

FICTIONAL ENTITIES

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The first question to be addressed about fictional entities is: are there any? The usual grounds given for accepting or rejecting the view that there are fictional entities come from linguistic considerations. We make many different sorts of claims about fictional characters in our literary discussions. How can we account for their apparent truth? Does doing so require that we allow that there are fictional characters we can refer to, or can we offer equally good analyses while denying that there are any fictional entities?

While some have argued that we can offer a better analysis of fictional discourse if we accept that there are fictional characters, others have held that even if that's true, we have metaphysical reasons to deny the existence of fictional entities. Some have supposed that accepting such entities would involve us in contradictions and so must be avoided at all costs, while others have held that, even if contradiction can be averted, we should refrain from positing fictional entities if at all possible since they would be utterly mysterious, involve us in positing unexplained differences in 'kinds of being', or violate reasonable calls to parsimony.

1. Linguistic Considerations

At least four sorts of fictional discourse may be distinguished:

- (1) Fictionalizing discourse (discourse *within* works of fiction), e.g. “[Holmes was] the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen” in “A Scandal in Bohemia”.
- (2) Nonexistence claims, e.g. “Sherlock Holmes does not exist”.
- (3) Internal discourse by readers about the content of works of fiction. This may be either intra-fictional (reporting the content of a single work of fiction, e.g. “Holmes solved his first mystery in his college years,”) or cross-fictional (comparing the contents of two works of fiction, e.g. “Anna Karenina is smarter than Emma Bovary”).
- (4) External discourse by readers and critics about the characters *as* fictional characters, e.g. “Holmes is a fictional character”, “Hamlet was created by Shakespeare”, “The Holmes character was modeled on an actual medical doctor Doyle knew”, “Holmes appears in dozens of stories”, “Holmes is very famous”

The puzzles for fictional discourse arise because many of the things we want to say about fictional characters seem in conflict with each other: How, for example, could Holmes solve a mystery if he doesn’t exist? How could Hamlet be born to Gertrude if he was created by Shakespeare? Any theory of fiction is obliged to say something about how we can understand these four kinds of claim in ways that resolve their apparent inconsistencies. And any theory of fictional discourse will have import for whether or not we should accept that there are fictional entities we sometimes refer to, and if so, what sorts of thing they are and what is literally true of them.

Given these very different types of fictional discourse, many different approaches have been developed, some of which accept and some of which deny that there are fictional entities. Many of the differences among them may be seen as products of differences in which of the four types of discourse each takes as its

primary case and central motivator—though of course all are ultimately obliged to say how we should understand each type of discourse.

Perhaps the most popular approach to fictional discourse has been to deny that there are any fictional entities, and to handle the linguistic evidence by adopting a pretense theory. It is plausible that authors in writing works of fiction (and so writing sentences of type (1)) are not making genuine assertions at all, but rather simply *pretending* to assert things about real people and places (Searle 1979, 65). (Though see Martinich/Stroll 2007, Chapter 2, for challenges to this.) Inspired by this observation about discourse of type (1), full-blown pretense theories of fictional discourse (such as that developed by Kendall Walton) treat all four forms of fictional discourse as involving pretense and so as making no genuine reference to fictional entities. Discourse of type (3), on these views, involves readers ‘playing along’ with the pretense ‘authorized’ by the work of fiction, and so pretending that what is stated in works of fiction is true. Claims like ‘Holmes solved his first mystery in his college years’ are ‘authorized’ moves in the game of pretense licensed by the work, which is why we find them more acceptable than parallel claims like ‘Holmes drove a white Plymouth’.

