

## Fictionalist Attitudes About Fictional Matters

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### *1. Introduction*

A pressing problem for many non-realist<sup>1</sup> theories concerning various specific subject matters is the challenge of making sense of our ordinary propositional attitude claims related to the subject in question. Famously in the case of ethics, to take one example, we have in ordinary language *prima facie* ascriptions of beliefs and desires involving moral properties and relationships. In the case, for instance, of “Jason believes that Kylie is virtuous”, we appear to have a belief which takes Kylie to be a certain way. If Jason desires that Kylie acts as she ought, he appears to have a desire which has as its content that Kylie perform actions of a certain sort (i.e. the actions that she ought to perform). However, for non-cognitivists in ethics who reject the idea that sentences such as “Kylie is virtuous” or “Kylie acts as she ought” are in the business of making truth-apt claims, or representing that certain moral features are possessed by objects or events, or even, in extreme cases, that such claims express propositions at all, the semantic analysis of the example propositional attitude claims made about Jason will have to be non-standard. (This is merely an application of the well-known “Frege-Geach problem” (see Geach 1965) to the case of embedding moral vocabulary in propositional-attitude ascriptions.)

The problem is by no means restricted to ethics, of course: to quickly mention some

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<sup>1</sup> “realist” is a slippery term, and so “non-realist” will be no less slippery. I mean “realism” about a particular subject matter here primarily as a doctrine that claims putatively concerning such a subject matter are truth apt, some of them are indeed true, and that such claims are to be assessed more-or-less at face value when providing the semantics for such claims. (The last is vague, but perhaps unavoidably so, given the variety of actual and possible semantic treatments available). The distinction between realist and non-realist claims can be made more precise in specific areas where needs be. Note that for present purposes I am not concerned to distinguish “realism” from e.g. theories of subject matters which take the truth of the relevant claims to be mind-, language-, concept- or evidence- dependent. So many constructivists and idealists will fall into the “realist” camp for present purposes.

other examples, those who do not think that conditional statements (or indicative conditional statements) express propositions (Adams 1975) will have difficulty making sense of beliefs that certain conditionals hold, or desires that certain conditionals hold. Similarly for expressivists about probability judgements, or aesthetic claims, or modal claims; or traditional instrumentalists about scientific claims (in which such claims are not truth-apt, but perform a function analagous to a calculating device) when it comes to dealing with apparently innocuous claims about scientists' beliefs and desires. Again, those who take terms in a target discourse to be literally meaningless have trouble describing the psychological attitudes of their opponents (consider for example the traditional verificationist attitude to theology, faced with the task of characterising the beliefs of the theologians, or the desires of the theologians for salvation, or an afterlife, or for avenging angels to strike the godless verificationists down, as it might be..); and the list of non-realist views which face such problems goes on. It is not that non-realist theories must face such problems (some do not), but rather that such problems are common.

Non-realists need not respond to the challenge of providing the semantics for belief and other propositional attitude contexts by providing truth-conditions for statements involving propositional attitudes about the relevant subject matters (ethics, conditionals, physics, theology, or what-have-you): though they may do so. However, what is more important in accounting for our linguistic practices is that these theories should explain the acceptability, or assertability, or appropriateness of some propositional attitude claims over others – why, for example it is right on a given occasion for a non-realist about conditionals to say that Bob believes that if it rains, it will pour, but not to say that Bob believes that if it rains, aliens will land. The story of acceptability or appropriateness of propositional attitude ascriptions may of course be given primarily in terms of truth conditions: it may just be that we sort claims about the relevant propositional attitudes into the good and bad ones primarily by sorting them into the true and the false ones. However, sorting the acceptable from the unacceptable may be done in other ways – it may be a matter of assertability rather than truth, or some non-cognitive account of the

distinction we observe in our ordinary usage of the relevant propositional attitude ascriptions might be given. Without some such account, the non-realist about a certain subject matter cannot provide an account of many of our commonplace uses of the relevant vocabulary in attitude ascriptions which has much intuitive plausibility. This will not displease all non-realists, especially those who are of a revisionist bent – they may be inclined to let the chips fall where they may, on this issue. If good sense cannot be made of something like our standard practices of ascribing the relevant propositional attitudes, however, this is a result which would deny us forms of speech which are both pervasive and important. Conversely, a non-realist theory unable to salvage such pervasive and important ways of talking which are apparently in good order incurs an unpleasant theoretical cost relative to its rivals.

## ***2. Troubles for Non-Realism***

One standard way to address this challenge for non-realists of different sorts is to adopt one of a family of so-called “quasi-realist” approaches to the discourse in question (see most famously Blackburn 1984, 1993, and Gibbard 1990). These are designed to make sense of such propositional attitude ascriptions, and often to allow that apparently innocuous instances of such ascriptions are indeed assertible, and perhaps also true (or quasi-true) as well. The question of whether this style of answer to the question of the truth-conditions for propositional attitude ascriptions involving the problematic discourse (ethical, conditional, mathematical or whatever) and more generally providing a criterion for distinguishing “acceptable” from “unacceptable” propositional attitude ascriptions in a given area of discourse is beyond the scope of my present task. However, the projectivist and quasi-realist strategies for dealing with the relevant propositional attitude ascriptions (involving putative propositions concerning a subject matter to be treated in a projectivist or quasi-realist way) by and large share three serious drawbacks. First is that such treatments are typically programmatic, and do not spell out in detail even what the proposed solution is meant to be.<sup>2</sup> This is of course not an objection in principle, since

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<sup>2</sup> Blackburn, for example, admits as much in Blackburn 1988, at least as far as his “slow track” is

future work could produce proposals with the needed detail. Second is that such treatments produce semantic non-uniformity, with the assertion conditions and truth conditions of some statements (the projectivist or quasi-realist ones) being treated differently from the claims to be given a straightforward realist treatment.<sup>3</sup> At least this is so at the level of the most perspicuous assertion- and truth- conditions, since the quasi-realist may construct more realist-like semantic conditions for the quasi-realist statements at later stages of the procedure of mimicking realist semantics (Blackburn makes a start at this in Blackburn 1988 and elsewhere). Third is that these treatments are relatively complex compared to realist treatments, or so I judge (claims about relative simplicity or complexity of semantic theories being very hard to establish). Fourth, and finally, a standard concern is that these treatments are of dubious consistency, especially when theories motivated by non-cognitivist theoretical commitments go too far in providing a cognitivist treatment of the discourse in question in the course of “recovering” putatively realist characterisations of that discourse. This paragraph is not intended as a refutation of projectivism or quasi-realism, of course, but rather to mention some standard concerns about such strategies.<sup>4</sup>

Error-theories, which hold that the realist is right about the semantics and truth-conditions of the claims of a target discourse, are a class of alternatives to realism which do not face the same sorts of Frege-Geach challenges as non-cognitivist, quasi-realist and (some) minimalist theories do. This is because the error-theorists agree with realists that the expressions in the vocabulary associated with the subject matter in question receive the orthodox semantic treatment: it is simply that the relevant (positive) claims are all false. The difficulty with the most straightforward versions of error theories is that they avoid semantic trouble with the relevant vocabulary, but at the cost of dispensing with the

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concerned: and his “fast track” proposal seems equally programmatic (though perhaps it is meant to allow that no more than programmatic remarks need to be made).

<sup>3</sup> Exempted from this charge may be global projectivists or quasi-realists, if such there be.

