



The prospects for fictionalist inquiry in psychology



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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a critical appraisal of the prospects for fictionalist inquiry in psychology, which runs contrary to the traditional dissociation between fiction and knowledge-laden discourse. Following a review of the contested boundary between fiction and nonfiction, a portrait of essential aspects of fiction emerges, which includes *authorial warrant*, *imaginative prescription*, and *performative engagement*. The paper then proceeds to outline *fictionalism* as a philosophical approach, with reference to early and more modern variants of the position. This leads to a little discussed epistemic position called the *fictional stance*, which is then developed and applied to various psychological domains including the psychology of fiction, the fictional constructions of psychology, and the narrative study of lives. The viewpoint that emerges sees the epistemic value of fictional thinking in the unique access it provides to intuitive powers of the psychological imagination and to non-conceptual understandings of psychological life.

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1. Introduction

“Hi, I’m Jerry Seinfeld. I’m fiction.”

“I know.”

“How did you know?”

“Because I’m nonfiction.” (Seinfeld, 1993, p. 1)

The frequent intermingling of fiction with nonfiction is a pervasive feature of contemporary culture. The fictional character named Jerry Seinfeld from the well known syndicated television series, for example, was portrayed by a real life comedian of the same name who shares many, though not all, of the fictional Jerry’s characteristics. This kind of mixing and merging of the fictional and the nonfictional in the public space of popular media is now so common as to be taken thoroughly for granted. Yet, epistemically, fiction and nonfiction are kept quite separate, with knowledge claims attaching almost exclusively to the latter. Notice that, in the opening quote, it is the nonfictional rather than the fictional Jerry who was said to “know.” Against the background of this sort of

epistemic privileging of the nonfictional, common to both academic and popular discourse, the idea of fiction as an epistemic¹ mode might seem peculiar, if not unintelligible. Given that fiction characteristically concerns itself with imaginary worlds, any attempt to engage with fiction is likely to strike the critical reader as a kind of escape from reality rather than as a serious attempt at knowledge.

Psychological interest in the epistemic potential of fiction is nonetheless clearly evident in the work of some contemporary psychologists who have recently turned to fiction writing as an avocation (Winerman, 2014). This work has occasioned some surprising and unexpected insights. Irvin Yalom’s acclaimed historical novel, *When Nietzsche Wept*, for example, was based on an imagined scenario in which the German philosopher received psychological treatment at the hands of Viennese physician Joseph Breuer. Just over a decade following the initial publication of the novel, historical documentation came to light detailing arrangements that had actually been made for Nietzsche’s treatment by Breuer that, given the circumstances, were never carried through. In an afterward to a new edition of the novel, Yalom (2003) remarked: “In other words, the very fictional event which I had imagined and used as the foundation to my novel came close to having been history” (p. 303). Yalom (2000) elsewhere reflected on other psychological benefits of fiction writing beyond historical insight, including opportunities for working through personal issues, for contemplating “what if” scenarios, and for increased psychological understanding more generally. Shira Nayman, one of the psychological fiction writers interviewed by Winerman (2014), noted:

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¹ The term *epistemic* is most commonly taken as simply “pertaining to knowledge,” in contrast with *epistemological*, which pertains to “theory of knowledge” (Angeles, 1981). The aim of this paper, then, is to develop an understanding of the psychological knowledge potentials of fiction, not to articulate a philosophical framework for a fictionalist theory of knowledge.

“Being a writer and a psychologist comes from the same place — I’m interested in the human experience” (p. 71).

This confluence of the fictional and the psychological is, however, nothing new. Historically, interest in fiction as a means of psychological inquiry goes back to the pioneering psychodynamic theorizing of Freud, Jung and Adler. Freud and Jung, in particular, regularly mined works of mythological fiction for psychological meaning, with Freud focusing on the Oedipal myth as told by Sophocles and Jung on mythological tales of transformation and rebirth (Smythe, 2014a). Yet, the notion of *fiction*, itself, is rarely subjected to critical scrutiny. Jung’s only reference to the notion in his *Collected Works*, for example, is brief and noncommittal: “Call it a fiction if you like,” he wrote, but fantasy and imagination are far more effective agents of psychological healing than physical or chemical treatments. He went on to critique the theories of Freud and Adler for neglecting this aspect of the psychological in favor of a one-sided and exclusive focus on instincts (Jung, 1932/1969, par. 494). Nonetheless, it was Adler who developed the notion of fiction explicitly as a psychological concept (Smythe, 2005). In particular, Adler’s notion of *fictional finalism* pointed to the role of *guiding fictions* and *fictional goals* in the explanation of human functioning, such that: “Everything grows ‘as if’ it were striving to overcome all imperfections and achieve perfection” (Adler, 1932/1965, p. 86).

Although fictional thinking has never been part of the psychological mainstream, contemporary and historical interest in the fiction reading and writing make a compelling case that fiction can be a valuable source of psychological knowledge and insight. How fiction works epistemically, however, remains an open question (Jones, 2010; Smythe, 2005). In this paper, I attempt to address this question by undertaking a reexamination of the notion of *fiction*, itself, with an eye toward its epistemic possibilities. I begin by examining the nature of fiction and the contested boundary between fiction and nonfiction. Next, I review *fictionalism* as a philosophical position in both its earlier and more modern variants. This discussion leads to an epistemic position called the *fictional stance*, which I develop and apply to the various intersections of psychology and fiction that have appeared in the literature. The viewpoint that emerges sees fictional thinking as a unique mode of access to intuitive, non-conceptual understandings of psychological life.

