

42. Note that doing *Y* need not *cause* the satisfaction of the relevant desire. Suppose Romeo desires to embrace Juliet. Romeo's embracing Juliet does not cause the satisfaction of Romeo's desire; it is rather that Romeo's embracing Juliet *brings it about* that his desire is satisfied. Another example is that omissions sometimes bring about satisfaction of desires. But omissions do not cause anything.
43. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a seminar at Stockholm University, at *Filosofidagarna* in Lund, June 2009; at the *RoME* congress in Boulder, Colorado, August 2009; and at a workshop on naturalism in ethics and metaphysics at Leeds University, September 2009. I thank the participants, in particular Selim Berker, Ross Cameron, Christian Coons, David Copp, Daniel Elstein, Ulrike Heuer, Jonathan Ichikawa, Gerald Lang, Daniel Nolan, Jan Osterberg, Kai Petterson, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Ted Sider, Jussi Suikkanen, Pekka Väyrynen, and Ralph Wedgwood, for helpful discussions. I am especially grateful to Matt Bedke, Stephen Finlay, Jens Johansson, Niklas Möller, and the editor of this volume, for their generous feedback.

4

The Myth of Moral Fictionalism

Terence Cuneo and Sean Christy

Naturalists wonder whether there is a place in the world for moral facts. Some believe not, advocating either a view according to which moral discourse is massively in error or one in which it fails to express moral propositions altogether. Other naturalists believe there is a place for moral facts, but only if they are identical with (or perhaps constituted by) natural facts. According to these philosophers, moral discourse embodies no fundamental error and is straightforwardly assertoric. For some time, many philosophers believed that these positions exhausted the options for naturalists. Recently, however, a new position has emerged as an alternative. This position, dubbed *moral fictionalism* by its advocates, maintains that moral thought and discourse either are or should become modes of pretense, wherein we pretend that there are moral facts.

In this paper, we explore the issue of whether moral naturalists should accept moral fictionalism. We argue that they should not. Understood as a view about actual moral discourse, we claim that the position is false. Understood as a position about how we ought to revise such discourse, we claim that it is unfeasible. We do not deny that moral fictionalism has its allure, especially for those of an anti-realist bent. But naturalists, we contend, should resist its attractions.

1. Fictionalism: two elements

Fictionalism is a type of view that comes in multiple, incompatible varieties. This raises the question of whether there is a common core to the various positions that are called fictionalist. About this issue we remain agnostic; we do not know whether there is such a common core. We do, however, believe that there are two claims that any plausible fictionalist position will incorporate.¹ In this section, our task is to identify them.

To identify these claims, it will be helpful to have some terminology at hand. Suppose we stipulate that the expression 'the Fs' can stand for entities of any type whatsoever – possible worlds, material objects, gods, moral facts,

or the like. Suppose, further, that we say that an *existential proposition with respect to the Fs* is a proposition such that, were it true, it would imply that there are Fs. Fundamental to fictionalism of any variety with respect to the Fs is the claim that an agent can take up the *fictive stance* toward them.² An agent S takes up the fictive stance toward the Fs, we shall assume, just in case the following three conditions are satisfied.

First, S performs speech acts in a range of circumstances C that appear to imply that she believes that there are Fs. That is, in C she performs speech acts the awareness of which would, were one not 'in the know,' naturally lead one to believe that she had thereby committed herself to the truth of some existential proposition with respect to the Fs. Second, in performing these speech acts S does not genuinely express any commitment to the being of Fs. In these circumstances, she doesn't (intentionally) commit herself to the truth of any existential propositions with respect to the Fs. Third, when performing these speech acts, S does something else with regard to the existential propositions regarding the Fs: she plays the role of the believer, pretending to accept them.³ It may bear emphasizing that the person who takes up such a stance might do so in such a way that she offers no clues to her audience that she is doing so. That she takes up the fictive stance, then, may be something of which her audience is entirely unaware.

For ease of reference, let us say that a *fictioneer* with respect to the Fs is a (mentally competent) adult agent who takes up the fictive stance with regard to the Fs in a range of circumstances C. (We should add that the fictioneer with respect to the Fs is not to be identified with the *fictionalist* with regard to the Fs. The latter, in our terminology, is someone who accepts a fictionalist *theory* regarding the Fs. We assume, however, that the fictioneer may have no views about a fictionalist theory and, so, needn't be a fictionalist.) The fictioneer with respect to the gods, for example, is someone who in a given range of circumstances takes up the fictive stance with respect to the gods, performing speech acts that would appear to commit her to belief in the existence of the gods but in fact do not.

We can now identify the two claims that we take to be common to any plausible version of fictionalism with respect to the Fs. The first claim is what we shall call:

No Commitment: The agent who is a fictioneer with respect to the Fs needn't (*qua* agent) take up one type of doxastic stance toward the Fs rather than another.

Philosophers typically maintain that an agent can take up any of three doxastic stances toward a proposition at a time: she can believe that it is true, she can withhold judgment about its truth, or she can believe that it is not true. No Commitment tells us that the fictioneer with regard to the Fs can

maintain any of these stances toward the Fs when she takes up the fictive stance toward them.

