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WHERE NOT TO LOOK FOR FICTIONAL OBJECTS¹

SUMMARY: Philosophers discuss whether we should commit ourselves to fictional objects or not. There is a test—quite widespread among philosophers—to settle the matter: if fictional objects are required to give an adequate semantic/pragmatic analysis of either intra-fictional or extra-fictional sentences, then we are committed to them; if we can account for this analysis without them, we are not so committed. I am going to consider this test and I will claim that on its own it cannot be considered a definitive test.

KEYWORDS: fictional names, fictional objects, abstract objects, realists/irrealists about fictional objects, intra-fictional sentences, extra-fictional sentences.

It is common sense that fictional objects do not exist, and by this we mean—at least—that they are not physical objects we will run into while moving around in our world. But philosophers discuss whether we should commit ourselves to fictional objects or not, and when they quarrel about this, they are not debating whether there are physical fictional objects around but considering whether we are committed to abstract objects or at least to possible objects (i.e., objects existing in other possible worlds). As is well known, philosophers divide into real-

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ists (according to whom we are so committed)² and irrealists (according to whom we are not so committed).³

Now, the interesting question is: is there a test able to settle the debate? There is in fact such a test, which is quite widespread among philosophers: it concerns the truth conditions of intra-fictional and extra-fictional sentences.⁴ Supposing that we need a uniform and intuitively adequate way to distinguish between true and false sentences (or, at least, adequate and inadequate sentences) using fictional names (i.e., names introduced for the first time in fiction), the criterion is the following: if fictional objects are required to give an adequate semantic/pragmatic analysis of such sentences, then we are committed to them; if we can account for the analysis without them, we are not so committed. I am going to consider this test and I will claim that on its own it cannot be considered a definitive test.

The general aim of my paper is not to settle the matter in favor of either realism or irrealism, nor to claim that either realist or irrealist theories are unsound, trying to find subtle objections for any theory.⁵ My aim is more delimited: I claim that the semantic/pragmatic analysis of fictional sentences is not a decisive test in favor of either realism or irrealism. This is compatible with there being good and consistent realist and irrealist theories; my claim is that the reason to choose one instead of the other is not to be seen in a semantic/pragmatic analysis which forces one instead of the other. And this is what I mean when I say that the semantic/pragmatic test is not conclusive.

1. Truth-Conditions of Sentences Including Fictional Names

There are assertions made within fiction and evaluated within it, i.e., intra-fictional assertions, as for example “Sherlock Holmes is a detective”. And there are assertions on fiction made outside fiction and evaluated outside it as “Sher-

² Among realist philosophers, Meinongians include Rapaport (1978), Parsons (1980), Zalta (1983), Priest (2005), Berto (2011); creationists include van Inwagen (1977), Schiffer (1996), Salmon (1998), Thomasson (1999; 2003), Kripke (2011; 2013); role Platonists include Wolterstorff (1980), Currie (1990), Stokke (2021).

³ Among irrealist philosophers, see: Walton (1990), Brock (2002), Sainsbury (2010), Everett (2013), Friend (2011), Salis (2013; 2021), García-Carpintero (2018; 2020).

⁴ By intra-fictional sentences I mean sentences included in fiction or concerning the content of a fiction (as for example, “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” or “according to Doyle’s stories, Sherlock Holmes is a detective”); by extra-fictional assertions I mean assertions made about fiction from the outside (as for example “Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character” or “Sherlock Holmes is smarter than any real detective”). The terminology is not uniform in the literature, I will make my interpretation explicit later in the presentation.

⁵ My proposal is therefore compatible with different semantic and pragmatic analyses of fictional names when they do not force the existence of fictional objects. For example, my proposal is perfectly compatible with the semantic and pragmatic analyses of fictional names in Adams, Fuller and Stecker’s (1997), Adams and Dietrich’s (2004), Adams and Fuller’s (2007).

lock Holmes is a fictional object”, i.e., extra-fictional assertions. Let us start with the first type of assertion.

