

Philosophy 621 Seminar in Metaphysics Winter 2018

Instructor: David Davies

Location: Leacock 927

Time: Wednesday, 14:35-17:25

Office: Leacock 941

Office hours: TBA

Topic for 2017-18: Fictionality and Fictionalism

Course Description

Few concepts are as central to our ordinary commerce with artworks yet as philosophically problematic as that of fiction. While we seem to have little difficulty employing the concept in everyday life, a number of very thorny problems continue to preoccupy philosophers.

I Most obviously, the very nature of fiction calls for clarification. What distinguishes those verbally or visually presented representations that are fictions from those that are not? Is the distinction a matter of syntax - something manifest in the structure of a representation - or of semantics - the presence or absence of reference or truth - or a matter of pragmatics - the ways in which representations are used or are intended to be used? And what are we to make of works of 'new journalism' such as Capote's *In Cold Blood* that seem designed to frustrate any attempt to draw a clear distinction between fictional and non-fictional works?

II There are questions about the notion of 'fictional truth,' or, less paradoxically, 'truth in a fiction.' In virtue of what is something true in a fictional narrative, for example, and how are we to take account of the possibility that the narrators of such narratives may be deceived (as in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*) or deceivers (as, arguably, in Nabokov's *Lolita*)?

III There are possibly deeper questions about what may be termed 'truth *through* fiction,' the capacity of fictions to furnish us with knowledge of the actual world. Literary cognitivists claim that fictions do indeed provide us with such knowledge, but this claim is controversial. Can a case for literary cognitivism be made by drawing an analogy between literary fictions and the use of thought-experiments in science and philosophy?

IV Another question posed by our imaginative and affective engagement with fictional narratives is the status of those characters, places, and events depicted therein that have no real counterparts. Of what do I imagine certain things, and for what do I feel certain things, when I watch a performance of *King Lear* and feel for Cordelia? The status of 'fictional characters' and our ability to talk about and affectively relate to such entities has long taxed not only philosophers of art but also philosophers of language, and treatments of these issues have been central to some of the most significant work in analytic metaphysics and the philosophy of language. How one thinks of fictional characters will also bear upon how one views apparent paradoxes that arise out of our emotional responses to representations acknowledged to be fictional.

In the first half of this seminar, we shall examine the ways in which these issues have been addressed in contemporary analytic philosophy. Recent work in this tradition has accorded a further significant role to fictions, however, in reviving the 'fictionalist' option in metaphysics. When, in his *Philosophy of Logic* (1971), Hilary Putnam characterised 'fictionalism' as a view

held by a number of philosophers around the turn of the 20th century (he has in mind Duhem and Vaihinger) which “seems presently to have disappeared”, few if any of his readers would have disagreed. Fictionalism, as Putnam describes it, was the view that “various entities presupposed by scientific and common sense discourse...were merely ‘useful fictions’, or that we cannot, at any rate, possibly know that they are *more than* useful fictions.” Within less than a decade of Putnam’s pronouncements, however, two very influential expositions of fictionalist positions emerged - Van Fraassen’s defense of ‘constructive empiricism’ in the philosophy of science in *The Scientific Image* (1980) and Hartry Field’s defense of a nominalist view of mathematics in *Science without Numbers* (1980).

However, the claim that certain apparently objective discourses should be viewed as ‘useful fictions’ assumes that we have a clear idea of what it is for something to be a *fiction*, and, while some serious literature on this topic had begun to emerge by 1980 (in particular, David Lewis’s “Truth in Fiction”), it did not obviously lend itself to the purposes of fictionalism. Only with the appearance of Kendall Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe* in 1990 do we find a sophisticated and fully developed theory of fictions suitable to serve the fictionalist cause. Indeed, Walton himself was very aware of the implications of his account of fiction for metaphysical issues and has been a prominent contributor to the fictionalist literature, along with his former colleague Stephen Yablo who has developed aspects of Walton’s view in defense of a fictionalist view of mathematics. The last twenty years have seen a flourishing of fictionalism, with vigorous debate concerning the merits of fictionalist analyses of many forms of discourse.

In the second half of the seminar, we shall examine, and try to assess the strengths and weaknesses of, contemporary work on fictionalism. We shall first devote a couple of weeks to a fuller consideration of Walton’s work on the nature of fiction and the implications of this work for issues in the philosophy of language (the nature of metaphor and the analysis of negative existentials). We shall then critically examine contemporary fictionalist accounts of moral discourse. Finally, we shall look at a recent exchange between one of fictionalism’s most prominent exponents (Yablo) and one of its most trenchant critics (Jason Stanley).

Readings

Most primary readings for this course will be contained in a course-pack available from the McGill University Bookstore. Any additional readings will be made available either on MyCourses or on reserve in the McLennan-Redpath Library.

Course requirements

Students are expected to have read the assigned texts prior to the seminar, and to come to the seminar with questions they would like to be addressed in the discussion. The principal requirement for the course is a research paper (around 15 pages typed double-spaced for undergraduates; around 20 pages, ditto, for graduate students) to be written on a topic selected by the student and approved by me. Papers are due at the end of classes. This paper will count for 80% of the total grade. The remaining 20% of the grade will be given for participation in the seminar, which will include being responsible for raising questions in discussion (undergraduates) or giving a short presentation on course material (graduate students).

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or

evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity/ for more information).