

Introduction: From Fiction Into Metaphysics

Although examples from fiction and mythology have long provided a source of interesting puzzles and counterexamples that have guided the development of theories from Frege to Russell to Kripke, fiction has been seen as a sideshow issue in metaphysics. Even the Meinongian minority, which has done much to bring the topic of fiction back into discussion, has done little to dispel the image of fiction as a strange metaphysical jungle beyond the boundaries of traditional metaphysics.

Lying behind the sideshow view of fiction is an assumption shared by believers and disbelievers in fictional objects alike: Fictional characters are (if anything) odd, freakish entities, quite unlike common or garden objects. Disbelievers have used the supposed freakish nature of fictional entities as grounds for rejecting them, alleging that they would be too unruly to accommodate in a theory and fearing that by handling such oddities we will be led into contradiction. Believers have boldly, smilingly embraced their odd creatures, proposed special ontological realms to house them, and shown how, by handling them carefully, we can accommodate their curious tendencies and avoid contamination by contradiction.

The key to seeing the centrality of fiction in metaphysics lies in giving up this assumption and recognizing the similarities between fictional objects and other entities. In the view I propose here, fictional characters are abstract artifacts – relevantly similar to entities as ordinary as theories, laws, governments, and literary works, and tethered to the everyday world around us by dependencies on books, readers, and authors. I argue that taking fictional characters to be abstract artifacts not only provides a better way of understanding fictional characters, it also makes the study of fiction of more central relevance to other issues in metaphysics.

For, as cultural artifacts and as abstract entities, fictional characters are not alone. Like fictional characters, other artifacts from tools to schools

and churches present difficulties such as how to lay out clear identity conditions for them, and how to analyze the relationships they bear to basic physical entities and to the practices and intentional acts of the individuals who create them and the communities of which they form a part. Solving such problems for fictional characters thus shows a route for solving these problems for other cultural artifacts, abstract or concrete.

Still less does their abstractness place fictional characters in a unique position. Instead it lands them in the same waters as such diverse entities as numbers, universals, laws, theories, and stories. Postulating any such abstracta leads to problems for those wishing to offer even partially naturalistic accounts of reference and knowledge. Once again, resolving these problems for fictional characters shows a path via which such difficulties may be avoided for a variety of abstract entities.

Perhaps most significantly, by combining both characteristics – by being both abstract entities and created artifacts – fictional characters fall firmly between traditional divisions of entities into the categories of concrete physical particulars and ideal abstracta. Properly accounting for fictional objects and other abstract artifacts demands breaking out of traditional category schemes that rest on bifurcations between the real and the ideal or the material and the mental. A finer-grained system of categories is required not only to accommodate fictional characters but also to do justice to the great variety of entities in the everyday world, from concrete cultural artifacts, to social institutions, to abstracta such as theories, laws, and works of music.

Treating fiction as a metaphysical sideshow is unfortunate not merely for fiction but also for metaphysics. For serious study of fiction reveals the inadequacies of traditional category systems, demonstrates how to handle other abstract artifacts, and provides occasion to reexamine the old question of what to admit into one's ontology. Based on the results from studying the case of fiction, I close by sketching an answer to the question of what we should bring into our ontology. By allowing for mental states, spatiotemporal objects, and things that depend on them in various ways, we can, from a relatively spare basis, account for a far wider range of things than is usually recognized: a true ontological bargain. One important advantage of this picture is its ability to offer a better analysis of cultural entities and abstract artifacts generally, among them the fictional objects that serve as our starting point. And so what seemed like a small corner of metaphysics – the problem of fictional objects – provides the seed to develop a new comprehensive metaphysical picture better able to do justice to the wide variety of entities in the world around us.

Part One

The Artifactual Theory of Fiction

Foreword

Discussions of fiction typically begin with the question of whether or not we must postulate fictional objects, with the defender of fiction attempting to establish that we absolutely cannot do without them, and the opponent attempting to show how we can manage to avoid postulating them through paraphrasing our apparent discourse about them and reconceiving our apparent experience of them. I believe that this approach to fiction is misguided on two counts.

It is misguided, first, to address the question of whether we should postulate fictional objects without first understanding what sorts of things they would be. We cannot see the potential costs and advantages of bringing fictional entities into our ontology until we have a clear conception of what sorts of entities fictional characters would be and how they would compare with other entities we might bring into our ontology. Vague fears that fictional characters would be too disorderly, too strange, so that postulating them would be liable to get us into trouble often drive decisions to avoid fictional objects at all costs. But we can only address whether such fears are grounded on the basis of understanding what these entities would be. Thus I propose that in Part One we postpone the question of whether or not there are such things as fictional objects, and begin by considering an easier question: If we were to postulate fictional objects, what would they be? In answer to this question I begin to draw out the *artifactual theory* of fiction. Because, in this view, fictional characters turn out to be paradigmatically dependent objects, indeed entities dependent on a variety of entities in a variety of ways, the main tool needed to develop this view of fictional characters is a theory of dependence. After making use of this theory of dependence to draw out in greater detail the view of fictional characters as abstract artifacts, I address how such a

view can handle two central problems ordinarily seen as stumbling blocks to postulating fictional characters: How to refer to them, and how to offer identity conditions for them. Drawing out solutions to these purported problems relieves fears that incline some to reject fictional objects and serves to fill in the details of how the artifactual theory works so that we can better examine the costs and benefits of postulating fictional characters.

