**Pretence Fictionalism about the Non-present[[1]](#footnote-2)**

Abstract

Presentists hold that only present things exist. But we all, presentists included, utter sentences that appear to involve quantification over non-present objects, and so we all, presentists included, seem to commit ourselves to such objects. Equally, we all, presentists included, take utterances of many past-tensed (and some future-tensed) sentences to be true. But if no past or future things exist, it’s hard to see how there can be anything that those utterances are about, which makes them true. This paper presents a hitherto unexplored response to both problems: pretence fictionalism about the non-present. This view combines semantic factualism with psychological non-cognitivism. Sentences that appear to quantify over the non-present have propositional content and (almost all of) those propositions are false because the thing they are about—the non-present—does not exist. Nevertheless when we utter such sentences we don’t thereby utter something false. Our utterances do not report the belief that the propositional content of the sentence uttered is true; rather, they express a non-cognitive attitude towards that content: namely an attitude of *pretence*. Hence by thinking various thoughts, and uttering various sentences we are, collectively, *pretending* as though things were (or will be) thus and so.

Key Words

Presentism; Truthmaking; The Non-present; Discourse; Error Theory; Noncognitivism

1. Introduction

Presentism is the view that only present things exist.[[2]](#footnote-3) [[3]](#footnote-4) Presentism is often touted as a folk friendly view of time.[[4]](#footnote-5) For all that, the view faces a number of objections. This paper aims to provide a new response to two such objections: the Quinean Objection and the Truthmaker Objection. That response is fictionalism about the non-present. In order to make sense of fictionalism about the non-present this paper sets out a particular version of that view: hermeneutic pretence fictionalism. My aim is to present a version of fictionalism about the non-present in sufficient detail that it can be argued that the view should be attractive to presentists. There are two things the paper does not aim to do. First, it does not aim to argue that the particular version of non-present fictionalism that I present is the best version of that view. It’s a version of the view that I find amenable; but along the way I will gesture towards various choice points at which the fictionalist could make a different choice and end up with a different view. At this stage I am more concerned to put this broad view on the map than I am to defend some particular version of that view. Second, my aim is to not to argue that fictionalism about the non-present is preferable to other views in the philosophy of time such as, for instance, a B-theoretic eternalist theory. Indeed, I think that is false. I am not a presentist. My claim is the much more limited one: insofar as one is a presentist (and there are plenty of them) one should at least find fictionalism about the non-present worthy of consideration. I begin, in §2, by outlining the Quinean and Truthmaker objections and providing a brief overview of pretence fictionalism by situating it amongst several other options that the presentist might adopt. In §3 I outline the broad contours of fictionalism about the non-present. In §4 I set out a particular version of that view: hermeneutic pretence fictionalism about the non-present. Then in §5 I hone in still further on that view, outlining what call hermeneutic shared pretence fictionalism about the non-present. In §6 I argue that hermeneutic pretence fictionalism (shared or otherwise) is an attractive view when compared to other versions of presentism. Finally, in §§7-8 I outline and respond to two objections.

2. The Quinean and Truthmaker Objections

Call an ordinary sentence that appears to quantify over the non-present[[5]](#footnote-6) (either non-present times, or non-present things) a *non-present sentence*.[[6]](#footnote-7) According to the Quinean Objection,[[7]](#footnote-8) non-present sentences such as

(1) There were Moa[[8]](#footnote-9)

are properly regimented into a form that involves quantification over some past things (Moa) and perhaps also some past times at which there were Moa. Given that we take (1) to be true, we are committed to the existence of the things over which (1), properly regimented, quantifies. Hence we are committed to the existence of Moa (and perhaps past times). The argument generalises, and so on its basis we are all committed to the existence of non-present things.[[9]](#footnote-10) Hence presentism is false.

Since the intuition that there are true past-tensed truths is particularly compelling, the Truthmaking Objection is typically framed in terms of those truths, and I will follow suite. It seems obvious that there are some past-tensed truths. But it is natural to think that if a proposition is true, it is true because of the way the world is: that is, truth supervenes on being.[[10]](#footnote-11) If truth supervenes on being, and only present being exists, then truth must supervene on present being. So past-tensed truths must supervene on present being. But it is also plausible that what determines a proposition’s true-value is what that proposition is *about*. This has become known as the aboutness constraint on truthmaking.[[11]](#footnote-12) The aboutness constraint is plausible, at least when it comes to many past (and present)-tensed truths.[[12]](#footnote-13) If it’s true that Freddie is a labradoodle, then since that proposition seems to be about Freddie, it ought be made true by Freddie, and his being a labradoodle.

So presentism is false. Since past-tensed propositions are about past things, and since propositions can only be made true by the things they are about, then since there are past-tensed truths, there are past things. [[13]](#footnote-14)

Presentists need to respond to these objections. This paper presents a novel response: *fictionalism about the non-present.*[[14]](#footnote-15) My goal is to show that the fictionalism about the non-present compares favourably with other presentist views.

Presentists, of course, are not alone in using language which, at least *prima facie,* seems to be best regimented in such a manner that it quantifies over entities that on reflection we do not think exist. In everyday talk we all, mathematical nominalists included, utter sentences that appear to quantify over mathematical objects. In everyday talk we all, moral nihilists included, utter sentences that appear to quantify over moral properties. Call the relevant sentences *problematic sentences.* In what follows I use ‘S’ to pick out an arbitrary sentence, and ‘P’ to pick out an arbitrary proposition. Further, if S1 expresses a proposition, then I use ‘P1’ to pick out the proposition expressed.

Various options for dealing with problematic sentences present themselves. Semantic non-factualists hold that (the relevant) problematic sentences have no propositional content, and hence are not apt for being true or false. For instance, older-style noncognitivist views in ethics embrace semantic non-factualism about moral sentences[[15]](#footnote-16) holding that sentences that appear to predicate moral properties to the object of the sentence do not do so. Instead, those sentences express some noncognitive attitude (i.e. a mental state that is not truth-apt) towards the object of the sentence in question.[[16]](#footnote-17) [[17]](#footnote-18) Hence utterances of moral sentences can be felicitous and yet not commit us to the existence of moral properties.

By contrast, semantic factualists about problematic sentences hold that those sentences express propositions, and hence are apt for being true or false. Some factualists then maintain that although the proper regimentation of the problematic sentences quantifies over the entities in question, this does not commit us to the existence of those entities even though the sentences are true.[[18]](#footnote-19) Other factualists argue that the proper regimentation of the problematic sentences does not quantify over the entities in question, and that the sentences are true because they are actually about something other than what they appear to be about.[[19]](#footnote-20) Let’s say that views of this broad kind endorse *semantic* *non-aboutness:* they hold that the problematic sentences are not really about what they appear to be about. Other factualists hold that the problematic sentences are best regimented in such a way that they quantify over the entities in question. Call such a view a *semantic aboutness* view, since they are views on which the problematic sentences are about what they appear to be about. But these semantic aboutness factualists endorse what I will call *truthmaker non-aboutness.* This is the view that what makes the problematic sentences true is not what those sentences are about. Still other factualists hold that the problematic sentences are best regimented in such a way that they quantify over the entities in question, and hence conclude that since those entities do not exist, the sentences are strictly speaking false, and so too are our utterances of those sentences. These last views are error theoretic about the discourse that employs the problematic sentences. Nevertheless, according to some error theorists there is reason to continue to employ those sentences. The resulting view is some kind of *error-theoretic fictionalism*. [[20]](#footnote-21)

Finally, the factualist might hold that the problematic sentences express propositions, and that appropriately regimented they quantify over the entities in question. Hence the sentences are systematically false.[[21]](#footnote-22). But when we utter those sentences we do not systematically utter falsehoods. For *utterances* of those sentences do not report cognitive states (i.e. mental states that are truth-apt). Instead, when we utter such sentences we are expressing some non-cognitive attitude towards the propositional content of the sentence. For instance, perhaps we are expressing an attitude of pretence towards the proposition in question. [[22]](#footnote-23)

Presentists have explored some of these options, and more, in responding to the Quinean and Truthmaker Objections. In order to maintain truthmaking aboutness, some presentness endorse semantic non-aboutness. On such views non-present sentences are made true by what they are about (truthmaking aboutness) but they are not in fact about what they appear to be about (semantic non-aboutness). Instead those sentences are in fact about (and made true by) presently existing things such as past-tensed properties of the world, the laws of nature in conjunction with the present ways things are, or some such.[[23]](#footnote-24) Call this view *truthmaking aboutness with semantic non-aboutness.* Other presentists have endorsed semantic aboutness, and held that non-present sentences are indeed about what they appear to be, namely the past. These presentists reject truthmaking aboutness, and hold that non-present sentences are made true by something other than what they are about, such as, for instance, presently existing things such as past-tensed properties of the world, the laws of nature in conjunction with the present ways things are, or some such. Call this combination of views *truthmaking non-aboutness with semantic aboutness.*

Still other presentists have denied that truth supervenes on being.[[24]](#footnote-25) Such presentists can maintain semantic aboutness, but reject truthmaking altogether: they maintain that the relevant non-present sentences are true, but not in virtue of anything (past or present). Finally, there are presentists who hope to endorse a view that is what you might think of as the ‘gold standard’: it combines both semantic aboutness and truthmaking aboutness. The idea of such views is that non-present sentences are about non-present things, (semantic aboutness) but that they are made true by what they are about (truthmaking aboutness) because non-present things in some good sense still exist, because the relevant thisness or haecceity of those things exist. [[25]](#footnote-26) It’s not really clear, though, that such views succeed in endorsing semantic aboutness, since it is not clear that the sentence ‘Socrates was a philosopher’ is really about Socrates’ thisness or haecceity, rather than being about a flesh and blood man who, according to the presentist, does not exist.

