What Should Fictionalists Say About…?

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Abstract

Richard Joyce proposes an innovative form of moral fictionalism according to which the moral error theorist can willingly suspend her moral disbelief by distracting herself from the systematic error that, in reflective moments, she believes to afflict moral thought and discourse. In this paper I ask three questions about the life of 'distraction fictionalists.' Specifically, I ask what distraction fictionalists should say about (a) the use of self-distraction as a psychological coping strategy, (b) some limitations of the comparison that Joyce makes between his fictionalist response to moral error theory and our response to the paradox of happiness, and (c) certain commonly occurring situations in which transparency and the avoidance of deception are highly valued.

Keywords

1.   Introduction

Morality: From Error to Fiction is an excellent addition to the metaethical literature.[1] It is written with the clarity and verve that metaethicists will have come to expect from Richard Joyce's work, and it makes an impressive case for both moral error theory and moral fictionalism. In what follows I raise three questions about the fictionalist way of life that is recommended (with some caveats) by Joyce. My questions are not meant as objections, for I think that there are ways of answering them that the moral fictionalist can endorse.[2] They are instead invitations to say more—they are things that occurred to me when reflecting on Joyce's discussion, and that I think are worth exploring. More specifically, I will ask what fictionalists of Joyce's stripe should say about…

(a) … the strengths and weaknesses of self-distraction as a coping strategy for those who are troubled by their belief in moral error theory;

(b) … the fragility of one's fictive moral attitude given some similarities between what one is distracting oneself *from* and what one is distracting oneself *with*;

(c) … the situation of individual error theorists in (commonly occurring) contexts where a high premium is placed on transparency and the avoidance of dishonesty.

Before asking these questions, however, I'll give a brief summary of Joyce's fictionalist view.

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[1] In what follows, all references that do not include a year are to this text.

[2] I am not without objections (my sympathies are with moral realism, not moral error theory) but going into them would add little here. Joyce is clear that there are ways for critics to push back on the case for error theory that he makes in Part I of the book, and in which he could in turn push back on them, etc. His aim in defending error theory is not to make "comprehensive watertight arguments" but "to display the structure of one error-theoretic strategy" (23). Rather than pointing out leaks in arguments that are not intended to be watertight, I will ask what I hope are constructive questions about Joyce's fictionalist theory. For the record, areas where I would push back include the companions in guilt argument (I think that the best-known versions of it fail, but that other versions are stronger—Ingram 2018; 2023: Ch. 4), the reliability of moral intuition (Ingram 2023: Ch. 6-8), and the reality of moral responsibility.

2.   Distraction

There are many ways to be a fictionalist, but Joyce's suggestion is to move from moral belief to the non-doxastic acceptance of moral claims, and from moral assertion to the non-assertoric affirmation of moral claims.[3] Let's focus for the moment on the former, which Joyce fleshes out as involving the suspension of disbelief.[4] Consider: moral error theorists don't *believe* that torturing an innocent person is wrong, and are disposed to acknowledge this in some contexts (e.g. in a metaethics class). But in everyday life they can suspend their disbelief. Rather than attending to the non-existence of properties like wrongness, they can instead engage in what Joyce refers to as "a kind of embrace— a kind of internal 'playing along' with the very thing [they] disbelieve" (138). A bit like how a cinemagoer retains the belief that he is in a large room surrounded by strangers, but is distracted from this belief by his engagement with the film (159-160). Of course, the cinemagoer's suspension of disbelief is localised and short-term, but Joyce argues that this sort of mindset can be broader and longer-lasting. His main example involves the paradox of happiness—if happiness is Janet's ultimate aim, then she will probably be better off if she stops thinking about this aim most of the time. Rather than always trying to decide whether this or that activity will make her happier, she should forget about happiness and cultivate other ends, such as stamp collecting, thinking of *these* as her ultimate aims (162). In reflective contexts Janet will acknowledge that collecting stamps is not her ultimate aim, and is not inherently worthwhile. She will acknowledge that her ultimate aim is happiness. Nevertheless, as she is absorbed in her stamps the question of whether she is happy will likely fade into the background, and she will just enjoy herself. By playing along with the falsehood that collecting stamps is her ultimate aim, Janet is thus embracing a fiction that contributes to advancing her actual ultimate aim.

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[3] Like Joyce, my focus here is on 'revolutionary' rather than 'hermeneutic' fictionalism.

