Frivolous Fictions

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Abstract: We want to say both that Sherlock Holmes does not exist, and that he is a fictional character. But how can we say these things without committing ourselves to the existence of Sherlock Holmes? Here I develop and defend a non-commital paraphrase of quantification over fictional characters, modeled on the non-commital paraphrase Kit Fine provides for quantification over possibilia. I also develop and defend the view that names for fictional characters are *weakly non-referring*, in Nathan Salmon's sense, and so provide us with a non-commital means to express singular propositions. The resulting position allows us to reap the benefits of Fictional Realism without paying the associated ontological cost.

1 Introduction

Many of us want to say that fictional characters don't exist. We want to say this both in general, as I just did, and in each case: for example, that Sherlock Holmes does not exist, that Harry Potter does not exist, and so on.

Many of us also want to make apparently substantive non-fictional claims about fictional characters, both in general and in particular cases: for example, that some fictional characters are more well-developed than others, that Sherlock Holmes was created by Conan Doyle, and that Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character. But such claims seem to commit us to the existence of fictional characters.

Popular positions on the ontology of fictional characters force us to make a choice. Fictional Realists choose to give up nonexistence in order to save the truth of the substantive non-fictional claims (van Inwagen 1977; Zalta 1983; Salmon 1998; Thomasson 1999; Braun 2005; Schnieder and von Solodkoff 2009; Kripke 2013). Pretense Theorists choose to give up on the substantive non-fictional claims, in order to save nonexistence (Walton 1990; Everett 2013). In this paper, I develop a position that allows us to have it both ways, and so satisfies what Walton (1990, 386) calls "the urge to stand with feet on both sides of the fence" on this issue.

Res Philosophica, *Vol. 93, No. 2, April 2016, pp. 357–376*
http://dx.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2016.93.2.8

Noneists (or Meinongians) have it both ways, because they make a distinction between being and being something (Parsons 2011, 1980; Routley 1980; Priest 2005; Berto 2011). On their view, some things don't exist, but there are still substantive truths about those things. In order to say this, Noneists need to reject the simplest definitions of existence and being, namely,

x exists iff $\exists y\, x = y$
x is iff $\exists y\, x = y$

I am sympathetic to Noneism, but the position I will develop here is not Noneist. I will assume throughout that to exist is to be something, and that fictional characters do not exist in this sense.

The position is drawn from the metaphysics of modality, and modeled closely after Fine's (1977; 1985; 2003) attempt to provide noncommittal paraphrase for possibilist discourse, as augmented by Salmon's (1987) attempt to provide a noncommittal account of singular reference to merely possible objects. It is similar in many respects to the "*de dicto*, quantifying out" approach discussed but not endorsed by Howell (1979, 162–169).

My goal here is to develop the position, and, to the extent possible, defend it. I think the position has some significant advantages, and I think more can be said in its defense than one might have thought. It is also my hope that the position will provide a useful foil for those who would reject it and, perhaps, a useful foil for those who wish to reject the corresponding views in the metaphysics of modality, defended by Fine and Salmon.

2 The Non-Fictional Truth About Fictional Characters

Consider the sentence,

(1) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character.

Taken at face value, this expresses a true singular proposition about Sherlock Holmes, and so seems to commit us to the existence of Sherlock Holmes. Or consider,

(2) Sherlock Holmes is a detective.

Again, taken at face value, this expresses a singular proposition about Sherlock Holmes, and so seems to commit us to there being such a thing as Holmes. But there is an important difference between (1) and (2). (1) is a piece of non-fiction, while (2) is a piece of fiction. That is, (1) tells us something about what Holmes is really like, outside of the story, while (2) tells us something about what Holmes is like according to the story.

Any theory of fictional characters will need to make this distinction. A popular strategy among Realists is to distinguish two kinds of predication. For example, van Inwagen (1977, 305) draws a distinction between *having* a property and *being ascribed* a property. Holmes *has* but is not *ascribed*

the property of being a fictional character; he is *ascribed* but does not *have* the property of being a detective. Zalta (1983) says that characters *encode* but do not *exemplify* the properties they have according to the story.[1]

Let 'is_{NF}' express the relation between a character and the properties it has outside the fiction, and 'is_{F}' express the relation between a character and the properties it has according to the fiction. Then a sentence like (2) is ambiguous, and could express either,

Sherlock Holmes is_{NF} a detective,

which is false, or,

Sherlock Holmes is_{F} a detective,

which is true.

Alternatively, we can introduce a sentential operator to mark the distinction between fictional and non-fictional truths. Here we have a choice. We can introduce an operator that takes two arguments, a fictional work and a sentence (e.g., 'According to *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes is a detective'). Or we can introduce an operator that takes just a sentence as an argument (e.g., 'According to a fiction, Holmes is a detective') and worry about how to identify and distinguish different fictions later. For simplicity, I adopt the latter approach here, and I write the operator as '$\mathbb{F}$.'

So, according to the operator view, (2) is false, but (3) is true:

(3) $\mathbb{F}$(Sherlock Holmes is a detective).

