Commentary on Dubourg & Baumard: Imagining our moral values in the present and future

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Abstract word count: 58
Main text word count: 850
Reference word count: 487
Total text count: 1,518

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Abstract:

Imaginary worlds allow us to safely develop, crystallize, and criticize our moral values—at times even serving as catalysts for change in the real world. Fans of imaginary worlds sometimes form groups to advocate for social change in the real world, and it is part of Leftist ideology to imagine radically different, possible futures aligned around shared moral values.

Spending time within imaginary worlds offers two important yet unstated opportunities: First, imaginary worlds help us to crystallize and develop our moral worldviews. They offer a stage to share moral lessons and values across time and space, and to form meaningful identity groups around those values. Second, imaginary worlds also allow us to imagine new possibilities for our current reality. We can use imaginary worlds to begin to materialize a future drastically different from the present—its own kind of imaginary but *possible* world. That is, we argue that imaginary worlds serve to communicate and crystallize our moral values, and offer a rich landscape from which abstract moral and political beliefs can flourish not only for impossible, fictional imaginary worlds, but for possible future ones too.

Imaginary worlds serve a critical function of allowing communication and exploration across time and space of moral values, which are notably sensitive to psychological distance (see Eyal et al., 2008; Mentovich et al., 2016). Indeed, even everyday language points to this key function of imaginary worlds: “The moral of the story” is often used to describe the most important takeaway after reading or watching an imaginary story unfold. For example, Aesop’s fables craft the narrative around both an imaginary world of talking animals and moral virtues. One function of fictional stories is both to *convey* norms and rules across time and cultures, and *create* memorable worlds where the reader can safely learn (e.g., through simulation; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Meyer et al., 2019) about what is right and wrong. And this learning is directly applicable to the real world: Imaginary worlds also help to define how we see right and wrong in our present reality—even after we put the book down. Imaginary worlds can also show us moral breakdown, which contributes to the shaping and challenging of our moral worldviews. For example, novels like *1984*, the *Handmaid’s Tale* and *Brave New World* (all named in Table 1) reveal to us our moral values in the present by showing us an extreme version of them in another time or place. Satire (like *Gulliver’s Travels;* see Table 1) provides a veneer of fiction from which it is safe to confront (and resolve) moral ambiguities that are present in the real world. We agree that imaginary worlds satisfy a need to explore (as the target authors describe), but also to separate good from bad (McHugh et al., 2021; see also Pizarro & Baumeister, 2013), crystallize our own beliefs, desires, and values, and explore concepts like justice, power, and punishment.

Moreover, a core function of moral values is to regulate behavior and draw lines around meaningful social groups (Yudkin, Gantman, Quidbach, & Hofmann, 2021)—as do fandoms of imaginary worlds. Fans readily sort themselves into social groups aligned with specific values within the imaginary worlds of the group. For example, Harry Potter fans strongly align with their chosen Hogwarts House, each identified by a moral value like bravery or kindness. What’s more, participation in fan culture can motivate people to bring values from the imaginary world of the fandom into the real world. This is the case with fan activism, a participatory practice through which members of a fan community organize around real-world issues (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Fan activists use imagery from their imaginary world as protest symbols. For example, indigenous and Palestinian protestors have used imagery from the movie *Avatar* to convey their message of colonization and land rights (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). The relationship between fandom and activism is also mutually reinforcing: Participating in collective action further solidifies group identity within a particular fandom (Carriere, 2018). This

kind of fan-based collective action is an example of how participating in imaginary worlds can help us imagine and work toward a possible, different future, where we better live out our values or even prioritize entirely new ones.

This is especially notable because imagining a world with different moral values is uniquely difficult (Black & Barnes, 2017; Gendler, 2000). One way that Leftist activists have met this challenge is through the practice of radical imagination. Drawing on radicalism as an ideology which seeks to completely transform existing institutions to achieve an anti-oppression future (Bötticher, 2017), this practice reimagines the world around the values of egalitarianism, solidarity, radicalism, and freedom from oppression. It takes as a starting point an imaginary world of the future completely unlike our present reality. The practice of imagining a radically different future, which coheres around shared moral values, fosters collective future cognition and community organizing (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010). Historic and contemporary radical movements have been theorized as organized around such radical imaginations of the future (e.g., Rickford, 2016; Kelley, 2002; Khasnabish, 2008; Rethman, 2010; Muzio, 2016)—imaginary worlds that activists first create in their minds, and then work to make real.

In sum, imaginary worlds allow us to better understand and develop our moral worldviews. Engaging with imaginary worlds helps us negotiate and solidify our moral values, construct our social identities, and imagine and work toward radically different, but possible futures aligned around shared moral values.

Conflict of interest statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding statement: We have no relevant funding to acknowledge here.

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