[4] As Joyce (138) emphasises, what fictionalists advise for moral belief must sometimes come apart from what they advise for moral assertion. I'll return to this in §5.

Note too that, according to Joyce (163), Janet is not *deceiving* herself about her ends (at least not in a way that is problematic). Instead, she is *distracting* herself from the truth about them by focusing her mind on other things. Joyce's claim is that moral error theorists can do something similar:

This notion of 'self-distraction' lies at the heart of the kind of moral fictionalism that I find plausible. According to this view, Humean values exist and Kantian values do not, and a smart person knows this. But a smart person also realizes that something similar in its irony to the paradox of happiness is in play: that the practice of deliberating explicitly in terms of Humean values tends to be self-defeating, whereas deliberating in terms of realist Kantian values can provide important personal and social benefits (benefits, that is, which are understood in Humean terms). The moral fictionalist, thus, prescribes a course of self-distraction and suspension of disbelief: in your day-to-day activities, forget about the Humean truth; let your thoughts, speech, and actions be guided by Kantian normativity. In other words, when it comes to Humean values, 'in order to get them, one must forget them.' So long as you retain the disposition to sincerely deny the Kantian foundations if asked about them in all seriousness, then you do not really believe in them; we can classify your attitude toward morality as one of 'nondoxastic acceptance.' If you follow this advice studiously, then in your day-to-day life you won't even be particularly aware that your attitude toward morality is not one of sincere belief—indeed, you won't be conscious that you are 'following advice studiously' at all. In everyday contexts, your attitude toward morality will have the phenomenology of belief—all the emotional, motivational, and practical advantages of moral belief—without being moral belief (163-164).

Joyce (183) suggests 'distraction fictionalism' as a label for this view. In what follows I will ask three questions about which I would like to hear the distraction fictionalist say more.

3.   Coping

In psychology and related fields, distraction and self-distraction are often discussed in connection with their role as coping strategies.[5] In the face of various kinds of stressor, one thing that we often do is 'mentally disengage,' taking our minds off the problem so as to alleviate the stress. For instance, I might try to distract myself from my troubles by watching television, listening to music, going to the shops, or immersing myself in work.

Joyce does not present distraction fictionalism as a coping strategy, but I would be interested to hear more about its prospects as one. My thought here is that belief in moral error theory can be a source of stress, and that to alleviate this stress we might seek to distract ourselves through the suspension of moral disbelief. Consider that, for many people, the belief that there are no moral facts will be deeply threatening. It may threaten one's sense of self (e.g. by revealing that one cannot, in fact, be a morally good person), one's life projects (e.g. by revealing that the notion of justice that guides one's political campaigning connects to nothing in reality), one's interpersonal relationships (e.g. by revealing that there are no moral facts to back up practices of moral praise and blame, forgiveness and apology, etc.), and so on. Indeed, it may make reality itself seem bleaker and less meaningful (cf. Ingram 2018: 655-656). One might look to distraction fictionalism as a response to these perceived threats—by shifting one's attention away from the non-existence of moral facts, and by 'playing along' with morality in thought, speech, and action, one might try to reduce the stress involved in believing moral error theory.

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[5] E.g. self-distraction is directly measured on the Brief COPE inventory (Carver 1997; cf. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989). And the Ways of Coping questionnaire (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) measures *distancing* and *tension-reduction*, which are distinct from self-distraction but include items relevant to it. These are the most widely used coping scales—see Kato (2015) for a meta-analysis of the frequency of use of these and other such scales.

The obvious question here is whether and when self-distraction is effective as a coping strategy. The evidence seems mixed, as one might expect given the variation in possible sources of distraction and the different problems at which it may be targeted.[6] Doing a cryptic crossword as a way to distract oneself from a painful medical procedure is very different to immersing oneself in work as a distraction from the issues in one's marriage, or scrolling through social media whenever memories of a childhood trauma spring to mind, and so on. Interestingly, self-distraction is often cast as a maladaptive coping strategy because, whilst it might afford short-term relief from the experience of stress, it does not engage with the root of the problem and can therefore lead to poorer psychological outcomes in the long-run. However, there is also evidence that in certain contexts self-distraction can be adaptive. For instance, if the focus of the distraction is positive, it may be a constructive way to get through intense periods of stress, affording temporary relief from them and thereby facilitating healthier or longer-term forms of coping.[7]

So one question here is whether and when the kind of self-distraction that Joyce recommends will be adaptive rather than maladaptive. This is ultimately an empirical question, but I would speculate that it will tend to be maladaptive. After all, distraction fictionalism is a proposal for how to think and act in everyday practical life. Suspension of moral disbelief is not invoked here as a periodic source of short-term relief, or as a temporary step on the road to recovery, but as a long-term framework for deliberation and action. And, crucially, it does not engage with the stressor at its source. The stress is thus liable to reoccur when one re-enters the kinds of reflective context in which the truth of moral error theory returns to mind. One might assume that such contexts are rare (though see §5), but the point remains that distraction fictionalism seems unlikely to get to the root of a common problem facing those who arrive at belief in moral error theory.

