Quasi-Realism No Fictionalism

1. David Lewis's paper 'Quasi-Realism is Fictionalism' starts with a supposition and a comment upon it which are music to my ears:

> Suppose that Simon Blackburn's quasi-realist program has succeeded perfectly on its own terms – something I think not unlikely.

Given the controversial nature of the program, this much endorsement from a philosopher and logician of Lewis's stature is pleasant indeed. And for the purpose of this paper I am going to bask in its light. In other words, I am not going to say very much directly to defend my program, or render it more or less likely to be successful than it is already.

However Lewis goes on to suggest that quasi-realism is a kind of fictionalism, and it is here that our accord comes under strain. I do not think it is. This, of course, may be a merit, in quasi-realism, or may be a demerit. Fictionalism has been gaining ground of late, having being applied at least to modal discourse, mathematical discourse and moral discourse, and perhaps others as well. So perhaps it would be better to be a fictionalist than to be a quasi-realist, or better to amalgamate the two approaches. Lewis himself thought that quasi-realism gained luster from being identified with fictionalism. But I believe on the contrary that my reluctance to be identified with fictionalism stems from a well-founded mistrust of fictionalism itself. In this paper I shall only register my disquiet at its application to the philosophy of evaluative thoughts and practices and discourses, with a word or two at the end about the modal case. I also believe that quasi-realism, properly understood, makes the deficiencies of fictionalism stand out. However, as we shall find, there may be various positions each claiming the title fictionalism, and some may be further from quasi-realism than others.

Years ago I recognized that the "quasi" in quasi-realism might mislead people, and I took some care to distance myself from an 'as if' philosophy, holding that we talk 'as if' there are (for instance) rights and duties, although there are none really. In my 1987 paper 'Morals and Modals' I asked:

What then is the mistake of describing such a philosophy <quasi-realism> as holding that 'we talk as if there are necessities when really there are none'? It is the failure to notice that the quasi-realist need allow no sense to what follows the 'as if' *except* one in which it is true. And conversely he need allow no sense to the contrasting proposition in which it in turn is true He no more need allow such sense than (say) one holding Locke's theory of colour need accept the view that we talk as if there are colours, when there are actually none. This is doubly incorrect, because nothing in the Lockean view forces us to allow any sense to 'there are colours' except one in which it is true; conversely neither need it permit a sense to 'there are actually none' in which *that* is true.

I went on to say that if the words retain an uncorrupted, English, sense then the Lockean and similarly the quasi-realist, holds not just that we talk and think as if there are …but that there are.

Of course, I freely admit that this has proved very puzzling to some. What then, they ask, is the distinctive claim of quasi-realism? Is it, as Ronald Dworkin claimed, the Cheshire cat of moral theory?[1] It is very confusing for people when the quasi-realist comes upon the scene with his alarmingly large repertoire of confiscation orders, taking words that used to seem to be the private property of the realist, and giving them unashamedly to the putative anti-realist. But I thought then, and think now, that there is somewhere to stand from which to conduct these debates. Dworkin is actually in no position to contest that. For he himself acknowledges that expressivism is a distinct theory of the nature of moral discourse – that is why he loathes it as he does. So there is something distinctive about expressivism, in which case there is something distinctive about combining it with an explanation and justification, a vindicatory genealogy, of forms of language that used to be thought inaccessible to expressivists. As a package, both expressivism, and its ally the quasi-realist construction of various contexts, depend upon the functional distinction between belief and attitude, couched in terms of direction of fit. It offers a genealogy of morals in the voicing of attitude and the demand for

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[1] Ronald Dworkin 'Objectivity and Truth, You'd Better Believe It', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1996.

practical stances from others. But it is not part of my purpose today to elaborate upon that side of the story.

Instead I want to elaborate upon the point which I took to be made by the comparison with Locke. So suppose someone did interpret Locke, not entirely implausibly, as holding that 'we talk as if there are are colours, although there are none really'. It seems then that this Locke would owe us a number of explanations. One would be, that he would need to explain in what way this world is deficient in terms of colour – how does it differ from some other world in which there are colours, really? If we are told that our is not, really, a coloured world, we cannot make much sense of what we are being asked to believe unless we can also make sense of the reverse property: what would it be for ours to be, really, a coloured world? Unless we understand the one, it is hard to see how we can understand the other. The only exceptions to that principle would be necessary propositions, which some hold that we understand without understanding their impossible negations. But we are not supposed to be in the domain of necessary propositions here, since we apparently know what it is to talk as if there are colours, although there are none.

