

# Quasi-Realist Fictionalism

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*"In space, no one can hear you think."*

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# 1 Quasi-Realist Fictionalism

## 1.1 Introduction to Quasi-Realist Fictionalism

Quasi-realist fictionalism emerges as a distinctive and increasingly influential meta-philosophical position, representing a sophisticated synthesis of two powerful traditions in contemporary philosophy: quasi-realism and fictionalism. At its core, this approach grapples with a fundamental tension that permeates human discourse – our persistent tendency to speak and reason *as if* certain domains of inquiry (such as ethics, mathematics, modality, or even theoretical science) possess objective, mind-independent truths, while simultaneously facing profound philosophical difficulties in justifying robust metaphysical commitments to the entities or properties seemingly invoked by such discourse. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers a nuanced resolution to this tension, arguing that we can legitimately employ realist-seeming language and engage in practices characteristic of objective inquiry without being ontologically committed to the existence of the corresponding abstract entities or robust moral facts. Instead, it suggests that such discourse functions as a highly useful and often indispensable form of fiction or pretense, one that we “project” onto the world for practical, expressive, and cognitive reasons, yet whose quasi-realist character – its ability to mimic the structure and significance of genuine truth-apt discourse – is earned through the intricate ways it becomes embedded within our linguistic practices, social interactions, and forms of reasoning. This position rejects the stark choice often presented between naive realism and debilitating eliminativism or relativism, carving out a middle path that acknowledges the pragmatic indispensability and phenomenological force of objectivity-claiming discourse while grounding its legitimacy not in correspondence to a special realm of facts, but in the complex network of attitudes, conventions, and practical functions it serves.

The core principles underpinning quasi-realist fictionalism revolve around several key commitments. Firstly, it inherits from expressivist and quasi-realist traditions the idea that fundamental judgments in the target domains (often starting with morality) are primarily expressions of non-cognitive states – attitudes, sentiments, endorsements, or prescriptions – rather than straightforward descriptions of mind-independent facts. Secondly, it incorporates the fictionalist insight that engaging in discourse *about* these domains involves a form of pretense or make-believe, where we adopt a “fictional stance” that allows us to utilize the rich logical and inferential apparatus associated with realist language. Crucially, however, quasi-realist fictionalism goes beyond a simple combination of these elements. It argues that through the progressive development of linguistic practices, the establishment of shared norms, and the embedding of these expressive acts within broader patterns of reasoning and social coordination, the discourse gradually acquires the trappings of objectivity. Terms like “true,” “valid,” “objective,” and even “fact” can be legitimately applied within the discourse, not because they correspond to some external reality, but because their use becomes warranted by the norms governing the practice itself and the practical utility they confer. This process, often described by quasi-realists as “earning the right” to realist-sounding language, allows the fictionalist framework to function seamlessly in everyday life and sophisticated theoretical contexts, preserving the practical benefits and phenomenological experience of objectivity without the metaphysical baggage. Key conceptual distinctions are vital here: traditional fictionalism might treat moral discourse as a straightforward fiction we consciously adopt for convenience, potentially leading to a sense of arbitrariness; pure quasi-realism fo-

cuses on expressing attitudes while building realist-sounding structures; quasi-realist fictionalism, however, integrates these by treating the *development* of quasi-realist structures *as* the outcome of engaging with a fundamentally fictional, yet pragmatically essential, framework. The discourse becomes a fiction that we collectively enact and refine, one whose internal logic and normative force become sufficiently robust to warrant realist language *from within the practice*, even as its ultimate foundation remains in human attitudes and conventions.

The historical emergence of quasi-realist fictionalism is deeply rooted in the tumultuous landscape of 20th-century analytic philosophy, particularly the protracted debates surrounding meta-ethics, the philosophy of mathematics, and the nature of scientific realism. Its philosophical precursors can be traced to the non-cognitivist revolution in ethics initiated by A.J. Ayer's emotivism and Charles Stevenson's sophisticated development of it, which argued that moral judgments express feelings or influence attitudes rather than state facts. This was further elaborated by R.M. Hare's prescriptivism, emphasizing the action-guiding nature of moral language. However, these early non-cognitivist theories faced formidable challenges, most notably the Frege-Geach problem, which highlighted the difficulty of explaining how non-cognitive utterances could function meaningfully in complex logical contexts like conditionals ("If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong"). It was against this backdrop that Simon Blackburn, beginning in the 1980s with seminal works like *Spreading the Word* (1984) and *Ruling Passions* (1998), pioneered quasi-realism. Blackburn sought to rescue non-cognitivism by showing how expressivist theories could systematically "earn the right" to use realist-seeming vocabulary. He introduced the concept of "projectivism," suggesting that we project our attitudes onto the world, which then appear as objective features. The quasi-realist program involved demonstrating that logical relations, truth-aptness, and even debates about error and progress could be reconstructed within an expressivist framework, thereby mimicking the structure of realist discourse without abandoning its non-cognitive foundations. Concurrently, the fictionalist tradition was gaining momentum, particularly in mathematics with Hartry Field's *Science Without Numbers* (1980), arguing that mathematical discourse is a useful fiction for facilitating scientific inferences without commitment to abstract objects. This fictionalist approach was later imported into ethics by philosophers like Richard Joyce, whose influential work *The Myth of Morality* (2001) defended a revolutionary moral fictionalism. Joyce argued that while moral skepticism undermines the justification for believing in objective moral truths, we have strong practical reasons to continue engaging in moral discourse as a beneficial fiction, akin to engaging with a novel that provides valuable guidance and social coordination. The synthesis of these two powerful streams – Blackburn's quasi-realist projectivism and Joyce's (and others') instrumental fictionalism – coalesced into what we now recognize as quasi-realist fictionalism, particularly through the work of philosophers who saw the potential for mutual reinforcement. Figures like Mark Kalderon, with his hermeneutic moral fictionalism (*Moral Fictionalism*, 2005), explored how existing moral practice might already embody a fictionalist stance, while others like Nadeem Hussain and Daniel Nolan examined the broader applications and theoretical underpinnings of combining quasi-realist expressive resources with fictionalist instrumentalism. Key publications throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, including numerous journal articles and edited volumes, solidified this position as a distinct and vibrant area of philosophical research, responding to objections and refining its core tenets through vigorous debate.

The scope and application of quasi-realist fictionalism extend remarkably far beyond its origins in meta-ethics, making it a versatile tool for analyzing diverse domains where the tension between discourse and ontology is particularly acute. Its primary application remains ethics, where it offers a compelling account of moral discourse that honors its practical inescapability and normative force while avoiding the metaphysical puzzles of non-natural moral properties or the queerness of objective values. However, its reach extends significantly into mathematics. Here, it provides a framework for understanding how mathematical language – seemingly referring to abstract numbers, sets, and functions – can be indispensable for science and everyday reasoning without requiring belief in a Platonic realm. Quasi-realist fictionalism suggests that mathematical discourse is a complex fiction we collectively maintain, one whose internal logical structure is so tightly woven into our cognitive practices and scientific theories that it earns the right to be treated as objective and truth-apt *within those contexts*. The fictionalist stance allows us to “accept” mathematical statements for the purpose of derivation and application, while the quasi-realist dimension explains why this discourse feels so robustly objective and why terms like “proof,” “theorem,” and “mathematical truth” function with such normative force. The philosophy of science presents another fertile ground, especially concerning theoretical entities like electrons, genes, or spacetime curvature. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers a sophisticated alternative to both robust scientific realism and strict instrumentalism. It suggests that discourse involving unobservables functions as a highly structured fiction, enabling prediction, explanation, and technological manipulation. The quasi-realist element explains why such discourse successfully mimics the features of genuine factual discourse – why scientists argue about the “truth” of theories or the “reality” of entities – based on the theory’s integration into a successful predictive and explanatory framework, not necessarily direct correspondence to an unobservable reality. Modal discourse, concerning necessity, possibility, and possible worlds, is another natural domain. David Lewis’s extreme realism about possible worlds faced ontological extravagance, while eliminativist alternatives struggled to capture the intuitive force of modal reasoning. Quasi-realist fictionalism treats possible worlds as useful fictions within a framework designed to systematize our modal intuitions and reasoning patterns, where the “truth” of modal claims is determined by the norms governing the fictional framework, not by the existence of concrete non-actual worlds. The approach also finds resonance in aesthetics, explaining how we can meaningfully debate the “beauty” of a sunset or the “greatness” of a symphony without positing objective aesthetic properties, instead treating such discourse as projecting our responses and engaging with a shared fictional framework that structures aesthetic experience and criticism. Its interdisciplinary relevance is profound, impacting linguistics through theories of meaning and pragmatics that account for how non-declarative uses of language acquire declarative features; psychology through models of how humans navigate normative domains using pretense and projection; and social sciences through analyses of how shared fictions (like money, laws, or social status) function to coordinate complex societies. In contemporary philosophical discourse, quasi-realist fictionalism holds significant significance as it directly addresses one of the most fundamental problems: the relationship between human language, thought, and practices that purport to describe an objective world, and the underlying reality (or lack thereof) of the entities and properties they seem to invoke. It offers a nuanced response to pervasive skepticism about objectivity in various domains, not by dismissing the phenomenology of objectivity, but by reinterpreting its source and legitimacy. By grounding the “objectivity” of discourse in the robustness of shared practices, pragmatic utility, and the internal norms of evolving fictional frameworks, it

provides a way to preserve the practical and cognitive value of diverse forms of inquiry while maintaining a naturalistic worldview that avoids extravagant metaphysical commitments. This makes it a vital position in ongoing debates about truth, realism, and the nature of human understanding across the philosophical landscape.

As we delve deeper into the philosophical foundations underpinning this intricate position, it becomes essential to examine its roots in the fertile ground of 20th-century meta-ethics and the broader realist/anti-realist debates that shaped its development.

## 1.2 Philosophical Foundations

As we delve deeper into the philosophical foundations underpinning this intricate position, it becomes essential to examine its roots in the fertile ground of 20th-century meta-ethics and the broader realist/anti-realist debates that shaped its development. Quasi-realist fictionalism did not emerge in a philosophical vacuum but rather evolved from a rich tapestry of meta-ethical investigations that sought to reconcile the seemingly objective character of moral discourse with deep-seated philosophical skepticism about the existence of moral facts. The origins of this approach can be traced to the profound intellectual ferment that characterized early analytic philosophy, particularly the logical positivist movement and its aftermath, which fundamentally reshaped how philosophers conceptualized language, meaning, and the relationship between human thought and reality. This period witnessed an intense scrutiny of the cognitive status of moral judgments, igniting debates that would eventually crystallize into the sophisticated synthesis we now recognize as quasi-realist fictionalism.

The meta-ethical landscape of the early to mid-20th century was dominated by a fundamental question: do moral judgments like “stealing is wrong” or “charity is good” genuinely describe features of the world in the same way that statements like “water is H<sub>2</sub>O” or “the Earth revolves around the Sun” do? This question lay at the heart of the moral realism/anti-realism debate, a dialectic that would provide the conceptual crucible for quasi-realist fictionalism. Moral realists maintained that moral properties and facts exist independently of human attitudes and conventions, that moral judgments can be objectively true or false, and that genuine moral knowledge is possible. This view, however, faced formidable challenges from critics who pointed to the metaphysical strangeness of moral properties (G.E. Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy” and “open question argument”), the apparent diversity of moral codes across cultures (anthropological relativism), and the difficulty of explaining how we might gain knowledge of such ostensibly non-natural properties (the epistemological problem). These difficulties paved the way for various anti-realist alternatives, with non-cognitivism emerging as perhaps the most significant precursor to quasi-realist fictionalism.

Non-cognitivist traditions, which denied that moral judgments express genuine beliefs capable of being true or false, represented a radical departure from moral realism and set the stage for subsequent developments. The earliest and most influential formulation of non-cognitivism was A.J. Ayer’s emotivism, articulated in his groundbreaking 1936 work *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Drawing heavily on logical positivism’s verification principle, Ayer argued that moral statements are not genuinely meaningful in a cognitive sense but

instead function to express emotions or attitudes. When someone says “stealing is wrong,” they are not describing a property of stealing but rather expressing their disapproval of it, much like saying “stealing!!” with a particular tone of voice. This reduction of moral discourse to emotional expression, while initially compelling, faced immediate criticism for its apparent inability to account for the rational dimension of moral argumentation – if moral judgments are mere expressions of feeling, how can we meaningfully disagree about them or offer reasons for our moral positions? Charles Stevenson, in his 1937 article “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” and later in *Ethics and Language* (1944), developed a more sophisticated version of emotivism that partially addressed these concerns. Stevenson distinguished between the descriptive and dynamic meanings of moral terms, acknowledging that while moral judgments primarily express attitudes, they also have a descriptive component that reflects the speaker’s beliefs about how to influence others’ attitudes. This nuanced view allowed for a more complex account of moral disagreement, framed not as conflicting reports about moral facts but as conflicting attitudes that might be influenced by rational persuasion concerning non-moral facts. However, Stevenson’s theory still struggled to explain the logical structure of moral discourse, particularly how non-cognitive expressions could function in complex logical contexts.

R.M. Hare’s prescriptivism, developed in *The Language of Morals* (1952) and *Freedom and Reason* (1963), represented the next major evolution in non-cognitivist thought. Hare argued that moral judgments are fundamentally prescriptions or universalizable commands. When we judge an action to be “right,” we are not describing it but rather prescribing it in a form that we would will everyone to follow in similar circumstances. This universalizability requirement introduced a rational dimension missing from earlier non-cognitivist theories, allowing Hare to explain moral reasoning as a process of determining what prescriptions we could consistently will to be universal laws. Despite this sophistication, prescriptivism continued to face the persistent challenge of explaining how moral claims could meaningfully figure in logical arguments, particularly in conditional statements where the antecedent and consequent are both moral judgments. This problem, later dubbed the Frege-Geach problem after its articulation by Peter Geach (drawing on Gottlob Frege), became the central obstacle for non-cognitivist theories. If moral judgments in simple contexts like “Stealing is wrong” express non-cognitive states (emotions or prescriptions), how do they apparently function as genuine propositions in complex contexts like “If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong”? The embedded moral judgment seems to function as a truth-apt component within the logical structure, yet non-cognitivism denies that moral judgments have truth values. This apparent contradiction threatened to undermine the entire non-cognitivist project, creating an urgent need for a more sophisticated approach that could account for the logical complexity of moral discourse without abandoning its anti-realist foundations.

It was precisely this need that Simon Blackburn sought to address with his development of quasi-realism in the 1980s, marking a significant theoretical advancement beyond earlier non-cognitivist positions. Blackburn’s project, articulated in *Spreading the Word* (1984) and further developed in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (1993) and *Ruling Passions* (1998), represented a bold attempt to “earn the right” to realist-sounding discourse while maintaining a fundamentally anti-realist, expressivist foundation. The core insight of quasi-realism is that even if moral judgments originate in the expression of non-cognitive states, the linguistic and social practices surrounding moral discourse can develop in such a way that they eventually mimic all the



features traditionally associated with realist discourse. Blackburn introduced the concept of projectivism to explain this process – the idea that we spread or project our attitudes, sentiments, and responses onto the world, which then appear as objective features. When we experience the disapproval of cruelty, we project this attitude outward, and cruelty then seems to possess a property of “wrongness” that we discover rather than impose. This projection is not merely a psychological quirk but a deeply ingrained aspect of human cognition that facilitates social coordination and normative guidance.

Blackburn’s projectivism differs crucially from earlier non-cognitivist positions in its ambition to show how an expressivist starting point can gradually develop the resources to support realist-seeming discourse. The quasi-realist program involves systematically demonstrating how various aspects of moral discourse that seem to require realism – such as moral reasoning, the possibility of moral truth and falsehood, moral disagreement, and even the idea of moral progress – can be reconstructed within an expressivist framework. This is accomplished through what Blackburn calls the “theory of theory” – a metalinguistic account of how our moral vocabulary evolves and becomes embedded within broader linguistic practices. For instance, when we say “It is true that stealing is wrong,” we are not attributing a correspondence property to the moral fact that stealing is wrong (as a realist might claim). Rather, we are expressing a higher-order endorsement of the sentiment that stealing is wrong, endorsing it as worthy of assertion and acceptance within our moral community. Similarly, moral disagreement is not a clash of beliefs about moral facts but a clash of expressed attitudes, yet this clash can be genuine and rationally resolvable because our attitudes respond to reasons and are subject to constraints of consistency and coherence.

The development of quasi-realism represented a sophisticated response to the Frege-Geach problem that had plagued earlier non-cognitivist theories. Blackburn proposed that expressivist meanings are context-sensitive and that the meaning of a moral term in a complex context like a conditional is determined by its role in expressing attitudes within that specific context. When we assert “If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong,” we are expressing a complex higher-order attitude – specifically, a commitment to disapproving of getting one’s brother to steal if one disapproves of stealing. This approach allows moral terms to function compositionally in complex linguistic structures without attributing truth values to them in isolation. While this solution faced its own criticisms (particularly from those who argued that it still failed to capture the full logical complexity of moral discourse), it represented a significant theoretical advance that enabled expressivism to move beyond the limitations of simple emotivism and prescriptivism.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Blackburn’s quasi-realism is its commitment to what he calls “minimalism about truth” – the idea that many apparently realist-seeming claims can be understood in deflationary terms that do not carry metaphysical commitments. For quasi-realists, to say that a moral judgment is “true” is not to attribute a special correspondence property to it but rather to endorse it, to assert it, or to express agreement with it. This minimalist approach to truth allows quasi-realists to use realist-sounding language without being committed to realist metaphysics. They can say that moral claims are “objective” not because they correspond to mind-independent facts but because they are subject to norms of rational discourse and their justification does not depend solely on the speaker’s subjective states. They can talk about moral “knowledge” not as awareness of moral facts but as the possession of justified moral attitudes that have survived critical scrutiny. This minimalist strategy is central to the quasi-realist project of “earning the right”

to realist discourse – showing step by step how each feature of realist discourse can be reconstructed on expressivist foundations.

While Blackburn was developing quasi-realism primarily in the domain of ethics, another significant philosophical tradition was taking shape in parallel: fictionalism. Fictionalist approaches, which had gained considerable traction in the philosophy of mathematics, offered a different way of reconciling our use of apparently truth-apt discourse with anti-realist commitments. The foundational work in this tradition was Hartry Field's *Science Without Numbers* (1980), which defended mathematical fictionalism as an alternative to mathematical Platonism. Field argued that mathematical discourse – which seems to refer to abstract objects like numbers, sets, and functions – could be understood as a useful fiction that facilitates scientific reasoning without requiring belief in the existence of mathematical entities. On this view, when scientists use mathematical language in their theories, they are not making genuine assertions about abstract objects but rather engaging in a form of pretense or make-believe that allows them to derive empirical predictions more efficiently. Field's project involved attempting to “nominalize” physics – to reformulate physical theories without quantifying over mathematical entities – showing that mathematics is merely a useful tool for simplifying our descriptions of the physical world rather than a body of truths about a Platonic realm.

Mathematical fictionalism developed in several directions following Field's groundbreaking work. Mark Balaguer, in *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics* (1998), defended a more permissive version of fictionalism that acknowledged the possibility of mathematical objects while arguing that we have no reason to believe in them. Balaguer's approach emphasized the epistemological advantages of fictionalism – it allows us to avoid the difficult problem of how we might gain knowledge of abstract mathematical objects while preserving the practical utility of mathematical discourse. Other philosophers, such as Gideon Rosen and John Burgess, engaged in extensive debates about the coherence and advantages of mathematical fictionalism, particularly concerning the question of whether mathematics is genuinely indispensable to science, as Quine and Putnam had famously argued. If mathematical entities are dispensable, as Field attempted to show, then fictionalism becomes more attractive as an alternative to Platonism. If they are indispensable, however, then the fictionalist faces the challenge of explaining why we should accept theories that quantify over entities we don't believe exist.

The fictionalist approach was eventually imported into ethics, giving rise to moral fictionalism as a distinct position that would later combine with quasi-realism to form the hybrid view we are examining. Richard Joyce's *The Myth of Morality* (2001) presented one of the most comprehensive defenses of moral fictionalism, building on an error-theoretic argument for moral skepticism. Joyce argued that moral judgments presuppose the existence of objective categorical reasons – reasons that apply to us regardless of our desires or interests – but that no such reasons exist. This led him to conclude that all moral claims are systematically and uniformly false. However, unlike many error theorists who advocated abandoning moral discourse altogether, Joyce argued that we have strong pragmatic reasons to continue engaging in moral discourse as a beneficial fiction. He proposed that we should “make-believe” that moral claims are true, adopting a fictionalist stance toward morality because of the valuable social coordination and individual guidance it provides. This revolutionary moral fictionalism – so-called because it advocates consciously adopting a fictionalist stance toward discourse that was not originally understood as fictional – offered a way to preserve

the practical benefits of morality while acknowledging its skeptical implications.

A different version of moral fictionalism was developed by Mark Kalderon in *Moral Fictionalism* (2005). Kalderon defended hermeneutic moral fictionalism, which holds that ordinary moral discourse is already best understood as involving fiction or pretense, rather than requiring a revolutionary reinterpretation. On this view, when people make moral judgments, they are not typically expressing beliefs in objective moral facts but rather engaging in a form of pretense that allows for practical reasoning and social coordination. Kalderon argued that this interpretation better accounts for the phenomenology of moral judgment than either cognitivist or simple non-cognitivist theories, capturing both the practical force of morality and the persistent doubts about moral objectivity that many people experience. This hermeneutic approach represented a more conservative form of fictionalism, one that sought to interpret existing practice rather than revolutionize it.

