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Paisley Nathan LIVINGSTON
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Andrea SAUCHELLI
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

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Philosophical Perspectives on Fictional Characters

Paisley Livingston and Andrea Sauchelli

IN WHAT FRED CREWS CALLS “duty free interdisciplinarity,” scholars borrow an idea from another field and slip it across the border into their home discipline, where it is misrepresented as the state of the art in the source field.¹ We aim to avoid this kind of error in the following selective survey of philosophical perspectives on fiction and fictional characters. Although we cannot offer a comprehensive historical overview, we describe a number of different positions that have been central to contemporary philosophical debates. We pass over various approaches and topics that have figured prominently in literary theory, and instead emphasize work that is less likely to be familiar to literary scholars. Our focus here is on what can be called the more fundamental issues, that is, questions about the very nature of fictional characters and the basis of our knowledge of them. We take it that these issues are logically distinct from, but of direct relevance to, a number of other fascinating topics, including questions about the feelings or emotions that are and are not appropriate to a reader’s experience of persons represented in a work of fiction, or the question of whether and how genuine knowledge is to be had from the experience of characters and their doings in fictions.

We do not pretend to be neutral about the positions surveyed in what follows, and shall refrain from misrepresenting our opinions as the object of a philosophical consensus. It is our hope that literary scholars may find some of these ideas insightful and useful, and indeed, we aim to establish that the philosophers whose works we discuss have presented a number of arguments and positions that are directly relevant to debates in literary studies. We hasten to add, however, that this is not a situation where an authoritative theory can be imported from one field into another. Instead, it should be acknowledged that topics surrounding fictional characters have proved to be an important challenge to a number of sophisticated theories in metaphysics and the philosophy of language and mind.

Here is a brief outline of the paper. We begin by setting forth a basic and central question about fictional characters and survey some of the main ways of trying to answer this question. We start with the broad family of realist approaches and discuss some of its members. The premise shared by such approaches is that, at least in some cases, claims about fictional characters refer to something real and can be right or wrong. Having discussed realist approaches we then turn to “irrealist” approaches. The basic orientation of all such approaches is provided by the thought that fictional characters are in some sense a figment of the human imagination. This family of views has its attractions, but faces problems as well. Those who think the problems outweigh the advantages have sought to find a way out of the realist/irrealist dilemma, and one family of views, based on work by Alexius Meinong, is discussed. We turn, finally, to issues related to the distinction between characters and other aspects of the content of fictions, including the relation between a literary concept of character and positions on personality theory in psychology. In a brief conclusion we sketch our preferred stance on the issues and positions canvassed in the paper.

A Challenge to Philosophy

Consider the following passage, which can be located in chapter 49 of any good edition of William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero*:

“I will do anything that may give pleasure to my Lord Steyne or to you,” said Rebecca, sincerely grateful, and seating herself at the piano, began to sing.

She sang religious songs of Mozart, which had been early favourites of Lady Steyne, and with such sweetness and tenderness that the lady lingering round the piano, sate down by its side, and listened until the tears rolled down her eyes.²

With regard to this passage, it seems right to say that it is true in the fiction that Lady Steyne is moved by Rebecca’s talented performance of some of the Lady’s favorite songs by Mozart. Yet what makes this the case? The philosophical challenge is to provide a principled account that can adequately explain, not only cases like this simple paraphrase, but the surprising variety of utterances about fiction, which includes detailed interpretations of a work’s content, comparisons between different fictions (for example, “Rebecca Sharp is more evil than Barry Lyndon”), existential statements (“There is no real Rebecca Sharp”), critical or metafictional claims (“Rebecca Sharp is a character in *Vanity Fair*”), and generalizations about the nature of fictional characters (“All

fictional characters are abstract objects"). As we show in more detail in what follows, these sample statements represent the striking variety of the discourse about fictional characters, and it turns out that an account or theory that can seem perfectly suited to dealing with one of these types of statements may not work well at all in an attempt to explicate some of the other kinds.

This most basic philosophical challenge concerning fictional characters can be couched as a question regarding the truth conditions of the various kinds of statements about fictions. In other words, what, if anything, could make a given statement about a fictional character right or wrong? A brief clarification of how that question may be articulated more fully is in order. Truth, we take it, is best characterized as relational. One way to put this is to say, using David Armstrong's influential idiom, that truth requires not only a truth-bearer, or something that has the property of being true, but also a truth-maker.³ What motivates this approach to the question of truth is the insight that the word "truth" does not in general refer to some kind of simple and independent entity or substance (as in Truth with a capital "t"). Instead, it is more plausible to think of truth as a feature that something like a belief or a statement can have or fail to have. Plausible truth-bearers, then, include statements, beliefs, propositions, and thoughts. Yet in the case of empirical beliefs or statements, a truth-bearer is true or false, not independently, but only in relation to what it is about. For example, the bare fact that someone believes himself healthy does not make this belief true or false. The belief is about a physical condition that either does or does not obtain. Or if someone asserts that Rebecca Sharp in *Vanity Fair* is a Martian in disguise, the fact that such an assertion has been made does not in itself make it correct. Truth, then, is understood as a relation between a truth-bearer and a truth-maker (or more traditionally, as a correlation between a proposition and a fact).

With these assumptions in mind, consider the statement, "Mozart wrote some religious songs." Here the truth-maker could be the event of Mozart's writing songs such as "O Gottes Lamm," since it is the actual occurrence of such an event that makes the statement true. Yet what is the truth-maker in the case of the above-cited sentence to the effect that Lady Steyne was moved by Rebecca Sharp's performance of songs by Mozart? If neither Rebecca Sharp nor Lady Steyne ever existed, it would seem that there are no truth-makers for this sentence. Is it not simply false, then, to say that Rebecca Sharp's performance moved Lady Steyne to tears? Yet such a conclusion is hardly appealing, at least for those of us who are strongly inclined to think that some statements about what happens in the fiction are true, while others are not.⁴ What, if anything, makes them true or false?

The problem is framed even more sharply for the many contemporary philosophers who have espoused a general, “referentialist” theory of the meaning of names, according to which the semantic contribution of a name is nothing other than its referent (for example, the name “Mozart” refers to Mozart, and its contribution to the meaning of the sentence “Mozart wrote religious songs” is just Mozart, the real person).⁵ It could seem to follow from this account that sentences containing fictional or “empty” names are not meaningful (and false), but devoid of meaning. Yet such an unsettling conclusion is hard to square with the fact that people use such sentences in meaningful conversations about the works of fiction they have experienced, and would appear to be able to agree and disagree over the fictional characterizations in them (for example, as when they readily concur that Mira Nair’s character named “Rebecca Sharp” is quite different from the character in Thackeray who bears the lexically identical name).

