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FICTION, MODALITY AND DEPENDENT ABSTRACTA

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Lucky for us, the residents of Southsea were unusually healthy. For if Arthur Conan Doyle's medical practice had been busier, Sherlock Holmes might have never been created. Fortunate, too, that Dostoyevsky met Anna Snitkina, for without the stability she gave Dostoyevsky's life, none of the brothers Karamazov might have come to be. The pages of literary history are full of such observations that, although there are such characters as Holmes and Karamazov, given other conditions there might not have been.

But central though such claims are to literary history and to our common understanding of fiction, most theories of fiction stumble in the attempt to account for them. Making sense of these claims requires that we offer a modal theory of fiction, addressing such issues as what possible worlds a fictional character is in and how to analyze modal discourse about fiction.

The question of which possible worlds a fictional character resides in has spawned an astonishing variety of replies – ranging from the possibilist view that fictional characters, though not members of the actual world, belong to other possible worlds; to the disbeliever's view that there are no fictional characters in any world, actual or possible; to the abstractist view that fictional characters are necessary abstracta appearing in all possible worlds.¹ Yet despite their variety, each of these views leads to various difficulties. The confusion on this issue and lack of a satisfying answer suggest that it might be worthwhile to look for a new way of understanding the relation between *ficta* and *possibilia*.

The second major problem lies in analyzing modal discourse about fiction. On the one hand, we need a way to account for the apparent truth of such claims such as “Holmes might have never been created” and “Meursault (of *The Stranger*) might not have killed

the Arab". But some modal claims about fiction aren't so straightforwardly true or false. Questions such as: Is Sherlock Holmes essentially clever? Might Brick of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* become an abusive father? might leave us simply confused. Thus we not only need a way to explain the apparent truth or falsehood of clear claims, but also a way of sorting out confusions and reaching an analysis of the more puzzling modal claims about fiction.

I propose here to navigate the troubled waters of fiction and modality. I begin by discussing some problems which other views encounter and developing instead the Artifactual Theory of fiction – a view according to which fictional characters like Holmes and Karamazov are created, dependent abstracta present in the actual world and in some, but not all, other possible worlds. Treating fictional characters as dependent entities enables us to overcome problems faced by other views, to provide a better answer to the problem of what possible worlds a fictional character belongs to, and to unpack the confusions in modal discourse about fiction. Its ability to handle the intricate problems of fiction and modality should provide some confirmation that we are on the right track to an adequate and durable theory of fiction.

But a well-tested theory of fiction is not the only result of this labor. There is a temptation to think of the problems with fiction as isolated difficulties of awkward objects, which less extravagant metaphysicians need not worry over. This would be a great mistake. For the problems of placing fictional characters in a modal context also arise for those handling other types of abstract objects. Like the friend of fiction, the defender of abstracta must stipulate where these objects fit in a possible worlds ontology – and the typical response that they are members of all possible worlds is ill-suited for certain abstract entities like works of music and literature, and unattractive to anyone who takes a constructivist or dependentist view of some abstract objects. The solution developed for fiction suggests an alternative account of what possible worlds dependent abstracta are in – an account which may be useful far beyond the realm of fiction.

I. THREE THEORIES OF FICTION AND THEIR PROBLEMS

Whether as motivation for an ontology of possibilia or in an attempt to provide a complete account of fiction, the question of where fictional characters fit in a possible worlds ontology has often been raised. Though the answers to this question have been remarkably varied, they each encounter difficulties in handling our basic beliefs and practices about fiction. Perhaps the most obvious answer is that fictional characters, though not members of the actual world, are members of other possible worlds. Fictional characters have long provided some of the most appealing examples of merely possible entities, and have often been used in arguments in favor of postulating unactualized possibilia. Saul Kripke, for example, uses Sherlock Holmes as an example (which he later retracts) of an entity which “does not exist, but in other states of affairs he would have existed”, and Alvin Plantinga treats the view that “Hamlet and Lear do not in fact exist; but clearly they could have” as one of the most persistent arguments in favor of unactualized possibilia.² And at first glance it seems plausible that, even if there is no actual person who has all of the properties ascribed to Hamlet in the play, surely there is some possible person exhibiting all of those properties, making Hamlet a member of another possible world.

But attractive though such a view may be, major problems arise if we try to identify a fictional character with that merely possible individual exhibiting all and only those properties ascribed to the character in the story. First, as has been frequently acknowledged, there seem to be simply too many possible individuals that fit the bill, and no means to choose between them.³ For the descriptions provided in literary works fail to completely specify what the characters described in them are like, leaving indeterminate a wide range of properties such as, typically, a character’s blood-type, weight, diet, and mundane daily activities. Thus we run into trouble immediately if we try to identify characters with possible people, for the features of a character left open by the story could be filled out in an infinite variety of ways by different possible people. Selecting any one as identical with a particular character seems hopelessly arbitrary. On the other hand, if the character is described as bearing incompatible properties, making it an impossible object, we have not too many possibilia to do the job, but too few.

A further problem arises in that treating fictional characters as *possibilia* gives us no way of accounting for their created status. As we normally think of them, fictional characters, unlike *possibilia*, are things created by an author as she writes a story. Even if we could find a single candidate possible detective to identify with Sherlock Holmes, this would be a possible man with the property of being born in the 19th Century, not of being created by Arthur Conan Doyle. In light of these problems it seems that *possibilia* simply will not do the job of fictional characters.

