



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Playing the God game: the perils of religious fictionalism*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/108409/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**

Le Poidevin, RD [orcid.org/0000-0002-7185-9440](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7185-9440) (2016) *Playing the God game: the perils of religious fictionalism*. In: Buckareff, A and Nagasawa, Y, (eds.) *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*. Oxford University Press , Oxford , pp. 178-191. ISBN 9780198722250

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722250.003.0011>

---

© 2016, The Author. This is an author produced version of a paper published in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

# Playing the God Game: the perils of religious fictionalism

(in Yujin Nagasawa and Andrei Buckareff, ed., *Alternative Conceptions of God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

Robin Le Poidevin

## 1. A tale of two church-goers

Reginald and Fiona are regular church-goers. They sing hymns, join in prayers, discuss the sermon afterwards and often meet to read passages of the Bible together and explore the meanings and implications of those passages. They seem to the neutral onlooker to be equally engaged in these activities, equally inspired by them, and equally inclined to relate them to their everyday lives.

Behaviourally, then, there is nothing to distinguish the religious attitudes of these two individuals. However, on questioning, each gives a very different philosophical account of the basis of that behaviour:

Reginald is a realist. More specifically he is a realist believer. He takes God-talk—subject to an important qualification—at face-value, and as true by virtue of the way the world is independently of human belief. He takes statements about God to refer to a real, mind-independent being. The important qualification is that this face-value approach applies to the most central statements of his religion, including the doctrinal statements. He recognises that a significant proportion of scripture is metaphorical, or couched in terms of stories and parables. He is a realist, but not a fundamentalist.

Fiona is a fictionalist. When engaging in religious language and practice, she takes herself to be engaging in a (rather complex) game of make-believe. This attitude goes together with a corresponding view of the semantics of theistic statements: she takes their truth-conditions to be definable by the theological fiction, and the apparently denoting terms to refer to fictional characters and situations. When she asserts ‘God loves us’, for example, she takes this to be true, but by virtue of the content of the relevant fiction. The general schema that she subscribes to is this: any given theological statement *p* is true if and only if it is true in the theological fiction that *p*.

Sometimes they get together with Andy the anthropological reconstructionist, who thinks that theological discourse is, despite its surface content, really about human ideals, Nora the non-cognitivist, who thinks that theological discourse is expressive rather than propositional, so utterances couched in that language (for the most part) simply lack truth-value—and Agnes the agnostic.<sup>1</sup> These positions provide an important contrast and

---

<sup>1</sup> Apparently, Andy has read and been inspired by the writings of Tillich and Bultmann. Nora has similarly been inspired by the writings of Wittgenstein, and feels that her view of religious language captures his. Naturally, other Wittgenstein scholars disagree with her on this tricky exegetical issue.

comparison with the first two, but it is really with Reginald and Fiona that we are initially most concerned.

We might imagine the history of the interactions between Reginald and Fiona (and Andy, Nora and Agnes, when they are around) as being divided into two phases: before they become aware of their radically different interpretations of the nature of theological discourse and afterwards, when each confesses to the other what they take the nature and point of the discourse to be. But how different would the two phases be? We might suppose that, perhaps after the initial surprise (at least on Reginald's part), the friends decide that there is no reason why they should not continue exactly as before, since the differences between them are not so much religious as meta-religious. That is, they concern issues that arise when we reflect on religious activity, as opposing to participating in it. Such meta-religious issues will concern questions about the content, justification, or role of religious language, beliefs or practices. Recognising that, in any case, there will be, within any religious community, divergence of views of one sort or another, the friends feel that a spirit of philosophical ecumenism is called for, and that this diversity of interpretative perspectives is likely to enhance, rather than undermine, their religiously-motivated interactions with each other. Such, at any rate, is their hope.

We may wonder, however, how far this spirit of philosophical ecumenism can prevail. Can a religious community in which realist belief represents the dominant outlook accommodate fictionalists? We might expect the common ground between realists and fictionalists to be relatively limited, and the state of peaceful co-existence between them to be only on the surface, concealing deeper disagreements. After all, whereas the realists are genuinely trying to make contact with a transcendent being, the fictionalists are merely playing the God game. Are these sceptical doubts justified?

Before engaging with that question, let us explore Fiona's fictionalist outlook in more detail.

