



## REACTIONARY FICTIONALISM

JASON DOCKSTADER

**ABSTRACT:** Fictionalism is the view that the claims of a target discourse are best seen as being fictional in some way, as being expressed in some pretense manner, or as not being about the traditional posits of the discourse. The contemporary taxonomy of fictionalist views is quite elaborate. Yet, there is a version of fictionalism that has failed to develop and which corresponds to the earliest form of the view found in the history of philosophy, East and West. I call this view “reactionary fictionalism.” I argue that traces of reactionary fictionalism can be found in Classical Daoism, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and Pyrrhonian Skepticism. Reactionary fictionalism is a kind of fictionalism that differs from both the hermeneutic and revolutionary kinds discussed today. Hermeneutic fictionalism says we already treat the claims of a target discourse in a fictional manner. Revolutionary fictionalism recommends we all start treating the claims of a target discourse in a fictional manner for reasons mostly of social utility. Reactionary fictionalism recommends, by contrast, that only those concerned with obtaining maximal therapeutic release from the pathology of literally asserting genuine beliefs in the claims of a target discourse should react in a pretense manner to inescapable contexts demanding the use of the claims of that discourse. I aim to show that reactionary fictionalism was a technique utilized in premodern skeptical traditions as a means for enduring one’s condemnation to near-permanent sociality. I recommend slotting reactionary fictionalism into our present taxonomy once we note that employing fictionalism can have a primarily therapeutic motivation and not merely a semantic, epistemic, or metaphysical one.

### 1. FICTIONALISM

Fictionalism is the view that the claims of a target discourse are best seen as being fictional in some way, as being expressed in some pretense manner, or as not being about the traditional posits of the discourse. Usually,

---

**Jason Dockstader** is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at University College Cork, Ireland. His main research interests are in comparative philosophy, metaethics, moral psychology, and the history of philosophy.

offering a fictionalist reading of a target discourse is motivated by suspicions about the mind-independent reality of the entities posited by that discourse. This suspicion can be expressed either through a positive disbelief in, or an agnostic uncertainty regarding, the posits of the discourse. Whether the posits are not thought to exist in a sufficiently real way, or judgment is simply suspended about their reality, fictionalism involves treating the claims which express those posits as not being literal. Fictionalism is often a means of conserving a discourse one might otherwise eliminate. With respect to most things, suspicion or suspension often precedes elimination. Yet, the fictionalist does not think the possible unreality of a discourse's posits is enough to eliminate it. Rather, fictionalism is a way of recognizing the troublesome aspect of a discourse while also changing perspective on it to guarantee its survival regardless of its success in corresponding to the world. Fictionalism is thus often, even in its most "revolutionary" moods, a way of warding off the elimination of a discourse, or at least it is an attempt to explain how a discourse can persist regardless of its possible failure to properly describe an aspect of the world.

One of the major distinctions amongst kinds of fictionalism is that between the hermeneutic and revolutionary varieties. Hermeneutic fictionalism is the view that the claims of a target discourse are already in some way employed in a fictional manner. For example, a hermeneutic fictionalist about modal discourse, say, would claim that when we speak in terms of possibility, necessity, and contingency we are already not literally asserting genuine beliefs about real possible worlds. Instead, we are employing, perhaps unconsciously, modal discourse in a fictional manner. This does not mean modal semantics is not still truth-apt. It is. Modal discourse is meaningful and descriptive. It is just that the mental state one is in when employing modal discourse is not one of genuine belief in real possible worlds. Also, the speech act one employs in uttering the claims of modal discourse is not one of literal assertion about real possible worlds. Instead, when we think and speak in modal terms, we are either referring to something besides, or not genuinely asserting full beliefs in, real possible worlds. We do not really believe or literally assert anything about real possible worlds. Instead, we literally assert real beliefs in something else, namely, fictional possible worlds, or we only quasi-assert make-beliefs in possible worlds. The point is we are *already* treating modal discourse in some fictional manner. Hermeneutic fictionalism has faced a number of objections, the most common being the phenomenological one that it does not seem like we are already treating modal discourse in some fictional manner when we use it, that it feels like we literally assert what we genuinely believe about

real possible worlds when employing modal discourse (Stanley 2001; Brock 2014).

Revolutionary fictionalism takes a different track. Instead of claiming we are already engaging with a fiction when using a target discourse, it recommends we *start* using a discourse in a fictional manner for reasons mostly of social utility. Take morality, for example. Moral discourse seems committed to entities, moral facts, which if they did exist would have to exhibit a strange sort of power, a mind-independent, objective, irreducibly normative, categorical force over people who were lucky enough to be aware of them. Some folks, like moral error theorists, find moral facts to be either conceptually incoherent or empirically undetectable (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2016; Kalf 2018). While they think moral discourse either conceptually entails or pragmatically presupposes the existence of moral facts, error theorists deny moral facts exist, thus rendering moral discourse either systematically false or untrue. However, for most error theorists, that moral facts do not exist is no reason to eliminate moral discourse. Thinking and speaking in moral terms still might be psychologically and socially useful. Revolutionary moral fictionalism recommends we start using moral discourse in a fictional manner, that we have moral thoughts other than full-fledged genuine beliefs in real moral facts and employ moral utterances without literally asserting the existence of real moral facts out in the world. The main reason we should revolt and reform the way we use moral thinking and speaking is to continue to generate the degree of mental fortitude and social cooperation it seems morality is effective at providing us with regardless of its truth value (Joyce 2016).

A common complaint issued against revolutionary fictionalism is that it does not seem one could successfully revolt and reform the use of a whole discourse alone. Presumably, there cannot be a lone revolutionary fictionalist. In the case of revolutionary moral fictionalism, Richard Joyce noted this problem and stipulated that treating discourse as a useful fiction is something really only a group of people could accomplish together. Otherwise, if one tried to be a revolutionary moral fictionalist with those who are either moral realists or who simply assume one is not engaging with a fiction when they speak, then one might get caught as being insincere or even a lying propagandist for a morality in which one does not really believe. This would defeat the whole purpose of employing the fiction of moral facts in order to foment mental fortitude and social cooperation in the first place. Since the motivation for employing a revolutionary fictionalism is to retain the use of a target discourse in spite of its possible systematic falsity or untruth for the sake of its apparent social utility, a revolutionary fictionalist

feels they need to have some friends in on the engagement with the fiction with them in order to achieve that social utility.

Now, there is another distinction among kinds of fictionalism that is distinct from the one between the hermeneutic and revolutionary approaches and which was implicit in the discussion above. This distinction concerns the way in one which one engages with a fiction. This is the distinction between content and force fictionalism, which is also sometimes understood as the difference between prefix and preface fictionalism, respectively (Lewis 2005). The content fictionalist says the way in which one engages with a fiction is by changing one's genuine beliefs and literal assertions to being about the fictions themselves, the fictionalized versions, and not the actual posits themselves, of the target discourse. A content fictionalist prefixes her beliefs and assertions to being about fictions, not the real versions of those fictions. The fiction itself is the real entity the belief and assertion is now about. So, to stick with the moral example, a moral fictionalist can literally assert genuine beliefs in propositions about moral facts that are in fact real fictions. One can do this by adding a tacit story operator to one's beliefs and utterances: "*According to the fiction of morality*, it is wrong to steal." The italicized part, as a tacit prefix, is usually left unthought or unsaid. With content fictionalism, the content of the asserted belief is now the real fiction itself and not whatever was meant to be the real posit of the discourse. Rather, the real posit is now the real fiction, with the real fiction being something like an abstract object.