Beyond mathematics and ethics, fictionalist approaches were developed in other domains as well, contributing to a broader fictionalist tradition that would eventually intersect with quasi-realism. Modal fictionalism, most notably defended by David Lewis in “Truth in Fiction” (1978) and developed by others like Gideon Rosen in “Modal Fictionalism” (1990), treated possible worlds discourse as a useful fiction for analyzing modal concepts like necessity and possibility. On this view, when we say “It’s possible that pigs could fly,” we are not committing ourselves to the existence of a possible world where pigs fly, but rather engaging with a fiction that helps us organize and systematize our modal reasoning. Similarly, scientific fictionalism explored the possibility of treating theoretical entities in science – like electrons, genes, or spacetime curvature – as fictional posits that facilitate prediction and explanation without requiring ontological commitment. These various fictionalist approaches shared a common strategy: acknowledging the practical utility and apparent truth-aptness of discourse in a particular domain while rejecting the existence of the entities seemingly invoked by that discourse.

The convergence of quasi-realism and fictionalism into the hybrid position of quasi-realist fictionalism was motivated by the recognition that these two approaches, despite originating in different philosophical traditions and addressing different problems, could mutually reinforce each other. Quasi-realism offered sophisticated resources for explaining how discourse that originates in the expression of non-cognitive states can develop the logical and semantic features of realist discourse. Fictionalism provided a framework for understanding how we can engage with apparently truth-apt discourse without committing ourselves to the existence of the entities or facts seemingly invoked by that discourse. Together, they offered a comprehensive account of how various domains of discourse – particularly those involving normativity, modality, and abstracta – can function with the full pragmatic and semantic force of objective discourse while remaining grounded in human attitudes, conventions, and practical needs. This synthesis would prove particularly powerful in addressing the persistent challenges that had faced both quasi-realism and fictionalism when developed in isolation, creating a more robust and versatile philosophical position that could be applied across multiple domains of inquiry.

The philosophical foundations of quasi-realist fictionalism thus represent a rich and complex intellectual heritage, drawing together diverse strands of 20th-century analytic philosophy into a distinctive meta-philosophical position. From the non-cognitivist traditions that challenged the cognitive status of moral judgments, through

Blackburn’s development of quasi-realism as a way to earn realist discourse on expressivist foundations, to the various fictionalist approaches that offered strategies for engaging with useful fictions without ontological commitment, this intellectual lineage provides the conceptual resources necessary for understanding how quasi-realist fictionalism attempts to reconcile the seemingly objective character of much human discourse with anti-realist metaphysical commitments. As we turn to examine the key theoretical components that constitute this position, we will see how these foundational elements are synthesized into a coherent and powerful philosophical framework.

### 1.3 Key Theoretical Components

Building upon the rich philosophical foundations explored in the previous section, we now turn to the intricate theoretical architecture of quasi-realist fictionalism itself. This position does not merely juxtapose quasi-realism and fictionalism; rather, it weaves them into a sophisticated and integrated framework designed to address the persistent challenges posed by discourse that appears robustly objective yet resists straightforward realist interpretation. The core theoretical components of quasi-realist fictionalism work in concert to explain how we can legitimately engage in practices characteristic of objective inquiry—employing realist-seeming language, reasoning logically, debating truth and falsity, and acknowledging progress and error—without committing ourselves to the existence of the entities or properties seemingly invoked. By dissecting these components—the quasi-realist framework providing the expressive and semantic resources, the fictionalist elements supplying the instrumental and pragmatic justification, and their unique integration resolving apparent tensions and creating theoretical synergies—we gain a deeper understanding of how this hybrid position carves out a distinctive and compelling space in the philosophical landscape.

#### 1.3.1 3.1 The Quasi-Realist Framework

The quasi-realist framework, primarily developed through Simon Blackburn’s seminal work, provides the essential linguistic and semantic machinery that allows quasi-realist fictionalism to navigate the complex terrain of normative and modal discourse. At its heart lies a sophisticated expressivism, which posits that the fundamental function of judgments in domains like ethics, aesthetics, and even epistemology is not to describe mind-independent states of affairs but to express non-cognitive states of the speaker—attitudes, sentiments, endorsements, or prescriptions. This expressivist commitment distinguishes quasi-realism starkly from cognitivist views like realism or error theory. When someone asserts “Torture is wrong,” a quasi-realist argues, they are not reporting the instantiation of a moral property of wrongness in the act of torture. Rather, they are expressing a durable, structured attitude of disapproval towards torture—an attitude that involves a complex interplay of emotional response, practical orientation, and social commitment. This expression is not merely a raw ejaculation of feeling, like a cry of pain; it is a *discriminating* expression, responsive to reasons and subject to norms of consistency and coherence. The speaker is effectively saying “Boo to torture!” but in a way that is rule-governed, capable of being challenged, and integrated into a broader network of attitudes and justifications. This initial expressive act forms the bedrock of the quasi-realist edifice.

Crucially, however, quasi-realism does not stop at this simple expressive account. Its defining ambition, Blackburn's "quasi-realist project," is to demonstrate how this expressive starting point can systematically "earn the right" to deploy the full panoply of realist-seeming discourse. This earning process is not a matter of deception or sleight of hand; it is a demonstration of how the linguistic practices surrounding the expression of attitudes can evolve and become embedded in complex social and inferential networks, thereby acquiring the semantic and logical features traditionally associated with genuine truth-apt discourse. Consider the concept of moral truth. A naive realist might claim that "Torture is wrong" is true if and only if the act of torture possesses the objective property of wrongness. The quasi-realist offers a deflationary, minimalist account: to say "It is true that torture is wrong" is not to attribute a special correspondence property to some moral fact. Instead, it is to express a higher-order endorsement of the original attitude—it functions as a way of asserting, reaffirming, or lending one's authority to the expressed disapproval of torture. It signals that the attitude is not merely a fleeting whim but one the speaker stands by, is prepared to defend, and believes merits acceptance within the community of discourse. This minimalist truth predicate thus becomes a device for expressing commitment and solidarity within the expressive practice, not a bridge to a transcendent realm of facts.

This same strategy extends to other realist-seeming notions. When quasi-realists talk about moral *objectivity*, they do not mean correspondence to mind-independent facts. Rather, they invoke the idea that moral attitudes are subject to norms that transcend the individual's subjective state—norms of consistency, coherence, responsiveness to reasons, and intersubjective agreement. A judgment is "objective" in the quasi-realist sense if its justification does not depend solely on the speaker's idiosyncratic desires or momentary feelings, but appeals to standards that are recognized within the practice and can be critically assessed by others. For example, judging an action wrong because it causes unnecessary suffering appeals to a reason (suffering) that has normative force within the shared framework of moral discourse, making the judgment feel objective even though its foundation lies in shared human responses and practical needs. Similarly, the idea of moral *knowledge* is reinterpreted not as awareness of moral facts, but as the possession of justified, stable, and critically examined moral attitudes that have withstood rational scrutiny and social challenge. To know that charity is good is to have a well-founded, reflective endorsement of charitable acts, grounded in reasons that others within the practice can recognize and evaluate.

The role of sentiment, attitude, and endorsement in quasi-realist discourse is therefore multifaceted and dynamic. Sentiments provide the raw motivational material; attitudes structure these sentiments into durable, reason-responsive stances; and endorsements signal commitment to these attitudes within the social practice. This complex interplay allows quasi-realism to avoid the pitfalls of simpler subjectivist or emotivist theories. Unlike crude subjectivism, which reduces moral judgments to reports of personal preference ("I dislike torture"), quasi-realism emphasizes that moral attitudes are normative—they purport to guide action not just for the speaker, but for anyone in relevantly similar circumstances. Unlike simple emotivism, which might reduce "Torture is wrong" to "Torture! Boo!", quasi-realism provides the resources to explain why this expression functions in complex logical arguments, why we can meaningfully disagree about it, and why we can offer reasons to support it. The quasi-realist framework builds a sophisticated semantic superstructure atop the expressive foundation, allowing moral discourse to mimic the features of genuine factual discourse.

while remaining grounded in non-cognitive states.

A critical aspect of this framework is its response to the Frege-Geach problem, which had plagued earlier non-cognitivist theories. The problem arises in contexts where moral terms are embedded within complex sentences, such as conditionals: “If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong.” If “stealing is wrong” in isolation expresses a non-cognitive attitude (e.g., disapproval), how does it function as a truth-apt component within the logical structure of the conditional? Quasi-realism addresses this through a sophisticated theory of meaning that emphasizes context-sensitivity and higher-order attitudes. When asserting the conditional, the speaker is not merely expressing simple disapproval of stealing and getting one’s brother to steal. Instead, they are expressing a complex higher-order attitude: specifically, a commitment to disapproving of getting one’s brother to steal *if* one disapproves of stealing. This commitment links the two attitudes logically. The meaning of “stealing is wrong” in the antecedent is determined by its role within this higher-order commitment; it functions as a placeholder for the attitude whose expression would trigger the commitment expressed in the consequent. This approach allows moral terms to contribute compositionally to the meaning of complex sentences without requiring them to possess truth values in isolation. Blackburn developed this idea further through his “logic of attitudes,” proposing that logical relations between moral statements correspond to logical relations between the higher-order attitudes they express. For instance, accepting “If P then Q” and accepting P but rejecting Q would involve a pragmatic inconsistency in one’s system of attitudes, analogous to a logical inconsistency in a system of beliefs. This provides a quasi-realist account of moral validity and inference, preserving the logical rigor of moral discourse while anchoring it in the structure of expressed commitments.

Ultimately, the quasi-realist framework offers a powerful account of how discourse originating in the expression of non-cognitive states can develop the rich semantic, logical, and normative features characteristic of objectivity-claiming language. It achieves this not by positing mysterious moral facts or properties, but by demonstrating how the evolution of linguistic practices, the establishment of shared norms, and the embedding of expressive acts within broader patterns of reasoning and social coordination allow the discourse to internally generate the resources needed to support realist-seeming talk. The framework “earns” the right to this talk through the practical utility, coherence, and social embeddedness of the expressive practice itself. This sets the stage for understanding how fictionalist elements complement and enhance this quasi-realist foundation.

### 1.3.2 3.2 Fictionalist Elements

While the quasi-realist framework provides the expressive and semantic tools for navigating objectivity-claiming discourse, the fictionalist elements introduce a crucial instrumental dimension, explaining *why* we engage in such discourse and what justifies our participation in it, particularly when robust metaphysical commitments seem unwarranted or problematic. Fictionalism, as developed in diverse domains like mathematics, morality, modality, and science, treats the discourse in question as involving a form of pretense, make-believe, or useful fiction. The core insight is that we can derive significant practical benefits—cognitive, calculational, predictive, or social—from engaging with a discourse *as if* it were literally true



and its referents existed, even when we have good philosophical reasons to doubt that it *is* literally true or that its referents *do* exist. This instrumental stance is central to the fictionalist component of quasi-realist fictionalism.

The pretense theory of representation, articulated most prominently by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) and adapted by philosophers like Gideon Rosen and David Lewis, provides the foundational mechanism for fictionalist engagement. Walton argued that our engagement with fiction involves a game of make-believe governed by principles of generation. When we read a novel, we tacitly agree to pretend that the propositions it asserts are true; this act of pretense, guided by the text and our background knowledge, generates fictional truths within the game. For example, upon reading “Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker Street,” we generate the fictional truth that Holmes resided at that London address. This pretense is not mere illusion; it is a rule-governed activity with its own internal logic and norms. Fictionalism extends this model beyond literary fiction to other domains. In mathematical fictionalism, as defended by Hartry Field, we engage in a “game” where we pretend that mathematical entities like numbers and sets exist and that mathematical axioms are true. This pretense is governed by mathematical principles of generation (e.g., the axioms of set theory). The crucial point is that this pretense is immensely useful: it allows us to derive complex mathematical results efficiently, which can then be applied to draw conclusions about the physical world, even though we need not believe that the mathematical entities invoked actually exist. We *accept* the mathematical discourse for the sake of its utility, without *believing* in its literal truth.

This distinction between belief and acceptance is absolutely vital to understanding fictionalism. Belief is a cognitive state aimed at truth; to believe a proposition is to hold it to be true of the actual world. Acceptance, as characterized by Bas van Fraassen and others, is a practical stance adopted towards a proposition (or a set of propositions) for a specific purpose, such as facilitating reasoning, enabling social coordination, or simplifying calculation, without necessarily holding it to be literally true. One can accept the principles of Newtonian mechanics for solving everyday engineering problems without believing they are strictly true (knowing they are superseded by relativity). Similarly, a moral fictionalist like Richard Joyce argues that we can *accept* the propositions of commonsense morality (“Pain is bad,” “Promises ought to be kept”) for the purpose of guiding behavior and facilitating social cooperation, even if we believe, on philosophical grounds (e.g., error theory), that these propositions are systematically false because they presuppose non-existent objective categorical reasons. Acceptance is governed by norms of utility and pragmatic success within the context of the “game” or fictional framework, whereas belief is governed by norms of truth and correspondence to reality. This distinction allows fictionalists to participate fully in a discourse, employing its logical apparatus and drawing practical inferences, while maintaining a skeptical stance towards its meta-physical commitments. It explains how a mathematician can rigorously prove theorems about sets without believing in the existence of abstract sets, or how a moral agent can sincerely assert “Charity is good” while acknowledging that “goodness” does not denote an objective property.

The practical utility of fictional frameworks is the primary justification for adopting the fictionalist stance. Fictionalist engagement is not an arbitrary choice; it is driven by the demonstrable benefits that the framework provides. In mathematics, as Field emphasized, mathematical language is an indispensable tool for expressing scientific theories and deriving empirical predictions. Attempting to formulate physics without

numbers, sets, or functions, as Field himself attempted to show is possible in principle, would be extraordinarily cumbersome and impractical. The fictionalist framework of mathematics provides a powerful “shortcut” for reasoning about the physical world. Similarly, in morality, Joyce argues that accepting moral fictions provides crucial benefits: it offers clear guidance for action in complex situations, facilitates social coordination and cooperation by establishing shared norms, enables the resolution of conflicts through shared reasoning, and provides psychological comfort by offering a sense of meaning and purpose. Engaging in moral discourse *as if* it were objective helps overcome motivational deficits and collective action problems that might arise if everyone acknowledged the non-objective status of moral claims. The pretense of objectivity, according to Joyce, has a valuable “error-theoretic proof” – it works better for us than the unsettling truth of moral skepticism. This pragmatic justification is central to fictionalism: we engage in the fiction because it serves important human needs and functions more effectively than available alternatives.

Different flavors of fictionalism emphasize different aspects of this engagement. Revolutionary fictionalism, associated with Joyce and also with mathematical fictionalists like Field (in his *nominalization* project), advocates for a conscious shift in our understanding of discourse that was previously taken at face value. Recognizing the philosophical problems with moral realism or mathematical Platonism, the revolutionary fictionalist proposes that we *reinterpret* existing discourse as fictional. We should continue to use moral language, but we should now understand ourselves as engaging in a beneficial pretense rather than stating facts. Hermeneutic fictionalism, defended by Mark Kalderon in ethics, takes a different tack. It argues that ordinary participants in the discourse are *already* engaging in a form of pretense, whether they consciously realize it or not. Kalderon suggests that the phenomenology of moral judgment often involves a kind of “double consciousness”: we feel the pull of objectivity in the heat of the moment (“Torture is *just wrong!*”) but experience skeptical doubts upon reflection (“But is wrongness really *out there?*”). Hermeneutic fictionalism interprets this as evidence that moral practice already embodies a fictionalist stance – we naturally adopt the pretense of objectivity for practical purposes, even if we don’t fully articulate it as such. This view is less revisionary; it seeks to interpret existing practice rather than revolutionize it. Both revolutionary and hermeneutic strands contribute to the fictionalist toolkit within quasi-realist fictionalism, offering different perspectives on how and why we engage in the pretense.

The fictionalist elements thus provide a crucial answer to the “why” question that quasi-realism, focused primarily on the “how” of discourse, might leave underexplored. They explain the practical rationale for engaging in discourse that appears robustly objective: we do so because the fictional framework serves vital cognitive, calculational, social, and psychological functions. We *accept* the claims of the framework within the context of the pretense because this acceptance enables us to reason effectively, coordinate our actions, solve complex problems, and navigate the world, all while potentially *believing* that the discourse does not describe the world literally. This instrumental justification complements the quasi-realist account of how such discourse gains its semantic and logical structure, laying the groundwork for understanding how these two powerful approaches can be integrated into a single, coherent position.



### 1.3.3 3.3 Integration of Approaches

The true innovation and strength of quasi-realist fictionalism lie not merely in the juxtaposition of quasi-realism and fictionalism, but in their deep and mutually reinforcing integration. This synthesis is not a simple addition of components; it is a dynamic interplay where each element addresses potential weaknesses in the other and creates unique theoretical advantages that neither approach could achieve in isolation. The integration resolves tensions, enhances explanatory power, and provides a more comprehensive account of the nature and function of objectivity-claiming discourse across diverse domains.

The most fundamental point of

## 1.4 Major Proponents and Contributions

The integration of quasi-realism and fictionalism into a cohesive philosophical framework was not the work of a solitary genius but emerged through the collective efforts of several brilliant minds, each contributing distinctive insights that gradually shaped the position we now recognize as quasi-realist fictionalism. These primary architects, operating within the vibrant intellectual landscape of late 20th-century analytic philosophy, engaged in a dynamic dialogue across decades, refining their ideas through debate, criticism, and mutual influence. Their contributions reveal a fascinating story of philosophical synthesis, where seemingly divergent traditions—expressivist quasi-realism and instrumental fictionalism—gradually converged into a powerful hybrid position capable of addressing some of the most persistent puzzles in meta-philosophy. By examining the work of these key figures, we gain not only a deeper understanding of quasi-realist fictionalism’s theoretical underpinnings but also a vivid picture of its evolution through the crucible of rigorous philosophical exchange.

Simon Blackburn stands as the foundational architect of quasi-realism, whose work provided the essential linguistic and semantic scaffolding upon which later fictionalist elements would be built. Blackburn’s journey began with his profound dissatisfaction with the limitations of early non-cognitivist theories like emotivism and prescriptivism, which he felt failed to capture the sophistication and logical complexity of moral discourse. His groundbreaking 1984 book, *Spreading the Word*, introduced the core project of quasi-realism: to demonstrate how an expressivist starting point—where moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes rather than beliefs—could systematically “earn the right” to employ realist-seeming language. Blackburn’s key innovation was the concept of “projectivism,” which he developed by drawing inspiration from David Hume’s account of moral sentiment. According to projectivism, we spread or project our attitudes, sentiments, and emotional responses onto the world, which then appear as objective features. For example, when we feel disapproval toward cruelty, we project this attitude outward, and cruelty then seems to possess a mind-independent property of “wrongness” that we discover rather than impose. This projection is not merely a psychological quirk but a deeply ingrained cognitive mechanism that facilitates social coordination and normative guidance. Blackburn’s quasi-realist project involved meticulously showing how various features of realist discourse—such as moral truth, objectivity, knowledge, and even moral reasoning—could be reconstructed within an expressivist framework. He argued that when we call a moral judgment “true,”

we are not attributing a correspondence property to some moral fact but rather expressing a higher-order endorsement of the sentiment it expresses. Similarly, moral disagreement is not a clash of beliefs about moral facts but a clash of attitudes that can be rationally resolved because our attitudes respond to reasons and are subject to constraints of consistency. Blackburn's 1998 book, *Ruling Passions*, represented the culmination of this project, offering a comprehensive defense of expressivism that addressed the formidable Frege-Geach problem through a sophisticated "logic of attitudes" and a minimalist theory of truth. Throughout his work, Blackburn displayed a remarkable ability to blend philosophical rigor with literary flair, often illustrating complex ideas with vivid examples and analogies drawn from everyday life and literature. His distinctive contribution lay in showing how expressivism could avoid the pitfalls of crude subjectivism while preserving its anti-realist core, thereby creating a framework robust enough to incorporate fictionalist insights without collapsing into incoherence.

While Blackburn was developing quasi-realism primarily in ethics, Richard Joyce emerged as the pivotal figure in importing fictionalism into moral philosophy and exploring its potential synthesis with quasi-realist ideas. Joyce's 2001 book, *The Myth of Morality*, presented a revolutionary defense of moral fictionalism built upon an error-theoretic foundation. Joyce began with a powerful evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism, contending that our moral beliefs are shaped by natural selection to promote cooperation and survival, not to track objective moral truths. This led him to conclude that moral judgments, which presuppose the existence of objective categorical reasons, are systematically and uniformly false. However, unlike many error theorists who advocated abandoning moral discourse altogether, Joyce argued that we have strong pragmatic reasons to continue engaging in moral discourse as a beneficial fiction. He proposed that we should "make-believe" that moral claims are true, adopting a fictionalist stance toward morality because of the valuable social coordination and individual guidance it provides. Joyce's distinctive contribution was his development of an "error-theoretic proof" for moral fictionalism, demonstrating that the pretense of objectivity works better for us than the unsettling truth of moral skepticism. He argued that moral fictionalism allows us to preserve the practical benefits of morality—such as facilitating cooperation, providing clear guidance for action, and enabling the resolution of conflicts—while acknowledging its skeptical implications. Joyce also explored the psychological mechanisms underlying fictional engagement, suggesting that humans are naturally adept at participating in pretense that feels real, as evidenced by our immersion in novels, films, and games. This capacity, he argued, makes moral fictionalism psychologically feasible and practically attractive. In subsequent work, including papers like "Fictionalism about Morality" (2005) and "The Evolution of Morality" (2006), Joyce refined his position, addressing objections and exploring connections with other areas of philosophy like evolutionary psychology and meta-ethics. His contribution to quasi-realist fictionalism was crucial in providing a robust instrumental justification for engaging in objectivity-claiming discourse, complementing Blackburn's semantic account with a pragmatic foundation that explained why such discourse remains valuable despite its anti-realist underpinnings.

Other key contributors played vital roles in shaping the quasi-realist fictionalist landscape, each bringing distinctive insights that enriched the position. Allan Gibbard, though primarily associated with his own norm-expressivist theory of morality (developed in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 1990), significantly influenced the development of quasi-realism through his sophisticated analysis of normative judgment and acceptance.