It also is misguided to conceive of the game in discussions of fiction as establishing whether we can or cannot do without fictional characters. Properly considered, the question of whether we should admit anything into our ontology should not be cast as a question of whether we could possibly, through radical reinterpretations of experience and language, avoid postulating them. Making ontological decisions is a balancing act; we need to know not whether one can possibly eliminate fictional characters, but rather whether one can offer a better theory overall with them or without them. To properly evaluate the situation, we need to attempt a balanced evaluation of postulating and nonpostulating theories in terms of their ability to analyze adequately our experience and language, and to weigh this against their relative ontological parsimoniousness and elegance. In Part Two I return to address the question of whether, on balance, we should or should not postulate fictional characters as they are described in Part One.

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If We Postulated Fictional Objects, What Would They Be?

If we are to postulate fictional characters at all, it seems advisable to postulate them as entities that can satisfy or at least make sense of our most important beliefs and practices concerning them. Often theories of fiction are driven not by an independent sense of what is needed to understand talk and practices regarding fiction, but rather by a desire to show how fictional characters may find their place in a preconceived ontology of possible, nonexistent, or abstract objects – to demonstrate one more useful application of the ontology under discussion, or to provide catchy and familiar examples. Instead of starting from a ready-made ontology and seeing how we can fit fictional characters into it, I suggest that we begin by paying careful attention to our literary practices so that we can see what sorts of things would most closely correspond to them. I thus begin by discussing what sorts of entities our practices in reading and discussing works of fiction seem to commit us to, and I draw out the *artifactual theory* of fiction as a way of characterizing the sort of entity that seems best suited to do the job of fictional characters.

WHAT FICTIONAL CHARACTERS SEEM TO BE

Fictional objects as I discuss them here include such characters as Emma Woodhouse, Sherlock Holmes, Hamlet, and Tom Sawyer – characters who appear in works of literature and whose fortunes we follow in reading those works.¹ In our everyday discussions of literature we treat fictional characters as created entities brought into existence at a certain time through the acts of an author. If someone contended that George Washington was a great fan of Sherlock Holmes, we might object that in Washington's time there was no Sherlock Holmes – the Holmes character

was not created until 1887. The term “fiction” derives from the Latin *fin-gere* meaning “to form,” and this linguistic root is still evident in our practices in treating fictional characters as entities formed by the work of an author or authors in composing a work of fiction.² We do not describe authors of fictional works as discovering their characters or selecting them from an ever-present set of abstract, nonexistent, or possible objects. Instead, we describe authors as inventing their characters, making them up, or creating them, so that before being written about by an author, there is no fictional object. Taking authors to be genuinely creative as they make up fictional characters is central to our ordinary understanding of fiction. One of the things we admire about certain authors is their ability to make up sympathetic, multidimensional characters rather than cardboard cut-outs, and at times we count our good luck that certain characters like Sherlock Holmes were created when, given a busier medical practice, Arthur Conan Doyle might never have created him.

Thus, if we are to postulate fictional characters that satisfy our apparent practices regarding them, it seems that we should consider them to be entities that can come into existence only through the mental and physical acts of an author – as essentially created entities. Once we begin to treat fictional characters as created entities, a further issue arises. Do they simply need to be created at some time, by someone, or is the identity of a fictional character somehow tied to its particular origin in the work of a particular author or authors taking part in a particular literary tradition? Unexamined intuitions may provide no clear answer to this question, but our goal is to draw out a view of fictional characters that corresponds as closely as possible to our practices in studying fictional characters. Such critical practices provide grounds for taking the latter view, that a particular fictional character not only has to be created but is necessarily tied to its particular origin.

Suppose that a student happens on two literary figures remarkably similar to each other; both, for example, are said to be maids, warding off attempts at seduction, and so on. Under what conditions would we say that these are works about one and the same fictional character? It seems that we would say that the two works are about the same character only if we have reason to believe that the works derived from a common origin – if, for example, one work is the sequel to the other, or if both are developments of the same original myth. Literary scholars mark this difference by distinguishing “sources” drawn on by an author in composing a work from coincidentally similar characters or works, mere “analogs.” If one can show that the author of the latter work had close acquaintance

with the earlier work, it seems we have good support for the claim that the works are about the same character (as for example in the Pamela Andrews of Richardson's and Fielding's tales). But if someone can prove that the authors of the two works bore no relation to each other or to a common source but were working from distinct traditions and sources, it seems that the student has at best uncovered a coincidence – that different individuals and cultures generated remarkably similar analogous characters.

So it seems that if we wish to postulate fictional objects that correspond to our ordinary practices about identifying them, fictional characters should be considered entities that depend on the particular acts of their author or authors to bring them into existence. Naturally the process of creating a particular character may be diffuse: It may be created by more than one author, over a lengthy period of time, involving many participants in a story-telling tradition, and so on. But the fact that the process of creating a fictional character may be diffuse does not disrupt the general point that, whatever the process of creation for a given character may be, for coming into existence it depends on those particular creative acts. Such a requirement not only is consistent with critical practices in identifying characters but also (as we see in Chapter 5) is crucial to treating characters as identical across different sequels, parodies, and other literary developments.

