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Does Metaphorizing the Mind Dethrone It?

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Abstract

This article contributes to ongoing debates in the philosophy of mind concerning the ontological status of mental states by examining mental fictionalism. Within a pragmatic and naturalist framework, mental fictionalism reconsiders the tension between the Cartesian legacy, which treats mental states as metaphysically and ontologically serious entities, and strict behaviorism, which entirely neglects this inner dimension. Drawing on the work of analytic philosophers such as Sellars, Ryle, and Quine, mental fictionalism suspends commitment to the ontological status of mental states. Instead, it legitimizes the functional role of folk psychology. On this account, mental states are grounded not in inner representations but in patterns of behavioral regularity and social norms. The article consists of three sections: the first outlines the theoretical framework of mental fictionalism; the second discusses the place of folk psychology within this framework; and the third examines the epistemic and pragmatic implications of these two lines of inquiry. The aim of this paper is not merely to describe mental fictionalism, but to show that metaphorizing the mind may offer a way to reconsider its epistemic and pragmatic function. Within this framework, metaphorizing the mind is understood not as a form of reduction, but as a strategy for preserving the epistemic strength of mental discourse.

Keywords: Eliminativism, Fictionalism, Folk Psychology, Mental Fictionalism, Metaphor, Mind.**Metaforlaştırmak Zihni Tahtından İndirir mi?****Öz**

Bu makale, zihinsel durumların ontolojik statüsüne ilişkin zihin felsefesindeki güncel tartışmalara zihinsel kurguculuğu inceleyerek katkıda bulunmaktadır. Zihinsel kurguculuk, pragmatik ve natüralist bir çerçevede, zihinsel durumları metafizik ve ontolojik olarak ciddiye alan Kartezyen miras ile bu içsel boyutu tümüyle göz ardı eden katı davranışçılık arasındaki gerilimi yeniden ele alır. Sellars, Ryle ve Quine gibi analitik filozofların çalışmalarına dayanarak, zihinsel durumların ontolojik statüsüne yönelik bağlılığı askıya alır; bunun yerine folk psikolojinin işlevsel rolünü meşrulaştırır. Bu yaklaşıma göre zihinsel durumlar, içsel temsillere değil, davranışsal düzenliliklere ve toplumsal normlara dayandırılır. Makale üç bölümden oluşmaktadır: İlk bölüm zihinsel kurgusalcılığın teorik çerçevesini özetlemekte; ikinci bölüm halk psikolojisinin bu çerçevedeki yerini tartışmakta; ve üçüncü bölüm bu iki araştırma çizgisinin epistemik ve pragmatik etkilerini incelemektedir. Bu makalenin amacı yalnızca zihinsel kurguculuğu tanımlamak değil, aynı zamanda zihnin metaforlaştırılmasının epistemik ve pragmatik işlevini yeniden değerlendirmenin bir yolunu sunabileceğini göstermektir. Bu çerçevede, zihnin metaforlaştırılması bir indirgeme biçimi olarak değil, zihinsel söylemin epistemik gücünü korumaya yönelik bir strateji olarak anlaşılmaktadır.

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*"I'm writing a book on magic," I explain, and I'm asked, "Real magic?" By real magic people mean miracles, thaumaturgical acts, and super-natural powers. "No," I answer: "Conjuring tricks, not real magic." Real magic, in other words, refers to the magic that is not real, while the magic that is real, that can actually be done, is not real magic."*²

Introduction

No human being can escape the mesmerizing performance of their own inner world. One always witnesses it from the very front row, from the perspective of the first-person singular. Descartes appreciated the epistemic value of this performance. In doing so, he set the course for modern philosophy. For later philosophers, however, it has not been easy to determine the role that first-person experience plays in organizing our inner experiential domain. It has also been difficult to trace the practical implications of its epistemic force. At the risk of spoiling the surprise at the outset, it is worth noting that this remains an unsettled debate. In the concluding remarks, it will be argued that the fact that the debate has not reached closure and that there remains value in continuing along this path underscores the significance of mental fictionalism. In this respect, mental fictionalism offers a valuable contribution to the naturalist search for reconciliation.

The philosophical topography of the inner world, transmitted to us as a historical legacy, and the question of where our inward journey carries us ontologically, metaphysically, and epistemologically, have been discussed in many different contexts. The investigation and interrogation of the nature of the set of mental states to which we refer with the pronoun "I"—in other words, the inquiry into the ontological inventory of the mind—have required that mental discourse itself be taken seriously and critically assessed.

In this context, one of the approaches that has been pursued is to focus primarily on the functions of the mind. The mind is symphonic, operating through a variety of different operators: perceiving, remembering, imagining, feeling, experiencing, believing, desiring, hoping, knowing, intending, and so on. We refer to these as "mental states." Yet mental states are not conceptually clear or unproblematic notions in philosophy; rather, they bear many ink stains upon them. For the present purposes, however, we shall set aside debates and classifications and proceed. The intentional forms of mental states, such as belief and desire, are referred to as propositional attitudes.³

Descartes, by claiming that a person can have direct access to their own mental states, laid the groundwork for the idea that the inner world possesses a stage of its own. Cartesian dualism recognizes this stage as a distinct substance at the ontological level and grants the mind a special status — as if bestowing upon it a throne of its own.⁴ Behaviorism rejects this status, even seeks to dismantle it; however, by doing so, it eliminates the very idea of the mind altogether, leaving only patterns of behavior behind.⁵ However, mental fictionalism, rather than reconciling them, reframes the debate: it does not dethrone the mind but changes the meaning of the throne. While the mental fictionalist holds that the Cartesian view takes the inner world too seriously, behaviorists, by contrast, remain indifferent to it.⁶ For mental fictionalism, the solution lies in a shift of perspective: mental states are understood as metaphorical expressions within folk psychology, to which appeal is made in order to make sense of behavior and language. Thus, on this view, mental states can be investigated, theorized about, and made the subject of

² Lee Siegel, *Net of Magic: Wonders and Deceptions in India* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1991), 425.