While that extension of the pretense view seems plausible enough, more difficulties arise for handling external discourse and nonexistence claims. Walton takes external claims of type (4) to invoke new ‘ad hoc’ ‘unofficial’ games of pretense other than those authorized by the story, where, e.g., we pretend that “there are two kinds of people: ‘real’ people and ‘fictional characters’” (1990, 423), or pretend that authors are like gods in being capable of creation, etc. Even apparently straightforward nonexistence claims (type 2) are treated as involving pretense: first invoking a pretense that there is such a character to refer to (using the name ‘Sherlock

Holmes’), and then in the same breath betraying that as *mere* pretense, with the addition of ‘doesn’t exist’ (1990, 422). The full-blown pretense approach thus seems to implausibly take as pretenseful precisely the (type 2 and type 4) talk about fiction that is designed to step outside of the pretense and speak from the real-world perspective. It also offers contorted and *ad hoc* readings of what seem to be straightforward literal claims (cf. Thomasson 2003). So while pretense theories do well at addressing internal and fictionalizing discourse, they are much less plausible adopted as across the board approaches—but if we can’t adopt them across the board, they can’t be used to avoid positing fictional entities.

Various other approaches to fictional discourse have been proposed which don’t rely on taking pretense to be ubiquitous in fictional discourse, yet still avoid accepting that there are fictional entities. The best developed of these is Mark Sainsbury’s (2005) negative free logic approach, which takes as its central motivation the truth of claims of type (2): nonexistence claims involving fictional names. On the negative free logic view, fictional names are non-referring terms, and all simple sentences using non-referring terms are false. Thus ‘Holmes exists’ is false (as ‘Holmes’ doesn’t refer), and so its negation ‘Holmes doesn’t exist’ is true (Sainsbury 2005, 195), leaving us with a far simpler and more plausible account of the truth of nonexistence claims than pretense views provide. Internal discourse by readers can still be held to be true even though it involves non-referring names, since these claims are plausibly held to be implicitly prefixed with a fiction operator, where “According to the fiction, Holmes solved his first mystery in his college years” may be true even if the simple claim “Holmes solved his first mystery in his college years” would be false. Cross-fictional statements can be handled similarly by taking them to fall in the context of an ‘agglomerative’ story operator that appeals to the total content of the

relevant stories, taken together, e.g. “According to (Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary [taken agglomeratively]), Anna Karenina was more intelligent than Emma Bovary” (Sainsbury forthcoming).

But like the pretense view, the negative free logic view has more difficulties accounting for the apparent truth of external claims of type (4), since their truth cannot be accounted for by taking them as implicitly reporting what is true according to the fiction. Various *ad hoc* ways of interpreting these claims have been tried, e.g. ‘Holmes is a fictional character’, may be read as reporting that, according to some fiction, Holmes exists (Sainsbury forthcoming)). But given the variety of external claims that must be rewritten in different ways, these remain the biggest thorn in the side of negative free logic theories.

On the other side of the debate are those who argue that we can only or best handle fictional discourse by allowing that there are fictional entities and that at least sometimes our discourse refers to them. But even among those who accept that there are fictional entities there are widespread disagreements about what we should consider them to be and what is literally true of them.

Some realist views about fiction are inspired by the apparent truth of internal claims of type (3), and so take fictional entities to be beings that (in some sense) have the properties the characters of the story are said to have, so that claims like ‘Holmes solved his first mystery in his college years’ is true because there is a fictional entity, Holmes, who in some sense has this property. These views have taken many forms— with some taking the fictional entities to be possible people, others taking them to be Meinongian non-existent objects, and others still taking them to be pure abstract entities such as kinds.

One natural approach inspired by the desire to accommodate the truth of type (3) internal claims is to take fictional characters to be merely possible people described by the stories. KRIPKE expressed this idea when he wrote “Holmes does not exist, but in other states of affairs, he would have existed” (1963/1971, 65). But Kripke himself later (1972, 158) rejected this answer, and his rejection of it has generally been taken on board. His grounds for rejecting it come from considerations about reference: the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ is not a description (which could be fulfilled by various possible individuals); instead, if it refers at all, it picks out the individual to whom the speaker’s use of the name bears a historical connection, and it refers to that very individual across all possible worlds. So if there happened to be someone in the actual world who coincidentally was just as Holmes is said to be in the novels, that would not show that he *was* Holmes. Similarly, if there are individuals in other possible worlds who fulfill the descriptions in the books, that does not show that any of them is Holmes. Moreover, since there will be a great many different possible individuals who fulfill the descriptions, it seems there would be no non-arbitrary way of saying *which* of these is Holmes (Kripke 1972, 157-8).