Once created, clearly a fictional character can go on existing without its author or his or her creative acts, for it is preserved in literary works that may long outlive their author. If we treat fictional characters as creations invented by authors in creating works of literature, and existing because of their appearance in such works, then it seems that for a fictional character to be preserved, some literary work about it must remain in existence. And so we have uncovered a second dependency: Characters depend on the creative acts of their authors in order to come into existence and depend on literary works in order to remain in existence.³ Here again the question arises: Does a fictional character depend on one particular literary work for its preservation, or does a fictional character need only to appear in some literary work or other to remain in existence? It certainly seems that a character may survive as long as some work in which it appears remains. If we could not allow that the same character may appear in more than one literary work, or even slightly different editions of a work, then we would be unable to account for literary critical discourse about the development of a character across different works, and we would even be unable to admit that readers of different editions of *The Great Gatsby* are discussing one and the same Jay Gatsby. In short, we would be left postulating many

characters in cases in which there seems to be but one. So it seems we should allow that one character may appear in more than one work, and if it can appear in more than one work, it must remain in existence as long as one literary work about it does. Thus even if “A Scandal in Bohemia” should exist no longer, the character Sherlock Holmes can go on existing provided that one or more of the other works in which he appears remains in existence. So, although a fictional character depends on a literary work for its continued existence, it depends only on the maintenance of some work in which it appears.⁴

The dependence of a character on a literary work forces us to address a second question: If a character depends on a work of literature, what does a work of literature depend on? When can we say that a literary work exists? Because characters depend on literary works, anything on which literary works depend is also, ultimately, something on which characters depend. As ordinarily treated in critical discourse, a literary work is not an abstract sequence of words or concepts waiting to be discovered but instead is the creation of a particular individual or group at a particular time in particular social and historical circumstances. Thus, as with characters, it seems that literary works must be created by an author or authors at a certain time in order to come into existence.

Like a character, it also seems that a work of literature depends rigidly on the acts of its particular author to exist, so that, even if two authors coincidentally composed the same words in the same order, they would not thereby have composed the same work of literature. One way to see the essentiality of a work’s origin to its identity is by observing that literary works take on different properties based on the time and circumstances of their creation and creator. By virtue of originating in a different place in literary, social, and political history, at the hands of a different author, or in a different place in an author’s *oeuvre*, one and the same sequence of words can provide the basis for two very different works of literature with different aesthetic and artistic properties.⁵ The same sequence of words appearing in *Animal Farm* could have been written in 1905, but that literary work could not have had the property of being a satire of the Stalinist state, a central property of Orwell’s tale. If the same words of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* were written by James Joyce not in 1916, but instead after *Ulysses* came out in 1922, that work would lack the property of exhibiting a highly original use of language, which *Portrait of the Artist* has. Two mysteries based on the same sequence of words written in 1816 and today, both ending with “the butler did it,” might have the property of having a surprise ending in the former but not the latter case.

A screenplay with the same sequence of words as Oliver Stone's *Nixon*, if written in 1913, could have the properties neither of being about (the real) Richard Nixon, nor of being a sympathetic portrayal of the main character, nor of being revisionary and speculative. Similar cases could be brought to bear to show that a wide variety of aesthetic and artistic properties central to discussions of works of literature – being a work of high modernism, a parody, horrifying, reactionary, exquisitely detailed, an updated retelling of an old story – depend on the context and circumstances of creation, so that literary works may be based on the same series of words but have different aesthetic and artistic properties. In at least some cases, these properties seem essential to the literary work, e.g., being a satire seems essential to *Animal Farm* considered as a work of literature. For that reason, it seems that a literary work is best conceived not as an abstract sequence of words but as an artifact that had to be created in those original circumstances in which it was created.

Like fictional characters, literary works, once created, can clearly survive the death of their author; indeed the great majority of literary works we have today persist despite the deaths of their authors. But does a literary work, once created, always exist, or can a work once again cease to exist even after it is created? If we take seriously the view that literary works are artifacts created at a certain time, it seems natural to allow that, like other artifacts from umbrellas to unions to universities, they can also be destroyed. It would surely seem bizarre to claim that all of the lost stories of past cultures still exist as much as ever. On the contrary, one of the things that is often lamented about the destruction of cultures, be they ancient Greek or Native American, is the loss of the stories and fictional worlds they created. We treat literary tales as entities that can cease to exist, that at times take special efforts and government projects to preserve (e.g., by recording the oral folktales of Appalachia), or that may be destroyed by a temperamental author burning unpublished manuscripts. Treating works of literature as entities that may be destroyed – at least if all copies and memories of them are destroyed – seems a natural consequence of considering them to be cultural artifacts rather than Platonistic abstracta.

Yet certainly there are many who do not share the intuition that literary works may cease to exist after being created. The idea that literary works, if they exist, must exist eternally (once created) seems to me to be a hangover of a Platonism that assimilates all abstract entities to the realm of the changeless and timeless, and in particular a consequence of viewing literary works roughly as series of words or concepts that can survive the destruction of any collection of copies of them. To the extent that it is a

hangover of Platonism, this position should lose its appeal if one accepts the earlier arguments that literary works are, instead, artifacts individuated in part by the particular circumstances of their creation.

