

FICTIONALISM AND MOORE'S PARADOX

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Many philosophers strive for a thin ontology but are nevertheless unwilling to curtail ordinary and scientific talk that carries apparent commitment to the entities they reject. As Carnap put it, such a philosopher speaks with an uneasy conscience, “like a man who in his everyday life does with qualms many things which are not in accord with the high moral principles he professes on Sundays.”¹ To appear less hypocritical he may, of course, tell us openly what he is doing and invite us to join him. But then it is hard to see why he is not advocating the absurd position that we should assent to sentences of the form ‘There are *F*s but I don’t believe that there are *F*s.’

This is a simple objection, and there is a simple answer to it. But the answer is not available to everyone. I will argue that defenders of a particular version of fictionalism are in trouble with Moore’s paradox. The bad news for fictionalism in general is that this particular version is the one that best deals with the Quine-Putnam challenge.

I

Suppose we have a certain practice – call it the *F*-discourse – within which we assent to sentences containing unembedded expressions that we take to be genuine singular terms referring to *F*s. To be a *fictionalist* about *F*s is to think that our naïve attitude towards the *F*-discourse is only halfway correct: we are right in thinking that we use genuine singular

terms that purport to refer to *F*s, but wrong in thinking that they actually succeed in referring. In engaging in the *F*-discourse, we inadvertently slip into fictional talk. Consequently, many sentences of our *F*-discourse that seem to be perfectly in order are untrue.²

Here is the standard challenge to fictionalism. Suppose that sentences within the *F*-discourse are underwritten by a theory (the *F*-theory, for short) that is at least tacitly held by those who competently engage in the discourse. Since the fictionalist believes that we frequently assent to sentences within the *F*-discourse that are untrue, she must hold that the *F*-theory is in error. But if the *F*-theory plays a crucial role in a wide range of explanatory practices, then there is good reason to believe that it is part of our overall best theory. And if it is, we cannot justifiably believe that it is in error; after all, we must believe what our overall best theory says. As long as we rely heavily on the *F*-theory in our explanations, fictionalism about *F*s is unacceptable. Or so Quine and Putnam have taught us.³

There are two standard responses to this challenge; I will call them the *radical* and the *conservative* lines. Radical fictionalists deny that the *F*-theory is part of our best theory, and their denial usually involves an ambitious program to replace what most of us regard as our best theory with something better. (A paradigm example is Hartry Field's

¹ R. Carnap, 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,' reprinted as a supplement to *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (University of Chicago, 1956), 205 – 21.

² The move from reference-failure to untruth (falsity or lack of truth-value) may be questioned. Perhaps some genuine singular terms have a semantic function other than reference, perhaps sentences can be true or false even if some of their constituents lack semantic value. Since such proposals involve non-standard semantics for the *F*-discourse and since one of the main motivations for fictionalism is to preserve semantic simplicity, I will regard them as incompatible with fictionalism. Fictionalists about Greek mythology can maintain that a sentence like 'Pegasus is a winged horse' is true in *some sense*, but they must deny that it is *literally* true.

program to nominalize our current physical theories.⁴) Conservative fictionalists concede that the *F*-theory is part of our best theory, but suggest that we should nevertheless suspend our belief that the *F*-theory is true. They argue that it is enough if we *accept* our best theory, where acceptance is an attitude that requires that we act, at least when we theorize, as if we believed. (Van Fraassen advocates a shift of attitude towards empirical science that would do away with ontological commitments to unobservables.⁵)

Although the number of tentative sympathizers is large, neither movement has been particularly successful in gaining committed adherents. Radicals have had difficulty convincing the masses that a gain in ontological economy is worth major losses in simplicity and comprehensibility. And conservatives have found only a few who are willing to set aside all ordinary standards by which scientific (and non-scientific) theories are evaluated and declare our best theories unworthy of belief. If naturalism is the view that the standards a philosophical view must meet are nothing more or less than those of our ordinary and scientific practices, both radical and conservative fictionalism are in conflict with naturalism.⁶

In the face of these difficulties, a number of authors have recently explored the possibility of a new kind of reply to the Quine/Putnam challenge. Since they opt for conservative tenets through radical means, I will call them the *neo-conservatives*.⁷ Like

³ Cf. W. V. O. Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism,' reprinted in *From a Logical Point of View* (Harvard UP, 1961), 20 – 46, and H. Putnam, 'Philosophy of Logic,' reprinted in *Mathematics, Matter, and Method: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1. (Cambridge UP, 1979), 323 – 57.

