

## In Defence of the Phenomenological Objection to Mental Fictionalism

Miklós Márton\* – János Tózsér\*\*


Received: 4 May 2019 / Accepted: 15 September 2019


*Abstract:* In this paper, we defend the main claims of our earlier paper “Mental Fictionalism as an Undermotivated Theory” (in *The Monist*) from Gábor Bács’s criticism, which appeared in his “Mental fictionalism and epiphenomenal qualia” (in *Dialectica*). In our earlier paper, we tried to show that mental fictionalism is an undermotivated theory, so there is no good reason to give up the realist approach to the folk psychological discourse. The core of Bács’s criticism consists in that our argumentation rests on an equivocation concerning the folk psychological concepts of conscious experiences. In our present argumentation, at first, we shortly recapitulate our earlier argumentation and Bács’s main objection to it. After that, we argue against the case of equivocation, claiming that it rests on a highly implausible and unsupported verificationist approach. Lastly, in answering another remark of Bács’s, we discuss the possibility of a realist mental fictionalism and conclude that it is an incoherent standpoint.

*Keywords:* mental fictionalism; folk psychology; mental antirealism; verificationism; conceptual dependence.

---

\* Eötvös Loránd University Budapest

 Corresponding author. Center for Theory of Law and Society, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, Bartók Béla str. 52/B, 2/2, Budapest, 1111, Hungary

 [marton@ajk.elte.hu](mailto:marton@ajk.elte.hu)

\*\* Hungarian Academy of Sciences

 Institute of Philosophy, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Ráday str. 26, Budapest, 1092 Hungary

 [jantozser@gmail.com](mailto:jantozser@gmail.com)



## 1. Introduction

In his paper “Mental Fictionalism and Epiphenomenal Qualia” (Bács 2018), Gábor Bács analyzed and criticized our earlier work “Mental Fictionalism as an Undermotivated Theory” in detail. In our earlier paper, we tried to show that mental fictionalism is an undermotivated theory, so there is no good reason to give up the realist approach to the folk psychological discourse.

In the present paper, we reply to Bács’s objections. At first, we recapitulate our earlier argumentation shortly. Secondly, we summarize Bács’s main objection to it. Thirdly, we argue that this objection fails. Lastly, in answering another remark of Bács’s, we discuss the possibility of realist mental fictionalism.

## 2. What is mental fictionalism and why is it undermotivated?

In our earlier paper, we treated mental fictionalism as a theory about folk psychological discourse. In this sense, it is a *pragmatic* theory: it concerns the *use* of folk psychological sentences, not the content or truth of them. Its core thesis states that when we utter sentences of folk psychology, we do not assert the truth-conditions of the propositional contents of these sentences; that is, we do not use such sentences to describe facts of our mental life, rather we use them for other goals. For example, for evaluating our fellows’ behavior or expressing emotions, or making as if we asserted something (see Márton, Tőzsér 2013, 627-28; and Demeter 2013).

To this extent, mental fictionalism is in contrast to those interpretations of the discourse which are committed to the fact-stating nature of the use of folk psychological sentences. Now, we strongly believe that this later realist interpretation is the *default view* of the pragmatics of this discourse. People in their non-philosophical moments take utterances of folk psychological sentences (mental state attributions to ourselves and to our fellows, explanations of their behaviors, etc.) as real fact-stating expressions. We normally think of these sentences as such that people use them with the intention to describe discourse-independent mental phenomena. Since the realist position is the default one, mental fictionalism as an antirealist view

must be an *error theory*: it claims that we are usually in error about the pragmatics of the discourse. This is the main point where it differs from the other two antirealist approaches, namely eliminativism and nonfactualism. Though all three can be viewed as an error theory, the other two versions locate the error not in the pragmatic properties of folk psychological sentences, but in their semantic ones. According to eliminativism, we are wrong in taking folk psychological sentences mainly true, and according to nonfactualism we are wrong in taking them to be contentful.

Since mental fictionalism is an error theory, a proponent thereof has to give us a reason why we should not commit ourselves to the realist interpretation of the discourse. She should tell a story *why it is misleading* to see the use of such sentences as stating facts about our real mental life. In short, there must be some motivations to endorse mental fictionalism.

