



The prospects for fictionalist inquiry in psychology



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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a critical appraisal of the prospects for fictionalist inquiry in psychology, which runs contrary to the traditional dissociation between fiction and knowledge-laden discourse. Following a review of the contested boundary between fiction and nonfiction, a portrait of essential aspects of fiction emerges, which includes *authorial warrant*, *imaginative prescription*, and *performative engagement*. The paper then proceeds to outline *fictionalism* as a philosophical approach, with reference to early and more modern variants of the position. This leads to a little discussed epistemic position called the *fictional stance*, which is then developed and applied to various psychological domains including the psychology of fiction, the fictional constructions of psychology, and the narrative study of lives. The viewpoint that emerges sees the epistemic value of fictional thinking in the unique access it provides to intuitive powers of the psychological imagination and to non-conceptual understandings of psychological life.

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1. Introduction

“Hi, I’m Jerry Seinfeld. I’m fiction.”

“I know.”

“How did you know?”

“Because I’m nonfiction.” (Seinfeld, 1993, p. 1)

The frequent intermingling of fiction with nonfiction is a pervasive feature of contemporary culture. The fictional character named Jerry Seinfeld from the well known syndicated television series, for example, was portrayed by a real life comedian of the same name who shares many, though not all, of the fictional Jerry’s characteristics. This kind of mixing and merging of the fictional and the nonfictional in the public space of popular media is now so common as to be taken thoroughly for granted. Yet, epistemically, fiction and nonfiction are kept quite separate, with knowledge claims attaching almost exclusively to the latter. Notice that, in the opening quote, it is the nonfictional rather than the fictional Jerry who was said to “know.” Against the background of this sort of

epistemic privileging of the nonfictional, common to both academic and popular discourse, the idea of fiction as an epistemic¹ mode might seem peculiar, if not unintelligible. Given that fiction characteristically concerns itself with imaginary worlds, any attempt to engage with fiction is likely to strike the critical reader as a kind of escape from reality rather than as a serious attempt at knowledge.

Psychological interest in the epistemic potential of fiction is nonetheless clearly evident in the work of some contemporary psychologists who have recently turned to fiction writing as an avocation (Winerman, 2014). This work has occasioned some surprising and unexpected insights. Irvin Yalom’s acclaimed historical novel, *When Nietzsche Wept*, for example, was based on an imagined scenario in which the German philosopher received psychological treatment at the hands of Viennese physician Joseph Breuer. Just over a decade following the initial publication of the novel, historical documentation came to light detailing arrangements that had actually been made for Nietzsche’s treatment by Breuer that, given the circumstances, were never carried through. In an afterward to a new edition of the novel, Yalom (2003) remarked: “In other words, the very fictional event which I had imagined and used as the foundation to my novel came close to having been history” (p. 303). Yalom (2000) elsewhere reflected on other psychological benefits of fiction writing beyond historical insight, including opportunities for working through personal issues, for contemplating “what if” scenarios, and for increased psychological understanding more generally. Shira Nayman, one of the psychological fiction writers interviewed by Winerman (2014), noted:

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¹ The term *epistemic* is most commonly taken as simply “pertaining to knowledge,” in contrast with *epistemological*, which pertains to “theory of knowledge” (Angeles, 1981). The aim of this paper, then, is to develop an understanding of the psychological knowledge potentials of fiction, not to articulate a philosophical framework for a fictionalist theory of knowledge.

“Being a writer and a psychologist comes from the same place — I’m interested in the human experience” (p. 71).

This confluence of the fictional and the psychological is, however, nothing new. Historically, interest in fiction as a means of psychological inquiry goes back to the pioneering psychodynamic theorizing of Freud, Jung and Adler. Freud and Jung, in particular, regularly mined works of mythological fiction for psychological meaning, with Freud focusing on the Oedipal myth as told by Sophocles and Jung on mythological tales of transformation and rebirth (Smythe, 2014a). Yet, the notion of *fiction*, itself, is rarely subjected to critical scrutiny. Jung’s only reference to the notion in his *Collected Works*, for example, is brief and noncommittal: “Call it a fiction if you like,” he wrote, but fantasy and imagination are far more effective agents of psychological healing than physical or chemical treatments. He went on to critique the theories of Freud and Adler for neglecting this aspect of the psychological in favor of a one-sided and exclusive focus on instincts (Jung, 1932/1969, par. 494). Nonetheless, it was Adler who developed the notion of fiction explicitly as a psychological concept (Smythe, 2005). In particular, Adler’s notion of *fictional finalism* pointed to the role of *guiding fictions* and *fictional goals* in the explanation of human functioning, such that: “Everything grows ‘as if’ it were striving to overcome all imperfections and achieve perfection” (Adler, 1932/1965, p. 86).