## 2. Fictionalism: semantics and attitude

Fictionalist approaches have been proposed for a variety of discourses: there is, for example, fictionalism about numbers, fictionalism about possible worlds, and fictionalism about moral values.<sup>2</sup> What characterises these positions is a distinctive view of the semantics of the discourse in question. Take modal fictionalism as the model. The modal fictionalist notes that a possible world semantics of modal discourse has much going for it, in that it allows us to understand the otherwise opaque modal operators ('necessarily', 'possibly', 'impossibly') in terms of quantifiers ranging over worlds ('in all worlds', 'in some worlds', 'in no worlds'). By this means we can justify the modal axioms in terms, for example, of relations between sets of worlds. The set of all worlds clearly includes some worlds, so 'necessarily p' entails 'possibly p', and so on. But this gain in explanatory power comes, it seems, at an ontological price: we are committed to the existence of these worlds, and the question then arises of what their nature is: concrete or abstract? The modal fictionalist wants the explanatory power of

---

<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, Field (1980), Rosen (1990) and Joyce (2005).

possible world semantics without its ontological cost, and attempts to achieve this by importing the standard possible world semantics into a fictional context. We therefore consider a fiction in which there are, let us say, an infinite number of concrete possible worlds, of which this is only one, all other worlds being both spatially and temporally isolated from us, the unifying principle of a world therefore being a spatio-temporal one:  $x$  and  $y$  belong to the same world if and only if they stand in spatio-temporal relations to each other. Call this the ‘Concrete Possible World Fiction’ (CPWF). The fictionalist semantics now proceeds as follows:

Possibly (p) if and only if, according to the CPWF, p obtains in at least one world

Necessarily (p) if and only if, according to the CPWF, p obtains in all worlds

This precisely mirrors the intuitive semantics for fictional truths:

‘Pip goes to see Miss Haversham’ is true if and only if, according to the fiction *Great Expectations*, Pip goes to see Miss Haversham

The crucial question for the modal fictionalist is whether this semantics really can deliver all the explanatory benefits of possible world realism. Fictionalism about numbers proceeds in a similar fashion, as does moral fictionalism, which makes use of the fiction that there really exist objective moral values.

The term ‘fictionalism’ is increasingly used in the literature to refer to a non-realist position on religion,<sup>3</sup> but it appears not to be used to refer to an analogue of the fictionalist positions above. It is defined, rather, in error-theoretic terms: the semantics for theological statements is supposed to be realist, but the truth-conditions simply do not obtain.<sup>4</sup> What makes such account appropriately describable as fictionalist is its characterisation of the attitude that should be taken towards theological statements: rather than regarding them as true, we should treat them as if they were true, and let them guide us accordingly. The motivation for so doing is the instrumental benefits religion brings. And by ‘instrumental’ is not meant (here at least) ‘cynically calculated’. It is not the fictionalist intends simply to put on a display of piety in order to win certain distinctly secular goods, such as a place for their children at a religious school. Rather, the hope is that engaging in religious activities would, for example, bring latent moral ideals into sharper focus.

It is important, then, to distinguish between a fictionalist semantics and a fictionalist attitude. But it is not clear that they are completely independent of each other. In particular, it is not clear that the attitude is rationally sustainable independently of the corresponding semantics. On the other hand, treating theological statements as if they were true clearly fits comfortably with the supposition that they are in fact fictional. That, arguably, is the purer position. So when I use the term ‘fictionalism’ in this essay I intend to refer to a position which proposes a fictionalist semantics: the fictionalist attitude will be the natural corollary.

---

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Eshleman (2005). His characterisation of the position can be found on pp. 190-1.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 185-6.

Some of the concerns raised in the literature about ‘religious fictionalism’ may affect the ‘pure’ form of fictionalism at issue here; others may not.

On the fictionalist account, the logical properties of theological discourse will be those of fictions. So, for example, the world defined by the theological fiction will be incomplete: there are some propositions that are neither true nor false in it, just as there is no fact of the matter as to whether or not Miss Haversham had a George II dressing table in her bedroom. In the God-fiction, bivalence is not preserved. Nevertheless, there is no reason to deny that it is fictionally complete; that is, it is not part of the fiction itself that some propositions lack truth-value. Similarly, God-talk is not closed under deduction: if it is true in the theological fiction that *p* and also true in the theological fiction that Not-*p*, it does not immediately follow that it is true in the fiction that (*p* and Not-*p*). Some inconsistency, therefore, may be tolerated, and does not generate, by the principle of *Ex Falso Quodlibet*, every proposition.