Given the problems with possibilist views, the most popular realist treatments of fictional entities have been not possibilist but Meinongian and abstractist views. Meinong himself was not interested in fiction *per se*, but rather sought to develop a general theory of the objects of speech and cognition (1904/1960). If there is knowledge, Meinong thought, there must be something known, if there is a judgment, there must be something judged, and so on. So, for example, if we know that the round square is round, there must be something (the round square) of which we know that it is round. Some of these objects of knowledge, however (like the round square) do not exist. Meinongian views thus take seriously the truth of internal (type (3))

sentences like ‘Holmes solved his first mystery in his college years’, and take fictional entities to be the NON-EXISTENT OBJECTS truly described in such sentences—so on these views a fictional entity is the object that (in some sense) has all of the properties ascribed to the character in the relevant work (or works) of fiction.

The simple version of this approach encounters difficulties of the kind that led to RUSSELL’s (1905/1990) criticisms of MEINONG. For the stories ascribe to Holmes not only properties like being a person and solving mysteries, but also properties like existing, in conflict with the apparent truth that Holmes doesn’t exist. Indeed Meinongian theories take nonexistence claims of type (2) to be straightforwardly true since, although there *are* the relevant fictional entities, they do not exist. So the Meinongian is in danger of contradiction by taking Holmes and the like both to exist (since Meinongian objects are supposed to have all of the properties ascribed to them) and not to exist (since they are non-existent objects).

The central achievement of neo-Meinongians such as Terence Parsons (1980) and Edward Zalta (1983) has been to show how these contradictions may be avoided. Parsons avoids them by distinguishing two kinds of properties: nuclear properties (like being a man, being a detective, etc.) and extra-nuclear properties (like existing, being possible, etc.). He then holds that only the *nuclear* properties ascribed to the character in the story are actually possessed by the corresponding objects, so we do not have to conclude that Holmes exists. Nonetheless, we do need some way to mark the fact that there may be objects (arguably, like Macbeth’s dagger) that *don’t* exist according to the stories, as well as objects that (like Macbeth) *are* said to exist. To mark this, Parsons suggests that there are ‘watered down’ nuclear properties corresponding to each extra-nuclear property, so that Holmes does not exist [extra-nuclear] but does have watered-down [nuclear] existence. Zalta (1983), following

Ernst Mally, avoids contradiction by a different route: distinguishing two modes of predication: encoding and exemplifying. Fictional entities *encode* all of those properties they are said to have in the stories, but that does not mean that they *exemplify* them. So Holmes encodes existence but exemplifies nonexistence, and contradiction is avoided.

A third view along similar lines takes fictional entities to be existing *abstract* objects of some sort rather than to be Meinongian non-existent objects. Nicholas Wolterstorff develops one such view, according to which fictional characters are “not persons of a certain kind, but person-kinds” which do exist (1980, 144). On this view, authors do not refer to anyone when they write fictional stories; instead, they delineate a certain kind of person by describing certain sets of characteristics. The fictional character Holmes is not a person, but a certain *kind* of person, or ‘person-kind’, that has essentially within it those properties the work attributes to the character, e.g. being a man, being clever, being a detective... As abstracta, of course kinds can’t literally *have* such properties as being clever or solving mysteries—but they can be *defined by* the properties essential within them. So on this view, type (3) claims such as “Holmes solved his first mystery in his college years” are true just in case the properties expressed by the predicate (solving one’s first mystery during one’s college years) are essential within the person-kind Holmes (1980, 159). Many (but not all—see below) of the properties attributed to characters in external discourse, e.g. being famous, appearing in stories, may be properties these abstract person-kinds genuinely *have* rather than properties essential within the kind.