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[6] For relevant discussion see e.g. Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989), Iwasaki (2001), Sheppes and Meiran (2007), Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner (2016), and Waugh, Shing, and Furr (2020).

[7] See e.g. Perez-Sales et al. (2005) on distraction as an initial coping strategy after natural disasters.

It is worth reiterating that Joyce does not present his distraction fictionalism as a coping strategy. The main benefits that he sees for it involve the role of moral thought as a commitment device (164-172). But its (probable) limitations in relation to coping suggest further questions facing the theory. For once we think about the prospects of self-distraction as a coping strategy, we can see reasons to think that, in the long-term, moral error theorists might be better off taking a different approach to moral practice. More specifically, consider how self-distraction compares to other, more consistently adaptive coping strategies like acceptance and positive reappraisal (cf. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989: 269-270). In brief, acceptance involves acknowledging difficult thoughts without necessarily seeking to change or resist them (e.g. so as to allow them to come and go), and positive reappraisal involves identifying and focusing on possible goods relating to a stressor (e.g. the opportunity to grow as a person). But these coping strategies fit more neatly with abolitionism than fictionalism. After all, acknowledging the truth of moral error theory so as to adapt oneself to it, and focusing on silver linings that are often alleged to come with the abandonment of moral discourse (e.g. reduced hostility in interpersonal conflicts—cf. Hinckfuss 1987 and Garner 2007), both involve thinking of morality in abolitionist terms. And note too that these strategies encourage *active* coping, insofar as they require us to target the stressor at its root.[8] For instance, acceptance might help me to consciously adapt my sense of sense of self to the truth of error theory, and positive reappraisal might involve focusing on the chance to navigate conflict without the constraint of categorical moral thought. It would be interesting to see whether an abolitionist view focused on acceptance and positive reappraisal would be more effective for long-term coping than a fictionalist view focused on distraction. This is another empirical question, but if self-distraction is a maladaptive strategy, and if there are adaptive alternatives to it, then this will all need to go into the cost-benefit analysis.

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[8] On 'active' coping see Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989: 268). This is a coping strategy in its own right, but is connected to acceptance and positive reappraisal insofar as these are intrinsically bound up with recognising the problem as something that one is attempting to get beyond.

There are various things that distraction fictionalists could say here. They could provide reasons to suspect that the benefits of self-distraction still tend to outweigh its costs. They could also note that, even if some of us feel threatened by the belief in moral error theory, this is not everyone's experience (and even among those for whom it is a stressor, some will find it more threatening than others). Joyce (173) recognises that fictionalism is better advice for some than others, and those seeking a way to cope with belief in moral error theory may be among those for whom it is not good advice. In any case, my first question is this: what should fictionalists say about the prospects of self-distraction as a coping strategy for those who are troubled by their belief in moral error theory?

4.   Fragility

A more familiar question for fictionalists concerns the fragility of fictive attitudes. It is easy to opt out of most fictions, and if we can just opt out of our fictive moral thoughts whenever the going gets tough, then they are a poor replacement for moral belief. They won't really work as a commitment device. Joyce answers this charge as follows:

I suspect that people are inclined to think this because they have in mind the wrong image of what the moral fictionalist is recommending … Let us return, then, to the paradox of happiness. Janet engages in the fiction that stamp-collecting is valuable for its own sake, even though in her more reflective moments she admits that it is not. If we admit the language of 'pretense' into this case (which I will allow for the moment) then we can say that Janet 'pretends' that stamp-collecting has a kind of value that she knows it does not really have … But is Janet's pretense a flimsy thing that she's willing to cast off at the drop of a hat? I see no reason for assuming so. It's a pretense that serves her well and contributes to her happiness; it's in her interests to generally maintain the pretense and she knows it (166-167).

