

Impossible Fictions Part II: Lessons for Mind, Language, and Epistemology

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Abstract

Impossible fictions have lessons to teach us about linguistic representation, about mental content and concepts, and about uses of conceivability in epistemology. An adequate theory of impossible fictions may require theories of meaning that can distinguish between different impossibilities; a theory of conceptual truth that allows us to make useful sense of a variety of conceptual falsehoods; and a theory of our understanding of necessity and possibility that permits impossibilities to be conceived. After discussing these questions, strategies for resisting the picture of impossible fictions presented here and in Part I are discussed. Perhaps apparently impossible fictions describe possibilities after all; or perhaps impossible fictions are all trivial; or perhaps some apparently intelligible impossible fictions are unintelligible after all.

1. Introduction

Some fictions are "impossible", in the sense that they describe things happening that cannot, in fact, happen. Or so it seems on the surface, at any rate. Part I of this two-part series focused on what lessons we might draw for our understanding of fiction from considering impossible fictions. In this part, our attention will turn to what impossible fictions can tell us about philosophical topics beyond the philosophy of fiction itself. One family of lesson is for theories of linguistic meaning and mental content, since impossible fictions suggest that we have a discerning grasp of different impossible contents. Another family concerns conceptual truth, imaginative resistance in fiction, and the link between conceivability and possibility. For

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example, our ability to make sense of impossibilities in fiction suggests that our conceptual abilities outrun the bounds of possibility.

Finally, this article will consider options for resisting taking impossible fictions at face value. If apparently impossible fictions describe possibilities after all, or are, despite appearances, incoherent or trivial, the lessons they appear to teach can be resisted.

2. Hyperintensionality and Impossible Worlds

Some theories of linguistic meaning and mental content treat these as carrying information by *distinguishing between possibilities*: in the simplest case, by ruling out a range of possibilities while leaving another range open. ("Dogs chase cats" rules out all the possible worlds where dogs do not chase cats, including those worlds lacking dogs: but it leaves open many possible worlds and is silent on questions e.g. about ice cream.) Examples of these theories include Montague, 1970, 1974, Lewis 1970, and Cresswell 2002 in the case of linguistic content, and in the case of mental content Stalnaker 1987, Jackson 2010, and in a slightly different form Lewis 1979. These theorists typically take the limits of genuine possibility to be the limits of what is *metaphysically possible*. So, in effect, they treat all metaphysical impossibilities the same way. A claim that is metaphysically impossible does not distinguish between possibilities, but rather rules them all out; and a claim that is metaphysically necessary also does not distinguish between possibilities, but rather does not rule any of them out.

Impossible fictions put these theories under considerable pressure. Different impossible fictions present quite different scenarios, and when we imaginatively engage with impossible fictions we consider different contents depending on the fiction. Plausibly, to capture what impossible fictions represent we need to be able to distinguish between different *impossibilities* as well. If impossible fictions are genuinely meaningful, and succeed in drawing distinctions that go beyond distinctions among possible worlds or possible objects, then the theories of linguistic meaning put forward by the authors cited in the previous paragraph are inadequate and must be supplemented. It is plausible that the accounts of mental content in terms of distinctions merely between possible worlds or possible objects must be supplemented as well. The issue will be

whether our engagement with impossible fictions requires mental states that do more than distinguishing between possibilities. Plausibly engaging with them can involve supposing one impossibility but not another, make-believing one but not another, and perhaps even desiring one rather than another, if we find some things in these fictions appealing but others not.

A natural way to extend these possible-worlds theories of linguistic and mental content is to employ impossible worlds as well. Then different impossible claims, while they rule out all of the possible worlds, could correspond to interesting demarcations between impossible worlds. The set of worlds where the Cheshire Cat disappears except for his grin, for example, will be different from the set of worlds where French mathematicians square the circle (though presumably there are some impossible worlds where both occur, so the sets will overlap). Impossible fictions are not the only motivation for introducing impossible worlds in a theory of representation. (For some other motivations, see Berto and Jago 2018 or Nolan 2013.) But impossible fictions are a striking reminder that we need to care about the meanings of different claims even after it is clear that the claims could not possibly be true.

Once we have impossible worlds available, they can help improve some of the proposals we looked at earlier which employ possible worlds. In particular, they give us new options for keeping a relative of David Lewis's account of truth in "fragmented" fictions (see section 2.4.1 of Part I, and Lewis 1983). Even if we reject Lewis's approach as a fully general theory of truth in fiction, we may still want to employ the method of intersection or the method of union for some kinds of disunified fictions. (For instance, in Lewis's original case, we might be tempted to think there are two consistent versions of the Holmes stories where Watson has different war-wounds, and so either it is both true according to the stories that his wound is in his shoulder, and true in the stories it is his leg, (the method of union) or not true in the stories as a whole that it is in either (the method of intersection). We may wish to use a similar method for stories that are inconsistent in other ways: an impossible time-travel story might exist in different versions or have some "inadvertent" inconsistencies as well, and it may be appealing to understand it in terms of the intersection or union of truths of two sets of *impossible* time-travel worlds corresponding to "fragments" of the fiction.

Impossible worlds and the impossible objects that are in them (in some sense) may be useful for other purposes too. A theorist might try to identify impossible worlds, or sets of them, with the *world of a story*. And *fictional characters* such as the dragons, detectives, and girl wizards that we talk about might be thought to be inhabitants of impossible worlds, since fictional characters are often incomplete. There is not space here to properly evaluate these suggestions, since there is a rich literature about what, if anything, fictional characters are, and what sense, if any, we should make of talk about the worlds of fiction. See Kroon and Voltolini 2018 for a survey of issues about fictional characters, and while fictional worlds are less discussed in contemporary philosophy, Weisberg 2016 is an introduction to a range of issues about fictional worlds and our thought about them.

3. Concepts, Conceptual Truths, and Epistemology

One feature of some impossible fictions is that they seem to present scenarios which are *conceptually impossible*: an adequate grasp of our concepts should be enough to tell us they cannot happen. Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, described above, is arguably a case like this, since plausibly it is a conceptual truth that a grin cannot be present without a face. Merely fictional characters stepping out of a story and arguing with an author is not just impossible, but we would suspect someone who thought it had happened as having a shaky grasp of the concept of merely fictional characters. Perhaps logically inconsistent fictions all violate conceptual truths, if it is e.g. a conceptual truth that a contradiction cannot be true.

On the other hand, we make sense of these strange fictional scenarios. This teaches us something important about so-called *conceptual truths*. You might have thought that claims that violate conceptual truths are nonsense or unintelligible, like talking about a five-sided square or a society of married bachelors. But it does not seem right that they are unintelligible, if through fiction we can engage with scenarios that violate conceptual truths. One conceptual falsehood must be different from another, if they can embed in stories differently: and if we can make sense of them in these stories, we must be able to make different sense of different conceptual falsehoods. They cannot be complete nonsense. (Perhaps there is another use of "conceptual impossibility" where a conceptual impossibility by definition is something someone cannot even

grasp given their concepts. The conceptual impossibilities under discussion here seem to not be like that.)

Often when we come across particularly strange impossibilities in fiction, we can understand them without feeling we can entirely adequately picture them in our mind's eye. But some impossibilities in fiction *can* be visually represented. There is a whole genre of impossible pictures, for example Escher-style drawings that represent spatial relationships that we can "see in the picture" but cannot be properly captured without seeing the pictures as inconsistent. (See Mortensen 1997 and Mortensen 2010 for discussion and many example pictures in the latter work.)

If we can make sense of stories containing conceptual impossibilities, including conceptual impossibilities like the Cheshire Cat, this causes trouble for one influential line of thought about *imaginative resistance*. "Imaginative resistance" is an expression that is used to apply to several phenomena, but one important one is a phenomenon concerning uptake of fiction. It concerns the phenomenon where sometimes readers *resist* taking things to be true according to fictions which seem to be presented as true. Tamar Gendler at one point calls it the "That's what *you* think!" phenomenon (Gendler 2000 p 61): we might be willing to take an author's say-so about many things in the story, but not e.g. that white supremacy is correct in the story world, even if we are sure the author *intends* to be describing a fictional world where that is the way things are. (See Tuna 2020 for an overview of the different philosophical issues raised by imaginative resistance.)

One suggestion considered in the literature is that many cases of imaginative resistance are explained by the presence of a certain kind of conceptual impossibility in a story. The suggestion that we cannot have any conceptual impossibilities in fiction has been unpopular since the arguments against it offered by Gendler 2000 pp 64-72, though some philosophers have argued that particular kinds of conceptual impossibility will result in imaginative resistance. Yablo 2002, for example, holds that there will be imaginative resistance when there is a combination of "lower level" facts specified in a fiction, together with a proposition about what is going on that conflicts with the verdict of applying a "response enabling" concept to the lower level facts. If a

reader is told in a story that a leaf has the typical arrangement that actual maple leaves have, including having five fingers, yet the leaf is perfectly oval, Yablo suggests the reader will balk. If a reader is told enough detail about the noise and smell and smoke and death of a violent monster-truck rally, then told it is "exhilarating and profound", a reader may well hold on to her natural aesthetic reaction rather than take the authors say-so (Yablo 2002: 485). Yablo predicts that the conceptual impossibility of these combinations, plus the way certain concepts work, yield imaginative resistance.

Another suggestion that has been offered to explain some cases of imaginative resistance is that certain *kinds* of impossibilities will not be accepted by readers as being true in stories that attempt to represent them as occurring. (Or perhaps it is a matter of what a reader *takes* to be impossible in certain ways.) Weatherson 2004, for example, agrees with some of Yablo's cases, and adduces others where he thinks there will typically be imaginative resistance, but thinks the best explanation is not Yablo's conceptual one, but rather that there will be imaginative resistance when combinations are impossible because of "in virtue of" connections: and in particular, when we are given "lower level" claims that necessarily yield higher-level facts, but then the higher-level facts fail to be in accord with them. (Weatherson 2004: 18.)

Nolan 2020 argues that given the right context, any proposition, including the combinations Yablo and Weatherson rule out, can be presented by a fiction without prompting imaginative resistance. If that is right, impossible fictions show that a different account of imaginative resistance must be found, even if we cannot find counterexamples to Yablo's and Weatherson's suggestions among possible fictions. (I should note that Weatherson 2004 offers his "in virtue of" constraint as only a "strong default principle of fictional interpretation", so perhaps he could accommodate cases where it does not obtain as being ones where that strong default is overridden.) Cawthra 2019 chapter 5 provides an extended discussion of different ways we can successfully imaginatively engage with impossible fictions, and Meskin and Weinberg 2011 offer a theory of the cognitive processes underlying fictional engagement that allows many understandable impossible propositions to be successfully imagined with the right scaffolding.

Finally, impossible fictions make it difficult to make out a straightforward link between *conceivability* and *possibility*. This is important because of a tradition in the epistemology of possibility (i.e. theories of how we know what is possible) that our primary guide to what is genuinely possible, in some generous sense, is what is conceivable. Stephen Yablo, for example, stressing the centrality of conceivability to modal epistemology, says "no independent evidence exists that conceivability is a guide to possibility – no evidence obtainable without reliance on the faculty under review" (Yablo 1993 p 3). He says this because he thinks that there is no *other* way to test our judgements of possibility across a wide range of cases except by relying on what is conceivable. Yablo holds that, at least for the most part, what is conceivable is possible, and to a significant extent at least what is inconceivable is impossible. Where things get tricky is identifying what one has conceived: you might have thought you could conceive of *this* table being ice, or the Morning Star not being the Evening Star, but you may have only conceived of a table *appearing like* this one being ice, or a body in the sky in the evening that looks like *this* being distinct from a body in the sky in the morning that looks like *that*.

However, if we do manage to conceive of things going as they do in various impossible stories, it seems that the impossible is at least sometimes conceivable after all. We could still hope to find some less straightforward connection between what is conceivable and what is possible; though we might also decide that the key to discovering what is genuinely possible is to be found elsewhere. One attempt to rescue a conceivability-possibility link in the light of impossible fiction is Levin 2012, though Levin's proposal is to focus instead on a connection between what is imaginable (in a way connected to sensory imagination) and what is conceivable will face a particularly sharp challenge from impossible pictures where we seem to *see* the impossibility presented.

This phenomenon of being able to make sense of very strange, apparently conceptually impossible fictions could prompt our saying that conceptual impossibility is little barrier to truth in fiction, or at least in some fictions. Likewise, conceptual impossibilities may not automatically trigger imaginative resistance. But the above reflections could prompt the opposite response instead. Perhaps *much less* is ruled out by our concepts than we might have thought. If our concepts did not rule out a smile without facial features, or a proposition being both true and

false, or similar happenings in fiction, perhaps they rule out very little at all. In that case, we could keep the supposed link between conceptual impossibility and truth in fiction, but use our ability to understand fictions as a reason to revolutionise our theory of conceptual truth.