³ Michael Rescorla, "The Language of Thought Hypothesis," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023).

⁴ Howard Robinson - Ralph Weir, "Dualism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2025).

⁵ George Graham, "Behaviorism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023).

⁶ Adam Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 37.

philosophical inquiry without being mystified. Moreover, the fact that our discourse about mental states is metaphorical does not amount to a devaluation of it.⁷ In other words, propositional attitudes can be articulated without categorically denying the ontological status of mental states. The following section takes a closer look at mental fictionalism. Before doing so, however, it will be helpful to clarify how three key notions that form the linguistic and conceptual foundations of mental fictionalism—metaphor, fiction, and make-believe—intertwine.

Human beings are hypersocial creatures; our survival depends on making sense of the world around us, and we achieve this by using models, metaphors, and fictions. Among these, metaphors play a distinctive cognitive role in connecting what is familiar with what is to be understood—a relation that Toon captures with precision. As Toon puts it, “When we use metaphors, we describe a primary domain (i.e. the domain we wish to understand) by looking to a secondary domain (i.e. the source of our metaphor).”⁸ The primary domain, in this context, is the realm of social life and behavior through which we live and act; the secondary domain is our semantic repertoire, populated by public representations.⁹ We employ the latter to make sense of the former. For the mental fictionalist, representations are fictional tools we use to make sense of the world. Hence, they have epistemic functions but no ontological commitments. The mental fictionalist therefore treats make-believe and modeling as overlapping practices. According to Toon, models function like props in games of make-believe—devices that do not mirror the world directly but allow us to form specific conceptions of it.¹⁰ In this sense, fiction does not assert reality directly; rather, it emerges from the interplay of imagining, pretending, and conceiving.¹¹ Thus, make-believe can be understood as a psycho-social activity in which the subject simulates certain mental states within a fictional context through a kind of role-playing. This activity involves engagement and allows the subject to develop a form of participation in mental representations that is fictional rather than ontological.

1. Mental Fictionalism: Framework and Problematic Domain

Mental fictionalism is a relatively recent approach. At its core lies the claim that mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.) are patterns of behavior. In order to understand and regulate these behavioral patterns, we treat them *as if* there were inner representations. In other words, this approach preserves the explanatory value of folk psychology and positions it not as a direct equivalent of internal processes but as a functional framework that enables the interpretation of human actions. In this respect, the narratives of folk psychology operate as structured imaginative forms that, while conceptually inaccurate, remain epistemically generative in the production of knowledge.¹² Accordingly, within this approach, the epistemic role of folk psychology is preserved by conceiving it as a useful fictional schema and a pragmatic instrument.¹³ Following Toon’s theory, it is simply “a game of prop-oriented make-believe.”

In order to ground mental fictionalism, different theoretical frameworks have been developed in the literature. Ted Parent defends the approach of prefix semantics. According to this view, within the framework of “Lewisian prefix semantics,” a sentence with mental content “p” is true only if “p” can be derived from the fiction of folk psychology.¹⁴ Demeter draws an analogy between folk psychology and musical performance.¹⁵ He argues that

⁷ Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*, 35.

⁸ Adam Toon, “We Have Never Been Cartesian,” *Synthese* 205/3, (February 24, 2025), 109.

⁹ Toon, “We Have Never Been Cartesian,” 109.

¹⁰ Steven French, “Series Editor’s Foreword,” *Models as Make-Believe: Imagination, Fiction and Scientific Representation* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹¹ Richard M. Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism* (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2010).

¹² Adam Toon, “Fictionalism and the Folk,” *The Monist* 99, no. 3 (July 2016): 280. <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onw005>

¹³ Meg Wallace, “Saving Mental Fictionalism from Cognitive Collapse,” *Res Philosophica* 93, no. 2 (2016): 405. <https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2016.93.2.5>

¹⁴ Ted Parent, “Ontology After Folk Psychology; or, Why Eliminativists Should Be Mental Fictionalists,” *Analytic Philosophy* (October 2024). <https://doi.org/10.1111/phib.12358>

¹⁵ Tamás Demeter, “Mental Fictionalism,” *Monist* 96, no. 4 (2013): 483-504. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist201396422>

mental elements in folk psychology become fixed in specific contexts, similar to how certain notes in classical music evoke effects without verbal articulation.¹⁶ In contrast, Adam Toon develops a distinct theory based on Walton's views.¹⁷ In this article, Toon's perspective is taken as the primary focus, and the views of other mental fictionalists are incorporated where relevant.

Numerous philosophers consider mental fictionalism to be aligned with the eliminative approach and use it as a foundation for analysis.¹⁸ However, a significant distinction exists: mental fictionalism withholds ontological commitment to folk psychology while acknowledging its practical value.¹⁹ Therefore, due to the fundamental principles underlying eliminative materialism and mental fictionalism, attempts to reconcile these positions are likely to face substantial challenges.²⁰

The primary motivation is to avoid the theoretical and practical costs associated with eliminative materialism's critique of folk psychology. Mental fictionalism is grounded in three fundamental principles:

i. Ontological Modesty (Naturalism): The semantic network invoked with respect to mental states need not possess a referent. We can suspend our ontological commitments.

ii. Consistency (Fictional Order and Internal Meaning): The semantic network concerning mental states, even without ontological commitments, remains consistent and maintains its own stability.

iii. Functionality (Pragmatic Value): Mental states serve practical functions. They facilitate behavioral prediction and contribute to social regulation, including social cognition and the development of ethical and social norms.

