

Fiction and Conviction

It is bad to be a fantasist, although sometimes it may not be that bad. We are, after all, sympathetic with Mitty, whose fantasies remained where they should be, in his head. Fantasies only become problematic when they trespass across the reality barrier. It is some difficult cases about the nature of that trespass that are going to concern us.

Bernard Williams confronts a version of the problem I want to face in his book *Truth and Truthfulness*. Having told a state-of-nature story in which, by a natural evolution, truth and its attendant qualities of sincerity and accuracy come to be regarded as virtues, Williams starts off in what he calls a different direction. He has not assumed that the people in his state of nature have what he calls an “objective” conception of the past. According to that conception, which is our own, there is a temporal ordering in which every event has a fixed place. Every event either precedes, or follows, or is simultaneous with every other event. No event is outside the ordering, which is therefore complete. Niceties like the relativity of simultaneity to the motion of an observer do not concern us here. Furthermore, every event is determinately placed in the order: it is determinate how distant any event is from us, either in the past or the future. We may not know that distance, but in principle it has a magnitude.

Williams does not think that this objective conception is part of a heritage that goes back as far as recognizable human life. Indeed, he thinks that this objective conception arrived at a distinct point in history. In the West it arrived in the fifth century BC. It was absent, according to Williams, in Herodotus, but present in Thucydides. At one point Williams follows Hume in billing it as the arrival of and interest in fact instead of fable, or truth instead of myth.¹ But describing it like that, in Williams’s view, leaves out the interesting textures, which become visible only if we go on to ask whether Herodotus or his audience are supposed to have *believed* their stories about the Gods. Although he does not put it quite like that, Williams gives us reason for doubting that they did. He says that in the context of doing whatever Herodotus was doing, the question “Is this a story we should tell?” would have had the force of “Is this a story to be told now, to this audience?” meaning, “Would it—as we may put it—suit them?”. He goes on:

There is nothing in those people’s practice to make us say that if they asked about such a story, “Is it true?” there was some *further* consideration that might be brought in: that question, if it was asked was not an independent question. It is a question that indeed arises, everywhere, in relation to what is familiar and recent; relatedly everywhere it is one possible reason for not telling some stories to some people that one knows them not to be true. But those considerations did not press on those stories about the old days, with their strange content and their indeterminate temporal remoteness.

¹ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 152.

The idea is that there are “familiar and recent” events and that in anything recognizable as human life, there is a question of truth that arises about them. We want to know where the tiger went, or who ate the nuts, or whether as many people are now on the hunting party as when we set out. As soon as talk arrives, we want to sift true from false reports on such matters. Indeed, it is plausible that the relevant talk could not arrive in the first place, without a notion of truth arriving simultaneously. For the word “tiger” to represent tigers, or be capable of functioning in a report that the tiger went into the cave, there has to be an operating notion of correctness and incorrectness, of the possibility of the reporter having got something right, or having got it wrong. For the word “five” to be deliver a contribution to the semantics of “five of us started, but there are only three now” there has to be a technique of counting, and with the idea of technique goes that of something that can be done properly or improperly, correctly or wrongly.

II

Along with Williams, we can already sketch part of an answer to the first of my questions – why being a fantasist is a vice, and calling someone a fantasist is an insult. The fantasist in whom the reality barrier has broken down is unreliable, believing things when he should not, and telling things as true when they are not. His inaccuracy, or insincerity (for they may blend together) is a nuisance, and one of an extremely important kind, both to himself and to others who rely upon him.

We can describe the connection between representation and action in a little more detail. Pieces of information can indeed be acted upon, and we can isolate the sub-sentential components and their specific contribution to typical explanations of actions and their outcomes. We might say, for instance, that

“tigers” represents tigers if and only if tigers typically play some role in explaining the successes and failures of action based upon sentences involving tokenings of the term.

