Fictionalism proposes that a certain discourse – such as talk about possible worlds, or mathematical talk – is useful, perhaps even indispensable for theoretical purposes, but should not be taken as true. The fictionalist argues that the content of this discourse can be treated as fictional – as belonging to ‘the fiction of many possible worlds’ or ‘the fiction of numbers as objects’, for example. By adopting this treatment, they propose that we can have the benefits which are offered by positing entities such as worlds, without believing in them. In this way, fictionalism tries to offer a way in which we can engage in and make sense of the same kind of talk a realist licenses, but without the realist’s metaphysical commitments. ‘Fictionalism’ is a term of art, but can be distinguished from neighbouring positions such as quasi-realism, error theory and deflationism by the way in which the fictionalist seeks to make sense of an area of discourse by giving a realist account the status of fiction.

One way some fictionalists account for an area of discourse in fictionalist terms is by making use of fiction operators such as ‘It is true in the many-worlds fiction that…’ or ‘According to the fiction of numbers as objects.’ Another way is by suggesting that participating in such discourse could be something done in a spirit of pretence: what the realist suggests would be explained by believing in certain objects or taking certain statements to be true can, the fictionalist suggests, be explained by construing the discourse as something more like a game of make-believe in which we imagine certain objects to exist and certain facts to obtain.

Some challenges for fictionalism stem from the nature of fiction itself. For example, fictional characters, or fictions themselves, might be best understood as abstract objects, but some fictionalists want to avoid committing to abstract entities. Fictions can also be unlike the discourses fictionalists wish to capture, in certain significant ways. Other potential problems for fictionalism include a threat that it is self-defeating, some difficulties with characterising what the content of the fiction is, and a challenge that philosophers do not know best concerning the commitments of other people’s discourse.
Believing in certain kinds of objects can help to solve philosophical problems. Take Lewis’s argument (1986) for other possible worlds which are real and concrete, and have concrete possible individuals located in them. Not only does Lewis use this framework to explain the nature of possibility, necessity and contingency, the ontological resource offered by other worlds also gives him a way of answering other metaphysical questions — e.g., what it is for an object to have a property. In this way, Lewis’s theory of worlds bears metaphysical fruit. But might we have these rewards without actually making Lewis’s underlying commitment to the existence of non-actual possibilia? Here the ‘modal fictionalist’ sees an opportunity. They propose, with Lewis, that we can utilise Lewis’s framework to make the best sense of modal discourse (which incorporates the claims we make about what might, would, wouldn’t or couldn’t happen). But they hope to give an account of how it is to be utilised that makes the benefits of Lewis’s framework, such as its explanatory and unificatory potential, accessible by some other route than believing the account. They propose that if Lewis’s theory is treated not as an account of how things really are, but as a fiction which represents things as being a way they are not, it can retain its power to illuminate, systematise and explain, but without the consequences it brings if we take it as a statement of metaphysical fact.

Mathematical discourse is another fictionalist target. The mathematical fictionalist allows that the workings of mathematical discourse may be bound up with its representation of abstract, non-spatio-temporal, causally inert objects such as numbers. But they advocate understanding this representation along the lines of fiction. Roughly, they suggest that deploying a fiction about abstract numbers secures at least the same benefits we would secure by believing a factual description of the behaviour of abstract numbers. Versions of mathematical fictionalism are developed by, e.g., Yablo (2005) and Leng (2010).

Other discourses which have been given fictionalist treatments include moral discourse (e.g. Kalderon (2005a)), areas of religious discourse (e.g. Eshleman (2005), Deng (2015), Sauchelli (forthcoming)), ascriptions of folk psychological mental states such as beliefs and desires (e.g. Wallace (2016), Toon (2016)), descriptions of biological processes as carrying semantic information (Levy (2011)), and descriptions of the world in terms of composition of wholes by parts (e.g. Sider (2008)). Connections have also been drawn between fiction and scientific modelling (e.g. Godfrey-Smith (2009), Frigg (2010), Toon (2012), Suárez (2015)), although the relation between these debates and fictionalism is complex, and treatments of models as fictions is not automatically fictionalism.