With the fictionalist position characterised, let us turn back to the relations between our three church-goers.

### 3. Fiona and Reginald: the integration of fictionalists into a realist community

On the face of it, Fiona and Reginald have a lot in common, making it relatively easy for them to maintain their policy of peaceful co-existence. Both agree that statements made in the language of God-talk are true. They agree on the decision procedures for deciding whether they are true: appeals to scripture, to canonical statements of doctrine, and to the implications of these. They may even both appeal to considerations of natural theology: the project of relating theological truth to natural phenomena. Natural theology is, of course, typically presented as a realist enterprise. But there is no reason why a fictionalist cannot incorporate the same kind of moves, for the religious fiction is not isolated from the real world. Features of the actual world—the fine-tuning of the universe, for example—can be incorporated into the religious fiction, and play a role within it. And indeed our understanding of ordinary fiction is almost always informed by knowledge of how things are in fact. A rudimentary understanding of the world’s actual geography, for example, is a requisite for following the narrative of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Similarly, an understanding of actual Tudor history will enrich a reading of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and similar historical novels. The authors of such novels will, of course, incorporate quite a bit of the relevant history, but some of this background readers might supply for ourselves, particularly if they are minded to extend the events of the novel in their own imagination. Such extension is precisely what the fictionalist about religious discourse may wish to engage in. So Fiona need not absent herself from conversations with Reginald about natural theology.

Nor need Fiona insist that Reginald is mistaken about the truth-conditions of the statements he utters. For if fictional discourse requires fictive intention, Reginald, who has no such intention, cannot be mistaken in providing a realist semantics for his statements. (He would, however, be mistaken if he extended that realist semantics to the statements made by Fiona.)

Both, too, can give religious discourse a central role in shaping their moral and spiritual outlook. Seeing the world through the interpretative framework of God-centred discourse allows them both to get more clearly in focus what is of most value in life: love for others, displacement of the self from the centre of one's projects, the voice of conscience, the subordination of short-term goals for long-term ones, etc. None of this, of course, is inaccessible from the atheistic perspective—it would be arrogant to suggest otherwise—but it is much more accessible (argue Reginald and Fiona) if one inhabits the theistic framework.

What happens when Fiona and Reginald's conversation turns to the problem of evil? Reginald feels some pressure to reconcile his realist belief in the goodness of God with the evident fact of suffering. Fiona is entirely willing to engage with this issue. After all, it is important to her that the fiction is not isolated from real human concerns, and also that the fiction is not (in any obvious way) internally inconsistent. Eventually, after having considered various theodicies which might make sense of suffering, Reginald proposes that, although there most certainly is a solution to the problem of evil, for there is both suffering and a loving God, that solution is probably beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Fiona can readily agree. For the existence of a solution to the problem of evil that is unknown to us is entirely compatible with the logic of fiction. As we observed above, a fiction is incomplete: some propositions will lack a truth-value within the fiction, since whatever account of truth-in-fiction we adopt, the truth-value of some propositions will be underdetermined by that account. Among those propositions lacking a truth-value in the religious fiction may be any statement of a particular theodicy (it is not to be found in any of the canonical writings, but only in interpretative commentaries which lack the authority of those writings). And if  $p$  is neither true nor false in the fiction, it cannot be a known fact. However, the fiction is still fictionally complete: that is, it is fictionally true that, for any proposition, bivalence holds. The fictionalist can, therefore, entirely consistently hold that there is a solution to the problem of evil—i.e. that it is true in the fiction that there is such a solution, even if for no  $p$ , is  $p$  the solution.

We may wonder, however, if the appearance of genuine communication between Reginald and Fiona is genuine. Sentences uttered by Reginald will certainly sound the same as sentences uttered by Fiona, and there will be a significant number of sentences to which they are both prepared to give assent. But the truth-conditions of a sentence uttered by Reginald, and an apparently identical one as uttered by Fiona, will be quite different. The realist's talk of God, if it picks out anything, picks out a real, transcendent being, otherwise it simply fails to refer. The fictionalist's talk of God, in contrast, picks out a fictional character, and, given the framework, it cannot fail to do so. Different semantics, different content, and so (it seems) no genuine communication. On the other hand, it is quite implausible to suggest that sentences have completely different meanings depending on whether they occur in a fictional or non-fictional context. 'The cat is on the mat', as uttered by a fictional character, conjures up the same image in the mind of the reader as that same sentence uttered in real life. We do not need a translation manual to be able to read a novel written in our own language. Statements about a cat in a fictional context really do represent a cat (just a purely intentional one). And any doubts that Reginald and Fiona are using words to mean the same things can be put to rest by checking that they both agree on the inferential patterns exhibited