⁴ Cf. H. Field, *Science Without Numbers* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980).

⁵ Cf. B. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Clarendon, 1980).

⁶ For a discussion of the tension between fictionalist nominalism and naturalism, see J. P. Burgess and G. Rosen, *A Subject with No Object* (Clarendon, 1997), esp. 214 – 25.

⁷ Cf. J. Melia, 'On What There Isn't,' *Analysis* 55 (1995), 223 – 9, M. Balaguer 'A fictionalist account of the indispensable applications of mathematics,' *Philosophical Studies* 83 (1996), 291 – 314, M. Balaguer, *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics* (Oxford UP, 1998), S. Yablo 'Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 72 (1998), 229 – 61, and S. Yablo 'A Paradox of Existence', forthcoming

old-fashioned radicals, the neo-cons hold that there really is a better theory than the one that is currently believed by most people to be the best, and this better theory does not include the *F*-theory. But they deny that we should therefore try to replace our current theory with this better one. We shouldn't because we can't; there is an insurmountable epistemic barrier between the better theory and us. Perhaps we cannot comprehend any formulation of this theory, or perhaps we can never gather enough evidence to support rational belief that the theory is true. Either way, it is clear what we have to do. We should, as the conservatives recommend, adjust our attitude towards the best theory we have and accept it without belief.

Prima facie, neo-conservatism is an attractive position for a fictionalist confronted with the Quine/Putnam challenge. Neo-conservatives have a perfectly good reason not to believe that our best theory is true: they think that according to our ordinary standards there is a better one. And they also have a perfectly good reason not to try to replace what most of us think is our best theory: they think that it is in fact our best theory. There are indeed better ones, but those cannot be *ours*.

II

But could there really be epistemic barriers between us and an excellent theory of the world of the sort neo-conservatives hypothesize? And if there are such barriers, could we rationally believe that they exist? Melia uses the following suggestive example to bolster

(<http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/apex.html>). Balaguer does not ultimately embrace this sort of view regarding mathematical entities, but he thinks it is the best form of anti-platonism. According to Yablo, if a certain *F*-discourse is subject to what he calls the 'first level of metaphorical involvement' then the correct attitude towards it is what I call

the neo-conservative view that there are and we might.⁸ Consider the sentence ‘The average star has 2.4. planets,’ and suppose that our astronomical theory provides good supporting evidence for its truth. However, if we take the subject term of this sentence at face value, the sentence cannot be true unless there is such a thing as the average star, which – let us grant the fictionalist – there is not. So despite the evidence that supports it, the sentence ‘The average star has 2.4. planets’ is untrue. Still, we cannot just knock it off the (imaginary) list of sentences of our best theory, for then we would lose valuable information about the relative frequency of stars and planets in the universe.

The obvious move is to replace ‘The average star has 2.4. planets’ with ‘The ratio of the number of planets and the number of stars is 2.4’. This seems fine, except that it entails the existence of ratios, whereas the original sentence does not. If we are after a modification that decreases rather than increases ontological commitments, we should look for something else. There are at least two sentences that fit the bill. One is ‘There are exactly N stars and $2.4 \cdot N$ planets’, where N is the numeral picking out the actual number of stars; the other is the infinite disjunction ‘There are either five stars and twelve planets, or ten stars and twenty-four planets, or fifteen stars and thirty-six planets, or ...’. If we replace the original sentence with one of these, nothing important seems to be lost, so the new theories are arguably better than the old ones. Unfortunately, it seems clear that we will never be able to believe these theories rationally. We could never have sufficient evidence to identify N , nor could we even understand what the infinite

neo-conservative fictionalism. He thinks that in cases when the metaphorical involvement is at the second or third level, our attitude ought to be more complex.

