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The Will to Make-Believe: Religious Fictionalism, Religious Beliefs, and the Value of Art

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I explore some of the reasons why, under specific circumstances, it may be rational to make-believe or imagine certain religious beliefs. Adopting a jargon familiar to certain contemporary philosophers, my main concern here is to assess what reasons can be given for adopting a fictionalist stance towards some religious beliefs. My understanding of fictionalism does not involve solely a propositional attitude but a broader stance, which may include certain acts of pretence. I also argue that a plausible reason to be fictionalist about a specific set of religious beliefs and practices has to do with the value of some artistic creations; namely, those that require the adoption of a religious point of view for their understanding.

In his 'sermon on justification by faith', William James defends the view that under very specific conditions, it is acceptable, that is, rational, to believe in undecidable propositions as 'our passional nature' dictates.[1] For considerations resembling those used by Pascal to justify his wager and with similar reference to religious beliefs, James suggests that there are cases in which a person may decide to follow a specific option because of their inclinations *and* because of the expected possible advantages. In this paper, I explore some of the reasons why, under specific circumstances, it may be rational to *make-believe* or *imagine* certain religious beliefs or, better, to imaginatively assume a religious view of the world involving a series of religious beliefs.[2] Adopting a jargon familiar to certain contemporary philosophers, my main concerns here are: (1) to draw several new general distinctions between different forms of fictionalism, and (2) to assess what reasons can be given for adopting a fictionalist stance towards certain religious beliefs.[3] The 'fictionalist stance' is here understood as not solely involving propositional attitudes such as entertaining that P or imagining that P—both in senses to be specified

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1 William James, 'The Will to Believe', in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1897/1979).

2 James' paper was mostly concerned with beliefs he thought not always being justified by evidence, whilst in the case of certain religious beliefs, I assume that we have good evidence to believe them to be false.

3 See Mark Kalderon (ed.), *Fictionalism in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) and Mark Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009) for introductions to fictionalism.

—but as also involving, depending on the area to which the fictionalist stance is applied, pretended actions.

The fictionalist solution delineated in this paper stems from a personal predicament that I believe I share with other people. The origin of my predicament comes from an apparent tension between the following three points: 1. certain grounding religious beliefs, i.e., existential claims about the existence of the divine, and practices are rationally unacceptable and therefore should not be seriously believed; 2. such religious beliefs and practices have been pivotal in the generation of rich and artistically valuable cultural traditions; and 3. the desire to appreciate some of the artistic works belonging to certain religious traditions despite the irrationality, falsity or even immorality of the beliefs that such works presuppose, aim to glorify, idolatrise, etc. Even if a subset of religious beliefs concerning the existence of a supernatural reality may be made consistent in relation to each other, it seems that we have good evidential reasons to believe that they should be ultimately rejected. I will not argue in favour of these claims in this paper, but rather assume them as a starting point.

The paper is divided into two parts, the first mainly concerned with the illustration of a kind of fictionalism suitable to my scope and the second focused on what I take to be an appealing reason to adopt this specific kind of fictionalism to certain religious beliefs.[4] The first part comprises two sections (1.1 and 1.2). In the first sub-section (1.1), I define a type of fictionalism, hypothetical fictionalism, and two understandings of the specific attitude the fictionalist stance may prescribe towards certain religious beliefs and practices. I also clarify, in the context of the current literature on religious language, the type of religious claims to which the fictionalist strategy should be applied. In the second subsection (1.2), I discuss the role of imagination and entertaining in the fictionalist stance. In particular, I clarify their relation to other similar attitudes such as acceptance and holding-true. In the first subsection of the second part (2.1), I explore two main lines of reasoning aimed at justifying the adoption of what I call religious hypothetical fictionalism. I will suggest that a promising reason for adopting religious hypothetical fictionalism is connected to the idea that religious beliefs may disclose to us a system of beliefs conducive to or even essential for the appreciation of beautiful works of art.

The main structure of the argument I will develop more in detail can be summarised as follows:

(1) Belief in certain religious propositions (as those involving the existence of certain supernatural entities) is irrational or unjustified.[5] (Assumption)

(2) Some weaker forms of cognitive-assent to these religious propositions and a certain form of engagement with the practices based on them are required for us to properly appreciate religious art. (The forms of weaker cognitive-assent are

[4] Other works on religious fictionalism include Robin Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1996), chapter 6; Andrew Eshleman, 'Can an Atheist Believe in God?', *Religious Studies* 41, 2 (2005), pp. 183–199; Christopher Jay, 'The Kantian Moral Hazard Argument for Religious Fictionalism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 75, 3 (2014), pp. 207–232; and Natalja Deng, 'Religion for Naturalists', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78, 2 (2015), pp. 195–214. These works discuss various kinds of reasons to adopt a fictionalist stance different from the one defended in 2.1.

[5] I will use throughout the paper the expressions 'religious beliefs' and 'religious propositions' interchangeably, unless when specifically stated.

specified in 1.1 and 1.2, a discussion on the appreciation of religious art is offered in 2.1)

(3) We have good reasons to appreciate religious art. (Assumption)

(4) So, given, (2) and (3), we have good reasons to adopt certain weaker forms of cognitive-assent to certain religious propositions and practices.

