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FICTION AND METAPHYSICS

MANY WORKS OF FICTION address themselves directly to metaphysical issues. One thinks of the stories of Olaf Stapledon, Charles Williams, or Jorge Luis Borges. Other fiction is more subtly and indirectly related to metaphysics — *A la recherche du temps perdu*, for example, or, in a rather different way, some science fiction. The relations that various novels and stories bear to the questions of metaphysics would be an interesting topic, but it is not the topic of the present article, which is the relevance to metaphysics not of this or that work, but rather of the very existence of such a thing as fiction. We shall see that philosophical reflection on fiction can lead one to certain remarkable metaphysical conclusions. Not surprisingly, the area of metaphysics to which these conclusions pertain is *ontology*. The word, though not the study it represents, is a new one — it is probably a seventeenth-century coinage. In the present century, the word “ontology” is associated mainly with the names of Heidegger and Quine. I shall be using the word in Quine’s sense: as a name for the study that attempts to answer the question, What is there?

Quine’s contributions to this study are of central importance for the thesis of this article. These contributions may be divided into two parts: those that belong to ontology proper and those that belong to what we may call meta-ontology. By Quine’s “ontology proper,” I mean his actual attempt to answer the question, What is there? This attempt is of great intrinsic interest, but it is not relevant to my topic. By Quine’s meta-ontology, I mean his famous discussion of what it is to ask what there is and his famous theses about how to approach this question.¹ These theses are the product of a really remarkable effort to think clearly about questions almost no one had thought clearly about, and a proper appreciation of them will liberate one from some very old and very strong illusions about being and existence. Or so many philosophers, including the present author, would say. And yet Quine’s meta-ontology, when it is combined with what seem to be some very simple and obvious facts about fiction, yields a result that seems just obviously wrong: that names drawn from works of fiction (“Mr. Pickwick” and “Tom Sawyer,” for example, as well as proper names of other sorts, such as “Dotheboys Hall” and “Barchester”) denote existent objects. The thesis of this

article is that this consequence of Quine's meta-ontology does not constitute a *reductio ad absurdum*; rather, Quine's meta-ontology should be retained and this consequence accepted.

I shall first examine Quine's meta-ontology in the abstract, and then in application to fiction. In the abstract, Quine's meta-ontology may be viewed as comprising four propositions.

(1) Being is the same as existence. That is, to say that things of a certain sort exist and to say that there are things of that sort is to say pretty much the same thing. For example, to say that horses exist is to say there are horses, and to say that there was such a person as Homer is to say that Homer existed. This might seem obvious, but on reflection it can seem less obvious. Suppose I am discussing someone's delusions and I say, "There are a lot of things he believes in that do not exist." On the face of it, I appear to be saying that there are things — the poison in his drink, his uncle's malice, and so on — that do not exist. To take a rather more metaphysical example, I have read a letter to the editor of a newspaper, the author of which argues that contraception is a sin since it prevents people who would otherwise exist from doing so. This may be a bad argument on many grounds that have nothing to do with metaphysics, but it is certainly clear that its propounder believes that there *are* unconceived people, people who might have existed but who, owing to certain acts of contraception, do not exist. Perhaps someone who reflects on these examples will conclude that it is not obvious that to be is the same as to exist. But whether or not it is obvious, it is true. There *is* no nonexistent poison in the paranoid's drink. There *are* no unconceived people. In sum, there are no things that do not exist. I cannot argue for this thesis at the length the issues it raises deserve. I will say only this: if you think there are things that do not exist, give me an example of one. The right response to your example will be either, "That does too exist," or "There is no such thing as that."

(2) Being is univocal. (And, since existence is the same as being, existence is univocal.) Many philosophers have thought that "there is" and "exist" mean one thing when they are applied to material objects, and another when applied to, say, minds, and yet another when applied to (or withheld from) supernatural beings, and one more thing again when applied to abstractions like numbers or possibilities. This is evidently an extremely attractive position. Undergraduates fall effortlessly into it, and it is very hard to convince anyone who subscribes to it that it is false or even that it is not obviously true. But it is false. Perhaps the following consideration will show why it is at least not obviously true. No one would be inclined to suppose that numerals like "six" or "forty-three" mean different things when they are used to count different sorts of objects. The very essence of the applicability of arithmetic is that numbers may count anything: if you have written thirteen epics and I own thirteen cats, then the number of your epics *is* the number of my cats. But existence is closely tied to number. To say that unicorns do not exist is to say something very much like saying that the

number of unicorns is zero; to say that horses exist is to say that the number of horses is one or more. And to say that angels or ideas or prime numbers exist is to say that the number of angels, or of ideas, or of prime numbers, is greater than zero. The univocity of number and the intimate connection between numbering and existence should convince us that there is at least very good reason to think that existence is univocal. (The notion that the meaning of “exists” must have something to do with space and matter when “exists” is applied to tables and chairs, and that this word must have some other meaning when it is applied to, say, mathematical objects like fields and mappings, is one of the old and strong metaphysical illusions from which Quine’s writings on existence should have liberated us.)