by God statements. Both agree, for example, that ‘God spoke to Moses’ entails ‘God spoke to someone.’ In the context of specific theories of meaning, admittedly, the meaning of ‘Fire!’, as uttered in a burning building, will not be the same as the meaning of ‘Fire!’, as uttered by an actor on stage. If we apply Grice’s theory of meaning, for example,<sup>5</sup> we will understand the first in terms of what the utterer wants us to believe, the second in terms of what the author wants us to imagine. But there will be a very significant, and asymmetric, connection. As we might put it, the meaning in a fictional context is parasitic on the meaning in a non-fictional context. It is because a non-fictional utterance of ‘Fire!’ means what it does that a fictional utterance of ‘Fire!’ means what it does.

The apparent robustness of the agreement between Reginald and Fiona, then, provides some hope that fictionalists can be integrated into a realist community. Three difficulties, however, arise for a fictionalist appropriation of the language and practice of the realist’s religion. They concern, respectively: the content of religious language, the experience of religious activity, and the relation between religious doctrine and behaviour. Let us look at these in turn.

#### 4. Choosing the right fiction

Any form of fictionalism depends for its success on a clearly-defined fiction. Modal fictionalism, for example, can exploit the fact that there already exists a well worked-out modal semantics in the form of concrete possible world realism. Given that realism can provide, for any modal proposition, a statement of its truth-conditions, so can fictionalism. All the fictionalist has to do is to precede that statement with the ‘According to the concrete possible world fiction...’ operator. This is not the only fictional story that could be told about the modal, but the fictionalist can decide, among the competing realist accounts, which offers the most satisfactory semantics,<sup>6</sup> and adopt that as the preferred fiction.<sup>7</sup> A similar procedure suggests itself for number fictionalism.

But with religious fictionalism, it is not so clear that one preferred fiction will emerge. There are at least as many religious fictions as there are religious traditions. This in itself is not troubling for the fictionalist, for part of the instrumental value of religion is its role in forming cohesive communities, unified by a common discourse and a common set of ideals. Adopting a religious tradition identifies one with a particular religious community. So the selection of any given religion is much more likely to be determined by cultural factors than by a judgement concerning semantics. Only one religion may in practice be a live contender. (This is not to deny, what is plainly the case, that people occasionally move from one religion to another, but typically this happens for decidedly non-fictionalist reasons.) And it is important, for instrumental reasons, that one religious fiction is chosen. Imagine a fictionalist who simply moves at whim from one religion to another. At any one time, there is a

---

<sup>5</sup> See Grice (1957).

<sup>6</sup> What does ‘satisfactory’ amount to here? Two things, at least: expressive power—i.e. the range of types of modal statements that are provided with a semantics; and respect for the inferential patterns we know to exist in modal discourse.

<sup>7</sup> For doubts concerning the modal fictionalist project, however, see Divers (1995).

consistent semantics for their utterances: it just happens to be a different semantics on different occasions. It is hard to see that this involves anything other than a very provisional, and perhaps also superficial, commitment to the religious life. In contrast, a fictionalist who stays true to a particular religious fiction is in a better position to explore it more deeply, to let it guide them more thoroughly.

Having selected a particular religion, however, further choices have to be made. For within a religious tradition—and this is abundantly true of Christianity—there will, within the realist community, be a variety of ideas concerning which parts of the discourse are to be taken literally, and which regarded as purely symbolic, or metaphorical. This is so even of so central a Christian doctrine as the Incarnation. There are realists who take the doctrine at face value, and assert that God the Son really did live a human life on Earth. But there are others who, while taking a realist view of God-talk in general, adopt a ‘non-Incarnational’ Christology: that is, they take Jesus to be simply and purely human, but as having a unique relationship to God which is metaphorically captured in terms of divine incarnation. This is not a trivial difference, given the central role of the doctrine of the Incarnation in the Christian religion. So which view will the fictionalist adopt, and on what grounds?

