

How the “As If” Becomes True: Fictions from Vaihinger to Appiah and Beyond

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In the past fifty years, and, in particular, in the work of David Lewis, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Mark Alfano, there has been considerable attention paid to the epistemic and practical significance of fictions. This is not a coincidence, as our world has seen an explosion of fictional entities, from string theory to credit default swaps to fake news. While most of the recent work on fictions and fictionalism has attempted to address its potential truth or epistemic status, today I would like to focus on a slightly different question: how a practical fiction, self-consciously created, eventually becomes a “fact.” This is a question left unanswered by various thinkers, and yet, if fictions are to be of practical significance, I would offer that it is *the* question. Not whether a fiction is true, but, rather, the process whereby a fiction *becomes* true. Today I will argue that, for fictions to become true, they must be plausible, repeated, shared communally, and have physical correlates.

As Appiah, Arthur Fine, and others have noted, the focus on fictions began most ostensibly with the late 19th-century Kant scholar, Hans Vaihinger. For Vaihinger, our minds are “inventive” (v, 12), constantly searching for a “way about more easily in this world” (15). A good Kantian, Vaihinger knows full well that our reason-seeking minds cannot match the world as-is; indeed, the best we can do, he argues, is to reason “analogically” (29), in the subjunctive mode of the “as if” [*als ob*]. Such analogies are, at best, practical expedients, ones

which we know to be as such. As he states, “the true fiction, formulated in a strictly scientific manner, is always accompanied by the *consciousness* that the fictional idea, the fictional assumption, has no real validity” (80).

Vaihinger makes two distinctions that are of benefit to our discussion. First, Vaihinger makes a careful distinction between fictions and hypotheses. The distinction is purely empirical. Fictions have explanatory power and are regulative, but cannot, in practice, be proven. Hypotheses, on the other hand, can be demonstrated (49, 88). Or, alternatively stated, a fiction is a useful artifice, whereas a hypothesis is potentially reflective of reality. This leads to the second observation, that, whereas hypotheses eventually become a conclusion if proven, a fiction, on the other hand, holds only a mediating role—once it has been demonstrated or given light to a particular phenomenon, it goes away. Like the middle term in a syllogism, a fiction vanishes once it becomes true for an agent (111). Again, as Vaihinger offers, “We cannot accept the ordinary view that thought is an end in itself. Thought serves as a means of communication with others and its individual mechanisms must all be regarded as mechanical expedients” (102).

The ethical implications of Vaihinger’s position are perhaps best shown through his use of a rather Kantian example, that of freedom. Owing to his reading of the First Critique, Vaihinger doubts the ontological status of freedom. And yet we must act “as if” we were free and accountable for our actions (47, 258). The fictional “as if” has performative force here—it allows us to think of ourselves as bound to certain norms and laws, even if we must remain ultimately agnostic about their source. Given the noumenal status of freedom, then, the idea can only be described as a “practical fiction” (48), an expedient (89, 99). Because freedom can never be proven, it must remain as a “mere idea,” a fiction which has value but not explanatory force (260).

This perspective, Vaihinger offers, is the mature one, where we do not mistake our fictional constructs for reality itself. It allows us a richer picture of action and of the world. And, indeed, as Arthur Fine notes, Vaihinger eventually finds fictions everywhere, from ethics to atoms to calculus to theology. The modern world, in Vaihinger’s estimation, is filled with fictions that allow us to paint a deeper picture both of moral activity and of what we know.

Vaihinger’s work has, over the past hundred years, laid largely dormant. Yet it occasionally returns, as in the case of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *As If*, where he makes the case, once again, for what he calls “idealizations” as “useful untruths” (KAA, xii). Whereas Vaihinger saw fictions as neither true nor untrue, Appiah makes the careful argument that many idealizations are both untrue and, yet, useful. These idealizations often contradict our simple picture of the world, and, thus, we have to partition our thinking into truth (which may not be of use), and untruth (which may be of use). As he states, “In believing that it is *as if* something is so, I dispose myself to act in a certain way, but only in certain contexts and for

certain purposes. In that context and for those purposes I will do what I would have done if I had just straight out believed it” (22).

Appiah spends considerable time discussing the utility of ideas that are, ostensibly, false. An idealization is potentially quite false, and at best a simplification. And yet such idealizations, as in the case of consciousness studies or quantum physics, are necessary. Hence, they seem to occupy a liminal epistemological space. As Appiah offers, “But being sorta true is not, alas, a way of being true—it is a special way of being false.” (45). These idealizations are valuable not because they are demonstrable, but by the pictures they give us of the world and how they allow us to act. Appiah spends much of the rest of his book discussing the applicability of idealizations to consciousness and ethics.