To illustrate, consider once again the subject of the gods. The fictioneer with regard to the gods may believe that there are no gods. That would give her excellent reason to take up the fictive stance toward the gods, especially if she believes that there are good practical reasons to be part of a community most of whose members believe in the gods. Somewhat differently, the fictioneer might simply be unsure about whether the gods exist. In this case, she might take up the fictive stance toward the gods for similar practical reasons. Finally, the fictioneer might firmly believe in the gods, but she might find it beneficial to strike the fictional stance with regard to them in some circumstances, as she might find that projecting fictions about them is helpful for teaching others about the gods. To which it is worth adding an additional point: it is, we assume, epistemically possible that either the atheist or the theist is correct about the gods. If this is right, a plausible fictionalism with regard to the Fs can remain noncommittal about whether the Fs exist. Fictionalism with respect to the Fs needn't have any particular ontological commitments with respect to them.⁴

The second claim that is central to fictionalism we term:

Back-off: In critical contexts, the fictioneer with respect to the Fs disavows (*qua* fictioneer) any commitment to there being Fs, all else being equal.

There are several types of critical context in which the fictioneer with respect to the Fs disavows any commitment to there being Fs. On this occasion, we limit our attention to only one.

The type of critical context we have in mind is one that carries a strong presumption of truth-telling, such as the court room or the philosophy seminar room. Suppose that, after having sworn to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, Fred, who is a fictioneer with respect to the gods, takes the witness stand. Fred is asked whether he believes that the gods have recently meddled in human affairs. If Fred is sincere and an atheist, he will disavow any commitment to such claims. His answer will be: 'I believe in no gods and, hence, no recent activity on their part.' Likewise, if Fred is a believer he will say something like this: 'Yes, I do believe in the gods. But when I was speaking of their recent exploits, I didn't express any such belief. I was simply telling an edifying story.' Or, somewhat differently, if Fred is an atheist and a trained philosopher, then (all else being equal) when he enters the philosophy seminar room he will shed any pretense regarding belief about the gods that he may exhibit in religiously infused contexts. Among other things, when in the seminar room, he will not spin edifying stories about divine exploits. For, if fictionalists about morality, such as Richard Joyce, are correct, the philosophy seminar room is a critical context. It is a place where

philosophical reflection and the pursuit of truth are held in high regard and pretense held in low regard (Joyce, 2001, ch. 7, section 4). Or, to put it more guardedly, it is so under suitably idealized conditions.

2. Moral fictionalism: two types

Let us now turn our attention from fictionalism broadly understood to moral fictionalism. If our discussion has been on the mark, we know that any plausible version of moral fictionalism will accept both No Commitment and Back-off. What, however, renders a position a species of moral fictionalism?

If recent philosophical discussion is any guide, it is the acceptance of one of two claims. According to hermeneutic moral fictionalists, such as Mark Eli Kalderon, sufficient for being a fictionalist about morality is accepting the claim that 'actual moral practice is best described in fictionalist terms' (Kalderon, 2005, p. 140). In our terminology, hermeneutic moral fictionalism is the view that, when engaging in ordinary moral discourse, ordinary agents are fictioneers regarding the moral domain. By contrast, according to revolutionary moral fictionalists, such as Richard Joyce, sufficient for being a moral fictionalist is accepting a thesis about the character of ordinary moral thought and discourse and a recommendation for how they should be revised. Proponents of revolutionary moral fictionalism maintain that ordinary moral thought and discourse are massively mistaken, for they purport to represent moral facts, which do not exist. However, philosophers such as Joyce also claim that the folk needn't be mired in their commitment to moral falsehoods. There is an exit strategy, which is that the folk collectively take up the fictive stance toward moral propositions. This is the revolutionary aspect of the position. The revolutionary moral fictionalist recommends a radical revision of our moral practices.

Moral fictionalism, then, is the view that either ordinary thought and moral discourse are fictive or that they should be. Kalderon offers various reasons to accept the former view, while Joyce furnishes reasons to embrace the latter position. In what follows, we shall largely pass over the reasons offered for accepting either of these positions, opting instead to engage with the views themselves. Our central contention is that neither of these views should be accepted. Hermeneutic moral fictionalism offers us an incorrect account of the character of ordinary moral discourse, while revolutionary moral fictionalism fails to offer compelling reasons to believe that it is the best response to the recognition that the moral beliefs of the folk are in massive error.

3. Against hermeneutic moral fictionalism

Hermeneutic and revolutionary moral fictionalism offer us strikingly different accounts of the nature of ordinary moral discourse. Proponents of

the former view maintain that it is fictional in character, while defenders of the latter view do not. Do we have reason to prefer one of these views to the other? We believe so. To make our case, let us begin by working with an example in which we compare the moral domain with one in which we are clearly fictioneers.

Many of us were reared by adults who were fictioneers about 'creatures of the holidays.' Among other things, these adults told us about Santa Claus and his holiday doings. As children, many of us accepted this testimony at face value, believing for some time all sorts of things about Santa and his activities. Then some of us figured out that there couldn't be such a man. We subsequently had our suspicions confirmed by peers, parents, teachers, and the like. Others of us, who didn't figure this out for ourselves, were told by adults the (often jarring) truth. The adults we knew disavowed any commitment to the existence of Santa and other creatures of the holidays, teaching us how properly to employ language that expresses fictional concepts.

Do we find any parallel to this in the moral domain? As best we can tell, no. Most of us were reared by adults who taught us that there are moral principles which are to be followed. Many of us accepted this testimony at face value. We accepted that stealing really is wrong, honesty is required, and so forth. This teaching was reinforced by an elaborate program of social conditioning in school, church, synagogue, youth camps, and the like. Perhaps some of us harbored doubts about whether there really is such a moral code or whether there is any reason to follow it. Still, in our youth, if we raised doubts about the reality of morality, our doubts were not by and large confirmed by peers, parents, priests, and teachers. Few of us had any parallel in the moral domain to the experience of being told there is no Santa. Few of us discovered that our parents or priests were fictioneers about morality; they never backed off the claim that, when they said that stealing is wrong, they were committing themselves to the wrongness of stealing.

