

Prop Oriented Make-Believe, Metaphor, Fictionalism: Reply to Elisabeth Camp¹

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Prop oriented make-believe is make-believe utilized for the purpose of understanding what I call “props,” real world objects or states of affairs that make propositions “fictional,” i.e. true in the make-believe world.² Prop oriented make-believe plays important roles in two distinct areas. It lies at the heart of the functioning of many metaphors (if not most or even all of them)—or so I, David Hills and others have claimed.³ And one variety of fictionalism in metaphysics invokes prop oriented make-believe to explain—explain away—apparent references to entities some find questionable or problematic (fictional characters, propositions, moral properties, numbers).⁴ I myself employ this kind of fictionalism in treating discourse about fictional characters and kindred merely fictitious or made-up entities.⁵

In what follows I defend Hills’ and my views of metaphor against arguments that Elisabeth Camp (2009)⁶ has leveled against them, many of which Catherine Wearing (2011) echoes or endorses. Camp and Wearing seriously misrepresent what we say about metaphor, and their arguments miss their targets. If they were right about our take on metaphor and the prop oriented make-believe it involves, it would be difficult to see how prop oriented make-believe could figure in coherent fictionalist theories (Wearing 2011: 2). So the clarification of our views

¹ Thanks to David Hills, for very helpful discussions.

² My most explicit account of prop oriented make-believe is in (Walton, 1993). See also (Walton, 2000).

³ I offer my thoughts about metaphor primarily in (Walton 1993 and 2000). Hills’ are to be found in his (1997), (2007), and (2011). Hills’ views about metaphor are in flux. Keep tuned for updates.

⁴ (Yablo 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001) combines the two, understanding fictionalist theories to involve metaphor.

⁵ My account in (Walton 1990) of discourse about fictional entities is a fictionalist one, although I don’t call it that there or label the make-believe it involves “prop-oriented.” See also (Walton 2000).

⁶ All references to Camp in this essay are to (Camp 2009). I have renumbered the displayed propositions that I reproduce from her paper

about metaphor will double as a defense of my fictionalist treatment of fictitious entities, and similar fictionalist theories.

Camp identifies me as “the primary proponent” of the “view that a single imaginative mechanism underwrites both metaphorical and fictional interpretation” (110), “a view on which metaphorical interpretation calls for the same basic sort of pretense as we would engage in if confronted with the same sentence presented as a fiction” (109). She also implicates David Hills and unnamed others. She then demolishes a very implausible “pretense” account of metaphor, leaving entirely untouched the views that Hills and I actually proposed.

Camp provides an accurate nutshell account of my view in quotations from my (1993) (although her glosses of these quotations, which I don’t quote, are seriously misleading):

Walton claims that a metaphor “implies or suggests or introduces or calls to mind a (possible) game of make-believe” (1993, 46). The content of the speaker’s assertion, in turn, “amounts to the claim that certain circumstances obtain, namely, the circumstances that would make it fictional that she speaks truly if, fictionally, she asserts the literal truth of what she says” (1993, 43) (Camp 2009: 108).

One way of “identifying what is wrong with a pretense view,” Camp says, “is to see that it does accurately describe a quite different phenomenon: just-so-stories” such as,

(1) It’s as if Jane had a puppy who died when she was little, and she’s still convinced it was her fault.

“It looks like an utterance of (1) should count as a metaphor, by Walton’s and Hill’s lights,” she claims; “it introduces a game of pretense, according to which Jane ... [is]... as she is described by the sentence uttered, with the purpose of inducing a perspective on that game’s focal prop in order to draw attention to features of it as it is in reality. However, intuitively just-so stories like (1) seem quite different from metaphors like [‘Bill is a bulldozer’.]” (110-111)

This argument misfires for several reasons. First, neither Hills nor I claimed that what we take to be characteristic of metaphors is unique to metaphor; neither of us proposed anything like sufficient conditions for something's being a metaphor.⁷ More importantly, (1) (construed in an ordinary way) simply does not fit what we say about metaphor.