I prefer the operator approach because it is more general. For example, it applies to the sentence, 'It is always raining,' which is true in Ray Bradbury's short story, "The Long Rain," but is not non-fictionally true (thank goodness). And it applies to the sentence, 'There are exactly five wizards,' which is true according to *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps there is a way to capture what is going on in these cases by judicious paraphrase and disambiguation of two kinds of predication, but it is not obvious. These examples suggest that the fundamental distinction is a distinction between fictional and non-fictional circumstances, and not just between fictional and non-fictional property ascriptions to the objects that show up in those circumstances.

However we mark the distinction, we are left with two sorts of non-fictionally true sentences about fictional characters. One sort, like (1), describes what a fictional character is like outside the fiction. The other, like (3), describes what a fictional character is like inside the fiction. Both appear to commit us to the existence fictional characters, for, absent some further story, both appear to express singular propositions about Holmes.

Apparent commitment to fictional characters also shows up in quantificational claims that make no use of proper names from fiction. For example,

[1] For a nice overview of these and other strategies, see Reicher 2006.

(4) There are characters in some nineteenth-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any eighteenth-century novel (van Inwagen 1977, 302).

(4) entails that there are fictional characters in nineteenth-century novels, and so that there are fictional characters. And, as Kroon (2003) emphasizes, we are happy to make such quantificational claims and, in the same breath, deny the existence of the characters we appear to be quantifying over, as in,

(5) There are numerous creatures mentioned in *Lord of the Rings* that don't really exist (151).

(5) looks both to commit us to there being fictional creatures, and commit us to their nonexistence. And, of course, we are equally happy to make such claims in the singular case, using proper names, as with,

(6) Holmes does not exist.

But it is hard to see how negative existentials of this sort could possibly be true, since they seem to entail a contradiction.

So this is our problem: what should see say about such sentences and their apparent ontological commitments?

Two popular responses are Fictional Realism and Pretense Theory. According to the Fictional Realist, fictional characters are existing abstract objects, and when authors tell stories, they are telling stories about these objects. So, on this view, Holmes exists, is an abstract object, and is a fictional character. But he (it?) is not a human, is not a detective, and does not smoke a pipe. Rather, he is all those things *according to the fiction*, but not in reality.

Fictional Realism provides a straightforward account of the truth of (1), (3), and (4), and it entails that (5) and (6) are, strictly speaking, false. So Realists need to say something more complicated to explain why we are inclined to say things like (5) and (6).[2]

Pretense Theorists, by contrast, argue that none of these sentences are in fact committing, because they are all just part of a game of pretense. Here the key idea is that we can pretend that there is a detective who smokes a pipe without there being something such that we are pretending that it is a detective who smokes a pipe. Similarly, we might pretend that there is something named 'Holmes,' and pretend that it is a detective.

Pretense Theory would seem to offer a nice account of sentences like (2), which are not true, but are treated as true (or "authorized") within the appropriate game of pretense. But the view has trouble with sentences like (1), (3), and (4), which express straightforward non-fictional truths about fictional characters. Here Pretense Theorists, following Walton (1990, ch. 10), argue that even these sentences are not literally true, but are instead only true (or "authorized") within an appropriate pretense. So, for example,

[2] For critical overview of what they might say, see Everett 2013, 142–163.

Everett (2013, 68ff.) argues that an utterance of (3) counts as true within a "complex extended pretense," that "extends the domain of make-believe to include further real objects."

Brock (2002) offers a nice suggestion: let the relevant "extended pretense" be the pretense that Fictional Realism is true. Then we can say, of sentences like (1), (3), and (4), that they are false, but they are true according to the fiction of Fictional Realism. He calls his view "Fictionalism about Fictional Characters." So, on Brock's view, *all* sentences that appear to commit us to fictional characters are not true, but only true according to the fiction of Fictional Realism.

Pretense Theorists run into trouble with sentences like (5) and (6). No doubt we can play a game of pretense in which we pretend that these sentences are true. But the whole point of sentences like (5) and (6), it seems, is to make a claim about what, as a matter of non-fictional fact, does not exist. So, like the Realists, the Pretense Theorists must say something more complicated about what is going on in these cases.[3]

So, putting aside the hard problem of negative existentials, we appear to face a choice: following the Realists, we can pay the ontological cost, and purchase robust non-fictional truths about fictional characters; or we can, following the Pretense Theorists, refuse the ontological cost, and seek a way of doing without the robust non-fictional truths. But it would be better if we could get what we want without paying for it.

3 Possibilia and Paraphrase

The solution I want to consider aims to provide non-committal paraphrases of everything we want to say about fictional characters, including negative existential claims like (5) and (6).[4] The paraphrases make use of two correlated intentional operators, '$\mathbb{F}$' ('in a fiction') and '$\mathbb{O}$' ('outside of all fiction'), and are closely modeled after paraphrases offered by Fine (1977; 1985; 2003) for quantification over possibilia. But finding non-committal paraphrases for quantificational claims, like (4) and (5), is not enough. We also need to deal with sentences involving proper names, like (1). Here again we can borrow from the literature on possibilia, and adapt Salmon's (1987) account of "weakly non-referring" names to the case of fiction.

Consider the sentence,

[3] For some options, see Walton 1990, 424–430, Brock 2002, 14–18, and Everett 2013, 63–74.