This is the beginning of a programme of ‘success semantics’. Obviously it requires expansion. We need some notion of an action as based on a tokening. And we need some confidence in the notion of a “typical” explanation of the upshot of action. But the prospects seem bright enough for each aspect of the approach. When I token to myself “the tiger went in there” and then behave warily and cautiously, the explanation of my survival will typically need to cite something about the tiger—that it went in there, or even if it didn’t that the chance of it being in there given my evidence was sufficiently high that caution in such a circumstance was highly desirable. The explanation does not typically cite corresponding facts about polar bears or beetles, and according to the suggestion, this is why “tigers” has the semantics it does. If we set out to hunt gazelle believing them to be in this patch of grass, the explanation of our failure may be that the gazelle were somewhere else. The explanation of this failure will not cite the whereabouts of buffalo or barnacles, although the explanation of other successes and failures may do so. Similarly, if I give you the message “meet at Marble Arch” and you act on it then typically the explanation of our successful meeting is that we both go to Marble Arch. There will be other, atypical cases, but across the huge spectrum of

communication the mundane explanations of our various successes cite the various things we represent, and the properties we represent them as having.

The idea, then, is that the disquotational nature of representation is illuminated by the disquotational nature of explanation.² Now, these typical patterns of explanation emerge most clearly when we are engaged with the here-and-now, and the recent past or immediate future. There are naturally unfolding ways of acting on remarks about the immediate environment. This is why the simple fantasist is a nuisance.

We could suggest that the cases that interested Williams are ones where no such typical pattern of explanation is forthcoming. When we deal with the dim and mythical past, the very notion of success and its typical explanation blur. So, for instance, imagine a Herodotus writing the sentence “in those days, Athena helped the Greeks to overcome Troy”. This is not a sentence whose tokening readily prompts action in any very repeatable pattern. It has no typical engagement with current needs and desires. It is not clear how it belongs to any kind of technique for living. And if it is (for instance, through being part of a ritual which in turn has some kind of social or other function), we, who put no credence in Athena, are in no position to say that the typical explanation of success is that Athena has some property or other. Not ourselves in the grip of the Athena story, we disbelieve in his explanatory potential. We would suppose instead that the typical explanation of whatever successes or failures ensuing on a tokening of the sentence should bypass Athena altogether, and simply cite the role an Athena character plays in the peoples’ imaginings or narratives. All that is required is, in Williams’s words, that the Athena story suits the people. Its representational properties play no role in explaining why that is so. It needs no connection with any particular stretch of space and time for life to unfold as it does.

In saying this we have jumped over a range of cases that do not concern the here-and-now, but where we certainly want to maintain genuine representation. I take it that, however it was with Herodotus, for us “Henry VIII” represents a particular historical figure who had his own niche in objective historical time. We hold beliefs about him, and we suppose those beliefs to be true, although we may be aware that, beholden as they are to historical fact, some of them may be false. Now, there may seem not to be a typical pattern of success in action associated with speaking in such terms. A child may be successful in writing “Henry VIII lived from 1491 – 1547” but the explanation of his success need not concentrate on Henry VIII and his actual lifespan, but what the child’s teacher or examiner takes to have been the lifespan. Here Rorty’s “solidarity” serves the child just as well as truth does.

But this is not the end of the story. We who are realists about historical truth suppose that there is a “typical” explanation of the centuries of acceptance of sentences translatable as “Henry VIII lived from 1491 – 1547”, and the explanation have as a common factor that Henry VIII did live for that period, or at least was taken to have done so by his contemporaries and the records of the time. Our explanation does not stop with an explanation of why this story suits the people. It goes on to say why it suits the people, and it is there that it comes upon Henry VIII and his particular time and place. We might say that the *proximate* explanation of the child’s success is that he gives the answer his

² There are many aspects of this approach—its disquotational nature, its distinction from Ramsey-style success semantics, its compositional nature, its distinction from causal approaches to semantics—that I cannot go into here.

teacher also gives. But the *full* explanation includes a long trail that, we take it, leads from Henry VIII, through the records, to teacher and child alike. The status of “Henry VIII” as fully representational is restored once we bring in our full explanatory picture.