The philosophical challenge, then, is to say how statements about fiction can be meaningful and, in some cases, true. This is of course not the only important philosophical question that arises with regard to fictional characters, but it is the central one in much of the contemporary philosophical literature on the topic, and as was announced above, in what follows our primary concern will be to survey some of the main responses to this challenge.

Fictional Characters as Abstract Objects or Artifacts

Realists about fictional characters hold that fictional characters actually exist in a mind-independent manner and have determinate properties that can make certain statements about them true or false. So the truth-makers for statements and beliefs about fictional characters would be actual beings of some sort. Yet this line of thought is not very promising if it is interpreted as the idea that every work of fiction is a *fiction à clef* referring to specific, real-world persons. There is no good reason to think that Thackeray had any one, actual person in mind in writing about Rebecca Sharp, or that readers of his novel are supposed to be thinking about and referring to that person. The statement, “Rebecca Sharp is just a fictional character and never really existed” seems uncontroversially correct. How, then, could any realist approach be squared with this fact?

One option, which has appealed to some literary theorists, is to hold that fictional characters are the denizens of possible worlds, while also holding that possible worlds exist.⁶ Very briefly, philosophizing about

possible worlds finds its point of departure in the fact that we tend to talk and think, not only about what (we think) is actually the case, but also about what could or could not happen. For example, “If you do not pass the exam, you will fail the course” expresses a train of thought familiar to all teachers. So what are we talking about when we use counterfactual utterances and refer to nonactual states of affairs? “Possible worlds” is one way of trying to reply to that question. Some philosophers, including David K. Lewis, have argued for the concrete reality of all possible worlds. What is merely possible from the standpoint of our actual world could be, or perhaps even is, actual at some other world. And if there are such possible worlds, maybe what a fiction describes is a world of this sort, including its denizens. The tempting thought, then, is that what makes some statements about fictions true is the possible world this fiction is about. There are, however, some basic objections to this entire approach, and we shall briefly evoke some of them in the next paragraph.

It must be acknowledged, first of all, that as a given work of fiction refers at best to a *set* of possible worlds, there is no simple one-to-one mapping of fictional characters onto an individual person existing in possible worlds.⁷ Why would that be so? A world is complete in the following sense: for any thought or proposition, it is either the case that this proposition is true in that world or that it is false. A world is in this respect determinate, which is not to say that anybody can know everything about it. In contrast to this basic assumption about worlds, the domain or states of affairs evoked or represented by a work of fiction is not complete in this sense. As Roman Ingarden famously argued, there are “spots of indeterminacy” even for the most attentive reader who keeps everything in the text vividly in mind.⁸ For example, there is the world where Becky sang n songs by Mozart, the world where she sang $n+1$ songs, the world where she wore n pieces of jewelry when she sang Mozart songs, the world where she wore $n+1$ pieces of jewelry on that occasion, and so on. It follows that if we think of fictions as referring to possible worlds, Rebecca Sharp is not just one possible person inhabiting one possible world, but a *set* of possible persons in an infinity of possible worlds. Statements about the Thackeray character by that name would be true, then, of all of the persons living in all of the possible worlds where the name picks out someone corresponding to the *type* of person represented by the descriptions of her in Thackeray’s work. For many philosophers, this is enough to show that this entire approach does not really provide an adequate elucidation of our ways of thinking about a fictional character, since we are often inclined to think of a character as *one* person or agent, and not a set of persons or agents. Sets, it may

be helpful to recall, are not concrete entities, but abstract objects. The property of being abstract, which is contrasted to the property of being concrete, is usually understood as the property of not being spatiotemporally located, though there are other ways of drawing the distinction.⁹

At this point the most salient realist option is simply to accept this consequence. Fictional characters are thereby accepted into one's ontology as a proper subset of the general category of abstract objects or types.¹⁰ The realist may have independent grounds for holding that abstract objects exist.¹¹ Yet there is a major problem to be faced here. Traditionally, abstract objects have been thought of as eternal and not influenced by any interaction with concrete agents. According to this Platonist understanding of abstract objects, they can be discovered but not created by creatures located in space and time. However, this basic premise about the status of abstract entities or *abstracta* runs contrary to a deeply entrenched intuition about fictional characters, namely, that they are created in a specific context by a specific author (or group of collaborating authors). Although realism about abstract objects may have the virtue of justifying certain kinds of statements about fictional characters, it can be hard to accept the implication that Rebecca Sharp exists eternally and would have done so had the human species never evolved on the planet Earth.¹²

Is there no other option for some kind of realist approach to fictional characters? Amie Thomasson is a contemporary philosopher who has argued that the traditional philosophical manner of sorting entities as abstract or concrete is not particularly enlightening. She proposes a different system of categories, and thus a different metaphysical picture, based in part on the idea of ontological dependence, where, roughly speaking, one item is ontologically dependent on another item just in case the nonexistence of the former implies the nonexistence of the latter.¹³ According to Thomasson, fictional characters such as Rebecca Sharp and Gregor Samsa should be classified as humanly created abstract artifacts.¹⁴ They are thereby recognized as sharing a common feature with other entities that are familiar parts of our sociocultural reality, such as nations, marriages, and laws: their very coming into existence depends on intentional acts of (allegedly) rational agents. They have all, so to speak, been "manufactured" by the creative intentions of rational beings, and that is why they are called "artifacts."

According to Thomasson, the identity conditions of a fictional character, that is, the conditions that determine when a particular character comes into existence, are specified by the practices of the actual "literary world" in which use is made of the "empty" name that supposedly refers to a fictional character. For example, the sentence "Josef K. exists" is

true in case the name “Josef K.” is used with the intention to refer to a fictional character, and that intention is successfully expressed through some means that is recognizable as a part of an established literary practice. This condition is satisfied whenever the intentions of the author (or authors) of a work are in line with the beliefs and practices of those who deal competently with literary works. In short, what it takes to be a fictional character is determined by the practices of literary critics and authors. Given that the agent using a fictional name in creating a work of literature is ipso facto an author, he or she can be regarded as one of those individuals who regulate the existence conditions of fictional characters. Thomasson dubs this the “easy approach to ontology.” As long as the conditions of applicability of a proper name are satisfied, the name refers and the referent thus exists.