Force fictionalism, on the other hand, involves replacing literally asserting genuine beliefs in the real posits of a discourse not with literally asserting genuine beliefs in real fictions, but with quasi-asserting make-beliefs in the real posits. Instead of prefixing a tacit story operator to one's beliefs and assertions to render them about real fictions, one neither genuinely believes nor literally asserts propositions about either real posits or real fictions, but quasi-asserts make-beliefs about purported real posits. So, rather than sincerely asserting a real belief in the wrongness of stealing, say, one quasi-asserts the make-belief in the wrongness of stealing. With force fictionalism, it is the force of the pretense, through a reduction of genuine belief and literal assertion, that matters, not the content of the judgment. The content is the same as the target discourse normally understood. It is in how one thinks and speaks with the discourse that puts one in the pretense mode. The difference between content and force fictionalism is that between exchanging real belief in and literal assertion about a real posit for real belief in and literal assertion about a real fiction, and exchanging real belief and literal assertion for make-belief and quasi-assertion about the real posit,

respectively. Joyce's revolutionary moral fictionalism is a force fictionalism because it does not involve starting to literally assert genuine beliefs in real moral fictions—as it does, for example, in Nolan et al. (2005), which is a revolutionary content moral fictionalism—but instead starting to quasi-assert make-beliefs in moral facts one also, in more reflective moments, does not believe really exist.

There can be both content and force versions of hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalism. A hermeneutic content fictionalist would say we are already literally asserting genuine beliefs in real fictions in the sense that we already literally assert genuine beliefs in the existence of fictional versions of purportedly real posits. A hermeneutic force fictionalist would say, on the other hand, that we are already quasi-asserting make-beliefs in real posits when we employ a certain discourse. Revolutionary fictionalism likewise can come in content and force forms. Revolutionary content fictionalists claim we should start literally asserting genuine beliefs in formerly real posits reformed to be real fictions, while revolutionary force fictionalists claim it would be socially useful if we starting quasi-asserting make-beliefs in the posits of a discourse also believed to not really exist in more reflective contexts (for good summaries of fictionalism, see Kroon 2011 and Eklund 2017).

## 2. REACTIONARY FICTIONALISM

I would like to develop a novel kind of fictionalism that neither claims we are already employing fictions in some way with respect to a target discourse nor that we all ought to revolt and start treating a discourse in a pre-emptive manner for reasons of social utility. I think this view is actually closer to the earliest forms of fictionalism found in the history of philosophy, East and West. An important aspect of this view to note first is that its ultimate motivation is therapeutic and not merely epistemic or ontological. On the other hand, it is moved more by epistemic than ontological concerns. The contemporary taxonomy of fictionalist views seems to have developed at least partly out of a concern with the tendency of science to render much of everyday and ordinary believing and speaking mostly false, untrue, or superfluous. Along with developments like deflationary accounts of truth, fictionalism emerged as a way of retaining good and common sense while unburdening it of its seemingly deep commitment to the folk psychological posits (mental states, moral and aesthetic properties, ordinary objects, etc.) that clearly fail to correspond to what the harder sciences tell us about reality. Also, fictionalism became a way of retaining a number of abstract

entities needed for science (mathematical objects, numbers, scientific theories, etc.) to function as an at least somewhat successfully informative and predictive enterprise. Fictionalism has been one of many recent strategies that allows philosophers to retain much of what they would regret eliminating. The motivation for this fictionalist retention is likely a fear of a global skepticism that would see any natural or artificial language as being systematically flawed and incapable of reporting anything accurately.

Reactionary fictionalism is a kind of fictionalism not primarily concerned with retaining ordinary or scientific ways of believing and speaking for the sake of the preservation of good and common sense, social utility, or something resembling truth. Instead, reactionary fictionalism is a way of noting that literally asserting genuine beliefs in any entities whatsoever often results from and produces even more attachment, disturbance, and suffering. Reactionary fictionalism starts by noting that there is something basically pathological about the literal assertion of genuine beliefs. The reactionary fictionalist would prefer to literally assert genuine beliefs in as little as possible. The first moment of reactionary fictionalism is a kind of quietism, an attempt to shut down purposive mental and verbal activity. Steven Collins has described this kind of quietism as “an attitude which emphasizes passivity in religious practice, and which seeks to attain as its final goal a state of beatific ‘inner quiet’” (Collins 1982, 139). However, the reactionary fictionalist recognizes that no matter how quiet one becomes, insofar as one remains apparently human, one is almost always stuck in social contexts where communication is required. The point of engaging with fictions then, for the reactionary fictionalist, will be to endure being stuck in social contexts while still internally enjoying having overcome the pathology of the literal assertion of genuine beliefs. As we will see, for each of Classical Daoism, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and Pyrrhonian Skepticism, pretense is to be employed mostly as a means for passively reacting to, and so enduring one’s being trapped in, social contexts and relations.

In its original philosophical employment, fictionalism was thus a technique for compensating for the impossibility of ever successfully completely removing oneself from social contexts and going quiet after experiencing the elimination of cognitive attachments that result from skeptical reflection. The reactionary fictionalist employs pretense as a defense mechanism against a world constantly requesting and expecting the literal assertion of genuine beliefs in the real posits of good and common sense. It is a way of maximizing avoiding the attachment that characterizes the ubiquitously cognitively induced suffering of human existence while retaining a practical foothold in the everyday world of normal human interactions. So,

reactionary fictionalism is motivated by a therapeutic need to strategically interact with, and hopefully survive, a world that does not want a global skeptic to succeed in overcoming attachments to dogmas and participation in social life.

Neither hermeneutic nor revolutionary fictionalism seems to effectively capture what the reactionary fictionalist is up to then. The reactionary fictionalist is someone who only wants to pretend as a means for avoiding pathological attachments while thinking and speaking. Such an employment of pretense is only ever a passive reaction to a particularly inescapable context, one in which it would be personally detrimental to not sound like a normal human. The reactionary fictionalist does not think we are all already pretending when we think and speak in modal or moral or mathematical terms, say. On the other hand, the reactionary fictionalist has little interest in joining a society-wide group employment of pretense for the sake of preserving a discourse's social utility. Energetically encouraging others to retain a discourse for the sake of achieving coordination and cooperation betrays too much attachment to everyday affairs. The reactionary fictionalist will instead pretend only when needed, when there is no other way to quietly get by without detection except through pretense. Reactionary fictionalism is a technique an individual skeptic employs for surviving the human world, not a description of what we are all already doing or a prescription for what we all ought to do. Reactionary fictionalism is thus neither a hermeneutic nor revolutionary form of fictionalism.