Earlier we said that an important mark of fictional discourse is that, in critical contexts, fictioneers with respect to the Fs disavow any commitment to the Fs. We have drawn attention to a type of pedagogical context in which children are taught the proper application of paradigmatic fictional and moral concepts, noting the differences between them. If pedagogical contexts are a type of critical context (in our sense of this term), then we have identified evidence that the folk are not fictioneers about morality.

Let us now round out the case for this claim. Following Joyce, we suggested that the philosophy seminar room is a critical context (under suitably idealized conditions), where truth is held in high regard and pretense held in low regard. If hermeneutic fictionalism were true, then one would expect to hear philosophers in the seminar room disavowing the claim that their ordinary moral discourse commits them to moral truths, admitting to one another that they, with the rest of the folk, are moral fictioneers. As most readers will know, this is not what one in fact hears when one steps

into a philosophy seminar room. Rather, one hears philosophers defending all manner of metaethical views, ranging from Platonism to constructivism to expressivism. In their defenses of these views, some philosophers hazard generalizations about the character of ordinary moral discourse, maintaining that ordinary moral discourse is best viewed as being assertoric (or expressive, as the case may be). Conspicuously lacking, however, is any indication that these philosophers have 'come clean' about the fact that they, along with the rest of the folk, are engaged in pretense when they participate in ordinary moral discourse outside the seminar room.

We could go on in this vein for some time, pointing out that it is rare to find ordinary people disavowing their commitment to morality in other critical contexts, such as the courtroom or in situations in which there is a high welfare cost to being committed to moral principles. To be sure, furnishing additional cases of these types would strengthen the case against hermeneutic moral fictionalism, providing us with additional reasons to believe that hermeneutic moral fictionalism falls afoul of Back-off. Arguably, however, adducing more cases of this variety would make little headway against hermeneutic moral fictionalism. Why? Because hermeneutic moral fictionalists such as Kalderon hold that the folk *unwittingly* take up the fictive stance toward morality. In Kalderon's view, it is no surprise that the folk fail to back off any apparent commitment toward morality in critical contexts. They do not do so because they do not understand that, when they engage in moral discourse, they are taking up the fictive stance at all (2005, p. 153).

The claim that ordinary people are massively and unwittingly in error about what they are doing when they engage in actual moral discourse offends Davidsonian sensibilities: it is an uncharitable view of the folk. Kalderon is sensitive to this worry. He contends, however, that it can be addressed satisfactorily, offering several reasons to believe that it is not implausible to think that the folk are in the dark about the character of ordinary moral discourse. After all, our attitudes and actions, Kalderon points out, are often not transparent to us. We sometimes don't know what we really believe or want. Furthermore, we cannot discern the character of moral discourse simply by looking more closely at the 'content of moral vocabulary' (2005, p. 154). Accordingly, if one is not already 'in the know' about how such discourse is being used, it is impossible to discern genuinely assertoric from fictional discourse. Finally, Kalderon claims, our 'representational idioms' are ambiguous. Sometimes, Kalderon writes, 'by "representing o as F" we mean that the proposition that o is F is being put forward as true. Sometimes by "representing o as F" we mean that the proposition that o is F is expressed whether or not that proposition is being put forward as true' (2005, p. 155). The folk cannot be expected to mark the difference.

Is Kalderon's response adequate? Well, suppose we focus for the moment on the character not of moral thought but of moral discourse. And suppose we assume that, unusual cases aside, such as slips of the tongue, performing

a speech act of a given type is an intentional or deliberate action. Asserting a proposition is not something that happens to us: it is an action that we deliberately perform. Suppose, further, that expressing a fictive stance is a speech act of a given kind (or something very similar thereto) and, hence, one that is usually intentionally performed.⁵ Given these assumptions, is it plausible to believe that we are entirely in the dark about our speech act intentions when we engage in moral discourse?

We think not. We human beings, after all, are story-telling animals. Competent adults know well the difference between spinning fictions and telling the sober truth about some matter. We navigate the distinction all the time. Admittedly, here and there we may unintentionally 'fall into' taking up the fictive stance. But, highly unusual cases aside, we are capable of discerning when we have done so. If this is right, then we can concede that our representational idioms are sometimes ambiguous. And we can concede that we cannot grasp the character of moral discourse simply by examining moral vocabulary. And we can concede that we can be mistaken about our attitudes and intentions. It is, however, one thing to concede all this and another to maintain that nearly all of us all of the time are mistaken about what we are doing when we engage in moral discourse – that, for some reason, when it comes to the moral domain in particular, we are unable to draw a distinction that we naturally and easily make in other domains, namely, between believing a proposition and taking up the fictive stance toward it. In our judgment, to attribute this mistake to the folk would require an extraordinary justification. The justification, as best we can tell, is not available. Given certain assumptions about meaning, we can imagine that ordinary people do not know what some of their claims *mean*. But we do not see how the folk would fail to have any inkling about what types of speech act they intend to perform when they engage in moral discourse.

Indeed, we suspect that the following, more robust claim is true: it is impossible that the folk be systematically deceived about whether they are taking up the fictive stance toward moral facts when engaging in moral discourse. For suppose it is true that performing a speech act of a given type is typically an intentional or deliberate action: unusual cases aside, an agent performs a speech act of a given type only if he intends to perform it. Suppose, furthermore, that taking up the fictive stance with respect to the Fs is to engage in pretense, pretending to commit oneself to there being Fs. Suppose, finally, that, if moral fictionalism is true, moral discourse consists in expressing the fictive stance toward moral facts (or propositions). If these three claims are true, then it is difficult to see how it could be that, when engaging in ordinary moral discourse, agents systematically and unwittingly pretend that there are moral facts. What, after all, would it be for someone systematically and unwittingly to pretend that there are things of a certain kind?