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion on the drawbacks of quasi-realism in this regard, see Nolan, Restall and West, “Moral Fictionalism”, in preparation.

use of the vocabulary altogether. Since the vocabulary of many areas is very useful, even when some have suspicions about realist understandings of the claims in question (e.g. Platonistic treatment of mathematical claims, scientific realist treatments of claims about unobservables, moral realist treatments of claims in ethics, or whatever), there is a reluctance to abandon the discourse altogether: this is of course one of the motivations for some non-cognitivist and quasi-realist approaches, especially those which are conceived of as proposals for linguistic reform rather than uncovering the way the particular pieces of language had been used all along.

### ***3. Fictionalism: A Happy Medium***

Fictionalism can be seen as a happy medium between an "eliminativist" approach which takes the relevant discourse to be largely incorrect and therefore also unacceptable and to be dispensed with, on the one hand; and approaches which do not interpret statements in the relevant discourses as having a standard realist semantics, on the other (with the consequent need to explain from scratch the statements' roles in indirect contexts of all sorts, including propositional attitude contexts). One standard fictionalist approach is to take the positive statements of a certain region of discourse (whether it be about mathematics, or possible worlds, or storybook characters) to be literally speaking false, but nonetheless worth using and recording for some theoretical purpose or other. So, for example, Hartry Field, a fictionalist about mathematics, held (in Field 1989) that statements committed to the existence of mathematical entities are all false, but many are nevertheless very useful, both in science and for everyday purposes.<sup>5</sup>

Taken this way, fictionalism is indeed a version of an error-theory, taking all the positive statements of a given theory to be literally false. (A restriction to "positive" statements is

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<sup>5</sup> A classic example of a fictionalist about a very wide range of things (and on some readings everything!) is the classic work of Hans Vaihinger 1924. Vaihinger takes whole classes of statements we are inclined to believe as in fact false, but useful to assert and employ in theories.

needed, since in most vocabularies it will be possible to formulate both a sentence and its negation, and the fictionalist need not suggest that both of these are false! An error theorist about phlogiston denies that there is any phlogiston, that phlogiston plays an important role in the burning of metals, etc. but need not deny e.g. that phlogiston is *absent* in an evacuated jar, or that phlogiston is *not* emitted in a wide range of reactions.) As a matter of terminological stipulation, let me distinguish fictionalism from a more standard variety of an error theory, according to which the discourse in question should be abandoned also—call this latter variety of an error theory “eliminativism”, after Churchland’s position on the posits of folk psychological theories (beliefs, desires, emotions etc.) in the philosophy of mind (see e.g. Churchland 1981).

It may be useful to extend the use of the term “fictionalism” to cover other positions which are extremely functionally similar. One would be a position which does not commit itself to the positive claims of the target discourse being *false*, but merely refrains from committing itself to the truth of the claims. A well-known example is Bas van Fraassen’s line on theories in the natural sciences which are committed to unobservable entities (viruses, benzene rings, isotopes, electrons, quarks, or whatever) (van Fraassen 1980). van Fraassen argues, not that scientific theories committed to such entities are false, but rather that we have no reason to think they are true, and recommends a studied agnosticism. His so-called “epistemic instrumentalism” is extremely similar to fictionalism: like paradigmatic fictionalism, he agrees with the realist about the semantics of the language, and what it is doing (it is purporting to describe a realm of objects too small to be sensed, rather than some non-representational function), and like standard fictionalism he justifies the continued employment of the theories in question on grounds other than their truth (or probable truth).

Another cluster of positions similar to the standard fictionalism of e.g. Field is an approach which takes sentences of a target discourse to fail to be true, but not to be false either: either because they take some other truth-value or values, or because they fail to have truth-values altogether, despite their surface appearances. Nonetheless the cluster in

question take the claims of the theory to be worthy of continued use nonetheless, for some purpose or purposes other than stating the truth in the relevant area. (One might hold this position if one had a view that held that the appearance of non-referring names in a theory rendered sections of it truth-valueless, or if one held that predicates not associated with instantiated properties likewise resulted in truth-value gaps<sup>6</sup>, or for a variety of other reasons).

In both the case of van Fraassen and the cluster of options which take a theory to be useful despite being not-true-but-not-false-either, the structure of the views are the same in most relevant respects as the structure of the standard, error-theoretical fictionalism. I shall therefore include these cases under the rubric “fictionalism”, though I am happy to regard this usage as a matter of stipulation, at least for purposes of this paper.

It is part of fictionalism, so defined, that statements of a certain sort are not to be taken as true (for one reason or another), despite being such that we should continue to make use of them. But what use are we to make of them? I take it that there are at least two important components of this question: the question of how one is to use these statements, and the question of why we should do so: what point might such an exercise have, that could not be better served in another way?

The question of why we should persist in, in some sense, employing a theory even when we do not take it to be true may have different answers from case to case. The first sort of advantage often claimed may include convenience for reasoning about matters of fact, as in Field’s mathematical fiction in Field 1989, or as in ‘timid’ modal fictionalism, which takes a fiction of possible worlds to be useful in part for convenience in reasoning about the literal truth or falsehood of claims cast in terms of modal operators.<sup>7</sup> Another

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<sup>6</sup> Walton 1990 endorses both of these reasons for taking some of the sentences of some fictions to literally lack truth-value (and indeed not to literally express propositions).

<sup>7</sup> A characterization of ‘timid’ modal fictionalism and the difference between it and some other varieties can be found in Nolan 1997.

convenience claimed for some fictionalist strategies is the ability to generate predictions or generalisations about matters of fact which are not otherwise in practice available, as in for instance fictionalism about unobservables in the style of van Fraassen 1980. It is very plausible that we could not in practice have made the successful predictions about observable objects we now make without deploying theories about unobservables (even if we did not have to believe in those theories): just think of what chemistry would look like if we had never been entitled to speculation about the molecular constitution of various observable stuffs, or to imagine how one might invent a functioning television set without any theory about the behaviour of small electric charges. Fictionalists will no doubt argue that there are other advantages available as well (for a slightly more detailed list, see Nolan Restall and West): and no doubt fictionalist proposals in particular areas will often claim advantages specific to that particular domain.

The question of how exactly the discourse should continue to be used in spite of its admitted falsity (or at least in spite of a lack of a commitment to its truth) is one which different theorists will answer differently. Some account of how it is legitimate to continue to utter the sentences in question (whether the sentences are ones involving commitment to mathematical objects, physical unobservables, moral states of affairs, or whatever the fictionalism involves) will be a central part of this answer. The question of what sort of legitimacy this talk will have is potentially a very controversial one, and this controversy may mirror the controversy about the status of sentences in and about paradigm fictions: some will see the relevant claims as only pretend assertions, not genuinely asserted at all by those who utter them in fictional contexts (as in Searle's treatment – see Searle 1979), or true when uttered in the appropriate contexts because they are implicitly prefixed with something like “according to the fiction” (Lewis 1978), false, but true under a presupposition (the supposition of the relevant theory) (Hinckfuss 1993) and so assertable in the context in which that presupposition is in place, or false, but assertable for some other reason. It does not matter for the substance of this paper what kind of account of sentences uttered in fictional contexts is appropriate: whether they are literally truth-valueless but nevertheless licensed for some reason or other; or



literally false but nonetheless assertable (or otherwise licensed as utterances); or even true, and thus assertable, but with misleading surface form; or some combination of these depending on facts about the context of utterance. Let me use “fictional assertion” as a general term for what is done in fictional contexts with those sentences which taken literally and at face value are false, but which may be uttered as if they were being asserted in the context of the fiction: but note that this choice of terminology is not intended to take any stand on the exact nature of this activity (even whether or not it is assertion, properly speaking).