[4] There are at least two rather different ways of understanding the claim that some sentence, S_2, is a non-committal paraphrase of some other sentence, S_1. On the first, the idea is that S_1 and S_2 both express the *same* proposition, but S_2 is a better guide to the quantificational form of that proposition, and so allows us to see that the proposition is non-committal. On the second—which I prefer—the idea is that S_1 and S_2 express *different* propositions, that the proposition expressed by S_1 *is* committal, but that *we can use* S_1 as a sloppy way of expressing S_2, which is non-committal. I don't think anything I say in this paper hinges on which way you prefer to understand the proposed paraphrases.

There is a possible purple cow: $\exists x$ (x is a possible purple cow).

Taken at face value, this commits us to the existence of a possible purple cow. But we can avoid this by placing the quantifier within the scope of a modal operator:

It is possible that there is a purple cow: $\Diamond \exists x$ (x is a purple cow).

The claim that this avoids commitment depends on the assumption that the Barcan Formula is not a valid schema:

Barcan Formula: $\Diamond \exists x\, Fx \rightarrow \exists x \Diamond Fx$

Necessitists, like Williamson (1999; see also 2002; 2013) and Linsky (1996; see also 1994), accept the Barcan Formula: they think that everything that could possibly exist exists of necessity. Fine's paraphrase strategy depends on the rejection of the Barcan Formula and the rejection of necessitism.

The simple strategy of moving the quantifier inside the operator does not work for more complex sentences (Fine 2003; 1985). '$\Diamond$' shifts the circumstance of evaluation for both quantifier and predicate satisfaction together, but often we need the two to come apart. Consider,

Some possible thing does not exist: $\exists x$ (x is possible and x does not exist).

If we move the '$\Diamond$' in front of the whole sentence, we make the dubious claim that there is a possible world containing an object that does not exist at that world:

Possibly, something does not exist: $\Diamond \exists x$ (x does not exist).

A more plausible interpretation of the claim has it that there is some possible object that does not exist at *our* world. The easiest way to express this is by using an actuality operator, '$\mathbb{A}$' ('it is actually the case that'), like so:

Possibly something is such that actually it does not exist: $\Diamond \exists x\, \mathbb{A}$ (x does not exist).

This paraphrase allows us to evaluate the quantifier relative to a merely possible world, but then shift back to the actual world to evaluate the predication of nonexistence.[5]

This gives us a strategy for paraphrasing quantificational claims about possibilia so as to avoid commitment, but it does not tell us how to handle proper names.

Salmon (1987) introduces the case of Noman, the possible child that would have come to be if *this* actual egg had been fertilized by *that* actual sperm. Given sufficiency of origin—the principle, roughly, that if it is possible for a given person to come from given zygotes, then necessarily, no other person could have come from those zygotes—this description uniquely specifies a merely possible individual. Given a somewhat permissive theory

[5] There is a lot more to be said about this paraphrasing strategy and how it can be extended and generalized. See Fine 2003 for more details.

of naming—one that allows fixing the referent by means of a proper definite description—this is enough to allow us to introduce the name 'Noman' for that individual.[6]

All this looks to commit us to a merely possible object, Noman. But to avoid such commitment, Salmon invokes Fine:

> Kit Fine has shown that the possibilist universal and existential quantifiers are fully definable using the standard modal operators in tandem with actualist quantifiers. . . . In fact, the import of a possibilist quantificational assertion can often be easily expressed using only first-order machinery through the judicious use of modal operators (including an operator for something's actually being the case) in tandem with actualist quantifiers only over individuals. (Salmon 1987, 57)

This suggests that Salmon intends that we combine his account of how Noman is named with the sort of non-committal paraphrase found in Fine but he leaves the details as an exercise for the reader.

So how does it work? First, we need to specify Noman without committing ourselves to his existence. Let *e* and *s* name an actual egg and sperm, respectively. We might begin by noting that *s* could have fertilized *e* and produced a child:

$$\Diamond \exists x \, (s \text{ fertilizes } e \text{ to produce child } x).$$

But this doesn't yet say that there is exactly one such possible child. How can we express this uniqueness, without committing ourselves to possibilia? We add the sort of condition familiar from Russell: "and everything that does this is identical to x." But, since we mean to include every possible thing in the scope of that quantifier, we need to add an appropriate modal operator,

$$\Diamond \exists x \, [s \text{ fertilizes } e \text{ to produce child } x \wedge \Diamond \forall y \, (s \text{ fertilizes } e \text{ to produce child } y \rightarrow x = y)].$$

This allows us to express the claim, as it were, that there is a unique possible product of *e* and *s*, but it does not commit us to the existence of that possible product. All that remains is to give it a name, which we can do by uttering something along the following lines,

$$\Diamond \exists x \, [s \text{ fertilizes } e \text{ to produce child } x \wedge \Diamond \forall y \, (s \text{ fertilizes } e \text{ to produce child } y \rightarrow x = y) \wedge \mathbb{A} \, (\text{I hereby dub } x \text{ 'Noman'})].$$

I realize that this is a bit of a complicated mouthful, but hopefully you can see how the paraphrased dubbing is meant to work, and why it can be seen

[6] Obviously much is controversial here. But our present interest is not in how Salmon proposes to fix the reference of 'Noman' to a merely possible individual, but how he proposes, having done that, to use the name without ontological commitment.

as giving us a means for naming Noman without supposing that Noman exists.