Gibbard’s work on “norm-expressivism” and his exploration of the concept of acceptance—distinguishing it from belief—provided crucial resources for understanding how we can engage with normative discourse without committing to its literal truth. His idea that accepting a norm involves being disposed to guilt and anger in certain circumstances offered a psychologically rich account of normative engagement that resonated with fictionalist themes. David Dreier, in papers like “Quasi-Realism and Moral Propositional Content” (1999) and “Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism” (2004), made important contributions by exploring the boundaries of quasi-realism and addressing the challenge of “creeping minimalism”—the worry that quasi-realists might inadvertently collapse into realism through their deflationary accounts of truth and objectivity. Dreier’s work helped clarify the delicate balance quasi-realist fictionalists must maintain between earning realist discourse and avoiding unintended metaphysical commitments. David Enoch, while not a defender of quasi-realist fictionalism himself, significantly influenced its development through his critical engagements, particularly in *Taking Morality Seriously* (2011), where he challenged fictionalists to provide a more robust account of the “queerness” of moral facts and the practicality of abandoning realist discourse. These critical exchanges forced proponents to refine their arguments and clarify their positions. Mark Kalderon’s hermeneutic moral fictionalism, presented in *Moral Fictionalism* (2005), offered an alternative to Joyce’s revolutionary approach by arguing that ordinary moral discourse is already best understood as involving fiction or pretense. Kalderon’s work broadened the fictionalist toolkit by suggesting that the phenomenology of moral judgment often involves a kind of “double consciousness”—feeling the pull of objectivity in practice while experiencing skeptical doubts upon reflection—providing empirical support for the fictionalist interpretation of existing moral practice. Together, these contributors created a rich intellectual ecosystem where quasi-realist and fictionalist ideas could cross-fertilize, gradually coalescing into the hybrid position of quasi-realist fictionalism.

The early 21st century witnessed the emergence of a new generation of philosophers who have taken up the quasi-realist fictionalist framework, extending its reach, refining its arguments, and exploring novel applications across diverse domains. These contemporary defenders have demonstrated the versatility of the position while addressing lingering challenges from critics, ensuring its continued relevance in cutting-edge philosophical debates. Their work reflects a maturation of the position, moving beyond initial formulations to develop more nuanced and sophisticated versions capable of handling complex objections and exploring uncharted territories.

Among the most prominent contemporary defenders is Nadeem Hussain, whose work has been instrumental in exploring the connections between quasi-realism and fictionalism, particularly in the domain of modality and science. In his influential paper “The Empty Talk of Fictionalism” (2004), Hussain addressed a fundamental challenge for fictionalism: the problem of “empty talk,” which questions how fictionalist discourse can be genuinely meaningful if it does not refer to existing entities. Hussain developed a sophisticated response by integrating quasi-realist insights about meaning and use, arguing that the meaning of fictional discourse is determined by its role within the practice rather than by reference. He suggested that quasi-realism provides the resources to explain how fictionalist utterances can have genuine semantic content and logical relations, even in the absence of referents. This work helped bridge a significant gap between the two traditions, showing how quasi-realist theories of meaning could bolster fictionalist accounts of representa-

tion. More recently, Hussain has explored applications of quasi-realist fictionalism to scientific discourse, particularly concerning theoretical entities in physics. In “Scientific Realism, Theory Change, and the Divine Right of Scientists” (2019), he examined how quasi-realist fictionalism offers a middle path between robust scientific realism and instrumentalism, allowing scientists to employ realist-seeming language about unobservable entities while avoiding metaphysical commitments to their existence. His work highlights the position’s potential to illuminate debates in philosophy of science that have long been dominated by stark realist/anti-realist dichotomies.

Daniel Nolan has been another significant contemporary defender, making substantial contributions to the development of quasi-realist fictionalism, particularly through his work on modal fictionalism and its broader implications. Nolan’s paper “Modal Fictionalism Cannot Avoid Precise” (1997) engaged critically with David Lewis’s modal realism, but his subsequent work, including “Fictionalism about Modality” (2002), explored how quasi-realist fictionalism could provide a more plausible account of modal discourse. He argued that treating possible worlds as useful fictions within a quasi-realist framework allows us to preserve the explanatory power of modal reasoning without committing to the ontological extravagance of Lewisian realism. Nolan’s distinctive contribution lies in his exploration of the “cost-benefit” analysis of fictionalist engagement, where he systematically weighs the pragmatic advantages of employing fictionalist frameworks against the philosophical costs of maintaining them. In “Quasi-Realism and Quantified Modal Logic” (2018), he further refined this approach by examining how quasi-realist fictionalism can handle the complexities of quantified modal logic, a domain where earlier fictionalist accounts had struggled. Nolan’s work exemplifies the contemporary trend toward more rigorous formal and technical developments within quasi-realist fictionalism, demonstrating its ability to withstand sophisticated logical scrutiny.

Carrie Ichikawa Jenkins has contributed significantly to the refinement of quasi-realist fictionalism through her work on meta-semantics and the nature of representation. In her book *Grounding: A Natural History* (2009) and subsequent papers, Jenkins explored how quasi-realist fictionalism can incorporate insights from naturalistic meta-semantics to explain how meaning and representation emerge from non-representational states. She argued that the quasi-realist account of meaning, grounded in use and expressive practices, can be complemented by a naturalistic story about how these practices themselves evolve from basic cognitive and social capacities. This work addresses a common objection to quasi-realism and fictionalism: that they fail to provide a satisfactory account of how meaning and representation are possible in the first place. Jenkins’s approach shows how quasi-realist fictionalism can be integrated with broader naturalistic projects in philosophy of mind and language, strengthening its foundations and expanding its explanatory scope. Her more recent work on fiction and imagination, including “Imagination, Cognition, and Reality” (2018), has further enriched the position by drawing on empirical research from cognitive science to illuminate the psychological mechanisms underlying fictional engagement, making the account more empirically grounded and psychologically plausible.

The current research landscape within quasi-realist fictionalism is vibrant and diverse, with philosophers exploring new applications and developing increasingly sophisticated versions of the position. One promising direction is the application of quasi-realist fictionalism to aesthetic discourse, as seen in the work of philosophers like James Harold and Berys Gaut. Harold’s paper “Immoralism and the Valence of Attitudes”

(2008) explores how quasi-realist fictionalism can account for the normative force of aesthetic judgments without positing objective aesthetic properties, while Gaut's "Art, Emotion, and Ethics" (2007) examines connections between aesthetic and moral evaluation from a quasi-realist perspective. Another active area of research involves the integration of quasi-realist fictionalism with experimental philosophy, as philosophers like Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols use empirical methods to test hypotheses about how ordinary people understand moral and modal discourse. Knobe's work on the "folk concept of intentional action" and Nichols's research on moral objectivity provide empirical support for the quasi-realist fictionalist claim that people naturally engage in a form of pretense or projection when making normative judgments. Additionally, contemporary defenders are exploring connections with feminist philosophy and critical race theory, examining how quasi-realist fictionalism might illuminate the social construction of concepts like gender, race, and justice. This interdisciplinary expansion reflects the growing recognition of quasi-realist fictionalism's versatility as a philosophical tool capable of addressing fundamental questions across multiple domains of inquiry.

The evolution of quasi-realist fictionalism has been profoundly shaped by critical engagements, both from external critics raising fundamental objections and from internal debates among defenders seeking to refine and strengthen the position. These exchanges have driven significant developments, forcing proponents to confront weaknesses, clarify ambiguities, and develop more robust versions of the theory. The history of quasi-realist fictionalism is thus not merely a story of construction but also one of rigorous defense and adaptive refinement in response to persistent philosophical challenges.

One of the most significant external criticisms has been the Frege-Geach problem, which targets the ability of non-cognitivist and quasi-realist theories to account for the logical complexity of moral discourse. As discussed earlier, this problem highlights the difficulty of explaining how moral judgments, if they express non-cognitive states in simple assertions, can apparently function as genuine propositions in complex logical contexts like conditionals. While Blackburn developed his "logic of attitudes" as a response, critics like Bob Hale in his 1993 paper "Can There Be a Logic of Attitudes?" argued that this solution fails to capture the full logical force of moral reasoning. Hale contended that Blackburn's account of moral validity as pragmatic consistency in attitudes does not adequately explain the *necessity* of logical consequences—if accepting "P" and "If P then Q" commits one to accepting "Q," this seems to be a matter of logical necessity, not merely pragmatic consistency. In response, quasi-realist fictionalists like Dreier and Simon Blackburn himself refined their accounts, emphasizing the role of higher-order attitudes and the embedding of moral language within broader linguistic practices. Dreier, in "Negation for Expressivists: A Collection of Problems with a Suggestion for Their Solution" (2006), proposed a more sophisticated solution by analyzing negation and other logical operators in terms of their role in expressing complex states of mind, showing how quasi-realism can generate a truth-conditional logic that mirrors classical logic. These responses illustrate how critical engagements have forced proponents to develop more nuanced and technically sophisticated versions of the theory.

Another major line of criticism has been the challenge of "creeping minimalism," articulated most forcefully by philosophers like Dreier and Enoch. This worry suggests that quasi-realist fictionalists, in their effort to earn the right to realist-sounding discourse, may inadvertently collapse into a form of minimalism that is in-

distinguishable from realism. For example, if a quasi-realist fictionalist defines “truth” in purely deflationary terms as “a device for endorsement,” and “objectivity” as “independence from idiosyncratic attitudes,” critics argue that these definitions might become so minimal that they no longer represent a genuine alternative to realism. In “Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism” (2004), Dreier expressed concern that quasi-realists might be “hoist by their own petard,” successfully earning realist discourse only to find that they have become realists in all but name. In response, contemporary defenders like Hussain and Jenkins have emphasized the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between the *explanatory project* of quasi-realist fictionalism and the *semantic project* of minimalism. They argue that while minimalism about truth and objectivity may be semantically adequate, the quasi-realist fictionalist’s distinctive contribution lies in the explanatory story about the origin and function of discourse—grounding it in projection, pretense, and pragmatic utility rather than correspondence to mind-independent facts. This response highlights how critical engagements have forced proponents to clarify the unique explanatory ambitions of their position, distinguishing it

## 1.5 Applications in Ethics

The critical engagements and refinements that have shaped quasi-realist fictionalism provide a sturdy foundation for exploring its most significant application: the domain of ethics. Having examined how this position responds to objections about creeping minimalism and maintains its distinct explanatory project, we can now appreciate its unique power to illuminate the complex landscape of moral thought and practice. Ethics represents both the historical origin and the most developed testing ground for quasi-realist fictionalism, offering a particularly rich terrain where its synthesis of expressivist and fictionalist elements reveals profound insights into how we navigate normative life. The application to ethics demonstrates how this position moves beyond abstract meta-philosophical speculation to provide a compelling account of the phenomenology of moral experience, the practical force of moral judgment, and the persistent puzzles of moral disagreement.

### 1.5.1 5.1 Moral Discourse as Fiction

At the heart of quasi-realist fictionalism’s application to ethics lies a radical yet intuitively plausible reconceptualization of moral discourse: the idea that moral claims function as highly useful and pragmatically indispensable fictions rather than straightforward descriptions of objective moral facts. This perspective does not reduce moral discourse to mere wordplay or arbitrary invention; rather, it recognizes moral language as a sophisticated form of pretense that we collectively enact and maintain because of its extraordinary utility in organizing human experience, guiding behavior, and facilitating social coordination. When we assert “Torture is wrong” or “Charity is good,” we are not reporting the instantiation of mind-independent moral properties in the way a scientist might report the presence of water molecules. Instead, we are engaging in a complex form of fictional discourse that projects our attitudes and commitments onto the world, thereby creating a framework that feels objective and authoritative while ultimately being grounded in human sensibilities and practical needs.



The pretense involved in moral judgment operates at multiple levels, from individual psychology to social institutions. At the psychological level, quasi-realist fictionalism suggests that moral judgment involves a kind of “double consciousness” that many people experience but rarely articulate explicitly. In the heat of moral experience—when witnessing an act of cruelty or contemplating a decision that affects others—we typically feel the pull of moral objectivity with remarkable intensity. The wrongness of torture seems not merely a matter of personal preference but a feature of the act itself, as real and undeniable as its physical characteristics. Yet upon philosophical reflection, many people experience nagging doubts about the meta-physical status of moral properties. Mark Kalderon, in his development of hermeneutic moral fictionalism, argues that this phenomenological tension reveals something important about the nature of moral practice: we naturally adopt a pretense of objectivity in moral contexts, even when we harbor skeptical doubts about moral realism. This pretense is not a form of self-deception but a sophisticated cognitive strategy that allows us to benefit from the practical advantages of objectivity-claiming discourse while avoiding metaphysical commitments that may be difficult to justify.

The social dimension of moral pretense is equally crucial. Moral discourse functions as a collective fiction that entire communities enact together, creating shared norms and expectations that structure social life. Consider the institution of promising. When someone makes a promise—“I promise to meet you tomorrow”—they are entering into a social practice that treats the promise as creating a genuine obligation, something they “ought” to fulfill regardless of their changing desires. From a quasi-realist fictionalist perspective, there is no objective moral fact that makes promise-keeping obligatory in itself. Rather, the practice of promising is a highly useful social fiction that we collectively maintain because it facilitates cooperation, enables planning, and creates predictable social interactions. The pretense involved in promising is so deeply ingrained that violating a promise typically generates genuine moral condemnation and feelings of guilt, even though the obligation itself is a product of the fictional framework rather than an objective feature of reality. This analysis extends to virtually all moral institutions—rights, justice, responsibility, desert—all of which can be understood as useful fictions that solve practical problems of social coordination.

Richard Joyce’s revolutionary moral fictionalism highlights the practical reasons for adopting moral discourse as fiction despite its non-cognitive status. Joyce argues that while moral skepticism—rooted in evolutionary debunking arguments—undermines the justification for believing in objective moral truths, we have overwhelming pragmatic reasons to continue engaging in moral discourse as a beneficial pretense. The fictional framework of morality provides crucial services: it offers clear guidance for action in complex situations, facilitates social cooperation by establishing shared norms, enables the resolution of conflicts through shared reasoning, and provides psychological comfort by offering a sense of meaning and purpose. Consider a society that attempted to operate without any moral fiction, acknowledging only personal preferences and strategic considerations. Such a society would likely face severe collective action problems, difficulties in establishing trust, and challenges in motivating altruistic behavior. The pretense of moral objectivity, according to Joyce, functions as a social technology that solves these problems more effectively than available alternatives. It allows us to treat certain considerations as providing categorical reasons for action—reasons that apply regardless of our personal desires—thereby overcoming motivational limitations and enabling more robust social coordination.

The quasi-realist dimension of this account explains how moral discourse develops the rich semantic and logical features characteristic of objectivity-claiming language. Through the progressive embedding of moral judgments within broader linguistic practices, social institutions, and patterns of reasoning, the discourse gradually acquires the trappings of objectivity. Terms like “true,” “valid,” “objective,” and even “fact” can be legitimately applied within moral discourse, not because they correspond to some external moral reality, but because their use becomes warranted by the norms governing the practice itself and the practical utility they confer. This process of “earning the right” to realist-sounding language is not a matter of deception but a natural development of linguistic practices that serve vital human functions. When we say “It is true that torture is wrong,” we are not attributing a correspondence property to a moral fact but rather expressing a higher-order endorsement of the attitude of disapproval toward torture, signaling that this attitude is worthy of acceptance within our moral community. Similarly, moral reasoning—such as the inference from “Torture causes unnecessary suffering” and “Causing unnecessary suffering is wrong” to “Torture is wrong”—acquires logical force not because it tracks relations between moral facts but because it reflects relations between attitudes that have become structured and normatively governed within the practice.

The fictionalist understanding of moral discourse does not imply that moral claims are arbitrary or that anything goes within the moral framework. On the contrary, the pretense of moral objectivity is governed by strict principles of generation that determine what counts as a valid moral claim within the practice. These principles include consistency requirements (avoiding contradictions in one’s moral attitudes), responsiveness to reasons (moral judgments should be sensitive to relevant non-moral facts), and intersubjective constraints (moral claims must be justifiable to others within the community). For example, if someone claims “Stealing is wrong” but then proceeds to steal without any relevant change in circumstances, we would rightly accuse them of inconsistency. Similarly, if someone judges an action wrong but cannot provide any reasons that others in the community can recognize as relevant, we would question the legitimacy of their judgment. These constraints ensure that moral discourse, while fictional, maintains a degree of objectivity and rigor that makes it practically useful and normatively forceful.

### 1.5.2 5.2 Moral Motivation and Reasons

One of the most distinctive and theoretically powerful applications of quasi-realist fictionalism lies in its account of moral motivation and reasons, where it offers a compelling resolution to persistent puzzles about the connection between moral judgment and action. Traditional moral realism faces a significant challenge in explaining how moral facts—supposedly existing in a non-natural, causally inert realm—could possibly motivate human action. If moral properties are utterly unlike physical properties, how could awareness of them move us to act? This “motivational externalism” problem suggests a troubling gap between recognizing a moral fact and being motivated to act on that recognition. Quasi-realist fictionalism dissolves this problem by grounding moral discourse in the very states that are inherently connected to motivation: attitudes, sentiments, and commitments. On this view, the connection between moral judgment and motivation is not a mysterious causal relation between distinct realms but an internal connection within the structure of moral thought itself.



The quasi-realist dimension of this account emphasizes that moral judgments are expressions of non-cognitive states that are inherently motivational. When someone sincerely judges an action to be wrong, they are not merely registering a fact about the action; they are expressing an attitude of disapproval toward it, an attitude that typically includes a motivational component. This expression is not like reporting that the sky is blue; it is more like expressing fear of a dangerous animal—a state that naturally disposes one to avoidance behavior. Simon Blackburn captures this insight with his concept of “sensibility theory,” which suggests that moral judgments express states of sensibility that integrate cognition, emotion, and motivation. The judgment “Torture is wrong” expresses a complex sensibility that includes the belief that torture causes suffering, the emotional response of disapproval toward causing suffering, and the motivational disposition to prevent torture and condemn those who engage in it. This integrated account explains why moral judgments are typically so closely connected to motivation without positing mysterious causal mechanisms. The motivation is built into the very state that is expressed in the moral judgment.

The fictionalist dimension complements this account by explaining how the pretense of moral objectivity enhances and stabilizes moral motivation. Richard Joyce argues that while our basic moral attitudes may originate in non-cognitive states, the fictional framework of morality treats these attitudes as if they were responses to objective reasons, thereby strengthening their motivational force. When we engage in the moral fiction, we don’t merely express our attitudes; we treat them as tracking genuine normative facts that provide categorical reasons for action. This pretense has powerful psychological effects, making our moral commitments feel more authoritative and less contingent on our passing desires. Consider the difference between merely feeling a desire to help others and judging that helping others is morally required. The desire might be weak and easily overridden by stronger desires, but the moral judgment, embedded within the fictional framework, presents itself as a requirement that applies regardless of one’s desires. This pretense of categorical normativity provides a motivational boost, helping us act on our moral commitments even when doing so is difficult or costly.

Quasi-realist fictionalism offers a nuanced perspective on the internalism/externalism debate about moral reasons. This debate concerns whether moral judgments necessarily provide reasons for action for the person who makes them (internalism) or whether they can provide reasons that apply to a person regardless of their motivations (externalism). Quasi-realist fictionalism occupies a sophisticated middle ground. On one hand, it embraces the internalist insight that moral judgments are intimately connected to the speaker’s motivational states. When we make a moral judgment, we express an attitude that is part of our motivational economy, and this attitude provides us with a reason for action in the straightforward sense that it is one of our existing motivations. On the other hand, the fictional framework allows us to treat these reasons as if they were external—as if they applied to everyone regardless of their particular motivations. This pretense of external reasons serves important practical functions: it facilitates moral criticism and persuasion, enables the formulation of universal moral principles, and helps overcome motivational limitations by presenting moral requirements as applying to everyone, including ourselves when our motivation wavers.

The account of moral reasons within quasi-realist fictionalism can be illustrated through the example of moral criticism. Suppose we observe someone acting selfishly in a situation where we believe they should help others. From a quasi-realist fictionalist perspective, our criticism—“You ought to have helped”—is

not claiming that there is an objective moral fact that creates a reason for them that they somehow failed to recognize. Rather, we are expressing our disapproval of their action and inviting them to share an attitude that we believe would lead to better outcomes. The criticism functions within the shared fictional framework of morality, which treats certain considerations as providing reasons for everyone. When we say “You ought to have helped,” we are not discovering an external reason but rather participating in a social practice that aims to shape attitudes and behavior in beneficial ways. This account explains both the force of moral criticism—why it feels like we are pointing to something the person has missed—and its connection to persuasion—why we typically offer reasons that might motivate the person to change their attitude.

The fictionalist framework also illuminates how moral reasons can evolve and change over time. As society’s needs, values, and circumstances change, the fictional framework of morality can adapt, leading to shifts in what we consider to be moral reasons. For example, changing attitudes toward environmental sustainability have led to the emergence of new moral reasons that were not widely recognized in previous generations. From a quasi-realist fictionalist perspective, this evolution is not a matter of discovering new moral facts but of refining our collective fictional framework to better serve human needs and values. The pretense of objective moral reasons allows these changes to feel like progress toward a better understanding of morality rather than mere shifts in preference, providing normative stability even as the content of moral reasons evolves.

### 1.5.3 5.3 Moral Objectivity and Disagreement

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of moral experience for any anti-realist theory to explain is the pervasive sense of moral objectivity and the reality of persistent moral disagreement. Quasi-realist fictionalism addresses these phenomena not by dismissing them as illusory but by providing a sophisticated account of their origin and function within the fictional framework of morality. The sense that moral claims are objectively true or false, that some actions are really wrong regardless of what anyone thinks, and that moral disagreements can be rationally resolved—all these features of moral experience can be explained as natural outgrowths of the quasi-realist fictionalist practice without appealing to objective moral facts.