Returning to our theme, one way of tackling Williams’s question whether Herodotus and his circle *believed* the mythological content of their writings, would be to ask what explanation they themselves would give of successes derived from thinking that Athena helped the Greeks. If they say, in effect, that the full explanation of why this story suits the people is that Athena did help the Greeks, then they sound like true believers. If, on the other hand, they rest content with something more sociological than they do not. They give grounds for a more nuanced explanation which may mention stories, but will not mention Athena. But of course in practice any such test will be highly imperfect. For there is no particular reason to expect people in general to be in control of the status of their own sayings, or to have a very reliable tacit understanding of it. We return to this point below.

III

Herodotus, as interpreted by Williams, is quite a long way from us – that is what makes Williams’s suggestion so exciting. But is he, in fact, so far away? Is Williams right that the way Herodotus interleaves his history with myth suggests that he had not our objective conception of historical time and historical truth? Are we to believe that Herodotus literally cannot hear the question ‘is it true?’ as a further question beyond ‘does it suit?’ I am not sure that it does. And even if Herodotus is thus (by our lights) disabled, it is by no means clear that this in turn suggests he lacks a conception of objective historical time.

There are a number of reasons for initial skepticism about Williams’s interpretation. First, in passages at the beginning of his history that Williams himself cites, Herodotus presents himself as pretty firmly in control of some basic historical method, such as the difficulty of reconciling what Persian historians and Greek historians say. He announces a preference for what he himself knows, and indeed throughout the narrative prefaces his innumerable delightful stories with cautious disclaimers. Secondly, following Williams’s method, we risk having to say that if the objective concept of time arrived with Thucydides, it was fairly soon lost. For many Christian chronicles show at least as enthusiastic an interleaving of history and myth as anything in Herodotus. Indeed it is something of a refrain in historians up to and including Ranke to bemoan their predecessor’s lamentable inability to distinguish the mythical from the actual. It would almost seem that the objective conception waxes and wanes with time. But a different hermeneutic method would suggest the less radical, and more charitable interpretation that the point of writing at all changes with time, and for some purposes myth is just as good as what we would call history. For example, it is just as good or better at revealing universal features of the human condition. We do not want to say that Wagner lacked a conception of objective time because he found it supremely valuable to re-work ancient myths in order to do precisely this.

Consider another example of the same phenomenon. We, I take it, have a conception of objective space (or space-time). Yet some people are religious, and many of those who are go round talking of heaven as a ‘better place’ to which people go after

they are dead, and where they live roughly the same kinds of life as people in ordinary space live, only free from woe. I do not want at this stage to call these people believers, for one of our issues is the nature of belief. Neutrally, I shall say that they are in the grip of a story. This story, like those of Herodotus, involves strange events and a 'place' of indeterminate remoteness, albeit spatial rather than temporal (although for all I know heavenly events may be indeterminate in time as well). Those who talk like this may typically shrug off questions such as 'how far away is heaven?' or 'in which direction did the Virgin Mary fly off?' But I suggest that it is uncharitable to suppose that this undermines their credentials as having the same conception of objective space as the rest of us. They shrug off the question of what supports God's throne, but that by itself does not suggest that they lack other peoples' conception of mass or gravity.

In Wittgensteinian terms, we might say that it is no part of the religious language game that one has an answer to the question 'how far away is heaven?' Indeed, it may be quite integral to the game that such a question not get asked. In the eyes of those in the grip of the story, it is a *crass* question. It shows misunderstanding, like the question Wittgenstein mocks, of asking whether if God sees everything, he must also have eyebrows.³ It mixes the religious too much with the profane, as would an expedition to discover the remains of Valhalla.