In one sense, we might distinguish fictionalism in metaphysics from fictionalism in other areas by situating fictionalism about modality, mathematics and mereological composition within metaphysics, fictionalism about folk psychology within philosophy of mind, moral fictionalism within ethics, and so on. In another sense, fictionalism in general falls partly within metaphysics. It takes a view on what our discourse shows about what exists, and on how representation relates to reality, and thus can be positioned alongside rival metaphysical positions such as realism, instrumentalism and eliminativism.

Fictionalism typically holds that a discourse’s usefulness does not depend on its truth, and/or that it does not depend on the truth of realist assumptions the discourse invokes. Field’s (1980) treatment of mathematics as a theory which is untrue, but which is to be adopted because it allows us to make inferences in a way that is key to scientific enquiry, and van Fraassen’s (1980) argument that the standards for scientific theories should be understood in terms of empirical adequacy and acceptance, rather than truth and belief, are often taken to be seminal for fictionalism (see Kalderon (2005b)).
In fictionalism, the distinction between truth and usefulness relates to a distinction between truth and content. The fictionalist wants to deploy the content of the formal or informal theory whose truth they reject. The virtues they wish to retain might include the theory’s usefulness, its indispensability to everyday life or to scientific progress, or its explanatory power. So long as these virtues belong to the representation’s content rather than its truth, they can be retained in the absence of truth by giving that content the status of fiction.

2. The fictionalist stance

There is no one model that all fictionalist theories follow. Some, such as Rosen’s (1990) modal fictionalism, endorse a schema pairing each sentence of a given type (in this case, modal sentences) with a sentence which includes an operator such as ‘In the fiction...’, ‘According to the fiction...’ or ‘It is true in the fiction that...’. In Rosen’s case, the biconditionals piggyback on those which a believer in non-actual worlds would endorse. For example, where the realist would hold:

\[
\text{Possibly } P \iff \text{there is some possible world at which } P
\]

the fictionalist holds something like this:

\[
\text{Possibly } P \iff \text{according to the many-worlds fiction, there is some possible world at which } P
\]

Such an approach maintains (some) modal statements as true, but does so by treating possible worlds statements as true in a fiction rather than true. What it takes for modal statements to be true is not for worlds to exist, but for a fiction to exist which represents worlds.

The fictionalist might treat these biconditionals as offering translations as well as truth-conditions, in which case they can (re)construct modal talk as talk about a fiction. Thus, ‘A strong person could swim through melted toffee’ means ‘In the many-worlds fiction, there is a world where a strong person swims through melted toffee’. Sentences which explicitly mention worlds might also be taken as elliptical for sentences prefixed with the operator. Thus, ‘Some worlds where pigs fly are worlds where cows fly too’ means ‘In the many-worlds fiction, some worlds where pigs fly are worlds where cows fly too’. (See Liggins (2008).) (There is also an option of deploying such a fictionalist schema without taking it to offer translations; see, e.g., Nolan & O’Leary-Hawthorne (1996).)

An alternative route a fictionalist can take is to say not that the discourse they are concerned with can be understood in terms of talk about a fiction, but that it can be understood as talk which composes fiction. Rather than reporting fictional truths by saying that there is a fiction with particular content, I might be ‘taking part’ in the fiction when I engage in the relevant discourse. (Compare how an actor delivering their lines is not talking about the play they are in, but doing something more like talking as if ‘from within’ the fictional world.) The idea of truth in fiction is, again, of central importance: what it takes to make a correct utterance in the relevant discourse is a matter not of saying something true, but of saying something that is true in the fiction. This form of fictionalism appeals to the ideas of pretence or make-believe, and often, in particular, to Kendall Walton’s (1990; 1993) theory of fiction. On Walton’s account, aspects of the real world can be ‘props’ which serve to generate fictional truths by prescribing us to imagine certain things within the scope of games of make-believe. For instance, in a children’s game, the act of dropping an acorn into a bucket might be a prop prescribing players to imagine that an eyeball is dropped into the cauldron. Yablo’s mathematical fictionalism (2005) holds that real aspects of a world which does not contain numbers serve as props which make number claims fictionally true. Facts about enumerable things – e.g., that whenever we have two things A and B, and a further two things C and D which are distinct
from A and B, we have four things – make it appropriate to imagine (or, in Yablo’s terminology, pretend) something about numbers – e.g., that 2+2=4.

