

Does Sherlock Holmes Exist? A Criticism of van Inwagen's Theory of Fictional Objects

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I. Introduction

Characters are very curious things indeed. Each one of us knows of literally hundreds of characters and can even provide a set of descriptions about each one. And yet, we know that not a single one of them exists. However, according to Peter van Inwagen this categorization is a complete mistake. He takes an artifactualist approach, where characters are not a sub-set of non-existent objects, but rather are abstract entities. In fact, not only do characters exist, according to van Inwagen, but so does every other fictional creation made by an author, including places (such as “Narnia”) and things (such as “The One Ring”). Together, van Inwagen calls these fictional objects “creatures of fiction.”^{1,2} I argue that van Inwagen’s model fails as a successful account of fictional objects since it rests upon certain faulty assumptions about reference and ordinary language, and it is insufficient to support his distinction between predication and ascription. However, as I aim to show, van Inwagen’s failure can help guide us to the beginnings of a correct ontological theory of creatures of fiction.

II. Setting Up the Problem

Given our ordinary talk of fictional objects, a common problem is how to make sense of seemingly meaningful referential statements about things that do not exist. Reference is a relation obtaining between a sort of representational token (such as a name, a picture, or an idea) and a certain object. For instance, if I give the statement,

¹ In what follows, I will use these terms interchangeably.

² Peter van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1977): 302.

- (1) Barack Obama is the President of the United States,

I am using the name “Barack Obama” as a representational token to identify or pick out a particular individual in the world and say something true about that individual, namely, that he is President of the United States.

The problem arises when we make similar referential statements about fictional objects. For instance, take the following statements:

- (2) Sherlock Holmes is a detective who lives on 221B Baker Street.
 (3) Sherlock Holmes is a milkman who lives in Saskatoon.

These statements, like (1), are in subject-predicate form (S is p), but while (1) and (2) both seem to be true statements, (3) seems to be false. Typically, we take it that a statement is true so long as it corresponds to reality. (1) is true because the name “Barack Obama” successfully refers to an object in the world and that object is actually the President of the United States. Obviously if Barack Obama was not the President but a senator, then (1) would be false.

But this strategy does not seem to work for (2) and (3) since, by hypothesis, the name “Sherlock Holmes” does not pick out a particular individual in the world, and so there is nothing in the corporeal world for the statements to correspond to. But then, how is it that we can intuitively identify (2) as being true and (3) as being false? This is what we may call the problem of reference:

- (a) Fictional objects do not exist.
 (b) There are true (and false) statements about fictional objects.
 (c) If a statement of the form S is p is about S , then there exists an x such that S refers to x .

Although we commonly take these propositions to all be true, at least one of them must be false since they are logically inconsistent.

As it stands, we must clarify what we mean by “statements about fictional objects.” I take it that there are at least three different types of statements about fictional objects, each of which may be subject to a

different analysis.³ First, there are fictional assertives, which are descriptions made by authors about fictional objects.⁴ Closely related to fictional assertives are literary descriptives, which are statements made by speakers other than the author and are about fictional objects that have already been written about. Finally, there are meta-fictional statements that describe relations between fictional objects and the real world. Examples of these are:

- (i) “[Sherlock Holmes] was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing...and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision.”⁵ (Statement written by Doyle)
- (ii) Sherlock Holmes was six feet tall, excessively lean, and had sharp piercing eyes and a thin hawk-like nose. (Statement given by a person other than Doyle after Doyle has written about Sherlock).
- (iii) Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any detective today.

In the first half of this paper, I will examine the foundation of van Inwagen’s solution to the problem of reference, and in the second half, I will address his analysis of fictional assertives, literary descriptives, and meta-fictional statements.

III. The Quantification Argument for the Existence of Fictional Objects

The first step in van Inwagen’s solution to the problem of reference is to reject proposition (a), the idea that fictional objects are really non-existent objects. There are some caveats to his theory, for while he maintains that creatures of fiction do exist, he grants that they do have a much different ontology than the regular objects that we are familiar with (chairs, trees,

³ Though van Inwagen does not give an explicit taxonomy of statements about fictional objects, it is clear that he accepts something along these lines, see van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” 301.