With respect to the distinction between content and force fictionalism, on the one hand, it does not quite matter whether the reactionary pretender really asserts genuine belief in a real fiction or quasi-asserts make-belief in an unreal posit. Either will work as a means of deflecting attention away from an internally achieved global suspension or elimination of literal assertions of genuine belief in real entities. However, obviously, on the other hand, really asserting genuine belief in *real* fictions is probably already too much metaphysical realism, with its attendant attachment and suffering, for the traditions we will look at to work as a means for avoiding the pathology of literally asserting genuine beliefs. While it is important to note certain disagreements, or different emphases, in these traditions, it is probably safe to say that reactionary fictionalism, in its different historical moments, is much more likely to be easily regarded as a force, instead of content, fictionalism. By only ever passively quasi-asserting make-beliefs, the reactionary fictionalist can employ a discourse in a thoroughly pretense mode without thereby suffering the contamination of literal assertion of real belief, thus hopefully providing maximal opportunity to enjoy the therapeutic upshot of

a skeptical achievement. Let us put some flesh on the bones of this reactionary force fictionalist view by looking at these few moments in the history of philosophy where it seems the view was in latent use. Let us start in China.

### 3. CLASSICAL DAOISM

The two main texts of classical Daoism are the *Laozi* 老子, or *Daodejing* 道德經, and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. To discover the latent reactionary force fictionalism employed by the Daoists, we will start with how Daoism was in many ways the foil of the predominant school of Classic Chinese philosophy, Confucianism. The Daoists were deeply skeptical of the Confucian worldview. One of the primary concerns of Confucianism was the “rectification of names” (*zhengming* 正名), which was about making sure words corresponded to reality. As normative naturalists (Liu 2007), Confucians thought reality was structured in accordance with normative facts and relationships, especially moral facts pertaining to one’s potential humaneness or benevolence (*ren* 仁), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), filial piety (*xiao* 孝), and righteousness (*yi* 義). These character traits were the chief Confucian virtues. The virtues (*de* 德) were thought to be naturally endowed moral powers to act in accordance with reality’s intrinsic moral structure, the way it purposefully orders itself and thus ought to be named. This structure was described as its way (*Dao* 道) and as the nature and function of heaven and Earth (*tiandi* 天地). Embodying and expressing the virtues enabled one to properly use names to correspond to the Dao’s moral order and purpose, and thus establish social harmony with and within heaven and earth.

Daoists disagreed with Confucians about names. They denied that reality was intrinsically named according to any normative or moral purpose. They claimed that things are not really what they are named, the normative significance imputed to them. Daoists were proto-projectivists, who regarded normative projection as being beset by systematic failure. Instead, the Dao—for Daoists, something like the eternal process of nature’s spontaneous creation and destruction of itself through and as all things—is either unnameable or lacking a name designating a specific normative function: “As to the Dao—if it can be specified as a Dao, it is not the eternal Dao. As to a name—if it can be specified as a name, it is not the eternal name” (Moeller 2007, 3). We also read in the *Laozi* that “the Dao is eternally unnamed,” but “when the carving begins and there are names” the Daoist sage will “master cessation” by suspending discursive projection (carving) and match the unnamed nature of the Dao with his own silence (79). The Daoists deny moral naturalism, and normative realism more generally,



because all projection of names fails to correspond to nature. Nature is intrinsically or objectively valueless, unnameable, and entirely lacking a goal or purpose, moral or otherwise.

The Daoists also regarded the emergence of naming and normative discourse as a sign of degradation and loss: “when the great Dao is dispensed with, then there is humanity and righteousness” (47). The *Zhuangzi* says, “when rights and wrongs waxed bright, the Dao began to wane” (Ziporyn 2009, 14–5), with moral discourse representing a kind of punishment whereby moralists “tattoo your face with Humanity and Responsibility and de-nose you with rights and wrongs” (48). For Daoists, the Confucian virtues are projected onto the world as a result of the loss of awareness of the amorality of the universe. Confucianism amounts to a pathological attachment to sincerely asserting genuine beliefs about purportedly real normative facts. But the universe (the Dao) or nature (*tian*) is indeed amoral: “Heaven and earth are not humane. They regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane. He regards the people as straw dogs” (Moeller 2007, 15).

How do the Daoists recommend we live in response to the global failure of projective naming, to the pathology of normativity and the carving up of the Dao into really distinct things instantiating intrinsically normative properties? On the one hand, we find in the *Laozi* a strong recommendation to go as quiet as one can. As we have seen, this quietism is an attempt to match the unnameability of the Dao. The Daoist approach is to go quiet, practice stillness, withdraw from intentional or deliberate activity, believe in and assert as little as possible, let events unfold spontaneously, accept nature’s fated transformations, and not judge nature’s amoral indifference: “the sage resides with the task of nonaction, practices the teaching of non-speaking” (7); “to withdraw oneself when the work proceeds—that is the Dao of Heaven” (23); and “One who knows does not speak. One who speaks does not know” (131). The *Zhuangzi* tells us the “Great Dao is unproclaimed” and “great demonstration uses no words” (Ziporyn 2009, 14).

While there does seem to be evidence for this sort of quietism, there are other moments in the texts that sound more fictionalist. It is not as if the Daoist sage resides in some isolated state of total silence. Rather, when he is stuck in social situations and has to do and say things, he remains detached from all that he does and says, which allows him to do and say it all with ease. The *Laozi* reads, “the sage knows without going, names without seeing, completes without acting” (Moeller 2007, 113). There is further emphasis on speaking and acting without genuine belief, assertive force, and intentionality, leading to the now-famous claim that the sage “does

nothing,” thus leaving “nothing undone” (115). With respect to speaking, the sage also says nothing and so leaves nothing unsaid, thus exhibiting a “spontaneous silent speech” (59, translation modified).

These paradoxes can be taken to mean the sage empties his mind of genuine belief and subtracts literal assertive force from his utterances much like a force fictionalist. Indeed, Julianne Chung has argued that the *Zhuangzi* should be read as offering a global force fictionalism (Chung 2018). Even as the Daoist sage acts and speaks, he does neither, but rather pretends to when required, without feeling or belief, and only as a reaction, never an initiation. Daoists play along. They never start the game. They do not think most people, especially Confucians, are already pretending, nor do they want to enact a revolution in our collective mental and discursive lives. They just want to quietly escape or passively endure the perpetual error of humanity’s sick need for literally asserting genuine beliefs with as little attachment and suffering as possible. We see more evidence of this reactionary fictionalist approach in the *Zhuangzi*.

The *Zhuangzi* is concerned with making sure the Daoist sage gets along with others in social contexts without engendering in them too many doubts about his sincerity. The key balance to strike is to appear committed to a discourse without starting any conversations or getting into disagreements or letting oneself fall into the trap of literally asserting genuine beliefs. The *Zhuangzi* counsels, “Don’t let the external compromise get inside you and don’t let your inner harmony show itself externally” (Ziporyn 2009, 29). Just react to a discourse if you have to, chime in unremarkably, but even then only quasi-assert make-beliefs in generic propositions. This approach seems to maximize freedom and well-being: “The Consummate Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing; responding but not storing. Thus he can handle all things without harm” (54). The “Consummate Person” has

the physical form of a human being, but not the characteristic inclinations of a human being. Since he shares the human form, he lives among men. Since he is free of their characteristic inclinations, right and wrong cannot get at him. Minute and insignificant, he is just another man among the others. Vast and unmatched, he is alone in perfecting the Natural (*tian*) in himself. (38)

The *Zhuangzi* makes use of two figures that best approximate the reactionary fictionalist approach: Mr. Mengsun and the pretending tree. There is a story of a conversation between Yan Hui and Confucius where Yan asks about the odd behavior of Mengsun Cai, who was recognized for being a great mourner, even though when his mother died he “wailed but

shed no tears, unsaddened in the depths of his heart, observing the mourning but without real sorrow” (47). Confucius explains that Mr. Mengsun has seen through to the end of the issue and behaves in the way expected of him but remains detached from any social roles or moral beliefs or feelings humans are thought to have: “Others cry, so he cries too. And that is the only reason he does so” (47). Mr. Mengsun reacts because it is expected of him, and it would create difficulties for him if he refused, but he neither really believes nor feels proper mourning is valuable or virtuous. He does not even feel much genuine loss. He feels very little, believes practically nothing, and never literally asserts anything. He just pretends when he has to.