This characterisation of “fictional assertion” is meant to cover even the case of a family of currently popular fictional approaches that take the use of a sentence in a fictional context to change its semantic value, often in a radical way: a change greater than implicitly affixing it was a “in the fiction” operator, for example. In the fictionalism of Crimmins 1998 or the “figuralism” of e.g. Yablo 2002, or in the work of other fictionalists influenced by chapter 10 of Walton 1990, the semantic value of an utterance in a fictional context will often be a literally true proposition about the non-fictional world: whatever it is that would make the sentence uttered fictionally appropriate to utter given the game of fiction in force, for example. The assertability of a sentence in a fictional context then is determined from its semantic value in the way that the assertability of ordinary sentences is. However, for these fictionalists, the semantic value a sentence in fact has when uttered in a fictional context will still normally be different from the semantic value of that sentence when uttered in literal contexts (if it has one), or the semantic value one would take it to have if one took it at “face value”: it is the proposition expressed by a “literal” use that these fictionalists take to be false (or they take the sentence if used literally to be truthvalueless). This form of fictionalism suffers from drawbacks of semantic non-uniformity and semantic complexity which might be thought costly in the same way that these features were drawbacks of the quasi-realist approach, and since the fictional context infects the meaning of the sentences they may not have the advantage of being able to “piggy-back” on the realist’s treatments of indirect contexts, so they may not seem the most attractive versions of fictionalism when

it comes to the advantages claimed for fictionalism at the start of this paper. Still, it is clear that they fall under the “fictionalist” umbrella, in that claims that are not *literally* true can still be usefully used for a variety of purposes.

The fictionalist must also provide an account of how we mix our talk which is to be taken fictionally with that part of our theories and assertions which we do wish to take literally. No doubt the story will vary from fictionalist proposal to fictionalist proposal. But some features will typically be in common. There will be a realm of discourse which the fictionalist takes literally (a “base discourse”), and a fiction which will have its contents depend in a systematic way on what is literally true in the language of the base discourse.<sup>8</sup> For a fictionalist about unobservables, the “base discourse” might be statements about observables, for a fictionalist about mathematics the base discourse might be, in a given application, the language of (de-mathematiced) physics, and for a moral fictionalist the base discourse might include such things as statements about how people in fact behave and will behave, and what it is desirable to do or rational to do, all things considered. We may, following Field, use the term “bridge laws” for the statements which connect what is literally true in the base discourse with what is true in the fiction, and vice versa. It is these bridge laws that allow us to infer from something's being fictionally true (e.g. that the patient's cells contain a given virus) something about what is literally true (the patient will be delirious and vomiting), and will enable us to go from what is literally true to what is true according to a given fiction (e.g. the claim that infants are dying of starvation to the claim that according to the moral fiction, something very morally bad is happening). Note that once the bridge laws are stipulated, it may turn out that there are things true according to the fiction which are not known to be true according to the fiction by the fiction's users: for a particularly vivid example, consider the modal fictionalism discussed in Rosen 1990, where the bridge laws ensure *all* of the

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<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps unsystematically, for those fictionalists who think there is no systematic way that fictional truths in a given area are generated from a fiction and what is literally true. Walton 1990 chapter 4 claims that the mechanisms for generating fictional truths in the case of paradigm fictions are “complex and unsystematic”.

truths about the actual world are also represented by his fiction to be true of the actual world.

Note that one thing that bridge laws will almost always do is to “import” into the theoretical fiction many claims that are also literally true: so, for example, a fictionalist about unobservables will not only fictionally believe in their pieces of laboratory equipment, such as electron microscopes<sup>9</sup>, but will not literally believe in electrons: nevertheless, it will true according to their fiction both that electrons exist, and that electron microscopes exist. After all, their theory will do things like describe the interactions between laboratory equipment and sub-atomic particles, and so it should be true according to that theory that there are such things as the electron microscopes it says interacts with electrons. Or in the case of moral fictionalism, it should be true according to the moral fiction that there are such events as killings, for example, since the moral fiction should say that some killings are wrong: and if some killings are wrong, then that implies that there are some killings. Theoretical fictions will often represent many things which are in fact true as well as propositions which are only fictionally true: in this respect they resemble novels where not only are there entirely fictional characters, but where the fictions also make representations about real personages like Napoleon or Hamlet (and real objects like the Sun and the Moon, real cities like London, etc.), and say true things about those real people and objects.

The fictionalist will then hopefully provide some reason to suppose that using the bridge laws to make inferences about what is literally true will not lead us astray, in the way that employing false theories for prediction and explanation so often does. Take a case where, for example, we use the bridge laws to go from something we take literally to

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<sup>9</sup> They may not think those pieces of equipment literally deserve the name “electron microscopes”, if they do not literally believe those pieces of equipment interact with electrons: but whether a standard name for a certain sort of artifact is an apt one is a different question from the question of whether there are such artifacts. Even if they would not want to literally use such an expression to refer to that equipment, they still believe in the pieces of equipment I am talking about.

something true according to the fiction, reasoning to something else true according to the fiction, and then inferring something new about what is literally true using the bridge laws again. A fictionalist might try to persuade us that this detour is harmless by giving a proof that for a given fiction and bridge laws it *cannot* lead from literal truth to literal falsehood (see e.g. Field's Conservativity result in his 1989 book). Or the fictionalist might argue that there are less than conclusive, but still strong, reasons to suppose that using the theory is reliable (for example a fictionalist about unobservables could argue that it is the scientific method which puts us in the position to rely on a theory arrived at in the right way to give us accurate predictions given some data). Let us assume for the purposes of this paper that a fictionalist in a given area has specified their principles for generating a fiction, the bridge laws which allow us to pass between what is fictional and what is literal, and some reason to suppose that moving back and forth between the domain of fiction and the domain taken literally will not, when done properly, lead us into literal errors.

#### ***4. Fictionalism and Propositional Attitudes***

Since the preferred varieties of fictionalism agree with the realist about the semantic behaviour of the statements in the target discourse (albeit a semantics which takes the positive predicates to never in fact be literally satisfied, and the distinctive ontology which is putatively referred to by the positive statements to not ever be successfully referred to), fictionalists can provide a straightforward and attractive account of the meaning of the target vocabulary, and the meaning of that vocabulary in negations, disjunctions, conditionals, and normal propositional attitude ascriptions. In the case of propositional attitude ascriptions, “Jason believes Kylie is virtuous” is not very different semantically from “Jason believes Kylie is tall” or “Jason believes Kylie is phlogisticated”: while in the first and third cases Jason has a belief which is bound to be actually incorrect, the belief ascription and the belief itself *qua* belief are none the worse for that. Similarly in the case of desire: if Jason desires that Kylie act as she ought, he desires that Kylie’s actions should have a certain feature (albeit, for the fictionalist, one

they will not, and perhaps cannot, have). There is no need to spin a new semantic structure out of whole cloth for moral language for the moral fictionalist, and *mutatis mutandis* for the fictionalist about unobservable physical entities, or mathematical objects, or possible worlds, or what-have-you.