⁸ J. Melia, *op. cit.*

disjunction says.⁹ We seem to be in the awkward situation of realizing that there are at least two better theories than the one we have, but that, due to our cognitive limitations, neither could be ours. This is the sort of epistemic situation that the neo-conservative fictionalist believes we are in with regard to a variety of our discourses.

The example is far from perfect: there are strong reasons to think that the phrase ‘the average star’ is not an ordinary singular definite description. In one sense there certainly are average stars: they are the ones that have nothing extraordinary about them. But if we understand ‘The average star has 2.4 planets’ along these lines, it no longer says anything like that the ratio of the number of planets and the number of stars is 2.4, so the example falls apart. Melia must have the other reading of ‘The average star has 2.4 planets’ in mind. However, if we embrace *that* reading, there is not much reason to believe that ‘the average star’ purports to denote a particular star. We should certainly not think of ‘the average star’ on analogy with ‘the distant star’; these phrases don’t seem to have the same syntactic properties. We can transform the sentence ‘The distant star is visible tonight’ into ‘The star that is distant is visible tonight’ without significant change of meaning. But the analogous transformation of ‘The average star is visible tonight’ yields the odd ‘The star that is average is visible tonight.’ To make sense of this latter sentence, we must fall back to the interpretation according to which an average star is a concrete star that has nothing extraordinary about it. Similar problems arise if one considers the sentence ‘There is an average star such that it has 2.4 planets.’ The only

⁹ An illusion of understanding may arise, for we might think that the infinite sentence is logically equivalent to ‘The ratio of the number of planets and the number of stars is 2.4’. But thinking this would be wrong: the proposed substitute sentence entails the existence of ratios, the infinite sentence does not.

available reading for this requires that we understand ‘average’ in the first sense mentioned above.¹⁰

Still, the example serves its purpose: if we naively treat ‘the average star’ as an ordinary singular definite description denoting some particular object, we get the picture. And I suspect we should not ask for more, for there are no examples that really work. I want to argue that neo-conservative fictionalism is an untenable view.

III

Fictionalists don’t advocate that we eschew sentences belonging to the *F*-discourse. They point to the fact that in everyday practice we often employ sentences that are strictly speaking false. We say, for example, that the sun rises, sets, or moves above the meridian even if we are no longer in the grips of Ptolemaic astronomy. We can “think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar.”¹¹

Innocuous though this practice might seem, the recommendation that we should simply go ahead and say what we don’t believe is paradoxical. As Moore observed, saying something of the form ‘*S* but I don’t believe that *S*’ is saying something distinctively absurd.¹² But if *S* is a sentence of the *F*-discourse that is untrue according to

¹⁰ Higginbotham suggests that we capture the relevant interpretation of ‘average’ adverbially. Cf. J. Higginbotham, ‘On Semantics,’ *Linguistic Inquiry* 16 (1983), 547 – 93. So, Melia’s ‘The average star has 2.4 planets’ would be interpreted as ‘Stars on the average have 2.4 planets’.

¹¹ The phrase and the example are from G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, §51 in A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop eds., *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd. 1948 – 57). They serve to defend his immaterialism (a kind of fictionalism about material objects) against the charge of verbal impropriety.

¹² Cf. G. E. Moore, ‘A Reply to my Critics,’ in P. A. Schlipp ed., *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1942), 542 – 3, and G. E. Moore, ‘Moore’s Paradox,’ originally untitled manuscript in T. Baldwin ed., *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 207.

the fictionalist, wouldn't she suggest that we *should* say things of the form 'S but I don't believe that S'?

