HYPOTHETICAL FICTIONALISM

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Abstract:As a philosophical discipline, fictionalism can be—and has been—used to explore the conscious and unconscious "fictions" informing discourses about the quasi-universal problem-solving fabric of human science and culture (language included). To a certain extent, factionalism is based upon a theory of imposibilia, and thus relies heavily on dialetheism: there are no such things as fictional realities/entities, yet we make-believe that something like that does exist; and they exist in philosophy (metaphysics), in mathematics and natural sciences, in religion, politics, morality, history, law, psychology, aesthetics… and literature (though "one cannot be a factionalist about 'real fictions'"). The title is a half-ironic and obvious allusion to Hans Vaihinger and his highly influential Philosophy of "As If," that seems to be very much behind most of the later work outlined in this paper.

Keywords:: Fiction(-Alism), (Non-)Existence, Pretense, Belief, Acceptance

"All matters confronting man might best be
regarded in hypothetical ways."
Hans Vaihinger

Experience may have taught many of us that a great number of things that are frequently taken for granted are quite all right as such—i.e. as they simply exist—until some philosophical mind starts taking them apart and dissecting them and they all become very complex and complicated. We can thus grow up and live (happily) with such (apparently, it seems) simple ideas—that literature is basically made up of stories that we generally like and often remember for their imaginative worlds where things are more rewardingly arranged than in real life; that mathematics is about numbers and proportions and equations that help us see this world as more organized than it really is; that the various sciences provide yet other ways of understanding our universe; and so on.

But this growing up comes at a price, and this price is that we get to think and talk about the theory of literature, the theory of fiction, about mathematical philosophy or the philosophy of science, about realism and factionalism and how the human mind relates to all of these. And so, here we are confronting factionalism at a time when we should have been well beyond it and its various forms and implications; also wondering, for instance, if college students should be given introductory courses on such concepts before their in-depth study of literature/fiction (and/or mathematics, philosophy, aesthetics, ethics…) or sometime later, when they have already got a feeling of what is in store for them.

And so, for the time being, we compile an (intimidating) bibliography and start reading about factionalism; and we learn (too late?) that whenever the mind expresses itself by means of language, i.e. constructs sentences and texts, a smaller or greater amount of fiction is created and introduced into the discourse—i.e. what mind and language most often produce—because for our

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minds the reality of language is at least as important as the reality of the universe around. Moreover, students—or uncommitted readers—of philosophy often find themselves facing the question whether philosophy is basically thought and talk about language or considerations (by means of language, nonetheless) about other (greater, more important) things. As we tend to side with the former opinion, let us just mention that philosophical discussions about fiction and factionalism (see infra) are mostly about the semantic relationships among the concepts of "fiction," "reality,"(authenticity), "pretense," "ersatz," "appearance," "fictitious" and "factitious," "make-believe," "deception," "perversion of truth," "fraudulent impositions" and, in the subtext, about "hypocrisy" and/or "imposture," all of which philosophers cannot afford to avoid, or have to find "useful" or "convenient" in approaching the less unpleasant problems of "truth/falsity," "right/wrong,"…

Time to mention, incidentally, that "pretense" for instance, may seem to be very much like a fundamental human characteristic: see the unavoidable roles of double talk, split personality, constructed interpersonal relations, appearance, fashion and clothing…, but also—and closer to our purposes—hermeneutic fictionalism's sentences best seen not as efforts to say what is literally true, but as useful fictions (they have "pretense-uses" as a result of the pretense-theoretical stance); or one of the aphorisms of Nietzsche—very much behind this type of philosophy himself—in The Gay Science: "Life is no argument; error might be among the conditions of life…"; or the very two theses of factionalism: linguistic—the aims of participants in the discourse are not anything like truthful descriptions of the world, i.e. not to speak the truth, but some other aims, like make-believe, pretense or usefulness (infra); and ontological—the entities characteristic of this discourse do not exist.