And there is the story of Carpenter Shi and his disciple who pass a massive, gnarled, bizarre-looking tree that had been turned into a shrine. The disciple asks the Carpenter why the tree has not been cut down, and the Carpenter says the tree is useless and worthless. Nothing of quality or endurance could be made from the tree. That night the tree tells the Carpenter in a dream that his judgments about him might be premature considering he has found a way to survive by being so useless. After the Carpenter tells the disciple about the dream the disciple asked why the tree was a shrine if it was so useless. The Carpenter castigates the disciple, explaining that the only way the tree could get away with being useless, and so not getting chopped down, was if it pretended to be a shrine, with such a pretense being an effective way to hide one’s liberating worthlessness by performing a particular social role. Pretending to be a shrine, just like pretending to be an excellent mourner, thereby reactively embodying what society expects of one without being even slightly attached to the fiction, is a therapeutically sound way, according to the *Zhuangzi*, of enjoying the denial of objective normative significance or real existence ( ).

Joyful detachment from any real belief or literal assertion through the use of a fiction with which one reacts to society’s expectations is encapsulated in the Daoist notion of “wandering” (*you* 遊). The *Zhuangzi* reaches a pitch of delirious affirmation whereby one treats as “right” whatever one encounters in their spontaneous, pointless, rambling, wandering life. Wandering involves passively saying yes to everything with joyful abandon. It is the way of treating everything as right, correct, and acceptable without believing or feeling or saying much of anything. Wandering is the perfection of the Daoist goal of detached tranquility. The *Zhuangzi* calls wandering “going by the rightness of the present ‘this,’” and when it is done without knowledge or effort, “it is the Dao” (14).

## 4. MADHYAMAKA BUDDHISM

Moving to India, we can discover in Madhyamaka Buddhism a similarly passive and reactive global force fictionalist approach utilized for the sake of maximizing the therapeutic upshot of having reached a skeptical suspension of literally asserting genuine beliefs. As a form of Buddhism, and in particular Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Madhyamaka school was focused on overcoming the suffering that stems from the belief in and desire for permanence and selfhood. “Madhyamaka” means “middle way.” The school aimed to avoid the extremes of an eternalist belief in things as having a permanent essence and the nihilistic tendency of thinking things lose their essence when they are annihilated. Instead, for Mādhyamikas, all things (*dharmas*)—including supposed selves and ordinary objects and their properties—are empty (*śūnya*) of essence, permanence, or substantiality (*svabhāva*). Things are so mutually interdependent (*pratītyasamutpāda*) that they lack any existence of their own. Things do not emerge or causally result from themselves, nor from other things, nor from both, nor from neither. This is the famous tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*) offered by Nāgārjuna, one of the founders of the Madhyamaka school, in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. Nothing ultimately substantially exists even though we think and speak as if something does. This is the insight that Mādhyamikas aim to experience through an overcoming of all belief, desire, and attachment. Such an insightful experience would be the ticket to that *nirvāṇa*, that liberation or release from suffering, all Buddhists seek.

An interesting wrinkle added to the nature of *nirvāṇa* by Mādhyamikas is that it is no different from a complete absorption into *samsāra* (Garfield 1995, 75), the karmic cycle of life, death, and rebirth. *Samsāra* literally means something like “wandering” or “aimless drifting,” which is similar to the *Zhuangzi*’s emphasis on *you* 遊 above. The identification of *nirvāṇa* with *samsāra* brings us to the most internally contentious aspect of the Madhyamaka school: the relationship between conventional (*samvṛtisatya*) and ultimate (*paramārthasatya*) truth or reality, especially insofar as it could be claimed that the nature of *samsāra* is no different from that of the conventional. If this is so, then the identification of *nirvāṇa* with *samsāra* would amount to the identification of the ultimate with the conventional. However, this identification does not mean the ultimate and conventional are also identical in some obvious sense. While all Mādhyamikas agree there is something like a difference between conventional and ultimate truth, they disagree as to the exact nature of this difference and how useful or relevant the conventional is for the ultimate goal of experiencing *nirvāṇa*.

On the one hand, accessing ultimate truth amounts to an experience of the emptiness of all things and hence *nirvāṇa*. On the other hand, such an experience is clearly ineffable and so can only be conveyed and perhaps even experienced through conceptual and linguistic conventions.

That the ultimate can only be regarded from the perspective of the conventional extends to this point about the ultimate itself, leading to the famous claim from Nāgārjuna that even emptiness itself is empty (69). The ultimate truth that everything is empty of essence is itself empty of essence and so is entirely dependent upon conventions for conception and expression. This is precisely what constitutes the middle way: all beliefs and assertions, along with all things they are purportedly about, are interdependently arisen, hence empty, and so is *that* very belief and assertion, if indeed it is the literal assertion of a genuine belief, leaving one dissolved and detached from any eternalist or nihilist beliefs or assertions. The conventional is ultimately empty and that emptiness is only conventionally expressible. By which strategy then should the conventional be approached and the ultimate experienced? In answering this question, we come to the Madhyamaka version of a global reactionary force fictionalism. We do so by supporting a certain understanding of the nature of the conventional as offered by Prasaṅgika Mādhyamikas like Candrakīrti who seem to argue that Nāgārjuna was right to employ a combination of conceptual quietism, as a result of his insight into emptiness, with a passive and reactive affirmation of the world of the conventional, the only world there is. We thus look first to Nāgārjuna's conceptual quietism and then to Candrakīrti's reactionary force fictionalist modification of that quietism.

Nāgārjuna begins and ends *The Fundamental Verses* by declaring he prostrates himself before the Perfect Buddha who, "free from conceptual construction," "taught" the true doctrine of emptiness that thereby "leads to the relinquishing of all views" (83). Similar to Daoism, the first response by Mādhyamikas to the realization of the falsity and failure of purposive cognitive grasping and assertive projection is to go quiet. When humans perceive and conceive things, they engage in the systematically flawed enterprise of superimposition (*samāropa*). The Madhyamaka goal is fundamentally therapeutic insofar as it aims to pacify as much superimposition as possible on the basis of the insight into the unnamable emptiness of all things and an intention to match that emptiness by shutting down one's constructive and projective mental and linguistic faculties as far as one can. Again, what is sought is the tranquility and peace that *nirvāṇa* provides, and one can obtain this by emulating the Buddha in not teaching or arguing for anything much beyond what is already the case. Nāgārjuna writes, "The pacification of all

objectification and the pacification of illusion: no Dharma was taught by the Buddha at any time, in any place, to any person” (76). The Buddha’s nonteaching conveys the ultimate truth that everything is ultimately empty, and Nāgārjuna offers the nonthesis, or the purposefully self-undermining thesis, of the emptiness of emptiness in order to emulate the Buddha’s quietist achievement of peace and passivity of mind. What attends this peace, what follows from pacification, is the cessation of the desiring, believing, and asserting that is at the root of suffering.