Rather than drop the matter here, let us offer a conjecture about what may have led Kalderon to the position that we are all unwitting fictioneers with

regard to morality. In a fine chapter about expressivism, Kalderon notes that expressivist attempts to solve the Frege–Geach problem suffer from a failure to distinguish the state of believing from its object (2005, pp. 61–4). Leaving aside the details of Kalderon’s argument for the moment, it is worth noting that the term ‘fiction’ is systematically ambiguous in much the same way as that the term ‘belief’. The word ‘fiction’ can be used to talk of the act of projecting a fiction, such as when we say ‘John is engaged in an elaborate fiction,’ or the object of a propositional attitude, such as when we say that ‘What John believes is an elaborate fiction.’ In his official presentation of the view (chapter 3), Kalderon works with the first use of the term. He maintains that to be a fictioneer is not to be identified with directing one’s attitude toward a fiction but to take up the fictive stance toward a proposition. In the last chapter of his book, however, when Kalderon furnishes examples of unwitting fictioneers, such as the members of Moore’s Bloomsbury group, he employs the term ‘fiction’ in the second sense to denote not the fictive stance but the object of an attitude. ‘Moore’s *Principia*,’ according to Kalderon, ‘functioned as the master fiction’ of the Bloomsbury group (2005, p. 162).

Note, however, that, if one uses the term in this latter sense, it is natural to think that one can unwittingly be a fictioneer. According to this understanding, so long as the object of one’s attitude is a fiction, one is thereby a fictioneer. Moore, we concede, may have been a fictioneer in this sense. Non-naturalism may, after all, be a fiction in the sense that it is a rather fantastic position that is false. (This is one way to interpret J.L. Mackie’s argument from queerness: non-naturalism is just too fantastic to be true.) If it is, then this is something of which Moore may have been entirely unaware. But, even supposing that one can unwittingly project a fiction, we find it incredible to believe that a philosopher of Moore’s sophistication and his followers were unwittingly engaged in pretense when defending moral non-naturalism. Accordingly, we balk at attributing such a position to Kalderon. Hence our conjecture: what accounts for the characterization of Moore as a moral fictioneer is that Kalderon has lost sight of the difference between taking up the fictive stance toward a proposition and having a fiction as the object of one’s propositional attitudes. Similarly, we conjecture that any plausibility that attaches to the claim that the folk are unwitting fictioneers is due to the fact that we are thinking of them as fictioneers only in the sense that the object of their moral attitudes is a fiction. We concede that this may be the case. But it should not lead us to believe that, when engaged in actual moral discourse, ordinary people are moral fictioneers in the sense we described at the outset of our discussion.

4. Against revolutionary moral fictionalism

Earlier we claimed that hermeneutic and revolutionary moral fictionalism offer very different accounts of the nature of moral discourse. Hermeneutic

moral fictionalists, we said, defend the view that actual moral thought and discourse are fictional. Revolutionary moral fictionalists do not, maintaining that actual moral discourse is both straightforwardly assertoric and massively in error. Unlike other error theorists, however, revolutionary moral fictionalists do not leave it at that. They offer a proposal for responding to the discovery of this error, which is that we transform moral discourse into fictive discourse.

Let us assume, for argument’s sake, that moral discourse is in error in the way that error theorists believe. Revolutionary moral fictionalists recognize that fictionalism is not the only response to the discovery of moral error. There are other options, of which Joyce identifies three. The first is *abolitionism*, which is the view that a proper response to the discovery of error is the elimination of the use of moral concepts. The second is *propagandism*, which is the view that the elites, who are those philosophically sophisticated enough to engage in metaethics, hush up the evidence of the error so that the folk can continue engaging in moral discourse and thinking in ordinary moral terms. The third option, which goes unnamed in Joyce’s book, but we call *intransigentism*, says that the proper response to the discovery of error is to carry on with business as usual, refusing to entertain seriously any evidence that contradicts the claims made in moral discourse.

According to Joyce, none of these options is satisfactory. Abolitionism, says Joyce, is too extreme. If Joyce is correct, adopting it will result in a loss of the practical benefits of morality, such as its ability to provide a foundation for social cohesion. Propagandism, in contrast, is inherently unstable. To implement it is to run the risk that the folk will find out about the deception, resulting in a very confused group of people, unsure of what to believe, and unable to trust their normal belief-producing mechanisms’ (2001, p. 214).⁶ Intransigentism, finally, would merely be a temporary response to the discovery of error, for ‘[n]o policy that encourages the belief in falsehoods, or the promulgation of false beliefs in others, will be practically stable in the long run’ (ibid.). Fictionalism is the best option among the four because it allows moral thought and discourse still to be practiced and, hence, the folk to reap their benefits.

What are the practical benefits of continuing to engage in moral thought and practice? Joyce points to two. First, engaging in moral thought and discourse, says Joyce, bolsters self-control. Moral obligation ‘imbues certain desirable actions with a “must-be-doneness”, which raises the likelihood of their being performed’ (2001, p. 181). Likewise, moral prohibition imbues certain undesirable actions with a must-not-be-doneness, which decreases the likelihood of their being performed. Second, moral thought and discourse provide a foundation for social cohesion. Morality binds communities together and is an economical way of prescribing which actions are for the benefit or the detriment of the community. Joyce concedes that choosing fictionalism over its competitors may not result in the folk enjoying

these benefits exactly as they did before the error was discovered. Still, fictionalism, Joyce claims, stands a better chance than the other three options of preserving these benefits. Because of this, Joyce recommends implementing the revolutionary program, claiming that it is the best response to the discovery of error.