Earlier we identified two conditions for having such a motivation: (a) One can doubt the existence of the entities postulated by folk-psychology, and (b) nevertheless, due to certain (mainly practical) considerations, one does not want to give up this discourse. Now, we argued that the first condition cannot be met. One cannot raise serious doubts about the existence of mental entities postulated by folk-psychology. After all, what else would be misleading in the default realist approach to folk-psychology? If someone had absolutely no doubt about the existence of mental phenomena, why would she want to take the use of its sentences as not intending to describe these phenomena? Especially if she truly does not want to give up the discourse.

Of course, on the surface, mental fictionalism is an ontologically neutral theory, because it deals only with pragmatics, or the use of folk psychological sentences rather than the truth of them. However, one can see now that in order to motivate the choice of this theory, one has to commit herself to the ontological position that the existence of mental entities is, at least, dubious. We think, therefore, that Bács is right when he writes that our objection against mental fictionalism “is an objection to *mental antirealism* in general” (Bács 2018, 302; emphasis in the original). All three antirealist views are committed negatively to the ontological status of mental phenomena, and fictionalism has the weakest form of this commitment. So, when we succeed in proving that it is not tenable, we also show it in the case of the other two stronger positions.

Naturally, the essential point of the question is whether we are right in claiming that the existence of mental entities does not raise serious doubts. In the original paper, we presented two considerations for this thesis. According to the first one, the existence of phenomenally conscious states and events cannot be doubted, because they are constituted by the experienced qualities during these states and events. In other words, conscious experiences are entirely constituted by the way they appear to us. Therefore, because one cannot meaningfully doubt whether what appears to her really does appear to her, one also cannot meaningfully doubt the existence of conscious experiences.

As for the second consideration, conscious experiences are paradigmatic mental entities, or they are even the only ones. We think only they can be called ‘mental’ in a fundamental and primary sense. As we wrote it:

According to our natural conviction, if a system or an organism, be it as complicated as you like, does not have any conscious experiences, that is, it does not undergo events that are something it is like for it to undergo, and so the world does not appear to it in any way, then we tend to treat this system or organism as an automat without a mental life. (Márton, Tőzsér 2013, 635)

Furthermore, we argued that other ‘mental’ entities count as mental only insofar as they bear some appropriate relationship to phenomenally conscious experiential states or events. That is, unconscious mental states (beliefs, non-occurrent desires and hopes, etc.) and processes can be counted as mental insofar as they stand in, for example, an inferential or dispositional relationship to conscious ones.

In sum, our argument for the undermotivation of mental fictionalism has the following logical structure:

- (1) The existence of conscious experiences does not raise any difficult ontological questions.
- (2) Conscious experiences constitute the totality, or at least the paradigmatic representative core, of mental entities described by folk psychology.
- (3) Therefore, the existence of mental entities described by folk psychology does not raise any difficult ontological questions. (1, 2)

- (4) Mental fictionalism is motivated if and only if (a) the existence of mental entities described by folk-psychology raises serious ontological questions, and (b) due to certain considerations, we do not want to give up this discourse.
- (C) Therefore, the fictionalist interpretation of folk psychology is undermotivated. (3, 4)

### 3. Bács's main objection

Bács's main case against our argumentation, or as he called it the 'phenomenological objection to mental fictionalism,' consists in claiming that it rests on an equivocation (Bács 2018, 303). He states that the first two premises of the argument cannot be jointly true if we stick to one and the same concept of conscious experience, and conversely: the premises could be equally true just in case the two concepts of conscious experience they contain are different. Since equivocation is not allowed in a sound argument, one of these premises must be false.

According to Bács, the first premise can be true only if by conscious experience we mean event-like phenomenally salient entities. In this interpretation, the content of the concept consists entirely in the spatiotemporal and phenomenal properties of such events: the phenomenal features of a conscious episode determine its type, i.e. whether it is pain, pleasure or an itch, while the spatiotemporal features of it determine which token of that type it is.

