

## Mental Fictionalism<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Suppose you are somewhat persuaded by the arguments for Eliminative Materialism, but are put off by the view itself. For instance, you might be sympathetic to one or more of the following considerations: (1) that folk psychology is a bad theory and will be soon replaced by cognitive science or neuroscience, (2) that folk psychology will never be vindicated by cognitive science, (3) that folk psychology makes ontological commitments to weird or spooky things that no proper science will admit the existence of, (4) that folk psychology seems to lead to a sort of epiphenomenalism (which is yet *another* thing that's weird and spooky), and (5) that folk psychology seems to lead to the conclusion that mental content is either determined by things outside the head or is completely *indeterminate*, neither of which is appealing.<sup>2</sup> Yet in spite of your sympathy for any one of (1)-(5), you may nonetheless cringe at the consequence of them—that is, you may be unwilling to accept the Eliminative Materialist's radical claim that (i) there are no beliefs, desires, etc., and (ii)—even more radically—we should stop all talk to that quantifies to the contrary.

Such a dilemma is typical in metaphysics, especially for those guided by a healthy Quinean methodology for ontological commitment. One popular solution to such a dilemma has been to turn to Fictionalism. The fictionalist strategy suggests: take the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is largely inspired by Daniel Nolan's work on Fictionalism, and Bill Lycan's array of arguments against Eliminative Materialism. In particular, see Nolan (2002), (2004) and Lycan (forthcoming). A special thanks to Bill Lycan for personal comments on several drafts.

<sup>2</sup> These reasons (1)-(5) in support of Eliminative Materialism are borrowed from Lycan's "A Particularly Compelling Refutation of Eliminative Materialism" at <http://www.unc.edu/~ujanel/ElimWeb.htm>.

ontologically suspicious entity, E. Take all sentences, S, which seemingly ontologically commit one to Es. Reinterpret<sup>3</sup> these sentences as sentences that are *not* ontologically committing.<sup>4</sup> Provide a brief explanation as to why these sentences, S, are useful—and so should still be uttered—but are nonetheless false, if taken merely at face-value.

Fictionalism of various sorts has been proposed, endorsed, and discussed;<sup>5</sup> it has its fair share of fans and foes.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite fictionalism's recent surge in popularity, there is a noticeable gap in the literature. There is no discussion of *Mental Fictionalism*—the idea that we are (or should be) fictionalists about mental entities. This is surprising on its face, since philosophers of mind have battled long and hard about how best to save folk psychology and our ordinary belief-desire talk in light of the overwhelming success and advances of neuroscience. As suggested above, the considerations for Eliminative Materialism *are* fairly persuasive. Yet if the cost of accepting these arguments means

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<sup>3</sup> I am intentionally leaving “reinterpret” underspecified. One may either be a *hermeneutic* or a *revolutionary* fictionalist. If one is a hermeneutic fictionalist, then one thinks that our language in a particular discourse is already fictionalist; it is a descriptive thesis about language. If one is a revolutionary fictionalist, then one thinks that our language in a particular discourse *should* be fictionalist; it is a prescriptive thesis about the language. Both of these will be discussed in more detail below. See Burgess and Rosen (1997) and Stanley (2001) for more on the distinction.

<sup>4</sup> This can be done in a couple of ways. One way would be to introduce a hidden fictional operator. Lewis suggests this in Lewis (1978). It is the model I will be more or less following below, minus the semantic interpretation of “in the fiction *f*” in terms of concrete possible worlds. For more discussion on the details of this strategy, and a brief discussion of alternatives, see below section 3, page 12.

<sup>5</sup> See Lewis (1978), Van Frassen (1980), Field (1980), Rosen (1990), Noonan (1994), Crimmins (1998), Divers (1999), Melia(2000), Stanley (2001), Yablo (2001), Brock (2002) , Dorr and Rosen (2002), Joyce (2005), Nolan, Restall, and West (2005), et. al. for just some of the proposals, endorsements, and discussions of various fictionalist views.

<sup>6</sup> See Rosen (1990), Brock (1993), Rosen (1994), Divers (1995), Hale (1995), Nolan (1997), MacBride (1999), Stanley (2001), Divers and Hagen (2002), Rosen (2005), et. al. for critical discussions of various fictionalist views.

forfeiting our ordinary, folk psychological vocabulary, then we might think twice about the legitimacy of the Eliminative Materialist's arguments.<sup>7</sup>

My job in this paper is to put Mental Fictionalism on the map, albeit tentatively. I *do* think that Mental Fictionalism has some advantages over other fictionalist views in the literature. I also think that it has some advantages over other theories of the mind—most notably, Eliminative Materialism. However, I also think that there are worries which plague Mental Fictionalism that do not plague other fictionalist accounts, and which do not plague other theories of the mind. These worries may provide some explanation as to why Mental Fictionalism has not yet been taken seriously in the literature. In the latter sections in this paper, I will suggest some ways the Mental Fictionalist might overcome these worries, hopefully paving the way for further development of Mental Fictionalism as a legitimate position in the philosophy of mind.

## 2. Fictionalism

Take your average metaphysician, Moe, who wrestles with following dilemma: Moe frequently engages in discourse, D, where he finds himself saying such things as (1)-(12):

- (1) There are fire trucks.
- (2) There are photons.
- (3) Tables exist, and they are made up of parts.
- (4) It is possible I could be riding a pink scooter right now.
- (5)  $2+2 = 4$ .
- (6) Kicking puppies unnecessarily is wrong.
- (7) Pegasus doesn't exist.
- (8) The average metaphysician worries about ontological commitment.
- (9) The sun will set at 7:52.
- (10) The cat is out of the bag.
- (11) Superman wears blue tights.
- (12) Wolverine is so much cooler than Superman could ever be.

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<sup>7</sup> I allude here to Lycan's Moorean argument, which will be discussed in more detail below, section 4.5.

We can assume that Moe utters (1)-(12) in all seriousness, and that he only utters what he takes to be true. Yet Moe is also a die-hard Quinean about ontological commitment; he believes that he is ontologically committed to those entities which his best theory says there are.<sup>8</sup> In addition, he believes that his everyday engagement in discourse D should reflect his ultimate theoretical commitments; he would like as little mismatch between his fundamental metaphysical beliefs and his ordinary talk as possible.

If Moe is a cautious metaphysician, easily spooked by the ontologically mysterious, we should already see his dilemma. For (1)-(12) not only seemingly commit Moe to fire trucks and photons (which may not be so metaphysically controversial), but also to composite objects, possibilia, mathematical objects, moral properties, fictional characters, the property of negative existence, the average F, setting suns, metaphors, and modal properties of fictional characters across fictions. It may not be clear where exactly Moe is having a problem—e.g., whether he cringes at the idea of composite objects, of moral properties, of non-existent objects, etc.—but if Moe is representative of the average metaphysician, Quinean at heart, then we can bet that he has a problem uttering at least one or more of (1)-(12), especially if he is in the throes of a philosophical discussion.

As explained in the introduction, a recent, trendy move to make in light of such a dilemma is to become a Fictionalist. The fictionalist strategy suggests: take the ontologically suspicious entity, E. Take all sentences, S, which seemingly ontologically commit one to Es. Reinterpret these sentences as sentences that are *not* ontologically

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<sup>8</sup> W. V. O. Quine (1960) and (1980).

committing. Provide a brief explanation as to why these sentences, S, are useful—and so should still be uttered—but are nonetheless false, if taken at face-value.