The central entity in our discourse is "fiction," so we can ask, alongside philosopher R. M. Sainsbury, "What is fiction?" (Stanford…) And unsurprisingly (supra) one finds that the concept is more than can be seen at face value: among others, we sill see that, in English, fiction is both included in and includes literature. But first—etymology: "fictio-," from "fingere" (to shape, to form, to fashion), is "feigning,""fabrication," "concoction," "figment," "illusion," "phantasm"…, and, finally, "untruth," "falsehood," and/or "deception" or "misrepresentation"; as such, "fiction" would include all forms of imaginative creation, products of "fictive intentions" (Sainsbury)—stories, plays, poems, paintings, films, TV series, mythology, popular culture, comic books, etc. etc. On the other hand, "fiction" refers to the class of literature comprising works of imaginative narration especially in prose forms, "writing regarded as having permanent worth through its intrinsic excellence" (dictionary definition); finally, "fiction" could refer to whatever is not real or reality, including elements or parts of mathematics, natural sciences, history, religion, law, ethics…; no wonder then that factionalism may be regarded as a fundamental dimension of human existence and experience.

But before getting there, let us look at fictionalism in general, and its variants (modal, mathematical, scientific, historical, legal, religious, moral…) and simultaneously try to avoid a tedious survey of views (wishful thinking in an informative paper). We immediately learn (from Gregory Currie among others) that there is more to fiction than shown above; Professor Currie wonders whether fiction can be used as a model for how to "explain away" the "existence" of problematic kinds of "objects," and answers that fiction is a natural means for the expression of philosophical ideas; another answer had come from utilitarian (n.b.) Jeremy Bentham (1747-1832, quoted by his commentator C. K. Ogden): "To language then, to language alone—it is that fictitious entities owe their existence: their impossible, yet indispensable existence." Most likely, by "language" the philosopher means such approaches as pragmatics, speech acts, cognitive

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studies and discourse analysis. So the aim of any kind of discourse (mind- and language-dependent) is not truth, bu explanation and clarification, and thus it is true or false on its own terms; which goes even in such cases as "Speaking of Nothing" (Donnellan), where the empty reference/referent is part of the speaker's pretense that he refers to something; anyway, meaning does not always need a referent to be explained, but can easily function with an "as if" one.

And thus we go back to Die Philosophie des Als Ob/The Philosophy of As If (1911, 1924) by Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933), who himself continued impulses from Medieval nominalists, from Hume, Kant, Bentham, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer; his assumption is something we have already tentatively introduced: the pervasiveness of illusion in human life and the undeniable human tendency towards self-deception; fundamentally therefore, the human condition is totally dominated by fictions (easily reminding one of Mark Turner's "story minds" or George Lakoff's cognitive metaphors). From Kant, Vaihinger borrowed the thesis that knowledge is limited to phenomena and thus cannot reach the things-in-themselves; so he proposes factionalism as a non- rational solution to problems that have no rational answers; consequently, his philosophy of "as if" is based upon the idea that men willingly accept falsehoods or fictions in order to live peacefully in an irrational world (the "hypocrisy" and "imposture" supra); the more so as human curiosity does not cease to produce fictions beyond necessity, i.e. beyond the pressure of survival in a hostile environment (Darwinism), so the philosopher made up his "Law of Preponderance of Means over Ends"—man sets himself problems of the kind that would presumably not arise as a matter of simple biological necessity; Vaihinger must have remembered Nietzsche's rhetorical question: "Why might not the world which concerns us be a fiction?" And one reproof (that we subscribe to) from his translator C. K. Ogden: "the chief defect of Vaihinger's monumental work was its failure to lay stress on the linguistic factor in the creation of fictions."

