*Chapter 10*

**Fictional Discourse and Fictionalisms**

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Once upon a time, I laid out a theory of fiction. It was developed at a time when debates about fictional discourse were largely between anti-realists—those who would deny that we ever refer to fictional characters (on grounds that there are no such things to refer to)—and neo-Meinongian realists (Parsons 1980, Zalta 1983, 1988), who took there to (in some sense) be fictional objects with those properties described in the story. While the anti-realists paraphrased all discourse apparently about fictional characters as involving mere pretense (Walton 1990), or saying what is true according to the story, etc., the neo-Meinongians took internal fictional discourse literally, holding that claims like ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective’ are straightforwardly true. For on the neo-Meinongian views there are such objects, and in some sense they have properties such as being detectives—the objects just happen to not exist; or perhaps they are abstract objects (like roles defined or constituted by certain sets of properties) that do exist (Wolterstorff 1980, Zalta 1983).

I developed an alternative to those two dominant approaches, along lines suggested earlier by Searle (1979, 70-75), van Inwagen (1977, 1983), and, as I later learned, in Kripke’s then-unpublished John Locke Lectures (since published, 2013). According to this approach, fictional discourse is to be understood roughly as follows. In many contexts (what I called ‘fictional’ or ‘internal’ contexts) (1999, 105), when we talk about Holmes or Karenina as they are portrayed in the story, when we say things like “Holmes is a detective” or “Karenina’s life was quite tragic”, we are, as the anti-realist suggests, engaged in something other than speaking the literal truth: these claims should be understood as implicitly within the context of a pretense that what the story says is true. In other contexts, however—those I called ‘real’ or ‘external’ contexts (1999, 106)—such as those involved in speaking (perhaps from a critic’s perspective) of the relevant fictional characters, created by authors in particular circumstances, as appearing in various novels, etc., I argued, we speak straightforwardly, without pretense, about fictional characters. These characters (I argued) are not possible or imaginary people, or any special kind of people in special kinds of worlds at all. Instead, they are a kind of abstract artifact, created by the author in writing the story. As such, they are relevantly similar to other abstract cultural creations such as laws (of state), contracts, symphonies, and works of literature themselves. Thus I called this view the ‘artifactual theory’ of fiction (similar views were developed around the same time by Nathan Salmon (1998) and Stephen Schiffer (1996)).

I argued (1999, 2003b) in favor of the artifactual theory over neo-Meinongian views on grounds of its ability to give a *smoother* theory of fictional discourse,[[1]](#footnote-1) and to fit better with our common sense conception of fictional characters, their creation, existence and identity conditions. I’ll leave those arguments to the side here.

I also argued for it over anti-realist alternatives largely on the grounds that it enables us to give a less revisionary account of fictional discourse. I say ‘*less* revisionary’ because it seems that any theory of fictional discourse has to give up appearances *somewhere* to avoid the surface inconsistencies in our ways of talking about fiction—e.g. as we, in some contexts, will say that Frankenstein’s monster was created by Dr. Frankenstein; in others that he was an invention of Mary Shelley’s; in some contexts we’ll say that Sherlock Holmes was a detective; in others that he is a fictional character who can’t be called on to solve crimes (see my 2003b, 205). The artifactual approach and anti-realist theories may handle claims in internal/fictional contexts in the same way (treating all as being in the context of a story operator, or implicitly involving pretense or playing along with a game of make-believe authorized by the story). But unlike the anti-realist, the artifactualist needn’t insist that *all* talk about fictional characters must be understood as in the context of a pretense, or in the scope of a story operator. As a result, the artifactualist is well positioned to give a less revisionary account of fictional discourse than the anti-realist. For the artifactualist needn’t paraphrase apparently serious external claims or take them to be in the context of some pretense or game of make-believe. Claims like “Emma Woodhouse was created by Jane Austen” or “Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character” are treated as straightforwardly true.

Anti-realists, in contrast, cannot treat external claims like these straightforwardly. Kendall Walton, for example, reads not only internal but also external claims as implicitly in the context of a game of pretense or make-believe. In this case the game cannot, of course, be the one authorized for the story: *Emma* licenses us to pretend that Emma was a child born to her now deceased mother: not that she was a character created by Jane Austen. So, for example, when one says “Jane Austen created Emma Woodhouse”, Walton suggests, we invoke a new, *ad hoc* game of make-believe in which “to author a fiction about people and things of certain kinds is fictionally to create such” (1990, 410-411). Similarly, if we say “Gregor Samsa is a (purely fictional) character”, we implicitly make use of “unofficial games in which it is fictional that there are two kinds of people—‘actual’ ones and ‘(merely fictional) characters’—or that some people ‘exist’ and others do not” (1990, 428). Walton then ultimately holds that all claims apparently about fictional characters are implicitly engaged in some game of make-believe—whether ‘authorized’ by the literary work or *ad hoc*.

Stuart Brock (2002) has developed an explicitly fictionalist view of fictional characters, parallel to fictionalist treatments of talk of numbers (Field 1980) and possible worlds (Rosen 1990). On Brock’s view, external statements about what fictional characters there are, when they were created, etc., are to be understood as in the context of an ‘according to the story’ operator. But the story in question of course cannot be the story the character appeared in, for “According to *Gone with the Wind* Scarlet O’Hara is a fictional character” is false. So Brock invokes a different story here: as he puts it, “critical statements are statements about the content of the realist’s theory of fictional characters” (2002, 9).So when one says “Scarlet O’Hara is a fictional character” this should be understood as saying only “according to the realist’s hypothesis, Scarlett O’Hara is a fictional character” (2002, 9). (In fact, as Brock acknowledges, there are several fictional realist stories; he suggests that the fictionalist adopt a hybrid approach that may use whatever realist’s story is most plausible in the context (2002, 14)). Again internal claims and external claims alike are paraphrased—he only reads existential claims straightforwardly (2002, 9). Brock argues that this fictionalist approach enables us to make sense of our critical discourse while remaining non-committal about the existence of fictional characters.

In a sense we can see both Walton’s and Brock’s views as fictionalist treatments of fictional characters, for both hold that critical statements apparently referring to fictional characters (as characters, created by authors, etc.) should be treated as less than serious assertions: instead, they should be handled in ways parallel to the ways we handle internal, explicitly fictional context statements: as implicitly in the context of a story or game of make-believe, and so as only pretending to refer. Stephen Yablo suggests a similar fictionalist approach to fictional characters, writing: “the [Leopold] Bloom people lecture about is just as much a figment of the imagination as the one in the bathhouse” (1999). While there are of course differences in the views (e.g. in whether it is better to think of ‘Scarlet O’Hara is a fictional character’ as in the context of an *ad hoc* game of make-believe or as short for ‘According to the realist’s hypothesis, Scarlet O’Hara is a fictional character’) I will largely put those differences to one side here. What I am interested in here is the general idea that not only internal but also external claims about fictional characters should be taken as implicitly involving a form of make-believe or fictional discourse.

While these fictionalist alternatives clearly give more revisionary treatments of fictional discourse than the artifactual theory provides, many have thought that these revisions in understanding fictional discourse are well worth it to avoid the ‘ontological costs’ of accepting that there are fictional characters. Indeed the most persistent objection raised against realism about fictional characters is the ontological worry that it is simply too strange or too profligate to accept the existence of fictional characters to which we can refer.[[2]](#footnote-2) So: should we be concerned with the ontological worry? Should we embrace a thoroughgoing fictionalist alternative to both external and internal discourse about fiction?

In section 1 I will discuss how I now think the artifactualist may best respond to the remaining ontological worry. This response involves combining first-order artifactualism about fictional characters with a deflationary metaontology that I have argued for elsewhere (2007, 2009, forthcoming). But fictionalists have advanced a major criticism of this metaontological approach. In section 2 I go on to explain the fictionalist criticism. In section 3 I argue that a proper understanding of genuine (internal) fictional or make-believe discourse gives us grounds to see that this criticism cannot hold any water against the deflationist approach. On the contrary, it can only beg the question against it. Moreover, as I will argue in section 4, this discussion reveals an important challenge that arises for thoroughgoing pretense and fictionalist views about fiction, such as those mentioned above, and beyond that, for fictionalist positions wherever they appear in metaphysics—whether they concern fictional characters, properties, numbers, possible worlds, or whatever. The upshot will be that artifactualists need not be concerned with the ontological worry, and that one should be wary of embracing the fictionalist’s alternative.

1. **Addressing the Ontological Worry**

I argued in *Fiction and Metaphysics* that fictional characters (as a certain kind of abstract artifact) were not different in category than works of literature, so that if we accept the latter, (and if it’s what *categories* of entity, not what individuals we accept, that’s important) we should accept the former (1999, 139-145). And certainly I think much of the sting of the supposed ontological worries is removed once we realize that when I talk about accepting fictional characters I’m talking about accepting abstract cultural creations analogous to contracts, laws, and stories—not nonexistent or imaginary people in a special imaginary world.

But I gradually came to realize that more can be said here. It’s not just that fictional characters are *like* literary works in being abstract artifacts; it’s that, according to the very rules of use for the term ‘fictional character’, *all it takes* for there to be a fictional character N is for an author to use the name ‘N’ in a pretending way (perhaps as the subject of a predicative sentence) in writing a work of literature (see my 2003a, 2007). Put in the terms I have developed elsewhere (2007): it seems that the application conditions for a term like ‘fictional character’ are guaranteed to be satisfied provided that ‘An author wrote a story using a name pretensefully…’ is true. Given that, it seems that the existence of fictional characters is guaranteed given only that there were authors who engaged in the relevant activities, and wrote the relevant stories—nothing more is required, so we should not hesitate to accept the former if we have the latter.

Another way of expressing this line of thought has been developed by Stephen Schiffer (1996). “Jane Austen wrote a book pretending to use the name ‘Emma’ to refer to a woman and describe various things she did (where Austen was not referring back to any real person or prior character)” and “Emma is a fictional character in a book by Jane Austen” are redundant: any competent speaker who knows the truth of the first is, according to the standard rules of use for our noun term ‘fictional character’, entitled to infer the second; nothing more, no further investigation, is required. Thus fictional characters, as I came to say, are *ontologically minimal* relative to such things as authors’ activities and literary works; nothing more is required for there to be such things. Once we see that they are ontologically minimal relative to entities like authors and literary works—and it seems the anti-realist must accept these entities to make sense of fictional discourse—then we can see that it takes nothing more to accept the fictional characters. Indeed denying the existence of characters while accepting that of entities sufficient to guarantee their existence merely severs the inferential connections built into our ordinary language, but does not provide a genuinely sparer ontology.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This fits quite naturally with the first-order artifactual theory, since the core idea of that approach was always that fictional characters are not a special kind of imaginary or nonexistent person, but rather are ordinary cultural creations much like literary works, laws of state, and so on. We normally accept that, if an author utters or inscribes sentences engaging in the right kind of pretense, a work of literature is created; and if the legislature and president act in the proper sorts of ways, a law is created: nothing more is required; that is *all it is* to create a work or law. The idea for fiction is similar: if an author in the right context engages in the right kind of pretense involving an introduced name, a fictional character is created; that is *all it is* to create a fictional character.

This strategy of arguing for a realist position has been used in a range of other ontological debates. The idea in each case is that ‘easy arguments’ take us from uncontroversial truths to what seem to be true existence claims about entities of a kind not mentioned in the uncontroversial truth. So, as neo-Fregeans (Wright 1983, Hale & Wright 2001) have pointed out, from a basic sentence like ‘The cups and saucers are equinumerous’ we may infer ‘The number of cups is identical to the number of saucers’, from which we may derive the ontological claim ‘there is a number’—trivially settling the question of the existence of numbers. Stephen Schiffer (1994, 1996, 2003) has argued that similar pleonastic ‘something from nothing’ transformations leave us with commitments to propositions, properties, events, and other disputed entities. I’ve argued that similar easy arguments guarantee the existence of institutional objects like marriages and contracts. For, provided the truth of apparently non-committal sentences like “two qualified citizens sincerely undertook the following vows and paperwork”, we can infer “A marriage came into existence”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

I will call the approach to resolving ontological debates via easy arguments ‘deflationary’, since it suggests that something is wrong with deep and protracted debates about whether the entities exist, as the questions may be answered so easily.[[5]](#footnote-5) The easy arguments typicaly lead to a first-order realist view, as they yield conclusions that the disputed entities (fictional characters, numbers, properties…) do exist. Thus I will call the overall position the ‘deflationary realist’ position. But it is important to note that it is deflationary only in the *metaontological* sense (of thinking the debates may be settled easily), not in holding that the entities in question exist in some second-class or deflated way. On the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming), the deflationary realist should maintain that there are the relevant entities in the only sense the terms in question have—and so be a simple realist about the entities in question.

In any case, the deflationary arguments typically go like this. We start with an uncontroversial claim in which there is no mention of an entity of type J, then make use of a linking principle, which the deflationist takes to be a conceptual truth expressing a constitutive rule for using/introducing the term ‘J’, to give us a derived claim that is, intuitively, redundant with respect to the basic claim. Yet the derived claim apparently entails the existence of Js (fictional characters, numbers, propositions, events…)—thus settling what seemed like serious disputed ontological questions easily (and affirmatively), by way of undisputed basic claims and trivial inferences.

So for properties, we can move from:

* Uncontroversial claim: The bowl is blue
* Linking principle: If x is Q, then x has the property of Q-ness
* Derived claim: The bowl has the property of blueness
* Ontological claim: There is a property (namely of blueness)

Or for numbers, we can move from:

* Uncontroversial claim: There are five stumps in the back yard
* Linking principle: If there are N xs then the number of xs is N
* Derived claim: The number of stumps in the back yard is five
* Ontological claim: There is a number

Or for fictional characters, we can move from:

* Uncontroversial claim: Jane Austen wrote a novel using the name ‘Emma’ to pretend to refer to and describe a woman
* Linking principle: If an author writes a story using a name N to pretend to refer to and describe someone, then the author creates a fictional character
* Derived claim: Austen created a fictional character
* Ontological claim: There is a fictional character

In each of these cases, to raise a serious ontological worry about the ontological claim but not the uncontroversial claim would be inappropriate: for the truth of the former guarantees the truth of the latter; nothing more is required.[[6]](#footnote-6) The artifactual theory does not ‘posit’ strange non-existent, merely possible, or imaginary people in a special realm, but merely articulates commitments that follow from the truth of basic claims we all accept, combined with the rules of use for our critical terms like ‘fictional character’. Those commitments include saying that there are fictional characters.

It is important to see the artifactualist’s realism about fictional characters in this deflationary metaontological context, since it enables us to avoid certain spurious objections. So, for example, Stuart Brock has recently argued that “creationism about fictional characters is an abject failure” (2010, 338) on grounds that, “like theological creationism” it adds more mystery than explanation. For, he argues, the artifactualist[[7]](#footnote-7) cannot give a good explanation of “where, when, and how fictional objects are created” (2010, 339). But this whole line of objection is seen as misconceived once artifactualism is understood in the deflationary metaontological context: the view that there are fictional characters (and that, given the activities of authors in writing literary works, these are guaranteed to exist) is not a causal or explanatory hypothesis like theological creationism, nor is it right to say that it “tells us of their [fictional characters’] causal origins” (Brock 2010, 341). It is not a causal or explanatory ‘hypothesis’ at all, but rather a view about the way our language concerning fictional characters works: such that trivial entailments take us from uncontroversial truths (e.g. that an author wrote a certain set of sentences not intending to refer back to any real person) to truths that there is a certain fictional character. While Brock admits that his “argument against [Artifactualism] is *only* an argument against the view that fictional characters are *causally* created” (2010, 343) he takes his core targets to include people like Schiffer and myself, who hold no such view.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Taking the view that fictional characters are created as a causal hypothesis, Brock insists that artifactualists must answer questions such as “When, exactly, does life begin for a fictional character?” (2010, 355) how is it created (identifying its cause), and where? But the artifactualist as described above is not trying to give a causal account of creation as one might of when promethium was first created. Instead, the idea is that given the rules of use for the term ‘fictional character’ there are trivial entailments that take us from certain uncontroversial statements about literary activities to truths about there being certain fictional characters. There will no doubt be areas of vagueness and indeterminacy in these rules, which may prevent us from giving a precise statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for the creation of a fictional character (though we can, as above, state certain sufficient conditions). But this is (*pace* Brock (2010, 362-3 n. 12)) precisely analogous to the case of other terms for social entities, such as nations and universities. And as the artifactualist does not offer a causal/explanatory hypothesis, there is certainly no pressure for the artifactualist to answer questions appropriate only for manufacturing and birthing: questions about the precise cause of coming into existence, place, and time (and even for manufacturing and birthing, our concepts may be indeterminate enough to make it inappropriate to demand a very precise answer).

1. **The Fictionalist’s Criticism**

I have argued that we can make use of an easy argument for the existence of fictional characters (considered as abstract artifacts), in a way that should remove ontological worries about accepting them. Fictionalists about entities of various sorts have, however, subjected easy ontological arguments to an important line of criticism. The idea is roughly that although ordinary people might be inclined to accept arguments like these, the apparently ontological claim in the conclusion is not a serious claim of existence, but rather should be read as in the context of a pretense. As a result, the trivial inference doesn’t really get us the ontological claim the realist wants—but only a pretense of one—and so doesn’t give us an ‘easy’ answer to the ontological question.

So, for example, the above line of reasoning might look plausible, say, as an easy argument for the existence of numbers. But according to Stephen Yablo the conclusion (that there is a number) shouldn’t be thought of as a serious claim at all, but rather merely as engaged in playing along with the make-believe of applied mathematics. “Numbers,” he writes, are “part of a realm that we play along with because the pretense affords a desirable—sometimes irreplaceable—mode of access to certain real-world conditions, viz. the conditions that make a pretense like that appropriate in the relevant game” (2005, 98).

Similarly, although ordinary people might be inclinded to accept easy arguments for fictional characters and say things like ‘there is a fictional character (in this novel that...)’, the fictionalist critic says that we should not interpret those claims any more literally than internal/fictional claims like ‘Emma is inclined to think a little too highly of herself’. For according to the fictionalist the prior claim, too, is implicitly in the context of a story or pretense—albeit a different one from Austen’s. This line of thought of course fits perfectly with the sort of fictionalist approach to fictional characters developed in different ways by Walton and Brock.

Yablo (2002, 2005) develops a generalized approach along these lines criticizing the use of easy arguments to settle ontological questions about the existence of numbers, properties, propositions and the like. He argues that the ontological claims we get as conclusions are not serious ontological claims for the simple reason that they are not to be understood as genuinely asserting the ontological claim—though stating them may involve asserting a distinct ‘real content’ of the claim. Instead, on Yablo’s view (2005, 98), the ontological claims we get as conclusions implicitly involve a kind of pretense, make-believe, or simulation—so that they lack the relevant force to be serious existence assertions. The linking principles that apparently entitle us to infer that numbers, properties, possible worlds, and the like exist, Yablo suggests, are analogous to generative principles in games of make-believe, which (in conjunction with props) yield only truths-in-the-relevant-make-believe (in the case of numbers: the make-believe of mathematics).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Yablo draws on Walton’s general work on make-believe to develop his view. So, for example, children playing a game of make-believe may adopt the generative principle that stumps are to count as bears (i.e., that we are to pretend that any stump is a bear) (cf. Walton 1990, 40). The stumps are the ‘props’ in this game, and (combined with the generative principle) may generate make-believe truths, such as that there are five bears in the back yard. Speaking within the game, a player only *pretends* when she says ‘look out, there are five bears!’, and does not commit herself to there *really* being five bears, but only to it being *true-in-the-make-believe* that there are five bears. Nonetheless, she may *really* commit herself to the ‘real content’ of the claim—that is, roughly, what information it communicates about the props (that there are five stumps in the back yard). Similarly, on Walton’s view, novels serve as ‘props’ in authorized games of make-believe. Thus on this view someone who says “Anna Karenina was run over by a train” speaks within the game authorized by the novel, and commits herself only to it being *true in the make-believe* that Anna was run over, and to the real content of the claim: that is, roughly, that the novel says or implies so.

It is clearly plausible to think that the *internal* claims about fiction involve a form of pretense or make-believe, or should be understood as implicitly in the context of an ‘according to the story’ operator. Here pretense and paraphrase theorists have done much to clarify the sense of such claims undertaken about the contents of works of literature or in the context of (other) make-believe games. But does it make sense to think of the *ontological* claims we make about fictional characters and other such things (derived from the easy arguments) as also merely pretending, invoking some form of make-believe or fiction?

Yablo argues that it does. The linking principles underlying the deflationist’s easy arguments for realism, he suggests, are best understood as rules for generating make-believe truths. So, for example, in the case of mathematics, the linking principles cited above would be understood simply as rules for generating make-believe truths within the ‘fiction’ of mathematics. As Yablo writes for the case of mathematics:

The governing fiction [generative principle] of applied arithmetic says that whenever there are some E's, there is an entity their number that measures them cardinality-wise; if there are five E's, this further entity is 5 (Yablo 2002, 77).

And so from the fact that there are five stumps in the backyard, we can (in conjunction with this principle) generate the claim that there is some number—five—of stumps. But this (like the claim about bears) should be taken merely as a *truth-within the relevant make-believe—*this time, the fiction of mathematics(Yablo 2002, 77). So, those who say things like ‘the number of stumps is five’ do not commit themselves to there *really* being numbers, though they may really commit themselves to the ‘real content’ of the claim, viz. that there are five stumps (Yablo 2002, 77).

Similarly, according to the fictionalist’s criticism, linking principles that are used in easy arguments for properties, states, possible worlds, and the like are only principles for generating relevant truths in the property-fiction, possible-worlds-fiction, etc. And if we extend fictionalism to fictional characters, the linking principles that lead us to talk of fictional characters should be treated as rules for generating make-believe truths in the relevant *ad hoc* game of make-believe, or the fictional-realist’s fiction about fiction. In each case, the fictionalist insists, the ontological claims that are supposed to be arrived at by way of easy arguments like those above should not be taken seriously and literally at all. They are analogous to claims in which we discuss the contents of works of fiction.

1. **A problem for the fictionalist’s criticism[[10]](#footnote-10)**

But there is a crucial disanalogy between the linking principles in easy arguments and generative principles that take us from talk about stumps to talk about bears, and from talk about novels to talk about people. Indeed careful attention to cases of *clearly* fictional discourse (such as internal discourse about works of fiction) makes the crucial difference evident. Just as Austin (1962, 70) argued that ‘real’ is a term that requires a contrast—to meaningfully apply ‘real’ to a duck, say, requires some implied contrast with ways in which it might fail to be real—so ‘pretend’ requires a contrast: to make sense of the idea that we merely pretend that P requires presupposing that there is some difference between what we commit ourselves to in pretending that P, and what we would commit ourselves to in asserting that P *really is* the case. A speaker can *merely pretend* that P only if she is not committed to the truth of P.[[11]](#footnote-11) The very strength of pretense theories of fictional discourse is that they enable us to see how a speaker may utter internal claims without commitment to their literal truth, though there may be something else (the real content of the claim, concerning props) to which she does commit herself.

In the case of the pretense about bears, we can understand the distinction between what it is to assert that there really are five bears in the backyard, and what it is to only *pretend* to assert it (with the asserted informational content just being that there are five stumps). For what it is for there to be a bear, for ‘bear’ to apply, is established by rules for genuinely applying the term in various situations, requiring, e.g., that there be a creature of a certain sort (perhaps the same sort as those ostended in a sample originally baptized as ‘bears’, or the like). We can leave the details to the side, because it’s pretty clear that however we understand the application conditions for ‘bear’, these are *not* met merely by the presence of a stump—there is something more (or rather, something else) that it would take for there to *really* be bears. So a speaker who *pretensefully* asserts (in the game of make-believe) that there are five bears, and *really* commits herself only to there being five stumps, undertakes very different commitments than one who seriously asserts that there are five bears. Here what it is to (merely) pretend that there are bears may be contrasted with what it would be to (really) assert that there are.

Similarly, in the case of internal fictional discourse, it is clear that there is a big difference between committing oneself to there being a woman named “Anna” who was run over by a train, and committing oneself to there being a novel that says so. Here, too, what it is to merely pretend that there is such a woman (by using the story as a prop in an authorized game of make-believe in which we pretend that what it says is true) may be contrasted with what it would be to (really) assert that there is, and so we can make sense of the idea that, in internal fictional discourse, we are merely pretending and not committing ourselves to the literal content of what we say.

But it is not at all clear that we can get the needed contrast in those cases in which the fictionalist holds that we merely ‘pretend’ that there are numbers, properties, or fictional characters considered as abstract artifacts (not as people).

Let us begin with the easier case of institutional rules that can be used as linking principles in easy arguments; for example, the rule that if two suitable people knowingly visit the Justice of the Peace, sincerely say the relevant vows and undertake the relevant paperwork, they come to be married (and so a marriage comes into existence). Should we say that this is merely a generative principle in a game of make-believe, so that someone who says ‘We are married’ is just *pretending* to assert this (while all that is *really* asserted is the ‘real content’ of the claim: that certain vows and paperwork were undertaken)? No—it makes sense to talk about ‘pretending we are married’ only by contrast with what it would be to *really be* married. But all it takes to *really* be married *just is* to have undertaken the proper vows and paperwork in the proper context—to commit oneself to that ‘real content’ just is to commit oneself to the claim that we are married (and thus that there is a marriage). The only sensible contrast that can be drawn between what it is to *pretend to* assert that we are married, versus what it is to *really* assert it, is in terms of whether we are asserting or only pretending to claim *that the vows and paperwork were undertaken*. But then we can’t understand the claim “we are married” as really asserting that the vows and paperwork were undertaken, but not as really asserting that there is a marriage.

Similarly, can we say that a principle such as: ‘if an author writes a story using ‘N’ to pretend to refer to and describe someone, then she creates a fictional character’ merely generates the *make-believe* truth that there is a fictional character (that it is merely true according the Artifactualist’s fiction—or in an ad hoc game of make-believe)? From the artifactualist’s point of view, this makes no more sense than the idea that the laws for marriage in the state of California only make it *make-believedly* the case that there are marriages. For on their view, *all it takes* for a fictional character to be created is for an author to engage in this kind of pretense. No contrast can be drawn between what we are committed to in being committed to the real content: that an author engaged in the right kind of pretense, and the literal content: that the author created a fictional character. This is precisely, for the deflationary artifactualist, the way to pinpoint the big difference between internal fictional discourse—where such a contrast can be drawn—and external fictional discourse—where it cannot.

The point is quite a general one that prevents fictionalists from successfully wielding this kind of criticism against easy arguments. For if, as the deflationist holds, the linking principles are conceptual truths that reflect genuine rules of use for our terms (specifying sufficient conditions for the term ‘marriage’, ‘property’, ‘fictional character’ or ‘number’ to apply) then *nothing more is required* for the ontological claim to really be true than for the uncontroversial claim to be true, and so in committing herself to the ‘real content’ of the claim a speaker also commits herself to the truth of the ontological claim—*in the only sense it has.* So from the deflationary realist’s point of view, no sense can be made of the suggestion that the ontological claims derived from an uncontroversial claim combined with a conceptual truth are merely pretending (the same would go if we took them to be merely simulating, making-believe, or figurative uses of language), and this cannot be used against the deflationary realist to suggest that the trivial inferences fail to yield serious answers to ontological questions.[[12]](#footnote-12) Deflationary realism—about fictional characters or things of other sorts—is not threatened by the fictionalist’s line of criticism.

This problem is a general one that applies whenever fictionalism about any kind of entity is wielded in an attempt to undermine easy arguments for those entities. In the centrally disputed case of numbers, for example, we can only make sense of the idea that claims that there are numbers are pretenseful by contrasting what a speaker commits herself to in *pretending* that there are numbers with what she would commit herself to in seriously *asserting* that there are numbers. On Yablo’s view, the speaker who says ‘There is a number—five—of stumps in the yard’ only *pretends* to assert that there is a number (five); and *really* commits herself only to there being five stumps. But the neo-Fregean’s linking principles are supposed to be conceptual truths reflecting constitutive rules for using a term like ‘number’, so that if there are five stumps that entitles us to infer that there is a number (five) of stumps; so to commit oneself to there being five stumps *is* to commit oneself to there being a number (five) of stumps.

The problem, in short, is that on the deflationary realist’s view, *no contrast can be drawn* between what (according to the fictionalist) it takes (say) for claims about numbers *to be true in the fiction of mathematics*, and what it takes for them *really to be true.[[13]](#footnote-13)* The difficulty arises for talk of numbers, properties, events and the like, but not for cases of overt (internal) fictional talk since the *only* use of the terms in talk of the former kinds is in what the fictionalist takes to be fictional contexts; there is no extra-fictional or literal use to contrast it with, to give it content. This again is in stark contrast to the case of genuine fictional discourse in works of literary fiction and overt games of make-believe. The terms typically employed in novels (‘person’, ‘pig’, ‘spider’) have well-established uses outside of the fictional context, enabling us to contrast an assertive use with a merely pretending use (in which one is only committed to the real content, about the ‘props).[[14]](#footnote-14) But the fictionalist attempts to write off *all* (apparently assertive, positive) uses of the disputed noun terms as somehow engaged in a pretense, simulation, or make-believe.

The deflationary realist of course wants to insist that the truths about what the fictionalist calls the ‘props’ (to be fed into the generative principle) are analytically sufficient for *real* truths about the existence of numbers. Similarly, what the fictionalist takes to be make-believe-generating principles are instead constitutive rules of use for the term introduced, specifying conditions sufficient for there to be a number. If that is the case, we can’t understand what it is to (merely) pretend that there are numbers by contrast with what it would be to (really) assert that there are—and so we can’t make sense of the fictionalist position as an alternative to realism.[[15]](#footnote-15) The same would go for truths about the existence of properties or fictional characters: if, as the deflationary realist suggests, the truth of the basic claim is analytically sufficient for the truth of the ontological claim, then we can’t take speakers to be *merely pretending* to embrace the ontological claim while committing themselves only to the basic claim. If the fictionalist rejects the idea that these arguments are indeed trivial, then she has rejected the deflationary realist’s position, but not given us any *reason for* rejecting it: she has merely begged the question against it.

1. **A Challenge for Fictionalisms**

Thus far I have only made the defensive move: showing that the deflationary realist’s position (about fictional characters or anything else) is not threatened by the fictionalist’s criticism; the fictionalist’s line of thought can at most beg the question against the deflationary realist. Of course one might still allow that the fictionalist has articulated an alternative to deflationary realism, even if she has given no argument against it. So are the two positions on a par?

There is actually more that can be said here—for the above line of thought leaves us with a general challenge for fictionalisms wherever they appear in metaphysics. The analogy the fictionalist relies on in articulating her view is with internal fictional or pretending discourse—say, discourse in which we pretend that there are people where there are only words, or bears where there are only stumps. In those cases a clear contrast can be drawn between what it would take for the literal content of the claim to be true, and what it would take for the real content to be true. But this analogy only takes us so far: for we can make sense of the idea that what we say in saying there are numbers, properties or fictional characters is less committal than the content of a serious ontological claim about these things only if there is a contrast between what it takes for the ‘real content’ of the claim to be true, and what it would take for there to *really be* such things.

The challenge for the fictionalist then, is to articulate *what more it would take* for the serious existence claim to be true. What more are you supposing it would *really take* for there to be fictional characters (say) than for authors to write stories that use names in certain ways? If you think it would require some special kind of imaginary people in a special realm (the deflationary realist might say), it is you, not I, who might be suspected of taking external fictional discourse too seriously. And in any case, whether or not there are imaginary people does not at all speak to whether there are abstract artifacts of the sort the artifactualist accepts.

Other criteria that might be invoked in answer to the question of what more it would take might include that there be something causally relevant, or perceptibly trackable, etc. But these would be blatantly irrelevant or question-begging as criteria for the existence of fictional characters (considered as abstract artifacts), numbers, and many other disputed abstract entities. Denying that there are fictional characters or numbers on grounds of denying that there is anything causally relevant or perceptually trackable is rather like denying that there are dogs on grounds of denying that there is anything purple.

There might be some who are tempted by the following general line of reply: that what more is required for there to *really be* numbers, properties, or fictional characters is: that there *really is some (new) object/entity/individual* present. But as I have argued elsewhere (2009), there are two uses of ‘object’ in English. One is as a sortal of its own, with its own application conditions—roughly, the sense of ‘Spelke objects’ in which to be an object requires roughly that matter be unified in a certain way such that it is cohesive but moveable independently from the background, perceptually trackable, etc (Spelke 1990). If a sortal sense of ‘object’ is what is meant, then we may evaluate whether there is some object in a particular situation by determining whether the application conditions for ‘object’ are fulfilled in that situation. But if ‘object’ is just one sortal among others, there seems no reason to be specially interested in whether the application conditions for ‘object’ are fulfilled rather than, say, those for ‘table’, ‘number’, or ‘fictional character’. Moreover, if the application conditions for ‘object’ (on this sortal use) are not fulfilled in a situation, that does not seem to reflect on whether or not the conditions for another, disputed sortal term (like ‘number’ or ‘fictional character’) are, and so does not seem to reflect on whether there really are numbers or fictional characters. For, you might say, numbers and fictional characters were never meant to be (or even require the presence of) unified lumps of matter.

Asking whether there is some ‘object’ there might appear to be a more important, general question precisely because ‘object’ is more commonly used in a covering sense (see my 2009), (or as what Lowe calls a ‘dummy sortal’ (1989)) ensuring that if there is, say, a table, or number, or a fictional character, there is some object. (It is also this use that gives the appearance that one could deny that there is a number, say, on grounds of denying that there is any object.) But the rules of use for ‘object’, used in this covering sense, ensure that it applies provided any first-order sortal does. So, if this is the way of understanding ‘object’, then ‘there is an object’ is guaranteed to be true as long as ‘there is a number’ or ‘there is a fictional character’ is—even if this was arrived at via a trivial argument. But then we can’t reject the existence claim about numbers or characters on the basis of rejecting that about objects; the order of inference is the other way up and the latter is guaranteed to be true if the former is.

Finally, if ‘object’ is being used in some other ‘neutral’ sense without application conditions of its own, and without being used in a covering sense, (I have argued (2009)) the claim ‘an object exists’ is not well-formed and not truth-evaluable: for we don’t have the application conditions needed to make the existence claim truth-evaluable. All in all, saying ‘there must *really* be some *object’* is not a promising route for the fictionalist to take in saying what more it would take for our ontological claims to be straightforwardly true.

Of course the fictionalist might reject the idea that existence claims are only truth-evaluable when the terms involved have application conditions. Debating this of course gets us straight into the deep waters of metametaphysics, which there is not space to deal with here. But it is worth noticing that the deflationary realist has at least put pressure on the fictionalist who hopes to meet the challenge in this way to explain how else *can* we understand ‘object’ and address and resolve debates about whether or not there is some ‘object’ in a given situation. Given the dearth of agreement about even the most basic issues of when there is an ‘object’ in a situation, that will be no easy task.

This is not meant to be any kind of knockdown argument against various forms of fictionalism, including those about fictional characters. Other objections to easy ontological arguments also remain and must be handled separately.[[16]](#footnote-16) What I hope to have shown here is simply that fictionalists have not raised any argument that tells against the deflationary realist line of reply to the ontological worry, and also to point out a daunting challenge that fictionalist views face. I also hope to have made more evident the connections between a first-order fictionalist position and certain issues in meta-metaphysics. For the above discussion leaves the fictionalist in a funny position: the fictionalist wanted to be non-committal about many first-order debates in metaphysics, suggesting that we can understand and use the discourse in question perfectly well without having to settle the question of whether the entities ‘really’ exist or not. But the fictionalist ends up pushed towards a fairly serious and committal *metaontology* (according to which there are robust, non-verbal disputes about whether there is an ‘object’ that cannot be addressed by noting that there is a table, or a lump of well-bonded matter, or…) to hold onto the idea that there really is a difference between what a speaker is committed to in asserting in the real content of the claim, and what she would be committed to in making a proper ontological claim. This is a position I think at least some fictionalists will find uncomfortable, and specifying what that difference is—in a clear manner, in ordinary English—presents challenges anyone should regard as formidable.

Fictionalism has often been considered an attractive position for those who wanted to avoid ontological commitment to entities of various types—and for those who hoped to avoid taking a stand on ontological issues. But closer attention to the contrasts between genuine fictional/pretenseful discourse and the discourse about ontologically disputed entities reveals an important disanalogy that makes the strategy far from obviously applicable, and prevents it from working as an objection to the deflationary realist. Though they wanted to avoid taking ontological claims ‘too seriously’, it turns out that it is fictionalists, not deflationary realists, who are taking ontological *debates* too seriously.

Earlier I posed the questions: How concerned should we be about the ontological worry? and, Should we embrace a thoroughgoing fictionalism about discourse about fiction (internal and external alike)? I have tried to make clear above why I think the deflationary realist is in a good position to dismiss the ontological worry (see also my 2009b). Indeed (as I have argued elsewhere (2007 Chapter 9) those who accept the truth of the uncontroversial claim at the start of an easy argument do not truly offer a more parsimonious ontology by denying (or avoiding commitment to) the truth of the ontological claim. Moreover, I have argued that the standard fictionalist criticism of the easy ontological response doesn’t hold water, and thus doesn’t undermine this line of response to the ontological worry. So I don’t think we should be concerned by the ‘ontological worry’. Nor do I think we should embrace a thoroughgoing fictionalism that treats both internal and external discourse about fiction as in the context of a pretense or paraphrase operator, since the ontological worries shouldn’t sway us, and the artifactual view retains the advantage of providing a less revisionary account of fictional discourse.

So, in sum, I think we should indeed be fictionalists about the people, creatures, and places described in works of fiction: talk within and about the content of novels may well be pretenseful, or best understood as in the context of a story operator. Happily or sadly, there is no reason to think that there are the wonderful, terrifying, and mystical people and creatures we read about in books. But we should not be fictionalists about fictional *characters*, understood as abstract artifacts that are the topics of discussion in literary history and criticism.

Finally, a more general lesson is that we should in general hesitate before embracing fictionalist views about disputed ontological entities. For, as attention to (internal) fictional discourse itself shows, there are very important disanalogies between discourse about numbers, properties, abstract artifacts and other disputed entities, and the discourse in genuinely fictional stories.

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1. Meinongian views do well at handling fictional statements about fictional characters, but struggle with real statements about fictional characters and fictional statements about real people (like the statements about Napoleon in *War and Peace)*. To avoid the contradictions and account for real discourse about fictional objects, the Meinongian ends up positing two types of property (nuclear and extra-nuclear) (Parsons 1980) or two modes of predication (exemplifying and encoding) (Zalta 1983), making *ad hoc* or at least inelegant adjustments to the theory. Moreover, to cope with fictional discourse about real people, Meinongians must read fictional discourse *about real individuals* differently than that about fictional characters—perhaps by paraphrasing it as only telling us what’s true according to the story (see my 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are of course other important objections as well. One concerns negative existence claims—for it seems that claims like ‘Sherlock Holmes doesn’t exist’ are true, although (on the artifactualist view) the fictional character Holmes exists. Another arises from important arguments developed by Anthony Everett (2005) to the effect that the realist about fictional characters must accept certain principles that, when combined with bizarre stories, lead to positing inconsistences and unacceptable forms of indeterminacy in the world. I have recently addressed both of these lines of concern in some detail (2010), so I won’t discuss them again here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I suggest this point for fiction in (2003a) and argue for it in greater generality in my (2007) and (2009b). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In *Ordinary Objects* (2007) I also argued that trivial arguments similar to the neo-Fregean’s take us from the eliminativist’s uncontroversial sentence ‘There are particles arranged tablewise’ to the derived sentence: ‘There is a tablewise arrangement of particles’ to the ontological sentence: ‘there is a table’, thus landing even would-be eliminativists with commitment to ordinary objects (2007, 162-168) (Of course there are important differences among some of these cases (detailed in my 2001), e.g. that the uncontroversial claim must be true for the easy arguments to work for particular events, marriages, fictional characters, and tables; but apparently not for those regarding numbers and properties. But those don’t make a difference for what’s at stake here.) I defend easy ontological arguments of various kinds in my (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course there are many other deflationary metaontological approaches distinct from the one defended here, including Eli Hirsch’s quantifier variantist view (2002), Karen Bennett’s epistemicist view (2009), David Chalmers’ ontological anti-realist view (2009), and Stephen Yablo’s quizzicalist view (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, a number of objections have been raised against easy ontological arguments in various domains, including arguments that there are no conceptual truths, or that the conceptual truths relied on keep bad company with superficially similar principles, or that they fail to give us serious ontological conclusions, or that they may be avoided by adopting an Ontologese quantifier. I respond to these objections and more in my (forthcoming), but there is not space to do so here. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. He uses the term ‘creationist’, but since this is a term already in use for a very *disanalogous* religious view, I will stick with the original term ‘artifactualist’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The tie to this form of meta-ontological deflationism admittedly was not evident in my original work on fiction (1999), but has been quite prominent in my recent work (e.g. 2001, 2003, 2007), and in all of Schiffer’s work on fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Note that Yablo’s views may have changed somewhat, as he now appeals to the idea of non-catastrophic presupposition failure, rather than to pretense, make-believe, or metaphoricality as giving us reason for thinking that claims about the existence of numbers are less than fully ontologically committal. What I say here applies to the earlier work (2002, 2005). On changes in his view, see also his (2005, 110-111, first (unnumbered) note), and note 12 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I develop this line of thought at greater length in my (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some may want to allow that one can merely pretend that P even if one is committed to P, provided that P is a distant and unforeseen consequence of one’s other (more immediate) commitments. Even if that is so, however, that will not affect the argument below, since the commitment in question here is neither a distant nor an unforeseen consequence. All that is required here is that we cannot *merely pretend* what we are explicitly committed to, or the immediate and obvious analytic consequences of what we are explicitly committed to. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In his more recent work, Yablo tries not to take a stand on whether or not the claims of mathematics are making real assertions, and doesn’t rule out that the statements of mathematics are literally true, or maybe-metaphors: to be taken literally if true, otherwise to be taken metaphorically (2005, 110-111). His current ‘quizzical’ approach (2009) is rather to take the issue between the nominalist (who might use fictionalism in support) and the Platonist as unresolvable. For the only thing that makes a difference as to whether or not our terms refer is semantic influence, but modulo the assumption of the existence of numbers, the semantic effect is the same: all the assertive content remains the same whether or not the terms refer. But this quizzical stand seems to still rely on a contrast between pretending uses and real uses of mathematical terms; cases in which number terms do and do not refer—it’s just that we cannot make the call about who’s right about the existence of numbers. Given that, the view remains subject to the above line of criticism: if there is no difference to be drawn that enables us to make sense of a merely pretending use as contrasted with an assertive use of the relevant language, the issue between the fictionalist and realist is not a real issue that’s undecidable. Instead, we can’t meaningfully pose the choice between the two views at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Fine (2009, 4) similarly suggests that, if straightforward claims about the existence of numbers are ‘not strict and literal truths, then one is left with no idea either of what a strict and literal truth is, or of what the strict and literal content of these claims might be’. Cf. Hirsch (2002, 110). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We can of course invent new terms to pretend with in fictional contexts (e.g. ‘Dementor’): we may introduce a term for a new kind of creature that…, a marvelous new machine that…, etc. But in these cases, unlike the number case, we can still understand what a serious, assertive use of these terms would commit us to, and contrast it with the merely pretending use. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Interestingly, Yablo seems almost to notice this point at one stage, remarking that “’really’ is a device for shrugging off pretences…[but] I’m not sure what it would *be* to take ‘there is a city of Chicago’ more literally than I already do” (1998, 259). But he adds in the attached footnote “I have a slightly better idea of what it would be to commit myself to the literal content of ‘the number of As = the number of Bs’” (1998, 259 n.74). Unfortunately, he does not say what that idea is, and I don’t know what it could be, unless it’s the common idea (discussed below) that there really is some *object*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hartry Field (1984) famously objects that these arguments are no more persuasive than *a priori* arguments for the existence of God that begin from analyzing the concept of God, and leave us with epistemological difficulties of explaining how we can come to know the relevant entities (especially when these are abstracta). For a reply to the first concern, see Schiffer (2003); Hale and Wright (2009) speak to the epistemological concern. I address these and other objections to easy arguments of various kinds in my (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)