuine desire. The problem can be framed as i-believing a fictional proposition, p, while prompting the i-desire not-p. Just as I feel sadness or joy when a real desire is fulfilled or not fulfilled, so I experience sadness or joy based on whether or not my i-desire is satisfied (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002). For example, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction The Great Gatsby, I ibelieve that Jay Gatsby is shot, while I i-desire that the whole misunderstanding is resolved and he need not be killed at all. According to the conative account, as there is no genuine object of this desire – there is no such person as Gatsby in reality – surely no real desire can play this role? My desire must therefore be within fiction, and therefore an imagined state. Of course, we know how the book concludes, and my i-desire is left unsatisfied, which I would argue is the cause of my sadness at his demise.

Opponents to the conative account acknowledge that often emotions rely on a combination of beliefs and desires (Nichols 2004b). Beliefs concerning factual propositions alone are argued to be insufficient in creating affective responses, with desire as the required component in producing these (Doggett & Egan 2007). To trigger an emotional response of anxiety, for example, I must believe I am going to fail an exam while desiring that I do not fail. Therefore, the conative account maintains that all affective responses to fiction are caused by my unfulfilled i-desires functioning in the same way that a real desire is invoked to cause sadness in a non-fictional context.

The conative account's resolution of the puzzle of imaginative resistance also relies on the pivotal role of i-desires. Supporters posit that desires are linked to moral character, considered to be core values and a 'higher-order' facet of character (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002). I can easily change my desire to not attend the gym, as either attending or not attending seems to be a reasonable preference to me, with neither offending any core beliefs I hold. Matters of moral preference, however, fail to be so open without significant justification. For example, based on the culture I have been raised in I consider female genital mutilation to be wrong, and so I strongly desire that such practices are forbidden. Such desires are not easily altered even in the imagination. The conative account relies on the highlighted similarity in character between desires and i-desires and posit that by extension i-desires are likewise constrained by moral character in the same way too.

Therefore, the personal ethical context of the suggested fictional proposition is principle. I can very easily i-desire attending the gym without feeling any resistance to the pretence, however a fictional proposition of moral presentation requires 'richer' - or colloquially, more

meaningful – i-desires (Currie 2002). When asked to imagine that female genital mutilation is right, I am actually being asked to i-desire that this is so. Therefore, these elaborated imaginings trigger an internal tension that manifests itself in imaginative resistance. I feel discomfort entertaining this i-desire, as it conflicts with my real desires and personal moral judgements. An i-desire is linked to my actual moral character via a causal chain from imagining, to i-desire, to desire, to moral character (Currie 2002; Doggett & Egan 2007). To hold vastly contradictory views in pretence seems incompatible with this chain, and is consequently remarkably difficult to entertain. It is rarely successfully achieved, rather resulting in an internal conflict and tension felt as imaginative resistance.

4: Refuting I-desires

Although i-desires play a pivotal role in seemingly plausible solutions to given problems, the conative account is not without objection. Proponents fail to elaborate on the supposed crucial relationships repeatedly depended upon to justify the similar functions and features of desires and i-desires, plus the even more curious posited relation to moral character. To solve the paradox of fiction the account relies on a presumed parallel between the affective responses of i-desires and genuine desires, while the solution to the puzzle of imaginative resistance relies on i-desires/desires in the capacity of their further link to internal moral character. This tenuous 'link' or 'connection' spoken of in the causal chain is not elaborated upon. The conative account provides no concrete evidence for equal functional capacity, simply expecting us to accept the few argued for similarities in function as sufficient to establish a connection between genuine desire and desire-like imagination, and a consequential causal chain back to the moral character of the agent. At the very least we require a deeper analysis of these 'links' to be provided in support, to explain the supposed causal relationship between these notions.

An initial example of the lack of connection is evidenced in our competent prediction of alien i-desires. As a supposed result of the causal connection between desires and i-desire, surely, we would struggle to conceive of compelling i-desires which are against the trend of our own genuinely held desires. However, we are actually exceptional at predicting the practical reasoning of alien i-desires; for example, forecasting the i-desires possessed by villains in fiction. Our predictive success fails to be accounted for by supporters of the account, with even Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) admit this and merely accepting it as difficult to explain. Unfortunately, this is not further elaborated upon in the literature, rendering i-desires 'insulated from evaluation' (Nichols 2004b) and casting significant doubt on the functional similarities between the desires and i-desires.