Of this we are dubious. In our judgment, there are other non-fictionalist responses to the discovery of error that are at least as promising as revolutionary fictionalism. In this regard, consider propagandism once again. Recall that, according to Joyce, propagandism is the view that the elites, who are those philosophically sophisticated enough to engage in metatheoretical discourse and thinking in ordinary moral terms. It is worth emphasizing however, that this view can be understood more expansively than Joyce describes it. Let us call a more expansive version of this position *propagandism in the broad sense*. Fundamental to propagandism in the broad sense are the following three claims.

First, the error theorist's diagnosis of ordinary moral discourse is correct. Actual moral discourse is by and large in fundamental error.

Second, while those aware of the error should be prepared to cover up evidence of it were the need to arise, the need in fact rarely arises. Why not? If propagandists in the broad sense are correct, for at least the following reasons. For one, the folk generally have neither the time nor the resources to dedicate to thinking through metaethical matters. Philosophy, for most, is a luxury. Moreover, many are unable to appreciate the reasons for believing that an error has been committed. After all, to appreciate the nature of the error and the reasons for believing that it has been committed requires not only sufficient time, effort, and training, but also a level of conceptual sophistication not possessed by most people. (It may be worth reminding ourselves of the degree of sophistication required to understand, say, Blackburn's argument from supervenience or Horgan and Timmons' Moral Twin Earth argument.) Finally, appreciating the error requires being open to seriously considering views that are opposed to deeply entrenched convictions about morality—convictions that are often grounded in religious beliefs and practices. Many of the folk do not exhibit openness of this sort. If propagandists in the broad sense are right about all this, attempting to communicate to the folk what is at stake in metaethical debates and what should be done about it is not worth the trouble. Better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Third, and finally, those aware of the error must often engage in moral deliberation with the folk. Propagandists in the broad sense maintain that the best way to do so is not to take up the fictive stance toward moral propositions in which we pretend to assert them. Rather, they recommend that the elite take up various types of non-doxastic stances toward moral propositions, employing them in ordinary speech not to pretend to assert them but to do such things as encourage, edify, or blame their interlocutors

Admittedly, to the uninitiated, the linguistic expression of these non-doxastic stances will often appear to be one or another species of assertion. But in reality they are not. To use the vernacular of speech act theory, when engaging in ordinary moral discourse, the elite present moral propositions not so as to assert them (or pretend to assert them) but to have various kinds of perlocutionary effects on their audience, such as their feeling encouraged or guilty.⁷

Is this view any less plausible than revolutionary moral fictionalism? Suppose we approach this question by doing a miniature cost-benefit analysis, comparing the virtues and vices of each view. It is clear that there is one sense in which revolutionary moral fictionalism appears to have a clear advantage over propagandism in both senses we distinguished earlier. All else being equal, having massive amounts of false beliefs is bad. (We assume, for the moment, that the value of truth is not merely instrumental. There is, we assume, something non-instrumentally worthwhile about getting into cognitive contact with reality.) Accordingly, if someone were to find himself with packs of false beliefs about what Locke called 'matters of maximal concernment,' such as morality and religion, then he should want to remedy this. To its credit, revolutionary moral fictionalism recognizes this. And it offers a strategy for remedying the problem, at least when it comes to morality. Propagandism, in contrast, does not.

Still, once the problem is recognized, one should like to have a strategy that has a decent chance of fixing it. The worry about the strategy that revolutionary moral fictionalists recommend is that it will not fix the problem. In what follows, we raise four difficulties with their view.

The first is that successfully implementing the revolutionary strategy requires convincing enough people that their moral views are massively in error. The problem is not so much the practical issue of how one would go about communicating this message to the world (late night infomercials?). Nor is it that it is unclear who would communicate the message. (According to our count, even among philosophers, there are rather few error theorists to communicate it.) It is rather that, according to revolutionary fictionalists such as Joyce, the reasons for believing that there is an error are philosophical arguments. The arguments themselves, moreover, are run-of-the-mill philosophical arguments. That is, they are extremely contentious; they do not command anything like widespread assent even among those who dedicate their lives to considering them.

Consider, for example, the most celebrated of these arguments, namely, Mackie's so-called argument from queerness. It purports to show that, if moral truths exist, then they would be very odd, unlike anything else we encounter in our ordinary lives. Suppose the argument is correct in its central contention. The fundamental problem with the argument, at least as far as the revolution goes, is that many philosophers are willing to believe strange things. More importantly, so also are the folk. The vast majority of

the folk, after all, believe in God. To inform the folk that morality is strange in roughly the way that God is strange would hardly be to offer them a (psychologically) compelling reason to believe that their moral views are in massive error. Indeed, if we appreciate the degree to which moral views are intertwined with religious ones, we can better see how much the revolution must accomplish. Arguably, it must convince the folk not merely that moral facts do not exist, but also that God does not exist. This is a tall order. It has been tried before on a national scale (Soviet Russia comes to mind) with limited success.

So, revolutionary moral fictionalism faces the formidable problem of convincing the folk of the truth of error theory. Propagandism in the broad sense does not face any similar problem. It does not even attempt to convince ordinary people of the fact that their moral views are in massive error.

A second difficulty with the strategy that revolutionary fictionalists recommend concerns moral pedagogy. Suppose we assume that the unlikely has occurred: through a process of rational persuasion and what Richard Rorty calls 'sentimental education,' error theorists have ushered in the fictionalist eschaton. In the eschaton, most of the folk have been convinced of the error of both their moral and religious views. Moreover, they have revolutionized their moral practices in such a way that they now conduct their moral discourse as fictioneers. The fictioneers, however, now face a question: how do we ensure that this way of moral thinking and talking is passed down to and endorsed by the next generation?