But neither of these strategies helps Wolterstorff cope with (type 2) nonexistence claims, for existence is ascribed to Holmes in the stories, and so is essential to that person-kind, and the abstract entity that is that person-kind also

exists. Wolterstorff suggests two alternative ways of understanding nonexistence claims: either as saying that the relevant person-kind has never been exemplified, or (acknowledging Kripke's point) that the author was not referring to anyone when he used the name in writing the story (1980, 161).

Despite their differences, possibilist, neo-Meinongian, and abstractist views are alike in taking most seriously internal (type 3) claims about fictional characters, and as a result they face similar difficulties accounting for the truth of at least some type (4) external claims. Whether fictional entities are taken to be unactualized possibilia, non-existent objects, or abstract kinds, it seems that in any of these cases the work of authors writing stories is completely irrelevant to whether or not there are these fictional entities: the relevant possibilia, non-existent objects, and abstract kinds were 'around' just as much before as after acts of authoring, and so we can't take seriously the idea that authors create fictional characters on any of these views. The best these views can do to account for the apparent truth of claims such as "Hamlet was created by Shakespeare" is to say that it is at least true that Shakespeare *described* or *selected* Hamlet from among all the available possibilia, non-existent objects, or abstract kinds and, by writing about that object, made it *fictional*. (Below I will return to discuss some metaphysical difficulties these views also face.)

All of the views canvassed thus far—whether or not they accept that there are fictional entities—face difficulties accounting for the apparent truth of certain external (type 4) sentences. This has inspired several recent theorists to begin by taking this sort of discourse as the focal case—a view that requires accepting that there are fictional characters and that these are created by authors in the process of writing works of fiction. Since they take fictional characters to be products of the creative activities of authors, call these 'artifactual' views of fiction.

The phenomenologist ROMAN INGARDEN suggested something like an artifactual view of fiction in his (1931) *The Literary Work of Art*, where he treats fictional characters (and the literary works in which they appear) as purely intentional objects—objects owing their existence and essence to consciousness. Saul Kripke (apparently independently) suggests that fictional entities are human creations in his unpublished 1973 John Locke lectures. He argues that fictional characters exist in the ordinary concrete world (not another possible world), but they do not exist ‘automatically’ as pure abstracta do. Instead, although they are ‘in some sense’ abstract entities, they are contingent and exist only given concrete activities of writing or telling stories. John Searle (1979, 71-72) similarly claims that authors, in writing stories and pretending to refer to people, instead create fictional characters to which others can then refer. More recently, artifactual views of fiction have been defended by Schiffer (1996) and Salmon (1998), and developed at length by Thomasson (1999, 2003). (VAN INWAGEN (1977, 1983, 2003) develops a similar view according to which fictional characters are theoretic entities of literary criticism, but he is noncommittal about whether or not they are created.)

Artifactualist theories take external (type 4) claims about fictional characters—e.g. that Holmes is a fictional character created by Arthur Conan Doyle, who modeled Holmes on a medical doctor—to be literally true. On Thomasson’s view, fictional characters are abstract artifacts created by authors’ activities in writing or telling stories, and dependent for their ongoing existence on those stories (and copies or memories of them). The status of fictional characters as created, dependent, abstracta, she emphasizes, is like that of many social and cultural entities such as laws of state, symphonies, and works of literature themselves: none of them may be

identified with any concrete entity, none has a definite spatial location, but all come into existence at a particular time given certain types of human activity.

Most artifactualists, like Searle, take fictional characters to be created by authors pretending to refer to real people and places, and so take fictionalizing (type 1) discourse to involve mere pretended assertions. Artifactualists generally do not take (type 3) internal discourse to state literal truths about properties these fictional entities have; instead, they (like Sainsbury fictional entities) typically read these as shorthand for claims about what is true *according to the fiction* or (following Walton) about what is accepted in games of pretense authorized by the story.