(5) So, given (1) and (4), we have good reasons to adopt certain weaker forms of cognitive-assent to certain religious propositions and practices but not believe them.[6]

In the last concluding section (2.2), I discuss some objections to the fictionalist solution to the aforementioned predicament.

Part I

1.1. The Varieties of Fictionalism and Religion Language

An initial understanding of the fictionalist strategy (towards a certain area A) can be put as follows: in the case that A is considered an area of discourse, i.e., possible world-talk, mathematical object-talk, etc., fictionalism may either 1. propose that the best description of the general attitude already adopted towards A is the attitude adopted in the case of fiction-talk or 2. prescribe to adopt towards A the attitude adopted in the case of fiction-talk.[7] This initial understanding is related to the familiar formulation of fictionalism; fictionalism about a specific area A has been presented as coming in two varieties: as a prescription to adopt a specific attitude towards some of the sentences or claims made within A, in which case it is called revolutionary fictionalism, or as a description, in terms of a fiction, of the commitments that sentences or claims made within A, in which case it is called hermeneutic fictionalism.[8] These two forms of fictionalism have thus in common a reference to the attitude(s) that we adopt towards what we recognise to be fictional. Such a minimal characterisation of fictionalism does not, in itself, also imply a specific view on the nature of fictional claims or of the attitudes we apply to them. However, the theoretical appeal of the fictionalist stance may decrease if we associate it with an analysis of fictional claims that involve undesired commitments; in particular, those commitments we wanted to avoid by adopting the fictionalist strategy in the first place. For instance, if we adopted fictionalism about possible worlds only because we took

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6 I own this formulation of my argument to a 'sympathetic anonymous referee'.

7 Not everyone has described fictionalism in this way: for instance, Richard Joyce characterised his version of moral fictionalism as involving the belief that moral claims are literally false. See Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), at p. 185. In my view, Matti Eklund's indifferentism can count as a form of fictionalism, to the degree that we would also hold that such an attitude—an attitude of indifference towards the truth-value of the claims at issue—be relevantly similar, if not identical, to the attitude we already assume towards fictional discourse. See Matti Eklund, 'Fiction, Indifference, and Ontology', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 71, 3 (2005), pp. 557–579.

8 See Jason Stanley, 'Hermeneutic Fictionalism', in P. French and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XXV: Figurative Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 36–71.

claims about possible worlds to be problematic for such and such reasons, then if by including fictionalism and thus also a reference to a fictional attitude or fictional claims in our analysis we were thereby committed to possible worlds, then we would not be justified in adopting a fictionalist strategy for dealing with possible worlds (this does not exclude the possibility of having other reasons to prefer one variety of fictionalism over other theoretical approaches to possible worlds). Applying a fictionalist strategy to religious beliefs does not thereby imply the belief that religious claims are false. However, part of the appeal of religious fictionalism stems from the belief that religious claims, in particular those involving the existence of supernatural entities, are ultimately false.

The category of revolutionary fictionalism can be further refined. For instance, the 'revolutionary' prescription may be non-categorical: even if the general reasons for adopting a specific stance were sufficiently general, the prescription to adopt the fictionalist stance may be valid only for a limited amount of time. According to this form of fictionalism, call it hypothetical or contextualist fictionalism (of a revolutionary type), the fictionalist stance may not be prescribed at all times in which we would have general and context-independent reasons to adopt the stance. This hypothetical (or contextualist) fictionalism, *contra* a categorical revolutionary form of fictionalism, does not prescribe that we should always assume a fictionalist stance towards a specific area of discourse but only that the adoption of such an attitude may be circumstantiated and, more importantly, temporally delimitated. An alternative view, categorical fictionalism, also recognises that there may be circumstantial reasons for adopting a fictional stance, but the characterising claim, *qua* categorical fictionalism, is that there are reasons to always adopt such a stance. For instance, a moral fictionalist may claim that so long as the reasons we have to be moral hold, we should always be moral in our lives despite the falsity of moral claims and thus always be applying the fictionalist stance to moral claims. Hypothetical fictionalism suggests that the circumstantial reasons behind its prescriptions should apply only at certain times (or for a limited amount of time). For instance, a fictionalist stance may be recommended not absolutely but only for certain tasks. More specifically, suppose that we have *pro tanto* reasons to appreciate religious works of art that require imagining certain religious beliefs as being true—that is, adopting a fictionalist stance to certain religious beliefs. It may happen that, given the specific character of religious beliefs, although we have always reasons to enjoy art, the fictionalist attitude towards certain religious beliefs should not be always adopted. Admittedly, the distinction between hypothetical and categorical fictionalism is not watertight: for instance, under a different understanding of 'the reasons for adopting a fictionalist stance', the difference between the two types of revolutionary fictionalism vanishes. In fact, as soon as we recognise that the reasons for prescribing the adoption of a stance may include a temporal element, we may simply say that sometimes we have reasons to be revolutionary fictionalists (without drawing a further distinction between types of revolutionary fictionalism). However, the previous distinction may be better seen as a useful heuristic tool aimed at stressing the importance of the temporal dimension and the limitation of the fictionalist prescription that will be discussed in the case of religious beliefs.

