

# Of course there are fictional characters

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**Abstract.** I argue that there is no straightforward inference from there being fictional characters to any interesting form of realism. One reason is that “fictional” may be an intensional operator with wide scope, depriving the quantifier of its usual force. Another is that not all uses of “there are” are ontologically committing. A realist needs to show that neither of these phenomena are present in “There are fictional characters”. Other roads to realism run into difficulties when negotiating the role that presupposition plays when we make intuitive evaluations of the truth or falsehood of sentences involving fiction, for we may presuppose things we do not believe. This means that a judgment of truth, implicitly relative to a presupposition we do not believe, can be sincerely made by someone who, from a more austere perspective, would regard the judgment as false.

Some form of realism about fictional characters seems the plainest common sense: of course there are fictional characters, and it seems easy enough to supply “examples” to prove the point. So in arguing, as I do in this paper, that there is no justification for realism, I seem to present myself as offering a radical thesis, one that would need justification in the light of ontological scruples or principles that many people will find suspect. I believe, however, that this appearance is misleading. Properly understood, the sentence “There are fictional characters” does indeed express a truth, just as common sense says. The mistake is the quick philosophical inference from this to realism about fictional characters. The position to be argued for in the first section of this paper is that the truth of the sentence does not commit one to any interesting form of realism. The second section supplies a general framework within which the relationship between reality and fiction is best understood, and the third section applies this framework to some tricky cases.

Any form of realism, as I understand it, affirms that something or other belongs to our reality. Platonism is a form of realism: it says that abstract objects like numbers form part of our reality. Realism about possible worlds says that possible worlds, though all but one of them are nonactual, are all fully real, and belong to our reality (as opposed to the alternative reality the possible worlds themselves portray or constitute). Everyone thinks that fictional characters belong to the “world of the fiction” – they have fictional reality, as one might

put it. The more challenging thesis is that they belong to our reality – they have real reality. That’s the thesis that I take to be unjustified, even by the truth of what I’ll call the fiction-sentence: There are fictional characters.

If fictional characters are to belong to our reality, they can’t be the ordinary kinds of objects that, for the most part, they are said in fiction to be. Sherlock Holmes cannot be a person (let alone a detective), for if he was a person we could find him (or if he has died, we could in the past have found him, and it would now make sense to look for his remains). As far as I know, there are just three ways in which our reality could make room for fictional objects. (1) Our reality contains nonexistent things as well as existent ones. (2) Our reality contains nonactual (merely possible) objects as well as actual ones. (3) Our reality contains nonconcrete as well as concrete things. The options for fictional characters are thus to be nonexistent, nonactual or nonconcrete. Of these options, only the third seems one that could be a consequence of a more or less platitudinous claim, as the claim that there are fictional characters is agreed to be. Real but nonexistent; real but nonactual; these are not contradictory classifications, but they demand philosophical sophistication to digest, and appear to be much fancier than the view that there are fictional characters.

By contrast, most non-philosophers are likely to be happy with the idea that there are real abstract things, like pension plans and chess openings. Hence the idea that fictional characters are abstract things gets off to a good start. However, the going soon gets troublesome. We think there are not just fictional characters but fictional detectives, like Sherlock Holmes. The claim that there are fictional detectives seems to have as good a claim to being a platitude as the claim that there are fictional characters. Yet no nonconcrete object can be a detective. So although the realist wishes to hold that fictional *characters* are part of our reality, she can’t very well hold that fictional *people* or fictional *detectives* are. If the fictional things are abstract, then they’re not people or detectives. The resulting combination of views, that there are fictional characters but no fictional detectives, is, to put it mildly, puzzling, and shows that realism cannot present itself as some straightforwardly commonsensical position.<sup>1</sup>

The combination is puzzling in another way. The fiction-sentence seems to say the same as “There are characters in fiction”. In that case, “There are fictional detectives” says the same as “There are detectives in fiction”. Yet the latter simply cannot be denied. It says no more than that there are detective stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Serious realists are well aware of this difficulty and others. See e.g., Thomasson 1999, 2003.

But the existence of such stories doesn't provide any direct route to the conclusion that there are fictional detectives in our reality.

The thrust of this paper is not to display detailed problems with realism. In the first section, the task is just to show that the truth of the fiction-sentence provides no easy road to realism. The second section supplies a framework within which this result seems entirely natural.

## 1. "There are" and "fictional"

We can't count on every use of "there is" or "there are" in a true sentence to constitute a serious ontological commitment. Various reasons for this are displayed in examples that follow ((1)-(3)). In each case the intention is to show that there is work to be done if one is to move from the truth of the fiction-sentence to the truth of realism about fictional characters.

### 1. There is no snow in Belize.

The sentence is true, and starts with "there is", but plainly this expression, in this context, is not being used to commit to the existence of anything. One standard explanation is that "at the level of logical form", the phrase occurs within the scope of negation: It is not the case that there is snow in Belize. When "there is" lies in the scope of negation, the sentence as a whole does not affirm the existence of anything.

The application to the case of the fiction-sentence is that "fictional" arguably takes the whole sentence in its scope, so that what we have "at the level of logical form" is: In fiction, there are characters. When "there is" lies in the scope of "In fiction", the sentence as a whole does not affirm the existence of anything in our reality.<sup>2</sup>

To reiterate the strategy: I'm not claiming that this is the right treatment of the sentence, but only that it's a treatment that needs to be shown to be wrong if we are to move from the truth of the fiction-sentence to realism. It's not the simple move it's sometimes represented as being.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As far as I can tell, putting "in fiction" at the end of the sentence ("There are characters in fiction") makes no difference. The result of coupling "In" with the name of a novel may vary. "In *War and Peace*, Kitty and Levin marry" seems true, and a remark about how the novel states things to be. But this also seems true: "In *War and Peace*, fictional characters mix freely with real people"; yet this is not a remark about how the novel states things to be.

<sup>3</sup> Van Inwagen 2003, p. 137 is happy to take the fiction-sentence itself as an adequate statement of realism, and argues at length for its truth. If the present paper is right, what needs support is not the truth of the fiction-sentence but the move from its truth to realism. In earlier work he presented an even weaker claim as adequate to realism: "There are such things as characters in novels" (1977,

It's hard to see, theoretically, how the adjective "fictional" functions. It's not an ordinary ("intersective") adjective like "square". To understand how "square tile" works, one can think of "square" as restricting "tile". "Tile" is true just of all the tiles, and "square" takes you to those things among the tiles that are square. To implement the idea, start with all the tiles, and then remove all the non-square ones, and you're left with just the things of which "square tile" is true. This is not a happy picture for "fictional". "Start with all the detectives, then remove all the non-fictional ones!" As this command would be most naturally understood, obeying it leaves you with nothing. That's just a picturesque way of saying that we don't naturally include fictional things in our reality. Yet we do want to hold that there are fictional detectives. How can that be?

A natural answer, already encountered, is that "fictional" works more like a sentence-operator; more like "it is not the case that ..." or "according to some story, ...". As we considered in connection with (1) above, operators like this can make a truth out of something that's not true. "There are unicorns" is not true, but the result of prefixing it with either of the operators just mentioned is true: "It is not the case that there are unicorns"; "According to some story, there are unicorns". If this is how "fictional" works in the fiction-sentence, then the sentence amounts only to some innocuous claim like these:

2. In some fiction, there are characters.<sup>4</sup>
3. There are characters in fiction.

This can happily be accepted by one who denies that our reality includes fictional characters. As (3) shows, postfixing is often more linguistically natural than prefixing. Non-realists can readily accept that there are fictional detectives, if this means only that there are detectives in fiction.

Another reason for resisting the move from the fiction-sentence to realism is that "there are" can't always be counted on to generate a serious ontological commitment. One example is:

4. There are many things that don't exist.

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p. 302). This is weaker because, as already noted, the non-realist will see "in novels" as a sentence operator capable of forming a truth from a non-truth. "There are such things as characters" may not be true, even though that sentence qualified by "in novels" is true, just as "there are such things as unicorns" is not true, even though that sentence qualified by "in mythology" is true.

<sup>4</sup> We say things like: "In the play *Othello* there are fewer interesting female than male characters", and that is the reading I have in mind for (3). However, the sentence can also suggest that the fiction is one that contains a fiction, as in: In the play *Hamlet*, there are fictional characters like Gonzago". Fictional operators are quite slippery, and there are many variations. For example, the following is plainly false: "According to the play *Othello* there are fewer interesting female than male characters"

This has been used to ground realism about nonexistents. But in the way that the sentence is naturally understood, it is unfit for the task. This is shown by the fact that the following is entirely coherent:

There are no dragons, no unicorns, no witches; indeed, there are many things that don't exist.

The first part of the sentence denies that there are things meeting the various conditions (being a dragon, etc.). The second part summarizes and generalizes the first. So whatever "there are many things" does in the second part (the part that's reiterated in (4)), it can't be construed as making a straightforward realist claim about nonexistents.

One who would move from the truth of the fiction-sentence to realism needs to show that the fiction sentence isn't as inadequate to this task as (4) is to the task of promoting realism about nonexistents.

Both the fiction-sentence and (4) might be substantiated by examples. Dragons, unicorns and Vulcan are examples of things that don't exist, yet there are no such things as dragons, unicorns or Vulcan. If "examples" were an ordinary noun, this would be puzzling: meeting the condition required of an example would be possible only if *there were* things that met the condition. Yet there are no dragons, and for that very reason they are examples of things that do not exist. There are dragon-examples, but no dragons. A realist about nonexistents would make no progress by claiming that there are (there *really* are!) examples of things that don't exist.

The same goes for fictional characters. Of course we can give examples of them. But there being fictional-character-examples of fictional characters is consistent with there being no real fictional characters, just as there being dragon-examples of dragons (or other nonexistents) is consistent with there being no real dragons.

The upshot of this section is that non-realists can without incoherence accept that the fiction-sentence is true, and so are similar sentences in which "characters" is replaced by more specific nouns. If there is a good argument for realism, it needs to look to something other than the fiction-sentence.

## 2. Presupposition: the basics

How is it that the truth of the fiction-sentence fails to lend decisive support to realism? I think it's an example of a general difficulty with finding support for realism about fictional things. We are happy to presuppose whatever needs

to be presupposed in a context, yet we need not believe what we presuppose. Often, when fiction is under discussion, we happily presuppose the relevant story. We may not believe it. Yet within the scope of the presupposition we can distinguish the true from the false, the obvious from the doubtful, the assertible from the unassertible, just as if we were operating without any presupposition we do not believe. This is what gives rise to the literalist view that some fictional sentences are genuinely true.<sup>5</sup> It makes it hard for the realist to find examples of sentences whose truth requires fictional characters to exist in our reality, for the theorist must ensure that our judgment of truth is made without any merely fictional presuppositions.

The general perspective can be illustrated by discourse not involving fiction. In very ordinary nonfictional cases, mechanisms are at work which are also crucial to fiction. Consider the way in which the use of an indefinite noun phrase can set the stage for all sorts of linguistic activities, including definite reference, assertion and denial, truth and falsehood. Suppose a conversation between A and B starts as follows:

A: There's an unusual white squirrel in my garden.

B: Has it got pink eyes?

A: No, just regular brown ones.

B: So it's not an albino.

Nothing has been said about whether B really believes A, or about whether A himself believes what he says. B's responses are fine either way. In her first remark, she moves smoothly and naturally from A's indefinite to a definite, which she uses again in her second remark. She may insist that her claim is true, even while having some doubts about the veracity of A's first claim. She presupposes that there's a white squirrel for the purposes of the conversational exchange, but it doesn't follow she believes this. This doesn't cast any doubt on the sincerity of her second remark. She could still properly assert that it's not an albino, even if she thinks A is pulling her leg. That's because you can continue to presuppose something that you come to think, or even know, is not the case.