The greatest difficulty for artifactual views arises in handling (type 2) nonexistence claims. Various strategies may be used here: denials that Sherlock Holmes exists may be read as denials that there is any such person (Thomasson 1999, 112), or any object answering the descriptions in the stories (van Inwagen 2003, 146). Alternatively, these nonexistence claims may be read as noting that past users of the name mistakenly supposed that the name-use chain led back to a baptism rather than a work of fiction (van Inwagen 2003, 146-7; cf. Thomasson 2003). If some such solution to the problem of nonexistence claims can be shown to be plausible and non *ad hoc*, artifactual theories may offer the best overall way to handle fictional discourse—a way which does require positing fictional entities.

2. Metaphysical Considerations

Nonetheless, many think that we have metaphysical grounds to resist positing fictional entities even if we can offer a somewhat better account of language by accepting that there are such entities and that we sometimes refer to them. These arguments have run in parallel to the developing theories of what fictional entities are.

As we have seen, Russell originally claimed that Meinongian objects were ‘apt to infringe the law of contradiction’ (1905/1990, 205); an objection that kept fictional entities largely undefended for over seventy years. While neo-Meinongians showed how to avoid contradiction, their views were nonetheless widely rejected for drawing a distinction between what objects *exist* and what objects *there are* (or over which we may quantify)—a distinction many philosophers claim to find incomprehensible (van Inwagen 2003, 138-142).

Abstractist and possibilist solutions, of course, are more acceptable to those already inclined to accept abstract objects, or possible worlds and the objects in them. But even if one accepts that there are platonistic abstracta or mere possibilia, other problems arise in supposing that fictional characters are among them. As mentioned above, fictional characters are generally thought to be created, contingent features of the actual world, but neither of these is true of either platonistically conceived abstracta (which are eternal and necessary) or of mere possibilia (which are not created by authors and are merely possible). Moreover, some stories are (intentionally or unintentionally) inconsistent, and so some of their characters can’t be treated as possible objects having all the properties ascribed in the story.

Another metaphysical problem that arises for both possibilist and abstractist views comes from the fact that they (like the Meinongian views before them) take the descriptions in works of fiction to determine *which* object we are talking about: the fictional entity is the possible person or abstract entity that has, or has essential within it, all of the properties ascribed to the character in the story. But this leads to problems with the identity conditions for fictional characters (see Thomasson 1999, Chapter 5). For these views entail that no fictional character could have had any properties other than those they are ascribed. If the author made even a minor change in the work, so

that the character is ascribed so much as one different property (however trivial), she would have written about a different possible person, or delineated a different person-kind. As a result, these views must hold that sequels, parodies, and even revised editions must always include entirely different characters from the original texts—in violation of our standard assumption that an author may change what she says about a given character, and that sequels may describe the further adventures of one and the same character. (Meinongian theories face similar difficulties with handling identity conditions.)

Artifactualist views avoid metaphysical difficulties like these by taking fictional characters (like works of literature themselves) to be created by activities of authors and individuated primarily by their historical origin. The artifactualist typically treats historical continuity—not properties ascribed—as the primary factor for the identity of a fictional character. This leaves open the idea that an author might have described a character somewhat differently than she did, and allows that a later author may ascribe new properties to a preexisting fictional character, provided she is familiar with that character and intends to refer back to it and ascribe it new properties (Thomasson 1999, 67-69).