One aspect of Thomasson’s sophisticated and well-developed theory is the thesis that fictional characters are rigidly historically dependent on the intentional acts of their creator(s). This means that in order to come into existence, a fictional character requires a specific act of creation. In other words, being created at a specific moment by a specific author is an essential feature of the character.¹⁵ A fictional character is also constantly and *generically* dependent on the existence of the literary work and of a community able to process information about it. These conditions provide criteria for establishing when a character ceases to exist: Lord Jim is a contingent being like us. Should all of the instances of the text of Joseph Conrad’s novel be destroyed and should there no longer be any agents capable of remembering or understanding the text, Lord Jim would no longer exist.

Thomasson’s proposals are well worked out and carefully argued. They represent, in our view at least, a significant advance in relation to the idea that one can simply pull a world or a set of worlds out of a given work of fiction, and in so doing, come up with a cast of fictional characters. Yet there are some objections that can be raised to Thomasson’s views, and we will briefly set forth two kinds of objections in what follows.

One kind of objection to this proposal targets the postulated link between metaphysical theses (in the sense of basic claims about the nature and ontological status of various entities) and the “world” of literary practices. Thomasson allows that with regard to many questions about the individuation of characters, literary practice is vague and indecisive, but her contention is that with regard to many other questions, literary practice is stable and coherent.¹⁶ Our objection to this approach can be couched in both a bold and more cautious form. The bold version denies that the literary practices to which the philosopher defers in fact form such a system. As is to be expected in a domain where experimentation

and innovation are endemic, there is no stable consensus amongst the (competent) practitioners, whose heterogeneous activities and attitudes involve different and even contradictory standards.¹⁷ In a more cautious version, the objection runs as follows: while it could be the case that there is a subtending and stable system of competent practices constitutive of meaning and reference in literary fictions, the onus is on the philosopher to establish that this is indeed the case, and to explain why this should be so. Thomasson has not in fact shouldered this burden. This does not entail, however, that it cannot be done, and indeed, it is only an extreme species of skepticism that denies that many of the statements made about literary characters have cogent and justifiable answers. Yet even if there is demonstrable convergence on certain types of claims amongst reasonable, well-informed readers, the question of what makes this convergence competent, reasonable, and justifiable remains. More succinctly, the objection challenges the apparent assumption that a subset of the critical discourse about literature is self-grounding or in some obvious way warranted, and thus capable of providing an uncontroversial ground for metaphysical contentions about the nature and modes of existence of some category of entities.

A second objection to Thomasson's view targets the fact that on her account, a character is an *abstract* artifact. The complaint is that abstract artifact theories cannot always provide a straightforward account of our statements about fiction. Even though we may be inclined to accept some arguments to the effect that our talk *about* fictional characters may involve reference to (or quantification over) *abstracta*, this does not imply that all our thoughts and statements involving fictional characters can be analyzed straightforwardly in this way. In particular, an attribution of a property to a fictional individual cannot always be analyzed as a straightforward attribution of a property to an abstract object. Such an analysis yields silly metaphysical mistakes. For example, in a translation of Albert Camus's *L'étranger* we find the following sentences: "His name is Raymond Sintès. He's a little on the short side, with broad shoulders and a nose like a boxer's."¹⁸ What can be ruled out is that Camus and his readers are in the business of attributing the property of having broad shoulders to an abstract object, as abstract objects do not have shoulders (or bones, or blood, and, in general, are not composed of cells). It follows that claims within the context of a fiction cannot always be analyzed as straightforward attributions of a property to an abstract object.

Thomasson has proposed at least one way of dealing with this issue.¹⁹ Namely, she would have us introduce a fictional operator (such as "in the fiction . . .") to disambiguate the attribution of properties to the abstract object when it is taken as representing a fictional character in-

side the context of the novel. This would help to mark off the specific part of our fictional discourse that requires abstract artifacts, such as metafictional ascriptions made by literary critics, or statements in which readers implicitly quantify over characters in their debates. This strikes us as an intuitively appealing move, but it is worth pointing out that it is not entirely unproblematic and raises a number of interesting questions. It is, moreover, a move characteristic of a rather different approach to fiction, namely, the prefix strategy, which is a topic to which we return in our next section.

Irrealism, Pretense, and Presupposition

The term “irrealist” can be used to single out a family of positions that converge on the thought that it is a mistake to postulate certain kinds of entities as the truth-makers for fictional discourse. There are several logically distinct reasons why one might be inclined to distrust such postulations. One is that there are strong, independent doubts about the existence of these sorts of entities (such as nominalist worries about abstract objects, or roughly, the idea that while there are particular thoughts and drawings of triangles, there is no independently existing abstract object to be referred to as “triangle”). Another kind of worry is that reference to these entities cannot really suffice to sort out our various statements about fiction, starting with “Sherlock Holmes does not exist,” and moving on to “Arthur Conan Doyle had Holmes die in ‘The Final Problem’ but brought the character back to life years later in ‘The Adventure of the Empty House.’”

One broad family of irrealist views is known as pretense theory. An influential example is Kendall L. Walton’s proposal that metaphysically dubious statements about fictional characters can be replaced by unobjectionable claims about imagining or pretense. Walton’s basic idea is that works in the representational arts are to be understood in terms of props for games of make-believe. Children’s imaginative use of toys and objects in their games of make-believe are taken as the model for understanding the proper relation between works of fiction and those who engage with them. The function of the text of a novel, for example, is to regulate and direct the imaginative games of the audience. Such “props” in games of make-believe generate fictional truths and authorize or prescribe certain imaginings. A fictional truth is something true in such a game, where what this really means is that some kind of norm or prescription warrants that such-and-such is to be imagined in that game. As Walton puts it, “A proposition is fictional if it is *to be* imagined, if a story or other work of fiction prescribes imagining it.”²⁰

While Walton claims that a philosophical analysis of the specificity of propositional imagining would be desirable, he concedes that such an analysis is out of reach. Very roughly, the core intuition is that to imagine some object or state of affairs is to engage in a kind of nonassertive entertaining or considering based upon some prop, where such an attitude does not entail holding that thought to be true.²¹ There is, of course, much more to be said about the nature of imagining and how it is in various ways different from, yet related to, such mental operations as believing, conjecturing, and so on, but we will follow Walton in what follows in working with a fairly sketchy idea of imagining as nonassertive considering or entertaining in thought.