Some philosophers have traditionally been suspicious of conceptual truth. Quine 1936 and Quine 1951 are important sources of this suspicion (though Quine himself does not focus on "conceptual truth" under that label). A more recent prominent rejection of conceptual truths is due to Jerry Fodor, in Fodor 1998 and elsewhere. Impossible fictions may be more grist to their mill. For those antecedently tempted to think our concepts do guarantee that there are no married bachelors or stand-alone smiles, on the other hand, revising their theories of which claims are conceptual necessities just to account for the anarchy of fiction may well seem too high a price. Whichever way theorists respond, the existence of apparent conceptual impossibilities in fiction suggest a number of constraints on our theories of concepts, conceptual truth and conceptual possibility.

4. Doing Without Impossible Fiction?

Since many of the lessons discussed above are controversial, some philosophers will be inclined to think that there has to be a way of resisting them. Even philosophers without axes to grind might be wondering what alternatives we have to the suggestions so far. In this section I will discuss some options for philosophers who want to hold that appearances are misleading in the case of impossible fictions: maybe these fictions lack content altogether, or they can be interpreted as expressing possible descriptions of the world after all. Or perhaps they do depict genuine impossibilities, but they are all trivial, representing the same thing. Perhaps, for example, they all represent that *everything* is the case in the worlds of their stories, and we do not need to look for a way that we can depict one impossible scenario rather than another. While the following discussion will not be exhaustive, it will sketch some of the general ways a philosopher could push back on the picture of impossible fictions suggested so far.

Hanley 2004 suggests some strategies for treating apparently impossible fictions as describing possible goings-on after all. As mentioned in section 3.3 of Part I, one strategy Hanley is inclined

to use is to posit an unreliable narrator: the apparent events of the fictional world are instead how things seemed to the narrator, or how a narrator chose to present what happened. In the case of *Sylvan's Box*, for example, Hanley suggests we should read it as a story where the narrator, Graham Priest, *thinks* he has discovered a box that violates the laws of logic, and gives us an inconsistent report of what he did with it. While logic-violating boxes may be impossible, deluded investigators are entirely possible. Nolan 2007 also suggests this is an available reading of the *Sylvan's Box* story, but claims the logically impossible reading is available as well. In some other cases, Hanley's discussion suggests that we do not know *what* to think about what is going on in the world of a story. In the case of the story *At Swim-Two-Birds*, by Flann O'Brien, (O'Brien 1939), Hanley resists the reading on which one of the characters in the story writes a story and then ravishes and impregnates one of the characters created in that story, which is probably the mainstream reading of what is going on with the characters Dermot Trellis and Sheila Lamont. Instead, while Hanley does not offer a specific interpretation of the book, he suggests that some attempts to state clearly what is happening in the world of the story risk being "at worst, the imposition of a clear story on what is a deliberately obscure one" (Hanley 2004 p 125).

Xhignesse 2016 offers a relative of the unreliable narrator approach. He draws a distinction between what is "claimed in a story" and what is true according to it. The former, rather than the latter, is relatively unrestricted—a storyteller can claim whatever they like, within practical limits. However, Xhignesse argues that much more is needed for a claim to be *true* according to a story, and in particular what is true in a story must always be consistent. He expands his positive account of what is going on in superficially inconsistent fictions in Xhignesse forthcoming.

More distantly related strategies would be to suppose things are somehow not as they seem in apparently impossible fictions, due to some other factor. There is a natural reading of *Alice in Wonderland* where most of what happens, including impossibilities like the Cheshire Cat's disappearance, are not real even in the world of the story but are just part of a dream that Alice has. This is strongly suggested by the last few pages of the book, though a reading where the adventures were no dream is also possible. There is nothing impossible about *dreaming*

impossibilities. We could try this sort of strategy even when there is no explicit evidence in the text of other impossible stories. Or we could try a more colourless version: *somehow or other*, things in the fictional world were not as suggested, though there may be no fact of the matter about whether this was because of a mistaken or deceitful implied narrator; it being all a dream; or something else we know not what.

A different strategy again is explored by Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2018, according to which some of the material that may *prima facie* be part of the content of the story might instead be part of what is communicated by an author outside the fiction. They apply this model to the case of personification of abstract objects and some other kinds of symbolism, suggesting the stories are not saying something impossible about death or love being a person, but rather the story itself is a consistent one about a character, and the "identification" with death, or love, etc. is a (consistent) message outside the story relating the relevant character to the relevant phenomenon. While their focus is relatively narrow, it looks like it could be extended to some other cases, such as some meta-fiction. (Perhaps e.g. the Chorus in *Henry V* does not make much fictionally true, beyond perhaps that someone is making remarks that would be odd to make in the world of *Henry V*, but rather the Chorus communicates messages from the author about the work.)

The main drawback of all of these strategies for ensuring fictions are interpreted as possible fictions after all is that the strategies often seem undermotivated by the texts and audience reception. We should be wary of not taking stories in the way intended by authors and understood by readers without a good reason; or at any rate we should be wary of insisting that the *only* readings a text has are ones unintended by authors and unnoticed by some a range of competent readers. Hanley stresses that it is harder to make something true according to a story than just putting a corresponding sentence down on paper (Hanley 2004 pp 122, 125. See also Xhignesse 2016.). That is probably right, but on its own it does not do much to suggest that certain kinds of impossibilities cannot be made to occur in stories through authors presenting them in the appropriate way. We have had decades or even centuries of authors apparently presenting impossibilities to us in fiction, and apparently competent audiences and critics reporting that those impossibilities are what are going on in the story. So if a philosophical theory cannot allow that they are true according to the relevant fictions that suggests the problem

is with the theories, not with the author's attempts or the readers' uptake. Deciding that a story hasn't gone the way you want it to because it has features you do not like is not a very productive way to approach fiction in general, so as theorists we should be reluctant to respond this way when the phenomena seem to disconfirm our theories of fiction. I should note that Hanley himself does think that there are a range of impossibilities, including contradictions, true according to non-trivial impossible fictions. Hanley adopts versions of Lewis's strategies of union and intersection, described above, so he only needs to resort to explaining-away strategies when faced with fictions that on the face of it cannot be handled well by Lewis's methods. So the concern that strategies like Hanley's depart too much from what authors and audiences take themselves to be doing is not just directed against, for example, those who insist that all impossible fictions are trivial, but to a range of responses that claim there is much less variety among impossible fictions than meets the eye.

Another concern about the strategies just discussed is that they appear to just move the "bump in the carpet". We substitute needing a theory of "apparently true in a fiction" that allows for all sorts of impossibilities to be *apparently* true, or *presented as true* by an unreliable narrator; or space for impossible dreaming of various kinds; or something similar. From one point of view this may seem no bad thing: since people present impossibilities as true or have impossible dreams sometimes, we would want a theory of these phenomena anyway. But once we have the tools to hand to distinguish different impossibilities and capture the variety of ways different impossibilities appear to be true according to different fictions, it may be hard to resist the idea that authors and audiences can use these resources to present and enjoy a wide range of impossible stories, not just a wide range of *apparently* impossible stories.

Another way to treat all apparently impossible fictions as describing possibilities after all would be to be very generous about what counts as possible. One extreme way to do this would be to declare that *every* proposition is possibly true, or at least every proposition we could grasp: after all, it would be easy to keep the principle that conceivability implies possibility if every proposition we could even grasp counts as genuinely possible. Mortensen 1989 is one writer who argues that every proposition (conceivable or not) is possibly true. Or one could go partway along this path: perhaps by claiming that the only impossibilities are logically impossible ones,

and so the fictions that are alleged to be merely metaphysically impossible describe possibilities after all. (Priest forthcoming takes a sceptical view of any metaphysical impossibilities short of logical impossibility, for example.)

A more limited way to insist that every apparently impossible fiction describes a genuine possibility would be to introduce a special grade of possibility, "literary possibility" perhaps, and to claim that everything represented by a fiction has at least this status (Nolan 2015 p 66-68). This manoeuvre by itself is unlikely to change any of the philosophical lessons from these fictions if we still admit the scenarios described are metaphysically impossible, logically impossible, or appear to be ruled out by our concepts, however.

Another general strategy is to allow that impossible fictions represent something different from any possible fictions, but that all impossible fictions are *trivial*: they all represent every proposition. There are at least two motivations for this initially odd position. One is a motive from applying the account of content favoured by the likes of Montague, Stalnaker, and Jackson described above. If propositions are sets of possible worlds, then there is only one proposition that does not hold in any possible world: the empty set of worlds. So if what a fiction represents is truly impossible, then taken as a whole it cannot correspond to any set of possible worlds, so the set of no possible worlds (i.e. the empty set) is the only proposition left. In a sets-of-possible-worlds account of propositions, a proposition corresponding to a set of worlds S entails any proposition corresponding to any *super*-set of S . Since the empty set of worlds is a subset of every other set of worlds, the proposition corresponding to the empty set entails all the others. So every impossible story says the same thing, and they all say something that entails every other claim. (Or so it would naturally seem if you start with the kind of possible-worlds account of content favoured by figures such as Montague, Stalnaker and Jackson, provided the fiction represents goings-on that are *metaphysically* impossible and not just e.g. ruled out by the laws of nature.)

The second motivation for treating all inconsistent fictions, at any rate, as trivial is the temptation to think that when A is true in a fiction, all the logical consequences of A are true in that fiction. (That truth in fiction is "closed under logical consequence", as it is sometimes put.) Above we

saw that impossible fictions suggest that principle is mistaken, but one could go the other way and keep the principle while accepting the consequence that impossible fictions have more true according to them than you might initially suppose. Furthermore, if one accepts the principle that all fictions are closed under logical consequence *and* the principle that any proposition whatever logically follows from a contradiction (which is a commitment of classical logic), then it will follow that every proposition is true according to any fiction that has a contradiction true according to it: this kind of inconsistent fiction will be trivial. (Perhaps we can sometimes engineer a fiction that is trivial: Wildman and Folde 2017 argue that we can, perhaps even by insisting a particular fiction is both inconsistent and closed under classical logic. But the question of whether *every* inconsistent fiction is trivial remains open even if we concede that there is at least one inconsistent and trivial fiction.)

One philosopher of fiction who considers taking this route is Kendall Walton (Walton 1990 pp 182–3). We still need to discriminate among different claims when dealing with impossible fictions, of course. Walton suggests we do this not by discriminating between claims that are true according to an inconsistent fiction and those which are not, but by drawing a distinction between "backgrounded" propositions and "foregrounded" ones. According to Walton, there can be many claims true according to a fiction that we should not focus on, if we are using the fiction as we are supposed to. (If we are engaging in an "authorised game of make-believe", to use Walton's expression.) The "foregrounded" claims are those that should take up the bulk of our attention and our imaginative engagement. Nevertheless, there are likely many "background" claims as well. Sherlock Holmes, presumably, was born with an appendix, but this fact plays little role in his adventures. Things that are true in the Sherlock Holmes story about his appendix are *backgrounded*. Perhaps everything is true in an inconsistent fiction, Walton suggests, but that only a small subset of those claims are *foregrounded* ones. We do not, and should not, pay much if any attention to all the other background claims when engaging with the story. (Walton 1990 p 182)

Walton mentions other puzzles that can be solved with this "backgrounding" strategy. Why does Othello speak in well-turned Shakespearian English? Why is nobody that he talks to surprised that he talks in a way unlike any other Venetian generals of the era? Is it because they all go

around speaking in Shakespearian English as well? Walton suggests that Othello does speak lines like "My services which I have done the signiory shall out-tongue his complaints", according to Shakespeare's *Othello*, but that we should not pay attention to questions such as the ones I just asked: or at least we should not when engaging with the fiction as was intended. Issues about how Shakespearian diction and style fit in to Othello's Venice do have at least limited answers, but we should just ignore them in any case.

Applied to an inconsistent fiction such as Priest's *Sylvan's Box*, (Priest 1997) the strategy Walton suggests would have it that it is literally true that according to *Sylvan's Box*, Ronald Reagan had a double life as a pet detective. (Or indeed that any other proposition you care to think of is true according to *Sylvan's Box*.) Extended to all impossible fictions, this strategy would have it that every impossible fiction has the same propositions true according to it: it is just that some have some propositions in the "foreground" that others have in the background. (*Sylvan's Box* foregrounds the proposition that Graham Priest and Nick Griffin had a drink together; and while that proposition is also true according to *Back to the Future*, it is in the background, since no proposition specifically about Graham Priest is foregrounded by that movie.)