1.1. Intra-Fictional Assertions

The first thing to consider is whether the truth-conditions of an assertion such as “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” are to be considered comparable to those of an assertion such as “George Clooney is an actor”. As is well known, the extensional assertion “George Clooney is an actor” is true if the person denoted by the name has the property of being an actor, it is false if such a person does not have this property, but the sentence is neither true nor false if the name does not refer to anything⁶ or the sentence is false if the name is an abbreviation of an unsatisfied definite description.⁷ Supposing that “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” is an extensional assertion, we need an object (even an abstract one), to which the name refers or which will satisfy the description associated with the name, to attribute the value true to it. An idea, which was originally proposed by Meinongian philosophers, is to introduce abstract objects (i.e., non-existent objects) to allow reference for names introduced for the first time in fiction, and to permit all the truth-values applying to the sentences including them.⁸

One of the problems with this approach is that it presupposes that, when we use language within fiction, we use it in the same way we use it outside fiction. The general intuition is instead that whenever we are committed to fiction, we pretend, and we are not seriously committed to what we read or say. Now, how can we characterize pretense? There are two possible ways to do so (Sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 of the current paper), and it is important to note that neither commits to fictional objects.

1.1.1. Intra-fictional assertions within games or false presuppositions.

A possible way to analyze fictional sentences is to say that they are not really intended to be true or false, they are instead assertions made within a game or at least assertions to be interpreted within false presuppositions.

The idea that fictional assertions are to be interpreted within games of make-believe was introduced by Walton (1990) and it has been approved and developed by others.⁹ The idea is interesting and fascinating: it is quite evident that if we accept that fictional assertions are made within games, they are not real assertions, they may be characterized by conditions which authorize their use or not. If this is the case, fictional assertions come with rules of adequacy and do not

⁶ This is the semantic analysis defended by Frege (1997).

⁷ This is the semantic analysis defended by Russell (1905).

⁸ Among Meinongians adopting an extensional interpretation of fictional assertions, see: Rapaport’s (1978) and Parsons’ (1980).

⁹ Among philosophers who follow Walton’s game-theoretic approach, see: Everett’s (2013) and Friend’s (2011).

have truth-conditions. Not having truth-conditions, they are not committed to anything making them true and therefore they do not commit in any sense to fictional objects.

A variant of the fictional stance is to assume that fictional assertions are made within false presuppositions. On certain occasions we may want to fantasize on what we would do if we had more money or more spare time or were living in a different country. In all these cases we make assertions within false presuppositions, and we are not committed to the truth or falsity of such assertions outside these presuppositions. In the same way, according to the presuppositional approach to fiction, whenever we read a story, we understand it within the false presupposition that we are talking about real entities and real events, but the presupposition is in fact false and therefore we are not committed to fictional objects according to this approach.¹⁰

1.1.2. Intensional intra-fictional assertions.

Certain philosophers believe instead that assertions within fiction may be true or false. To develop this intuition, one promising way is to assume that any assertion P within fiction is an assertion within the implicit operator “within fiction F , ...”, and therefore equivalent to “within fiction F , P ” (i.e., it is an intensional and not extensional assertion). If we allow this assumption, David Lewis presents an effective way to establish the truth conditions of any fictional sentence P (Lewis, 1978). The idea is to consider all the possible worlds more similar to the actual one where the fiction F is reported as a known fact and not within pretense: if in all these worlds the sentence P is true, then “within fiction F , P ” is true; if there is at least one of such worlds where P is false, then “within fiction F , P ” is false.