Salmon says that there is a sense in which the name 'Noman' refers, and a sense in which it does not. It does not refer in the sense that there is nothing that it refers to:

$\sim\exists x$ ('Noman' refers to x).

But "there might have been someone x such that 'Noman' actually refers to x" (1987, 94). That is,

$\Diamond\exists x\,\mathbb{A}$ ('Noman' refers to x).

So, he says, it is *weakly non-referring*.

According to Salmon, we can use weakly non-referring names to express singular propositions about merely possible objects. So we can use the name 'Noman' to say things like,

Noman is possibly human: $\Diamond$ (Noman is human)

and,

Noman does not exist: $\sim\exists x\,(x = \text{Noman})$.

For Salmon, these sentences express true singular propositions *about* Noman, even though Noman does not exist.

4 Fictional Characters

Can we apply these strategies to the case of fictional characters? There are good reasons to think that Holmes is not a possible object, and that truth in a fiction is not truth at some possible world. Possible worlds are complete and consistent, while fictions are not. So we cannot apply the Fine-Salmon strategy to fictional characters as is.

But there are also familiar reasons for thinking that possibility and fiction can be modelled in similar ways. We can think of a work of fiction as conjuring up a fictional world or realm. And we can think of these realms as indices relative to which we can assess truth in fiction, just as a possible world is an index relative to which we assess possible truth. We have already seen that we can make the distinction between what is non-fictionally the case and what is fictionally the case by helping ourselves to an operator '$\mathbb{F}$.' It is natural to think of this operator by analogy to '$\Diamond$,' as a device that shifts the circumstance of evaluation to a fictional realm. So, building on these analogies, we can construct a paraphrase that uses '$\mathbb{F}$' in place of '$\Diamond$.'

Using '$\mathbb{F}$,' we can paraphrase a sentence like,

There is a fictional dragon: $\exists x\,(x$ is a fictional dragon)

which commits us to fictional dragons, with a sentence like,

In a fiction, there is a dragon: $\mathbb{F}\exists x\,(x$ is a dragon)

which does not. The claim that this does not commit us to dragons depends on the assumption that the Barcan Formula for Fiction is not a valid schema:

Barcan Formula for Fiction: $\mathbb{F}\exists x\, Fx \rightarrow \exists x\, \mathbb{F}\, Fx$.

Critics often suggest that Fictional Realists are committed to something like the Barcan Formula for Fiction.[7] But I have not found an example of a Fictional Realist who unambiguously commits themselves to this principle; they often seem to be focused on the main characters, as it were, but not the extras. Noneists and Meinongians are different on this score; they tend to think of quantification as easily leaping over intentional operators of all kinds, in part because they don't think quantification has anything to do with ontological commitment.

Pretense Theorists must reject the Barcan Formula for Fiction. They must make a sharp distinction between what there is and what there is according to the pretense. This is perhaps most obvious given Brock's (2002) version of the view, which relies on a distinction between what there is TC[1] and what there is according to the fiction of Fictional Realism. If he were to accept the Barcan Formula for Fiction, this distinction would collapse. The strategy pursued here likewise depends on the rejection of the Barcan Formula for Fiction.

To co-opt Fine's paraphrase, we also need an operator that is analogous to '$\mathbb{A}$,' but correlates with '$\mathbb{F}$' instead of '$\Diamond$.' So let's give ourselves an operator, '$\mathbb{O}$,' to be read as 'outside all fiction.'

When I say that it needs to be analogous to '$\mathbb{A}$,' I mean that it needs to be a "stepping-back" operator, in the sense of Howell (1979, 162–63).[8] In the case of 'actually,' English seems to allow both a "rigid" (or "stepping-back") use and a "nonrigid" use, as in the following two examples:

- If I were a better philosopher, then I would actually understand Fichte.
- If I were a better philosopher, then I would understand Fichte better than I actually do.

In the first, nonrigid use, "actually" adds emphasis, but does not shift the circumstance of evaluation; the circumstance is one in which both I am a better philosopher and I understand Fichte. In the second, rigid use,

[7] Brock (2002, 1) attributes a "Principle of Plenitude" to Fictional Realists that is likely equivalent to the Barcan Formula for Fiction. Nolan and Sandgren (2014, 616–617) suggest "Bridge Principles" that seem predicated on the assumption that Fictional Realists accept something like the Barcan Formula for Fiction.

[8] Howell envisages a generic "stepping-back" operator 'S,' which shifts us back to the actual, present, non-fictional circumstance, from any possible, temporal, or fictional circumstance, and attributes the idea that for such operators to David Kaplan. Perhaps some uses of 'really' in English work like this—see (5) for example. Here I will instead assume that we have distinct "stepping-back" operators for modality ("actually"), time ("now"), and fiction ("outside of all fiction").

"actually" shifts the circumstance of evaluation back to the actual world, so we can compare my actual degree of understanding to the degree of understanding I have in the counterfactual circumstance. Fine's paraphrase strategy only works if we assume that '$\mathbb{A}$' expresses the rigid use of 'actually' in English. Likewise, our paraphrase will only work if we assume that '$\mathbb{O}$' is similarly "rigid."