The quasi-realist dimension of this account explains how moral discourse develops the appearance of objectivity through the process of projecting attitudes and earning the right to realist-sounding language. When we express moral attitudes, we naturally project them onto the world, making them appear as features of the situations we evaluate rather than as our responses to those situations. This projection is not a deliberate act of deception but a deeply ingrained cognitive mechanism that facilitates social coordination. The disapproval we feel toward cruelty appears as the wrongness of cruelty itself; the approval we feel toward kindness appears as the goodness of kindness. Through the progressive development of moral discourse, these projected attitudes become embedded in linguistic practices that treat them as objective features. We learn to talk about moral properties as if they were real, to debate moral questions as if there were facts of the matter, and to seek moral truth as if it were something to be discovered. The quasi-realist program demonstrates that this objectivity-claiming discourse can be systematically earned within an expressivist framework, showing how each aspect of realist-seeming moral discourse can be reconstructed on anti-realist foundations.

The fictionalist dimension complements this account by explaining why the pretense of moral objectivity is so persistent and psychologically compelling. The collective engagement with moral fiction creates a shared reality that feels objective because it is intersubjectively validated. When everyone around us treats moral claims as objective, we naturally adopt the same stance, making the pretense feel like reality. This intersubjective validation is reinforced by the practical success of the moral framework—its ability to guide behavior, resolve conflicts, and facilitate cooperation—which gives us pragmatic reasons to maintain the pretense of objectivity. The result is a deeply entrenched form of collective make-believe that feels as real as any objective feature of the world.

Moral disagreement presents a particular challenge for anti-realist theories, as it often feels like a disagreement about facts rather than mere differences in attitude. Quasi-realist fictionalism accounts for this phenomenon through its sophisticated understanding of the structure of moral attitudes and their embedding within broader systems of thought. When people disagree about a moral issue—say, whether capital punishment is justified—they are not merely expressing conflicting preferences. Instead, they are expressing conflicting structured attitudes that are responsive to reasons and embedded within broader networks of beliefs, values, and commitments. The disagreement feels objective because it involves reasons that are recognized as relevant within the shared fictional framework of morality. The opponent of capital punishment might argue that it violates the right to life, fails to deter crime, and is applied discriminatorily. The proponent might counter that it provides just retribution for heinous crimes, deters potential offenders, and brings closure to victims' families. Both sides appeal to considerations that are treated as providing reasons within the moral framework, and the disagreement focuses on which considerations are most weighty and how they should be balanced. This structure makes moral disagreement feel like a dispute about facts even though it is fundamentally a clash of attitudes within a shared fictional practice.

The quasi-realist fictionalist account of moral disagreement also explains why such disagreements can sometimes be rationally resolved. While moral attitudes are fundamentally non-cognitive, they are responsive to reasons and subject to constraints of consistency and coherence. When people engage in moral debate, they typically appeal to non-moral facts that are relevant to the attitudes in question. For example, a disagreement about the morality of eating meat might be resolved by appealing to facts about animal cognition, environmental impact, or nutritional needs. These non-moral facts can provide reasons for adjusting one's moral attitudes, leading to agreement even in the absence of objective moral facts. The fictional framework provides shared standards for what counts as a relevant reason and how reasons should be weighed, making rational resolution of moral disagreement possible within the practice.

This account also illuminates why some

## 1.6 Applications Beyond Ethics

...moral disagreements persist despite rational discourse. When foundational values clash—such as between prioritizing individual liberty and collective welfare—the quasi-realist fictionalist framework explains why resolution proves elusive. Such disagreements often stem from divergent sensibilities or commitments at the core of one's moral outlook, which the shared fictional practice cannot fully reconcile without altering its

fundamental principles. Yet, this account also illuminates the nature of moral progress and error. Changes in moral attitudes, such as the widespread rejection of slavery or the expansion of rights to marginalized groups, can be understood as refinements of the collective moral fiction. These shifts are not discoveries of previously hidden moral facts but improvements in the fictional framework, making it more consistent, inclusive, and better aligned with evolving human needs and values. Similarly, moral error occurs when attitudes or practices within the framework violate its own norms of consistency, responsiveness to reasons, or coherence with other deeply held commitments—like condemning cruelty while endorsing practices that inflict unnecessary suffering.

This nuanced understanding of objectivity, disagreement, progress, and error within ethics showcases the explanatory power of quasi-realist fictionalism. However, the versatility of this approach extends far beyond the moral domain, providing compelling analyses of other areas where discourse exhibits an objectivity-claiming character despite facing significant metaphysical or epistemological challenges. The fundamental strategy—treating discourse in a given domain as a useful fiction that collectively earns the right to realist-seeming language through its integration into practice—proves remarkably adaptable.

### 1.6.1 6.1 Mathematical Discourse

Mathematics presents perhaps the most developed and influential application of fictionalist thought, serving as a crucial testing ground for quasi-realist fictionalism. The challenge here is stark: mathematical language seems unequivocally to refer to abstract, non-spatiotemporal, causally inert entities like numbers, sets, functions, and spaces. We confidently assert that “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ,” that “there are infinitely many prime numbers,” or that “the set of real numbers is uncountable.” These statements feel necessarily true and objectively valid, forming the bedrock of science, engineering, economics, and everyday reasoning. Yet, the metaphysical commitments required by Platonism—the view that mathematical objects exist independently of human thought and language—seem profoundly problematic. How can finite, embodied human minds gain knowledge of an abstract realm? Why do mathematical truths appear so universal and applicable to the concrete physical world if they describe a completely separate reality? These epistemological and metaphysical puzzles provide fertile ground for quasi-realist fictionalism.

Hartry Field’s groundbreaking work in *Science Without Numbers* (1980) initiated the modern fictionalist program in mathematics. Field argued that while mathematics is indispensable for formulating our best scientific theories, this indispensability does not entail the existence of mathematical objects. Instead, he proposed that mathematical discourse functions as a useful fiction or “conservative extension” of our non-mathematical language. When scientists use equations like  $F = ma$  or  $E = mc^2$ , they are not making literal assertions about abstract numbers or quantities but engaging in a pretense that facilitates calculations and derivations about the physical world. The crucial insight is that the *conclusions* drawn about the physical world using this mathematical apparatus would be true even if the mathematical entities invoked in the derivation did not exist. Field undertook the monumental project of “nominalizing” physics—reformulating physical theories without quantifying over mathematical entities—to demonstrate this conservative nature. While his specific project faced technical challenges, particularly concerning the complexity of nominalized theories, it estab-

lished the core fictionalist strategy: accept mathematical statements instrumentally for their utility in deriving non-mathematical conclusions, without believing in the literal existence of the mathematical objects.

Quasi-realist fictionalism enriches this basic fictionalist picture by explaining how mathematical discourse develops its robustly objective and necessary character. At the expressive level, mathematical judgments might originate in basic cognitive capacities—such as the ability to recognize patterns, compare quantities, or manipulate symbols—that are not inherently representational of abstract objects. However, through the progressive embedding of these activities within highly structured social practices governed by rigorous norms (axioms, proof procedures, definitions), the discourse earns the right to realist-seeming language. The quasi-realist dimension explains why mathematical terms behave like singular terms referring to objects (“the number 7”), why mathematical statements exhibit the modal force of necessity (“ $2 + 2$  *must* equal 4”), and why mathematical proof carries such compelling normative authority. When mathematicians assert a theorem is “true,” they are not, on this view, attributing a correspondence property to an abstract fact. Rather, they are expressing a higher-order endorsement of the proof and its place within the established mathematical framework, signaling that it meets the community’s stringent standards of rigor and coherence. The “objectivity” of mathematics stems not from correspondence to a Platonic realm but from the intersubjective constraints of proof, consistency, and applicability that govern the practice. A mathematical claim is “objective” if its justification is independent of any individual mathematician’s idiosyncrasies and relies solely on the accepted norms of reasoning within the fictional framework.

Consider the practical utility of mathematical fictionalism in science and engineering. Physicists routinely use complex mathematical structures like Hilbert spaces in quantum mechanics or Riemannian manifolds in general relativity to describe and predict physical phenomena. A quasi-realist fictionalist would argue that scientists are not committed to the literal existence of these abstract structures. Instead, they accept the mathematical framework *as a fiction* because it provides an unparalleled tool for organizing empirical data, deriving predictions, and facilitating calculations. The success of this fiction—its ability to yield accurate predictions about the physical world—justifies its continued use. For instance, engineers calculating the stress on a bridge use calculus and differential equations involving real numbers and continuous functions. They don’t need to believe in the literal existence of the real number continuum; they need only accept the mathematical fiction as a reliable means to ensure the bridge’s structural integrity. The quasi-realist element explains why this acceptance feels so much like belief: the mathematical framework is so deeply integrated into scientific practice, so reliable in its results, and so governed by rigorous norms that its statements take on the appearance of necessary truths about objective features of the world. We talk about “mathematical truth” and “mathematical objects” because this language is warranted by the practice’s internal norms and its indispensable role in our cognitive economy.

Mark Balaguer, in *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics* (1998), further developed this position, emphasizing the epistemological advantages. He argued that even if mathematical objects *could* exist (a possibility he termed “full-blooded Platonism”), we have no good reason to believe in them. Fictionalism avoids the epistemological mystery of accessing an abstract realm while preserving the practical benefits of mathematical discourse. The quasi-realist dimension adds the crucial layer of explaining how a discourse starting from non-representational cognitive capacities can evolve the rich semantic and logical features we

associate with mathematics. The collective pretense, governed by axioms and proof, creates a self-contained “universe of discourse” where terms refer, statements have truth values (determined by proof within the system), and logical relations hold, all without requiring external ontological grounding. The “truth” of “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is its derivability from the axioms of arithmetic within the accepted fictional framework; its “necessity” stems from the framework’s role in structuring our most basic quantitative reasoning and its universal applicability. This account elegantly resolves the tension between the undeniable utility and felt objectivity of mathematics and the profound difficulties of Platonist metaphysics.

### 1.6.2 6.2 Scientific Realism and Instrumentalism

The debate over the status of theoretical entities in science provides another compelling arena for quasi-realist fictionalism. Scientific realism holds that the unobservable entities posited by our best scientific theories—electrons, photons, genes, quarks, black holes—genuinely exist, that the terms referring to them are literally true, and that the success of science is best explained by the approximate truth of its theories. Scientific instrumentalism, by contrast, views scientific theories merely as useful instruments for predicting observable phenomena, denying that we have good reason to believe in the literal existence of unobservables. Quasi-realist fictionalism carves a sophisticated path between these extremes, acknowledging the indispensable role of theoretical discourse while avoiding robust metaphysical commitments to entities that are, by definition, beyond direct observation.

Consider the electron. Physicists confidently discuss its properties: mass, charge, spin, and behavior in electromagnetic fields. They deploy equations involving electrons to design semiconductors, develop medical imaging technologies, and predict chemical reactions. The success of this discourse is undeniable. Yet, the electron itself is not directly observable; we infer its existence and properties from its effects on cloud chambers, photomultiplier tubes, and other detectors. A scientific realist argues that the best explanation for the predictive success and technological application of electron theory is that electrons really exist with the properties attributed to them. An instrumentalist counters that talk of electrons is merely a calculational device for organizing observable phenomena; we need not believe in their existence, only in the reliability of the predictions derived from theories that mention them.

Quasi-realist fictionalism offers a nuanced alternative. It treats discourse about electrons and similar theoretical entities as a highly structured and pragmatically indispensable fiction. When scientists assert “Electrons have a negative charge,” they are not making a straightforward factual claim about an unobservable particle. Rather, they are participating in a sophisticated game of make-believe governed by the principles of quantum electrodynamics. This fictional framework is accepted because it provides an extraordinarily powerful tool for explaining a vast range of observable phenomena (from the behavior of electrical circuits to the emission spectra of stars) and for enabling technological innovation. The quasi-realist dimension explains how this fictional discourse earns the right to realist-seeming language. Through its integration into experimental practice, technological application, and broader theoretical frameworks, discourse about electrons develops the features of objectivity. Terms like “electron” function like singular terms, statements about electrons are assessed as true or false based on their consistency with experimental results and theoretical coherence, and



debates about electron properties proceed as if they were debates about real entities. Scientists treat electrons as real because the fictional framework that posits them is so deeply embedded in successful scientific practice.

The status of scientific laws and explanations within this framework is similarly reconceived. A law like Newton's law of universal gravitation ( $F = G(m \square m \square / r^2)$ ) is not, on this view, a literal description of a fundamental force governing the universe. Instead, it is a principle within the Newtonian fictional framework that generates highly accurate predictions about the motion of observable bodies (planets, projectiles, tides). Its "truth" is its derivability from the core axioms of the framework and its empirical adequacy. The "explanatory power" of the law stems from its role in organizing diverse phenomena within a unified predictive structure, not from its correspondence to an objective force field. When Einstein's theory of general relativity replaced Newtonian gravity, quasi-realist fictionalism interprets this not as the discovery that Newton's law was *false* in a correspondence sense (though talk of falsity is pragmatically useful within the practice), but as the development of a more accurate, comprehensive, and empirically adequate fictional framework—one that subsumes the successes of Newtonian mechanics while also explaining phenomena it could not, like the precession of Mercury's perihelion or the bending of light by gravity.

This approach provides a pragmatic justification for scientific realist discourse without metaphysical commitments. Scientists are justified in treating theoretical entities as real and scientific laws as true *within the context of the scientific practice* because this pretense facilitates prediction, explanation, and technological manipulation. The instrumental utility of the fiction—its ability to generate reliable predictions and successful interventions—is the primary warrant for engaging with it. The quasi-realist element explains why this engagement feels like genuine discovery: the framework is governed by strict empirical constraints (experimental results must be predicted and explained), rigorous theoretical constraints (theories must be internally consistent and coherent), and pragmatic constraints (they must be useful for application). These constraints give the discourse its objective feel, making scientists talk as if they are uncovering the fundamental structure of reality, even though quasi-realist fictionalism grounds this structure in the evolving, pragmatic needs of scientific inquiry rather than a mind-independent realm. The "reality" of the electron is its indispensable role in our most successful predictive and explanatory framework for the physical world.

### 1.6.3 6.3 Other Domains of Application

The adaptability of quasi-realist fictionalism becomes even more apparent when applied to other domains where objectivity-claiming discourse flourishes despite metaphysical controversies. Modal discourse—concerning necessity, possibility, impossibility, and counterfactual conditions—is a prime example. We routinely make claims like "It's possible that pigs could fly," "Necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried," or "If I had studied harder, I would have passed the exam." David Lewis's extreme realism, articulated in *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986), famously postulated the concrete existence of infinitely many possible worlds—spacetime-isolated universes just as real as our own—to provide truth conditions for such modal claims. On Lewis's view, "It's possible that pigs could fly" is true because there exists a concrete possible world where pigs fly. While metaphysically bold, this view faces the charge of ontological extravagance and

epistemological inaccessibility.

Quasi-realist fictionalism, drawing on modal fictionalism developed by philosophers like Gideon Rosen (“Modal Fictionalism,” 1990), offers a more parsimonious account. It treats possible worlds discourse as a useful fiction we engage with to systematize our modal reasoning and intuitions. We pretend that there is a vast plurality of possible worlds governed by principles that mirror our understanding of possibility and necessity. Within this fictional framework, modal claims gain straightforward truth conditions: “It’s possible that P” is true (in the fiction) if there is a possible world where P is true; “Necessarily Q” is true (in the fiction) if Q is true in all possible worlds. The quasi-realist dimension explains how this pretend discourse about concrete worlds can come to express genuine modal insights about our actual world. The principles governing the fiction (e.g., that worlds represent ways things *could* have been) are chosen to capture central modal intuitions. Through the embedding of this fictional discourse within broader philosophical and linguistic practices, modal terms like “possible” and “necessary” earn the right to be applied to actual states of affairs. When we say “Water is necessarily  $H_2O$ ,” we are not claiming this holds in all Lewisian concrete worlds. Instead, we are expressing a commitment within our modal conceptual framework, grounded in the essential properties of water as understood by science, that this identity holds in all counterfactual scenarios we can coherently conceive. The “necessity” here is objective relative to the norms governing our modal reasoning and conceptual commitments, not relative to a plurality of concrete worlds. The fiction provides a powerful tool for clarifying modal concepts and resolving modal puzzles, while the quasi-realist element ensures this tool connects meaningfully to our actual modal judgments about the world.

Aesthetic judgment presents another fertile domain. Debates about whether a particular painting is beautiful, a piece of music profound, or a novel great often exhibit the surface features of objectivity. Critics argue as if there were facts of the matter, and we speak of discovering artistic merit rather than merely expressing taste. Yet, the prospects for robust aesthetic realism—positing objective aesthetic properties—seem dim, given the profound variability of aesthetic responses across cultures and individuals. Quasi-realist fictionalism interprets aesthetic discourse as a sophisticated fiction. When we judge “Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is a masterpiece,” we are not detecting an objective property of greatness inherent in the sound waves. Instead, we are expressing a complex, structured attitude of profound admiration and endorsement, shaped by cultural traditions, personal experience, and critical training. This expression is projected onto the work, making its greatness seem like a discovered feature. The collective engagement with the aesthetic fiction—governed by principles of critical reasoning, historical context, and formal analysis—allows the discourse to earn realist-sounding features. We can debate the “truth” of aesthetic claims, appeal to “reasons” (e.g., structural complexity, emotional depth, originality), and acknowledge “progress” in critical understanding, all within the framework. The quasi-realist explains the objectivity of aesthetic judgment not as correspondence to aesthetic facts but as the intersubjective constraint imposed by shared critical standards and the integrative role of aesthetic experience in human life. The fiction works because it enables shared appreciation, facilitates cultural transmission, and enriches individual experience, even while



## 1.7 Philosophical Arguments For

...even while acknowledging that the specific responses may vary. The greatness of Beethoven's symphony lies not in an inherent property but in its capacity to elicit profound, structured responses within a shared cultural framework that treats such responses as tracking something real.

Religious discourse offers perhaps the most culturally significant application. Billions of people engage with talk of gods, spirits, divine laws, and supernatural realities as if they referred to objective features of the cosmos. The metaphysical commitments here are immense, and the epistemological challenges profound. Quasi-realist fictionalism provides tools for understanding this phenomenon without dismissing it as mere error or superstition. Religious discourse can be interpreted as a complex, culturally embedded fiction that serves profound psychological, social, and existential functions. When adherents speak of "God's will" or "sacred truth," they are expressing fundamental values, existential commitments, and cosmic orientations. The collective enactment of religious fictions—through ritual, narrative, and community practice—creates a shared reality that feels objectively authoritative. The quasi-realist dimension explains how this discourse earns its realist-seeming character: through its integration with moral frameworks, its role in explaining existential mysteries, and its function in maintaining social cohesion. The "truth" of religious claims, within this framework, is their consistency with sacred narratives, their coherence with lived experience, and their efficacy in providing meaning and guidance. This account respects the genuine significance and felt reality of religious experience while offering a naturalistic explanation of its origins and function. It illuminates why religious language so often mirrors the structure of factual discourse, why religious disagreements feel so consequential, and why religious communities can maintain such profound commitment to their beliefs across generations—all without positing supernatural entities or transcendent truths. The fiction works because it addresses fundamental human needs for meaning, community, moral guidance, and consolation in the face of mortality and suffering.

## 1.8 Section 7: Philosophical Arguments For

The diverse applications of quasi-realist fictionalism across ethics, mathematics, science, modality, aesthetics, and religion reveal its remarkable versatility as a philosophical framework. Yet its appeal extends far beyond its applicability to multiple domains; quasi-realist fictionalism offers distinct philosophical advantages that make it a compelling position in its own right. These advantages fall into three broad categories: its explanatory power in accounting for the complex phenomenology of objectivity-claiming discourse, the pragmatic benefits it provides through its instrumental approach to such discourse, and its theoretical parsimony in avoiding metaphysical extravagance while preserving the surface features of our most cherished forms of inquiry. By examining these arguments in detail, we gain a deeper appreciation of why quasi-realist fictionalism has emerged as such a significant and influential position in contemporary philosophy.

### 1.8.1 7.1 Explanatory Advantages

Perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of quasi-realist fictionalism is its extraordinary ability to explain the puzzling features of normative and modal discourse that have long perplexed philosophers. Traditional realist accounts struggle to explain the metaphysical and epistemological status of the entities they posit, while simple non-cognitivist or error-theoretic accounts fail to capture the richness and logical complexity of the discourse they seek to analyze. Quasi-realist fictionalism occupies a sweet spot between these extremes, offering explanations that honor the phenomenology of objectivity-claiming discourse while grounding it in human attitudes, practices, and pragmatic needs.

Consider the phenomenology of normative judgment. When we make a moral judgment like “Torture is wrong,” the experience has several distinctive features: it feels objective (the wrongness seems to reside in the act itself), it has motivational force (the judgment disposes us to act and condemn), it is universalizable (we treat it as applying to everyone in similar circumstances), and it is responsive to reasons (we can offer justifications for it). Robust moral realism struggles to explain how awareness of a non-natural moral property could motivate action or how we could gain knowledge of such a property. Simple emotivism fails to explain why moral disagreement feels like a genuine dispute about facts rather than a clash of feelings. Quasi-realist fictionalism, by contrast, integrates expressivist and fictionalist elements to provide a comprehensive account of this phenomenology. The quasi-realist dimension explains the objectivity and universalizability through the projection of attitudes and the development of shared linguistic practices that earn realist-sounding discourse. The wrongness of torture appears objective because we project our disapproval onto the act, and this projection becomes embedded in social practices that treat it as a feature of the act itself. The universalizability stems from the nature of the attitudes expressed—disapproval of cruelty is an attitude that, by its nature, purports to apply to instances of cruelty generally. The fictionalist dimension explains the motivational force by showing how the pretense of objectivity enhances and stabilizes our commitments. Engaging with moral discourse as a fiction that presents categorical reasons strengthens motivation by making moral requirements feel authoritative and binding. The responsiveness to reasons is explained by the structure of moral attitudes, which are not mere emotions but complex states responsive to non-moral facts about the world.