Upon further analysis we can in fact conclude that there are few similarities in function between desires and i-desires, which causes us to question whether they should be considered a unified category at all (Spaulding 2015). Cognitive attitudes such as beliefs and desires all operate predictably, such as all providing a similar degree of motivation and ability to be satisfied under certain conditions, causing the taking of predictable steps to fulfil the given want. I-desires, however, are sporadic in behaviour, failing to follow a prescribed function. I-desires unreliably motivate action to different degrees (Spaulding 2015); an i-desire is unlikely to motivate my leaping onstage to prevent Romeo's suicide (as I do not genuinely hold this desire) while an i-desire to eat chocolate may motivate me to act out unwrapping and eating a bar of chocolate. This supports the objection that i-desires do not function in a similar way to genuine desires,

which casts further doubt on their supposed connection relied upon by Currie and Ravenscroft (2002).

Of course, in reality there are instances in which genuine desires are not guaranteed to be acted upon also. However, I would argue that this is merely due to a competing, more highly valued desire being prioritised. The original desire does provide significant motivation, but another, preferred desire provides greater counter-motivation. This would be, of course, in personal terms, subjective to the individual's preferential ranking of desire. Perhaps I do not eat a chocolate bar – no matter how badly I want to – as I simultaneously hold the desire not to spoil my dinner, which I consider to be a higher priority. Alternatively, i-desires do not appear to be in such active competition, as within an imagined scenario, other factors to be considered are comparatively incredibly limited. This disparity in the motivational capacities of desires and i-desires again emphasises the lack of connection between them – in itself weakening the given solutions to the problems in fiction – while highlighting a deeper incoherence in the supposed category of i-desires. Therefore, we can confidently maintain the objection that due to their ununified function, the concept of i-desires is confused. Surely a plausible solution cannot rest on a notion which itself appears incoherent.

This brings me to the strongest objection against the conative account; having established that the notion of i-desires is incoherent, I argue that they should not be relied upon at all. We can emphasise the dispensability of i-desires, as unnecessary additions to the cognitive architecture and therefore redundant in their application to the problems of fiction. The role played by idesires in the conative account does not appear to be uniquely necessary; genuine desire can fulfil this role equally well (Nichols 2004b), and perhaps more so, as this would draw upon an acknowledged and verified component of cognitive architecture, rather than invoking theoretical, incoherent i-desires. In the case of the paradox of fiction, imagined scenarios evoke emotions which correspond with real desires. So, to imagine throwing a birthday party attended by no one is sufficient to make me feel sad. Here, the i-belief of the fiction alone seems to generate emotion without involving i-desires. I do not need the i-desire that I am not alone at my party in order to genuinely desire this. Perhaps witnessing Anna Karenina cheat on her husband does not genuinely generate the emotion of jealously within me due to personally holding this exact corresponding i-desire; rather this affective response is a result of drawing analogy from my own desires that a spouse does not commit adultery (Radford & Weston 1975). Through the application of my own desire it becomes perfectly plausible that the fiction generates the genuine emotion of envy, as if I were to experience the situation myself. Why must we *imagine* we hold these desires, when we do in fact hold them? This analogy drawn between desire and the fiction is sufficient to explain the derived affective response, rendering i-desires dispensable.

To build on this objection, our experience as spectators is a valuable consideration here (Nichols 2004b). Genuinely held desires which replace the need for the conative account's idesires need not always be drawn from analogy. We may also consider our desires and attitudes towards these circumstances in the context of the fiction's value in reality, when derived from objective evaluation of the pretence. This means not only holding real desires about the content of the scenarios, but also the nature of the fiction itself. Affective responses triggered by an imagined scenario may in fact be due to an internal conflict in real desires between what we ibelieve and i-desire to occur, versus our enjoyment of the fictional narrative as a whole. Although I desire within the book that Jay Gatsby is not shot, I do not wish *The Great Gatsby* to be rewritten as I nevertheless appreciate and desire a tragic narrative. The sadness I experience is a result of this internal, unsatisfied tension between my desires regarding the nature versus the content of the fiction. Appealing to our experiences as spectators may also explain our feelings of imaginative resistance to fictional moral propositions; we have genuine desires against alien moral content of fiction (in line with our standard desires about moral acts), which may conflict with our appreciation of the objective narrative. This appreciation holds no implication for our desires in reality (e.g. does not motivate me to leap onstage and save Romeo, or alter morally concerned desires in real life events), as I am aware of the distinction and lack of causality between fictional events and reality. Our experiences as spectators, therefore, can explain one potential invocation of genuine desire in the place of i-desire, at no detriment to resolving the problems. Holding i-beliefs about the imagined content of fiction is enough to evoke genuine desire, which, alongside genuine enjoyment of the fiction, explains consequential emotional or moral responses without resorting to i-desires at all.