Mental fictionalism, as defended by Adam Toon, draws inspiration from Ryle.²¹ Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949) critiques Cartesianism and addresses the mind-body problem using the well-known metaphor of the "ghost in the machine." For this reason, Ryle is frequently recognized for challenging and dispelling the dualist perspective.²² Ryle has often been regarded as the exorcist of the ghost in the machine.²³ For Ryle, the Cartesian conception of mind is a myth and constitutes a "category mistake."²⁴ On his account, the notion of "soul" does not denote a mysterious essence but rather refers to the totality of a person's abilities, dispositions, and inclinations.²⁵ Mental fictionalism aligns with Ryle's perspective, but this is just a starting point. Mental fictionalists push back against the reductive approach of contemporary behaviorism, which ignores the inner dimension.

¹⁶ Demeter, "Mental Fictionalism."

¹⁷ Toon, "Fictionalism and the Folk"; Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*.

¹⁸ Richard Joyce, "Psychological Fictionalism, and the Threat of Fictionalist Suicide," *Monist* 96, no. 4 (2013): 517-38. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist201396424>; Miklós Márton and János Tözsér, "Mental Fictionalism As an Undermotivated Theory," *Monist* 96, no. 4 (2013): 622-38. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist201396429>; William G. Lycan, "A Rylean Mental Fictionalism" in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 70-85. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-5>; Meg Wallace, "Mental Fictionalism" in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 27-51. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-3>

¹⁹ László Kocsis and Krisztián Pete, "The Sellarsian Fate of Mental Fictionalism" in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 128. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-9>

²⁰ This position is compatible with Demeter's analysis. Tamás Demeter, "A Mental Fictionalism Worthy of Its Name" in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 86-103. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-6>

²¹ Adam Toon, "Defending Mental Fictionalism: A Précis of Mind as Metaphor," *Philosophical Psychology* (June 2025): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2025.2519317>

²² Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

²³ Julia Tanney, "Ryle'i Tekrar Düşünmek" *Zihin Kavramı* içinde, ed. Gilbert Ryle (İstanbul: Doruk Yayıncılık, 2020), 48.

²⁴ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 16.

²⁵ Shanjendu Nath, "Ryle as a Critique of Descartes' Mind-Body Dualism," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 3, no. 7 (2013): 3.

Ryle's framework proves insufficient to explain the content of mental states; this gap is filled by Quine's naturalist intuitions. Through this synthesis, Toon's approach allows for the naturalization of both language and behavior. Consequently, within the intellectual trajectory followed by the mental fictionalist, a Quinean outlook can be strongly—though indirectly—discerned. Even though mental fictionalism does not explicitly invoke Quine, it nonetheless shares many of its key principles with his naturalist and pragmatic sensibilities. From a broader perspective, the kinship between mental fictionalism and Quine becomes evident when viewed against Quine's critique of the Cartesian quest for certainty.²⁶ Mental fictionalism follows an intellectual trajectory influenced by Quine, albeit indirectly. It shares key commitments with Quine's naturalist and pragmatic outlook, seeking to minimize ontological commitments and to legitimate theoretical constructs through their pragmatic functions. As has been pointed out, mental fictionalism focuses on the articulation of mental states—that is, on the ontological status of the content that becomes the subject of mental discourse. Its guiding motivation appears to be the attempt to resolve the tension with Quine's paradigm of ontological commitment, since it seems to turn our attention to the question of how we should address the ontological commitments of mental states in everyday discourse. This, in turn, is directly related to the way in which folk psychology itself is to be understood. For example, Demeter, himself a mental fictionalist, criticizes the acceptance of folk psychology as a *fact-stating discourse*.²⁷ Demeter's critique, in one respect, converges with Quine's approach of interpreting references to "belief" in language as a *dramatic act*; for both perspectives imply that attributions of mental states should not be understood as statements reporting objective facts, but rather as functional structures within linguistic and pragmatic contexts. As we may recall, Quine likewise regarded the articulation of another person's belief or mental state not as an objective report, but as an empathetic and fictional act—a form of dramatic staging.²⁸ According to Quine, this is less a matter of providing an objective report than an empathetic and fictional act, a form of dramatic staging. His account, therefore, is directed not at beliefs themselves, but at their linguistic expression. In this way, the subjective character of belief attributions is brought to light; such attributions are not facts that can be incorporated into the objective domain of science, but rather linguistic acts operating at the level of empathy. This, indeed, is no mere coincidence. For mental fictionalism advocates the naturalization of meaning and claims that the norms emerging over time are projected onto a metaphorical inner realm. As it is put, "A community that already uses language as an external tool in its social practices—to name things, to make assertions, to ask questions—begins to talk as if they had such things inside their heads."²⁹

Another point of convergence lies in Quine's approach to ontology developed in "On What There Is" (1948), where he emphasizes that by suspending ontological commitment, refraining from unnecessary posits, and attending solely to practical efficacy, we can nevertheless proceed with our theorizing.³⁰ Nevertheless, despite these intersections, it should be made clear that mental fictionalism is not a theory of meaning.³¹ At this point, it is possible to establish a direct continuity between Quine's ontological pluralism and the naturalizing orientation of mental fictionalism. Quine argues that conceptual systems need not be exact replicas of objective reality; rather, they should be evaluated in terms of their explanatory success and theoretical efficiency.³² Similarly, mental fictionalism maintains that the concept of "mind" need not refer to a distinct metaphysical domain of entities but can instead function as a regulative principle for explaining behavioral patterns and social norms. Thus, to metaphorize the mind is not to eliminate its epistemic and semantic value, but to naturalize it by freeing it from its metaphysical commitments.

²⁶ Kemal Batak, *Felsefenin Sonu: W.V.Quine, Doğallaştırılmış Epistemoloji ve A Priori Bilgi* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2015).

²⁷ Demeter, "Ment. Fict.," 484.

²⁸ Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 219.

²⁹ Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*, 68.

³⁰ Willard V. Quine, "On What There Is," *The Review of Metaphysics* 2, no. 5 (1948).