⁴ Although this is what it appears authors are doing when they make statements about their fictional objects, I think that this is fundamentally incorrect, as I will argue in section IV.

⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (New York: Modern Classics Library, 2003), 12.

airplanes, planets and so forth).⁶ Fictional objects belong to a broader ontological category of “theoretical entities of literary criticism.”⁷ Included in this category are not only characters, places, and objects mentioned in stories, but also rhyme schemes, literary forms, plots, and so on, all of which have an abstract as opposed to a concrete existence.⁸

Take the following meta-fictional sentence given by van Inwagen:

- (4) “There are characters in some 19th-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any 18th-century novel.”⁹

Meta-fictional statements like this are quite common in literary criticism, and they all seem to assert the existence of characters.¹⁰ After all, to give a statement like (4), it would seem that it could only be true so long as there were such things as characters in novels. If there were no such things, what could a statement like (4) be about? To use Quine’s terminology, it seems that we are “ontologically committed” to the existence of characters from sentences like (4).¹¹

This fact is even more apparent when we apply formal logic. Rendering (4) in quantifier idiom, we get

$$(4^*) \exists x (C(x) \ \& \ \forall y (N(y) \rightarrow P(x, y)))$$

Where $C(x)$ is “ x is a character in a 19th century novel,” $N(y)$ is “ y is a character in an 18th century novel,” and $P(x, y)$ is the two place predicate, “ x is presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is y .”

But, by the rules of formal logic, we may derive the following:

$$(5) \exists x C(x)$$

This simply means that there is some x such that x is a character in a 19th-century novel. Hence, there must exist characters, a fact which we appear

⁶ van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” 303.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 302.

¹⁰ Along with van Inwagen, I employ Quinean ontology with respect to existential quantification and hence make no distinction between “there exists” and “there is.”

¹¹ W.V.O. Quine, “On What There Is,” in *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logical-philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 13.

to be ontologically committed to whenever we give a statement about characters.¹²

We can syllogise van Inwagen's argument as follows:

(P1) (4) expresses a true proposition.

(P2) (4*) is a correct translation of (4) into formal logic.

(P3) The rules of formal logic are truth-preserving.

(P4) (4*) commits us to the view that there are such things as characters.

(C1) Therefore, there are such things as characters.¹³

This argument seems entirely wrongheaded to me, for it seems incorrect to interpret the statement, which is given in ordinary language, as asserting a philosophical position or being ontologically committed to the existence of characters. When we translate the sentence into quantifier logic, we require the use of the existential quantifier to say "there exists an x such that x is a character in a 19th-century novel." But it seems to be incorrect that (7) is actually asserting a philosophical position that there are characters.

In ordinary language, we use expressions without necessarily committing ourselves to a certain philosophical position. Consider Jared, a prominent scientist, who is climbing a mountain with his friend. They reach the peak just as the sun is setting and Jared exclaims, "That is a beautiful sunset!" It would make no sense for his friend to respond, "You should know that sunsets don't really exist. The sun isn't actually setting, it's just how it looks because of the rotation of the Earth." Clearly it would be incorrect to take Jared as asserting that sunsets are not illusions but actually exist, even though he is using vocabulary that seems to commit him to recognizing the existence of sunsets; in fact, Jared knows that sunsets are illusions. If he were attempting to be scientifically accurate he would say, "The rotation of the Earth and its elliptical orbit around the sun creates such a beautiful illusion." The point of his original assertion is not to perfectly describe the world, but to simply express his attitude towards a certain feature of the world (and, more specifically, with how that feature

¹² van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction," 302.

¹³ *Ibid.*

appears to be). Thus, in order to determine what a speaker is actually asserting when expressing a statement, we also need to understand the intentions of the speaker.

This fact becomes apparent when we examine those ordinary language statements which clearly do commit the speaker to a philosophical position or the existence of an entity. If Bill, a poorly informed individual, exclaimed, “That is a beautiful sunset!” we might be willing to claim that Bill has committed himself to the existence of sunsets. Notice that this exclamation is identical to Jared’s but that, while Jared was not committed to the existence of sunsets, Bill is. The upshot is that there seems to be no property of these exclamations as such that makes them ontologically committing. The most plausible explanation, it seems, is that Jared knows his use of the word “sunset” accurately describes the world, whereas Bill falsely believes that his use of the word “sunset” accurately describes the world. These two epistemic statuses are key in determining what these two speakers intend to assert: Jared does not intend to assert that sunsets exist because he knows that they do not, whereas Bill does assert this because he falsely believes that sunsets do exist. Preliminarily, as far as ordinary language goes, ontological commitment largely seems to depend upon what speakers intend to commit themselves to and not what their statements appear to commit them to.¹⁴

Thus, when we express statements such as (4) in quantifier idiom, it is incorrect to assume that our language commits us to the existence of characters, just as it is incorrect to assume that Jared’s exclamation has committed him to the existence of sunsets. As far as ordinary language goes, it seems fundamentally incorrect that statements commit speakers as

¹⁴ The upshot of this position is that speakers can never be unintentionally committed to anything (in ordinary language). A full solution to this problem is outside the scope of the present paper, but to give a preliminary response, this fact is not as absurd as it seems at first glance. There is clearly an implicit distinction between the ontological commitment of a statement and a speaker. For a speaker to be ontologically committed, his intention must align with the ontological commitment of a statement. Thus, a speaker may accidentally utter a statement that commits himself to the existence of some entity x without thereby committing himself to the existence of x . Take, as an analogy, an innocent man who accidentally gives a statement P that commits himself to being a criminal. He has unintentionally committed himself to being a criminal by uttering P , but he is clearly not actually committed to this, as is evident when the man comes to realize what P actually means and exclaims, “That is not what I meant; let me rephrase that.”

the case between Bill and Jared demonstrates.¹⁵ Rather statements reflect the speaker's commitments. The exclamation, "That is a beautiful sunset," is not ontologically committing in and of itself, and it only becomes ontologically committed to the existence of sunsets when speakers intend so.¹⁶ Similarly, we cannot assume, as van Inwagen does, that (4) commits speakers to the existence of characters. As in Jared's case where we treated the word "sunset" as a circumlocution, so we may also wish to treat the word "character" in (4) as a circumlocution and give a clear paraphrase: If we examine a wide collection of 18th and 19th-century books and count the statements that give physical details about appearance, we should find more of these statements in 19th-century than in 18th-century books. Or, perhaps more accurately, we may wish to say that 19th-century books have more adjectives relating to appearance than 18th-century books. Thus, in order to be an effective argument, it seems that van Inwagen must accept a number of dubious assumptions about assertions and philosophical commitment in ordinary language.

IV. Fictional Assertives Lack Reference

Although I have argued that van Inwagen's argument fails to establish the existence of fictional objects, I will assume the soundness of the argument in order to assess his complete answer to the problem of reference. As such, we now turn to his analysis of the three types of statements about fictional objects: fictional assertives, literary descriptives, and meta-fictional statements.

Recall that fictional assertives are statements made by authors describing fictional objects. At first, it seems that van Inwagen's theory gives a simple analysis of how we may perform a truth-evaluation of these

¹⁵ Here, I am agreeing with Searle that speaker's meaning is prior to sentence meaning. "Speech Acts and Illocutionary Logic," in *Logic, Thought, and Action*, ed. by Daniel Vanderveken (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2005), 117–118.

¹⁶ This point needs clarification. Although statements in and of themselves are not ontologically committing, linguistic practices may designate that certain statements are ontologically committing. For instance, for an ancient tribe, statements made about sunsets may be ontologically committed to the existence of sunsets, and this linguistic custom defines what a speaker may do with language. If a speaker, in this community, does not wish to commit himself to the existence of sunsets, then he must make this apparent. If he states, "That is a beautiful sunset," his statement is committed, by custom in his community, to the existence of sunsets even though he intends to not be committed.

sorts of statements; for when Doyle states that Sherlock Holmes was a detective or lived on 221B Baker Street, he is literally referring to the abstract entity Sherlock Holmes and saying something true about him. The obvious problem with this, as van Inwagen himself admits, is that abstract entities cannot have concrete properties like being spatially located.¹⁷ If Sherlock Holmes is an abstract entity, then Doyle says something false when he states that Sherlock Holmes is a detective, but this clearly cannot be correct.