2. The nature of fiction

2.1. Fact, fiction and nonfiction

To begin, some clarity is needed on the notion of fiction, which is subject to frequent and pervasive misunderstandings. The term “fiction” comes from the Latin *factio*, which refers to acts of making, fashioning, or molding; thus, fiction could be understood as something made from the imagination (Smythe, 2014a). The popular dichotomy between fact and fiction is untenable, however, as works of fiction cannot be distinguished from works of nonfiction solely based on how much factual content they happen to contain. Fictional works (e.g., historical novels) may often contain a great deal of factual information; and putatively nonfictional works (e.g. Clifford Irving’s fraudulent “autobiography” of Howard Hughes) do not become a works of fiction when their factual content is disputed. The distinction between fiction and nonfiction that has become broadly consensual in the philosophical literature is cast, not in terms of factual content but, rather, with respect to different standards for the production, appreciation and evaluation of works, as outlined below.

2.2. Aspects of fiction

The discussion in this section draws substantially from the work of Currie (1990) and Walton (1990), whose theories of fiction have gained wide currency among philosophers. These works are especially noteworthy in offering conceptualizations of fiction beyond the purely literary reference points of traditional theories. At least three characteristic aspects of fiction emerge from this work, although there is by no means full agreement on all of them; these aspects include: *authorial warrant*, *imaginative prescription*, and *performative engagement*.

2.2.1. Authorial warrant

Whereas nonfictional works are subject to evaluation in terms of standards of evidence and argument that go beyond the works themselves, works of fiction warrant their own assertions, so to speak (Ryan, 1997; Walton, 1990). As Walton (1990) pointed out:

A particular work of fiction, in its context, establishes its fictional world and generates the fictional truths belonging to it. A particular biography or history does not itself establish the truth of what it says or produce the facts it is concerned with Every piece of discourse or thought which aspires to truth has a reality independent of *itself* to answer to, whatever role sentient beings might have in the construction of this reality. The fictional world corresponding to a given work of fiction is not thus independent of it. (pp. 101–102)

In the fictional world of the novelist, events unfold in a certain way just because the author describes them as such, no matter how much factual information she may draw upon for the purpose; biographical works, in contrast, are constrained by how well they cohere with established fact in their domain.

Authorial warrant can, however, extend beyond an individual work or author to a larger body of related works, as in serialized novels, movies or television programs. The “Star Trek cannon” that governs admissible content in the fictional universe of Star Trek, for example, was originally authorized by series creator Gene Roddenberry but has since become highly fluid and contested. Such works may also contain an abundance of factual information, such as geographical details about London in the Sherlock Holmes novels or references to the laws of physics in Star Trek, that are potentially subject to evaluation by external standards. Plainly, authorial warrant is a relative rather than an absolute criterion.

2.2.2. Imaginative prescription

Given that fictional works warrant their own assertions, it seems natural to view fictional discourse as purely stipulative, as novelist and playwright Michael Frayn (2006) seems to do when he asserted that a fictional proposition does not simply describe a state of affairs, “it is that state of affairs itself” (p. 241). In terms of the theory of speech acts (Searle, 1979), this would be to classify fictional statements as *declarations*. But this is clearly not sufficient, as there are other such speech acts, for example, declarations of political allegiance or of religious affiliation, that have nothing to do with fiction. So we need to constrain this type of characterization further.

Currie (1990) proposed that fiction requires its own distinctive kind of speech act, called *fiction-making*, which is governed by *fictive intentions*. By means of these fictive intentions, the author or fiction maker intends her audience to make-believe what is told to them as a consequence of their understanding it and, moreover, to recognize the author’s intention that they do so.

Other fiction theorists resort to a notion of make-believe, without linking it to authorial intentions. Walton (1990) asserted

that:

This make-believe function needs to be recognized apart from the interests in fiction makers which things possessing it often serve. To restrict “fiction” in its primary sense to actions of fiction making would be to obscure what is special about stories that does not depend on their being authored, on their being vehicles of persons’ storytellings. The basic concept of a *story* and the basic concept of *fiction* attach most perspicuously to objects rather than actions. (p. 87)

In Walton’s account, works of fiction function as props in games of make-believe in ways traditionally sanctioned by a culture. It is the works themselves, considered in the context of those who use them, that generate fictions, not the intentions of their authors. In support of Walton’s view is our modern tendency to regard ancient myths and legends as “fictional,” contrary to what we assume were the original intentions of their authors. While these ancient works were clearly not produced with fictive intentions, it is not clear that they are the product of nonfictional intentions either, as their symbolic and polyvalent character cuts across the modern distinction between fiction and nonfiction (Baydala & Smythe, 2012; Smythe, 2014b). Thus, Currie’s theory of fictive intentions cannot give an account of the “fictions” of ancient literature (which he summarily dismisses as “pseudo fictions”). Nonetheless, for modern works of fiction Currie’s criterion of fictive intention is no doubt apt; no amount of consensual agreement among readers, for example, is likely to transform Irving’s bogus autobiography of Howard Hughes into a work of fiction, given the original (albeit deceptive) intentions of its author.