Apart from a lingering Platonism, one feature of our language might incline some to the view that literary works cannot cease to exist: We often speak not of *destroyed* or *past* works, but rather of *lost* works, as if all that were missing was our ability to find these (still existing) works of ancient, careless, or temperamental authors. This language practice, however, is easily explained without adopting the odd view that works of literature, once created, exist eternally despite even the destruction of the whole real world. The explanation is simply that, because a literary work does not require any *particular* copy to remain in existence, it is hard to be certain that there is not some copy of the work, somewhere, that has survived, and with it the work of literature. Who knows what may be lurking in the basement corridors of the Bodleian Library? A formerly lost sonnet of Shakespeare's was discovered there not so long ago. Unlike in the case of a unique painting, of which we can find the ashes, we can always hold out hope in the case of a literary work that a copy of it remains in some library, attic room, or perfect memory, so that the literary work might be "found" again. (This is reinforced by noting that, although we ordinarily speak of old or ancient works as lost, in the case of a modern manuscript burned by its author, we are more prone to count the work "destroyed" than merely lost.) But none of this speaks against the idea that, provided all copies and memories of a literary work are destroyed, never to be recovered, the literary work is gone as well – or, to put it another way, the literary work is then lost not in the sense in which sets of keys are lost, but in the sense in which an exploded battleship is lost, or a doctor can lose a patient.

If we consider characters to be creations owing their continued existence to the literary works in which they appear, then if all of the works regarding a character can fall out of existence, so can that character. Thus it is a consequence of this view that if all copies of all of the works regarding some ancient Greek heroine have been destroyed, never to be recovered or recalled, then she has fallen out of existence with those works and become a "past" fictional object in much the same way as a person can become a dead, past, concrete object. If we take seriously the idea of fictional characters as artifacts, it seems equally natural to treat them as able to be destroyed just as other artifacts are.⁶ Thus fictional characters as well as the literary works in which they appear may fall out of existence with the literature of a culture.

One objection that might be raised to the idea that both fictional characters and literary works may fall out of existence is that it seems we can still think of them, refer to them, and so on, even after their founding texts have all been destroyed. But this is no different than in the case of other perishable objects and artifacts: We may still think of and refer to people after they have died, buildings long since destroyed, civilizations long gone by. If fictional characters and literary works cease to exist, I am not suggesting that they then enter a peculiar realm of Meinongian nonexistence or that it is as if such objects never were, but rather that they become past objects just like the other contingent objects around us. The problem of how we can think of and refer to past objects is no small one but is not unique to fiction.

Ordinarily, a literary work is maintained in existence by the presence of some copy or other of the relevant text (whether on paper, film, tape, or CD-ROM). It is in this way that the literature of past ages has been handed down to our present day. But even if printed words on a page survive, that is not enough to guarantee the ongoing existence of the work. A literary work is not a mere bunch of marks on a page but instead is an intersubjectively accessible recounting of a story by means of a public language. Just as a language dies out without the continued acceptance and understanding of a group of individuals, so do linguistically based literary works. A literary work as such can exist only as long as there are some individuals who have the language capacities and background assumptions they need to read and understand it. If all conscious agents are destroyed, then nothing is left of fictional works or the characters represented in them but some ink on paper. Similarly, if all speakers of a language die out, with the language never to be rediscovered, then the literary works peculiar to that tongue die out as well.⁷ Thus preserving some printed or recorded document is not enough to preserve a literary work – some competent readers are also required. If competent readers and a printed text survive, however, that is enough to preserve a literary work.

In other cases, however, we speak of a work of literature as being preserved even if there are no printed copies of the text. In oral traditions, for example, the work is preserved in memory even if it is not being spoken or heard, and (as in *Fahrenheit 451*) it seems that a work could be preserved in memories during times of censorship, even if all printed copies of it were destroyed. So even if a literary work is typically maintained by a printed, comprehensible text, it seems that such is not necessary. A latent memory of the work (disposed to produce an

oral or written copy of the work, given the appropriate circumstances) may be enough to maintain it in existence.⁸ Thus we can say that, for its maintenance, a character depends generically on the existence of some literary work about it; a literary work, in turn, may be maintained either in a copy of the text and a readership capable of understanding it or in memory.⁹

In sum, it looks as if, if we are to postulate entities that would correspond to our ordinary beliefs and practices about fictional characters, these should be entities that depend on the creative acts of authors to bring them into existence and on some concrete individuals such as copies of texts and a capable audience in order to remain in existence. Thus fictional objects, in this conception, are not the inhabitants of a disjoint ontological realm but instead are closely connected to ordinary entities by their dependencies on both concrete, spatiotemporal objects and intentionality. Moreover, they are not a strange and unique type of entity: Similar dependencies are shared with objects from tables and chairs to social institutions and works of art.

Artifacts of all kinds, from tables and chairs to tools and machines, share with fictional characters the feature of requiring creation by intelligent beings. But it might be thought that the way in which fictional characters are created does make them strange, for although one cannot simply create a table, toaster, or automobile by describing such an object, fictional characters are created merely with words that posit them as being a certain way. For example, because characters are created by being written about by their authors, Jane Austen creates the fictional character Emma Woodhouse and brings her into existence (assuming she did not exist before) in writing the sentence:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

But the fact that a character can be created merely through such linguistic acts should cause no peculiar difficulties for a theory of fiction. It has long been noticed that a common feature of so-called conventional or effective illocutionary acts such as appointing, resigning, adjourning, and marrying is that they bring into existence the state of affairs under discussion. Thus, for example, the celebrant of a marriage pronounces a couple husband and wife, a pronouncement that itself creates the couple's new status as husband and wife.¹⁰ More recently, it has been noticed that it is a common feature of many cultural and institutional entities that they

can be brought into existence merely by being represented as existing. Searle discusses this general feature using money as the example. A dollar bill may read:

“This note is legal tender for all debts public and private.” But that representation is now, at least in part, a declaration: It creates the institutional status by representing it as existing. It does not represent some prelinguistic natural phenomenon.¹¹

A contract, similarly, may be created simply by the utterance of words such as “I hereby promise to.” Searle even cites as a general feature of institutional reality that institutional facts can be brought into existence by being represented as existing and can exist only if they are represented as existing (62–63).¹²

What I am suggesting is a parallel with fictional characters: Just as marriages, contracts, and promises may be created through the performance of linguistic acts that represent them as existing, a fictional character is created by being represented in a work of literature. If there is no pre-existent object to whom Austen was referring in writing the words above, writing those words brings into existence the object therein described: The fictional character Emma Woodhouse.¹³ Thus even the feature that fictional characters may be created not through hard labor on physical materials but through the utterance of words, rather than placing them in a peculiarly awkward situation, points again to their being at home among other cultural entities. Human consciousness is creative. It is that creativity that enables us to increase our chances of survival by formulating plans and examining scenarios not physically before us. It is also that creativity that enables the human world of governments, social institutions, works of art, and even fictional characters to be constructed on top of the independent physical world by means of our intentional representations.¹⁴

Nor are fictional characters alone in requiring certain forms of human understanding and practice for their ongoing preservation as well as creation. It has often been argued that works of art in general are not mere physical objects but instead depend both on some instantiation in physical form (in a performance, on canvas, in a printed copy), and – for their intentional properties such as expressiveness and meaning – on the intentional acts of humans.¹⁵ Similarly, cultural and institutional facts regarding money, contracts, and property are plausibly characterized as depending not only on certain physical objects like pieces of paper with a certain history, but also on maintaining forms of human agreement.¹⁶ For something to be money, it is not enough that it be a piece of paper with a certain history, it must also, both initially and continually, be

accepted as what people collectively agree to count as money in a particular society.

In short, on this view fictional characters are a particular kind of cultural artifact. Like other cultural objects, fictional characters depend on human intentionality for their existence. Like other artifacts, they must be created in order to exist, and they can cease to exist, becoming past objects. It is primarily in its treatment of fictional characters as ordinary cultural artifacts rather than as the odd inhabitants of a different realm that the artifactual theory differs most markedly from other ways of characterizing fictional objects. It is also their place as cultural artifacts that makes fictional objects of broader philosophical interest, for the ontology of fiction can thus serve as a model for the ontology of other social and cultural objects in the everyday world.

It may help to locate the artifactual theory in conceptual space by briefly contrasting it with other views of what fictional objects are. Some of its advantages vis-à-vis these other theories only show up when we attempt to overcome the problems of developing identity conditions for fictional objects and handling reference to and discourse about them.¹⁷ Nonetheless, a brief comparison should help elucidate the differences between this theory and other treatments of fiction.

MEINONGIAN THEORIES OF FICTION

The most popular and well-developed theories of fiction that have been available are those broadly construable as Meinongian theories, including those that take fictional characters to be either nonexistent or abstract entities, such as those developed by Parsons, Zalta, and Rapaport. Neither Meinong's theory nor contemporary Meinongian theories are devised specifically as theories of fiction; they concern the wider realm of nonexistent objects generally.¹⁸ Nonetheless, much of the motivation for and many of the applications of Meinongian theories of nonexistent objects concern fictional objects. Many different theories have been devised that may roughly be labeled Meinongian; despite their differences, they typically share certain fundamental characteristics captured by the following principles:

1. There is at least one object correlated with every combination of properties.¹⁹
2. Some of these objects (among them fictional objects) have no existence whatsoever.²⁰
3. Although they do not exist, they (in some sense) have the properties with which they are correlated.²¹

The first principle is sometimes known as a “comprehension principle,” ensuring a multitude of nonexistent objects. Meinongian theories differ with respect to which properties count in principle one. Parsons’s theory, for example, limits properties to simple, nuclear properties such as “is blue” or “is tall”; Zalta’s theory permits so-called extranuclear properties (such as “is possible” and “is thought about”) and complex properties. Meinongians also vary with respect to how nonexistent objects “have” their properties according to the third principle; for views like Parsons’s, there are two kinds of property (nuclear and extranuclear), but only one kind of predication, enabling “have” to be read straightforwardly, as (in this theory) nonexistents have their properties in the same way as real objects do. For views like Zalta’s or Rapaport’s, there are two modes of predication; nonexistent objects have properties in a different way than their real counterparts. Although ordinary objects exemplify their properties, nonexistent objects “encode” the properties with which they are correlated (Zalta) or have them as “constituents” (Rapaport).²²

Meinongian theories of fiction resemble the artifactual theory in that both allow that there are fictional objects, that we can refer to them, that they play an important role in experience, and so on. Moreover, Meinongians are largely to be credited with showing that consistent theories of fiction can be developed and with undermining the paradigm according to which there are only real entities (a paradigm Parsons refers to as the “Russellian rut”).

