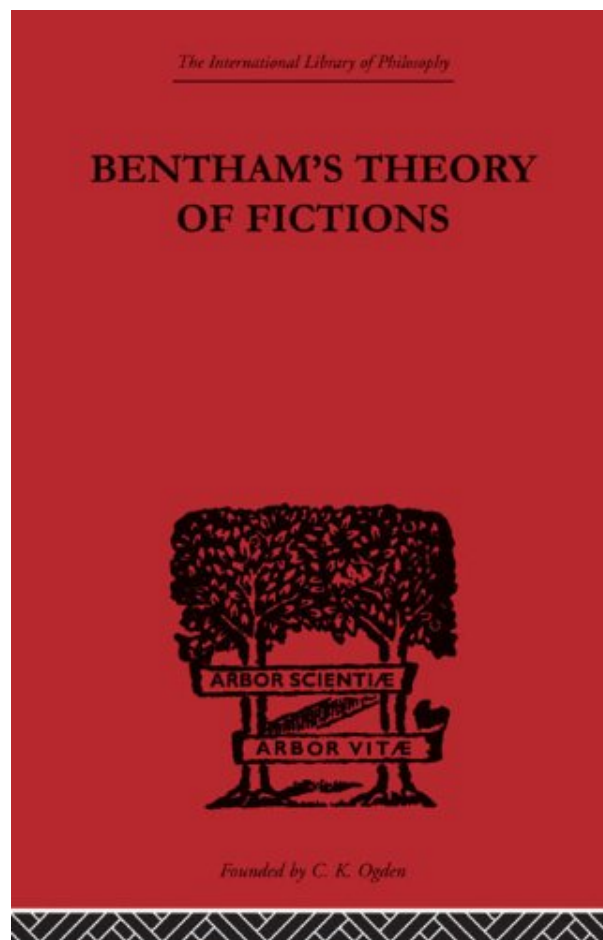


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BENTHAM'S THEORY OF FICTIONS



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The Forgotten Bentham

By Joseph Martin

What a fascinating book! I had been aware that many of the innovations appearing in Nietzsche's work regarding 'Truth' (i.e., the lack thereof) had been 'in the air' throughout the post-Hegelian Neo-Kantian milieu. One only needs to read Schopenhauer and also FA Lange (see his "The History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance") to be aware of this. However, I was unaware that anything comparable was going on in Britain. When I finally got around to reading Vaihinger ("The Philosophy of As If"), and noticed that he mentioned Bentham (in the Preface to the English edition) as a precursor, - well, I was flabbergasted! I hadn't read any Bentham in decades, and I didn't recall anything at all like what Vaihinger was pursuing.

C. K. Ogden, who edited the English translation of Vaihinger's "Philosophy of As If", is also the editor here and he provides a usefully detailed 150 page introduction. The text of "The Theory of Fictions" was not published in Bentham's lifetime. Wherever there seemed to be some confusion in the text, Ogden consulted the MS. In the Introduction to the present work, Ogden asserts that the "chief defect of Vaihinger's monumental work was its failure to lay stress on the linguistic factor in the creation of fictions." He muses that this would be the next step, - except that the step had "already been taken by Bentham a century ago"!

At this point Ogden then quotes what is perhaps Bentham's most famous remark regarding fictions:

"To language, then -to language alone- it is that fictitious entities owe their existence; their impossible, yet indispensable existence."

Of course, all this illustrates nicely, *avant la lettre*, the difference between continental and anglo-american philosophy. The neo-Kantian (and, generally speaking, all continental philosophy) is ultimately concerned with the unknowable (for Kantians this was the Noumena), or at least the so far unknown, and thus metaphysics/ontology; while the anglo-american is more interested in the 'merely' practical (the doable and the undoable) and the linguistically 'sayable / unsayable'. To Bentham, the idolator of utility, the examination of fictitious entities is an extremely practical affair having myriad ramifications for our understanding of law, politics and science.