All is not quite plain sailing for the fictionalist in this respect: for while fictionalists can avail themselves of the semantic machinery available to the realist, this will help against the specter of the Frege-Geach difficulties only if the realists have semantic machinery that can make sense of areas of discourse which are infected with a failure to “correspond to the world” in the right way. If the realist is saddled with a view according to which names that do not refer to objects are meaningless, or predicates that do not express instantiated properties are meaningless, the fictionalist may not be able to rest content on the realist’s laurels. Still, there are attractive accounts of content which do allow that people can have literal beliefs and desires which are appropriately described using non-referring terms and predicates which lack a (non-null) extension, and many people will find one of these accounts congenial in any case.<sup>10</sup>

While a fictionalist does not therefore face standard Frege-Geach-like challenges concerning the relevant propositional attitudes in the most straightforward class of cases (or at least they need not), they do face an analogous challenge in a slightly different class of situations. On the assumption that the normal users of moral language have realist attitudes (at least implicitly), the above story is straightforward. The story is not so straightforward when fictionalists come to describe their own attitudes, or the attitudes of other fictionalists. This is of concern especially to a fictionalist who hopes to convince those around her of the truth of fictionalism in a given area. Speaking literally, of course, fictionalists can say what one would expect, given that they are error theorists: moral fictionalists do not believe slavery is morally wrong, for example, indeed they believe it is not morally wrong (and perhaps even morally permitted, depending on how one draws

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<sup>10</sup> Ironically, some have seen in fictionalism a way to defend a thesis that non-referring names are meaningless when used literally: see Crimmins 1998.

the positive/negative distinction within moral vocabulary). Furthermore, modal fictionalists of the sort discussed by Rosen 1990 literally believe there is only one possible world; mathematical fictionalists of Field's stripe literally believe there are no prime numbers; and so on.

Despite this, fictionalists may well sometimes find it convenient to talk as if they and their fellow fictionalists have positive moral attitudes of various sorts. For example, a moral fictionalist who is prepared to utter the sentence "abortion is wrong", when asked what his opinion of abortion is, might naturally reply "I believe that abortion is wrong". More usefully, we need devices for reporting the positions of others: a fellow moral fictionalist Bill regularly utters the sentence "abortion is wrong", seeks to prevent abortions from occurring, donates money to right-to-life organisations, etc.: when asked about Bill's attitude to abortion, it would be convenient to be able to say that Bill believes that abortion is wrong (..impermissible, ..ought not occur, etc.). Similarly, it may be convenient to ascribe Bill moral desires: Bill, like Jason, above, might also desire that Kylie be virtuous: or at least it would be convenient to talk this way, even while admitting ascriptions of "positive" beliefs and desires to self-conscious fictionalists will not be literally true.

While it may be convenient to fictionally impute these psychological states to oneself or to other fictionalists, the various fictions employed by fictionalists, whether they be fictionalists about mathematics, or microphysics, or possible worlds, or morality, or whatever it might be, will need to be extended if the fictionalist wishes to indulge in this extended pretence. For the question of what beliefs and desires one has is a matter of descriptive psychology, rather than of mathematics, or microphysics, or possible worlds, or morality, or whatever: even an eliminativist about e.g. morality will admit that people have beliefs about the moral statuses of things (outcomes, events, people, properties, or whatever), and desires concerning the moral status of things: though many such beliefs will be held to be untrue by an eliminativist, and many of the desires misguided. Likewise, even an eliminativist about the microscopic realm (should there be such a

person) should admit that many people have beliefs about objects too small to see, and desires concerning them (e.g. about the presence of disease-causing bacteria and viruses, or chances of radioactive decay of atoms in a particular sample), even though, again, the eliminativist about the microscopic realm would take such beliefs and desires to be mistaken or misguided. What psychological states people have will typically be taken to be something that is a matter of fact, rather than a matter of fiction.<sup>11</sup>

The fictionalist seems to be faced with a dilemma: either extend their fiction to cover fictional ascriptions of certain beliefs, desires and other attitudes, e.g. in the case of a moral fictionalist, beliefs that certain outcomes are morally good or bad, certain actions morally obligatory or forbidden; or give up talking as if fictionalists have positive beliefs, desires etc. of the relevant sort. The challenge facing the fictionalist is like that facing other anti-realists: not so much to justify the truth of certain claims about propositional attitudes, but if possible to provide for the *acceptability* of the kinds of propositional-attitude-ascription sentences fictionalists would be tempted to produce once fictionalism spread through a population. Either they must revise their practices, and give up talking as if each other have (e.g.) positive moral beliefs; or they must provide for the acceptability of talk as if their fellow fictionalists have the relevant beliefs and desires, even though those propositional attitudes are not literally held, and even though a fictionalist may not be in general an anti-realist about propositional attitudes.

If the fictionalist passes up the opportunity to extend the fiction to cover what they are to say about their own attitudes and the attitudes of other fictionalists, they give up on several benefits which fictionalists should be concerned to retain – several of which were mentioned on pp 10-11. There is the immediately obvious one of keeping a familiar and psychologically convenient way of everyday talking – in this case our everyday practices

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<sup>11</sup> The case of fictionalism about propositional attitudes themselves would be an exception, and would not face the problem raised by this paper, at least in the form in which it is presented here. Fictionalism about propositional attitudes faces particular and apparently severe difficulties of its own, however: difficulties which I shall not pursue in this paper.

of ascribing attitudes about various subject matters to ourselves and others. There is also the advantage of communication about first-order issues, and people's attitudes towards them, in ordinary circumstances without having to mention people's commitment to literal error theories ("Well, Bill doesn't really believe that abortion is wrong, it's just that..."). When, e.g. a fictionalist about unobservables is asked about what their opinion is about radiation levels outside a leaking reactor, if they have a way of talking as if they have a positive opinion they can get to the main point, rather than detouring through mention of their more philosophical concerns. A nuclear scientist asked by a reporter about his beliefs concerning the effect of fallout would risk unhelpfulness and producing confusion if the best she could honestly say was "Well, I don't believe that there is any radiation at all, let alone harmful effects of radiation, but....".

If it is indeed true, as I suggested above, that fictionalists can gain an advantage in expressing claims over more austere nominalist rivals, then a fictionalist who lacks the ability to extend their fiction to talk as if other fictionalists and they themselves have apparently committed attitudes will also be deprived of the ability to capture the content of a fellow fictionalist's attitudes in the convenient way that e.g. moral language sometimes allows: if I would like to say that Jack (a fellow fictionalist) believes we should put more effort into defending the right of free speech than the right of security of property, or even if I want to say that Jill (also a fictionalist) tries to be charitable (on the assumption that the concept of charity is a thick moral concept and not merely a descriptive one), I shall be hard pressed to say what I mean if I am not allowed to help myself to the pretence that Jack has beliefs about the value of rights, and Jill has beliefs and desires about how one might be charitable. For paraphrasing the claim about Jack or the claim about Jill into sentences which are literally true of their psychological states is by no means a straightforward matter. Similarly if I wish to talk as if a van Fraassenite director of health believes that the rapid spread of a certain virus is caused by vitamin deficiencies (while not literally saying any such thing, knowing that the director lacks belief both in viruses and vitamins), trying to say literally what the health director *does* literally believe about the population in question, its diet, and its health, without mention



of vitamins or antibodies, is not straightforward.

It is in the spirit of fictionalism to try to retain these sorts of advantages, so it is worthwhile investigating what a fictionalist can do in the way of providing a way of fictionally ascribing moral attitudes to themselves and other fictionalists, despite the problem that they will also need to be able to make literal claims about the psychological states of fictionalists at the same time. Before we begin to outline how this might be done, we must stress an important condition for a solution to the problem of extending e.g. the moral fictionalist pretence to (at least some) claims about moral attitudes. This is the problem of higher-order attitudes: attitudes about attitudes. For suppose we wish to pretend that Anne believes that capital punishment is wrong. We may also wish to talk as if Belle, who knows Anne well, believes (or even knows) that Anne has that attitude. And that Cath has discovered from talking to Belle that this is what Belle takes Anne's attitude to be, and that Dale believes that Cath's belief about Belle's belief is mistaken... and so on. When all of them are self-conscious fictionalists, and know the others to be, however, the story will have to start to get very complicated. For Anne does not literally think capital punishment is wrong, and Belle, knowing of Anne's fictionalism, will not literally believe that Anne literally believes that capital punishment is wrong, and Cath, knowing of Anne's fictionalism and Belle's awareness of it, will not literally believe that Belle believes that Anne is opposed to capital punishment... so new pretences will need to be introduced at each step, and presumably in a systematic way.