We can withdraw any presupposition we can identify. When a presupposition is withdrawn, assertions on which it depended are also withdrawn. "There was no white squirrel? In that case the question I was addressing doesn't arise." We do not need to say there is an entirely presupposition-free perspective, only that one perspective may properly extend another's presuppositions.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Martinich and Stroll 2007.

The phenomenon is widespread, even in the most sober aspects of our lives. “What color was the car you saw driving away?”, the prosecutor asks the witness. In asking the question, he presupposes that there was such a car, but the strategy behind the question might be to make it manifest that there was no such car (the witness contradicts herself, or has implausible ignorance of details concerning the supposed car). “Does your friend stay with you at night?”, the therapist asks her young patient, who has a fantasy friend. The question presupposes there really is such a friend, though the therapist knows this is not so. “Did you see the fire? It was close to your office” asks the wife, who knows there was no fire, but, to test her husband’s honesty, asks a question presupposing there was a fire.<sup>6</sup>

Questioners, or their questions, may presuppose things known or believed by the questioner not to be true. The same goes for assertions. The prosecutor might assert: “The car left no tire tracks”. The therapist: “Your friend has to go away for a while”. The wife: “You must have seen the fire”. The presuppositions of these assertions are that there was a car, a friend, a fire. But our asserters may know or believe that none of these things is so. This fact does not in itself show that the assertions should not have been made. Assertion within the scope of a presupposition is a familiar and legitimate use of language.

The mechanism whereby we move easily from an indefinite to a definite is invoked in the most banal stereotype of how fiction is introduced: “Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess. She lived ...”. Our capacity to think and reason “about” the beautiful princess is undermined neither by the conventional marker of fictionality (“Once upon a time”), nor by the indefiniteness of the first sentence.<sup>7</sup> A single act of presupposition ensures our full engagement. The case is distinctively fictional because (a) we do not believe what we presuppose and (b) the conventional mark of fiction puts us in a position to appreciate that we are not even supposed to believe what we presuppose.

Once we allow that presuppositions do not need not be believed, many features of our responses to fiction that have been used to motivate realism can be explained in a way that deflates that motivation. For example, it is often said that, in an Introduction to Literature test, we need to mark the first of the following as true and the second as false:

Holmes lived on Baker Street.

<sup>6</sup> The possibility of examples like this shows the power of presupposition in another way. You, the reader, were (I hope) happy to presuppose the existence of the prosecutor, the therapist and the wife, in order to see where my examples were leading.

<sup>7</sup> No doubt beautiful princesses are a dime a dozen, but in some way that’s not easy to understand, the indefinite enables us to think as if we could focus on *just one* of them.

Holmes lived on Dover Street.

This intuition needs to be respected. At the same time, we need to explain why in other contexts we also have the contrary intuition. Doing research on Marylebone residents in the latter years of the nineteenth century, we are scouring the electoral records in the Marylebone Borough Library. Noting our frustration, the librarian comes to help: "I'm looking for a Mr Sherlock Holmes. He lived on Baker Street". In this context, we have no inclination to regard the second sentence as true. The librarian should disabuse us of our error. This intuition, too, deserves respect.

The presuppositional account has an obvious way of doing justice to both intuitions. In the first case, we presuppose the story, and our judgments of truth and falsehood are relativized to this presupposition. In this perspective, one in which the presupposition is accepted, it is true that Holmes lived on Baker Street, and false that he lived on Dover Street. It's a presupposition we do not believe, in that we do not take the Holmes stories to be factual accounts. We can withdraw the presupposition. If we are doing research in the Marylebone Library we should certainly have withdrawn it: in that more austere context, our aim is to focus on how things are in reality, not on stories, though some confusion has led us to believe there really was a Sherlock Holmes. With the supposition withdrawn, it is not true that Holmes lived on Baker Street (and nor, of course, that he lived on Dover Street).