³¹ Adam Toon, "Fictionalism and Intentionality," *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 57. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-4>

³² Frederick Kroon et al., *A Critical Introduction to Fictionalism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 11–15.

A theory of meaning may appeal to representational explanations; however, for mental fictionalism, the mental state that centers the speaker and the hearer derives not from any inner representation but from general patterns of behavior. This is because explaining the meaning of language through the notion of representation overlooks the fact that representation itself already carries a linguistic form. In such a case, language takes on the task of explaining its own structure, which results in a theoretical circularity.³³ For the mental fictionalist, the way out of this circularity appears to lie in focusing on the nature of linguistic appearances within ordinary practices. This focus leads to the additional requirement of naturalizing meaning. For, “if representationalism asks us to naturalise mental representation, fictionalism asks us to naturalise meaning.”³⁴ Therefore, for the mental fictionalist, intentionality does not need to depend on representations, since it arises from and is sustained by patterns of human behaviour. The subject possesses the mental state attributed to them by virtue of performing the corresponding action.³⁵ What we attend to as representation is, in fact, a metaphorization. Thus, “We make sense of other people by talking as if they were guided by an inner world of representations, and we make sense of ourselves by talking as if we had such a world inside us.”³⁶

Mental fictionalism departs from representationalism by seeking to move beyond the limitations of representationalism itself, situating mental representations not as literal inner entities but on a practically useful footing.³⁷ According to Toon’s approach, the fictionalist does not deny the existence of mental states, and in particular of thoughts; rather, the stance is one of agnosticism. Whether or not mental states, representations, or thoughts actually exist, we would continue to speak as if mental representations did exist, given the considerable advantage they provide.³⁸ According to him, the “mind” is not a myth but a metaphor, and the inner world described in reference to the mind is a kind of folk story.³⁹

A closer examination of Toon’s view shows that the mental fictionalist approach is grounded in, and conceptually supported by, Kendall Walton’s framework of make-believe.⁴⁰ In Walton’s terminology, as adopted by Toon, when a child, in the course of play, imagines pieces of wood to be animals, those pieces of wood function as stage props. A child who treats a log as a horse establishes, by means of a principle of generation—stipulating that the log counts as a horse—an implicit contract with herself. Through this contract, she generates propositional fictions from such principles of generation. In this scenario, this entails the presupposition of a chain of criteria concerning what is to be imagined, how, and why. These fictions, in turn, contain their own fictional facts and fictional truths—and these fictional truths may be objective. A further branch incorporated into the scenario will, insofar as it belongs to the same fictional world, fall under the same propositional attitudes.⁴¹ Specifically with respect to Walton’s approach, it is noteworthy that he begins with fictionalism. For from as early as 18 months of age, when their linguistic abilities are only just beginning to develop, children engage in role-play not with the intention to deceive but purely for the sake of enjoyment. This form of pretense is assumed to constitute the very foundation of the modes of fiction and representation that later emerge in culture—literature, theater, cinema, painting, and sculpture.⁴² These fictions, which increasingly function as mechanisms for socialization and self-expression, provide significant insights into the nature of the human mind as conceptualized by Toon. Fiction belongs to the stage; it is

³³ Adam Toon, “Fictionalism and Intentionality” in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 57, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-4>

³⁴ Toon, “Fictionalism and Intentionality,” 59.

³⁵ Toon, “Fictionalism and Intentionality,” 56.

³⁶ Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*, 55.

³⁷ Toon, “Fictionalism and Intentionality,” 54-55.

³⁸ Adam Toon, “The Story of the Ghost in the Machine” in *Art, Representation and Make-Believe: Essays on the Philosophy of Kendall L. Walton*, ed. Sonia Sedivy (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2021), 384-399.

³⁹ Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*, 3.

⁴⁰ Toon, “Fictionalism and the Folk.”

⁴¹ Adam Toon, *Models as Make-Believe: Imagination, Fiction and Scientific Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 34, 35.

⁴² R. M. Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 1.

on the stage. Accordingly, it is not merely a metaphor but a form of make-believe, enacted within a scene that itself draws upon, and indeed is constituted by, the imagination that participates in processes of knowledge production. A model is true only from a certain perspective, and only insofar as what it invites us to imagine in that respect holds for the target as well. Thus, the mental fictionalist approach appears to draw upon both metaphor and the imagination involved in epistemic practices, for precisely this reason: to metaphorize the mind is, in social life, to engage in a kind of make-believe staged on a shared platform. A model functions *representationally* only insofar as it prescribes a perspective from which we are to imagine, and that imaginative stance proves accurate for the target from that perspective. No demand for isomorphism or one-to-one correspondence is involved; resemblance or overlap is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for representation. What is crucial are the principles of generation that determine the perspectives from which we are to imagine. Thus, modeling and metaphor are deeply intertwined, and the same holds in the context of folk psychology. Our concept of the mind as an “inner world” actually arises from the internalization and metaphorical transposition of external representational devices—such as notebooks, maps, scripts, and plans—onto the mind.⁴³ In invoking the term “mind,” we are, in a sense, staging a scene. These metaphors, in turn, serve to conceptually frame our behavior and assist us in anticipating and projecting underlying assumptions. Accordingly, folk psychology can be regarded, in a sense, as a game. Within this game, we operate under the pretense that individuals possess internal states such as beliefs, desires, or intentions, and we interpret their behavior accordingly. This interpretative practice—grounded in the assumption of such inner states—constitutes a make-believe game.