As it stands, this objection is surely too crude. Fictionalists do recommend that, at least in everyday contexts, we keep *using* the sentences of *F*-discourse, but not that we keep *asserting* using them. A mere utterance of a Moorean sentence is not necessarily absurd. One might, for example, quote such a sentence without absurdity. Also, Moore-sentences may occur embedded in a larger sentence that can be uttered without saying anything absurd. As Wittgenstein pointed out to Moore, there is nothing nonsensical about uttering the words 'It is quite possible that it is raining but I don't believe that it is raining' or 'If it is raining but I don't believe that it is raining then I am mistaken.'¹³ Assertion involves a commitment to the content of the sentence uttered¹⁴ and since fictionalists don't think that the relevant contents are true, they had better not say that we should go on asserting them. And they don't. What they say is only that we should freely participate in certain games of make-belief where we *pretend* to assert that *S*.¹⁵

But this response, by itself, is not enough to counter the challenge. An actor on the stage makes no assertions, but still, if she utters 'It is raining but I don't believe that it is raining' she utters something distinctively absurd. Of course, she did nothing inappropriate, but that is only because given her role and given the text of the play, she was *supposed* to utter something absurd. Children, actors, and the rest of us when we engage in games of make-belief make no assertions, but we nevertheless *use our words*

¹³ Cf. G. E. Moore, 'Moore's Paradox,' *op. cit.* 207.

¹⁴ The nature of this commitment is subject to debate. But according to *any* plausible account, those who assert something they do not believe will thereby violate at least one of the central norms of assertion.

¹⁵ The notion of pretending to assert something is similar to Grice's notion of *making it as if one said* something. Cf. P. Grice 'Logic and Conversation,' in *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Harvard, 1989), 30 and P. Grice, 'Further Notes on Logic and Conversation,' *op. cit.* 41.

assertively. We act as if we asserted something, which means that we outwardly conform to the practice of making assertions, and if we pretend well, our act will sound and look much like genuine assertion. The proper scope of Moore's observation includes pretend-assertions as well as genuine ones: if one utters a Moorean sentence assertively, one thereby produces an absurd utterance.^{16,17}

Understood this way, Moore's paradox poses the following challenge for the fictionalist. Let '*S*' be a sentence of the *F*-theory which entails the existence of *F*s. Fictionalists about the *F*-discourse want to convince us that '*S*' is untrue and they nevertheless encourage us to continue to use '*S*' in a way that is outwardly indistinguishable from the way we used it before. But then, it is not clear why we would refrain from uttering assertively '*S* but I don't believe that *S*'. Uttering such a sentence assertively is absurd, even if one is only pretending to make an assertion. So, the fictionalist owes us a story why he is not simply encouraging us to make absurd utterances.¹⁸

¹⁶ Embedded uses of a sentence would not typically qualify as assertive; if a sentence occurs within the scope of a modal operator or in the antecedent of a conditional, any competent speaker would know that it is not asserted. The same holds for ordinary quotation: the fact that one speaks in someone else's voice must be made clear either by explicitly saying this or at least by using special intonation. By contrast, the actor on stage reciting the words of the playwright will *refrain* from these devices and hence, although she does not assert she speaks assertively.

¹⁷ Moore puts his observation as follows: "It's absurd to say them [i.e. sentences like 'It is raining but I don't believe that it is raining'] in the sort of way in which people utter sentences, when they are using these sentences to *assert* the proposition which these sentences express. I will call this 'saying them assertively'. I don't want to say that to utter sentences assertively is the same thing as making an assertion." G. E. Moore, 'Moore's Paradox,' *op. cit.* 207. Although I am not entirely sure, it seems plausible to me that the distinction Moore draws in the last sentence between uttering a sentence assertively and making an assertion coincides with the one indicated above.

¹⁸ Couldn't the fictionalist insist that we should refrain from using '*S* but I don't believe that *S*' simply because this would not be in conformity with the ordinary use of '*S*'? He could, but this extra prohibition would remain unexplained. True enough, the use of a Moorean sentence would tip off anyone that the speaker has some highly non-standard attitude towards '*S*'. But surely, the fictionalist cannot recommend that in engaging in the *F*-discourse we must *hide* the fact that we lack belief in the *F*-theory. This would not go very far in calming our worries about the hypocrisy of the suggestion.