Now, the obvious question in response to this quietist pacification of superimposition is, what are the Buddha and Nāgārjuna doing exactly as they think, speak, and write about emptiness? If they are not literally asserting genuine beliefs, how are they using the conventions of belief and speech? The simplest answer is they are using conventions to convey the ultimate with the intent of undermining conventions by infecting them with their own emptiness. How does that work? The Madhyamaka answer is that conventional reality is used as a means for performing this therapeutic self-undermining that would enable one to have an insight into and experience of emptiness. Conventional truth is thus used as a mere skillful means (*upāya*). Thought and talk of emptiness is just a pedagogic or exegetical expedient means for regarding and expressing the ultimate truth that all things are empty, including all thought and talk of emptiness, thus cancelling itself out in the process and exposing one to the insight that constitutes *nirvāṇa*. Nāgārjuna writes, “Without a foundation in the conventional truth, the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation [*nirvāṇa*] is not achieved” (68). There are some places in Mahāyāna and Madhyamaka texts where this self-undermining of the conventional is understood as being a purposive purgative therapy. In his commentary on Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti cites the *Kāśyapa-parivarta Sūtra*, which compares emptiness to a medicine meant to cure a body of an illness and then purge itself from the body it has cured (Mills 2018, 123; a similarly purgative image is found in Pyrrhonian Skepticism as well [Annas and Barnes 2000, 206–7]). Going back to earlier sutras, we find other upayic images comparing the Buddha’s teaching to a raft that is used for crossing over a river but not for retaining, to some stories told by a father to trick his sons into leaving a burning house, and a father presenting his sons with an empty fist to get their attention.

Using conventional reality as a mere skillful means toward exposing one to the insight of emptiness can already sound rather fictionalist. Conventions could be said to be used in a pretense mode in order to induce the experience of the ultimate truth of emptiness. There is even greater evidence

for a Madhyamaka version of a force fictionalism in the way Candrakīrti understands conventional truth. As possibly noticed, there has been slippage between calling it “conventional truth” and “conventional reality.” This is because, for Candrakīrti, the conventional implies both. The conventional covers both the psychological and linguistic aim to capture some aspect of the world and the purported world meant to be captured. The *satya* in *saṃvṛtisatya*, conventional truth, means both true and real or existent (Newland and Tillemans 2011, 4). The *saṃvṛti* in *saṃvṛtisatya* has a few meanings for Candrakīrti. On the one hand, *saṃvṛti* means convention in the sense of human agreements, rules, regulations, names, and what these conventions are supposed to refer to, all of which are arbitrary constructions and projections of the normally deluded human mind. *Saṃvṛti* in this sense is what humans believe and say and have reached a tenable consensus about, the worldly practices and transactions that determine human mental and linguistic life. *Saṃvṛti* is what the world understands to be the case. On the other hand, *saṃvṛti* means to cover and conceal in the sense of hiding the truth, of being false or at least true only for the ignorant and obscure. Hence conventional reality is conventional truth for the ignorant and unenlightened (13). Finally, *saṃvṛti* is simply another way of referring to the world or reality of mutually interdependent and empty things, the only things there are, which are both themselves conventions and the purported content of conventions.

Citing a famous passage from the *Ratnakūṭa* in his *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛtti*, Candrakīrti has a specific recommendation for how an enlightened being could respond to the world, to conventional truth and reality: do not try to confront or change it, but passively acquiesce to it (Siderits 2003, 202). For Candrakīrti, “what is acknowledged by the world” (*lokaprasiddha*) is all a Buddha could offer the world:

The world (*loka*) argues with me. I don’t argue with the world. What is agreed upon (*saṃmata*) in the world to exist, I too agree that it exists. What is agreed upon in the world to be nonexistent, I too agree that it does not exist. (Tillemans 2011, 151)

Most commentators have found Candrakīrti’s flippant detachment from any independent search for truth to be reprehensible. Tom Tillemans likens it to wallowing in a “dismal slough” (Tillemans 2011, 152) where anything and everything goes. But, for Candrakīrti, passively acquiescing to the world is the only means of therapeutically enduring it and using it as a conventional means to reach an experience of emptiness. Not by trying to fix conventions or adding anything informative or insightful, but by

merely outwardly submitting to the world while remaining internally utterly detached from any genuine beliefs or desires whatsoever will one be able to experience an insight into the ultimate truth of the emptiness of all things.

Some have noted (Matilal 1970; Crittenden 1981; Garfield 2006; Tillemans 2011; D'Amato 2012) that Candrakīrti's approach, and Madhyamaka in general, resembles a kind of fictionalism, that the conventional world is treated as a mere pretense, but they have failed to determine whether this fictionalism was of a content or force variety and how distinct it is from the hermeneutic and revolutionary forms on offer today. It is not the case that Candrakīrti is claiming a Buddha would approach the conventional by really asserting genuine beliefs about known falsehoods rendered as real fictions. That might be closer to the Svātantrika branch of Madhyamaka. But, for Prasaṅgikas, real fictions would be just as empty as the real posits of which they are the fictional versions. So, Candrakīrti's acknowledgment of *lokaḥprasiddha* does not amount to a content fictionalism whereby one literally asserts real beliefs about conventions understood as real fictions. And neither is Candrakīrti claiming that the world is already pretending in some basic or fundamental manner. He does not seem to be a hermeneutic fictionalist. The world is determined by literal assertions of genuine concepts, beliefs, and desires by deluded humans that aim to express the truth. Such is what makes conventions conventional. It is just the world is wrong about everything, and it is why humans suffer. However, Candrakīrti is also not, as far as I can tell, recommending that everyone start pretending to only quasi-assert make-beliefs. Of course, it would be nice if more could reach that point. The Mahāyāna Buddhist will probably always be aiming for that in some way in his dealings with others who are aiming to obtain release from attachments. But such a revolutionary approach involves disagreeing with and confronting the world too much, which Candrakīrti refuses to do. He is no revolutionary. Rather, Candrakīrti's Prasaṅgika Madhyamaka approach amounts to a reactionary force fictionalism. His recommendation is that those rare few who are capable of experiencing *nirvāṇa* should merely reflect the conventional world of false views and mutually interdependent things back onto itself through a totally detached pretense performance of passively quasi-asserting make-beliefs about purported things and their properties when called upon by certain contexts to reaffirm the delusions upon which they depend, all the while quietly experiencing the ultimate emptiness of reality. This is how Candrakīrti's reactionary force fictionalism compliments and completes Nāgārjuna's quietist pacification of literally asserting genuine beliefs. A global reactionary force fictionalism is how one



lives and therapeutically survives in a conventional world experienced to be ultimately empty.