A stronger point of departure from the contemporary wisdom on fictionalism is that what I called the fictionalist *stance* does not involve only a propositional attitude or an attitude to be applied to beliefs or sentences. In fact, I take it that a fictionalist stance may involve a variety of other components. For instance, the fictionalist stance may include a broader policy towards aspects of our cultural lives that may go beyond what is understood as beliefs

expressed in a propositional form.[9] More specifically, another component that a revolutionary fictionalist stance may prescribe is a specific policy of actions, for example, to playact certain actions, the complete character of which may not be fully captured in propositional form. Pretence play is an activity that can be described using propositions, but the activity itself is not a belief. A fictionalist stance may involve visualising that certain events from the past are happening or thinking of a specific object in the same way in which we would think of, say, a fictional character. More generally, a fictionalist stance may involve prescriptions concerning the propositional attitudes to be applied to certain propositions in an area of discourse, along with different and active forms of engagement with certain areas. The reason for this broader characterisation of fictionalism will be clearer in what follows, but, as an anticipation, we may think of the domain to which fictionalism is intended to be applied here: religion. If the fictionalist stance is applied to a religion, instead of simply to some religious beliefs, then we should take into account the fact that there are certain religious activities and practices that do not involve only beliefs and sentences.[10] These other activities and practices may be justified by certain religious beliefs, as the creation of artistic artefacts or the performance of rituals. For example, the creation of a sand mandala (a practice) is performed to express a belief in impermanence, but the activity is not itself a belief. Additionally, framing fictionalism in terms of a stance is helpful because religions frequently do not suggest only a well-defined set of beliefs but rather an entire point of view on the world and the nature of man, which is supposed to have moral consequences; in other terms, a comprehensive stance.[11]

In the rest of this section, I will focus on the application of a hypothetical fictionalist stance to religious beliefs and leave the specification of other aspects of the stance to the next section. Additionally, I will not have much to say about the hermeneutic version of fictionalism applied to religious claims, even though a version of such a theory does have theoretical appeal. My reason for focusing on a prescriptive version of fictionalism is that the type of religious beliefs (or practices) to which I will apply the fictionalist strategy do not seem to already have, as essential parts of their meaning, fictional content nor are they generally uttered (intentionally) to express fictional content.[12] In fact, a plausible option in the debate on religious language is that at least certain general claims made by theologians about the nature and existence of the divine are generally uttered with the intention of being taken literally or, at least, as representing reality. Reinterpretations of the meaning of certain religious sentences, of what is said through them, or the specific speaker's meaning associated to them in terms of an intentional expression of a fiction do not seem to be promising to me. My claim is not that all ascriptions of certain properties to the divine are to be understood in the same sense in which we use

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[9] Provided that talk in terms of propositions is the best way to discuss the content of beliefs.

[10] I will not even attempt to propose a definition of 'religion'. However, I take it that almost all recent definitions would recognise that a religion involves both practical and theoretical aspects. See Kevin Schilbrack, 'What Isn't Religion?', *The Journal of Religious Studies*, 93, 3 (2013), pp. 291–318.

[11] Michael Tanner raised a similar point in the case of morality in his early criticism of Kendall Walton's discussion of imaginative resistance. See Michael Tanner, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality (II)', *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* 68 (1994), pp. 51–66.

[12] For an introduction to the debate on the nature of religious language, see William Alston, 'Religious Language', in William J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 220–244; and Michael Scott, *Religious Language* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

related predicates in other contexts; that is, religious ascriptions to the divine always retain their literal meaning. Rather, my point is simply that some sense can be made of at least some ascriptions of properties to the divine—'the divine exists', 'God is omnipotent', 'Buddha reached the enlightenment'—and that such ascriptions are representational in that they can be judged to be either true or false and are either true or false independently of us. This assumption is compatible with the view that Michael Scott calls moderate expressionism about religious language: certain religious claims are conventionally used to represent some alleged religious fact and also express a non-cognitive attitude towards the divine, whether of approval or disapproval.[13] Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that all instances of religious language and speech are to be understood as being representational: invocations in petitionary prayers, chants, parts of a ritual, certain ceremonies and so on are better understood as non-representational. Moreover, religious speech is frequently performative, as in wedding ceremonies or curses, and this type of discourse is not better understood as being descriptive. Therefore, conceding the point that certain general religious claims aiming at describing general features of the divine are meaningful and can be either true or false, what theoretical role can the specific fictionalist strategy at issue here play?