So, for example, if Moe, like Hartry Field, thinks that our best, overall theory of the world can do without mathematical objects or numbers, then he might be a Mathematical Fictionalist.<sup>9</sup> He may interpret all of our mathematical talk as couched in fictional-relative clauses so that a sentence such as (5)

$$(5) 2+2 = 4$$

gets glossed as (5<sub>f</sub>)

$$(5_f) \text{ In the mathematical fiction, } 2+2 = 4.$$

(5<sub>f</sub>) does not entail that there is a number, 2, or that there is a number such that when added to itself, yields another number, 4. It does not entail that there are numbers at all, nor functions, nor any other mathematical object. This is because a sentence that is prefixed with an operator such as “In the fiction *f*” is only making claims about what is or is not true *according to some fiction or other*. Since what is true in a fiction need not be true, *simpliciter*, being a fictionalist about mathematics will allow one to talk the mathematical talk without thereby committing oneself to ontologically suspicious entities such as numbers or sets or functions and the like.

And so on for other fictionalist views. Moe might think, like Bas Van Fraassen, that our best, overall theory of the world can do without unobservable entities, yet that talk of such entities is theoretically useful. If so, then he might be a fictionalist about unobservable entities.<sup>10</sup> Or he might think, like Gideon Rosen suggests, that our best, overall theory of the world can do without possible worlds, even though our modal

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<sup>9</sup> Field (1980).

<sup>10</sup> Van Fraassen (1980).

knowledge relies indispensably on talking about them.<sup>11</sup> And so on. All of the sentences (1)-(12) express a seeming commitment to some entity or other that some philosopher has found ontologically abhorrent, and, as a result, has resorted to some sort of fictionalism to save the day.

The pattern should now be obvious; the basic move for every fictionalist account is a diagnosis by analogy. The fictionalist suggests: “Look at sentences such as (8) through (12). These are representative of the kinds of sentences that most of us utter every day. All of us find ourselves talking about the average person, the average car, the average American, etc. We talk about sunsets and sunrises and often act as if we are in the midst of a geocentric universe. We use metaphors and idioms and illustrative, poetic language. We talk about comic book characters, literary characters, and people and things in movies and plays. We talk about what these characters do and what they are like and what they wear and who they are bested by on relevant grounds of comparison. When engaged in such talk, we somehow take our utterances to be true, but we don’t take our utterances as ontologically committing. We don’t get confused, for example, when someone says, “Barb has got Bob on a tight leash”; we don’t think that there really is a leash, which Barb has attached to Bob, and that it’s tight. So there is *some* way [insert details of your favorite account of fictional truth here] that we make statements such as (8)-(12) true but not literal (or true but not ontologically committing; or acceptable but not true but pragmatically appropriate and also not ontologically committing, etc). Whatever way *that* is, that’s the way we should treat seemingly ontologically committing sentences such as (4), (5), and (6). In other words, whatever is going on in sentences such as (8)-(10) to

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<sup>11</sup> Rosen (1990). Rosen doesn’t exactly endorse Modal Fictionalism in his (1990) paper, but he certainly succeeds in making it a view worthy of serious philosophical consideration.

make them appropriate to utter is *just like* what's going on with sentences such as (4)-(6). And *that* is how we can all keep our ordinary, everyday talk, yet still be good, rigorous Quineans."

Or so claims the fictionalist.

But let us return to Moe, our typical metaphysician. In addition to sentences such as (1)-(12), Moe also utters sentences such as (13)-(15):

(13) Joe believes there is beer in the fridge.

(14) Jen desires some nachos.

(15) Deb feels on the brink of a meltdown.

As before, we can assume that Moe utters (13)-(15) in all seriousness, and that he only utters what he takes to be true. We can also assume that he still upholds his Quinean standards for ontological commitment, and that he is interested in getting his ordinary, everyday utterances to reflect his fundamental metaphysical beliefs as much as possible. However, let us also assume that Moe has been persuaded by many of the considerations for Eliminative Materialism. Repeating the reasons laid out in the introduction, Moe may be persuaded by one or more of the following claims: (1) that folk psychology is a bad theory and will be soon replaced by cognitive science or neuroscience, (2) that folk psychology will never be vindicated by cognitive science, (3) that folk psychology makes ontological commitments to weird or spooky things that no proper science will admit the existence of, (4) that folk psychology seems to lead to a sort of epiphenomenalism (which is yet *another* thing that's weird and spooky), and (5) that folk psychology seems to lead to the conclusion that mental content is either determined by things outside the head or is

completely *indeterminate*, neither of which is appealing. Yet the Eliminative Materialist radically claims that because of (1)-(5), we should eschew Folk Psychology all together, giving up our ordinary, everyday talk of beliefs and desires and other mental phenomenon *entirely*.

Clearly, Moe is in a dilemma: he would like to keep Folk Psychology (FP)—whether because FP is extremely useful, or because FP is too well-entrenched in our world view to give up, or because *it just cannot be* that there is such massive, widespread error about what’s going on in our heads (especially given the relative success of FP), etc.—but he also thinks the Eliminative Materialist has got unflappable grounds for her position. So what is Moe to do?

### 3. Mental Fictionalism

One way to solve Moe’s dilemma is to turn to *Mental Fictionalism*—the idea that we are (or should be) fictionalists about the mental. Mental Fictionalism will mimic the other fictionalist views already populating philosophical space. So statements such as (13), (14), and (15)

(13) Joe believes that there is beer in the fridge.

(14) Jen desires some nachos.

(15) Deb feels on the brink of a meltdown.

Would be recast as (13<sub>f</sub>), (14<sub>f</sub>), and (15<sub>f</sub>):

(13<sub>f</sub>) In the fiction *f*, Joe believes that there is beer in the fridge.

(14<sub>f</sub>) In the fiction *f*, Jen desires some nachos.

(15<sub>f</sub>) In the fiction *f*, Deb feels on the brink of a meltdown.

Like (5<sub>f</sub>), (13<sub>f</sub>) is true just in case according to the fiction *f*, Joe believes there is beer in the fridge. The difference, of course, is that in (13<sub>f</sub>) “in the fiction *f*” will pick out, not the mathematical fiction, but *folk psychology*. We take folk psychology as a fictional story about how things are in our heads, and we treat it as we would any other fiction. So all of our discourse about mental activity—beliefs, desires, first person qualitative feels, etc.—will *appear* as if we are making claims about the world. Instead, however, we have a nice way of couching all such talk within the scope of fictional operators such that no unsavory ontological claims are entailed by our ordinary talk about the mental.

One might initially worry about whether Folk Psychology can indeed be taken as a fiction *tout court*. After all, someone might argue, Folk Psychology is a product of the folk, and the folk are notoriously in wild disagreement about what exactly is going on—especially when the folk are holding an opinion about what is going on *inside our heads*.<sup>12</sup> And it is not as if any theory the folk produce will be as cohesive and determinate as, say, a mathematical fiction. We can all easily agree on simple mathematical claims such as “ $2+2 = 4$ ” and “there are infinitely many prime numbers greater than 11,” and we can rely on the experts to fill in the more difficult details of the mathematical story. To take another, less contentious example,<sup>13</sup> genuine fictions like the Sherlock Holmes novels have an uncontroversial resource for deciding whether certain claims are true or false in the fiction—we can open up the book and *look*. That there are certain facts about the fiction that are in print—e.g., that Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street, that he had a sidekick named Watson, etc.—decisively establishes that there

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<sup>12</sup> I think someone talks about this somewhere—check!