On either approach, the fictionalist allows that their target discourse can look and sound just the way it should look and sound if we are realists. Because of this, fictionalism is sometimes described as holding that we can ‘talk the talk’ without ‘walking the walk’.

We can distinguish between hermeneutic fictionalism, which advocates fictionalism as the best account of the target discourse as it is actually conducted, and revolutionary fictionalism, which holds that the discourse is not in fact conducted in fictionalist spirit, but ought to be conducted in that way. (Alternatively, a fictionalist could fall between hermeneutic and revolutionary by taking fictionalism to be ‘the minimal unconfused revision’ of a discourse whose current use is neither consistently fictionalist nor consistently realist, an option identified by Lewis (2005: 319).)

Fictionalism does not necessarily have to be motivated by wanting to avoid realist ontological commitments. As Toon (2016) notes, a hermeneutic fictionalist might hold that people do as a matter of fact talk in a fictionalist spirit, regardless of whether they themselves have qualms about the existence of the objects a realist ontology would commit to. Typically, however, both hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalisms are associated with reluctance to countenance the kinds of objects that realism would take the target discourse to require. Often this reluctance involves actually denying the existence of whatever objects a realist posits, although sometimes fictionalism advocates agnosticism about those objects, rather than disbelief (see Friend (2008) and Bueno (2009)).

3. Distinguishing fictionalism from other positions

The boundaries between fictionalism and other positions can be difficult to trace. In Blackburn’s (e.g. 1984) quasi-realism, we take moral discourse to be grounded by an expressivist genealogy of morals, but one which legitimates making the same kinds of contributions to moral discourse as a realist about moral properties can. Both quasi-realism and fictionalism make available to their advocates the same utterances that are available to a realist, and without saying they mean something vastly different from what the realist takes them to mean. Moreover, some philosophical methodologies can be seen as antecedents of either position: Humean projectivism informs Blackburn’s quasi-realism, and has also been taken as a form of fictionalism (Varzi (2013)).

Lewis (2005) argues that quasi-realism really is fictionalism: the quasi-realist’s endorsement of projectivism functions as a preface which, roughly, puts their moral utterances within the scope of fiction in the same way as would the preface ‘Let’s make-believe the Sherlock Holmes stories are true, even though they aren’t’. Blackburn (2005) responds that there is an important difference in what is taken to explain or legitimate our discourse. The fictionalist appeals to content which is false if advanced as a statement of fact to play that role – this is why they retain such content as fiction. The quasi-realist takes their expressivist genealogy to be enough to explain and vindicate the moral utterances we actually make. Even if such utterances happen to coincide with ‘metaphysically … loaded language’ (2005: 329), a fiction in which things are as the metaphysically loaded reading would have them has, according to quasi-realism, no useful explanatory role to play.

Fictionalism can also be distinguished from an error theory which maintains that there are good reasons for continuing to make false realist statements (e.g., their social embeddedness). Here the difference lies in the distinction between putting something forward as fiction and putting it forward mistakenly. The fictionalist does not think there are good reasons for getting it wrong about the
world; instead, they think there are good reasons for getting it right about what a particular fiction represents, or for taking part in playing out that fiction.

Another neighbour of fictionalism is deflationism. Deflationism about truth holds (in very broad outline) that the predicate ‘is true’ does not pick out a property of truth, but does play an important role – at least according to some deflationists – in allowing us to convey that certain facts obtain and how they relate to one another. A position sometimes called ontological or meta-ontological deflationism (Thomasson (2013)) holds that when the existence of entities can be inferred from uncontroversial premises – e.g., inferring ‘There are numbers’ from ‘There are more dogs than cats here’ via ‘The number of dogs is greater than the number of cats’ – then we should hold that such entities exist, but deny that they are the kind of object that could do metaphysical work like explaining the truth of the claims of the discourse.

