

Individualist Fictional Realism

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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

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

quarter of this century consisted of mostly 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 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 fictional realism, and the problems with those alternatives. Finally, I will give my argument for a version (or versions) of fictional realism that potentially sustains criticisms and addresses the challenges that alternatives both pose for my theory and themselves falter to. The approach of this paper is intended to be modest.

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

- *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

Whereas the later account from 2007 posits the

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

- *Objectivity thesis*: Fictional characters do not depend on anyone's attitudes, linguistic practices or conceptual schemes. Fictional 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 produces.

The principle of plenitude is important for distinguishing the theory 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 distinction between Frege's theory and fictional realism, and it is for this reason that he posits the principle of plenitude. In an endnote, Brock indicates that the number of fictional characters can be any finite number greater than 1 (as well as that the principle "must be refined," though also that such refinement is "no easy task").⁵ This is significant in relation to the aims of this paper as rather than settling with any finite number greater than one, I am positing that it is necessary that infinitely many fictional characters exist. This is the case so as to maintain the objectivity thesis while also positing that the individual agent determines what is the case regarding the specific characters that they are entertaining, referring to or receiving the reference to. Rather than it being decided by any individual the details of the fictional character, individuals decide (or non-cognitively cause) which character of infinitely many is being referred to by each reference to a fictional character.

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

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

⁵Brock, "Fictionalism About Fictional Characters," 18-19.

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 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. This is perhaps the root of Brock's ongoing qualms with fictional realism, but problems with fictional realism are to be discussed later in this paper. 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 as 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 decides 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 obtain if not 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 any number greater than 1 of fictional characters at any given moment, as 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, although they do not obtain in the actual world. Brock, in both of his accounts, argues that there are two kinds of fictional realism, namely concrete realism and abstract realism about fictional characters. 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 the 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' 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 de drawn out of his major work, *On the Plurality of Worlds*,⁶ it was articulated earlier by Lewis in the article "Truth in Fiction."⁷ He begins this publication by addressing a theory that will be addressed again later in the paper, namely the second variety of concrete realism about fictional characters. This theory is associated with Meinon-

⁶David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1986).

⁷David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978): 37-46.

gian 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 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 consequences they ought to imply.”⁸ He then begins his description of his alternative thesis with the move that nearly all realists and antirealists alike make, the assertion that descriptions about fictional characters have implicitly or explicitly begin with the operator “In such-and-such fiction.” That is, almost any theory of fictional characters asserts that truths regarding fictional characters are pertaining to the stories they belong to and not the world generally. Part of the thesis of this paper is that this operator ought to be replaced with ‘In my conception of such-and-such fiction...,’ but this will be returned to later as it is outside the scope of Lewis’ theory, which deserves full exposition.

As Lewis describes, the presence of the prefixed operator changes the truth value of the proposition about the fictional character. Significant to his argument as a whole, what makes 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 they are isolated to us, whereas 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

⁸Lewis, “Truth in Fiction,” 37.

worlds where the plot of the fiction is enacted,”⁹ 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. Whether that perspective is in the first or third perspective, it is always the imaginative perspective of a storyteller, and as such the plot will vary from each occasion of telling (it does not matter whether that telling is vocal or written). Thus, Lewis arrives at the conclusion that the worlds we ought to consider as the worlds in which prefixed sentences substantiate truth in is “the worlds where the fiction is told, but as known fact rather than fiction.”¹⁰ The denotationless name that a storyteller in our world uses denotes an actually existent person when used by storytellers in the 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.¹¹ The trouble with Analysis 0 is that it ‘ignores background’, meaning that the content that is not explicit in the fiction, yet 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 by which counterfactuals are made “non-vacuously true 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 where” the antecedent is true but the subsequent is not.¹² Analysis 1 then

⁹Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 39.

¹⁰Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 40.

¹¹Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 41.

¹²Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," 42.

becomes: a prefixed sentence (as a reminder, a proposition with the prefixed 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 not true.

Although Analysis 1 removes the bizarre worlds from the set, there remains many unknown details about the worlds that do not change the extent to which the worlds differ from our own. 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 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,”¹³ 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.¹⁴

The abstract realism as applied to fictional characters of van In-

¹³Lewis, “Truth in Fiction,” 44.

¹⁴For 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.

wagen is portrayed in his 1983 article titled “Fiction and Metaphysics.”¹⁵

Van Inwagen applies Quine’s meta-ontology, which he describes as comprising four propositions. The first is that “to be is to exist.” That is, “there are no things that do not exist;” to say that something is, is to say that it exists.¹⁶ The second proposition is that existence is univocal; it applies equally to both material objects and immaterial objects. His support for this is that numbers apply univocally to both.¹⁷ The third proposition is that existential quantifiers posit existence.¹⁸ The fourth is that determining ‘What is there?’, which for Quine is the aim of ontology, is a result of the process of deciding what theories to accept.¹⁹ What these propositions result in, describes van Inwagen, is that in order to determine what exists, one must translate their 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, namely “theories that treat stories as having an internal structure.”²⁰ 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 then translate from those theories existential statements.

Van Inwagen’s focus in this paper is the existence of fictional char-

¹⁵Peter van Inwagen, “Fiction and Metaphysics,” *Philosophy and Literature* 7, no. 1 (1983): 67-77.

¹⁶Van Inwagen, “Fiction and Metaphysics,” 68.

¹⁷Van Inwagen, “Fiction and Metaphysics,” 68-9.

¹⁸Van Inwagen, “Fiction and Metaphysics,” 69.

¹⁹Van Inwagen, “Fiction and Metaphysics,” 69.

²⁰Van Inwagen, “Fiction and Metaphysics,” 72.

acters. He accepts that they do not exist spatiotemporally. However, if accepting Quine's meta-ontology, they must exist somehow, because there is nothing that does not exist, and fictional characters are. Fictional character in some sense be, possible due to our ascription of properties to them. Because they somehow be, they exist. And yet, we cannot say that they enjoy a special kind of existence, such as fictional existence, because 'existence is univocal.' Therefore, van Inwagen posits that fictional characters do exist though that existence is not spatiotemporal. What results is that, for van Inwagen, fictional characters are theoretical entities of literary criticism.²¹ They are abstract objects not situated in space or time. An extension of this is that the properties that fictional characters have are not those provided by the story itself, but those provided by the literary theory concerning them, such as the archetypal role they play in the story or the part of the story that the character is introduced. Van Inwagen asserts that the properties that are provided by the story are things that the character "holds."²² 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" (typically expressed as that every proposition must be either true or false): applies to the properties something has, not to the properties it holds.²³ This allows for being able to find out what we do not know about fictional characters. So, although the relation is special, a special logic is not necessary.

Van Inwagen's abstract realism posits the existence of abstract en-

²¹Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 75.

²²Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics" 75.

²³Van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," 76.

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 common contentions of philosophy is whether it is acceptable to posit the existence of entities that do not belong to the actual world, though most often the concern with doing so is that those entities are typically non-physical or not spatiotemporally located. Abstract entities are non-physical. Concrete entities, however, are physical, even though the spatiotemporal worlds they belong to are not necessarily the world we ourselves belong to. Van Inwagen, three years after his 1983 article on fictional characters, criticized Lewis's arguments for the existence of infinitely many concrete possible worlds.²⁴ An argument against the existence of infinitely many concrete possible worlds is incredulity. However, abstract realism is subject to that same incredulity. It is difficult to accept that there are entities that are not spatiotemporally located in the actual world, whether those entities are abstract or concrete. The end result of this paper is a revision of both abstract realism as applied to fictional characters and concrete realism as applied to fictional characters. It is being contended in this paper that fictional realism is true so long as a few caveats or affordances are made. What is not contended in this paper is whether concrete realism that posits the existence of isolated possible worlds or abstract realism that posits the existence non-physical entities is the better over the other. The criticisms next addressed against fictional realism apply to both abstract and concrete realism.

However, a remark that I believe is novel to this paper, is that the discrepancy between accepting abstract and concrete versions is a matter of having the corresponding theory about two genres of

²⁴Peter 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.

fiction. According to concrete realism, 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.”²⁵ This might be what makes “modal realism,” the title he gives his theory that infinitely many isolated possible worlds exist, a “philosopher’s paradise,” because it accounts for what was ‘incomplete’ in his 1973 discussion of causation, namely a consideration of indeterminism.²⁶ An advantage of his account of counterfactual analysis of causation over a regularity analysis is “that it allows undetermined events to be caused.”²⁷ If concrete modal realism is true, it may turn out to be the case 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 not in fact a diversion from the natural laws of the actual world, but only our apprehension of the actual world when we encountered the ‘fiction.’ Genuine science fiction does not contradict the laws of nature of the actual world but speculates as to what might be possible once we reach beyond our current limited understanding of those laws. Fantasy does make this contradiction, but Lewis’s account of counterfactuals leaves open the possibility that that contradiction is not a contradiction at all. Thus, if concrete modal realism is true, then there is no discrepancy between science-fiction and fantasy. This

²⁵Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 2.

²⁶David Lewis, “Causation,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 1, Seventieth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division (Oct. 11, 1973): 559.

²⁷Lewis, “Causation,” 559.

is a contentious claim. The contradiction of a fantasy with the actual natural laws may be evidence of a logical contradiction, but not immediately and only after inference from what the natural laws of the fantasy world might be, which must be inferred from accounts of the fantasy world.

Abstract entities, on the other hand, perhaps hold rather than have natural laws. If a contradiction is apparent in laws, which would be the case if comparing the laws held by abstract entities that are fictional worlds with the laws that obtain in the actual world, it does not result in the non-existence of that abstract entity, as a logical contradiction would, because, as van Inwagen argues is the case with the properties the original text attributes to fictional characters, laws of a fictional world that is an abstract entity are held rather than had by that entity. This permits an indeterminacy of natural laws for that fictional entity. However, it does not imply that those laws might turn out to be the laws of the actual, or real, world.

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, it entails that all statements of literary criticism presuppose its truth. That is, statements that begin with the prefixed 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 either 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 itself a fiction, and 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.

Although there are other varieties of fictionalism about fictional characters, the issues I will address toward this variety carry over to other varieties, and though there are many other issues with fictionalism about fictional characters generally, the three that I am concerned about here are the most important and most helpful when it comes to defending fictional realism.

When it comes to prefixing a proposition about a fictional character with, ‘According to fictional realism, in such-and-such fiction, ...’ the problem arises that it seems that the proposition prefixed only by ‘In such-and-such fiction’ is entailed and determined by fictional realism, and that those who hold fictional realism to be true must also hold the (prefixed) 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.²⁸

Zouhar lists three problems for fictionalism that result from the

²⁸Marián Zouhar, “On the Systematic Inadequacy of Fictionalism about Fictional Characters,” *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 925-42.

fact that prefixing statements of literary criticism with that they are according to fictional realism seems to assert that all fictional realists believe those statements of literary criticism to be true. The first is that given that the fictionalist about fictional characters denies the truth of fictional realism, none of the propositions can be asserted as true. This of course gives recourse for fictionalists to the suggestion of understanding statements about fictions as imperatives, 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 another, both 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, by 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 (given the position of fictionalism about fictional characters). This would contradict the most essential principle of fictional realism, that there are fictional characters. Essentially what this argument against fictionalism about fictional characters amounts to is that fictionalism about fictional characters results in an incoherence of fictional realism when fictionalism about fictional characters relies on the coherence of fictional realism to begin with. Thus, the approach of having the prefix ‘According to fictional realism...’ before statements of literary criticism does not succeed.

When it comes to taking fictional statements and critical statements as imperative statements, Moore’s paradox stands in the way.²⁹

²⁹Zoltán Gendler Szabó, “Fictionalism and Moore’s Paradox,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2001): 293-307.

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 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 and critical statements into imperative statements. We would then have to prefix every fictional and critical statement with something like ‘pretend that...’ and ‘imagine that...’, something that is not compatible with how we actually tell stories and discuss literary criticism, namely as if they are in some sense true. Thus, when the fictionalist is suggesting that we ought to use fictional and critical statements as we would normally, but interpret them as not true, they are essentially arguing that the assertions are intended to be taken as truths but being invisibly 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. But for fictionalists to tell us this is to suggest that we also should make statements asserting something while also asserting that we do not believe that something, which is the very absurdity Moore’s paradox is concerned with. Although this is rather a brief and crude articulation of the argument, it remains a demonstration of an issue with fictionalism. For more on this topic, see Zoltán Szabo, 2001.

The third and final problem with fictionalism (about fictional characters, but also generally) that I am addressing here is that Meinongianism has advantages over fictionalism. We have mentioned Meinon-

gianism briefly above. It posits that there are true statements about an object 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 refrains from positing the existence of the objects of the discourse (in our case, fictional characters) while retaining the ability to refer to them. 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.”³⁰ I will refrain from exhausting this point and remind the reader that this is a third argument against fictionalism. Gan does note that although Meinongianism does have advantages over fictionalism, “it should not be inferred from this that Meinongianism is superior to fictionalism,” because according to Meinongianism, no reference is ontologically committing, which is an incompatible thesis with realism because “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.³¹ Fictionalists have an explanation for this commitment whereas Meinongians do not. For some fictionalists, the ontological commitment of statements is recognized, and as a consequence of recognition is made optional as being accepted or not. Meinongians do not leave open that option to any extent.

Although Lewis addresses a problem with Meinongianism about fictional characters, that it ‘cuts off’ characters from their implied consequences, another issue with Meinongianism is offered by van Inwagen’s account. Meinongianism is contrary to the principle of Quine’s meta-ontology that being is the same as existence. Meinon-

³⁰Nathaniel Gan, “Fictionalism and Meinongianism,” *Theoria* 36, no. 1 (2021): 59.

³¹Gan, “Fictionalism and Meinongianism,” 59.

gianism 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 address this theory. I am attracted to endorsing Niall Connolly’s recent discussion of it that contends that “There is no defensible view that merits the name ‘modal Meinongianism.’”³²

The first criticism of fictional realism addressed in this paper was that alternatives exist and have advantages, but the inadequacies of the alternatives has been discussed, and more complaints can be had with them. The second criticism of fictional realism is more directly toward fictional realism itself. The theory that we conclude with is in response to this criticism, and, though by definition it is realism, it borrows from anti-realist tendencies.

The 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 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.³³

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

³²Niall Connolly, “Modal Meinongianism Doesn’t Exist,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 100, no. 4 (2024).

³³Ben Caplan & Cathleen Muller, “Against a Defense of Fictional Realism,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 255 (2014): 211-24.

identical with itself or another character is determined by the intent of the author. A problem with creationism was argued for by Brock in 2010.³⁴ 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 their intent, pretended to 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.³⁵

However, there is another issue with creationism. This issue is obtuse in origin. Connolly's recent account of fictional characters, which untenably still treats them as non-existent objects, made recourse to structuralism,³⁶ 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, in his famous 1968 essay, "The Death of the Author,"³⁷ argued that priority ought to be given to the reader's interpretation. The essay is often interpreted as indicating the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism. Meaning is only given to a text when it is read. Thus, it is more sensible to say that the reader creates the fictional character than that the author creates the fictional

³⁴Stuart Brock, "The Creationist Fiction: The Case against Creationism about Fictional Characters," *The Philosophical Review* 119, no 3. (2010): 337-64.

³⁵David Friedell, "Abstract Creationism and Authorial Intention," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (2016): 129-37.

³⁶Connolly, "Modal Meinongianism Doesn't Exist."

³⁷Roland Barthes, "The Death of The Author" (1969).

character. But this position would be anti-realist; 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 position because it is objectively the case that there are infinitely many such characters. What little remains of this paper is to detail how this might work with both concrete and abstract realism.

Regarding concrete realism, there are two main points to bring up. The first has already been mentioned, that the prefixed 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 that world, by any means, the reader would be in a position to report the fiction as known 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 the reader in every world where the reader would report the fiction as known fact.

Fictional realism is true, and yet the reader has influence over what properties a fictional character holds. 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 holds 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 is determining which possible worlds are relevant.

Regarding abstract realism, in his essay van Inwagen held that it

is literary criticism that 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 we also want to say that literary criticism is subject to being read, and that it is again the reader of literary criticism who determines which of infinitely many fictional characters are being referred to. 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, if it does not contradict previously ascribed properties, then it may be said to still be referring to the same fictional character, but when it contradicts previously held properties, the ascription causes the replacement of the fictional character with the previously held properties with a fictional character that holds 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 judgement of the reader. This theory should not create confusion when it comes to literary criticism because literary criticism does not need to presuppose an ontology of fictional characters.

The aim of this paper has been to begin to develop a theory as opposed to a practice, which is why the use of examples has been minimal throughout. However, the theory might explain 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”).³⁸

If the ontological status of fictional characters is considered 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 our speculative interests, but our 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 interests despite their relation to the transcendental speculation of reason, because of the ceaseless struggle of transcendental investigation.³⁹ It would be interesting to apply the theory began in this paper to these issues, particularly their resulting suggestions as to how things ought to be. But to consider the practicality of the theory in its own right, as to what it suggests we ought to do, is to pluck the fruits of this labour.

³⁸Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, Jacob Hirsh, Jennifer dela Paz, & 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): 705.

³⁹Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt (Penguin 2007).

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