It is not clear to me whether or not English offers anything analogous to a "rigid" or "stepping-back" use of phrases like "outside of all fiction" or "non-fictionally."[9] For example, the following seems to be clearly nonrigid:

> According to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, it is non-fictionally the case that a detective lives at 221B Baker Street.

Generally, fiction is meant to be taken as non-fiction, at least in the minimal sense that what is true within a story is meant to be taken as though it were non-fictionally true within that story. Compare such nonrigid uses to the use our paraphrase demands,

> According to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes is a detective but really, outside of all fiction, he is not a detective.

Here the idea is that the thing that is a detective within the story—Holmes—is not a detective outside the story. So the idea is that the phrase, 'really, outside of all fiction,' serves to shift the circumstance of evaluation back out of the fictional realm and to non-fictional reality.[10]

Note that this means that much of what is true according to a fiction is *not* under authorial control.[11] I can write a story according to which the world is flat, so that,

$$\mathbb{F}\,(\text{the world is flat}),$$

but I cannot write a story according to which, outside of all fiction, the world is flat,

$$\mathbb{F}\,\mathbb{O}\,(\text{the world is flat}).$$

This point is not just a point about authorial control. Once we give ourselves '$\mathbb{O}$,' every non-fictional fact is going to be included inside every fiction, in the sense that, for any non-fictional fact p,

$$\sim\mathbb{F}\sim\mathbb{O}\,p.$$[12]

So Shakespeare's plays will include, as part of their content, all the non-fictional facts. But that seems wrong! Surely those plays have nothing to say about smartphones![13]

[9] Perhaps the occurrence of 'really' in sentence (5) is best understood in this way.

[10] For a Pretense Theoretic analogue of this distinction, see Everett's (2013, 38) distinction between "pretense-oriented piggybacking" and "world-oriented piggybacking."

[11] Thanks to Joshua Spencer for pressing me on this point.

[12] Just as 'necessarily' is equivalent to 'not possibly not,' 'in all fictions' is equivalent to 'not fictionally not.'

[13] Thanks to an anonymous referee for this vivid expression of the concern.

I think these worries are misplaced. The truth of these sentences is a consequence of adding a stepping-back operator into the language we use to discuss truth in fiction. When we do that, it turns out that not everything that occurs within the scope of an '𝔽' operator is properly understood to be part of the content of the relevant fiction.

Consider the analogous point about modality: once we add the '𝔸' operator to our language, not all of what is true at a world is made true by facts at that world. There are worlds in which the world is flat, so that

◊ (the world is flat)

but there are no worlds in which the world is *actually* flat,

◊ 𝔸 (the world is flat).

Someone might object that this puts an undue restriction on the autonomy of other possible worlds, or that it suggests that each possible world has, as part of its content, all the actual facts about smartphones. But this objection is misplaced: this is just a consequence of adding a stepping-back operator into the language we use to discuss modality.

Similar issues arise for '𝔽.' When we embed an 'it is fictionally the case' operator inside of another 'it is fictionally the case' operator, we might be interested in capturing the phenomena of fictions within fictions, like the play, "The Murder of Gonzago," which exists according to *Hamlet*. So we might want to say, for example, that

𝔽 (Gonzago is murdered)

is false, but

𝔽 𝔽 (Gonzago is murdered)

is true. And we might want to say that,

𝔽 (Harry Potter exists and 𝔽 [Gonzago is murdered])

is false, but

𝔽 (Hamlet exists and 𝔽 [Gonzago is murdered])

is true. When we use '𝔽' this way, we assume that what is fictionally the case, according to a given story, is under the control of that story.

But there is another, equally legitimate way of understanding embedded uses of '𝔽,' where the operator is insensitive to embedding and simply serves to shift us to *any* fictional circumstance, in much the same way that, in S5, '◊' shifts the circumstance of evaluation to any possible world.

When '𝔽' is understood in the first way, we might call it a "stepping-from" operator, since where it takes us next depends crucially on where we are in the logical space of fictional realms. When it is understood in the second way, we might call it a "stepping-across" operator, since it lets us shift the circumstance of evaluation freely from any point in logical space to any other.

Suppose I want to make the cross-fictional comparative claim that Gandalf is more powerful than Yoda. I might try something like this,

> $\mathbb{F}$ (Gandalf has power of degree n and $\mathbb{F}$ [Yoda has power of degree m and $n > m$]).[14]

If we read '$\mathbb{F}$' as in the first way, as a stepping-from operator, this is all wrong: *Star Wars* does not exist, as a work of fiction, within the fictional realm of *The Lord of the Rings*. But if we read '$\mathbb{F}$' as a stepping-across operator, this captures the cross-fictional comparison that we have in mind.

Just as I see no reason not to give ourselves both rigid and nonrigid actuality operators, and no reason not to give ourselves both rigid and nonrigid senses of "outside the fiction," I see no reason not to give ourselves both stepping-from and stepping-across senses of '$\mathbb{F}$'; each is useful, but for different theoretical purposes. In what follows, I will assume that '$\mathbb{F}$' behaves as a stepping-across operator.

Now consider van Inwagen's sentence,

> (4) There are characters in some nineteenth-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any eighteenth-century novel.