As far as I can see, there is only one promising avenue for the fictionalist here. He can emphasize that just as he does not think we should use ‘*S*’ to make assertions, he also does not think we should use ‘I don’t believe that *S*’ to make the relevant sort of pretended assertions. According to him ‘*S*’ and ‘I don’t believe that *S*’ are complements: the former is pretend-assertable but not assertable without absurdity; the latter is assertable but not pretend-assertable without absurdity. The trouble with uttering ‘*S* but I don’t believe that *S*’ assertively is that within a single context, such an utterance would either be taken as an assertion of both conjuncts or as a pretended assertion of both conjuncts. The only way to make sense of an assertive utterance of ‘*S* but I don’t believe that *S*’ involves a *context shift*: between the first and the second conjunct the context of utterance would have to change from a context of make-belief to a context outside of make-belief from which we are evaluating the utterances made when we are engaged in the make-belief. If the context-shift is somehow marked – say, by a change of tone or some gesture – then there is in fact nothing absurd about the utterance.¹⁹ If the context-shift is not marked, the audience will regard the speech act as a unitary one, in which case they can legitimately conclude that the speaker uttered an absurdity.

The fictionalist answer rests on the plausible assumption that when we move from ordinary *F*-discourse to reflection about the literal truth of the *F*-discourse, we shift context. We are either immersed in a game of make-belief or we are evaluating it from without; there seems to be no room in the middle. What I want to argue is that having

¹⁹ We know independently that if shifts of context are allowed utterances of Moorean sentences may be unproblematic. For example, if one utters assertively ‘It is raining...’ in a loud voice and then one continues by whispering to a nearby friend, still assertively ‘... but I don’t believe it is raining’ the utterance is mischievous, but it is by no means absurd. Cf. G. E. Moore, ‘Moore’s Paradox,’ *op. cit.* 207 – 8.

embraced the existence of a superior theory that is inaccessible for us, neo-conservative fictionalists have tacitly committed themselves to the possibility of a certain intermediate position between immersion and critical reflection. And this is the reason why the context-change answer is unavailable for them, which in turn explains why they run into trouble with Moore's paradox. In the next section, I will present my case in detail.

IV

Suppose things are as the neo-conservative says they are. Our best theory includes the *F*-theory but there is a better theory that does not. This better theory (call it the '*F*-free theory'), however, is unavailable to us, due to some cognitive limitation on our part. So we suspend our belief in the *F*-theory but we keep using the sentences of the *F*-discourse assertively in pretended assertions. Now, suppose we make contact with creatures whose cognitive powers vastly outrun ours; among other things, they actually formulate and come to believe the *F*-free theory. Unfortunately, the sophisticates are unwilling to teach the theory to us.²⁰ They are, however, willing to use sentences of the *F*-discourse assertively when talking to us even though when we use one of our sentences (in itself or embedded in a larger sentence), they regularly map it to a sentence of the *F*-free theory that is closest in meaning.²¹ Given the incompatibility of the underlying theories, this

²⁰ It is unclear whether they could do so; whether we could overcome our cognitive limitations with their help depends on what sort of cognitive limitations are at issue. If all we lack is sufficient evidence, perhaps we can come to believe the *F*-free theory on the basis of testimony from the sophisticates. But if the theory is only presentable in a language we *in principle* cannot understand, we will never come to believe it even with their help.

²¹ Of course, if we *mention*, rather than *use* such a sentence the quasi-translation would be homophonic. So, for example, if '*S*' is a sentence of the *F*-theory, the quasi-translation of 'We are trying to prove the

mapping is not truth-preserving, so it cannot be a translation. But since it is the closest thing to a genuine translation we can have, it seems proper to call it 'quasi-translation'.

Now, suppose a simpleton (one of us) is engaged in a conversation with a sophisticate, and at some point the simpleton utters assertively a sentence (call it '*S*') from the *F*-discourse which trivially entails the existence of *F*s. What sort of speech act was performed?

At first, one might be tempted to say that the simpleton has made an assertion. After all, talking to the sophisticate is very much like talking to someone through an interpreter: the only difference seems to be that the sophisticate has internalized the translation procedure. But the analogy is misleading because quasi-translation is not genuine translation. When we communicate through an interpreter, normally we believe the contents of our sentences, and we intend to bring our conversational partner to believe those contents as well. This is not the case here; since the simpleton is fully aware that his *F*-theory is false, he does not believe the content of '*S*' and he does not want to bring the sophisticate to believe the content either. To say that by uttering '*S*' assertively he nevertheless asserts that *S* seems gratuitous.