To support this claim, Toon reinterprets Wilfrid Sellars’s famous account of the origins of mental state language. Sellars’s “Myth of Jones” begins by positing a prehistoric community that initially spoke a genuinely Rylean language. Here, by way of a parenthetical remark—and at the risk of repetition—let us recall Ryle: Ryle made it his task to underscore the difficulties inherent in Cartesianism.⁴⁴ What Ryle designated as the “intellectualist legend” is the tendency to assume that intelligent behavior is always underpinned by pre-formulated inner theories or representations.⁴⁵ Ryle argued that it is a mistake to view the mind as an immaterial entity. According to him, our predictions about matter gain meaning only within the context of behavioral dispositions and capacities. Thus, Sellars’s prehistoric Rylean community does not have distinct mental entities called “mental states.” Instead, they have the ability to describe behavioral dispositions.⁴⁶ In this prehistoric Rylean community, Jones then appears, taking what is external—overt verbal behavior—as his model, and from there moving to the idea of what is internal, namely thoughts, thereby constructing a model of them. Jones’s way of explaining the mind achieves explanatory success not by imposing an inner essence, but by modeling observable practices. Thus, “metaphorization” here does not amount to reduction; rather, it involves transferring the explanatory power from metaphysics to epistemic functionality. The central claim of this paper is rooted precisely in this point: to metaphorize the mind is not to dethrone it, but to shift its explanatory authority from metaphysics to practical knowledge. Jones’s success lies in surpassing the Rylean constraints; through this model, he can now predict behavior far more effectively than could be achieved within a purely Rylean explanation.⁴⁷ So, what does this mean from Toon’s perspective? Toon brings together Walton’s approach with Sellars’s Myth of Jones. For Toon, Jones’s invention—the positing of mental states—can be understood as a sophisticated proposal: the idea that “the entire model serves as a useful metaphor for describing people and their behaviour.”⁴⁸ It is evident that this interpretation bears a distinctly behaviorist appearance. However, at this juncture mental fictionalism crucially diverges from behaviorism: unlike the behaviorist, who reduces

⁴³ Toon, “Defending Mental Fictionalism: A Précis of Mind as Metaphor.”

⁴⁴ Tanney, “Gilbert Ryle.”

⁴⁵ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 31.

⁴⁶ Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 91–92.

⁴⁷ Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” in *The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis—Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Indiana: Minnesota Press, 1956).; Toon, “Fictionalism and the Folk.”

⁴⁸ Toon, “Fictionalism and the Folk,” 6.

mental states to behavior, the fictionalist—at least in the form articulated by Toon—does not collapse mental states into mere behavioral dispositions.⁴⁹ In other words, the fictionalist does not posit the “language of mind” as an ontological reality but instead regards it as a fictional element of our discursive practice. The attribution of mental states functions as a metaphorical means of recognizing, describing, and predicting human behavior. When we speak of mental states, what we are in fact doing is metaphorizing the mind—and this metaphorization ought not to be construed as a form of denigration.

Mental fictionalism maintains a clear distance from both the extended mind thesis and enactive approaches. As it is put, “Unlike the extended mind thesis, mental fictionalism rejects the representational theory of mind. According to the fictionalist, mental representations do not exist—either inside or outside the head. And yet, unlike advocates of enactive approaches, mental fictionalism need not urge cognitive science to stop talking about mental representations.”⁵⁰ It would seem that this distance derives from its divergence from representationalism.

But what, then, can it say about pre-linguistic infants or non-human animals? For the mental fictionalist, the navigational and orientation capacities of migratory animals may be understood as exhibiting behavioral regularities and a kind of “metaphorical model” analogous to the linguistic or symbolic representations found in humans. Such an interpretation lends support to the claim that there can be both language-dependent and non-language-dependent mental states, and hence that animals and pre-linguistic infants, too, may be said to possess mental states.⁵¹

2. Folk Psychology as the Key Motivation for Mental Fictionalism

Others’ behavior is explained by assuming their mental states and use these assumptions to predict actions. Many fields, including philosophy, cognitive science, anthropology, and developmental psychology, agree that this ability relies on folk psychology. Here, the focus is not on a scientific theory but on our everyday way of understanding.⁵² Folk psychology serves as a Rosetta Stone for human behavior, enabling us to understand and interpret one another.

However, accounts of folk psychology vary widely across the literature.⁵³ Folk psychology refers to the semantic repertoire through which, in ordinary language, people understand and articulate mental states—typically beliefs, desires, and intentions—and to the (putative) theoretical framework that this repertoire is taken to imply. It is worth noting, however, that folk psychology is not always assumed to possess a theoretical framework. Rather, it may be defined as a reflective practice, meaning an activity in which we actively consider and try to make sense of others’ behavior by connecting it to mental states, rather than simply noting observable patterns. Instead of merely relying on observational generalizations when interpreting a person’s behavior, this practice seeks to situate that behavior within a conceptual whole structured by mental states such as intentions, motives, and beliefs. The very essence of this reflective practice lies in the assumption that others, like ourselves, are bearers of mental states.

Philosophers’ definitions of folk psychology are typically an expression of their broader stance within the philosophy of mind. Attitudes toward and approaches to folk psychology can be categorized in a variety of ways.⁵⁴ For

⁴⁹ Toon, “Fictionalism and the Folk,” 9.

⁵⁰ Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*, 7.

⁵¹ Toon, “Fictionalism and Intentionality,” 56.

⁵² Daniel D Hutto and Matthew Ratcliffe, “Introduction” in *Folk Psychology Re-Assessed*, ed. Daniel D Hutto and Matthew Ratcliffe (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 1.

⁵³ Bruno Mölder, “Mind and Folk Psychology: A Partial Introduction,” *Studia Philosophica Estonica* (February 2017): 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.12697/spe.2016.9.1.01>

⁵⁴ Tamás Demeter, T. Parent and Adam Toon, “What Is Mental Fictionalism?” in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 3-4. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-1>

the purposes of this discussion, folk-psychological attitudes can be classified under three general headings: those who are broadly compatible with and conciliatory toward folk psychology; those who reject it outright; and those who adopt an agnostic stance. Among these, the most striking group has been the eliminativists.

Now, by looking at these three distinct perspectives, we can outline a projection that helps us understand the framework of mental fictionalism. The differing approaches to folk psychology, including Fodor's reconciliatory stance, Dennett's functional acceptance, and Churchland's eliminative rejection, form a conceptual bridge that clarifies how mental discourse is positioned across these three levels.