The question might also be put to this Locke, motivated by the thought that fiction is parasitic on reality. We can put the matter in Lewis's own terms. In his paper 'Truth in Fiction' and its postscript Lewis gives us a number of progressively more sophisticated accounts of 'in the fiction f, F'. He starts with the simple idea that:

> A sentence of the form 'in fiction f, F' is true iff F is true at every world where f is told as known fact rather than fiction.

Objections to this arise because we want to say that in the Holmes's stories it is not true that Holmes has a third nostril, which this analysis contradicts. Lewis is led to consider those worlds that depart the least from the actual world, and where the story is told as known fact. Finally, there is some discounting in order to accommodate the world view of those writing the stories (so, for instance, it should not come out that in the Holmes's

stories there was an atomic bomb detonated on Hiroshima within the next half century). Eventually we arrive at:

> A sentence of the form 'in fiction f, F' is non-vacuously true iff, whenever w is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of f, then some world where f is told and known fact and F is true differs less from the world w, on balance, than does any world where f is told as known fact and F is not true.

Fortunately this complexity does not concern us, and neither do the very cogent doubts about possible worlds analyses of fictions that others have raised.[2] What does concern us is that the account requires us to understand the idea of the fiction being told as known fact.

In many cases, including the kinds of rather straightforward fictions on which Lewis concentrates, this requirement poses no problem. In the fiction, a knight called Don Quixote tilts at windmills, and we can readily imagine it being told as known fact that a knight called Don Quixote has tilted at windmills. Some cases are harder: we could tell a fiction in which nobody knows that the treasure is in the cupboard, but it is not so easy to imagine it being told as known fact that nobody knows that the treasure is in the cupboard. But however this is solved, it seems much worse when we come to our Lockean fictionalism about colour.

For this account implies that to understand the Lockean theory of colour we are imagining, we would need to know what it would be for the fiction to be told as known fact. So consider 'canaries are yellow' which , on the account, in our world is told as if true, although it is actually just a fiction. Is it true in the colour fiction, that canaries are yellow? To answer we need to understand what it is for 'canaries are yellow' to be told as known fact, although in our world it is not. This is a tall order. If it is not known fact in our world, what is different in those world in which it is? Are canaries even more blazing yellow than they are here? But how does their not being so extremely yellow, if they are not, also disqualify them from being truly yellow as they are?

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[2] See, for instance, Diane Proudfoot 'Telling it as it Could Not Be', ?

A similar incredulous stare awaits moral fictionalism, or so it seemed to me. I say that it is bad to neglect the needs of children. According to this version of moral fictionalism, I am taken to be saying that in the moral fiction, it is bad to neglect the needs of children, although it is not bad really. So: what would it be for it to be told as known fact that it is bad to neglect the needs of children? It is not so in this world, evidently, so what is different about worlds in which it is? Do children in that world suffer more? But why would that cast doubt on it being bad to neglect ours?

Lewis's own account of fiction can certainly be queried. Perhaps the most telling objection is raised by Richard Joyce, who stresses the distinction between reporting on the content of a fiction, and oneself pretending or making believe. Moral fictionalism, he says, should work in terms of the latter notion. It is preferable to aim at an account whereby we make believe that things are thus and so, rather than one in which we report, truly or falsely, on the content of some already given make-believe. This may well be right. But it does not avoid the problem that we have to have fixed a content for what we pretend to be true. If after reading some sceptic we only make-believe that there are colours, we still need to know what it is that we are pretending, and that requires knowing the difference between worlds allegedly unlike ours, in which there are colours, and worlds including ours in which there are not. We need to know how it is that our world fails to contain super canaries, which are truly yellow, and only contains facsimiles which are not.