But there are also important differences between the artifactual theory and any such Meinongian theory of fiction. First, the theories differ with respect to where they apply the word “exists”; I am willing to claim that fictional characters exist; the Meinongian (by principle two) grants them no existence whatsoever. But because the Meinongian famously maintains that there are such objects, that we can think of them, refer to them, and so on, this difference is largely linguistic.²³

A deeper difference between the theories regards how many objects they say there are. Unlike the Meinongian, I do not employ any kind of comprehension principle and so do not claim that there is an infinite, ever-present range of nonexistent (or abstract) objects. In the artifactual theory, the only fictional objects there are those that are created. This points to a further difference between this view and that of the Meinongian: In the artifactual view, fictional objects are created at a certain point in time, not merely discovered or picked out. According to the Meinongian, fictional characters are merely some of the infinite range of ever-present nonexistent or abstract objects – namely, those that are described in some story.

Accordingly, if an author writes of a character, she or he is merely picking out or referring to an object that was already available for reference. Authors can then be said to discover their characters or pick them out from the broad range of objects available, but not to bring these objects into existence. They *can* be said to make these objects *fictional*, for an abstract or nonexistent object does not become fictional until it is written about. Nonetheless, the object remains the same; it simply bears a new relation to contingent acts of authoring.²⁴ As Parsons writes:

I have said that, in a popular sense, an author *creates* characters, but this too is hard to analyze. It does not mean, for example, that the author brings those characters into existence, for they do not exist. Nor does he or she make them objects, for they were objects before they appeared in stories. We might say, I suppose, that the author makes them *fictional* objects, and that they were not fictional objects before the creative act.²⁵

In short, the only kind of creation permitted in Meinongian accounts is the author's taking an available object and making it fictional (by writing about it in a story). This, it seems to me, is not robust enough to satisfy the ordinary view that authors are genuinely creative in the sense of creating new objects, not merely picking out old objects and thereby making them fictional. By contrast, in the artifactual theory, authors genuinely bring new characters into being that were not around before – they invent their characters rather than discovering them. In short, the Meinongian might be said to offer a top-down approach to fiction that begins by positing an infinite range of nonexistent or abstract objects and then carves out a portion of those (those described in works of literature) to serve as the fictional characters. In contrast, the artifactual theory attempts to take a bottom-up approach to fictional characters by treating them as constructed entities created by authors and depending on ordinary objects such as stories and a competent audience.

As we see in later chapters (Chapters 5, 4 and 7 respectively) there are also many differences between Meinongian theories and the artifactual theory regarding identity conditions for fictional objects and how reference to and discourse about fictional objects are handled. Some shortcomings of the Meinongian view include an inability to genuinely treat fictional characters as created entities and consequent difficulties in offering adequate identity conditions for fictional characters (especially identity conditions across texts).²⁶ Other problems arise for Meinongian treatments of fictional discourse, notably in handling fictional discourse about real individuals. Thus, despite the merits of Meinongian theories in

offering a consistent and well-developed view of fictional characters, I argue that the artifactual theory provides a better conception of them overall. The main difference underlying the two theories and responsible for the advantages I claim for the artifactual theory lies in a fundamental difference in approach, as the Meinongian sees fictional characters as part of a separate realm of abstract or nonexistent objects, disjoint from and dissimilar to that of ordinary objects, and in the artifactual theory their similarities and connections to entities in the ordinary world are taken as fundamental.

POSSIBILIST THEORIES OF FICTION

Whether in an attempt to provide a complete account of fiction or as motivation for an ontology of possibilia, an attempt is often made to locate fictional characters among unactualized possibilia. Fictional characters have long provided some of the most appealing examples of merely possible entities and have often been used in arguments in favor of postulating unactualized possibilia. Kripke, for example, uses Sherlock Holmes as an example (which he later retracts) of an entity that “does not exist, but in other states of affairs he would have existed,” and Plantinga treats the view that “Hamlet and Lear do not in fact exist; but clearly they could have” as one of the most persistent arguments in favor of unactualized possibilia.²⁷ And at first glance it seems plausible that, even if there is no actual person who has all of the properties ascribed to Hamlet in the play, surely there is some possible person exhibiting all of those properties, making Hamlet a member of another possible world.

This is a fundamentally different approach to fiction from that of the artifactual theory, because in the artifactual theory fictional objects are not possible people but actual characters. Although it is a tempting way to accommodate fictional characters, and fictional characters may provide fun (purported) examples of mere possibilia, major problems arise if we try to identify a fictional character with that merely possible individual exhibiting all and only those properties ascribed to the character in the story. First, as has been frequently acknowledged, there seem to be simply too many possible individuals that fit the bill, and no means to choose among them.²⁸ For the descriptions provided in literary works fail to completely specify what the characters described in them are like, leaving indeterminate a wide range of properties such as, typically, a character’s blood type, weight, diet, and mundane daily activities. Thus we run into trouble immediately if we try to identify characters with possible people, for the features of a character left open by the story could be filled out

in an infinite variety of ways by different possible people. Selecting any one as identical with a particular character seems hopelessly arbitrary. On the other hand, if the character is described as bearing incompatible properties, making it an impossible object, we have not too many possibilities to do the job, but too few.