In Williams's view, our religious people suppose that ordinary space or time 'smear out', become indeterminate, and involve distances that cannot be measured. There are events that happened in time, but at no particular time from us, and there are events that happen in places, but at no specific distance from us. There are thrones that support people, but with no mass.

If we want to avoid this imputation, we face the question of how the religious language game is to be thought of. If people who talk of heaven and events in heaven are not describing an exotic part of space, with a distance and a direction from earth, what are they doing? There are many suggestions, some compatible with others, of which these are just a few:

They are describing what they took to be events in a separate space or time, distinct from ours, in which people can nevertheless find themselves.

They are telling stories: satisfying fictions.

They are finding metaphors through which to gain some understanding of the human condition

They are insisting upon or expressing certain emotional reactions to the human condition: hope, desire, rebellion, acceptance.

They are performing, analogously to performing dances and songs, or reciting poetry.

They are promoting the old human favourites: self-interest, self-importance, the will to power, the illusion of control over events.

They are affirming identities, or separating themselves from others.

The first of these indeed offends against the completeness of the objective spatial order. But it involves a particular kind of claim, and one that is not readily applicable back to

³ Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett, Oxford: Blackwell, 1966, p. 71.

Herodotus. It must represent an over-interpretation of him. For an historian gripped by the idea of two times could behave in a number of ways. Plausibly, he might at the outset announce that he is only concerned with one of them, such as our objective time, and then he might be just like one of us. Similarly a Christian physicist might be expected to do his physics just like anyone else: he does not have to confuse what he says about the space of our cosmos with what he says about the space which heaven occupies. Interleaving the two is more the subject of jokes, such as spoof calculations on how big angels' muscles need to be to support their wings.

Williams does not interpret Herodotus like this. The claim is that he lacked something we have, not that he had something we have, but an additional complication on top of it. I do not think the breakdown of completeness of the ordering, brought in by the 'two times' interpretation, shows any such lack. By analogy, imagine a mathematics concerned only with cardinal numbers and their ordering. It is not a disability, from the standpoint of this mathematics, if someone comes along and claims that as well as cardinal numbers there are complex numbers that do not fit naturally into the ordering of the cardinals. This discovery represents an advance, similar to that of cosmologists who think in terms of parallel worlds, rather than a disability.

None of the interpretations following the first impute a cognitive disability to the storytellers either. We may be inclined to grumble that if they are doing these later things, it is a pity that they chose a story told so like a recital of plain historical truth, in an apparently descriptive, factual language, in order to do them. But it is crucial to our exploration of the boundary between fact and fiction that this grumble may be misplaced. It seems entirely possible that there should be no better kind of language to use to do whatever it is that the religious storyteller is doing. This is suggested by Wittgenstein at one point: "It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute anything else?"⁴ We might even mount a Darwinian argument: if there were better ways of doing it, it is surprising that they should not have emerged during the centuries of writing and wrestling that religious people have put into the task. So for example suppose the religious person finds 'I know that I shall see my redeemer' a profoundly satisfactory and important thing to say. It seems presumptuous to suppose both that we know just what the satisfaction and importance is, and that we also know of a better way of achieving it. On the face of it, neither claim is easily sustained.

At this point reason totters, and we may be apt to feel a strong sense of outrage. Wittgensteinian theology sounds shifty, and priests who try to explain themselves in such terms are often thought of as atheists in all but name. Either that, or an abyss of 'anything goes' relativism might seem to open up. We seem in danger of offering the sayings of religious storytellers a general-purpose immunity to any kind of alethic evaluation, and the all-important barrier between fantasy and fact is being dismantled on their behalf. This is indeed a threat. But at least the Wittgensteinian interpretation does not exempt the religious language from *ethical* criticism. We might know enough of what the satisfaction is to wish that religious people would not go in for it. We might gesture at some of the things that go into the mix, and if we find them distasteful we may campaign against the persistence of the sayings and doings. The storytelling might leave people who go in for it worse than they would otherwise have been.