It might be thought that a fictionalist will naturally side with the non-incarnational Christologist, as both will agree that, literally understood, the doctrine of the Incarnation is false, so the point of continuing to use incarnational language must lie elsewhere. But it does not follow that in the fiction, incarnational language must be taken metaphorically, for else the same reasoning would recommend that every statement uttered within the fiction is to be construed metaphorically. On the other hand, the fictionalist is not obliged to say that, fictionally, God lived on Earth as a human being. For even within fictional discourse, the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical can be maintained. That is, it may be fictionally true that it is metaphorical that God lived on Earth. So there is a genuine choice for the fictionalist to make here. The fictionalist may choose to wait until the debate between the two realist factions is concluded, and then adopt whichever emerges as the preferred view. But this is unsatisfactory, first, because the issue will not be concluded, and second because reasons for preferring one interpretation of the Incarnation within an essentially realist context may not carry over to the fictionalist context.

This is just one case in which the fictionalist is faced with more than one story to choose between, and the grounds for choosing one over the other are not clear. How will Fiona respond? She may point out that the indeterminacy of any fiction invites us to explore different fictional paths. We might take a given fictional narrative as a trunk from which may sprout different fictional branches, corresponding to different ways in which the narrative might be developed. Engaging with the fiction might involve a certain amount of hopping from branch to branch—and so it is, explains Fiona, with the religious fiction. We do not need to prioritise one branch over another. (Though, bearing in mind the reasons given above against the practice of a fickle fictionalism that simply moves through different religious traditions, the hopping should not get out of hand.)



## 5. Public and private prayer

One very obvious difference one would expect between realism and fictionalism is an experiential one. It just isn't going to feel the same if one abandons the realist outlook in favour of a fictionalist one. Taking it all to be real, and engaging in pretence, are two very different states of mind. Shifting between active engagement with religion on the one hand, and cool reflection on its content and import on the other, is for the fictionalist likely to result in a certain amount of cognitive dissonance, or so one would have thought. For the active engagement to work, awareness of the fictionalist interpretation has to be suppressed (compare being with someone who, throughout a particularly emotional and absorbing film, says 'it's only a film: it's not really happening'). And this is likely to become especially acute when moving from the public to the private sphere. In an act of public worship, and perhaps particularly when a significant number of those participating are realists, the fictionalist will be caught up in the solemnity, joyfulness and intensity of the occasion. It is comparatively easy, in those circumstances, to engage fully with the fiction (as the fictionalist sees it). The interpretative semantics is far from the forefront of one's mind. But public worship does not exhaust the realist's repertoire of religious practices: there is also the time spent in private prayer, time to which the realist would attach considerable value and importance. What will the fictionalist do?

Let's consider first the reasons Reginald might have for engaging in private prayer. First, he may use it to petition God for various things he desires, in the hope that God will grant his requests. Second, he may use it for companionship, to help him feel closer to God. Third, he may use it for something intermediate between these: to align his will with the will of God. By coming closer to God in prayer, he hopes to become aware of the divine will, and in so doing reorient, as far as possible, his own desires.

Can any of these have a counterpart in Fiona's outlook? The first, prayer as petition, seems ruled out at once. Fiona cannot but be aware that no-one is there to grant her requests, and the attempt to make such a request will surely strike her as a sham. There can be no willing suspension of belief here. But this may not be the loss it appears. After all, even realists may have reason to be suspicious of petitionary prayer. Can we really ask God to intervene, if he does not already judge it appropriate to do so? Either what will happen, without intervention, is already in accordance with what he ordains, in which case intervention will make things worse, or it is not in accordance with the divine will, but intervention would not be compatible with the desire to allow humans to shape the world by their own unaided actions.<sup>8</sup> And in any case, the realist may take the view that petitionary prayer is something we should grow out of. Rather than asking God to fix things, as if we were children, we should rather see ourselves as the instruments of God's purpose. So although Fiona cannot, without a serious degree of self-deception, replicate the realist's use of petitionary prayer, this may not be such a problem, from the mature religious viewpoint.

What of the second use of prayer, the seeking after companionship? For Fiona, there is no companion, and praying as if there is, for the sake of companionship, invites comparison with the sad case of someone's picking up the telephone and (trying to ignore the

---

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Basinger (1983).

dialling tone) having a pretend, and very one-sided, conversation, in the vain hope that they will feel a little less lonely. Surely, then, this second use of prayer can have no genuine counterpart in Fiona's life.