Using our tools, we can paraphrase this as,

> $\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{O}$ [x is a character in a nineteenth-century novel $\wedge$ $\mathbb{F}\forall y\,\mathbb{O}$ (y is a character in an eighteenth-century novel $\rightarrow$ x is presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than y)].

This is complicated, so let's walk through it step by step. First, the '$\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{O}$' serves to take us to a fictional realm, bind an object in its domain to the variable 'x,' and return to non-fictional reality. Next, we specify that x is a character in a nineteenth-century novel. Note that the occurrence of 'x' is still within the scope of the quantifier, and so still bound. And note that the property—*being a character in a nineteenth-century novel*—is a property that x has outside the fiction, not according to the fiction. Next—'$\mathbb{F}\forall y\,\mathbb{O}$'—we step back out into a fictional realm, bind another object to a second variable, 'y,' and return to non-fictional reality. And now we make a conditional non-fictional claim about the relationship between x and y: if y is a character in an eighteenth-century novel, then x is presented with more detail than y. This last claim is made within the scope of both quantifiers, so both variables remain bound.

(4) entails that there is a character in a nineteenth-century novel, and so entails that there is a character, and so commits us to fictional characters. But this paraphrase does not entail that there is a character in a nineteenth-century novel, because the Barcan Formula for Fiction is not valid. So

[14] Cross-fictional comparatives are complicated, and this is not meant to provide a model for all cases.

this paraphrase captures the truth behind (4), but in a way that does not commit us to the existence of any fictional characters.

The procedure is general. Faced with a quantifier ranging over fictional characters, like '$\exists x$,' we replace it with a quantifier phrase bookended by operators '$\mathbb{F}\,\exists x\,\mathbb{O}$.' If you want to think of this metaphorically, you can imagine that the bookended phrase allows us to dip briefly into a fictional realm, grab some object from the domain using a quantifying phrase, and then pop back out to the real world, where we can proceed to say whatever it is we wanted to say about that object, by using a bound variable.

This gives us a strategy for paraphrasing away quantificational commitment to fictional characters. But it does not yet tell us how to handle sentences that involve proper names for fictional characters, like 'Holmes.' So the next step is to co-opt Salmon's account of weakly non-referring names.

It is easy enough, using our tools, to *express* the claim that 'Holmes,' like 'Noman,' is weakly non-referring, in the relevant sense. On the one hand, there is nothing 'Holmes' refers to:

$$\sim\exists x\,(\text{'Holmes' refers to } x).$$

On the other hand, according to a fiction there is something that, as a matter of non-fiction, 'Holmes' refers to:

$$\mathbb{F}\,\exists x\,\mathbb{O}\,(\text{'Holmes' refers to } x).$$

And if we can, as Salmon suggests, use weakly non-referring terms to express singular propositions, then, assuming that 'Holmes' is weakly non-referring, we can use sentences like (1) and (6) to express true singular propositions about Holmes, without committing ourselves to the existence of Holmes.

(1) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character.
(6) Sherlock Holmes does not exist: $\sim\exists x\,(\text{Holmes} = x)$.

But I skipped a step. Salmon showed us both *how* to uniquely specify Noman and how to then use that specification to give him a name, without committing ourselves to his existence. So far, I have not said anything about *how* we might uniquely specify Holmes. I have only shown that we can express the claim that 'Holmes' is weakly non-referring; I have not shown that the claim is plausibly true.

Here I am not sure what to say, because I am not sure how we do go about naming fictional characters. But I think I have the resources to co-opt whatever a Fictional Realist might want to say on the matter. Suppose she says that there is some unique set of properties P attributed to Holmes in the stories, and that 'Holmes' is attached to whatever object uniquely has those properties in a fiction. Then I can match her internalist dubbing ceremony, by saying,

$$\mathbb{F}\,\exists x\,(x \text{ has each of } P \text{ and } \mathbb{O}\,[\text{I hereby dub } x \text{ 'Holmes'}]).$$

Suppose she says that there is some unique set of properties Q that Holmes has outside of fiction (perhaps including relations to Doyle or the texts), and that the name 'Holmes' is attached to whatever object uniquely has those properties outside of fiction. Then I can match her externalist dubbing ceremony, by saying,

$$\mathbb{F}\,\exists x\,\mathbb{O}\,(x \text{ has each of } Q \text{ and I hereby dub } x \text{ 'Holmes'}).$$

And if Holmes is instead specified by some complex combination of properties both in and outside the fiction, I should be able to match that too, though my paraphrase will be a bit more complicated.

Or perhaps the view is that the name 'Holmes' is not introduced via an explicit dubbing. Perhaps the author, in writing the story, introduced the name and created or indicated the character at the same time, and the name was attached to the character through that process. Again, I think I have the resources to co-opt whatever story the Realist wants to tell, since I take myself to have a general strategy for paraphrasing any of the relevant facts that might come into such an account.

This is all meant to be schematic. I do not take it to be my business here to defend or develop on account of how 'Holmes' refers to Holmes over any other. I simply mean to suggest that, assuming that an account can be given, whatever form it might take, I think I co-opt it.

So that's the view. There are no fictional characters, but there are non-fictional truths about fictional characters, both singular and general that can be expressed by the judicious use of intentional operators.