It is now interesting to consider why this analysis of fictional sentences does not commit to fictional names referring to fictional objects, nor even to possible objects. Let us consider the sentence “according to Conan Doyle’s stories, Sherlock Holmes is a detective” and let us apply David Lewis’ method. The sentence is true because, in all the possible worlds more similar to the actual one in which someone tells Conan Doyle’s stories as known facts, the person referred to by the narrator with the name “Sherlock Holmes” is a detective. Let us now consider the following question: is any possible man named “Sherlock Holmes” in any of the possible worlds more similar to the actual one in which someone tells Conan Doyle’s stories as known facts, the reference of the name used within fiction in our world? The answer is “no”, there is no possible man the name refers to in our world. The reason is not that the semantic analysis of the intensional sentence allows for the name to refer to different persons in different possible worlds, there not being therefore a single referent for the name “Sherlock Holmes” in all possible worlds; the reason is deeper than this: we must distinguish between the

¹⁰ This is the approach introduced by Sainsbury (2010) and recently defended by Salis (2013), Orlando (2021) and García-Carpintero (2018; 2020).

semantic analysis of an intensional sentence and the reference of the names included in it; as Kripke writes: “One should not identify what people would have said *in* certain circumstances, had those circumstances obtained, with what we would say *of* these circumstances, knowing or believing that those circumstances *do not* obtain” (Kripke, 2013, p. 40, emphasis in the original).

To appreciate the difference between the tools used to give a semantic analysis of an intensional sentence (which appeals to what we would have said in certain circumstances, had they obtained) and the reference of the names included in it (which instead appeals to what we say of circumstances we know do not obtain), let us consider the following example of another type of intensional sentence. Suppose that a child (Rose) is convinced that a horrible, black-hearted man named Bluebeard is going to kidnap her. How can we evaluate the truth-value of the sentence “Rose believes that Bluebeard is going to kidnap her”?

We may want to analyze any sentence of the form “*X* believes that *P*” in the following way: “*X* believes that *P*” is true if and only if all the worlds more like the actual one compatible with all *X*’s beliefs are such that *P* is true in them. Let us now apply this analysis to “Rose believes that Bluebeard is going to kidnap her”; the statement is true because in all the worlds compatible with her beliefs the statement “Bluebird is going to kidnap Rose” is true. But when we assert “Rose believes that Bluebeard is going to kidnap her” we are saying something true without being committed to the existence of Bluebeard in our world, nor being committed to the name “Bluebird”—as used by us—referring to any object or person in any other possible world. Possible worlds and the objects in them may be just postulated to evaluate the truth-value of intensional sentences, without commitment to the actual reference of the names in our world to such objects. In the same way, we do not need commitment to fictional objects to account for the truth-conditions of intra-fictional sentences if it is allowed that they are intensional sentences.

Once extensional analysis of fictional assertions is dismissed for the above-mentioned reasons (Section 1.1 of the current paper), any other analysis of fictional assertions does not commit to fictional objects. We may therefore conclude that assertions within fiction do not establish that there are fictional objects. Some philosophers have claimed that extra-fictional sentences constitute the adequate test for fictional objects, and this is what is now worth considering.

2. Extra-Fictional Assertions

It is quite generally accepted that whenever we are telling a tale or reading a fiction, we are interested in what is asserted within the pretense of fiction.¹¹

¹¹ As I wrote above, it is generally disputed what it means to assert within pretense: it may mean to make an intensional assertion, it may mean to make an assertion within a game of make-believe or to make an assertion within a false presupposition. As I argued, in any of these interpretations, there is no commitment to fictional objects.

Our intuitions are quite different when we consider extra-fictional assertions, they are assertions like “Sherlock Holmes is a fictional object”, “Sherlock Holmes is smarter than any real detective” or “Anna Karenina is cleverer than Madame Bovary”. Let us consider why these sentences look different to us. When we say “Sherlock Holmes is a fictional object” we are not pretending, we are saying something we consider true. When we compare Sherlock Holmes with real detectives, we are interested in our world and Sherlock Holmes becomes an object of comparison for real people. When we compare Anna Karenina with Madame Bovary, we are not talking inside any of the two fictions in which the names originated, and we are comparing them from the outside. It is quite common to maintain that extra-fictional assertions are different from intra-fictional ones. These intuitions are not easy to settle. The point at issue is how to account for the difference between intra-fictional assertions and extra-fictional ones.