Fictionalism’s relationship with deflationist positions is one of both potential synergy and potential conflict. Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2010; 2013) contend that deflationist views of truth should be construed as fictionalist views of truth-talk. Meanwhile, Thomasson (2013; 2015) argues that ontological deflationism is preferable to fictionalism. Since the fictionalist wishes to maintain a fiction in which objects do the kind of metaphysical work the realist takes them to, they owe us an explanation of what exactly the difference is between the world as it is and what happens in the fiction. The deflationist, by contrast, owes no account of what it would be for the relevant objects to really exist, beyond the fact that their existence can be inferred in such-and-such ways.

4. Challenges for fictionalism concerning the metaphysics of fiction

It is not obvious that fiction lacks ontological commitment in the way many fictionalists would like. One issue here is what exactly a fiction is. If we think of it as something abstract and non-spatio-temporal, it is problematic for any fictionalist who wants to avoid such objects. But if we think of it as something more like a set of utterances by a story-teller, then other problems arise, as Nolan (1997) argues concerning modal fictionalism. We normally think of modal truths as independent of human articulations of ideas about possible worlds; for example, we assume that there were truths about what is possible before Lewis published On the Plurality of Worlds. So if a possible-worlds fiction depends on these kinds of human acts, then modal fictionalism apparently fails to capture some of our expectations of modal discourse. A similar argument can be made concerning mathematical discourse. For some fictionalist responses to this kind of problem, see e.g. Kim (2005).

The nature of truth in fiction also raises questions for fictionalism. What is true in a fiction differs from what is stated explicitly – there are things we take to be part of the ‘fictional world’ although we are not told or shown them. Elucidating the scope of fictional truth might utilise notions such as what is entailed by explicit statements, or what would be the case were those explicit statements true (Lewis (1978)). A potential issue for modal fictionalism here is that we must appeal to modal concepts to posit a fiction which underlies modal discourse (Nolan (1997)). Truth in fiction is also ‘incomplete’ or ‘indefinite’. There are cases where it seems we want to say ‘It is not the case that it’s true in the fiction that P, and it is not the case that it’s true in the fiction that not-P’. By contrast, the discourse the fictionalist seeks to explain typically will not allow a statement like ‘it is not the case that P and it is not the case that not-P’, since ‘∼P & ∼∼P’ is a contradiction. So one challenge for the fictionalist is to give an acceptable account of how to map this feature of fictional truth onto the discourse. See Woodward (2012) and Skiba (2017) for discussion.

The nature of fictional characters is also a potential issue for fictionalism. As Sainsbury (2010) points out, one view is that characters are abstract objects, which might again generate unwelcome results.
for any fictionalist who hopes to avoid abstracta by invoking fiction. That fictionalist might take comfort in the fact that Thomasson’s (e.g. 1999) treatment of characters as abstracta frees them of some of the features which might be found problematic. As abstract artefacts, Thomasson’s characters are temporally located and dependent on human practices. However, Thomasson argues that this account of how fictional characters come to exist supports an ontologically deflationist position which undercuts fictionalism (see §3).

Fictionalists who utilise Walton’s framework bypass some concerns about characters. Walton argues that talk about characters which seemingly occurs outside the scope of fiction – e.g., if we say that a character was created by a certain author, is iconic, or symbolises the fear of death – in fact still involves engagement in games of make-believe. Because it treats these discussions of characters as a sort of engagement in an expanded fiction, Walton’s approach is sometimes categorised as fictionalism about fictional objects – a fictionalist treatment of the apparent ontological requirements of the metaphysics of fiction itself (see also Brock (2002)).

A further question for the fictionalist is whether they take the realist entities that feature in their fiction to be possible or impossible. If the latter, the fictionalist must negotiate debates over whether and to what extent fiction is capable of representing impossibilities (see, e.g., Lewis (1978; 1983), Priest (1997), Hanley (2004), Nolan (2007), Bourne & Caddick Bourne (2016)). Moreover, since they take the content of the fiction to help make sense of our discourse, the fictionalist must also be able to give some account of what the content of the fiction is (Blackburn (2005); Thomasson (2015)). This challenge is especially pronounced if the fictionalist takes the realist’s objects to be impossible. It is unclear what this fictionalist thinks it would be for things to be as the realist account says they are.