Nor should it be thought that the need to handle higher-order attitudes is only a product of a philosopher's desire to produce a theory adequate even for obscure cases. For our attitudes to other people, and in particular their attitudes, are among the most commonplace and central features of our mental lives: far more time is spent finding out about other people and their beliefs and desires (as well as their fears, hopes, expectations, suspicions, etc. etc.) than virtually any other subject. Furthermore, much of our epistemic access to the world is a result of our access to the attitudes of others: to be able to make proper use of testimony, we need to know how to tell from what people say

what they believe, what their intentions were in saying so, and so on. So much of what we know about others' attitudes is itself discovered through our access to people's beliefs concerning those others and their attitudes. It may be unusual, but by no means a philosopher's fantasy, that we, e.g. read a report in a newspaper or magazine which is a second- or third-hand retelling of an incident which is evidence that a knowledgeable insider takes an important figure to have a particular attitude. This would produce at least fifth-order attitudes in us: and it is easy to add some more levels if I discover my friend A has been informed by my friend B about the report, which B read in the paper. We rarely notice how many levels of nested attitudes occur in our everyday life. It may be, of course, that after a certain point the need to provide for nested attitudes becomes more fanciful: five-hundredth-level attitudes seem unlikely to be very common, if there are any at all. Still, the ability to talk and behave as if there are such higher-order attitudes be able to serve some of the same purposes of communication about each other, and indirectly about the world, as ascribing first-order propositional attitudes.

Higher-order attitudes ultimately to do with people's moral attitudes are a special case of higher-order attitudes, but the usefulness of talk about them can be explained in the same sorts of terms as the justification of the need for higher-order attitude ascriptions in general. To talk as if others have moral beliefs, for example, and that yet others might be useful sources of testimony about those beliefs, enables us to gain important evidence about important values that people cherish. Knowledge of how someone is liable to act is often gained through discovering what the realist would describe as the extent to which they are motivated in a moral way (they have desires about moral attributes of some sort or another): being able to talk as if some people are villains, others dutiful, yet others indifferent, and to be able to evaluate reports to this effect that are made to us, clearly seems to be useful in our dealings with our fellow human beings. Likewise, being able to talk as if a group of fictionalist mathematicians have certain hunches about what statements are theorems and which are not, or talk as if a particular mathematician wants to investigate a certain mathematical structure, is useful for understanding and predicting what that mathematician will say or do (and may shed light on what the mathematician is

trying to communicate, insofar as knowing where someone is “coming from” is often an important part of ensuring successful communication). So making room for a fictionalist to assert higher-order attitude ascriptions is not just an interesting philosophical challenge—it is likely to be very important in practice, should fictionalism become widespread.

Of course, making room for these fictional attitude reports, both of the basic sort and of the higher-level sort, is even more important if fictionalism is in fact already widespread in any area. Plausibly it is: talk in physics of rigid rods or ideal gasses is often treated as fictionalist, a case can be made that teleological talk in contemporary evolutionary biology is best seen as a useful fiction, and some fictionalists want to argue that our everyday talk of abstract objects, alternative outcomes, and other puzzling entities is *already* fictionalist (e.g. the figuralist position in Yablo 2002). Such fictionalists should think that we already (implicitly at least) deploy an extended fiction that people have the attitudes we normally say they do about such matters, or be prepared to explain why there is so much widespread error when we say that people have the beliefs and desires we ascribe to them.<sup>12</sup> The former seems preferable.

### **5. A Solution**

With this complication in mind, let us discuss one obvious way a fictionalist might develop the ability to talk as if they and others have attitudes about a subject matter, without thereby having to literally possess those attitudes. Let us begin with the case of belief ascriptions, since this is an important case in its own right, as well as having significance as the propositional attitude which must be treated with particular caution if the fiction is to avoid incoherence: for it must be possible both to e.g. literally take

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<sup>12</sup> I imagine Yablo at least would be happy to say that our report e.g. that most highschool students believe that  $7+5=12$  is to be treated in a similar “figuralist” way to the way he thinks that we treat “ $7+5=12$ ”, should it turn out that we are not ordinarily realists about numbers. This paper can be seen as a story about how the “figuralist” mechanism generates the fictional truths about our propositional attitudes concerning e.g. numbers: though the mechanism to be discussed should be equally applicable to fictionalist strategies which lack the particular commitments that Yablo has.

someone to be a fictionalist about mathematics (and thus literally believe there are no positive truths about sets, functions, numbers or whatever) and fictionally a believer of standard mathematical claims (and thus fictionally believe that there are positive truths concerning sets, functions, numbers, etc.) – and to be able to say both in successive breaths without either fictionally or literally contradicting oneself, and without imputing contradiction (either literally or fictionally) to the believer in question.

Let me discuss the specific case of moral fictionalism, even though the remarks I will make about moral fictionalism will generalise in an obvious way. Suppose we are moral fictionalists and that we would like to say, speaking loosely, that a fellow fictionalist Bill believes that abortion is wrong – even though, speaking literally, he believes nothing of the sort, being a moral fictionalist. Under what literal circumstances would we want our extended moral fiction to have as part of its content that Bill believes that abortion is wrong? One thing that many philosophers have wanted to do is tie belief to appropriate assertion – the thought being that prima facie one has done something wrong by one’s own lights if one asserts something one does not believe. Now, moral fictionalism has already provided for conditions for Bill to appear to assert “abortion is wrong”: he is to utter that sentence only when he takes it that the moral fiction claims that abortion is wrong. (Of course he is not required to utter the sentence whenever he takes it to be true according to the moral fiction that abortion is wrong, otherwise he would be constantly parroting the sentence). So given that we have conditions for Bill to find “abortion is wrong” fictionally assertable (whether fictional assertion is to pretend to assert, to assert under presuppositions, to assert something about the content of fiction, or whatever), we have a building block to build a condition for fictional belief.

In a literal case, there is a sense in which I am right to assert P just in case it is true that P, but I believe that I am right to assert P just in case I believe that P. So, if it is right for Bill to ‘fictionally assert’ “abortion is wrong” just in case it is true according to the moral fiction that abortion is wrong, then we might try constructing the extended fiction (EF for short) so that it says that Bill believes abortion is wrong just in case Bill takes himself to

be in a position to assert that abortion is wrong: that is, just in case he takes it to be the case that according to the moral fiction, abortion is wrong.

A similar line of thought provides us with one natural suggestion for handling the fictional ascription of higher-order attitudes which “ground out” in moral attitudes. Let us say that Carl is a fictionalist about morality who knows Bill and what Bill thinks, including that Bill is also a moral fictionalist. We are inclined to say in such a case that, loosely speaking, it is appropriate to say that Carl believes that Bill believes that abortion is wrong. Of course, Carl does not literally believe this, since he knows full well that Bill does not believe anything is morally wrong, strictly speaking. Still, Carl does believe that Bill takes himself to be in a position to fictionally assert that abortion is wrong, and does believe that, according to EF, Bill believes that abortion is wrong. So just as it was true according to the EF that Bill believed abortion is wrong just in case Bill believed that according to the moral fiction, abortion is wrong, we shall say that according to EF, Carl believes that Bill believes that abortion is wrong, just in case Carl believes that, according to EF, Bill believes that abortion is wrong. And it is true according to EF that Dennis believes that Carl believes... just in case Dennis believes that according to the EF fiction, Carl believes... and so on. To sum up the general rule as a slogan (using the language of as-if): it is as if X believes that  $p$  just in case X believes it is as if  $p$ . Or in the language of “according to the fiction”, where  $p$  is a moral claim, or a claim about a belief about a moral claim, or a higher order claim of the relevant sort, (a claim about a belief about a belief about a moral matter, or a claim about a belief about a belief about a belief about a moral matter, or...)