Does he then make a pretended assertion? I think not. Pretended assertions are supposed to elicit pretended beliefs in their addressees. When children are playing and one of them pretend-asserts that a huge elephant is approaching, the other is supposed to pretend-believe it, otherwise she has opted out of the game. But in addressing the sophisticate and assertively uttering '*S*', the simpleton has no such intentions. Why would he want to elicit a pretend-belief in the content of '*S*', given that he knows that the

hypothesis that *S*' is 'We are trying to prove the hypothesis that *S*', whereas the quasi-translation of 'You

sophisticate *can do better*? Clearly, what the simpleton intends is that the sophisticate should form a *genuine* belief whose content is correlated via quasi-translation with the content of his own sentence. That is, in assertively uttering ‘*S*’ the simpleton intends that the sophisticate should (i) grasp the content of ‘*S*’, (ii) quasi-translate ‘*S*’ to a sentence of the *F*-free theory, say ‘*S'*’, (iii) grasp the content of ‘*S'*’, and (iv) assent to this latter content. To insist that *in addition* to these, the simpleton must also intend that the sophisticate should pretend to assent to the content of ‘*S*’ seems gratuitous.

Let me call the speech-act performed by the simpleton *quasi-assertion*. When a simpleton quasi-asserts that *S*, he intends not that his sophisticate partner come to believe that *S* or come to pretend-believe that *S*, he intends rather that the sophisticate come to believe the content of the quasi-translation of ‘*S*’. The communicative intentions associated with quasi-assertion are intimately connected to the mutual recognition of the epistemic barrier between the participants of the conversation: in quasi-asserting the speaker aims at eliciting assent to a thought he does not grasp.

But now we have a problem. For it seems that if a simpleton utters assertively ‘*S*’, he might as well utter assertively ‘I don’t believe that *S*’ as well. There seems to be no ground for denying that ‘I don’t believe that *S*’ is quasi-assertable: after all, due to the epistemic barrier, the simpleton clearly does not believe what the quasi-translation of ‘*S*’ says, and so, the quasi-translation of ‘I don’t believe that *S*’ is straightforwardly true.²² Within the context of his conversation with the sophisticate, an assertive utterance of ‘*S*’ and an assertive utterance of ‘I don’t believe that *S*’ would *both* count as perfectly

just uttered the sentence ‘*S*’ is ‘You just uttered the sentence ‘*S*’.

²² This assumes that the *F*-discourse is not psychology, and hence the quasi-translation of expressions like ‘I’ and ‘believe’ are homophonic. The present argument does not work without such an assumption.

appropriate quasi-assertions. But if both ‘*S*’ and ‘I don’t believe that *S*’ are quasi-assertable in the given context, it is hard to see how ‘*S* but I don’t believe that *S*’ could fail to be quasi-assertable as well. Such an utterance would even have a point: by making it the simpleton can bring the sophisticate to believe the quasi-translation of ‘*S*’ and that he, the simpleton, is in no position to believe the quasi-translation of ‘*S*’. There is nothing perplexing about having such intentions within epistemic situation of the example. So, it seems that we found a context when a Moorean sentence can be uttered assertively without absurdity.

Unless they are willing to repudiate the Moorean intuition that ‘*S* but I don’t believe that *S*’ cannot be uttered assertively within *any* context, fictionalists must contend that the scenario – at least as I described it – is impossible. There are three serious attempts I can think of to do so. They are all sensible reactions, but none is available for the neo-conservative fictionalist.

The first response is that the situation described is impossible because there could not be sophisticates. I think there is a lot to be said in favor of this reaction. Most of us, including old-fashioned radicals and conservatives, are under no obligation to think that there could be a theory that we cannot have but nevertheless can recognize to be better than our best theory. And if there could be no such theory there could not be beings who have such a theory. But neo-conservatives believe that there *is* such a theory, so it is hard to see how they could deny that there *could be* beings like the sophisticates of the example. Of course, stubborn denial is always an option. But it would be rather strange to try to avoid ontological commitment to properties, numbers, or values through

ontological commitment to theories that are necessarily unbelievable by *any* creature whatsoever.