It is arguable that (1) is meant and understood literally, that if it is true it is literally true. If so, there is no reason to suppose that it introduces a game of pretense (or make-believe), as Hills and I take (many) metaphors to do, or that the speaker is engaged in pretense. Perhaps (1) is elliptical for, "It is, in some respect or other, as if" Or it might amount to, "It is, in such and such respects, as if, " the relevant respects being ones that are salient in the context.

Some might understand (1) construed literally to mean that it is *exactly* as if Jane had a puppy who died ..., or that things *in general* or *for the most part* are as they would have been had that been so. Then (1) is bound to be literally false, probably obviously so, and what the speaker means to be getting across will be an implicature approximately to the effect that in such-and-such contextually salient respects Jane is as she would be if her puppy had died Perhaps, then, the speaker can be understood to be pretending to assert (1) construed literally. But this is certainly not to introduce prop oriented make-believe of the kind Hills and I take to be typical of metaphors. What the speaker means to be getting across is not that a certain circumstance obtains, one which, if present, would make it fictional that it is exactly, or for the most part, as if Jane had a puppy who died

Camp says little specifically, beyond the sentence quoted above, about how she thinks (1) is likely to be meant or understood. She does say that in uttering it the speaker wants hearers to pretend that Jane had a puppy who died when she was little and is still convinced it was her fault (110). (This already is a departure from our views about metaphor. As Camp herself notes, I

⁷ In (Walton 2000) I argue that prop-oriented make-believe is central to claims of existence and non-existence, as it is to many metaphors. And I explain why, nevertheless, I do not count these claims as metaphors.

hold “that by speaking metaphorically the *speaker* pretends to *assert* the sentence that she *actually utters*.” (108, my emphases.))⁸

Camp may be right about the speaker of (1). He might think that imagining Jane to have undergone this childhood experience will encourage hearers to work out what else would likely be true of Jane in that case, and get them to notice that some of what would be true *is* true — that, for instance (as Camp suggests), Jane expects everything to go wrong, that she is apologetically incompetent and obsequious with superiors (110). If this is what the speaker has in mind, we might think of him as introducing a game of make-believe (pretense) in which it is given that, fictionally, Jane had a puppy who died (perhaps also that, fictionally, (1) itself is true?). The hearer considers what other fictional truths this one implies (probably by virtue of something like what I have called the Reality Principle) which may amount, more or less, to thinking about what she would be like had she had a puppy who died The speaker’s claim may be that certain of these propositions whose fictionality is implied are also true.

This picture of how (1) might function is not implausible. It is consistent with Camp’s discussion, and is suggested by much of what she says. But it is not at all the way I or Hills proposed that metaphors work. The make-believe games metaphors introduce are not ones in which certain fictional truths are given, established as it were by stipulation. They are games consisting in *conditional* principles of generation, which determine what is or would be fictional should the prop possess certain properties. If “Your computer has a virus” is fictional in a speaker’s implied game, this is so not because the speaker asks hearers to imagine it, but because, and only if, the computer has certain (difficult to specify) properties which, given the conditional principles, generate this fictional truth. The speaker’s claim is that the computer does possess these properties. If the speaker is right, *only* if she is right, it is fictional in the game that the computer has a virus. In order to interpret the metaphor, to understand what the speaker is getting at, hearers must recognize the game. They must have some awareness of its

⁸ But see (Walton 1993: 46).

principles of generation, of what properties would, if present, make it fictional that the computer has a viral infection.⁹ Full understanding of the metaphor does not require accepting that this actually is fictional in the implied game; we won't take it to be fictional unless we think the speaker's claim is true.

Since Camp thinks the “pretense” view of metaphor, which she attributes to Hills and me, accurately describes (1), it is not surprising that she thinks it yields bizarre readings of metaphors. She seems to suppose that our accounts will treat metaphors in a manner much like the way of understanding (1) that I just sketched.

(2) Bill is a bulldozer.

“Taking (2) as an occasion for Waltonian pretense,” she claims, “draws attention to different features of Bill than those Anne [who used this sentence metaphorically] was claiming him to possess when she uttered [it]” (111). “If you really pretended that Bill was a *bulldozer*, you'd end up with a wildly inappropriate interpretation, on which he was enormous and clanking and consumed a lot of diesel” (111. Her emphasis).