Of course, supporters of the conative account do not accept this objection easily. They have responded that although real desires may occasionally factor into imaginative circumstances, certain affective responses demand i-desires in order to suitably engage with the fiction (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002; Doggett & Egan 2007). They attempt to draw a distinction between a truly imaginatively engaged response to the fiction – which is argued to be the main concern of the problems of fiction, requiring the solution of i-desires - and an aesthetic, evaluative affective response to enjoying the experience of the fiction – which is where we employ genuine desire. We undeniably appreciate, say, tragic narrative, such as is found in *The Great* Gatsby. However, this evaluative approach is far more relevant to exploring the problems of tragedy and horror (Carroll 1990; 2002), and less useful in assessing i-desires in the context of the paradox of fiction and the puzzle of imaginative resistance. Resorting to this defence in our given focus would only suggest an element of attempting to cover all bases; are proponents of the conative account merely involving a degree of genuine desires to accommodate critics? To what degree will the account accommodate desire upon further objection? This counters the conative account's previous confidence in i-desires and weaken the reliability of the theory overall.

In summary, the conative account falls victim to numerous objections, to which the defences are insufficient. Attempted modifications to the theory appear rather like desperate grasps at 'covering all bases' (accounting for any potential failure) rather than carefully thought out arguments making relevant and important additions to the theory. I-desires cannot provide a viable solution to the problems outlined, since the concept is unpredictable and incoherent in application, consequentially redundant in use. They are seemingly easily replaced by genuine desire at no real detriment to the solutions. To continue an endless stream of modifications makes the position increasingly weaker, and consequently the theory less reliable (Nichols 2004b). Overall, in positing i-desires, the conative account raises more issues than it solves. On this basis, I argue that i-desires should not be considered necessary or even relevant to solving the given problems of fiction.

<u>5: Potential Resolution</u>

Our challenge therefore becomes to present a solution to the paradox of fiction and the puzzle of imaginative resistance which does not appeal to i-desires, further demonstrating their

redundancy. I would argue this can be successfully done via the cognitive account (Nichols & Stitch 2000). Rather than appealing to i-desires, this account appeals to imagination as similar to belief, with pretence, belief, and desire occupying their own distinct area within our cognitive architecture as shown in figure 3 (Nichols 2004a). Pretence is acknowledged as a distinct cognitive component fuelled by a script elaborator which embellishes the imagination. Pretence selectively interacts with belief via an interactive relationship with the inference mechanism, which supplies tacit knowledge to the pretence. This generates updates inferred from belief, but the two components are still quarantined. This would provide an explanation, for example, to the phenomenon that children in Leslie's (1997) experiment do indeed believe that the cup is empty throughout, but the inference mechanism prevents this from figuring in the pretence.

By positing this inference mechanism, we can resolve the puzzle of imaginative resistance, as the tension we seem to feel is merely contradictory notions within this component; the result of contrasting inputs from belief (about what we consider to be right) and the imagined alien moral scenario. The author is asking us to entertain the pretence simultaneously with our incompatible belief, causing tension within the inference mechanism. This allows for the argument that imaginative resistance extends to non-moral fictional propositions too, as this can be applied to any pretence that is not compatible with a belief we hold (Weatherson 2004; Stock 2005; Walton 2006).

Pretences and beliefs are then proposed to feed-forward together, to an affective mechanism which produces our emotional responses. This explains our ability to feel emotion triggered by imagination (i-belief) or genuine belief, or a combination of the two. This explains the paradox of fiction, as our emotional responses need not be the result of a certain desire, but is simply a direct affective response triggered by pretence or genuine belief interchangeably – the affective mechanisms process input from pretence in exactly the same way as it does input from belief. Affective consequence is the same as a genuine belief – explaining why emotional responses to fictions are as diverse and intense as those experienced as a result of genuine beliefs.

Desires are kept distinct from this area, interacting only with our practical reasoning systems which produce behaviour. In isolating desires from the affective mechanisms, the cognitive account allows for the seemingly intuitive importance of desires within the cognitive architecture, but without involving them in potentially objected involvement in affective output (Griffiths 1997; Nichols 2004). This avoids a great issue that faced i-desires. Furthermore, as this theory holds an equal explanatory power regarding the problems without needing to posit i-desires, then it is the better theory in view of Ockham's razor, due to its simpler cognitive architecture invoking the fewest assumptions (Nichols 2004b; admitted by Doggett & Egan 2007).