Definite and indefinite noun phrases lead interpreters to make presuppositions that they may or may not believe. Typically, in fiction, we recognize that we are not supposed to believe the presuppositions we make. But relative to the presuppositions, stories give rise to distinctions between the true and the false, the right and the wrong, the clever and the stupid, much as reality does. Realism is an overreaction to this fact, asking us to treat fictional worlds as if they were part of our own; or as if abstract correlates of them were part of our own. The better picture, I suggest, is that fictional worlds rest on a raft of presuppositions that we typically do not believe.

### **3. Tricky cases: more resources for non-realists**

The cases of fictional sentences described so far are easy ones for a non-realist, and can be adequately dealt with in terms of presuppositions that are not believed. We all know that stories aren't supposed to be true, so it's natural to feel no inclination to treat them as introducing novel and exotic entities into



our ontology.<sup>8</sup> More problematic are cases in which fiction and reality are intertwined, as when people say that they admire the cunning of Holmes. Here things get trickier. The reason is that many such sentences are ones we are tempted to count as really true, as presupposition-free truths about our reality; so they are truths whose apparent ontology has to be taken seriously. I'll consider some examples in a taxonomizing way, trying to treat each as representative of a kind. The different kinds make different responses appropriate, so we'll also collect some further resources for non-realists.

Let's start with admiration, as in:

5. P. G Wodehouse admired Holmes.

This is intended as a completely factual report about a real person, P. G Wodehouse, and I invite you to share my opinion that it is a literal truth (in our reality). The sentence is apparently a simple relational sentence, like "Waco is north of Austin". If it really is straightforwardly relational, both of the related terms – "P. G Wodehouse" and "Holmes" – need to refer to things (in our reality) for the sentence to be true (in our reality). So Holmes exists (in our reality). Thus the truth of (5) provides an argument for realism.

The argument proves much too much. "Admires" is an example of a so-called "intensional transitive verb", typically classified in a family with "hunts", "looks for", "thinks about". If every truth constructed with such verbs established that both terms had referents belonging to our reality, we would be thoroughly overstocked. Take something that, by your lights, does not belong to our reality.<sup>9</sup> I'll choose the fountain of youth, but feel free to make your own choice. Ponce de León looked for the fountain of youth. So we have an apparently relational truth, yet the second term, "the fountain of youth", does not refer to anything. If the argument of the previous paragraph were good, we would by parallel reasoning have an argument for the conclusion, by hypothesis false, that the fountain of youth belongs to our reality.

The moral for non-realists is that they should not be perturbed by examples that essentially appeal to intensional transitives like "admires". This is an additional resource, over and above the point about presuppositions. A full development would provide a detailed semantic account, which did justice to this curious

<sup>8</sup> Theorists who believe that a meaningful proper name has to have a bearer will not be able to take this relaxed view. But it's a natural view, and one fully defensible philosophically (Sainsbury 2005).

<sup>9</sup> If the form of this request makes you uncomfortable (as well it might!), replace it by: take an expression which, by your lights, has no referent in our reality.

feature; and this has proved hard to find.<sup>10</sup> The ontological facts, however, are clear independently, and place a condition of adequacy on any semantic proposal.

Critical reflection on fiction generates another kind of case that might seem of service to realists. Peter van Inwagen suggested this example, in which Dickens is reflecting on his own novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, nearly a quarter of a century after it was published:

6. Mrs. Sarah Gamp was, four-and-twenty years ago, a fair representation of the hired attendant on the poor in sickness. (Van Inwagen 1977, p. 301)

The idea is that we have something genuinely true, and so requiring the real existence of Sarah Gamp, albeit as a fictional character. Van Inwagen's example is designed to resist "paraphrase" into sentences in which, for example, the name occurs within the scope of the kind of operator (for example, "In the story, ...") which can make a truth out of something not true. Even if "Sarah Gamp attended the poor in sickness" is not true, prefixing it by a "fiction operator" results in a truth: "In the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Sarah Gamp attended the poor in sickness". But Van Inwagen constructed (6) with the aim of making any such move unavailable. Dickens is not merely telling us what is in his story; rather he is thinking about a story already told, and making a supposedly entirely correct judgment about it.

This last way of putting it should raise a red flag for the realist. Stories are indisputably part of our reality (though the events they relate typically are not). If Dickens's judgment has as its real subject a story, then perhaps it does not involve anything further: perhaps Mrs Gamp features only within the story, and has no place in our reality.

Although this is somewhat metaphorical, it seems to me on the right lines, suggesting how a non-realist can understand the example. We can treat it as not really about Mrs Gamp, but about some properties that Dickens, in a story, ascribed to a character in the story.<sup>11</sup>

An adequate account must do justice to the fact that, in contrast with "Holmes lived on Baker Street", we want (6) to be true absolutely. Can't we take Dickens's

<sup>10</sup> Forbes 2006 has an overview and also an original proposal of his own. Even if an adequate semantics associates expressions that combine with intensional transitives with abstract entities (as in Cocchiarella 1982 and Orilia 2010), these entities are not what people look for, admire or want: they look for *nonabstract* fountains, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Could one really ascribe a property to a fictional character, if fictional characters are not part of our reality? (The realist is always on the look-out!) The answer is Yes. Take something that, by your lights, does not belong to our reality (say the fountain of youth). One can ascribe properties to it, like the property of having been sought by Ponce de León. It may be puzzling *how* this can be so: but it is so. "Ascribe", like "looks for" and "hunts", is an intensional transitive verb.

word for it? One message we are to take from (6), together with our knowledge of the novel, is that the poor were not well served in sickness in 1840s London. But how can we extract this serious and entirely non-fictional message, intended as absolutely true, from something that seems to weave in and out of fictional and nonfictional truth?

What (6) tells us is that Mrs Gamp, as described in the story, resembles many real nurses to the poor. In other words, there are properties such that, in the story, Mrs Gamp possessed them, and in reality typical nurses to the poor possessed them also. In this last rendering we see that “Mrs Gamp” appears only within the scope of the fiction operator “in the story”. Dickens can ascribe properties to a character in his story without ascribing properties to anything outside the story. So the “Mrs Gamp” part of what (6) says does not require any extra-fictional individual. By contrast, the remainder of what (6) says does require something extra-fictional: that the ascribed properties also hold of typical nurses to the poor. (6) tells us something about fiction, and uses that to tell us something about reality. It’s rather as if someone were to tell a purely fictional story, giving a detailed account of the protagonist’s states of mind, and then added: “And that’s how I feel too”. This is a very straightforward way in which fiction can be used in the making of claims that are intended as nonfictionally and absolutely true.<sup>12</sup>

Interfictional comparisons are supposed to make trouble for the view that we can always regard fictional names in true sentences as falling within the scope of a fiction operator. For example:

7. Anna Karenina was more intelligent than Emma Bovary.

This does not purport to tell us how things are in a story, for no story contains both characters. Hence, (7) cannot be seen as implicitly governed either by the fiction operator “In the novel *Anna Karenina*” or by the fiction operator “In the novel *Madame Bovary*”. The realist would like us to conclude that doing justice to (7) requires us to see Anna and Emma as elements of our reality.

Once we have the notion of presupposition, however, this kind of case provides no ground for realism. Presuppositions can be piled up, just as indefinites can. If you are part of a three-way conversation with A and B in which each of them says he met a philosopher, you can intelligibly assert that the philosopher A met is more intelligent than the philosopher B met. The comparison using definite noun phrases, even if they are sourced in distinct indefinites, presents no problem. You

<sup>12</sup> Van Inwagen’s example turns on the phrase “is a representation of”. This is an intensional transitive: There are representations of Pegasus, even though there is no Pegasus. This provides an additional reason for thinking the example is not well adapted to establishing realism.

do not have to believe that either A or B is telling the truth. Maybe they are both inventing philosophical acquaintances. Your assertion presupposes that each met a philosopher, but you don't have to believe this. Likewise (7) presupposes that there's an Anna and an Emma. The sources for these definite noun phrases are distinct, but there is no difficulty amalgamating the presuppositions. And, as always, not all presuppositions are believed.