That might seem to rule out the third use of prayer, too: the aligning of one's will with the will of God. There is no (real) will of God if there is no (real) God. But might one nevertheless attempt to align one's will with what one imagines would be the will of God? Fictional character though he may be, God represents for Fiona a moral ideal, an expression of perfect love. There is nothing self-deceptive in Fiona's genuine attempt to order her will in accordance with this ideal. But then, it will be objected, there is no need for Fiona to do this through the medium of prayer. All she need do is to contemplate that ideal, and attempt to order her desires accordingly. There is no need for a fake attempt at communication. Nevertheless, Fiona may find that a cool contemplation of an ideal is not sufficient. She needs to enter more imaginatively into a vision of pure love. Prayer might be just the medium for that imaginative state. It is not, of course, an act of communication, and indeed it need not take precisely that form. It might, rather, be a meditation, and one in which Fiona might find it helpful to voice, in her head, her own thoughts, as if they were addressed to another person, and imagine what someone motivated only by love would say in response. And, without there being any actually hallucinatory experience, answers may come to her as if they did not have their origin in her own thoughts. Phenomenologically, this could have a great deal in common with the experience of prayer that many realists have.

There is one other aspect of prayer that might come under this third heading, which the fictionalist cannot wholly replicate, and that is the wrestling with doubt that even the staunchest realist is subject to from time to time. 'Help thou mine unbelief', cries the realist.<sup>9</sup> Fiona is not subject to those doubts, since they cannot arise in the fictionalist framework. Is this a loss? Reginald might argue that this wrestling with doubt is part of the authentic religious experience, something that sharpens one's awareness of the demands of a religious life, and a constant test of the sincerity of one's faith. That this should find no counterpart in Fiona's life makes hers a less truly religious outlook. But perhaps, after all, there is a counterpart in Fiona's prayers. Earlier, I mentioned the cognitive dissonance that threatens the fictionalist's religious engagement. Awareness of the fictional nature of what is being said and appealed to may at any time break in upon Fiona's sincere attempt to immerse herself in the fiction. Dealing with that dissonance, resisting its disruptive effect, bears some comparison to the realist's attempt to cope with doubt. Further, Fiona's loyalty to her chosen fiction may be tested from time to time, when it confronts her with uncomfortable moral, psychological or spiritual truths, and on those occasions some effort of will is required not simply to abandon it.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Mark 9.24

<sup>10</sup> I am very grateful to an anonymous reader for this suggestion.

## 6. Reasons and causes

Another potential difference between realism and fictionalism is the role religious language plays in the shaping of behaviour. For Reginald, theistic statements stand in a reason-giving relation to moral attitudes. For example, ‘God loves us’ expresses a reason to love each other: we are objectively lovable! For Fiona, it seems, such statements cannot be reason-providing in the same way, since the fictional truth that God loves us does not give us a reason to love each other. No merely fictional truth, it seems, can give us a reason to do anything. So it does not help to point out that it is fictionally true that ‘the fact that God loves us gives us a reason to love each other’, for again what counts as a reason in the fiction has no implications for moral attitudes outside the fiction.

This is not to deny that engaging with fiction can shape and develop our moral understanding. Indeed this is part of its very considerable value. But more than one mechanism is at work. A fiction might alert us to certain truths about human nature (the characters will not, typically, be presented as having a wholly alien mentality), or present us with hypothetical dilemmas which test our moral understanding. In fiction, then, we may indeed find reasons for what we do—but then those reasons aren’t (or aren’t wholly) fictional truths. At a somewhat more immediate level, we find ourselves emotionally involved with the fictional characters. Notoriously, our anxiety, joy and sadness for them seem to sit side by side with a firm belief that they do not actually exist.<sup>11</sup> That emotional involvement may then go on to alter our behaviour towards real people, in positive ways. Here, the relation between fictional truth is not so much reason-giving but causal. Or since (as Davidson (1963) plausibly argued) reasons can also be causes, we should avoid the implication that reasons are acausal, and say just that fiction shapes our behaviour in ways that don’t appeal to reasons. For the fictionalist, God-talk is wholly fictional. So the connection between such talk and subsequent behaviour is merely causal. God talk cannot, for the fictionalist, rationalise moral behaviour. For the realist, it can.