With regard to the philosophical puzzle concerning the truth conditions of earnest statements referring to fictional characters, Walton holds that no such entity as Sherlock Holmes is required for statements about the character in "The Final Solution" to be true. The use of the name "Sherlock Holmes" is to be understood as taking place inside pretense: the implicit writer or speaker of the sentences in the novel is pretending to refer to an entity and thus is not committed to its actual existence. Walton's general scheme for dealing with fictional characters is that an assertion concerning fictional entities is true in case it is fictional, in the relevant authorized game of make-believe, that the agent making that assertion speaks truly. An apparent assertion about a fictional entity should be understood, then, as a move in a game of make-believe in which we pretend to give a true description of the world.

Walton's influential proposal rightly underscores the role of the imagination in the making and appreciation of works of fiction. If there are any significant theses that form the object of a strong consensus in this area of philosophy, one of them is that the attitude of imagining is essential to the difference between works of fiction and other categories of works and utterances.²² It does not automatically follow from this point, however, that a pretense account can deal with claims about fictional characters that are made outside the pretense, such as "Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character." This is a statement that many of us would acknowledge as being straightforwardly true, and not true on the condition that we engage in some complicated rewording. Walton's proposal, for example, is to say, with regard to such statements, that in making them we "acknowledge, while betraying the pretense, only that there is a work in whose authorized games so pretending is fictionally to refer successfully."²³ The relevant objection to this complicated rewording, as voiced by Peter Lamarque, is that Walton's theory "extends pretence too widely" because it implies the presence of games of make-believe in cases where a literal interpretation "seems more intuitive."²⁴ More bluntly put, we don't *pretend* that Conan Doyle invented a character named Sherlock

Holmes, we rightly *believe* that he did so, and the reason why such beliefs are true is that he really did create the character: the truth-maker is the events involved in Doyle's creative activity.

Is it really true that Walton's sophisticated approach cannot successfully account for the truth conditions of straightforward and uncontroversial metafictional statements? To get a better sense of the problem, note that if we mechanically apply the prefix strategy (appending the "it is fictional that . . ." clause before the relevant statements about the fictional characters), what we have previously identified as an intuitively true metafictional statement becomes: "It is fictional in Conan Doyle's 'The Final Solution' that Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character." This statement, however, reports an inference that the reader is in fact *not* prescribed to draw within the pretense. What the fictioneer invites us to imagine is that Holmes is a remarkably clever human being, *not* a fictional character. There are, of course, self-reflexive fictions that invite us to think of a fictional character as a fictional character, but an adequate theory must handle fictions where this is not the case as well as those where it is.²⁵

It should be apparent at this point in the discussion that each of the approaches surveyed so far is appealing in that it gets part of the story right, but that each of them runs into trouble when faced with other aspects of discourse about fictional characters. Is there no way to provide a more comprehensive account?

One such approach to the logic and semantics of fictional characters is Mark Sainsbury's recent pluralistic proposal. As Sainsbury's views on the matter are quite complex, we can only offer a brief and simplified sketch. Sainsbury argues that the supposed benefits of including exotic entities such as unreal persons within our ontology can be had without sacrificing a more sober and defensible ontology. He acknowledges that discourse about fiction is varied, and proposes that different strategies should be employed to deal with the different kinds of claims made about fiction. A cornerstone of Sainsbury's strategy is a theory about fictional names called "Reference without Referents."²⁶ The basic idea is that empty names can make a semantic contribution to the propositions of which they are a part, despite the fact that they lack a referent. Unlike those who defend a standard referentialist account, Sainsbury claims that in general we associate referring expressions with certain reference conditions, rather than with the referent of the expression itself. For example, in the case of the name "Obama," we have the following conditions: for all *x* ("Obama" refers to *x* if and only if *x* = Obama).²⁷

How does such an analysis help us with a simple sentence such as "Josef K. is a bank clerk"? Sainsbury identifies various options. The first option is to paraphrase the sentence in some way that makes it

turn out true and not problematic, that is, not committing us to the existence of exotic entities. The general idea behind this strategy is to claim that a problematic sentence is true but, despite its apparent ontological commitment, its truth conditions are equivalent to those of a nonproblematic sentence. For example, we can say that a sentence such as "Josef K. is a bank clerk" is true and that, despite its apparent commitment to an exotic entity (Josef K.), this sentence can be paraphrased into another one, the truth conditions of which are not ontologically committing. The rationale behind this move is usually that the second (and unproblematic) sentence reveals the real hidden logical form of the previous one. For example, it is argued that the sentence "Josef K. is a bank clerk" includes, at a logical level, a noncommitting fictional operator: "According to the fiction, Josef K. is a bank clerk." The two sentences are equivalent because the latter is taken to reveal the real logical form of the former.

A second option is to deny that this sentence is true, while adding that, although the sentence is literally false because there is no actual Josef K., we can still account for the idea that in some circumstances the sentence can be taken as true. The trick is to have recourse to the notion of presupposition. For example, we can say that when we take the sentence to be true, we should be understood as *presupposing* that the sentence is prefixed by an operator such as "according to Franz Kafka's *The Trial*." Or perhaps the presupposition is that Josef K. is a real person. Having recourse to the presupposition strategy allows us to remain neutral about the equivalence in truth conditions between the two sentences. Sainsbury notes that in conversational contexts our presuppositions do not always match what we actually believe. In the context of literary criticism, critics who discuss Josef K. can accept or presuppose that Josef K. is a real person, without, however, believing this to be true. They can do so for any number of reasons, such as attempting to arrive at a better understanding of the character's possible emotional states.²⁸ Another strategy for dealing with claims about fiction is to treat them not as truth-evaluable; in the place of truth values or truth conditions, we adopt the notion of faithful-to-the-story. "Josef K. is a bank clerk" would turn out to be faithful to the story, but not literally true. What is and is not faithful to the story associated with a given work of fiction is, of course, a matter of great controversy, one that returns us, once more, to the basic problem of how the content of a fiction is determined.²⁹ While there are certain advantages in adopting Sainsbury's pluralistic approach, simplicity is not one of them.

To sum this last section up, the irrealist approach captures important, well-entrenched ideas about the nature of fiction and fictional characters.