A consequence is that, from the most austere perspective, in which we reject anything we can identify as a presupposition we do not believe, (7) is false. This may initially seem surprising, but that's because it's hard to view (7) from this austere perspective. The very presence of the familiar fictional names triggers the relevant presuppositions. (Replace the names in (7) by names from very obscure fictions and the effect disappears.) Once we have identified this mechanism, however, it's fairly easy to resist it. Let our job be to give a complete description of our reality, and of our reality alone. (7) will not feature, even though the description will include accounts of the writings of Tolstoy and Flaubert. This shows that the result delivered by presupposition theory, that (7) is not true from the most austere perspective, is correct.

In studying literature or mythology, questions of identity across works or myths arise. It is said that the Romans took over Greek deities but gave them new names: Zeus became Jupiter, and so on. The indefatigable Mr Holmes appears in four full-length novels and more than 50 short stories. It's the same Holmes all the time. More generally, for any novel there can be a sequel (or prequel) by the same hand or another, containing some or all of the same characters as the original.<sup>13</sup>

These humdrum facts might inspire an argument for realism. We have identity truths, like:

8. Zeus is Jupiter.

These make essentially the same case as the one we've considered in connection with (7). There are new considerations, in that it's a debatable issue under what conditions sentences like (8) are true (given the relevant presuppositions).<sup>14</sup> But these don't affect the extent to which the truth of sentences like (8) motivate realism. As with (7), they don't provide a motivation, since it's only once we've made the appropriate presuppositions that these sentences are true; from the most austere perspective, they are not.

<sup>13</sup> For philosophical exploration of these issues, see Orilia 2006.

<sup>14</sup> The actual example seems to be historically incorrect. The Romans worshiped a god they called Jupiter before making contact with Greek culture. But no doubt better examples could be found.

The following well-known example raises several questions about which resources a non-realist would do best to deploy:

9. Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any real detective.

We want this to be true, at least under a suitable presupposition. But that presupposition had better not be that Sherlock Holmes is a real detective, for then (9) would entail that he is more famous than himself, in which case it cannot be true. If we are to apply the presuppositional strategy to this case, some other presupposition needs to be found.

Both realists and non-realists have difficulties with this example. From the realist perspective, fictional characters like Holmes are supposed to be real, yet in (9) it seems that Holmes is precisely being *contrasted* with what is real. Here a realist nuance already mentioned, in which fictional characters are real but fictional detectives are not, would need to be exploited. I leave the details for realists to work out. Instead, let's see how the case also poses problems for presuppositional accounts.

One natural move would be to say that (9) presupposes that Holmes is a fictional as opposed to a real detective. The comparison would be seen as involving a heterogeneous class of detectives, some real, some fictional.<sup>15</sup> We saw earlier, however, that non-realists already agree that there are fictional detectives: this is not a presupposition that they don't believe. However, they don't think of fictional detectives as a kind of detective. In their eyes, "There are fictional detectives" does not proclaim the existence of a special kind of detective; it says simply that there are detectives in fiction, i.e. that there are detective stories. So it's not easy for a theorist of this kind to make adequate sense of the "heterogenous class" containing detectives of two different kinds. Yet that does seem to be just what the comparison needs.

At this point, two roads are open to non-realists. One continues the present strategy, and simply refines what the presupposition needs to be. The other claims that "is more famous than" is, or is closely related to, an intensional transitive.

Following the presuppositional strategy, a non-realist should say that all that needs to be presupposed is that there is such a detective as Holmes, though he is not a real one. The relevant heterogenous class is not the real plus the fictional, but the real together with something not real. Presupposing this class shouldn't be any harder than presupposing a class of cows and dragons when asking if cows are bigger than dragons. The problem is that this approach ensures that

<sup>15</sup> This way of putting it goes back to Strawson 1967, p. 195.

(9) is not true from the most austere perspective. I'm not sure whether we need to be very unhappy about this. One might regard (9) as made true by the fame of the Holmes stories; expressing the genuine sociological fact as if it related to Holmes himself could be seen as a mere manner of speaking.

The other approach involves considering whether "more famous than" is doing any special work, or whether the same issues would arise with some more ordinary comparative, like "is more intelligent than". The example that follows, in which "is more famous than" is replaced by a more ordinary comparison, is easy to deal with, and this suggests that there's something special about fame.

10. Sherlock Holmes is more intelligent than any real detective.

Non-realists should not be anxious about the underlying facts that make (10) true. In the stories, Conan Doyle ascribed Holmes a high degree of intelligence. (10) is true if this degree is higher than the degree of intelligence of any real detective. But a non-realist can't take this easy approach to (9), for Doyle did not ascribe a high degree of fame to Holmes (at least in the early stories), and even if he had, that would not be what makes (9) true. We should conclude that it's not just the comparison between fiction and reality that makes (9) tricky, for (10) is such a comparison but does not raise special problems. The notion of fame is playing some special role.

To get a better fix on this role, let's reduce to the simplest application of it:

11. Holmes is famous.

This can be understood in two ways. If we model it on "Holmes lived in Baker Street" then we need to regard it as false, since (in the early stories) Holmes was retiring and allowed the bumpkins at the Yard to take credit for his successes. The interesting understanding in the present context is as a supposedly literal and real-world sociological truth, one that underlies the truth of (9). The presupposition theorist might feel awkward about saying that (11) is true only under a presupposition that we ought not to believe, viz that there is such a person as Holmes. We have some inclination to take (11) to be true from the most austere perspective.

Can realists do better? If abstract objects can be famous (perhaps the US Constitution or the number pi would be non-fictional examples), then (11) can be straightforwardly true from their point of view. But (11) is intuitively very close to something that cannot be true for a realist:

## 12. Holmes is a famous detective.

This entails that Holmes is a detective, but no abstract object is that. So realists will have to treat (12) as not true from the most austere perspective. The contrast with their treatment of (11) is hard to motivate. By contrast, the non-realist treatment of neither as true from the most austere perspective seems more systematic.

I think we do need to acknowledge something strange about “famous”. Although the category of so-called intensional transitive verbs is familiar, there are also what one might term “intensional predicates”, and “famous” is one of them. Just as a sentence built from an intensional verb can be true when one of its terms, typically the second, fails to refer, so a sentence built from an intensional predicate can be true when its term fails to refer. If you believe there are intensional transitive verbs, you have to believe that there are intensional transitive predicates. If many people looked for the fountain of youth, then the fountain of youth was *much sought-after*. If people admire Holmes, then Holmes is *admired*. As these examples suggest, it is often the case that the explanation for this behavior on the part of a predicate is that it derives from an intensional transitive verb. “Famous” may not stand in quite this relation to a verb, but it is nonetheless closely related to activities to whose description intensional transitives are essential. The famous are often admired; they readily come to mind; they are often thought about in a suitably deferential way. The intensional transitive facts on which the application of “famous” depends do not require the existence of the famous thing. Hence we should not expect “famous” to require it either.

This enables us to reclassify (11) as true from the most austere perspective, not by appealing to presuppositions, but by appealing to specific semantic features of the central expression in question. With this in hand, we can return to (9) (“Holmes is more famous than any real detective”). Bearing in mind that it’s no doubt also true that Holmes is more famous than his side-kick, Dr Watson, we can classify (9) as true from the most austere perspective. We don’t need presuppositions. We need only recognize that, just as “famous” is an intensional predicate, “more famous than” is also intensional.

## 4. Conclusion

Let’s review what I hope to have accomplished. There are, of course, fictional characters and fictional detectives, but this fact does not lend support to the view that fictional characters are elements of our reality. Realists need to address some specific matters of how various idioms, notably “there are “ and “fictional” might

be supposed to operate, as set out in §2. When it comes to other arguments for realism, two main further resources available to non-realists were detailed: there is the role of presupposition, something important to non-fictional as well as to fictional discourse; and there is the role of intensional transitives (familiar) and intensional predicates (less familiar). These expressions can feature in truths in a way that does not involve commitment to corresponding entities. A successful road to realism needs to circumvent these barriers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> My thanks to Francesco Orilia for many helpful comments on an earlier draft.