A superficial short history of modern factionalism would certainly include Jeremy Bentham, Hans Vaihinger, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, the more recent Richard Joyce, Mark Kalderon, W. V. O. Quine, Daniel Nolan, Arthur Fine, Hartry Field, Mark Balaguer, Stephen Yablo, Bradley Armour-Garb, James Woodbridge, Gideon Rosen, John Nolt, Seahwa Kim, John Divers, R. M. Sainsbury, David Liggins…(see also our REFERENCES section). So, it looks like we have to go back to Bentham once again to assess the power of his utilitarianism, doubled by obvious Kantian precepts; such as "truth is beyond human grasp," whence factionalism as the view that a serious intellectual inquiry need not aim at truth or a subjective idealist philosophical concept which regards human cognition as a system of fictions that are justified in practice but have no theoretical significance (The Free Dictionary); following that every kind of being has its own peculiar way of apprehending reality, and, necessarily, that usefulness rather than truth is the norm of acceptance (though one also remembers, from Nietzsche, that truth itself may be a "useful lie"); thirdly, each of the above forms of apprehension is more likely to conceal than to reveal the nature of reality, determining Sainsbury ("Preface") to say that "taking fictional entities seriously requires one to explore unfamiliar realms—realms of nonexistent things, or non-actual things, or non-concrete things…"(p. XVIII); or Eklund (in Stanford…) to be less resolute: "Fictionalism about a region of discourse can provisionally be characterized as the view that claims made within that discourse are not best seen as aiming at literal truth but are better regarded as a sort of fiction…"(our emphases); or Fine, to sum it up: factionalism as an anti-realist position which argues that a scientific theory may be reliable without being true and without the entities it invokes existing. All these philosophers' problem—we take it—is that with fictionalism "what is true" can easily be replaced by "what is good," or "what is convenient/useful/believable…"; as fictionalists they may tend to have a simplified view of

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semantic content and ask people to engage in make-believe or fiction more often than in anything else; and hence Quine's hostility toward some "philosophers' double talk."

Fictionalism has been variously discussed in its relationships with error theory (from Loke to Mackie, Joyce, Field…) and found as a more attractive alternative; with anti-realism and the theory of meaning (Kripke: meaning does not rely on reference or truth-conditions, but on definition, and all definitions rely on other definitions); and with views of virtual reality (virtual irrealism, and virtual digitalism (Michael Heim, David J. Chalmers: much knowledge is and will be based on the values of virtual worlds, which may be second-level realities, but not second-class realities). Finally, fictionalism has been classified as hermeneutic (descriptive) or revolutionary (prescriptive), cognitivist (belief in alternatives) or non-cognitivist (belief in empirical adequacy).

Still, the next category is that of modal fictionalism, a frequently discussed application of a fictionalism treatment of abstract objects, providing—in David Lewis' words—" a philosopher's paradise"; i.e. a place where you can spend your time combining words in statements: some things are true; some are false; some are true, but might have been false; some are true, but could not have been false; some are false, but might have been true; some are false, but could not have been true…(Encyclopedia of Philosophy); these are modes of truth and falsity and how they interact with necessity and possibility; which is the subject of modal logic (so vehemently rejected by Quine); and modal fictionalism has traditionally been conceived (beginning with Leibniz, apparently) as fictionalism about possible worlds and their "contents." In time it has come to be discussed by Russell, Rosen, Evans and Walton, Currie and Ravenscroft, Zalta, Parsons, Plantinga, Salmon, Van Inwagen, Kripke, Nolan…

As distinct from actual, real worlds, possible worlds or "as if" or "what if" worlds are all the ways in which a "world" can be, i.e. convenient, useful fictions developed as techniques or devices for exploring these issues of necessity and possibility that are essential for examining non-existent topics such as fictionalia, universals, qualities, properties (qualia, like "blueness," for instance), numbers…, God…, and then create a modal discourse, in which modal operators ("necessarily," "possibly" and equivalent expressions) play important roles. Again, the role of language is paramount: a "possible world" itself is a "specification of a way the world could have been," also described as "nonnormal," "nonclassical," "nonstandard"…; the different meanings of "actuality" or "actualism" (modal elements are ultimately true or false in such a world defined in non-modal terms); plus Quine's claim that the very sources of "necessity" and "possibility" are in the language first and foremost.

Unsurprisingly, modal fictionalism has also been received with multiple forms of skepticism; a John Divers title—"Modal fictionalism cannot deliver possible worlds semantics"; an Alexander Steinberg one—"Pleonastic Possible Worlds"; claims involving modal operations are among the most controversial issues; "modal fictionalism… is self-refuting" (Daniel Nolan in Stanford…); "theories of possible worlds might be conceived only as inkmarks on pieces of paper, or information states inside brains…" (ibid); and, also from Nolan, a tough question: "Why is making modal claims any more important than any other engagement with stories /like the literary critical ones, for instance/?"