Each of these views has its costs. Presentist views that endorse truthmaking aboutness with semantic non-aboutness get to say that non-present sentences are made true by what they are about. But they do that only at the cost of holding that the literal content of non-present sentences is other than it appears to be. They are, in fact about, say, the past-tensed properties of the world presently, and it is these past-tensed properties that make true those sentences. The cost here lies in saying that ordinary non-present sentences express radically different propositions than their sentential structure and sub-sentential components would lead us to expect.

Presentist views that endorse truthmaking non-aboutness and semantic aboutness get to say that non-present sentences are about what they appear to be, but only at the cost of then saying that they are made true by something other than what they are about. This is like holding that the sentence ‘Freddie is a labradoodle’ is about Freddie and his being a labradoodle, but that the sentence’s truth-value is not determined by Freddie and his being a labradoodle.

Finally, the third response incurs the cost that the presentist has to deny that truth supervenes on being. But surely truth, or at least, most truth, does supervene on being. Even if some truths (perhaps modal truths, or metaphysical truths) do not supervene on being, it would be surprising indeed if truths about labradoodles did not so supervene. As a result, so-called nefarious presentists[[26]](#footnote-27) have been accused of ‘ontological cheating’.[[27]](#footnote-28)

I won’t press these objections further. I simply note that the view I outline incurs none of these costs and that is one reason why it should be a live option for the presentist.

An underexplored option on the part of the presentist is to conclude that non-present sentences are false[[28]](#footnote-29) or at least, not true.[[29]](#footnote-30) By accepting this, the presentist can hold that, appropriately regimented, those sentences quantify over non-present things, and that these sentences are about what they appear to be about. Moreover, the presentist can hold the plausible claim that if non-present sentences are about the non-present, they are true only if the non-present is as they say it is. Hence if there are no non-present things, then non-present sentences are either false, or not true. The advantage of such a view is that the presentist can adopt a straightforward semantics for non-present sentences according to which those sentences are about non-present things.

According to fictionalism about the non-present, though, in uttering non-present sentences we are not utter falsehoods or untruths. On the particular version of the view that I outline in this paper when we utter such sentences we are not making assertions. Rather, we are expressing some kind of non-cognitive state: we are expressing an attitude of *pretence* towards the propositional content of the sentence. So this version of fictionalism about the non-present is a kind of pretence fictionalism about the non-present, though I will often refer to the view simply as fictionalism about the non-present. In the following section I outline that view in more detail.

3. An Overview of Fictionalism about the Non-present

Fictionalism about the non-present is a broad church. Strictly speaking, it simply says that non-present sentences express propositions that are about the non-present, and which, as a result, are either false or at least not true, but that those sentences are true in some fiction. This leaves open many different ways of spelling out the view. I'll take a stand on several of these in defending *hermeneutic pretence* *fictionalism* about the non-present. Along the way I will flag various places where I think there are other interesting versions of fictionalism about the non-present that can and should be explored.

There are two crucial aspects of hermeneutic pretence fictionalism about the non-present. The first is that non-present sentences (a) are correctly regimented in such a way that they quantify over the non-present, and (b) express propositions and (c) are true only if the non-present is as the propositions that are expressed by those sentences say it is. On this view, when we utter non-present sentences we utter sentences with perfectly ‘ordinary’ propositional content, that is, we utter sentences that are about what they seem to be about (i.e. past or future things). Hence fictionalists endorse semantic aboutness. But, according to the second crucial aspect of the view, when we utter non-present sentences we do not assert their propositional content instead, we express attitudes of pretence towards that content: we pretend that the content is true. This is in contrast to our utterances of present sentences, which (often, or mostly) assert the propositional content of those sentences. [[30]](#footnote-31)

Both aspects of the view require some unpacking. I’ll begin with the second aspect of the view.

First, the view I present is an *interpretive* or *hermeneutic* version of fictionalism. It’s the view that the best interpretation of what we are doing when we think and talk about the non-present by employing non-present sentences is that we are engaging in a particular fiction: *the* *non-present fiction.* The fictionalist could, instead, embrace a sort of *revisionary* fictionalism. On that view the best interpretation of what we are doing is not that we are engaging in a fiction, but instead that we are doing something else. Once, however, we see that presentism is true and that our utterances are systematically false, we should revise so that we come to endorse fictionalism. This is not a view I will consider here; but if, at the end of the paper, you are inclined to think that the view I offer is not a very plausible interpretation of what we *are* doing, but a good account of what we *should* be doing, that will not unduly distress me. This is, after all, still a version of fictionalism about the non-present.

The version of hermeneutic fictionalism that I outline in this paper is a version of *pretence* fictionalism. It is the view that when we engage in the non-present fiction we pretend *as though* the content of that fiction is the case. Hence when we utter non-present sentences we are not asserting the content of those sentences. Instead, we are directing an attitude of pretence towards that propositional content. This is (more or less) the version of fictionalism that Yablo (2001) calls instrumentalism; as Yablo puts it, it is the view that we are pretending to assert, rather than asserting.

What is it to direct an attitude of pretence towards a proposition? I will suppose that to direct an attitude of pretence towards proposition P is to pretend that P, where to pretend that P is to do something like *suppose* that P, *take it* that P, and act *as if* P for all practical purposes. So to pretend that <two hours ago I had a Covid vaccination> is to act as if it’s the case that two hours ago I had that vaccination: it is to utter sentences such as ‘two hours ago I had a Covid vaccination’; it is to plan to take the day off work in case of side effects, it is to alter my view about my chances of getting Covid, and so on.

There are, of course, other options that the fictionalist could take. Some of these are roughly as plausible as the hermeneutic pretence fictionalism I will outline, while others are less so. For instance, meta-fictionalism is the view that in uttering non-present sentence S, a speaker is really asserting the proposition <according to the non-present fiction, S>. This seems to me to be a reasonable hermeneutic claim about utterances of sentences such as ‘Holmes is a detective’ and ‘Santa has a white beard’. I do not find it very plausible that the best interpretation of utterances of non-present sentences such as ‘Socrates was a philosopher’ is that said utterances assert that in the non-present fiction, Socrates was a philosopher. Still, it’s worth noting that much of what I say in spelling out the content of the non-present fiction could be used by a meta-fictionalist to articulate such a view.

Alternatively, the fictionalist might say that when a speaker utters a non-present sentence S, she is asserting that the world is a certain way, a way that makes it true that in the non-present fiction, S. This view is sometimes known as object fictionalism. Object fictionalism and meta-fictionalism are both views on which utterances of non-present sentences assert some content, which is other than the literal content of those sentences. By contrast, pretence fictionalism (or instrumentalism) is a view on which the utterance has the literal content in question, but it is not asserted.

Crucially, then, all three versions of fictionalism are ones on which non-present sentences express literal content that is false, (or at least not true). And all three versions of fictionalism are ones on which non-present sentences are true in the relevant fiction. Where they differ is with regard to whether utterances of those sentences assert something other than their literal content (meta-fictionalism and object fictionalism) or express the literal content but do not assert it. I don’t think that an awful lot hangs on whether the fictionalist endorses the sort of pretence fictionalism I outline in this paper, or something closer to object fictionalism.