2.1. Extra-Fictional Assertions Within Games or False Presuppositions

Some philosophers claim that extra-fictional assertions, even if different from intra-fictional ones, are still different from simple extensional assertions; they are assertions made within a pretense a bit different from the one adopted in intra-fictional assertions. And within this assumption, the corresponding semantic analysis does not commit to fictional objects.

For example, philosophers adopting the game-theoretical analysis first proposed by Walton are happy to allow games to be played both inside and outside fiction. Without going into the details, the idea is that we can play outside fiction with the rule of make-believe that there are fictional objects in our world and all our speech should be interpreted within this rule. The rules of a game do not commit to any real object (Everett, 2013; Friend, 2011; Walton, 1990). And it is even possible to analyze a sentence like “Sherlock Holmes does not exist” as making explicit the game within which the name has been used in fiction: saying that we have been using the name “Sherlock Holmes” with the intention to pretend reference without referring to anything (Evans, 1982).

The other variant of the fictional stance is equally available when using extra-fictional assertions, just as false assumptions, which—according to the proposal—we adopt when talking within fiction, may also be adopted outside fiction. When we say that “Sherlock Holmes is a fictional object” we may talk under the assumption we consider false that there are fictional objects in our world, allowing us to talk of an object, while we do not believe—but we simply fictively assume—that there really is such an object (see again Sainsbury, 2010, but also García-Carpintero, 2018; 2020; Orlando, 2021; Salis, 2013).

According to the fictional stance, in both its variants, the difference between intra-fictional and extra-fictional sentences is a difference in the type of pretense: either the game we play when asserting intra-fictional sentences is different from the game we play when asserting extra-fictional ones, or the false assumptions we adopt when using intra-fictional assertions are different from the false as-

sumptions we adopt when using extra-fictional ones. In both analyses, the claim is that speakers are not committed to fictional objects, which are simply pretended, but not really referred to.

2.2. Extensional Extra-Fictional Assertions

Some philosophers claim that extra-fictional sentences are not used within pretense. They claim therefore that extra-fictional assertions should be taken as literal assertions committing to fictional objects. This is the proposal which is now to be considered.¹²

The point is now to find a justification for the fact that an extra-fictional assertion is to be interpreted literally and extensionally. As a matter of fact, once it is allowed that extra-fictional assertions are to be interpreted literally, then commitment to fictional objects is quite straightforward. The problem is therefore not to explain how it is that the literal interpretation of extra-fictional assertions commits to fictional objects, but the relevant question can be expressed in the following way: how is it the case that fictional objects come into existence and are explicitly referred to by extra-fictional assertions? Two answers have been offered in the literature and defended against criticisms: the role-theorist answer and the abstract artifact creationist answer. I am going to consider each of them and explain why—in my opinion—they do not settle the matter.

2.2.1. The role-theorist answer.

According to role theorists, fictional objects are roles or abstract rules.¹³ The idea is clearly expressed as follows:

Intuitively, someone occupies the role of pope when she has certain properties, such as having been elected, being the head of state of the Vatican, being the bishop of Rome, and so on. Similarly, among role-realist views of fictional characters it is common to say that a role is constituted by a set of properties. For instance, the role of Anna Karenina is constituted by properties such as being a woman, being Russian, being a countess, being called “Anna Karenina”, being married to Alexei Karenin, and so on. The properties that constitute Anna Karenina are determined by the fiction *Anna Karenina*. (Stokke, 2021, p. 7833)

¹² It is quite interesting to note that the language itself does not grant the interpretation of extra-fictional assertion; as von Solodkoff and Woodward observe, the distinction between fictional objects really possessing (having) and their fictionally possessing (holding) properties “is not semantically encoded and does not force us to hold that the copula ‘is’ is ambiguous between the ‘is’ of predication and the ‘is’ of ascription” (2017, p. 424).