## 5. PYRRHONIAN SKEPTICISM

Finishing in Greece, we find a similarly global force reactionary fictionalist approach in Pyrrhonian Skepticism. As with Classical Daoism and Madhyamaka Buddhism, Pyrrhonian Skepticism developed as a therapeutic attempt to quiet the human urge to engage in normative and metaphysical conceptual construction and projection while successfully enduring one's near total immersion in human society. And as with Daoism and Madhyamaka, Pyrrhonian Skepticism involves two moments, the first quietist and the second fictionalist, that combine into a coherent view about how one can live out a skeptical achievement. Just as there is an emphasis on quietism in the *Laozi* and Nāgārjuna, in the surviving Aristocles passage found in Eusebius, which is thought to be a third-hand report mostly accurately expressing the views of Pyrrho, we find a quietist response to a description of reality that sounds quite Daoist and Buddhist in its apparent claim that things are vague and, in contemporary metaphysical terms, gunky. Gunk is the view of things as being indefinitely decomposable, as possessing no proper parts or atomic simples (Lewis 1991). Everything is seemingly a part of everything else, mutually interdependent and interpenetrating, in a gunky universe. This leads to a recognition that, even though the skeptic inquires (σκέψις) into the nature of things, nothing said could properly correspond to the world. That things lack definite character implies we have no access to true (or false) propositions about them. It also implies that the claims themselves are equally lacking in definite character. For Pyrrho and his followers, the experience of this basic indeterminateness of things and the claims about them leads one to see all claims about things as being equipollent (ισοσθένεια), as being equally powerful or plausible. Thus, the skeptic suspends judgment (εποχή) about what is the case, refusing to literally assert genuine beliefs about the world. What follows such suspension is a kind of tranquil quiet, a freedom from disturbance (ἀταραξία), an equipoise in the face of positive and negative claims about things, and the elimination of the emotional turmoil that usually attends such claims. This seems to be what is presented in the Aristocles passage:

According to Timon, Pyrrho declared that things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable, and inarbitrable. For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, uncommitted, and unwavering,

saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not. The outcome for those who actually adopt this attitude, says Timon, will be first speechlessness, and then freedom from disturbance. (Long and Sedley 1987, 15)

It is the first response of speechlessness that provides evidence for the first moment of quietism in Pyrrhonism. As with Daoism and Madhyamaka, when discovering the mutually interdependent, indeterminate, unnameable emptiness of the world, the therapeutic response is to match such emptiness with one's own silence. By suspending judgment, one experiences an amazed silence that attends a peace of mind, which leaves one without genuine beliefs to literally assert. Gideon Rosen, before ascribing a kind of fictionalism to Pyrrhonism, notes that Pyrrhonists "pass over in silence" questions about the exact nature of the world (Rosen 2005, 19). Now, similar to debates in Madhyamaka, there is great debate about whether the Aristocles passage claims that Pyrrho thought the world itself was indeterminate or only that claims about the world were, with the first reading counting more as a metaphysical view amounting to a negatively dogmatic global antirealism and the second reading counting more as an epistemic view amounting to an agnostic suspension of believing or asserting anything determinate about the world. While I tend to find the latter, epistemic reading more convincing, there is no need to adjudicate that debate here (see Thorsrud 2014 for a helpful summary). Instead, I will focus on the second moment of Pyrrhonian Skepticism as found in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Πυρρόνεια ὑποτυπώσεις). Though there are stories that Pyrrho "used to go off by himself and live as a recluse" and "rarely made an appearance to his household," reflecting a more quietist lifestyle, there are other reports that Pyrrho, finding that "convention and habit are the basis of all that men do," lived in accordance with his experience of tranquility by "avoiding nothing and taking no precautions, facing everything as it came" (Long and Sedley 1987, 13). Overall, Pyrrho "had not departed from normal practice" (15).

Resembling both Zhuangzi and Candrakīrti, we find this passively acquiescent pretense approach described further in Sextus's *Outlines*. There is a discussion about how the Pyrrhonian skeptic lives in accordance with his detachment from literally asserting genuine beliefs. In the section on "non-assertion," Sextus reminds us that while Pyrrhonists "neither posit nor reject anything which is said dogmatically about what is unclear," they also "do yield to things which passively move us and lead us necessarily to assent" (Annas and Barnes 2000, 48). This passive yielding is a kind of assent to things that does not amount to full belief:

When we say that Sceptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take “belief” in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for Sceptics assent to the feelings forced on them by appearances. . . . Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear. (6)

Most commentators agree that Pyrrhonian skeptics do not literally assert genuine or full beliefs when they assent to feelings forced on them by appearances. They neither fully believe nor literally assert  $p$  nor  $\sim p$ . Yet, there is debate as to whether the Pyrrhonist’s passively acquiescent assent to appearances amounts to a kind of belief, either in what the appearances are appearances of or in the fact that one has such appearances. Michael Frede is closer in saying that Pyrrhonists have beliefs of some sort, while Jonathan Barnes and Miles Burnyeat reject Frede’s view (Burnyeat and Frede 1997; for a helpful summary of this debate, see Morison 2019). For Burnyeat (1980, 43), what the Pyrrhonist is doing when she assents is, instead of believing, “acknowledging” that things appear to her in a certain way, and Barnes (1982, 65) claims that when she speaks she is, instead of asserting, “avowing” something and merely expressing her feelings through such an avowal. Frede thinks she is, on the other hand, loosely asserting beliefs in a much broader sense that does not involve her literally asserting full or genuine beliefs.

While there is not space to get into this debate, perhaps a possible compromise could be struck by utilizing the force fictionalist notion of quasi-asserting make-beliefs. It could be that avowing an acknowledgement just is quasi-asserting a make-belief. Expressing the feeling involved in make-believing something is the case could just be what the speech act of quasi-assertion amounts to. It is not that one is literally asserting a full belief about an actual fiction that stands in for real posits. Rather, one is merely reflecting (and deflecting) the world back onto itself without the literal assertion of full belief in any aspect of it. This seems like what the Pyrrhonist is doing when assenting to appearances: passively acquiescing to how the world is affecting one by quasi-asserting make-beliefs about it and oneself. Merely accepting feelings forced on one by appearances can be regarded as make-believing something is the case, and when one is called to say something about it, one does not literally asserting anything, but merely pretends something is the case through the utterance of a quasi-assertion. Donald Baxter (2018) has mostly read Sextus in such a way. He emphasizes the difference between “active endorsement” and “passive acquiescence,” with the latter involving “acting as if a belief were true without deciding

that it is. In this respect, it is like conjecture, pretense, supposition, and taking as a working hypothesis” (Baxter 2018, 384). Along with this not being a kind of content fictionalism, it is neither a hermeneutic nor revolutionary fictionalist view. The Pyrrhonist pretends only as a passive reaction to how it is affected by the world. He neither claims that is how we are all already behaving nor how all of us should behave, but rather how anyone might aim to behave if they wanted to overcome the pathological agitation that follows from literally asserting genuine beliefs, that is, that follows from being dogmatic.

How exactly, according to Pyrrhonism, is one affected by one’s appearances in such a way that their thinking and speaking amounts to nothing more than a global reactive force fictionalist performance? Sextus offers a standard or criterion of action Pyrrhonists adopt. It is divided into four everyday observances that are determined by the “passive and unwilling feelings” (Annas and Barnes 2000, 9) that attend appearances. These observances consist in “guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise” (9). By the guidance of nature, one instinctively thinks and perceives. By the necessity of feelings, one instinctively hungers and thirsts, for example. By the handing down of laws and customs, one accepts without belief moral judgments like “piety is good” and “impiety is bad.” By the teaching of kinds of expertise, one can, say, practice medicine without holding or asserting any medical beliefs (9). In these ways, the Pyrrhonist passively acquiesces to the ways in which he is affected by what he perceives and regards. He acts in accordance with his experience of a world he neither affirms nor denies. He asserts no beliefs, but rather quasi-asserts make-beliefs, about whatever he passively receives when called to. In this way, the Pyrrhonist experiences the tranquility that comes from quietly internally suspending judgment about dogmatic beliefs while still navigating the world with maximal ease. This seems to amount to a global reactive force fictionalism performed for the sake of therapeutic release from the emotional agitation that leads to and results from attachment to literally asserting genuine beliefs.