On the one hand, object fictionalists don’t need to explain what it means to pretend that thus and so, and that is, perhaps, one reason to prefer the view. On the other hand, object fictionalists end up saying that an utterance of non-present sentence S asserts something other than its literal content: it asserts something about the way the world is, (presently) which is a way that makes it true in the non-present fiction, that S. I take it that the natural thing to say, here, is that it is existence of apparent current records (including of course memories) that makes it true in the non-present fiction that S. But if so, the object fictionalist says that when we utter S, we assert something about current records. While maybe this is the best interpretation of our utterances, I am not so sure. I take this to be an unattractive feature of the view.

In the end, though, both pretence fictionalism and object fictionalism need similar resources. Both need an account of the content of the non-present fiction, and ideally both need an account of why engaging with that fiction is useful. This paper attempts to provide both of these resources. So in the end if you prefer an object fictionalist version of fictionalism about the non-present to the pretence version that I present, I will not be unhappy. My goal is to get fictionalism about the non-present on the map, not to take a firm stance on which version of the view is preferable.

The second crucial aspect of fictionalism about the non-present is that non-present sentences express propositions that are about the non-present. So the fictionalist needs there to be propositions with this kind of content. Indeed, I think the most natural version of fictionalism is one on which the content of the relevant fiction is given by some set or other of such propositions. For instance, the version of pretence fictionalism I outline shortly is one on which we pretend that certain propositions are true: namely certain propositions expressed by non-present sentences.

In what follows I take propositions to be what are expressed by sentences; to be the content of mental states, and to be the bearers of truth. Further, I assume that propositions are relatively fine-grained, since I take it that we want to be able to distinguish between the contents of two sentences that each express a necessary truth, as well as between the contents of two sentences that each express a necessary falsehood. For instance, we want it to be the case that directing an attitude of pretence towards the proposition that it was the case that 2+2 =5, is distinct from directing an attitude of pretence towards the proposition that it was the case that 4+4+8.

One very popular approach to fine-graining propositions is to take them to be structured entities—entities structured in such a way that their structure reflects the structure of the relevant expression (Soames 1987; King 1995; 1996; 2007). So propositions have structures that can be ‘filled’ with different elements—the semantic values of the sentence’s constituents—and two sentences express different structured propositions if either the structure, or what is in the structure, differs. This view is often coupled with the also popular direct reference theory, on which the semantic value of a name is the individual to which it refers, and the semantic value of a predicate is the property to which it refers. Call this combination of views *Structured Millianism.*

Structured Millianism is a popular view that seems to be incompatible with fictionalism about the non-present. For consider the non-present sentence ‘Socrates was a philosopher at t.’ However exactly we want to represent that structure, it will have a slot for the semantic vale of the name Socrates, as well as a slot for the semantic value for the property of being a philosopher, and a slot for the semantic value for time, t. The problem is that if the semantic values of names are individuals, then since according to presentists Socrates does not exist, there is nothing to fill the first of those slots. Likewise, there appears to be nothing to fill the ‘t’ slot either, since no past times exist. As a result, we end up with a proposition that is gappy. It has two empty slots, and one slot filled with the property of being a philosopher.

If Structured Millianism is the only fine-grained account of propositions then, it would appear, fictionalism about the non-present is dead in the water from the get go. But even if it isn’t the only such account, it’s the best, or most popular account, then it will be a cost to fictionalism abut the non-present if the view can only be spelled out by appealing to some other account of propositions.

The first thing to say, here, is that the apparent incompatibility of Structured Millianism with fictionalism about the non-present is not just a problem for fictionalists about the non-present. Any presentist who endorses semantic aboutness faces the same problem. Second, the general form of this problem is a problem for anyone who endorses Structured Millianism. Even if presentism is false and ‘Socrates’ is not an empty name, there are, arguably, plenty of names that are empty, such as ‘Holmes’ and ‘Santa’.[[31]](#footnote-32) Sentences that feature these names appear to be meaningful, and yet on the Structured Millian view they express gappy propositions.

Here is what I think the fictionalist should say. The first option is to reject direct reference theories in favour of descriptivist or neo-descriptivist views on which all terms, including names, have associated with them descriptions (albeit perhaps descriptions that involve causal claims as per causal descriptivism).[[32]](#footnote-33) Then that description specifies a function that takes us from the term to its extension in different worlds; a function that may have no extension in the actual world. On such a view we could either think of propositions as entities comprised, in a structured manner, of intensions, or we could think of them as simply functions from possible *and impossible* worlds to extensions (Nolan 2013; Jago 2014; Yagisawa 2010).

Those who, like, me, are neo-descriptivists should find this option amenable, and it is such a view that I will have in mind in what follows.

Still, since many folks are direct reference theorist, if the fictionalist is committed to some kind of neo-descriptivist theory then this will represent a cost of the view compared to (some) other presentist alternatives. Is there a way forward for such fictionalists? I think there is. Structured Millians have to have *something* to say about which propositions are expressed by sentences containing, *inter alia,* empty names. I am inclined to say that if what they say succeeds, then the fictionalist can employ their machinery to make sense of non-present sentences, and if it doesn't succeed, then that just shows that we should reject Structured Millianism.

What might such an account be? Braun (1993 and (2005) defends a version of Structured Millianism on which some sentences express gappy propositions. This suggestion appears to be problematic for the fictionalist since it looks like she would need to say that many non-present sentences express the *same* gappy proposition. Consider ‘Annie was tired at t\*’ and ‘Freddie was tired at t’. If both names are empty, as are both times, then both sentences will express the same gappy proposition. But the fictionalist surely wants those two sentences to express different propositions.

There are, however, two ways forward here. Suppose that Gerald, presently, believes the gappy proposition that is the content of the former non-present sentence. There had better be some good sense in which he believes something different from if he believes the content of the second non-present sentence. Braun suggests that Gerald believes a single proposition (the gappy one) but *under differ guises:* he believes the former in an ‘Annie-ish’ manner, and the latter in a Freddie-ish manner.

So the fictionalist might say that non-present sentences express gappy propositions, and that although many such sentences express the same gappy proposition, we sometimes believe a single proposition under different guises. Or, in the case of pretence fictionalism, we pretend that a particular (gappy) proposition, P, under different guises. Pretending that the gappy proposition above is true under an Annie-ish guise is different from pretending that it’s true under a Freddie-ish guise. Now, while I have a hard time getting a handle on what an Annie-ish guise is, given that on this view there is no definite description associated with the name ‘Annie’, it’s worth noting that *if* this general approach to the problem faced by Structured Millianism succeeds, then the fictionalist should be able to employ some version of this approach, albeit with a bit of finessing.

Another option would be to follow Spencer (2016) and hold that the gappy proposition that is the content of ‘Annie was tired at t\*’ is distinct from the gappy proposition that is the content of ‘Freddie was tired at t’ even though those two propositions contain the same elements and the same gaps in the same slots.

There would, of course, be some work in spelling out a Structured Millian version of fictionalism about the non-present, and that is not something I do here. The general point is just that insofar as Structured Millianism has the resources adequately to make sense of empty names, the fictionalist about the non-present should be able to employ those resources. In what follows, though, I’ll assume some version of neo-descriptivism and hence sidestep these kinds of worries.

4. Hermeneutic Pretence Fictionalism

What, then, is the content of the, or a, non-present fiction? I will say that the content of a non-present fiction is that set of propositions towards which an individual, or collection thereof, directs an attitude of pretence.[[33]](#footnote-34) Indeed on this view fictions, and in particular non-present fictions, are just sets of propositions. Then an individual’s non-present fiction, IF, is the set that is union of all of the propositions towards which that individual has an attitude of pretence, and aproposition P is true in an individual non-present fiction, IF, just in case P is member of IF. I’ll have more to say about the fiction of collections of individuals—i.e. shared fictions—in the following section.

Then individual non-present fictions have several notable features. First, we’d expect each of them to be *consistent*. An individual cannot both pretend that P, and pretend that not P. So at most, one of P, or not P, will be a member of any individual non-present fiction. Second, we’d expect individual non-present fictions to be *incomplete*. We’d expect there to be propositions and their negations towards which individual do not direct any attitude of pretence. Further, we’d expect some individual fictions to be incompatible with one another. That is, we’d expect some individual fictions to include P, and some to include not P (for some P). Finally, and notably, we see a substantial overlap between individual fictions (that is, many of the same propositions are in multiple individual fictions). Let’s begin by considering the last aspect of individual fictions.