¹³ As already mentioned, role Platonists include: Wolterstorff (1980), Currie (1990), Stokke (2021).

In compliance with this theoretical stance, the author of fiction individuates a set of properties through the fiction, and it is this set of properties that is the referent of fictional names: a set of properties which may be instantiated.

This proposal has a well-known objection first raised by Kripke¹⁴ and then reconsidered by (Lewis, 1978). Consider that, when Conan Doyle wrote the Holmes fictions, he wrote them with the intention of pretending to refer by the name “Sherlock Holmes”, not having heard of anybody who had this name nor had done anything he attributed to Holmes. Suppose that—unknown to him—there were a person who had done everything he attributed to Holmes and was even named “Sherlock Holmes”. In such an improbable, but not impossible, situation, we would consider the name “Sherlock Holmes”, when used by Doyle, as not referring to any person satisfying all the properties attributed to Holmes in the fiction. And this is different from what happens when Tolstoy uses the name “Napoleon” in *War and Peace*, because the actual reference of the name is relevant to the fiction. It is therefore evident that the set of properties individuated by a fiction cannot be the simple reference of a fictional name; the intention of the user and the causal relations between the fictional use of the name and other uses are relevant for establishing whether the fictional author introduces a fictional object or not. This observation requires a revision of the role-theorist proposal and transform it into a new theory.¹⁵ It is with this objection in mind that abstract artifact creationist philosophers advance their proposal.

2.2.2. The abstract artifact creationist answer.

The general idea proposed by the abstract artifact creationist supporter of fictional objects¹⁶ is that the pretense attitude with which a name or a description is introduced by a fictional author is what allows fictional objects to come into existence. To evaluate this idea, it is worth considering an argument in its support, an objection to it and the reply that has been offered to the objection. My final contention is that this proposal is not adequately supported.

Thomasson (1999; 2015) argued that many abstract objects (fictional objects included) may be derived from basic claims and trivial inferences. For example, we may derive the existence of properties through the following argument (see Thomasson, 2015, p. 261 for this and the following arguments):

¹⁴ Presented for the first time in the addenda to Kripke’s (1980) and then discussed at greater length in his (2013).

¹⁵ Stokke (2021) considers the objection and allows the intention of the user and the causal relations among different uses to be part of the semantic analysis of extra-fictional sentences. This is an interesting integration of role-theory with the abstract artifact creationist proposal. But before being assessed, we need to consider whether the abstract artifact creationist proposal is obligatory due to the semantic/pragmatic analysis of fictional sentences.

¹⁶ As already mentioned, creationists include van Inwagen (1977), Schiffer (1996), Salmon (1998), Thomasson (1999; 2003), Kripke (2011; 2013).

- Uncontroversial claim: the bowl is blue,
- Linking principle (LP1): if x is Q , then x has the property of Q -ness,
- Derived claim: the bowl has the property of blueness,
- Ontological claim: there is a property (namely of blueness).

For deriving the existence of number, she proposes the following argument:

- Uncontroversial claim: there are five stumps in the back yard,
- Linking principle (LP2): if there are N x 's then the number of x 's is N ,
- Derived claim: the number of stumps in the back yard is five,
- Ontological claim: there is a number.

And for deriving fictional objects, she proposes the following argument:

- Uncontroversial claim: Jane Austen wrote a novel using the name “Emma” to pretend to refer to and describe a woman,
- Linking principle (LP3): if an author writes a story using a name N to pretend to refer to and describe someone, then the author creates a fictional character,
- Derived claim: Austen created a fictional character,
- Ontological claim: there is a fictional character.