However, the second premise can be true if and only if the content of the concept of conscious experience in it contains further ingredients, namely the causal profile of that state. Bács thinks that folk psychological notions of the various conscious experiences entail the typical causal connections these states or events have. To use one of his examples: the folk psychological concept of itching contains in itself the allusion to the fact that by those who have this experience, itching causes scratching or at least the urge to do so (Bács 2018, 305). So, folk psychological concepts of conscious experiences are not exhausted by their spatiotemporal and phenomenal properties, but "are conceptually linked to their causes and effects" (Bács 2018, 303)—this is what Bács calls the Conceptual Dependency Thesis (CDT).

His main argument for CDT depends on our practice of attributing conscious mental states and events to our fellows.<sup>1</sup> We routinely do this and of course, in doing so we lean on observed behavior and circumstances as evidence. So far, so good. However, Bács goes further when he maintains that

there is no conceptually innocent, purely empirical evidence. Any evidence must be plugged into the concept of the thing it is evidence for. This should not come as a surprise, because evidence is an epistemic notion. What counts as evidence for X depends in part on what we know about X, and what we know about X is rolled into its concept. A necessary condition for being evidence for is this: Y is evidence for X only if X is conceived as (i.e. the concept of X means) such a thing that under normal circumstances if Y obtains it stands a good chance that X obtains; or alternatively, if it is not possible (or highly improbable, or whatever) that Y obtains but X fails to obtain. [...] So the concept of X must include the connection between X and Y, which constitutes the conceptual link, in order for Y to be able to count as evidence for X, and therefore, it will include Y. (Bács 2018, 304)

In short, Bács's reason for CDT is epistemological. He seems to think that the content of a predicate incorporates the way we get to know whether the predicate is instantiated in a certain context.

Let us turn to the first premise of our argument, i.e. the claim that the existence of conscious experiences does not raise any difficult ontological questions and see whether it can be true if we understand the notion of 'conscious experience' as involving CDT. Bács writes that "if conscious

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a further, minor argument that aims to support CDT in Bács's paper which alludes to linguistic evidence. There are a lot of expressions in natural language which refer to conscious experiences—sensations, perceptual states—which name the part of the body where the causes of these conscious states occurred, or the typical behavior caused by the states. However, as Bács himself hastily adds, this linguistic evidence is very weak, since "it is not always a good idea to take the meaning of ordinary expressions at face value" (Bács 2018, 304). We concur in this question: one should not draw metaphysical conclusions from the meanings of natural linguistic expressions, unless one also wants to achieve serious astronomical insights from the expression "the Sun comes up."

experiences are not entirely constituted by qualia [but also by causal connections], then the indubitable existence of qualia does not imply the indubitable existence of conscious experiences” (Bács 2018, 306). Causal relations are—at least according to most views of causation—empirical and are not, contrary to their phenomenological features, exhausted by their appearance to a subject. For this reason, one can be easily wrong about their existence. So, if a conscious experience is present just in case its usual causal connections are also present, then the existence of conscious experiences is by no means indubitable.

Bács supports this claim with a thought-experiment of the usual Twin-Earth kind. His Twin-Earth is a Leibnizian one, where conscious experiences of the inhabitants of this planet are causally totally isolated. They do not have any causal connections, including the ones our phenomenally identical counterpart conscious experiences have. However, notwithstanding this situation, the inhabitants have folk psychology which is exactly the same as ours. In their folk psychology there are mental predicates standing for conscious experiences and these include the allusion to causal connections like ours—at least according to Bács. From these premises Bács concludes that Twin-Earthers cannot make true assertions by these predicates, since they stand for nothing, as nothing satisfies the description contented in them.

In sum, the alleged equivocation consists in the fact that the first premise, if true, contains a notion of conscious experience in which there are entirely transparent events or states—which is why we cannot be wrong about their existence—while the second premise, if true, contains the folk psychological notion of conscious experience, which, in turn, is committed to CDT. You cannot substitute the two notions in the two premises *salva veritate*, therefore they are different concepts and the case of equivocation is sound.

#### 4. Objections to Bács’s objections

We think there is no equivocation in our argument; at least Bács’s objection does not prove that there is. Let us start with his first consideration, namely that folk psychological concepts of conscious experience would involve CDT.