<sup>13</sup> I.e., you may not be convinced that mathematics *could* be a cohesive and determinate fiction.

is a particular, determinate fiction that we are all talking about when we use the prefix “In the Sherlock Holmes fiction.” So how is Folk Psychology like the Sherlock Holmes fiction, or the mathematical fiction? What could possibly qualify as the Folk Psychological canon—the uncontroversial, hardback equivalent to Conan Doyle’s novels?

Actually, taking folk psychology as a cohesive, determinate fiction will be less controversial than one might initially think, especially if we are cautious to keep track of the dialectic. For both the Eliminative Materialist and the intentional realist who accepts folk psychology at least agree that folk psychology is a *theory*—the difference is just that the former believe that folk psychology is a bad, dispensable theory, while the latter think it is a good, *indispensable* one. So there need not be an actual book in print delineating all of the nitty-gritty details of Folk Psychology. Since both parties involved in the debate over the ontological status of the mental *agree* that Folk Psychology is a unified theory<sup>14</sup>—never minding whether it is a good one or not—it is an easy step from there to take it as a fiction; after all, a theory is just a proposed story about how things are. In this case, we take the proposed theory of how things are as a proposed theory of how things are *in a particular fiction*. Also, having such strict standards for what counts as a fiction—i.e., claiming that a legitimate fiction must be one bound or in print—results in way too narrow of a classification for fictions. Such an account would leave out oral fictions and myths, fictions generated by pantomime, visual fictions, fictions created in the imagination without any external expression, and the like. So the Mental Fictionalist should have no trouble acquiring a cohesive fiction, since we need not have a fiction written down in order for it to qualify as a legitimate fiction, and nearly all participants in

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<sup>14</sup> See in particular Churchland (1981), Stich (1978), and Horgan and Woodward (1985).

the debate over the mental already agree that Folk Psychology is a unified theory, which is surely sufficient for treating Folk Psychology as a fiction.

Once we lay out the basic strategy for Mental Fictionalism, there are many options for how the details of such a view would go. For example, following Stanley (2001), we may either endorse a hermeneutic mental fictionalism or a revolutionary mental fictionalism. A hermeneutic mental fictionalist claims that our discourse about the mental is *already* fictional. Folk Psychology, in other words, just *is* a fiction, much like the world of Sherlock Holmes, and so statements about it—like statements about the world of Sherlock Holmes—are *already* ontologically innocuous. This is a descriptive view about our everyday use of Folk Psychology. Contrast this with a revolutionary mental fictionalist, who claims that our Folk Psychological discourse is not fictional, but *should* be. This is a prescriptive claim about how we should use a particular language.

One could also, following Yablo (2001), distinguish between the following sorts of mental fictionalist views:

**Instrumentalism:** the speaker is not “really” asserting anything about mental content, only pretending to do so.

**Meta-fictionalism:** the speaker is “really” asserting that according to Folk Psychology, the *Xs* are so and so.

**Object-fictionalism:** the speaker is “really” asserting that the world is in a certain condition, namely, the condition it needs to be in to make it true in Folk Psychology that the *Xs* are so and so.

**Figuralism:** the speaker is “really” asserting that *something* is in a certain condition, but perhaps not the world; the *Xs* are functioning as representational aids in a figurative description of the *Ys*, where the *Ys* may themselves be representational aids invoked to help us describe still further objects.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Yablo (2001), pp. 74-85. Summary of the distinctions slightly modified from Eklund (2007).

One could also choose between many different interpretations of the prefix “In the fiction *f*.” For example, Lewis (1978) suggests that the semantics of “In the fiction *f*” are ultimately cashed out in terms of concrete possible worlds. Since Lewis’ concrete modal realism is seen by many as ontologically extravagant, and since many of those who are sympathetic to fictionalism in the first place are motivated by general ontological thriftiness, I suspect most fictionalists will not want to opt for an analysis of the fictional operator in terms of possible worlds. One way around this would be to cash out the semantics of the fictional operator in terms of syntactic or logical consequence.<sup>16</sup> Another way would be to lean heavily on the attitudes we take towards certain sentences, making the distinction between *acceptance* and *belief*, where acceptance falls short of belief. Van Frassen suggests this in Van Frassen (1980). Notice that this approach will be (seemingly) problematic for Mental Fictionalism in particular, since propositional attitudes are precisely the entities the Mental Fictionalist wants to fictionalist about. (I will discuss this potential problem below.) Yet another way would be to endorse a kind of semantics/pragmatics distinction, and claim that fictional contexts are ones where certain assumptions are pragmatically presupposed. See Hinkfuss (1993) for more on this sort of account. Finally, another way might be rely on the distinction between talking *loosely* and talking *strictly*. Donald Baxter does this in Baxter (1988), where he is (arguably) endorsing a sort of fictionalism about the identity between parts and wholes. And no doubt there are other ways besides.

I do not wish to settle on any particular Mental Fictionalist account here; the details of a successful Mental Fictionalism account will have to wait until after we have discussed whether Mental Fictionalism *in general* is a viable philosophical position. I

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Field (1980).

simply wanted to outline some of the options for the Mental Fictionalist, even if none of these details are decided upon at this point in time.

#### 4. The Many Riches of Mental Fictionalism

In this section, I canvass some of the advantages of Mental Fictionalism, both as a view of the mental and also as a fictionalist account in its own right. The first four parts of this section, 4.1-4.5, illustrate the advantages Mental Fictionalism has over Eliminative Materialism. The final part of this section, 4.5, discusses how Mental Fictionalism has advantages over other Fictionalist accounts. In the next section, I will address potential problems for Mental Fictionalism.

##### *4.1 Having Your Cake and Eating It, Too.*

One obvious advantage of Mental Fictionalism is simply that one can be an Eliminative Materialist at heart, yet still keep belief-desire talk around. For since this view proposes a paraphrase for all of our claims about beliefs and desires—a paraphrase that allows these statements to be *true*—we get to keep all of our folk psychological talk, and there is no need to try and get rid of it, or think that it will, or should, ever go away. Sure, we have amended folk psychological talk *a little* by claiming that there are hidden fictional operators at play, but this is a minor adjustment. This, of course, is the general advantage of any fictionalist account in metaphysics—fictionalism allows one to talk the talk without making any onerous ontological commitments.

## 4.2 No Cognitive Suicide

Another advantage of Mental Fictionalism is that it avoids a common objection against Eliminative Materialism: that EMists are in danger of committing “cognitive suicide.” Such arguments against Eliminative Materialists go something as follows<sup>17</sup>: “In order for Eliminative Materialists to even be able to argue against their opponent, or to argue for their position, they must *use* belief-desire talk, for communication and assertion *require* propositional attitudes. But their conclusion is that all belief-desire talk is *false*—i.e., that propositional attitudes do not exist! So if they were right, there would be a cognitive collapse; they would be committing cognitive suicide!”