Given all of these problems with identifying fictional characters with merely possible objects, one might be tempted to jump to the opposite conclusion, reasoning that, if names of fictional characters do not refer to (merely) possible entities – and surely we all know that they do not refer to any actual entities – they cannot refer at all, and so there are no fictional characters in any world, actual or possible. Kripke in fact shifts from the former to the latter view (though this, too, he later rejects), arguing that there is no actual or possible individual to which names of fictional or mythical characters refer.⁴ But this fails to do justice to our language practices regarding fictional characters. For even if we can paraphrase many such statements as “According to the story . . .”, troubles persist in distinguishing certain correct claims that seem to be about them, like “Anna Karenina was created by Tolstoy” and “Sherlock Holmes is by far the most famous of all fictional detectives” from incorrect claims that seem to be about them like: “Anna Karenina was created by Dostoyevsky” and “Sherlock Holmes is an obscure Victorian heroine”. The troubles which theories denying fictional objects face in handling fictional discourse have been amply discussed elsewhere.⁵

Still another approach lies at the opposite extreme: taking fictional objects to be abstract entities appearing in *all* possible worlds. Edward Zalta develops such a view, distinguishing two modes of predication: exemplifying and encoding. Whereas ordinary objects exemplify their properties, abstract objects (and only abstract objects) encode properties.⁶ Each fictional character is identified with that abstract entity which encodes exactly those properties ascribed to the character in the story. Hamlet, for example, is precisely that abstract object which encodes the properties of being Danish, being

a prince, being melancholic, and so on for all of the other properties ascribed to Hamlet in the play. Finding an abstract object to match such literary descriptions is not difficult, for it is an axiom of the theory that “For every condition on properties, it is necessarily and always the case that there is an abstract individual that encodes just the properties satisfying the condition”.⁷ Since abstract entities are identical just in case they encode all and only the same properties, it is clear that exactly one abstract object may be identified with each fictional character, and that each fictional character will be a member of all possible worlds. Moreover, any properties a fictional character encodes possibly or sometimes, it encodes necessarily and always.⁸ So Hamlet, the abstract object which encodes the properties ascribed the character in the play, belongs to all possible worlds and encodes precisely the same properties at every world.⁹

Such a view is awkward in several respects as a theory of fictional characters. First, like the possibilist view, it ignores the created status of fictional characters. Since, on this view, fictional characters are *necessary* beings, they are not contingent on being written about, and the process of “creation” is reduced to that of picking out an ever-present abstract entity. One might reply that their *being fictional* or *being authored* may nonetheless be dependent on being written about, as an author picks out a certain abstract entity and thereby makes it fictional. But this still fails to capture the import of our claims that before being created, there *was no such thing* as Hamlet, for there was the abstract entity Hamlet just as much before as after it was authored.

Moreover, since characters are individuated on the basis of the properties they (necessarily and always) encode, this theory, and indeed any theory which takes fictional objects to be individuated exclusively by the properties with which they are correlated, must maintain that no property ascribed to a character, however trivial, might be different. This means, first, that we have no way of identifying the same character across different stories, editions, or translations in which so much as a single different property is ascribed to it. Secondly, it requires that we treat all of the properties ascribed to it as necessary properties. I return to address this and other problems which arise for the abstractist and possibilist when

we attempt to analyze modal properties of and statements about fictional characters.

It seems that despite the array of choices, none of these views: that fictional characters are in some merely possible world, in no possible world, or in all possible worlds, fit our practices about fictional characters. What sort of view might fit better? We often make claims like the following: although there is a character called “Sherlock Holmes”, he might have never been created if Arthur Conan Doyle’s medical career had gone better. When we do so, we treat our familiar fictional characters as *contingent* members of the *actual* world: things that do exist, but might not have. Perhaps these characters would be better treated as members of the actual world, and some, but not all, possible worlds—provided we can do so without contradicting the known facts that there is no actual creature answering to the descriptions of Holmes, Hamlet, or Moby Dick.¹⁰

II. THE ARTIFACTUAL THEORY OF FICTION

Each of the views presented above shares the assumption that if there is, for example, a Hamlet at all, it must be something which has all of those properties ascribed to Hamlet in the stories in question. The failure to find an actual object with these properties leads, on the one hand, to the search for a possible object with these properties; on the other hand, to postulating an abstract object which encodes these properties rather than exemplifying them. But why should we assume that fictional characters have all of those properties attributed to them in the relevant stories?

Expecting Holmes to have all of the properties ascribed to him in the stories may be a case of taking the statements in works of fiction too seriously. If Richard Nixon appears in a fictional work we do not similarly conclude that, whoever Richard Nixon is, he must exhibit all of those properties ascribed to him in the relevant work. Instead, we are inclined to distinguish the properties which Nixon has (independently of what any stories say) from those properties he is ascribed in the story, although, in the context of a discussion of the work of literature, we might talk as if he (really) had these ascribed properties.

The same distinction can be made with respect to the fictional characters appearing in literary works: there are some properties which these characters are merely ascribed in the story, and others which they have apart from any ascriptions in the stories. This parallels the distinction often drawn in studies of fiction between so-called “internal” and “external” statements about fictional characters, internal statements being those describing what goes on in the story (Holmes is a detective, lives on Baker Street . . .), external being those which talk about characters from the “real world” point of view (Holmes is a fictional character, appearing in dozens of short stories . . .).¹¹ If we take external statements to be making genuine predications of fictional characters, and internal statements to be merely reporting what is true *according to the story*, then we are not forced into looking for some object, actual or possible, concrete or abstract, which has the properties ascribed to Holmes in the relevant stories. Moreover, as we shall see below, reading internal statements about fictional characters as implicitly prefixed with a story operator reveals the systematic ambiguities in modal statements about fictional characters.

Once it is clear that, by saying that Sherlock Holmes is actual, we are not claiming that there is a dashed clever detective living on Baker Street, we are free to classify him as a member of the actual world, bearing various relations to other actual entities, as well as bearing certain modal properties, without falsely claiming that such a person existed. For while a character like Holmes genuinely has some properties, like being a fictional character, being created by Arthur Conan Doyle in 1887, appearing in dozens of short stories and so on, he is not (literally) a detective, does not live at Baker Street, and indeed is not a man, though all of these are ascribed to him in the story.

But if fictional characters are not the men and beasts they are described as being, what are they? According to the Artifactual Theory of fiction, characters are abstract artifacts: created objects dependent on such entities as authors and stories. While they are abstract in the sense that they lack a spatio-temporal location, it must be emphasized that fictional characters under this conception differ importantly from abstract entities considered as ideal, necessary, independent entities as they so often are, and as they are on

abstractist theories of fiction like that developed by Zalta. On this view fictional characters are not necessary entities, but instead are created, *dependent* abstracta. Considering fictional characters to be dependent entities will enable us to offer an account of fiction which corresponds more closely to our ordinary practices regarding fiction and provides the basis for a better modal theory of fiction.

Since fictional characters are quintessentially dependent objects, to unravel their status we must unravel their dependencies.¹² First, in order to come into existence, fictional characters depend on the creative acts of authors. This enables us to account for the deep-seated ordinary belief that fictional characters are created entities, for indeed they can come into existence *only* through the conscious acts of an author and exist for the first time when first they are created. In studies of dependence a distinction is often made between rigid dependence, or dependence on a particular individual, and generic dependence, or dependence on there being *something* of a relevant kind.¹³ Thus one might inquire here whether the dependence in question is rigid dependence on the particular acts of a particular author, or if it is merely the case that a fictional character depends simply on someone or other authoring it.

While one could answer this question either way on a broadly dependentist view of fiction, it is a good policy to attempt to make the fictional characters we postulate correspond as closely as possible to our ordinary ways of dealing with fiction. The answer to this question may then be found in our practices. Suppose that a student happens upon two literary figures remarkably similar to each other; both, for example, are said to be maids, warding off attempts at seduction, and so on. Under what conditions would we say that these are stories about one and the same fictional character? It seems that we would say that the two stories are about the same character only if we have reason to believe that the stories derived from a common origin – if, for example, one story is the sequel to the other, or if both are developments of the same original myth. If a literary scholar can show that the author of one story had close acquaintance with the earlier work, it seems we have good support for the claim that the stories are about the same character (as for example in the Pamela Andrews of Richardson's and Fielding's tales). But if someone can prove that the authors of the two works

bore no relation to each other or to a common source, but were working from distinct traditions and sources, it seems we would agree that the student has at best uncovered a strange coincidence: that different individuals and cultures generated remarkably similar characters. Given these practices, it seems that the same criteria would apply even in the highly unlikely case that two characters ascribed exactly the same traits should appear in unrelated works: if their origins are distinct, we are left with an incredible coincidence, and two exactly similar characters. So it looks like, if we wish to postulate fictional objects which correspond to our ordinary practices about identifying them, fictional characters should be considered entities which depend rigidly on the particular acts of their author or authors (however diffuse the process of creation may be) to bring them into existence.

Once created, clearly a fictional character can go on existing without its author or her creative acts. Nonetheless, a fictional character can fall out of existence with the stories of a culture. If all copies of all of the stories regarding some ancient Greek heroine have been destroyed, never to be recovered or recalled, then she has fallen out of existence with the stories and become a "past" fictional object in much the same way as a person can become a dead, past, concrete object. Indeed, it would surely seem bizarre to claim that the fictional characters of all lost stories and past cultures still exist as much as ever. Thus it seems that, if a fictional character is to be preserved, some story about it must remain in existence, and so we have uncovered a second dependency: characters depends on the creative acts of their authors in order to come into existence, and depend on stories in order to remain in existence.

Here again the question arises: does a fictional character depend rigidly on one particular story for its preservation, or is the dependence generic, enabling it to be maintained by different stories? Abstractist or possibilist theories which base the identity of a character on the properties it is ascribed eliminate the possibility that there can be more than one story about a single character. For if the character is ascribed even a single different property, it is a different character. Thus these views provide no means to admit that the same character may appear in different stories, sequels, or even slightly altered new editions or translations of an old story.¹⁴ But to

understand our literary traditions it is essential to recognize how a single character like Sherlock Holmes may reappear in many different stories of the same series, or a character like Gudrun may develop over the course of different D. H. Lawrence novels. Indeed many stories would not be comprehensible at all if we could not take them to include the well-known characters of other stories. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* makes little sense if we don't see that these are the same Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet*, and Byron's *Don Juan* would lose much of its humor were he inventing a new romancer rather than importing a legendary one.

The Artifactual Theory has the advantage that it allows that one character may appear in, and be maintained by, more than one story. Even if "The Seven Percent Solution" should exist no longer, the character Sherlock Holmes can go on existing provided that one or more of the other stories in which he appears remains in existence. So, while a fictional character depends on a story for its continued existence, it depends only generically on some story in which it appears. We can say that characters *x* and *y* appearing in stories *R* and *S* are the same character only if the author of *S* is a competent user of the name of *x* and intends to import *x* into *S* as *y* (or vice versa).¹⁵ One can become a competent user of a fictional name either through acquaintance with the character via the original story, or second-hand, by means of other name-users who are so acquainted. If the author of *S* is a competent user of the name, she may make a genuine reference to *x* in the later story and ascribe *x* additional properties.¹⁶ Thus, for example, we can say that Guildenstern appears in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* given that Stoppard is a competent user of the name "Guildenstern" (presumably he learned the name through acquaintance with the original text) and intended to import Guildenstern into his play.¹⁷

The dependence of a character on a story forces us to address a second question: if a character depends on a story, what does a story depend on? When can we say that a story exists? Since dependence is transitive and characters depend on stories, anything which stories depends on is also, ultimately, something on which characters depend.