As we saw, his main reason for this thesis consists in the assumption that the evidence we lean on when we attribute conscious experiences to our fellows are plugged into the very concepts we have of them. That is—as it can be seen from the above longer quotation—he supposes that the epistemic conditions of true attributions are built into the *meaning* of the predicates we use to describe these conscious episodes. This move has a strong verificationist flavor—at least to our ears. The case of verificationism is supported by the fact that somewhat later (Bács 2018, 305), Bács alludes to the learning of folk psychological notions of conscious experiences in order to justify CDT, and there he obviously supposes that the meaning of a concept entails the circumstances of learning it.

Now, as it is well-known, verificationist theories of meaning have to face some powerful objections and therefore have not been too popular among meaning-theorists over the last sixty years. Intuitively, you need not know how to recognize whether a predicate is instantiated in order to understand it, and even if you know this, this knowledge is not built into the meaning of the predicate. After all, we have not a faint idea how to get to know whether a subatomic particle is present in a given context, but nevertheless, we think we understand the notion of an electron. Or, we strongly believe we do know what dinosaurs are, although we cannot decide whether some fossils serve as good evidence for their existence or not. But even for the paleontologist who surely possesses this knowledge, the concept of a dinosaur hardly entails allusion to the fossils. When she speaks about dinosaurs, it seems she speaks about animals that lived on Earth more than 65 million years ago, and not about present-day fossils.

Moreover, Bács manifestly commits himself to applying the verificationist theory to folk-psychology. For example, in presenting his argument, he writes that “the folk psychological concept of any conscious experience will include the behavior characteristic to it as evidence for its presence in others” (Bács 2018, 304). He also claims that “the folk psychological concept of pain is associated not just with pain sensation, but also with bodily damage causing it and pain behavior it causes” (Bács 2018, 303). What is more, he explicitly states that his CDT is analogous to the so-called criterial solution to the problem of other minds, which in turn “also implies that in folk psychology mental events are not only causally linked to behavior but



conceptually as well” (Bács 2018, 305). Criterial evidence is conventional in the sense that it is part of the meaning of a term such as ‘pain;’ that certain kinds of behavior count as more or less defeasible evidence for its ascription. The criterial solution is therefore also committed to the verificationist theory of meaning to some extent, and therefore, it renders the problem of other minds—which posits a gap between the meaning of conscious state attributions and the justifications thereof—meaningless rather than solving it.

As it is also well-known, there are many persuasive counter-arguments against such views that take behavioral evidences as built into the contents of folk psychological concepts. The most relevant one in our case is Hilary Putnam’s famous example of “super-stoics:”

Imagine a community of ‘super-spartans’ or ‘superstoics’—a community in which the adults have the ability to successfully suppress *all* involuntary pain behavior. They may, on occasion, admit that they feel pain, but always in pleasant well-modulated voices [...] However, they do feel pain, and they dislike it (just as we do). [...] Imagine a world in which there are not even pain reports. I will call this world the ‘X-world’. In the X-world we have to deal with ‘super-super-spartans’. These have been super-spartans for so long, that they have begun to suppress even *talk* of pain. [...] They pretend not to know either the word or the phenomenon to which it refers. [...] Only, of course, they do have pains, and they know perfectly well that they have pains. (Putnam 1965/2002, 49-50)

What these examples show persuasively in our opinion is that there could be cases in which the usual causal connections between conscious experience (e.g. pain) and its behavioral effects do not hold. And this situation can be normal in a community or the whole world, so one cannot think that the causal connections in question are usual. So, the folk psychological sentence “X is in pain and X does not show any pain-behavior” does not contain any logical or semantic contradiction. Therefore, the folk psychological concepts of conscious experiences have no conceptual connection to pain-behaviors, contrary to what Bács assumes. The same can be said about the criterial solution to the problem of other minds—at least according

to most researchers of the problem. One can coherently conceive of situations where the allegedly criterial evidence holds, but the conscious episode does not occur, or vice versa. The criterial evidence, therefore, has no conceptual link to conscious episodes. There is a gap between observed behavior and the unobserved inner states they fail to bridge (see Hyslop 1995, ch. 5. and 8).