Nonetheless, artifactualist views face other metaphysical objections. Although the artifactualist treats fictional characters as created entities, they are also clearly abstract in some sense: though not eternal and necessary like the Platonist's abstracta, they still lack a spatio-temporal location (and are not material) (Thomasson 1999; see also CONCRETE/ABSTRACT). But the very idea that there may be created abstracta strikes some as hard to swallow. As van Inwagen puts it "Can there really be abstract things that are made? Some might find it implausible to suppose that even God could literally create an abstract object" (2003, 153-4). Thomasson (1999) addresses these

worries by noting that those who accept the existence of such ordinary social and cultural objects as laws, marriages, symphonies, and works of literature themselves are apparently already committed to the existence of created abstracta, so that no special problems arise in accepting created abstracta to account for fictional characters. Of course this ‘companions in guilt’ argument leaves us with two choices: allow that there are abstract artifacts and accept the existence of fictional characters, literary works, laws, etc., or deny the existence of all of these and find some way of paraphrasing talk about the latter entities as well as about fictional characters. But those who would take the latter route should note that even accounting for fictional discourse itself is much more difficult if we cannot make reference to the stories in which they appear.

A final and persistent metaphysical argument against fictional entities is that, since it would be much more parsimonious to deny the existence of fictional characters, we should do so if at all possible. The parsimony argument can be addressed in several ways. First, it is worth noting that even Occam’s razor only tells us that ‘it is vain to do with many what can be done with fewer’—but if we can provide a *better* account of fictional discourse by accepting fictional entities, the anti-realist about fictional entities is not really doing the same thing as the realist, with fewer entities. Second, as Thomasson (1999) notes, it is not obviously more parsimonious to do without fictional characters if we must posit abstract artifacts in some other arena, e.g. to make sense of our talk about novels, symphonies, laws of state, and the like.

The most potentially powerful, though also the most controversial, response to parsimony-based arguments comes from a certain minimalist or ‘pleonastic’ approach to their ontology proposed by Stephen Schiffer (1996). On Schiffer’s view,

pretenseful uses of a fictional name in works of literature, e.g. “[Holmes was] the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen”, automatically license us to introduce the singular term “the fictional character Sherlock Holmes” which may then be used in a hypostatizing way in literary discussions. Given those prior pretenseful uses, that singular term is guaranteed to refer to a fictional character. But if all that it takes for fictional names to be guaranteed to refer to characters is that these names be used pretensefully in works of literature, it is not at all clear that someone who accepts that there are pretenseful uses of these names in works of literature but denies that there are fictional characters is genuinely offering a more parsimonious view. Instead, as Thomasson argues (2003), such a person would be only twisting the ordinary rules of use for terms like ‘fictional character’ by artificially inflating the conditions it takes for there to be such characters—not offering a genuinely more parsimonious ontology.

3. Broader Relevance

The question of whether or not we should accept that there are fictional entities—and if so, what sort of thing they are—has been a recurrent topic throughout the history of analytic philosophy because of its broader relevance for a range of other philosophical issues. First, as we have seen in section 1, it has relevance for our theory of language. If we deny that there are fictional entities (and so deny that we ever refer to them), we must explain how we can have true statements involving non-referring terms. If we accept that there are fictional entities, we must explain how we can refer to non-existent objects (if we take a Meinongian view), merely possible objects, or abstracta (whether Platonist or artifactual)—a task that is especially

difficult for causal theories of reference, since none of these entities are obviously a part of the actual causal order.

Issues regarding fictional entities also have broader relevance for work in metaphysics. If artifactualists like Thomasson are correct, then whether or not one accepts that there are fictional characters is closely connected to the issue of whether one accepts other mind-dependent social and cultural objects such as laws and nations, stories and symphonies. Moreover, our stance regarding fictional entities has central relevance for issues of ontological commitment and quantification: If the Meinongian is right, we can quantify over entities that don't exist, and existence must be distinguished from quantification. If the minimalist is right, then the measure of ontological commitment is not whether or not we quantify over the relevant entities—for if we accept that there are authors who use fictional names pretensefully in writing works of fiction, we are already tacitly committed to fictional characters regardless of whether they explicitly quantify over them.

See also FICTIONAL TRUTH, OBJECTS, AND CHARACTERS

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