2. Lewis's own paper on fictionalism and quasi-realism is built around the notion of an error. His attachment to moral fictionalism is that it is a 'conservative alternative' to the idea that morality in and of itself is tainted with error, in something like the way in which phlogiston theory or witchcraft explanations are so tainted. If we come to believe in this error, one response is to abandon the whole thing: to cease to go in for morality, just as we have grown out of phlogiston and witchcraft theories. Another is to correct the error, retaining only whatever part of the practice kept free of it. But the fictionalist alternative is to continue as before, only prefacing our sayings with some indication that we are making believe that what follows is true. Lewis writes:

You might take fictionalism or quasi-realism in two alternative ways: as possible revisions of our thinking in response to the discovery of an error, or as descriptions of how we are thinking already. Or there is an intermediate alternative: you might describe us – some or all of us – as being in a state of confusion such that fictionalism or quasi-realism would be the minimal unconfused revision of our present state.

And he goes on to claim that fictionalism is the easier way to gain the right to echo everything the realist says but without his mistakes. The fictionalist say everything the most doughty moral realist ever says, but only after a first, disowning preface: let's make believe that what's to come is true, though it isn't. After the disowning preface, the fictionalist is no longer asserting what he says, 'rather he is quasi-asserting it because of his disowning preface'.

By my lights, this raises rather a lot of questions. To explain them, we need to go through various possibilities, concerning the status of the hovering error. In particular, we need to ask whether the error, to which both fictionalists and quasi-realists are supposed to react, lies in the practice itself, or only in what some special theorists, misguided philosophers called realists, say about the practice, or yet again in some awkward amalgam or fusion of the two. The same difficulty over locating the error has always seemed to me difficult for John Mackie.

(1) The first alternative is that the error lies in the practice. That is, some first-order claims, the kind of things people come up with as they moralize in classrooms or parliaments, talk shows and tabloids, are in themselves erroneous. They are erroneous enough that a clearsighted person would not want to assert them, but might content himself with something less, such as pretending or making believe that they are true for some purpose or another.

There are two major problems with this alternative. The first is finding a reason for thinking that there is indeed an error just where this alternative places it. It is not so very clear how there can be. If the preacher says that it is bad to neglect children, he risks error if on the contrary it is good, or at worst indifferent, to neglect children. We can hold

that he is in error, but in everyday life only if we hold that one of these other positions, each of them moral, is not in error. But how is there scope for holding that all three are in error?

The answer must be that the error lay in picking up the vocabulary in the first place. Moralizing and evaluating, asserting any of the three options, is the culprit. Now positions of this shape are certainly possible. If I am convinced, for example, that the everyday conception of free-will conceals metaphysical horrors such as Cartesian dualism, I will not respond to the assertion that we have free-will by saying that we do not, but by a Rortian plea to junk the vocabulary, grow out of the discourse, change the subject. The whole conversation conceals too many presuppositions that I reject.

But if this is the model, expressivism and its loyal ally quasi-realism stand foursquare in the way. For the combination completely *undermines* any reason for imputing error to assertions made with the evaluative vocabulary in the first place. The diagnosis of error takes the form 'you wouldn't or shouldn't be asserting any of those things (bad, good, or indifferent to neglect children) unless you held M' where M represents some large scale, philosophical mistake. Examples might be: 'you wouldn't or shouldn't be asserting any of those things unless you held that there exists a timeless lawgiver in heaven, or unless you held that all human beings think alike on this, or unless you held that your opinion was the deliverance of pure rationality, or unless you held that some properties are in and of themselves magnetic, or…'

But quasi-realism shows us how to avoid any such thoughts. You can hold that it is bad to neglect children without being hostage to any of them. You assert it, thereby voicing your stance or attitude or prescription or desire. We thereby tell how the world would have to move to conform to your norms or standards, and we know what attitude to child neglect we need to have in order sincerely to echo you. Neither you nor we, your audience, need to care a jot about lawgivers, consensus, pure rationality, or magnetic properties. You presumably care about childrens' needs, and good for you.

Perhaps that needs a little qualification. Attitudes can be tied to beliefs sufficiently closely that if the beliefs turn out false, they automatically fall with them. If as a Cambridge man I adopt a supercilious attitude to those from Oxford, I might be said to believe that they are somehow benighted. We can have truths of the form "you

wouldn't or shouldn't hold that attitude unless you held M" where M is a particular belief. But although this can be true in particular cases, it is much harder to believe that it could be true across the board. It is only true where we have what we might call false attitudes, analogous to false pleasures: attitudes that would not and should not survive a clearsighted apprehension of how things stand.