Joyce thinks that fictionalists can make similar claims. Moreover, just as Janet still has instrumental reason to pursue her hobby even if her 'pretence' collapses, a moral error theorist whose 'pretence' collapses will still have instrumental reason to (e.g.) keep her promises.

I think that there is a lot to be said for this response, and also for Joyce's (177) related observation that we must think carefully about what it is *actually* like to engage with a fiction. However, the question that I want to ask concerns a difference between what Janet is doing in the paradox of happiness case and what the moral error theorist is doing in suspending moral disbelief. Note first that Janet is distracting herself from her ultimate aim (happiness) by focusing on something very different to it. Rather than thinking about how to make herself happier, she is thinking about how to improve her stamp collection. The thought of happiness is able to fade into the background because her focus is on something else altogether. In contrast, the fictionalist is supposed to be distracting herself from moral error theory by focusing on something that seems to be in very close orbit to it—namely, a framework of substantive moral claims. Moral error theory might be a repudiation of such claims, but it is precisely this that connects them. And this connection reduces the distance between what the moral error theorist seeks to distract herself *from* and what she seeks to distract herself *with*. Whereas in Janet's case there is a great distance between these things, the same is not true for moral error theorists.

The significance of this is that it compounds the fragility of the fictive attitude. It may be harder for a moral error theorist to enter or remain in the moral fiction than it is for Janet to forget about aiming at happiness. Simply by thinking moral thoughts, there is an increased likelihood that one's attention will return to the non-existence of moral facts. It is a bit like me trying to distract myself from my increasing baldness by becoming a collector of hats. I might enjoy collecting hats, but they are the exactly the sort of thing that reminds me of my increasingly hairless head—focusing my attention on hats makes it harder rather than easier to suspend my follicular disbelief. Similarly, engaging in non-doxastic moral thought may make it harder for someone who believes moral error theory to maintain the fiction, for the very fact that such thought has to do with morality may simply serve to draw attention to that from which they are trying to turn away. In short, the kind of non-doxastic acceptance that Joyce advocates may be fragile after all, in which case the accusation that it is limited as a commitment device returns.

Of course, Joyce can plausibly fall back on the point that, when the moral error theorist finds herself snapping out of the fiction, she will usually still have instrumental reasons to keep her promises (and so forth). Nevertheless, my second question is this: what should the distraction fictionalist say about the apparent lack of distance between what they mean to distract themselves *from* and what they mean to distract themselves *with*?

5.   Deception

I noted above (§2) that Joyce's proposal is to fictionalise morality such that it involves non-doxastic acceptance rather than belief, and non-assertoric affirmation rather than assertion. But there are some interesting complications here, for the question of what to do with moral practice can be addressed to different audiences. Specifically, we can address this question to a *group* of likeminded error theorists or to an *individual* error theorist who lives alongside people who do not share her metaethical commitments.[9] And whilst a group of error theorists can work to revolutionise moral discourse as well as moral thought, an individual can only revolutionise her moral thought. For, as Joyce says, "which type of speech act one performs (and thus whether one's language is or is not ontologically committed) is not up to the speaker alone—it depends in part on how the audience takes the speech" (138). Thus, an error theorist who does not live among other error theorists cannot help but make an assertion when she utters 'torture is evil,' for she cannot alter what these words mean by herself. Still, what she *can* do by herself is think fictive thoughts. Her revolution thus has to be an internal one, limited to what happens in her head rather than what comes out of her mouth. But it can still be to her benefit.

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[9] As Joyce (134-135) notes, there are many other variations that we could explore here. E.g. in the group case we can vary its size and its relation to other groups, and in both the group and individual cases we could vary their temperaments, their desires, the strength of their justification for believing moral error theory, the cultural or historical setting in which they live, and so on. I won't go into all this here.

An obvious worry here is that the individual fictionalist is engaging in a form of deception, for there is a mismatch between what she thinks and what she says—when using moral language she makes assertions that fail to reflect what she really believes. For the error theorist there is obviously nothing *morally* wrong about engaging in such deception, but there may be non-moral reasons to worry about it. After all, most of us do not want to be (or be thought) deceptive. Joyce, however, isn't worried:

[I]f you are anxious that whenever you use moral language someone aware of your moral skepticism might cry out 'Aha! You hypocrite!'—if you are worried about duplicity and bad faith as you move among the believers—then I have good news for you: it's *fine* (probably). You are going along with a way of talking for the sake of social convenience, which may be as much for the benefit of your interlocutors as it is for yourself. If the topic of conversation is, say, Nazi war crimes, then *nobody* wants to hear you say that there was nothing morally wrong with what the Nazis did, accompanied by your lengthy analysis of, say, Bernard Williams' arguments against external reasons. That would probably just be confusing and rude ... On the other hand, nor does being a moral skeptic commit you to secrecy or duplicity. If the conversation is not about Nazi war crimes, but, rather, actually *is* a philosophical discussion about the ontology of moral properties, then it might be entirely appropriate for you to raise the topic of Williams' arguments against external reasons (136).

