

Fanfiction, Canon, and Possible Worlds

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“It is a remarkable fact that writing and reading as well as talking and writing about fiction proceed so smoothly”
[Jacquette, 2003, 115].

1 Philosophical theories of fiction

Jacquette is right: it *is* remarkable how, as a general rule, we interact so easily with fiction, not only in reading and writing and talking about it, but also viewing it. (In fact, if one isn’t a philosopher, one may never have *any trouble whatsoever interacting with fiction*—this sort of worry is the sort that often only philosophers have!). While non-existent objects pose special problems for compositional semantics, as [Frege, 2001] demonstrates, we routinely make statements about non-existent objects such as Santa Claus, Sherlock Holmes, and Pegasus—indeed, reading philosophical work on non-existent or fictional objects in the last half a century, one gets the impression that Santa Claus, Sherlock Holmes, and Pegasus are the only fictional objects out there. Furthermore, the statements we make about these fictional objects are understandable even if it is not immediately clear whether or how they are truth-evaluable. Few people are willing to admit that we cannot make true and false predications about non-existent objects, and fewer still to admit that such predications are meaningless. This gives rise to a central desideratum for a philosophical account of fiction (or fictional discourse, or fictional objects): That it make sense of this intuition that predications about fictional objects are meaningful, and, at least in some cases, truth-evaluable or truth-apt. (Note that truth-aptness requires meaningfulness, but not necessarily the other way around.)

Here we can see motivation for a number of philosophical questions that are standardly asked about fiction:

- Metaphysics: What are non-existent objects, such as Santa Claus, Sherlock Holmes, Pegasus?
- Epistemology: How do we know things about them?

- Language: How do we say meaningful (and true!) things about them?

And not only can we ask these things about fictional objects, but about fictional stories themselves more generally, moving beyond questions of language to questions of metaphysics and epistemology—what are fictional stories, and how can we know things about them?

But after we've asked these questions, and tried to answer them, it's important to realise that questions of fiction are not *merely* questions about non-existent objects. There is an epistemic dimension to fictional objects—the fact that we know that fictional objects are fictional—that is an important way of distinguishing fictional objects from (merely) non-existent ones, many of which may be believed to exist. [Crane, 2013] labels these two different classes of non-existent objects as 'fiction(al) objects' (which do not exist and are known not to exist) and 'error objects' (which do not exist but may be believed to exist). Thus it is an epistemic dimension that distinguishes fictional objects from error objects, not a metaphysical or ontological one. We may believe that error objects exist, but we are mistaken, or in error, in doing so. As soon as we learn that an object is an error object, it ceases to become one and instead becomes a fictional object. Thus, ether, or the planet Vulcan, are error objects only in so far as we do not know (or believe) that they are error objects. This epistemological distinction means that we should differentiate philosophical accounts of fiction from philosophical accounts of non-existent objects more generally: there must be more to accounts of *fiction* than simply an explanation of *non-existence*.

Furthermore, making (meaningful, truth-evaluable) predications about non-existent objects is not the only philosophical way that we interact with fiction, and the reason we are interested in asking the epistemological and metaphysical questions too is not merely for their own sake but because of how the answers to those questions have an impact on more than just talk about non-existent objects. Thus any adequate account of fiction and fictional objects will involve not only theories of language and meaning, but also of ontology and epistemology [D'Alessandro, 2016, 53]. There are numerous puzzles specific to fictional contexts that we can then ask our metaphysical, epistemological, and linguistic theories to say something about. For instance, the metaphysics of fictional objects should be able to explain the paradox of fictional emotion [Radford, 1975, Walton, 1978], wherein we seem to feel genuine emotions to things that we know do not exist. We can also, for example, ask that theories accounting for the meaningfulness of discourse about fictional objects should also say something about the meaningfulness of fictional (constructed) languages ([Uckelman and Chan, 2016]), or wonder how it is that fictional characters maintain their identity across different media [Sandgren, 2016].

But we should desire more from our philosophical theories of fiction than simply an account of the ontology and epistemology of fiction objects, coupled with a theory of meaning that allows us to make meaningful or perhaps even truth-evaluable claims about these objects, because these accounts alone do not shed light onto one of the most fundamental features of fiction, which is that it is *constructed*. It is in consideration of this important feature that we, in this paper, consider a fictional phenomenon which has, to date, been largely ignored in philosophical contexts: Fanfiction.¹ The study of fanfiction from a

¹Scholarly discussions of fanfic are generally found in media and cultural studies, and to a lesser extent in literature and narrative studies, cf., e.g., [Busse and Hellekson, 2006,

philosophical point of view raises a number of questions: What is fanfiction? What distinguishes it from ordinary fiction? How can we make sense of what is going on when people create and interact with fanfiction?

Beyond addressing some of these questions raised above in the current paper, we want to motivate the more general claim that fanfiction—and indeed all of fandom—is something that philosophers should be interested in analysing them. In preparing this paper, we were quite struck by the fact that fanfiction as a topic for academic consideration first showed up among sociologists (especially in media and cultural studies) around about 2000, where people focused on fanfiction as a *social phenomenon*. About a decade later is when literature scholars took up the idea of analysing fanfics using the same tools of analysis of so-called “literary texts” (as if fanfic is not itself literary!). By my calculations, this makes 2020 the right time for philosophers to come onto the scene and pick up the interesting—and distinctive—philosophical questions that fanfiction and fandom provide!

In the scope of the present paper we cannot give a comprehensive philosophical account of fanfic. Instead, we aim to provide a starting point for further discussions, namely, looking at two competing accounts of fanfiction—the derivative or dependent account and the constitutive account—and argue that these competing views parallel two competing ways in which a possible worlds account of fiction can be fleshed out, namely, Lewis’s modal realist account and Kripke’s stipulative view. The existence of these parallels is not merely interesting in its own right, but we will argue further that its existence provides us with a test of adequacy for the possible worlds accounts: It is worthless to provide a philosophical account of the theoretical foundations of fiction if such an account doesn’t coordinate with the actual practice and production of fiction. A philosophical theory of fiction which mischaracterizes or fails to explain aspects of the practice of fiction—including the production and consumption of fanfiction—cannot be an adequate theory.

We begin in section 2 by laying out the basic definitions of concepts important for understanding fanfic, in particular the notions of canon and authority that must be explicated in order to even define fanfiction, and highlighting philosophically relevant aspects. We are particularly interested in whether fanfictions are best viewed as *derivative of* or *dependent on* their ‘parent’ fictions or as (at least partially) *constitutive* of those fictions. In section 3, we consider two versions of the possible worlds approach to fiction, namely those of [Lewis, 1978] and [Kripke, 1980], and show to what extent these theories make sense of the notions of canon and authority, and to what extent they accord with actual practices of fanfiction, taking into account both producers and consumers. In particular we argue that if one takes a dependent view of fanfiction, one should be inclined to adopt a Lewisian account, while proponents of a constitutive account are pushed towards a Kripkean account. Ultimately, however, neither of these accounts is entirely satisfactory, and we conclude in section 4 by outlining ways in which these drawbacks can potentially be ameliorated and ways we hope to see the present work built upon.

Thomas, 2011, Jamison, 2013]. The only specifically philosophical treatment we have found—[Cook, 2013]—addresses the topic obliquely. Even the numerous books connected to literary fiction in the very prolific Popular Culture and Philosophy Series contain almost no discussion of the phenomenon.

2 What is fanfiction?

Before we can say anything about what philosophical theories of fiction have to say about fanfic, we need to first say what we mean by this term. As Thomas defines it,

The term *fanfiction* (sometimes abbreviated as *fanfic*) refers to stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a ‘canon’ of works; these fan-created narratives often take the pre-existing storyworld in a new, sometimes bizarre, direction ([Thomas, 2011, 1]; cf. [Black, 2007, 385]).

That is, fanfiction is both *fiction*—it covers “texts available in the Internet which cannot be considered literature proper, but which incorporation in literary analysis would expand the boundaries of traditional literature” [Viires, 2005, 162]—and it is *fan-driven*, comprised of “texts created as a so-called pseudo-sequel to a book, comic book, *anime*, television series or a movie, which is... created by... fans” [Viires, 2005, 162–163]; both of these aspects are essential. Fanfiction is “a subgenre of a larger, older genre of literature that is generally called ‘derivative’ or ‘appropriative’” [Derecho, 2006, 63], and in recent years it has increasingly become an online, Internet-based phenomenon.² Fanfic is a part of a broader fan-based phenomenon generally referred to as “fandom”, which encompasses not only fanfic but also cosplay, game modding, vidding (“an art in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music to make an argument or tell a story”, [Coppa, 2009, 108], and other activities.

We cannot do justice to the breadth of this huge swathe of diverse phenomenon in a single article, and do not attempt to. For the purposes of this article, we are interested in fanfic produced in connection with 20th and 21st century works, primarily (but not exclusively) written fanfic in the science fiction and fantasy genre. It is natural to take this circumscribed approach to fanfiction given that the 1920s and 1930s represent a distinct turning point in the history of fanfic [Thomas, 2011, 1]; [Viires, 2005, 163–164], when a proliferation of fanzines came into existence. It follows that we exclude from the present analysis visual fanfic, e.g., comic-books and films; the interesting connections between Live-Action Role-Playing (LARP) stories and fanfic; and considerations of what historical examples of fiction can and cannot count as “fanfic” (See [Derecho, 2006] and [Mac Cana, 1980] for examples of historical “fanfiction”).³—not because these are not fascinating and complicated questions in their own right, but only because when beginning an investigation it makes sense to start with a small and well-defined phenomenon rather than embracing everything. If we can present an understanding of a narrow slice of fanfic, then we will be in a position to extend the analysis to these further topics.

A central concept required to understand the creation of fanfic and how its authors and consumers interact with it is the concept of *canon*, which includes “the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters” [Busse and Hellekson, 2006, 9] and which “may encompass film

²For a good history of the move of fandom from print to online media, see the introduction of [Busse and Hellekson, 2006].

³For instance, it has been suggested that Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is merely “Bible fanfiction”; and one philosopher from Stirling tickled my fancy greatly by suggesting that perhaps all of Aristotelian commentary could be understood as fanfiction!

adaptations of a text, interviews with the author or cast, and even merchandising and marketing” [Thomas, 2011, 8]. Without a canon, there can be no fanfic, for without some antecedently created story, there is nothing for fans to become fans of, and thus nothing to make what they write *fanfiction* as opposed to just ordinary fiction. Authors of fanfic are motivated by a desire to return “to familiar storyworlds and characters time after time” and to have “both ‘more of’ and ‘more from’ the fictional worlds they endlessly revisit” [Thomas, 2011, 7]. By starting from an already existing story, characters, or world, authors of fanfic produce what has been called “transformative works”, which “take existing artifacts and add to or alter them to create a new message or meaning” [Busse, 2009, 104]. This transformative aspect is closely connected to issues of canon, for canon puts constraints on how much the original material can be transformed and still be “the same” material, in some suitable sense.

The existence of canon is “particularly important for the creators of fan texts because they are judged on how well they stick to or depart from canon” [Busse and Hellekson, 2006, 10]; cf. [Pearson, 2003, 3], even though “fans have always disregarded aspects of the books that are unequivocally canonical if they interfere with the stories fans want to create” [Tosenberger, 2008, 201]. This disregard illustrates one of the complications in giving an adequate account of what can count as canon: Canon itself is dependent on a notion of authority, in so far as there must be someone (or some ones) who can arbitrate what is and what is not canon, but this authority doesn’t always lie in the original author or creator. Not only can aspects of the original story can be ignored or dispensed with (as Tosenberger notes), the author can herself accept an outside source as an authority on some aspect of her story. We highlight two examples of this happening. The first is J.K. Rowling’s assenting to a specific fanfic interpretation of Professor Dumbledore’s sexual orientation. After this “bombshell”, “journalists and fans debated the ‘canonicity’ of Dumbledore’s homosexuality. Journalist Jeffrey Weiss claimed, ‘If you didn’t put it in the books, please don’t tell us now,’ a view echoed by some fans” [Tosenberger, 2008, 201]. Another example is [Peterson, 2015] construction of the Dothraki language for use not only in the “Game of Thrones” TV series but also in G.R.R. Martin’s *Song of Fire and Ice* books, an example we discuss further below.

The complicated relationship between author, canon, and authority is manifested in another concept closely related to canon, namely that of *fanon*. Fanon can be characterised in a number of different ways, as “the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext” [Busse and Hellekson, 2006, 9], “the process whereby over time certain plot or character elements become established within the fan community—even when those elements never appeared in the source text, or radically depart from it” [Thomas, 2011, 8–9], or “the noncanonical knowledge about a source text, [which] is the sum of the community’s shared interpretive acts” [Kaplan, 2006, 136]. On such an account, fanon is an essentially constructive phenomenon, the result of a performative act. The line between canon and fanon is, unsurprisingly, a blurry one, and some have argued that it is possible for elements of fanon to cross the line into canon. (One proposed example is Colin Firth’s wet shirt scene in the 1995 BBC production of “Pride and Prejudice” [Thomas, 2011, 8], which turns up in many post-1995 adaptations of the story.)

It is important, though, that not every story that is consistent with the original story is eligible to become canon. How fanfic becomes canon is in large

part a social process—whereby sufficient agreement that the story is canon is engendered—but even without considering the social dimension to the determination of what can become canon, it is still possible to say that certain fanfics are simply not eligible. Looking at how people interact with fanfic show that the producers of it do not have free choice (“fans debate and even police elements of the canon, for example by complaining that a story is OOC (Out of Character)” [Thomas, 2011, 8]). [Cook, 2013] offers five observations on the canon/non-canon divide [272–273] which help illustrate the constraints on what can and cannot be canon:

1. some noncanonical works are *interpretationally* relevant;⁴
2. the canon versus noncanon distinction is *sensitive to medium*;⁵
3. canonicity practices are, at least partially, *political* and *commercial*;⁶
4. canonicity practices are *dynamic* and *negotiable*: a work is not eternally canonical;⁷
5. canonicity practices are *participatory*.⁸

The participatory aspects of canonicity practices are just the flip side of the fact that fanfic is transformative of its parent canon, a fact which is perhaps the defining feature of fanfic, distinguishing it from other types of fiction or genres of literature.

But to say that fanfic is “transformative” is not to say anything about what type of transformation is involved: What are we transforming? And how are we transforming it? There is no consensus on these questions.

One way to transform a work is by taking what already exists and changing it. Such a view makes fanfic essentially derivative in nature, “a genre fundamentally based on artistic appropriation” and “a form of cultural production that is *essentially derivative*” [de Kosnick, 2009, 120, emphasis added]. When one is writing fanfic, one is not generating something *new* or *novel*, in some relevant (though rarely specified) sense. Unfortunately, calling fanfic ‘derivative’ brings in unnecessarily pejorative overtones. We would like to reject ‘derivative’ as a useful label due to its negative connotations, and instead offer ‘dependent’ as an alternative way to describe the view that fanfic essentially depends on the canon both for its existence *tout court* and for its existence as *fanfic*.

Another way to transform a work is to add to it, to participate in the building of the world in which it is considered to exist. We can view this type of transformation as constructive or constitutive and contrast it with the view of fanfic as derivative. The constructive aspects of fanfic are often noted: “fan academics have begun to think of the entirety of fan fiction in a given fannish

⁴That is, noncanonical works can help us understand what is going on in the canon—such an account helps make clear how it is we could understand commentaries on the Aristotelian canon as a type of fanfiction!

⁵For instance, what counts as Game of Thrones canon may differ depending on whether you’re discussing the books or the TV series.

⁶Large corporations have a vested interest in policing what counts as canonical in, e.g., the Star Wars universe.

⁷For instance, the rebranding of the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe as *Star Wars Legends* and made non-canonical in 2014 [Anonymous, 2014].

⁸Without people agreeing that something is canon, there is no canon.

universe as a work in progress. This *fantext*, the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom (or even in a pairing or genre), offers an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of the characters” [Busse and Hellekson, 2006, 7], and forces us to view texts not as “static, isolated objects” but as “story-worlds [that] are generated and experienced within specific social and cultural environments that are subject to constant change” [Thomas, 2011, 6]. Some even consider this ‘work-in-progress’ aspect of fanfiction to be central to it [Busse and Hellekson, 2006, 7], [Thomas, 2011, 9].

These two ways of viewing fanfic—as being essentially dependent on or essentially constitutive of the parent fiction—parallel two ways in which one of the standard philosophical accounts of fictional discourse can be cashed out. This we turn to in the next section.

3 Possible worlds accounts of fiction

Lewis offers a modal account of fiction, developed as an alternative to Meinongian approaches such as those found in [Parsons, 1974, Parsons, 1975], which explains how we can make true and meaningful predications about fictional objects via the notion of possible worlds. Lewis’s primary motivation is accounting for predications about fictional objects for whom “there is a perfectly good sense in which [they are] a real-life person of flesh and blood” [Lewis, 1978, 37]), and thus he is happy to exclude from consideration stories “about the exploits of super-heroes from other planets, hobbits, fires and storms, vaporous intelligences, and other non-persons” [Lewis, 1978, 37]. There is, however, on the face of it, no intrinsic reason why his account of fiction will not work for these more fantastic constructs (however, if there is something about it which excludes it from being able to analyse hobbits, superheroes, and vaporous intelligences, then we have evidence that this account cannot give an account of a large proportion of contemporary fanfiction, simply because it cannot account for fantasy fiction).

Lewis’s proposal is to “not take our descriptions of fictional characters at face value, but instead let us regard them as abbreviations for longer sentences beginning with an operator ‘In such-and-such fiction...’” [Lewis, 1978, 37], a view which is echoed by Kripke when he says that “a work of fiction, generally speaking of course, is a pretense that what is happening in the story is really going on” [Kripke, 2011, 58]. One task, then, of philosophy of fiction, is to give truth conditions for sentences formed with this intensional operator [Lewis, 1978, 37]; [Byrne, 1993, 24], and Lewis’s theory does so in terms of possible worlds. He first presents one analysis which he finds problematic, and revises it into this second analysis:

A sentence of the form “In the fiction f , φ ” is non-vacuously true iff, whenever w is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of f , then some world where f is told as known fact and φ is true differs less from world w , on balance, than does any world where f is told as known fact and φ is not true. It is vacuously true iff there are no possible worlds where f is told as known fact [Lewis, 1978, 45].

The problem of impossible fictions is addressed briefly at the end of the article

[Lewis, 1978, 45]). There are two ways in which the vacuous case might occur; the first is when there simply happens to be no world where f is told as known fact. The second is when f contains a contradiction, and thus cannot be represented by a possible world. The second way is of course the more interesting one, but Lewis only gestures at possible solutions. Interestingly, one of these routes involves something like making sense of competing fanfics: “I suppose that we might proceed in two steps to say what is true in a venially impossible fiction such as the Holmes stories. First, go from the original impossible fiction to the several possible revised versions that stay closest to the original. Then say that what is true in the original is what is true according to our analyses of non-vacuous truth in fiction, all of these revised versions” [Lewis, 1978, 46]. In later work, he proposed that fictional truth instead be identified with non-vacuous in *at least one* of the revised versions [Byrne, 1993, 26].

Different flavors of possible-worlds approaches to fiction are obtained by incorporating different theories of possible worlds, and we consider two. Lewis’s own account of the nature of possible worlds lies at one extreme of the sliding scale between realist and anti-realist approaches. He believes that “there are possible worlds other than the one we happen to inhabit” which are “entities in their own right” [Lewis, 1973, 182–183]. These entities cannot be reduced to anything else, and they are of a kind with our own actual world [Lewis, 1973, 184]. Because these possible worlds are entities in their own right, there are truths in them that go beyond what is explicitly stated in the fictional tales. Thus, Lewis’s theory is, in the terminology of [D’Alessandro, 2016], an *implicitist* account of fiction, on which “there are some works and some propositions which are not expressed by any explicit statements in those works, such that the propositions in question are nevertheless true in the corresponding fiction” [D’Alessandro, 2016, 53]. These worlds also exist independently of us or any of our activities, and are neither determined nor controlled by our activities.

Thus, Jacqueline is mistaken when he says that “We can wave a wand and stipulate that there are such worlds” [Jacquette, 2003, 112] on a Lewisian account. A stipulative approach to possible worlds is, however, precisely what we are offered with Kripke’s views of possible worlds, in which “(1) Generally, things aren’t ‘found out’ about a counterfactual situation; they are stipulated; (2) possible worlds need not be given purely qualitatively, as if we were looking at them through a telescope” [Kripke, 1980, 49–50]. (This sort of stipulative account is called “Fictional Vichianism” by [Voltolini, 2011].) On such a view, we do not “discover” things about possible worlds, through a telescope or otherwise; rather, we are able to decide what occurs in a possible world, and it is our decision that causes there to be a possible world of a particular kind. (Such an account of possible worlds dispenses with the first way in which vacuous truth can arise on Lewis’s account, for we are always at liberty to stipulate that there is in fact such a world where f is told as known fact.)

The stipulative approach, in contrast to the realist approach, allows for the adoption of the position of fictional explicitism, wherein “the set of propositions that are true in a given fiction is a subset of the set of propositions that are expressed by explicit statements in the corresponding works” [D’Alessandro, 2016, 53]. It is important, however, to make clear the causal direction here. When Voltolini, articulating a creationist or stipulative account of fiction, says that statements of fiction “are true with respect to a make-believe world, namely a world in which things go precisely the way in which the relevant story-teller

pretends that they are” [Voltolini, 2011, 112] this makes it look as if the existence of the possible world “in which things go precisely” a particular way is what makes the sentences true. However, it is in fact the other way around: It is because the statement is taken as true that there is a make-believe world in which things go in the relevant way.

The view that fanfic—and fandom more generally—is derivative or dependent, corresponds nicely with a Lewisian realist view of possible worlds. If, as Routley claims, “[a] work of fiction is regarded as portraying part of a world” [Routley, 1979, 3], cf. also [6]), though these worlds “are usually incomplete” [8], then fanfic depends on its canon in virtue of it explicating the same possible world (or worlds) as the canonical story. As Gwenllian-Jones says, “fictional worlds, of necessity, always exceed the texts that describe them. . . The recovery of the fictional world from its fragmented and partial textual presence is a dynamic cognitive process in which textual data, knowledge of the real world, and imagination are all marshalled” [Gwenllian-Jones, 2004, 92]. Lewis’s possible worlds are really out there, and when we are writing, drawing, or creating a film, we are merely describing or depicting these worlds. Lewis himself even discusses the phenomenon of fanfiction (without, however, calling it by this term). He notes that “many other authors [other than Conan Doyle] also have written Holmes stories. These would have little point without interfictional carry-over. Surely many things are true in these satellite stories not because of the explicit content of the satellite story itself, and not because they are part of the background, but rather because they carry over from Conan Doyle’s original Holmes stories” [Lewis, 1978, 45]. This same ‘interfictional carry-over’ occurs when readers import knowledge of certain types of tropes into a story where those tropes are not explicitly mentioned. For example, Lewis cites the case of *Scrulch*, who has all the properties generally associated with dragons, even though it is not explicitly stated that Scrulch can breathe fire (and neither is it explicitly stated that he can’t). Lewis argues that due to interfictional carry-over we conclude that Scrulch can breath fire [Lewis, 1978, 45]. (There is much that could be said here both about literary tropes and default reasoning, but we do not have the space to take up this topic here).

One might even say that this description of the fictional world happens in a way similar to the way in which historians and artists describe and depict real events. Such an account would also explain the feeling that one may have, in the presence of extremely well-crafted fictions, that the original author is doing more than merely making things up, that he is telling you things that really exist, and are really out there, and are so independently of whether he ever told you them. This feeling can be enhanced when one part of a series of books set in the same world are written by one author and another part by another, as happened with the *Wheel of Time* series begun by Robert Jordan and finished by Brandon Sanderson. Sanderson’s writing style is enough different from Jordan’s that one has the feeling that one was reading a history where the chronicler changed part-way through. This sense of “different writer, same story” enhanced the feeling that the story was more than just something created in the head of the author, for if it had been, then it is unclear to what extent someone else could’ve had sufficient access to that mental content to continue on with the story, if the mental content *only* existed in the mind of the original author. It is an advantage of this view that it allows the creation of derivative or dependent

works, for it gives us one way of understanding what happens in the creation or production of fanfic: There is some real world or story out there, and many people have access to it and have the ability to tell different parts of the story or describe (including, e.g., paint/draw) different parts of the world. This account can also ground statements of error in representation, such as complaints against the representation in a particular movie of certain characters from literature by, e.g., the wrong choice of actor. Such claims rely on there being an actual fact of the matter.

But despite the many ways in which modal realism seems to get fanfiction right, the Lewisian view also seems to get some aspects of the practice and production of fanfiction *wrong*, of which we will highlight three.

The first is the problem of underdetermination, i.e., the fact that there are some aspects of stories or fictional worlds concerning which there appears to in fact be *no* fact of the matter, and that no amount of inspection of the fictional world would ever answer certain questions one way or another. For example when [Sprague de Camp, 1976] asks, “Why did the Middle-Earthians have no formal religion?” [45], it is unclear what aspects *about the fictional world itself*, as opposed to aspects about Tolkien as its author, that could answer this question.

The second is that the very production of fanfic is problematic for a (wholly) dependent or derivative account, because—as noted above—not all fanfic is considered equal. Most fanfic remains outside of the canon; but in the cases where it becomes part of the fanon or even the canon, it does not do so because readers have viewed the original fictional world through a telescope and found the fanfic to describe it correctly. Instead, it seems that fanfic becomes canon precisely *because* it becomes constitutive of the fiction. It constitutes a new part or portion of the story or world that did not exist before, and it does so in a specific way, going beyond being merely consistent with the activities (or even the character’s intentions, mental states, or character) of the story-so-far. A Lewisian view cannot account for this understanding of how fanfic can become canon.

The third is that it is not always clear how to extend the dependency view of fanfic to other, related, fandom phenomena, such as conlangs (constructed languages, usually developed in fictional contexts). With the rise of epic science fiction and fantasy TV series in the last few decades, there has been increasing attention to the question of foreign and alien languages, with the result that there are out there linguists whose profession it is to develop languages for these TV series and associated movies. When one looks at how these conlangs are designed, constructed, and implemented, it is hard to give a dependent rather than constitutive account of these languages. It is difficult to speak of anything other than “creating” the languages; they are created and not “discovered” or “recovered” from some actual extant grammar, vocabulary, phonetics, script, as would be required on a dependent view. Instead, these languages did not exist before they were created; and, very interestingly, after they are created they can even become constitutive of the fictions themselves in a very concrete way. A clear example of this can be seen in the Dothraki language developed by [Peterson, 2015] for the “Game of Thrones” TV series. The language as it originally appeared in the books was ad hoc, as Martin had no systematization behind his original uses of Dothraki words and phrases. After Peterson was

hired to extend and expand the fragment into a robust language with a concrete ‘history’, Martin now incorporates Peterson’s version of the language into the books in a systematized and meaningful fashion. It is difficult to see how this could be given a dependent rather than constitutive explanation

Faced with a choice between Lewisian modal realism and Kripkean stipulativism, the Kripkean view seems better equipped to account for the fanfic/fanon/canon distinctions than a Lewisian view. The three objections that we raised against a Lewisian understanding are none of them applicable to a Kripkean view.

To the objection of underdetermination, the Kripkean can reply by simply stipulating that the world is *thus-and-so* rather than *that-and-such*. Something not yet determined? No problem! Simply stipulate further how you want the world to be!

To the difficulty the Lewisian account has explaining how fanfic can become canon, the Kripkean view, where fictional worlds are defined by stipulation, can account for the move of fanfic from ‘not-canon’ to ‘canon’ because of the constitutive nature of canon-creation.

Finally, to the problem of the associated business of world-building, including the construction of conlangs, the Kripkean’s response is almost self-evident: Because the possible worlds are the result of a stipulative and constructive act, it is straightforward to integrate the construction of languages, etc., into the conceptual framework of the rest of the fanfic-creation process.