The fiction theories of Currie (1990) and Walton (1990), despite their differences, nonetheless converge on a notion of *imaginative prescription* as a criterion of fiction. Walton’s account of the function of fictional works in games of make-believe entails that they mandate or prescribe imaginings. Fictional language is in this way fundamentally *prescriptive* rather than merely stipulative. This is not a matter of simply triggering actual imaginary experiences in the reader, which many works of nonfiction can also do, but of normatively prescribing them. Fictional prescriptions consist of “propositions that are *to be imagined*—whether or not they are in fact imagined” (Walton, 1990, p. 39); and, for the most part, they operate tacitly and in the background. The force of fictional prescription is *normative* rather than causal; as Walton stated “A proposition is fictional, let’s say, if it is to be imagined (in the relevant context) *should the question arise*, it being understood that often the question *shouldn’t arise*” (p. 40). Currie’s fictive intentions also, in essence, consist of prescriptions to imagine, understood as issued by an author rather than intrinsic to a work. Moreover, both Currie and Walton distinguish make-believe as a propositional attitude from concrete acts and experiences of imagining. In Currie’s words: “What distinguishes the reading of fiction from the reading of nonfiction is not the activity of the imagination but the attitude we adopt toward the content of what we read: make-belief in the one case, belief in the other” (p. 21), with the attitude of make-believe defined in terms of prescriptions to imagine. In contrast to the traditional notion of the “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, 1817), Currie and Walton’s formulations call, instead, for a willing engagement in make-believe.

2.2.3. Performative engagement

An abstract, propositional understanding of make-believe may suffice for a philosophical account but not for a psychological understanding of fiction. The conceptual separation of make-believe from the concrete psychological activities of imagining fails to do justice to how we actually engage with works of fiction. As Frayn

(2006) observed, in addition to its conceptual aspects, there is also an essential *performative* aspect of fictional imagination; fictional worlds are something we actively participate in, not merely contemplate. This involves what Ryan (1997) identified as a “paradoxical element”: “If a fiction is to invite the reader to participate in the fictional world and to regard it as real in make-believe, it must to some extent deny itself as fiction” (p. 168). The paradoxical character of fictional engagement is recalcitrant to a philosophical formulation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions but is vividly captured in Frayn’s (2006) metaphorical description:

It’s like a social relationship: a story entertains you—you entertain the *story*. You invite it in, pour it a drink, and let it talk to you without interrupting. When I enter the world of the story I do it not with the narrowed eyes of a detective entering a suspect’s house, but rather in the way I enter France on my holidays. I’m there to enjoy myself I catch something of the *savour* of life that eludes me in the life I actually live at home. Nor am I limited to simply observing. A story has an element of virtual reality about it. I live the life a little. I involve myself in it. (p. 245)

To sum up, then, fiction is characterized by three distinctive criteria: *authorial warrant*, such that works of fiction warrant their own assertions; *imaginative prescription*, such that they normatively prescribe imaginings; and *performative engagement*, such that they are accessed in a participatory versus a merely contemplative manner. This is not to claim that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is always clear-cut. Fictionality, like factuality, is a matter of degree. A prosaic scientific treatise would possess relatively little fictionality, for example, whereas a narrative history, to the extent that it employs techniques of imaginative storytelling, would have more. The so-called “nonfiction novel,” a genre inaugurated by Truman Capote’s (1965) *In Cold Blood*, is difficult to classify, given both its use of the techniques of fiction writing and its intentional fidelity to the factual record; such works could be considered either as nonfictional works that have a high degree of fictionality or as fictional works with a high degree of factuality. The point is that fictionality and factuality are not mutually exclusive categories but, rather, orthogonal dimensions along which works of both fiction and nonfiction may vary widely.

3. From fiction to fictionalism

The picture of fiction just sketched should make it clear that the notion has a potentially wider application beyond its home domain of imaginative storytelling. The fictional and the factual are not mutually exclusive categories, as we have seen, and imaginative prescriptions in the form of models, postulates and hypothetical constructs play a central role in theorizing in a number of domains. The application of fictional thinking to these other domains takes us from *fiction* to *fictionalism*, which has emerged in the modern philosophical literature as a distinct and increasingly popular metaphysical perspective, if not yet a heavily subscribed one. Fictionalists generally adopt the antirealist view that claims in a given domain of inquiry may be fully acceptable without being literally true or even believable; as Rosen (2005) put it: “For the fictionalist, literal falsity is simply not a defect and literal truth as such is not a virtue” (p. 16).

3.1. Early fictionalism

Although precursors of fictionalism can be traced back as far as the Hellenistic period (Rosen, 2005), it first emerged as an explicit

perspective just over a century ago in the philosophical writings of Jeremy Bentham (Ogden, 1932) and Hans Vaihinger (1911/1935). While their views are not fully compatible with the antirealist agenda of modern fictionalism, they nonetheless provide an essential background to it.

3.1.1. Bentham and defensive fictionalism

Bentham began his philosophical career as an outspoken critic of legal fictions, which he found to be a pervasive and pernicious feature of British and Roman law. His critique of legal fictions was subsequently elaborated into a more comprehensive general theory of fictions, which drew a distinction between the *judicial fictions* of legal practice and the *logical fictions* that are essential to the normal function of language in general. In this context, a “fictional entity” is one “to which, though by the grammatical form of the discourse employed in speaking of it, existence be ascribed, yet in truth and reality, existence is not meant to be ascribed” (Ogden, 1932, p. 12). Although Bentham accepted logical fictions as a necessary feature of language, he nonetheless remained vigilant of the potential for “word magic” in language. He was especially wary of the tendency to reify the referents of nouns as things and of prepositions as spatial relations. The psychological expression “having an idea in mind,” for example, might conjure up an image of the mind as a kind of container in which to place ideas as objects; but this spatial metaphor (or, in Bentham’s terms, “archetypal image”) has to be distinguished from what the expression actually means, which is often better rendered via some form of literal paraphrase.

