FICTION'S ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS[1]

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This article examines one way in which a fiction can carry ontological commitments. The ontological commitments that the article examines arise in cases where there are norms governing discourse about items in a fiction that cannot be accounted for by reference to the contents of the sentences that constitute a canonical telling of that fiction. In such cases, a fiction may depend for its contents on the real-world properties of real-world items, and the fiction may, in that sense, be ontologically committed. Having outlined a way of gauging the ontological commitments of a fiction, the article concludes by illustrating the way in which these considerations can be put to work in assessing the prospects of using fictionalism as a tactic for understanding the metaphysics of modality without incurring a commitment to the real existence of merely possible worlds.

The view that metaphysically problematic bodies of discourse (such as those concerned with merely possible worlds) can be regarded as fictions[2] owes much of its popularity to the thought that fictions are not committed to the real existence of the entities that they appear to mention. This thought needs to be treated with care. Although fiction is, for the most part, ontologically noncommittal, there are fictions that depend for their contents on the real-world properties of real-world items. In these cases, fiction does carry an ontological burden.

This article examines one sort of case in which a fiction can be ontologically burdened: the case in which there are real-world items appearing in the fiction and where the real-world status of these items matters for the fiction's content. It presents a criterion for identifying when the items in a fictional context are real-world items, and it shows how this leads to the fiction depending for its

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[1] This article has benefitted greatly from conversations with Andrew Jorgensen and comments provided by Rowland Stout on an early draft. Thanks are due also to an anonymous referree for encouraging me to engage more directly with the issues arising from deconstructionism and the "death of the author."

[2] See Gideon Rosen, "Modal Fictionalism," *Mind* 99(395) (1990): 327–54 and Mark Eli Kalderon, *Fictionalism in Metaphysics* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2005).

content on real-world states of affairs, and so to its being ontologically committed. The article concludes by showing how these sorts of considerations can be put to work in metaphysical disputes by outlining an argument showing that if modal discourse is treated as a fiction, then there must be a commitment to the real existence of merely possible worlds among the ontological burdens that that fiction carries.

<p style="text-align:center">I</p>

There are two features of fictional discourse that, in combination, motivate fictionalism as a metaphysical tactic. The first is that talk about fiction is ontologically undemanding. The second is that talk about fiction is subject to interesting normative constraints.

The first of these features—ontological undemandingness—is, on the face of it, relatively straightforward. When giving metaphysical or scientific accounts of what there is, we do not need to worry about time machines, talking stoves, or Sherlock Holmes. Such items are merely fictional. Participation in the linguistic practices that appear to mention these items does not require commitment to their real existence.

The second feature that accounts for fictionalism's appeal—normative constraint—needs a little more spelling out. Talk about fictional entities is normatively constrained in that there are many commonplace contexts in which it is not merely appropriate or felicitous, but actually correct to say, for example, "Sherlock Holmes was a pipe smoker" and in which it is incorrect (not merely inappropriate or silly) to say "Holmes was a tap dancing enthusiast." Such examples show that talk about fictional entities is apt for evaluation against norms of correctness.

This aptness for normative evaluation is important because, while talk about fiction *is* apt for evaluation, other kinds of talk that lack real-world referents are not. Aptness for evaluation against norms of correctness distinguishes talk about fiction from nonsensical mouthing: nonsense cannot succeed in getting something right. Aptness for evaluation against norms of correctness also distinguishes fiction talk from radically mistaken discourse about nonexistents (seriously meant talk about phlogiston, for example). There are norms that apply to talk about phlogiston, but those norms reject all but a very few of the discourse's sentences on the grounds that they are uniformly false. The norms governing talk about Sherlock Holmes, in contrast, are nuanced enough to allow for the possibility of genuine disagreements among Holmes fans and for genuine successes and failures in saying something more or less accurate about the fiction. The presence of this nuanced structure of norms is what sets fictional talk apart from other referent-lacking talk.

The combination of nuanced normative constraint and ontological noncommittalness promises to provide a route by which metaphysical difficulties can be avoided. This promise seems strongest in the case of those metaphysical difficulties concerning possibilia. If possibilia are fictional, then we do not need to accommodate them in our metaphysical or scientific theories, but that does not mean that we have to lose our grip on the fact that there are norms in place such that talk about possibilities can get things right, and can be talk in which sensible disagreements are articulated.