1.2. Religious Hypothetical Fictionalism and Make-Believe

One of the characterising features of the (religious-hypothetical-revolutionary) fictionalist stance discussed here involves a prescription to adopt the stance we already assume towards works of fiction—hence the name 'fictionalism'—to the general religious claims specified in the previous section. It is not essential for adopting a fictional stance towards a certain area of discourse that the claims within such an area are already considered false. Also, it is important to keep in mind that the description of the divine entities to which the fictionalist stance can be applied does not have to represent one or more personal agents. Rather, the divine may be said to be impersonal, as for example the Dharma and the laws of Karma in Buddhism.[14] For instance, a Buddhist hypothetical fictionalism about the laws of Karma may prescribe the assumption of the fictionalist stance towards claims about these laws. In what follows, I will discuss a general version of religious hypothetical fictionalism, the details of which will depend on the religion to which the stance is applied. In principle, there can be a hypothetical fictionalism about Catholicism, hypothetical fictionalism about Theravada Buddhist, and so on. The particular reasons for adopting the fictionalist stance will vary in relation to the religion at issue and the extension of the stance. More specifically, we may want to be fictionalists about only certain parts of the theological claims made by a religious group without thereby assuming a fictionalist stance towards the rituals and actions belonging to such a religion. For instance, strange as it could sound, we may be fictionalists only about the immaculateness of the Virgin Mary and also think that a Christian marriage is a real marriage, not just a fictional or symbolic one.

The attitude towards beliefs prescribed by the fictionalist stance has been subject to various discussions in the recent literature, but less or nothing has been said regarding certain non-

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[13] Scott, *Religious Language,* pp. 71–85.

[14] See Paul J. Griffiths, 'Nontheistic Conceptions of the Divine', in William J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 58–79; and Mark Siderits, *Buddhism As Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007).

propositional aspects of the general fictionalist stance.[15] I suspect that the reason principally has to do with some of the areas to which the fictionalist strategy has been applied so far: mathematical objects, possible worlds, propositions, fictional characters, scientific models, and so on. However, religion is a more complex phenomenon in the sense that the adjective 'religious' has been used to described a broad variety of items belonging to different ontological categories, i.e., actions, experiences, beliefs, and so on. Among the many attitudes in terms of which the fictionalist strategy can be specified, I will consider entertaining and make-believe in turn. The theoretical function of the attitude of 'entertaining' can be understood as being similar to that of acceptance, intended as an attitude that does not involve belief.[16] To clarify the difference between belief and acceptance, Jonathan Cohen claims that if an agent believes that something is the case, then such a person is disposed to feel that what she believes is true.[17] On the contrary, if an agent accepts that something is the case, then this person has (even implicitly) adopted a mental policy to the effect that for a certain well-determined period of time, this person includes a particular proposition among the premises of her practical or theoretical reasoning. According to Cohen, believing something is a spontaneous disposition to feel that something is the case, whereas acceptance is an attitude assumed voluntarily, as when we plan some future action or consider a counterfactual situation without thereby holding that such a situation is real.[18] Pascal Engel also distinguishes between acceptance$_1$ and acceptance$_2$, where the former involves assenting to a proposition and holding that that proposition is likely to be true.[19] Acceptance$_2$ is voluntary, does not involve a belief in the truth of what we accept$_2$, is context dependent, and is not a matter of degree. However, Engel's emphasis on the pragmatic role of acceptance$_{2,}$ may constitute a reason for maintaining that the characterising fictionalist attitude should not be acceptance$_2$. The reason is that our engagement with fictions do not always have to be for pragmatic reasons, where by this I simply mean that sometimes the engagement with fictions can also be just for its own sake. Thus, given the commitment to the idea that fictionalism prescribes the adoption of a strategy towards an area of discourse that is similar to what we (would or should) do in relation to a fiction, hypothetical fictionalism would better prescribe a different attitude. Although originally proposed in a different context, a viable alternative for the role of the characterising fictionalist attitude is Uriah Kriegel's account of entertaining.[20] In particular, Kriegel claims that 'disengaged entertaining' is different from believing and desiring because of entertaining's lack of phenomenal orientation on either the truth, in the case of belief, or the goodness, in the case of desire, of the propositions that are entertained. Kriegel claims that entertaining is also characterised by varying degrees of phenomenal intensity. In particular, the degree to which an agent can entertain a proposition is analogous to the varying degree of vividity in which we have an

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[15] An example is Chris J. Daly, 'Fictionalism and the Attitudes', *Philosophical Studies*, 139 (2008), pp. 423–440, where fictionalism is understood as an 'account of the attitude we should take to the sentences of [a subject matter] S'.

[16] An account of fictionalism in terms of 'entertaining' is presented in Andrea Sauchelli, 'Buddhist Reductionism, Fictionalism About the Self, and Buddhist Fictionalism', *Philosophy East and West,* 66, 4 (forthcoming). The following part on 'entertaining' is partially based on this paper.

[17] Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)

[18] In this regard, see also Michael Bratman, 'Reflection, Planning and Temporally Extended Agency', in his *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[19] Pascal Engel, 'Believing, Holding True, and Accepting', *Philosophical Explorations*, 1, 2 (1998), pp. 140–151.

[20] Uriah Kriegel, 'Entertaining as a Propositional Attitude: A Non-Reductive Characterization', *American Philosophical Quarterly,* 50, 1 (2013), pp. 1–22.

experience. Such a phenomenal intensity varies in relation to the clarity and alertness with which the attitude is manifested in our consciousness. Similar to Engel's acceptance$_2$, entertaining is voluntary, context dependent, and is an attitude the adoption of which by an agent does not necessarily imply the agent's aiming at truth, although it can certainly be used to discover certain truths. A typical instance of entertaining a proposition may have conceptual or phenomenological priority over occasions of visualising. For instance, we may entertain a proposition without thereby visually imagining the content of such a proposition, i.e., when we entertain certain propositions in the process of verifying the validity of an argument.