Like a character, a story must be created by an author or authors at a certain time in order to come into existence, and depends rigidly on the acts of its particular author. But that, too, seems insufficient to maintain a story in existence – for once created, a story can once again cease to be. Ordinarily, a story is maintained in existence by the presence of some copy or other of the relevant text (which is itself part of an historical chain of copying which ultimately reaches back to the original text). It is in this way that the stories of past ages and their characters have been handed down to our present day. But printed words on a page are not enough for the existence of a story. A story as such can exist only as long as there are some conscious individuals who have the language capacities and background assumptions they need to read and understand it. If all conscious agents are destroyed, then nothing is left of fictional works or the characters represented in them but some ink on paper. Similarly, if all speakers of a language die out, with the language never to be rediscovered, then the stories peculiar to that tongue die out as well.¹⁸ Thus preserving some printed or recorded document is not enough to preserve a story – some competent readers are also required. If competent readers and a printed text survive, however, that is enough to preserve a story, which is in turn, sufficient to preserve a character.

In other cases, however, we speak of a story as being preserved even if there are no printed copies of the text.¹⁹ In oral traditions, for example, the story is preserved in memory even when it is not being spoken or heard, and (as in *Fahrenheit 451*), it seems that a story could be preserved in memories during times of censorship even if all printed copies of it were destroyed. So even if a story is typically maintained by a printed text and capable readership, it seems that such is not necessary. A latent memory of the story (disposed to produce an oral or written copy of the story, given the appropriate circumstances) may be enough to maintain the story in existence.²⁰ Thus we can say that, for its maintenance, a character depends generically on the existence of some story about it, while a story, in turn, may be maintained either in a copy of the text and a readership capable of understanding it, or in memory.²¹

Thus in short, according to the Artifactual Theory, fictional characters are multiply-dependent entities – abstract artifacts which depend in different ways on several different types of entities. The

dependencies of fictional characters may be summed up as follows: A fictional character depends rigidly on the acts of its author(s) to come into existence. To remain in existence, a fictional character depends on a story in which it appears, and, in turn, for a story to remain in existence there must either 1) be a copy of the story and a capable readership or 2) a memory of the story. The conditions for maintaining a character can fail or be fulfilled independently: there can be a copy of the text but no readership, or a capable readership but no texts or memories. In either of these cases the character ceases to exist.

One further feature of fictional characters is worth noting: Although they have a temporal origin (the time of their creation), fictional characters lack a spatio-temporal location. And this is precisely what we should expect: no informed reader expects to be able to find Sherlock Holmes on Baker Street or anywhere else in the space-time continuum. This is explicable given that, since a fictional character does not depend on any particular copy of a story or any particular reader or remembered, it would seem wrong to locate it where any given copy or reader is. Moreover, since a fictional character can survive long after its author and her creative acts have ceased to be, it would be wrong to locate it where its author is. These being its only anchors to the spatio-temporal world, it would be entirely groundless to assign it any other position. Given their lack of a particular spatio-temporal location, fictional characters may be classified as abstract entities, importantly similar to other entities like universals, symphonies and stories.

This makes fictional characters unusual sorts of entities from a certain perspective, for they are neither ideal abstracta of a platonist or Zaltaist variety, nor are they ordinary physical concreta. Yet in another sense they are not so strange, for in fact there seem to be a great many types of entities that could be classified quite naturally as dependent abstracta. Stories, like characters, depend in different ways on the creative acts of authors and on texts and readers or memories to preserve them, and, like characters, lack a spatio-temporal location (despite the fact that each token copy of a story is spatio-temporally located). Musical works, similarly, must be created by a composer and maintained through performance, notation, or memory, and lack a spatio-temporal location (though each

performance is located). Even universals considered *in res*, though they do not require creation, are dependent entities (depending on some instantiation of them) lacking a definite spatio-temporal location. Dependent abstracta have also been postulated by those involved in other ontological projects – most notably by constructivists about mathematical entities. On Brouwer’s conception, for example, mathematical objects are dependent on human thought. Brouwer even refers to mathematical entities as “fictitious objects” since on his view they, like fictional objects, are consciousness-dependent.²² The more we can unravel the status of fictional characters as dependent abstracta, the better we will be able to analyze the status of other entities like these.

Now that we are armed with a basic understanding of what fictional objects are and how they relate to entities such as authors, readers, and copies of texts, the time has come to subject our theory of fiction to the tests of modality.²³ We shall see how other views about the relation between fiction and possibilities – notably possibilist and abstractist views – run into difficulties, and how, by considering fictional characters as dependent entities, the Artifactual Theory can readily meet each challenge.

III. A MODAL THEORY OF FICTION

As I have argued that fictional characters should be classified as dependent entities relying on such entities as authors and stories for their very existence, the key to understanding the structure of fictional characters lies in understanding dependence. The dominant approach to developing a theory of dependence, from Aristotle through Husserl through contemporary work, is the so-called modal-existential account, according to which an entity A is said to be dependent on B just in case, necessarily, if A exists, B exists.²⁴ Otherwise put, every possible world with A is a possible world with B.²⁵ Though it is not the only way of explicating dependence, speaking in terms of what exists at a given world and time provides one of the clearest ways of describing cases of dependence and also makes the applications to the problems of fiction and modality particularly straightforward.

Treating fictional characters as dependent entities provides a simple answer to the question of what worlds a character belongs to. Since a fictional character is a dependent entity, it is a member of only those possible worlds which also have as members *all of its* requisite supporting entities. So, for example, those worlds without Shakespeare are also worlds without Hamlet, Macbeth and the rest; those worlds with no Holmes stories are also worlds lacking Sherlock Holmes; and those worlds completely lacking conscious beings are worlds altogether devoid of fictional characters. Note that this solution relies on other actual entities themselves, like authors and their creative acts, appearing at other worlds. Thus if one takes the view that no actual individuals, but only their counterparts, exist in other possible worlds, there will by the same token only be counterpart fictional characters. Only if we allow that some of their actual supporting entities appear at other worlds can we allow that actual fictional characters do so as well.

We can lay down more precise conditions for which worlds a character is in by examining the particular dependencies involved. I have argued that a fictional character can come into existence only through the creative acts of its author (or authors) – that it is rigidly dependent on its author for coming into existence. Thus we can say that any possible world containing a given character as a member is a world containing that very author and his or her creative acts. Indeed we might add that since a character cannot exist *before* it is created by such acts, for any time and world containing a character, that world must contain the author's creative acts at that time or at some prior time.

Once created, a fictional character can go on existing without its author, but still depends for its existence on the existence of a story about it. We can explicate these requirements in terms of possible worlds by stipulating that any world (and time) with a given character is also a world (and time) containing some story about it. But since a character may be maintained by two or more different stories, it can appear in different stories at different possible worlds, provided that its point of origin in the author's creative acts exists in that world, and that the stories concerning the character refer back to it. So Holmes may be maintained by different stories at different worlds: at some worlds only "The Seven Per-Cent Solution" may remain,

at others only “A Scandal in Bohemia” may remain. In still other worlds in which Doyle wrote an additional Holmes story not in the actual world, Sherlock may be maintained by that additional story even in the absence of the other stories. In fact, provided Doyle’s acts of creating Holmes are part of another world, then one and the same Holmes may appear in an entirely different set of stories at another world.

Assuming that author’s creative acts and a relevant story are also jointly sufficient for producing the fictional character, the character will be present in *all and only* those worlds containing all of its requisite supporting entities. If any of these conditions are lacking, then the world does not contain the character, even if it may contain some of that character’s foundations. If Doyle does not exist at some world, then Holmes is similarly absent. If there is a world in which Doyle’s works were never translated and all of the speakers of English were killed off, leaving no one to understand or remember his works, then Sherlock Holmes also ceases to exist at that world, even if printed copies of Doyle’s works remain. Or if, in some other world, Doyle’s first work about Holmes was never published, leaving Doyle to give up writing, destroy all copies of the manuscript and keep his stories a secret, then as soon as Doyle’s memory ceases at that world, so does Holmes.

Thus on this view, Holmes, Hamlet, Karamazov and the rest are dependent abstracta present in the actual world and in some, but not all, other possible worlds. This is not, however, to rule out that there may be merely possible characters, but only to assert that all of our familiar fictional characters are actual. While this may sound like the trivial claim that all actual characters are actual, in view of the frequent belief that these characters are mere possibilities the claim is not so trivial. This solution is in many ways more appealing than its alternatives. For treating these characters as members of the actual world and (merely) some possible worlds readily enables us to account for the apparent truth of such claims as those that, although there are actually such characters as Sherlock Holmes and Dmitri Karamazov, given other circumstances there might not have been. Other common answers to the question of which possible worlds a fictional character is in show no obvious means to account for these basic truths. Disbelievers in fictional objects must consider

the boredom of Doyle's practice as of little advantage, for Sherlock exists just as little now as he would have if Doyle had never put pen to paper. Those who take fictional objects to be unactualized possibilities or necessary abstracta can take scarcely more interest in these favorable conditions, for on these views, the possible or abstract entity Holmes was around as much before being authored as after. While the events of Holmes' life may have been chronicled by Doyle, this bears no more relevance to Holmes' being than stories about Richard Nixon bear to his. Both views can, at best, consider these entities to be picked out and written about at a certain time, but cannot consider them to be created by the acts of their authors. The ability of the Artifactual Theory to account for this basic belief and for the truth of claims that characters might have never come into existence make it an appealing alternative.

Nonetheless, the Artifactual Theory does not rule out that, given other conditions (if Keats had lived longer, Doyle had taken up other interests. . .) there might have been other fictional characters than those which there actually are. If there is a world in which Doyle abandoned the Holmes stories and turned to write romances about a hapless carpenter, we may say that it is possible that there be a fictional carpenter authored by Doyle, existing at those worlds in which he is created by Doyle and maintained by one or more of the possible romances. But that fictional carpenter at that other world remains a merely possible fictional character, not a possible carpenter. Anyone who wishes to maintain an ontological distinction between actual and possible entities will find this of advantage. For whereas on possibilist or abstractist views, the two characters would share precisely the same ontological status, differing only in that Holmes alone is written about in the actual world, on the Artifactual Theory one can treat Holmes and the carpenter as actual and possible entities respectively and thus respect the apparent ontological difference between those characters that are and those that only might have been.

IV. HOW TO ANALYZE MODAL DISCOURSE ABOUT FICTION

I have shown how our basic theory of fiction can offer a more intuitively plausible solution to the problem of which possible worlds a fictional character resides in. But to offer a full theory of fiction

and modality we must go a step further and face the puzzles of modal discourse about fiction, analyzing sentences that may appear simply baffling, and which present embarrassments for other theories of fiction. Some statements claiming that a character could be different than it is certainly *seem* to be true. For example, in “A Scandal in Bohemia”, Watson appears before Holmes with “six almost parallel cuts” on the inside of his left shoe. Counting a statement like “Watson could have had five rather than six cuts on the inside of his left shoe” as false seems wrong simply from its triviality – it would seem bizarre indeed to say that, if the character had merely five cuts on his shoe, he could not be Watson. On the other hand, counting a statement like “Meursault could have refrained from killing the Arab” as false seems wrong because indeed it is a central point of *The Stranger* that Meursault *could* have done otherwise than kill the Arab.

But the abstractist theory, and indeed any theory which takes fictional objects to be individuated exclusively by the properties with which they are correlated, has trouble accounting for this. On Zalta’s abstractist view, fictional characters are individuated solely by means of the properties they encode: characters are identical if and only if they encode exactly the same properties. And any properties encoded by an abstract object like a fictional character are encoded by it necessarily and always.²⁶ Thus if a single property which a given character encodes were changed, we would be dealing with a different abstract object. So if, as seems most natural, statements to the effect that a certain character could have had different properties than it does are read as claiming that the character could have encoded other properties, all such statements come out as false, leaving the theory with the embarrassing consequence that not so much as a single property of (encoded by) a fictional character might be different than it is.²⁷

A reply is available to the abstractist: Even though it is not possible that a fictional character encode different properties than it does, in fact, encode, a fictional character may be held to encode certain modal properties which it is ascribed in the story. Since a character encodes exactly those properties it is said (in the story) to exemplify, if we read *The Stranger* not as claiming that Meursault possibly fails to exemplify the property killing-the-Arab, but as claiming that he exemplifies the property possibly-not-killing-the-Arab, then it would

follow that Meursault encodes the property possibly-not-killing-the-Arab. That Meursault encodes this property could account for the sense in which the statement “Meursault could have refrained from killing the Arab” is true, despite the fact that it is false that, possibly, he fails to encode killing-the-Arab.

Such a reply is not without its costs, however. Adopting this solution requires that we read statements like “Meursault could have refrained from killing the Arab” as ascribing modal properties to things, rather than as shorthand for a modal statement regarding basic, non-modal properties. Even if we can rest easy reading statements about fictional characters as ascribing them modal properties like possibly-not-killing-the-Arab, we may not be equally comfortable with counting “John Wilkes Booth could have refrained from killing Lincoln” as true in virtue of the fact that Booth exemplifies the property possibly-not-killing-Lincoln. Instead, we are inclined to say that modal operators apply to sentences, not properties, and that the latter sentence is true because it is possible that Booth fail to exemplify the property of killing Lincoln. Thus we either have to take these statements *in fiction* as somewhat inexplicably having a different logical form from ordinary modal statements (allowing us to read ordinary modal statements in the customary manner), or read all modal statements as ascribing modal properties to things.

Such difficulties quickly dissolve when we examine modal statements in the context of the Artifactual Theory of fiction and make use of our general method of handling fictional discourse. The key to that method lay in distinguishing internal claims about what goes on in the story from external claims made from the real-world point of view about these characters as literary creations, and reading the former as implicitly within the context of a story prefix while reading the latter straightforwardly. We should begin by making the same distinction with respect to modal discourse about fiction, distinguishing external claims such as “If Arthur Conan Doyle’s medical career had been more successful, Sherlock Holmes might have never been created”, from internal claims such as “Although Watson had six cuts on the inside of his left shoe, he could have had merely five”, and “Meursault could have refrained from killing the Arab”.

The status of fictional characters as dependent entities makes certain external modal truths about them immediately apparent.

Fictional characters are essentially created entities, so it is true, for example, that Sherlock Holmes is necessarily created. Any world in which a character appears is a world in which it is created, and indeed each fictional character is necessarily such that it was created by those particular creative acts which in fact created it. Fictional characters are also essentially consciousness-dependent. Contingent external truths about fictional characters include such statements as: It is possible that Sherlock Holmes should have never been created if Doyle's medical career had gone better, and it is possible that Holmes have remained unknown were it not for the interest of *Lippincott's Magazine*; Dmitri Karamazov might have never been created had it not been for the stability given Dostoyevsky's life through his marriage to Anna Snitkina.

But many of those modal statements we care most about regarding fictional characters are not external statements like those above, but internal statements describing how the characters' lives might have varied from those set out in the work of literature. Analyzing such internal statements is somewhat trickier than analyzing the corresponding external statements, and indeed at first we may not know what to say about some of these claims.

The trickiness of analyzing these claims stems from the fact that, in their simple forms, these statements are ambiguous. For if (as I have suggested) we read internal statements as implicitly in the context of a story operator, there are at least three plausible readings of such sentences, according to how we read the scope of the modal operator and that of the story operator. Thus, for example, "Meursault could have refrained from killing the Arab" could be read as:

- A. There is some story (*The Stranger*) such that according to it, it is possible that Meursault refrained from killing the Arab.

or as:

- B. There is some story (*The Stranger*) such that, it is possible that, according to it, Meursault refrained from killing the Arab.

or as:

- C. Possibly, there is some story such that, according to it, Meursault refrained from killing the Arab.

I think statements of type A – that there is some story such that, according to it, it is possible that . . . – are what we usually mean when we inquire after such internal modal statements about fictional characters. In this case, (A) is surely true under any reasonable interpretation of the novel, indeed it is one of the keys to the novel. But it does not describe killing the Arab as a contingent property of the character, for the ascription is within the scope of the story operator. Similarly, on an A-style reading, “It is possible that Watson have other than six cuts on his shoe”, is true, for according to the story, the cuts were caused by a careless servant, and certainly the Holmes stories incorporate enough of our ordinary background assumptions to insure that according to the story, it remains possible that one not hire a certain servant, or that the servant be careless in a slightly different way. In any case, once the alternatives are laid out, it seems fairly clear that readings like (A) are what we mostly have in mind. This provides us with a reasonable way of reading and inquiring after the truth value of such internal modal statements, and accounting for the sense in which statements like those above are true. But we can do so without having to broach the question of whether or not being clever is an essential property of Holmes or being a murderer is an essential property of Meursault. For these are, on this theory, not properties of the characters at all, but only properties they are ascribed in the relevant stories.

Analyzing claims like (B) – that there is some story, such that it is possible that, according to it . . . – brings us into deeper issues regarding the identity conditions of stories. It seems that claims like (B) are seldom if ever what we mean by our internal modal claims about fiction, and probably would arise only in a philosophical discussion about story identity, thus I will not pursue these here.²⁸

But even if (A) provides an appropriate reading of many modal claims about fiction, often we make modal claims – about what might happen to a character after the story is over, or what would have happened if a pivotal event had turned out differently – regarding which the actual story has nothing to say or imply one way or the other. Thus if we wish for any of these to come out as true we need a different means of reading these sentences. Such claims might be read on the model of (C): Possibly there is some story, such that, according to it. . . . If we claim that Brick of *Cat on a*

Hot Tin Roof could become an abusive father, or could have been a successful football player we might mean that possibly, there is some story (perhaps a sequel) in which Brick has a child, but fails to overcome his alcoholism and tendencies to violence, or, on the other hand, that a different story could be written in which Brick had not fallen into depression and had become a successful athlete, but in which he is recognizably and believably the same character. Such alternate stories are sometimes even composed to make claims like these particularly compelling; often it is when we have such alternate stories in mind that we make such claims. Whether you count (C) as true will depend on whether you are willing to allow that the same character can appear in more than one story, and under what conditions. Since the Artifactual Theory allows this (on the condition the author of the second work is a competent user of the fictional name, and intends to import that character into her work), it has the advantage of enabling some such claims to come out as true.

In short it seems that we may mean many different things when we make modal claims about fictional characters. By treating fictional characters as dependent abstracta we can offer straightforward and sensible readings of external modal claims about fictional characters such as those that they might have never been created, or never been discovered. Moreover, distinguishing internal and external claims about fictional characters and reading internal claims as implicitly prefixed with “according to the story” enables us to unravel a variety of ambiguities in internal modal claims about fictional characters, dispel our confusions in facing internal modal claims about fiction, and provide readings appropriate to the context. The ability of the Artifactual Theory to unravel these difficulties and to meet the challenges of offering a modalized theory of fictional objects where its rivals fail suggests that treating fictional characters as dependent abstracta enables us to offer a better analysis of fiction.

V. RAMIFICATIONS FOR DEPENDENT ABSTRACTA

I have suggested that we take fictional characters not to be merely possible entities, nor necessary abstract entities, but rather to be dependent entities present in all and only those worlds in which they

find their necessary support. This solution to the problem of the place of fictional objects in a modal metaphysics suggests the path to a different means of conceiving of the place of dependent abstracta generally in a possible worlds ontology, a means which may be more appropriate for at least some kinds of abstracta, and which those with certain views about abstract entities might find congenial.

Often when abstracta are handled in a possible worlds ontology they are treated as the occupants of *all* possible worlds – as ideal, necessary beings. But this seems odd for at least some kinds of abstract entity – entities like stories and musical works. For these, like fictional characters, seem to be created entities, brought into being by their composer or author in particular historical and cultural circumstances, not discovered or picked out from an ever-present realm of ideal entities.²⁹ Recognizing the category of dependent abstracta enables us to offer a better account of entities like fictional characters, stories, and musical works. Working out the details of a dependentist account for the case of fiction may also provide a model for how this may be done to accommodate other entities like these.

Viewing all abstracta as necessary beings would also be unattractive to those who view certain kinds of abstracta as dependent – for example, to those who take an *in re* view of universals,³⁰ a constructivist view of mathematical entities,³¹ or view certain ideas as the products of cultures or individual mental acts.³² For in such cases, it would seem wrong to say that these entities are present in all possible worlds regardless of whether they are instantiated, or whether or not they have been created.

Where fictional characters are concerned, I have argued that although they are abstract in the sense of lacking a particular spatio-temporal location, they are not members of all possible worlds but only belong to those worlds containing the entities on which they depend. This solution to the problem of which possible worlds a fictional character resides in comes as a direct consequence of their status as dependent entities. The same principle applies to other dependent entities of all types: they may be found in those possible worlds in which their supporting entities reside. Thus on an *in re* view of universals, the universal *being-red* would exist in precisely those worlds in which there is something red (for it depends on

being instantiated). A musical work like a symphony or a literary work like a story might exist only in those worlds containing its creator and some instantiation of that work. A mathematical entity, on a constructivist view, might exist in only those worlds containing mental acts of the relevant type. Similarly, a culturally-local idea might exist only where it has been developed through the relevant intentional acts of a community.

By following this method, one can allow possible worlds to vary in what abstract entities they contain as well as in what ordinary, spatio-temporal entities they have; there can be contingent, dependent abstracta indexed according to the possible worlds in which their supporting entities reside. There are as many choices about precisely which worlds an abstract entity resides in as there are ways in which it can be, or fail to be, dependent.³³

NOTES

¹ Though they are not the only alternatives, I focus on these three views of fiction because they represent the clearest and most diverse views of the relation between fictional characters and possible worlds.

² For Kripke see his "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic", reprinted in Leonard Linsky, ed. *Reference and Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 65 (see also his retraction on p. 172). Plantinga considers and argues against this case for the existence of unactualized possibilities in his *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 153 & ff.

³ Versions of this problem are discussed by Kripke, in *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 157–158, and by Plantinga in *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 154–155.

⁴ *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 157–158.

⁵ See for example Parsons' *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 32–38 and my "How to Handle Fictional Discourse" (unpublished).

⁶ They may, however, exemplify extra-nuclear properties. The encoding/exemplification distinction is laid out by Zalta in *Abstract Objects* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 13–14, 39.

⁷ Edward Zalta, *Intensional Logic and the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988), p. 19.

⁸ *Intensional Logic*, p. 19 (axioms 3 and 4 respectively).

⁹ As a result of Axiom 2 "For every condition on properties, it is necessarily and always the case that there is an abstract individual that encodes just the properties satisfying that condition" combined with the principle that abstract objects are identical just in case they encode all and only the same properties, and that any property an abstract object encodes, it encodes necessarily and always. See *Intensional Logic*, p. 19.

¹⁰ This is not to rule out that there may be merely possible fictional characters, but only to suggest that all of our familiar fictional characters (Holmes, Hamlet and the rest) are not mere possibilia but members of the actual world.

¹¹ Charles Crittenden lays out the distinction between internal and external statements about fictional characters in his *Unreality: The Metaphysics of Fictional Objects* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 94–95.

¹² There are many different ways of drawing out a broadly dependentist account of fictional characters, according to precisely which dependencies one claims for them. Below I offer and argue for the dependentist view which, it seems to me, corresponds most closely to our ordinary practices regarding fiction. But many decisions (eg. whether or not they depend on a written text, whether they depend rigidly or only generically on authors and stories, and so on) could be made either way without effecting the general picture of fictional characters as dependent abstracta and without impairing the general results that follow for other dependent abstracta.

¹³ See, for example, Peter Simons, *Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 295–297.

¹⁴ I argue against some popular attempts of abstractists to allow for trans-textual character identity in “Fictional Characters: Dependent or Abstract? A Reply to Reicher’s Objections” (*Conceptus*, forthcoming).

¹⁵ This should be taken as a necessary condition for a character appearing in a second story. The possibility of unintentional reference shifts, however, prevents this from being a sufficient condition for the characters’ being the same. Nonetheless, if characters fulfill this condition, that is a fairly reliable indicator that the characters are identical.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that there are no problems with the character acquiring contradictory properties in different stories, for, as described above, statements describing properties which a character has in a story are to be read as prefixed by “according to the (relevant) story . . .”. So if, for example, Guildenstern loses 89 gold pieces in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* but not in *Hamlet*, this is merely a surface inconsistency. For these sentences can be read as (one and the same Guildenstern is such that) according to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* he loses 89 gold pieces, but it is not the case that according to *Hamlet* he loses 89 gold pieces.

¹⁷ For details on how fictional names refer and how the reference of a fictional name may be passed from link to link down chains of publication and communication, see my “The Reference of Fictional Names”, *Kriterion*, 3. Jahrgang, Nr. 6 (1993): 3–12.

¹⁸ Though the possibility always remains that these stories, and the characters represented in them, may be brought back on the basis of these texts if the language is once again discovered and understood. That one and the same character or story may exist, fall out of existence, and come back into existence, is not so strange. For given that fictional characters and stories are not spatio-temporally located entities, there seems no reason to require spatio-temporal continuity as an identity condition.

¹⁹ Elsewhere I have distinguished between publicly accessible fictional characters, which have some external record of them e.g. in written form, and private imaginary characters which have no such record (“Fiction and Intentionality”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56, June 1996). On that basis I

claimed that fictional characters require an external copy of the text for their maintenance. It now seems to me that we need to allow that one and the same character might begin life as an imaginary creation accessible only to its author, then be externalized in a written text and so made fictional. So while we can still say that a character's *being fictional* depends on the existence of an external text, its mere existence does not. Since the distinction between characters which are externalized in public works of fiction (printed works or utterances) and those which are not is not important here, I omit it hereafter in the interest of simplicity. These dependence conditions can be taken as applying to "characters" simpliciter: Characters could be maintained by memories alone, though that would not be enough to maintain them *as fictional* in this sense.

²⁰ Naturally that memory must be by a comprehending individual. If someone merely memorizes the right sounds in the right order without understanding their meaning, a comprehending audience will be required in addition to the memory of sounds.

²¹ Several issues arise here about identity conditions of stories, e.g. whether the supporting copy of the text or memory must be (word for word) perfect. Since I allow that one and the same character may be maintained by different stories, whether we count a slightly altered story as one or two is irrelevant to the question of whether the character is maintained. Thus I will not get into these issues here. On a broadly dependentist view one could outline conditions either requiring strict word-for-word identity for story identity, or offer looser conditions tracking the development of one tale across a historical chain incorporating many changes but retaining some central structural elements. I have elsewhere outlined strict sufficient conditions for story identity which (in the interest of preserving transitivity of identity) include a requirement that the supporting texts be word-for-word identical (*The Ontology of Fiction: A Study of Dependent Objects*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1995, pp. 249–254).

²² See Brouwer's "Discours Final" (*Les Methodes Formelles en Axiomatique Colloques Internationaux du CNRS*, 1950), and discussion in Carl J. Posy's "Brouwer's Constructivism" (*Synthese* 27, 1974), p. 132.

²³ For a fuller presentation of the Artifactual Theory of fiction, see my *The Ontology of Fiction*.

²⁴ An account of dependence which is *not* of the modal/existential variety is developed by Kit Fine in his "Ontological Dependence" (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95, June 1995).

²⁵ This talk about possible worlds may be rephrased in terms of statements in a tensed modal logic; this particular view of dependence and of fiction is neutral with respect to many different views of what possible worlds are or how we are to explicate our fundamental modal notions.

²⁶ *Intensional Logic*, p. 19.

²⁷ This problem also applies for Meinongian theories that take fictional objects to be correlated one-to-one with sets of nuclear properties, e.g. that of Terence Parsons in *Nonexistent Objects*, p. 18.

²⁸ Anyone who takes including the same set of propositions as a necessary condition for the identity of a story will treat all claims about properties possibly, but not actually, ascribed to a character by a story as false. On the other hand, if one treats stories as constructed objects with their most important identity conditions lying in the preservation of their origin and important items of content, one could allow

that a story ascribe to a character slightly different properties than it, in fact, does. On such a theory, certain B-type statements, like the trivial one about Watson, could be true (as this could be altered without the story losing its identity). But even so, the statement (B) above would come out as false, as killing the Arab is the pivotal event of the story. Cf. note 21 above.

²⁹ Roman Ingarden argues that literary works cannot be considered as timeless, ideal entities in his *The Literary Work of Art* (translated by George G. Grabowicz, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 9–12. Jerrold Levinson offers similar arguments that a musical work cannot be identified with an abstract structure in his “What a Musical Work Is”, reprinted in his *Music, Art and Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 65–78.

³⁰ David Armstrong defends an *in re* view of universals, arguing that the only universals there are are those instantiated at some time, past, present or future. See his *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 75–82.

³¹ A clear account of mathematical constructivism may be found in Carl J. Posy’s “Brouwer’s Constructivism”, pp. 125–159.

³² David Woodruff Smith argues that ideas and intentional contents should be considered dependent, created entities in his “The Background of Intentionality” (forthcoming).

³³ I wish to thank Greg Fitch for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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