

Philosophy in Review



Tamás Demeter, Ted Parent and Adam Toon, (Eds.), "Mental Fictionalism: Philosophical Explorations"

Aron Dombrovski

Volume 42, Number 4, November 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094009ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094009ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dombrovski, A. (2022). Review of [Tamás Demeter, Ted Parent and Adam Toon, (Eds.), "Mental Fictionalism: Philosophical Explorations"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 42(4), 14–16. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094009ar>

Copyright © Aron Dombrovski, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Tamás Demeter, Ted Parent and Adam Toon, (Eds.). *Mental Fictionalism: Philosophical Explorations*. Routledge 2022. 384 pp. \$160.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780367548957).

Folk psychology is heavily embedded in our everyday discourse, providing a toolkit to understand the people around us as well as ourselves. Sentences related to thoughts, beliefs, desires, or any other mental states are all part of this theory, e.g. 'Peter *believes* that the Empire State Building is 443 meters tall'; 'Laura *wants* to eat a cheesecake'; 'John *fears* the dentist.' In light of the important role folk psychology plays in our life, one may think that its foundations are solid. But a sentence that relies on the existence of mental entities can be questioned on metaphysical grounds, leading to a skeptical attitude towards its meaning and truth. This concern gave rise to eliminativism, which aimed to substitute folk psychology with neuroscientific talk – an idea many have found impossible to put into practice. But is there any other option for those who think that folk psychology is not true, and that eliminativism cannot be the answer?

Fictionalism has already proved its utility in cases where a certain discourse may not be true but it is indispensable for our everyday routine, e.g. mathematics, modality, or ethics. Mental fictionalism is an approach to folk psychology that wishes to conserve our practices by keeping the discourse but also acknowledges that it lacks certain epistemic virtues, i.e., its sentences – taken at their face value – are not true. Saying any more about this standpoint, in general, is not an easy task due to the diversity of its variations. It is good news that a new volume *Mental Fictionalism: Philosophical Explorations* was published containing a comprehensive introduction by the editors and 18 essays by leading experts on the subject.

The volume starts with an introduction by the editors that introduces basic concepts, distinctions, strategies, and supporting theories (i.e. John Searle's speech act theory and Kendall Walton's pretense-theory) for mental fictionalism. It is a recommended read for those who have a philosophical background but are not familiar with this area of research because it can help to understand the other papers. After the Introduction, the book is divided into four thematic parts. The first part contains five proposals that elaborate on different versions of mental fictionalism. It starts with Meg Wallace's classic article about a general idea of mental fictionalism that is similar to the Introduction, and – I would say – it mainly has historical value: this article was written in 2007 as one of the first formulations of mental fictionalism, published in this volume for the first time. It is followed by Adam Toon's paper, which tries to protect the theory from the problem of cognitive suicide. The objection's somewhat dramatic name refers to a self-defeating argument: in order to spell out their theory, mental fictionalists have to use sentences that contain mental terms. This is one of the main issues of this approach, and many papers consider it. William Lycan defended a behaviorist version of the theory, but his aim is unusual: the author is not committed to his theory, rather, he tries to prove that no philosophical theory can be rejected on purely theoretical grounds as a metaphilosophical program. This follows a similar project published earlier, where he argued for cartesian dualism. Tamás Demeter with his *affective storyism* introduces a novel way of characterizing mental fictionalism by treating folk psychology not as a theory but as a toolkit that helps us express our feelings and navigate in the social realm. A novel



feature of Demeter's account is that he openly advocates a covert version of fictionalism, where – in order to preserve folk psychology's utility – only a few people should know about its true nature. Adrian Downey departs from fictionalism and tries to provide an eliminativist theory that can answer the most crucial problems. Downey's so-called enactive-ecological fictionalism is a close cousin to Ryleian approaches.