The fictionalist will want to explain this overlap. She can do so by appealing to the notion of an *apparent record.* Apparent records include apparent memories; apparent history—written down in (apparent) diaries, books, memoirs, history texts, scientific papers, books on evolution, cosmology, biology, chemistry, physics—apparent natural records—tree rings, fossils, archaeological digs, soil layers—and so on. Apparent records are all those things that exist in the present, and which, jointly, appear to provide a record of the past being thus and so. I will suppose that apparent records have representational content: they represent that things were thus and so. Thus two apparent records, R1 and R2, are inconsistent just in case their representational contents are incompatible.

As a matter of fact, the propositions towards which individuals direct an attitude of pretence is sensitive to the apparent records. Roughly speaking we pretend *in accordance with the apparent records*. Since different individuals have access to different apparent records (Bert might seem to remember P, while Ted has no apparent memory of P, and has access to apparent records that not P) this explains both why there is a good deal of overlap in our individual fictions, and also why there are some differences.

Why do we pretend in accordance with the apparent records? Indeed, why do we pretend *at all?* The answer is that we act in accordance with the apparent records because doing so is successful, and acting in accordance with the apparent records is, for all practical purposes, the same as pretending as though the non-present is some way, namely the way represented by the apparent records. Let’s take each of these claims in turn.

Why is acting in accordance with the apparent records successful? The eternalist will say that the apparent records are records, and on their basis we can make predictions about what the future. But even the eternalist has no good account of how we can legitimately infer things about the future from the existence of past patterns. The eternalist can of course say that as it happens we live in an orderly world in which on the basis of past patterns, we can predict the future. But the fictionalist will say something similar. As it happens we live in an orderly world in which on the basis of *presently* *existing* *patterns* we can predict the future. In this regard both the eternalist’s and the presentist’s predictions are based on patterns. The only difference is that the eternalist’s pattern is diachronic, while the presentist’s pattern is synchronic. But it’s not clear why that difference should make a difference. If the fictionalist can appeal to synchronic patterns then she has an explanation of why acting in accordance with the apparent records is successful.

Acting in accordance with the apparent records, though, is for all practical purposes the same as acting as though the non-present is some way (namely the way encoded in the apparent records). After all, acting in accordance with an apparent record that represents that R, is for all practical purposes the same as acting as though it was the case that R. So the pretence fictionalist has a pleasing account of why it is that we engage in the pretence that we do, and why each of pretences overlap in the manner that they do.

At this point, though, one might worry that the fictionalist has painted herself into a corner. If pretending as though the non-present is some particular way is for all practical purposes acting in accordance with the apparent records, then why not simply say that we are acting in accordance with the apparent records? Why posit any sort of pretence? The pretence, one might object, is redundant

There are two ways one might press the redundancy objection. The object fictionalist might argue that if it’s true that pretending as though the non-present is some way is for all practical purposes acting in accordance with the apparent records, then the best interpretation of our practices is object fictionalism. When people utter non-present sentences they don’t express the literal content of those sentences, (which is about the non-present) but instead they express some non-literal content. In particular, they assert propositions about the apparent records. So the world being such and such a way with regard to the apparent records is what grounds certain claims being true in the non-present fiction, and the world being that way renders true the (non-literal) content of the relevant utterances.

By contrast, those who endorse semantic non-aboutness might press that objection by arguing that if acting as though the non-present is some way is just like acting in accordance with the apparent records, then the best interpretation of our practices is some kind of semantic non-aboutness. In particular, the best interpretation is that non-present sentences in fact express propositions about the apparent records, and that content is straightforwardly made true by those records. We should think that we have, all along, been talking about apparent records.

The pretence fictionalist can respond to both objections by noting that while acting in accordance with the apparent records is, for all practical purposes, like pretending as though the non-present is some way, it doesn’t follow that the best interpretation of our practices is either object fictionalism or semantic non-aboutness. Consider semantic non-aboutness first. This view requires a highly disunified semantics. On that view present sentences such as ‘Annie is tired’ or ‘there are dogs’ are about present, ordinary flesh and blood things – namely Annie and dogs. But past-tensed sentence such as ‘Annie was tired’ or ‘there were dogs’ are not about ordinary flesh and blood things like Annie or dogs: they are about present records. It’s difficult to believe this is the simplest or most plausible interpretation of the meanings of present and non-present sentences taken jointly. Moreover, many of us think that the intentions of speakers at least partly determine the meanings of our words. While the world determines that ‘water’ refer to H20 rather than XYZ (say), it is the referencing fixing description associated with ‘water’ that determines to what it refers, and that referencing fixing description is some important aspect of the term’s meaning.[[34]](#footnote-35) Further, each of us has some, albeit defeasible, access to that referencing fixing description: that’s how we can figure out what our terms would have referred to, if things had actually been different. If you accept something like this then you should be sceptical of the semantic anti-aboutness claim. For it seems very unlikely that the referencing fixing description for terms like ‘dog’ and ‘Annie’ are such that when used in present-tensed sentences they pick out dogs and Annie, and when used in non-present tensed sentences they pick out something else entirely: apparent records. Indeed, I expect that if asked, most of us would deny that this is anything like what we mean by those terms (or the sentences employing them). If, like me you think we have some access to our own meanings, then this gives you reason to doubt that the interpretation offered by the semantic anti-aboutness theorist is correct.

Matters are a bit less straightforward when it comes to object fictionalism. After all, the object fictionalist holds that non-present sentences express what we suppose they do; it's just that when we utter them we don’t assert their literal content. Now, as I’ve said previously, my aim is not to argue against object fictionalism. So if you’re now convinced that object fictionalism is preferable to pretence fictionalism this will not unduly concern me. Still. I think the pretence fictionalist has a response to the objection. She can say that just as we have some access to what our words mean, so too we have some access to whether we are using those words literally or not: that is, we have some access to whether we are asserting their literal content or doing something else with them. When we reflect on what we are doing with our utterances of non-present sentences, though, we are not inclined to say (I submit) that we are in fact making utterances about apparent records. And that gives us some, defeasible, reason to think that this is not what we are doing.

Now, the object fictionalist will no doubt respond that her claim is a hermeneutic one: it’s about the best interpretation of our practices. It doesn’t need to be that this is what we intend to be doing, or that we are conscious that this is what we are doing. Sure. Fine. But amongst the practices we want to make sense of we should include the fact that people will deny that what they are doing when they utter non-present sentences is actually asserting some non-literal content about apparent records. Given that, it is not obvious that object fictionalism is the best interpretation of our practices.

Don’t similar worries plague the pretence fictionalist? After all, if we ask people if they are engaged in a massive pretence they will surely respond that they are not. So the best interpretation of their practices will not be that they are, in fact, engaged in pretence. But the pretence fictionalist can note that pretending as though the non-present is some way is just acting as though it is. People *do* act as though the non-present is some way. To be sure, they are not intending, consciously, to engage in pretence. But the pretence fictionalist does not think that they are. She simply thinks that we act as though the non-present is some way, and that the best interpretation of this is that we are pretending. Since pretending to act, and acting, appear indistinguishable, and since her claim is not that we consciously engage in the pretence, we’d expect people to deny that they are engaged in a pretence. So the pretence fictionalist predicts that this will be so and has a neat explanation for it.

Still, one might worry that there are other sorts of evidence that tend to suggest that this is not the best interpretation of our practices. For if we are engaged in pretence, it is an unusual pretence: it appears to be universal (everyone does so) and pervasive (it pervades almost all aspects of our lives rather than being localised). I will argue later that engaging in some non-present fiction or other is inescapable. It is not a choice that we make, but rather, a necessary precondition for practical rationality. This explains why the pretence is both universal and pervasive.

Setting aside that explanation for now, though, does the fact that the pretence is universal and pervasive give us reason to doubt that fictionalism is true? No. The fictionalism in question is not, to be sure, like the sorts of pretence in which we consciously engage when we step onto the stage in a theatre. But ‘philosophical fictionalisms’ are often very unlike everyday cases of pretence or fiction creation.

Consider fictionalism in mathematics. That view might not be right. But if it is, then we engage in a fiction that is at least nearly universal, and is pretty pervasive. To be sure, there are things we do that do not directly involve engaging with the mathematical pretence: but an awful lot of our lives engage with an (admittedly fairly simple) mathematical fiction. Or consider moral fictionalism. That view might not be right. But if it is, we all, nearly universally, engage in a fiction that is pretty pervasive. To be sure, there are some things we do that do not involve engaging with the moral fiction; but an awful lot of our lives engage with that fiction. Or consider prudential fictionalism. That view might not be right. But if it is, we all, universally, engage in a fiction that is pervasive. To be sure, there are some things we do, which do not involve engaging with the prudential fiction; but an awful lot of our lives engage with that fiction. Fictionalism about the non-present is relevantly like these kinds of fiction. That each of them is relatively universal and pervasive is not, to my mind, a reason to think that they are not true.