If the notion of entertaining is deemed not thick enough or too emotionally uncommitted to characterise our engagement with fiction, it can be supplemented (or replaced) by very similar notions, such as pretence and make-believe. These terms are immediately associated, in the philosophical subconscious of contemporary analytic philosophers, with Kendall Walton's approach to representational works of art. Because Walton's account has been repeated *ad nauseam* in recent years, I will only briefly outline a couple of ways in which his understanding of make-believe and fiction can be applied to the case of religion.[21] According to Walton, a fictional representation represents its content by prescribing imaginings about it. Similar to children's games of make-believe, fictional works prescribe their participants to imagine certain objects in certain ways. A children's game of make-believe may prescribe us to imagine of a door in the kitchen that it is the gate of Mordor from the *Lord of the Rings*. Similarly, a novel such as *The Name of the Rose* prescribes us to imagine of Northern Italy that it was visited by Adso of Melk. Such prescriptions to imagine can take various forms, such as sentences in a novel or other types of stipulations concerning the role that real objects may play in a game of make-believe. For instance, in the Catholic mass, intended as part of a game of make-believe, we can interpret the sacrament of the Eucharist as involving the prescription to imagine of the hosts and vine that they are the body and blood of Christ, respectively. In this context, the role played by a host is that of a prop in a game of (religious) make-believe. In turn, a prop is something that generates fictional truths—what is true according to the game of make-believe at issue—given certain principles of generation. These principles are generally taken to be implicit or explicit and as depending crucially on the type of game at issue. A principle of generation is a principle that specifies the sufficient conditions determining whether a given proposition is true in a fictional world. This account of fiction in terms of make-believe is frequently coupled with a view of reference to fictional objects that relies on the notion of pretence.[22] According to this approach, games of make-believe do not necessarily prescribe to imagine of real objects that they are in a certain way or that all alleged acts of reference are genuine. In fact, in engaging with, say, the biblical story of the *Ecclesiastes*, intended as a fictional representation, alleged references to Koheleth the Teacher may not involve reference to a real or fictional character intended either as a real entity of this world or as an abstract or non-existent object.[23] More specifically, alleged acts of reference to Koheleth can be seen as involving a pretence: the author of the *Ecclesiastes* and its audience are simply

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21 Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

22 See Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*. Edited by John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) for an early account to this effect.

23 See Paisley Livingston and Andrea Sauchelli, 'Philosophical Perspectives on Fictional Characters', *New Literary History,* 42, 2 (2011), pp. 337–360 for a recent survey of the literature on fictional characters.

pretending that 'Koheleth the Teacher' refers to a real person. Alternatively, 'Koheleth the Teacher' can be taken as referring to an abstract object, the existence of which may either depend (ontologically) on the creative acts of fiction-making or on nothing but itself.[24] In the latter case, the religious-fictional name would refer to an entity that is ontologically similar to numbers or other abstract objects. These are not the only options available on the market in the metaphysics of fictional entities, but adjudicating the best theory is not immediately or crucially relevant to my project. Suffice it to say that plausible solutions exist regarding the way in which we can understand religious claims and alleged reference to religious objects as being fictional.

Whether we understand the prescription of the fictionalist in terms of entertaining or make-believe and pretence, we may immediately question whether we can preserve the motivational and inspirational aspects associated with a religion. In other words, the worry is that religious prescriptions, if understood as being grounded only on fictional stories, would no longer be capable of fulfilling some of their functions. More specifically, the worry is that if, for example, we simply make-believe that God exists, then religious-moral prescriptions that seem to be grounded in the alleged 'real' existence of God would become empty. In reply, one point is that the objection, based on the eventual loss of the motivational force behind moral beliefs, may be true in those cases in which morality is already understood as being grounded in the divine. However, it is not necessary to think that all religious believers also believe that the source or foundation of morality is the divine. Additionally, even if the divine is taken to be the foundation of morality, what motivates us to be moral may not be the fact that the divine is morality's foundation but rather certain emotions such as empathy and benevolence. It may be true that some motivational aspects of religious prescriptions would have to be adjusted or re-thought in case such prescriptions would come to be considered as deriving from a fictional game of make-believe, but, after all, one of the points of the initial predicament was that many religious beliefs are false. So, our atheist has probably already found the source of her moral (and other) prescriptions somewhere else (if at all). More on the reasons for adopting a religious fictional stance can be found in the next section.

Part II

2.1. Arguments for Hypothetical Fictionalism

The fictionalist stance should be applied to a specific set of religious beliefs and practices. In a way similar to when pictures of relatives or loved ones staring at us may motivate us to perform good actions or refrain from doing certain alleged immoral actions, we may take that imagining that a divine entity or order exists may help certain people fulfil their moral resolutions.[25] Let us call a given set of existential beliefs about the divine (and some of its

[24] See Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) for a creationist account of fictional objects.