(According to EF, X believes that  $p$ ) iff (X believes that according to EF,  $p$ )

As well as this rule for importing content into the EF (from right to left), and going from claims about what is true according to the fiction to something which is literally the case (left to right), we should also include the ground-level fiction as a part of the extended fiction. That way the biconditional will hold in a case of the non-iterated fictional belief

ascriptions. (According to the fiction Bill believes that abortion is wrong iff Bill believes that according to the fiction, abortion is wrong). Otherwise the EF would not represent that abortion is wrong, so Bill, our competent fellow fictionalist, would not be expected to believe that it did. One could set the scheme up to handle the ground level case separately, if one so desired, and keep the ground-level fiction out of the extended fiction, but in the standard case that would be needlessly complicated.

It is surprisingly straightforward to extend this EF fictional biconditional to attitudes other than belief, and mixtures of different attitudes. Take the case of desire: to be specific, a case where we would like to be able to say, loosely speaking, that Bill desires that Kylie be virtuous. Again, strictly speaking, Bill may desire no such thing, being a fictionalist and not believing that anyone is, nor is likely to be, literally virtuous, for Bill holds that there is strictly speaking no such thing as virtue. We can say that according to EF, Bill desires that Kylie be virtuous: and by analogy with the case of belief we shall say that this is the case just when Bill desires that according to the fiction Kylie be virtuous.

This needs to be understood the right way, of course. When we say (speaking loosely) Bill desires that Kylie be virtuous, we would normally mean that he wants Kylie's character to conform to the standards in fact prescribed (according to the fiction) in order to be virtuous. We do not normally mean that he desires that the standards of virtue be changed (or the fiction about such standards be changed) so that Kylie's actual disposition, however it may be, counts as virtuous by the lights of the standard. Nor do we mean that Bill would be happy with either option (Kylie's character conforming to the actual standard, or the standard's prescriptions being in line with Kylie's actual character), even though both would do for making it the case that according to the fiction about virtue, Kylie is virtuous.

However, this understanding is not a resource that needs to be particularly appealed to by a moral fictionalist. Anyone ascribing moral desires ought to recognize the distinction.

If our realist Jason desires that Kylie be virtuous, he will normally desire that Kylie's character conforms to the actual standards (whatever they are), rather than desiring that the standards endorse Kylie's character (however it happens to be). This is so even though both directions of conformity are ways Kylie's character and the standards can be brought into harmony. (Perhaps the latter is impossible if the standards for virtue hold of necessity—but one can still desire impossible things, especially if one does not know they are impossible). Just as in principle character and principles can be brought into harmony by changing one or the other, in principle character and fictional principle can be brought into harmony by controlling character or controlling the fiction. We are normally to understand someone who (loosely speaking) desires a person to be virtuous (or act rightly, or produce good outcomes) desires that the fiction says that they do, but that the fiction says that they do because their features are such that the actual fiction gives the result that their character is virtuous (or acts are right, or consequences are good), rather than the desire being that the fiction turn out to endorse whatever the actual character, acts, or consequences happen to be, or desiring one or the other indifferently. When understood this way, the fictional ascriptions of desire look natural: when we say (fictionally) that Bill desires that Kylie be virtuous, what makes our saying so appropriate is ultimately largely facts about Bill's desires concerning Kylie's character. Similarly, our fictional ascription of his desire that she acts rightly is legitimate largely because of desires he literally has about her actions, his fictional desire that the outcomes of her actions are good is the product of his non-fictional desires concerning those outcomes, etc.

With this caveat, which will also be needed when ascribing moral hopes, moral disgust, and various other attitudes, an account generalised from the one for belief can be simply given for propositional attitudes:

(According to EF,  $X \Phi$ s that  $p$ ) iff ( $X \Phi$ s that according to EF,  $p$ )

This can be used for mixed cases above the first order cases as well: if it is appropriate to

fictionally assert “Bob believes that Bill desires that Kylie be virtuous”, this will be because Bob believes that it is true according to the EF fiction that Bill desires that Kylie be virtuous.

This will tell us when to fictionally assert that some person X has a propositional attitude  $\Phi$  that  $p$ . We should also add another condition, to specify when we can fictionally assert that X does *not* have a propositional attitude  $\Phi$  that  $p$ .<sup>13</sup> A separate clause is needed, since the mere fact that it is not the case that one proposition A is true in a fiction does not establish that not-A is true in that fiction: fictions are famously incomplete, and may not say anything either way about certain subject matters (it would be odd to assume that every fiction must represent one way or another about the price of cabbages in Istanbul, for example). An additional clause is not difficult to supply, however: we can ensure that the EF is complete in respect of the relevant psychological attitudes (that is, that for each attitude with each relevant content, the EF either says X has it or it does not), for instance by stipulating another bridge law:

(According to EF, it is not the case that X  $\Phi$ s that  $p$ ) iff (it is not the case that X  $\Phi$ s that according to EF,  $p$ )

This bridging principle should probably be restricted to fictionalists in our fictionalist community: in cases where there are mixed communities of genuine believers and fictionalists, we may not wish our extended fiction to say that some genuine believers do not believe that  $p$ , simply on the basis that they have no opinion about the fictionalists’ extended fiction!

Other methods are no doubt available for specifying how to fill out the rules governing the EF to specify when a statement of the form (According to the EF, it is not the case that X  $\Phi$ s that  $p$ ) holds, but this one seems adequate. (Another would be some sort of

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<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to a questioner at Indiana for stressing the importance of this point.



principle ensuring that the fiction was complete in some respects – so that e.g. if there was not something which forced the fiction to represent that  $X \Phi$ s that  $p$ , it defaulted to representing that not- $(X \Phi$ s that  $p)$ . The reason why we want our fiction to make claims about when people do not hold certain attitudes is that we want to also specify when it is appropriate, in the extended fiction, to deny that e.g. Bill believes abortions are obligatory. And of course talk about beliefs and desires about what other people do *not* believe and desire can mix with higher-order belief and desire ascriptions, so we would like a treatment that can iterate smoothly.<sup>14</sup>

### ***6. What if the Ground-Level Fiction Contains Propositional Attitude Attributions?***<sup>15</sup>

The story just given works in the simplest case, when the ground-level fiction does not itself contain any claims about what propositional attitudes people hold. Some ground-level discourses a fictionalist may be interested in will be like this: Field's fiction of containing only a portion of mathematical physics, for example. But others will not: the base fiction for a moral fictionalist will include claims about what people believe and desire, and moral evaluations of those (e.g. it may say that Jill's desire to kill Jack is wrong, or that Jack's desire to give to charity is virtuous). A basic fiction might endorse these claims for a variety of reasons. In the case of moral fictionalism, many of the propositional attitude ascriptions will be there because of import principles from what is literally the case, as in the previous two examples. Or it may only be fictionally true in the basic fiction that certain beliefs and desires are possessed at all. Take for example an

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<sup>14</sup> A fictionalist may wish to have other rules for generating the content of the extended fiction, besides importing the content of the relevant ground-level fiction and the content which is imported because of the right-to-left side of the bridge-law biconditional discussed. For instance, we may wish the extended fiction to sometimes make it fictionally the case that an action of an agent is caused by a combination of beliefs and desires which someone has according to that extended fiction, even if the action is literally only caused by attitudes literally possessed by that person. Or we may wish to have some principle about truth so that we can use a truth predicate in the extended fiction so we can say e.g. everything that Bob believes about electrons is false (or whatever).