No such interpretation of this metaphor is indicated or suggested by our proposals. The ad hoc game introduced by the speaker's utterance, in any ordinary context in which Bill is understood to be a person, would surely not be one in which whether it is fictional that Bill is a bulldozer depends on whether he is (actually) enormous, clanking, and diesel guzzling. Bill's having these properties is out of the question and out of consideration; other more likely properties would be the ones to generate this fictional truth. Depending on the context and what the speaker and her listeners know about Bill, what does or would make this fictional in the implied game will be something like Bill's being determined, stubborn, forceful, and insensitive to obstacles. What the speaker means to get across, on Hill's and my views, is that Bill does possess some such combination of attributes.

⁹ This is not quite right, or at least we need to be careful about what sort of awareness of the principles they must have. See (Walton 1993: 52-55).

Camp is not very explicit about how she thinks the “pretense” view would treat (2). But she clearly takes it to entail that, in interpreting (2), hearers will recognize an implied game in which (2) is fictional, and will pretend that (2) is true, that Bill is a bulldozer. Pretending this involves or leads to imagining Bill to possess lots of bulldozer-ish properties, such as being enormous and clanking and diesel guzzling, and hearers understand the speaker to be attributing some of these properties to Bill.¹⁰ I expect that, according to the “pretense” theory as Camp understands it, these additional imaginings are prescribed, that it is fictional in the ad hoc game that Bill is (e.g.) an enormous clanking diesel guzzler. (The fact that fictionally Bill is a bulldozer will probably imply this by virtue of the Reality Principle, if it is true that were Bill actually a bulldozer he would be enormous, clanking, and diesel guzzling.¹¹) In any case the “pretense” theory of metaphor, understood along the rough lines Camp indicates, is very close to what I just suggested for (1).¹²

Catherine Wearing (2011), echoing Camp, attributes to me and Hills a similar “pretense” theory (and to Andy Egan a similar account of idioms), according to which “interpreting a metaphor or an idiom involves representing a particular (literal) content *as pretended*, and deriving the speaker’s intended meaning by reference to that pretense, i.e. by working out what would follow, if one were so pretending.” (Wearing, 2011: 2, her emphasis). “Pretense tends to assign the very properties of the metaphor’s vehicle [the bulldozer, in the present case] to its

¹⁰ In this reconstruction of Camp’s take on the “pretense” treatment of (2), I am relying partly on what she says about other metaphors, e.g. “I am Anna Karenina” taken as a metaphor. “Pretending [‘I am Anna Karenina’] to be true involves imagining me *being* Anna Karenina ... endowing myself with properties that Anna possesses which I lack.” (112, her emphasis.)

¹¹ But not if it is true, instead, that *were Bill a bulldozer he would be the first bulldozer to run on Wheaties rather than diesel*. For my notion of the Reality Principle, see (1990: 144-150). I am ignoring some technicalities that needn’t concern us here; hence the “probably.”

¹² Camp later backs off attributing the “pretense” theory to me in one respect, acknowledging that I do not require the hearer to participate in the implied game, to imagine what is fictional in it. But her attribution to me of the remainder of the theory remains: that in interpreting the metaphor the hearer recognizes the implied game to be one in which it is fictional that (in her example) Bill is a bulldozer, and that the speaker asserts propositions that follow in one way or another from that, probably ones whose fictionality is implied by the fact that fictionally Bill is a bulldozer.

topic [Bill]. ... pretense encourages properties to be copied at will from the metaphor's vehicle to the topic in constructing the fictional realm." (Wearing, 2011: 19).

This "pretense" theory of metaphor is remote from what Hills and I say about metaphor. Again, our view is that in interpreting (2) the hearer recognizes a game with conditional principles of generation, but does not necessarily take it to be fictional that Bill is a bulldozer, let alone work out what would follow—either what fictional truths this one implies, or what would actually be the case if Bill were a bulldozer, or what else one would imagine about Bill if one imagined (pretended) him to be a bulldozer. What the speaker asserts, truly *or falsely*, is just that Bill has properties such as to make it fictional that he is a bulldozer.