In summary, Bács's arguments in favor of CDT fails to justify the thesis. Naturally, this result does not imply the falsity of CDT—it can be true for other reasons. For example, one can hold such a claim as a result of a functionalist conviction. However, there are well-known counter-arguments against it which Bács fails to account for. For example, the much-debated arguments based on the inverted spectrum thesis or inverted Earth scenarios (whether they are real or counterfactual ones) equally aim to prove that conscious mental states and their normal causal inputs and outputs do not stand in a tight conceptual relationship (see Shoemaker 1982; Block 1990). One can have a red-seeing experience triggered by green objects and followed by events and states usually follow green-seeing experiences. Or, to use the above-mentioned example of Bács: one can have an itching experience without feeling any urge to scratch oneself, but rather to do something else. The proponents of the argument see no conceptual incoherence in such scenarios, even in the case of a whole community. Again, by invoking these arguments, we do not want to claim that CDT is definitely false but merely that they represent a strong challenge to the thesis, so these arguments must be considered by everyone who tends to accept or reject the thesis in question.

Based on the above considerations, we can safely state that Bács failed to justify CDT, that is, the claim that folk psychological notions of conscious mental states conceptually involve and therefore entail their causes and effects. Because of this failure, Bács did not succeed in showing that these notions of folk-psychology cannot refer to conscious experiences as those phenomenally transparent, event-like entities we assume them to be.

As for his considerations concerning the first premise of our argument, we think it is an obvious truth that it cannot be right if we read the concept of conscious experience as involving CDT. Bács is right in claiming that if the allusion to causal connections is plugged into the concepts of conscious

experience, the existence thereof is by no means indubitable. We think it is common sense, and therefore we completely agree with Bács about this. Clearly, we have not been persuaded that the folk psychological notion of conscious experience really involve CDT, so nothing seem to threatens the truth of our first premise.

However, we think his Twin-Earth scenario is somewhat misleading, because it contains a highly implausible assumption and therefore, his argument based thereon is not persuasive either. Our problem is the following: Bács's scenario presupposes that the introduction and development of Twin-Earth folk-psychology has run its course entirely *independently* of the phenomenal states the Twin-Earthers had. As if the semantic properties of their folk psychological predicates would have nothing to do with the phenomenal states they undergo. This is the feature of the thought experiment which seems most implausible to us. We cannot believe that the introduction of these predicates was by pure stipulation. Rather, it is much more plausible that the intention of the first users of these terms aimed to name the very phenomenal features they experienced. These experiences were there and were salient at the time of their introductory use. We think that various kinds of conscious experiences are natural kinds, so the predicates in question are natural kind terms. Therefore, if one accepts this plausible reading of the scenario, one has to conclude that these terms *do refer* to the phenomenal states Twin-Earthers undergo. Of course, Twin-Earthers *are wrong* in thinking about these states as having causal connections. They have false beliefs about the nature of their experiences, but they can talk about them successfully.<sup>2</sup> In short, we think that in the plausible reading of the scenario Bács is wrong when he states that “there are no \*pains\* on Twin-Earth” (Bács 2018, 306; \*pain\* is the Twin-Earthian folk psychological counterpart concept to our concept of PAIN). There are indeed \*pains\* on Twin-Earth, namely the conscious experience to which this concept refers, that is, the experience which was present at the time the term was introduced. For the same reason we think Bács is wrong when he writes the following:

---

<sup>2</sup> We think our reading of the scenario is the one which is in harmony with the original point of Putnam's Twin-Earth example and the argument based on it. See (Putnam 1975; and also Kripke 1972/1980).