Yet this kind of approach would appear to run aground on the historical and cultural reality of created works and characters. This was the strength of the abstract artifact theory that recognizes such items as irreducibly real entities. Yet as we saw above, that very approach must at a certain point have recourse to the prefix strategy and to some idea of a special attitude, such as pretense or imagining, that governs certain statements about fictional characters. Sainsbury's pluralistic approach has the virtue of inviting us to shift perspectives along with contexts so as to adopt viable ways of talking about the contrasting aspects of fictions, yet we are left with the question of how these different perspectives and contexts fit together, as well as the deeper problem of offering something like a principled account of how the very content of a fiction, or in other words, what happens in the story, is determined at all. With his evocation of "authorized games of make-believe," Walton implies that there is indeed a solution to that problem, but he in fact provides no principled account of how the distinction between authorized and unauthorized pretense is to be drawn and applied. The search for a comprehensive account continues.

Fictional Characters as Nonexistent Objects

Not all philosophers have been convinced that the options are exhausted by a choice between believing and disbelieving in fictional entities, or between postulating or denying their existence. An early articulation of an alternative was Alexius Meinong's contention that fictional characters figure amongst those items in the universe that lack the property of existence, but have a sort of being labelled *Gegebenheit* or givenness (and not merely a givenness in thought or experience).³⁰ According to this theory, when we say that Rebecca Sharp does not exist, we are right, but we can coherently add, without the "dodges" of paraphrase, prefix, or presupposition, that she has musical talent and manages to bring Lady Steyne to tears.

Meinongian theories of fictional entities, broadly conceived, include a set of principles describing the nature of nonexistent objects.³¹ Purely fictional characters are taken to be a subset of the set of nonexistent objects. The main claim of Meinongians is that there *are* objects that do not exist. If this formulation sounds contradictory (as the use of italics in the last phrase was meant to suggest), it can be reformulated as "some objects do not exist." Meinong is followed in this regard by Terence Parsons and Graham Priest, who argue that there is a viable distinction between being and existence, and that it is not explicitly contradictory,

even though it may sound paradoxical, to affirm that some of the objects over which we quantify (by means of expressions of the form “for all,” “there is,” and so on) do not have the property of existing.

The crucial thesis of Meinongian theories is that an object does not have to exist in order to instantiate a property. This is a denial of what has often been presented as a knock-down objection to the entire approach, namely, the thesis that existence is a necessary condition on having properties.³² Finally, any theory of fictional entities that is to be based on the idea of nonexistent objects must hold that the latter can play the theoretical role that the former are supposed to play. Support for this thesis is needed because even if the idea of nonexistent objects can be defended successfully, it does not straightforwardly follow from that idea that a subset of these nonexistent entities can be identified with the set of fictional characters.

Meinongians motivate their approach by claiming that nonexistent objects are necessary to the general explanation of various linguistic and mental data. More specifically, Meinongian metaphysics is said to have the advantage of providing an account of intentionality and intensionality.³³ To begin with the latter, in one kind of statement about fictional characters, intensional verbs are used to postulate a real relation between an actual agent and a fictional character. An example is “René Girard thinks Meursault is self-deceived.” According to Meinongians, nonexistent entities are crucial in accounts of such uses of intensional verbs involving fictional characters, the thought being: no relation without *relata*. But how does the Meinongian metaphysics help account for the truth conditions of statements belonging to this category? According to Priest, we can give an account of the truth of this statement by saying that Girard thinks Meursault is self-deceived just in case Meursault, a nonexistent object, is in those worlds that describe the sphere of what Girard has beliefs about. The key idea here is that nonexistent entities can be the referent of empty names and that as a result they can provide an explanation of the meaningfulness and truth-value of expressions containing this kind of names.

Turning now to intentionality, we begin with the thought that intentionality is, as Franz Brentano proposed, the “mark of the mental,” or at least something essential to our mental states.³⁴ According to many philosophers, it is relatively uncontroversial to observe that people frequently think about things that cannot properly be described as being part of the actual world (such as what Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley would have done had they lived to a ripe old age), and the proposed theoretical justification for believing in nonexistent objects is that we can describe intentional mental states of this imaginative

sort as being directed towards nonexistent objects. More bluntly put, the Meinongian contention is that nonexistent objects play the role of fictional intentional objects that do not belong to our world: when we think about Rebecca Sharp, we have to be thinking about something, and that something is a nonexistent person.

A question that comes to mind here is this: do Meinongians really *explain* the object-directedness of intentionality, or do they merely recruit a pervasive assumption about this feature of our experience to ontological ends? Perhaps the Meinongians have inverted the order of explanation: what explains the illusory “being” of nonexistent objects is human intentionality, which allows us to engage in thoughts and imaginings about what does not exist. Perhaps a genuine explanation of this capacity is beyond the scope of philosophical analysis; in any case, the “account” floated by Meinongians is hardly an explanation in any robust sense.

As could easily be expected, many philosophers have been quite perplexed by the idea that there are things that do not exist. It is regularly complained that the distinction between being and existence is not perspicuous, and that existence is not straightforwardly interpreted as a property on a par with being red or being a bank clerk. Setting these and other metaphysical and logical objections aside, for the purpose of our discussion it is enough to show that there are problems with the identification of a subset of nonexistent objects as the set of items that play the role of fictional characters. One important *desideratum* for any theory of fictional characters, we take it, is a convincing account of the idea that a fictional characters bears a special relation to the author(s) of the work in which that character figures.³⁵ It seems reasonable to suppose, for example, that before Fyodor Dostoyevsky thought and wrote about Raskolnikov, there was no object to which the name “Raskolnikov” referred.

However, Meinongian theories of objects imply that there is an infinite number of such objects even before any creative act was undertaken by any author. Fictional characters, being a species of nonexistent objects, are thus an arrangement of properties having a prior being (nonexistence); they are, then, arrangements that some author can select or pick out, but not create. What is problematic about Meinongian doctrines is that the internal structure of a fictional character remains the same whatever the author does, his or her only role being to attribute to the selected character the extranuclear property of being fictional or to appear in this or that novel. This is a very big problem for the doctrine if we take seriously the idea that the creators of fictional works are genuinely creative. While it would be a mistake to take this latter intuition to entail that authors bring real persons into existence *ex nihilo*, the account

provided by Meinongians is nonetheless highly counterintuitive on this point, at least for those who hold that authors do more than “select” a character and “make it fictional.”³⁶

Content and Character

The general arguments about the metaphysics and semantics of fiction that we have passed in review leave various more specific questions in the background, and it is to some of these that we turn in this section. One such question is whether there is a distinction to be drawn between fictional entities in general, such as all inanimate objects and settings, and fictional characters more specifically. A house can, of course, in a supernatural story be represented as having thoughts, feelings, and desires, and so function as a character in that fictional work. Yet in many contexts, it makes good critical sense to distinguish between a novelist’s description of a house and his or her descriptions of characters. Realists about fictional entities could frame our question about the basis of such a distinction as a request to identify those properties shared by all and only fictional characters. For antirealists, the question can be framed as follows: if a fictional character is anything at all, it is part of the contents of a work of fiction, or what the fiction is about. One may then ask just which parts those might be.