[25] The similarity is based on the consideration that pictures of our beloved may move us to act as if a specific person were with us at the moment of action. The indirect influence of the person in the picture would be manifested in our imagining of them that they were with us at the moment of action. For a more articulated (and plausible) account of the sense of proximity in photography, see Mikael Pettersson, 'Depictive Traces: On the Phenomenology of Photography', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 69, 2 (2011), pp. 185–196.

general features) and the bridge principles that connect these claims to moral precepts 'RB' and the set of practices based on such principles 'RP'. Let us also suppose that RB contains some false beliefs, namely those concerning the existence of certain divine entities. Suppose further that we find some of the consequences of RP or RP themselves to be morally valuable. Another step of the argument is that some of the beliefs in RB may still retain some motivational force if imagined or entertained, that is, if we apply the fictionalist stance to them. This last point can be strengthened by assuming that the fictional stance may also prescribe, when moral beliefs are at stake, entertaining certain motivational counterfactuals having the following structure: if you had to decide whether you should do A instead of B, then you should act by imagining or entertaining the beliefs contained in RB. One example would be 'if you had to decide whether you should kill John or let him go, make your decision and act imagining that God exists and that He is watching you'. The argument in support of religious hypothetical fictionalism would also likely include the claim that at least the existential beliefs concerning the divine in RB are false. However, given that there are pragmatic and/or moral reasons to perform some of the practices in RP (or their consequences), we may salvage some of the motivational and justificatory power we would have were the relevant claims in RB true by entertaining or imagining them, provided that fictional or make-believed scenarios can motivate us. Hypothetical fictionalism prescribes us such a stance towards the beliefs in RB, to the degree that this stance is conducive to the performance of RP. Thus, we have reasons to apply the fictionalist stance to the beliefs contained in RB.[26]

This rationale for religious hypothetical fictionalism clearly resembles certain versions of moral fictionalism, where the reasons given for applying the fictional attitude to certain moral beliefs can be connected also to the utility (reasonability, etc.) of retaining a moral system or order, if not simply to convince people to support some morally valuable social changes. However, it has to be emphasised that the two types of fictionalism may substantially diverge. More specifically, the fictionalism advocated here is only hypothetical, in the sense explained previously, and thus does not prescribe that in all cases we should assume the same stance towards RB. For instance, the goods achievable by implementing RP may be limited in scope and time, for example, in calming oneself before an important interview or sport competition; thus, once the goods have been achieved, we do not have reasons to continue imagining or entertaining that, for example, God exists. On the contrary, it can be argued that if we are bound to act morally at all, then we are always bound to act morally at all times and thus that if imagining the beliefs in RB helps us to act morally, then we should always maintain the fictionalist stance. Certain religious claims may be worth entertaining if, for instance, they might help people find the motivation to be charitable, benevolent, or equal and just (as in the case of the abolition of slavery in America). However, I take it that the previous argument is appealing to the degree that the choice of the content of the RP does not lead to unwelcome consequences, i.e., holy wars, witch hunts, lynching, etc. Still, even with this proviso, I am still sceptical of the appropriateness of religious hypothetical fictionalism as the best or good long term incentive for morality. A continuous reliance, even for small acts of charity, on the wrong type of motivation, e.g., imagining that we should accumulate more karmic 'points' to avoid hell or bad reincarnations or that all human beings are equal because created by the same God, may hinder the development of the right type of moral

[26] The details of the previous reasoning may be easily varied in relation to the preferred normative theory in ethics.

motivation and displays of 'real' kindness (if it exists) to other people. I do not think that all human beings deserve equal respect *because* we are all 'God's children', although this idea may have been beneficial in, say, the rightful abolition of slavery. The fictionalist stance may be more appropriate for certain people whose character is either so defective as to be completely devoid of any type of 'moral sentiments' and thus in need of any available moral incentive or for those who are already strong-willed enough so as not to end up deluded into believing false stories as a result of continuous exposure to them.[27] Obviously the issue is more complex than what can be appropriately addressed here, and a better assessment of this line of reasoning depends on the specific religion or denomination at issue and ultimately rests on psychological studies on the effects of religions.[28] Still, my general (and perhaps too broad) claim can be put as follows: reference to a supernatural reality to ground certain moral claims, assuming that there are no supernatural realities, can be an ingenious trick and possibly a useful temporary stratagem. However, rational agents should aim at a sort of justification for morality that does not involve mass deception. I do not have space to argue in favour of such a principle here.

A more appealing line of reasoning in favour of (a properly qualified version of) religious hypothetical fictionalism starts from the appreciation of art and beauty, a relatively neglected advantage of entertaining religious beliefs in the current literature. In fact, to my mind, the appreciation of the vast literary, architectural, and general artistic patrimony that is related to certain religious traditions constitutes one of the most serious rationale for thinking that some religious beliefs are still worth being entertained or imagined as being true. Thus, my point is that a neglected but very plausible reason for adopting a hypothetical fictionalist stance towards certain religious beliefs relies on the possibility that entertaining or imagining certain religious beliefs would thereby allow us to better appreciate certain works of art and feel aesthetic pleasure. In fact, many religious works of art could not be (fully) appreciated if they were not properly understood from within a specific religious perspective. The details of the reasoning behind this idea can be spelled out in the following way. The appreciation of certain works of art requires the adoption of a certain perspective or point of view from which the artwork can be appreciated. This does not solely require the often-discussed condition of perceiving and judging works of art through their appropriate artistic category or after an appropriate critical retrieval.[29] In fact, the proper appraisal of certain works of art may require that we adjust ourselves also to the belief system within which such an object was conceptually located (perhaps this last condition is already a necessary condition for 'perceiving a certain work through the right category' or for correctly applying the right category to the perception or judgements of a work of art).[30] This adjustment or re-orientation may involve the adoption of

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27 A similar proviso can be made in relation to the accessibility to violent or immoral fictions.