Both Vaihinger and Appiah, then, consistently demonstrate the utility of fictions/idealizations. And, in the case of Appiah, I think we can read some of his other work through this lens. And yet neither can demonstrate *how* we make these idealizations real in our minds. In the case of Vaihinger, he is simply silent on the issue. Appiah at least recognizes this aporia, but does not offer much in the way of explanation, offering that “showing *that* it does work doesn’t explain *why*” (36) and “Idealization works here [in the instance of correlating brain states and consciousness], then, for reasons we do not understand” (49). Thus, I think we should ask the question: How do we entertain concepts that we know to be false? Or, how do we keep fictions in mind long enough for them to *become* true?

I will return to Appiah once again, but to perhaps gain some clarity regarding the performative force of fictions, I’d like to call upon Mark Alfano’s work in virtue ethics, specifically his *Character as Moral Fiction*. While Alfano spends considerable time discussing the epistemological status of fictions and countering competing moral theories, at the heart of his book lies a simple idea: that, if a person is treated as having certain desirable moral characteristics, they will eventually come to adopt those same characteristics (Alfano 82-3). This leads to his most notable concept, that of “factitious” virtue, a portmanteau of “factual” and “fictitious,” whereby ethical behavior is claimed for an agent without them yet possessing that behavior. Like a placebo effect (83) or a self-fulfilling prophecy (88), an agent performs the truth of a prior claim.

Alfano marshals considerable social-scientific evidence in support of his thesis, which, I will claim, stands on three key points. First, as Alfano argues (91), the attributions made of an agent must at least be plausible. If I want to claim goodness for Suzy, she must at least be capable of goodness and tending towards a particular kind of good behavior. Secondly, such labeling is, by its very nature, interpersonal (92, 96). The social dimension of character development allows agents to follow norms (97) and to fulfill certain roles deemed to be socially beneficial. As Alfano states, “Aristotle thought that people became courageous by acting courageously; I contend that they become courageous (or near enough) by being called courageous” (102). Third, virtue labeling must also be repeated over

time. Alfano notes many social strategies for creating virtues, such as training, habituation, and the arts (177-9). All are signified by repetition and multiple modes of cognitive reinforcement.

Taken together, these three qualities form, for Alfano, a kind of looping effect, whereby a label, when plausible, given socially, and repeated over time, eventually comes to be real. It is not real at its utterance. It is real in the future. For the agent, they must, at least unconsciously, act “as if” the label itself is real. These three features seem to be sufficient for generating factitiously virtuous behavior.

While Alfano does not further discuss the cognitive mechanisms at work in the agent receiving such utterances as real, I think they are of critical importance here and are a necessary supplement to the framework laid out by Alfano. And I think that some aesthetic theory helps to shed light on how an agent allows for social and repetitive practices to work, at least on a psychological level. In particular, recent theoretical work on make-believe and play may allow us to see the mechanisms at work here.

In this regard, I will make two points that bear out our ability to receive, and make real, ethical utterances. First, as Kendall Walton, R.M. Sainsbury, and even Appiah make clear, what is not needed with respect to fiction is “suspension of disbelief.” Rather, when we receive something we perceive as fictional, we actually *believe* in such a fiction in rather distinctive ways. Walton, in multiple books, famously calls these emotions “quasi-emotions.” In an example that Walton uses to great effect, when watching a movie I actually do experience fear, hate, disgust, etc. (e.g., Walton, *In Other Shoes* 256). While, along with Sainsbury (20), I disagree that these emotions are “quasi” felt—we really do feel them as real—I would offer that Walton gives a compelling account of fictional belief. In short, in fiction our belief is automatic (if not involuntary), felt as real, and represented in our minds. These beliefs are pre-reflective and unconscious. I do not attempt to conjure fear when watching a movie. It simply happens (see Walton, *In Other Shoes* 262, Sainsbury 12, and Casey 30ff). Moreover, these spontaneous imaginings are self-enclosed: they occur in their own world and according to their own logic. I am not surprised, for example, when Wolverine’s claws can slice through a Humvee. This is because, as Edward Casey notes, imaginings tend to have their own space and time, an internal schema or “state of affairs” that pertains solely to those imaginings (see Casey 42, 51). And this aesthetic is autonomous: each imagining has its own logic. The logic of X-Men is not the logic of Avengers, and vice versa. In short, when rapt in aesthetic appreciation, we immediately conjure both a world in which such fictions occur and the emotions appropriate to those fictions.