5 Objections

One might insist that quantification within the scope of '$\mathbb{F}$' is ontologically committing. That is, one might insist that the Barcan Formula for Fiction is valid. I don't have anything to say in response, beyond this: I, with the Pretense Theorists, find it intuitively plausible that one can pretend that there is a detective without there being something such that, one is pretending *of it* that it is a detective. The solution is predicated on this assumption.

There is a general semantic argument against "stepping-back" operators of all sorts. Consider,

$$\Diamond\,\exists x\,\mathbb{A}\,Fx.$$

Semantically, the idea is supposed to be that the modal operator '$\Diamond$' takes us to another possible world, where the quantifier '$\exists x$' picks up an object from the domain of that world. Then, the operator, '$\mathbb{A}$' pulls us back to the actual world, where we evaluate whether or not x—the object picked up from the domain of the possible world—is F.

But if we are Actualists, then we think that only actual objects exist. So there are no merely possible objects available to be picked up from

other possible worlds. So when '$\mathbb{A}$' brings us back to the actual world, the variable '*x*' has no value; all we are left with is an open sentence, '*Fx*,' and we have no way to evaluate that sentence as true or false.[15]

This objection generalizes further. Consider,

$$\Diamond \exists x\, Fx.$$

Semantically, the idea is supposed to be that the modal operator '$\Diamond$' takes us to another possible world, where the quantifier '$\exists x$' picks up an object from the domain of that world, and we then evaluate whether or not that object—*x*—is *F* at that world.

But if we are Actualists, then we think that only actual objects exist. So there are no merely possible objects to be picked up from other possible worlds. So the bound variable '*x*' has no value; all we are left with is an open sentence '*Fx*,' and we have no way to evaluate that sentence as true or false at that world.

If sound, this objection shows that Actualists cannot use a variable domain quantified modal logic, because they lack the resources needed to understand the use of quantification and variable binding within the scope of modal operators.

But an Actualist can resist this objection by doubling down. Just as we can paraphrase apparent quantification over merely possible objects in the object language, we can paraphrase apparent quantification over merely possible objects in the semantics. So we can say, speaking loosely, that a quantifier and the associated bound variables range over merely possible objects. But we cash that out with a noncommittal paraphrase. So, for example, in the sentence,

$$\Diamond \exists x\, \mathbb{A}\, Fx$$

the bound occurrence of '*x*' takes as its value a merely possible object. That is,

$$\Diamond \exists y\, \mathbb{A}\, (y \text{ is the value of '}x\text{'}).$$

The semantic objection to stepping-back operators tacitly assumes that, when doing the semantics, we cannot make use of stepping-back operators, and so we can only assign actual objects as values to our variables.

There is also a metaphysical objection to the view. Consider,

(7) In a fiction there is something such that outside of all fiction, it does not exist but it is a horse: $\mathbb{F}\, \exists x\, \mathbb{O}\, (x$ does not exist but x is a horse).

The careful embedding of quantifiers inside of operators blocks ontological commitment. But at root, this sentence appears to attribute—as a matter of non-fictional fact—the property of *being a horse* to a nonexistent, merely

[15] I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

fictional object. But that seems absurd: a merely fictional object cannot be a non-fictional horse.

The same worry arises for the sentence used to express the claim that 'Holmes' is weakly non-referring:

(8) In a fiction there is something such that outside of all fiction, 'Holmes' refers to it: $\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{O}\,(x$ does not exist but 'Holmes' refers to $x)$.

Again, at root, this sentence appears to attribute—as a matter of non-fictional fact—a reference relation between an object that exists—the name 'Holmes'—and a merely fictional object. But that seems absurd: a merely fictional object cannot be the non-fictional referent of a term.

It may appear that sentences like (7) and (8) make claims about how things are outside of fiction, but since everything occurs within the scope of '$\mathbb{F}$,' everything that falls within that scope is merely fictional, and asserts nothing about non-fictional reality.[16] But this is not so: '$\mathbb{O}$' gives us the power to make claims about non-fictional reality within the scope of a '$\mathbb{F}$' operator. So (7) and (8) do make claims about non-fictional reality. But—and here is the trouble—those claims seem to be infected with fictional entities.

One way to understand the worry here—the worry about infection—is as a charge of frivolity: the view is not *serious*, in a technical sense borrowed from the metaphysics of modality. Call a property or relation *serious* if it entails the existence of its instances, so

F is a serious property iff $\sim\Diamond\exists x\Diamond\,(x$ does not exist but x has $F)$.

Call a property that is not serious *frivolous*. Plantinga (1979; see also Plantinga 1983) argues that all properties are serious properties, so that Actualism entails Serious Actualism.[17] Both Fine (1985) and Salmon (1998) reject Serious Actualism, and Fine's paraphrase strategy depends on this rejection.

We need to extend this distinction to the case of fiction. Here it is useful to distinguish two ways in which a property might be existence entailing. First, we can ask whether a given property is non-fictionally serious—that is, such that a fictional thing cannot have it non-fictionally unless it non-fictionally exists:

F is a serious$_{NF}$ property iff $\sim\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{O}\,(x$ does not exist but x has $F)$.

Second, we can ask whether a given property is fictionally serious—that is, such that a fictional thing cannot have it in a fiction unless it exists in that fiction:

F is a serious$_{F}$ property iff $\sim\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{F}\,(x$ does not exist but x has $F)$.