Philosophers debating the metaphysics of fiction have often had little or nothing to say on this topic. Some have defended a broad conception whereby the label “fictional characters” covers all objects, things, and events as well as persons.³⁷ The distinction alluded to above between inanimate objects and characters would be groundless and of no critical use. A position of this sort has the advantage of not including any potentially controversial theses about the nature of agents or persons, but this is an advantage purchased at some cost. Such a conception has the shortcoming, for example, of implying that certain ongoing debates in literary studies are entirely misconceived—such as the debate over the relative importance of character analysis in literary criticism, which pertains to distinctions that these philosophers deem irrelevant or not worth drawing in the first place.³⁸ It also entails that the number of characters in even the simplest fictions “explodes.” At the other extreme, the term “character” is reserved for representations of persons, given some more or less stringent conception of personhood (and some of the philosophical conceptions are indeed so stringent that they would rule that some of the human beings represented in fictions are not persons).³⁹

An alternative to these two approaches is to think of characters as represented *agents*, where agents are beings capable of performing intentional actions.⁴⁰ This minimalist proposal allows us to acknowledge that some nonhuman entities in fiction are represented as having humanlike qualities and can thus be conceived of as characters; it has the merit of ruling out the nut Krakatuk in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Nußknacker und Mausekönig*, while ruling in the intelligent and rebellious appliances in Stanislaw Lem's "Washing Machine Tragedy."⁴¹ This proposal also has the merit of neutrality with regard to ongoing disputes in psychology and philosophy regarding the status of personality theory.⁴²

Very briefly, the debate in question concerns the explanatory value of attributing personality structures or character traits to individual human beings. The personality theorist argues that it is cogent to explain a person's dishonest actions, for example, by referring to a trait or disposition that is a long-standing feature of that individual's personality. This is, in other words, the psychologist's correlative to the moral philosopher's discourse of vices and virtues. The situationist, on the other hand, thinks that the behavior in question could be better explained by referring to those aspects of the situation that somehow prompted or elicited a dishonest action. Situationists and other social psychologists speak of an "attribution error" whereby people explain their own actions in terms of flexible responses to contexts and situations, while trying to explain the deeds of others by attributing to them (and herein lies the error) long-standing dispositions or character traits. Armed with this result, situationists complain that many works of fiction perpetuate the kind of erroneous thinking that is characteristic of personality theory: the novelist shows us a character who is explicable uniquely in terms of a "ruling passion" or some such, and we are invited to extend this kind of thinking to human beings in the real world. Yet the personality theorist and the virtue ethicist respond to this entire line of reasoning by saying that the ancient way of talking about character and action is not, in fact, erroneous, and that moral character, both within and without fiction, is at once real and of explanatory and moral import.

We cannot pursue the debate between these contrasting views in this context. Instead, we want to point out that, even if it were established that the explanatory value of character traits has been vastly overrated by personality theorists and the discourse of moral psychology more generally, as situationists have argued, this finding would remain orthogonal to the question of how agency has been represented in fictions, unless one is in a hurry to assign cognitive value (or the lack thereof) to *fictional* characterizations. Consider, for example, a possible situationist's contention that Thackeray's characterization of Rebecca Sharp is somehow

faulty because her multiple deceptions and misdeeds are not sufficiently linked to the influence of her situation. This could be right, but it does not follow that the literary work is bad as a result. While works of fiction can be mined for their psychological insights, this sort of cognitive payoff is but one of the values of literature, and a work lacking such insights may have other qualities worthy of our attention.

Another question that has been explored by philosophers as well as literary critics is whether every narrative work of fiction has at least one narrator.⁴³ In cases where there is a narrator, it can also be asked whether this figure should be counted amongst the characters in the fiction. There are reasons why one might think so, at least if we assume that characters are part of the fiction's content—the part in which agents and their doings are represented. One such doing is telling or recounting, and any figure represented as doing such things qualifies as a character in the story. Some such content is explicit, as in the many long embedded narratives in Charles Sorel's *Histoire comique de Francion*. Yet the characterization of the storyteller is sometimes largely or entirely implicit. As a storyteller's voice or writerly style always represents aspects of his or her agency (for example, in the manner of choosing phrases and points of view), we may conclude that all narrators are characters. (Although we do not have space to pursue the topic here, an analogous reasoning extends to implicit readers or auditors, as when Marcel Proust's narrator anticipates and responds to an objection that *Monsieur le lecteur* addresses to *Monsieur l'auteur*.⁴⁴)

It does not follow from this argument that the characterization of the narrator is necessarily coherent or plausible. Consider the narrator of *Vanity Fair*, whose statements and quotations tend to convey a seemingly authorial perspective on the various agents' antics. One is not inclined to think of this narrator as one of the characters until reading a passage in chapter 62, where the narrator tells us: "It was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to see them first, and to make their acquaintance." If the narrator is a person in the story, that is, someone capable of meeting and talking to Becky and the others, then how could this same narrator be omniscient, or in a position to know that every word about Becky's private thoughts is true? One conclusion that could be drawn is that it is true in Thackeray's fiction that his narrator is an impossible agent, a bit like a time traveler who visits his hometown prior to his own birth and prevents his mother from giving birth to him.

Another question about the basic constitution of the cast of characters is raised by the fictioneer's actual or apparent reference to real persons. Is it appropriate to apply the designation "fictional characters" to such

figures? For example, in Alexandre Dumas's play of 1853, *La jeunesse de Louis XIV*, Molière serves as the young Louis's secret agent in a variety of courtly intrigues involving Mazarin and his niece. It is tempting to argue that either Dumas's play is a work of fiction having no fictional characters, or that it is a work of fiction, the primary characters of which are all historical figures familiar to the author and his initial audience. While some members of that audience may have had no firm opinions regarding Molière and his relations with Louis XIV, those who were somewhat well-informed about seventeenth-century France and the life of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, whose *nom de plume* was Molière, would probably have doubted, and with good reason, that the ambitious dramatist was involved in any of the intrigues that make up the action of the play. Such beliefs, however, presumably did not prevent them from engaging imaginatively with the contents of the fiction. In fact, with regard to this and many kindred examples, the prescribed imaginative attitude involves comparisons between the content of one's relevant beliefs (about historical figures as well as characters in earlier works) and the contents one is being invited to imagine. Some of what is believed or known about the historical figure carries over into one's understanding of the fictional character bearing the same name, but other such beliefs do not.

Similarly, in appreciating a cinematic adaptation of a well-known literary work, one actively compares the work's Rebecca Sharp character to the characterization bearing that name in the source work, sometimes decrying, sometimes rejoicing in, the differences and similarities. This is part of what it means to appreciate the adaptation as an adaptation, so that one's appreciative experience of the works is a complicated blend of imaginative engagement and metafictional reflection.

Conclusion

In the place of a recapitulation of points from our descriptive survey, we propose the following concise formulation of our own understanding of the key problems and of our preferred approach to their solution. We deny, contra the Meinongian line, that fictional entities are best thought of as nonexistent entities that have some special mode of being called "subsistence." Although such postulations would certainly provide the sought-after truth-makers for fictional discourse, they themselves would appear to stand in need of plausible truth-makers. For similar reasons, we do not find it promising to try to explain the referential function of fictional discourse in terms of worlds furnished by either concrete or abstract possible entities, at least if talk of fictional worlds is supposed

to be more than loose and metaphorical. More generally, in this regard we follow Roman Ingarden and Amie Thomasson in espousing the assumption that the grounds of fictional discourse are quite complex.

A first such basis is the creative human capacity known traditionally as the imagination. Irréalists are right to identify imagining as the distinctive type of mental attitude and process that opens the door to fiction, just as the artifact theorist is right to think of works of fiction and their contents as the result of human creativity. To create a work of fiction is to engage in a specific train of imaginings and subsequently to create a prop of some kind, such as a text or an audiovisual display, that can serve to invite others to engage in similar imaginative experiences. A good philosophical account of how a work of fiction can be created begins with the assumption that human beings have the capacity to engage in imaginings having determinate content, but it does not follow that philosophy can or need provide any deeper explanation of how this is possible. Works of fiction are created only if agents use their imaginations in certain kinds of ways and end up endowing the work with a determinate content, where the term “content” refers to what is to be imagined in engaging appreciatively with the work qua work of fiction. The determinate content of a work of fiction owes its existence, then, to the imaginative process or act, and this is what grounds the truth-values of such statements as Rebecca Sharp is a fictional character, while also justifying the seemingly contrasting contentions that Rebecca Sharp does not exist, and that she has a lot of musical talent. While the act of imagining a particular train of thoughts is real, what those thoughts are about can, but need not, be anything actual or possible.

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NOTES

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1 Fred Crews, personal communication.

2 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*, ed. Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 474.

3 David Armstrong, *Truth and Truthmakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004). We are not suggesting that there are no outstanding problems pertaining to concepts of truth or that the truthmakers approach is philosophically neutral or unproblematic. See Helen Beebe and Julian Dodd, eds., *Truthmakers: the Contemporary Debate* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005). For additional background on philosophical conceptions of truth, see William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996) and Richard L. Kirkham, *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992).

4 Skepticism about the veracity of all beliefs referring to fiction and fictional characters is, of course, a theoretical option. We will not rehearse the arguments against it here,

except to say that such an option is hard to square with the practice of literary criticism and with any engagement with and appreciation of works of fiction.

5 For an overview of “Millian” and other accounts of the meaning and reference of names, see Sam Cumming, “Names,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/names/#2.1>.

6 For a strong articulation of reasons supporting skepticism about possible worlds, see Michael Jubien, *Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), chap. 3. For background, see Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994).

7 For an excellent critical discussion of the possible world semantics of fiction, see Diane Proudfoot, “Possible World Semantics and Fiction,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 35 (2006): 9–40. A bullish presentation of a Lewisian possible worlds approach is given in Richard Hanley, “As Good as it Gets,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 1 (2004): 112–28.

8 Roman Ingarden, *Vom Erkennen des literarischen Kunstwerks* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1968); *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 293.

9 For commentary on other possible ways of drawing the distinction, see David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 82–86.

10 See, for example, Peter Van Inwagen, “Quantification and Fictional Discourse,” in *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2000), 235–47, “Creatures of Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977): 299–308, and “Existence, Ontological Commitment, and Fictional Entities,” in Michael J. Loux and Dean W. Zimmerman, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 131–57.

11 The literature on this topic is vast. Two useful, recent introductions are Stacey Friend, “Fictional Characters,” *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 2 (2007): 141–56, and Mark Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2009). Important contributions include Peter Lamarque, “Work and Object,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 102, no. 2 (2002): 141–62, and “How to Create a Fictional Character,” in *The Creation of Art*, ed. Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 33–52, Edward Zalta, *Abstract Objects* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), and *Intensional Logic and the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980). For a recent plea for realism about abstract objects, see Linda Wetzel, *Types and Tokens: On Abstract Objects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

12 For more on this topic, see Stuart Brock, “The Creationist Fiction: The Case Against Creationism About Fictional Characters,” *Philosophical Review*, 119, no. 3 (2010): 337–64.

13 Fabrice Correia, “Ontological Dependence,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 5 (2008): 1013–32; Kit Fine, “Ontological Dependence,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95, no. 3 (1995): 269–90.

14 Amie Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), “Fictional Characters and Literary Practices,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 2 (2003): 138–57, “Speaking of Fictional Characters,” *Dialectica* 57, no. 2 (2003): 205–23, *Ordinary Objects* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), “Existence Questions,” *Philosophical Studies* 141 (2008): 63–78, “The Easy Approach to Ontology,” *Axiomathes* 19 (2009): 1–15. Whether Thomasson’s position on the ontology of fictional characters should be classified as “realist” or not depends on how one understands that notion, but on a prevalent assumption, she would count as an antirealist because she allows that the existence of characters depends in part on human cognition.