3.1.2. Vaihinger and prosthetic fictionalism

Hans Vaihinger’s (1911/1935) *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* offers a somewhat more optimistic view. Vaihinger succinctly summed up what he called “The Principle of Fictionalism” as follows: “A idea whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith its falsity, is admitted, is not for that reason practically valueless and useless; for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity may have great practical importance” (p. viii). Although Vaihinger acknowledged the potential of fictions to lead thought astray in the ways described by Bentham (of whose work he was initially unaware), he went on to distinguish these “unscientific fictions” from the genuinely useful “scientific fictions,” such as point masses and ideal gasses, that are essential to theoretical thinking in a number of domains. He considered the latter to be indispensable heuristic devices for circumventing the inevitable impasses that impede rational thought in a given domain; they are “the by-paths, of which thought makes use when it can no longer advance directly along the main road” (p. 13). Vaihinger viewed fictions, then, as a kind of prosthetic device for extending the reach of rational thinking, not just in the natural sciences but also in economics, politics, mathematics, philosophy, theology and law. Vaihinger’s use of the term “fiction” in these contexts is deliberately loose and unsystematic, being applied to both concepts and propositions. He drew a general distinction between “genuine fictions,” which are generally understood both to contradict reality and also to be self-contradictory, and “semi-fictions,” which contradict reality but are not self-contradictory, then went on to develop an elaborate taxonomy of highly overlapping kinds of fictions. Vaihinger’s overriding objective throughout was to undermine the view that constructs that are devoid of reality are thereby devoid of utility. Although Vaihinger’s philosophy of *As If* was widely criticized by the philosophers of his era, it nonetheless provided the philosophical foundation for Adler’s fictional finalism, as discussed earlier. Moreover, as Fine (1993) has pointed out, Vaihinger’s fictionalism, once repudiated by the logical positivists with whom he is often associated, has since been vindicated by developments in modern science, particularly in the practices of theoretical

modeling.

3.2. Modern fictionalism

Following the pioneering work of Bentham and Vaihinger, fictionalism remained a dormant tradition in the history of thought for several decades. Then, in 1980, what is now considered the modern period of fictionalism was ushered in with the publication of Hartry Field’s *Science Without Numbers* and Bas van Fraassen’s *The Scientific Image*, which offered fictionalist accounts of mathematics and scientific theory, respectively (Kalderon, 2005). Subsequent applications of fictionalism to other domains, including moral discourse, semantic theory and non-realist metaphysics, were soon forthcoming. The basic thesis of modern fictionalism is that statements in a given region of discourse can be *accepted* without commitment to their truth. The notion of “acceptance” upon which modern fictionalists rely needs further clarification; a minimal criterion, according to Kalderon (2005), is that it “need not be truth-normed and that the acceptance of a sentence from the associated region of discourse need not involve belief in its content” (p. 2). Such acceptance is, nonetheless, to be understood as “full acceptance,” as distinct from the tentative or provisional acceptance that one might give to a scientific hypothesis that could subsequently be discarded.

Our normal mode of engagement with fiction provides a rich source of analogies for understanding what such non-truth-normed acceptance might entail. In engaging with a work of fiction, we accept as a matter of course any number of claims about imaginary characters and events without needing to believe that they are actually true or that they refer to real people or occurrences. Similarly, modern fictionalists propose that we can fully engage with a region of discourse, whether about morality, metaphysics, mathematics or religion, without needing to believe in the reality of the abstract, metaphysical entities that such discourses seem to entail. The motivation for doing so is ontological economy, to avoid commitment to the existence of ontologically questionable kinds of entities—abstract principles, numbers, unobservables, moral imperatives, spiritual beings—whilst continuing to use forms of discourse that have nonetheless proven useful in other ways. In this way, fictionalism is characteristically invoked in support of an antirealist philosophical agenda. There is more than just analogy, however, behind fictionalists’ resort to the discourse of works of fiction in support of their views. The antirealist argumentation of modern fictionalism should ideally be supported by an antirealist theory of fiction itself, as Sainsbury (2010) has argued; otherwise, its ontological strategy is self-defeating. In any case, neither Bentham nor Vaihinger would qualify as a fictionalist in the modern sense, as neither world endorse full, non-truth-normed acceptance of statements about fictional entities. Bentham’s approach was to attempt to reduce such statements to more straightforward paraphrases; Vaihinger’s strategy was to accept fictions only provisionally as aids in overcoming the barriers to rational thought.

The work of modern fictionalists has served to clarify a number of important conceptual distinctions and to distinguish their tradition from forms of reductionism, instrumentalism and pragmatism, with which it is often confused. It is also important to emphasize that modern fictionalism is not a monolithic perspective but, rather, is meant as an approach to a given “region of discourse,” so the merits of the approach have to be evaluated separately for each domain of discourse to which it is applied—religion, morality, mathematics, scientific theory, modal discourse, and more. There are as many fictionalisms, then, as there are domains of discourse that are amenable to this approach. The doctrine of “pan-fictionality”—that the category of fiction be applied across the board to a wide-ranging variety of discourses—which Ryan (1997)

has attributed to some postmodern thinkers, is not a position that a modern fictionalist would endorse.