On these three counts, then, the Kripkean approach seems a clear winner; and if this is correct, then we must also favor the constructive account of fanfic over the dependent account. Unfortunately, it would be too quick to conclude this, for the Kripkean approach has its own problems. First of all, there is a way in which the liberality of the Kripkean account is *too* liberal: The only constraint on the stipulation of Kripkean possible worlds is the law of non-contradiction (and even this can be rejected if one admits impossible worlds [Berto, 2013]). But there are—user-implemented—constraints in the production of fanfic. As we discussed above, not every story that is consistent with the original story is eligible to become canon; but a Kripkean account of will not give us any insight as to what is eligible and what is not because the production of canon is essentially a social process, not a metaphysical one.

We also discussed above how producers of fanfiction do not have free choice, but are instead constrained, more or less, by the authority of canon. It is also difficult to explain Cook’s five features of canon from a Kripkean account of the production of fanfiction⁹, something that we may yet wish to require from our philosophical theories of fiction.

4 Conclusion

What we hope to have shown in this paper is that fandom is full of philosophically interesting material—including fanfiction—much of which is under-investigated. We focused on but one area of fandom, introducing the notions of “fanfiction”, “canon”, “fanon”, etc., and argued that any adequate philosophical account of fiction must be able to explain these. As a test case, we

⁹This is also a problem for the Lewisian account, too.

considered two variants of the possible-worlds account of fiction, the Lewisian realist and the Kripkean stipulative, and showed that they parallel the two ways in which fanfiction can be understood, as either dependent/derivative or constructive/constitutive.

Whether fanfic is best understood as derivative or constitutive is itself not a mere philosophical question, but potentially has legal implications:

Bruce Keller and Rebecca Tushnet point out that no “bright-line rule” states that only parody, among all genres of transformation, may be monetized under the banner of fair use. Keller and Tushnet argue that the Supreme Court based its “vision of transformative fair use” on Judge Pierre Laval’s concept of “productive” use that “employ[s] the quoted matter in a different manner or for a different purpose from the original.” . . . A strong case may be made that, by Laval’s definition, fan fiction qualifies as ‘productive’ reworking of original material that does not threaten the marketability of its source works. . .

If a case involving fan fiction and copyright infringement ever results in a court ruling, that ruling may agree with this framing of fan fiction as productive and non-threatening (or even promotional) rather than derivative and competitive [de Kosnick, 2009, 122].

This shows the importance of providing a thorough-going foundation for whatever account of fanfic we ultimately settle on. We have argued that neither the Lewisian or the Kripkean approach gives a thoroughly satisfying account of fanfiction, with both failing to accurately capture certain aspects of the practice. It is difficult to explain how Cook’s five observations about the canon/fanon/non-canon divide could be true if the underlying structure of fictional truth is Lewisian, while on the other hand, a Kripkean account must be restricted so that complete free choice is circumscribed.

As it stands, neither account is able to effectively underpin the actual practice of fanfiction, and it is clear that an adequate theory will have to be much more nuanced than some standard philosophical theories of fiction generally are. Nevertheless, we have demonstrated that the Kripkean account does fare better than the Lewisian account, with the stipulative or constructive approach going further towards providing a foundation for understanding the relevant phenomenon. There is plenty of fodder for future work in developing this. In particular, one might think that a possible-worlds approach to truth-in-fiction is simply too narrow to be able to account for all of the myriad facets of practice and production that go into fanfiction. Further work might be well-served by being devoted to taking a more general approach; indeed, it has been suggested¹⁰ that there may be interesting parallels between fanfiction and musical improvisation and the making of cover versions of songs, a suggestion which we hope to pursue in future work.

We also believe there is benefit in widening the scope of analysis to include a number of features specifically excluded in this paper. Such topics ripe for philosophical investigation include the relationship between LARPing and fanfiction; the contexts in which certain types of cosplay can be understood in a counterfactual manner; how literary canons can extend their authority to different media

¹⁰By Joe Morrison, Belfast, during post-colloquium discussion after I presented this paper.

such as music, art, and film; as well as more typical philosophical questions such as how different characters can be identified across different fictional contexts as “the same character”, via notions of intentional identity [Sandgren, 2016] or via stipulation [Routley, 1979, 3]; the metaphysics of the metaverse; and the problem of understanding how cross-over fictions, which “take the characters from one fictional world and ‘cross’ them with another” [Thomas, 2011, 8], operate. All of these questions have been spectacularly ignored by contemporary philosophy, which, we believe, has much of interest to say, both to philosophers and to fans.

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