All such serious objections to the seemingly problematic modal factionalist theories necessarily invite alternatives, such as instrumentalism (see Anthony Dardis), eliminativism, and reductionism (D. Lewis). The only area where modal theories employing possible worlds terminology have been found really useful is that of thought experiments (which could also prove harmful at times), i.e. stories with epistemic power proposing imaginative situations, based

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upon "impossible" hypotheses, theories, or principles, and meant to discover new things without the "trouble" of empirical data; from among the ones that almost all of us remember, we can mention the Turing machine in computer science, Searle's Chinese Room and Putnam's Twin Earth Experiment in (linguistic) philosophy, Maxwell's Demon and Schroedinger's Cat in physics, Hilbert's Paradox of the Grand Hotel and the Infinite Monkey Theorem in mathematics (and literature)…

If the possible worlds of modal fictionalism may exist or not and may be a part of a useful discourse (like many thought experiments), mathematical fictionalism (see Hartry Field), i.e. talk of numbers, sets, equations and other "mathematical objects" does not habe to be truke to be good, while the aim of science in general is not truth but empirical adequacy, and neither should involve belief in its content; acceptance need not be truth-normed. With belief suspended and acceptance relieved from the strictures of truth, we can easily pretend to join Bertrand Russell's intended audience for his 1919 Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, i.e. "those who have… no more knowledge of math than can be acquired at a primary school," and face some of the controversial issues concerning mathematics before getting to mathematical fictionalism proper.

First comes mathematicism (as distinct from mathematism—an ideology), which is as old as Pythagoras: from the mathematical universe hypothesis, and everything is math, and "nature is inherently (or even innately) mathematical" to "math as the language of nature" or being the very foundation of reality (Pythagoras, Plato, Galileo, Leibniz, Tegmark, Lutus, Dirac, Feynman…). Second: with very many tentative definitions (logicist, intuitionist, formalist…) mathematics (mathema= knowledge, study/science, learning) does not finally have a generally accepted definition, except, probably, the circular one ("Math is what mathematicians do…). Moreover (and "Thirdly…"), there is no consensus even on whether math is a science or not: from being regarded as "the queen of the sciences" (Galileo, Gauss) or one of the formal sciences (alongside logic, computer science, systems theory) to being no science at all (Goedel, Popper…) and described as a game (Hilbert), as an art (Morse), as symbolic logic (Russell), or a specialized linguistic structure (Piaget). Fourth—and closer to our purpose here—there are doubts as to whether there is (need of) a philosophy of mathematics; see such titles as "Does math need a philosophy?" (by William Timothy Gowers—in Hersh, 2006) or "Does philosophy still need mathematics and vice versa? (Jeremy Arigad et als.), or even Russell's own claim (supra) that "much of…/his book/…is not properly to be called philosophy."

Even so, we can approach fictionalism in the philosophy of math with these quotes: "Math may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what we are saying is true…" (B. Russell); so—"There'sk no sense in being precise when you don't even know what you are talking about" (John von Neumann); and—"As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality" (Albert Einstein). Therefore, (and to cut a long story short): "According to fictionalism, math is a collection of useful fictions whose statements are, despite their usefulness, actually all false. In these fictions there are recurring 'characters' like numbers, straight lines, graphs and many others, all entirely fictitious. Nevertheless, the fictions are useful because they convey (or rather, reflect) truths about our world. Furthermore, discussing our experiences in terms of carefully chosen, representative fictional characters, facilitates communication" (our emphases: Essays on Mathematics). For the literati, Sainsbury describes math as "a useful myth, to which we can help ourselves without believing in numbers" ("Preface") and Balaguer (2009) emphasizes that "rather than describe a mathematical statement—a fictitious 2+2=4-- as 'true,' it could be described as 'true within the story of mathematics…l"(see supra); "Hamlet's father is a

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ghost" is not true, as there are no ghosts, but the statement is true in the Shakespearean story. Some of us may like Field's opinion/statement that math stories are like fiction stories, such as fairy tales and novels, but may also want to remember that this is an utterance within a story about math fictionalism (part of nominalism) and that all extant philosophies of math (needed or not needed)—Platonism, realism and quasi-realism and irrealism, rationalism, intuitionism, structuralism, logicism, empiricism, physicalism…--face serious difficulties.