Because Mental Fictionalism allows us to keep belief-desire talk around (albeit *amended* belief-desire talk), it avoids such cognitive suicide arguments. For whenever it will be insisted that communication and assertion require propositional attitudes, the Mental Fictionalist need not have any problem agreeing. It is just that the Mental Fictionalist has recast all of the propositional attitude talk as fictional talk, thus saving herself from literally quantifying over such things as beliefs and desires, but still retaining the ability to talk *as if* there were such things around. So, unlike the Eliminative Materialist, the Mental Fictionalist does not have to worry about committing cognitive suicide.

I should note, however, that I am not convinced that the Cognitive Suicide argument is particularly effective against the Eliminative Materialist, since it seems to me

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<sup>17</sup> See Boghossian (1990) and (1991) and Baker (1987).

to be a misinterpretation of the eliminativist position. It is true that the Eliminative Materialist will make ontological claims such as “There are no beliefs or desires,” and may proceed to give arguments supporting this conclusion. But the act of endorsing a statement such as “there are no beliefs” or the act of providing reasons in support of this conclusion does not entail that the Eliminative Materialist is subjecting herself to a cognitive collapse. For the Eliminative Materialist does not think that absolutely nothing is going on when, *according to Folk Psychology*, we are saying something, advancing beliefs, proposing arguments etc. There *is* cognitive activity when these things are (seemingly) going on. It’s just that our ordinary, everyday belief-desire talk is wildly disparate from the cognitive activity that *is* going on—so much so, that “belief” and “desire” fail to pick out any activity or process that’s actually in the world. But that doesn’t mean that there isn’t *any* cognitive activity occurring. And this cognitive activity can account for what’s going on when the Eliminative Materialist claims that there are no beliefs.

In fact, looking a bit ahead, there is going to be an analogous “cognitive suicide” worry for the Mental Fictionalist, which I think is similarly misguided. To see how one might think there is a problem, simply reflect on the fact that so many fictionalists rely on mental activity—such as pretense or make-believe or our *attitudes* towards fictions, etc.—to motivate their particular brand of fictionalism. Obviously, this will be problematic for Mental Fictionalism since it is mental activity—including pretense, make-believe, attitudes towards fictions, etc—that is the very thing the Mental Fictionalist wants to be a fictionalist about.

However, I think that the Mental Fictionalist's response will echo the Eliminative Materialist's response (or pre-emptive dodge) here, so I think that this sort of self-refuting worry will ultimately be unsuccessful against the Mental Fictionalist.

Yet given that there are many who think that the "cognitive suicide" objection is devastating for Eliminative Materialism, then let us leave this section as follows: if you think that Eliminative Materialism is self-refuting, then one advantage of Mental Fictionalism over Eliminative Materialism is that Mental Fictionalism is not subject to this particular worry. If you think that Mental Fictionalism may avoid this particular self-refuting worry, but that another kind of self-refutation (of the sort I mentioned above) awaits, then I suggest you hold tight. I will discuss this particular sort of worry in the last part of section 5.

#### *4.3 Keeping Belief-Desire Talk in Explanation*

I turn now to a third advantage of Mental Fictionalism over Eliminative Materialism. Because the Mental Fictionalist gets to keep belief-desire talk, she can maintain (unlike the Eliminative Materialist) that belief-desire talk is indispensable for explanation and prediction. For anytime belief-desire talk is used in explanation and prediction, the Mental Fictionalist will recast this talk like all belief-desire talk, i.e., as fictional talk. So, for example, (16)

- (16) Joe's belief that there is beer in the fridge explains why he just ran to the fridge.

might get recast as (17)

- (17) In the fiction *f*, Joe's belief that there is beer in the fridge explains why he just ran to the fridge.

And since all it takes for (17) to be true is that *according to the folk-psychology fiction*, Joe's belief that there is beer in the fridge explains why he just ran to the fridge, we can easily show how we get to keep all of the 'indispensable' belief-desire talk.<sup>18</sup>

Now, admittedly, things are going to get a bit tricky here. This is because one might not want to accept that explanations such as (17) are causal, whereas the original (16) does seem to be causal. However, I see no reason why (17) can't be a causal explanation. For consider (18) and (19):

- (18) Superman got his cape stuck in the phone booth, and that explains why Jason was laughing.
- (19) According to the fiction, Superman got his cape stuck in the phone Booth, and that explains why Jason was laughing.

If (19) is the appropriate gloss on (18), this shows how we can have a causal explanation via the fiction, for it is easy enough to imagine that it was the fact that something funny happened in the fiction that caused Jason to laugh.

More needs to be said here, of course, and we might wonder whether the Mental Fictionalist's gloss on causal and explanatory claims will ultimately be satisfactory. However, the Mental Fictionalist certainly has an advantage over the Eliminative Materialist here (since the Mental Fictionalist at least gets to keep such talk around), so MF is doing better on this score at least.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For a similar response to (two) different kinds of fictionalism, see Balaguer (1996) and (1998). Balaguer argues that fictionalists can admit the indispensability of certain theories yet "simply account for this in fictionalist terms." Balaguer (1998), p. 811. He is discussing Mathematical and Semantic Fictionalism in these papers.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Bill Lycan for discussion on this section.

#### 4.5 Avoids Lycan's Moorean Objection

Yet another advantage of Mental Fictionalism is that it avoids Lycan's Moorean objection to Eliminative Materialism.<sup>20</sup> Lycan (forthcoming) proposes that, like Moore, we modus-tollens any arguments for Eliminative Materialism. He claims,

“Numerous common-sense mental ascriptions, such as that Granny wants a beer and believes there is one under the sofa, are individually more plausible, and always will be more plausible, than are the purely philosophical premises of any argument designed to convince us to the contrary. As Moore saw, purely philosophical assumptions have very weak epistemic credentials and cannot by themselves outweigh simple common-sense facts... In order to reach the staggering conclusion that there has never been a belief, a desire, or any other propositional attitude, any argument for Eliminativism will have to rest on one or more a priori principles connecting scientific truths to negative ontology. And it is terminally unlikely that any such principle could be more credible for me than that Granny wants beer.”

Irrespective of whether this sort of objection is ultimately successful against the Eliminative Materialist or not, notice that such an attack is immediately avoided by Mental Fictionalist. For the EM's conclusions “No one has ever believed anything” or “Granny has never wanted a beer” are false when properly amended by the Mental Fictionalist: according to the folk- psychology fiction, lots of people have believed lots of things, and Granny *has* wanted a beer!

Now perhaps it might be argued that according to the Mental Fictionalist, it is true that no one has ever believed anything *strictly speaking*—i.e., *absent* the fictional operator, the Mental Fictionalist must admit that no one has believed anything. And it is *this* conclusion that Lycan would probably attack in his Moorean way. However, one of the advantages of Mental Fictionalism as I'm proposing it would be that, because our slip into fictional talk is often subtle, our ability to detect when we are talking fictionally and when we are not is not so obvious. So, for example, Lycan's claim that he is more certain

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<sup>20</sup> Lycan (forthcoming).

that the EM's conclusion is false than he is certain that any of the premises are true might be called into question. For the Mental Fictionalist could argue as follows: "your certainty that the EM's conclusion is false is fueled by the slip between the EM conclusion *without* the hidden fictional operator and the conclusion *with* the hidden fictional operator. Since the conclusion *with* the hidden operator—viz., "in the fiction *f*, no one has ever believed anything"—is clearly false, this accounts for why you are so certain that the EM's conclusion must be false." The burden of proof would then be on Lycan to show that he is *not* making a slip between the conclusion without the operator and the conclusion with it.