⁴ Ibid, p. 71.

Or it may be that we can connect their sayings with nothing at all. Wittgenstein says he comes close to this, when he considers the sayings of spiritualists. God is indeed dead, and those who go on being gripped by the stories become incomprehensible.

Bertrand Russell liked to compare religious belief with straightforwardly factual kinds of belief, which were as improbable, scientifically, as anything could be: the belief that there is a china teapot in its own orbit around the sun, for example. It is fair to say that this identifies religion with mere superstition, foolishness. But now imagine that this teapot undergoes a sea change. Suppose it becomes an authority (out of its spout come forth important commands and promises). Suppose it becomes a source of comfort, as earthly teapots are, but more so. Suppose it becomes the focus of national identities: it is especially one of our teapots, not theirs. And so on: it answers prayers, adopts babies, consecrates marriages, closes grief. The teapot was cracked, but rose again and is now whole. It has achieved mythical, legendary, even religious status. It becomes crass to ask how big it is, how its orbit is shaped, what china it is made of. These questions demean and belittle the teapot, and probably suggest sacrilegious intent on the part of those who insist upon them.

When we imagine a people recounting the now-biblical stories of the teapot, it also belittles them to imagine them asking ‘does this story suit us, here, now?’. For them, the story very probably *requires* telling as it has been told (perhaps in the very words in which it has always been told, as children often require of their stories). Suiting us is the last thing on the storyteller’s mind (even atheists like me recognize that religious doctrine often does not suit people, although I also hold that in diverse ways it often does, or it would not persist).

Notice too that if we ask the diagnostic ‘but is it true, about the teapot?’ we may meet nothing but a flat, Wittgensteinian, minimalist or disquotationalist reply. ‘*p* is true’ means that *p*. It is true that the teapot answers prayers if and only if it does. And according to the religious storyteller, the thing to say is: it does. He is presenting it as to be accepted – as true.

Herodotus strikes me, as a non-specialist, as much less intoxicated by myth, legend, or theology than many subsequent historians and storytellers. He nods to the times when Gods walked the earth, rather than insisting on them. I am not convinced that he is gripped by these stories. But Williams cannot hear this as bringing him any closer to the contemporary fold:

There are thousands of people in classical antiquity whose names we know, and who are certainly not legendary, but about whom we can assert very little; there are others who are legendary and about whom we can assert a great deal, such as Zeus. Since these are, for us, two different matters, to run them together, as this scholar does, is, for us, a muddle. But Herodotus himself did not make this muddle, because it was not yet possible to do so. In his outlook, there was, rather, a certain kind of indeterminacy about the past...⁵

As we have seen, the same attitude would condemn the Christian mythologist to having an outlook according to which there is a certain kind of indeterminacy about space, and

⁵ Williams, p. 157. The scholar Williams is attacking is Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus*

possibly time. My alternative suggestion is that each of them avert their eyes from some questions which, on the face of it, their stories raise. The activity of storytelling itself does not allow these questions. The response to them is not ‘we just do not know how far away, in space or time, these events are’. Nor is it that they are an indeterminate distance or time away. The response is that we just do not ask. If someone awkward insists on asking, there may be little difference between the shrug of rejection, the shrug of indeterminacy, and the shrug of not knowing – in other words Williams is wrong to raise it as a charge against Donald Lateiner that he ‘runs these together’. They are run together in the mind of one gripped by the story, who perhaps says that it pertains to a dim and distant place in space or time, about which certain questions need not and should not be raised. The hearer, in a somewhat Russellian vein, may interpret them as *just* storytelling, even while pretending not to be. Or he complains that what they are doing can be done better without storytelling. He may complain of ‘compartmentalization’, the storyteller’s evident ability to keep what is to be said about the teapot free from questions that normally arise about things in space and time. But at this point, for those in the grip of the story, the shutters come down. These are the things we say, the things to be said. Listen to the story, and you may learn something about the here-and-now, for that is its point of application.