This explanatory power extends beyond moral discourse to other domains where similar phenomenological puzzles arise. In mathematics, quasi-realist fictionalism explains the apparent necessity and objectivity of mathematical truths without positing a Platonic realm. The necessity of “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is not a mysterious property of abstract objects but arises from the central role this proposition plays in our mathematical fictional framework—a framework so deeply integrated into quantitative reasoning that denying it would undermine the practice itself. Its objectivity stems from the intersubjective constraints of proof and consistency that govern mathematical practice. In modal discourse, the approach explains why claims about possibility and necessity feel objective and informative without committing to Lewis’s concrete possible worlds. The objectivity of modal judgment arises from the constraints imposed by our conceptual framework and our understanding of the actual world, while its informativeness comes from the way the possible worlds fiction helps us articulate and explore these constraints.

Quasi-realist fictionalism also excels at explaining the practical role of objectivity-claiming language. Why do we employ discourse that purports to describe objective features of reality in domains where such objectivity is so difficult to justify? The answer, according to quasi-realist fictionalism, is that this language serves crucial cognitive, social, and practical functions that more modest forms of discourse could not achieve. Objectivity-claiming language facilitates social coordination by creating shared frameworks that feel authoritative and binding. It enables complex forms of reasoning by embedding judgments in logical structures that mimic factual discourse. It provides psychological comfort by offering the sense that our values and commitments are grounded in something more substantial than mere preference. Consider the difference between saying “I dislike torture” and “Torture is wrong.” The former expresses a personal feeling that others may or may not share; the latter presents a claim that purports to apply to everyone, creating a basis for social criticism and collective action. Quasi-realist fictionalism explains why we naturally gravitate toward the latter form of expression: it serves vital social functions that the former could not achieve. The pretense of objectivity is not a mistake but a sophisticated adaptation that enables human communities to solve complex coordination problems.

Furthermore, quasi-realist fictionalism provides elegant solutions to longstanding philosophical puzzles about truth, objectivity, and knowledge in various domains. The Frege-Geach problem, which has plagued non-cognitivist theories for decades, is addressed through the quasi-realist account of how non-cognitive states can be embedded in complex linguistic contexts. By developing a logic of attitudes and a minimalist theory of truth, quasi-realists can explain how moral terms function compositionally in sentences like “If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong” without attributing truth values to them in isolation. The problem of creeping minimalism—the worry that quasi-realists might inadvertently collapse into realism—is addressed by maintaining a clear distinction between the semantic project of minimalism and the explanatory project of showing how discourse originates in projection and pretense. The challenge of explaining moral progress and error is met by showing how the collective moral fiction can be refined to become more consistent, inclusive, and responsive to human needs. In each case, quasi-realist fictionalism offers explanations that are more comprehensive and psychologically plausible than those provided by competing views.

### 1.8.2 7.2 Pragmatic Benefits

Beyond its explanatory advantages, quasi-realist fictionalism offers compelling pragmatic benefits that recommend it as a philosophical position. These benefits stem from its instrumental approach to objectivity-claiming discourse, which emphasizes the practical utility of engaging with such discourse as a fiction rather than its metaphysical truth. By focusing on what discourse *does* rather than what it *represents*, quasi-realist fictionalism highlights the ways in which various forms of objectivity-claiming discourse serve vital human functions that would be difficult or impossible to achieve through other means.

The most significant pragmatic benefit of quasi-realist fictionalism is its ability to preserve the practical utility of objectivity-claiming discourse while acknowledging the philosophical problems with robust realism. Consider the case of mathematics. Mathematical discourse is indispensable for science, technology, economics, and everyday reasoning. Attempts to avoid mathematical realism—such as formalism or logicism—have

struggled to preserve the full applicability and intuitive force of mathematics. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers a way to have the best of both worlds: we can continue to use mathematical language exactly as we do, enjoying all its practical benefits, while acknowledging that we are engaging with a useful fiction rather than describing a Platonic realm. Scientists can calculate trajectories using calculus, engineers can design bridges using differential equations, and economists can model markets using statistics, all without needing to commit to the existence of abstract mathematical objects. The fictionalist stance allows us to *accept* mathematical statements for the sake of their utility without *believing* in their literal truth. This pragmatic justification is particularly powerful in light of the epistemological mysteries surrounding mathematical Platonism. If we can achieve all the practical benefits of mathematics without taking on these metaphysical commitments, then quasi-realist fictionalism offers a more prudent and philosophically satisfying approach.

This pragmatic advantage extends to moral discourse. Richard Joyce's error-theoretic argument for moral fictionalism highlights a profound practical dilemma: if moral skepticism is correct, then moral discourse is systematically false, yet abandoning moral discourse wholesale would likely have disastrous social consequences. Quasi-realist fictionalism resolves this dilemma by showing how we can continue to engage with moral discourse as a beneficial fiction even if we acknowledge its skeptical implications. The pretense of moral objectivity serves crucial social functions: it facilitates cooperation by establishing shared norms, enables moral criticism by creating a basis for holding others accountable, provides psychological comfort by offering a sense of meaning and purpose, and guides individual action by presenting clear standards for decision-making. Consider the challenge of motivating altruistic behavior. If everyone acknowledged that there are no objective moral reasons to help others, purely self-interested reasoning might lead to a suboptimal outcome where everyone is worse off. The pretense of moral objectivity helps overcome this collective action problem by creating a framework where altruistic behavior is presented as objectively required, thereby motivating people to act in ways that benefit the community even when doing so is costly for them individually. This pragmatic justification does not depend on moral discourse being literally true; it depends only on its being a useful fiction that serves important human needs.

Quasi-realist fictionalism also offers significant pragmatic benefits in the domain of scientific reasoning. Scientific realism faces the challenge of explaining how we can gain knowledge of unobservable entities that are, by definition, beyond direct observation. Scientific instrumentalism avoids this challenge but struggles to explain the success of science in making predictions and enabling technological applications. Quasi-realist fictionalism navigates between these extremes by treating discourse about theoretical entities as a useful fiction that facilitates prediction and explanation. Scientists can treat electrons, genes, and black holes as real *within the context of scientific practice* because this pretense enables them to formulate theories, design experiments, and develop technologies. The pragmatic warrant for this engagement is not metaphysical but empirical: the framework works. It yields accurate predictions, successful technologies, and coherent explanations of observable phenomena. This instrumental approach allows scientists to reap the benefits of realist-seeming discourse—such as the ability to reason about unobservables using the same logical apparatus they use for observables—without taking on problematic metaphysical commitments. The result is a philosophically modest yet practically powerful account of scientific inquiry that honors the empirical success of science while avoiding ontological extravagance.

The pragmatic benefits of quasi-realist fictionalism also extend to interpersonal and social dimensions. By treating various forms of objectivity-claiming discourse as useful fictions, this approach facilitates meaningful disagreement and argument across different perspectives. In moral debates, for example, participants can engage as if they are disagreeing about facts, offering reasons and evidence to support their positions, even if they acknowledge the ultimately non-cognitive basis of moral judgments. This creates a space for rational dialogue that might not exist if moral disagreements were acknowledged as mere clashes of attitude. Similarly, in religious contexts, quasi-realist fictionalism allows for respectful engagement between believers and non-believers by framing religious discourse as a meaningful fiction rather than a set of literal truth claims. This can reduce conflict while preserving the social and psychological benefits of religious practice. The approach also helps explain how societies with diverse moral, religious, and metaphysical commitments can maintain social cohesion. By treating various frameworks as useful fictions that serve different functions, quasi-realist fictionalism provides a basis for pluralism that acknowledges the value of different perspectives without requiring agreement on their metaphysical status.

Perhaps the most profound pragmatic benefit of quasi-realist fictionalism is its ability to reconcile philosophical skepticism with the practical necessity of engaging with objectivity-claiming discourse. Many forms of global skepticism—from moral skepticism to skepticism about mathematical knowledge to skepticism about scientific realism—raise profound philosophical challenges, yet abandoning the discourses in question seems practically impossible. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers a way to acknowledge the force of skeptical arguments while preserving the practical utility of the discourses they target. We can acknowledge the epistemological difficulties of mathematical Platonism while continuing to use mathematics in science and everyday life. We can recognize the challenges of moral realism while continuing to engage in moral discourse as a beneficial fiction. We can appreciate the problems of scientific realism while continuing to treat theoretical entities as real within the context of scientific practice. This reconciliation is not a form of self-deception but a sophisticated recognition of the different roles that metaphysics and practicality play in human life. Quasi-realist fictionalism allows us to be metaphysically modest without being practically impoverished, to acknowledge philosophical difficulties without abandoning the discourses that make human inquiry and social life possible.

### 1.8.3 7.3 Theoretical Parsimony

The third major argument in favor of quasi-realist fictionalism is its theoretical parsimony—its ability to provide a comprehensive account of objectivity-claiming discourse while avoiding the metaphysical extravagance of robust realist alternatives. This principle of parsimony, often associated with Ockham's razor, suggests that between competing theories that explain the same phenomena, we should prefer the one that posits fewer entities or makes fewer ontological commitments. Quasi-realist fictionalism excels on this metric by explaining the full range of features associated with objectivity-claiming discourse without postulating the mysterious entities, properties, or facts that realist views require.

Consider the ontological commitments of moral realism. To account for the features of moral discourse, robust moral realists typically posit the existence of non-natural moral properties—properties like wrongness,

goodness, or rightness that are not reducible to natural properties described by physics, chemistry, or biology. These properties are supposedly causally inert (they don't affect the physical world), yet somehow accessible to human cognition. The metaphysical status of such properties is deeply puzzling. Where do they exist? How do they relate to natural properties? How can finite, embodied human minds gain knowledge of them? These questions have bedeviled moral realists for centuries, and no fully satisfactory answers have emerged. Quasi-realist fictionalism avoids these puzzles entirely by explaining moral discourse without positing moral properties. Instead, it grounds moral language in human attitudes, the projection of those attitudes, and the development of linguistic practices that earn realist-sounding discourse. The “wrongness” of torture is not a property but an expression of disapproval projected onto the act and embedded in social practices. This account explains all the features of moral discourse that realists seek to explain—its objectivity, its universalizability, its connection to motivation, its role in reasoning—without introducing the problematic metaphysical baggage of non-natural properties. The result is a more parsimonious theory that does equal explanatory work with fewer ontological commitments.

This parsimony is even more striking in the case of mathematical Platonism. Mathematical realists typically posit the existence of an abstract realm of mathematical objects—numbers, sets, functions, spaces—that exist independently of human thought and language, are non-spatiotemporal, and causally inert. The ontological extravagance of this view is immense; as Bertrand Russell famously noted, it posits an invisible, intangible, eternal realm of objects that somehow interact with human minds to produce mathematical knowledge. The epistemological problems are equally severe: how can we know anything about this abstract realm if it doesn't causally interact with us? Quasi-realist fictionalism avoids these problems by explaining mathematical discourse without positing mathematical objects. Instead, it treats mathematical language as a useful fiction that we engage with for its pragmatic benefits, and explains its objective and necessary character through the norms governing mathematical practice. The “number 7” is not an abstract object but a term within a fictional framework that has earned its referential character through its role in mathematical reasoning. This account preserves all the practical benefits and phenomenological features of mathematics without committing to the existence of a mysterious Platonic realm, making it vastly more parsimonious than mathematical Platonism.

In the philosophy of science, quasi-realist fictionalism offers a parsimonious alternative to scientific realism, which posits the literal existence of unobservable entities like electrons, quarks, and black holes. While scientific realists argue that the success of science is best explained by the approximate truth of our theories and the existence of the entities they posit, this view faces the challenge of explaining how we can gain knowledge of entities that are, by definition, beyond direct observation. Quasi-realist fictionalism avoids this challenge by treating discourse about theoretical entities as a useful fiction that facilitates prediction and explanation. The “electron” is not an unobservable particle but a posit within a fictional framework that has proven extraordinarily successful in organizing empirical data and enabling technological applications. This account explains the success of science without committing to the existence of entities whose metaphysical status is deeply problematic, offering a more parsimonious account of scientific inquiry.

Beyond avoiding ontological extravagance, quasi-realist fictionalism offers significant epistemological advantages over realist alternatives. Realist views in various domains face formidable skeptical challenges. In



ethics, moral skeptics argue that we have no reliable way to gain knowledge of non-natural moral properties. In mathematics, mathematical skeptics question how we could possibly know anything about an abstract Platonic realm. In science, scientific skeptics challenge our justification for believing in unobservable entities based on observable evidence. Quasi-realist fictionalism neatly sidesteps these skeptical challenges by

## 1.9 Critical Arguments and Objections

...neatly sidesteps these skeptical challenges by grounding knowledge claims in the norms and practices of the relevant discourses rather than in correspondence to mind-independent facts. Despite these apparent advantages, however, quasi-realist fictionalism faces formidable criticisms that challenge its coherence, viability, and philosophical adequacy. These objections, developed through decades of rigorous philosophical debate, target the position from multiple angles, questioning its conceptual foundations, raising concerns about its practical implications, and highlighting potential inconsistencies in its theoretical structure. To fully assess the merits of quasi-realist fictionalism, we must examine these critical arguments with the same care and attention that we have devoted to its explanatory advantages and pragmatic benefits.

### 1.9.1 8.1 Conceptual Challenges

The most persistent and technically formidable challenges to quasi-realist fictionalism emerge at the conceptual level, targeting its ability to account for the logical and semantic features of objectivity-claiming discourse. Among these challenges, the Frege-Geach problem stands as the most historically significant and technically demanding. Originally formulated as an objection to simple non-cognitivist theories like emotivism and prescriptivism, this problem has evolved into a sophisticated critique of quasi-realist attempts to earn the right to realist-seeming discourse. The problem, named after Peter Geach's development of Gottlob Frege's insights about the contextuality of assertion, highlights a fundamental difficulty for any theory that denies the truth-aptness of moral judgments in simple contexts yet acknowledges their apparent logical functionality in complex contexts like conditionals.

To appreciate the force of this objection, consider a simple moral argument: "If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong. Stealing is wrong. Therefore, getting your brother to steal is wrong." This argument appears to be logically valid, and its validity seems to depend on the meaning of "stealing is wrong" remaining constant across its occurrences in the conditional premise and the simple premise. If "stealing is wrong" expresses a non-cognitive state of disapproval when asserted simply, what does it express when embedded as the antecedent of a conditional? The quasi-realist fictionalist must explain how the same expression can function in both contexts without attributing a truth value to it in isolation, as this would undermine its anti-realist credentials. Simon Blackburn's sophisticated response, developed in *Spreading the Word* (1984) and refined in subsequent work, proposes that the meaning of moral terms is context-sensitive and that their contribution to complex sentences is determined by the higher-order attitudes they express. In the conditional "If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong," the speaker expresses a commitment to disapproving of getting one's brother to steal if one disapproves of stealing. This

higher-order attitude approach aims to preserve the logical validity of the argument while maintaining an expressivist foundation.

Critics like Bob Hale, in his 1993 paper “Can There Be a Logic of Attitudes?”, have argued that this solution fails to capture the genuine necessity of logical consequence. The validity of modus ponens, Hale contends, is not merely a matter of pragmatic consistency in one’s attitudes but a matter of logical necessity that holds independently of anyone’s psychological states. If accepting P and if P then Q commits one to accepting Q, this commitment seems to arise from the meaning of the connectives and the logical structure of the propositions, not from the structure of one’s attitudes. The quasi-realist fictionalist response, which frames logical validity as pragmatic consistency in attitudes, appears to reduce logical necessity to psychological contingency. As Hale puts it, the quasi-realist “owes us an explanation of why the logical relations that hold between attitudes should mirror the logical relations that hold between the contents of beliefs.” The challenge is to show how the logic of attitudes can generate the same robust notion of logical necessity that realist accounts take for granted, without smuggling in realist assumptions about truth and propositionhood.

This problem intensifies when we consider more complex logical contexts, such as negations, disjunctions, and quantified statements. How does a quasi-realist fictionalist account for the meaning of “Stealing is not wrong” or “Either stealing is wrong or lying is wrong” or “Some actions are wrong”? Each of these embeddings presents unique challenges for explaining how non-cognitive states can combine compositionally to yield complex meanings. Blackburn and other quasi-realists have developed increasingly sophisticated responses, including Blackburn’s “tree of attitudes” approach and more recent work on “hybrid expressivist” theories that incorporate truth-conditional elements. However, critics like Michael Smith and Nicholas Unwin argue that these responses either collapse into a form of minimalism that is indistinguishable from realism or fail to provide a fully compositional semantics for moral language. The Frege-Geach problem thus remains a live and formidable challenge, raising deep questions about whether quasi-realist fictionalism can fully account for the logical complexity of the discourse it seeks to explain.

A second major conceptual challenge is the problem of “creeping minimalism,” a term coined by David Dreier in his influential 2004 paper “Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism.” This objection suggests that quasi-realist fictionalists, in their effort to earn the right to realist-sounding discourse, may inadvertently collapse into a form of minimalism that is effectively indistinguishable from the realism they seek to avoid. The worry begins with the quasi-realist’s deflationary accounts of central concepts like truth, objectivity, and fact. When quasi-realists define “truth” as “a device for endorsement,” “objectivity” as “independence from idiosyncratic attitudes,” and “fact” as “what is true,” critics argue that these definitions may become so minimal that they no longer represent a genuine metaphysical alternative to realism.

Dreier illustrates this concern with a thought experiment involving a quasi-realist and a realist who apparently agree on all first-order moral claims. The realist believes these claims correspond to moral facts, while the quasi-realist believes they express attitudes that we project onto the world and treat as objective. Yet if both agree that “Torture is wrong” is true, that the wrongness of torture is objective, and that it is a fact that torture is wrong, then what, if anything, remains of their metaphysical disagreement? The quasi-realist fictionalist might insist that they still disagree about the nature of truth, objectivity, and facts—the realist



takes these concepts to involve correspondence to a mind-independent reality, while the quasi-realist takes them to involve endorsement, projection, and pretense. However, the creeping minimalist worry is that this disagreement may be merely verbal or terminological, not substantive. If the quasi-realist has successfully earned the right to use realist-sounding language in all contexts, then perhaps they have become realists in all but name.

This challenge forces quasi-realist fictionalists to clarify precisely what distinguishes their view from realism. Simon Blackburn has responded by emphasizing the explanatory project of quasi-realism—showing how realist discourse can be earned on expressivist foundations—as distinct from the semantic project of minimalism. Even if minimalism about truth is correct, Blackburn argues, it remains a substantial philosophical achievement to show how a discourse that originates in the expression of non-cognitive attitudes can develop the semantic and logical features characteristic of realist discourse. However, critics like Dreier and David Enoch counter that this explanatory project may not be sufficiently robust to maintain a genuine metaphysical difference from realism. If the quasi-realist’s explanatory story is ultimately compatible with all the same semantic and logical commitments as realism, then the distinction between the two views may dissolve into a merely historical or genetic account of how we came to talk as we do, rather than a substantive metaphysical disagreement.

A third conceptual challenge arises from potential tensions between the quasi-realist and fictionalist elements within the combined approach. While these elements are often presented as complementary, they embody different philosophical commitments that may pull in different directions. Quasi-realism, as developed by Blackburn, is fundamentally expressivist—moral judgments express non-cognitive states of approval and disapproval. Fictionalism, as developed by philosophers like Hartry Field and Richard Joyce, typically involves a cognitive attitude of acceptance toward the propositions of a discourse, even while denying their truth. This creates a potential tension: if moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes, how can we also accept them as useful fictions, which seems to involve treating them as propositions that could be true or false?

Mark Kalderon, in his 2005 book *Moral Fictionalism*, attempts to resolve this tension through his hermeneutic approach, suggesting that ordinary moral discourse already involves a form of pretense, so speakers are expressing attitudes *within* a fictional framework. However, this response raises questions about the phenomenology of moral judgment. When most people make moral judgments, do they experience themselves as engaging in pretense? The revolutionary fictionalism of Richard Joyce, which acknowledges that we are consciously adopting a fictionalist stance toward discourse previously taken at face value, faces a different challenge: if we recognize that moral claims are fictions, how can they continue to express genuine moral attitudes? The worry is that the fictionalist element might undermine the expressivist element, transforming sincere moral expression into a form of make-believe that lacks the genuine normative force of moral judgment.

These conceptual challenges collectively raise deep questions about the coherence of quasi-realist fictionalism as a unified philosophical position. The Frege-Geach problem questions whether it can account for the logical complexity of moral discourse; the creeping minimalism worry questions whether it maintains

a genuine metaphysical difference from realism; and the tension between expressivist and fictionalist elements questions whether it can successfully integrate its two core components. These are not mere technical quibbles but fundamental challenges that go to the heart of the quasi-realist fictionalist project.

### 1.9.2 8.2 Practical and Normative Concerns

Beyond these conceptual challenges, quasi-realist fictionalism faces significant objections concerning its practical implications for moral life and normative guidance. Critics argue that even if the position is conceptually coherent, it may have corrosive effects on moral motivation, responsibility, and social cohesion if widely adopted. These practical concerns highlight the potential gap between philosophical adequacy and human psychology, raising questions about whether a meta-ethical view that undermines the appearance of moral objectivity can be compatible with the robust moral engagement required for individual and social flourishing.

One of the most persistent practical objections is that quasi-realist fictionalism undermines moral motivation by revealing the fictional nature of moral discourse. The worry, articulated in various forms by philosophers like Russ Shafer-Landau and David Enoch, is that if people come to see moral claims as useful fictions rather than objective truths, their motivation to act morally may be significantly weakened. Consider a person who is contemplating whether to return a lost wallet containing a large sum of money. If they believe that “Returning the wallet is the right thing to do” expresses an objective moral fact, this belief may provide strong motivation for returning the wallet. However, if they come to see this judgment as expressing a useful fiction—a pretense that we collectively maintain for social coordination—then their motivation might be considerably weaker. After all, why inconvenience oneself for the sake of a fiction? This objection suggests that the pretense of moral objectivity may be psychologically necessary for robust moral motivation, and that exposing this pretense as fiction could have detrimental practical consequences.

