

ALS OB

Authored by
mohammad looti

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1. Core Definition

The term **Als ob** is a German phrase meaning "as if" or "as though." In academic discourse, particularly in philosophy and psychology, it denotes a profound epistemological and pragmatic principle championed by the German Neo-Kantian philosopher, Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933). The core tenet of the concept is that human thought and action frequently rely upon theoretical constructs or presuppositions that are known, or at least suspected, to be factually false, contradictory, or unprovable. Despite their lack of objective reality, these deliberate falsehoods--termed "fictions"--are essential tools for navigating the world, organizing experience, and achieving practical results. The utility of the fiction, rather than its truth value, becomes the measure of its importance. For instance, an individual might act **als ob** they possess unlimited energy when facing a difficult task, even though they know their energy is finite, because that attitude provides the necessary psychological drive to succeed.

Vaihinger codified this approach in his seminal 1911 work, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (The Philosophy of As If), arguing that much of human intellectual progress, spanning mathematics, physics, law, religion, and ethics, is built upon these functional fictions. The crucial distinction in Vaihinger's philosophy is the conscious recognition that these operational assumptions are not hypotheses awaiting verification, but known errors or contradictions that are adopted solely for their instrumental value. They serve as mental shortcuts or temporary frameworks that allow complex or metaphysical problems to be addressed practically. This acknowledgment--the conscious adoption of the "as if" mindset--distinguishes Vaihinger's system from simple self-deception or error.

Essentially, **Als ob** describes a fundamental mechanism of cognitive economy. When confronted with limits to empirical knowledge or the inherent complexity of reality, the human mind constructs simplified models, abstract ideals, or even outright contradictions (like treating a continuous flow as discrete units for calculation) and then operates **as if** these models were literally true. The definition of **Als ob**, therefore, extends beyond mere linguistic translation; it serves as the label for a comprehensive philosophical stance that places utility and purposeful action above strict adherence to objective truth in the realms where absolute knowledge is unobtainable or impractical. This pragmatic orientation positioned Vaihinger's work at the crossroads of European idealism and rising American pragmatism.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While Vaihinger is synonymous with the philosophy of **Als ob**, the phrase itself has deep roots in

German philosophical history, particularly within the tradition of Immanuel Kant. Kant frequently employed the phrase in his critical philosophy, most notably in the realm of morality, where he argued that we must act **als ob** we possess free will, even if metaphysical proof remains elusive. For Kant, the principle served as a necessary regulative idea--a guiding assumption that structures moral behavior. Vaihinger took this Kantian usage and systematized it, expanding the scope of the "as if" principle from a moral imperative into a universal epistemological method applicable to all intellectual disciplines.

Vaihinger began developing his concepts as early as the 1870s, initially intending his work as an extension and interpretation of Kantian thought. However, his writings were not published until decades later, allowing him time to refine his definitions and gather exhaustive examples from history. The publication of *The Philosophy of As If* in 1911 coincided with a period of intellectual ferment, bridging late 19th-century positivism with early 20th-century thought emphasizing subjective experience and instrumentalism. Vaihinger demonstrated that thinkers throughout history, from ancient Greek atomists modeling the infinite via finite parts, to modern scientists employing concepts like the "perfect gas" (which does not exist), were unknowingly engaging in the practice of **Als ob**.

The historical development cemented **Als ob** as a key concept in philosophical fictionalism. It offered a sophisticated justification for the use of non-literal or metaphorical tools in scientific modeling and abstract reasoning. By rigorously classifying different types of fictions (e.g., semi-fictions, didactic fictions, operational fictions), Vaihinger provided a framework for understanding why intellectual systems often thrive on concepts that are, strictly speaking, logically false or contradictory. The immediate impact of the work was substantial, drawing attention from figures across the intellectual spectrum, including pragmatists like William James and scientists struggling with the abstract nature of modern physics.

3. Key Principles of Vaihinger's Theory of Fictions

Vaihinger's philosophy hinges on the precise definition and classification of the mental constructs used in the **Als ob** methodology. He rigorously distinguished fictions from other forms of thought, such as hypotheses and dogmas. A **hypothesis** is an assumption made with the expectation or hope that it can eventually be proven true through empirical testing; it aims at correspondence with reality. A **dogma** is an assertion held to be true despite lacking proof. In contrast, a **fiction** is a conscious, temporary, and often contradictory assumption that is known to be false, yet remains useful.

One crucial characteristic of the fiction is its inherent contradiction or absurdity when examined literally. Vaihinger noted that many foundational concepts operate by deliberately ignoring specific aspects of reality to achieve clarity or utility. For example, treating space as infinitely divisible (a

mathematical fiction) allows calculus to function, even though physical space may not be infinitely divisible in practice. Furthermore, fictions are often employed when dealing with complex psychological or sociological realities, such as acting **als ob** everyone is perfectly equal under the law, a necessary fiction for the operation of justice despite known social and economic disparities. The utility derived from these fictions is practical and psychological, enabling coherence and motivation.

Vaihinger also introduced the idea of the "vanishing point" of fictions. This principle suggests that fictions, having served their instrumental purpose, must eventually be recognized and discarded or neutralized once they are no longer useful or if their underlying falsity begins to breed confusion or error. The ideal philosophical approach, according to Vaihinger, involves utilizing the fiction skillfully for practical aims while maintaining full awareness of its fictional nature. This intellectual honesty prevents the fiction from hardening into a dogma, which Vaihinger viewed as the great peril of intellectual life. The ultimate value of the **Als ob** approach, therefore, lies not just in the creation of fictions, but in the self-aware process of their deployment and eventual relinquishment.