[16] Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this concern.

[17] For additional arguments, see Bergmann 1996. For objections to Plantinga's arguments, see Hinchliff 1989.

So let's return to (7)—the claim, in effect, that something that merely exists according to a fiction is non-fictionally a horse. This seems absurd, because it seems absurd to suppose that something can be a non-fictional horse if it only exists according to a fiction. That is, this seems absurd because *being a horse* seems to be a serious$_{NF}$ property: one cannot be a horse in circumstances in which one does not exist.

Is (8)—the claim, in effect, that something that merely exists according to a fiction is non-fictionally the referent of 'Holmes'—equally absurd? That depends on whether or not the relational property, *being a referent*, is also serious$_{NF}$.

My intuition is that *being a horse* is a serious$_{NF}$ property, and that is why (7) is absurd, but *being a referent* is a frivolous$_{NF}$ property, so that (8) is not absurd. It seems to me that some properties and relations are uncontroversially serious—both in the original modal sense and in the non-fictional sense. These include properties like *existence* (if it is a property), *being a detective*, and *being a horse*, and relations like *coexistence* and *kicking*. But some properties and relations seem, at least first blush, to be frivolous, like *being non-existent* (if it is a property), *being dead*, and *being famous*.

This is an essential feature of the view: some properties and relations, including the referring relation, are frivolous. When we say that

$$\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{O}\,(\text{'Holmes' refers to } x)$$

we are allowing that, as a matter of non-fictional fact, 'Holmes' stands in a reference relation. But the thing it stands in this relation to does not exist—that is,

$$\sim\exists x\,(\text{'Holmes' refers to } x).$$

And so, if we wish to sound paradoxical, we might say that 'Holmes' refers but has no referent. What we mean is, in effect, that 'Holmes' refers to a nonexistent object. But the strict fact of the matter can only be expressed as it is above, using our operators.

Consider again (1) and (6):

(1) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character,
(6) Sherlock Holmes does not exist: $\sim\exists x\,(\text{Holmes} = x)$.

Here we have no operators and no quantifiers. We instead have the use of a singular term, 'Sherlock Holmes,' which is weakly non-referring. How does this work?

As a first pass, we can say that (1) is true just in case,

(9) $\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{O}\,(\text{'Holmes' refers to } x \text{ and } x \text{ is a fictional character})$.

And (2) is true just in case,

(10) $\mathbb{F}\exists x\,\mathbb{O}\,(\text{'Holmes' refers to } x \text{ and } \sim\exists y\,[x = y])$.

Already this shows that we are committed to saying that both *being a fictional character* and *not being identical to anything* are frivolous properties—properties that Holmes can have non-fictionally even though he only exists fictionally.

But there are reasons not to accept these truth conditions as analyses. For example, it seems like Doyle might have given Holmes a different name, say, 'Lockshire Bones.' If so, then, (1) would still be true, but (9) would be false. Worse, it seems like Doyle might have given Holmes the name 'Watson' and Watson the name 'Holmes.' If so, (1) and (9) would both be true, but (9) would be made true by Watson, not Holmes. These are, of course, the standard sorts of arguments used to show that names are directly referential, and they seem to apply just as well to fictional names as they do for ordinary names.

So this suggests that, when we introduce a name for a fictional character, like Holmes, we have introduced a device for direct reference. Of course, it is a weakly non-referring device for direct reference. Still, we can use it to express singular propositions about Holmes. So, if we represent propositions as ordered pairs, we might say that (1) expresses the proposition,

⟨Holmes, *being a fictional character*⟩.

But one of the constituents of this ordered pair does not exist. So we either have to say that the corresponding proposition does not exist—on the grounds that *being a constituent of a proposition* is a serious property, or that the proposition exists, but not all of its constituents exist—so that *being a constituent of a proposition* is a frivolous property. It is not clear what hinges on this decision.

6 Advantages

I think this view has significant advantages over its rivals. It is perhaps the only view that can claim to satisfy the "the urge to stand with feet on both sides of the fence." It combines robust non-fictional truths about fictional characters with a steadfast denial of their existence.

Further, the view allows for robustly true negative existentials. According to the view, Holmes does not exist—that is, nothing is identical to Holmes. In saying this, we express a true singular proposition about Holmes, using the name 'Holmes,' which is weakly non-referring. I don't know of any other view that gets this result.

Without doubt the position has costs. It is committed to frivolous properties and relations, which you might find metaphysically queer. And nobody likes views that make liberal use of unfamiliar intentional operators. The proffered paraphrases are often complex and difficult to parse. But if you look past these complexities, the view offers a surprising kind of ontological and ideological simplicity. There are no fictional characters

on the view, and apparent discourse about fictional characters is entirely captured using two simple devices, '$\mathbb{F}$' and '$\mathbb{O}$.' And though it is true that these devices end up having some unexpected features, they are at least close kin to devices that anyone will need if they want to capture the difference between what is true according to a story and what is true in real life.

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Acknowledgements Thanks to Ben Caplan, Joshua Spencer, Wes Cray, David Braun, Heidi Savage, and all the participants in the 2013 Ohio State-Maribor-Rijeka Conference on Art and Reality at the Inter University Centre in Dubrovnik for helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

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