The hearer *will* take it to be fictional that Bill is a bulldozer *if* she thinks the speaker's claim is true. Even so, she is likely not to have thoughts about an enormous clanking diesel guzzler. Such thoughts might well arise in a content oriented game of make-believe: Think of a children's game in which Billy plays the part of a bulldozer, butting at furniture which play the part of things to be bulldozed. The fact that fictionally Billy is a bulldozer might (though it needn't) be understood to imply that, fictionally, he is enormous and clanking and diesel guzzling. Participants, interested in the content, might find these implied fictional truths significant as the game proceeds. But insofar as make-believe is prop oriented, we are usually not concerned with implied fictional truths (nor with what would actually be the case if something that is fictional were true); it is the props that matter. Pointing out what fictional truths the props generate directly should the speaker's claim be true suffices to call attention to the features of the prop we are interested in, regardless of any additional fictional truths the directly generated ones might imply.¹³

Of course, a hearer might imagine that Billy is a bulldozer without supposing this to be fictional in the implied game. Hills says that when Romeo declares "Juliet is the sun" he and his listeners *entertain* "in a spirit of pretense," the thought that Juliet is the sun (1997: 147). But

¹³ For the distinction between implied and directly generated fictional truths, see my (1990: Ch. 4).

Hills clearly holds that this proposition is fictional in the game Romeo’s metaphor introduces *only* if his assertion is true, only if the prop, Juliet, possesses the properties needed to make it fictional given the game’s conditional principles of generation. And he understands Romeo to be attributing these properties to Juliet, not any other properties that, fictionally, Juliet might possess.¹⁴

I suggested that the game introduced by a metaphorical utterance of (2) (if it works the way we take to be typical of metaphors) is probably one with principles of generation to the effect that it is fictional that Bill is a bulldozer just in case he is determined, stubborn, forceful, insensitive to obstacles, and that these qualities of the prop (Bill) are the ones the speaker means to call attention to. There is no point in even raising the question of whether, if it is fictional that Bill is a bulldozer, this fictional truth implies that fictionally Bill is enormous, clanking, and diesel guzzling. If, for some reason, someone should suggest that these fictional truths are implied, our interest, insofar as the make-believe is prop oriented, will be in the features of the prop that are responsible, i.e. just those which, if present, generate the *implying* fictional truth.

A speaker *could* arrange for the additional fictional truths to be generated directly by additional features of the prop. She might, extending the metaphor, describe Bill as an “enormous, clanking, diesel guzzling bulldozer,” thereby calling attention not only to Bill’s determination and stubbornness, but also, let’s say, to his manner in meetings—his huffing and puffing, pounding the table, rising threateningly from his seat and clinking loudly on glasses to get attention, often after having had too much to drink. The implied game might then include a principle of generation to the effect that such behavior does or would make it fictional that Bill is an enormous, clanking, diesel guzzling bulldozer. Again, the make-believe is prop oriented. The

¹⁴ (Hills 1997: 148). See also (Hills 2011: 62-66). Romeo’s pretense that Juliet is the sun, Hills claims, “calls attention to various *allegedly* real features of Juliet that *allegedly* qualify her to play the sun’s part” (1997:147, my emphases), adding that the “allegedly’s” are there to account for metaphorical falsity. Wearing misrepresents his view by quoting this passage *eliding* the two occurrences of “allegedly” and three previous ones. (Wearing 2011: 12).

speaker's point is to call attention to Bill's behavior in meetings as well as his determination and stubbornness, certainly not to suggest that he really is enormous, clanking, and diesel guzzling.