Attitude		Main Position
Compatible	Fodor ⁵⁵	Folk psychology is scientifically meaningful and explanatory.
Agnostic	Dennett (interpretivist) ⁵⁶	Folk psychology is metaphysically/ontologically indeterminate, yet practically functional.
Rejection/ Eliminativist	Churchland ⁵⁷	Folk psychology is fundamentally mistaken, and neuroscience will bring about a paradigm shift.

Fodor contends that propositional attitudes, including beliefs, desires, emotions, and motives, are real mental states that contribute to the causal explanation of human behavior. According to Fodor, the explanatory power of these states arises from their representational nature, which assumes an underlying symbolic system of thought. This position forms the basis of his theory of mental representation, expressed through the concept of the Language of Thought, which he developed most extensively in *The Language of Thought* (1975).⁵⁸ A mental representation is a mental entity that carries certain semantic properties (for example, a definition, a content, or a truth condition). Therefore, to have a propositional attitude, in other words, "To believe that p, or hope that p, or intend that p, is to bear an appropriate relation to a mental representation whose meaning is that p."⁵⁹ This means that propositional attitudes have intentionality (and the notion of aboutness) and that they possess content. He argues that this intentionality is real and has a causal effect. Accordingly, he maintains that "We have no reason to doubt—indeed, we have substantial reason to believe—that it is pry possible to have a scientific psychology that vindicates commonsense belief/desire explanation."⁶⁰ However, Fodor does not take folk psychology at face value. His aim is not to "copy it wholesale" but rather to vindicate its fundamental explanatory power and principles within a scientific psychology, and to reconstruct them. As he states: "I'm dubious, in fact, that we can give it up; that our intellects are so constituted that doing without it (I mean really doing without it; not just philosophical loose talk) is a biologically viable option. But be of good cheer; everything is going to be allright."⁶¹

⁵⁵ Jerry A. Fodor, *Psychosemantics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

⁵⁶ Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991).

⁵⁷ Paul M. Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 2 (February 1981): 67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025900>

⁵⁸ Jerry Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1975).

⁵⁹ Rescorla, "The Language of Thought Hypothesis."

⁶⁰ Fodor, *Psychosemantics*, 16.

⁶¹ Fodor, *Psychosemantics*, xii.

In Dennett's view, folk psychology provides us with certain explanatory conveniences and is functionally useful.⁶² However, it has no ontological counterpart. I would like to point out that Dennett can at times be interpreted as a fictionalist. The reason is that, for him, the tacit belief that there exists in the brain a kind of inner arena where our experiences are played out as if projected by a device is an illusion. The Cartesian theater—supposedly observed from the front row and constructed from the first-person perspective—is itself an illusion.⁶³

Our belief in the existence of a “self” is a fiction that functions as the focal point around which various narratives revolve; we merely presuppose a “center of narrative gravity.”⁶⁴ Moreover, the idea that we possess phenomenal experience⁶⁵ is itself an illusion.⁶⁶ Therefore, he appears to be compatible with mental fictionalism. One reason for this is that Dennett has not been as strongly influenced by neuroscience as eliminativists have. At the same time, Dennett defines his own position in relation to particular problem areas. For example, since he argues that phenomenal experience is not real, he can be regarded as leaning toward both the eliminativist and the fictionalist side.⁶⁷ According to Dennett, mythologized concepts such as consciousness and free will also carry with them certain metaphysical assumptions.

However, as science advances, these will change. For him, fictionalism and instrumentalism are not so much theories as they are “diplomatic work-arounds, designed to grease the rails to a new level of understanding.”⁶⁸ He summarizes his own position as follows: “I am a realist about consciousness but an eliminativist about qualia, and I am happy to join Keith Frankish in calling my overall view of consciousness illusionism [...]”⁶⁹ After Dennett's emphasis here, mental fictionalism and illusionism may appear to be quite close; however, there are subtle differences between them, as follows:

	Mental Fictionalism	Eliminativism	Illusionism
Focus	Proximity to eliminativism	Ontological denial (complete rejection)	Ontological reality and illusion
Core motivation	Practical functionality and utility	Absolute acceptance of reality	Acceptance of reality + preservation of social order
Existence claim	Mental states can be used as useful fictions	Mental states do not exist in fact	Mental states/free will do not exist in reality
Proximity to eliminativism	Low	Full	High

⁶² Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).; Daniel C. Dennett, “True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why It Works” in *Scientific Explanations: Papers Based on the Hubert Spencer Lectures Given in the University of Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁶³ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 112-113.

⁶⁴ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 418.

⁶⁵ Phenomenal experience refers to the “what-it-is-like” aspect of being in a conscious state. This notion was popularized by Thomas Nagel in his famous paper *What is it like to be a bat?* (1974). It has been variously described as qualia, subjective experience, phenomenal consciousness, and first-person experience. It has also been referred to as the subjective character of experience, the qualitative character of experience, raw feels, sensory qualities, and phenomenality.

⁶⁶ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 431.

⁶⁷ Daniel C. Dennett, “Am I a Fictionalist?” in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 352-61. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-23>

⁶⁸ Dennett, “Am I a Fictionalist?,” 355-356.

⁶⁹ Dennett, “Am I a Fictionalist?,” 356.