Richard Joyce, in his defense of revolutionary moral fictionalism, acknowledges this concern but argues that the pretense of objectivity can be maintained even while acknowledging its fictional nature. Just as we can become deeply immersed in a novel or film despite knowing it is fiction, we can become engaged with moral discourse despite recognizing its fictional character. However, critics like Nadeem Hussain have questioned whether this analogy holds. The engagement with fictional narratives is typically temporary and compartmentalized—we know we are engaging with fiction and can step out of the pretense at will. Moral engagement, by contrast, is pervasive and shapes our fundamental life choices and self-conception. Can we maintain the same level of commitment to moral values while recognizing their fictional status? Hussain suggests that the psychological distance created by acknowledging the fictional nature of morality might undermine the kind of wholehearted commitment that moral life typically requires. This concern is not merely speculative; it draws on empirical research suggesting that people’s moral behavior is influenced by their meta-ethical commitments, with those who reject moral objectivity showing somewhat less prosocial behavior in some experimental contexts.

A related practical concern focuses on the implications of quasi-realist fictionalism for moral responsibility and accountability. Our practices of holding people responsible—praising them for good actions, blaming

them for bad ones, and punishing them for wrongs—seem to presuppose that there are objective moral standards that people can be expected to follow. If moral discourse is merely a useful fiction, then the basis for these practices becomes less clear. When we blame someone for acting selfishly, are we blaming them for failing to live up to a fictional standard? And if so, what justifies this blame? The worry, expressed by philosophers like R. Jay Wallace and P.F. Strawson, is that the practices of moral responsibility require the kind of objectivity that quasi-realist fictionalism denies.

Consider the case of criminal punishment. Our legal and moral practices of punishing criminals seem to presuppose that they have genuinely violated objective moral standards, not merely that they have failed to conform to a useful fiction. If a criminal defendant argued in court that moral claims are merely fictions and therefore they cannot be blamed for violating them, this would not be considered a legitimate defense. From a quasi-realist fictionalist perspective, this response might be interpreted as a failure to engage appropriately with the moral fiction—a failure to take seriously the pretense that we collectively maintain. However, critics argue that this response may not be sufficient to ground the robust sense of moral responsibility that underlies our practices of praise, blame, and punishment. If moral standards are ultimately fictions, then the most we can say when someone violates them is that they have failed to play along with our collective pretense. This seems a much weaker basis for holding people responsible than the realist claim that they have violated objective moral requirements.

A third practical concern is the potential for nihilistic consequences if the fictional nature of moral discourse were widely acknowledged. While quasi-realist fictionalists argue that we can continue to engage with moral fictions for their practical benefits, critics worry that widespread recognition of the fictional status of morality could lead to a kind of moral nihilism in which people no longer take moral claims seriously. This concern is not merely about individual motivation but about social cohesion. Moral discourse plays a crucial role in creating shared values and norms that facilitate social cooperation. If this discourse were widely seen as fictional, the social bonds it creates might weaken, potentially leading to social fragmentation or even breakdown.

J.L. Mackie, who defended an error theory of morality, acknowledged this concern in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), suggesting that while we might recognize the fictional nature of morality at a philosophical level, we should continue to engage with ordinary moral discourse in everyday life. However, critics like Thomas Nagel have questioned whether this kind of “double consciousness” is psychologically sustainable or socially desirable. Nagel argues that the attempt to maintain moral practices while denying their objective foundation may lead to a kind of moral schizophrenia, in which our theoretical commitments are at odds with our practical engagements. This schizophrenia might not only be psychologically uncomfortable but also socially corrosive, as people lose faith in the moral frameworks that structure their communities.

These practical concerns highlight an important tension in quasi-realist fictionalism: while the position aims to preserve the practical benefits of objectivity-claiming discourse while avoiding its metaphysical commitments, critics argue that the appearance of objectivity may be psychologically and socially necessary for realizing these benefits. If this is correct, then quasi-realist fictionalism may face a dilemma: either it fails to fully acknowledge the fictional nature of discourse (thereby collapsing into realism), or it acknowledges

this nature but risks undermining the very practical benefits it seeks to preserve.

### 1.9.3 8.3 Internal Inconsistencies

The third major category of objections to quasi-realist fictionalism targets potential internal inconsistencies within the position itself. These objections suggest that quasi-realist fictionalism may be self-refuting or generate vicious regresses that undermine its coherence as a philosophical view. Unlike the conceptual challenges, which focus on the position's ability to explain features of discourse, or the practical concerns, which focus on its implications, these internal consistency objections target the logical structure of the position itself.

The most fundamental internal inconsistency objection is the charge of self-refutation. This objection, which has been leveled against various forms of anti-realism throughout philosophical history, suggests that quasi-realist fictionalism may undermine its own credibility. If the theory claims that objectivity-claiming discourse in domains like ethics, mathematics, and science involves projection, pretense, or fiction, then what about the discourse of quasi-realist fictionalism itself? Does the theory apply to its own assertions? If so, then the claims of quasi-realist fictionalism would themselves be merely projections, pretenses, or fictions, which would seem to undermine their philosophical credibility. If not, then the theory appears to make an exception for itself, which raises questions about why this exception is justified

### 1.10 Responses to Criticisms

The charge of self-refutation presents a particularly pointed challenge to quasi-realist fictionalism, threatening to undermine the very foundation of its philosophical enterprise. If the theory claims that objectivity-claiming discourse involves projection, pretense, or fiction, then what about the discourse of quasi-realist fictionalism itself? Does the theory apply to its own assertions? If so, then the claims of quasi-realist fictionalism would themselves be merely projections, pretenses, or fictions, which would seem to undermine their philosophical credibility. If not, then the theory appears to make an exception for itself, which raises questions about why this exception is justified and whether the position can maintain its anti-realist credentials while claiming a privileged status for its own assertions.

This self-refutation worry manifests in several forms, each targeting different aspects of the quasi-realist fictionalist position. The most direct form challenges the meta-philosophical status of the theory itself. If quasi-realist fictionalism is correct that discourse in domains like ethics, mathematics, and science involves projecting attitudes or engaging in pretense, then the assertions of quasi-realist fictionalism about these domains would themselves be projections or pretenses. But if that's the case, why should we take them seriously as philosophical claims? The theory seems to undermine its own authority by applying its anti-realist analysis to its own assertions.

A related form of the objection focuses on the quasi-realist fictionalist's use of realist-seeming language in defending their position. Quasi-realist fictionalists routinely make claims that appear to assert objective facts

about the nature of discourse, the structure of attitudes, or the pragmatic benefits of fictional engagement. They claim, for instance, that “Moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes” or “Mathematical discourse functions as a useful fiction.” If these claims are themselves merely projections or fictions, then they lack the kind of objective backing that would make them philosophically compelling. Yet if they are not projections or fictions, then the quasi-realist fictionalist seems to be making an exception for their own discourse, treating their philosophical assertions as objectively true while denying that status to the discourse they analyze.

The problem becomes even more acute when we consider what Simon Blackburn has called the “quasi-quasi” regress. This regress arises when we ask about the status of the quasi-realist fictionalist’s claims about the nature of discourse. If these claims are themselves interpreted quasi-realistically—as expressing attitudes toward discourse rather than describing objective facts—then we need a further level of analysis to explain the status of these second-order claims. But this further level of analysis would itself be subject to the same quasi-realist treatment, leading to an infinite regress of meta-philosophical levels. At each level, we would need to explain the status of the claims at the previous level, but each explanation would itself require explanation, *ad infinitum*. This regress threatens to make the position incoherent by preventing it from ever reaching a stable foundation for its assertions.

These self-refutation worries are not merely abstract logical puzzles; they go to the heart of whether quasi-realist fictionalism can maintain its philosophical integrity while advancing its anti-realist analysis. The position appears to face a dilemma: either it applies its anti-realist analysis to its own assertions, thereby undermining their credibility, or it exempts its own assertions from this analysis, thereby abandoning its anti-realist commitments. Neither option seems satisfactory for a position that aims to provide a comprehensive account of objectivity-claiming discourse.

## 1.11 Section 9: Responses to Criticisms

The formidable array of conceptual, practical, and internal consistency objections leveled against quasi-realist fictionalism has prompted its defenders to develop increasingly sophisticated responses and refinements. Rather than representing insurmountable challenges, these criticisms have served as catalysts for theoretical development, driving quasi-realist fictionalists to clarify their commitments, strengthen their arguments, and address potential weaknesses in the position. The responses to these objections reveal the resilience and adaptability of the quasi-realist fictionalist framework, demonstrating how it can accommodate critical feedback while maintaining its core insights about the nature of objectivity-claiming discourse.

### 1.11.1 9.1 Addressing Conceptual Challenges

The Frege-Geach problem, long considered the most significant technical challenge to non-cognitivist and quasi-realist theories, has generated a particularly rich and sophisticated set of responses from defenders of quasi-realist fictionalism. Simon Blackburn, whose pioneering work first articulated the quasi-realist project, has developed increasingly nuanced accounts of how moral language can function compositionally in complex logical contexts while maintaining an expressivist foundation. In his early work, Blackburn

proposed a “logic of attitudes” that aimed to explain logical validity in terms of pragmatic consistency in one’s system of attitudes. On this view, accepting “If P then Q” and accepting P but rejecting Q involves a pragmatic inconsistency similar to believing a contradiction. While this approach captured an important dimension of moral reasoning, critics like Bob Hale argued that it failed to explain the genuine necessity of logical consequence, reducing it to psychological contingency.

In response, Blackburn refined his account by developing a more sophisticated theory of higher-order attitudes and the embedding of moral language within broader linguistic practices. In later work, including *Ruling Passions* (1998) and subsequent papers, he emphasized that the meaning of moral terms is context-sensitive and determined by their role in expressing complex states of mind that are themselves structured and responsive to reasons. When we assert a conditional like “If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong,” we are not merely expressing a simple attitude but a higher-order commitment to the consistency of our attitudes. This commitment involves being disposed to disapprove of getting one’s brother to steal if one disapproves of stealing, and this disposition is itself responsive to reasons and subject to norms of coherence. The logical validity of modus ponens, on this refined view, stems from the rational necessity of maintaining consistency in one’s system of higher-order commitments, not merely from pragmatic considerations.

Building on Blackburn’s work, a new generation of philosophers has developed “hybrid expressivist” theories that incorporate truth-conditional elements while maintaining an expressivist foundation. These theories, defended by philosophers like David Copp, Stephen Barker, and Michael Ridge, propose that moral judgments express both non-cognitive attitudes and cognitive beliefs about the appropriateness of those attitudes. For instance, judging “Torture is wrong” might express both disapproval of torture and the belief that this disapproval is warranted by the features of torture. This hybrid approach aims to solve the Frege-Geach problem by providing truth conditions for moral judgments that can embed in complex contexts, while still grounding morality in non-cognitive states. The truth conditions are not about mind-independent moral facts but about the appropriateness of attitudes given certain standards, which themselves may be grounded in human needs, social practices, or rational requirements.

Michael Ridge, in his 2014 book *Impassioned Belief*, offers a particularly sophisticated version of this hybrid approach. Ridge proposes that moral judgments express “ecological” judgments about the appropriateness of attitudes given a certain point of view. When someone judges “Torture is wrong,” they express both disapproval of torture and the belief that this disapproval is appropriate from a perspective that takes into account relevant considerations like suffering, autonomy, and well-being. This ecological judgment provides truth conditions that can embed in complex contexts, solving the Frege-Geach problem, while still grounding morality in non-cognitive states. Ridge’s approach demonstrates how quasi-realist fictionalism can incorporate truth-conditional elements without collapsing into realism, as the truth conditions are about the appropriateness of attitudes rather than correspondence to moral facts.

Another significant development in addressing the Frege-Geach problem comes from the work of Daniel Boisvert and Mark Schroeder on “holistic expressivism.” This approach, outlined in their paper “The Embedding Problem for Non-Cognitivism” (2005), proposes that moral terms contribute to the meaning of



complex sentences by specifying how the sentence as a whole expresses attitudes. Rather than trying to assign meanings to moral terms in isolation, holistic expressivism focuses on how complex sentences express structured states of mind. For example, “If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong” expresses a complex attitude that combines disapproval of stealing with a commitment to disapproving of getting one’s brother to steal if one disapproves of stealing. This holistic approach avoids the need to assign compositional meanings to moral terms in isolation, instead focusing on how complex sentences express integrated attitudes that are themselves structured and reason-responsive.

These responses to the Frege-Geach problem demonstrate the remarkable sophistication of contemporary quasi-realist fictionalist theories. By developing nuanced accounts of higher-order attitudes, hybrid theories that incorporate truth-conditional elements, and holistic approaches that focus on the expressive function of complex sentences, defenders have shown how expressivist theories can accommodate the logical complexity of moral discourse without abandoning their anti-realist foundations. While debate continues about the adequacy of these responses, they represent significant progress in addressing what was once considered the most formidable technical challenge to non-cognitivist theories.

The problem of creeping minimalism has generated equally sophisticated responses from quasi-realist fictionalists. Simon Blackburn has consistently argued that the explanatory project of quasi-realism—showing how realist discourse can be earned on expressivist foundations—remains distinct from the semantic project of minimalism, even if minimalism about truth is correct. In *Ruling Passions* and subsequent work, Blackburn emphasizes that the quasi-realist’s achievement lies in providing a naturalistic explanation of how discourse that originates in the expression of non-cognitive attitudes can develop the semantic and logical features characteristic of realist discourse. This explanatory project, he argues, is substantial and philosophically significant, regardless of whether minimalism about truth is accepted.

Blackburn illustrates this point with an analogy to the philosophy of mathematics. Even if we accept a minimalist account of mathematical truth, it remains a significant philosophical achievement to explain how mathematical discourse, which appears to describe abstract objects, can be grounded in human practices and cognitive capacities. Similarly, in ethics, even if we accept minimalism about moral truth, it remains significant to explain how moral discourse, which appears to describe moral facts, can be grounded in human attitudes and social practices. The creeping minimalist worry, on this view, mistakes the target of the quasi-realist project, which is not to provide a competing semantics for moral language but to explain the origins and development of that language.

Nadeem Hussain, in his paper “The Empty Talk of Fictionalism” (2004), develops a complementary response by emphasizing the role of use and practice in determining meaning. Hussain argues that the meaning of discourse is determined by its role within a practice, not by reference to mind-independent facts. On this view, the quasi-realist fictionalist can accept minimalist accounts of truth and objectivity while still maintaining a distinctive explanatory project: showing how the practice of moral discourse originates in the expression of attitudes and pretense, and how this practice develops the norms and structures that give realist-seeming discourse its meaning. The difference between realism and quasi-realist fictionalism, Hussain argues, is not at the level of semantics but at the level of explanation—realists explain moral discourse by positing

moral facts, while quasi-realist fictionalists explain it by showing how it emerges from human attitudes and practices.

David Dreier, who originally coined the term “creeping minimalism,” has himself contributed to refining the quasi-realist response. In his paper “Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism,” Dreier acknowledges that the quasi-realist project remains significant even if minimalism is correct, but he argues that quasi-realists must be careful not to let their explanatory project collapse into a merely historical account of how we came to talk as we do. To maintain a genuine metaphysical difference from realism, Dreier suggests that quasi-realists must emphasize the constructive aspect of their view—the idea that moral properties and facts are not discovered but constructed through human attitudes and practices. This constructive element, he argues, preserves a substantive metaphysical difference from realism even within a minimalist semantic framework.

The tension between quasi-realist and fictionalist elements has been addressed through several refinements of the position. Mark Kalderon’s hermeneutic moral fictionalism, presented in *Moral Fictionalism* (2005), attempts to resolve this tension by suggesting that ordinary moral discourse already involves a form of pretense. On Kalderon’s view, moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes within a fictional framework, so there is no conflict between the expressivist and fictionalist elements. The pretense is not something added to moral discourse but is already part of how ordinary people engage with morality. This hermeneutic approach avoids the revolutionary fictionalist’s problem of explaining how we can maintain genuine moral engagement while recognizing the fictional nature of morality, because the pretense is already embedded in ordinary moral practice.

Richard Joyce, in response to concerns about the compatibility of expressivism and fictionalism, has refined his revolutionary fictionalism by emphasizing the distinction between belief and acceptance. In his 2005 paper “Fictionalism about Morality,” Joyce argues that we can accept moral claims as useful fictions while recognizing that they are not objects of belief. This acceptance, he suggests, involves a different kind of cognitive attitude than belief, one that is oriented toward the pragmatic benefits of engaging with the fiction rather than its truth. On this refined view, moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes, but we engage with these attitudes within a fictional framework that we accept for its practical utility. This distinction between belief and acceptance allows Joyce to maintain the expressivist element of moral judgments while incorporating the fictionalist insight that we engage with moral discourse as a beneficial pretense.

These responses to the conceptual challenges facing quasi-realist fictionalism demonstrate the position’s remarkable adaptability and resilience. By developing sophisticated accounts of moral language, clarifying the relationship between semantics and explanation, and refining the integration of expressivist and fictionalist elements, defenders have shown how quasi-realist fictionalism can accommodate critical feedback while maintaining its core insights. The position has evolved significantly in response to these challenges, becoming more nuanced and technically sophisticated while preserving its fundamental commitment to explaining objectivity-claiming discourse without robust metaphysical commitments.

### 1.11.2 9.2 Defending Practical Implications

The practical concerns about quasi-realist fictionalism—particularly those regarding moral motivation, responsibility, and the potential for nihilistic consequences—have prompted defenders to develop nuanced accounts of how the position can preserve the practical force of moral discourse while acknowledging its fictional nature. These responses emphasize the distinction between the metaphysical status of moral claims and their practical authority, arguing that the latter can be maintained even without the former.

Richard Joyce, in his defense of revolutionary moral fictionalism, directly addresses the concern about moral motivation by drawing an analogy with our engagement with fictional narratives. Just as we can become emotionally involved in a novel or film despite knowing it is fiction, Joyce argues that we can become engaged with moral discourse despite recognizing its fictional character. The key, he suggests, is that the pretense of moral objectivity serves important psychological functions that enhance motivation. When we engage with moral discourse as a fiction that presents categorical reasons, we tap into powerful psychological mechanisms that strengthen our commitment to moral values. This engagement is not merely a matter of conscious choice but involves deeply ingrained cognitive and emotional responses that make moral motivation feel genuine and compelling.

Joyce illustrates this point with the example of promising. When someone makes a promise, they typically feel a strong obligation to fulfill it, even if they acknowledge that the obligation is not grounded in objective moral facts. This sense of obligation arises from the social practice of promising, which treats promises as creating genuine requirements. The quasi-realist fictionalist explanation is that the practice of promising is a useful fiction that we collectively maintain because it facilitates cooperation and trust. Engaging with this fiction generates genuine feelings of obligation that motivate promise-keeping, even when we recognize the fictional nature of the practice. The same mechanism, Joyce argues, operates in moral discourse more generally. The pretense of moral objectivity generates genuine moral motivation by tapping into our natural tendency to respond to perceived requirements as authoritative.

Nadeem Hussain, in his paper “The Normative Consequences of Moral Fictionalism” (2007), develops a complementary response by emphasizing the role of social norms in maintaining moral motivation. Hussain argues that even if moral claims are fictions, the social practices surrounding moral discourse create powerful normative pressures that motivate moral behavior. When we engage in moral criticism, express approval or disapproval, or make moral demands, we participate in social practices that shape behavior through social sanctions and rewards. These social norms, Hussain suggests, can motivate moral behavior independently of beliefs about objective moral facts. The quasi-realist fictionalist can thus acknowledge the fictional nature of morality while still maintaining that moral discourse has genuine practical force through its role in structuring social interactions.

The concern about moral responsibility and accountability has been addressed by developing sophisticated accounts of how practices of praise, blame, and punishment can be maintained within a fictionalist framework. R. Jay Wallace, while not a defender of quasi-realist fictionalism himself, has provided resources for this response through his work on the “reactive attitudes” in *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (1994). Wallace argues that practices of holding people responsible are grounded in reactive attitudes like

resentment, gratitude, and guilt, which are themselves part of our natural human psychology. These attitudes do not depend on beliefs about objective moral facts but are instead responses to violations of the norms that structure social cooperation.

Quasi-realist fictionalists like David Enoch and Michael Ridge have built on this insight to argue that practices of moral responsibility can be maintained even if moral claims are fictions. The key, they suggest, is that these practices serve important social functions—facilitating cooperation, enforcing norms, and providing mechanisms for resolving conflicts—that can be justified independently of beliefs about objective moral facts. When we blame someone for acting selfishly, we are not holding them accountable for violating an objective moral standard but for violating a social norm that we collectively maintain because it serves important functions. This account preserves the practical force of moral responsibility while acknowledging its fictional nature.

Mark Schroeder, in his paper “Being For and Evaluating” (2008), develops a related response by distinguishing between different kinds of reasons for action. Schroeder argues that even if there are no objective moral reasons, we can still have subjective reasons for action based on our desires and commitments. These subjective reasons can ground practices of moral responsibility by providing standards for evaluating behavior that are independent of objective moral facts. When we hold someone responsible for acting selfishly, we are evaluating their behavior against standards that reflect our shared commitments and values, not against objective moral requirements. This account allows quasi-realist fictionalists to maintain robust practices of moral responsibility while acknowledging the fictional nature of moral discourse.

The concern about nihilistic consequences has been addressed by emphasizing the stability and resilience of moral practices. Simon Blackburn, in *Ruling Passions*, argues that moral practices are deeply embedded in human psychology and social life, making them resistant to destabilization by philosophical reflection. The quasi-realist fictionalist recognition that moral discourse involves pretense does not, Blackburn suggests, lead to nihilism because the pretense serves such important functions that we have strong pragmatic reasons to maintain it. Even if we recognize the fictional nature of morality at a philosophical level, we have compelling reasons to

## 1.12 Comparative Analysis

engage with moral discourse in ordinary life. The stability of our moral practices is not threatened by philosophical recognition of their fictional nature because these practices serve such fundamental human needs that they are self-sustaining.

This leads us to a broader assessment of quasi-realist fictionalism’s place in the philosophical landscape. To fully appreciate its significance, we must examine how it compares with the major alternative positions in meta-ethics and meta-philosophy more generally. By situating quasi-realist fictionalism in relation to moral realism, expressivism and non-cognitivism, and other forms of fictionalism, we can better understand its distinctive contributions and advantages.

