Philosophy in Review

Bradley Armour-Garb and Frederick Kroon, (Eds.), "Fictionalism in Philosophy."

Aron Dombrovszki

Citer ce compte rendu

Bradley Armour-Garb and **Frederick Kroon, (eds**.). *Fictionalism in Philosophy*. Oxford University Press 2020. 256 pp. $90.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190689605).

In ordinary discourse, we often use sentences which we, at first sight, consider true but after examining their ontological consequences, become rather suspicious. Take for example mathematics: an exceptionally useful tool to get along in not just everyday life, but science as well, nevertheless, serious utterances of 'number talk,' e.g., '2+2=4,' commit the speaker to the existence of numbers. Everyone who is not comfortable accepting the existence of these strange types of entities is in trouble because it seems that she cannot use number-talk seriously without also implying something false. And this problem is more general as it is also present in other areas, such as in folk psychology (for those who are anti-realist regarding mental entities), in modal discourse (for those who are anti-realist regarding possible worlds), or in moral discourse (for those who are anti-realist regarding values), and so on. Fortunately, metaphysicians and philosophers of language have developed different metatheories to deal with this predicament, and fictionalism is one of the most popular approaches, which allows us to keep the discourse in question without the problematic ontological commitments.

Those who are interested in the details are now in a fortunate position: after the 2019 publication of *[A Critical Introduction to Fictionalism](#)* (Frederick Kroon, Stuart Brock, and Jonathan McKeown-Green, Bloomsbury), Bradley Armour-Garb and Kroon present an anthology with a collection of papers on the most important issues in the field. In the introduction, the editors introduce the subject matter, give a brief explanation of what fictionalism is, what its common notions and distinctions are, and what might motivate one to become a fictionalist regarding a certain discourse. They also sketch the short history of modern fictionalism. This introductory chapter is useful not just for those who are new to the topic, but also for those who work in the area as it presents the fundamental issues elegantly and compactly.

The introduction is followed by ten chapters. After a few chapters on fictionalism taken generally, one gets essays about moral fictionalism in particular, while the final essays consider new ways for further developments.

The first chapter, written by Gideon Rosen, is about the rationality of being a realist or a fictionalist regarding mathematics, natural sciences, and speculative metaphysics. Rosen is permissive on the first two subjects, concluding that both realist and agnostic attitudes can be correct towards these subject matters, but when it comes to metaphysics, agnostic fictionalism has the edge over agnostic realism, keeping in mind that theories of metaphysics do not make practical differences in our life. These suggestions raise the question of the sense of doing metaphysics, as the utility of a given theory is an important condition for any fictionalist account, but Rosen finds inherent value 'in the activity of science' (43).

John P. Burgess, in chapter 2, represents linguistic, hermeneutic fictionalism as a temporary part of a process. Burgess considers different, e.g., medical, mathematical, or psychological discourses (or fragments of these discourses), and shows that each one of them passed through three different phases after its users gave up realism, moving: from an error theoretic approach to a generic

way of talking with a fictionalist transition in-between. If his conclusion is right, then we should regard fictionalist proposals only as a temporary solution instead of a true and final interpretation of certain sets of sentences.

Chris Daly provides a defense of fictionalism in two steps. He first elaborates some necessary distinctions and notions to articulate a fictionalist position. He then deals with two main issues: namely with the question of being a fraud as a fictionalist, and the problem with fictionalist reasons, while he dismisses the problem of drawing a sharp line between philosophical and ordinary discourses.

Continuing in a similar manner, David Liggins argues that hermeneutic fictionalism is an undermotivated theory to its rival, error theory. Both metatheories account for using a discourse that constituted mainly false sentences, but error theory is a more elegant choice as it utilizes fewer theoretic tools to explain the same phenomena. Liggins also revisits the phenomenological objection against hermeneutic fictionalism concluding that this issue is still a serious challenge.

The general part of the volume is followed by Richard Joyce's essay, that focuses mainly on moral fictionalism defending both hermeneutic and revolutionary versions against certain objections, which—according to Joyce—are based on misunderstandings. In the paper, he considers arguments against the pretense view of metaphor, the phenomenological objection, and Christopher Peacocke's problem of fetishism. In Joyce's view reflecting on the nature of metaphor can be a great help in solving these common objections.

If someone is a fictionalist about mathematical discourse, should they also be a fictionalist about moral discourse? In chapter 6, Mary Leng tries to answer this question. While mathematical fictionalism is a plausible account, explaining why we should continue to use mathematical sentences despite their being false, moral fictionalism does not have the same strong motivation. Leng suggests that if someone is skeptical about moral discourse, maybe they will be better off with another nonrealist account.

In chapter 7, Mark Balaguer does two things. First, he develops so-called mathematical and mereological error-theoretic fictionalism, then examining the common features of these accounts. Balaguer provides a general error-theoretic fictionalist account that can be used for every controversial topic, such as discourses about temporal or abstract objects. Second, Balguer develops and briefly argues for an error-theoretic fictionalist account about coincident objects and material constitution.

Craig Bourne and Caddick Bourne focus on the role of fiction in mental fictionalist accounts, i.e., fictionalism about folk psychology. The properties of fiction in these theories have rarely been developed in detail, and when they are, at least five problem arise. These are: (i) the metaphysical nature of fiction, (ii) our distinctive attitudes towards fiction; (iii) the problem of self-defeat, (iv) the content of fictional representations, and; (v) the usefulness of fiction in general. The authors do not aim to solve these issues nor to present them to refute mental fictionalism; rather they elaborate them as challenges to solve for those who would like to adopt the theory.

In their essay, Roman Frigg and Fiora Salis deal with the complex issues surrounding the fictionalist interpretation of scientific models. After developing a fictionalist account that can explain

what models are, they work out the details of how the representation works between the model and its target system. Besides elaborating the technical details of their theory, the authors also consider the responsible way of being a fictionalist about science-related topics, as it can feed irrationalists and science skeptics: 'as long as the fiction view of models is discussed in informed circles and, when popularized, is presented carefully and with the necessary qualifications, it is no more dangerous than other ideas' (203).

Finally, in chapter 10, Stuart Brock revisits Pascal's Wager, which is a practical argument for believing in the existence of God, revealing fictionalist elements in the argument. Even though Pascal was not a fictionalist, there are certain similarities between his views on why we should believe in the existence of God and of the motivations of contemporary religious fictionalism. Before concluding, Brock also sketches a version of a religious fictionalist account, pointing out the main theses (e.g., truth-aptness, non-doxasticism, immersion, and so on) and possible objections against it.

To sum up, Bradley Armour-Garb and Frederick Kroon's new collection of essays on fictionalism presents cutting-edge research on the popular topic of fictionalism. These essays with the introduction can be easily understood by any philosopher or student, but it's especially useful for those scholars who work in the field of metaphysics and aims to deepen their knowledge about the subject. The volume ends with an index to help the reader navigate through the book.

Aron Dombrovszki, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary