Individualist Fictional Realism

Elisha W. A. Smith

University of New Brunswick & Dalhousie University

MRS. PONZA. What? The truth? It is only this: I really am the daughter of Mrs. Frola, and also the second wife of Mr. Ponza, Yes– and for myself, no one! I am no one!

GOVERNOR. Oh, no, Mrs. Ponza: for yourself, you must be one or the other!

MRS. PONZA. No. For myself, I am the woman that I am believed to be.[1]

Most philosophers consider the status of fictional characters a non-issue, or if an issue at all, then an issue for the philosophy of language to address. However, there has been frequent ontological debate about fictional characters and whether they obtain as existent objects in any sense. The last quarter of the twentieth century consisted mostly of realist approaches to the issue, whereas the first

---

[1]Luigi Pirandello, *Right You Are, If You Think You Are*. Trans. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover Publications 1997).

quarter of this century consisted mostly of anti-realist approaches to the issue. The aim of this paper is to defend fictional realism by advocating for an individualism as well as an infinity of fictional characters.

I will begin by giving particular accounts of the two kinds of fictional realism, proceeding to discuss two criticisms fictional realism has received. Discussion of these criticisms gives way to discussion of alternatives to and competitors with fictional realism, and the problems with those alternatives and competitors. Finally, I will give my argument for a version (or versions) of fictional realism that potentially sustains criticisms and addresses the challenges faced by other theories and other versions of fictional realism. The approach of this paper is intended to be modest.

A comparison of two of Stuart Brock's accounts of realism about fictional characters causes notice of an interesting difference. Both accounts posit that all realists about fictional characters accept two theories. In each account the first theory is the exact same, namely the:

- *Ontological thesis*: There are fictional characters. A fictional character is an individual (or role) picked out by a name or description which (i) is first introduced in a work of fiction and (ii) does not pick out a concrete individual in the actual world.

But then the accounts differ as to the second theory. The earlier account from 2002 posits the:

- *Principle of Plenitude*: There is an abundance of fictional characters.[2]

---

[2]Stuart Brock, "Fictionalism About Fictional Characters," *Noûs* 36, no. 1 (2002): 1.

Whereas the later account from 2007 posits the

- *Objectivity thesis*: Fictional characters do not depend on any-
  one's attitudes, linguistic practices or conceptual schemes. Fic-
  tional characters would continue to exist (or be) even if there
  was nobody to think or talk about them.[3]

It is possible that the principle of plenitude is not included in the
later account because the objectivity thesis addresses the concerns
the absence of the principle of plenitude produced.

The principle of plenitude is important for distinguishing a the-
ory proposed by Gottlob Frege in 1892 from a realist position.[4]
According to that theory, all fictional names designate a singular
object, perhaps the number 0. Brock is wanting to make a distinc-
tion between Frege's theory and fictional realism, and it is for this
reason that he posits the principle of plenitude. It is not deter-
mined by Brock's summations of fictional realism how many fic-
tional characters exist (or be). I am claiming that it is necessary
that infinitely many fictional characters exist in order to maintain
the objectivity thesis and that the individual agent determines what
is the case regarding the specific characters they are entertaining,
referring to or receiving reference to. Rather than being decided
by any individual the details of the fictional character, individuals
decide, determine, or non-cognitively cause which character or set
of characters of infinitely many is being referred to.

It is not a facet of fictional realism that the number of fictional
characters is finite. However, this is something that the objectivity
thesis requires objectivity about; it must be objectively the case that

---

[3]Stuart Brock & Edwin David Mares, "Fictional Characters," in *Realism and Anti-Realism*
(Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007): 199.

[4]Brock, "Fictionalism About Fictional Characters," 2.

there are infinitely many fictional characters. Arguably, the objectivity thesis cannot succeed without there being infinitely many fictional characters, because a finite number of fictional characters will be dependent on someone or some group of people. The objectivity thesis also avoids identifying fictional characters with something like the number 0, because for Frege references are of the most significance, yet references cannot be said to 'continue to exist (or be) even if there was nobody to think or talk about them'. For Frege, a reference to a fictional character is only a reference to a fictional character when it is considered belonging to the set of references that designate the singular object that is perhaps the number 0. Speech acts and written acts, which constitute references, are dependent on persons to exist.

In the theory being presented in this paper, an individual agent determines which of infinitely many pre-existing fictional characters are being referred to by each reference to a fictional character. Of note is that this does not entail an absence of argumentative truth in discourses about references to fictional characters, but rather that for each individual agent, each reference to a fictional character refers to a different fictional character among infinitely many. Before elaborating on this point, the way that fictional characters exist or be, if not concretely in the actual world, must be discussed. However, the assertion that infinitely many fictional characters exists is not contrary to the principle of plenitude, especially considering that, although when an agent holds a fictional character in mind they are actually holding an infinite number of infinite sets of fictional characters given the openness of unaddressed details about a single fictional character, practically speaking there only needs to be more than one fictional character at any given moment. This is because fictional characters discussion of fictional

characters, according to the theory being presented here, amounts to argumentation as to which of at least two fictional characters a referent is for.

Fictional realism is the position that fictional characters exist (or be), although they do not spatiotemporally obtain in the actual world. Brock, in both of his accounts, argues that there are two kinds of fictional realism, concrete and abstract. He also argues that there are two broad varieties of each kind, but I am inclined to for now focus on only one variety of each kind, because the second variety of concrete realism will come up later in this paper, and the second variety of abstract realism is not of enough difference from the version of the first that I am addressing to warrant consideration. Rather than considering the two kinds broadly, I will exposit a particular instantiation of each kind, each of which enjoys being of their earliest and most pleasant articulations. David Lewis's theory is the preferred version of concrete realism, and Peter van Inwagen is responsible for the preferred version of abstract realism.

Although Lewis' theory of fictional characters can be drawn from his 1986 major work, *On the Plurality of Worlds*,[5] it was articulated earlier in a 1978 article titled "Truth in Fiction."[6] He begins the publication by addressing the second variety of concrete realism about fictional characters. This theory is associated with Meinongian thought. It is that fictional characters may be referred to as having the properties ascribed to them, but what they are is not something that exists. The problem Lewis identifies with this theory is that the properties cannot be inferred from, or, as Lewis puts it, "the Meinongian must tell us why truths about fictional characters are cut off, sometimes though not always, from the conse-

---

[5]David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1986).
[6]David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978): 37-46.

17

quences they ought to imply."[7]

Lewis then begins his alternative thesis with the move that nearly all realists and antirealists alike make, assertion that descriptions about fictional characters implicitly or explicitly begin with the operator 'In such-and-such fiction...'. Indeed, almost all theories about the ontology of fictional characters assert that truths regarding fictional characters are pertaining to the stories they belong to and not the world generally. Part of the thesis of my paper is that this operator ought to be replaced with something like 'In my conception of such-and-such fiction...', such that truths regarding fictional characters pertain to individual conceptions of the story, but this will be returned to later as it is outside the scope of Lewis's theory, which deserves full exposition.

As Lewis describes, the presence of the operator changes the truth value of the proposition. Significant to his argument as a whole, what make a prefixed sentence true for Lewis is if there is a set of possible worlds that is somehow determined by the fiction in which the proposition is true. Important to note is that for Lewis possible worlds are real and concrete, although isolated from us. Philosophers like Saul Kripke and Alvin Plantinga discuss possible worlds as if they are hypothetical products of our speculations, rather than as concrete existents independent of speculation as Lewis does.

The first approximation of that set of possible worlds is "those worlds where the plot of the fiction is enacted,"[8] but a couple of problems arise with this approximation. The first brought up by Lewis is that it is not automatically known from a text what the plot of the fiction is. Second, stories are told from a person's perspective. It is always the imaginative perspective of a storyteller, and

---

[7] Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 37.
[8] Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 39.

as such the plot may vary from each occasion of telling, whether that telling is vocal, written, or otherwise. Thus, Lewis arrives at the conclusion that the worlds we ought to consider as the worlds in which the prefixed sentences substantiate truth in is "the worlds where the fiction is told... as known fact rather than fiction."[9] The denotationless name that a storyteller in our world uses denotes an actually existent person when used by storytellers in the relevant set of possible worlds.

Lewis uses the label 'Analysis 0' for the proposal that things are true in a fiction if they are true in every world where the fiction is told as known fact.[10] The trouble with Analysis 0 is that it "ignores background," meaning that the content that is not explicit in the fiction but can be inferred as part of it, is disregarded, but also that the set of possible worlds includes many bizarre worlds that are contrary to what we would typically infer from the fiction. Lewis, in response to this, introduces Analysis 1, which relies on his treatment of counterfactuals, according to which counterfactuals are made "non-vacuously true iff [(if and only if)] some possible world where" the antecedent and the subsequent propositions "are true differs less from our actual world, on balance, than does any world" the antecedent is true but the subsequent is not.[11] Analysis 1 then becomes: a prefixed sentence (as a reminder, a proposition prefixed with the operator 'In such-and-such fiction...') is non-vacuously true iff some world where the fiction is told as known fact and the proposition is true differs less from our actual world, on balance, than does any world where the fiction is told as known fact and the proposition is false.

---

[9]Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 40.

[10]Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 41.

[11]Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 42.

Although Analysis 1 removes the bizarre worlds from the set, there remains many unknown details about the worlds that vary in the extent to which they differ from our own world. Thus, a plurality is still necessary. However, there are cases in which there are details about our world that, because the creator of the fiction was unaware of them, cause there to be a greater difference between our world and a world in which the fiction is told as known fact and the proposition is true than our world and a world in which the fiction is told as known fact and the proposition is false. Lewis' solution to this is the introduction of a set of what he calls "collective belief worlds of the community of origin,"[12] which are a set of worlds in which the beliefs overt in the community in which the fiction originated come true. Analysis 2 differs from Analysis 1 by comparing the worlds in which the fiction is told as known fact not with the actual world, but with one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin.

Lewis concludes by addressing how the truth of a fiction may derive from other fictions, as well as the relevance of impossible worlds, which are topics deserving of more treatment than they receive in this paper.[13]

The abstract realism as applied to fictional characters of van Inwagen is portrayed in his 1983 article titled "Fiction and Metaphysics."[14]

Van Inwagen applies Quine's meta-ontology which he describes as comprised of four propositions. The first is that "to be is to exist."

---

[12] Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 44.

[13] For a recent discussion of impossible worlds in this context, see Badura, Christopher, and Francesco Berto, "Truth in Fiction, Impossible Worlds, and Belief Revision," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 1 (2019): 178-93.

[14] Peter van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," *Philosophy and Literature* 7, no. 1 (1983): 67-77.

That is, "there are no things that do not exist;" to say that something is, is to say that that something exists.[15] The second proposition is that existence is univocal; it applies equally to both material and immaterial objects. Support for this is that numbers apply univocally to both.[16] The third proposition is that existential quantifiers affirm existence.[17] The fourth is that determining 'What is there?', which for Quine is the aim of ontology, is a result of the process of determining which theories to accept.[18] What these propositions result in, describes van Inwagen, is that in order to determine what exists, one must translate held theories into the symbolism of modern formal logic, specifically to arrive at sentences that begin with an existential quantifier. There existing what the existential statement reports to exist confirms the truth of the theory, so that existence is ground for accepting the theory.

Van Inwagen then arrives at a conclusion as to what theories about fiction are: "theories that treat stories as having an internal structure."[19] He also clarifies that these theories are not present automatically from the presentation of a fictional story but result from addressing the story critically. We may translate existential statements from critical statements.

Van Inwagen's focus is the existence of fictional characters. He accepts that they do not exist spatiotemporally. However, if accepting Quine's meta-ontology, they must exist somehow, because they are and there is nothing that does not exist. We cannot, however, say that fictional characters enjoy a special kind of existence, such as 'fictional existence', because existence is univocal. Van Inwagen's

---

[15]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 68.
[16]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 68-9.
[17]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 69.
[18]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 69.
[19]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 72.

resolution to this situation is to assert that fictional characters are theoretical entities of literary criticism;[20] they are abstract objects not situated in space or time.

An extension of this is that the properties a fictional character has are not those provided by the story itself, but those provided by the literary theory concerning them. Van Inwagen asserts that the properties provided by the story are things that the character 'holds.'[21] Thus, although the existence of fictional characters is not special, the relation they have to their properties is. What van Inwagen describes as an advantage of this is that the law of the excluded middle, which "requires that, for every property, an object have either that property or its negation" (often expressed as that every proposition must be either true or false), applies to properties something has, not to the properties it holds.[22] This allows for being able to find out what we do not know yet know about fictional characters. Although the relation is special, a special logic is not necessary.

Van Inwagen's abstract realism posits the existence of abstract entities, whereas Lewis's concrete realism posits the existence of concrete entities. Both contend that the entities they posit are isolated. One of the most frequented debates in philosophy is whether it is acceptable or not to posit the existence of entities that do not spatiotemporally obtain in the actual world. Most often the concern with doing so revolves around the problems with those entities being nonphysical. Abstract entities are nonphysical. Concrete entities, however, are physical, even if the spatiotemporal worlds they belong to are not necessarily the world we belong to. Van Inwagen,

---

[20]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 75.
[21]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics" 75.
[22]Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 76.

three years after his article on fictional characters, criticized Lewis's arguments for the existence of infinitely many concrete possible worlds.[23] Incredulity is the strongest impediment to accepting the existence of infinitely many concrete possible worlds. Yet, abstract realism invokes and has invoked likely more incredulity than Lewis's concrete realism. It is difficult to accept that there are entities that are not in the actual world, whether those entities are abstract or concrete.

A remark I believe to be novel to this paper is that the discrepancy between accepting abstract realism and accepting concrete realism is a matter of having the corresponding theory about two genres of fiction. Though this does not affect the conclusions of this paper, it might be useful at remedying some incredulity, despite its preposterousness. I am claiming that if concrete realism is accepted, then fantasy is made subsidiary to science-fiction, meaning that every appearance of fantasy is an appearance of science-fiction, but not every appearance of science-fiction is an appearance of fantasy.

It seems that Lewis suggests in his 1986 classic that scientific or natural laws are not fixed across all possible worlds, because "absolutely every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is."[24] This might be what makes "concrete modal realism," the title he gives his theory that infinitely many isolated concrete possible worlds exist, a "philosopher's paradise,"[25] because it accounts for what was 'incomplete' in his 1973 discussion of causation, namely a consideration of indeterminism. An advantage of his account of counterfactual analysis of causation over a regular-

---

[23]Peter van Inwagen, "Two Concepts of Possible Worlds," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XI Studies in Essentialism* by Peter French et al.. (1986): 185-213.

[24]Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 2.

[25]David Lewis, "Causation," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 1, Seventieth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division (Oct. 11, 1973): 559.

ity analysis is "that it allows undetermined events to be caused."[26] If concrete modal realism is true it may be that the apparent diversion from the natural laws of the actual world that happens in fantasy not merely happens in a concrete world (or infinitely many possible concrete worlds), but we may learn in the future that that diversion was from what we understood to be the natural laws of the actual world, not from what the natural laws actually are.

Genuine science fiction does not contradict the laws of nature of the actual world but speculates what might be possible once we move beyond our current limited understanding of those laws. Fantasy typically does make this contradiction, but Lewis's account of counterfactuals leaves open the possibility that the apparent contradiction is not a contradiction at all. Thus, if concrete modal realism is true, then there is no significant difference between science-fiction and fantasy. This is a contentious claim that I am not overly attached to. The contradiction of a fantasy, or a science-fiction for that matter, with the actual natural laws may be evidence for a logical contradiction, but almost never immediately, only after inference is made from what is speculated to be the natural laws of the fictional world, which must themselves be inferred from the fiction or literary theory concerning the fiction.

Abstract entities, which if accepting abstract realism fictional worlds are, perhaps hold rather than have natural laws. If a contradiction is apparent in laws, which would likely be the case if scrutinizing the laws of a fictional world whose laws depart from those of the actual world, it does not result in the non-existence of the abstract entity that is that fictional world, as a logical contradiction would, because those laws are held rather than had by that entity. Thus, indeterminacy of natural laws for fictional worlds is acceptable. It

---

[26]Lewis, "Causation," 559.

does not follow, however, that the laws of the actual world might be those laws held by a fictional world.

Turning now to the task of this paper: the first criticism toward fictional realism is that the anti-realist position called fictionalism is possibly superior. Fictionalists argue that if fictional realism is true, then all statements of literary criticism presuppose its truth. That is, statements that begin with the operator 'In such-and-such fiction...' and similar statements that indicate that the proposition is with reference to the fiction and not the actual world, must also be prefixed with 'According to fictional realism...' or in some other way indicate that the ontology of fictional realism is supposed. What fictionalism about fictional characters resolves to do is treat fictional realism as a fiction. What fictionalism does generally is posit that fictions, of any kind, do not need to be ontologically committing (although fictionalism itself might be ontologically committing).

What is taken as the beginning point for fictionalists about fictional characters is that fictional statements are primary to statements of literary criticism. Thus, we are to observe foremost the assertions that a storyteller makes rather than the discourse surrounding the story. One variant of fictionalism about fictional characters posits that storytelling is a special kind of speech act that the statements of are not propositions or assertions, but commandments toward the experiencer of the speech act to imagine the statement as factual. This variety extends itself to critical statements, so that critical statements are not serious assertions either, but, like the fictional statements they are about, act as imperatives to pretend that something is the case.

One variant of fictionalism about fictional characters posits that storytelling is a special kind of speech act that the statements of are

not propositions or assertions, but commandments toward the experiencer of the speech act to imagine the statement as factual. This variety extends itself to critical statements, so that critical statements are not serious assertions either, but, like the fictional statements they are about, act as imperatives to pretend that something is the case. Although there are other varieties of fictionalism, the issues I address below with this variety carry over to other varieties, and though there are many other issues with fictionalism generally, the three that I am concerned with here are the most relevant when defending fictional realism.

When it comes to prefixing a proposition with 'According to fictional realism...', the problem arises that it seems that the proposition is entailed and determined by fictional realism, so that those who hold fictional realism to be true must also hold the proposition to be true. This may seem like only a minor nuisance for the fictionalist, but Marián Zouhar argues that this problem is more detrimental for the fictionalist than it may at first seem.[27]

Zouhar lists three problems for fictionalism that result from the fact that prefixing statements of literary criticism with that they are according to fictional realism seems to assert that all fictional realists believe or accept those statements as true. The first is that given that the fictionalist denies the truth of fictional realism, none of the propositions can be asserted as true. This does give recourse for fictionalists to the suggestion of understanding statements about fictions as imperatives or commandments, but more on this in a moment. The second problem Zouhar lists is that it represents fictional realism as a set of inconsistent statements. If a literary critic posits something contrary to what another literary critic posited,

[27]Marián Zouhar, "On the Systematic Inadequacy of Fictionalism about Fictional Characters," *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 925–942.

both claims are regarded as belonging to the set of statements contained by fictional realism. It is nonsensical for a theory to affirm both a proposition and its negation.

The third problem follows from the second. It is that the principle of explosion, according to which any proposition can be inferred from a contradiction, leads to the proposition that 'there are no fictional characters' belonging to the set of statements that fictional realism consists of. This would contradict the most essential principle of fictional realism, that there are fictional characters. What Zouhar's argument against fictionalism about fictional characters amounts to is that fictionalism about fictional characters results in an incoherence of fictional realism when the coherence of fictionalism about fictional characters relies on the coherence of fictional realism. The approach of the fictionalist of prefixing critical and fictional statements with the operator 'According to fictional realism...' does not succeed.

When it comes to understanding fictional statements and critical statements as imperative statements, Moore's paradox stands in the way.[28] G.E. Moore claimed that it is absurd to assert that something is the case while also asserting that you do not believe it to be the case. If fictionalism were to translate fictional statements and critical statements into imperative statements outright, then the imperative statements would evade the issue being presented here, as truth is not really involved in imperative statements. But to do so would be to eliminate the discourse altogether, and the theory would no longer be fictionalism but a theory that asserts that we ought to translate fictional statements and critical statements into imperative statements. Such a theory would prescribe that we

[28]Zoltán Gendler Szabó, "Fictionalism and Moore's Paradox," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2001): 293-307.

prefix every fictional statement and every fictional statement with something like 'pretend that…' and 'imagine that…', something that is not compatible with how we actually tell stories and discuss literary criticism, as if our statements are in some sense true.

When the fictionalist suggests that we ought to use fictional statements and critical statements as we normally would but interpret them as not true, they are practically arguing that the assertions or propositions are intended to be taken as true but are being suffixed by '…and I do not believe…'. Or, to articulate this more clearly, fictionalists tell us that, because of the discourse such statements belong to, we should pretend to assert rather than actually assert fictional statements and critical statements. For fictionalists to tell us this is for them to suggest that we should make statements asserting things at the same time as we assert that we do not believe those things, which is the absurdity Moore's paradox is concerned with. Although this is a rather brief and crude articulation of this argument, it is a strong contention against fictionalism. For more on the topic, see Zoltán Szabo 2001.

The third problem with fictionalism (about fictional characters) that I am addressing here is that Meinongianism has advantages over fictionalism. Meinongianism was briefly mentioned above. It posits that there are true statements about objects even if that object does not exist. In our case, it posits that fictional characters can be referred to as having properties ascribed to them, but they do not exist. Like fictionalism, Meinongianism denies the existence of the objects of the discourse while affirming the ability to refer to those objects.

As Nathaniel Gan described in 2021, an advantage over fictionalism that Meinongianism has is that it takes truth in a relevant

discourse "at face value."[29] It has no issues with the principle of explosion or Moore's paradox. However, Gan notes that although Meinongianism has advantages over fictionalism, "it should not be inferred from this that Meinongianism is superior to fictionalism," because the Meinongianist does not have an explanation for the ontological commitments fictional realism affirms: "realists about a kind of object" affirm how "our affirmation of a sentence containing a singular term is usually thought to ontologically commit us to the referent of that term" if that term refers to the kind of object the realist is a realist about.[30] For some fictionalists, the ontological commitments of statements is recognized, and as a consequence of recognition are made optional whether to accept or not. Meinongianists do not leave open that option.

Although Lewis addresses a problem with Meinongianism about fictional characters, that it 'cuts off' characters from their implied consequences (which is likely associated with its disregard for ontological commitments), van Inwagen also indicated an issue with Meinongianism. Meinongianism is contrary to the principle of Quine's meta-ontology that being is the same as existence. Meinongianism is false because everything exists. One thing to note is that while the second variety of concrete realism mentioned above is based on Meinongianism, it is also true that Meinongianism is generally an anti-realist position as it opposes the first variety as well as abstract realism. A neo-Meinongian theory called 'Modal Meinongianism' has become the most prominent version of Meinongianism. It is an incompleteness of this paper that it does not adequately address this theory. However, I am attracted to endorsing Niall Connolly's recent discussion that contends that "there is no

---

[29]Nathaniel Gan, "Fictionalism and Meinongianism," *Theoria* 36, no. 1 (2021): 59.

[30]Gan, "Fictionalism and Meinongianism," 59.

defensible view that merits the name 'modal Meinongianism'."[31]

The first criticism of fictional realism addressed in this paper was that other theories have advantages. The inadequacies of those theories have been discussed, and more inadequacies or problems exist. The second criticism of fictional realism is more direct than the first. The theory that we conclude with is a response to this criticism. Although the novel theory is by definition realist, it borrows from anti-realist tendencies.

The second criticism is that fictional realism is committed to the claim that fictional characters can be indeterminately identical. That is, often it is indeterminate whether one reference to a fictional character refers to the same or a different fictional character than another reference to a fictional character. This applies whether the reference uses the same name or not. Ben Caplan and Cathleen Muller affirm that this is an undeniable feature of fictional realism.[32] Creationism is the variety of fictional realism that has been understood to withstand this criticism. It is the view that authors create their characters. Thus, whether a fictional character is or is not identical with itself or another character is determined by the intent of the author.

A problem with creationism was argued for by Brock in 2010.[33] It becomes apparent that a fictional character is not created each time the author uses the name nor the first time the author uses the name, as both cases would entail indeterminacy, but must be when the author intended to create the character and, as a consequence of

---

[31] Niall Connolly, "Modal Meinongianism Doesn't Exist," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 100, no. 4 (2024).

[32] Ben Caplan & Cathleen Muller, "Against a Defense of Fictional Realism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 255 (2014): 211-24.

[33] Stuart Brock, "The Creationist Fiction: The Case against Creationism about Fictional Characters," *The Philosophical Review* 119, no 3. (2010): 337-64.

their intent, pretended refer to or uniquely identify the character. Brock's problems with creationism have to do with new properties being ascribed to fictional characters that were not present when the author created them and might even contradict properties that were ascribed to them at creation. David Friedell in 2016 defended creationism rather well against Brock's arguments.[34]

However, there is another issue with creationism. This issue is obscure in origin, mostly because we have so far been working within the analytic tradition. Connolly's recent account of fictional characters, which untenably still treats them as non-existent objects, made recourse to structuralism,[35] whereas my account makes recourse to post-structuralism. Creationism, when it comes to determining the facts about fictional characters, gives priority to the author's intent. Roland Barthes argued in his famous 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" that priority ought to be given to the reader's interpretation over the author's determinations.[36] The essay is often thought to indicate the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism. The main claim of the essay is that meaning is only given to a text when it is read.

If this is the case, then it is more sensible to say that the reader creates the fictional character than that the author creates the fictional character. But this position would be anti-realist, as for the reader to create the fictional character is to violate the objectivity thesis. The solution to this problem, and the ultimate thesis of this paper, is that infinitely many fictional characters exist and have always existed. What the reader does is identify specific characters as the fictional characters they are entertaining. This remains a realist

---

[34] David Friedell, "Abstract Creationism and Authorial Intention," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (2016): 129–37.

[35] Connolly, "Modal Meinongianism Doesn't Exist."

[36] Roland Barthes, "The Death of The Author" (1969).

position because it is objectively the case that there are (or there exists) infinitely many such characters. What remains of this paper is to detail how this might work with both concrete realism and abstract realism.

Regarding concrete realism, there are two main points. The first has already been mentioned, that the operator 'In such-and-such fiction...' ought to be replaced with 'In my (or someone particular's) conception of such-and-such fiction...' The second point is that it is not enough for the fiction to be told as known fact in the possible world, but it is necessary that if the reader were a member of the world, by any means, the reader would be in a position to report the fiction as fact. Thus, taking Analysis 0 as an example, the principle would be that a proposition is true about a reader's conception of a fiction iff the reader would report the proposition as true were they in any of the worlds where the reader would report the fiction as a known fact.

Fictional realism is true, and yet the reader has influence over what properties a fictional character has. This is because infinitely many fictional characters exist, and the reader is who determines which fictional character, and their counterparts, are being referred to. Lewis already maintains that infinitely many possible worlds exist. What is being suggested here is that the reader, rather than the author or the community of the author, determines which possible worlds are relevant.

Regarding abstract realism, in his essay van Inwagen holds that literary criticism determines the properties of fictional characters. The literary critic is a reader, and the claim of this paper is that the reader determines, or perhaps even argues, which of infinitely many fictional characters a reference is of. But literary criticism is subject to being read; the reader of literary criticism is who de-

termines which of infinitely many fictional characters the literary criticism is referencing. In the case of abstract realism, those characters are abstract entities. When a property is ascribed to a fictional character that was not previously ascribed to that fictional character, if it does not contradict previously held properties then it may be said to still be referring to the same fictional character, but when the property contradicts previously held properties the ascription causes the replacement of the previously referred to fictional character with a fictional character that has the newly ascribed properties.

Although much work remains to be done to develop this theory, it has been shown why such a theory is necessary. If developed correctly, it will withstand criticisms against it. Any ambiguities or indeterminacies that result from a fiction are to be resolved by the judgment of the reader, not the judgment of the creator, the community of the creator, or the literary critic. This theory should not create confusion in literary criticism because literary criticism does not need to presuppose or suppose an ontology of fictional characters.

The aim of this paper has been to develop a theory as opposed to a practice, which is why examples have been absent throughout. However, the theory might have practical implications, such as explaining why people benefit from entertaining fictions. Fictional characters exist and so do we; engaging in a fiction is an opportunity for practicing empathy. Reading novels has been shown to increase a person's empathy (or, at the very least, "exposure to fiction was more positively (or less negatively) related to… performance-based measures of social ability than exposure to non-fiction").[37]

---

[37]Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, Jacob Hirsh, Jennifer dela Paz, & Jordan B. Peterson, "Bookworms versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction versus Non-Fiction, Divergent Associations

If, despite these efforts, the ontological status of fictional characters is considered within the domain of pure reason, and Kant was correct about the limits of pure reason, then it can be asserted that despite being a theory, the real value and importance of the propositions that constitute this theory will not relate to speculative interests but practical interests. Kant considers the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God as the three things that are usefully discussed in terms of practical interests rather than speculative interested despite their relation to the transcendental speculation of reason, because of the ceaseless struggle of transcendental investigation.[38] It would be interesting to apply the theory began in this paper to these issues. But to consider the practically of the theory in its own right, as to what it suggests we ought to do, is to pluck the fruits of this labour.

---

with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds," *Journal of Research in Personality* 40, no. 5 (2006): 705.

[38]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt (Penguin 2007).

Bibliography

Badura, Christopher, and Francesco Berto. "Truth in Fiction, Impossible Worlds, and Belief Revision." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 1 (2019): 178–93.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of The Author." 1968.

Brock, Stuart. "Fictionalism About Fictional Characters." *Noûs* 36, no. 1 (2002): 1–21.

Brock, Stuart, and Edwin David Mares. *Realism and Anti-Realism.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007.

Brock, Stuart. "The Creationist Fiction: The Case against Creationism about Fictional Characters." *The Philosophical Review* 119, no. 3 (2010): 337–64. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41684385.

Caplan, Ben, and Cathleen Muller. "Against a Defense of Fictional Realism." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 255 (2014): 211–24. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24672602.

Connolly, Niall. "Modal Meinongianism Doesn't Exist." Grazer *Philosophische Studien* 100, no. 4 (2024): 586–98.

Friedell, David. "Abstract Creationism and Authorial Intention." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (2016): 129–37. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44510491.

Gan, Nathaniel. "Fictionalism and Meinongianism." *Theoria* 36, no. 1 (2021): 49–62.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of pure reason*, translated by Marcus Weigelt. Penguin, 2007.

Lewis, David. "Causation." *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 17, Seventieth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division (Oct. 11, 1973): 556-567.

Lewis, David. "Truth in Fiction." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978): 37–46.

Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford, UK; B. Blackwell, 1986.

Mar, Raymond A, Keith Oatley, Jacob Hirsh, Jennifer dela Paz, and Jordan B Peterson. "Bookworms versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction versus Non-Fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds." *Journal of Research in Personality* 40, no. 5 (2006): 694–712.

Pirandello, Luigi. *Right You Are, If You Think You Are*. Trans. Stanley Appelbaum. New York: Dover Publications, 1997.

Szabó, Zoltán Gendler. "Fictionalism and Moore's Paradox." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2001): 293–307. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40232119.

Van Inwagen, Peter. "Fiction and Metaphysics." *Philosophy and Literature* 7, no. 1 (1983): 67–77.

Van Inwagen, Peter. "Two Concepts of Possible Worlds," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XI Studies in Essentialism* edited by Peter French et al.., 1986. 185-213.

Zouhar, M. "On the Systematic Inadequacy of Fictionalism about Fictional Characters." *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 925–942. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-018-9997-2.