IV

I have expressed reservations about Williams’s treatment of Herodotus, and mentioned the indeterminacies that affect the philosophy of religion, only as means to the very different end of trying to understand the difference between fact and fiction.

It is currently quite popular to suggest that elements of our thought involve fictions. Numbers, theoretical entities, possible worlds, rights and values, have each been given fictional status. Some people call them inventions or constructions; others more forthright call them fictions. We make believe that things stand thus and so with these things, and the make-believe has a function. It enables us to get something right about the real world, or do something right in the real world, the world which is not make-believe.⁶

I hope that the story so far alerts us to a difficulty in formulating and assessing fictionalism. Is Herodotus making-believe that there was once a ruler Minos, who may have ruled the seas before the first of the human race? Is the Christian making-believe that there is a better place where all differences are reconciled? In other words, were we right to see Wittgenstein priests as atheists in dog collars? In some respects it is as if they are. Like the purveyor of overt fairy stories, they might even use a preface like ‘once upon a time...’, as a device to ward off what would otherwise be awkward questions, such as when exactly or where exactly these events are supposed to transpire or to have transpired. But in other respects, perhaps more important, it is as if they are not. To use Austin’s distinction, these are ‘serious’ uses of speech, as opposed to parasitical, play-acting, quotational, or other non-literal uses. We have described the storytellers as gripped by their stories. They express *conviction*.

Thus consider a philosopher of logic insisting that there are nearby possible worlds in which there are talking donkeys. This is serious. It is a conviction. There is nothing else to think; dissent even implies failure to understand the language and its use,

⁶ Representative papers are collection in *Fictionalism*, ed. M. Kalderon, forthcoming.

while attempts to reduce or analyse away the content meets the equally strong conviction that nothing else will do. There is no other equally powerful and proper way of putting it. And questions about the whereabouts of these worlds, or the temporal distance of events in them, are as inappropriate as the parallel questions about divine events. Are we to take this logician's professions of realism at face value? Or can we happily conceive of his possible worlds as fictions? Or is there even an issue?

Suppose first we try to understand our philosopher in terms of fictionalism. According to Lewis's analysis, we understand what it is for something to be true in a fiction by employing the concept of what is true in the closest possible worlds in which it is told as known fact. But in the difficult cases, which include those of numbers, possible worlds themselves, human rights, and others, the question is whether *this*, our very own world, is a possible world in which these things are being told as known fact. There is nothing fake or less than serious about the convictions of the storytellers. And as we have already acknowledged, we make no headway by introducing the notion of truth. 'It is true that there are possible worlds in which there are talking donkeys' comes with just the same ring of conviction as 'there are possible worlds in which there are talking donkeys'.

To put the same point another way, we know when we have make-believe just insofar as we know when we have real belief. In an ordinary case, we can pretend, for instance, to believe that Saddam has gallons of anthrax, because we know what it would be to believe that he has gallons of anthrax, and we know too of things that would verify or falsify that belief. And if it is false, we know what kind of nuisance the politician is who fantasizes that it is true. But what distinguishes make-believe from real belief in the case of possible worlds? Is it possible that this is a difference that makes no difference?

I am reluctant to believe that it is, although our discussion certainly tends that way. I should confess that I am among those who finds Wittgensteinian religiosity uncomfortable, and at least half of me wants to insist on the charge of atheism in a dog-collar. But I am also aware that this may be because of ethical, and aesthetic, reservations about religious packages, rather than an insistence on knowing the difference between fact and fiction.

Perhaps here we may be reminded of J. L. Austin's own apparent unease with the 'constative/performative' distinction, and his inclination to 'play Old Harry' with, among other things, the true/false distinction.⁷ The radical note underlying much of Austin's apparently inconsequential botanizing among illocutionary acts and verbs describing what we are doing, is that the concrete reality is the whole speech act. Hacking the class into subsets, such as describing as opposed to theorizing, saying what is literally true as opposed to idealizing or producing a comparison, and so on are, in his eyes, suspicious and misleading ways of concealing the textures.