While the background/foreground distinction makes sense, and it is conceivable that some creatures might engage with fictions, or something like them, where everything that is normally done by truth-in-fiction is done instead with choices about what is foregrounded, it is hard to see why fiction-tellers and audiences would have developed such a system, rather than just being selective about which propositions are true in a fiction like *Sylvan's Box*. (In Walton's terms, what is true in a fiction is what is prescribed to make believe in authorised games of make believe with that fiction. So, in Walton's terms, why not just not issue any prescription in the first place that commits us to allowing make-believe that Reagan is a pet detective in *Sylvan's Box*?)

The backgrounding/foregrounding strategy will also not help very much if the *motive* for resisting non-trivial impossible or inconsistent fictions is to not allow for theories that allow for hyperintensional distinctions (i.e. distinctions between propositions that cut more finely than necessary equivalence): since while someone following Walton's suggestion might be able to treat "it is true in a fiction that..." as treating all logical impossibilities the same way, since all are

true according to a fiction but none are, that theorist will have to insist that "it is foregrounded in the fiction that..." discriminates between different impossibilities: while it is foregrounded in *Sylvan's Box* that there is a box that is both empty and not-empty, it is not foregrounded in *Sylvan's Box* that there is a planet that is exactly 100m across and also exactly 1000km across. (*Sylvan's Box* is intuitively not about planets at all, perhaps besides Earth.)

A final option would be to declare some or all impossible fictions *unintelligible*: that people appear to make sense of them, but really they do not. Given the wide array of impossible fictions, even logically impossible fictions, this is not a common option taken in published work on impossible fiction, though I have heard it suggested sometimes in discussion. It could of course be true that some texts produced to be fiction might end up unintelligible: though readers are capable of making sense of some strange texts, especially with some contextual guidance. But we should be careful of dismissing too much fiction as unintelligible, especially as there are communities of readers and writers who seem to be getting on just fine. This is particularly true for the kinds of impossibility found across literature: if works like Shakespeare's *Henry V* or Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty* are supposed to be unintelligible, there is a lot of explaining to do about what authors and readers are doing with these texts. If your theory tells you that widely consumed texts are really unintelligible, the fault may be with your theory rather than the text.

That said, responding that a fiction is unintelligible is sometimes a reasonable response. Perhaps any words can be arranged on a page and the result declared poetry: but if so, we need not suppose that all such poems have a body of propositions true according to them. Not every literary experiment will yield a work that functions like a fiction, at least not without significant contextual scaffolding. (Such works might still be able to do some of the things paradigm fictions do for us, like excite emotions, or give aesthetic satisfaction, or prompt imaginings of our own.) So there might be works that could not be true, or are not associated with a fictional world that is possible, without thereby deserving whatever treatment we develop for the fictions discussed so far. The charge of unintelligibility goes too far, in my view, when it classifies fictions as unintelligible, or as lacking any content, when we appear to be able to do the full range of engagement with them characteristic of our treatment of less controversial fictions.

Different strategies from the above list might be employed in different cases. Some theorists might be willing to allow that there are some sorts of impossible fictions, while thinking other apparent cases are possible after all; some collapse into triviality; and/or some are in the end unintelligible. Theorists should be careful to not go too far with any of these "explaining away" manoeuvres: at some point denying the data because your theory cannot accommodate it is a recipe for error. But where the line is between appropriate explaining-away and not learning from the phenomena can often be a matter of fine judgement.

5. Conclusion

Fictions that describe impossibilities are a familiar feature of literature, though disputes can of course be had over which fictions exactly depict impossibilities, and what sorts of impossibilities they are. Realising this has significant ramifications for our theory of fiction, including constraining what sorts of stories are plausible about truth in fiction; what a "logic of fiction" could look like; what theory we should give of reliable and unreliable narrators; and what theory we should adopt of fictional characters and fictional worlds.

Impossible fictions also shed light on important philosophical questions beyond the philosophy of fiction. They make a strong case for the need to treat different impossible claims as not all meaning the same thing. They suggest that we can make at least partial sense of conceptual falsehoods, and that these can be taken to be true in a story without automatically provoking imaginative resistance.

While there are ways of resisting the appearances and insisting that meaningful stories only traffic in possibilities, or alternatively that impossible fictions are all trivial, representing everything as true according to them, the richness and variety of impossible fictions, even mathematically or logically impossible fictions, suggests instead that we should widen our philosophical horizons to accommodate them on their own terms. In doing so we learn more about fiction; about mental and linguistic representation; about the connections between our concepts and intelligibility; and the epistemology of possibility.

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Short Biography

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