Van Inwagen's solution is simply to reject that fictional assertives are about creatures of fiction at all. When authors describe their characters in stories, they are neither actually making a claim nor writing about anything. When Doyle gives any fictional assertive about Sherlock Holmes (that he is a detective for instance), this does not represent an attempt at saying anything about Sherlock Holmes, since Doyle was neither referring to nor asserting anything. For this claim, van Inwagen relies upon an argument given by J. O. Urmson.¹⁸

According to Urmson, authors who write fictional assertives make no attempt at asserting a proposition about the world, and so it makes no sense to evaluate these statements as true or false. To give Urmson's analogy, suppose Carl and Nigel decide that they are going simulate the 1994 game between Short and Kasparov, with Carl playing as Short, and Nigel playing as Kasparov. They proceed to play the game using exactly the same set of moves that their respective 1994 counterparts used. In this case, it makes no sense to ask the question of Carl and Nigel, "Who won?" Neither of them won because neither of them were actually playing a real game of chess. Although they abided by all of the rules, and although it may have looked perfectly Olike a real game of chess to any bystander who happened to be present, no real game of chess was actually played. As Urmson says, "In the case of fiction 'Is it true?' will be inappropriate for the same reason as 'Who won?' is inappropriate to the mock-chess."¹⁹

Nevertheless, because of how similar the mock-chess game is to the 1994 game, it is quite natural to describe the mock game in the

¹⁷ van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction," 305.

¹⁸ For a similar argument, see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 149–159.

¹⁹ J. O. Urmson, "Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1976): 156.

language of real chess. If Nigel (playing as Kasparov) moves his queen pawn from D2 to D3, it is sensible enough to borrow this vocabulary as opposed to some odd “pretend” or “mock-chess” language.²⁰

Similarly, just as statements made about mock-chess are not really statements made about chess, fictional assertives made by authors about creatures of fiction are not really about creatures of fiction. In fact they are not even assertives at all; they are pretending to be assertives merely for the pragmatic value of avoiding the use of some odd fictional language. According to van Inwagen, fictional assertives do not even “represent an *attempt* at reference or description.”²¹ If correct, this provides van Inwagen with a very simple analysis of fictional assertives. When read literally, any fictional assertive that Doyle has given is false, since abstract entities (like the character Sherlock Holmes) cannot have concrete properties (like living on 221B Baker Street). But as it turns out, when Doyle gives the fictional assertive, “Sherlock Holmes lives on 221B Baker Street,” this statement does not refer to the abstract entity “Sherlock Holmes,” since it is not really a statement about anything. Though fictional assertives appear identical to real assertives, they differ in their lack of reference and truth-evaluability.²²

I think that the problem with this claim about the non-referential nature of fictional descriptives is that it is based upon an insufficient theory of reference. Both van Inwagen and Urmson appear to be advocating for the following definition of an assertive:

A sentence *A* is an assertive iff (i) *A* has a descriptive propositional content *p*; (ii) *p* does not contain any empty terms (i.e., every term in *p* has a reference); and (iii) a speaker *S* who asserts *A* is committed to the truth of *p*.

The problem arises when we consider that assertives presuppose that every term in *p* already has a designated reference. Assertives are not the type of speech act which can fix reference since, by the above definition, they are merely descriptive, whereas the designation of a reference involves an intentional action. When I look out my window and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” 301.

²² Urmson “Fiction,” 155.

assert, “The weather is stormy outside,” I am simply describing the way the world is or appears to me. This is quite different from what is going on when the parents of a newborn declare for the first time, “Our baby is called ‘Mary’” or when a ship owner announces, “I dub this ship ‘Challenger.’” These sorts of statements do not describe the world as it is, for newborns and ships do not come with pre-assigned names. Rather, these statements attempt to linguistically change the world; the parents and the owner have not described reality, for the names “Mary” and “Challenger” do not have references until the parents and the ship owner respectively designate them. Upon assigning these names, they have created new linguistic facts about the world.²³ Following Searle, I will take to calling these sorts of statements “declaratives.”²⁴

Often times, statements which appear to be assertives are really declaratives. For instance, imagine that in the distant future, a group of astronauts leave their homes on Earth and set sail to find a new planet to colonize. Far outside our solar system, they happen upon a habitable planet and land on one of its many islands. After deciding to permanently stay on that island, they state, “This island is a country called ‘Atlur.’” Of course, this statement appears to be an assertive which describes a certain state of affairs, for it has the same form as other assertives like, “This is a rock,” or, “This chair is made of plastic.” Countries, however, are social phenomena, and so in order to classify that specific island as a country, an initial declaration is required. After the declaration has been made and the reference fixed, these statements become assertives. Prior to its establishment, “Atlur” was an empty name since it had no reference or content. After the declaration, “This country is called ‘Atlur,’” the reference of the name was fixed to a specific area of land. After this baptism, when a person now states, “This country is called ‘Atlur,’” he is performing an assertion, not a declaration, since he is describing the world

²³ This is based off of Kripke’s theory of naming. See Saul Kripke, “Naming and Necessity,” in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1973), 290–293

²⁴ John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 16–19.

and not fixing a reference.²⁵

Although fictional assertives appear to be actual assertives, they are in fact declaratives. When Doyle writes statements about Sherlock, he is not describing the world but fixing the reference of the name “Sherlock Holmes.” Of course, in order to fix reference, there must be some sort of subject of this baptism. In our case of the country, the settlers fixed the reference to a particular island, but Doyle clearly cannot fix the reference of “Sherlock Holmes” to a concrete object. As we have seen, van Inwagen takes it that creatures of fiction are abstract objects and that fictional assertives do not refer to them or anything else. In contrast, I think it makes more sense to think of creatures of fiction as mental objects, and that these objects are the subject of reference.

Firstly, unlike abstract objects, fictional objects clearly have temporal and ontological beginnings. As the author, Doyle quite literally brought Sherlock Holmes into being at a certain time, a fact that van Inwagen clearly concedes.²⁶

Secondly, abstract and fictional objects have a quite different ontology altogether. For the latter are existentially dependent upon other entities, whereas the former are not. Roughly, an entity x is existentially dependent upon another entity y if x could not exist unless y exists. For example, concrete objects such as mountains and trees are existentially independent, whereas countries, currency, marriage, and Presidents (which we might call social objects) are existentially dependent upon persons. The property of being currency is not a property of the physical world and so has no independent existence outside of the persons who conceive of it. The piece of paper and ink only becomes currency when persons define it as such. Likewise, as traditionally conceived, abstract objects are existentially independent.²⁷ In contrast, creatures of fiction are clearly existentially dependent, for if no person ever conceived of Sherlock Holmes, he would never have existed.

²⁵ Though Kripke does not make this distinction explicitly, it is certainly implicit in his theory of naming.

²⁶ van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” 306.

²⁷ Bob Hale, “Realism and Antirealism about Abstract Entities,” in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. by Jaegwon Kim, Ernest Sosa, and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 66.

We can now answer the question of what Doyle fixes the reference of “Sherlock Holmes” to when he makes a fictional assertive. These statements are declaratives (although they appear to be assertives) which fix the reference to mental objects and have the following form:

- (6) If something is an idea of a man who is a detective who lives on 221B Baker Street and has further properties P_1 through P_n , then it is a mental object of Sherlock Holmes Where P_1 through P_n are properties designated by Doyle.

Once again, Doyle’s first use of a statement with the form of (6) is a declarative and not an assertive, for it is fixing the reference of “Sherlock Holmes” to a type of mental object.²⁸ Now we can see how fictional assertives can be about their objects of reference, for they do not presuppose that the reference is already fixed, but they instead establish the reference themselves. They are really “fictional declaratives.” Consequentially, a fictional declarative is truth-evaluable, though of course, the statements are trivially true. Returning to the previous example, when the astronauts first give the declarative that the island they are standing upon is a country called “Atlur,” they could have equally used any other name and still produced a true statement.