Let us assume that, to reap the social and personal benefits of morality, the children must be taught that stealing is really and truly wrong, honesty is really and truly the best policy, and so on. At no point in their younger years will there be anything in their moral training analogous to being told that Santa does not exist. The risks of doing so would be too high: confusion, mistrust, and disorientation might ensue, justifications could not be communicated well enough because most lack the conceptual sophistication to understand them, and some might legitimately wonder why moral thought should be taken so seriously if it is mere pretense. In effect, then, the youth will be reared in such a way that they will be given little indication of morality's true status. This has two results worth highlighting.

First, revolutionary moral fictionalism is not so different from propagandism in the narrow sense introduced earlier. In the eschaton, those 'in the know' must engage in an extensive hushing-up of the truth to the youth. We have already noted that Joyce believes that this position is unsustainable, at least when it comes to morality. But if it is, say, because it risks the result of a confused people unsure of whom to trust and what to believe, then so also is revolutionary moral fictionalism. Admittedly, the confused and disorientated will likely not be the adult fictioneers but the youth. Still, the risk of this seems severe enough that it is very difficult to see how revolutionary moral fictionalism can be recommended as a superior option

to propagandism. Both views share, if not the same problem, at least very similar ones.

Second, suppose that in the eschaton the induction into the life of being a moral fictioneer were deferred until later in life – say, until the age of maturity (Joyce, 2001, p. 229). If so, then justifications would have to be offered anew. And presumably these would be the same justifications mentioned earlier, namely, philosophical arguments of various kinds, perhaps buttressed by various manipulative techniques. But it is not a predetermined outcome that, upon engaging with them, the uninitiated would become fictioneers about morality. Consider a parallel. Imagine that most people were fictioneers about God but raised their children in a religious environment, which gave no indication that their parents, priests, and teachers did not believe that God exists. Upon being told the truth about what their parents, priests, and teachers believe about God, it would be, we think, overly optimistic to expect that the youth would become fictioneers about religion. Presumably the youth would have varied reactions to the news concerning the true views of their parents, priests, and teachers. They might continue to be theists, or become Mackie-style atheists, or embrace expressivism about religion. Similarly, when told the truth about what their parents, priests, and teachers believe about morality, we should expect similar reactions. Those made privy to the real views of their parents, priests, and teachers might continue along just as they were, embracing something like realism. Alternatively, they might become disenchanting with all the secrecy and accept abolitionism. To expect a homogeneous response would be to expect too much.

So, there is a second problem for revolutionary moral fictionalism. It is a problem that propagandism in the broad sense does not face. If propagandism of this sort were true, there would be no need to try to indoctrinate the youth in such a way that they, too, become fictioneers about morality. In a phrase, there is no problem of propagation for propagandists.

We now turn to the third problem. In various places, Joyce compares revolutionary moral fictionalism to Hume's position regarding skepticism about the external world (2001, pp. 190–94). Recall that, according to Hume, when he is in his study, he can become quite exercised about skeptical problems, finding himself deeply perplexed by the issues. But, when he steps out of his study for a game of backgammon with his friends, these skeptical worries recede. His indigenous belief-forming faculties take over and Hume finds himself unable to accept skepticism about the external world, comporting himself like an ordinary human being.

Now suppose morality were similar to skepticism of this sort. In critical contexts such as the seminar room, one finds oneself convinced by various anti-realist arguments. But, when one emerges, one finds oneself thinking and acting as if certain acts really are wrong and certain character traits really are morally admirable. One's indigenous belief-forming faculties take

over and one cannot help but accept these things. The phenomenology of moral experience forces this upon us.⁸ But if this were the case, then revolutionary moral fictionalism would have a problem. The point of the revolution, after all, is to extricate the folk from error. But if, in ordinary contexts, the folk were to find themselves accepting moral propositions, then the error would not have been averted. The folk would find themselves continually backsliding into their indigenous realist habits of mind (recall that, for revolutionary moral fictionalists such as Joyce, this is our natural disposition). Admittedly, if this were true, the error would not be on the same scale as it was before the revolution. In critical contexts at least, the folk would accept the truth. Still, the error would be considerable. It would be bad enough that the point of implementing the revolution would have been largely scuttled.

Let us be clear about what we are claiming. We have not claimed that, were the fictionalist eschaton to be realized, the folk would lapse into their realist habits. Rather, our claim is twofold. First, revolutionary moral fictionalists cannot lean too heavily on parallels with Humean critical contexts. Were the parallels close, their project would be jeopardized. Second, and more importantly, it is critical for the revolution to guarantee that when operating in ordinary contexts most agents do not lapse into the habit of actually accepting moral propositions. Rather, were revolutionary moral fictionalism to achieve its aim, ordinary moral agents would have to become like expert actors. They would have to become people who are capable of bracketing their ordinary beliefs, wholeheartedly immersing themselves into fictional roles, and yet not believe what they say when occupying them (Joyce, 2001, p. 219). We worry that this is to demand too much of the folk. To operate in this way requires not only that the folk reliably keep critical and ordinary contexts distinct, but also that they exercise remarkable discipline and imagination when in ordinary contexts, governing their belief-forming faculties in such a way that they do not produce moral beliefs. Perhaps this could be accomplished in some way. But we imagine that for many this will prove psychologically very difficult. We are not hopeful that the folk will want to put forward the effort.