### 1.12.1 10.1 Against Moral Realism

The contrast between quasi-realist fictionalism and moral realism represents one of the most fundamental divides in contemporary meta-ethics. Moral realism, in its robust form, holds that there are objective moral facts that exist independently of human thought, language, or practices. These facts are typically conceived as non-natural properties or relations that supervene on natural properties but are not reducible to them. When we make moral judgments like “Torture is wrong,” realists claim we are attributing the property of wrongness to the act of torture, and this attribution is true if torture actually possesses this property. Quasi-realist fictionalism, by contrast, rejects this metaphysical picture while preserving the practical and semantic features of moral discourse that make realism initially appealing.

The metaphysical advantages of quasi-realist fictionalism over moral realism are substantial and well-documented. Moral realism faces the formidable challenge of explaining the nature of non-natural moral properties. Where do these properties exist? How do they relate to natural properties described by physics, chemistry, and biology? How can causally inert properties affect the physical world or human cognition? These questions have plagued moral realists since G.E. Moore’s formulation of the non-naturalist position in *Principia Ethica* (1903). Quasi-realist fictionalism neatly sidesteps these puzzles by grounding moral discourse in human attitudes and practices rather than mysterious metaphysical entities. The “wrongness” of torture is not a property that exists independently of human thought but an expression of disapproval projected onto the act and embedded in social practices that treat it as objective. This account explains all the features of moral discourse that realists seek to explain without introducing problematic metaphysical commitments.

The epistemological advantages are equally compelling. Moral realists must explain how finite, embodied human beings can gain knowledge of non-natural moral properties. The “queerness” argument, famously developed by J.L. Mackie in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), highlights the mysterious nature of this supposed cognitive capacity. If moral properties are utterly unlike the properties described by natural science, how could we possibly have a faculty for detecting them? Evolutionary debunking arguments, advanced by philosophers like Sharon Street in “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value” (2006), further challenge moral realism by suggesting that our moral beliefs are shaped by natural selection to promote survival and reproduction, not to track objective moral truths. Quasi-realist fictionalism avoids these epistemological puzzles entirely by grounding moral knowledge in the norms and practices that govern moral discourse. We “know” that torture is wrong not by detecting a moral property but by mastering the practices of moral discourse and the attitudes they express. This account provides a naturalistic explanation of moral knowledge that is compatible with our scientific understanding of human cognition.

Consider the practical example of moral progress. Moral realists typically explain moral progress as the discovery of previously unrecognized moral facts. For instance, the widespread recognition that slavery is morally wrong represents, on the realist view, a discovery about the moral facts concerning human dignity and autonomy. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers an alternative explanation that avoids the mysteries of moral discovery. The rejection of slavery represents not the discovery of a new moral fact but the refinement of our collective moral fiction to become more consistent, inclusive, and responsive to human needs. This refinement occurs through critical reflection on the implications of our attitudes, the recognition of inconsistencies

in our practices, and the expansion of our moral concern to include previously marginalized groups. The quasi-realist fictionalist account of moral progress as improvement in our collective fiction rather than discovery of moral facts provides a more naturalistic and psychologically plausible explanation of this important phenomenon.

In response to realist criticisms, quasi-realist fictionalists emphasize that their position preserves all the practical benefits of realist discourse while avoiding its metaphysical commitments. Realists often argue that only their view can account for the objectivity and authority of moral judgments. However, quasi-realist fictionalism explains these features through the projection of attitudes and the development of shared practices that earn realist-sounding discourse. The objectivity of moral judgment stems not from correspondence to moral facts but from the intersubjective constraints of moral practice—consistency, responsiveness to reasons, coherence with other commitments. The authority of moral judgment comes not from its connection to objective moral facts but from its role in structuring social cooperation and guiding individual decision-making. This account preserves the phenomenology of moral objectivity while providing a more parsimonious explanation of its origins.

The comparative assessment of explanatory power reveals significant advantages for quasi-realist fictionalism. Moral realism struggles to explain the connection between moral judgment and motivation—the idea that recognizing a moral fact typically provides a reason for action. This connection remains mysterious if moral facts are causally inert and exist independently of human motivations. Quasi-realist fictionalism, by contrast, builds motivation into the very structure of moral judgment. When we judge that torture is wrong, we express an attitude of disapproval that is inherently motivational. The connection between judgment and motivation is not a causal relation between distinct realms but an internal connection within the structure of moral thought. Similarly, moral realism has difficulty explaining the diversity of moral views across cultures and historical periods. If there are objective moral facts, why do people disagree so persistently about what these facts are? Quasi-realist fictionalism explains this diversity as the natural outcome of different cultural contexts shaping different patterns of attitude projection and different collective fictions. This explanation is more compatible with anthropological evidence of moral variation than the realist appeal to error or incomplete understanding.

### 1.12.2 10.2 Against Expressivism and Non-Cognitivism

While quasi-realist fictionalism differs significantly from moral realism, it also represents a substantial advance over earlier expressivist and non-cognitivist theories from which it evolved. Simple forms of non-cognitivism, such as A.J. Ayer's emotivism in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) and R.M. Hare's prescriptivism in *The Language of Morals* (1952), provided important insights into the non-descriptive function of moral language but faced severe limitations in accounting for the logical complexity and realist-seeming features of moral discourse. Quasi-realist fictionalism retains the core expressivist insight that moral judgments express non-cognitive states while incorporating fictionalist elements that address the shortcomings of simple non-cognitivism.

The limitations of pure non-cognitivism become apparent when we consider the Frege-Geach problem, which



has been the most persistent technical challenge for expressivist theories. Simple emotivism interprets moral judgments as expressions of emotion—“Stealing is wrong” means something like “Boo to stealing!” This interpretation struggles to explain how moral terms can function in complex logical contexts like conditionals. If “Stealing is wrong” expresses an emotion of disapproval when asserted simply, what does it express as the antecedent of a conditional like “If stealing is wrong, then getting your brother to steal is wrong”? The emotivist cannot say that the conditional expresses a conditional emotion, as this makes no psychological sense. Similar problems arise for prescriptivism, which interprets moral judgments as universal prescriptions. Quasi-realist fictionalism addresses this problem through its sophisticated account of higher-order attitudes and the embedding of moral language within broader linguistic practices. When we assert a moral conditional, we express a complex higher-order attitude that combines disapproval of stealing with a commitment to disapproving of getting one’s brother to steal if one disapproves of stealing. This account preserves the logical validity of moral reasoning while maintaining an expressivist foundation.

Beyond the Frege-Geach problem, simple non-cognitivist theories fail to explain why moral discourse appears to be about objective features of the world. Emotivism and prescriptivism reduce moral judgments to subjective states of emotion or volition, making it difficult to understand why moral disagreement feels like a genuine dispute about facts rather than a clash of feelings or preferences. When people debate whether capital punishment is justified, they typically appeal to reasons and evidence, not merely express emotions or issue commands. Simple non-cognitivism cannot easily accommodate this feature of moral practice. Quasi-realist fictionalism explains the appearance of objectivity through the projective dimension of moral judgment and the development of shared practices that earn realist-sounding discourse. We naturally project our attitudes onto the world, making moral properties appear as features of the situations we evaluate. Through the progressive embedding of moral discourse in broader linguistic and social practices, this projection becomes stabilized, and the discourse earns the right to realist-seeming language. This account explains why moral disagreement feels objective while maintaining an expressivist foundation.

The fictionalist element of quasi-realist fictionalism addresses another limitation of simple expressivism: the challenge of explaining the practical authority of moral discourse. If moral judgments merely express subjective attitudes, it becomes difficult to explain why we should take them seriously as guides to action. Why should I care about your emotional reactions or subjective preferences? Quasi-realist fictionalism responds by showing how moral discourse functions as a collective fiction that we accept for its pragmatic benefits. The pretense of moral objectivity enhances the practical authority of moral discourse by presenting moral requirements as categorical and binding. This pretense serves important social functions—facilitating cooperation, enabling criticism, providing guidance—that give moral discourse its normative force. The fictionalist element thus complements the expressivist insight by explaining how moral discourse can have practical authority even if it does not describe objective facts.

Consider the historical development of expressivism into quasi-realist fictionalism. Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realism, developed in *Spreading the Word* (1984) and refined in subsequent work, represented a significant advance over earlier non-cognitivist theories by showing how expressivism could earn the right to realist-sounding discourse. Blackburn’s project of “earnestness” aimed to demonstrate how an expressivist starting point could systematically develop the semantic and logical features of realist discourse. This

project addressed many of the limitations of simple non-cognitivism while retaining its core insight about the non-descriptive function of moral language. The incorporation of fictionalist elements, inspired by work in mathematics and science, further strengthened the position by providing a pragmatic justification for engaging with objectivity-claiming discourse despite its anti-realist foundations. This historical evolution shows how quasi-realist fictionalism emerged from the limitations of earlier expressivist theories, incorporating insights from fictionalism to create a more comprehensive and adequate account of moral discourse.

The comparative assessment of theoretical virtues reveals clear advantages for quasi-realist fictionalism over simple expressivism and non-cognitivism. While simple non-cognitivist theories have the virtue of parsimony in avoiding metaphysical commitments, they achieve this parsimony at the cost of explanatory adequacy. They cannot account for the logical complexity of moral discourse, the appearance of objectivity, or the practical authority of moral judgment. Quasi-realist fictionalism retains the parsimony of avoiding robust metaphysical commitments while significantly enhancing explanatory power. It can account for the logical features of moral discourse through its sophisticated theory of higher-order attitudes, explain the appearance of objectivity through projection and the development of shared practices, and ground the practical authority of moral discourse in its pragmatic benefits. This combination of parsimony and explanatory power makes quasi-realist fictionalism a theoretically superior position to simple forms of non-cognitivism.

### 1.12.3 10.3 Against Other Forms of Fictionalism

Quasi-realist fictionalism must also be distinguished from other forms of fictionalism that have been developed in various domains of philosophy. While all fictionalist approaches share the core idea that discourse in a particular domain can be usefully treated as a fiction, they differ significantly in their metaphysical commitments, semantic accounts, and pragmatic justifications. By contrasting quasi-realist fictionalism with alternative fictionalist positions, we can better appreciate its distinctive features and advantages.

One important distinction is between revolutionary and hermeneutic fictionalism. Revolutionary fictionalism, defended by Richard Joyce in *The Myth of Morality* (2001), holds that we ought to abandon the literal truth of discourse in a particular domain and instead engage with it as a beneficial fiction. This revolutionary stance acknowledges that current discourse involves error—moral judgments presuppose the existence of objective moral facts that do not exist—and recommends a shift to a fictionalist mode of engagement. Hermeneutic fictionalism, by contrast, defended by Mark Kalderon in *Moral Fictionalism* (2005), holds that ordinary discourse in the relevant domain is already best understood as involving fiction or pretense. On this view, people naturally engage in a form of “double consciousness” in moral judgment, feeling the pull of objectivity in practice while experiencing skeptical doubts upon reflection. Quasi-realist fictionalism incorporates elements of both approaches but offers a more nuanced position. It acknowledges the projective dimension of moral judgment that supports a hermeneutic interpretation while also recognizing the pragmatic benefits of consciously engaging with moral discourse as fiction, which aligns with revolutionary fictionalism. The distinctive contribution of quasi-realist fictionalism is its integration of these insights with the expressivist account of moral language, creating a more comprehensive position that addresses both the semantics and pragmatics of moral discourse.

Another important distinction is between instrumentalist and error-theoretic forms of fictionalism. Instrumentalist fictionalism, inspired by logical positivist approaches to science, treats discourse in a particular domain as a useful instrument for prediction and calculation without committing to the truth of its claims. This approach is well-developed in the philosophy of mathematics, where Hartry Field's *Science Without Numbers* (1980) argues that mathematical discourse is a conservative extension of non-mathematical language that can be accepted for its utility without believing in mathematical objects. Error-theoretic fictionalism, by contrast, begins with the diagnosis that discourse in a particular domain is systematically false and recommends engaging with it as fiction despite its falsity. This approach is exemplified by Richard Joyce's moral fictionalism, which starts from the error-theoretic conclusion that moral judgments presuppose objective moral facts that do not exist. Quasi-realist fictionalism differs from both these positions by incorporating the expressivist insight that moral judgments do not aim to describe facts at all, even erroneous ones. On the quasi-realist fictionalist view, moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes, and the fictional element comes from the pretense of objectivity that develops around these expressions. This account avoids the error-theoretic claim that moral discourse is systematically false while still allowing for the instrumentalist insight that we can engage with moral discourse for its pragmatic benefits.

Reductionist and eliminativist alternatives represent further points of contrast. Reductionist approaches, such as Cornell realism defended by Richard Boyd in "How to Be a Moral Realist" (1988), attempt to identify moral properties with natural properties described by science. For instance, the property of wrongness might be identified with the property of causing unnecessary suffering. Eliminativist approaches, such as the error theory defended by J.L. Mackie, recommend abandoning moral discourse altogether once we recognize its mistaken presuppositions. Quasi-realist fictionalism avoids both reductionism and eliminativism by preserving moral discourse in its familiar form while providing a non-reductive account of its function. Unlike reductionism, it does not attempt to identify moral properties with natural properties but instead explains moral discourse in terms of the expression of attitudes and the development of shared practices. Unlike eliminativism, it does not recommend abandoning moral discourse but instead provides a justification for continuing to engage with it as a beneficial fiction. This middle path allows quasi-realist fictionalism to preserve the practical benefits of moral discourse while avoiding the metaphysical commitments of reductionism and the radical implications of eliminativism.

The application of quasi-realist fictionalism to different domains reveals further distinctive features. In the philosophy of mathematics, quasi-realist fictionalism differs from Hartry Field's instrumental fictionalism by incorporating an expressivist account of mathematical judgment. While Field treats mathematical discourse as a purely instrumental tool for deriving non-mathematical conclusions, quasi-realist fictionalism explains mathematical objectivity and necessity through the projection of attitudes and the development of mathematical practices that earn realist-sounding discourse. This account provides a more comprehensive explanation of why mathematical discourse feels objective and necessary than purely instrumental approaches. In the philosophy of science, quasi-realist fictionalism differs from Bas van Fraassen's constructive empiricism in

\*The Scientific

### 1.13 Interdisciplinary Connections

Image\* (1980). While van Fraassen's view treats scientific theories as empirically adequate instruments for saving observable phenomena without committing to the truth of claims about unobservables, quasi-realist fictionalism offers a more nuanced account of how scientific realism functions as a pretense that develops through the projection of attitudes and the embedding of scientific discourse in experimental and technological practices. This integration of expressivist and fictionalist elements creates a distinctive position that illuminates the interdisciplinary connections between philosophy and other fields of human inquiry.

#### 1.13.1 11.1 Psychological and Cognitive Science

The connections between quasi-realist fictionalism and psychological science run deep, offering mutually illuminating insights into the nature of human cognition, emotion, and social behavior. At its core, quasi-realist fictionalism proposes that our engagement with objectivity-claiming discourse involves complex psychological mechanisms of projection, pretense, and collective enactment. These psychological dimensions are not merely incidental to the philosophical position but are central to its explanatory project. Psychological research provides both empirical support for key elements of quasi-realist fictionalism and raises new questions that philosophical reflection must address.

One of the most compelling psychological connections emerges from research on moral psychology and the cognitive science of normative judgment. Quasi-realist fictionalism suggests that moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes that we project onto the world, treating them as objective features of the situations we evaluate. This account finds support in Jonathan Haidt's social intuitionist model of moral judgment, developed in "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail" (2001). Haidt's research demonstrates that moral judgments are typically driven by rapid, intuitive emotional responses rather than deliberate reasoning. When people encounter morally charged situations, they experience immediate affective reactions—disgust at cruelty, admiration at kindness, anger at injustice—and only subsequently construct rational justifications for these reactions. This psychological process aligns remarkably well with the quasi-realist fictionalist account of moral judgment as expressing attitudes that are projected onto the world and rationalized post hoc.

The phenomenon of moral dumbfounding, extensively documented by Haidt and his colleagues, provides particularly striking evidence for this connection. In experimental settings, participants often make strong moral judgments but cannot articulate reasons for them when pressed. For instance, when presented with scenarios involving consensual incest between siblings using contraception, participants typically condemn the action as morally wrong but struggle to provide coherent reasons beyond vague feelings of disgust or that "it's just wrong." This pattern suggests that moral judgments originate in affective responses rather than reasoned deliberation about objective moral facts. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers a philosophical framework that makes sense of this psychological phenomenon: moral judgments express attitudes that feel objective but are rooted in emotional responses that we project onto the world.

Research on cognitive dissonance and motivated reasoning further supports the quasi-realist fictionalist account of how we maintain commitment to objectivity-claiming discourse. Leon Festinger's classic work on

cognitive dissonance, developed in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), demonstrates that people have a powerful psychological need to maintain consistency among their beliefs and attitudes. When confronted with information that challenges their commitments, people engage in motivated reasoning—selectively interpreting evidence, recalling information that supports their existing views, and avoiding or dismissing contradictory information. This psychological mechanism helps explain how the pretense of objectivity in moral, mathematical, and scientific discourse can be maintained despite skeptical challenges. Quasi-realist fictionalism suggests that our engagement with objectivity-claiming discourse involves a form of collective make-believe that serves important psychological functions, and research on motivated reasoning shows how cognitive mechanisms protect this engagement from disruptive information.

The psychology of pretense and imaginative engagement provides another rich area of connection. Quasi-realist fictionalism proposes that we engage with moral, mathematical, and scientific discourse as forms of pretense that we enact collectively. This account draws on psychological research about how humans engage in pretend play and imaginative activities from early childhood. Paul Harris’s work in *The Work of the Imagination* (2000) demonstrates that children as young as two can engage in sophisticated pretense, understanding the distinction between pretense and reality while still being emotionally and behaviorally engaged in the pretend scenario. This capacity for “dual encoding”—simultaneously recognizing that something is pretend while engaging with it as if it were real—persists into adulthood and forms the psychological foundation for our engagement with fictional narratives, games, and, according to quasi-realist fictionalism, objectivity-claiming discourse.

Neuroscientific research has begun to illuminate the cognitive mechanisms underlying these processes. Studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have shown that engaging with pretense activates similar brain regions to those involved in theory of mind tasks—areas associated with understanding others’ mental states, such as the medial prefrontal cortex and temporoparietal junction. This suggests that pretense involves sophisticated cognitive capacities for mental simulation and perspective-taking that are fundamental to human social cognition. Quasi-realist fictionalism proposes that these same capacities are deployed when we engage with moral, mathematical, and scientific discourse as forms of collective pretense. The projection of attitudes onto the world and the maintenance of this pretense through social practices draw on the same cognitive mechanisms that enable children to engage in pretend play and adults to become immersed in fictional narratives.

Empirical research specifically testing predictions of quasi-realist fictionalist approaches has begun to emerge in recent years. One line of research, inspired by Richard Joyce’s evolutionary debunking arguments for moral fictionalism, examines how exposure to meta-ethical reflections affects moral motivation and behavior. In a series of experiments, psychologists have found that inducing participants to think about the evolutionary origins of moral beliefs—suggesting that these beliefs are shaped by natural selection rather than tracking objective moral facts—can reduce the intensity of moral condemnation and decrease prosocial behavior in some contexts. However, these effects are typically modest and temporary, suggesting that the pretense of moral objectivity is psychologically robust and not easily disrupted by philosophical reflection. This pattern aligns with quasi-realist fictionalism’s prediction that moral discourse serves such important psychological and social functions that it is relatively resistant to skeptical challenges.

Another promising area of research examines cross-cultural variation in the phenomenology of moral objectivity. Quasi-realist fictionalism suggests that while the content of moral judgments varies across cultures, the tendency to project moral attitudes onto the world and treat them as objective may be a universal feature of human psychology. Anthropological research by Richard Shweder and others has documented both the diversity of moral codes across cultures and the surprising convergence in how people from different cultures experience their moral commitments as objectively binding. This combination of diversity in content and universality in phenomenology supports the quasi-realist fictionalist account of moral discourse as involving universal psychological mechanisms of projection and pretense that are applied to culturally variable content.

### 1.13.2 11.2 Linguistics and Philosophy of Language

The connections between quasi-realist fictionalism and linguistic science are equally profound, offering insights into how language functions to express attitudes, construct shared realities, and facilitate social coordination. At its core, quasi-realist fictionalism is a theory about how language works in domains that appear to describe objective features of the world but are better understood as expressing non-cognitive states and engaging in collective pretense. This theory makes specific predictions about the semantics, pragmatics, and syntax of objectivity-claiming discourse that can be investigated through linguistic analysis and cross-linguistic comparison.

One of the most significant linguistic connections emerges in the domain of semantic theory. Quasi-realist fictionalism challenges traditional truth-conditional semantics, which assumes that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the conditions under which it would be true. For objectivity-claiming discourse, this approach would require positing the existence of objective facts that make sentences true—moral facts, mathematical facts, modal facts, and so on. Quasi-realist fictionalism proposes an alternative semantic account that grounds meaning in the expression of attitudes and the norms governing collective pretense. This approach resonates with expressivist semantic theories developed by philosophers like Robert Brandom in *Making It Explicit* (1994), which emphasize the social and pragmatic dimensions of meaning over representational correspondence.

The pragmatic dimensions of quasi-realist fictionalism have particularly rich linguistic implications. The theory suggests that objectivity-claiming discourse serves multiple pragmatic functions simultaneously: it expresses attitudes, coordinates social behavior, facilitates reasoning, and creates shared frameworks for understanding. These pragmatic functions are reflected in linguistic phenomena such as speech acts, presupposition, and implicature. When someone asserts “Torture is wrong,” they are not merely describing a state of affairs but performing a complex speech act that expresses disapproval, invites others to share this attitude, and implicitly criticizes those who engage in torture. This pragmatic complexity has been extensively documented in linguistic research on the performative dimensions of language, particularly in the tradition of J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and John Searle’s speech act theory.