There are, nonetheless, some broad, general distinctions that apply to diverse kinds of fictionalisms. The most widely drawn distinction is between *hermeneutic fictionalism*, which attempts to describe how discourse in a given domain actually works, and *revolutionary fictionalism*, which seeks instead to prescribe how it should work. A third type is based, not on how discourse in a given domain *does* or *should* work but, rather, how it *can* work. What I will call *stance fictionalism* is the view that considers the fictional to be an interpretive stance toward discourse in a given domain that *can* be taken up, as distinct from the view that the discourses in question *are* or *should* be regarded as fictional. This position has not yet been widely discussed in the philosophical literature on fictionalism, although Sainsbury (2010) considers something like stance fictionalism to be fundamental:

In my view, the *can* question is the crucial one, and makes us do some work on the value of the thoughts in question, the value that is supposedly preserved under a fictionalist interpretation, the “good” feature that supposedly does not require truth. Only if the thoughts *can* be so regarded is there any point in taking seriously either the *should* or the *are* questions. If the thoughts cannot be taken as relevantly similar to fiction (without some intellectual loss), then they should not be so taken; and if, under this supposition, they are so taken, then ordinary thinkers need some re-education, since they must be missing out something valuable about some of their thoughts. (p. 176)

In the following section, I will briefly discuss some basic features of the *fictional stance*² as an epistemic perspective. Epistemic implications flow from any ontological position, even from the anti-realist standpoint of modern fictionalism. The conception of the object of inquiry as fictional entails, for example, that it be studied as a work of imagination rather than through the usual methods of empirical inquiry.

4. The fictional stance

Writers on the psychology of fiction often discuss the essential features of fiction in ways that overlap substantially with narrative. For example, it is observed that fiction writers characteristically employ narrative devices such as scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, point of view and status construction to achieve their specific aims (Oatley, 2011). However, as Boyd (2009) has pointed out: “To explain fiction fully we cannot merely explain narrative” (p. 129), as the category of fiction is not coextensive with that of narrative. To understand fictional thinking is to appreciate the value of purely imaginary constructions, not merely narrative ones; as Boyd asked: “Why do we spend so much of our time telling one another stories that neither side believes?” (p. 129). In this section, I consider three related aspects of this issue.

4.1. The logic of “as if”

The grammatical operator *as if* is frequently cited as fundamental to fictional thinking (e.g., Divers & Liggins, 2005; Kroon, 2011) but has rarely been analyzed in detail. Even Vaihinger’s (1911/1935) seminal volume on fictionalism took up this analysis

² The notion of the *fictional stance* is superficially reminiscent of Dennett’s (1989) *intentional stance*. Both are interpretive stances, with the intentional stance having to do with treating a behaving system as a rational agent and the fictional stance with treating a text or other expression as a work of fiction.

only briefly. Toward the end of Part II of the volume, Vaihinger finally raised to question: “What logical function, or what type and modification of the general form of a judgment is expressed by the *linguistic* formula ‘as if’ (as though)? What turn of thought is suggested and given expression to by this phrase?” (p. 258). On a superficial analysis, the locution could be taken to be a truncated form of an “if... then...” statement, in that the “if” is followed by an antecedent expression but by no consequent expression. Consider the following example of a fictional ascription:

He tried to patch things up with his father *as if* he were Luke Skywalker confronting Darth Vader

The “as” in such an expression marks a comparison between two things—a person’s attempt to reconcile with his father and Luke Skywalker’s manner of confronting Darth Vader. This expresses what Vaihinger called the *primary judgment* of fictional thinking. To this is added the *secondary judgment*, as signaled by “if,” that the condition in question, namely, the person being Luke Skywalker and confronting Darth Vader is “an unreal or impossible one” (p. 258). That is, to paraphrase, the person in question was attempting to reconcile with his father in the manner of Luke Skywalker confronting Darth Vader but he is *not* Luke Skywalker and his father is *not* Darth Vader.

As noted above, there is no explicit consequent term in the *as if* formula; in our example, the comparison with Skywalker’s confrontation of Vader does not entail any explicit conclusion regarding how the individual in question actually dealt with his father. Compare the *as if* statement above with the following “if... then...” statement:

If he were Luke Skywalker confronting Darth Vader, *then* he would attempt to patch things up with his father in a directly provocative way.

According to Vaihinger, however, the consequent or conclusion is “merely concealed and suppressed. It lurks unheard between the ‘as’ and the ‘if’” (p. 258). *As if* thinking in this way invites the imagination of possibilities, as yet to be articulated, rather than settling upon any definite implication. This marks a critical distinction between fictional and hypothetical thinking; in framing a hypothesis using an “if... then...” construction, the antecedent term represents at least a *possibility* and the consequent a specific implication or prediction, whereas in *as if* or fictional thinking, the antecedent is from the outset considered to be an *impossibility* or *unreality* and the consequent is unspecified and undetermined. In essence, the “as if” locution functions an open-ended invitation to imagine something, the details of which cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance; as such the imaginings it invokes remain fundamentally indeterminate.