So far then, the pretence fictionalist has an account of what it is to engage in individual non-present fictions, why we do so, and why those fictions substantially overlap.

Then the simplest version of hermeneutic pretence fictionalism is what I call *individualistic pretence fictionalism*. It’s the view that there are just all of the various individual fictions—the various individual pretences in which we are each engaged—and that an utterance of a non-present sentence, S, by a speaker, Sp, expresses Sp’s attitude of pretence towards S. So according to the fictionalist what we are each *really* doing when we utter non-present sentences is pretending the propositions expressed by the sentences in our individual non-present fiction, are true.

Given that we are not in fact asserting these sentences, though, there is something that remains to be explained: namely why it *seems* to us as though we are asserting truths. Call explaining this accommodating our *ordinary truth practices:* our practices of acting as though some utterances of non-present sentences are true, and others false. The pretence fictionalist can accommodate such practices by noting that it is hardly surprising that it seems to us as though we are making truth-apt utterances: for we are in fact acting *as though* that is what we are doing.

The fictionalist can go one step further than this. She can use an account of felicity to ‘mimic’ the role of truth. She can then note that wherever it seems to us as though an utterance is true, she will say that the utterance is felicitous. Since her account of felicity maps onto our intuitions about the truth of utterances, she can use this to accommodate our ordinary truth practices.

In order to do this she will want to say that those utterances we seem to take to be true are those that are, on her view, felicitous and those we seem to take to be false are ones that are, on her view, infelicitous. So she wants to map apparent truth to felicity.

Defining felicity relative to a non-present fiction is straightforward. An utterance of a non-present sentence, S, by a speaker Sp, is felicitous just in case P, the proposition S expresses, is part of Sp’s non-present fiction. An utterance is not felicitous iff it fails to be felicitous.

The fictionalist could then identify utterances that are infelicitous with those that are not felicitous. But that would be a mistake if she also wants to say that those utterances that we seem to take to be false are those that are infelicitous. For suppose that neither P nor ¬P is part of the relevant non-present fiction. Then neither an utterance of S, nor ¬S (by a relevant speaker, Sp) is felicitous. If we identify infelicity with an absence of felicity, then we will say that an utterance of S, or of ¬S by Sp is infelicitous. If that is right, then it ought be that it seems to us that an utterance of S by Sp is false, and also that an utterance of ¬S by Sp is false. But that does not tally with what we seem to be inclined to say.

Instead, then, I suggest the fictionalist say that an utterance of a non-present sentence, S, by Sp, is infelicitous, just in case (a) an utterance of S by Sp is not felicitous, and (b) ¬P is part of Sp’s non-present fiction. This means that in cases in which neither P nor ¬P are part of the relevant non-present fiction, neither an utterance of S nor of ¬S by Sp are felicitous, but an utterance of neither is infelicitous. By contrast, an utterance of S by Sp, is infelicitous if it’s not the case that P is in Sp’s non-present fiction, and it *is* the case that ¬P is in Sp’s non-present fiction. So an utterance of ‘yesterday Daleks destroyed London’ by Sp is infelicitous, since not only is that utterance not felicitous, since the proposition <yesterday[[35]](#footnote-36) Daleks destroyed London> is not in Sp’s non-present fiction, but the proposition <it is not the case that yesterday, Daleks destroyed London> is (let us suppose) in Sp’s non-present fiction.

For this account to succeed, it needs to be that typically the utterances we seem to take to be true are the utterances that, according to the fictionalist, are felicitous, and those we seem to take to be false are, according to the fictionalist, infelicitous. *Prima facie,* though, the fictionalist faces a problem. For she holds that each individual non-present fiction is incomplete. Hence felicity will sometimes be incomplete. But ordinarily it does not seem to us that truths are incomplete.

In addition, the individualistic pretence fictionalist holds that whether an utterance by a speaker is felicitous depends on the content of that individual’s non-present fiction. This leaves open that an utterance of S by Sp is felicitous, while an utterance of S by Sp\* is not. On the assumption that an utterance of S by Sp and by Sp\* expresses the same proposition, P, though, we do not usually think that P can be true at Sp’s context and false at Sp\*s. Or at least, even if we are a relativist about truth for some propositions such as, for instance <vegemite is tasty> we are not likely to be relativists about the truth of utterances of propositions such as <Annie was tired at t\*>. So our intuitions about which utterances are true seems to come apart from facts about which utterances are felicitous according to the fictionalist. I'll return to this latter problem in section 5, where I move from discussing individualist hermeneutic fictionalism to discussing what I call hermeneutic *shared* fictionalism about the non-present. For now, let’s focus on the first of these problems.

If the non-present fiction is incomplete then, one might think, the fictionalist cannot map the utterances we seem to take to be true, to those that are, on her view, felicitous, and those we seem to take to be false, to those that are, on her view, infelicitous. To see why, consider an utterance of the non-present sentence S2: ‘700 million dinosaurs were alive at *t*’. Call the proposition towards which the fictionalist claims Sp’s utterance of S2 expresses an attitude of pretence, P2. Suppose that neither P2 nor ¬P2 are part of the relevant non-present fiction. Then it will not be felicitous for Sp to utter S2 nor to utter ¬S2. But, the thought goes, surely we all suppose that one of those utterances is true, and the other false, even if we are not sure which is which. This shows that there is no neat mapping between those utterances that are, according to the fictionalist, felicitous, and those we seem to take to be true.

Here, I think the fictionalist has to bite the bullet a bit. She has to concede that for some utterances of non-present sentences we cannot neatly map truth to felicity. I think we can go some way towards capturing Sp’s attitude—that either S2 or ¬S2 is true—by noting that for the fictionalist an utterance of the *disjunction* of S2 v ¬S2 is felicitous.

In order to accommodate this, the fictionalist will need to hold, quite generally, that if the relevant non-present fiction includes neither P nor ¬P, it does not follow that ¬(P ∨ ¬P) is part of the non-present fiction. Rather, at least sometimes (and perhaps always) [[36]](#footnote-37) P ∨ ¬P is part of the relevant fiction, even if neither P nor ¬P is. The reason to suppose this to be so is simply that typically, we pretend that P ∨ ¬P is the case, for all, or almost all, P, regardless of what we pretend regarding P, and what we pretend regarding ¬P.

We can now see why the fictionalist does not want to identify infelicity with an absence of felicity. In the case just described the fictionalist says that although an utterance of ‘S ∨¬S’ by Sp is felicitous, an utterance of S by Sp is not felicitous, and neither is an utterance of ¬S. If we concluded, from this, that utterances of both S, and ¬S, are infelicitous, then it ought be that it seems to us that an utterance of each is false. But if it indeed seemed that an utterance of both S, and of ¬S, is false, then it would hardly seem to us as though an utterance of the disjunction were true. Fortunately, this is a case in which although utterances, by Sp, of either S or ¬S are not felicitous, utterances of either are not infelicitous, and that is because neither P, nor ¬P are in the relevant non-present fiction.

Still, the fictionalist has to concede that for some utterances of non-present sentences that we are inclined to say have a truth-value, but we know not which, it is not the case that those utterances either are felicitous, or are infelicitous, but we know not which. Rather, they are simply neither felicitous nor not. In this respect felicity comes apart from the appearance of truth. I am inclined to say that while this is a cost to the view, it’s a cost that may be worth bearing. After all, the sentences in question are all ones that are, in some good sense pragmatically inert: they are sentences that express propositions towards which the speaker takes no attitude of pretence at all. They are sentences that express propositions that play no role in how the speaker thinks about or understand the world, nor are they input the speaker’s decisions or plans. So while we are, perhaps, inclined to say that utterances of those sentences take a truth-value, that we are inclined to say this plays no further role in our way of being in the world. It may be, then, that we can capture enough of the intuition that we have in such cases by appealing to the felicity of the relevant disjunction, and noting that whatever remains is a small cost that the fictionalist must bear. So long as her view is, in other respects, superior to that of other presentists, it can still be that the view is attractive.

So far the pretence fictionalist has presented one fairly simple version of pretence fictionalism. There are plenty of things to like about that view. But we might worry that the mapping between felicity and apparent truth just will not work, and so the fictionalist cannot accommodate our practices. That’s because we don’t typically take truth to be relative to individuals. But individualistic fictionalists will say that felicity is relative to individuals, and so the mapping between the two will be poor.