4. Other challenges for fictionalism

Some forms of fictionalism have been charged with ‘comical immodesty’ (Burgess (2002)). Lewis (1991: 58-59) suggests it is laughable that a mathematical fictionalist philosopher would try to tell mathematicians that mathematics is a good fiction, but not true. One fictionalist response (Daly (2006)) targets Lewis’s supporting claim that mathematics is an established field, and Burgess’s that it has a better track record of successes than philosophy. Since whether success indicates truth is something the fictionalist debates, the history of success in mathematics is irrelevant to whether the discourse should be read in realist or fictionalist terms. Leng (2005: 23-28) argues that whilst it may be overly immodest for a philosopher to recommend revisions to what utterances mathematicians make, such an immodest step is not a consequence of endorsing a fictionalist interpretation of mathematical discourse. Note, too, that a fictionalist can agree with much of the objector’s deference to primary users of the target discourse. A fictionalist can agree that mathematicians are best placed to know what mathematics is about, or what the content of the theory is, but insist that it is still the business of the fictionalist to argue that the representation delivers its explanatory and epistemic benefits when that content is rendered as fictional.

Another challenge to fictionalism is the threat that it is self-defeating. The ‘Brock-Rosen objection’ – put forward by Brock (1993) and by Rosen (1993, arguing against the position he developed in (1990)) – argues, against the version of modal fictionalism which employs a schema featuring fiction operators, that the fictionalist should hold to the following instance:

Necessarily, there is a plurality of worlds iff according to the many-worlds fiction, it is the case at all worlds that there is a plurality of worlds.
Since it is, according to the many-worlds fiction, the case at all worlds that there is a plurality of worlds, the fictionalist should hold to ‘Necessarily, there is a plurality of worlds’. But ‘Necessarily, there is a plurality of worlds’ entails ‘There is a plurality of worlds’, so the fictionalist has to hold that there is a plurality of worlds – precisely what modal fictionalism was supposed to avoid. For some responses to versions of the objection, see e.g. Noonan (1994), Liggins (2008), and Woodward (2008). For an argument that the objection generalises to various fictionalist theories, see Nolan and O’Leary-Hawthorne (1996).

Another threat to fictionalism can arise if the fictionalist is insufficiently careful about their metaphysical motivations. Sometimes certain objects are regarded as ontologically suspicious in their own right. One way this is sometimes expressed is to say we are ‘queasy’ about the objects. Pursuing fictionalism on the basis of queasiness alone is a risky move. If the supposedly suspect entities are to feature in a meaningful representation (the fiction) which is clear, coherent and informative enough to play a positive role in making sense of discourse, then the challenge is to explain what is so strange about them that it should make us queasy. A fictionalist motivated by queasiness needs a characterisation of the realist’s commitments where they make enough sense to be worth retaining as fiction, but not enough sense to believe in. Because this is not an easy task, it is better to base fictionalism on a more fine-grained evaluation of the specific problems a realist approach solves in a given area, and the specific problems it does not. This may, of course, include consideration of what kind of a theoretical virtue parsimony is and what counts as achieving it. By contrast, simply finding particular types of object too odd in their own right to feature in one’s ontology is likely to be a false friend for fictionalism in the long run.

**Annotated Bibliography**

(Argues that deflationism about truth should be viewed as making an appeal to pretence analogous in certain ways to that made by Yablo’s mathematical fictionalism.)

(Argues that deflationists about truth should adopt one or other of various forms of fictionalism about truth-talk.)

(Chapter 5 discusses realism and alternatives, and chapter 6 develops Blackburn’s quasi-realism.)

(A response to Lewis’s argument that quasi-realism is a fictionalist position.)

(Argues for a possible-worlds theory of fiction in which fiction does not represent impossible scenarios.)

(One origin of the ‘Brock-Rosen objection’.)
(Argues that discourse which seems to refer to fictional objects should be understood as making use of a fiction operator.)