Now, this book is decidedly not your great-grandfather's (or the academic) Jeremy Bentham. It throws an

entirely new light on the entire Utilitarian gambit. This book was first published in 1932. I have the 1959 paperback edition before me. Ogden denies that Bentham's contemporaries and commentators ever really understood him.

"Since Bentham himself so clearly indicates the importance which he attached to the Theory of Fictions as an Instrument, it is all the more surprising that his biographers, interpreters, and critics have almost all been content to dismiss it with a contemptuous reference."

(Ogden here excludes only Sir Leslie Stephen, who "in his account of Bentham in 'The English Utilitarians', provides a detached and intelligible summary.")

Again, this is not the Bentham one generally encounters in those 'History of Philosophy' survey courses. But why? Well, the first thing to note is that this text, 'The Theory of Fictions', was not given this form by Bentham. Rather, it was culled from several of the later manuscripts. In his manuscripts Bentham, it seems, was in the habit of "starting afresh whenever he resumed the consideration of any subject from a different angle" so there is a great deal of repetition in these notes. Of course, editing these notes was very difficult. And his editors and collaborators worked on what they thought important. But unfortunately "the material on Linguistic Psychology occupied a peculiar position, and its importance was not obvious to his younger collaborators."

And so it was left to Ogden, a century later, to do the work necessary to bring this material to the world. Whether you merely wish to understand the presuppositions of utilitarianism, or you have an interest (as I do) in the antecedents of our horrid postmodernity, - you must read Bentham on fictitious entities and their utility cum necessity! Also, do have a look at Vaihinger's "The Philosophy of As If" to hear the continental side of the argument for the necessity of fictions.

I should close with a note of warning; I found Bentham stylistically a very difficult read. I give four stars due to style. Of course, this could be because these remarks of Bentham's were culled from manuscripts. However, I think it has something to do with the oratorical traditions of the 1700's and 1800's. At times it seems as if the verbal pyrotechnics that are aimed at spellbinding an uneducated mob are routinely used in all forms of writing too. (I also find Carlyle, at times, quite unreadable.) However, the long introduction by Ogden was very readable. The introduction and Bentham's text are almost of equal length.

If one is interested in the notion of 'necessary fictions' I would recommend the following books at minimum:

Opus Postumum, Immanuel Kant (Vaihinger underlines the relevance of this unfinished book to his work. Nietzsche also saw it. Continental Philosophy.)

Bentham's Theory of Fictions, Charles K. Ogden (The book I am here reviewing. Anglo-American Philosophy.)

The History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance, Friedrich Albert Lange (Nietzsche read the still untranslated first edition of this book. Continental. But the second edition was translated by Bertrand Russell so it travels well.)

Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s, Friedrich Nietzsche (Radical Neo-Kantianism. Continental.)

The Philosophy of As if, H. Vaihinger (Continental.)

Some later works to consult:

Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond, David Runciman (Anglo-american.)

Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes, Quentin Skinner (On the necessity for Reason to rhetorically embellish itself in an unreasonable world. Like Bentham, Vaihinger also considered Hobbes a

precursor. Anglo-American.)

Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche After Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, James J. Winchester (especially, chapter 5. Continental/Postmodern.)

Nietzsche's Anthropic Circle : Man, Science, and Myth, George J. Stack (Continental/Postmodern.)

The Modern Construction of Myth, Andrew Von Hendy (A bit of a stretch but see chapters 12 and 13 especially. Myth may have been the very first 'necessary fiction'.)

Narrative Truth And Historical Truth: Meaning And Interpretation In Psychoanalysis, Donald P Spence (Yes, another stretch, but psychoanalysis has a rich tradition of wrestling with the fictions of the unconscious that some interested in the theme of necessary fictions might find illuminating.)

I include below an abbreviated Table of Contents of my 1959 edition because Amazon seems to only have Ogden's Introduction listed:

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