A great virtue of the volume is that it shows the weaknesses of mental fictionalism too. The second part contains five papers, each focused on different challenges to the theory. László Kocsis and Krisztián Pete favor a Sellarsian proto-theory of folk psychology over mental fictionalism. They emphasize that mental fictionalism is not able to explain how the users of folk psychology can successfully predict others' behavior if their sentences are not true. Zoe Drayson argued that mental fictionalism is an undermotivated theory because most of its proponents do not provide any reasoning why should one deny the existence of mental entities. Without these arguments, it is not clear what is the problem with mental realism. Daniel D. Hutto introduces several versions of eliminativism in order to present it in its most viable form. Then, he shows that the theory – despite the usual opinion – is still a worthy contender against mental fictionalism. Amber Ross points out certain disanalogies between common fiction – like *Sherlock Holmes* – and folk psychology, e.g. the indefiniteness problem: the exact borders of folk-psychological discourse are vague, and canonical 'facts' are not established. Ross also examines the genre of folk-psychological fiction, which is a fantasy with magical elements. Finally, the aforementioned cognitive suicide challenge returns in a stronger form after Miklós Márton and János Tózsér show that it is still a problem for eliminativism as well as for fictionalism. The authors arrive at this conclusion after a linguistic analysis of fiction and a taxonomy of different kinds of fictionalism.

Four articles about further developments of mental fictionalism can be found in the third part of the volume. Ted Parent generalizes the account into a global fictionalist theory, where he considers every ontological statement fictive. This thesis is challenged by Descartes's cogito argument because it is hard to question the literal truth of sentences that state the existence of the thinking self. Parent tries to solve this issue with linguistic analysis. Sam Wilkinson introduces two kinds of psychiatric fictionalism. The first is a fictionalist approach to the mental sphere. Of course, it does not mean to deny that mental patients suffer from certain diseases; its main thesis is that those are not mental but brain diseases. The second form is fictionalism about diseases in general, which may not sound like an intuitive idea. Wilkinson motivates this approach with the value-ladenness of medical judgments: considering someone ill is always bad, so a gap opens between brute facts and medical judgments. Julianne Chung introduces epistemological fictionalism, a framework for our knowledge-ascription claims. Chung analyzes different approaches to the interpretation of these statements: exaggeration, hyperbole, finally settling on a metaphoric approach. A second paper by Meg Wallace attacks ontological deflationism by proving that cognitive suicide is a present problem there too. Deflationists – notable proponents are Rudolf Carnap, Eli Hirsch, and Amie Thomasson – wish to omit all metaphysical talk because they do not find it useful, or, in a stronger version of the account, they think that it is meaningless. Wallace thinks that the problem of cognitive suicide can be avoided by fictionalists because they take ontological talk seriously.

The final part of the book introduces different alternatives to mental fictionalism. The chapter opens with Tim Crane and Katalin Farkas's article about mental modellism, which is a minimalistic version of mental fictionalism. Mental modellism builds up on Crane's previous theories of mind that grants objective reality to consciousness, worldview, and habitus. These terms are all used with a specific meaning that is elaborated in the article. Their new theory is able to escape cognitive suicide because it is realist about mental entities, even though the authors admit that sentences of folk psychology in most cases contain nonreferring terms. Bruno Mölder's paper has a twofold aim. First, he lays the ground by setting the criteria for fictionalist standpoints, and taxonomizes them through different aspects, providing a new distinction between the lean and rich committing force of folk psychology. Second, he enriches this taxonomy with his ascriptivist theory which is a rival approach to mental fictionalism. According to ascriptivism, narration and self-narration have a constitutive role in the existence of our mental states. Julia Tanney presents arguments about the existence of abstract entities and attacks the compositionality and proposition theory of meaning in order to arrive at a deflationist argument that mental terms do not refer to anything. According to Tanney, philosophers falsely suppose that our common-sense beliefs are committed to anything metaphysical because the majority of people lack any ontological knowledge. Finally, Daniel C. Dennett examines his own relation to mental fictionalism and states that fictionalism must be a temporary account that will be surpassed by better frameworks. After this, Dennett recapitulates his previous theory of mind and tries to clarify some of the misunderstood elements.

The volume contains a diverse collection of essays covering the very idea of mental fictionalism as well as its typical problems, possible solutions, further developments, and surrounding areas of research. The editors' introduction helps those who are not familiar with the topic but experts also can find useful articles to enrich their research.

Aron Dombrovski, MTA Lendület Values and Science Research Group