#### *4.6 General Fictionalist Worries—Arbitrariness, Consistency, and Incompleteness*

As discussed in the introduction, there are many other fictionalist accounts. However, with many of these, come several general problems such as arbitrariness worries, contingency worries, and incompleteness worries. I think that Mental Fictionalism rivals other fictionalist accounts when it comes to these worries, since I think Mental Fictionalism can avoid them all together.

For example, one of the problems facing *Modal* Fictionalism involves the fact that there are several adequate candidates to serve as our possible worlds fiction. Should we take Rosen's advice and use Lewis's *On the Plurality of Worlds*? Or should we use an Ersatz model? Or something else entirely? That there are several equally adequate, yet incompatible, candidates to stand in as our possible worlds fiction, seems to make our choice between them somewhat arbitrary, thus making the view less plausible. And similarly for *Moral* Fictionalism. There are many moral theories out there; which one are

we (or should we be) appealing to when we make moral claims? Should we adopt the Utilitarian story? Or the Kantian one? Or something else entirely? The more equally adequate, yet incompatible, candidates we have for the relevant moral fiction, the less plausible fictionalism in these areas appears.<sup>21</sup>

However, notice that Mental Fictionalism can easily avoid this sort of problem. For, as explained above, Eliminativists and intentional realists alike agree that there is a folk psychological theory—it just happens that one of them thinks this theory is true while the other thinks that it is false. Yet so long as they are in agreement that there *is* such a unified theory—whether true or false—the mental fictionalist can simply (non-arbitrarily!) settle on this one theory as her fiction.

Related to the above arbitrariness worries are concerns involving the seeming contingent nature of fictions. Fictions are man-made creations that, intuitively, need not have been created. However, consider Modal Fictionalism for a moment. It claims that something of the following sort holds: Possibly  $p$  iff according to the possible worlds fiction, there is a possible world where  $p$ . Yet if the possible worlds fiction that we are using to analyze this bi-conditional is a *contingent* fiction (as so many, if not *all*, fictions are), then it seems that the following is true: if no one had ever been around to tell the possible worlds story, then nothing would have been possible.<sup>22</sup> This result seems to cut sharply against our modal intuitions.

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that these “arbitrariness” worries are not necessarily devastating for either Modal or Moral Fictionalism. But they are worrisome enough. That Mental Fictionalism is without such challenges is certainly a bonus for the view.

<sup>22</sup> See Nolan (2002) for elaboration on this problem.

A similar problem arises for Mathematical Fictionalism. Mathematical Fictionalism holds something like the following bi-conditional:  $x$  is 6ft tall iff according to the mathematical fiction,  $x$  has a height of 6 ft. Yet if the mathematical fiction employed is a contingent, man-made fiction, then the following counterfactual seems to hold: (i) If there had been no one around to tell the mathematical story, then nothing would be 6ft tall. (i) is somewhat counterintuitive, since even if one is an eliminativist about mathematical entities, one need not be (as the fictionalist in this case shows) an eliminativist about predications of height or measurements. And you need not think that just because stories or fictions are contingent, that predications of height and measurements are.<sup>23</sup>

So if fictions are man-made, contingent creations,<sup>24</sup> then any fictionalist view that relies on them will have to make sure that the consequences of such a reliance aren't problematic. However, in the case of Modal and Mathematical Fictionalism, where the relevant fictions result in modal truths or mathematical predicates, respectively, we might legitimately worry that such reliance on contingent fictions *are* problematic.

But notice that Mental Fictionalism avoids this sort of worry. For the Mental Fictionalist, it won't matter that Folk Psychology is contingent—i.e., it won't matter that it is a theory that was artificially created by contingent beings who might not have existed, and who might not have created Folk Psychology even if they *had* existed. This

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<sup>23</sup> This contingency worry might seem less problematic for the Mathematical Fictionalist than it does for the Modal Fictionalist. For instance, you might think that the counterfactual *if there had been no one around to tell the mathematical story, then nothing would be 6ft tall* is less counterintuitive than *if no one had ever been around to tell the possible worlds story, then nothing would have been possible*. Fair enough. It doesn't really matter for my point here, so long as one of them seems problematic.

<sup>24</sup> Notice that this objection could be avoided if one is a Platonist about fictions. That is, one could insist that the Sherlock Holmes stories exist somewhere in Platonic heaven, independent of Conan Doyle's existence, or his initiative to write such adventures down on paper. Of course, since most people are driven to fictionalist accounts because of their heightened susceptibility to the ontological heebie-jeebies, I doubt that many would be fond of this sort of maneuver. See Nolan (1997a) and (2002) for more discussion of this problem [nb: he calls it "the problem from artificiality"].

is because nothing (intuitively) necessary hangs on the fiction. *Modal Fictionalism*, recall, claims that modal truths hang on what is said in the possible worlds fiction.<sup>25</sup> But modal truths are (intuitively) necessary—indeed, this is one of the primary reasons why Lewis’s Modal Realism is modeled on an S5 modal logic. But, contrary to this intuition, if Modal Fictionalism is true, then our claims rely on something that isn’t necessary, and as a result, such claims themselves are not necessary. Mental Fictionalism, however, doesn’t make a claim parallel to the Modal Fictionalist’s in this respect, and so contingency worries are not a problem for the Mental Fictionalist.

Finally, a typical problem for other fictionalist views involves the fact that fictions are often incomplete. For example, Conan Doyle does not tell us what kind of soap Sherlock Holmes uses to wash himself, nor how many ounces of opium he smokes per week. That fictions are typically silent on certain matters or incomplete in this way generates a problem for some fictionalist views—in particular, Modal Fictionalism and Mathematical Fictionalism. In Modal Fictionalism, for example, if the possible worlds fiction is incomplete, then there will be some modal truths that are unaccounted for. However, there is no parallel problem for the Mental Fictionalist, since it won’t matter to her that the Folk Psychological fiction is incomplete.

In fact, it is probably a bonus for the view that folk psychology is silent on some matters. You presumably don’t have a belief—even according to Folk Psychology—about how many hairs I have on my head or whether I like to dip pickles in spicy mustard. (Well, you probably have a belief about these things *now*, but you didn’t prior to me making these topics relevant.) The point is that there are numerous things that we

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<sup>25</sup> This isn’t true of all Modal Fictionalist accounts, but it is true of some. See Rosen (1990) and Nolan (1997) for more on the distinction between “strong” and “timid” Modal Fictionalism.

have no opinion about, and numerous things we have neither a desire for nor a repulsion against. That Folk Psychology may be silent about such matters, then, seems to make Mental Fictionalism more plausible than other fictionalist views such as Modal or Mathematical Fictionalism.

##### 5. Potential Problems for Mental Fictionalism

If Fictionalism is all the rage, and if such a view might be welcome in an area of philosophy such as philosophy of mind, where many have anguished over the ontological status of the mental, then why haven't there been any serious endorsers of Mental Fictionalism to date? Is it because Fictionalism (in general) is simply not taken seriously as a philosophical strategy? Is it because Fictionalism—like Contextualism—is too over-exposed? Is the philosophical landscape too saturated with Fictionalist views as is?