The second response is that the situation, as I described it, is impossible because although there could be sophisticates, simpletons could not communicate with them. The simpletons could produce noises, which in turn would cause the sophisticates to have certain beliefs, but since these beliefs do not stand in an appropriate relation to the simpleton's own beliefs, no communication would take place. There are cases somewhat similar to the one described when such a response would indeed be reasonable. If all the simpleton knew was that whenever he utters 'S', the sophisticate quasi-translates it into some deep truth, it would be plausible to say that they are not conversing at all; for all the simpleton knows, the content of 'S' plays absolutely no role in determining what the sophisticate will come to believe. But our case is different. Here the simpleton knows a lot about how the sophisticate is interpreting him: he knows that 'S' gets quasi-translated to a sentence that is *closest in meaning* among those underwritten by the *F*-free theory. Of course, one can insist that the simpleton's beliefs concerning the *F*-free theory are too unspecified to make a difference. But this is an unwise move for the neo-conservative: surely, the less we comprehend about the *F*-free theory, the less we are in a position to compare it with our best theory. A dimly understood theory cannot give us a good reason to suspend our beliefs in the best theory we have.

The third response is that although there could be sophisticates and the simpletons could communicate with them, their communication is mischaracterized in the description of the above scenario. I argued above that in uttering 'S' assertively, the simpleton is not asserting or pretend-asserting that *S*. But from this it does not follow that

the speech act he performs (which I called quasi-assertion) is not assertion or pretend-assertion of some *other* content. In particular, one could argue that when the simpleton utters assertively ‘*S*’ in a conversation with a sophisticate, he thereby asserts that *S*’, or perhaps pretends to assert that *S*’. But then uttering assertively ‘*S* but I don’t believe that *S*’ he would presumably assert or pretend to assert the content of ‘*S*’ and the content of ‘I don’t believe that *S*’, either of which amounts to making an absurd utterance.

Notice that this response assumes that an assertive utterance of ‘*S*’ carries *different contents* depending whether the simpleton talks to other simpletons or to sophisticates. In itself, this is not an implausible assumption. After all, we can think of the quasi-translation used by the sophisticate as part of the way they *interpret* the simpletons, and if we think that their practice is legitimate, we are bound to say that the simpleton’s utterances are susceptible to a certain alternative understanding. But this is not a view a fictionalist could easily hold.

Fictionalism is distinguished from other ways of being ontologically vigilant by taking the semantics of our sentences at face value. Fictionalists believe that the apparent singular terms of the *F*-discourse really are singular terms: they purport to refer to *F*’s. But the third response contends that *sometimes* these terms are not to be interpreted as genuine singular terms: when they are used in the course of a conversation with a sophisticate, sentences in which such terms occur are susceptible to a non-standard interpretation. This raises a problem. If a non-standard interpretation is out of the question when no sophisticates are around, what makes it available when the sophisticates appear among us? After all, according to the story, we already knew of the existence of the *F*-free theory before they showed up, and they don’t teach us anything

new about it once they got here. If talking to sophisticates by uttering assertively ‘The average star has 2.4 planets’ we manage to express a proposition that says what we care about without entailing the existence of arbitrary stars, why not say that in talking to other simpletons we can pull off the same trick?

Perhaps fictionalists want to bite this bullet. They might say that sentences of the *F*-discourse are advanced in a ‘metaphorical vein’, which implies (among other things) that only their metaphorical content is asserted.²³ Assuming that talk about literal and metaphorical content is to be taken literally, this proposal advances a systematic ambiguity theory: sentences of the *F*-discourse have at least two contents and when we use them assertively, we assert one or the other depending on the context of use. But this is an unstable view for two reasons. First, it postulates an ambiguity without linguistic evidence, and thus it no longer treats the sentences of the *F*-discourse at face value. A fictionalist who yields to this temptation will have a hard time defending his view against other extravagant semantic proposals, according to which, given proper interpretation, the *F*-discourse carries no commitment whatsoever to *F*’s. Second, this proposal postulates an implausible split between the *standard* and the *literal* content of the sentences of the *F*-discourse. According to the proposal, only children and confused philosophers ever assert the literal content of *F*-sentences; experts and the ordinary folk opt for the metaphorical interpretation. But an ambiguity of this sort must be a fleeting phenomenon: the standard use of ‘*S*’ is to assert a certain propositional content, sooner or

²³ Cf. Yablo ‘A Paradox of Existence,’ *op. cit.*

later that content becomes the literal content of ‘*S*’.²⁴ A fictionalist who concedes that sentences of the *F*-discourse are literally true is a lapsed fictionalist.