Obviously, there is nothing special about the specific name that they use. The only relevant fact is that they do in fact designate a name for the island, and whatever name they pick, it is automatically true (at the moment of naming) that the island is called that name.²⁹ Since a declaration creates a fact about the linguistic representation of the world, it is true the moment it is uttered, just as any fact of the world is true the

²⁸ Note that these statements are only declaratives the first time Doyle makes them; afterwards, they become assertives. For instance, if Doyle says, for the first time, “Sherlock Holmes is a detective,” this statement is a declarative. If, the next day, Doyle says the same statement to a friend, he has given an assertive whose truth value is dependent upon the initial declarative.

²⁹ Of course, this in no way implies that assertives will be permanently true. If the astronauts decide at t_1 that the island is called “Atlur” and, at t_2 , agree to change the name to “Antonia”, it will be true that, at t_1 , the island was called “Atlur,” and, at t_2 , the name of the island was changed to “Antonia.”

moment it obtains.³⁰ A similar story may be told about fictional assertives as well: for any name x that Doyle picks for his character, it is true, at the moment of naming, that the character is called x .

While I am convinced that fictional objects have their reference fixed by declaratives, I am uncertain as to what sort of thing fictional objects really are. Although I have stated that they are some kind of mental object, this is merely an inference to the best explanation, as it seems apparent that they cannot be abstract or concrete objects. Though I have argued against fictional objects being a kind of abstract object, I have not explicitly said anything about fictional objects being concrete. However, since fictional objects are existentially dependent entities, they cannot be concrete objects, which are existentially independent.³¹

V. Ascription and Predication

The final part of van Inwagen's theory of fictional objects addresses his analysis of literary descriptives and meta-fictional statements. Note that van Inwagen's answer regarding fictional assertives does not address this problem, for a statement is a fictional assertive only when it is given by the author. When a speaker other than Doyle utters that Sherlock Holmes is a detective, this is not a fictional assertive, but rather a literary descriptive, a statement made by speakers other than the author and about creatures of fiction that have already been written about. Rather, according to van Inwagen, when analyzing literary descriptives and meta-fictional statements, the key is distinguishing between types of properties and types of relations fictional objects can have with properties.³²

In addition to all of the concrete properties that seem to be predicated to fictional objects, there are all sorts of literary properties that fictional objects seem to have as well. These properties include being a character in a novel, being created by an author, being the main villain, and so forth. The solution to this puzzle, according to van Inwagen, is that

³⁰ This is often referred to as a "double direction of fit." See. Daniel Vanderveken. *Meaning and Speech Acts Volume 1: Principles of Language Use*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 106.

³¹ Jay E Bachrach, "Fictional Objects in Literature and Mental Representations," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, no. 2 (1976): 134–139.

³² van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction," 305.

fictional objects have certain literary properties predicated to them, while concrete properties can only be ascribed to them.³³ Van Inwagen defines this relation of ascription “ x is ascribed to y in z ,” symbolised by the three-term predicate $A(x, y, z)$, where x is a property, y is a creature of fiction, and z is a work of fiction or a place in that work (for example, Chapter 2).³⁴ So, when we say, “Sherlock Holmes is a detective,” what we really mean is “Sherlock Holmes is ascribed the property of being a detective,” and that is symbolized as $A(\text{detective, Sherlock Holmes, Chapter 1 of } A \textit{ Study in Scarlet})$.

Although van Inwagen is willing to treat the relation of ascription as primitive,³⁵ he claims that Cartesian dualism provides a useful analogy for this relation. Someone may argue against the dualist that his position must be false, for the dualist identifies the person as an immaterial soul, yet persons obviously have concrete properties (e.g., being a certain height) while immaterial souls do not. The dualist will certainly agree that a person does not have these concrete properties. The person, instead, has mental properties such as the ability to think or to feel emotions. But souls do have the property of animating a body, and thus bear an intimate relationship to concrete properties. So while Christopher (who is identical with an immortal soul) does not *have* the property of being 175 pounds, he does have the property of animating a body which is 175 pounds.³⁶