So, just as in the standard case of ‘Water’ which fails to refer to the liquid found on Twin-Earth because it is not H<sub>2</sub>O (Putnam 1975), ‘Pain’ would fail to refer to what feels like pain on Twin-Earth because it is causally not responsible for pain behavior. (Bács 2018, 308)

In this passage, it remains ambiguous which language the term ‘pain’ belongs to. If we mean it in harmony with Bács’s scenario, it must belong to Twin-Earther’s language. In that case, it is analogous to the meaning of the term ‘water’ also of the language of Twin-Earthers. And the Twin-Earthian term ‘water’ surely refers to Twin-Earthian water, even if they would falsely think it is composed of two hydrogen and one oxygen atoms. The same is true for the Twin-Earthian term (and concept) of ‘pain.’<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> There is a possible complication here concerning the epiphenomenal nature of Twin-Earthian conscious experiences. Someone might object to the story we described that because these phenomenal states are causally impotent, they cannot cause the introduction of any term or the intention to introduce one. However, we think if it is indeed a problem, it is not just our problem; rather it is also a problem for Bács. At the end of his paper, he presents some supposedly false propositions from Twin Earth folk-psychology which attribute causal connections to the phenomenological states the inhabitants of this planet have. The only natural reading of these propositions, we think, is the one in which by uttering or thinking these propositions, Twin-Earthers speak or think about their phenomenological states. For example, one of Bács’s example is the proposition: “Peter did not go into the water because he was \*afraid\* of sharks” (Bács 2018, 307). We agree with him that this proposition is false, because the phenomenal state Peter has has no causal effect, so it cannot cause his reluctance to go into the water. However, as Bács himself acknowledges, “Peter did feel something which was phenomenologically like the feeling of fear” (Bács 2018, 307), and the natural reading of the sentence is the one in which Peter has false beliefs about this feeling. But then, it seems the only plausible explanation of this fact commits him to the view that this phenomenally salient state caused Peter’s thought. Even in the case of Bács’s last example, “There exists \*anxiety\*” (Bács 2018, 308), the natural reading is the same again, namely that the utterer of this sentence (probably a Twin-Earthian philosopher) was speaking about her phenomenal state, just wrongly subsumed it under the concept \*ANXIETY\*, because it has no causal connections. However, it sounds highly paradoxical if we consider how she can get this thought. If her phenomenal state is indeed epiphenomenal, how can she think about it? In conclusion, if the epiphenomenal nature of Twin

In summary, we agree with Bács that one can be wrong about the existence of causal connections and, therefore, the first premise of our argument cannot be right if we read the concept of conscious experience as involving CDT. Only we think the argument he presents for this statement is not persuasive. All in all, we think we have shown that Bács's case of equivocation is not sound: the two premises can be jointly true with the same reading of 'conscious experience,' namely the one which describes them as simple spatiotemporal entities with phenomenal properties. Therefore, his counter-argument against our phenomenological objection fails.

### 5. Is there a really realist fictionalist position?

There is a further possible objection to our position, i.e. that the acceptance of mental fictionalism is undermotivated. It is based on the possibility of a *realist fictionalist* position, which, while acknowledging the existence of propositional attitudes, claims that the folk psychological explanations containing these attitudes are fundamentally flawed, and this feature of the discourse would motivate the fictionalist approach. This objection is presented in a somewhat sketchy way by Bács and was also considered by us in our original paper. As he puts it:

Folk psychological explanations in terms of propositional attitude attributions are fundamentally flawed not because propositional attitudes do not exist, but because propositional attitudes cannot meet important conceptual and methodological requirements for figuring in explanations—for example, because propositional attitudes are individuated by the very behaviors they are meant to explain, or because propositional attitudes are attributable on normative grounds rather than empirical facts. But we cannot

---

Earth phenomenal states makes our scenario inconsistent, it will make Bács's scenario inconsistent *as well*, since otherwise how can the inhabitants of this strange planet think or speak about their phenomenal states, even if wrongly? We think what this problem really shows is how problematic it is to conceive of epiphenomenal conscious experiences coherently. For more on this problem see (Shoemaker 1975; Chalmers 1996, 172-209).

hope to purge propositional-attitude discourse from everyday life. Therefore, our best option is to go fictionalist. [...] This would be the *realist fictionalist's way*. The realist fictionalist is someone who takes some discourse as a fiction without disputing the existence of its subject matter. (Bács 2018, 302; emphasis in the original)

Although in our earlier paper we considered this objection as a real and serious challenge, we changed our minds by now. We cannot see realist fictionalism as a real theoretical possibility.