Perhaps, however, this difference, though non-trivial, is not enough to prevent the integration of fictionalists into the realist community. The important thing is that religious language continues to be behaviour-shaping; the precise mechanism by which it does so need not interfere with the actual business of religion, but is only the kind of thing to exercise philosophers (!). In any case, the fictionalist can resist the suggestion that the fictional statements of religion cannot be reason-giving. It can be part of engaging with the fiction that certain fictional statements are responded to as if they were true. And that may mark the difference between religious fiction and other fictions. With a film or novel it may be entirely appropriate to respond to it as if it were true, but only up to a point. That is, certain emotional responses might be appropriate, the kind that would also be appropriate if it were not fiction but fact. It would not, however, be appropriate to respond to a crime novel, for example, by ringing up the police to ask what they are doing about this horrible murder. But with the religious fiction, a deeper emotional and imaginative involvement will lead, not to

---

<sup>11</sup> According to Kendal Walton (1978), however, these emotions are only quasi-joy, quasi-sadness, etc.

inappropriate attitudes and behaviour, but ones whose value for the self and the religious community vindicates that involvement. And that vindication is a form of rationalisation.

## 7. Andy, Nora and Agnes

So far, the differences between Fiona and Reginald look as if they are not so serious as to break up the sense of common ground sufficiently to warrant Fiona's banishment from a realist community. It is time now to invite the other representatives into the discussion, to see if they fare significantly better, or significantly worse.

Andy, recall, is the anthropological reconstructionist. He takes theological discourse to be translatable into statements about human ideals, and not actually about a transcendent being at all. Does he face the same kinds of challenge as Fiona? He would say that the choice between different interpretations of religious doctrine is, if a genuine one, a choice between different ideals. It is not clear, for example, that the dispute between incarnational and non-incarnational Christology is one of ideals, rather than one that arises only for the realist (and fictionalist, insofar as every realist dispute has a fictionalist counterpart). Fiona's problem in making sense of private prayer, on the other hand, looks as if it will arise in exactly the same form for Andy. Prayer is not really an act of communication, so we need to have some other account. And the account that is available to Fiona is equally available to Andy. As for the issue of whether theological statements provide reasons for action, Andy will point out that, since theological statements are encoded moral ideals, they already contain within themselves recommendations for action. It seems overall, then, that Andy will find the challenges to fictionalism slightly less pressing.

On the other hand, Andy is faced with an objection not faced by Fiona: it is just implausible that every statement in God-talk can be mapped onto a corresponding statement about moral ideals. And when we make the attempt to do just that, some apparently different statements in God-talk will turn out to correspond to the same moral statement. The apparent richness and complexity of God-talk will then turn out to be something of a distraction. Fiona, in contrast, can do full justice to the richness of meaning in God-talk, as different statements will play different roles in the fiction. She can concede to Andy that there is a connection between God talk and moral ideals, but still insist that it is not as direct as Andy suggests. We often do read moral messages into a fictional narrative, without supposing that each statement can be translated into a corresponding moral statement. Fiona might even point out to Andy that in some sense her position absorbs his. Sometimes, instead of directly engaging with a fiction, losing ourselves in it, as it were, we want to take a critical stance towards it. We might, for example, want to describe the Shakespearean characters of Prince Hal, Henry IV and Richard II as representing three images of kingship. Then we are self-consciously talking of fictional characters and the way they are constructed by the author. Andy, as Fiona might provocatively put it, is simply Fiona in critical mode. But, unlike Fiona, who can readily explain the emotional impact of religion in terms of engagement with fiction, Andy has nothing to offer on this score.

Nora the non-cognitivist is a variant of Andy, the difference between that, whereas Andy will take God-talk to assert moral ideals, Nora takes God-talk to express those ideals

(just as ‘ow!’ expresses pain).<sup>12</sup> Again, Fiona can say with some justification that her position absorbs Nora’s. Insofar as the fiction makes us aware of certain moral ideals, when we engage with it appropriately, it could be said to express them. But Fiona, unlike Nora, is not obliged to hold that each statement in God-talk expresses a specific ideal.