4.2. Background understanding

The indeterminacy and open-endedness of fictional inference in the *as if* formula is a general feature of fictional thinking. Readers of fictional texts, for example, are tasked with constructing entire fictional worlds based on very minimal information in the text itself. By what principles do readers or critics decide what is to be considered fictional in any given case? After considering some possible general principles for the generation of fictional truths, Walton (1990) concluded that the mechanics of such generation: “have turned out—to no one’s surprise, I should think—to be very disorderly. Implications seem not to be governed by any simple or systematic principle or set of principles, but by a complicated and

shifting and often competing array of understandings, precedents, local conventions, saliences” (p. 169). Other fiction theorists point in this context to the role of *background understanding*. Sainsbury (2010) wrote that:

It's hard to believe that the inferential processes appropriate to determining what this story said could be captured in some formula that would apply as well to other stories. The best advice would seem to be that we have to use everything we have in the way of text, background knowledge, and our own experience to reach an account which, in some potentially unsystematizable way, is maximally coherent and satisfying. (p. 82)

Currie (1990) noted that an author of fiction “knows that he does not need to tell us everything. He can rely upon a shared background of assumptions, telling us only those things that deviate from or supplement that background, or those things that belong to background and that he feels a need to emphasize” (p. 80). Fictional thinking, then, depends upon various forms of background understanding that are tacit, non-explicit and, in the limit, shade into inarticulacy.

The notion of background understanding, or pre-understanding, has figured persistently in modern hermeneutics and the philosophy of language (Dreyfus, 1991; Searle, 1983, 1995, 2002; Taylor, 1995, 2016). It refers to tacit knowledge of widely shared practices, capacities and forms of life that, while generally inarticulate, nonetheless constitute a fundamental condition of intelligibility of human expressions of meaning. Although background understanding can, in any given instance, be spelled out to a limited degree, it is not itself a form of articulation or a conceptual structure but, rather, something enacted in our shared, embodied and situated lives with others.

In contrast with its function in other forms of discourse, background understanding plays a uniquely *constitutive* role in fiction. Unlike the factual worlds of nonfictional discourse or the possible worlds of modal logic, fictional worlds have no independent existence apart from the discourse that creates them. The imaginative prescriptions of authors, together with the penumbra of background assumptions they invoke, serve to *constitute* fictional worlds rather than to represent independently existing realities. For this reason, as Currie (1990) pointed out: “When it comes to truth in fiction there is no distinguishing an epistemic from an ontological difference” (p. 91). Fiction making and comprehension thus constitute unique opportunities to explore, engage and mobilize one's tacit understandings of human life in ways relatively unconstrained by a field of reference. We can, for example, activate our basic, non-conceptual intuitions about the intricacies of human emotion, intentionality and purposeful striving for their own sake rather than in service of any veridical representation of reality. It is arguably among the main functions of fiction to create a space for this kind of imaginative exploration.

4.3. Intuition

The epistemic functions of intuition thus call for further scrutiny, given the fundamental role that intuition plays when people engage with fiction. After spelling out a number of distinct philosophical usages and meanings of the term, Osbeck (2014) noted that the various senses of *intuition* tend, on the whole, to point to “some form of ‘immediate apprehension’” of “awareness, understanding, or knowledge” (p. 1017). This is consistent with the meaning of the Latin *intuitus*, which refers to the direct perception of knowledge (Anderson, 2011). Psychologically, the immediacy of intuition is marked by a sense of the directness an insight or knowledge, its discontinuity with previous thought, a lack of

intentional control over its occurrence, and its holistic character (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999). Although there has been a long history of philosophical skepticism about the possibility and implications of direct or immediate knowledge, contemporary philosophy nonetheless retains a notion of intuition in reference to forms of understanding that are embedded in background knowledge of various kinds. The intuitive thus thrives on the margins of the articulate and the conceptual, consistent with the argument of the previous section.

The epistemic possibilities of intuition as a research method have become evident through its formulation as a hermeneutic method of qualitative inquiry by Rosemarie Anderson (2004, 2011) and colleagues. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the method in detail, except to point out that, while intuition informs every stage of this type of research process, it is considered to be neither infallible nor exclusive of other knowledge sources. Among five modes of intuition that Anderson (2004) has identified, the one most relevant to fictional inquiry would be *empathetic identification*, by which one aims to “inhabit the lived world of another person or object of study” (p. 312). As pointed out earlier, engagement with fiction provides unique access to the nuances of human emotion and intentionality through mobilizing our non-conceptual intuitions.

5. Psychological applications

To date, fictionalist thinking has had a limited impact on the field of psychology. Although psychological illustrations of various kinds figured prominently in the writings of Bentham and Vaihinger, contemporary psychology has remained relatively unaffected by philosophical developments in fictionalism. Among the reasons for this, perhaps, is a lingering, uncritical literalism about psychological concepts, which remains one of the more enduring legacies of positivism in our discipline. Nonetheless, there are some potential areas of application that I elaborate upon briefly below.