A further problem arises in that possibilist views, like Meinongian views, give us no way of accounting for the created status of fictional characters. Even if we could find a single candidate possible detective to identify with Sherlock Holmes, this would be a possible man with the property of being born in the nineteenth century, not of being created by Arthur Conan Doyle. Finally, possibilist theories, Meinongian theories, or any theories that base the identity of a character on the properties ascribed to it eliminate the possibility that there can be more than one story about a single character. For if the character is ascribed even a single different property, it is a different character. Thus these views provide no means to admit that the same character may appear in different stories, sequels, or even slightly altered new editions or translations of an old story. Perhaps it is because of such problems that this view has been far less popular among those working seriously with fiction. Indeed Kripke and Plantinga both, after considering it, reject this view. In light of these problems it seems that possible objects are not candidates well suited to do the job of fictional characters. Because this view of fiction seems hardly able to get off the ground, I do not spend much time discussing it.²⁹

FICTIONAL CHARACTERS AS OBJECTS OF REFERENCE

Other views of fiction consider fictional objects mere objects of reference that we must postulate to make sense of a certain kind of literary discourse. Such views are developed by Crittenden, who treats fictional objects as “grammatical objects,” and by van Inwagen, who considers fictional objects to be the “theoretical entities” referred to in works of literary criticism. These views parallel the artifactual view in many important respects, and the differences between such theories and the artifactual theory lie less in direct conflicts than simply in the artifactual theory’s filling in areas left blank by the other theories. Nonetheless, there are also important differences of approach between these theories and the artifactual theory.

Working within a broadly Wittgensteinian view of language, Crittenden postulates fictional objects as (mere) objects of reference, or grammatical objects. Although he takes fictional names as referring to certain objects,

he repeatedly emphasizes that the status of these objects is merely that of objects of reference, available to be referred to by readers, critics, and other practitioners of the relevant language games of fiction, although they do not exist and are “not to be understood as having any sort of reality whatever.”³⁰

Although Crittenden denies that fictional characters exist, many of the features he assigns to fictional characters (based on the commitments of language practices) conform to those assigned by the artifactual theory. He too takes fictional objects to be entities created by authors through writing stories, and entities that are dependent on certain kinds of intentionality and practices involving language. But he seems to take dependence as marking a sort of honorary nonexistence and is keenest to point out that fictional objects have no *independent* existence when he is trying to emphasize that they have no “sort of reality whatever.” Our later investigations into dependence should give pause to those inclined to equate an entity’s existing as dependent with its not (really) existing, or having no metaphysical status.

I am sympathetic to taking our language practices regarding fiction seriously. I also agree that our literary practices in general may serve as a valuable guide in developing a theory of fiction because ideally, we want to postulate fictional characters as entities that can make sense of as large a portion of common practice as possible. But Crittenden’s Wittgensteinian antimetaphysical stance leads him to rely on practice too heavily and eschew talk of the ontology of fiction by replacing ontological issues with a mere discussion of practice. As he writes:

Fictional discourse has no grounding in any further metaphysical reality; this linguistic practice itself and not some independent ontological realm is the fundamental fact in any account of the status of fictional characters (69).

Thus, instead of using practice as a guide to understanding what sorts of things fictional characters would be, Crittenden allows it to constitute what is true and false of fictional characters. Even in particular cases in which substantive issues arise regarding what is true or false of a fictional character, he simply reduces the issue to one of inquiring after our current practices. Thus he reduces the truth-values of claims about fictional characters to the accepted practices regarding their truth or falsehood, for example writing:

Such [fictional] objects . . . have properties just in that property-attributing expressions are appropriately applied to them in types of discourse such as

fiction and myth. Whether these expressions are truly or falsely applied depends on purely linguistic or conceptual considerations and not on external, independent reality (97).

But in talking about fiction we should recognize that here, as elsewhere, we could – even as a group – be wrong. We could be wrong, for example, regarding whether characters treated as identical really are, and we could be wrong regarding the attributes we commonly ascribe to a character. Our practices themselves appeal to features beyond practice to decide issues of substance regarding the identity and properties of a fictional character – features like the character’s origin. Crittenden himself occasionally acknowledges the important role played in character identity by external criteria such as the history behind the writing of the stories (43–44). Using these criteria to determine the identity conditions for fictional characters requires a willingness to reach beyond practice to discuss what the objects that would justify our practices and revisions of our practices would be like. It also requires that we treat fictional characters as more than mere objects of reference – as objects (albeit dependent ones) able to make true or false, reasonable or unreasonable, our claims and practices regarding them. The move to a detailed ontological discussion of fictional objects, not just practices regarding them, is still required.

Among current analytic treatments of fiction, that closest to the artifactual theory is perhaps that which van Inwagen develops, according to which fictional characters are “theoretical entities of literary criticism.”³¹ In treating fictional characters as the entities described in literary criticism, van Inwagen rightly emphasizes the importance of postulating fictional characters to make sense of critical discourse about them. The two positions coincide at many points, first and foremost in the claim that fictional characters exist.³²

The most important difference between the artifactual theory and van Inwagen’s, like that between it and Crittenden’s, lies in the fact that van Inwagen does little to describe the ontological status of the creatures of fiction he postulates. He describes fictional characters as “theoretical entities”; theoretical entities in general he describes only as those referred to by the special vocabularies of theoretical disciplines, and which make some of those sentences true. So, in the case of creatures of fiction:

[S]ometimes, if what is said in a piece of literary criticism is to be true, then there must be entities of a certain type, entities that are never the subjects of non-literary discourse, and which make up the extensions of the theoretical general terms of literary criticism. It is these that I call “theoretical entities of literary criticism.”³³

This, however, does not tell us what fictional characters are like, but only that they are the things that make at least some (which?) of the sentences of literary criticism true. He does not discuss, for example, whether or not they are created, whether they can appear in more than one text, or how they relate to readers, and so we have no way of offering identity conditions for them or of evaluating the truth-value of critical sentences apparently about them. We also have little way of knowing how these creatures of fiction compare with other sorts of entities. Van Inwagen places them in the same category as other entities discussed in literary criticism such as plots, novels, rhyme schemes, and imagery, but it is not clear how they compare with other types of entities such as works of music, copies of texts, and universals. Thus we are left with no means of fitting fictional characters into a general ontological picture or of determining the relative parsimony of theories that do and do not postulate them.