Let us start by asking the question: what could be one's reason to acknowledge the existence of propositional attitudes? We think there are two possible answers: a) one could have only experiential, i.e. explanation-independent reasons to believe in the existence of propositional attitudes; and b) the only reason at hand could be following Quine's dictum, namely that one has to believe in the existence of only those entities which play a role in successful theoretical explanations or explanatory strategies. So, according to the first option, propositional attitudes are the kinds of entities that are phenomenally salient or, at least, appropriately related to phenomenally salient mental episodes. On the other hand, according to the second option, propositional attitudes are entities of a theoretical kind. In the first case, one has reason to believe in the existence of propositional attitudes if and only if one has appropriate experiences, while in the second case, if and only if there are successful theoretical explanations at hand in which propositional attitudes play a role.

Applying these two options, we can delineate the logical landscape of possible positions. There are four theoretical positions according to how one answers the relevant questions in the two options. By the first option, this question asks whether there are appropriate *experiences* of propositional attitudes, while in the second option, the question asks whether there is a successful *explanation* which appeals to them. Let us see these possibilities and what follows from them concerning the alleged realist fictionalist position.

If you choose the first option, you have to decide whether you think there really are explanation-independent experiential reasons to acknowledge the existence of propositional attitudes. If your answer is positive, then you

will have good experiential reasons to believe in propositional attitudes. So, you are surely a *realist* about them. Furthermore, you do not want to give up folk psychological discourse *tout court*. So, why be a *fictionalist*? Naturally, you can think that there are some bad explanations in folk-psychology (they may have weak explanatory power, falsified predictions or results etc.), and indeed, you may be right about this. However, in such a situation, you would be motivated to improve folk-psychology and not to choose fictionalism. That is, you would try to present better explanations, more exact predictions, etc. using the *same* propositional attitude terms. Indeed, current psychology seems to do exactly this. It seems very implausible to us to think that in this situation you would be inclined to take the usage of sentences containing propositional attitudes as non-fact-stating ones. In sum, in the case of this position, you will have no reason to opt for realist fictionalism, because you will have no reason to choose fictionalism at all.

If you think there are no good experiential reasons for accepting the existence of propositional attitudes, or you think it is dubious whether there are, then you will have indeed *ontological doubts* about the existence of propositional attitudes. So, you claim that propositional attitudes are phenomenally salient, experiential kinds of entities (or, at least, are appropriately connected to such kind of entities), for the existence of which there are no theoretical reasons, but you think there are no experiential reasons, either. Therefore, you are not a realist about propositional attitudes, *a fortiori* you cannot be a *realist* mental fictionalist. It is that simple.

Let us now turn to the other main option, i.e. the one which follows Quine's dictum. Of course, you have to choose again whether you think these explanations or explanatory strategies succeed or not.

If your answer is positive, then we will think again that there is no reason to be a realist fictionalist. The situation is very similar to (1): you have good reason to believe in the existence of propositional attitudes and you do not want to give up folk-psychology. Moreover, in this case you think that—at least the majority of—folk psychological explanations are good ones. So, apparently you have every reason to be a realist about the existence of propositional attitudes, but you have absolutely no motivation to accept the *fictionalist* approach. The fact that the only reason to acknowledge propositional attitudes is that they play a role in successful

folk psychological explanations does not offer any motivation for giving up the default realist interpretation of the pragmatics of this discourse. You can say that it motivates you to take propositional attitudes as theoretical entities, but why should we not use sentences containing terms of theoretical entities to state facts? For example, one can plausibly argue that genes are explanation-dependent theoretical entities, but it would be absurd to conclude from this that evolutionary biologists do not use sentences containing the term ‘gene’ to state real facts.