The supporter of the fictional stance may refuse to interpret the linking principle literally, allowing the principle only within a game of make-believe or within a false presupposition. This line of attack has been developed by Yablo (2002; 2005) to defend the view that our talk of numbers is only to be interpreted within pretense (see also Yablo, 2014). According to Yablo, we should interpret the linking principle (LP2) within pretense, and we are not therefore committed to numbers outside pretense. It may be argued that the same line of reasoning is also adopted to claim that the linking principles (LP1) and (LP3) are to be accepted only within pretense and any ontological commitment—the one to fictional objects included—is only to be interpreted within pretense. This line of reasoning is adopted by Walton (1990) and Brock (2002) against any realist claim of fictional objects.

To avoid this contention, Thomasson (2015) observed that, as “real” requires a contrast to be mastered (e.g., to meaningfully apply “real” to a duck, a contrast is necessary with what fails to be a duck, for example a toy duck), “pretend” equally requires a contrast to be mastered. She writes that

to make sense of the idea that we merely pretend that P requires presupposing that there is some difference between what we commit ourselves to in pretending that P , and what we would commit ourselves to in asserting that P really is the case. (Thomasson, 2015, p. 265)

For example, we make sense of pretending that the bowl is blue, when there is no bowl or when there is a bowl which is not blue, because we understand what we would commit ourselves to, when saying that the bowl is blue. But let us now consider what we commit ourselves to in asserting “if x is Q , then x has the property of Q -ness”: we commit ourselves to the abstraction of properties from instances. And when we pretend this, we are just pretending that properties may be abstracted from instances. The idea is that in the case of properties, we may infer an abstract property (for example, the property of blueness) from the real instantiation of the property (the bowl being blue). And obviously we may pretend that there is a property instantiation (for example we may pretend that there is a blue bowl) and we may pretend to infer an abstract property of blueness from property instantiation.

In a similar way, when we assert “if there are N x 's then the number of x 's is N ” we are committing ourselves to the possibility of abstracting numbers from a multiplicity of objects and, when we pretend this, we pretend that this is the case. The idea is again that from the real instantiation of a number of objects we may infer that there are abstract objects as numbers, but we may also pretend that there is an instantiation of a number of objects, and we may pretend to infer that there are numbers.

Let us now consider the linking principle (LP3): “if an author writes a story using a name N to pretend to refer to and describe someone, then the author creates a fictional character”. There is an important difference between the literal interpretation of this principle and the one of the other linking principles under consideration: while in the other principles, we infer abstract objects from real instantiations or real multitudes, in this case we are required to infer an abstract object from pretense. Now, in the case of fictional objects the linking principle requires a connection to be made between a pretense attitude and an abstract object, and the observation I am making is that in this case it is not at all clear whether from a pretense attitude towards a certain content we may infer a real or a pretended object.

This means that the literal interpretation of (LP3) is itself problematic: does it require inferring *real abstract objects from pretense*? or does it require inferring *pretended abstract objects from pretense*? It is not clear what the answer should be because there is no indisputable literal reading of (LP3). And with this last observation, it is claimed that the trivial inference is not a definitive way to establish whether there are fictional objects or not. My claim is simply that both realists and irrealists may allow (LP3) as the acceptance of (LP3) does not favor one thesis instead of the other.

Thomasson's observation that we may make sense of pretense only within a contrast is relevant to understanding the antecedent of the conditional (LP3): we understand what it means to pretend to refer by a name because we know what it means to refer by a name. But once the antecedent of the conditional is grasped, it is not clear whether the pretense in the use of names mentioned in the antecedent of (LP3) is transferred to the created objects or not. It is this ambigui-

ty in (LP3) which allows the debate on fictional objects between realists and irrealists to continue growing, showing that the traditional test for fictional objects is inadequate. If there are good reasons to look for fictional objects, the actual semantic/pragmatic analysis of intra-fictional and extra-fictional assertions is not the right place to look for them.

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