A third difficulty for revolutionary moral fictionalism, then, is that it asks the folk reliably to accomplish something that is psychologically very difficult to do. Propagandism in the broad sense, by contrast, requires none of this. If it were implemented, ordinary people would be able to go on largely as they always have.

We have just pointed out that, even if the folk were persuaded to become moral fictioneers, there is no guarantee that they could reliably immerse themselves in this role. It may prove too challenging. Imagine, however, that this concern could be addressed satisfactorily. There is still another difficulty worth raising, and that is whether the institution of morality would survive if the folk were to become moral fictioneers.

When Joyce addresses the issue of why abolitionism is unacceptable, his eye is on the benefits of morality. He observes that engaging in moral practice has certain practical benefits: it promotes self-control and social cohesion. Let us now add that, for the institution of morality to have these benefits, certain *stability conditions* must be satisfied. Among other things, the practices that the institution recommends must be such that they can be reliably passed on from generation to generation, they must be such that there is a fairly high degree of conformance with them, and they must be such that the people think it makes sense to engage in them.

Suppose, however, that, instead of emphasizing the benefits of morality, we were to focus on its costs. We know that morality is hard. It can demand great sacrifices of us, sometimes suffering or death. Presumably, in the fictionalist eschaton, the folk would be aware of this. Not only would they be aware of this, but, as moral fictioneers, they would also realize that they can move back and forth between ordinary and critical contexts with relative ease. They will realize that, while one is in an uncritical context, a critical context in which one backs off the fictive stance is only a step away, as it were. This prompts a question: if most people realized all this, would the stability conditions that attach to the institution of morality be satisfied?

The last thing we want to do is issue dire predictions about the death of morality in the fictionalist eschaton. Perhaps morality would keep chugging along as it has for millennia. But we have our doubts. We do not doubt that, when the cost of commitment to morality is high, some fictioneers will hold fast. For example, we can imagine people becoming so attached to their role of being a moral fictioneer that they could not bear backing off morality when it calls for sacrifice. And we can imagine others being gripped by the fear that backing off would threaten to undermine the institution, which they greatly value. Still, in the eschaton we suspect that many others would find it difficult to see why they should sacrifice anything of importance for morality's sake. These people know full well that morality has its uses (although it is worth noting that the values appealed to by philosophers such as Joyce are general impersonal ones, such as helping to secure social cohesion). But they realize that their commitment to it is at bottom pretense; they are playing the role of being a true believer. We suspect that many will rightly wonder whether maintaining the pretense is worth it when the costs of conforming to morality are high, such as when it threatens one's own well-being or that of one's loved ones.

The standard justifications for standing fast, after all, are unavailable. Moral fictioneers do not believe that moral norms are the expressions of the will of a benevolent deity who will reward the faithful for conforming to them. And they do not believe that moral norms are somehow 'magnetic,' as Plato believed of the Form of the Good. Nor do they believe that these norms have rational authority in Kant's sense or hook into our deepest cares in broadly Aristotelian fashion. If any of these views were true, there would

be a robust story to tell about why morality should command our allegiance, even when the cost of conforming to it is high. But none of these stories is available to the moral fictioneer. Or, more exactly, they are available, but only as mere stories, fictions alongside many others that have pragmatic uses. Revolutionary moral fictionalists maintain that moral practice will go on in much the same way as it did prior to the revolution. The worry we wish to raise is that we do not have sufficient reason to expect that it will. Fictionalism may have the paradoxical consequence that accepting it will undermine the very purpose for which it was introduced, namely, sustaining the institution of morality.

So, there is a fourth difficulty that revolutionary moral fictionalism must face, which is whether it can sustain allegiance to morality in such a way that the institution is stable. Propagandism in the broad sense, by contrast, has no similar difficulty. The folk have at their disposal all the standard justifications for believing that conforming to morality, even when the costs are high, is well worth it. On the assumption that the folk generally would be unmoved by the types of considerations that move some philosophers to become moral anti-realists, then the folk can appeal to these justifications when the price of conforming to morality is high.

When assessing his own case for revolutionary fictionalism, Joyce is modest, writing:

I do not pretend to have firmly established the case that taking the fictive stance towards morality will definitely bring pragmatic gains. It is an empirical matter, and I have only put forward some considerations in favor of the hypothesis, not a mature theory... [M]y argument doesn't depend upon the fictive stance providing an *enormous* practical gain; if the returns are reliably just slightly higher than those of its competitors, then the case for moral fictionalism is made. (2001, p. 228; cf. pp. 230–31)

In a similar spirit, we acknowledge that the cost–benefit analysis we've provided would have to be expanded considerably to establish decisively that fictionalism is not a better option than its competitors. Still, we submit that we have furnished enough evidence to induce doubt that the returns of fictionalism are at all higher than some of its competitors. These doubts, we submit, leave us with no more reason to accept revolutionary moral fictionalism than other alternatives such as propagandism in the broad sense identified earlier.

5. Conclusion

We began our discussion by raising the following question: should naturalists be moral fictionalists? There is no denying that in some respects fictionalism should be attractive to naturalists. In its most plausible forms,

fictionalism promises to sidestep thorny ontological issues. In principle, naturalists who are fictionalists could simply remain non-committal about whether there are moral facts – why not wait until science gives us reason to jump one way or the other? – while recommending a view about moral discourse according to which the folk needn't commit any mistake of the sort error theorists countenance. Moreover, the view may avoid the standard pitfalls of expressivist views, such as making sense of moral argumentation. According to fictionalism, the object of moral judgments is, or should be, moral propositions.⁹ Still, identifying a plausible version of moral fictionalism has proved elusive. Fictionalism does not capture the character of ordinary moral discourse. And it is not apparent that we could revise moral discourse in the way some fictionalists recommend. We conclude that our leading question should be answered in the negative. There are better options for naturalists to embrace than moral fictionalism.