5.1. The psychology of fiction

There is now a modest but substantial literature on the psychology of fiction from the diverse perspectives of cognitive psychology (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999, 2011), theoretical psychology (Barani, Wan Yahya, & Talif, 2014; Jones, 2010, 2014; Mills, 2006, 2010; Moghaddam, 2004) and literary studies (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006). This literature on the whole serves as a repudiation of the view, espoused by Gerrig (1993) and others, that fiction has no special cognitive status or value. In his seminal work on narrative cognition, Gerrig amassed a substantial body of research findings to substantiate the claim that “there is no psychologically privileged category ‘fiction’” (p. 197). Contrary to this alleged non-utility of fiction, the more recent psychology of fiction literature has provided evidence of its numerous benefits. Reading fiction has been shown empirically to be related to social abilities of various kinds, social knowledge acquisition, empathy, attitude and personality changes, emotional engagement and understanding, and to the development of “theory of mind” in children (Mar et al., 2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999, 2011). Theoretical psychologists have argued for the role that fiction can play in the constitution of the dialogical self (Barani et al., 2014; Jones, 2010, 2014; Mills, 2010).

Although much of this literature suffers from a conflation of the fictional with the literary, such that it is often difficult to disentangle the effects of fiction per se from the gifted insights of literary authors, it nonetheless makes a compelling case for the social and cognitive benefits of fiction. The power of fiction to engage our intuitive abilities to navigate the complex social world of human

intentionality and mental state attributions has even become the basis for an influential approach to literary criticism (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on the psychology of fiction, one key idea that has emerged from this literature is worth mentioning insofar as it has implications for the epistemic functions of fiction. This is the notion of fiction as a type of *simulation*. Oatley (2011) succinctly captured this view as follows: “Narrative stories are simulations that run not on computers but on minds” (p. 17). Simulations are useful in fictional as in natural contexts as a way of understanding complex systems—in the case of fiction, systems of human social life—that are constituted by the interactions among a large number of parts; as Oatley went on to explain: “For complex matters we may know how each part works, but we may need something like a simulation to see how the parts fit together in combination” (p. 17). The mental simulation of fictional worlds is in this way an essential part of the constructive work of fictional creation and understanding.

As Mar and Oatley (2008) have pointed out, any simulation inevitably involves abstraction insofar as it singles out and simplifies certain essential aspects of a phenomenon and glosses over inessential; a flight simulator, for example, is based on a judicious selection of relevant variables such as air density, turbulence and wind shear, from amongst the myriad of incidental factors that might be present in an actual flight situation. At the same time, any given simulation involves a host of particulars in the way of initial conditions, temporal and material constraints, and specific interactions among parts. This joint effort at abstraction and particularization is distinctive of both simulation and fictional understanding. It corresponds to what Berry (2010) has termed the “particularizing force of imagination” (p. 32). Based on his own experiences as a poet and fiction writer, Berry observed that the fictional imagination fosters forms of understanding that are both “clear and whole” and also focused on the uniquely particular. The fictional worlds we construct are inevitably imagined in terms of concrete particulars rather than empty abstractions, yet they are also taken to have a more general, unifying significance. It is this paradoxical confluence of the unifying and particularizing powers of the imagination that lends fiction its distinctiveness as “a way of knowing things that can be known in no other way” (p. 186).

5.2. The fictions of psychology

While fiction can thus be an *object* of psychological inquiry, it can also be a *means* of understanding psychological concepts themselves, which takes us from the psychology of fiction to the fictions of psychology.

5.2.1. Mental fictionalism

Philosophers interested in fictionalism as an approach have turned their attention recently to *mental fictionalism*. In the lead article to a special issue on the topic in *The Monist*, Demeter (2013) defined mental fictionalism in terms of “a set of conventions for psychological storytelling ... in which we represent agents’ behavior by familiar concepts thereby facilitating its understanding” (p. 491). The “familiar concepts” at issue include notions of belief, desire, intention, emotion, and the like, which are part of the mentalistic idiom of common sense or “folk psychology” and also of classical forms of cognitive science. Insofar as such discourse involves ontologically problematic entities such as beliefs and desires, it would seem to invite a fictionalist treatment. On Demeter’s construal, folk psychology is not a “fact-stating” discourse that refers to an objective, discourse-independent world (e.g., brain states) but, rather, a practical hermeneutic device for navigating the

social world. It does not aim at truth but, rather, plays an orienting role in social life.

Demeter’s proposal received only limited support, however, from other contributors to the Special Issue. Joyce (2013) and Parent (2013) in different ways defend mental fictionalism from the threat of “cognitive suicide”—that such fictionalism would ultimately be self-defeating insofar as its claims cannot be believed but only “make believed.” Daly (2013) showed how mental fictionalism is compatible with eliminative materialism about mentalistic entities, and Sprevak (2013) explored the prospects for extending mental fictionalism to neural representations. On the other side of the debate are contributors who view mental fictionalism as an under-motivated (Márton & Tozsér, 2013) or ill-motivated theory (Hutto, 2013). Márton and Tozsér find mental fictionalism to be under-motivated to the extent that it doubts the existence of mental states, which they claim to be ultimately derivative from conscious experiences that cannot themselves be doubted. Hutto’s critique goes further in finding mental fictionalism to be “ill motivated in any domain” (p. 582). Like Demeter, Hutto takes folk psychology to be a socially-situated narrative practice, which includes the occasional telling of fictions but also, more importantly, contains standards of factual accuracy that make most of its assertions “precisely unlike fictions” (p. 600). Morton (2013) provided further support for this view by describing examples of imaginary or fictitious emotions, such as disembodied passion, Quixotic courage, and blind rage, that differ from actual emotions; mental fictionalism is said to fail insofar as it does not systematically distinguish between the two.