4. Applications in Science and Mathematics

The **Als ob** principle found immediate and profound application in the natural sciences and mathematics, domains where abstraction and idealization are indispensable. In physics, for instance, concepts such as the **ideal rigid body**, the **perfect vacuum**, or the notion of **force acting instantaneously at a distance** are all fictions. Scientists know that no body is perfectly rigid, but modeling the world **as if** such bodies exist simplifies complex calculations and allows for predictions that approximate reality closely enough for practical purposes. These fictions are operative tools that bridge the gap between complex observation and solvable mathematical models.

In mathematics, the necessity of fictions is particularly acute. The concept of **imaginary numbers** (e.g., the square root of negative one) is a classic Vaihingerian fiction. Imaginary numbers have no empirical reality but are indispensable components of complex analysis, geometry, and electrical engineering. Similarly, the concept of a mathematical **point**--a location with zero dimensions--is a fiction, as anything with zero dimensions cannot exist physically. However, the system of geometry operates **als ob** these points are real entities, enabling the entire structure of mathematical space. Vaihinger argued that such concepts are not errors, but brilliant cognitive inventions that allow human reason to transcend the limitations of immediate sensory data.

The acceptance of **Als ob** in scientific methodology provides a philosophical defense for instrumentalism, which holds that theories should be judged primarily by their effectiveness in explaining and predicting phenomena, rather than their metaphysical truth. In this view, scientific progress often involves replacing one useful fiction with another, more comprehensive one, without

necessarily claiming that the new model has achieved final truth. This perspective became particularly relevant in the early 20th century with the rise of quantum mechanics and relativity, where concepts often defied intuitive or classical understanding, forcing physicists to rely on models that operated purely on pragmatic grounds.

5. Influence on Psychology and Social Theory

The most significant impact of **Als ob** outside of philosophy was on psychology, primarily through the work of Alfred Adler, the founder of Individual Psychology. Adler adopted Vaihinger's concept of fictions to explain how individuals structure their personality and navigate social life. Adler proposed that every person develops a "fictional finalism" or "guiding fiction"--a core, often unconscious, goal or ideal state (e.g., being perfectly successful, universally admired, or utterly safe) that acts **as if** it were attainable.

This guiding fiction is rarely checked against reality, yet it provides the powerful motive force that organizes the individual's perception, behaviors, and lifestyle. For example, a person with an intense inferiority complex might operate **als ob** they are destined for greatness, driving them to enormous overachievement. While the underlying assumption (the necessity of perfect greatness) is fictional and perhaps unrealistic, the resulting actions and efforts are real and beneficial in certain contexts. Adlerian therapy often involves helping patients recognize and understand their guiding fictions so they can consciously adjust them toward more socially constructive and realistic goals.

In social theory, the **Als ob** principle resonates deeply with concepts of social constructionism. Many societal institutions and norms--such as the inherent value of money, the sovereignty of a state, or the legal concept of a corporation as a "person"--are collective fictions. While these concepts lack objective physical existence, society operates **as if** they are real, lending them immense power and structure. The legal system, for example, is entirely dependent on the fiction of contracts and abstract rights. Understanding these shared beliefs as useful fictions, rather than absolute truths, allows social theorists to analyze how they are maintained and how they influence behavior and power dynamics within a population.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its wide applicability, the philosophy of **Als ob** has faced substantial criticism, primarily centered on its implications for epistemology and ethics. The chief concern is that Vaihinger's system appears to endorse intellectual relativism, suggesting that utility trumps truth, thereby dissolving the objective distinction between accurate knowledge and deliberate falsehood. Critics argue that once the search for objective truth is sidelined in favor of instrumental efficacy, the foundations of rational inquiry become unstable. They fear that the conscious use of fictions could

easily slide into dogmatism or outright deception if the user loses sight of the original fictional nature of their beliefs.

A second major critique focuses on the difficulty of maintaining the necessary intellectual honesty that Vaihinger required. It is challenging for the human mind to consistently operate **as if** something is true for pragmatic reasons while simultaneously maintaining the awareness that it is false. Over time, particularly when the fiction yields consistent success (as in scientific models), the functional belief tends to solidify into an accepted truth, defeating the purpose of the **Als ob** method. Critics argue that Vaihinger provided an excellent description of how the mind often operates but failed to provide a robust mechanism for preventing the functional fictions from becoming dangerous, unexamined dogmas.

Furthermore, from a metaphysical standpoint, some philosophers reject the fundamental premise that reality is so inaccessible or contradictory that fictions are necessary. Realist schools of thought argue that the apparent contradictions Vaihinger highlights are often merely symptoms of incomplete theories, and that continued empirical and rational effort will eventually resolve these paradoxes, making the reliance on conscious fictions unnecessary. Nonetheless, the strength of the **Als ob** concept lies in its ability to explain how intellectual progress occurs in the face of uncertainty, providing a pragmatic justification for the theoretical creativity required at the frontiers of human knowledge.

7. Further Reading

[Hans Vaihinger \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Philosophy of As If \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Alfred Adler \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Epistemology \(Wikipedia\)](#)