## 6. CONCLUSION

I have claimed that if one looks back to the premodern traditions of Classical Daoism, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and Pyrrhonian Skepticism one can detect a latent form of fictionalism we do not find discussed today. While more a force than content fictionalism, what I am calling “reactionary fictionalism” is also neither a hermeneutic nor revolutionary fictionalism

insofar as it recommends only those concerned with maximizing the therapeutic upshot of a global skeptical achievement should passively react to the world when called upon to do so with a pretense performance of quasi-asserting make-beliefs. The claims of all discourses are to be passively and reactively treated in a pretense manner, but only when employing a quietist pacification of normative and metaphysical conceptual projection is not an option. Distinct from other fictionalisms, the motivation for reactionary fictionalism is primarily therapeutic. To conclude, let us ask what contemporary fictionalists might make of reactionary fictionalism.

Contemporary fictionalists might wonder why they should find reactionary fictionalism preferable, or why they should take it seriously in the first place. Indeed, they might wonder if reactionary fictionalism is even a fictionalist view in the contemporary sense. In Kroon, Brock, and McKeown-Green's recent critical introduction to fictionalism, they offer three theses as individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions required for a view to count as a fictionalism. With respect to a discourse, a fictionalism must endorse "factuality," "quasi-fictionality," and "utility" (Kroon et al. 2018, 93). "Factuality" is what metaethicists often call factualism, the view that a discourse is truth-apt and expresses propositions. Factualism often comes as part of a package with cognitivism, the view that one's employment of a discourse entails beliefs in its propositions. "Quasi-fictionality" refers to how the norm of acceptance or assent with respect to the claims of a discourse is determined not by truth, but either by truth in a fiction or the claims being in accordance with a certain manner of telling a story. Such a norm allows a fictionalist to relegate the existence of the central posits of a discourse to a condition of either non-existence or uncertainty. Also, it allows a fictionalist to accept the claims of a discourse without necessarily believing in them, a condition the authors call "non-doxasticism" (96). "Utility" involves the engagement with a discourse being motivated and justified by something other than truth. A discourse need not be true to be useful. We still receive a positive payoff from using a discourse regardless of its possible falsity or untruth. Kroon et al. admit that these three conditions do not render fictionalism an uncontested concept. They note Bradley Armour-Garb and Woodbridge's (2015) very sophisticated account, for example, stresses more the serious content toward which the claims of a fictional discourse are redirected. Kroon et al. thus distinguish between their strict conditions for fictionalism and other looser fictionalist views that could count as examples of "fictionalism broadly construed" (Kroon et al. 2018, 97).

The question is then, does reactionary fictionalism serve as an example of Kroon et al.'s stricter kind of fictionalism, fulfilling each of its necessary

conditions, or more as a fictionalism in the broader sense? On the face of it, it seems that reactionary fictionalism does a decent job of fulfilling Kroon et al.'s conditions. Reactionary fictionalists are factualists about discourses. It seems to them that people are literally asserting real beliefs when they utter sentences, and these sentences thus express propositions that compose meaningful and truth-apt discourses. There is not much of a sense of a latent nonfactualism and noncognitivism in the three traditions we canvassed. Also, it seems that the motivation reactionary fictionalists have for passively reacting to the world with a thorough pretense performance of only quasi-asserting make-beliefs is that of the utility of doing so. It appears useful to reactionary fictionalists to quasi-assert make-beliefs when they feel forced to because it seems the best way of avoiding the attachments and suffering that characterize literal asserting real beliefs while still getting away with appearing like sincere speakers and believers. Discourses are to be used in a pretense manner as a means for avoiding the pathologies of literally asserting genuine beliefs. The falsity or untruth of discourses is of secondary concern. What matters is using discourses in a merely deflective manner in order to endure human life with maximal ease. It seems reactionary fictionalism does a fair enough job of fulfilling the conditions of "factuality" and "utility" then. What about "quasi-fictionality?"

Here, things get a little tricky. On the one hand, reactionary fictionalism certainly does engage in the truth relegation of the central posits of discourses, and so employs them only through a force fictionalist pretense performance. Reactionary fictionalism accepts the claims of discourses without belief, thus fulfilling the "nondoxasticism" condition. On the other hand, the "norm of acceptance" reactionary fictionalists use, while based on the force fictionalist proposal of quasi-asserting make-beliefs, is quite unlike any of the norms of acceptance used by other contemporary fictionalist views. This is because reactionary fictionalism is a global fictionalism and not merely a local fictionalism, as are all contemporary fictionalist options.<sup>1</sup> The reactionary fictionalist is a fictionalist about all discourses. Usually, a fictionalism needs some aspect of the "real world" to serve as a basis for an

---

<sup>1</sup> There could be a worry that reactionary fictionalism is not a global fictionalism, but actually a local fictionalism in disguise, especially since each of the traditions covered start off sounding like local fictionalisms (Classical Daoism about normative claims, Madhyamaka Buddhism about metaphysical claims, Pyrrhonian Skepticism about epistemic claims). But this would be to miss how each of these traditions explode into global fictionalist views as means for preserving as much skeptical quietism as possible about all conceptual projection. Reactive pretense is the way to avoid attachment to *all* claims. Reactionary fictionalism is thus a global fictionalism, which is what most clearly distinguishes it from all other fictionalisms.

engagement with a fiction. The norms of acceptance used by a fictionalism usually cannot themselves be fictional. But, for reactionary fictionalism, there is no “real world,” nothing that is not perspectival or empty or conventional or uncertain, and so there is no real basis or norm of acceptance upon which a global pretense could be based. This threatens reactionary fictionalism with incoherence and self-refutation. Laura Guerrero has issued this exact charge against Mario D’Amato’s Yogācāra-inspired brand of Buddhist global fictionalism (D’Amato 2012; Guerrero 2018). If reactionary fictionalism is a global fictionalism, then is it not also pretending about reactionary fictionalism, leaving it without a real reason for being taken seriously? Why would contemporary fictionalists need to take reactionary fictionalism seriously if it is an internally incoherent, nonnormative, baseless, self-refuting enterprise?

The reactionary fictionalist has two ways of responding to the charge of self-refutation. On the one hand, she can gladly bite the bullet and affirm that reactionary fictionalism is self-refuting since it is admittedly global in reach. As we have seen, there seems explicit textual evidence for this exact move in the traditions we covered with their use of purgative metaphors. Reactionary fictionalism is a device for enduring and deflecting genuine discourses. It is not meant to be justified by some “real world” norm of acceptance. It has no “real world” prop or principle of generation in the Waltonian sense beyond the seemingly brute desire to overcome the suffering and attachments of literally asserting real beliefs. Reactionary fictionalism engages in a purposive and pragmatic form of self-refutation. If the reactionary fictionalist is accused of pretending about pretense, she will pretend to admit she has been caught. Hopefully, if the conversation ever reaches this point, the reactionary fictionalist’s interlocutor would leave her alone and let her perform her pretense when she feels compelled to. The point of a global pretense is to performatively survive an inability to externally enjoy a quietist pacification and elimination of asserting beliefs. If such a performance is ultimately baseless or based on an indefinite regress of pretense props, then so be it, says the reactionary fictionalist. Purposive pragmatic self-refutation serves a greater goal than rational coherence.