A good illustration of this position would be that of Dennett’s. He famously holds that we have to posit propositional attitudes only because of the success of the intentional strategy in explaining the behavior of our fellows. And, at the same time, he explicitly denies to be a mental fictionalist. As he puts it:

Some instrumentalists have endorsed *fictionalism*, the view that certain theoretical statements are *useful falsehoods*, and others have maintained that the theoretical claims in question *were neither true nor false* but mere instruments of calculation. *I defend neither of these varieties* of instrumentalism; as I said when first I used the term above: “people really do have beliefs and desires, on my version of folk psychology, just as they really have centers of gravity.” (Dennett 1987b, 72; the first two emphases are in the original, the third one is ours)

Of course, there are cases where folk psychological explanations, or, as he calls it, “the intentional stance” does not work because of the failure of the assumption of rationality. However, it is crucial that in these cases Dennett *does not want to maintain* the intentional, i.e. folk psychological discourse. As he puts it: “This is not to say that we are always rational, but that when we are not, the cases *defy description* in ordinary terms of belief and desire” (Dennett 1987a, 87; emphasis is ours). In such situations, we have to step back and apply other kinds of explanations.

The last possibility is the one where you think that there could be only explanation-dependent reasons to acknowledge propositional attitudes, but you also think that these explanations are flawed. In this situation, the only rational conclusion, we think, is that there are no propositional attitudes. What else could you think? If you take the explanations in question as



unsuccessful and, at the same time, you also think that propositional attitudes are theoretical entities whose existence depends on the success of the explanations they take part in, then you will have no other logical option but to deny the existence thereof. So, if that would be the reason to be a fictionalist, it is indeed based on *ontological doubts*. Consequently, you cannot be a realist about propositional attitudes, *a fortiori*, you cannot reasonably choose *realist* mental fictionalism. The presence of ontological doubts is explicitly stated by a committed fictionalist, namely Demeter in the following way:

Folk psychology represents agents in a way similar to how some fictions represent the world: in a way they are not, and—as folk psychology does not state facts—cannot be. In this sense folk psychology is a tool for making Escherian representations. Escher’s Drawing Hands, for example, is not a representation of hands drawing one another, but a representation as if hands were drawing one another—as if it were possible. (Demeter 2013, 497)

In other words, according to Demeter, folk psychological sentences are about impossible states of affairs, so they cannot exist. What is this if not a radical ontological doubt about propositional attitudes?

To conclude, Bács’s objections did not persuade us that our earlier argumentation against mental fictionalism was wrong. We still think our “phenomenological objection” does show that mental fictionalism is under-motivated. Moreover, we think that the realist fictionalist approach mentioned by Bács is not even a consistent standpoint, therefore it can hardly motivate the acceptance of mental fictionalism, too.

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Zsuzsanna Balogh for her helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. We also are grateful for the anonymous referee for her/his helpful comments and suggestions.

### Funding

The research leading to this paper was supported by NKFIH (National Research, Development and Innovation Office), grant no. K 123839.

---

### References

- Bács, Gábor. 2018. "Mental Fictionalism and Epiphenomenal Qualia." *Dialectica* 72 (2): 297–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1746-8361.12229>
- Block, Ned. 1990. "Inverted Earth." *Philosophical Perspectives* 4: 53–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214187>
- Chalmers, David. 1996. *The Conscious Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Demeter, Tamás. 2013. "Mental Fictionalism: The Very Idea." *The Monist* 96 (4): 483–504. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist201396422>
- Dennett, Daniel C. 1987a. "Making Sense of Ourselves." In *The Intentional Stance*, 83–101. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.
- Dennett, Daniel C. 1987b. "Reflections: Instrumentalism Reconsidered." In *The Intentional Stance*, 69–81. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.
- Hyslop, Alec. 1995. *Other Minds*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Kripke, Saul. 1972/1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Márton Miklós, and Tőzsér János. 2013. "Mental Fictionalism as an Undermotivated Theory." *The Monist* 96 (4): 622–638. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist201396429>
- Putnam, Hilary. 1965/2002. "Brains and Behavior." In *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, edited by David Chalmers, 45–54. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1975. "The Meaning of 'Meaning'." *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7: 131–193.
- Shoemaker, Sydney. 1975. "Functionalism and Qualia." *Philosophical Studies* 27 (5): 291–315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01225748>
- Shoemaker, Sydney. 1982. "The Inverted Spectrum." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (7): 357–381. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026213>