

Names in Fiction

Dilip Ninan

dilip.ninan@tufts.edu

1 Introduction

Consider the following pair of sentences:

- (1) Frodo is a hobbit who was adopted by his cousin.
- (2) Frodo doesn't really exist; he is simply a fictional character made up by Tolkien.

Those of us familiar with Tolkien's writings would seem to be in a position to accept both of these sentences. And yet how can we? If Frodo doesn't really exist, then he doesn't exist. If he doesn't exist, then he doesn't have any properties, and so doesn't have the property of being a hobbit who was adopted by his cousin. So the truth of (2) would seem to preclude the truth of (1). Nevertheless, it seems that we should like to accept them both: in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo *is* a hobbit who was adopted by his cousin; but, of course, being a creature of fiction, Frodo doesn't really exist. In his rich and imaginative essay, "Fictional Names in Psychologicist Semantics," Emar Maier sets out to resolve this conundrum.

Maier begins by helpfully setting out three approaches to fictional names (pp. 2–4).¹ The first is *realism*. Realists urge us to extend our ontology to include fictional entities that can serve as the referents of fictional names (e.g. Parsons, 1980; Thomasson, 1999). From a semantic point of view, fictional names work much like ordinary proper names: both are simply referring expressions, something like the logician's individual constants.

Theorists with a "robust sense of reality" might balk at the metaphysical extravagance of the realist approach (Russell, 1919). But Maier does not press philosophical objections of this sort. Rather, he observes that (unless more is said) the realist approach predicts that (3) entails (4) (pp. 2–3):

- (3) Sam carried Frodo.
- (4) Sam carried an abstract object.

¹All unattributed page numbers are to Maier's essay.

Since Frodo obviously isn't a flesh-and-blood organism that we can locate in our universe, he must (one might suppose) be an abstract object. But while many of us would accept (3), (4) appears to express a metaphysical impossibility. Maier finds realist responses to this objection implausible from a linguistic point of view, since they end up positing *ad hoc* ambiguities of various sorts (p. 3).

Anti-realism denies that there are any fictional entities for fictional names to refer to. On one influential version of this view (Lewis, 1978), sentences like (1) and (3) are to be interpreted as if they contained a covert *In-Tolkien's-tale* operator. The fictional names that occur in those sentences are then analyzed descriptively. On this approach, sentence (1) is true just in case: in Tolkien's tale, the hobbit called "Frodo" was adopted by his cousin.² But Lewis excludes from his investigation *metafictional* uses of fictional names like (2) (Lewis, 1978, 38). Furthermore, unless one also adopts a descriptive analysis of ordinary proper names, the resulting theory threatens to bifurcate the semantics of proper names: one analysis for ordinary proper names, and a quite different one for fictional names (Lewis, 1978, 40–41). One of Maier's aims is to give a *uniform* theory of names, one that applies to both fictional names and ordinary names, and one that applies to both fictional and metafictional uses of fictional names (p. 4).³

The third approach is *pragmatic anti-realism*. Pragmatic anti-realists approach the problem of fictional names from the level of speech acts. On the version of this view that Maier favors, "fictional statements do not express information about the way the world is, but rather invite the reader to imagine a certain state of affairs" (p. 4). On this approach, an utterance of sentence (1) would normally be an invitation to imagine a scenario containing a hobbit named "Frodo" who was adopted by his cousin. One objection to this approach is that it fails to capture the (alleged) 'aboutness' of claims involving fictional names, a fact that Maier discusses in connection with the phenomenon of *counterfactual imagination* (a phenomenon to which we shall return).

The remainder of this essay is structured as follows. In §2, I set out the relevant parts of Maier's own proposal, including his view that the belief expressed by a typical use of (2) is 'parasitic on' the imagining that a typical utterance of (1) would normally induce. In §3, I consider a realist alternative to Maier's view, one which borrows some of his central ideas. The realist alternative appears to accomplish what Maier's own view accomplishes, but doesn't invoke the apparatus of parasitic attitudes. Finally, in §4, I raise the question of whether typical utterances of (1) really are 'prescriptions to imagine,' an idea that plays a central role in Maier's account.

²Lewis then treats *In-Tolkien's-tale* as an intensional operator, and provides a possible worlds semantics for it.

³By a *fictional use* of a fictional name, I do not mean a use of name by a fictional character, but rather (something like) a use of name that occurs in the course of constructing or recounting a particular fiction. See §4 below for relevant discussion.

2 Parasitic attitudes

As just noted, Maier's own proposal is built, in part, on the idea that fictional statements are 'prescriptions to imagine' (Walton, 1990). We might think that assertive utterances of ordinary declarative sentences are 'prescriptions to believe.' When I utter the sentence, *It's raining outside*, I am, among other things, proposing that you come to believe that it's raining outside. Maier's idea is that (typically) when I utter a sentence like *Frodo was adopted by his cousin*, I am not proposing that you come to believe something; rather, I am instructing you to imagine something. *Metafictional* statements like (2), on the other hand, are instructions that the hearer adopt a belief: when I tell you, *Frodo doesn't really exist*, I am hoping to get you to believe something (if, that is, you don't already believe it).

One attractive feature of this proposal is that it locates the difference between (1) and (2) at the level of pragmatics. For note that someone who took Tolkien's book to be an historical document describing the long-forgotten happenings of some distant land might use (1) in an attempt to get his audience to *believe* the content of (1). Similarly, a renegade Tolkien critic might use the first clause of (2) not to make a metaphysical comment about the status of fictional characters, but to express her idiosyncratic view that it is a 'deep truth' of Tolkien's book that Frodo is merely a figment of Bilbo's imagination. A critic like this might use the first clause of (2) as an invitation for us to imagine something, something that better conforms to Tolkien's intentions than the usual interpretation does.

Maier develops the 'prescription to imagine' idea in a number of ways. First, he develops a version of the language of *Discourse Representation Theory* (DRT) which he then uses to represent the mental states of agents who accept sentences like (1) and (2). Second, he proposes a model-theoretic interpretation of this language, an interpretation which he uses to specify just what it is that a fictional use of (1) invites us to imagine, and just what it is that a metafictional use of (2) invites us to believe.

A key feature of Maier's proposal is that mental states like beliefs and states of imagining are interdependent in certain ways: one can be 'parasitic on' another. Consider, for example, a person *A* who accepts both a fictional use of (1) and a metafictional use of (2). *A*'s attitudes might be described as follows:

- (5) *A* imagined that there is a hobbit named "Frodo" who was adopted by his cousin. But *A* also believes that that hobbit doesn't really exist, but is simply a fictional character made up by Tolkien.

The idea here is that *A*'s belief is parasitic on his imagining; the hobbit that figures in his beliefs is (somehow) transported from his imaginings. But what, exactly, does this mean?

Here is one possible account, which is something of a simplification of what Maier has in mind. Suppose we represent *A*'s imagining by a set of possible worlds:⁴

⁴Maier uses pairs of possible worlds and variable assignments to represent doxastic alter-

- (6) $\{w : \text{there is an individual } y \text{ in } w \text{ such that } y \text{ is a hobbit named "Frodo"}$
 in w and y was adopted by y 's cousin in $w\}$

To say that A 's belief is *parasitic on* this imagining is (roughly) to say that the content of his belief can be represented as a function from possible worlds in (6) to sets of possible worlds. So the content of A 's belief would be something like this:

- (7) $\lambda w. \{w' : \text{there is an individual } y \text{ in } w \text{ such that } y \text{ is a hobbit named "Frodo"}$
 in w and y doesn't exist at $w'\}$

modulo the stipulation that the domain of this function is (6). The rough idea, I take it, is that the possibilities in (6) serve as the 'background' for describing the belief whose content is given by (7). Relative to a possible world w in (6), a world w' is compatible with what A believes just in case the hobbit named "Frodo" in w doesn't exist in w' . Note here that the initial imagination world w is, in some sense, 'providing' the individual that is said not to exist at the belief world w' . This corresponds to the idea that A 's belief is parasitic on A 's imagining.

But what exactly does it mean for an agent's state of mind to be represented by (7)? For example, one might think that the belief I would give voice to by uttering (2) is *true*. But what is it for a 'two-dimensional intension' like (7) to be true? Maier doesn't say. One possibility would be to say that such a function is true just in case it maps the actual world α to a set that contains α . But if we adopt that account of truth, (7) turns out to be either undefined or false. If α is not in (6), then the function (7) is undefined at α . If α is in (6), then (7) is false at α . For if α is in (6), then (7) maps α to the following set:

- (8) $\{w' : \text{there is an individual } y \text{ in } \alpha \text{ such that } y \text{ is a hobbit named "Frodo"}$
 in α and y doesn't exist at $w'\}$

But α is presumably not an element of this set. For one thing, there is no hobbit named "Frodo" in the actual world. But even if there were, (8) would still be false at the actual world. For if there were a hobbit named "Frodo" in the actual world, then he would presumably exist in the actual world, in which case (8) would still be false. So the falsity of this proposition at the actual world is overdetermined.

But perhaps an alternative account is available. What if we say this?

- (7) is true at α if every world w in (6) is such that (7)(w) is a set that contains α ;
- (7) is false at α if every world w in (6) is such that (7)(w) is a set that does not contain α ; and
- (7) is neither true nor false at α otherwise.

Let w be an arbitrary world in (6). Presumably, the individual y in w named "Frodo" in w fails to exist at the actual world α . If this is right, then A 's belief with content (7) comes out true, as desired.

natives (p. 34), but he says little about how this it is to be understood.

3 Realism *redux*

As I have characterized it, Maier's account involves the idea that an individual that exists at one world may fail to exist at another. And it involves, in particular, the idea that an individual that exists at a non-actual possible world may fail to exist at the actual world. Maier is candid about this aspect of his proposal:

...‘exist’... is just a regular predicate meaning something like real-world, physical existence. So, in the end, we do need a model-theoretic ontology that includes existing and non-existing entities.
(p. 36, n. 31)

How should we understand this? Here are two possibilities. First, we might assume a metaphysics according to which quantificational domains vary between possible worlds. In that case, an individual y ‘fails to exist’ at a world w just in case y is not in the domain of w . Second, we might instead assume a ‘constant domain’ metaphysics. In that case, we might say that what it is for y to ‘fail to exist’ (in the relevant sense) at a world w is for y to be concrete at some world w' and to be *non-concrete* at w (Williamson, 2013).⁵

So, from an ontological point of view, there is a point of contact between Maier's view and the realist view mentioned at the outset. So why prefer Maier's approach to that approach? Maier has a good answer to this question:

The current account [i.e. Maier's account]... avoids the pitfalls of straightforward Meinongian realism.... I don't predict that *Sam carried Frodo* entails that Sam carried an abstract or fictional object, and I don't assume any ambiguity between fictional and metafictional name usage, or distinguish different types of predication. (p. 36, n. 31)

Maier might be right that his account is superior to extant realist accounts, but it seems to me that there is a realist view that avoids these objections. The realist view I have in mind does this in part by availing itself of some of Maier's resources.

Here is the proposal. Fictional names refer to fictional entities. Fictional entities are mere *possibilia*: they exist at other worlds but not at the actual world. Perhaps this means they are in the domains of other worlds, but not in the domain of the actual world; perhaps it means that they are in the domain of every world, but exist concretely at other worlds, non-concretely at the actual world. Maier should have no objection to these metaphysical claims, for his own account relies on some such view. The principal difference so far between this account and Maier's own account is that, on this account, names refer to these fictional entities, rather than inducing existential quantification over them.

The realist I am imagining then goes on to help herself to Maier's idea that fictional utterances are prescriptions to imagine. If we identify propositions

⁵According to the second of these two views, some uses of ‘exist’ should simply be understood as meaning ‘concrete’.

with sets of possible worlds, then we can say that an utterance of (1) invites the hearer to imagine the following proposition:

- (9) $\{w: \text{Frodo was adopted by his cousin in } w\}$

Metafictional utterances, on the other hand, are prescriptions to believe. An utterance of (2) invites the hearer to believe the following proposition:

- (10) $\{w: \text{Frodo does not exist in } w\}$

There is no problem about why this belief should count as true. For on the view in question, “Frodo” refers to something that doesn’t exist at the actual world, which means the actual world is an element of (10).

What about Maier’s principal objection to realism, the claim that realism predicts that (3) entails (4)?

- (3) Sam carried Frodo.

- (4) Sam carried an abstract object.

Note that on the realist view we are considering, (3) is true at a world w just in case Sam carried Frodo at w . Assuming it is impossible to carry an abstract object, at no such world will Frodo be an abstract object that Sam is carrying. Thus, it seems that the present proposal predicts that (3) does not entail (4), since there are worlds at which the former is true and at which the latter is false.

It is important to realize that any world at which (3) is true is a world at which Frodo is concrete: a flesh-and-blood hobbit (assuming, that is, that hobbits are made of flesh and blood). So at any such world, Frodo is not an abstract object, even if he is non-concrete at the actual world. Note further that one might deny that for every object y and world w , y is either abstract or concrete at w . Frodo might be concrete at w while being non-concrete at w' while failing to be an abstract object at either world.

This realist view does not posit any ambiguity in fictional names, nor does it distinguish between multiple forms of predication. It does come with what some would regard as an exotic metaphysics, but it is a metaphysics to which Maier himself is committed. Note that this view appears to have no need for Maier’s idea that some attitudes are parasitic on others.

One phenomenon that plays an important role in Maier’s discussion is that of *counterfactual imagination*. Does this phenomenon bear on the choice between the foregoing realist view and Maier’s proposal? Maier gives the following example of a counterfactual imagining:

...on the basis of reading Kafka, I imagine that Gregor Samsa turned into a beetle, but then go on to imagine what it would be like if he, Gregor, had been named ‘Josef’ and turned into a horse instead of a beetle. How can both imaginations be about the same individual, Gregor Samsa, unless they are both *de re* attitudes about a fictional character? (p. 31)

The phenomenon of counterfactual imagining has been used to cast doubt on descriptive approaches to fictional names. The trouble such imaginings pose for descriptivism is that, in such cases, one imagines that a fictional character has properties incompatible with the properties that figure in the relevant description (Friend, 2011). It then becomes hard to characterize the content of the counterfactual imagining in a way that doesn't make it explicitly contradictory.

Despite the affinity between his view and standard descriptivist views, Maier avoids this problem by appealing to his apparatus of parasitic attitudes. But note that this doesn't seem to favor Maier's view over the realist view we have been considering. For counterfactual imagining doesn't appear to raise even a *prima facie* problem for the realist view. Someone who imagines that Gregor is named 'Josef' and is turned into a horse simply imagines the following proposition:⁶

- (11) $\{w : \text{Gregor Samsa is named 'Josef' in } w \text{ and is turned into a horse in } w\}$

This should be well-defined, since "Gregor Samsa" is simply a name that picks out a fictional entity, one that exists at some worlds, but not at the actual world.

So it seems to me that the realist view we have been discussing avoids the problems facing the realist views Maier discusses, and does as well as Maier's own proposal with respect to the phenomena he investigates. One potential advantage of the realist approach is that it accomplishes this with fewer resources than Maier's approach. In particular, the realist doesn't need to avail herself of the apparatus of parasitic attitudes. Of course, Maier might think that we need this apparatus anyway to deal with other problems in the theory of attitude ascriptions. But even if that is correct, it is of some interest to know whether or not that apparatus is needed to deal with issues raised by fictional names *per se*. I have been suggesting that it is not needed for this purpose.

4 Are fictional reports prescriptions to imagine?

So far we have been following Maier in supposing that fictional uses of sentences like (1) are prescriptions to imagine. But is that right? Note that there is a difference in acceptability between the following sentences:

- (1) Frodo is a hobbit who was adopted by his cousin.
- (12) Frodo lives at 211b Baker Street.

I am tempted to say that (1) is accurate and that (12) is not. This raises two questions for the view that fictional statements are prescriptions to imagine. First, if utterances of (1) and (12) are simply *prescriptions* or *invitations*, what does it mean to say that (1) is accurate, whereas (12) is not? If I tell you

⁶We set aside worries about the metaphysical possibility of turning human beings into horses. It is not essential to the realist view under consideration that propositions be sets of metaphysically possible worlds, nor even that they be sets of possibilities of some kind or other.

to close the door, my utterance doesn't seem to be something that can be assessed for accuracy. Perhaps I shouldn't have said it because my saying it was, in the circumstances, rude or thoughtless. But that wouldn't show that my utterance was *inaccurate* – talk of accuracy just seems out of place when it comes to imperatives. But such talk does not seem out of place when it comes to (1) and (12), something that seems puzzling if such utterances are really just prescriptions or invitations.

Second, even if we put the first objection aside, how does the ‘prescription to imagine’ approach account for the apparent difference in correctness between (1) and (12)? After all, there is no apparent difference between the corresponding *explicit* prescriptions to imagine:

- (13) Imagine that Frodo is a hobbit who was adopted by his cousin.
- (14) Imagine that Frodo lives at 211b Baker Street.

An utterance of (13) is a invitation to imagine something that actually happens in Tolkien’s book. An utterance of (14) is not, but that is no objection to it. There is nothing wrong with inviting someone to imagine that Frodo lives at a certain address in London. Why then does it seem that (12) is wrong in a way that (1) is not?

Having challenged it, I should note that I do think the ‘prescription to imagine’ idea has some application in this vicinity, just not quite the one Maier envisions. Let us distinguish between two ways in which a fictional sentence might be used: as an *authorial diktat* or as a *fictional report*. Consider *Tolkien’s use* of sentence (15):

- (15) When Bilbo was ninety-nine he adopted Frodo.

That is, consider (15) as it appears in Tolkien’s book. This is what I am calling an *authorial diktat*. It seems to me that there is a case to be made that authorial diktats are prescriptions to imagine. Note, for example, that it would be odd to assess (15), as it occurs in *The Lord of the Rings*, as accurate or inaccurate, as true or false. For Tolkien is not trying to describe the world; he is simply telling us a story. It would be quite out of place to object, upon reading these words, by saying, “No, I’m quite sure that Bilbo was ninety-seven when the adoption took place.” Similarly, it would be quite odd to even *ask* whether what Tolkien was saying was true or not. These observations appear to lend some support to the idea that authorial diktats are prescriptions to imagine.

But consider now *my* use of sentence (1). Normally, if I were to utter (1), I would be using it to tell you something about what happens in Tolkien’s story. This is what I am calling a *fictional report*, a report of some of the goings-on in some work of fiction. When someone utters a fictional report, it is not out of order to deny the truth of what he or she said nor is out of order to question whether or not what he or she said is really true. If I assert (12) in your presence, it is quite right for you to deny it and to point out that I have mixed-up two quite different fictional universes. If I assert (1) in your presence,

it is quite natural for you, having forgotten the details of Tolkien’s story, to wonder whether what I’ve said is really true or not.

So it seems to me that while authorial diktats might be prescriptions to imagine, fictional reports are not. And it seems to me that something like Lewis’s view (mentioned above) yields a better treatment of fictional reports than Maier’s approach does. Suppose I use (1) and (12) to make fictional reports. If we represent these uses as containing a covert *In-Tolkien’s-tale* operator, then (1) is predicted to be true, (12) false, as seems right. For (1) is an accurate report of what happens in Tolkien’s story, whereas (12) is not.

References

- Friend, Stacie. 2011. “The Great Beetle Debate: A Study in Imagining with Names.” *Philosophical Studies* 153:183–211.
- Lewis, David. 1978. “Truth in Fiction.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15:37–46.
- Parsons, Terence. 1980. *Nonexistent Objects*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1919. *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Thomasson, Amie. 1999. *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walton, Kendall. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Williamson, Timothy. 2013. *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.