Returning to our example, if we cannot bear to be so radical two possible avenues towards finding a difference are already in front of us. The first would be to see what explanations our philosopher offers of the success of his sayings. Conviction in possible worlds, he is implying, is a good thing, and it is legitimate to ask him why he thinks this. If the answer is sufficiently distant from what I called the fundamental schema of success semantics, above, then we may incline to the make-believe diagnosis. In particular if there is no disquotation in the explanation – no continued reference to possible worlds and their nature – then we should be more inclined to talk of make-believe, and useful

⁷ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 151.

fictions.⁸ But I do not set much store by this avenue. Peoples' own explanations of their doings are sufficiently inchoate that it would be tendentious to take them very much at face value. A mathematician's explanation of why it is useful to think that if we set out with five and now number only three, two have got lost, is probably going to be that five is two great greater than three, and there is an end on it. A true believer's explanation of why it is useful to tell the story of heaven is all too likely to repeat the story of heaven. It is useful, says the poetry lover, to be gripped by the thought that life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, stains the white radiance of eternity, because that is what life does.

The alternative avenue is to set store by our own explanation of why it is useful to be gripped by the story, if indeed we think that it is. And here there is plenty of scope to get away from the disquotational. We do not have to manifest the grip of the story as we enter our own explanations. Suppose, for instance, I explain the utility of possible world storytelling something like this. We want to know what would have happened if something else had happened, in order to fix standing dispositions to action. It is useful to know whether, if we had connected the two wires, we would have blown the circuit, because we may need to guard against the intention or chance of connecting the two wires, or two such wires, in the future. If we think we would not have, when in fact we would have, there is a good chance of things going worse in the future. When we get it right, there is a good chance of things going better. This is why being gripped by the stories of nearby possible worlds helps us.

This may sound like an emphasis on the distinction between the participant's standpoint, and that of a theorist external to the practice but offering an explanation or diagnosis of it. Such explanations often offend participants, rubbing the bloom off their flowers, although that by itself is no argument that they are false. But in cases like that of possible worlds (more readily than in optional cases like that of religion) we are all participants at least some of the time. We do not need to drop our convictions as we simultaneously offer a non-disquotational explanation of them.

If we can advance and cement such explanations what have we done to belief in possible worlds? We have shown that being gripped by the story is every bit as good as belief. Take the case where conviction is good, since it may be inappropriate to waver about whether if we had crossed the wires, we would have blown the circuit. The cash value in terms of actual acts and omissions is just the same whether we think of it as being gripped by a story, or in control of a fact. We can now go in either of two ways. We might say that we have shown that it is good to be gripped by the story, but wrong to believe it. But this is only one option, since we have left ourselves with no working distinction between what is said to be good – being gripped – and what is said to be wrong – believing. And it is useless to try to reinvent this alleged distinction with phrases like the overused 'ontological commitment'. The commitment is already there in the conviction that the thing to say is that there is a possible world in which there is a talking donkey. And the ontological part is just that this sentence, the one to say, begins with a quantifier. You can talk of ontological commitment, but only if you know what you mean by saying that Shelley is, or is not, ontologically committed to the white radiance of eternity.

⁸ I find it useful to describe this as there being no disquotation in the explanation, although one might frame such an explanation in terms of there being no possible worlds, thereby technically disquoting. The point is that there will be no positive use of possible worlds in the explanation.

Nevertheless, we have saved our own ontological souls if our fullest or best explanation of why it is good to be gripped by the story avoids disquotation. Perhaps it is not clear why saving our ontological souls should be a priority, and such is the view of Richard Rorty and others who reject any such discussion. But I maintain a more conservative position. If we can find bare, non-committal explanations of the good our stories do us, we may be on the way to seeing how things hang together better than if we cannot do so.