No doubt fictionalism *is* over-popular; I suspect that there are many readers (if they have stuck with me so far) who have been groaning at the proposal of yet *another* fictionalist view. But this distaste cannot be the only reason Mental Fictionalism has yet to secure a foothold in the philosophical literature; philosophers need more than simple dislike of a view to deem it unworthy of consideration.<sup>26</sup>

Rather, I suspect that there are several legitimate worries that have been anticipated for Mental Fictionalism, truncating at the start any chance for the view's success. I will discuss some of these below, with suggestions about how a Mental Fictionalist may respond. The first two of these objections are ones launched against Fictionalism in general. I will offer only cursory responses to these worries, since I do not believe they

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<sup>26</sup> After all, Radical Skepticism, Idealism, Dialetheism, Modal Realism, etc. are *all* taken seriously as philosophical positions, even if they lack many (if any) fans.

are very substantial worries to begin with, and they certainly don't seem to pose a particular problem for Mental Fictionalism.

However, there are at least three other worries that are a bit more substantial and which may provide some reason as to why Mental Fictionalism has been absent to date. I will discuss each of these one by one below. One of these three—the last one that I will discuss—may be the most (seemingly) formidable problem for Mental Fictionalism and is analogous to the Cognitive Suicide objection launched against the Eliminative Materialist, which I alluded to briefly above. I will spend a considerable amount of time discussing this objection in the last part of this section.

### 5.1 *It's Unmotivated!*

One worry Mental Fictionalism might face is the claim that the introduction of hidden fictional operators is unmotivated or ad hoc, or lacks any phenomenological support. In the case of genuine fictions, for example, there seems to be *prima facie* motivation for introducing fictional operators—namely, we have obvious conflicting intuitions about the truth-value of sentences like (11).

(11) Superman wears blue tights.

In the case of belief-desire psychology, however, there aren't any such intuitions. Ask the average man on the street if he thinks he is engaged in pretense or make-believe when he claims

(13) Joe believe there is beer in the fridge.

He may claim that Joe is wrong, or that Joe's belief is false because there—sadly!—isn't any beer in the fridge. But he would not claim to be actively engaged in some kind of pretense when he offers such a belief-desire report.

In response, the Mental Fictionalist can say a couple of things. First, she might appeal to the many other fictionalist accounts—e.g., Modal Fictionalism, Moral Fictionalism, Mathematical Fictionalism, etc.—and show how none of them are *prima facie* phenomenologically motivated either. All of these face the above worry, which has been called the Phenomenological Objection.<sup>27</sup> So even if this *were* a problem, the Mental Fictionalist could deny that it is a problem for her alone—indeed, it is a problem for fictionalism in general. Moreover, to the extent that someone found any of the other fictionalist accounts convincing, then so much the better for Mental Fictionalism, and so much the worse for our *prima facie* intuitions.

Also, recall that while sentences such as (11) or (12) may have the phenomenological “stink” of fictional talk, other sentences such as (8)-(10) are much more subtle. So since there are already plenty of uncontroversial statements such as (8)-(10) that nearly everyone would like to be fictionalist (or fictionalist-like) about, and which do not admit of an obvious fictional “feel,” the lack of a fictional feel of sentences such as (13)-(15) should be suggestive of nothing.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, however, the Mental Fictionalist could simply deny that our intuitions about sentences such as (11) really are all that obvious. After all, it probably took some time (and perhaps even a philosophy course) to realize that a sentence such as (11) is any

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<sup>27</sup> See Eklund (2007).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Crimmins (1998) and the distinction between “shallow speaking as-if” and “imaginative play.”

different from a sentence such as “Mikal Barishnikov wears blue tights.” In fact, it wasn’t until after we realized that Superman was just a fictional character and not a real guy, that we started having second thoughts about the truth-value of (11). Likewise with belief and desire talk. If we are truly convinced by some of the considerations for Eliminative Materialism (as was assumed at the start), then we will just be coming to “realize” that beliefs and desires (as the realist thinks) simply do not exist. And if we *have* come to this conclusion, then we really will have the same sorts of conflicting intuitions concerning sentences such as “Granny wants a beer” as we do with sentences such as (11).

### 5.2 *The Phlogiston Worry*

If we can save belief-desire psychology by appealing to a hidden fictional operator, what’s to stop us from doing the same in the case of phlogiston? For example, why not say that all phlogiston-talk also has hidden operators such that we get sentences like: in the *phlogiston* fiction, *p*. And if so, then it seems we have rampant fictionalism about all sorts of archaic theoretical entities—which seems not only unnecessary and excessive, but implausible, semantically speaking. It is pretty unlikely that there are really *that* many cases of hidden fictional talk!

I don’t quite see why this consideration would be too troublesome for the Mental Fictionalist. I suggest that she simply bite the bullet here and admit that, yes, phlogiston-talk does—or, rather, *did*—include hidden fictional talk. The important difference, however, between phlogiston-talk and belief-desire talk is that we no longer have any use for phlogiston-talk, so we there’s no need to worry about it.

Fictionalists are drawn to their position by at least two things: eliminativist leanings and acknowledgement that discourse quantifying over the entities they are leaning-eliminativists about is *useful*. To the extent that such talk stops being useful, that's the extent to which a fictionalist stops being a fictionalist and starts being an eliminativist. It is relevant, then, that phlogiston-talk has ceased to be useful, for it means that we no longer need to cushion such talk with fictional operators. But if it *were* useful, I see no problem with a fictionalist treating such talk like any other fiction; it should be no different than our talk about Superman, the Tooth Fairy, the Greatest Conceivable Being, etc.

### 5.3 *This is Just Dennett's Instrumentalism!*

A more substantial objection than the previous two—and one that is particular to Mental Fictionalism—is the charge that Mental Fictionalism is nothing more than Dennett's Instrumentalism.<sup>29</sup> To the extent that one can accurately pin down Dennett's view,<sup>30</sup> it seems to go something like this: for any entity whatsoever, if its behavior can accurately and reliably be predicted by taking the intentional stance towards it, and if the predictive power gained by taking such a stance is an advantage over alternative stances (e.g., a physical or design stance)<sup>31</sup>, then it *is* an intentional system—i.e., it is a system that we can correctly attribute beliefs and desires to. To put it another way, if attributing

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<sup>29</sup> Dennett (1978) and (1987).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Stich's criticisms of the slipperiness of Dennett's position in his "Dennett on Intentional Systems," in *Mind and Cognition: An Anthology*, Second Edition, Ed. William Lycan (1999).

<sup>31</sup> This caveat is added to avoid "lectern" objections. See Dennett (1987) p. 23.

beliefs and desires to a system helps in predicting its behavior, then it is appropriate to claim that such a system *has* beliefs and desires.