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Jay Garfield for stressing the need to be clear about this more complicated case.

anthropological fiction, where for convenience anthropologists on occasion talk to each other as if there really are the demons and helpful spirits that some tribe they are studying say that there are. (This pretence might be for convenience in talking about the tribe's religious activities, or to achieve a better understanding of the tribe's worldview, or whatever). Then when the anthropologist says the demons want boys to fail their manhood tests, or that the good spirits believe that they will eventually defeat the demons, or whatever, these belief and desire ascriptions are not part of what the anthropologist takes to be literally the case, but are not part of an extended fiction either: they are part and parcel of the ontology of the basic fiction, which is an ontology of spirits, their behaviour and their attitudes.

It would be silly if we applied the biconditional developed in the previous section to extended fictions based on ground-level fictions that already contain propositional attitude ascriptions. Once we import the ground-level anthropological fiction, the extended fiction will have true according to it that the good spirits believe they will win. We should not conclude from this that it is literally the case that the good spirits believe that, according to the extended fiction, they will win: presumably neither in fiction nor in reality do the spirits have opinions about the anthropologists' fiction. This is even more obvious when the ground-level moral fiction says, for example, that Jack believes that putting a cheque in the mail is an effective way to give to charity (the ground-level moral fiction will have true according to it much that is also literally true when those propositions are relevant to what the story should say is good or bad, right or wrong). We should not think automatically that Jack believes that, according to an extended moral fiction, putting a cheque in the mail is an effective way to give to charity. Jack may not even be a moral fictionalist, and may never have heard of a moral fiction. (He may not even have moral concepts – I presume it is possible to know how to give to charity even if one is amoral enough not to see much point, and the outcomes of an amoral person's actions can still be assessed for degree of moral value).

Fortunately, the wrinkle we need to add when the ground-level fiction contains

propositional attitude ascriptions is not very complex. The import rule for the extended fiction need not be altered: when someone  $\Phi$ s that, according to the extended fiction,  $p$ , we can allow that the extended fiction represents that person as  $\Phi$ ing that  $p$ . When the extended fiction represents that someone  $\Phi$ s that  $p$ , though, that may not be because that person literally  $\Phi$ s that according to the extended fiction,  $p$ . The other way it could have happened via the content of the ground-level fiction. So the “export rule” - what we can tell about what is going on outside EF from the contents of EF – will be disjunctive.

When it is true that according to EF, X  $\Phi$ s that  $p$ , then *either* X  $\Phi$ s that, according to EF,  $p$  *or* according to the ground-level fiction, X  $\Phi$ s that  $p$ . (There may even be unusual cases when both disjuncts are satisfied). Depending on the rules for the ground-level fiction, we may then be able to infer something about what is literally the case about X – but that is a story to leave to the specification of the ground-level fictions. The disjunctive rule is less convenient, but in many cases it will be reasonably clear which disjunct we should think is applicable – we can tell that what the EF says about one spirit’s belief about another spirit’s belief is in the EF because it was in the anthropologists’ ground-level fiction, but the belief of our colleague about a spirit’s belief is due in all likelihood to the import bridge law used to set up EF.<sup>16</sup>

An equivalent tweak should be made for our biconditional about when EF represents that X does *not*  $\Phi$  that  $p$ . The import half of the biconditional can remain unchanged (again, perhaps with the restriction of the values of X to members of our fictionalist community), and the export conditional may have to be disjunctive: when according to EF, X does not  $\Phi$  that  $p$ , then either X does not  $\Phi$  that, according to EF,  $p$ , *or* according to the ground-level fiction, X does not  $\Phi$  that  $p$ . This, incidentally, may point the way to how we can have an extended fiction which handles both realists and fictionalists: if a base fiction says that a realist  $\Phi$ s that  $p$  when that realist does indeed  $\Phi$  that  $p$ , (and that the realist

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<sup>16</sup> The reader is invited to speculate about how useful this fiction would be if we were dealing with a tribe who believed in spirits that both did anthropology and had opinions about fictionalism. It is usually possible to think of possible situations where convenient fictions would not have been convenient.

does not  $\Phi$  that  $p$  just in case the realist literally does not  $\Phi$  that  $p$ ), but stays silent about the relevant ascriptions to fictionalists, then the extended fiction will represent both realists and fictionalists having attitudes of the relevant sort, thus giving us the ability to compare and contrast the attitudes that the fictionalist (fictionally) has and the realist (fictionally and literally) has.

### ***7. Limitations and an Alternative***

Cases of non-propositional attitudes do not seem to be as straightforward to deal with. This sort of case includes the situation in which it is as if a fictionalist about unobservable physical entities is surprised by the behaviour of some subatomic particle, or when it is as if a moral fictionalist hates a criminal's wickedness, or in general when fictionalists have the fictional counterparts of likes or dislikes for fictional entities, or the counterparts of reliance or distrust, or whenever we are tempted to say that it is true according to the fiction that the fictionalist has some non-propositional but intentional attitude: an attitude to a thing, or event, or state, or property or relation, rather than an attitude which, on the surface at least, is an attitude involving a proposition (such as the attitudes of belief that..., desire that..., hope that.. etc.). Partly I suspect this is a reflection of the broader problem of explicating apparently non-propositional attitudes to non-existent objects. It may also be that such attitudes are less well understood. I have sympathy for views which attempt to account for what I have been calling non-propositional attitudes in terms of complexes of propositional attitudes of one sort or another, or possibly complexes of propositional attitudes and emotional states (where the relevant emotional states are not in turn understood as states directed towards non-propositional objects). If such an approach could be established, then the problem of "non-propositional attitudes" would be solved, for the attitudes in question could be analysed in terms of propositional attitudes, and the account provided for them applied.<sup>17</sup> However, for those who resist this reduction,

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<sup>17</sup> This is not quite the end of the story if some so-called non-propositional attitudes involve emotional states, and it is thought that when one reacts to fiction, one reacts not with genuine emotion but with fictional-emotion of some sort. Then this would need to be added to the account of what it was to have such a "non-propositional attitude" according to a fiction. I have no wish to take a position on this question

clearly the account of how these attitudes could be incorporated into a suitable extended fiction would have to take a different form.

Note that this extended fiction (the EF fiction I have been discussing) may be useful in some contexts for many people who are not themselves necessarily fictionalists about any of the typical subjects. For it is not only fictionalist that will want to talk about the attitudes of fictionalists, and it would be just as unnatural and inconvenient for a non-fictionalist attempting to describe the attitudes within a group of fictionalists (especially higher-order attitudes) without employing the EF fiction as it would be for fictionalists. Talking as if fictionalists have attitudes involving the relevant subject matter, and that they have attitudes to each other's attitudes in such areas will be useful for fictionalists and non-fictionalists alike, particularly if fictionalism becomes common in a given group. What a moral fictionalist's attitudes are will be of interest to non-fictionalists about morality as well as moral fictionalists, and given the convenience of talking as if even moral fictionalists have moral beliefs, desires about morally-characterised states of affairs, etc., even a non-fictionalist about morality who needs to deal with such fictionalists will find the extended fiction expedient.

