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Philosophical Papers
Vol. 31, No. 2 (July 2002): 183-198

Abstract Artifacts in Pretence

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Abstract: In this paper I criticise a recent account of fictional discourse proposed by Nathan Salmon. Salmon invokes abstract artifacts as the referents of fictional names in both object- and meta-fictional discourse alike. He then invokes a theory of pretence to forge the requisite connection between object-fictional sentences and meta-fictional sentences, in virtue of which the latter can be assigned appropriate truth-values. I argue that Salmon's account of pretence renders his appeal to abstract artifacts as the referents of fictional names in object-fictional discourse explanatorily redundant. I further argue that his account is therefore no improvement over those he criticises, thus leaving his own account unmotivated.

Empty names pose a prima facie difficulty for the semantic doctrine of referentialism. According to referentialism names contribute their referents to the propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur.[1] It follows directly from this doctrine that if a name is empty, if it has no referent, sentences containing it fail to express complete propositions. It is then a short step to the further conclusion that such sentences are not truth-evaluable. Neither conclusion has seemed palatable. Sentences such as "Sherlock Holmes is a brilliant detective" and "There is no planet Vulcan" seem not only to express genuine propositions, but also to be true.[2] Despite this problem, however, and as Saul Kripke has argued at length, there are compelling reasons to accept one or another form of referentialism.[3]

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[1] I leave it open whether this is all they contribute. One might, for instance, rather think of a name as contributing an ordered pair containing the referent and its mode of presentation. See for instance Peacocke, 1981, where he deals with demonstratives in this way.

[2] The problem of empty names also arises for those such as McDowell according to whom names contribute de re senses to the propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur. A de re sense is one which exists only in so far as it has a referent. See for example McDowell, 1977, and 1984.

[3] See Kripke, 1972. The alternative would be to embrace some form of description theory of names. Description theories have traditionally, although not uncontroversially, been attributed both to Frege and to

Referentialists have typically sought to resolve the difficulty in one of two ways. The first strategy is to maintain that such apparently empty names are not really empty. This involves positing abstract artifacts or non-existent entities as the referents of such names.[4] The second is to offer an account of our apparent understanding of sentences in spite of the fact that they fail to express complete propositions.[5] It is not my concern in this paper to resolve these issues for the referentialist. I want instead to focus on Nathan Salmon's recent proposal of a particular referentialist analysis of fictional and mythical discourse. Salmon canvasses his view as "an offer [the referentialist] shouldn't refuse lightly"[6] in light of criticisms he levels at an alternative referentialist position he finds in the writings of Kripke, David Kaplan, and Peter Van Inwagen.[7] In this paper I argue that Salmon's position is unmotivated, and that it fails to improve on that of Kripke, Kaplan, and Van Inwagen. Indeed, Salmon's own account either serves to vindicate the position of his referentialist adversaries, or falls prey to a criticism very similar to that which he levels against those adversaries.

The position Salmon identifies in Kripke, Kaplan, and Van Inwagen can be crudely characterised by what I call *the asymmetry thesis*. According to the asymmetry thesis there is an asymmetry between the semantic treatment of apparent empty names as they occur *within* works of fiction (in object-fictional sentences) and the semantic treatment of apparent empty names as they occur *outside* those works of fiction (in meta-fictional sentences). In their object-fictional occurrence apparent empty names are indeed empty. In their meta-fictional occurrence, in contrast, they are not really empty at all; they refer to fictional characters conceived as abstract theoretical entities. The abstract theoretical entities are required, it is thought, to account for the truth-evaluability of meta-fictional sentences. Thus, for example, Van Inwagen maintains that certain sentences of literary

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Russell. See also Searle, 1958. For a description theory of names within a fictional context see Currie, 1990.

[4] For an endorsement of the appeal to abstract artifacts not referred to in the body of the text see Thomasson, 1999. For a thorough defence of the coherence of the view that empty names refer to non-existent objects see Parsons, 1980.

[5] See for example Kroon, 1994a and 1994b; Walton, 1990; and Zelta, 1988.

[6] Salmon 1998: 302. See also Salmon, 2002.

[7] Kripke, 1972, Kaplan, 1973, and Van Inwagen, 1977.

criticism are truth-evaluable and yet they cannot be paraphrased in such a way as to avoid quantification over characters of fiction. Van Inwagen's appeal to abstract artifacts as the referents of apparent empty names in meta-fictional sentences is explicitly motivated by an application of Quine's criterion of ontological commitment. Van Inwagen gives as an example of such a sentence, "There are characters in some 19th-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any 18th-century novel".[8] Sentences within fiction, on the other hand, are assumed to be neither true nor false. Of Dickens's description of Mrs. Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewhit* as "a fat old woman … with a husky voice" Van Inwagen writes,

> if someone had been looking over Dickens's shoulder when Dickens was writing … , and had said to him, 'No, no, you've got her all wrong. She is quite thin, about twenty-four, and her voice is melodious', this would simply have made no sense.[9]

If this is correct, no account of the truth-evaluability of sentences within fiction is needed, and hence no abstract theoretical entities need serve as the referents of empty terms as they occur in object-fictional sentences, within works of fiction. The asymmetry thesis is thus partially grounded in our inclination to say that meta-fiction is sometimes true whereas object-fiction is not.[10]

The fundamental question is how the existence of abstract theoretical entities can account for the truth-evaluability of meta-fictional sentences. The problem is this: when literary critics assert that Mrs. Gamp was old, fat, and fond of gin, we want to maintain that they do so truly. However, abstract theoretical entities are simply the wrong kinds of things to have such properties. The assertions cannot, therefore, be straightforwardly true. Some account of their truth must be forthcoming. And one is naturally tempted to look to

[8] Van Inwagen, 1977: 302

[9] Van Inwagen, 1977: 301.

[10] I am here concerned with just those sentences that contain apparent empty names. I therefore leave to one side the case of sentences within fiction which are clearly true. Examples abound in historical novels.

a connection between what the meta-fictional sentences of the literary critics assert and the object-fictional sentences that comprise the relevant fiction.

Van Inwagen's strategy is to re-construe certain meta-fictional sentences as saying that the fictional characters concerned are *ascribed* those properties at certain places in the literary works concerned. This is clearly not meant as an analysis of all such meta-fictional sentences, but only a certain subset of them. Thus the meta-fictional sentences "Mrs. Gamp is a character in a novel", "Mrs. Gamp is a theoretical entity of literary criticism", and "Mrs. Gamp was created by Dickens", are all true sentences that wear their logical forms on their sleeves, so to speak. Mrs. Gamp, the abstract artifact, can indeed have these properties. In contrast, the logical form of the meta-fictional sentence "According to the fiction, Mrs. Gamp was fat" is given as "$(\exists x)$A(fatness, Mrs. Gamp, x)", where "A(x, y, z)" denotes the 3-place relation of ascription between a property, a creature of fiction, and a place in a work of fiction.[11]

By way of elucidation, Van Inwagen claims that his reconstrual of such meta-fictional sentences is analogous to the Cartesian Dualist's reconstrual of "John is six foot tall and has dark hair" as "John *animates a body* that is six foot tall and has dark hair". Thus the dualist's distinction between having a property, on the one hand, and animating a body which has a property, on the other, is taken to parallel Van Inwagen's distinction between having a property and having a property ascribed to one in a work of fiction. The analogy, however, is not an entirely happy one. In so far as we can understand the sentence "John is animating a body which is six foot tall", we can do so only because we know what it is for a body to have the property of being a certain height. That is, the original sentence is truth-evaluable because there is some appropriately related thing that has the properties that it says John has, namely his body. In contrast, there is nothing appropriately related to Mrs. Gamp (the abstract artifact) that *has* the properties that are ascribed to her in the novel. Any understanding of the ascription relation would, it seems, rely on something like the following principle: it is true that a property is ascribed to a fictional character at a place in a work of fiction if and only if there is at that place a sentence which says of that character that it has that property.

[11] The question how to conceive of <u>places</u> within works of fiction is a further related difficulty which I set to one side for present purposes.

And this is where Salmon's criticism takes hold. According to Salmon's understanding of proponents of the asymmetry thesis, sentences in novels are not about anything, and hence do not *say of* anything that they have certain properties. What we were after was an account of the truth of meta-fictional sentences such as "According to the fiction, Mrs. Gamp was fat", but looking to what is said within the fiction will not help us if we are also to assume that nothing is said within the fiction. He writes,

> On the account provided by Kaplan, Kripke, and van Inwagen, object-fictional sentences, like 'Sherlock Holmes plays the violin', have no genuine semantic content in their original use. This renders the meaningfulness of true meta-fictional sentences like 'According to the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, Holmes plays the violin' problematic and mysterious. … If object-fictional sentences … express nothing and only pretend to express things, how can they be true with respect … to the fiction, and how can meta-fictional sentences involving object-fictional subordinate clauses express anything at all, let alone something true?[12]

Salmon thus claims that any position characterised by the asymmetry thesis will be unsatisfactory. Not only will it be unable to account for the truth of any given meta-fictional sentence, but it will be unable to account for the very meaningfulness, and hence truth-evaluability of any such sentence.[13] He proposes to resolve the difficulty by providing object-fictional sentences with propositional content, thereby rejecting the asymmetry thesis. Accordingly he countenances the existence of fictional characters conceived as abstract theoretical entities and maintains that they are the referents of apparent empty names in both object- and meta-fictional contexts alike. Thus we need no longer pretend that object-fictional sentences express propositions; such sentences actually do so. In the remainder of this paper I will examine Salmon's alternative referentialist proposal and argue that his account of his own position undermines the motivation for holding it. Salmon thus fails to improve on the asymmetry thesis proposed by Kripke, Kaplan, and Van Inwagen.

[12] Salmon, 1998: 297-8.

[13] I neither endorse nor reject Salmon's criticism here; I simply note it.

For the moment, let us examine Salmon's further reasons for rejecting the asymmetry thesis. Salmon writes,

> One need not claim … that a name like 'Sherlock Holmes' is ambiguous. In particular, there is no obvious necessity to posit a use of the name by Conan Doyle and his readers that is non-referring (in any sense) and somehow prior to its [meta-fictional] use as a name for the fictional character and upon which the latter use is parasitic.[14]

Salmon's nominal target here is Kripke, who explicitly claims that names such as "Sherlock Holmes" are ambiguous.[15] However, we would do well to distinguish the asymmetry thesis from what we may call the *ambiguity thesis*. The former states that names in their object-fictional occurrence and names in their meta-fictional occurrence should not be treated as semantically alike. The latter states that a name is semantically ambiguous as between its object-fictional occurrence and its meta-fictional occurrence. Salmon does not argue against the asymmetry thesis directly, but instead argues against the ambiguity thesis. This is an important point to bear in mind given that the theses are not equivalent. Salmon, then, provides two reasons for rejecting the ambiguity thesis. The first is a general methodological consideration. He writes, "[o]nce fictional characters have been countenanced as real entities, why hold onto an alleged use of their names that fails to refer to them?".[16] This rhetorical question, however, misses the mark. To say that proponents of the asymmetry thesis are holding on to an alleged use of "their" (the fictional characters') names that fails to refer to them is clearly question-begging. In fact, it relies on the assumption that fictional and meta-fictional uses of names are semantically alike – i.e. precisely the assumption that the asymmetry theorist rejects.

The second consideration is taken to be more decisive. Salmon writes,

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[14] Salmon, 1998: 298.

[15] Kripke, 1972.

[16] Salmon, 1998: 298.

> a name semantically refers to this or that individual only relative to a particular kind of use, a particular purpose for which the name was introduced. … a pretend use by itself does not even give rise to a real name at all… . The problem with saying that 'Sherlock Holmes' is nonreferring on Conan Doyle's use is that in merely pretending that the name had a particular use, no real use was yet attached to the name on which it may be said to refer or not to refer.[17]

The force of this second consideration again rests on the relation between the asymmetry thesis and the ambiguity thesis. I take it that a commitment to the asymmetry thesis does not entail a commitment to the ambiguity thesis, since there is no reason to suppose, consistent with the asymmetry thesis, that names as used within works of fiction have any real use "on which [they] may be said to refer or not to refer".[18] To repeat, the asymmetry thesis states that meta-fictional sentences but not object-fictional sentences incur a commitment to fictional characters. The ambiguity thesis states that a name is ambiguous as between its use in meta-fictional sentences and its use in object-fictional sentences. If this is right, then Salmon's second consideration, just like the first, does not establish that the asymmetry thesis should be rejected. In effect, Salmon's point here could be taken to be terminological, construed simply as an objection to employing the expression "use of a name" broadly to encompass utterances of referring names and pseudo-utterances of sounds that are not yet names, not even pretend names. It is consistent with a name's having only one use that object-fictional sentences and meta-fictional sentences be treated differently in regard to their ontological commitments. [19]

It would seem, then, that the main consideration, indeed perhaps the only consideration against the asymmetry thesis, is that it leaves us with no account of how the sentences of literary criticism could be truth-evaluable, since it leaves us with no satisfactory account of the relation between object-fictional and meta-fictional sentences. The various considerations Salmon offers against the asymmetry thesis at root depend

[17] Salmon, 1998: 299.

[18] Salmon, 1998: 299.

[19] When Kripke claims that names such as 'Sherlock Holmes' are ambiguous, however, there is reason to think he has the asymmetry thesis explicitly in mind.

upon the fundamental consideration of accounting for the apparent truth-evaluability of meta-fictional sentences. It is with regard to this consideration that I contend Salmon's view fails to improve on that characterised by the asymmetry thesis.

Salmon's preferred account is given in the following passage.

> It seems at least as reasonable … to claim instead that once the name 'Sherlock Holmes' has been imported into genuine discourse, Conan Doyle's sentences involving the name express singular propositions about his character. … To say this is not to say that Conan Doyle asserted those propositions. He did not – at least not in any sense of 'assert' that involves a commitment to one's assertions. He merely pretended to be Dr. Watson asserting those propositions. In so doing, Conan Doyle pretended (and his readers pretend) that the propositions are true propositions about a real man, not untrue propositions about an abstract artifact. That is exactly what it is to pretend to assert those propositions. To assert a proposition, in this sense, is in part to commit oneself to its truth; so to pretend to assert a proposition is to pretend to commit oneself to its truth. And the propositions in question entail that Holmes was not an abstract entity, but a flesh-and-blood detective. Taken literally, they are untrue.[20]

Literary works, then, according to Salmon, comprise sentences that express genuine propositions, but the propositions expressed are largely false. They are largely false because, as already noted, abstract theoretical entities are not the kinds of things that could be male, musicians, or brilliant detectives. Whether this is a counterintuitive consequence of the theory can be left to one side for the moment. Consider instead the answer the theory must give to the fundamental question, namely: how are the meta-fictional sentences rendered truth-evaluable? Salmon's thought is presumably this. If object-fictional sentences express propositions which concern the very same fictional characters as the corresponding meta-fictional sentences, the latter could be true or false in virtue of the supposed truth or falsity of the former.

[20] Salmon, 1998: 301.

It would be tempting to think that positing the same abstract artifacts as the referents of fictional names in both object-fictional and meta-fictional sentences alike would suffice to account for the truth-evaluability of the latter. However, matters are not so simple. It will be remembered that, according to Salmon, the object-fictional sentences are by and large false. The question then becomes: how, if the object-fictional sentence "Sherlock Holmes plays the violin" is false, could the meta-fictional sentence "According to the fiction, Sherlock Holmes plays the violin" be true? This is where Salmon's story of pretence enters the picture. The object-fictional sentence "Sherlock Holmes plays the violin" expresses a proposition which (i) concerns an abstract artifact, and (ii) is false. When we consider the meta-fictional sentence, we are required to reflect on the two levels of pretence corresponding to each of (i) and (ii). First, we pretend that the object-fictional sentence it embeds expresses a proposition which concerns a real man rather than an abstract artifact. Second, we pretend that this proposition has a certain truth-value which it may not have. The truth-values of certain of the meta-fictional sentences of literary criticism then depend on these two levels of pretence concerning the propositions expressed by object-fictional sentences. The pretence, then, occurs at the object-fictional level. A meta-fictional sentence of the form "In fiction F, p" is then true if and only if in order to understand F we are to pretend that the sentences that comprise F express true propositions about real people, and one such sentence is "p". Thus the truth of certain meta-fictional sentences depends upon the specific kinds of pretence with which one is supposed to engage if one is to understand the fictional work.[21]

At first glance the second level of pretence seems straightforward enough. There is nothing peculiar about pretending that a proposition has a certain truth-value other than the one it has – for instance, that the proposition that I'm on the beach in California is true rather than false. Such is what plays and daydreams are made of. However, while such examples are straightforward and easy to come by, they do not seem to provide a good analogy for Salmon to appeal to. Try pretending that the following sentence expresses a true proposition: "The number two is a man who likes to play croquet". It is

[21] Matters will not, of course, be so straightforward. Salmon restricts his attention simply to meta-fictional sentences of the form 'According to fiction F, p'.

not clear we really have any idea how to do this. [22] And yet Salmon's second level of pretence is more closely modelled by the latter kind of example than by the former, more mundane kind. Fictional characters are, after all, abstract entities. The idea that we could pretend that the proposition expressed by "Sherlock Holmes is a man" is true seems to trade on something other than our ability to pretend that the proposition it expresses is true.

But perhaps this is unfair. Perhaps Salmon's picture becomes plausible once we consider both levels of pretence together (where, to repeat, the two levels of pretence concern the understanding of the object-fictional sentences). In addition to pretending that the propositions expressed by certain sentences are true, then, we need to pretend that "Sherlock Holmes" refers to a real man rather than an abstract artifact. Here we are faced with two options. According to the first, to pretend that "Sherlock Holmes" refers to a real man rather than an abstract artifact is to pretend that certain propositions concerning Sherlock Holmes are true; for instance, the proposition expressed by the sentence "Sherlock Holmes is a man". On this view, however, there is simply no distinction between the two levels of pretence, and we are left with the problem outlined in the previous paragraph. According to the second, to pretend that "Sherlock Holmes" refers to a real man is to pretend that there exists a man to whom we refer by the use of "Sherlock Holmes". However, if we endorse this option the fact that Sherlock Holmes is an abstract artifact becomes explanatorily redundant.

It is instructive to see just why the second of these options is unavailable to Salmon; that is, to see why the second type of pretence renders Salmon's appeal to abstract artifacts as the referents of fictional names in object-fictional sentences explanatorily redundant. Intuitively, pretending comes in two varieties. A child can pretend that she has a magic wand, or she can pretend that something in particular, her pencil, say, is a magic wand. Intuitively the latter but not the former of these involves an object (in this case the

[22] I am assuming for illustrative purposes that the number two is an abstract object. Those who are unhappy with the thought that numbers are abstract objects can substitute in the name of something they do consider to be an abstract object. Those who deny the existence of abstract objects will already have reason to reject both the asymmetry thesis and Salmon's alternative account, but my claim that Salmon's account is subject to the criticism he levels against the asymmetry thesis still stands.

pencil). Salmon's account appears to preclude this distinction. Every *prima facie* instance of pretending that an object exists turns out to be, if Salmon's account is correct, a case of pretending that a particular object has certain properties that it does not have. Thus to pretend that I have a magic wand is to create an abstract artifact which is then such that I pretend *it* is a magic wand. This provides an independent reason for thinking that Salmon's account of pretence is implausible. In the absence of an argument to the contrary, there is no reason to suppose that we could not simply pretend that there existed a man named "Sherlock Holmes", without this committing us to creating an abstract artifact that we pretend is a man.

In a footnote, Salmon draws a distinction between pretending *de dicto* and pretending *de re*. He writes,

> In reading a piece of fiction, do we pretend that an abstract entity is a prince of Denmark (or a brilliant detective, etc.)? The question is legitimate. But it plays on the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re*. Taken *de dicto*, of course not; taken *de re*, exactly. That abstract entities are human beings is not something we pretend, but there are abstract entities that we pretend are human beings.[23]

But it is not clear how this distinction is supposed to help. The *de re* / *de dicto* distinction can be treated, crudely speaking, in one of two ways. First, one could think of the distinction as marking out a distinction between kinds of thought.[24] On this view, *de dicto* thoughts are taken to involve a purely conceptual relation between thinker and object, whereas *de re* thoughts are taken to involve essentially, and in addition to any conceptual relation that may obtain, a further non-conceptual relation between thinker and object. On this view, elements of the content of a given *de re* thought will not by themselves determine which object the thought concerns; some non-conceptual relation between the thinker and the *res* must be involved. In the case of abstract artifacts, however, it is unclear what this extra non-conceptual relation could consist in. It could not, for example, be a perceptual relation, such as would serve to connect basic perceptual demonstrative

[23] Salmon, 1998: 316 fn. 45.

[24] See for instance Burge, 1977.

thoughts, conceived on this model, with their objects. Nor can there be a non-question-begging appeal to contexts that invoke relations to other supposed fictional characters. We are owed some account of what makes a particular abstract object the one relevant to the truth-conditions of any given object-fictional sentence. Presumably such an account would be given in terms of the relation between, say, the author, or the fiction, and the fictional character concerned. However, it is hard to see what this account would be. The alternative would be to think that there is no such distinction among kinds of thought, maintaining instead a distinction merely between *de re attributions* and *de dicto attributions* of a single kind of thought. This may have been what Salmon had in mind. However, even if there is no distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* thoughts, we are still owed an account of how a given abstract artifact enters into the truth-conditions of a given thought.

Let us return to the main line of argument. Salmon, then, appears to be committed to the claim that every failure to refer to a concrete entity is in fact a case of referring to (and oftentimes creating) an abstract artifact.[25] This is borne out by the fact that Salmon's general position yields an ontology of abstract artifacts that contains not just fictional characters but much more besides. Thus Salmon categorises failed theories and myths with literary works, and argues that Vulcan exists, although it is, of course, not a planet, and that witches exist, although as abstract artifacts they are unlikely to engage in the kinds of mischief for which they were once thought to be responsible.[26]

It is not, however, Salmon's robust ontology with which I have here taken issue. Rather, my concern has been to show that Salmon's account of pretence as a necessary feature of one's understanding of fiction renders his appeal to abstract artifacts as the referents of fictional names in object-fictional discourse explanatorily redundant. This is not to say that the appeal to abstract artifacts as the referents of fictional names in meta-

[25] Salmon does admit that there are exceptions – supposed uses of supposed names which do not refer, either to physical objects or to abstract artifacts, but he thinks they are "rare – and bizarre" (Salmon, 1998: 306).

[26] The principle difference between myth and fiction is, according to Salmon, that a myth is believed whereas fictions involve pretence. I have for the purposes of brevity largely ignored the differences here. They do not affect the argument.

fictional contexts will be explanatorily redundant, but this is a claim that the asymmetry thesis already endorses. Salmon invokes his theory of pretence to forge the requisite connection between object-fictional sentences and meta-fictional sentences, in virtue of which the latter can be assigned appropriate truth-values. However, I have argued that his theory of pretence does not require the existence of abstract artifacts; indeed, that it renders them explanatorily redundant. Hence, Salmon faces the following dilemma. Either his theory of pretence provides an account of the truth-evaluability of meta-fictional sentences, or it does not. If it does, the asymmetry theorist can appeal to the theory of pretence Salmon lays out without incurring a commitment to abstract artifacts as the referents of fictional names in object-fictional discourse. Consequently, his rejection of the asymmetry thesis fails and his own account is unmotivated. On the other hand, if the theory of pretence does not provide the requisite connection between the object-fictional and meta-fictional sentences according to which the latter can be assigned appropriate truth-values, Salmon's theory fails by his own lights, since it doesn't satisfactorily explain the truth-evaluability of meta-fictional sentences. Either way, Salmon's theory is no improvement over those of Kripke, Kaplan, and Van Inwagen. To emphasise, the fact that the same set of abstract artifacts serve as the referents of fictional names in both object-fictional and meta-fictional sentences alike does not itself suffice to yield an account which assigns the appropriate truth-values to the latter. It is Salmon's theory of pretence which he invokes to serve this purpose; but his theory of pretence need not incur a commitment to abstract artifacts.

In conclusion, Salmon fails to provide a superior account of fictional discourse than that provided by the various asymmetry theorists. The theories of Kripke, Kaplan, and Van Inwagen are therefore still in good standing. Whether the asymmetry theory is itself ultimately plausible will turn on whether it is right to think that certain meta-fictional sentences incur a commitment to the existence of fictional characters. This in turn will depend on whether there is an adequate extension of the theory of pretence to the meta-fictional level. This topic will have to await treatment on another occasion.[27]

[27] With thanks to Jack Bricke, Robin LePoidevin, and David Ryan for forcing me to clarify the presentation of my argument.

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