Moreover, consider Jeremy. Jeremy, for reasons that need not detain us, has apparent memories of the Dalek’s invading London yesterday. Jeremy directs an attitude of pretence towards the proposition <Daleks invaded London yesterday>. Yet, we might think, it seems wrong to think that his utterance of ‘Daleks invaded London yesterday’ is felicitous for all that. Instead, we want to say that there is something wrong with his utterance, *despite the fact that he really does pretend that Dalek’s invaded London yesterday.* If you share this kind of intuition then you might be motivated towards what I call shared non-present fictionalism.

5. Shared Non-present Fictionalism

According to shared non-present pretence fictionalism there are various individual non-present fictions, but in addition there is also a *shared* fiction and it is this shared fiction that matters for determining whether utterances are felicitous. Why are shared fictions? Shared fictions are, like individual fictions, set of propositions. They are sets of propositions that participants jointly pretend to be the case. I think that some kind of shared fiction exists whenever there are individual fictions that overlap. If Annie and Freddie both pretend that P1, P2 and P3, then there is some shared fiction—shared between Annie and Freddie—whose content includes at least P1, P2 and P3. The shared fiction I think the non-present fictionalist has in mind, though—the one that does the theoretical work she wants—is not a fiction whose content is simply the overlap of the individual fictions of its participants.

In what follows I will suppose that there is a single shared fiction that is the one that is relevant for determining when utterances are felicitous. I don't want to take a stand on which shared fiction this is, that is, whether it’s the fiction shared between small groups, large groups, communities, nations, or planets of people. Different versions of shared fictionalism might take different stances on this matter. I will simply talk about *participants* to *the* shared fiction, where by this I mean those people whose individual fictions contribute to the content of the shared fiction in question, and where the shared fiction is the one that the shared fictionalist has in mind (i.e. the one that determines whether utterances are felicitous or not). The shared fictionalist will need to spell out which shared fiction this is out of the many shared fictions that exist. But that is a job for another day. In what follows I focus on spelling out the content of the shared fiction, conditional on us knowing who the participants are, to that fiction.

On this view the shared non-present fiction is that set of propositions towards which, *jointly*, participants express an attitude of pretence. Towards which propositions do participants, jointly, have an attitude of pretence?

The natural suggestion is that the content of the shared non-present fiction is a function of the contents of the various individual non-present fictions. Consider the set of propositions that is the union of all the propositions towards which individual participants have an attitude of pretence. Call that set TOTAL. It is plausible that the content of the shared fiction is some function of the content of TOTAL. After all, it’s unlikely that there is content in the shared fiction that is *not* in TOTAL, given that any proposition that is not in TOTAL is one towards which *none* of the participants in the shared fiction have an attitude of pretence. That leaves open, of course, that there might be propositions in TOTAL that are not in the shared fiction. In particular, it might be that the content of the shared fiction is just those propositions that overlap with each individual non-present fiction. Or it might include those propositions, and some more besides. In what follows I outline several toy accounts of the content of the shared fiction, mostly with a view to exploring how we might go about this, and to put enough bones on the view to allow us to see it in action. The intention is to not defend these toys views.

Let’s think a bit about the content of the shared fiction. We almost certainly do not want to say that just because one participant, say, Jeremy, has an attitude of pretence towards proposition P, that jointly, participants have that attitude. After all, in some such cases P is not in the overlap between any two or more individual participants’ non-present fictions. Suppose Jeremy directs an attitude of pretence towards the proposition <yesterday London was invaded by Daleks>. We probably don’t want to say that this proposition is part of the shared non-present fiction. So just because P is in TOTAL, it does not follow that P is in the shared fiction. We should reject a simple function according to which P is a proposition towards which participants, jointly, have an attitude of pretence, iff P is a proposition towards which one or more participants has an attitude of pretence.

But nor, quite likely, do we want to include only those propositions that are in each of the participants’ individual non-present fictions. That is, we likely don’t want to say that the content of the shared fiction is just that set of propositions that overlap the participants’ non-present fictions. For suppose that Jeremy does not direct an attitude of pretence towards <yesterday the sun rose>. He is the only one not to do so. Then if he’s a participant in the shared fiction, the shared fiction won’t be one in which <yesterday the sun rose> is a part. That seems like a mistake.

So it seems likely that we will want a function that includes more propositions than just those in common between *all* the participants’ individual non-present fictions, but also a function that includes fewer propositions that those that feature in any one participants’ individual non-present fiction.

How might we go about this? I’ve already noted that individual pretence tends to be constrained by the apparent records. We would expect the shared fiction also be sensitive to such records, not least because it’s a function of the individual pretences, which are themselves so constrained. One very simple view then (and simplicity is a virtue at this point, since we just want to get a handle on the broad contours of shared fictionalism) is to say that P is in the non-present fiction iff (a) P is in TOTAL and (b) if the apparent records with respect to whether P are consistent (i.e. the records represent that P, or that not P, *but not both*) then P is consistent with those apparent records (i.e. the records do not represent that not P) and (c) if the apparent records with respect to whether P are inconsistent, then the weight of apparent records is in favour of P, over not P. Clause (b) says that if the records are consistent with respect to whether P, (by either representing that P, or that not P, but not both) then P is in the non-present fiction only if P is consistent with those apparent records (i.e. the apparent present that P, rather than that not P). If the records are not consistent with respect to whether P, then clause (c) kicks in, and P is in the fiction only if the weight of apparent records favours P over not P.

On this simple view the shared fiction is consistent. Although some individual participants might pretend that P, and others might pretend that not P, it’s not the case that jointly, participants pretend that both P and not P. Instead, in that case they neither pretend that P, nor that not P.

A second simple view of the content of the shared fiction is as follows. P is in the non-present fiction iff (a) P is in TOTAL and (b) if the apparent records with respect to whether P, are consistent, then P is consistent with those apparent records and (c) if the apparent records with respect to whether P are inconsistent, then either (i) the weight of apparent records is in favour of P over not P or (ii) the apparent records are roughly evenly weighted with respect to whether or not P. This leaves open that where the weight of records is evenly weighted with respect to whether or not P, that both P and not P are part of the non-present fiction. On this simple view the shared fiction can be inconsistent. Call the first view *Consistent* and the second *Inconsistent*.

These are each simple views, and ultimately the fictionalist might need to offer a more complicated view of how the shared fiction gets the content it does. Hopefully, though, these simple views are sufficient for the purposes of making the view clear, and showing off its benefits.

Whichever of Consistent or Inconsistent the fictionalist accepts, she will hold that the non-present fiction can be *incomplete* since for some proposition, P and its negation, neither P nor its negation might be in TOTAL.

We’ve already seen how the individualistic pretence fictionalist can accommodate our ordinary truth practices by appealing to the felicity (or not) of utterances, and how she can do so (at least to some extent) even when the fiction in question is incomplete. The shared fictionalist can offer a similar account. One benefit of her account over that of the individualist, though, is that she will not say that whether an utterance is felicitous varies depending on the content of the speaker’s individual pretence. Instead, she will say that whether an utterance is felicitous depends on the content of the shared fiction. Thus when Jeremy utters ‘yesterday the Daleks invaded London’ this will (likely) come out as infelicitous even though he does direct an attitude of pretence towards the relevant proposition. So this view does a somewhat better job of mapping apparent truths to felicitous utterances.

Still, one might worry that there are problems in the offing here. Suppose that yesterday, Jeremy uttered ‘yesterday the Daleks invaded London’, and suppose that yesterday the apparent evidence was that yesterday, the Daleks did not invade London. Now suppose that today, the apparent evidence is that two days ago Daleks *did* invade London. Very likely, it will seem to us as though what Jeremy uttered was true. But the fictionalist, you might think, cannot say that what Jeremy said was felicitous, since the proposition he uttered was not part of the shared fiction. So our intuitions about truth will come apart from the fictionalist’s claims about felicity.

The fictionalist, however, can capture the sense in which we think that what Jeremy said was true when he said it, by noting that according to the fiction what Jeremy said *was* true when he said it. According to the present shared fiction, it is true that Daleks invaded London two days ago, and hence it’s true, in the fiction, that what Jeremy said one day ago is true. So it is felicitous to utter ‘what Jeremy said two days ago was true’, since it is in fact the case that the proposition expressed by that sentence is true in the shared fiction.

The shared fictionalist who endorses Inconsistent, however, faces other worries in this vicinity. We don’t usually suppose that contradictory utterances—utterances of sentences of the form S ∧¬S—are true. But if the shared non-present fiction is one on which, for at least some P, both P and ¬P are part of the fiction, then it seems to follow that sometimes, it will be felicitous to utter a sentence of the form S ∧¬S.