I suspect that the omission of such aspects of a genuine metaphysical theory of fiction is no accident, for both theories attempt to hold a largely deflationary account of fictional characters as entities we must postulate merely to make sense of certain odd types of (theoretical or fictional) discourse; Crittenden at least would see asking such metaphysical questions as going astray in taking these mere objects of reference too ontologically seriously. Both such accounts thus still treat fiction (and for van Inwagen, theoretic discourse generally) as presenting a special case in which we must posit theoretic objects or mere objects of reference to make sense of our discourse. In this respect both theories differ importantly from the artifactual theory because, in this view, fictional characters are not to be considered theoretic entities or mere objects of reference any more than tables and chairs, committee meetings, and works of art are. Instead they are a certain type of object referred to, and indeed not a peculiar type of object but a type of object relevantly similar to stories, governments, and other everyday objects.

FICTIONAL CHARACTERS AS IMAGINARY OBJECTS

One view that has a certain similarity in spirit to the artifactual theory, although the two differ in substance, is the view that treats fictional characters as imaginary objects – entities created and sustained by imaginative acts. It is a view developed, for example, by Sartre in his work on the imagination, which he takes to apply not only to imagined objects but also to objects represented in works of art, and even to works of art themselves. An imagined object, in this view, is an entity created in an

imaginative act of consciousness and that exists only as long as it is being imagined. As Sartre writes:

We have seen that the act of imagination is a magical one. It is an incantation destined to produce the object of one's thought, the thing one desires The faint breath of life we breathe into [imaginary objects] comes from us, from our spontaneity. If we turn away from them they are destroyed.³⁴

Such a view is similar in spirit to the artifactual theory in that both insist that fictional characters are created objects, indeed objects created by the intentional acts of their authors. They are likewise similar in that both take fictional characters to remain dependent even after they are created.

But Sartre's view, and similar views of imaginary objects, treat them as existing only as long as someone is thinking of them. As a result two large problems confront this view *qua* theory of fiction. First, the idea that these objects exist only as long as they are being thought of runs counter to our usual practices in treating Holmes, Hamlet, and the rest as enduring through those periods of time in which no one is imagining them. It seems to have the odd consequence that such characters "flit in and out of existence."³⁵ Second, if, as Sartre has it, a fictional character is not only created by the author's imaginative acts but (re)created afresh by the imaginative acts of each reader, it is difficult to see how we can legitimately say that two or more readers are each reading about or experiencing one and the same fictional character.

It was Ingarden who first suggested how to avoid these problems and still conceive of fictional characters as, in some sense, dependent on intentionality. In Ingarden's view, a fictional character is a "purely intentional object," an object created by consciousness and having "the source of its existence and total essence" in intentionality.³⁶ More precisely, a fictional character is created by an author who constructs sentences about it, but it is maintained in its existence thereafter not by the imagination of individuals, but by the words and sentences themselves. Words and sentences have what Ingarden calls "borrowed intentionality," a representational ability derived from intentional acts that confer meaning on phonetic (and typographic) formations. Thus, although fictional characters remain mediately dependent on intentionality, the immediate dependence of fictional characters on words and sentences gives them a relative independence from any particular act of consciousness:

Both isolated words and entire sentences possess a borrowed intentionality, one that is conferred on them by acts of consciousness. It allows the purely intentional

objects to free themselves, so to speak, from immediate contact with the acts of consciousness in the process of execution and thus to acquire a relative independence from the latter (125–126).

Because these pieces of language are public and enduring, different people may all think of one and the same fictional character, and the character may survive even if no one is thinking of it provided its representation in such pieces of language remains. In sum, Ingarden showed the way to acknowledge the consciousness-dependence of fictional characters without losing their status as lasting, publicly accessible entities; his work provides the true historical predecessor of the theory here defended.

The artifactual theory similarly avoids the problems of Sartre's view by noting that, although the intentional acts of an author are required to bring a fictional character into existence, it is not the case that it exists only for as long as someone imagines it. On the contrary, fictional characters are ordinarily maintained in existence by the existence of some copy or copies of the literary work concerning them. Although that literary work requires the ongoing existence of a community capable of reading and understanding the text, it does not require that someone constantly be reading it or thinking of it in order to remain in existence, just as the ongoing existence of money requires a community willing to accept it as money although it does not constantly require that someone be explicitly thinking "this is money." Thus literary characters on this model do not flit in and out of existence depending on whether people are thinking of them; they exist as long as literary works regarding them remain. Moreover, fictional characters on this view are not created afresh with each person's thinking of them; on the contrary, by reading the same work many different readers may all access one and the same fictional object.³⁷