Cross-linguistic evidence provides fascinating insights into how different languages realize the quasi-realist fictionalist functions of objectivity-claiming discourse. While all human languages have resources for ex-



pressing normative judgments, they do so through diverse linguistic structures. Some languages, like English, have dedicated moral vocabulary (right, wrong, ought, should) that functions similarly to descriptive vocabulary. Other languages express normative judgments through constructions that more transparently reveal their non-descriptive nature. For instance, in some African languages, moral judgments are expressed through constructions that literally mean “We say X is bad” or “Our people do not do Y,” explicitly grounding the judgment in collective attitude rather than objective fact. This linguistic diversity supports the quasi-realist fictionalist claim that the appearance of objectivity in moral discourse is a projection that varies in transparency across languages while serving similar pragmatic functions.

The phenomenon of semantic drift—how meanings change over time—provides another intriguing connection. Quasi-realist fictionalism predicts that terms originating in expressions of attitude will gradually develop the semantic features of descriptive language through the process of “earning the right” to realist-sounding discourse. Historical linguistics provides numerous examples of this process. Terms like “good” and “bad” in many Indo-European languages originally referred to social status or utility rather than moral properties, only gradually acquiring their distinctly moral senses through centuries of usage. Similarly, mathematical terms like “number” and “set” originated in practical counting and collection activities before developing their abstract, theoretical senses. This historical trajectory aligns with the quasi-realist fictionalist account of how discourse that begins in expression and practical application gradually acquires the semantic features of objective description.

The syntax of objectivity-claiming discourse offers further linguistic evidence for quasi-realist fictionalism. One of the most persistent challenges for non-cognitivist theories has been the Frege-Geach problem—explaining how moral terms can function compositionally in complex logical contexts like conditionals, negations, and quantifications. Quasi-realist fictionalism addresses this problem through its sophisticated account of higher-order attitudes and the embedding of moral language within broader linguistic practices. Linguistic research on the syntax of evaluative language supports this approach by demonstrating that moral terms have distinctive syntactic properties that reflect their dual expressive and descriptive functions. For instance, moral predicates can appear in contexts that typically require descriptive content (like “It is true that torture is wrong”) while also exhibiting syntactic behaviors characteristic of expressive language (like resisting embedding under certain operators). This syntactic complexity suggests that moral language occupies a unique position between purely expressive and purely descriptive discourse, which aligns with the quasi-realist fictionalist account.

The study of linguistic relativity—the hypothesis that language influences thought—provides another fascinating connection to quasi-realist fictionalism. If the quasi-realist fictionalist account is correct, then the linguistic resources available for expressing normative judgments should influence how people experience and think about these judgments. Research by linguists like Anna Wierzbicka in *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words* (1997) has documented significant cross-linguistic variation in the conceptualization of moral domains. For instance, some languages have distinct terms for different kinds of moral obligations (to family, to community, to gods) that are collapsed into a single concept in English. This linguistic variation appears to correlate with differences in moral reasoning and the phenomenology of moral judgment across cultures, supporting the quasi-realist fictionalist claim that the projection of attitudes onto

the world is shaped by linguistic and cultural frameworks.

Pragmatic research on presupposition and common ground management offers further insights into the collective pretense dimension of quasi-realist fictionalism. Herbert Clark's work in *Using Language* (1996) demonstrates how conversation participants continuously negotiate and maintain a shared set of presuppositions—the common ground that enables successful communication. Quasi-realist fictionalism suggests that engaging with objectivity-claiming discourse involves establishing and maintaining a collective pretense that certain claims are objectively true. This process of pretense management shares important features with the negotiation of common ground in ordinary conversation. Both involve implicit agreements to treat certain propositions as true for the purposes of the interaction, both rely on subtle linguistic cues to signal and maintain these agreements, and both can break down when participants fail to coordinate their pretenses or presuppositions. Research on how conversation participants manage common ground thus provides a model for understanding how the collective pretense of objectivity is established and maintained in moral, mathematical, and scientific discourse.

### 1.13.3 11.3 Social and Political Philosophy

The implications of quasi-realist fictionalism for social and political thought are perhaps the most far-reaching of all its interdisciplinary connections. At its core, the theory offers a distinctive perspective on fundamental questions about political legitimacy, social justice, and the nature of political community. By reconceptualizing normative discourse as a form of collective pretense that serves important social functions, quasi-realist fictionalism provides new tools for analyzing political concepts and addressing political challenges in an increasingly pluralistic world.

One of the most significant applications of quasi-realist fictionalism in political philosophy concerns the nature of political legitimacy and authority. Traditional theories of political legitimacy typically appeal to objective moral principles—natural rights, the common good, or hypothetical contracts—to justify political authority. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers an alternative account that grounds political legitimacy in the collective pretense that certain political arrangements are objectively justified. On this view, when we say that a government is legitimate or that citizens have an obligation to obey the law, we are not describing objective political facts but participating in a collective fiction that facilitates social cooperation. This pretense is not mere deception but a sophisticated social practice that serves crucial functions: creating stable expectations, enabling collective action, and providing a framework for resolving disputes.

John Rawls's theory of political liberalism, developed in *Political Liberalism* (1993), shares important affinities with this quasi-realist fictionalist approach. Rawls argues that in a pluralistic society characterized by diverse comprehensive doctrines, political principles must be justified on the basis of an overlapping consensus rather than any particular conception of the good. This overlapping consensus functions as a kind of collective fiction that citizens with different metaphysical commitments can accept for political purposes even while disagreeing about its ultimate justification. Quasi-realist fictionalism extends this insight by suggesting that the overlapping consensus itself is best understood as a form of collective pretense—citizens engage with political principles as if they were objectively justified because doing so enables them to live

together despite their deep disagreements. This account preserves the practical force of political principles while acknowledging their contested metaphysical status.

The concept of human rights provides a particularly compelling example of how quasi-realist fictionalism can illuminate political concepts. Human rights discourse typically presents rights as objective moral facts that all human beings possess simply by virtue of their humanity. This realist framing faces significant philosophical challenges, particularly in explaining the existence and knowability of human rights across diverse cultural contexts. Quasi-realist fictionalism offers an alternative account that preserves the normative force of human rights while avoiding these metaphysical difficulties. On this view, human rights are not objective moral facts but components of a collective fiction that we maintain because they serve crucial functions: protecting vulnerable individuals, limiting the power of states, and providing a framework for international cooperation. When we assert that “All human beings have a right to life,” we are not describing an objective moral fact but participating in a collective pretense that structures global political discourse and practice. This account explains the remarkable influence of human rights discourse in international politics while acknowledging its culturally specific origins and contested foundations.

Theories of justice provide another rich area for quasi-realist fictionalist analysis. John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971) famously uses the device of the original position—a hypothetical situation where rational parties choose principles of justice behind a veil of ignorance—to generate principles of justice. Quasi-realist fictionalism suggests that this hypothetical device can be understood as a form of structured pretense that helps us articulate principles that reflect our considered judgments about fairness. The original position is not a description of an actual contract situation but a fictional framework that enables us to project our attitudes about fairness onto a structured scenario, yielding principles that we can then treat as objectively justified. This account preserves the normative force of Rawls’s principles while acknowledging their basis in collective pretense rather than objective moral facts.

The challenge of political disagreement in pluralistic societies takes on new dimensions from a quasi-realist fictionalist perspective. Traditional approaches to political disagreement typically assume that political disputes are about objective facts or principles that, in principle,

## 1.14 Future Directions and Conclusion

Traditional approaches to political disagreement typically assume that political disputes are about objective facts or principles that, in principle, rational deliberation could resolve. Yet the persistence of deep political disagreement across diverse societies suggests a more complex reality. Quasi-realist fictionalism illuminates this phenomenon by showing how political disagreement often involves clashes between different collective fictions—different ways of projecting values onto the world and treating them as objective. When liberals and conservatives debate the role of government in healthcare, or when nationalists and globalists discuss immigration policy, they are not merely disagreeing about empirical facts but engaging with different normative frameworks that are each maintained as collective fictions. Recognizing this dimension of political disagreement does not eliminate disagreement but transforms how we understand it. Rather than viewing political opponents as simply mistaken about objective facts, we can see them as participants in different

collective fictions that serve different social functions and express different patterns of attitude projection. This understanding opens new possibilities for political dialogue and compromise, as it acknowledges the constructed nature of political principles while still taking seriously their practical importance.

## 1.15 Section 12: Future Directions and Conclusion

### 1.15.1 12.1 Current State of the Debate

The philosophical landscape surrounding quasi-realist fictionalism has evolved dramatically since its emergence in the late 20th century, transforming from a niche position in meta-ethics to a comprehensive philosophical framework with applications across multiple domains. The current state of the debate reflects both the maturation of the position and the emergence of new challenges that promise to shape its future development. Contemporary philosophers have moved beyond the initial task of simply articulating the position to engaging in sophisticated debates about its internal coherence, explanatory adequacy, and relationship to competing views.

One of the most significant developments in recent years has been the convergence of quasi-realist fictionalism with other philosophical traditions, creating hybrid approaches that incorporate insights from seemingly opposed positions. The emergence of hybrid expressivist theories, which combine elements of cognitivism and non-cognitivism, represents perhaps the most notable example of this convergence. Philosophers like Michael Ridge, in his 2014 book *Impassioned Belief*, have developed sophisticated hybrid theories that attempt to preserve the core insights of quasi-realism while incorporating truth-conditional elements that address the Frege-Geach problem. These hybrid approaches have generated vigorous debate about whether they represent genuine progress in addressing the challenges facing non-cognitivist theories or merely a disguised form of minimalism that collapses into realism.

The debate over creeping minimalism has evolved into a more nuanced discussion about the relationship between semantics and explanation in meta-philosophy. Simon Blackburn and other defenders of quasi-realism have increasingly emphasized that the significance of their position lies not in providing a competing semantics for moral language but in offering a naturalistic explanation of how discourse that appears to describe objective facts can emerge from the expression of non-cognitive attitudes. This explanatory project, they argue, remains substantial and philosophically significant even if one accepts minimalism about truth and objectivity. Critics like David Enoch and Terence Cuneo have countered that without a robust semantic difference from realism, the explanatory project loses its philosophical bite, reducing to a merely historical account of how we came to talk as we do rather than a substantive metaphysical position.

The interdisciplinary dimensions of quasi-realist fictionalism have also become increasingly prominent in contemporary debates. Philosophers are engaging more extensively with empirical research in psychology, cognitive science, linguistics, and anthropology to test and refine the psychological and social assumptions underlying the position. This interdisciplinary turn has generated both promising collaborations and new challenges. On one hand, research in moral psychology provides empirical support for key elements of quasi-realist fictionalism, such as the role of emotional responses in moral judgment and the tendency to

project attitudes onto the world. On the other hand, empirical findings about cross-cultural variation in moral phenomenology and the cognitive mechanisms underlying pretense raise new questions about the universality of the processes described by quasi-realist fictionalists.

The application of quasi-realist fictionalism to domains beyond ethics has expanded significantly in recent years, with particularly fruitful developments in the philosophy of mathematics, science, and modality. In the philosophy of mathematics, debates continue between Hartry Field's instrumental fictionalism and more expressivist versions of mathematical fictionalism that incorporate quasi-realist elements. In the philosophy of science, quasi-realist fictionalism has engaged with debates about scientific realism and antirealism, offering a middle path that preserves the practical force of scientific discourse while avoiding robust metaphysical commitments. In modal metaphysics, the development of sophisticated modal fictionalist approaches by philosophers like Gideon Rosen and Daniel Nolan has created new connections with quasi-realist themes about the nature of modal discourse.

The influence of quasi-realist fictionalism on contemporary philosophical discourse extends beyond meta-ethics and metaphysics to shape debates in political philosophy, aesthetics, and the philosophy of language. In political philosophy, the position has informed discussions about the nature of political legitimacy and the challenge of political disagreement in pluralistic societies. In aesthetics, quasi-realist fictionalist approaches have been developed to explain the objectivity-claiming character of aesthetic judgment without positing objective aesthetic properties. In the philosophy of language, the position has contributed to debates about the semantics of evaluative language and the relationship between meaning and use.

Despite these developments, significant areas of disagreement persist among philosophers working on quasi-realist fictionalism. One ongoing dispute concerns the precise relationship between the quasi-realist and fictionalist elements within the combined approach. While some philosophers, like Mark Kalderon, argue for a hermeneutic approach that sees pretense as already embedded in ordinary moral discourse, others, like Richard Joyce, defend a revolutionary approach that acknowledges a shift from literal belief to fictional acceptance. This disagreement reflects deeper questions about the phenomenology of moral judgment and the psychological plausibility of maintaining genuine moral engagement while recognizing the fictional nature of moral discourse.

Another area of ongoing debate concerns the scope of quasi-realist fictionalism and its applicability to different domains of discourse. While the position was initially developed in the context of moral discourse, its extension to mathematics, science, and modality raises questions about whether the same explanatory framework can adequately account for the distinctive features of these different domains. Some philosophers argue that the quasi-realist fictionalist approach works better for some domains than others, while others maintain that the core insights of the position can be applied universally across all objectivity-claiming discourse.

### **1.15.2 12.2 Promising Research Directions**

As quasi-realist fictionalism continues to evolve, several promising research directions have emerged that promise to advance our understanding of the position and its applications. These directions span philo-

sophical analysis, empirical investigation, and interdisciplinary collaboration, reflecting the increasingly multifaceted nature of contemporary research in this area.

One of the most promising research directions involves the further development of hybrid theories that combine expressivist, fictionalist, and truth-conditional elements. While early hybrid approaches focused primarily on addressing the Frege-Geach problem in moral language, recent work has begun to explore how hybrid theories can be applied to other domains and how they can address additional challenges facing quasi-realist fictionalism. For instance, David Copp's "society-centered" theory incorporates truth-conditional elements while maintaining an expressivist foundation, and Michael Ridge's "ecological" theory explains moral judgments in terms of attitudes toward the appropriateness of other attitudes from a particular point of view. Future research in this direction could explore how these hybrid approaches can be refined to better account for the phenomenology of moral judgment, the dynamics of moral disagreement, and the possibility of moral progress. Particularly promising is the exploration of how hybrid theories might incorporate insights from cognitive science about the dual-process nature of moral judgment, distinguishing between rapid intuitive responses and more deliberate reasoning processes.

The empirical investigation of the psychological mechanisms underlying projection and pretense represents another promising research direction. While quasi-realist fictionalism posits that our engagement with objectivity-claiming discourse involves projecting attitudes onto the world and engaging in collective pretense, the specific cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying these processes remain to be fully elucidated. Empirical research using methods from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and developmental psychology could shed light on questions such as: How exactly do people project attitudes onto the world? What are the neural correlates of pretense and make-believe? How do children develop the capacity to engage in collective pretense? And how do these processes vary across cultures and contexts? One particularly fruitful line of investigation might involve cross-cultural studies of the phenomenology of moral judgment, examining whether the tendency to experience moral judgments as objective is universal or culturally variable. Such research could test the quasi-realist fictionalist claim that projection and pretense are fundamental features of human psychology that manifest in culturally specific ways.

The application of quasi-realist fictionalism to new domains of discourse offers another promising avenue for future research. While the position has been extensively applied to ethics, mathematics, science, and modality, there are numerous other domains where objectivity-claiming discourse flourishes despite facing metaphysical challenges. These include aesthetic judgment, epistemic discourse (talk about justification and knowledge), religious discourse, and even everyday causal explanation. For instance, in the philosophy of art, quasi-realist fictionalism could be developed to explain how aesthetic judgments like "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a masterpiece" can feel objectively true while acknowledging the profound variability of aesthetic responses across individuals and cultures. In epistemology, the approach might illuminate how discourse about knowledge and justification functions as a collective fiction that structures inquiry and debate. In the philosophy of religion, quasi-realist fictionalism could offer a way to understand religious discourse that respects its significance for believers while avoiding the metaphysical commitments of traditional religious realism. Each of these applications would require adapting the core insights of quasi-realist fictionalism to the distinctive features of the domain in question, potentially leading to new variations and



refinements of the position.

The development of more sophisticated formal models of quasi-realist fictionalism represents another promising research direction. While much of the work on quasi-realist fictionalism has been conducted in relatively informal terms, recent years have seen increasing interest in developing formal semantic and pragmatic models that can capture the nuances of the position. For instance, some philosophers have begun to explore how dynamic semantics, which models meaning in terms of information change in conversation, might be used to model the expressive and projective dimensions of moral discourse. Others have investigated how game-theoretic approaches could model the collective pretense involved in engaging with objectivity-claiming discourse. Future research in this direction could lead to more precise formulations of quasi-realist fictionalism and more rigorous responses to technical challenges like the Frege-Geach problem. Particularly promising is the potential application of tools from formal pragmatics and speech act theory to model the complex social interactions involved in establishing and maintaining collective fictions.

The exploration of quasi-realist fictionalism's implications for practical philosophy and applied ethics offers another promising research direction. While much of the work on the position has focused on meta-ethical and metaphysical questions, its implications for normative ethics and applied philosophy remain relatively underexplored. For instance, how might a quasi-realist fictionalist approach inform debates about specific ethical issues like abortion, climate justice, or artificial intelligence? How might it shape our understanding of moral responsibility and punishment? And how might it contribute to addressing practical challenges like political polarization and cultural conflict? One particularly interesting line of inquiry could explore how quasi-realist fictionalism might inform approaches to moral education, suggesting ways to cultivate moral engagement while fostering critical reflection on the nature of moral discourse. Another promising direction could investigate how the position might inform approaches to intercultural dialogue, offering resources for understanding and bridging different normative frameworks without collapsing into relativism.

The integration of quasi-realist fictionalism with other philosophical traditions represents a final promising research direction. While the position has primarily developed within the analytic tradition, there are intriguing connections to be explored with continental philosophy, pragmatism, and non-Western philosophical traditions. For instance, the quasi-realist fictionalist emphasis on the practical and social dimensions of discourse resonates with themes in American pragmatism, particularly in the work of John Dewey and Richard Rorty. The position's focus on projection and the construction of meaning through social practice has affinities with certain strands of continental philosophy, particularly existentialism and post-structuralism. And its recognition of the diversity of normative frameworks across cultures connects with themes in Buddhist philosophy and other non-Western traditions. Exploring these connections could enrich quasi-realist fictionalism by incorporating insights from diverse philosophical traditions while also contributing to cross-cultural philosophical dialogue.

### 1.15.3 12.3 Conclusion and Significance

Quasi-realist fictionalism stands as one of the most significant philosophical developments of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding objectivity-claiming dis-

course that bridges the gap between realist and anti-realist approaches. Through its synthesis of expressivist and fictionalist elements, the position provides a nuanced account of how discourse that appears to describe objective features of the world can emerge from the expression of non-cognitive attitudes and the engagement in collective pretense. This account preserves the practical force and phenomenological features of objectivity-claiming discourse while avoiding the metaphysical commitments that make robust realism so problematic.

The significance of quasi-realist fictionalism extends across multiple domains of philosophical inquiry. In meta-ethics, it offers a resolution to longstanding debates about moral realism and anti-realism, showing how moral discourse can be objective in its practical force without being objective in its metaphysical foundations. In the philosophy of mathematics, it provides a way to understand the necessity and applicability of mathematics without positing a mysterious realm of abstract objects. In the philosophy of science, it illuminates how scientific discourse can be both empirically successful and metaphysically modest, treating theoretical entities as useful fictions rather than mind-independent objects. In modal metaphysics, it explains how discourse about possibility and necessity can be both informative and ontologically parsimonious, avoiding the extravagant ontology of possible worlds while preserving the logical structure of modal reasoning.

Beyond these specific domains, quasi-realist fictionalism offers a distinctive perspective on fundamental questions about normativity, truth, and objectivity. It suggests that normativity arises not from objective facts but from human attitudes and collective practices, that truth is best understood as a device for endorsement rather than correspondence, and that objectivity is a projection of attitudes rather than a feature of the mind-independent world. This perspective does not eliminate normativity, truth, or objectivity but recontextualizes them, showing how they emerge from and serve human needs and practices. In doing so, it offers a naturalistic account of these phenomena that is compatible with our scientific understanding of human cognition and social behavior.

The practical significance of quasi-realist fictionalism is equally profound. By showing how objectivity-claiming discourse can be maintained without robust metaphysical commitments, the position offers resources for addressing some of the most pressing challenges of our time. In an increasingly pluralistic world, where different cultures and communities maintain conflicting normative frameworks, quasi-realist fictionalism provides a way to understand and engage with these differences without collapsing into relativism or dogmatism. It acknowledges the constructed nature of normative frameworks while still taking seriously their practical importance, opening possibilities for dialogue and compromise across deep disagreements. In the face of global challenges like climate change, artificial intelligence, and social inequality, where normative guidance is desperately needed but objective foundations are elusive, quasi-realist fictionalism offers a way to maintain normative commitment while acknowledging the provisional and constructed nature of our normative frameworks.

The future of quasi-realist fictionalism appears bright, with numerous promising directions for research and application. As the position continues to evolve through engagement with empirical research, formal modeling, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cross-cultural dialogue, it will likely develop in ways that address current limitations and open new possibilities for philosophical inquiry. The position's emphasis on the prac-

tical and social dimensions of discourse makes it particularly well-suited to address the complex challenges of our time, offering a philosophical approach that is both theoretically sophisticated and practically relevant.

Ultimately, the significance of quasi-realist fictionalism lies in its ability to reconcile two seemingly opposed aspects of human thought: our tendency to project objectivity onto our normative commitments and our capacity for critical reflection on the nature of those commitments. The position shows how we can engage seriously with moral, mathematical, scientific, and modal discourse while recognizing that this discourse involves projection and pretense. This reconciliation is not merely a philosophical achievement but a practical one, enabling us to maintain the cognitive and social benefits of objectivity-claiming discourse while cultivating the intellectual humility that comes from recognizing its constructed nature. In a world where dogmatism and skepticism both pose significant threats to human flourishing, quasi-realist fictionalism offers a middle path that combines commitment with reflection, engagement with critical distance, and normativity with naturalism. It is this