One headache that will arise from this extended fictionalising is distinguishing literal propositional attitude reports from their fictional counterparts. For people may have literal attitudes about another's moral beliefs as well as have them fictionally. For example, Hiero might literally believe that Bill believes that abortion is wrong: through seeing Bill in action and not yet realising that Bill is a fictionalist. And Igor might (fictionally) believe that Hiero believes that Bill believes that abortion is wrong – perhaps through hearing a report from Hiero, but Igor's not realising that Hiero wasn't speaking fictionally, but was instead speaking literally. And Julia might (literally) desire that Igor believe that Hiero believe that Bill believes that abortion is wrong – she may wish to correct Igor's misapprehension about Hiero. At each stage of iteration, attitudes can be held literally or only according to EF, opening up a range of possible misunderstandings

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of emotional involvement in fiction here.

that could fill an epic comedy of errors. (Whether they could contribute to an interesting or entertaining comedy of errors is another matter). Distinguishing pretence from seriousness is always a challenge to a greater or lesser extent when fictionalists are about: but the skills we have developed through growing up in a media age should prove adequate to the task.

It is an unfortunate feature of this iterative EF pretence, with its apparently complex methods for determining what is fictional in higher order cases and need to draw fine distinctions between literal beliefs and fictional beliefs and the higher order beliefs of both sorts, and the possibility of mixups between them and the higher-order ramifications of those mixups results in a system that does seem a little more complex than the realist's ascription of propositional attitudes about morality to fellow realists. It is perhaps at this point that the quasi-realist will retort to our earlier charges about their difficulty in dealing with propositional attitude ascriptions that the necessarily complex story they had to tell about higher-order attitudes is not one that the fictionalist can afford to scoff at, and perhaps (*perhaps!*) this is a fair ad hominem: though I will wait for a worked-out story from the quasi-realist camp about higher-order attitude ascriptions before I might agree that their problem in this area is on a par with the fictionalist strategy put forward above.

In any case, there is an alternative strategy the moral fictionalist might attempt: a strategy for retaining much of the expressive and simplifying power of moral language (though perhaps not all of the other advantages), without having to extend the pretence to our psychological ascriptions of moral beliefs and moral desires, and the higher-order beliefs and desires associated with them. This would be to talk about what our fellow fictionalists believe or desire, not about moral matters, but about what is true *according to the moral fiction*. Instead of (falsely but appropriately) asserting that Bill believes abortion is wrong, we could instead assert that Bill believes that according to the moral fiction abortion is wrong. (Or perhaps that he believes that according to his particular moral fiction abortion is wrong, if there is more than one acceptable moral fiction).

Similarly, instead of saying that Bill desires that Kylie be virtuous, we might say that Bill desires that according to the moral fiction, Kylie would be virtuous. If this route is taken, higher order ascriptions can just be treated literally: if Ella is aware of Bill's views on abortion (and moral fictionalism), we might say that Ella believes that Bill believes that according to the moral fiction (or Bill's moral fiction) abortion is wrong, if Ella wants to pass the news about Bill to Francine, we can say that Ella desires that Francine believes that Bill believes that abortion is wrong according to the moral fiction: but if Ella wants to deceive Francine into thinking Bill a realist, she will desire that Francine believes that Bill believes that abortion is wrong *simpliciter*. Likewise with the innumerable other iterations of higher-order attitudes.

The great advantage of this second proposal is that the higher-order attitudes require no extra mention of fiction or use of pretence at all – they are treated in the standard manner in which higher order attitudes are treated when any other subject is involved.<sup>18</sup> As a result, this strategy avoids the risk of confusing literal attitude ascriptions with fictional ones, since all ascriptions are literal, and cases are distinguished by whether or not the first order attitudes are about moral states of affairs or only about what is true in the moral fiction. The disadvantage of this latter strategy is that it departs further from non-fictionalist usage than the first strategy, and so is less convenient in that respect. In addition, because it requires explicit mention of the moral fiction in its attitude ascriptions when we are dealing with fictionalists, meta-ethical matters may intrude into discussions where they are not wanted: for instance many practical discussions aimed at

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<sup>18</sup> There still may be multiple introductions of mentions of the fiction in those complicated cases where we might normally be tempted to say that there are moral evaluations of states of affairs involving higher-order attitudes which have at the base level an attitude involving the (a) moral fiction: for example, if Ella would violate a confidence were she to tell Francine about Bill's attitude to abortion, Gerry might disapprove of Ella's desire to tell: indeed it may be that Gerry believes that according to the moral fiction it is wrong that Ella desire that she (Ella) bring it about that Francine believes that Bill believes that according to the moral fiction abortion is wrong. These extended cases, even if they occasionally induce headaches, do not cause any additional problem in principle for this strategy, and it may be noted will be somewhat complex even in straightforward cases where all participants are moral realists.

co-ordinating actions taking into account people's attitudes to the relevant proposals.

Of course, the two alternatives are not entirely exclusive: as long as people are clear about what is being done, the two strategies could both be employed at different times. The extended fiction is best suited to occasions where talking like a realist is most convenient, and using the literal method of ascription is most useful where avoiding confusion between literal attitude ascriptions and only pretended ascriptions is particularly important. I leave it to future fictionalist communities (and commentators thereon) to decide on their conventions in this matter.

## **8. Conclusion**

Dealing with propositional attitude ascriptions which directly or indirectly involve attitudes about fictional states of affairs is a point of some complexity in the rounding out of a fictionalist position, as well as a headache for those who need to talk about fictionalists' attitudes. But once accomplished, we may note that the strategy can be applied, not only in the standard cases of fictionalism or its cousins usually mentioned in the philosophical literature, but also in the comparatively commonplace case of talking of literary fiction: if we hear it said that Zelda believes that Yank believes that Batman and Robin were lovers, we are unlikely to assume that Zelda believes that Yank literally accepts the existence of Batman and Robin and their activities. If Zelda tells her friend Wendy about Yank, while we might say that Zelda desires that Wendy believe that Yank believes that Batman and Robin were lovers, we again may not think that Zelda desires that Wendy come to literally believe such a thing about Yank—it is unlike what her desire would be in a case, say, where Zelda is trying to convince Wendy that Yank is so delusional he cannot distinguish real life from comic book worlds any more. A similar practice of employing extended fictions to discuss higher-order attitudes is tempting here.

This paper smoothes a wrinkle in fictionalist projects which has for too long remained unnoticed: perhaps because fictionalists are often more concerned to set out and defend a fictionalist position as one which an individual can maintain in good philosophical



conscience, rather than as one which is primarily conceived of as an attitude which is held in a practical manner by a community of inquiry. (Not that the former is unimportant – I am tempted to think it a precondition for the latter). The housekeeping it does is important for another purpose also, mentioned at the beginning: to the extent that a fictionalist claims that their position is to be preferred to theories offering various non-realist semantic analyses due to the Frege-Geach problems which plague such rivals, the fictionalist had better be able to handle any analogous problems they face, such as the one concerning fictional propositional attitudes discussed in this paper. The usefulness of propositional attitude talk is manifest – in showing that the fictionalist can use it in questionable areas with a clear conscience, this paper makes a useful addition to nearly any fictionalist's toolkit. In addition, it should prove helpful for those interested in talking *about* fictionalists and their attitudes (loosely speaking): and it may prove useful even for those who may not embrace fictionalism in any widespread way, and who do not have much occasion to discuss the opinions of fictionalists, but who nonetheless wish to embrace fictionalism or an analogue about certain very limited subjects such as ideal gasses or the characters of literary fiction.<sup>19</sup>

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