(Develops a version of mathematical fictionalism, and discusses the roles of empiricism and of the metaphysics of fiction in this position.)

(Argues against mathematical fictionalism.)

(Defends mathematical fictionalism against an objection.)

(Develops a version of religious fictionalism, and compares it with a number of other versions of the position.)

(Discusses a number of non-realist approaches to religious discourse and argues for a version of religious fictionalism.)

(Influential argument that mathematics, and its legitimate use in scientific reasoning, can be understood without taking there to be mathematical entities.)

(Discussion of Mark Eli Kalderon’s moral fictionalism, also including an overview of some distinctions between fictionalist positions.)

(Uses Walton’s framework to develop the view that modelling in science is comparable to fiction.)

( Discusses some of the questions that arise from treating scientific models as fictions.)

(Defends Lewis’s theory of truth in fiction, e.g. against the objection that there are more impossibilities represented by fiction than Lewis’s possible-worlds approach can deal with.)

(Argues for fictionalism as a way forward for non-cognitivism in metaethics.)

(Sketches aspects of the history and development of fictionalism.)

(Proposes a way for the modal fictionalist to deal with an objection concerning the independence of modal truths from human acts of producing fictions.)

(A fictionalist treatment of mathematical theories.)

(Argues that a fictionalist position allows some discourse in biology to be understood as metaphorical.)

(An analysis of truth in fiction in terms of possible worlds.)

(Considers issues about truth in fiction, including the role of pretence and the representation of impossibility.)

(Sets out Lewis’s influential theory of possible worlds and his arguments for believing possible worlds to be concrete objects.)

(A book about mereology, set theory and mathematics, containing Lewis’s objection to revising or rejecting mathematics for the sake of philosophical theory.)

(Argues that Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realism is a form of moral fictionalism.)

(A response to the Brock-Rosen objection. Develops the idea that statements about possible worlds should be construed in terms of a fiction operator.)

(Argues against modal fictionalism (of the form suggested by Rosen), based partly on some features of fiction.)

(Discusses the representation of impossibility by fiction.)

(Argues that the Brock-Rosen objection generalises beyond modal fictionalism.)

(Responds to the Brock-Rosen objection.)

(Argues that fiction is capable of representing certain impossible scenarios.)

(A seminal statement and discussion of a modal fictionalist position.)

(One origin of the ‘Brock-Rosen objection’.)

(A useful introduction to various types of fictionalism and various theories of fiction, which also develops Sainsbury’s own account.)

(An argument concerning the potential role of religious fictionalism in engagement with religious art.)

(Proposes that monism can adopt a fictionalist treatment of discourse about subparts of the world.)

(Discusses an argument that a problem for modal fictionalism concerning the incompleteness of fictions generalizes to other fictionalisms, and puts forward a response.)

(Discusses what scientific fictions show about the nature of representation in science.)

(An influential theory of fictional characters as abstract artefacts.)

(Distinguishes fictionalism from an ontological deflationist position and argues for deflationism, responding to some fictionalist objections.)

(Argues against fictionalism and in favour of ontological deflationism.)

(Approach to scientific modelling in terms of make-believe, utilising Walton’s theory of fiction.)

(Develops a version of folk psychological fictionalism that draws on Walton’s theory of fiction.)

(Develops van Fraassen’s influential ‘constructive empiricist’ approach to scientific discourse and practice.)

(Distinguishes three types of fictionalism in ontology and associates them with Pascal, Berkeley and Hume respectively.)

(Defends fictionalism about folk psychological attitudes against an objection that the notion of fiction presumes folk psychology.)

(Argues that treating something as a prop in a game of make-believe can be a way of appreciating facts about the prop itself, an idea that has been influential for fictionalism.)

(Sets out Walton’s influential and wide-ranging theory of fiction as involving games of make-believe.)

(Responds to the Brock-Rosen objection.)

(A fictionalist response to a problem arising from the incompleteness of fictions.)

(Develops a version of mathematical fictionalism utilising Walton’s account of fiction and make-believe.)