28 A starting point is Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2005).

29 *Loci classici* are Kendall L. Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review,* 79, 3 (1970), pp. 334–367 and Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Object*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). The broad considerations advanced in the above text are meant to be neutral in regard to the debate on the role of artistic and aesthetic general principles in art criticism. See George Dickie, *Evaluating Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Matthew Kieran, *Revealing Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); and Matthew Kieran and Dominic Lopes (eds.), *Knowing Art* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006) for relevant references to the contemporary debate.

30 A sample is the notion of 'period eye' in Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972/88).

certain propositions we do not believe, among them religious beliefs. A particular family of categories of art is that of religious art; that is, art that is properly classified as having a specific religious character for a variety of reasons. The religious character of a work is determined by its atmosphere, the particular sort of belief system presupposed to be adopted to understand the references made in the work, the persons represented in the work, and so on.[31] Examples include *St. Peter* in Rome, Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul*, Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955), the Buddhist temple complex *Tōdai-ji* (東大寺) in Nara, Saint John of the Cross' poem *La noche oscura del alma* (*Dark Night of the Soul*), and so on. As for many works of art worthy of the name, religious art may require an extensive imaginative exercise; an exercise that involves imagining or entertaining possibly alien belief systems full of presuppositions and details connected to theological and mythical nuances. For instance, certain works of art do not solely require us to know that the *raison d'être* of some of their details is connected to certain religious beliefs (i.e., the colours of certain Shinto temples) but also prescribe us to experience certain events in specific ways (as in the *Dark Night of the Soul*). In other words, one of the points of these works is that of inviting us to become part of a system of beliefs, and part of their artistic success can be related to their capacity of being successful in this function (as in religious music). The main general point is that there are cases in which we may be required to entertain or imagine certain religious beliefs as being true to properly appreciate and engage with works of religious art. This engagement may also involve an attempt, on the side of the audience, to picture us in situations in which it may not be completely possible to be anymore. For example, it is probably no longer possible to enter into certain Inca belief systems.[32] However, I think that the incapacity of a complete imaginative immersion in an alien belief system is common and should not be seen as particularly outlandish or problematic: a proper engagement with certain culturally distant works of art is a matter of degree and is never fully accomplished. As in the case of trying to understand certain properties possessed by certain temporally and culturally distant works of architecture, we can achieve only a partial understanding of the living conditions of a specific group of people who lived centuries ago and with an approach to the world radically different from ours. Still, an understanding of the conditions under which a work was created and the entertaining or imagining of some (or all) of the beliefs involved in the system of beliefs presupposed by the (authors of the) work—in the case at issue, specific religious beliefs—are connected to an informed, and arguably better, experience of the work of art in question.[33] Simply knowing that certain artistic choices were made because of a specific religious belief may not suffice in eliciting all the intended responses that an author intended to obtain from his audience. In fact, it can be thus argued that a proper understanding of a religious work requires a more committed mode of engagement with the work in question. In the case of architectural works such

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[31] I do not have a more precise definition of the essential features of what constitutes 'religious art'. There is probably no such a thing as religious art but rather various more specific genres of art having a religious character. However, leaving unspecified the notion of religious art will not affect the main points of the argument: I take it for granted that we have a sufficiently clear understanding of why certain works of art can be classified as religious.

[32] To use James' terminology, the Inca belief system is no more a live hypothesis (a real option) for us.

[33] See Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979/1980), chapter 4 for the idea that informed experience can be a crucial component of the aesthetic understanding of an architectural object.

as the Gothic cathedral of Chartres or the Basilica of Saint-Denis, architects, artists, and the people involved in their constructions had particular aims in mind and a specific public who was supposed to find their solutions functional and appropriate. To understand their work, we need to understand what the various designer-architects (for short, authors) intended to achieve and the belief systems to which they presupposed their audience adhered. Among the conditions of success for their projects, in fact, we should count the ways in which the authors of the works in question address the expectations shared by whoever is expected to experience their work. Given that these authors had in mind a specific public, we may expect that if we were able to put ourselves in a position to understand and imagine the conditions of success the authors had in mind, the resulting experience of the work will be enhanced. Ideally, an aesthetic experience accompanied by a more active (that is, imaginative) awareness of the system of beliefs that the designer(s) had in mind is enriched. Given the considerable amount of works of art inspired by religious beliefs, adopting a hypothetical fictionalist stance towards certain aspects of the religious beliefs in question would result in an increased level of understanding of the works in question and thus, probably, a more rewarding artistic and aesthetic experience. If we value art and beauty, as we should, then we have a *prima facie* reason for adopting a hypothetical fictionalist stance towards certain religious beliefs.