So one can try his luck with science-s; a good, simple-minded (and unpromising) beginning here would be to assume that, since mathematics is supposed to provide not only descriptions, but also explanations for all (the other) sciences, and since mathematics is mostly a fiction in factionalist philosophy, then fictionalism is a feature of all empirical, social, and humanistic sciences—ant that would be the long and short of it. Only one has to go back to philosophy—the philosophy of science—and find that the importance of fiction-s in science (see Suarez) is given by such idealizations as scientific models, i.e. "laboratory fictions," explanatory fictions," "fictional representations"…, all of them proof that fictions are as ubiquitous in scientific narratives and practice as they are in any other human endeavor. Even so, the basic scientific principle remains that the accuracy of a theory does not depend on the researcher's belief-s—it is more or less true, no matter how much he believes it; a scientific theory may never be literally true, but empirically adequate (van Fraassen)—the only object of belief in fact; and thus, once again, acceptance without (full) belief.

And empirical adequacy is first ensured by the effort of building, using, and revising of models (prepared descriptions, images, computer generated patterns) created to examine how different parts of the world work, from subatomic particles (electrons, quarks, fermions…), neural networks, frictionless planes, electromagnetic waves…, to solar systems, world history and the international system (Toon, Corry, Walton); and the researchers talk as if, and handle as if, and think as if these models were the respective realities themselves; moreover, such modeling may be seen as a kind of performative speech act, while the similarity between the model-system and the real-world target system is basically that of a metaphor (mappings between properties); and one can certainly look at narratives or stories as fictional model-systems of world outside (see Godfrey-Smith).

In a 1987 keynote address Carl Sagan makes a useful distinction: "In science it often happens that scientists say, 'You know that's a really good argument; my position is mistaken!'.../This/… happens every day; I cannot recall the last time something like that happened in politics or religion…," or, one should add, in morality, law, history, psychology, aesthetics or…literature; and the reason is given by Stan Husi: "One cannot be a fictionalilst about fictions…, since their purpose is not truth…," or empirical adequacy, "and consequently suffer no defect if shown to be literally false."Politics is practiced by self-sufficient factionalists about their own life stories; religious fictionalism holds it to be legitimate to engage in religious practices without believing the content of religious claims (M. Scott); the plentiful theories about fictionalism in morality are given by the fact that one's moral truth forms another moral truth for others (R. Joyce, M. Kalderon) as all our moral judgments involve systematically false beliefs; it is now commonplace that "the writing of history involves the use of regulative fictions"(Fr. Kermode); for thinkers like Kenneth Campbell and Lon Fuller legal fictions are lies that are not intended to deceive, while for Bentham "lying and nonsense compose the groundwork of English judicature…"; as to psychology, H. Vaihinger, A. Adler or G. Kelly talk about the irrelevance of mental fictionalism in the study of mental fiction; and K. Walton, or Andrew Kanie refer to the obvious fictionalism in aesthetics, in music and the arts; finally, the effectiveness of literary

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fiction in dealing with the world is a reasonable effectiveness, not an unreasonable one as in math (Vaihinger, Winger); literary fictions belong to Vaihinger's category of "the consciously false," where "as if" is taken as such, without claims, and so the literati may be the only ones who do not claim (in this philosophy) to practice something other than they really do; and, once again, "one cannot be a fictionalist about fictions."

As a fundamental dimension of human existence and experience, the fictionalist or pretense-theoretical approach (Walton, Barbero) can be applied to a wide variety of (epistemological) areas (global or universal fictionalism) as "whatever can be thought must certainly be a fiction…" (Nietzsche in Kermode); and even though he has to steer though some very treacherous waters (Sainsbury on Meinongianism) and be viewed as the advocate of duplicity and hypocrisy, "the fictionalist's distinctive claim is that a false claim can be ideally acceptable." (G. Rosen)

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