The two kinds of imagination or “imaginative projects” Camp's title refers to—“pretense,” and “metaphor” (“metaphorical ‘seeing-as’,” “metaphorical construal”)—differ, she says, in “[what] is the focus and goal of imaginative activity, and [what] is mere means” (111, 113). In the case of metaphor one thing is used “to structure [one's] understanding” of something else, or “to filter or frame [one's] characterization of [another thing]”; a speaker employs one thing “as a lens to structure [one's] understanding of [another thing]”; “Y functions as a tool for understanding X as it actually is” (112, 113). In all of her examples, the “focus and goal” of these imaginings, what they help us understand, is I.A. Richards' “tenor,” i.e. what I call a prop. And Y, the thing that helps us to understand X, is a feature or element of the content of the implied pretense or make-believe (Richard's “vehicle”). This “metaphor” variety of imagining obviously corresponds closely to what I call prop oriented make-believe, “make-believe in the service of the cognition of props” (Walton 1993: 39).¹⁵ Her notion of “pretense,” by contrast, goes with what I call content oriented make-believe.

So it is very surprising that Camp associates my (and Hills') accounts of metaphor with “pretense” rather than “metaphor,” saddling us with what she calls a (the?) “pretense” theory of metaphor. The notion of prop oriented make-believe is designed precisely to bring out the very point that she repeatedly emphasizes, that the focus of metaphorical utterances is not on what is (or might be) pretended to be the case, not on the content of the pretense, but on the tenor that the content serves to illuminate, the tenor “as it actually is.”

It is not easy to see what has gone wrong here. Conceivably there is something of a clue in Camp's bald assertion to the effect that make-believe is never prop oriented in my sense, that it can only be content oriented: “When we employ an object as a prop in a game of make-believe, it is

¹⁵ “The make-believe that metaphors involve is, I have suggested, prop oriented. Our interest is focussed on the props, on ... the tenor. The make-believe is a device to clarify or illuminate the props.” (1993: 49).

precisely a *prop*: a mere means to an imaginative end” (113, her emphasis). This is just not so—not if “prop” is understood in the way I explained it;¹⁶ otherwise her claim has nothing to do with my and Hills’ make-believe construals of metaphor that she attempts to criticize. Camp says nothing to challenge the many examples of prop oriented make-believe that populate my (1993) and (2000), as well as writings of Hills, Mark Crimmins, Frederick Kroon, James Woodbridge, and Stephen Yablo—examples in which the content is primarily or entirely a means for understanding the prop, definitely not a “mere means to an imaginative end.” Moreover, she seems not to have noticed that, in claiming (albeit incorrectly) that Hills’ and my accounts accurately describe just so stories such as (1), she is committed to accepting that these are instances in which props (in my sense) are not mere means in the service of imaginings.

Camp’s initial attribution to me and Hills of the view that “a single imaginative mechanism underwrites both metaphorical and fictional interpretation” is misleading at best. My point was that both fiction and metaphor involve make-believe, i.e. the generation of fictional truths by props, but that it works very differently in the two cases and serves very different purposes. More exactly, the content-oriented make-believe typical of standard works of fiction and the prop-oriented variety typical of metaphor differ fundamentally with respect precisely to what is the “focus and goal” of the make-believe, as do uttering a sentence meaning to point out that the proposition expressed is fictional (or to participate verbally in a fiction), and uttering a sentence to call attention to a real world circumstance which makes the proposition expressed fictional.

I have also pointed out, however, that content oriented and prop oriented make-believe are often mixed or combined (Walton, 2000: 74-75). The latter sometimes plays a role in the

¹⁶ Cf. especially (Walton 1990 §1.5). In a nutshell, “a prop is something which, by virtue of conditional *principles of generation*, mandates imaginings” [i.e. generates fictional truths] (Walton 1990: 69).

appreciation of fiction,¹⁷ and the former sometimes contributes to the interest, effectiveness and value of metaphors (Walton 1993, 49-53).

Amie Thomasson (2009) claims that my fictionalist treatment of fictional entities “seems to implausibly take as pretenseful precisely the talk about fiction [e.g. “Sherlock Holmes does not exist,” “Holmes is a fictional character”] that is designed to step outside of the pretense and speak from the real-world perspective.” This ignores the fact that the make-believe at the heart of my fictionalist account is prop oriented, that it involves pretense only as a means of addressing real-world facts.

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¹⁷ I offered examples in (1990: §7.6), although I didn’t characterize them there as instances of “content oriented” make-believe.

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