Neo-conservative fictionalism, then, seems to lack the resources to explain what could be wrong with the scenario when in talking to a sophisticate a simpleton quasi-asserts a Moorean sentence without absurdity. Of the three possible explanations considered, the first and the second responses are available for old-fashioned fictionalists but not for neo-cons, while the third is deeply problematic for any fictionalist.

V

The problem of quasi-assertability of Moorean sentences leaves neo-conservative fictionalists with two options: to come up with a good explanation why a conversation between simpletons and sophisticates is impossible, or to concede that it is possible and repudiate the intuition that Moorean sentences cannot be uttered assertively without absurdity. As I argue above, I see prospects for the first of these options as being rather bleak. But what about the second? Couldn’t neo-conservative fictionalist simply accept my argument and say that although in normal circumstances it is absurd to utter Moore sentences assertively, there is no such absurdity in situations when one is talking across epistemic barriers?

The problem with this reply is that it invites a slippery-slope *reductio*. There are fairly ordinary cases of talking across epistemic barriers. We say, for example, the sun is

²⁴ Consider the case of dead metaphors. A sentence like ‘Mary lived at the foot of the hill’ is literally true. ‘Foot of the hill’ is an idiom whose meaning must be learned independently of the meanings of its constituent expressions.

rising, even though we know that the Earth revolves around the Sun. Those of us who have tried to come up with an adequate and true paraphrase of the sentence ‘The sun is rising’ know that this is not an easy matter. Nevertheless, it can be done. Now suppose you don’t know how the paraphrase would go, but you are talking to someone who does. Then you are a simpleton talking to a sophisticate and so, by the assumption that Moore-sentences are quasi-assertable, you can utter assertively ‘The sun is rising but I don’t believe that the sun is rising’.²⁵ And if you can quasi-assert this when talking to a sophisticate, then it seems that you can utter it assertively even when you are talking to someone who may well be a simpleton. After all, people who cannot do this quasi-translation still probably think that someone could. Faced with an utterance of ‘The sun is rising, but I don’t believe that the sun is rising’ they can go through the following Gricean style reasoning: “The speaker just uttered a Moorean sentence. But such sentences cannot be uttered assertively without absurdity, unless they are addressed to a sophisticate who can quasi-translate it. I have no reason to assume that the speaker is not serious, so obviously she must believe that I am one of the sophisticates. Given this assumption, her utterance is not absurd.” And if I (as a speaker) know that you (as a listener) have the option of undertaking this sort of reasoning, then assertoric utterances of a fairly wide range of Moorean sentences will be non-problematic in a fairly wide range of cases. This result is, I think, disturbing. Consequently, though some may wish to

²⁵ There are two important differences between this case and the one discussed in the previous section. The first is that we can all become sophisticates regarding our ordinary talk about the sun; there is no deep epistemic barrier between those who know how the paraphrases would go and those who don’t. The second is that the false theory that underwrites utterances of ‘The sun is rising’ is by no means indispensable. Neither of these differences would justify the claim that in *this* case, as opposed to the one discussed in the previous section, the Moorean sentence is not quasi-assertable.

bullet-bite here, accepting the quasi-assertability of Moorean sentences seems an unattractive option.

It seems, then, that neo-conservative fictionalists *are* in trouble with Moore's paradox. If so, then those who are committed to a fictionalist stance towards certain indispensable areas of our discourse are stuck with the old ways of facing the Quine/Putnam challenge.*

Zoltán Gendler Szabó

The Sage School of Philosophy
Cornell University

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