And so to our final character, Agnes the agnostic. The standard agnostic accepts the realist construal of theological statements: they are intended as being (more less) literally descriptive of reality. But the agnostic does not know whether they are in fact true or not, and may indeed hold that they are undecidable. So understood, there are degrees of agnosticism, corresponding to strengths of belief or doubt, and some realist believers may confess to a degree of agnosticism with respect to certain aspects of God talk. When Reginald talks of his wrestling with doubt, he may appropriately express this in terms of ‘agnostic moments’. So there will be little difficulty, one would have thought, in integrating agnostics into a realist community. Nevertheless, there will always be the suspicion that agnostics are just a bit half-hearted about religion. They are uncertain which particular religious account to adopt because they are uncertain whether one should adopt any religious account! They will approach prayer with a ‘hedging one’s bets’ attitude. This is well expressed by Anthony Kenny: the agnostic may pray in the hope that there is someone there, rather like someone ‘adrift in the ocean, trapped in a cave, or stranded on a mountainside, who cries for help though he may never be heard or fires a signal which may never be seen.’<sup>13</sup> And the agnostic (of this standard kind) will recognise theological statements as reasons for actions, but any doubts as to the truth of those statements will translate into uncertainty over the usefulness of the actions. Finally, any agnostic who recognises a significant degree of uncertainty about theological statements will probably want to refrain from uttering the creeds, for fear of bad faith, in the Sartrean sense<sup>14</sup>. So, altogether, the agnostic looks to be in a weaker position, vis-à-vis full engagement with the religious life, than any of the other characters of this discussion.

But we have not yet asked Agnes about her views. Is she an agnostic of this standard kind? It turns out she is not. She concedes to the standard agnostic that, given a realist semantics, theological statements are undecidable. But she is undecided whether that is the appropriate semantics. Perhaps a fictionalist semantics is appropriate. It may be that a realist semantics is appropriate for part of God-talk, and a fictionalist semantics for the rest. But where should the line be drawn? She doesn’t know. This might seem to be rather a lot of doubt, and the others might be inclined to dismiss Agnes as thoroughly confused. However, Agnes can argue that she has an advantage over the standard agnostic, for she can guarantee the truth of theological statements. She reasons as follows: ‘Either the realist truth-conditions obtain or they do not. If they do, I intend the statements to have realist truth-conditions; if they do not obtain, then I intend the statements to have fictionalist truth-conditions. Either way, they come out true, but in virtue of what they come out true I cannot say. So I can utter the creeds in good faith. And I can attach at least the same value to the statements as can the

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf the distinction Ayer makes between subjectivism about moral utterances, and his own expressivist account: see Ayer (1936), chapter VI.

<sup>13</sup> Kenny (1979), p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> That is, lying to oneself: see Sartre (1969), Part One, Chapter Two.

fictionalist, and can contemplate the possibility that their value goes beyond that, in putting us in touch with a transcendent reality.’

Agnes regrets that there is not a more elegant name for her position. ‘Semantic religious agnosticism’ is the best she can offer for the time being. Insofar as Fiona has able to address the various challenges to her call for philosophical ecumenism, so, it seems, can Agnes. Indeed, it seems that Agnes may have the advantage, after all.<sup>15</sup>

## References

- Ayer, A.J. (1936) *Language, Truth and Logic*, London: Victor Gollancz
- Basinger, David (1983) ‘Why petition an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God?’, *Religious Studies* 19, pp. 25–42
- Davidson, Donald (1963) ‘Actions, reasons and causes’, in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, pp. 3-19
- Divers, John (1995) ‘Modal fictionalism cannot deliver possible worlds semantics’, *Analysis* 55, pp. 81–88
- Eshleman, Andrew (2005) ‘Can an atheist believe in God?’, *Religious Studies* 41 (2005)
- Field, Hartry (1980) *Science Without Numbers*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Grice, H.P. (1957) ‘Meaning’, *Philosophical Review* 66, pp. 377-88
- Joyce, Richard (2005) ‘Moral fictionalism’, in Mark Kalderon, ed., *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 287–313
- Kenny, Anthony (1979) *The God of the Philosophers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Rosen, Gideon (1990) ‘Modal fictionalism’, *Mind* 99, pp. 327-54
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (1969) *Being and Nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes, London: Methuen
- Walton, Kendal (1978) ‘Fearing fictions’, *Journal of Philosophy* 65, pp. 5-27

---

<sup>15</sup> Some of the ideas in this paper were discussed at a seminar on religious fictionalism at Durham in December, 2012. I am very grateful to those present for their suggestions, and especially to Chris Insole, Ian Kidd and Nancy Cartwright. Thanks also to Andrei Buckareff and two anonymous readers for comments on an earlier draft.