After Dennett's emphasis, it should be stated that illusionism appears to be closer to eliminativism than to mental fictionalism. In order to make the position of illusionism more explicit, it should be noted that the central debate here revolves around whether phenomenal experience—which we may treat as a subset of mental states—ought to be regarded as real. In the philosophy of mind, among those who accept phenomenal experience as real are dualists, neutral monists, mysterians, and those who argue that a new understanding of physics—arriving via a paradigm shift—will provide an explanation for phenomenal experience. This first view accepts phenomenal experience as real. A second view also accepts phenomenal experience as real but does not advocate for a new understanding of physics. According to this view, we can explain phenomenal experience with our existing scientific resources. Representational theories can be cited as an example of this view. A third view, however, denies the existence of phenomenal experience. This view is known as illusionism. According to its adherents, there is no such thing as phenomenal consciousness.⁷⁰ What we wish to emphasize here is that this classification focuses on phenomenal experience, not on mental states. Mental states constitute a broader set. Illusionism presupposes mental states but does not acknowledge the existence of phenomenal experiences within them. As for the relation between illusionism and mental fictionalism, given that both views are relatively recent in origin, this is an area where one should be cautious about making bold claims.⁷¹

Returning to where we began, mental fictionalism is not so much a claim about phenomenal experience in particular as it is directed toward mental states more broadly, suspending their ontological status.⁷² Thus, in contrast to illusionism and eliminative materialism, mental fictionalism preserves its own distinctive intellectual voice.

Whether considered from an illusionist or a fictionalist standpoint, this discussion ultimately leads back to the same central question: Is the human mind organized in such a way that it can make sense of itself? From an evolutionary perspective, the mind has developed as a system capable of modeling intricate causal relations; yet, when this modeling capacity turns inward, it tends to generate narrative structures that serve social rather than epistemic purposes. From the standpoint of mental fictionalism, as Demeter insightfully observes, folk psychology functions as a narrative activity oriented toward social rather than epistemic virtues.⁷³

When it comes to eliminativism and given the close boundary between the eliminativist framework and mental fictionalism, it is important to further examine Churchland's axis—which marks the continuum between eliminativism's total rejection of folk psychology and mental fictionalism's reinterpretation of it as a useful fiction. This connection reveals how the radical approach of eliminativism has shaped the more conciliatory stance of mental fictionalism toward folk psychology.⁷⁴ Eliminative materialism maintains that mental states such as beliefs and desires will be replaced by their neurophysiological counterparts in light of advances in neuroscience.

Although eliminative materialism varies from theorist to theorist, defenses of eliminative materialism share a common line of reasoning: 1) The mind is either identical with the brain or reducible to it. 2) The most powerful scientific explanations of the mind and brain are, neither now nor in the future, compatible with folk psychology. 3) When folk explanations conflict with scientific explanations, it is assumed that the rational choice is to adopt the

⁷⁰ Keith Frankish, "Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness" in *Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2017).

⁷¹ When it comes to folk psychology, it is debatable whether there exists, as philosophers propose, a classification of experience into phenomenal and non-phenomenal. For further discussion, see Justin Sytsma, "Folk Psychology and Phenomenal Consciousness," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 8 (July 2010): 700-711. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2010.00315.x>

⁷² The question of which mental states possess phenomenal experience is, however, a considerably broad issue that deserves separate treatment. For further discussion, see: David J. Chalmers, *Conscious Mind in Search of Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁷³ Demeter, "Ment. Fict.," 489.

⁷⁴ Toon, "Fictionalism and the Folk," 284.

scientific one.

Accordingly, the most adequate scientific approach to the mind and brain will involve the rejection of folk psychology.⁷⁵ The radical stance of the eliminative approach has, however, led to it being sharply criticized.

Speaking specifically of eliminativism, for the eliminativist, folk psychology has no place in the cognitive sciences.⁷⁶ For eliminativists, the very notion of “folk” is fundamentally flawed and misleading. According to them, folk psychology is a pre-scientific discourse that will be eliminated by future science.⁷⁷

To reject folk psychology, for eliminative materialists, means to claim that common-sense psychological concepts such as beliefs, desires, and intentions correspond to no real entities, and ultimately to argue that folk psychology should be abandoned in favor of a more scientifically grounded understanding of human behavior and cognition. This has sometimes been referred to as cognitive suicide. For when the eliminative materialist asserts that belief–desire discourse is false, they thereby also accept that propositional attitudes do not exist. In this case, the eliminative materialist, in attempting to defend their own view, undergoes a kind of cognitive collapse—in other words, they commit cognitive suicide.⁷⁸ The mental fictionalist, however, does not fall prey to such a criticism. This is because mental fictionalism is inclined toward an agnostic stance. What protects mental fictionalism from being merely a terminological variant of eliminativism is that it does not advance an ontological theory about the nature of mental states, but rather adopts an agnostic stance toward their status. The fictionalist does not decide whether mental states exist; instead, they preserve the linguistic and practical functions of these concepts.⁷⁹

Thus, while for eliminativists the notion of “folk” is used interchangeably with the notion of “error” and designates a theory assumed to be eliminated by a completed science, mental fictionalists regard the “folk” concept as a useful inner-world assumption that guides our social life. As Sainsbury states the main motivation of fictionalism in this respect:

The starting point for fictionalism is some kind of ontological scruple: one cannot bring oneself to believe in moral values, nonactual things, unobservable things, or abstract things. But one has somehow to do justice to the fact that one cannot simply throw away the related regions of discourse: morality, modality, elementary physics, or mathematics. Fictionalism to the rescue.⁸⁰

This motivation is understandable, given that we have not yet developed a comprehensive theory of the nature of mental contents as we currently conceive them, nor has an interdisciplinary consensus been reached on resolving the hard problem. As a result, every theory of mind we adopt comes with its own set of assumptions. Therefore, the most appropriate starting point is to address the baggage embedded in our existing language. Mental fictionalism treats attempts to radically revise this socially constructed language as a costly and reductive endeavor.