Philosophical proposals for mental fictionalism that are put forward in the style of modern fictionalism are meant to apply to the mental as an entire “region of discourse.” The fictionalist stance thus becomes obligatory and non-optional, either as a description (hermeneutic fictionalism) or as a prescription (revolutionary fictionalism) for social practices. Applying fictionalism in this way to mentalistic discourse as a whole does not provide the flexibility to make more subtle distinctions, *within* the domain of the mental, between what is to be considered fictional or imaginary versus actual; as Morton (2013) succinctly noted, “if everything is a fiction then nothing is” (p. 514). More importantly for our purposes, mental fictionalism has no discernable epistemic function. As Demeter (2013) acknowledged, folk psychology on this conception “does not have epistemic virtues, but rather social ones” such that “the understanding available via folk psychology does not mean or entail knowledge” (p. 489). The fictions of folk psychology, so construed, are built into the logical grammar of mentalistic discourse in a way that is transparently understood and thoroughly familiar to competent language users. It does not lead beyond what is already known. Mental fictionalism is thus a non-starter for epistemic inquiry.

5.2.2. Narrative fictions

Psychological treatments of fictionalism, in contrast, have been more in the style of Vaihinger than of modern fictionalism, in that they tend to treat the fictional stance as something optional and flexible rather than mandatory. In contrast to philosophical formulations, they take fictionalism, not as an ontological position, but more as an epistemic toolkit. In this spirit, postmodern psychological writers such as Gergen (1991) have hinted at the fictional character of some psychological discourses, a perspective that has since been elaborated further in the theoretical psychology literature (Moghaddam, 2004; Smythe, 2005).

Fictionalism would seem find a natural domain of application in the narrative study of lives, a research tradition that seeks an understanding, in narrative terms, of the stories people tell about their lives. The notion of fiction has not, however, been consistently

thematized in this domain; the term is not even indexed, for example, in any of volumes of Sage's seminal series on *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Moreover, as Jones (2010) has pointed out, the epistemic functions of fiction remain relatively unexplored in narrative psychology more generally. One reason is the suspicion that the fictional devices of autobiographical storytelling can lead to a kind of departure from reality, such that events are imbued with meaning that they may have lacked at the time one lived through them and the self is endowed with a false sense of coherence. The notion of fiction then becomes problematic, as Freeman (2003) has argued, insofar as it is parasitic on an overly narrow view of reality—the reality of “the allegedly raw and pristine, the uninterrupted and unconstructed, the ‘real stuff’ ... that just happens, in time, and that we will inevitably falsify when we later look backward and try to impose some order” (p. 115). But if the fact/fiction dichotomy is untenable, for the reasons discussed earlier in this paper, then so is the distinction between fiction and reality. The fictional is not a distortion of the real or the factual but, rather, a work of imaginative construction, of *poesis*, a view that Freeman subsequently endorsed.

This understanding of the fictional opens up a whole range of narrative constructions in which the meaning of events and the coherence of self emerge over time, beyond the punctate reality of immediate experience. Key among these is what Freeman (1998) characterized as the *poetic construction of selfhood*, the imaginative labor by which autobiographical narration reconfigures the self. As Freeman wrote, “the very act of self-interpretation is at one and the same time an act of self-construction, of *poesis*, that creates a new self even in the midst of discovering it” (p. 109); a self that is best conceived “neither as a ‘thing’ nor as a ‘process’ but as a *work*, always in progress, never finished” (p. 112). The work of narrative construction of self is by no means limited to autobiographical writing, however; it can also be undertaken, though with different affordances, in fiction writing, as Jones's (2014) notion of *writerly dynamics* makes clear. On Jones's account, fiction writing affords possibilities for creative opportunism, for exploring the liminal spaces of the “not-me” and “not-mine,” and for mythopoetic meaning that are generally not available in autobiographical writing. Both authors call attention to the tacit and nonarticulate aspects of narrative fictions—“those aspects of experience that would otherwise remain silent” (Freeman, 1998, p. 115); “something that cannot yet be spoken” (Jones, 2014, p. 129).

Ricoeur (1992) suggested that fictional literature offers “a vast laboratory for thought experiments in which the resources of variation encompassed by narrative identity are put to the test of narration” (p. 148). He went on to describe the narrative coherence in the life of an individual as “an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience” (p. 162) and noted in this context that:

It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history (p. 162)

Consistent with the work of other narrative theorists, Ricoeur viewed narrative understanding as grounded in tacit forms of background understanding by which they give expression to something that cannot adequately be captured in conceptual language.

6. Conclusion

We thus return to a central theme of this paper, that fiction provides unique opportunities to engage our tacit, non-conceptual

understandings of psychological life in ways that go beyond abstract theorizing or mundane factual description. The epistemic potential of fiction resides in the access it provides to intuitive powers of the psychological imagination in constituting forms of understanding beyond the rationally and empirically demonstrable. Oatley (1999) alluded to this epistemic potential in his claim that “fiction can be twice as true as fact” (p. 103). Jones (2010) pointed to the power of fiction to evoke a sense of the uncanny, the numinous and the liminal. The present paper has sought an understanding of these epistemic potentials with reference to contemporary theories of fiction and fictionalism, culminating in the development of the epistemic framework of the fictional stance. Clearly, there is much in this domain that remains to be explored.

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