I am a bit less relaxed than Joyce seems here. He is right that we often avoid correcting falsehoods when doing so is unnecessary or unhelpful—if a friend proposes meeting at sunrise, it is not problematically deceptive to avoid mentioning that, strictly speaking, the sun does not rise (135)—but moral cases seem to me different from this. Given the role that morality plays in social coordination, and given the value of having confidence in those with whom one seeks to coordinate, there is a risk that the moral error theorist will struggle to retain the confidence of others if the mismatch between what she thinks and what she says is discovered. This isn't to say that error theorists *are* untrustworthy (this has not been my experience!), just that they risk being seen as such if discovered to be fictionalists. However, my main question regarding the place of deception in the life of the fictionalist concerns specific contexts in which a high value is placed on being truthful.

There are many areas of life in which we have especially high expectations that those to whom we are speaking will be transparent with us. For instance, in the context of education there are plausibly a number of epistemic considerations governing when it is and is not appropriate to employ deception (e.g. the need to balance accuracy with effective communication, the relevance of the deception to the subject matter, etc.). In the context of medical practice there are professional standards regarding honesty and integrity (e.g. in relation to informed consent and doctor-patient confidentiality). And in legal contexts there are often institutional reasons to be open and transparent (not only when under oath in a courtroom, but also in commonplace legal transactions such as drawing up a business contract or pursuing a divorce). Morality won't always enter into these contexts, but it will a lot of the time. For instance, moral education is central to education, so we must consider whether the kind of deception to which an individual fictionalist is committed renders them prone to falling short of important pedagogical ideals.[10] Likewise for the medical and legal contexts. It would be interesting to find out how those who are not committed to moral error theory might respond if they were to learn that their doctor, nurse, therapist, lawyer, or business partner is going along with moral discourse without sincerely believing in it. How might this bear on their trust in them?

To clarify, my point is not that the fictionalist's worldview actually renders them untrustworthy, or more likely to mistreat their learners, patients, clients, and business partners. They will usually have strong instrumental reasons, including those deriving from their concern for others, to do their best for them. My point is rather that the kind of deception to which a fictionalist seems committed risks causing more problems than Joyce's discussion allows, given the fictionalist's own instrumental reasons to live and function effectively in contexts where a high degree of non-moral value is attached to the avoidance of deception. And, as the cases of education, medicine, and law suggest, this sort of context is quite commonplace. It is not limited to the philosophical seminar room.

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[10] I discuss this more thoroughly in Ingram (ms).

The fictionalist might argue that, in contexts such as these, we can abandon the fiction whenever it risks leading to deceptions that are more costly than beneficial. But the more often this happens, the less obvious it will be that the recommendation being made is distinctively *fictionalist*—it may start to look more like the 'negotiationist' view outlined by Björn Eriksson and Jonas Olson (2019), which recommends being flexible about whether, when, and how to participate in moral thought and discourse.[11] Thus, my third question is this: what should distraction fictionalists say about the situation of an individual moral error theorist who often enters contexts in which there are very strong non-moral reasons to be honest, or to avoid using moral language in a deceptive way?

6.   Conclusion

I should like to reiterate how much I enjoyed reading *Morality: From Error to Fiction*, and that in asking my questions about Joyce's distraction fictionalism I simply hope to continue the conversation—I am interested to know what fictionalists should say about self-distraction as a coping strategy, the links between what they are trying to distract themselves *from* and what they are trying to distract themselves *with*, and contexts in which a high value is attached to avoiding deceit. But Joyce has done us a great service by presenting a formidable and stimulating case for moral fictionalism and moral error theory.[12]

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[11] Eriksson and Olson attach their negotiationist proposal to conservationism (they see conservationism as the best policy for certain idealised conditions, but suggest that in non-ideal conditions it can help to be flexible). But negotiationism can plausibly stand alone—i.e. the advice to moral error theorists might just be to use or avoid moral language in *whatever* way is (instrumentally) best in their present context.

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