Some clarifications are needed at this point. Again, the character of hypothetical fictionalism is such that the fictionalist stance is not to be understood as solely including a propositional attitude, regardless of whether we characterise it as entertaining or make-believe. In fact, the fictionalist stance may also include acts of pretence that may better be characterised as not necessarily involving a propositional content. For instance, a proper appreciation of the architectural and aesthetic properties of a medieval castle—its majestic look, its aptness for resisting various attacks, its firmness, etc.— may require us to move and experience the building imaginatively.[34] Perceiving the difficulty of assaulting a fortress and the terrifying effect it may have been designed to elicit on its audience may require imagining being the potential assailants. This model of art appreciation, the details of which will differ depending on the type of work of art at issue, may be literally taken to involve a game of make-believe. In the case of the appreciation of a cathedral *qua* work of architecture, we may need to pretend to be (or take) part of a ceremony—if that is not going on at the moment of appreciation—and move through the building while entertaining or imagining that the cathedral were the place where a real communion with the divine can be (and is) achieved. We may have to make-believe (or entertain) that certain objects or events can really be 'sacred'. Additionally, the fictionalist is not going to deny that in the understanding of certain religious works of art, other non-religious elements will also have to be imagined or understood. Rather, the peculiar contribution of the religious hypothetical fictionalist is the prescription of the fictionalist stance towards those religious beliefs and practices that, for a variety of reasons, cannot be believed or sincerely performed. Another point I want to emphasise is that the hypothetical fictionalist stance is to be understood as being rational for so long as we are interested in an appreciative practice. As soon as our interest in the artistic experience is over, we do not have reasons to imagine religious beliefs as being true. This does not mean that we cannot imagine different religious-based moral systems: with certain exceptions, this can be done.

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[34] See Andrea Sauchelli, 'Functional Beauty, Architecture, and Morality: A Beautiful Konzentrationslager?', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 62, 246 (2012), pp. 128–147, in particular section III.

2.2 Objections and Conclusions

Religious hypothetical fictionalism may face an objection based on empirical studies on the nature of persuasion or belief change: if entertaining and imagining religious beliefs as being true may in the end cause us to believe certain (implausible) religious claims—for instance, that certain people are really divinely sanctioned 'impure'—then we may have precautionary reasons to avoid entertaining or imagining such beliefs in the first place. The effect of imagination on belief is even more powerful if the religious beliefs are presented as parts of a fictional story or narrative, and most of the great world religions provide such narratives.[35] Thus, perhaps the atheist should not follow the hypothetical fictionalist's suggestion to adopt the fictionalist stance. I call this objection the belief-contagion objection.[36]

As already hinted in various parts of the essay, I think that the above line of reasoning based on the 'dangerousness of religion' is well founded and constitutes a serious challenge to the type of fictionalism proposed here. Consequently, I agree that in the long run certain versions of religious hypothetical fictionalism may not be that appealing after all—in particular, those versions of hypothetical fictionalism based on particularly violent or cruel religions. However, the previous objection can be simply taken as hinting at a series of precautions to be adopted before starting a religious imaginative project. Moreover, perhaps the religious hypothetical fictionalist stance may be appropriate only for certain types of people; for instance, those with sufficient stability of character and maturity to be able to refrain from actually following (overly) irrational religious beliefs. In other words, religious hypothetical fictionalism should be adopted, even considering its partial and temporally limited scope, only by people capable of maintaining a certain distinction between beliefs simply entertained or imagined and those truly accepted as true. Additionally, the religious fictionalist may want to explore at the same time a variety of different traditions, as an antidote to eventual pernicious religious dogmas that may encrust her mental life.

To conclude, in this essay, I have explored how and whether the fictionalist stance, popular in other fields of inquiry, can help solve the predicament I discussed in the introduction. Religious hypothetical fictionalism can solve the predicament because of its prescription to 'only' imagine or entertain certain religious beliefs as being true without thereby committing ourselves to certain religious beliefs. To the degree that such imaginative exercises are carefully accompanied by reflective moments of distancing from possibly pernicious and contagious religious beliefs, I take it that such beliefs may still be of some use. Insofar as I am concerned, the best reason I can find to indulge in religious imaginative exercises is for aesthetic reasons.[37] Beauty is (for a limited time) well worth a Mass.

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[35] There is a specific literature on religious persuasion, but see Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock (eds.), *Narrative Impact* (Mahwah, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002) for a more general assessment of the influence of fictional (religious) narratives in everyday life. A specific example of the power of imagination in prompting religious beliefs is the well-known Jesuit manual of spiritual exercises written by Ignatius of Loyola.

[36] See Tamar Szabo Gendler, 'On The Relation Between Pretense and Belief', in Matthew Kieran and Dominic Lopes (eds.), *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 124–141; for the use of the term 'contagion' in the context of imaginative projects.

[37] Other reasons for adopting a hypothetical fictionalist stance may be related to an anthropological or sociological interest in certain religious forms of life.

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