First, it should be noted that there is a precedence in the literature for distinguishing Instrumentalism (in general) from Fictionalism (in general).<sup>32</sup> This distinction is grounded in part on the fact that instrumentalists typically claim that the statements that they are instrumentalist about *lack* a truth-value. Notice that this is not the case with Fictionalists. Indeed, as explained in previous sections, one of the primary motivations for Fictionalism (in general) is to *keep* our ordinary talk rather than eliminate it. And, of course, we want to keep our talk because we think it is (for the most part) true (or, at least, we want to refrain from attributing massive, widespread error). Dennett, in contrast, is not so clear about whether he wants our ordinary belief-desire ascriptions to admit of a definitive, unambiguous truth-value. After all, whether a system can legitimately be ascribed beliefs and desires depends on someone *else* taking an intentional stance towards it. So in this one respect, at least, Mental Fictionalism differs importantly from Dennett's Instrumentalism.

More specifically, however, is the fact that the Mental Fictionalism I have outlined here is making a semantic, as well as an ontological, claim. Mental Fictionalism is the proposal that (i) strictly speaking, there are no beliefs and desires, and (ii) talk that (seemingly) commits us to the contrary is really just fictional talk. Notice that (ii) is a positive, semantic claim that distinguishes it importantly from Dennett's Instrumentalism.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Nolan (2002), for example.

<sup>33</sup> Notice, too, that even if one is a different sort of mental fictionalist—for example, one who didn't introduce fictional operators, but relied on conversational presuppositions to introduce the fictional context

Another difference to consider is that for Dennett, so long as taking an intentional stance towards a system results in predictive power with respect to that system, it is legitimate to claim that that system *has* beliefs and desires. However, this leads to somewhat counterintuitive results, such as admitting that thermostats, plants and even flashes of lightning have mental states.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, since Mental Fictionalism relies on Folk Psychology as its fiction, and Folk Psychology does not attribute beliefs and desires to things like thermostats, plants, or flashes of lightning, then the Mental Fictionalist will not be able to say—even within the scope of the fictional operator—that such things *have* beliefs and desires. The most a Mental Fictionalist may be willing to admit is that we sometimes anthropomorphize certain objects—such as thermostats, plants, and lightning—just for fun, or as a playful joke, or for whatever reasons motivate us to speak metaphorically. But, the Mental Fictionalist might insist, this talk is importantly different from normal belief-desire attribution, since in the former, such talk is obviously false, and in the latter it is true (since it is accompanied by the ever handy-dandy *in the fiction f* operator).

Finally, one of Dennett’s requirements for taking an intentional stance towards a certain system is that we must assume that the system is ideally rational. That is, in order to figure out whether a certain system has beliefs and desires, we should see what it *ought* to believe or desire, under the assumption that it is ideally rational, and only then do we predict its behavior. Admittedly, it is not uncontroversial whether this “ideally rational”

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(see, e.g., section 3 p.12)—it will *still* differ from Dennett’s Instrumentalism, since it is appealing to fictional contexts to justify (seemingly) false assertions, and Dennett does not depend on such a move.

<sup>34</sup> See Dennett (1987) pp. 21-31.

requirement ultimately proves problematic for Dennett's account,<sup>35</sup> but the point to be made here is that Mental Fictionalism does not even have to consider such worries. Since Mental Fictionalism simply piggy-backs on all that Folk Psychology has to say about mental states, and Folk Psychology certainly does not assume that intentional agents are ideally rational, Mental Fictionalism does not have to worry about it. This delineates yet another difference between Mental Fictionalism and Dennett's Instrumentalism.

#### *5.4 This Fictionalism is not Novel!*

Another objection particular to Mental Fictionalism is the charge that this view is no different than being a fictionalist about propositional attitudes or attitude reports, which has already been proposed and discussed in, e.g., Crimmins (1998) or Balaguer (1998).

Crimmins (1998) suggests that we adopt a pretense account for propositional attitudes that seemingly use "modes of presentation." His account is motivated by a puzzle about identity statements—in particular, Frege puzzles, involving sentences such as "Hesperus is Phosphorus." According to Crimmins, whenever we seemingly distinguish between several different modes of presentation of a single thing, we talk *as if* the one object is many. His view might be dubbed "Mode of Presentation Fictionalism."

Balaguer (1998), in contrast, proposes what he dubs "semantic fictionalism."<sup>36</sup> This is a fictionalism about propositions, in particular, and is committed to the claims that: "(a) platonists are right that 'that'-clauses purport to refer to propositions, but (b)

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<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Stich in his "Dennett on Intentional Systems," and Dennett "Real Patterns" in *Mind and Cognition: An Anthology*, Second Edition, Ed. William Lycan (1999).

<sup>36</sup> Balaguer does not endorse Semantic Fictionalism; he merely thinks that it is an alternative to Platonism in light of Frege-Bealer-Schiffer arguments for Platonism. See Balaguer (1998), p. 810.

there are no such things as propositions, and (c) ‘that’-clause-containing sentences...are not true—they are useful fictions.”<sup>37</sup> To motivate this view, Balaguer draws an analogy between mathematical fictionalism and semantic fictionalism, and then canvasses some arguments against the existence of abstract entities in general. One line of reasoning Balaguer gives runs roughly as follows: since propositions are purportedly abstract, they are causally inert. Yet propositional attitudes are supposedly the attitude relation—such as belief—between an individual and a proposition. If propositions are causally inert, then they can’t have any affect on anything physical, and so, cannot have any affect on an individual or an individual’s belief state. So, it seems that abstract entities such as propositions are unnecessary, making the nominalistic world-view more likely. Moreover, we can account for the illusory reference to abstracta such as propositions by a fictional account. Thus, semantic fictionalism is coherent and plausible.

While it may be obvious to some already, let me nonetheless lay it out explicitly: there are at least three ways in which the Mental Fictionalist account presented here differs from Crimmins’ (1998) proposal, and at least two ways in which it differs from Balaguer’s (1998) account. Let me run through these differences briefly.

First, Crimmins’ account is specifically a fictionalism about propositional attitudes that seemingly involve “modes of presentations.” Crimmins claims that “our talk about what people say and think *often* involves semantic pretense.”<sup>38</sup> So, on Crimmins’ view, not *all* of what people say and think is going to be talk as-if, or fictional talk. In contrast, the view presented here claims that what people say and think *always* involves fictional talk; *all* propositional attitudes are merely products of the Folk Psychological

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<sup>37</sup> Balaguer (1998), p. 805.

<sup>38</sup> Crimmins (1998), p. 9.

fiction, and so all of them are talk as-if (even the ones not presented in multiple modes of presentation). Put more succinctly: Crimmins' account is specifically a fictionalism about mode of presentation reports; Mental Fictionalism is specifically a fictionalism about mental entities and Folk Psychology. Second, Crimmins is motivated by Fregean puzzles of identity statements. Mental Fictionalism is motivated by a more general worry—the overwhelming success of neuroscience and the highly credible arguments for Eliminative Materialism. Finally, Crimmins makes heavy use of pretense and games of make-believe. Notice that I have tried to downplay this aspect of Mental Fictionalism as much as possible. The exact reasons for my doing so will be laid out below, in section 5.5, but is enough for our purposes here to notice that very little emphasis has been made on *pretending* or *make-believe* on this account.

