

# Rethinking Mental Language: Toon's Fictionalism and its Philosophical Roots

Book Review: *Mind as Metaphor: A Defence of Mental Fictionalism*.

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In *Mind as Metaphor* (2023), Adam Toon offers an engaging and provocative defence of mental fictionalism, arguing that our ordinary talk about the mind – its beliefs, desires, and other mental states – is more akin to fictional storytelling than to literal, representational descriptions of inner cognitive states. The book challenges the dominant representational theory of mind by asserting that mental representations are useful fictions rather than actual entities hidden in some private inner world. Toon's work intersects with various philosophical traditions, from Cartesian dualism to cognitive science, and brings together contemporary debates about the nature of mind, language, and metaphor. In this review, I will explore Toon's central arguments, situating them within the broader context of mental philosophy, and engage with other authors who have contributed to the conversation on mental metaphors and fictionalism.

Toon's argument challenges the dominant representational theory of mind, which holds that mental states are inner representations (Section 1.2.1; p. 11–13). As he notes, this theory has roots in early modern philosophy, with thinkers such as Descartes, Locke, and Hume positing that mental states are internal mechanisms that mediate our interactions with the external world. The core of representationalism is that beliefs, desires, and intentions are mental representations that causally influence our behavior (p. 13). According to this view, when we say that someone 'believes the sunset is beautiful', we are describing a mental representation of that sunset, housed inside the individual's mind.

However, Toon rejects the literalness of this view, proposing that our mental talk is metaphorical rather than representational (p. 19). He claims that there is no such thing as an inner realm populated by beliefs and desires; instead, these are fictions that help us interpret human behavior. This perspective aligns with earlier critiques of Cartesianism, particularly Gilbert Ryle's (1949) critique of the 'ghost in the machine' metaphor, which argues against the notion of a hidden mental world that controls human action. Ryle's critique has traditionally been directed against dualism, but Toon argues that it also applies to materialist versions of the representational theory of mind (Section 2.1.2). Like Ryle, Toon suggests that talk of an inner mental world is a philosophical myth, but he further claims it is a folk myth – embedded in how ordinary people talk about the mind (p. 18–19).

One of Toon's most compelling contributions is his analysis of metaphor in our mental language. He argues that the way we talk about mental states – through metaphors such as 'mental representations' or 'inner worlds' – is deeply ingrained in our everyday language but should not be taken literally (p. 23). Toon likens this metaphorical talk to fiction, much like how science fiction uses imaginative scenarios to explore real-world concepts. For example, when we say, "Mark believes the No. 73 bus goes to Oxford Street", we are not describing an inner mental state, but we are actually using a metaphor to make sense of Mark's behavior.

To support his view, Toon draws on Kendall Walton's theory of fiction, which suggests that fictional works function like props in games of make-believe. In this sense, mental states are 'props' that help us engage in a game of understanding behavior (Walton 1990). By treating mental talk as metaphorical, Toon claims that we can still explain and predict behavior without committing ourselves to the existence of hidden mental entities (Section 1.3.1). This interpretation draws parallels with Daniel Dennett's (1991) 'intentional stance,' where beliefs and desires are treated as useful attributions rather than as actual inner states (Section 2.1.4).

While the author's argument for mental fictionalism is original and thought-provoking, it raises important questions about the nature of metaphors in philosophical discourse. One critique comes from Julian Jaynes, who also explored the role of metaphors in our understanding of consciousness. In *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976), Jaynes argued that metaphor plays a key role in our understanding of mind and consciousness, suggesting that early humans perceived their thoughts as external voices. Jaynes' view diverges from Toon's in that he sees metaphors as integral to the development of consciousness itself. In contrast, Toon treats them as useful fictions that aid our understanding but do not reflect real mental entities.

Additionally, Douwe Draaisma's (2000) work on the history of 'memory metaphors' offers another point of engagement. Draaisma explores how metaphors – ranging from wax tablets to computers – have shaped theories of memory over centuries. Like Draaisma, Toon recognizes the power of metaphors in shaping philosophical thought, but Toon takes a more radical stance by rejecting the literal truth of mental metaphors altogether. Draaisma's historical analysis might suggest that even if metaphors evolve, they retain

some epistemic value. Toon's fictionalism, however, denies that metaphors reveal anything about the mind's nature, arguing that they are merely tools for behavioral prediction (for more, see Chapter 5).

Moreover, critics might argue that Toon's rejection of representationalism risks undermining the explanatory power of cognitive science. Representationalism forms the backbone of much cognitive science research, providing a framework for understanding how the brain processes information. Toon's fictionalism could be seen as a step backwards, denying the material basis for mental states that neuroscience has worked hard to uncover. As Stephen Stich (1983) points out in *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science*, abandoning representationalism would require cognitive science to reconfigure its entire understanding of mental processing. Toon's view, while theoretically interesting, may struggle to account for the empirical successes of representational models in neuroscience.

I believe *Mind as Metaphor* contributes significantly to the ongoing debate about the nature of mind and language. One of the book's key strengths is its ability to challenge entrenched philosophical positions, offering a fresh perspective on the relationship between mind and metaphor. Toon's writing is clear and accessible, making complex philosophical ideas approachable for a broader audience. His use of fictionalism as a framework for understanding mental language is original and insightful, drawing on established philosophical traditions while pushing the conversation in new directions.

However, I argue that the book's reliance on metaphor as the primary lens for understanding mental talk may also be its greatest limitation. While metaphors undoubtedly play a role in shaping our understanding of the mind, reducing all mental talk to metaphor risks oversimplifying the complexity of human cognition. Critics might argue that Toon's fictionalism dismisses the possibility that mental states have a material basis, particularly given the advances in cognitive neuroscience. While Toon's argument is compelling within a philosophical context, it may struggle to address the empirical findings that support a representational understanding of the mind.

To sum up, *Mind as Metaphor* offers a bold defence of mental fictionalism, challenging both the representational theory of mind and the traditional Cartesian view of an inner mental realm. By treating mental states as metaphors and fiction, Toon provides a fresh perspective on how we talk about the mind and its operations. Engaging with a range of philosophical traditions, from Ryle's critique of dualism to Walton's theory of fiction, I must say that Toon's work offers a unique contribution to the ongoing debate about the nature of mind and language. While some may question whether fictionalism can adequately replace representationalism, this work invites readers to reconsider the metaphors that shape our understanding of mental life.

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