Although fictional thinking has never been part of the psychological mainstream, contemporary and historical interest in the fiction reading and writing make a compelling case that fiction can be a valuable source of psychological knowledge and insight. How fiction works epistemically, however, remains an open question (Jones, 2010; Smythe, 2005). In this paper, I attempt to address this question by undertaking a reexamination of the notion of *fiction*, itself, with an eye toward its epistemic possibilities. I begin by examining the nature of fiction and the contested boundary between fiction and nonfiction. Next, I review *fictionalism* as a philosophical position in both its earlier and more modern variants. This discussion leads to an epistemic position called the *fictional stance*, which I develop and apply to the various intersections of psychology and fiction that have appeared in the literature. The viewpoint that emerges sees fictional thinking as a unique mode of access to intuitive, non-conceptual understandings of psychological life.

2. The nature of fiction

2.1. Fact, fiction and nonfiction

To begin, some clarity is needed on the notion of fiction, which is subject to frequent and pervasive misunderstandings. The term “fiction” comes from the Latin *factio*, which refers to acts of making, fashioning, or molding; thus, fiction could be understood as something made from the imagination (Smythe, 2014a). The popular dichotomy between fact and fiction is untenable, however, as works of fiction cannot be distinguished from works of nonfiction solely based on how much factual content they happen to contain. Fictional works (e.g., historical novels) may often contain a great deal of factual information; and putatively nonfictional works (e.g. Clifford Irving’s fraudulent “autobiography” of Howard Hughes) do not become a works of fiction when their factual content is disputed. The distinction between fiction and nonfiction that has become broadly consensual in the philosophical literature is cast, not in terms of factual content but, rather, with respect to different standards for the production, appreciation and evaluation of works, as outlined below.

2.2. Aspects of fiction

The discussion in this section draws substantially from the work of Currie (1990) and Walton (1990), whose theories of fiction have gained wide currency among philosophers. These works are especially noteworthy in offering conceptualizations of fiction beyond the purely literary reference points of traditional theories. At least three characteristic aspects of fiction emerge from this work, although there is by no means full agreement on all of them; these aspects include: *authorial warrant*, *imaginative prescription*, and *performative engagement*.

2.2.1. Authorial warrant

Whereas nonfictional works are subject to evaluation in terms of standards of evidence and argument that go beyond the works themselves, works of fiction warrant their own assertions, so to speak (Ryan, 1997; Walton, 1990). As Walton (1990) pointed out:

A particular work of fiction, in its context, establishes its fictional world and generates the fictional truths belonging to it. A particular biography or history does not itself establish the truth of what it says or produce the facts it is concerned with Every piece of discourse or thought which aspires to truth has a reality independent of *itself* to answer to, whatever role sentient beings might have in the construction of this reality. The fictional world corresponding to a given work of fiction is not thus independent of it. (pp. 101–102)

In the fictional world of the novelist, events unfold in a certain way just because the author describes them as such, no matter how much factual information she may draw upon for the purpose; biographical works, in contrast, are constrained by how well they cohere with established fact in their domain.

Authorial warrant can, however, extend beyond an individual work or author to a larger body of related works, as in serialized novels, movies or television programs. The “Star Trek cannon” that governs admissible content in the fictional universe of Star Trek, for example, was originally authorized by series creator Gene Roddenberry but has since become highly fluid and contested. Such works may also contain an abundance of factual information, such as geographical details about London in the Sherlock Holmes novels or references to the laws of physics in Star Trek, that are potentially subject to evaluation by external standards. Plainly, authorial warrant is a relative rather than an absolute criterion.

2.2.2. Imaginative prescription

Given that fictional works warrant their own assertions, it seems natural to view fictional discourse as purely stipulative, as novelist and playwright Michael Frayn (2006) seems to do when he asserted that a fictional proposition does not simply describe a state of affairs, “it is that state of affairs itself” (p. 241). In terms of the theory of speech acts (Searle, 1979), this would be to classify fictional statements as *declarations*. But this is clearly not sufficient, as there are other such speech acts, for example, declarations of political allegiance or of religious affiliation, that have nothing to do with fiction. So we need to constrain this type of characterization further.

Currie (1990) proposed that fiction requires its own distinctive kind of speech act, called *fiction-making*, which is governed by *fictive intentions*. By means of these fictive intentions, the author or fiction maker intends her audience to make-believe what is told to them as a consequence of their understanding it and, moreover, to recognize the author’s intention that they do so.

Other fiction theorists resort to a notion of make-believe, without linking it to authorial intentions. Walton (1990) asserted

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