On the other hand, we can already see something odd about this response. If the reactionary fictionalist is always pretending, then how can she be accused of self-refutation? How is there any self to refute? She has never literally asserted any proposition that could be refuted. It is hard to be accused of self-refutation when one has not literally asserted any real beliefs in the first place. In fact, according to the traditions discussed—through their seemingly total use of perspectivism, *reductio ad absurdum*, and

tetrallemmas—it is anyone else who genuinely asserts any real beliefs who must inevitably refute themselves. If neither a self nor a proposition can result from itself or another or both or neither, then it is anyone who literally asserts a real belief in a self or proposition that inevitably self-refutes. To sincerely assert a real belief in anything is to fall into the trap of either or both of other- and self-refutation, according to the reactionary fictionalist. It is also probably the case that this is a main source of the suffering they are aiming to overcome. Only by employing a global pretense is other- or self-refutation avoided and liberation achieved. Never literally asserting real beliefs, but only quasi-asserting make-beliefs when forced to by the world, is thus the only way to avoid self-refutation, not by tapping into and employing some supposed real world “norm of acceptance.”

Obviously, both of these responses are extreme. Yet, such extremity is motivated by the therapeutic desire for release. The extremity of the ailment of human suffering brought on by attachments requires an extreme response. At this point, the reactionary fictionalist is going to feel compelled to request charity from contemporary fictionalists. The reactionary fictionalist will hope other contemporary fictionalists will be willing to accept that, as she readily admits, her interest in and motivation for employing a global, reactive pretense is orthogonal to what interests and motivates them. Contemporary fictionalists are mostly aiming to solve certain metaphysical, epistemic, and semantic puzzles. Reactionary fictionalists are not primarily interested in solving such puzzles. Or, rather, they think such puzzles can be solved through a wholesale silencing of all sorts of philosophical speculation. To use Ethan Mills’s recent phrase in summarizing the views of the three traditions we have discussed (Mills 2018, 34), the reactionary fictionalist is as much a “skeptic about philosophy” as she is a skeptic about normal, everyday discourse.

If having this primarily therapeutic motivation renders reactionary fictionalism only an example of “fictionalism broadly construed,” then the reactionary fictionalist will have to accept that, but again, such admission into even the broad church of contemporary fictionalism will have to first be an act of charity on the part of contemporary fictionalists. Of course, fictionalists today have every reason to want to restrain fictionalism and keep it to being a rather specific thesis. Reactionary fictionalism does indeed come off as so breezy and as such an apparently easy thing to employ that it would seem to trivialize the notion of fictionalism itself (though I do think it is extremely difficult to pull off, which helps to explain why it has been offered on only a few, rare occasions throughout the whole history of philosophy, East and West). However, it seems unduly restrictive and



exclusionary to reject, at least as an addition to the history of proto-fictionalism and as a possible way of *practicing* fictionalism today, an approach that is driven primarily by a therapeutic desire to overcome the pathologies of both everyday and philosophical discourse. In the end, it might be discouraging to discover philosophical views are only ever to be taken seriously as a means for tinkering with other philosophical problems and never as a means for overcoming philosophical problems in their entirety. If looked at more as a spectrum of views, reactionary fictionalism is a fictionalist view at the limit of possible fictionalist views, half a philosophic position and half a performance of self-healing. Reactionary fictionalism can thus be considered informative for contemporary fictionalists insofar as it can show them what happens when a fictionalism has primarily therapeutic motivations and so goes global.

## REFERENCES

- Annas, J., and J. Barnes, eds. 2000. *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Armour-Garb, B., and J. Woodbridge. 2015. *Pretense and Pathology: Philosophical Fictionalism and its Applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barnes, J. 1982. "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist." *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* N.S. 28: 1–29. Reprinted in Burnyeat and Frede 1997: 58–91 (page references to reprint).
- Baxter, D. 2018. "A Pyrrhonian Interpretation of Hume on Assent." In *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by D. Machuca and B. Reed, 380–94. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Brock, S. 2014. "The Phenomenological Objection to Fictionalism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88: 574–92.
- Burnyeat, M. F. 1980. "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" In *Doubt and Dogmatism*, edited by M. Schofield, M. F. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes, 20–53. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Reprinted in Burnyeat and Frede 1997: 25–57 (page references to reprint).
- Burnyeat, M. F., and M. Frede, eds. 1997. *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Chung, J. 2018. "Is Zhuangzi a Fictionalist?" *Philosopher's Imprint* 18, no. 22: 1–23.
- Collins, S. 1982. *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crittenden, C. 1981. "Everyday Reality as Fiction – A Madhyamika Interpretation." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9: 323–33.
- D'Amato, J. 2012. Buddhist Fictionalism. *Sophia* 52: 409–24.
- Eklund, M. 2017. "Fictionalism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/fictionalism/>.
- Garfield, J., trans. 1995. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Garfield, J. 2006. "Reductionism and Fictionalism: Comments on Siderits's *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*." *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophy* 6, no. 1: 1–7.
- Guerrero, L. 2018. "Buddhist Global Fictionalism?" *Ratio* 31, no. 4: 424–36.
- Joyce, R. 2016. *Essays in Moral Skepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kalf, W. F. 2018. *Moral Error Theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kroon, F. 2011. "Fictionalism in Metaphysics." *Philosophy Compass* 6, no. 11: 786–803.
- Kroon, F., S. Brock, and J. McKeown-Green. 2018. *A Critical Introduction to Fictionalism*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Lewis, D. 1991. *Parts of Classes*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- . 2005. "Quasi-Realism is Fictionalism." In *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, edited by M. Kalderon, 314–21. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Liu, J. 2007. "Confucian Moral Realism." *Asian Philosophy* 17, no. 2: 167–84.
- Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley, eds. and trans. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin.
- Matilal, B. K. 1970. "Reference and Existence in Nyāya and Buddhist Logic." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 1: 83–110.
- Mills, E. 2018. *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śri Harṣa*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Moeller, H.-G., trans. 2007. *Daodejing*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Morison, B. 2019. "Sextus Empiricus." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/sextus-empiricus/>.
- Newland, G., and T. J. F. Tillemans. 2011. "An Introduction to Conventional Truth." In *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by T. Cowherds, 3–22. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nolan, D., G. Restall, and C. West. 2005. "Moral Fictionalism versus the Rest." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 3: 307–30.
- Rosen, G. 2005. "Problems in the History of Fictionalism." In *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, edited by M. Kalderon, 14–64. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Siderits, M. 2003. *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*. Hampshire, UK: Ashgate.
- Stanley, J. 2001. "Hermeneutic Fictionalism." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25: 36–71.
- Tillemans, T. J. F. 2011. "How Far Can a Mādhyamika Buddhist Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives." In *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by T. Cowherds, 151–66. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thorsrud, H. 2014. *Ancient Scepticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Ziporyn, B., ed. 2009. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett.