

What it is to be Winnie the Pooh: an essay on the metaphysics of fictional entities

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A familiar characteristic of fictional works is that they feature fictional entities, or characters, places, things, and events with no real or actual counterparts. Fundamental to explaining our engagement with fiction is the question of the status of fictional entities, or what kind of thing they are, if they are anything at all. For those philosophers who are ontologically committed to fictional entities (or those few who are not ontologically committed yet find a metaphysics of fictional entities useful), there appears to be a consensus that fictional entities at least lack existence as ordinary physical objects. Yet there is a sharp disagreement on what sort of ‘existence’ fictional entities then have. This paper examines two possible ways of explaining the metaphysical status of fictional entities. One is the Meinongian strategy of classifying fictional entities as ‘non-existent objects’ that nonetheless possess being in the sense of having those properties in terms of which they are given. The other is the Artfactualist strategy of classifying fictional entities as abstract artifacts created by and dependent on the activity of authors for their being; this is the strategy of Thomasson, and also the strategy that I will defend in this paper.

Preliminary: Intuitions about Fiction

Before proceeding with my discussion of the metaphysics of fictional entities, I want to briefly outline some criteria by which these theories are typically measured. Following Voltolini, any good metaphysics of fictional entities ought to preserve seven intuitions: (i) the nonexistence of fictional entities; (ii) the causal inefficacy of such entities; (iii) the incompleteness of such entities; (iv) the created character of such entities; (v) the actual possession by such entities of the narrated properties; (vi) the un-revisable ascription to such entities of those properties; and (vii) the necessary possession

by such entities of those properties (Voltoloni 133). As I will demonstrate in the first half of this paper, the shortcoming of Meinongian metaphysics of fictional entities is that Meinongianism cannot account for (iv) the created character of those entities. This seriously damages the plausibility of Meinongian theories of fiction since it not only conflicts with our actual literary practice, but also consequences in an inability to fulfill (here I add my own criteria) the intuition that (viii) certain fictional entities are identical with themselves and discernible from one another.

Fulfilling the intuition that (viii) certain fictional entities are identical with themselves and discernible from one another is important to explaining our actual engagement with fiction. For example, hardly anybody would disagree that Winnie the Pooh is identical with himself across the various stories of A. A. Milne, while the character Holmes is identical with himself across the various stories of Conan Doyle. Yet hardly anybody would agree that Winnie the Pooh and Holmes are identical with one another; we say they are two distinct fictional entities. In the second half of this paper I will demonstrate how Meinongianism's inability to sufficiently make identity distinctions among fictional entities makes a case for the plausibility of artifactualism. My defence of artifactualism is that it can account for (iv) the created character of fictional entities, and so can satisfy intuition (viii), at least to a better extent than Meinongianism.

Meinongian Metaphysics of Fictional Entities

As stated, Meinongian metaphysics of fictional entities explain fictional entities within a wider realm of 'non-existent objects'. These theories are so-named for they have their roots in Meinong's 'Theory of Objects', which attempts to explain how it is possible to refer to objects which do not exist (Meinong 79). The category of 'non-existent' objects includes, among others, those fictional objects like the gold mountain that do not in fact exist, and those impossible objects that could never exist, such as the round square (Meinong 82). Meinong's solution to the problem of how we can meaningfully talk about such objects, despite their apparent non-existence, is to assert that these objects actually do, in a sense, exist. However, this 'existence' is not existence in any material, temporal sense; nor is it existence in any non-spatiotemporal sense (it is not 'subsistence') (Meinong 108). Rather, the sort of 'existence' (Meinong uses the term 'being') which these objects have is a sort of 'being-given' as objects (108). This means that non-existent objects have properties (or 'being such-and-so') independent of their actual being, which explains how it is possible to speak of them (Meinong 108).

Meinongian metaphysics of fictional entities, then, explains fictional entities as non-existent objects that nonetheless have those properties they possess in the works of fiction in which they appear. These theories share three common principles: (i) at least one object is correlated with every combination of properties (the ‘comprehension principle’); (ii) some of these objects (including fictional objects) do not exist; and (iii) although they do not exist, they (in some sense) have those properties with which they are correlated (Thomasson 14; also see Terence Parsons (1980); Ed Zalta (1983)). Nevertheless, they differ with respect to which properties count under (i). For example, Parsons’ theory includes only ‘nuclear’ properties such as ‘is a mountain’ and ‘is made entirely of gold,’ excluding those extranuclear properties which are permitted in Zalta’s theory, such as ‘is thought about by x’ (Thomasson 15). Meinongian theories also differ as to how objects “have” properties under (iii). While Parsons’ theory includes only one kind of predication, enabling non-existent objects to have properties in the same way as existent ones, Zalta’s includes two modes of predication (Thomasson 15). On Zalta’s view, existent entities exemplify their properties while non-existent objects “encode” them (Thomasson 15).

In explaining fictional entities as non-existent objects that do in fact have those properties in terms of which they are given, Meinongian metaphysics of fictional entities easily satisfy all but intuition (iv) of Voltolini’s intuitions. For fictional objects on this account (i) do not exist, at least not spatio-temporally, and this makes them (ii) causally inefficacious. Further, they (iii) are objectually incomplete because they only possess those properties which they are given (either explicitly or implicitly) in the work of fiction, properties which (v) they do actually have, and which (vii) they have necessarily, since that is how they have ‘being-given’. Finally, for this same reason, there can be (vi) no ascription revision of these properties (Voltolini, 133). Despite the merits of Meinongian metaphysics of fictional entities in meeting these intuitions, however, intuition (iv) on creation remains unmet. This will be made clear in the following section.

Creation in Meinongian Metaphysics

It follows from the Meinongian classification of fictional entities as non-existent objects that fictional entities can neither be brought into existence by an author nor depend on an author for their being. For while the Meinongian might insist that writing fiction is constitutive of fictional objects, or that it creates them in the same act as referring to them, this act of creation can only be the creation of the object’s fictionality, not the object itself; the author cannot be said to create the object, because

the object is non-existent. Yet if an author does not bring an object into existence, then it must already be an object, since an author could not refer to it otherwise. While authors can make non-existent objects fictional by writing about them, in writing about them an author is simply picking out or referring to them, meaning they are already available for reference (Thomasson 16). This suggests that fictional creation for Meinongian metaphysics differs from creation in the ordinary sense of the word:

I have said that, in a popular sense, an author creates characters, but this too is hard to analyze. It does not mean, of example, that the author brings those characters into existence, for they do not exist. Nor does he or she make them objects, for they were objects before they appeared in stories. We might say, I suppose, that the author makes them fictional objects, and that they were not fictional objects before the creative act. (Parsons 188)

Fictional creation, then, involves an author taking an object already available for reference and making it fictional by writing about it. Yet, as Thomasson emphasizes, the idea that authors create by picking out already available objects and making them fictional conflicts with our intuition that fictional characters are (i) genuinely created entities whose existence is generated through the activity of authors (also intuition (iv) in Voltolini's list), and (ii) dependent upon the activity of authors to bring them into being, as well as on literary works in order to remain in existence (this will be discussed in more detail in the second half of this paper) (Thomasson 16). As shall be demonstrated in following section, the inability of Meinongian metaphysics to treat fictional characters as genuinely created by authors consequences in a lack of identity criteria adequately addressing the problem of (viii) individuation of fictional entities.

Meinongianism and The Problem of Individuation

The problem of individuation of fictional entities is a variant on Quine's concern that Meinongian theories, in allowing for an infinite range of possible objects due to the comprehension principle, contain no way of adequately specifying whether objects are identical with themselves or distinct from one another:

Take, for instance, the possible fat man in that doorway; and again, the possible bald man in that doorway. Are they the same possible man, or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible men are there in that doorway? . . . Or, finally, is the concept of identity

simply inapplicable to unactualized possibles? But what sense can be found in talking of entities which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with themselves and distinct from one another? (Quine 4)

Quine objects to Meinongianism because it lacks any clear identity criteria by which one may immediately identify and distinguish within the domain of possible entities one such possible individual from another. For example, it is not immediately clear whether a sentence like “the possible fat man and the possible bald man in that doorway” is referring to one person or two. Yet a commitment to the being of non-existent entities means we ought to be able to distinguish between them; otherwise, there is no reason why we ought to commit to their being in the first place.

Extending Quine’s worry to fiction, it is difficult to see how the Meinongian approach can individuate fictional entities in the way that we want. For we can easily imagine different characters from different works of literature possessing identical properties (ex. two evil stepmothers), or the same character appearing in different works of literature with different properties (ex. Holmes in the many stories of Conan Doyle). In ordinary literary practice, we typically identify characters as the same, and not just coincidentally so, if there is reason to believe the works derive from a common origin, such as a common author in the case of a sequel, or a common original myth (Thomasson 6). Yet Meinongian theories cannot factor in the circumstances of creation, because they do not treat non-existent entities as genuinely ‘created’ by authors, but only ‘made fictional’.

Without further identity criteria, however, Meinongian theories cannot individuate between different characters with identical properties, nor can they account for the same entity appearing in different works with different properties (or even a single different property), which might be the case if, say, the works in question comprise a series. For fiction, there at least does seem to be two strategies to individuate the same character across different works: (i) use only those properties shared by all works in which the character is featured; or (ii) use all properties ascribed to the character in those works. However, neither of these strategies can fully account for the distinctions between characters that we might want to make.

First, individuating a character in terms of those properties shared by all works in which it is featured excludes from individuation those properties that might be fundamental to a character’s identity, yet not featured in all works. This strategy, then, is likely to individuate characters based on very few properties, especially when it concerns a series, where an author is unlikely to repeat properties across all works, or a myth, where most characterization is unique to the adaptation. Thus it is likely that different characters will be ascribed identical properties, leading once more to the

problem of individuation. For example, if the only common properties of the evil stepmother in all versions of Cinderella are that she is a) evil and b) a stepmother, then she would be discerned by only those two properties. If, say, the evil stepmother of Snow White also only had the properties of being a) evil and b) a stepmother, then this strategy would identify the evil stepmother of Cinderella with the evil stepmother of Snow White, a character that she is fundamentally distinct from. While potentially a sketchy example,¹ this serves to show that the strategy cannot capture our intuitions regarding individuation.

Another strategy is to use all properties ascribed to the character in those works in which it is featured. However, this strategy does not seem adequate either. For one can easily imagine the same character appearing in different texts, written by different authors (historical novels, fan-fiction, spin-offs, and so on). At least for some types of works, we tend to treat those characters referred to by different authors as different characters with different properties even when we recognize them as the same, precisely because they were written about by different authors. For example, we speak of Shakespeare's Cleopatra as distinct from the Cleopatra of Margaret George's *The Memoirs of Cleopatra*. Yet this is impossible for the Meinongian, who individuates without factoring in the circumstances of creation. For the Meinongian, these characters are the same characters and are treated as such. Yet if the Meinongian ascribes to those characters all the properties ascribed to them in those works in which the character is featured, then characters will be individuated by different, and often incompatible, properties than what we would normally ascribe to them. So, this strategy does not seem to adequately capture our intuition regarding individuation either.

In short, while Meinongian metaphysics of fictional entities satisfy intuitions (i), (ii), (iii), (v), (vi), and (vii) on Voltolini's list of criteria for any good metaphysics of fictional entities, they do not fulfill (iv) the created

¹Perhaps it could be said that 'being c) the stepmother of Cinderella' is a property. If this is the case, I admit that my example is a bad one. While I think the example given suffices to show the problems of individuating in terms of shared properties, a better example might be minor characters, which often have very few individuating properties. Consider the case of a dragon guarding a treasure, a common theme in folklore and fairytales. If the common properties of a dragon in all versions of one particular tale were 'being a dragon' and 'guarding treasure,' then, on this strategy, this dragon would be identified with the dragons of any other tales where the only common properties between versions are 'being a dragon' and 'guarding treasure.' Given the simplicity with which minor characters are often described, it is not hard to imagine minor characters such as dragons having few shared properties across versions of the same tale, and further, that the same set of properties comprises the properties shared by a character across versions of a different tale.

character of such entities. This poses a serious danger to the overall plausibility of Meinongian metaphysics of fictional entities since it not only conflicts with our intuition that fictional entities are genuinely created by authors and dependent on authorial activity for their being, but also the intuition that (viii) certain fictional entities are discernible from one another. I will now demonstrate how artifactualism does satisfy the intuition that (iv) fictional entities are created and discuss how this affects its ability to satisfy criteria (viii).

Artifactualist Metaphysics of Fictional Entities

Like Meinongian theories, Artifactualist metaphysics of fictional entities hold that there are such things as fictional objects (Thomasson 15). However, while the Meinongian famously claims that these objects do not exist, the Artifactualist is willing to grant them existence, where this existence is, as the name suggests, existence as an artifact (Thomasson 15). Here I will explain Artifactualism using Thomasson's version. In contrast to Meinongian theories of fiction, which are driven by a desire to show how fictional entities fit into a pre-conceived ontology of non-existent objects, Thomasson develops her metaphysics of fictional entities by looking at the sorts of entities that our beliefs and literary practices seem to commit us to and characterizing the sort of entity that most closely corresponds to them (Thomasson 5).

The first thing Thomasson notices is that "we treat fictional entities as created entities brought into existence as a certain time through the acts of an author [or authors]" in composing a work (5). This is evident by our talk of authors as inventing, making up, or creating their characters, all of which implies that before being written about, there was no fictional object (Thomasson, 6). As has been demonstrated, the intuition that fictional entities come into existence through the mental and physical acts of an author cannot be satisfied by and indeed conflicts with Meinongian approaches to fiction. Yet treating fictional entities as essentially created entities is central to our apparent practices regarding them, and so is central to any view that corresponds closely with them (Thomasson 6).

The next thing Thomasson notices is that the identity of a fictional entity is necessarily tied to its particular origin; as mentioned, we consider two works are about the same character only if there is reason to believe that they derive from a common origin, such as a common author or source (6). A necessary condition of deriving from a common source is close acquaintance between the author of the second work with the previous work, and the intention to import the entity; otherwise, any similarity between

characters is only considered analogous (Thomasson 6). The existence of fictional entities, then, ought to be considered as dependent on the particular creative acts of their author or authors (Thomasson 7). Again, as has been demonstrated, this intuition is incompatible with Meinongian theories; yet it is crucial to our practice of identifying characters, especially where those characters are identical across texts (Thomasson 7).

While fictional entities depend on the creative acts of authors to come into existence, they seem to depend on literary works in order to remain in existence (Thomasson 7). This is because, once created in literary works, fictional entities retain their existence from their appearance in such works, as opposed to the author or his or her creative acts (indeed, the majority of literary works outlive their authors, yet we do not think of them as character-less for it) (Thomasson 7). This means that fictional entities remain in existence only insofar as those works in which they appear are preserved (Thomasson 7). Now, if a fictional entity was necessarily dependent on one particular literary work for its existence, then there might be as many identical characters for each work in which they appear (ex. as many Jay Gatsby's as there are editions of 'The Great Gatsby'). It seems, then, that a fictional entity only requires the existence of some literary work or other in which it appears in order to remain in existence (Thomasson 7).

If fictional entities depend on works of literature for their existence, then whatever literary works depend upon is also something on which fictional entities depend (Thomasson 8). According to Thomasson, a literary work is an artifact whose identity is necessarily tied to those circumstances in which it is created, including the acts of its particular author or authors at a particular time in a particular literary, social, and historical context—in short, it is a *cultural artifact* (Thomasson 8).² Like all cultural artifacts, works of literature, then, are entities that may cease to exist, provided that all comprehensible copies and memories of them are destroyed, never to be recovered (Thomasson 9). This means that fictional entities, since they owe their continued existence to literary works in which they appear, can also fall out of existence (Thomasson 10). Thomasson

²Thomasson's argument here is that the same sequence of words can have different aesthetic or artistic properties depending on the context and circumstances of creation—she gives the example of Orwell's *Animal Farm* not possessing the property of being a satire of the Stalinist state if it was written in 1905, or of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* not having the property of exhibiting an original use of language if Joyce had written it after *Ulysses* (Thomasson 8). I am not sure if I agree that these properties necessarily form part of these works' identities. However, these are certainly necessary properties for looking at such works as part of our literary practices and traditions.

likens this to becoming a “past” object in the same way that a living person can become a dead, past object. Like people, fictional entities that have ceased existing do not become Meinongian ‘non-existent’ objects, nor is it as if such objects never were (Thomasson 10).

In short, the artifactualist account explains fictional entities as cultural artifacts which, like the cultural artifacts of marriage or contracts, are created by the performance of a linguistic act that represents them as existing, whereby this representation is in a work of literature (Thomasson 12–14). Clearly, this satisfies the intuition that (iv) fictional entities are created. Like other cultural artifacts, fictional entities once created can cease to exist and become past objects if the condition that gives the representation of their existence meaning (human intentionality, either in the form of comprehension of the physical words on a page, or the retention of the entity in memory) no longer holds (Thomasson 12–14). This dependency on human intentionality, both for their creation and their continued existence, makes fictional entities abstract entities. In maintaining that fictional entities are abstract, artifactualism non-controversially satisfies the intuition that (i) fictional entities are non-existent, at least in the spatiotemporal sense; and that (ii) fictional entities are casually inefficacious (Voltolini 136). It also satisfies the intuition of (iii) incompleteness, since according to the literature in which an entity is represented, there are certain properties that it neither has nor does not (Voltolini 136).

Individuation in Artifactualism

According to Voltolini, while artifactualism satisfies intuitions (i) to (iv), it fails to satisfy intuitions (v) to (vii) (Voltolini 132). I will address this shortly—first I want to outline the main merits of artifactualism, which are best seen in comparison to the defects of Meinongianism. As discussed, the main defect of Meinongianism is that it cannot account for intuition (iv) and so faces problems in (viii) developing identity conditions for fictional entities; while the main merit of artifactualism is that it can account for that (iv) the intuition of creation. In this section I will demonstrate how this means that artifactualism does not fall subject the problem of individuation, at least not in the way that Meinongianism does.

Artifactualist metaphysics of fictional entities, unlike Meinongian theories, hold that fictional entities do exist, that they exist as abstract artifacts, and that their existence is dependent on their creation by authors at a particular time. Unlike Meinongian theories, then, artifactualism can account for the intuition that authors are genuinely creative in the sense of bringing fictional entities into existence, as opposed to simply

taking available objects and making them fictional by referring to them (Thomasson 16). While this is a merit in its own right, it also contributes to a further difference between the two theories: in artifactualism, there is not an infinite, ever-present range of fictional entities (there is no ‘comprehension principle’) like in Meinongian theories; the only fictional entities in artifactualism are those that are actually created. Artifactualism is therefore not affected by the problem of individuation in the same way as Meinongian theories, since there exist criteria effectively specifying whether entities are identical with themselves or distinct from one another, this criteria being those circumstances in which the work where an entity’s existence is represented is created.

Recall that Meinongian theories are unable to account for why entities with identical properties in different works are not in fact the same entity (ex. the evil stepmothers in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*), or account for why the same character appearing in different works of literature is in fact the same (ex. Holmes in the stories of Conan Doyle). These consequences arise even when Meinongian theories provide specific identity criteria, precisely because they individuate in terms of properties and without factoring in the circumstances of creation or human intentionality. Artifactualism, however, does factor these in. For example, Thomasson claims that a necessary identity condition for fictional entities within different literary works is a common source, meaning that the author of the second work was closely acquainted with the previous work, and intended to import the entity (Thomasson 6). The Holmes of Conan Doyle’s many stories would thus be a single entity (there is a common source—the author, who clearly intended to import Holmes into different works), while the evil stepmothers of *Cinderella* and *Snow White* would not (they have their origins in two different myths). Artifactualism, then, can account for the individuation of fictional entities in a way that Meinongianism cannot.

However, this is not to say that artifactualism always individuates characters sufficiently. Since identity criteria for artifactualism—close acquaintance with the previous work and the intention to import the entity—is relatively non-specific, there does arise cases where artifactualism identifies entities with one another when we want to say they are distinct. For example, consider the case of two entities exhibiting radically different properties; on the artifactualist view, nothing prevents two entities exhibiting radically different, perhaps even contradictory or incompatible, properties from being identified as one entity provided that the conditions of acquaintance and intentionality have been met. Yet it seems strange to say that I could write a story in which I import Winnie the Pooh, only as a bunny and not a bear; being a bear seems essential to the original Pooh’s identity. Perhaps the distinct identity of the second Pooh could be affirmed

insofar as my being a different author prohibits close enough acquaintance between my work and the previous work in order to establish identity when radically different properties are also involved. Yet this would not hold if I happened to be A. A. Milne importing Pooh as a bunny into a story.

Like Meinongianism, then, artifactualism is insufficient at individuating fictional entities. Part of the reason for this is that, as Voltolini claims, the view that fictional entities are abstract and dependent on literary works for their existence prohibits fictional entities from (v) actually possessing the properties that characterize them in the works in which they appear (Voltolini 132). For abstract entities cannot be bears, or detectives, or ride double-decker buses; they can only have those properties according to the relevant literary works. This means that (vii) the ascription of such properties is un-revisable only for the relevant literary works, and that fictional entities do not (vii) possess such properties necessarily. For the artifactualist, then, it is not true of Pooh that Pooh is a bear, but only that Pooh is a bear according to the Winnie the Pooh stories. So if A. A. Milne happened to write a new story intending to import Pooh as a bunny, there is nothing to prohibit this Pooh from being identical with the Pooh of the Winnie the Pooh stories, since it is only according to those stories that Pooh is at all, let alone necessarily, a bear.

In Defence of Artifactualist Metaphysics

While the problem of individuation affects both Meinongianism and artifactualism due to their mutual inability to satisfy all intuitive criteria, it does so to a different extent depending upon those criteria that they do in fact satisfy. This paper has placed particular emphasis on the role of creation in our everyday literary practice and engagement with fiction. As demonstrated, Meinongian theories are unable to account for the creation of fictional entities (intuition (iv) on Voltolini's list), and so unable to individuate fictional entities sufficiently across texts (what I have termed 'intuition (viii)') despite providing specific identity criteria. More precisely, Meinongian metaphysics cannot account for why certain entities in different works of literature exhibiting identical properties are not in fact the same entity, nor for why certain entities are in fact the same despite exhibiting different properties in different works. Artifactualism, however, can account for these phenomena (and hence for intuition (viii)) since it holds that (iv) fictional entities are in fact created by and dependent on human activity for their existence.

In giving such an account of fictional entities, artifactualism suggests that fictional entities are abstract, and so cannot (v) genuinely possess

properties nor have them (vii) necessarily. This has consequences for individuation, since there is no criteria specifying why entities exhibiting certain properties cannot in fact be the same provided that the conditions of close acquaintance between works and the intention to import have been met. However, I think that artifactualism's ability to sufficiently deal with the cases described above gives it the upper hand to Meinongian theories where it concerns individuation, even despite its defect in relation to properties. For it seems to me that if Meinongianism is at fault for failing to fulfill the intuitive (iv) creation of fictional entities by authors and (viii) individuation of entities across texts, both of which artifactualism can satisfy (intuition (iv) in full and intuition (viii) at least in part), then artifactualism is clearly the better theory, at least where it concerns these two criteria.

In fact, unlike Voltolini, I think that Meinongianism's inability to satisfy these criteria makes a strong case for artifactualism being a better metaphysics overall, even if it satisfies less intuitive criteria. For I do not think that all intuitive criteria regarding fiction have equal weight. For example, it is not immediately intuitive that (v) fictional entities genuinely have those properties they are given in works. Yet nobody would likely think a metaphysics of fictional entities plausible that did not hold that (i) fictional entities are non-existent in a spatiotemporal sense; it seems immediately intuitive that (i) is the case. Now, I think the same can be said for the intuition that (iv) fictional entities are genuinely created by authors. As has been highlighted in this paper, the idea that authors genuinely create characters seems fundamental to literary practice as well as what we believe it means to be a fictional entity. In my opinion, any metaphysics of fictional entities which cannot capture (iv) seems to miss the mark of what it is to be a theory of fiction.

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