

Fictions and Hans Vaihinger

Pronounced As: häns fihing-r, 1852-1933, German philosopher. Educated at Tübingen, Leipzig, and Berlin, he served at Strasbourg first as tutor and then as professor of philosophy. He was one of the great Kant scholars. His own system was set forth in 1911 and was translated into English as *The Philosophy of "As If"* (1924). He argued that since reality cannot be truly known, human beings construct systems of thought to satisfy their needs and then assume that actuality agrees with their constructions; i.e., people act "as if the real were what they assume it to be. Sensations and feelings are real, but the rest of human knowledge consists of pragmatically justified 'fictions'.

The theory involves familiar, though not necessarily insurmountable, difficulties. In saying that we should act as if a doctrine were 'true', it presupposes a perhaps ineffectually non-pragmatist notion of truth. (If we explicate this occurrence of 'true' in pragmatist terms, we fall into an infinite regress: 'We should act as if we should act as if, etc. According to the theory, claims about the utility of holding doctrines, and indeed the theory itself, will themselves be no more than useful fictions.

The purpose of this article is to give some idea of Vaihinger's concepts. Perhaps the following several quotations that can be found on the internet may help.

The first is from a talk by Deb Whitehouse, called "Phoenix Rising":

"The German philosopher Vaihinger had a term for beliefs that we know are not true but still come in handy: he called them useful fictions. That was his great philosophy of AS IF: you act AS IF something were true if it's beneficial to you. Now I'm not a philosopher, but I keep one handy around the house to answer questions about the meaning of life (no home should be without one). However, it just so happens that I heard about Vaihinger's notion of a useful fiction when I studied the great depth psychologist Alfred Adler. Adler was very fond of Vaihinger's philosophy of as if, and he built that concept into his psychology

The following quotation is from the article "Alfred Adler" (1870 - 1937) by C. George Boeree:

"Another major influence on [Alfred] Adler's thinking was the philosopher Hans Vaihinger, who wrote a book called *The Philosophy of "As If."* Vaihinger believed that ultimate truth would always be beyond us, but that, for practical purposes, we need to create partial truths. His main interest was science, so he gave as examples such partial truths as protons and electrons, waves of light, gravity as distortions of space, and so on. Contrary to what many of us non-scientists tend to assume, these are not things that anyone has seen or proven to exist: They are useful constructs. They work for the moment, let us do science, and hopefully will lead to better, more useful constructs. We use them "as if" they were true. He called these partial truths fictions.

Vaihinger, and Adler, pointed out that we use these fictions in day-to-day living as well. We behave as if we knew the world would be here tomorrow, as if we were sure what good and bad are all about, as if everything we see is as we see it, and so on. Adler called this fictional finalism. You can understand the phrase most easily if you think about an example: Many people behave as if there were a heaven or a hell in their personal future. Of course, there may be a heaven or a hell, but most of us don't think of this as a proven fact. That makes it a "fiction" in Vaihinger's and Adler's sense of the word. And finalism

refers to the teleology of it: The fiction lies in the future, and yet influences our behavior today. Adler added that, at the center of each of our lifestyles, there sits one of these fictions, an important one about who we are and where we are going."

Fiction or guiding idea

In Adler's approach to personality, a persistent but largely unconscious train of thought or principle by which a person directs, coordinates and categorizes experiences. In the well balanced, these guiding fictions are assumed to approximate reality and to be quite flexible and adaptive. In the neurotic they are assumed to be somewhat divorced from reality and tend to become rigid and non-adaptive. Note that fiction is used here as representing abstractions or schemas, they are not necessarily 'fictitious' but tend to function 'as if' they were true. Hence many Algerians prefer to use the phrase guiding idea, which is less ambiguous.