

## The pretensions of religious fictionalism

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### Abstract:

There is a tendency to let fictionalism become a procrustean bed for any view that allows the combination of a more or less uncritical participation in a discourse and its practices with resistance to a fully literal construal of its claims. We consider the tendency problematic, and in this paper we argue that its faults are found in some influential recent accounts of religious fictionalism. We consider one strand of religious fictionalism that centers on the attitudes of *users* of religious discourse rather than the discourse itself, and we argue that such an approach makes it too easy to be a religious fictionalist. On the other hand, we claim that a religious fictionalism that focuses on the secular, eg moral, benefits of engagement in the discourse of religion is susceptible to collapse, and thus makes it too hard to be a religious fictionalist.

### 1. Introduction

According to religious fictionalism on the standard sort of formulation given, for example, by Robin Le Poidevin (2019), Michael Scott and Finlay Malcolm (2017), and Stuart Brock (2020), it is morally and intellectually legitimate to affirm and to accept religious claims and to participate in religious practices without having religious beliefs. What can legitimate such religious engagement are important benefits that do not depend on believing the claims of a religion to be true. But despite this common ground among ways of understanding religious fictionalism (henceforth, “RF”), there are also important differences. Scott and Malcolm (2017) (henceforth, “S&M”) identify a variety of types of practitioners of religion who appear to fit their conditions; they hope to show thereby that RF is not only a conceptually coherent position, but that it is the perspective of choice (implicit or explicit) of some *actual* practitioners. Le Poidevin takes a different route. There is no concern of any kind with trying to accommodate existing positions, as is clear from his understanding of “acceptance”—an attitude of pure make-believe—and his entirely secular understanding of the benefits of engaging with religion. Brock (2020) endorses a subtly different position: a “prescriptive” form of RF according to which, on pragmatic grounds, and in light of certain goals, one might adopt a positive stance towards religious practice regardless of the actual credence one assigns to the truth of religious claims.

In this paper we raise some problems for the kind of accommodationist approach that S&M and Brock seem to favor. We think that it is an instance of something that has worried some of the critics (and even proponents) of fictionalism in general: a tendency to let fictionalism become a procrustean bed for any view that allows the combination of a more or less uncritical participation in a discourse and its practices with resistance to a fully literal construal of its claims.

A useful way of articulating the problems we have in mind is to contrast these versions of RF with a more familiar kind of philosophical fictionalism: moral fictionalism, which is similarly focused on questions of how, practically speaking, we should act in the world. Like other paradigm varieties of philosophical fictionalism, moral fictionalism is usually characterized with a focus on discourse. By contrast, S&M and, in a different way, Brock, characterize RF in terms that center more on *users* of religious discourse, and we think that this is a feature that causes trouble for their accounts of RF. When RF is characterized in discourse-focused terms, as it seems to be for Le Poidevin, it is immune from such trouble. But we also think that this will not in the end save RF.

Describing RF and the challenges it faces on a user-focused approach will occupy the next section of this paper. Section 3 will discuss our preferred discourse-focused approach to philosophical fictionalism. We show that a user-focused approach like that of S&M faces a problem of scope that is not faced by other familiar forms of fictionalism such as moral fictionalism. But despite the apparent advantages of a discourse-focused approach to RF, we suggest that discourse-focused RF doesn't have a future, unlike moral fictionalism. In particular, we argue in section 4 that it faces a collapse problem. Section 5 considers whether this worry also applies to Brock's account of RF. Section 6 draws the different threads of the paper together.

## 2. Easy-road RF?

RF has been described in a variety of ways, some stronger than others. Here are three representative formulations. The first is from S&M:

Religious fictionalism is the theory that it is morally and intellectually legitimate to affirm religious sentences without believing the content of what is said. Additionally, religious fictionalists propose that it is similarly legitimate to engage in public and private religious practices, such as the observation of religious festivals, going to church, or prayer, without having religious beliefs. In general, fictionalists take the benefits of religious engagement to be available to those who do not believe that the claims of religion are true, or even to those that believe these claims are in error. (S&M 2018: 1)

Note the focus on individual practitioners and the benefits they might "legitimately" gain. (The significance of the classification will become apparent later.) Note also that, as stated, RF is a theory about the moral and intellectual status of ways of engaging with religion; on this way of understanding RF, even committed believers can be RF-ists (they might think it legitimate for others to engage with religion in this way, though without taking this path themselves). Like most writing on this topic, we will usually restrict the term to those who actually engage with religious discourse and its practices.

Here is Le Poidevin's formulation of RF:

I shall take religious fictionalism to be the view that to immerse oneself in the religion, to employ its discourse to express that immersion, and to allow it to influence (in part via the emotional responses it evokes) is to engage in a game of make-believe. In that (entirely serious) game, to utter religious statements is not to assert them, but to pretend to assert them. That is why neither the fictionalist's utterances, nor the attitudes they convey, are truth-normed. (Le Poidevin 2019: 32)

Elsewhere he writes that he uses the term “religious fictionalism” to denote a theory of religious language that accepts that statements in the language are truth-apt and irreducible but denies that their purpose is to be objectively fact-stating (Ibid.: 60).

At a glance, this suggests that for Le Poidevin religious fictionalism about some religion R is a view about the language or discourse of R and the way in which practitioners of R use the language to express their immersion in R. That can't be what Le Poidevin has in mind, however, since it would make RF a descriptive doctrine about how all practitioners actually understand the language of R—a surely implausible doctrine for most religions and one that Le Poidevin explicitly disavows (he classifies his version of RF as prescriptive or revolutionary in intent). But there are better ways to understand his account. On one such way, RF characterizes the way some practitioners of R might engage with the language of R; insofar as it is “a theory of religious language,” it is a theory of an agent's or community's *use* of religious language. The reading of Le Poidevin that we prefer, however, takes it as denoting a theory about the language of R that accepts that statements in the language are truth-apt and irreducible, and endorses the continued use of the language in a make-believe spirit, not for the purpose of stating facts but for achieving other worthwhile goals. (As we suggest below, there is a crucial difference between this way of understanding Le Poidevin and the alternative user-focused way.)

Putting this difference aside for now, the most striking difference between Le Poidevin's and S&M's formulation is the central role Le Poidevin assigns to make-believe. S&M's formulation is consistent with letting RF-ers have some other kind of non-doxastic attitude to religious statements—e.g., acceptance (Alston 1996), acquiescence (Bychak 2012), or assumption (Howard-Snyder 2013). Some even take (propositional) *faith* to be such an attitude (indeed, it is at the forefront of Brock's account of RF, to be discussed below), although S&M themselves are dubious. They think that, at the very least, genuine faith that *s* requires that there is no outright disbelief in *s* (cf. M&S 2017: 6; Malcolm 2021: 3), so that some who count as adherents of RF by S&M's lights shouldn't, in their view, be credited with faith.<sup>1</sup>

The role of faith looms particularly large in Brock's recent discussion of RF (Brock 2020). Brock's version is a conjunction of five theses that by and large agree with S&M's understanding of RF: the Truth-aptness thesis (religious statements are truth-apt), Non-

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm (2018) considers an account that includes the “no disbelief” condition but thinks that it ultimately fails. More generally, Malcolm and Scott have provided a range of reasons for rejecting non-doxastic accounts of faith (Malcolm & Scott 2017; Malcolm 2018; Scott 2020).

doxasticism (a religious fictionalist does not (or need not) believe sincere religious claims; she *accepts* them), the Speech-act thesis (her religious utterances are not assertoric but perform some other function), the Immersion thesis (she fully engages in the practices and rituals prescribed by the religious community), and the Evaluative thesis (accepting religious claims and engaging in these practices and rituals has a certain utility independent of whether or not the claims are true or believed). Brock's account thus continues the focus on *users* of religious discourse and associated practices. But he adds a twist, viz., a non-doxastic notion of propositional faith—"NDA-faith: An individual  $x$  has faith that  $p$  iff (1)  $x$  accepts that  $p$  and (2)  $x$  evaluates  $p$  positively. (Here "accepts" is a placeholder for a cognitive attitude that, unlike belief, does not aim at truth, is not sensitive to evidence in the same way as belief, and is voluntary in a way that belief is not.)

On Brock's preferred account of RF, acceptance is intimately related to NDA-faith. (We discuss Brock's position, together with some putative problems for it, in a later section.) Those who share S&M's doubts about calling a non-believing attitude of acceptance *faith* will, of course, reject this description, but there is one significant element to Brock's account that may explain the usage. Brock develops his account in large part to make room for a form of Pascal's Wager. He thinks the Wager adds pragmatic reasons to the moral reasons for people not already committed to accepting and immersing themselves in the religious way of life. It "introduces further benefits you might attain in the afterlife if you do so. Those benefits are selfish, but if you are lucky, and God exists, the benefits are infinite" (2020: 224). But this is beginning to sound familiar. As we point out below, it adds the element of hope to what can motivate acceptance, and hope is a significant element in anything deserving to be called *faith*.

It is important to emphasize another central feature of Brock's conception of RF. According to Brock, RF "is a stance you might adopt towards a particular religion  $R$  *no matter what credence you give  $R$  or the individual propositions that make it up*" (2020: 211, our italics). He goes on to explain that this is why "fictionalism, as stated, is compatible with theism (belief), with atheism (disbelief), and with agnosticism (neither belief nor disbelief)" (2020: 211). We return to this feature of Brock's conception below, as well as in section 4.

Despite their common features, these accounts exhibit some clear differences. Notably, for Le Poidevin the role of make-believe is central, whereas this is seen as an option rather than a compulsory element of S&M's and Brock's formulations. And Brock, but not the others, uses a non-doxastic notion of faith as the model for acceptance. Before saying more about these differences, we will note how a more familiar distinction—that between hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalism—applies in the case of RF. This will allow us to see where these different versions fit along the hermeneutic/revolutionary divide.

In light of characterizations of hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalism by Matti Eklund (2019) and S&M (2017: 1-2), we shall take hermeneutic RF (henceforth, "HRF") to be a species of RF according to which speakers who engage in religious discourse do not aim at the literal truth of what they are uttering, are not committed to the things the discourse purports to describe, and do not believe the religious claims that they and others make. We shall take the contrasting

revolutionary version of RF (henceforth, “RRF”) to hold that HRF is false, but that people *should* adopt RF. Note that this characterization should really be relativized to particular religions, since there is no reason to think that what goes for one religion also goes for another.

The following questions now arise. First, is RF coherent, and, second, assuming that it is, is there reason to think RF is a tenable view, whether as HRF or RRF or in some other guise? As S&M and Brock see it, the answer to both questions is yes—in fact, S&M think that we should recognize RF in some existing approaches to religion. (Le Poidevin also answers in the positive but does so more tentatively.)

S&M take their formulation to permit a particularly strong version of this answer. According to HRF, speakers of the target discourse do not in fact believe the content of what is said. But this raises the question of who the speakers are, since an answer is needed to determine whether or not HRF is an apt characterization of their practices. For Abrahamic religions, if *all* speakers of the target discourse (say, the discourse of Christianity) are included, the bewildering variety of attitudes and practices among this group surely shows without further ado that HRF is the wrong characterization.

S&M and Brock point to one way of resisting this conclusion. They remind us of the line taken by Georges Rey (2007) that inconsistencies in the discourse and practices of many religious people, particularly educated ones, suggests that they are self-deceived. The spin that S&M and Brock put on this is that the attitude of such people might be one of fictionalist acceptance rather than belief (S&M *Ibid.*: 7, Brock 2020: 213), and they think that in that case HRF is the appropriate characterization of the religious stance of such people. Although S&M don’t explicitly say so, their account of the case requires that we restrict the domain of relevant speakers/participants to the ones who adopt this stance—if Rey is right, we should at least include all religious people with a basic scientific education. Call this way of defending HRF as the appropriate interpretation of the discourse and practices of some religious group *domain relativization*.<sup>2</sup>

Domain relativization holds some surprises, for it is not hard to see that the way even some conservative Christians engage with the discourse of Christianity and its practices comes close (we think uncomfortably close) to satisfying the requirements for HRF. Some of the evidence is briefly described by S&M. Christians, even conservative ones, will often say that the central claims of their faith are to be construed as metaphorical or as pointing to a deep truth that language is ill-equipped to state. To accept the words attributed to Jesus, that “my father’s house has many rooms,” is (surely!) not to accept that God *literally* has a house with many rooms. Or,

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<sup>2</sup> Brock’s position on HRF is ambiguous. He writes: “Hermeneutic [religious] fictionalists think the five theses stated earlier accurately describe what many (if not all) of those engaged in religious discourse are doing. They argue that a close examination of the religious practices of some communities favors a fictionalist rather than a realist interpretation of those practices.” (2020: 213). It is not clear whether Brock is claiming that HRF applies to a community if enough of the community subscribe to his five theses or that HRF applies only to the subgroup of the community who subscribe to these theses (domain relativization).

to take a more central theological tenet: “God is love” doesn’t express the proposition that God is identical to the quality of love, nor does it merely express or convey that God loves all people (or all the *elect*, or ...). And the same will be true of many statements that are even more theologically loaded.<sup>3</sup> Just consider the way some conservative Christians may classify “God is three persons in one” as suggestive of a deep truth, rather than inviting them to believe one thing could literally be simultaneously three things. Indeed, given a tendency to regard the cornerstone of their faith as their trust in a *person* (“I trust the Lord Jesus Christ, not a book!”), it shouldn’t be surprising to find many conservative religious believers open to the idea that the literal truth of statements about God is less important than a trust based on this personal relationship,<sup>4</sup> that their acceptance of such claims is to that extent not *truth-normed*, viz., not “answerable to the world.” In principle, they might take this attitude to every important claim of Christianity.

Even if this is not enough for a full-blooded version of HRF, once we combine it with the fact that conservative Christians will often, or generally, describe their attitudes to their religious propositions as grounded in faith, it becomes difficult to escape the attractions of an HRF classification of the position. As S&M put it:

[T]o the extent that religious discourse trades in the communication of faithful attitudes, it follows from [an NDA account of faith], since many (if not all) of the faithful do not believe the religious propositions they affirm, that the most charitable interpretation of religious discourse is that it does not conventionally express the beliefs of speakers. When speakers express their faith they are, in effect, quasi-asserting religious sentences. This appears to lend support to a (hermeneutic) variety of religious fictionalism. (2018: 6)

S&M don’t say much about the supposed benefits of engaging with religious discourse and its practices on this picture, but presumably it will involve something like the way such engagement is thought to put its practitioners in touch with the divine. In any case, it is clear that these observations are applicable only to *some* conservative Christians; for this target group, HRF may well seem the right classification.

Arguably there are radically different Christians who also fall under HRF on the domain-relativization approach, where these concerns equally apply. Thus, consider what S&M have to say about apophaticism, the view that we can’t represent God’s nature, except in purely negative terms:<sup>5</sup>

[If apophaticism is true then] what we say in our attempts to describe God's nature is untrue. However, apophatic authors show no sign of preferring the elimination of religious

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<sup>3</sup> Even a claim like “God exists” may, on reflection, be regarded as an inadequate form of words since “exists” is a category we understand in its application to the mundane, not anywhere else.

<sup>4</sup> We are indebted to Shirley Lamont-Grayson for her passionate defense of this view.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the issues, see Scott & Citron (2016). See also Michael Scott’s chapter in the present volume.

discourse or withdrawal from religious practice. In part, this seems to be because even though what we say about God is untrue and should not be believed, the activity of attempting to represent God, and the recognition of its failure, may promote a closer relationship with God. The benefits of continued engagement outweigh the drawback that talk of God does not yield truths. (2018: 6)

Suppose that apophaticism can indeed be classified as a version of HRF. If so, we have two *opposing* versions of Christian discourse and its practices that can both be classified as actual instances of HRF on S&M's formulation.

Our final example involves the kind of non-doxastic account of NDA-faith preferred by a number of philosophers of religion, and explicitly used by Brock. Although he doesn't stress this point, Brock's talk of *faith*, understood as the kind of commitment and its relation to evidence that is instanced in Christianity, seems designed to make the combination of tenets, aims, and attitudes described in his conditions (1)-(6) look familiar to us, something that may be close to the views and attitudes of at least some religious people.

Are there actual "people of faith" who fit Brock's characterization of RF ("RFB," for short)? Many, it would seem. If the NDA-account of faith is a descriptively accurate account of what Christians and others call *faith*, then fully committed theists can be RFB-ists. Suppose they take themselves to have religious beliefs on the basis of strong evidence, but that they act out their religious commitments in a way that is quite independent of the available evidence. If presented with countervailing evidence, they might admit that they have no response—that, intellectually, their position may well be beyond the pale—but nevertheless insist that their faith remains strong. Or consider theists of a more familiar kind: the kind who undergo periods of deep doubt but don't see this as a reason to give up their faith.<sup>6</sup> (If we focus on the way religion sustains moral commitments, there may even be a kind of normative Kantian argument for privileging acceptance over belief as the appropriate attitude to the claims of religion. See Jay 2014; Joyce, this volume.)

But there are also agnostic and even atheistic RFB-ists. Take some of the people described in *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Dennett & LaScola 2015) who no longer believe but cannot leave the practices of their religion behind—not simply because they would miss the community of other people of faith, nor because they continue to recognize the value of what their religion has given them, but because they feel that their religion embodies a possible vision of the universe and their place in it that they still find awe-inspiring and now regard as a beautiful story, even hoping, perhaps against all hope, that it is true. (S&M too are likely to see this as a version of RF, perhaps even HRF despite its origins in unbelief.)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the sort of attitude epitomized in the cry from the father of the demon-possessed boy: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24 NKJV). Doubt commonly sits alongside belief. If we want to give a name to this complex mix of attitudes that persists through periods of intellectual commitment and periods of doubt, *faith* seems as good a term as any.

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Or consider the seemingly self-deluded theist described by Rey (2007) and identified by Brock and S&M as a candidate religious fictionalist. Unlike Dennett's and LaScola's lapsed theist, such a "theist" does not own up to lack of belief; lack of belief is simply something that is evident from inconsistencies in her speech and practices. If S&M and Brock are right about this case,<sup>7</sup> it is we, as theorists, who think that what such a theist takes to be belief is best construed as mere acceptance, and it is we who go on to explain such variances in her speech and practices in terms of the hypothesis that she is a non-believing fictionalist. (This is arguably not so very different from the way hermeneutic mathematical fictionalists deal with the claim that people mostly believe that there are numbers, or moral noncognitivists with the claim that people mostly believe that there are moral truths.)

Finally, here is a philosophically more nuanced example of a version of theism that fits Brock's conditions for RFB. There has been a recent upsurge of interest in Jamesian fideism, a view that holds that religious belief need not be based on evidence but can be entered into when there is a choice to be made among "genuine" options—options that cannot by their nature be decided on intellectual grounds and are (as William James puts it) "forced, living, and momentous." On John Bishop's Jamesian account of a "'doxastic venture' model of faith" (Bishop 2007), it is morally permissible to make a "doxastic venture of religious faith" insofar as the truth or falsity of the relevant class of religious propositions is not adequately supported by one's total available evidence. Doing so "will not amount to inducing a state of belief (either directly or indirectly); rather it will be a direct act of *taking to be true* in one's practical reasoning what one already holds to be true from passion, non-evidential, causes" (Bishop 2007: 12). (Bishop calls his account *doxastic*, but this merely reflects a semantic preference. If belief is taken to be a state that is sensitive to evidence, as Brock does, then the view counts as *non-doxastic*.<sup>8</sup>) The sort of theistic claims that count as passionately caused are ones "resulting from enculturation or from desires (perhaps deep-seated and unconscious)" (2007: 12). This ought to include the kind of motivations that are mentioned by Brock. It may well be the perceived attractiveness of the kind of moral virtues displayed in acts of communion, charity, humility, penance, atonement, and confession that leads someone to treat a certain class of theistic propositions as true, to accept them unconditionally, and to immerse herself in the rituals and practices that go with this theistic framework. Of course, there remains the hope that the propositions are indeed true, but that is also the case for the fictionalist who wagers on God in Brock's account of RF. The upshot, we think, is that such a Jamesian fideism can also be brought into the fold of RF as understood by Brock (and even S&M). Since the position can be thought of as a philosophical elucidation of the way many people of faith behave in relation to the faith-

<sup>7</sup> For a skeptical response, see, for example, Scott (2015).

<sup>8</sup> One reason for preferring "non-doxastic" is that, as Bishop agrees, there could be numerous such systems of belief, all "living, forced and momentous," all vying to be chosen. But in that case, the probability that any particular one of them is true might well be negligible, and so a believer would have to say "I believe that *p*, but there is virtually no chance that *p* is true"—something that strikes us as close to being an instance of Moore's paradox.



propositions they accept, this may even suggest that on a Jamesian fideist picture of faith these theists are implicitly committed to a form of HRF.

In presenting these various examples of a combination of theism and a rejection of full-fledged belief in God, we don't mean to imply that such a combination is a particularly easy one to maintain. For one thing, there is surely a tension. Take a theist to be someone who accepts that God exists, whether or not they believe that God exists. A claim like "God exists but I don't believe that God exists" seems to be a straightforward instance of Moore's paradox, and thus its reflective version "I am a theist but I don't believe God exists" will strike many as similarly paradoxical. RF, as understood by Brock and S&M, owe us an account of how it can be coherent to entertain such claims.<sup>9</sup> We think that all these various positions contain their own way of explaining, more or less well, how the trick is done, but the sheer variety of explanations discourages the thought that classifying them all as examples of RF adds much of value to the discussion.

We can now state our worries about Brock's and S&M's accounts in particular. Because they seem eager to show that RF and even HRF occupy a worthy niche in intellectual space, they have cast their net remarkably wide and thereby made it surprisingly easy to be counted an RF-ist. The resulting characterization allows a rather motley assortment of views to be labeled as instances of RF, and, assuming domain relativization, even as instances of HRF. This includes (i) views that we would be inclined to class as clearly religious (e.g., apophaticism); (ii) views where the motivating goals of engagement with religious discourse and rituals are affective in nature and not based on seeing the religion as true, but where the question of truth still matters to a larger or smaller degree (e.g., Jamesian fideism and the position taken by Dennett and LaScola's hopeful ex-believers); and (iii) views where the motivating goals of engagement with religious discourse and rituals are purely social and moral in character and where the possible truth of the religion is taken to be entirely irrelevant.

These accounts of RF have not merely made it easy to be counted an RF-ist—we think they have made it *too* easy. (This is the "it's-all-too-easy" problem.) One might wonder, though, what the worry is about an easy road to RF. (Don't many applaud rather than criticize forms of mathematical fictionalism for being easy-road?)<sup>10</sup> But the road here is "too easy" in the wrong way. Our main concern is that by casting its net so wide RF thereby offers too shallow a way of classifying views. It doesn't reveal much about the views the label classifies (especially views falling under (i) and (ii), above); in particular, it doesn't tell us what motivates such views, what distinguishes them from others, what characterizes the nature of acceptance on the different views, how we are to understand their relationship to other religious traditions, and so on. Call this the *shallowness concern*.

A related concern—call it the *breadth concern*—is the way that RF has been allowed to include views that we would classify as broadly religious, [e.g.](#), the views falling under (i) and

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<sup>9</sup> Above all, the coherence of such claims requires a strict acceptance-belief distinction. Brock (2020: 209, fn. 2) acknowledges the challenges to this distinction.

<sup>10</sup> See Balaguer (2018) on easy-road versus hard-road mathematical fictionalism.

(ii), rather than secular. To the extent that the shallowness concern arises from the very diverse ways in which people continue to care about religious truth at some level even in the absence of belief, this concern about breadth does much to explain the shallowness concern.

Below, we say more about what is distinctive about the present easy-road approach. But for now, we want to say more about what is concerning about the shallowness and breadth concerns that underlie this easy road. We agree, of course, that there is nothing inherently wrong with imposing a broad grid that hides much fine detail, but we think that to show the worth of philosophical fictionalism in philosophy the grid has to show appropriately deep and revealing patterns, something that has not been shown in the way RF is being understood.

Think of it this way. Religions and their languages and practices constitute an age-old and extraordinarily varied and complex phenomenon. In its many forms and manifestations, it runs the gamut from simple and rigid to extremely sophisticated. The history of religion is replete with debates and rivalries of the most intricate kind, often intellectual, often marked by deep philosophical differences, often in conjunction with sharply differing degrees of tolerance. While one could try to impose a grid on this swirl of doctrine, philosophy, and attitude, this is often best done in the context of the kind of theological, or theo-philosophical, discussion that is appropriately sensitive to the nature and dynamics of these differences. The sense in which one of Dennett and LaScola's lapsed but hopeful theists accepts Christian discourse, for example, is utterly different from the sense in which an apophatic Christian does so. For the lapsed theist, the vision and the faint hope of its realization has something close to literal truth as its focus. By contrast, apophaticists who reject literal truth seem leery of any univocal account of their attitude to statements of faith. Some statements are accepted because they are seen as a kind of analogical truth ("God is good," say), although the purpose of uttering such statements is not to say something close to the truth (finite humans can't do that) but to express devotion. Other statements may be accepted because they are seen as having a different purpose. For example, apophaticists may accept claims about God's hating sin and sinners because, as Gregory of Nyssa suggests, "the text informs us in every word of this kind ... that the divine Providence deals with our feebleness by means of our own characteristics, so that those inclining to sin may restrain themselves from evils through fear of punishment" (2007: 154). If so, we accept and utter such statements because of their perceived regulative function rather than their expressive function.

In all of this, there is little reason to think that the philosophy of language and its deployment of the idea of fictionalism can have much to offer this discussion by way of enlightenment. But that is precisely what we seem to get from the way RF is being understood. The patterns that it lays across religion and its practices are indeed patterns (and so we don't accuse these accounts of some deep error), but they are patterns that hide the sophistication and nuances that characterize debates in these areas.

### 3. A scope problem

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To see more clearly what distinguishes the present and (we think) problematic way of understanding RF from other types of philosophical fictionalism in the literature, consider again S&M's contention (2017: 7) that Rey's (2007) meta-atheism is a form of HRF. Rey's central thesis is the following: "Despite appearances, many Western adults who've been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false" (Rey 2007: 245). Suppose we go along with the idea that such an attitude can be construed as a form of fictionalist acceptance. Importantly, Rey is not making a claim about *all* speakers who engage in this religious discourse; he is merely making a claim about *some* such speakers. Despite this, S&M contend that the view can be counted as a form of HRF, using the strategy of domain relativization to do so.

As HRF is standardly understood, however (even by S&M on a first reading of their account), the view that "claims of the disputed discourse are ... accepted rather than believed" is not qualified. That is, it does not just apply to claims made by *some* or *many* agents; it applies to claims made by *all* such agents who are engaged in that discourse. If this is right, it follows that Rey's view is not a version of HRF, contrary to what S&M claim. Call the problem of the tension between the standard understanding of HRF and the way S&M relax the scope of the quantifier in their understanding of Rey's position *the scope problem* for their position.

This scope problem seems to infect other purported HRF positions. HRF is a view on which speakers in general do not aim at the literal truth but only appear or pretend to do so when they utter sentences from the discourse in question; the focus is squarely on the discourse, not on how some subset of the set of speakers understand the discourse. But it seems clear that at least some religious folk, when they are engaging in religious discourse, genuinely believe what they are uttering and are making sincere assertions. It is surely obvious that not all Christians, for example, would agree that because they trust Christ, they should agree that central claims of Christianity are to be construed nonliterally; it is equally obvious that not all are Jamesian fideists or apophaticists. Many are simply believers, on a pretty standard evidence-sensitive understanding of belief. If so, HRF is false for at least the discourse of Christianity on the standard conception of HRF.

We have seen that the scope problem arises for theorists whose versions of HRF take off from the actual attitudes and aims of ordinary speakers of the discourse in question, with the discourse relativized to its use by certain groups or communities. It might be thought that the scope problem can be resolved by simply opting for this more relaxed way of understanding the discourse-participants of the religion in question—that is, by allowing domain-relativization. This would make HRF very different from other types of hermeneutic fictionalism. In particular, it would radically change the *focus* of fictionalism. Traditionally, the focus of one or another variety of fictionalism has been taken to be on a certain discourse and how it is in *fact* understood by participants (hermeneutic fictionalism) or how it *should* be understood (revolutionary fictionalism). By contrast, S&M take the focus to be users or participants in the discourse, or perhaps communities of users. Users are also the focus in Brock's characterization of RF, since he thinks that it is a person's attitude of faith and the immersive nature of their

engagement with the language and practices of a religion that makes them a fictionalist, not features of the discourse.

Should the scope problem be resolved in favor of a form of user-focus by letting domain-relativization determine the boundaries of a discourse? Our earlier discussion of the *it's-all-too-easy* problem shows the pitfalls of such an approach. Recall, in particular, the (shallowness) concern that the approach doesn't uncover appropriately deep and revealing patterns in the views it classifies. On the other hand, it might be thought that RF is very different from other fictionalisms and that it is peculiarly suited to a more user-focused understanding of a discourse. Like all the other major religions, Christianity contains numerous different branches, each practiced by people whose main partners in this practice belong to the same strand; why not count the discourses or languages of these different branches as being different? That would rationalize the categorization of at least some of the different ways of understanding Christianity as instances of HRF (although it wouldn't help with Rey's meta-atheism, for example). But such a response to our concerns would trivialize the notion of HRF. Since the various divisions within Christianity have all spawned their own micro-divisions on the basis of differences in doctrine and practice, it threatens to turn any distinctive use of the language of Christianity on the part of some subgroup into a separate discourse. Better, surely, to have a broad-based understanding of a religious discourse, however this is defined.

We have thus far raised two problems for RF as understood by S&M: the *it's-all-too-easy* problem (a problem for Brock as well) and the scope problem. We identified the source of these problems as the user-focused way in which theorists like S&M and Brock have understood RF. These problems suggest that we should return to a squarely discourse-focused way of understanding RF. On such an account, HRF is, we take it, out of the question. An advocate of RF should then opt for revolutionary, rather than hermeneutic, RF.

In fact, our putative examples of HRF have another feature that suggest the wisdom of opting for a revolutionary over a hermeneutic form of RF. Because S&M (and arguably Brock as well) wanted to show that RF was not just conceptually coherent but was in some sense a recognizable view, their examples involved versions of RF in which the benefits of engaging in religious discourse and its practices were understood in terms that were themselves broadly religious or in sympathy with religious ends, and this might be thought not to jibe with the intent of RF. As a result, it seems reasonable to consider versions of RF where the benefits of embracing a particular religion are described in terms that are clearly secular or *areligious*, e.g., they are described as merely social or moral, but without the value of these social or moral ends being grounded in religion, and where those who accept the claims of the religion (possibly for the sake of these benefits) (i) do not believe the claims to be true and (ii) do not even believe that these benefits are enhanced by the possibility of their being true (which would presumably rule out Brock's version of RF). It is difficult but not impossible to imagine such versions as being hermeneutic (for this would involve people self-consciously inventing gods in order to get themselves to act in morally and socially responsible ways), but in any case that is not the right picture of existing religions and certainly not of the religions normally in focus when discussing

fictionalism. In their case, a discourse-focused approach can yield only a revolutionary form of RF.

Since we take a discourse-focused approach to encapsulate what is best in the very idea of philosophical fictionalism, we begin our discussion of revolutionary forms of RF by saying more about the approach.

#### 4. Revolutionary RF?

In our view, philosophical fictionalism is best seen as a view about the appropriate attitude to take towards some discourse in light of certain salient features that it possesses. An examination of extant versions of philosophical fictionalism reveals that what philosophical fictionalisms have in common is the view that there needs to be a change in our attitudes towards face-value discourse—that is, discourse that purports to state facts. Revolutionary philosophical fictionalists maintain that the face-value reading of some discourse is correct (that is, the discourse indeed purports to state facts) but, for so being, the discourse is in error, viz., its distinctive statements are untrue, either false or without a truth-value at all.<sup>11</sup> But because they also see the need to retain the discourse—it is too useful to give up—such error theorists recommend a change in our attitudes towards that discourse. This is what makes the view *revolutionary*: Come the revolution, when people recognize the problems with this discourse, they should take on board the recommendation of these theorists. Such a view is *fictionalist* because it enlists one of the strategies, mechanisms, or approaches that have been deployed to show that genuine fictional discourse, or our attitude towards such discourse, is non-ontologically committing.

A feature of philosophical fictionalism that needs particular emphasis is that all philosophical fictionalists maintain that there are good reasons for continuing to employ the relevant discourse. Take moral fictionalism. The usual way to defend moral fictionalism is to suggest, along with John Mackie, that the idea that certain actions are objectively categorically required of us is indefensible. But despite holding such an error theory, Mackie thought that moral discourse could continue with the status of a “useful fiction” (Mackie 1977: 239). But how can we be motivated to act if the beliefs are no longer in place, and all we have are beliefs that certain actions are required of us *according to a fiction*? The most fully worked out response to this motivational worry is contained in Richard Joyce’s defense of moral fictionalism (Joyce 2001, 2005, this volume). He argues that an important practical benefit of having moral beliefs is that they diminish the possibilities for rationalization that we are all prone to. Adopting morality as a fiction yields some of the same benefits. Having rejected morality, but understanding the practical benefits of moral beliefs, we secure these practical benefits, or enough of them, by accepting morality rather than believing it.

<sup>11</sup> On a somewhat weaker understanding of revolutionary fictionalism, error theory is not necessary; agnosticism about whether the discourse is factual may be enough (Armour-Garb & Kroon 2020: 15-16).

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This is a revolutionary form of moral fictionalism, since, like Mackie, Joyce thinks that at face-value the discourse purports to describe a realm of moral facts, but because there are no such facts and because the thought that there are such facts is needed to guide moral behavior, we need to reconstrue the thought: to avoid error, we should modify our attitude from belief to some form of non-doxastic acceptance (e.g., make-believe).<sup>12</sup>

Now consider *religious* revolutionary fictionalism, RRF—in the form, say, described by Le Poidevin. It is tempting to think that RRF not only escapes the *it's-all-too-easy* and scope problems, but that in its emphasis on moral and social goods it shares many of the virtues of a revolutionary moral fictionalism like Joyce's. But this is far from being the case, for other worries now arise. RRF-ists propose a revision to current practice. They think that commitments to the truth of the claims of the target religious discourse are misplaced and should be jettisoned, even though speakers should continue to engage with the discourse without believing what it purports to say. But now we encounter a converse problem: the "it's-all-too-hard" problem for RRF. The problem is that it is difficult to see how the religion can survive its practitioners taking up the advocated revolution. For suppose that everyone engaging in the discourse only *made believe* that its claims were true and entered into its rituals only in a make-believe spirit. Then the following question would arise. There is surely a large cost to such engagement (we are talking about a commitment that mimics full belief, not an occasional dipping into the religion when it suits), so in order to warrant this cost, the benefits of such engagement must then be correspondingly high. But what would these benefits be? Presumably not the kind of benefits we get from the far less demanding commitments of moral fictionalism. But if they involve the fostering of values and commitments that substantially exceed what secular interests could underwrite, why would one think that these would survive the extinction of religious belief itself (if not immediately then in due course) as the significance of the extinction sets in? (They needn't disappear entirely, of course, but could just be reconceptualized in other terms — precisely what happens in the case of scientific revolution where engagement with a viewpoint one rejects is maintained for a period because of the benefits of doing so, but where the search is underway for alternative ways of retaining what was valuable in the earlier view.)

In short, if Le Poidevin's RRF is a prescription for how thinkers should respond to the dictates of religious practice, it would seem to undermine the impetus for engaging in that practice. If there is resistance to the idea that the revolution is almost certain to fail, it may be because one imagines a sizable core of devotees who will maintain adherence to the religion come what may; for these people, all attempts to argue for easier routes to the same ends will fall on deaf ears. The presence of such a core makes it seem like the revolution can be permanent. Attempts by revolutionaries to persuade this core that they need not keep attending church will be met with fervid religious arguments; since the revolutionaries know they can accept these arguments, even while not believing them to be cogent, the core is unlikely to change its ways.

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<sup>12</sup> See Joyce (2020) for further discussion of how such attitudes should be understood. Somewhat similar attitudes are said to be in play on the very different account of moral fictionalism advanced by Mark Kalderon (2005). Kalderon's is a hermeneutic form of moral fictionalism.

But the idea of such a core has a familiar ring about it. These are practitioners who genuinely believe in the truth of the religion's claims and the efficacy of its practices. They are the remaining religious realists, and thus the ones who intellectually resist the revolution, just like the scientists who hold out rather than change their beliefs during a scientific revolution. Revolution, at least when it is understood in these terms, is not *genuine* revolution. (Incidentally, this also helps to explain why the *it's-all-too-hard* problem for RRF does not apply to revolutionary moral fictionalism, such as that advocated by Joyce. His form of revolutionary moral fictionalism does not require that there be any moral realists, since a commitment to moral talk does not require the existence of a sustained community of moral realists to be efficacious.)

So much for the *it's-all-too-hard* problem for RRF. But there is kind of weakly prescriptive RF that may not be susceptible to this problem. This form doesn't say that the religion's practitioners *should* embrace the religion by non-doxastically accepting its claims and immersing themselves in its rituals, but merely that it is *permissible* to do so. Natalja Deng calls this "weak evaluative RF" (Deng 2015: 198). She rejects the view as it stands, on grounds that she finds the idea of non-doxastic acceptance problematic, but thinks that there is a version of the view that escapes her objections. In the version she prefers, non-doxastic acceptance is replaced by make-believe, as in Le Poidevin's account of RRF, but, unlike Le Poidevin, Deng allows considerable latitude in what to include in the content of the make-believe and the degree to which religious practices are adhered to:

The make-believer can decide what to include in the fiction, and in principle he can include ideas from different religious traditions. His is a sui generis form of engagement with religious ideas and practices. (Deng 2015: 212)

We might call this "lightweight RF". Note that the label is not meant to denigrate the view. In fact, we think that lightweight RF clearly escapes the *it's-all-too-easy* and the *it's-all-too-hard* problems for the versions of RF we have discussed. But because Deng shares the ambition of other proponents of a secular form of RF, like Le Poidevin, that her RF-ists should feel part of a religious community, both of them worry that their versions of fictionalism might not allow practitioners to integrate properly into such a community. Both think that the problem is overstated: Deng counsels transparency and thinks that "the make-believer was always an unusual member of the community" (2015: 211), while Le Poidevin thinks that the problem is mitigated if the religious community defines itself primarily in terms of shared commitments (2019: 57).

We think that such responses underestimate the problem. No doubt self-confessed practitioners of prescriptive forms of RF will not be excluded from attending church or temple, but that can be for all kinds of reasons, including the hope that the fictionalist will come to his senses. If full rather than a kind of partial integration is what they care about, we suspect that the most that such RF-ists can in the end hope for is the *pretense* that they are fully integrated into their religious community. Given their views, perhaps that is all that they should care about,

although it is not, we are confident, what properly integrated members of a religious community care about.

In the concluding section we briefly return to the place of Deng's lightweight version of RF in discussions about RF.

## 5. More on Brock on religious fictionalism

We have raised some general worries for certain aspects of HRF and of RRF. But suppose that there was a form of RF that falls under neither species of philosophical fictionalism: neither hermeneutic nor revolutionary (putting aside Deng's lightweight version of fictionalism). Would such a form evade the problems that we have raised for HRF and RRF? In this section we consider the question by looking more closely at Brock's recent version of RF, RFB.

Recall that RFB is a combination of five theses (Truth-aptness, Non-doxasticism, the Speech-act thesis, the Immersion thesis, and the Evaluative thesis), together with a non-doxastic analysis of propositional faith. Recall too that for Brock "[RFB] is a stance you might adopt towards a particular religion R no matter what credence you give R or the individual propositions that make it up" (2020: 211). While RFB doesn't strike us as incoherent, we have already had occasion to worry about the *breadth* of RFB. Earlier we argued that there appears to be a bewildering variety of actual theistic, agnostic, and atheistic views that conform to RFB, and we saw this as a potential problem (the *it's-all-too-easy* problem): focusing on this would make it hard to see how interesting, and interestingly different, the trees are.

Assuming this is indeed a problem, we think the best way to deal with it is by deleting the theist option from the mix. Suppose, then, that we hold that someone can be an RFB-ist only if she is either an agnostic or an atheist and so doesn't have both acceptance and belief as attitudes to religious claims. This has consequences for one of Brock's other claims. Brock maintains that RFB is neither hermeneutic nor revolutionary. But Brock also maintains the Evaluative thesis:

Accepting religious claims, and engaging in the associated religious practices and rituals, has a certain utility independent of whether or not the statements are true or believed.

At first glance, the Evaluative thesis looks out of place; unlike the other theses, it doesn't say that fictionalists accept, or do, such-and-such, but instead comments on a central feature of this doing and accepting. The connection is not hard to see, however. Brock presumably thinks that a fictionalist is involved in "accepting religious claims, and engaging in the associated religious practices and rituals" precisely because doing so has the utility proclaimed in the Evaluative thesis. But now we strike a problem. So interpreted, the thesis seems incomplete, since ascribing "a certain utility" to what a fictionalist does is not enough to explain why she does it—there could be all kinds of countervailing reasons for *not* adopting a fictionalist stance.<sup>13</sup> Brock's real view, we think, is that the fictionalist will see these benefits as an overriding reason for engaging

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jay (2014: 212) on evaluative versus revolutionary fictionalism.



with the religion, that the burden is well worth the cost. (For Brock these benefits may even include the possibly infinite benefits that comes from a kind of Pascalian Wagering for God, although it is hard to see the agnostic or atheist agreeing.)<sup>14</sup>

So, in the end, Brock's position seems to amount to this: for the agnostic or atheist fictionalist about some religion R, there are compelling reasons for accepting R's claims and engaging in R's practices and rituals, based on the secular (e.g., moral) benefits that accrue from doing so. If this is correct, however, then such a fictionalist must surely think that this attitude should be adopted by everyone, not just by herself.<sup>15</sup> If she thought that the benefits could also be obtained by some people in some other way—one that didn't require pretending things were other than they in fact are—why wouldn't she be an advocate for this less costly option, both for herself and others? It seems, then, that once we strip away theistic readings of RFB (because of the *it's-all-too-easy* problem), RFB amounts to a form of revolutionary religious fictionalism after all. If so, we suspect it is subject to the *it's-all-too-hard* problem that we earlier identified as a serious problem for RRF.

## 6. A final look at RF

Our paper has taken a critical look at RF, contrasting it on a number of fronts with moral fictionalism. First, we looked at some more or less standard formulations of RF found in the current literature and argued that these made it too easy to be an RF-ist: these formulations suggest an easy road to RF that is beset by concerns about shallowness as well as breadth. We stressed that this *it's-all-too-easy* problem does not question the coherence of such formulations but rather the thought that something important is discovered about religious traditions by categorizing them in this way. We further claimed that Scott and Malcolm's account in particular is subject to a distinctive kind of scope problem that does not seem to affect other cases of philosophical fictionalism.

Given these two problems, we then decided that the real place to look for a motivation for RF is elsewhere, in a desire to secularize the benefits of both religious belief and religious practice. But when we looked at secular ways of understanding the benefits of continued participation in religious discourse and practices mentioned by RF, we were struck by a converse problem: the *it's-all-too-hard* problem. Views that allege such benefits are prescriptive or revolutionary rather than hermeneutic, but we argued that it is unlikely that views of this kind (RRF) can survive the revolution. We also saw that formulations of RF that try to steer a middle line, such as Brock's, may have trouble doing so.

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<sup>14</sup> After all, wagering for God has its risks. If there is a God, there might be a special place in Hell reserved for those who merely *pretend* to believe and who don't see the pretending as a hopeful first step to belief.

<sup>15</sup> Or perhaps by everyone who values these benefits, given the indispensable role the religion has in fostering them. (Such a [benign?] relativization also brings a view like Howard Wettstein's (2012) into the RRF camp.)

These are strange troubles for a fictionalist to have. Even though it may be a matter of controversy just how to make the idea of fictionalism about this or that discourse precise, generally the locus of debate is on whether one *should* be a fictionalist of this stripe. It is usually easy to spell out the reasons, and often just as easy to find counterarguments. In the case of RF, however, all bets seem to be off. We have argued that RRF—which is RF’s best and most exciting hope (so long as the alleged benefits are presented in appropriately secular form)—seems susceptible to collapse. By contrast, other sorts of revolutionary fictionalism, concerning different subject matters (e.g., mathematical talk, modal talk, and even moral talk) constitute a genuine option, even if unattractive for reasons not having to do with collapse.

In short, there is no corresponding *it’s-all-too-hard* problem for revolutionary fictionalism *per se*. Similarly, there is no corresponding *it’s-all-too-easy* problem for hermeneutic forms of fictionalism *per se*. Generally, the problem is the very different one of finding compelling reason to classify the attitude that ordinary participants in a discourse have as a non-doxastic form of acceptance rather than belief.

What is it about RF that makes it susceptible to both the *it’s-all-too-easy* and the *it’s-all-too-hard* problems—and where to go from here? We addressed the first question in section 2. In brief, the *it’s-all-too-easy* problem is a reflection of the bewildering complexity of the phenomenon of religion, its discourses and its practices, and the time-tested sophistication of its debates; fictionalist patterns imposed will seem relatively shallow as a result. Our answer to the second question draws a slightly different connection to the phenomenon’s complexity. Religions—the Abrahamic religions but, of course, not just these—have always been taken to provide guidance on questions of morality and justice. They have typically provided exemplars or models of morality and justice, and there is little doubt that these have provided, and can continue to provide, motivations for engaging in like behavior through story-telling and without requiring the beliefs that originally fueled the stories. But in the case of other forms of revolutionary fictionalism, theorists have provided sophisticated explanations for why the revolution should be made permanent. The very complexity of the phenomenon of religion—the debates occurring within and between the various religions and manifestations of the same religion, as well as the evolution of religious perspectives (sometimes in response to changes in moral perspectives)—discourages any thought of a simple connection between the stories they tell us and what we take morality and justice to require of us. While we don’t doubt that an evolving mash-up of the stories of a whole range of incompatible religions will long continue to circulate and motivate should there be whole-sale abandonment of religious belief, none of this leaves us with a credible reason for supposing that the discourse and even practices of a *particular* religion will survive such an abandonment of religious belief.

If this is along the right path, where do we go from here? No doubt RF will continue to have its defenders, but we think that its best hope is something different, something more along the lines of Deng’s weak conception of the way we might imaginatively use religious stories and religious models (or an evolving mash-up of these) to good purpose.<sup>16</sup> We doubt, however, that

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<sup>16</sup> See Deng (2015) and Deng’s contribution to the present volume.

such engagement should be called a version of “fictionalism,” not just because there is no recognizable single discourse that features in such imaginative episodes, but because there is no single community of users that participants belong to, communicate with, or learn from: as we suggested earlier, any sense of community will be illusory. To engage with religion in this limited manner is not to *participate* in religion in any sense deserving of the term. What we have is not religious fictionalism, but rather episodes of imaginative immersion in what might better be called (with a nod to Schiffer (1987)) *remnants of religion*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> We wish to thank Stuart Brock and Richard Joyce for their very helpful comments and suggestions, and for organizing the meetings that led to this volume.

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