There are three ways the shared fictionalist might respond. First, she might take this as a reason to instead embrace the consistent fiction view. If she does not, then two options remain. The first is to bite the bullet. Then she concedes that if both P and ¬P are parts of the non-present fiction, then it follows that so is the conjunction P ∧ ¬P. The fictionalist can then suppose a fairly strong paraconsistent logic governs the content of the fiction.[[37]](#footnote-38) If she takes this route, however, she will have to allow that some utterances of S ∧¬S are felicitous. Then she will have to concede that sometimes, utterances are felicitous even though we would not judge them to be true. Still, since the fictionalist only aims to show that in general our judgements of truth align with the felicity of utterances, this may still be sufficient as long as the fiction does not contain overly many inconsistencies.

A second option is to deny conjunction introduction (in its full generality). The fictionalist might argue that it does not follow that from the fact that, jointly, we pretend that P1, and jointly, we pretend that P2, that jointly we pretend that P1 ∧ P2. In particular, perhaps we don’t pretend this precisely when one proposition is the negation of the other. In order to pursue this option, the fictionalist would need to find some kind of paraconsistent logic that is strong enough to preserve, as valid within the fiction, the inferences we take to be valid, but which does not accept conjunction introduction in full generality. I leave this as a task for the interested reader. Assuming the fictionalist can complete this task, though, she can vindicate the claim that an utterance of S ∧¬S is not felicitous even if an utterance of both S and of ¬S is felicitous.

I don’t want to take a stand on which version of shared pretence fictionalism is preferable. The aim is just to present this view, alongside individualistic pretence fictionalism, as viable versions of pretence fictionalism about the non-present.

6. Why be a Non-present Fictionalist?

In what follows I will focus on pretence versions of non-presentist fictionalism; but I think that similar considerations apply, *mutatis mutandis,* when we consider object fictionalism about the non-present.

Why be a non-present fictionalist? Well, you should only be a non-present fictionist if you’re a presentist. This paper offers no arguments in favour of presentism over other temporal ontologies. Indeed, I am not a presentist, and I don’t think you should be either, so I don't think you should be a non-present fictionalist. But I do think that insofar as you are a presentist, you should at the very least consider being a non-present fictionalist.

Why would a presentist endorse non-present fictionalism over any of the other presentist options? Let’s first consider the issue of ontology. Like all versions of presentism, non-present fictionalism eschews any past or future ontology. It is, however, committed to there being fictions. Fictions, on this view, are just sets of propositions. I take it that most of us (presentists included) are committed to the existence of sets and propositions. If so, a commitment to fictions represents no additional ontological commitment.

Indeed, the non-present fictionalist has a leaner ontology than many of her presentist competitors. To see this, consider the version of presentism that endorses truthmaking aboutness and semantic non-aboutness. This version of presentism is one on which non-present sentences are about presently existing things—like thisnesses, or past-tensed properties, or some such—and these presently existing things make those sentences true. So this version of presentism is committed to the existence of these presently existing things: thisnesses, haecceities, past-tensed properties, and so on. The fictionalist need not be committed to such things, since she thinks that nothing makes non-present sentences true. So she has a leaner ontology than this version of presentism. Moreover, her view has the further advantage that she gets to say that non-present sentences are about the things they appear to be about: she offers a perfectly ordinary, unified, semantics for both present and non-present sentences. To be sure, she says that non-present sentences are false: but she denies that our utterances of those sentences are false, and she provides an attractive account of what we are doing when we make such utterances. Hence her view is superior to this version of presentism.

Now consider the version of presentism that endorses truthmaking non-aboutness and semantic aboutness. On this view although non-present sentences are about the past, they are made true by something in the present, such as a haecceity, or thisness, or past-tensed property. So this view, too, is committed to the existence of such things and hence has a less lean ontology than does non-present fictionalism. Moreover, this view is committed to saying that non-present sentences are made true by something other than what they are about, a cost the fictionalist does not incur. So fictionalism is superior to this view both because it rejects truthmaking non-aboutness, and because it is ontologically more parsimonious.

Finally we have nefarious presentism, which denies the need for any truthmaking at all. Non-present fictionalism is superior to this view. Truth does supervene on being. We ought not sever the connection between the two. Non-present fictionalism allows us to preserve truthmaking, and, indeed, truthmaking aboutness, without having to say that our utterances of past-tensed sentences are false. So while the two versions of presentism share the same ontology, non-present fictionalism presents a much more plausible view of truth.

Still, this leaves open that there might be other objections that non-present fictionalism faces that other versions of presentism do not. In what follows I consider and respond to two such objections.

7. The Embedding Problem for Pretence Fictionalists

The pretence fictionalist holds that utterances of non-present sentences express an attitude of pretence towards the propositional content of those sentences, while utterances of present sentences (those that are about the present) are (often) assertions that report truth-apt beliefs that those propositional contents are the case.

This raises a general issue regarding how utterances of sentences that have both non-present and present sentences as sentential components, interact. I will call this *the embedding problem*. For instance, consider the following sentences:

1. I hope that dinosaurs existed for 200 million years
2. Annie is a doodle and yesterday, Annie ate pork.
3. Annie is a doodle, or yesterday, Annie ate pork.

The pretence fictionalist faces no difficulties with embedding at the sentential level, since she holds that non-present sentences straightforwardly express propositions. So in the case of (1) she holds that the embedded sentence ‘dinosaurs existed for 200 million years’ is truth-apt, and false. Whether or not (1) is true or false, though, just depends on whether the speaker does direct an attitude of hope towards the proposition that the embedded sentences expresses. The fictionalist will then say that (2) is false, since the second conjunct is false. She will say that (3) is true, since the first disjunct is true.

The fictionalist faces problems, though, when it comes to *utterances* of sentences (1) through (3). An utterance of (1) appears problematic because, taken at face value, it is not clear towards what the attitude of hope is being directed, if the utterance of ‘dinosaurs existed for 200 millions years’ does not express a proposition. An utterance of (2) appears problematic because what appears to be an assertion of a conjunction is instead an assertion of the first conjunct, and then an expression of an attitude towards the second. Similar concerns arise for (3).

In what follows I will outline just one possible fictionalist response. Further, I will outline it only for these relatively simple cases. There are more complex cases in which there are embeddings within embeddings as for instance in something like ‘’Freddie is a doodle and yesterday, Freddie ate a dodo’’ is hoped, by Annie, to be false and believed, by David, to be true’.

I hope that some of what I say below can be extended to such cases, but I leave it to the fictionalist to spell out the details in these cases.

How ought the fictionalist make sense of an utterance of (1)? The fictionalist cannot think that an utterance of (1) expresses an attitude of hope towards that the propositional content asserted is true, since she denies that an utterance of that embedded sentence asserts any such content.

Her response will depend on whether she thinks utterances like this are best understood as expressing a non-cognitive attitude (hope) towards some content *of* the pretence, or, instead, as expressing that non-cognitive attitude *within* the pretence. On the former option the utterance expresses hope that, jointly, we pretend as though that proposition is true (i.e. hope that the proposition is part of the non-present fiction). On the second option an utterance of (1) expresses an attitude of pretence towards the hope that dinosaurs existed for 200 millions years. That is, in uttering the sentence one is *pretending* that one *hopes* that dinosaurs existed for 200 millions years. One might worry that on this last option we are merely pretending to hope, rather than in fact hoping. But we need to bear in mind that the fictionalist is offering us an interpretive claim. So it’s not the claim that we are, consciously, pretending to hope. Rather, it’s the claim that as part of the pretence, we *are* hoping that dinosaurs existed for 200 millions years.

Now consider (2): Annie is a doodle and yesterday, Annie ate pork. An utterance of that sentence involves a kind of mixed-attitude expression. It both reports a truth-apt belief towards the proposition <Annie is a doodle> and expresses a non-cognitive attitude of pretence, towards <yesterday, Annie ate pork>. One fairly natural option (though there are many) is to say that an utterance of a complex sentence like (2) (or (3)) is truth-apt, only if utterances of each the sentential components of that sentence are truth-apt. So an utterance of ‘S1 and S2’, where ‘S1’ and ‘S2’ are sentences, is truth-apt only if an utterance of ‘S1’ expresses P1, and an utterance of ‘S2’ expresses P2. That utterance is true just in case both P1 and P2 are true, and false otherwise. Likewise, an utterance of a disjunction ‘S1 or S2’ is truth-apt, only if an utterance of ‘S1’ expresses P1, and an utterance of ‘S2’ expresses P2. That utterance is true just in case at least one of P1 or P2 is true, and is false otherwise.