15 In this regard, Thomasson’s position parallels “contextualist” and “action-theoretical” arguments in the ontology of works of art to the effect that works are not individuated

solely in terms of types of artistic structures, texts, or particular objects, but also in terms of factors figuring within the context of creation. A history of contextualist ontology of art remains to be rewritten. Forerunners include Stephen C. Pepper, *The Work of Art* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1955) and C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1946); see also Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), and David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

16 Amie Thomasson, "The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 3 (2005): 228.

17 We cannot develop this thesis at great length here. For a good example of the sort of fundamental disagreement that could be referred to, consider actual critics' starkly contrasting claims about the character in Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Tears, idle tears," as documented by Kerry McSweeney, *What's the Import? Nineteenth-Century Poems and Contemporary Critical Practice* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2007), 24–26.

18 Albert Camus, *L'étranger*, ed. Matthew Ward and Peter Dunwoodie (New York: Knopf, 1993), 27.

19 Amie Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 105–14. For a critical survey of various different ways of dealing with this problem, see R. Hanley, "Much Ado About Nothing: Critical Realism Examined," *Philosophical Studies* 115 (2003): 123–47.

20 Kendall L. Walton, "On the (So-Called) Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," in *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*, ed. Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 144; see also his *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990). An early proponent of the type of approach Walton develops was Konrad Lange. See his *Das Wesen der Kunst: Grundzüge einer realistischen Kunstlehre* (Berlin: G. Grote, 1901), a snippet of which was translated by Max Schertel and Melvin M. Rader as "Art as Play" in *A Modern Book of Esthetics: An Anthology*, ed. Melvin M. Rader (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), 6–36.

21 Here Walton follows Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980) and Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1974). Another source is Edward S. Casey's *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), which draws heavily on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'imaginaire: psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940); see also Konrad Lange's *Die bewußte Selbsttäuschung als Kern des künstlerischen Genusses* (Leipzig: Veit, 1895).

22 For a survey and proposal in this vein, see Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), chap. 6.

23 Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 442.

24 Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 191.

25 Several philosophers have argued that sentences with empty names express incomplete propositions (because empty names do not refer and the meaning of a proper name is its reference). See Frank Adams, Gary Fuller, and Robert Stecker, "The Semantics of Fictional Names," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (1997): 128–48, David Braun, "Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names," *Nous*, 39, no. 4 (2005): 596–631, Stacey Friend, "The Great Beetle Debate: A Study in Imagining with Names," *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming), Eddy Zemach, "Tom Sawyer and the Beige Unicorn," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 2 (1998): 167–79, and Marga Reimer, "The Problem of Empty Names," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79 (2001): 491–506; for criticisms, Anthony Everett, "Empty Names and 'Gappy' Propositions," *Philosophical Studies* 116 (2003): 1–36.

26 See Mark Sainsbury, *Reference without Referents* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), and *Fiction and Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2009).

27 See also Kent Bach, "Giorgione Was So-called Because of his Name," *Philosophical Perspectives* 16 (2002): 73–103.

28 Sainsbury refers to Robert Stalnaker's studies on presupposition that, in turn, are based on the notion of the common ground of a conversation. The common ground of a conversation is defined as common belief about what is accepted (In a context C, P is common belief in case, for every believer b in C, P is believed by b and P is believed by b to be believed by all the members in C and so on *ad infinitum*). A presupposition is a proposition belonging to the common ground. See Robert Stalnaker, "Presuppositions," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2 (1973): 447–57, "Common Ground," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25 nos. 5–6 (2002): 701–21.

29 Sainsbury situates his discussion of fictional characters in a broader account of intentionality and intensionality. In a nutshell, he thinks that an irrealist about fictional characters would be better off if he or she could provide an unproblematic account of the general structure of intensional contexts like "I thought about Pegasus all morning." The reason is that fiction is a special case of intensionality, where intentionality is understood as the capacity of the mind to be about things (existent, absent, or nonexisting) and intensionality is the "linguistic manifestation of intentionality." See Mark Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 126.

30 Alexius Meinong, "Über Gegenstandstheorie," in *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie* (Leipzig: Barth, 1904), 1–50; trans. "On the Theory of Objects," in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. R. M. Chisholm et al. (New York: Free Press, 1960), 76–117. For background, see Anna Sierszulka, *Meinong on Meaning and Truth* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2005).

31 See Terrence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), Graham Priest, *Towards Non-being* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), "Précis of *Towards Non-being*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76, no. 1 (2008): 185–190, "Replies to Nolan and Kroon," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76, no.1 (2008): 208–14.

32 The idea that existence is not a property, but a precondition of having properties was advanced against this kind of view by Gilbert Ryle in his contribution to "Symposium: Imaginary Objects," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 12, *Creativity, Politics, and the A Priori* (1933), 18–70.

33 This kind of justification for accepting a philosophical theory has become part of the common practice in the discipline. We cannot here take up various questions related to the limitations of this methodology.

34 Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. L. McAlister (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973). For a fine introduction, see Tim Crane, *Elements of Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).

35 For rejoinders to skepticisms about authorship and proposed conceptions of individual and collective authorship, see Livingston, *Art and Intention*, chap. 3, and *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), chap. 3.

36 For additional discussion of Priest's views, see Bob Hale, "Into the Abyss," *Philosophia Mathematica* 15, no. 3 (2007): 94–110, and F. W. Kroon, "Much Ado about Nothing: Priest and the Reinvention of Noneism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76, no. 1 (2008): 199–207.

37 Such a broad usage is presented, for example, by Stacey Friend, "Fictional Characters," *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 2 (2007): 142, and by Edward N. Zalta, "The Road Between Pretense Theory and Abstract Object Theory," in *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2000), 117–47.

38 For a richly documented discussion of a central case, see Margreta De Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

- 39 George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*, ed. William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1988), 45–46.
- 40 Livingston, “Characterization and Fictional Truth in the Cinema,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 149; and “‘Tese og anti-tese om begreppet karakter,’” *K&K 30* (2002): 125–36.
- 41 E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Werke*, ed. Herbert Kraft and Manfred Wacker (Frankfurt: Insel, 1967), 2:296–351; Stanislaw Lem, *Memoirs of a Space Traveler*, trans. Joel Stern and Maria Swiecicka-Ziemianek (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 89–110.
- 42 For background and references, as well as a philosopher’s advocacy of the situationist side in the debate, see John Doris, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).
- 43 The literature on this topic is enormous. For a start, see Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), Andrew Kania, “Against the Ubiquity of Fictional Narrators,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 47–54, and George M. Wilson, “Elusive Narrators in Literature and Film,” *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 73–88.
- 44 Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 2: 651.