In the same way, van Inwagen argues that fictional objects have literary properties but not concrete properties. However, just as Christopher does not *have* but *bears an intimate relationship with* certain concrete properties, so too do creatures of fiction not *have* but *bear an intimate relationship with* certain concrete properties.³⁷

Van Inwagen states,

“And just as, on the Cartesian view, we may say ‘Jones is six foot tall’ and be talking about an immaterial substance

³³ Ibid., 305–306.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 306.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Of course, the notion of “ascription” is not perfect a word, and in fact, may be quite misleading. Van Inwagen admits this, but for lack of a better term, chooses to simply accept the consequences, but not without some clarification (see van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” 305–306).

without thereby predicating being six foot tall of that immaterial substance, so, on the present view, we may say ‘Mrs. Gamp is fond of gin’ and be talking about a theoretical entity of criticism without thereby predicating fondness for gin of that theoretical entity of criticism.”³⁸

If correct, this is quite an ingenious solution to the problem. However, the reason why this solution works for Cartesian dualism and not for fictional objects is that the dualist can say that an immaterial soul bears a relationship to concrete properties because that soul is said to *animate* the body which *has* those properties. But on van Inwagen’s account, what feature of a creature of fiction allows him to similarly say that it too bears an intimate relationship to certain physical properties? In order to be ascribed a property, there must be some connection between the creature of fiction and the thing to which the property in question is predicated, just as in the case of Cartesian dualism. However, fictional objects, on van Inwagen’s conception, are abstract entities, so in what way could they have such a connection?

One solution may be to appeal to possible world semantics. Hence, we may take the sentence:

(2) Sherlock Holmes is a detective who lives on 221B Baker Street and analyze it as stating,

(2*) There is a possible world *W1* in which Sherlock Holmes is a detective who lives on 221B Baker Street.³⁹

Thus, the reason why Sherlock Holmes can be *ascribed* the properties of being a detective and living on 221B Baker Street is because there exists a possible world in which he actually does exist and is *predicated* the aforementioned properties. Thus, the abstract Sherlock Holmes bears an intimate relationship to the Sherlock Holmes in *W1* who is predicated of these properties.

For a moment, let us assume with van Inwagen that fictional objects are abstract. According to possible worlds semantics, when we say

³⁸ Ibid., 305.

³⁹ For a similar solution, see Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being. The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 116–125.

that a proposition is possible, we mean that the proposition is true in at least one possible world. The question is how we can analyze fictional objects using possible world semantics without committing ourselves to modal realism. Follow the traditional Kripkean account, possible worlds are simply abstract logical devices.⁴⁰ However, the whole purpose of analyzing (2) in terms of possible world semantics was to explain how something that is abstract could have properties ascribed to it. But our analysis of (2) as (2*) is certainly no solution, for we end up having to explain our theory of fictional objects by appealing to yet another abstract object. If this relation of ascription fails to apply to fictional objects, then on van Inwagen's account, we lack any ground for saying that literary descriptives (like, "Sherlock Holmes is a detective") and meta-fictional statements (like, "Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any detective today") can be truth-evaluable.

VI. Concluding Remarks

In sum, we have seen how the three parts of van Inwagen's model fail. First, his quantificational argument for the existence of creatures of fiction posits an infeasible interpretation of statements of ordinary language. Second, his idea that fictional descriptive sentences are neither an attempt to refer to anything nor truth-evaluable is due to a false classification of assertives (which presuppose that reference is fixed). In fact, these sorts of sentences are declaratives and so serve themselves to fix the reference. Lastly, van Inwagen's idea that fictional objects can only have literary properties predicated to them and concrete properties ascribed to them (an idea which he uses to give a truth-analysis of literary descriptives and meta-fictional statements) fails, since fictional objects are not the types of entities which can have properties ascribed to them. From these criticisms, I have argued that we can begin to build a rough model about fictional objects, where authors give declaratives to fix the reference of names like "Sherlock Holmes" to mental objects. Although I have my reservations about whether fictional objects could be mental objects, it seems that this is currently the best explanation, though there is certainly more metaphysical groundwork that is required here.

⁴⁰ Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," 267.

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