II

The combination of ontological noncommittalness and normative constrainedness that makes fictionalism so appealing in metaphysics is also a source of tension. The fact that talk about fiction can succeed in getting something right is in tension with the fact that there are no things for it to be right *about*. The status of talk about fiction as a sensible attempt to get something right depends on the presence of a structure of norms governing talk about the fiction, but ontological noncommittedness can make it hard to see where this structure could come from.

Not every norm that governs talk about a fiction lacks a clear origin. When a fiction has a canonical telling, then some of the norms concerning discourse about the fiction originate directly from the content of the sentences of that canonical telling: It is correct to say that Holmes is a pipe smoker because there are sentences in Conan-Doyle's books saying as much. A lot of the normative structure governing discourse about the sorts of fiction found in novels comes in this way from the content of the sentences that constitute a canonical telling of these fictions. But some of the norms that govern talk about fictions have less straightforward origins.

Some of the norms governing talk about items in fictions do not correspond to simple textual stipulations. It is, for example, quite correct for a participant in discourse about the Holmes stories to say that Dr. Watson went to university. This would be correct even if there were no sentences in Conan-Doyle's works saying that Watson went to university. It would be correct because there *are* sentences saying that Watson is a *doctor* and because it is common knowledge (drawn from the real world) that doctors have been to university. Similarly (and more importantly for the present argument), it is correct to say that Holmes lives on a street in an historic part of London. It is correct to say this even if no sentence of Conan-Doyle's says it, because there *are* sentences saying that Holmes lives on *Baker Street*, and because Baker Street *really is* in an historic part of London. In these last two cases, the norms that classify sentences about the fiction as correct are norms that depend, not on canonical stipulations, but on the real world—doctors in the one case, Baker Street in the other.

The problem that faces the metaphysician who wants to avoid suspect ontology by treating possible-worlds talk as talk about a fiction is that, as with the norms governing talk about Watson's education and the history of Holmes' address, some nontextual ontology may be needed to account for the rich structure of norms that govern talk about possibilia. In this way, the modal discourse may retain ontological commitments, even when considered as a fiction. If modal discourse does have such commitments, then it may be that, among the ontological commitments that it has, there is a commitment to the reality of some merely possible worlds. If so, then the problem that the ontological burden of fictions creates for the modal fictionalist is not merely that modal discourse may be ontologically committed, even when considered as a fiction, but that it may be committed to the very bits of ontology that the modal fictionalist was trying to avoid. The final section of this article presents this problem in more detail. The first item of business is to find a way of gauging a fiction's ontological commitments.

<center>III</center>

We have said that it is true in the Holmes stories that Watson went to university and that this example shows that it is sometimes correct, in discourse about a fiction, to ascribe properties to items occurring in the fiction that go beyond the properties ascribed to those items (either specifically or generically) by the canonical sentences of the fiction. In such cases, the norms in virtue of which such ascriptions are correct are norms that have to come from somewhere. The presence of norms of correctness that outrun the stipulations of canonical sentences therefore shows that the items whose description is governed by those norms are items that have a life outside the fiction in question. In some cases, this may be because they have a life in some *other* fiction. In other cases, it is because the items are ones that can be found in the real world or that belong to real-world types. In these latter cases, it is the real-world properties of the items (or of the types to which they belong) that account for the extracanonical norms concerning what can be said of those items in talk about the fiction.

This connection between real-world properties and extracanonical norms makes for a fiction that is ontologically burdened in the following way: Let us assume that if, in discourse about a fiction, it is correct to say that an item in that fiction has some property, then the claim that the item has that property is true-in-the-fiction. Assume also that the content of a fiction depends, at least in part, on the set of things that are true in that fiction. From these assumptions, it follows that when discourse about a fiction is governed by norms that depend on the real-world properties of the items mentioned, that fiction depends for its content on the existence of real-world items. Because fictions are individuated by their contents, the existence of a particular fiction can depend on the existence of

the real-world items that contribute to the norms governing discourse about that fiction. It is in this sense that a fiction governed by extracanonical norms may be ontologically burdened.

Not all of the ontological burdens carried by a fiction need to be commitments to the real-world existence of items that are mentioned in the sentences constituting a canonical telling of the fiction. Again, the case of Watson's education illustrates the point. It would be correct to say that Watson went to university, even if Conan-Doyle never mentioned it, and its being correct to say so depends on the fact that real-world doctors go to university. Its being true-in-the-fiction that Watson went to university is a part of the content of the Holmes fiction. That fiction therefore depends for its content on a property of real-world doctors and on the existence of real-world universities. These are ontological commitments that the fiction can carry even if the Holmes canon contains no mention of universities. The example therefore shows that the ontological commitments of a fiction need not be commitments to the real-world existence of items that are mentioned in the fiction. For the purposes of this article, however, we shall be concerned with cases in which the ontological commitments of a fiction originate with items that *are* mentioned in that fiction and where the commitments take the form of a commitment to those very items existing in the real world. It is in these cases that a fiction's ontological commitments are easiest to uncover. To gauge this sort of ontological commitment, we need to find a way in which to identify those of the items mentioned in canonical tellings of the fiction that are, like Holmes, merely fictional, and those that are, like Baker Street, items found in the real world.

IV

Although it is something that might be called into question, it seems on the face of it that examples of real-world items in fictional contexts are abundant and that they come from all sorts of metaphysical categories: There are fictional stories about real *people*, about real *places*, and about real *events*: Duncan I features in *Macbeth* (Macbeth himself is a difficult case), the forest of Arden features in *As You Like It*, the battle of Agincourt features in *Henry V*. The inclusion of real-world items in works of fiction is not unusual—if we count cases of real-world *properties*, it may even be universal. Nor are real-world inclusions in fiction particularly sophisticated or postmodern (although postmodern writers have had a good deal of fun with them). They are frequently found in the kinds of fiction that young children effortlessly understand.

The ease of understanding real-item-involving fiction should not tempt us into thinking that a simple account will suffice to explain what distinguishes real items in fictional contexts from merely fictional items. We should not, in particular, be tempted by the view that real-world items in a work of fiction are simply those

items in the fiction that are based on or inspired by items in the real world. Conan-Doyle's depictions of Holmes and of Baker Street were *both* based on items in the real world. Holmes was based on the real-world Edinburgh medic Joseph Bell, and Baker Street was based on the real-world London thoroughfare Baker Street. But, while Baker Street is a real object that figures in the fiction, Holmes, despite his real-world model, is a fictional object. Having a referent that is drawn-from-life to some degree may be necessary in order for a fictional name to refer to a real-world item, but it is clearly not sufficient because, as the Holmes/Bell cases shows, there are items drawn from life that are merely fictional nonetheless.

We cannot turn "drawn from lifeness" into an acceptable criterion for distinguishing real-world items in fiction from merely fictional ones just by adding a condition of closeness. It is not just that Baker Street in the stories is based closely on Baker Street in London, while Holmes is based only loosely on Joseph Bell. For one thing, we do not really know how close the Sherlock Holmes/Joseph Bell resemblance is—the hat, apparently, was worn by both, and Bell did go in for a certain amount of criminology—but this uncertainty does not shake our conviction that Holmes is fictional. For another thing, it is not really true that the fictional Baker Street is a close portrayal of the real street: Conan-Doyle includes rather little in the way of detail about Baker Street, and the action in most of the stories takes place elsewhere. The difference between real-world items in fictions and merely fictional items is not simply a difference in the degree to which they are drawn from life.

Nor is it simply that Baker Street does and Sherlock Holmes does not share a *name* with its real-world counterpart. It cannot be that having the name of a real-world item is necessary for an item in a fiction to be real, because there are some instances of real-world items that figure in fictions but that *do not* bear their real-world names in the fiction. The city of Oxford is a real-world item that figures in the fiction of *Jude The Obscure*, but in the fiction, the city has the name "Christminster." The town of Cabourg is a real-world town that figures in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but in the fiction, the town is called "Balbec." There are also instances of merely fictional items that *do* share the names of real-world items that correspond to them, but which are nonetheless distinct from the real-world bearers of those names: The character named "Martin Amis" in Martin Amis's novel *Money* is not identical with the author. The character named "Saul Kripke" in Rebecca Goldstein's *The Mind Body Problem* is not the real-world philosopher of that name. Therein lies Goldstein's joke.

Simple accounts of the distinction between fictional items and real-world items in fictional contexts fail because the distinction should be drawn, not by reference to the sharing of properties between real-world and fictional contexts, but by reference to the norms that are in place about which properties can be ascribed

correctly. The distinction between merely fictional objects and real-world objects in fictional contexts (or, for those who wish to avoid quantifying over merely fictional items, between those instances of a name in a fictional context that have a real-world referent and those that do not) is the following: When a *real-world item* appears in a fiction, it is correct to say, in discourse about the fiction, that the item has its real-world properties (except when these properties are explicitly suspended for the purposes of the fiction). When, on the other hand, a name in a fictional context has merely fictional reference, then one speaks correctly in using that name as part of a discourse about the fiction if and only if one ascribes those properties that are required for the truth-in-the-fiction of (as many as possible of) the sentences of the fictional canon, or else ascribes generic properties which are commonly known to be typical of the sort of item in question.

In drawing this distinction, as elsewhere, we can speak more succinctly if we do allow ourselves to quantify over merely fictional items. Allowing such quantification, the distinction is this: Fictional items do *not* inherit the properties of the real-world items from which they were drawn unless these properties are introduced (specifically or generically) in canonical sentences. Real items do.

Drawing the distinction between merely fictional items and real items that appear in fiction by reference to the origins of the norms determining what can correctly be said of the items in question, and not by reference to the actual content of the sentences that constitute the fiction, nor by reference to where the author looked for inspiration, enables us to return the intuitively correct verdicts about the various examples mentioned above. It is true in the Holmes fiction that Baker Street runs roughly north/south through an historic part of London even if no sentences in the Holmes canon say as much. The fact that this is true in the fiction is reflected in the fact that one could imagine Holmes making use of it in one of his "deductions." It is not true in the fiction (unless an authorized addition to the canon makes it so) that Sherlock Holmes is, as Joseph Bell was, a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. The fact that this is not true in the fiction is reflected in the fact that, if the story depends on Holmes making use of this in his deductions, then Conan-Doyle has made a mistake. The real-world item—Baker Street—does inherit the properties of its counterpart. The merely fictional item—Holmes—does not.

Taking the distinction between merely fictional items and real-world objects in fictional contexts as being marked by a difference as to the origins of the norms concerning which properties can be correctly attributed to those items also enables a satisfactory treatment to be given of the otherwise puzzling possibility of authorial mistakes concerning matters of fact within the author's own fictions. When norms owe their contents to more than just the content of the sentences in the fictional canon, those norms can be violated within the canonical sentences themselves, as well as in talk about the fiction. The following example from

Christopher Ricks' essay "Literature and The Matter of Fact" is a particularly clear case:

> On 10 March 1841, Dickens wrote to thank someone who had seen the proofs of *Barnaby Rudge*, where it was said that a man was hanged "for passing bad one pound notes" (ch xi). There were no one pound notes at the time of this historical novel; notes under five pounds were not issued until 1797. Dickens' letter is exemplary.
>
> > My Dear Sir
> > I have looked back to the Annual Register, and find you are quite right about the one pound notes. Very many thanks to you for your kind care.
>
> And the text as we have it now reads "for passing bad notes."[3]

Dickens' correspondent was not making a mistake when he corrected Dickens on this point. Nor was Dickens making a mistake when he took the correspondent seriously. Dickens did not say (and, as Ricks is careful to explain, he was quite right not to have said) that no error could have been made as he was the author and so was able to stipulate that, in his story, bank notes did come in one-pound denominations in 1780. Nor can Dickens' concern with accuracy simply be a concern with verisimilitude, as it is only the rarest of readers who is in a position to notice that "bad one-pound notes" are unrealistic in a novel set at that time. What explains Dickens' concern is that, whether or not the reader notices, the inclusion of one-pound notes was an *error*. The fact that it was possible for the author himself to make such an error shows that there was a norm in place, a norm that makes it incorrect to say, in the fiction, that bank notes come in one-pound denominations. The content of that norm is determined by the real-world properties of bank notes. Because bank notes are real-world objects, they retain their real-world properties in the fictional context. It is for this reason that there is a possibility of canonical sentences getting things wrong.

This norm-based account of the difference between merely fictional items and real-world items that figure in fictions also holds for the other examples we have mentioned. A critic who complained about differences between the real-world philosopher Saul Kripke and the fictional character who bears his name in Goldstein's *Mind Body Problem* would be a critic who was missing the point. In this case, the fictional character is distinct from the real-world bearer of his name, and so the real Kripke's properties do not introduce norms concerning the fictional Kripke. On the other hand, it would be appropriate for a critic, qua critic, to examine the correspondence between the city known as "Christminster" in *Jude The Obscure* and the City of Oxford. (No doubt somebody has done it.) Insofar

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[3] Christopher Ricks, "Literature and The Matter of Fact," *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1996) 305.

as Hardy fails to get Oxford right, it is a failure to do justice to his subject matter, and this is a failure of the novel.

V

We have seen that the norm-based account of the distinction between real-world items in fictional contexts and merely fictional items returns the intuitively correct verdicts on various examples and that it has the advantage of enabling us to account for the otherwise puzzling phenomenon of authorial mistakes within the author's own fiction. Despite that, there are sure to be some readers who think that all of this is quite wrong headed. There are two quite different quarters from which such objections might emerge. The first reason why one might object is that one denies that there is any interesting distinction to be drawn between merely fictional items and real-world items in fictional contexts. The second reason why one might object is that one thinks there is a mistake involved in treating discourse about fiction as governed by structured norms of correctness.

The first objection might be made by one who thinks, for reasons concerned with the philosophy of language, that there *are* no real-world items in fictional contexts.[4] That is not, on the face of it, an appealing claim, but sense can be made of it: It might be that uses of names in fictional contexts always refer to merely fictional items (some of which duplicate many of the properties of their real-world counterparts). Or it might be that names in fiction do not really *refer* at all.

The second sort of objection that I shall consider comes not from the philosophy of language, but from deconstructionism in hermeneutics. According to a certain strand of deconstructivist thinking, the interpretation of texts is a relatively unconstrained matter, and any attempted regimentation of the norms that govern what is and is not correct to say in discourse about a fictional text can only be owing to a misplaced allegiance to the dead "myth of authorship."[5]

I will address these two objections in turn, taking the philosophy of language considerations first, and the deconstructive/hermeneutic ones second.

However it is formulated, the denial that a name in a fictional context can refer to a real-world item is unappealing for a couple of reasons, although it is not as easily refuted as has sometimes been suggested. Stacie Friend, in her essay "Real People in Unreal Contexts," develops examples of paradoxical-looking sentences

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[4] Frederick Kroon, "Make-Believe and Fictional Reference," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52(2) (1994): 207–14.

[5] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1979) 141–60.

mixing real and fictional uses of a name.[6] The paradoxical appearance of such sentences is, she claims, an appearance that they would not have if the real-world name and the name-in-the-fiction did not share a referent. The examples she gives are ones in which the reader of a story is moved to feel pity by a character's lack of pity and where the character in question is a depiction of that very reader. Friend is right that the theorist who denies that real-world items can appear in fictional contexts faces a difficulty here, but it is not so grave a difficulty as to require him to abandon his view: Because some sentences mixing real and fictional uses of a name can be *true*, their paradoxical appearance must merely be an appearance. Those who deny that real-world items can be referred to in fictional contexts need only give an account of a paradoxical *appearance*, and appearances can have a variety of sources. For the theorist who denies that real-world items can appear in fictional contexts, the account of this appearance may not come as easily as it would if he acknowledged the presence of real-world items in fictional contexts, but, because his view certainly will allow for the possibility of fictions that have huge amounts in common with real descriptions, there is no reason to suppose that he will lack the resources to give an account of why some sentences look paradoxical on the face of it.

Friend also examines more quotidian cases, in which it is funny or troubling or somehow striking when a familiar name crops up in a fictional context. Those who know John Perry, Friend tells us, will struggle to take seriously a fiction in which it is said that "John Perry never tells a joke." Their difficulty, she suggests, is best explained by the fact that the name in the fiction refers to John Perry, that notorious real-world joker. Here again it may be true that the simplest explanation of an appearance is not available to the theorist who denies that real-world objects can be referred to in fictional contexts but, as before, so long as that theorist allows for close similarities between fictional items and real items, there is no reason to think that he will lack the resources to build an alternative explanation consistent with his view.

An alternative response to the denial that real-world items can be referred to in fictional contexts (more satisfactory, in the present context, than the perhaps-soluble explanatory puzzles that Friend presents) is to look in more detail at what that denial amounts to, with a view to showing that, properly understood, the sort of thing that the denier must have in mind could only apply to fictions in some other sense of "fiction" than is intended by the metaphysical fictionalist.

The theorist who wishes to deny that real-world items appear in fictional contexts cannot plausibly deny that it is possible to speak falsely about real-world

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[6] Stacie Friend, "Real People in Unreal Contexts," *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-Existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2000) 183–203.

items and to do so in a sustained manner. The theorist therefore faces the problem that, once we have allowed that there are sustained bodies of falsehood about real items, we do not need to add any questionable ingredients in order to show that a sustained body of falsehoods can support a structured set of discourse-governing norms, and this is all that the metaphysical tactic of fictionalism needs.

To see the nature of this problem, consider the example of a charlatan who presents as true a story according to which there is an unguent in his bottles that cured the baldness of a man in Derbyshire. It is clear that the charlatan's story is about a real-world item. This is clear because the people who believe the story come to have false beliefs that are about a real-world item—it is that belief which explains why they rub the unguent into their heads if bald. Believing the story to be true only explains this behavior with a real-world item because the story that is believed is a story that contains claims about that real-world item.

It is also clear that talk about the claims made by the charlatan is talk that is constrained by a structured set of norms. It is correct to say that, in the story, the unguent cured the baldness of a man in Derbyshire, but not correct to say it cured the lumbago of a woman there. It is true according to the story that the unguent cures baldness, but it is not true according to the story, even if it is true *simpliciter*, that the unguent is made from boot polish mixed with jam.

The theorist who wants to deny that real-world items can figure in a fiction cannot deny that real-world items figure in stories like the charlatan's (for he would then lose his explanation of the behavior of those who believe the story). Nor can he deny that there is a structure of norms governing what can correctly be said about what is true according to the charlatan's story (for then he would lose touch with the fact that there are only some things that the charlatan can be correctly accused of claiming). The denier of real-world items in fictional contexts must therefore be claiming that stories like the charlatan's do not count as fictions. But this could only be to restrict the use of "fiction" in a way that is not required or intended by the fictionalist. The discourse concerning the charlatan's unguent *does* have the crucial features of normative constraint and ontological noncommittalness. Whether or not we call it talk about a "fiction," discourse about the charlatan's story is the sort of discourse that the fictionalist wants to take as a model for modal discourse. In the sense of "fiction" intended by the fictionalist, therefore, real-world objects *can* feature in fictional contexts.

The second objection that I want to consider is not an objection to the idea that there is a distinction to be drawn between real items in fictions and merely fictional items, but is instead an objection to the use that I have made of *norms* in accounting for that distinction. Theorists who are impressed by deconstructionism in hermeneutics, and by the claims associated with Foucault's work on the "death of the author," are often opposed to the idea that there is any such thing as the set of norms that govern correct and incorrect discourse about a fiction. "The death of

the author" is a slogan endorsed by those who reject the project of taking a work of fiction and attempting to produce the interpretation that some particular set of norms prescribes. If, in this deconstructionist spirit, one rejects the idea that there are norms of correctness governing discourse about a fiction, then one will also reject the idea, on which I have here been depending, that the content of a fiction corresponds to the set of things that can *correctly* be said of the things that figure in that fiction. And so one will reject the idea that these norms of correctness can be used in drawing the distinction between real and merely fictional items.

It is true that the kind of deconstructionism associated with claims about the death of the author appears to be radically at odds with the position I have been advocating here. I have been taking it that (1) fictions are individuated by (perhaps *inter alia*) their contents, that (2) the content of a fiction corresponds to the set of things that are true in that fiction, and that (3) the set of things that are true in a fiction are the set of things that can be correctly said of the things that figure in the fiction. The approach that the deconstructionist takes to a work of fiction starts, not by considering the set of things that are true in the fiction, but by considering the particular kind of social artifact that is a text in which a fiction is told. Deconstructionism treats discourse about the fiction as one sort of activity that such artifacts afford, and it regards any norms of correctness that govern such discourse as constructs that emerge, in various complex ways, from the power structures governing the social settings in which discourse about fiction takes place. On the deconstructionist view, then, the norms that govern discourse about the fiction are regarded as being something like the rules of game. The rules are the things that make the game what it is. They are not independent, objective conditions of rightness with any authority outside the game that they define. Just as there may be various different games that can be played with a bat and ball, so there may be various ways of discoursing about a text. Nothing that can be done with a bat is incorrect *simpliciter*, although it may be incorrect relative to one set of norms or another. Similarly, nothing that can be said about a text will violate the norms of correctness *simpliciter*, because when we consider the artifact that is a fiction-telling text there will be no such thing as the particular set of norms that govern discourse about it.

The deconstructionist has norms entering the picture only once a text has taken on a role as part of a discourse in a certain social setting. The view that I have been developing has norms of correctness playing a foundational role in determining what the contents of a fiction are. The deconstructionist objection to my explanation of the fictional object/real object distinction is that the explanans on which I have been depending goes missing from the deconstructionist's picture.

But the appearance of radical disagreement between my view and the deconstructionist's is only superficial. The deconstructionist approach is an approach to texts, considered as a certain sort of social artifact. The approach that I have been

taking here, and the approach taken by the fictionalist in metaphysics, is an approach to fictions, considered in abstraction from the texts and social practices by which those fictions are created and communicated. Fictions in my sense do not stand in a one-to-one correspondence to texts. This is particularly clear when we consider novels. I have been taking it that fictions are individuated by the set of things that are true in them, but there are novels for which one cannot specify the things that are true in them. Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973) and Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* (2001) are examples. Both novels consist largely of narrative in the first person voice, but in both, the narrative is framed in such a way as to set out an alternative, incompatible, version of the events narrated, and, at least in the case of Murdoch's novel, it is left open which of the incompatible versions is true. A text, then, may not determine a set of things that can correctly be said in discourse about what is true in it.

Once we have seen that there is a distinction between texts and fictions, we can admit that the deconstructionist's claims may all be true, so long as they are considered as claims about texts: It may be true that there is no particular set of norms that specify what is and is not correct to say in discourse about what is true according to a text, and so it may be that there are no norms to be used, in the way that I have been proposing, in drawing a distinction between merely fictional items and real items that feature *in that text*. But accepting these deconstructionist claims requires only that we accept that the distinction we are concerned with is distinction that must be drawn from within a socially constructed norm-creating interpretative practice. It does not force us to say that, once the norms are in place, that take us from text to fiction, there is no such distinction to be drawn.

We can accept all of the deconstructionist's points as being true when we consider fictions merely as texts, but can accept this while still maintaining that fictions-considered-as-texts are not the sort of items that are in question when we consider fictionalism as a metaphysical tactic. We saw in Section I of this article that the presence of norms that constrain discourse about fiction is essential to fictionalism's motivation as a tactic in metaphysics. When the modal fictionalist claims that discourse about possibilia is discourse about a fiction, it is part of his intention to portray that discourse as normatively governed. If we consider fictions in the way that the metaphysical fictionalist has in mind, then we *do not* consider them, deconstruction style, as texts without associated norms, we consider them as norm-governed contents. In saying this, we do not disagree with the deconstructionist, we simply talk about a different sort of object.

There is one further objection that, although somewhat vague, is worth addressing here because I have met several readers who are worried by it: One might accept that there are real-world objects that appear in fictions, but think that it simply could not matter to the content of the fiction which of the things that appear in it are real and which not. The worry is motivated by the thought that a consumer

of fictional discourse, even a reasonably sophisticated consumer, may not be in a position to tell which entities in the fiction are real and which ones are made up. If knowledge of what the sentences in the fiction say does not put you in a position to know whether it is true in the fiction that n is F, then, the worry goes, how can n's Fness matter to the content of the fiction?

This line of objection has some intuitive force, but we have already seen some examples that show it cannot be right. When we considered Dickens and the bank notes, we saw that the real-world properties of the items he depicted were something that Dickens was right to care about because, in writing about one-pound notes, there was a possibility of error—Dickens could make a mistake about what was true in his own fiction. The real-world properties of the bank notes do make a difference to what is and is not true in the story that Dickens was telling. And so they make this difference to the content of that fiction even though it is a difference that readers of the fiction, even sophisticated readers, will typically not be in a position to notice. This is not to deny that for many purposes the real-world status of objects that appear in a fiction does not matter. The point is just that it can.

VI

We have seen that the distinction between merely fictional objects and real objects in fictional contexts corresponds to a difference as to whether or not real-world properties are inherited in the fictional domain: it is true-in-the-fiction that real-world objects have their real-world properties, even when the sentences of the fiction do not say as much. It is not true-in-the-fiction that merely fictional objects have properties over and above the ones they have somewhere been said to have, together with generic properties commonly known to belong to items of the relevant sort. This provides us with a usable method for identifying real-world objects in fictions only if we have a method for gauging which properties can correctly be predicated of fictional objects in discourse about the fiction. More specifically, it provides us with a usable method for identifying real-world objects in fictions only if we have a method for gauging which properties *over and above (and perhaps contrary to) the ones mentioned by the author* can be correctly predicated of fictional objects in discourse about the fiction. No such method will be presented in this article, and, at least in the case of literary fictions, the specification of such a method would require difficult questions about hermeneutics to be addressed. There is, however, a rule of thumb that can serve instead of a general theory of what can correctly be said about items in fiction. The rule of thumb says that an object in a fiction has some property (in that fiction) only if a sentence presupposing that it has that property can be felicitously introduced into the fiction. This rule of thumb was in action earlier when we showed that Baker

Street in the Holmes stories does have the property of running roughly north–south by noting that we can imagine the stories being developed in a way that depends on Holmes knowing that it does: Such a development would be coherent and natural and readily understood. In fact, quite a lot of Conan-Doyle's stories depend on Holmes being in the know about some fact that gets to be true in the fiction because it is true in the real world, and not because Conan-Doyle has explicitly introduced it. This is sometimes an irritation to the reader, but it is not a total cheat on Conan-Doyle's part. It *would* be a total cheat, however, if the plot of a Holmes story developed in a way that depends on Holmes turning out to be a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. Holmes' noninheritance of this property from Bell is a symptom of his fictionality. When we consider *philosophical* fiction, the hermeneutic niceties required to work out which things are true in a fiction are easier to avoid. Identification of a mismatch between what is actually said in metaphysical discourse and what it is correct to say in that discourse is more straightforward.

VII

The norm-origin-based account of the distinction between merely fictional objects and real-world objects in fictional context provides us with a way of gauging some of the ontological commitments of a fiction, and so it provides us with a tool that we can use in assessing attempts to employ fictionalism as a way of treating metaphysical issues without postulating troublesome ontology. The variety of fictionalism that is considered here is modal fictionalism. The fact that not every item in a fictional context is a fictional item is not, by itself, a source of difficulties for the modal fictionalist. That fact shows only that an additional step is required if we are to get from treating modal discourse as a fiction to the fictionalist's desired conclusion that possible worlds are not real items. The need for this additional step entails that the modal fictionalist has work to do, but it may be work that the fictionalist is willing to take on. In order to get to the conclusion that modal fictionalism fails to free itself from ontological commitments to mere possibilia, we need to show that the modal discourse, considered as a fiction, must be a fiction that depends for its content on the real existence of possible worlds.

If we take it that the norms governing talk about merely possible worlds could not come from a fiction that was not itself part of modal discourse, then the conclusions we have drawn so far give us the following means of gauging the ontological commitments of modal discourse: Modal discourse, considered as discourse about a fiction, is ontologically burdened to the extent that the sentences of that fiction are not sufficient to account for the norms that govern talk about it.

The question of whether modal discourse, considered as a fiction, is committed to the real existence of merely possible worlds can therefore be addressed by

asking whether the sentences making up modal discourse could be sufficient to account for the norms that are in place concerning what can and cannot be said correctly about those worlds.

A familiar sort of worry suggests that the sentences making up modal discourse could not be sufficient to account for those norms, so that the modal fiction must be an ontologically burdened one. The worry is a version of one that all language-based accounts of modality face: that there are simply not enough sentences of the language to account for all of the modal facts. There are correct and incorrect things that can be said about possible worlds, even when no sentences in the discourse pertain to those worlds. This worry is avoidable in some of its forms,[7] but in the present context, it seems to succeed in finding its mark.

The problem can be seen by considering the (possibly empty) set of possible worlds containing only things that we have never spoken about. Perhaps that set is empty, but perhaps there are many worlds in it, or perhaps there are only a few. If the set is large, then it is correct to say that the set is large. If it is not large, then it is not correct to say that it is. Either way, there is a norm to be accounted for. Where does this norm come from? This norm cannot be accounted for by canonical stipulations, because the things in these worlds have never been spoken about: Nobody is in a position to make such stipulations. Nor can it be accounted for as a generic property commonly known to be a feature of the worlds in question because, thanks to the stipulation that the things in these worlds are unspoken of, these are worlds about which nothing much is commonly known.

The set of canonically stipulated sentences in the possible worlds story, rich though it may be, does not contain enough members to provide structure that is sufficient to account for all of the ways in which talk about possibilia could succeed or fail.

The presence of norms that govern our discourse about modality, but that go beyond the content of the sentences of that discourse, and beyond what is commonly known to be true of possible worlds indicates that, even when considered as a fiction, the modal discourse depends for its content on the real existence of possible worlds, so that the modal fictionalist has not freed himself from the ontological commitment that he was hoping to avoid. In this way, the norm-origin account that I have developed here as an account of the distinction between fictional and real objects may be put to work in assessing fictionalism as a tactic in metaphysics.

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[7] See David Lewis, *On The Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1986) §3.2.