On this way of proceeding, neither an utterance of (2), nor of (3) is truth-apt. Still, the fictionalist clearly wants to distinguish an utterance of either from an utterance of (4)

(4) Annie is a doodle, and yesterday, Annie ate a dodo.

The fictionalist will say that utterances of (2) or of (3) are felicitous, while utterances of (4) are infelicitous (or at least, not felicitous).

Generally speaking, the fictionalist will say that an utterance of a sentence of the form ‘S1 ∧ S2’ is felicitous when either, in the limiting case, it is truth-apt and true, or, when it is not truth-apt, an utterance of either conjunct is either true, if truth-apt, or is felicitous, if not truth-apt. That is, no utterance of either conjunct is either false, or not felicitous.

More carefully, an utterance of a sentence of the form ‘S1 ∧ S2’ is felicitous just in case (a) the utterance is truth-apt and true or (b) the utterance is not truth-apt, and either (i) an utterance of ‘S1’ expresses an attitude of pretence towards proposition P1, and P1 is part of the non-present fiction, and an utterance of ‘S2’ expresses an attitude of pretence towards proposition P2, and P2 is part of the non-present fiction or (ii) an utterance of ‘S1’ expresses an attitude of pretence towards proposition P1, and P1 is part of the non-present fiction and an utterance of ‘S2’ expresses an attitude of belief towards P2, and P2 is true, or *vice versa.*

Generally speaking, the fictionalist will say that an utterance of a sentence of the form ‘S1 ∨ S2’ is felicitous when either, in the limiting case, it is truth-apt and true, or, when it is not truth-apt, an utterance of at least one disjunct is either true, if truth-apt, or is felicitous, if not truth-apt.

More carefully, an utterance of a disjunction of the form ‘S1 ∨ S2’ is felicitous just in case either (a) the utterance is truth-apt and true or (b) the utterance is not truth-apt, and either (i) an utterance of ‘S1’ expresses an attitude of pretence towards proposition P1, and P1 is part of the non-present fiction or an utterance of ‘S2’ expresses an attitude of pretence towards proposition P2, and P2 is part of the non-present fiction, or (ii) an utterance of ‘S1’ expresses an attitude of belief towards P1, and P1 is true, or an utterance of ‘S2’ expresses an attitude of belief towards P2, and P2 is true.

That leaves much work still to be done in responding to the embedding problem in its various guises. Hopefully, though, enough has been said here to see how the fictionalist might proceed in giving a more rigorous account.

That brings us to the penultimate objection: that fictionalism is incompatible with presentism.

8. Presentism is Incompatible with Fictionalism

At the beginning of this paper I defined presentism as the view that only present things exist. In fact though, presentists are typically also committed to the claim that what exists, changes. They define presentism as follows:

DEF: Only present things exist, and what exists, changes.

DEF has two sentential components S1: only present things exist, and S2: what exists, changes.

If S1 is a present sentence, then the presentist can happily say that it is truth-apt and true. But one might worry that it is not, in fact, a present sentence, since it is, in part, about the non-present: namely, it says of the non-present that it does not exist. Still, even if this is so, I’m inclined to say that S1 is an example of a true non-present sentence: it is true because what it says about the non-present (that it doesn't exist) is true. In what follows I will suppose S1 to be true. What of S2? I think it plausible that S2 is a non-present sentence: it is, partly, about what happens at times other than the present. In particular, it’s about the fact that things are different, at some non-present times, than they are presently. If you disagree, and instead think that S2 is a true present sentence, then you will simply say that DEF is true. But suppose you think that S2 is a non-present sentence. Then DEF is false, since one of its conjuncts is false.

Suppose the fictionalist concedes that DEF is false. How disastrous is this? Well, she will maintain that an *utterance* of DEF is not false. An utterance of DEF is not truth-apt, since an utterance of one of its conjuncts (S2) is not truth-apt. An utterance of DEF is, however, felicitous, since an utterance of S1 is true, and an utterance of S2 is felicitous. So an utterance of DEF has the same status as an utterance of ‘yesterday the earth existed’. Neither is truth-apt, and both are felicitous. If an utterance of DEF is no worse off (as it were) than an utterance of ‘yesterday the earth existed’, then I say, this should be sufficient for the presentist.

9. Conclusion

Fictionalism about the non-present is a radical view. But then, so are the other versions of presentism on the market. Presentists, when all is said and done, are already committed to some pretty weird stuff. My contention is just that fictionalism about the non-present is not a worse view than other presentist views on the market, and, indeed that it may well be superior. That’s not to say that the view doesn't face objections: it does. But I hope to have shown that it has the resources to respond to some of the more pressing objections. No doubt there is much work to be done in spelling out the view in its various guises. This paper is not intended to be its best, or final, articulation, but rather, to motivate taking it seriously as an alternative to current presentist views.

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1. With thanks to ANONYMISED. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In the widest possible sense, or in the widest possible scope of the quantifier. I return later to the question of whether it is also the view that what exists, changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. It is controversial exactly how to define presentism, but this will do for our purposes. See Bigelow 1996: 35, Ingram 2016: 2868; Miller 2013: 346, Leininger 2015: 726; Tallant 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See Putnam 1967: 240, Butterfield 1984: 161, Bigelow 1996: 35–36, Sider 2001: 11, Markosian 2004: 48 for such claims. Though see Latham, Miller and Norton 2019 for empirical work that suggests this is false. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. These are sentences that appear to be about the non-present, not sentences that are non-present. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Then mostly, non-present sentences will be past or future-tensed sentences. But I leave open that the set of non-presently-tensed sentences and the set of non-present sentences may not be co-extensive. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. So named by Emery (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. A now extinct flightless bird from New Zealand. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Sider (1999) makes this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For instance, Lewis (1992, 2001), following Bigelow (1988), proposes the following:

    For any proposition *P* and worlds *W* and *V*, if *P* is true in *W* but not in *V*, then either something exists in *V* but not in *W* or else some n-tuple of things stands in some fundamental relation in *V* but not in *W*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Merricks 2007: 22–34, 136–42) argues for this constraint. For discussion of the constraint see Baron, Chua, Miller and Norton (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Perhaps there are exceptions here. Perhaps negations and disjunctions and other logical truths are not made true by what they are about. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Here, I assume that only existing things can be truthmakers. Versions of Meinongian presentism might reject that claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Sider (1999) gestures towards such a view (at least about the past) in a footnote. He does not, however, develop the view. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. That is, sentences that appear to predicate moral properties to the object of the sentences, not sentences that have moral properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See for instance Gibbard (1990), Blackburn (1984; 1998); Schroeder (2008); (2000), Ridge (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Most contemporary noncognitivists will also say that the relevant sentences are true in a minimal or deflationary sense that is captured by the T-schema. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. For a view of this kind see Azzouni (2004, 2007, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. The mereological nihilist, for instance, might say that our talk, say, tables, is really talk about simples arranged table-wise, and hence is true even though there are no composite objects. See Parsons (2013) for a version of such a view. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. See Leng (2005) and Balaguer (2009) for views of this kind in the philosophy of mathematics, and Joyce (2001) for a view of this kind in moral philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Or at least, not true. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Walton (1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Keller 2004, Crisp 2007, Cameron 2008, Markosian (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. See Tallant (2013) and Tallant and Ingram (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. See for instance Ingram (2016; 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Tallant (2009; 2013) and Tallant and Ingram (2015) defend this view. Others defend similar kinds of view, including Sanson and Caplan (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. See for instance Sider (2001: 40 and 2004: 674); Heathwood (2007: 141). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. To my knowledge the only presentist who holds the view that non-present sentences are false is Dawson (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Dummett (1969) holds this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Allowing of course that certain sub-sets of these sentences might not be assertions, as for instance the moral noncognitivist will say about present moral sentences such as ‘eating that baby is wrong’. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Unless one thinks that Homes and Santa exist, and are fictional entities. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. See Kroon (1987); Loar (1976), McKinsey (1978) Lewis (1984) and Jackson (1998a, 1998b). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Importantly, since having an attitude of pretence towards P is acting as though P is the case, an individual can have such an attitude without ever explicitly tokening a thought that involves P, or uttering P. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. See for instance Jackson (1998); Chalmers (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Where the temporal indexical ‘yesterday’ is appropriately filled in. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. She might want to allow that sometimes, it is not even felicitous to utter the disjunction. For instance, perhaps some interpretations of quantum mechanisms lend themselves to rejecting bivalence for some sentences. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Such as, for instance, Priest’s (1979) logic of paradox. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)