This recognition is conditioned by a second, and equivalent, observation, regarding the nature of aesthetic experience. For, in the midst of experiencing a fiction, our minds also simultaneously partition fictional worlds from the real world in which we live. This, too, is spontaneous. Walton refers to this as our

psychological mechanisms running “off line” (Walton, *In Other Shoes* 280). Appiah notes, similarly, that we abandon “the normal consequences of that belief” (108) or “its normal consequences” (110). Finally, Sainsbury dubs this our “within-the-fiction state,” one which is distinctive from our normal way of reckoning with the world (15-16).

The common feature of each of these observations is the notion of a disunified mind, or of varying psychological schema that refer to particular kinds of phenomena. This is not, as some may infer, a form of Type 1 and Type 2 processing. Rather, as Floyd Merrell recommends, we can better think of aesthetic reception as an act of “framing,” whereby certain fictions exist within a particular frame or schema that allows them to create sense (Merrell, Chs. 1 and 2). These frames have a peculiar phenomenological status. We employ them pre-cognitively, but, when asked, we are always aware of the fictionality of a particular frame. As Merrell states, we never say, “In this fiction with respect to which I have suspended my disbelief...” (22). Because of the way in which we slip easily into fictional schema, we can oscillate seamlessly between fictional worlds and real worlds, somehow making careful and autonomic psychological distinctions between the two states (cf. 24-6).

Taken collectively, I’d like to now summarize the features of what I believe allows for the “as if” to become real in our minds:

1. Plausibility, either ontologically or narratively;
2. Intersubjectivity;
3. Repetition;
4. Belief, a perception or event felt as real;
5. The normal psychological process of distinguishing the “as if” from the real.

Taken together, I would offer that these constitute what many have called “make-believe.” To “make-believe” is to engage with something as if it is true, to give it truth value on a conscious level. The above criteria, I would offer, are sufficient for making believe and for, on a more extended level, rendering the world of the “as if” true in a more-than-fictional sense.

To employ a familiar example, think of children’s games of make-believe. When my daughter pretends to be a fairy princess, she actively believes in fairy princesses while also segregating that belief from other bodily and psychological schema. If such play is intersubjective and repeated—as it often is—it can become even more real to my daughter and her friends.

I am not arguing, of course, that fairy princesses can become real to my daughter. They rarely do. And this is principally because they lack plausibility and even a potential narrative or ontological match with the real world. And yet, on a very basic level, even this example demonstrates the positive role that make-

believe plays in allowing us to enact scenarios without suffering their real consequences. This is, of course, the notion of play-as-rehearsal, made by primatologists, psychologists, and even Appiah (see Appiah 105-6). It is also at the root of Appiah's notion of idealization and heuristics, whereby we can model systems and ideas "as if" they were real, imagining them and even enacting such models in a controlled way.

With respect to ethics, however, something more is asked. If we are to treat an individual as virtuous, or a collective *as if* they are equal, or a system *as if* it is just, then all five of the above conditions must be met. For an individual to eventually manifest a certain virtue, they must not only be labelled as such repeatedly, but they themselves must also cognitively entertain such a label as potentially true, and, moreover, believe it to be true *long enough for it to become so*. A fiction becomes real if we collectively treat it as real for a sufficient period of time.

Arguably, then, the boundary between fiction and reality is, as many of us already experience it, quite fuzzy (see, e.g., Merrell 36). Fictions can *become* true, at least socially, if they have traction with reality, are repeated, and allow for collective belief. Such fictions need not be correspondently true at the moment of their utterance or thought; rather, they are potentially true if certain conditions are met.

This account of virtue labeling and aesthetic experience, I would offer, fills in a critical lacuna in the work of fictionalists like Vaihinger, Appiah, and Alfano, as well as aesthetic theorists like Walton. (It may also have some bearing on epistemological discussions of fictionalism.) Fictionalists are right to say, that, normatively, fictions have value. But they leave open the ways in which fictions ultimately become real. And aesthetic theorists like Walton give powerful accounts of imagination and make-believe, but do not account for the ways in which such make-believe can become even more real in the minds of individuals and collectives. By offering an explanation for how ideas become real in individuals and groups, particularly ethical and cultural concepts, we can better understand the mechanisms behind ethical labeling, cultural acceptance of clearly arbitrarily defined cultural norms (like sports rules), and even social acceptance of certain memes and norms of discourse. What is required, for each, is a synergism between plausibility, community, repetition, belief, and framing.

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