At this point, it will also be appropriate to introduce another criticism in favor of folk psychology (and, indirectly, of mental fictionalism). Adrian Downey asks how, in its ongoing conflict with folk psychology, eliminative materialism is supposed to eliminate folk psychology.⁸¹ It can also be argued that this constitutes a formidable challenge for eliminative materialism. Indeed, art and culture arise from the individual diagnosis, definition, and

⁷⁵ Adrian Downey, “Enactive-Ecological Fictionalism” in *Mental Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 106. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-7>

⁷⁶ Daniel D. Hutto, “A Brickhouse Defence for Folk Psychology” in *Mental Fictionalism*, ed. Tamás Demeter, T Parent and Adam Toon (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 161. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091073-11>

⁷⁷ P. M. Churchland, “Folk Psychology (2)” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. S. Guttenplan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1994), 308–16.

⁷⁸ Wallace, “Ment. Fict.,” 34.

⁷⁹ Toon, “Fictionalism and the Folk,” 290.

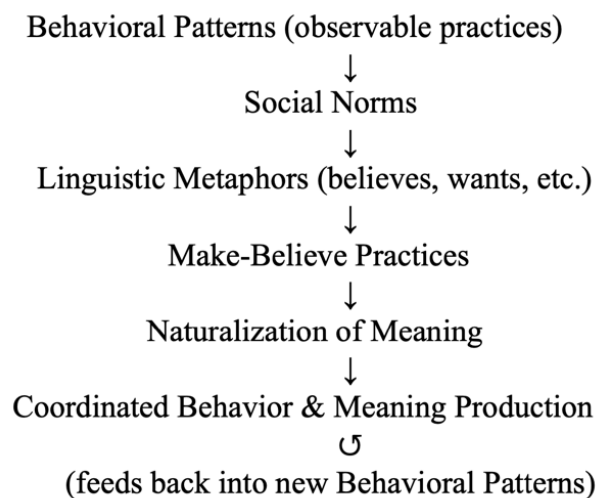
⁸⁰ Richard M. Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism* (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2010), 2.

⁸¹ Downey, “Enactive-Ecological Fictionalism,” 107.

description of psychological needs within everyday practices, and furthermore develop in this very way. The primary factor that makes social cognition possible can arguably be regarded as folk psychology. Art, in bringing forth its own object, cannot present the materials it produces, nor the psychological perspectives and reflections through which the object is exhibited, without taking folk psychology into account.⁸² A neuroscientific examination of art can be carried out, and it is possible to investigate, in a neuroaesthetic context, how particular brain regions respond to aesthetics, as well as to construct brain stimulation maps.⁸³ However, this will not suffice to account for the cycle of creation between art and the agent engaged with the object of art—what Noë conceptualizes as entanglement.⁸⁴ When we are asked what it is in a work of art that affects us, our response does not appeal to causal explanation.⁸⁵ Moreover, while it remains doubtful what power of public science communication could render hyper-scientific psychology reducible to the entire society—at a level transmissible across generations—the ideal of an art in which folk psychology is entirely reduced would amount to a depiction of an Orwellian world. It thus appears that eliminative materialism (illusionism) must take mental fictionalism into account.

Toon reminds us that: “In the beginning was the deed. After that, came the word—which brought with it new deeds and new ways to describe them. Our ordinary talk about the mind is a metaphorical mapping of words onto deeds.”⁸⁶ Demeter deepens this insight through a vivid analogy: “Escher’s *Drawing Hands*, for example, is not a representation of hands drawing one another, but a representation as if hands were drawing one another—as if it were possible.”⁸⁷

Therefore, the summary is as follows:



Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, from the perspective of mental fictionalism, fiction is intrinsic to the human capacity to conceptually reconstruct the world. Fiction is a constructive activity, and the agent of that activity emerges from within it. A metaphor is not a representational instrument but an act that produces meaning itself. Make-believe is the cognitive extension of the human creative capacity. What is crucial here is that this activity does not reduce the

⁸² Carl Plantinga, “Folk Psychology for Film Critics and Scholars,” *Projections* 5, no. 2 (January 2011). <https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2011.050203>

⁸³ Flavia De Simone et al., “Editorial: Psychology and Art: Exploring New Ways of Interaction,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 16, (January 2025). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1542235>

⁸⁴ Alva Noë, *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make Us What We Are* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

⁸⁵ Noë, *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make Us What We Are*, 191.

⁸⁶ Toon, *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*, 83.

⁸⁷ Demeter, “Ment. Fict.,” 497.

mind to an ontological “shadow entity”; rather, it liberates its capacity for meaning-making from metaphysical dependencies. In this way, mental discourse can maintain its epistemic function of producing knowledge without the obligation to make any ontological commitment.

Extending this line of thought, the position of mental fictionalism brings a new direction to debates concerning the nature of consciousness. The “hard problem” in the philosophy of mind, which concerns the difficulty of reconciling the phenomenal aspect of consciousness with the objective forms of scientific explanation, is not, from this perspective, a metaphysical mystery but a linguistic and semantic misalignment. What places consciousness outside the domain of the physical is not experience itself but the way meaning is positioned. In other words, it is the removal of mental concepts from their functional contexts and their relocation onto an ontological plane. For this reason, mental fictionalism attempts to address the hard problem through the naturalization of meaning, but it does so without reducing itself to a theory of meaning, focusing instead on the practical function of explanation. In this way, it provides a framework that allows us to rethink both the limits of representation and the nature of meaning production. Ultimately, mental fictionalism emerges as a perspective in the philosophy of mind that shifts explanatory power from metaphysics to epistemic functionality, toward a generative dimension of meaning.

In the final analysis, as philosophical inquiries that examine the symbolic relations between language and the external world have clearly shown, the power of representation cannot be denied. Nevertheless, although mental fictionalism neither explicitly engages with this issue nor takes it as a central focus, another question arises: when the human being is considered as a metaphor-generator, what fundamental principles give rise to, sustain, and direct this generative act of meaning-creation within the social sphere? At what point does the human being become an agent in this generative process? Or, alternatively, might these very principles themselves amount to a meta-metaphoric form of metaphorization? When the mental fictionalist confronts this question, their position may begin to coincide with eliminativist or illusionist tendencies, or even move beyond their boundaries.

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