Among these options, we believe, is the view we have called propagandism in the broad sense. In our engagement with revolutionary moral fictionalism, we presented the rudiments of this rival position, suggesting that it should be attractive to naturalists of an anti-realist bent. As we presented it, propagandism in the broad sense accepts the error theorist's diagnosis of ordinary morality: large portions of ordinary moral discourse are in massive error. But it rejects the revolutionary moral fictionalist's remedy: the response to this error is not to transform moral discourse. Rather, it is to more or less leave things as they are. Of course, moral anti-realists must often engage with the folk in moral deliberation. Propagandists in the broad sense suggest that the best way to do so is to take up various types of non-doxastic stances toward the moral propositions that the folk assert. As we say, we think there is much to like about this view. But an elaboration of it will have to wait for another day.¹⁰

Notes

1. For those familiar with Mark Eli Kalderon's and Richard Joyce's work on moral fictionalism, the first claim is inspired by Kalderon's *Moral Fictionalism* (2005), while the second is inspired by Joyce's *The Myth of Morality* (2001).
2. Or toward the existential propositions with respect to the Fs, depending on whether one thinks of such an attitude along *de re*/predicative or *de dicto* lines. We shall slide between both ways of characterizing the fictive stance. Clearly, fictionalism must be understood in such a way that taking up the fictive stance toward the Fs does not imply that the Fs exist. There are several ways to secure this result, among which is to stipulate that the expression 'the Fs' designates a role of a certain kind that may or may not be occupied. Oddie (2005, pp. 12–13) offers a helpful discussion of this approach.
3. Kalderon (2005, pp. 119–29) canvasses several ways in which pretense of this sort can be understood.
4. Two points bear mention: first, some might wonder whether it is possible to take up the fictive stance toward a proposition that one believes is true. To see that

this is indeed possible, it is helpful to recognize, first, that a fiction needn't be a false proposition and, second, there is nothing about the concept 'the fictive stance' which implies that its object be a proposition that the fictioneer believes is false. Think of historical fiction in this regard. Presumably, when projecting a work of historical fiction, authors such as James Michener take up the fictive stance toward a wide range of propositions that they believe are true. Still, in projecting such a world, they do not *present* them as true. Second, some fictionalist positions commit themselves to the claim that fictional discourse about the Fs such as 'The Fs are P' should be glossed as 'In the fiction, the Fs are Ps.' Claims such as this, it is said, are true just in case in the fiction the Fs are P. And, on the assumption that some such claims are true, fictionalism implies that there are some fictional truths. We do not attribute this position to moral fictionalists, as neither of its main defenders, Kalderon or Joyce, explicitly embraces it. (In fact, Joyce rejects it.) For a discussion, see Kalderon (2005), p. 121 and Joyce (2001), p. 200.

5. Alston (2000) defends the view that, in the paradigmatic case, speech acts are intentional, while Wolterstorff (1980) defends the position that projecting a fiction is an illocutionary act.
6. Here Joyce quotes from Richard Garner.
7. Those familiar with the literature on fictionalism know that there are two main schools of thought regarding the character of fictive discourse. Some, such as John Searle (1979), maintain that it consists in pretending to assert propositions. Others, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff (1980), believe that it consists in taking up other non-doxastic attitudes toward them with the purpose of having some perlocutionary effect on an audience. Propagandism in the broad sense, in effect, appropriates this latter view without maintaining that it best captures the character of fictive discourse.
8. Horgan and Timmons (2007), though not themselves moral realists, maintain that moral phenomenology has many of the features that realists claim it does.
9. Although see Joyce (2001), p. 200 for a contrary view.
10. We wish to thank Dan Hookey, Don Loeb, Rik Peels, and René van Woudenberg, as well as an audience at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam for their comments.

5 Expressivism, Inferentialism and the Theory of Meaning

Matthew Christman

1. Introduction

One's account of the meaning of ethical sentences should fit – roughly, as part to whole – with one's account of the meaning of sentences in general. When we ask, though, where one widely discussed account of the meaning of ethical sentences fits with more general accounts of meaning, the answer is frustratingly unclear. The account I have in mind is the sort of metaethical expressivism inspired by Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare, and defended and worked out in more detail recently by Blackburn, Gibbard, and others. So, my first aim (Section 1) in this paper is to pose this question about expressivism's commitments in the theory of meaning and to characterize the answer I think is most natural, given the place expressivist accounts attempt to occupy within metaethics. This involves appeal to an idealist account of meaning. Unfortunately for the expressivist, however, this answer generates a problem; it's my second aim (Section 2) to articulate this problem. Then, my third aim (Section 3) is to argue that this problem doesn't extend to the sort of account of the meaning of ethical claims that I favor, which is like expressivism in rejecting a representationalist order of semantic explanation but unlike expressivism in basing an alternative order of semantic explanation on inferential role rather than expressive function.

2. Expressivism and the theory of meaning

Metaethics is often taught as beginning – in a way that has any clear distinction from normative ethics – with Moore's (1903, chapter 1) discussion of the 'naturalistic fallacy' and presentation of the 'open-question argument' against the reduction of moral terms like 'good' to non-moral terms like 'what's desired.' To be sure, almost no contemporary metaethicist thinks that the 'naturalistic fallacy' really is a fallacy or that the 'open-question argument' shows everything that Moore thought that it showed. However, it is widely assumed that one's metaethical view must take a stand on