Perhaps the critique would be that it is somehow immature, bad form, to moralize and evaluate at all. We should grow out of saying 'should'. Apart from the self-referential trap into which this seems to have fallen, there is the insuperable difficulty of suggesting what life could be like without evaluation, grading, comparing, advising, esteeming and all the flux of prescriptions and attitudes, emotions and desires, that we would be being asked to give up. So we can safely ignore this kind of nihilism, or braggadocio.

Here it is appropriate to dwell on a second way in which quasi-realism stands foursquare in the way of fictionalism. Consider the inference:

We talk as if there are queer, magnetic moral properties
There are none really
So: to retain respectability, we should see ourselves as only making-believe, pretending.

Quasi-realism blocks this inference because it can be generous with 'as if'. Perhaps it is right to say that we talk as if there are queer, magnetic moral properties. But we also talk as if we are expressing practical attitudes in a language well adapted for that purpose. Since according to me it is the second that we are doing, we should not be seen as pretending anything at all. The coincidence between expressive language and metaphysically suspect, loaded language is, as it were, epiphenomenal. The actual phenomena of moral life may be 'as if' something metaphysically false is true. That would be one explanation of our adopting them. But they may also be as if some vindicatory genealogy is true. That would be a different explanation of our adopting them, and according to me the true one. A phenomenon can be 'as if' p, and also 'as if' some contrary, q. And q may be the true explanation, whereas p is not.

Consider as a parallel free will again. Some might say that in reasoning with you or in resenting your behaviour, I treat you as if you are something more than your brain

and body, some strange Cartesian soul free from the clutches of determinism. Maybe I do. But I also treat you as if you are nothing over and above a living animal that happens to be responsive to the communications and attitudes of others. And since according to me this compatibilism explains the treatment, that is what we are doing, and there is no fiction or make-believe in our doing it. If we want a less contentious example, imagine someone saying that one's feisty ninety year old parent is behaving as if she will live for ever. Maybe she is. But she is also behaving as if she will live for the next few years, and if this explains her doings then there is no lurking charge of make-believe or irrationality.

This means that fictionalism should not be presented simply as the philosophy that we talk as if something is true which is not. It should be the richer doctrine that the false content is integral to, and explains our practice. Either we make believe that the false content is true, or we report that in some fiction it is true. This in turn might be a description of our actual practice or a recommendation of how to comport ourselves once we realize the situation. But in any of these versions the quasi-realist will dissent, because he will deny that a false content is integral to and explains our practice.

The second set of problems with this version of fictionalism arises if we turn to the positive proposal. Here, we admit the diagnosis of error, right inside the first-order practice, but we are counseled to make-believedly believe and make-believedly assert the first order claim. We make believe that it is bad to neglect children. The quasi-realist, once more, finds this hard to understand, as a general proposal. Of course, we can play at moralizing. There are, one is given to understand, erotic games in which partners make believe that one of them has been naughty, en route to further play-acting. But they hardly serve as representative specimens of practical life. Apart from anything else they seem parasitic on attitudes that have a life outside the game, just as we have seen that fiction is parasitic on fact. Otherwise one might hazard that the erotic game would not work at all. It is no good pretending to attitudes that have no existence outside pretences. And of course morality is above all a place where we do not make-believe. We stand fast, thump the table, and find our voices vibrant with conviction.

So let us put aside games, and ask how else the make-believe works. Is the suggestion that we pretend to attitudes that we do not really have? Fie upon such hypocrisy. The only reasonable suggestion is that we don't really know whether we are

making-believe or not. This can indeed happen: people do not know themselves. Perhaps lovers often, or even typically, worry whether they are sincere or just making-believe as they repeat their endearments. Some cynics think it is always only make-believe, and songs sometimes tell us so. Perhaps true love is a fiction.

But if so, the explanation will not transfer to the case of moral attitudes. If true love is a fiction, it is because it includes too many quantifiers: in every way, and every respect, and for ever, the true lover adores without limit the object of the passion—and human beings can't quite manage that. But true moral attitudes do not implicitly contain such quantifiers. In fact in the moral case the problem if anything may be the reverse, not that there is too little sincere moralizing, but too much. For sometimes we indeed have the attitudes in question, perhaps campaigning for them, demanding them from others, putting our shoulders to the wheel of changing the world for the better. So what false modesty should prevent us from asserting them? On the face of it ethics is the last place in the world in which we are happy to preface our assertions and insistences with modest disclaiming prefaces. If I think that you are completely out of line, I am not making believe that you are completely out of line, even as I thump the table, go purple in the face, march you out of the door and forbid you to show your face again.

(2) The second suggestion places the error elsewhere. The idea now is not that there is anything erroneous in moral practice per se, but only in the things that some philosophers, realists, have said about it. One of the lessons of quasi-realism is that it is not easy to pinpoint this error. But let us suppose that there is one. Suppose a philosopher does have a conception of how moral practice works, or what its aspirations are, that is defective on this count. He believes something very queer, for instance that there is literally a unique set of moral tablets stored up in a place called heaven, and that the truth of a moral opinion consists in its derivability from what is on the tablets. Let us call this theorist a Reealist. The Reealist interpretation of what we say when we assert that it is bad to neglect children is that this proposition is derivable from what is on the tablets, and he can express this by saying that Reealy it is bad to neglect children.

Is fictionalism a good response to the Reealist? It might be. Suppose the Reealist is a bit of a brute. He does not just want you to agree that it is bad to neglect children, but

also to assent to his theory. To save embarrassment you might want to say "Reealy it is bad to neglect children" but you might also want to cross your fingers behind your back, saying it with what Catholics called a mental reservation, a private or concealed sign that in truth you only assent to the view that in the Reealist fiction, it is bad. You thus humour the brute, just as you might humour your devout mother by saying the words "Jesus saves", privately holding that in the fiction Jesus saves.

But in the absence of emotional pressure or other threats, why would you want to humour the Reealist? Much better to say outright what you actually think, which is that this Reealist theory is untrue, and since much better accounts of moralizing are on the table, there is no point in pretending that it is true.

Perhaps that last remark also needs qualifying. Perhaps humanity is so depraved that only myths and fictions keep us together. On pragmatic grounds, we may do better to assent to Reealist rubbish, because too much of the practice would fall to pieces if the people came to realize that Reealism is false. There could be wisdom in this, but I very much doubt whether there is. Morality survived the loss of the religious myth without very much trouble, and I cannot but think it self-flattery for any philosopher to suppose that it needs an equivalent philosophical sustaining myth to supply its place. People will go on campaigning for children, or thumping the tables and showing each other the door without help from us. We need not disguise the truth, or play along with bad theory.

3. The third location for the error lies in a combination of the other two. Perhaps there is an unholy fusion of first-order practice in the pulpit or the talk show, and some kind of other thoughts about the content of the practice or its empirical nature or its consequences. A bad philosophy has seeped out of the study and into the market place. And as a result our everyday moral practices are tainted. However, tainted though they are, we need them. Hence the recommendation that we go on, ruefully as it were, moralizing away, but all the time with our fingers crossed behind our backs, a silent disclaiming preface. We make-believe that all is well.

I can imagine situations that deserve this diagnosis. Here is one. Take the concept of a right, one of Bentham's own outstanding examples of a fiction. Suppose everyday practice shows us seamlessly supposing two things true of rights:

(1) Peoples' rights give even superpowers beyond the reach of their resentment, reasons to treat them decently

(2) Peoples' rights ensure that whoever does not treat them decently will come to grief.

Now suppose I learn to my confusion that nothing satisfies both conditions. Whatever gives superpowers reasons to treat powerless people decently has nothing to do with whether they will come to grief if they do not. It turns out that we had injected a lot of wishful thinking into our conception of a right, confusing moral weight with actual weight. Rights are fictions.

Was our mistake first-order or second-order? It might be hard to say. On the one hand, we suppose rights are embedded in discourse about reasons for refraining from harm. On the other hand, we suppose they commonly crop up in arguments apparently designed to appeal to self-interest as a reason for respecting them. The first places them squarely within first-order discourse: announcing a right is announcing a boundary to indecent conduct. The second seems more second-order, telling of one of the consequences of infringing rights. And each clause is adequate to one part of our practice, but they are not both true.

Here fictionalism might be a kind of remedy. It is, as Lewis says, more conservative than abandoning the notion of a right altogether. We might want to go on using the term as we talk to the American establishment, but with our own mental reservation.

On the other hand, we might not. If the superpower is not that much less insightful than we are, it too will have discovered the problem. It is then poised to dismiss rights talk with even more contempt than it instinctively does anyhow. Maybe it would be wise to shift our ground, deploying some set of moral concepts behind which we can put our shoulders more wholeheartedly – as Bentham thought.

I do not really believe that this model applies to our actual use of the concept of a right, which I see as centrally identified through the placing of boundaries, and only tangentially involved with predictions of harm. And if it does not apply to a culturally

thick and supposedly Johnny-come-lately concept like that, it is much less to apply to the central concepts of reason for action, the good and the right.

As I read them, moral philosophers attracted to this model and to consequent fictionalism are perhaps over-impressed by the best-fit-to-the-platitudes model of reference fixing. At any rate, this makes us more likely to detect errors taken to be integral to practice, and more pessimistic about simply avoiding the errors and carrying on without them. So we trawl the marketplace and churches, to find what the folk sayings are. We find, for instance, that

> good little girls don't suck their thumb
> good people always know exactly what to do
> the wicked shall be laid low and the good will inherit life everlasting

Earnestly writing these down, we become skeptical whether the 'folk-concept of the good' has any application at all, since they are each false.[3] But we have been taught, by philosophers if not by political correctness, that we cannot just excise bits of the folk concept without irreparably altering it. And then, if we want to carry on with a clean conscience, we need to keep our fingers crossed or enter a mental reservation. It is good not to neglect your kids becomes a fraught half-truth, and it is better intellectually if we only make-believe it is true.

Obviously, the quasi-realist does not believe a word of this. The folk may say as many weird things as they like about who is good, what follows from being good, or what are the consequences of being good. It does not affect in the least what they are doing when they say that something is good, nor our perfect right to go on and use the term as full-bloodedly as we wish, with no disclaimers, finger-crossing, make-believes, or mental reservations. Incidentally a staunch ally in this stance is Kant, who insisted so

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[3] I think this methodology explains Lewis's own attraction to fictionalism.

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steadily on the autonomy of ethics, whose authority is dependent neither on external rewards nor on empirical convergence of opinion.[4]

3. Much of what I have tried to say about moral fictionalism may transfer to other cases. I shall close by saying a little about the modal case.

Nothing is more common than the thought that Lewis's modal realism takes possible worlds talk at face value. But does it? What value does such talk wear on its face?

It all depends what I am doing when I say that there is a possible world with a talking donkey, or that in all possible worlds, such-and-such is the case. Am I plunging carelessly into the most extravagant possible ontology? Or am I simply choosing a useful language for expressing things that intellectually or metaphysically I allow – talking donkeys, perhaps – and other things I forbid, such as $2 + 2$ being anything other than 4, or water being anything other than H_20?

Once more, if Lewis's ontology makes us nervous, we think there is a mental attitude, which Lewis managed to hold, of believing that Reeally there are possible worlds, and if we are nervous about taking up this attitude we prefer to see ourselves as at best talking as if there Reeally are possible worlds. And we might go on to think we save our souls by only making believe that Reeally there are.

Or, we might adopt my strategy and say that while superficially we talk as if there Reeally are possible worlds, we also talk as if we have found a neat way of tabulating modal commitments, policing our mental life and our sayings and keeping track of inferences and structures in what we allow and disallow. And in that case our commitments can be as full-blooded as we wish. We can be fiercely committed to our modal doctrines, unless, as for faint hearts in the moral case, our confidence has been sapped by dire threats of ontological overload, capsize and doom. I can only say that as we look around, full-blooded modal discourse seems to have brought little doom with it.

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[4] Of course, Kant wavers when it comes to accepting that there is no afterlife where wrongs are righted, but that has always sounded to be simply a pious lapse.