However, while successful in solving the given issues, this model of cognitive architecture is not flawless. I argue that the diagram in figure 3 (Nichols 2004a) must allow for feedback from the affective mechanism into the pretence and belief domains, this is to extend the structure beyond the existing one-way communication. There is increasing evidence that emotions do influence our imaginative fantasies and beliefs, which is evidenced particularly in cases of mood disorders (Bower 1981).

For example, sufferers of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder experience emotional responses which influence their belief in their personal safety during a given episode, based on a mental system of threat awareness (Dryden & Reeves 2013) which may be traced to the affective mechanisms. Likewise, a person suffering from depression may struggle to experience a genuine belief as positive (or equally, a fictional proposition) such as "my sister has given birth to a healthy baby"; the affective mechanism has fed back and influenced/altered the expected experience of this proposition. At extremes, depression has been known to prevent the subject from being capable of imagining future events at all (Tyrrell & Elliott 2019). Murphy et al (2015) conducted studies in cognitive bias modification which acts as further evidence for this cyclical interaction. Presenting older people in low moods with positive imagined pretence is recorded to improve their mood; then, as emotions become more positive, there is correlation with the vividness of the imagined scenarios. In all given instances, it is evidence of an active cyclical interaction between the affective mechanism and other components of the architecture. This must occur beyond the currently posited feed-forward approach credited in the cognitive account, which must be documented in future diagrams presenting the cognitive architecture.

Therefore, as demonstrated, the cognitive account of imagination must be updated in order to become more accommodating to these issues, while maintaining that such amendments require no involvement of i-desires. I-desires are inconsequential to affective responses or imaginative resistance, which I have shown to be easily explained by the inference mechanism and the (potentially interactive) affective mechanism. The adjusted cognitive account remains able to sufficiently explain the given problems in fiction without the superfluous addition of i-desires.

Appendix

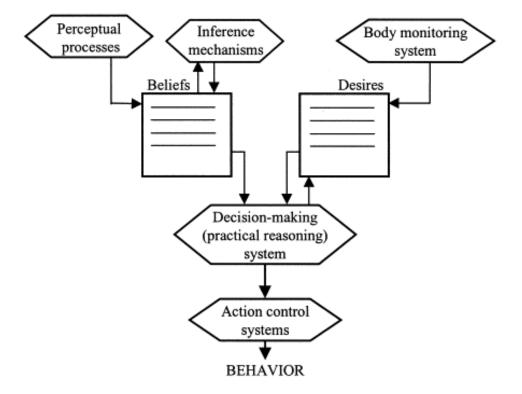


Fig. 1. Basic cognitive architecture (Nichols & Stich 2000):

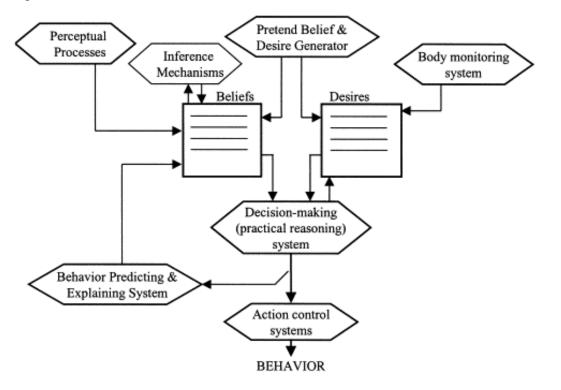
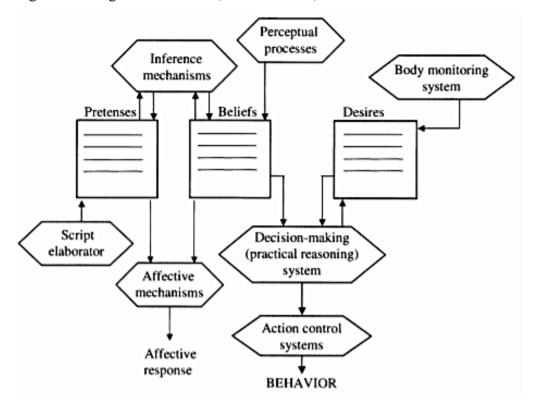


Fig. 2. The Conative Account (Nichols & Stich 2000):

Fig. 3. The Cognitive Account (Nichols 2004a):



Word Count: 4,995

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