Mental Fictionalism differs from Balaguer's Semantic Fictionalism in at least two ways. First, Balaguer's account is specifically a fictionalism about propositions and abstracta; Mental Fictionalism is a fictionalism about mental entities and Folk Psychology. Traditionally, the mental entities of Folk Psychology are not abstract—they may be spooky and weird because they are ghost-like, dualist-y sorts of things—but they are *not* abstract. More importantly, they are not non-causal, which is the one particularly unsavory feature of abstracta that Balaguer targets. This leads us to the second distinction between Balaguer's semantic fictionalism and Mental Fictionalism—Balaguer's view is motivated by an abhorrence of abstracta; Mental Fictionalism is (again) motivated by the overwhelming success of neuroscience and the highly credible arguments for Eliminative Materialism.

So, looking carefully at the details of the views, and the particular worries motivating them, we can easily distinguish Mental Fictionalism from related, but different fictionalist views such as Mode of Presentation Fictionalism and Semantic Fictionalism.

### *5.5 Pretense or Make-Believe in Fictions*

I turn now to the problem that I think many may have anticipated for Mental Fictionalism, and the one that seems, on its face, to be the most devastating problem for the view.

On almost all contemporary fictionalist accounts, most noticeably beginning with Walton (1985) and (1990), much is made out of the act of pretending or games of make-believe to generate support for fictionalism as a philosophical position. Walton (2000), for example, talks about a game where children pretend that the bikes in a garage are horses in a corral. A fiction's content is often generated by real world facts; the number of bikes in the garage, for example, may dictate how many horses we are imagining are in the corral. After drawing our attention to imaginative games, it is then proposed that we often engage in a similar kind of pretense all of the time—e.g., we use metaphors and idioms, we talk about the average man and sunsets, etc. Then, depending on which fictionalism that is being endorsed, arguments are made to show how we might be engaged in games of make-believe or pretense in particular kind of discourse—such as mathematics, possible worlds, morality, etc. While the details of just how this is done vary from account to account, the one common thread throughout all other fictionalist accounts is the endorsement of a distinction between fictional talk and non-fictional talk

that *relies on mental attitudes*. We either engage in *imaginative* pretense or play games of make-believe or *imagine* that things are thus-and-so or *believe as if* things are a certain way, etc. Fictional accounts seem to rely crucially on our mental attitudes, and in particular *beliefs*. Yet this is the very thing that the Mental Fictionalist is proposing we are fictionalists about.

Analogous to the Cognitive Suicide worry launched against the Eliminative Materialist, then, an objection against Mental Fictionalism would run as follows: “the Mental Fictionalist will be committing a cognitive collapse when she claims that all belief-desire talk, and all of Folk Psychology, is a fiction. For in order for there to be a distinction between fictions and non-fictions, or fictional-talk and non-fictional talk, we must be able to make sense of the act of pretending or make-believe. But these acts *presuppose* that Folk Psychology is *not* a fiction—i.e., they presuppose that there actually *are* beliefs and desires. Yet the Mental Fictionalist only thinks that was act *as if* there are. In other words, strictly speaking, the Mental Fictionalist thinks that all belief-desire talk is *false*—i.e., that propositional attitudes do not exist!—we only pretend that there are when we are engaged in the Folk Psychological fiction. Yet it is unclear what *engagement in the Folk Psychological fiction* could possibly mean, since this is usually understood—at the very least—as realism about propositional attitudes.”

As I mentioned in a previous section, I think that this objection—like the cognitive suicide argument launched against the Eliminative Materialist—is a misguided one. To see this, first consider how the Eliminative Materialist might answer the following (admittedly lame) modus tollens argument against her view: “If Eliminative Materialism is true, then it follows directly from the view that there are no beliefs and

desires, Folk Psychology is false, and we are all subject to massive, widespread error. As if this consequence isn't bad enough, there also can be no genuine distinction between when we legitimately take something to be true and when we are simply pretending. There can be no play acting or imaginative make-believe, and there will be nothing to separate these performances from behaving in earnest; there is no difference between telling a tall tale and telling it straight; there is no difference between fiction and non-fiction. For all of *these* distinctions presuppose that there are indeed propositional attitudes, and that what makes the difference between pretense and sincerity is the attitude we take towards a certain proposition, situation, or idea. That a philosophical view would boldly claim that there are no beliefs and desires is bad enough; that it would follow from this that there is no difference between someone imagining that she is Superman (complete with X-ray vision) and reflecting on how much she loves dipping pickles in spicy mustard is ludicrous. So, since Eliminative Materialism cannot even make sense of the difference between make-believe and real belief—a distinction that any philosophical view should uphold—Eliminative Materialism is false.”

The Eliminative Materialist's response to this sort of objection will repeat her response to the original cognitive suicide objection: namely, she will explain that the Eliminative Materialist does not think that absolutely nothing is going on when, *according to Folk Psychology*, we are saying something, advancing beliefs, proposing arguments etc. There *is* cognitive activity when these things are (seemingly) going on. It's just that our ordinary, everyday belief-desire talk is wildly disparate from the cognitive activity that *is* going on—so much so, that “belief” and “desire” fail to pick out any activity or process that's actually in the world. But that doesn't mean that there isn't

*any* cognitive activity occurring. And this cognitive activity can account for what's going on when the Eliminative Materialist claims that there are no beliefs. Similarly, when it comes to distinguishing between pretence or make-believe and sincere avowals, the Eliminative Materialist does not think that absolutely nothing is going on when, *according to Folk Psychology*, we are pretending, make-believing, sincerely avowing, etc. There *is* cognitive activity when these things are (seemingly) going on. It's just that our ordinary, everyday pretense-sincere avowal talk is wildly disparate from the cognitive activity that *is* going on—so much so, that terms such as “pretense”, “make-believe” and “sincere avowal” fail to pick out any activity or process that's actually in the world. But that doesn't mean that there isn't *any* cognitive activity occurring. And this cognitive activity can account for what's going on when us non-Eliminative Materialists differentiate between make-believe and sincere belief.

Similarly, the Mental Fictionalist will make use of the cognitive activity that is (strictly speaking) going on whenever an intentional realist claims that we are engaged in mental activity. For it is not that the Mental Fictionalist thinks that absolutely *nothing* is happening in the world when someone claims to be pretending she is Superman or that she is drinking tea with her imaginary friend. There *is* cognitive activity when these things are seemingly going on. It is just that our ordinary, everyday pretense-sincere avowal talk is wildly disparate from the cognitive activity that *is* going on—so much so, that terms such as “pretense”, “make-believe” and “sincere avowal” fail to pick out any activity or process that's actually in the world. However, the advantage of Mental Fictionalism is that it allows one to still *talk as if* these terms do pick out something, even though this “talk as if” will ultimately (and strictly speaking) get cashed out in terms of

some sort of complicated cognitive activity that is unsuitable as a legitimate element of Folk Psychology. In this way, then, the Mental Fictionalism, like the Eliminative Materialist, can evade cognitive collapse worries

## 6. Concluding Thoughts

My aim here has mostly been to put the outlines of a view on the map to help those initially sympathetic to the arguments for Eliminative Materialism, but unwilling to accept the radical claims of EM. I hope that I have shown that Mental Fictionalism has some advantages over Eliminative Materialism, as well as some advantages as a fictionalist view in its own right. I also hope that I have successfully circumvented just some of the worries one might have for such a view. It still remains to be seen—and remains a further project—to see whether Mental Fictionalism will beat out other alternative views about mental entities, and also whether such a view will ultimately withstand further and deeper scrutiny on its own.

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