(3) The third component of Quine’s meta-ontology is difficult to state, even inaccurately, without some discussion of formal logic. There is, in standard contemporary logic, the logic we have from Frege and Russell, a symbol called the existential quantifier, often written as a reversed sans-serif capital E and pronounced “there exists a” or “there is a” or “for some.” Thus, “ $\exists x$ x is a dog” is read “There is an x such that x is a dog” or “For some x , x is a dog.” This symbol is one of a systematically interrelated family of symbols that collectively form an instrument of great beauty and utility for representing the logical structure of statements and for examining the logical relations between statements. (Russell once said that a good notation is like a living teacher; he was thinking of this system of symbols.) Quine’s third thesis is that this symbol, the existential quantifier, adequately represents that single sense of being or existence that figures in our everyday and our scientific assertions; that this symbol and the rules for using it are best understood as a regimentation of the quotidian “exists” and “there is.” (The very name *existential quantifier* suggests that Quine is right about this; accordingly, philosophers who reject the third thesis sometimes prefer to call this symbol the *particular quantifier*.)

(4) I have said that for Quine ontology is the study that attempts to answer the question, What is there? The fourth component of Quine’s meta-ontology gives us a general way of approaching this question. As Quine sees matters, the problem of deciding what to believe about what there is is a very straightforward special case of the problem of deciding what to believe — or, more grandly, a special case of the problem of deciding what theories to accept. To find out what there is, find out what theories to accept. To find out how to find out what there is, find out how to find out what theories to accept. (No easy tasks, to be sure, but ones we are stuck with if we have *any* scientific or epistemological interests.)

Let us suppose I have somehow found out what theories to accept, and let us suppose that, as a result, I accept, say, the General Theory of Relativity, Quantum Chromo-dynamics, the *Verstehen* conception of the social sciences, the Chomskian thesis of innate grammar, and the dogma of the Real Presence. (As the items on this list show, we are using “theory” in a broad sense: a theory may be very simple or very complex and to say that one holds a certain theory is not

to imply that one is in any way uncertain about the truth of its constituent propositions.) Now that I know what theories I accept, I am in a position to answer the question, What is there? (Or, at least, I am in a position to find as good an answer to it as a being with my finite and imperfect resources can find. Owing to my finitude and my imperfections, there will be aspects of the world that are unrepresented or wrongly represented in my theories, and, as a consequence, there will be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy and more things dreamt of in my philosophy than there are in heaven and earth. This, sadly, would seem to be inevitable.)

To find out what there is, once I have found out what theories to accept, I need do no more than find out what my theories say there is. Sometimes this is easy. The theory called *theism*, for example, says that — in fact consists of the assertion that — there is a God. But often matters are not so simple, for a theory may in some sense say of something that it exists without coming right *out* and saying it. For example, one would not normally think of classical mechanics as asserting the existence of numbers, and yet the typical assertions of mechanics are assertions about the relations between sets of numbers. Should I, therefore, just in virtue of accepting the classical description of the motions of physical things in response to impressed forces, also accept the existence of certain non-physical things, namely the numbers that measure the motions and the forces? This is a tricky question to which Quine's meta-ontology provides an answer: What I must do, in the general case, is to translate my theories into the symbolism of modern formal logic (that flexible and powerful system of symbols that includes "∃"). Then I must examine the sentences of my theories and see which of them begins with an existential quantifier, and these sentences will tell me what there is. For example, if classical gravitational mechanics contains a sentence that begins "∃*x* *x* is a number and . . .," then, in accepting this theory, I commit myself to accepting the existence of at least one number.

Why? Well, to accept a theory is to accept it as *true*. And if a theory contains a sentence that begins "∃*x* *x* is a number and . . .," then that theory is true only if there is at least one number. Now it may be that someone will want to accept, say, classical mechanics and also want to be a nominalist. This person may protest that in accepting classical mechanics he does not *really* affirm the existence of numbers. He may make some such speech as this: "I concede that when I make use of classical mechanics, I sometimes *appear* to be saying that there are numbers of such-and-such a description. But that is only a manner of speaking that I find convenient. I no more embrace a platonic ontology by employing this convenient manner of speaking than I embrace a Ptolemaic astronomy by employing the convenient language of sunrise and sunset." Now there is nothing wrong with this speech, in Quine's view. But he will insist that the speechmaker show us how — at least in principle — to eliminate from his theory those sentences that assert the existence of numbers. If he refuses to do this, he is in point of philosophic principle in the same position as someone who claims to be

an atheist and who accounts for the existence of the world by saying that God created it, and who resolves this apparent contradiction by saying that his reference to God is “just a manner of speaking” and refuses to say another word on the topic. Quine’s thesis that the ontology of a formal theory is revealed by those of its constituent sentences that start with an existential quantifier is often called his “criterion of ontological commitment.” But this criterion will not reveal the ontological commitments of the *person* who accepts the theory unless he accepts it as literally true, just as a person’s commitments as regards the motions of the earth and the sun will be revealed only by analysis of those of his statements about the earth and the sun that he means to be literally correct.

So much for Quine’s meta-ontology in the abstract. Let us now return to the subject of fiction. What should one say about the ontology of fiction if one accepts Quine’s meta-ontology? One’s course seems clear: one must first decide what theories about fiction to accept, and then one must translate these theories into the language of formal logic and see what they have to say about what there is.

What are theories about fiction?

Let me back momentarily away from this question and make up a tribe of primitives, as philosophers do when they are dismayed by the complexity of the real world.

Suppose there is a tribe whose members love stories about heroic deeds. The members of this tribe have a word for stories and classify them into three types: histories, lies, and fictions. The “fictions,” unlike the histories and like the lies, are products of the imagination; unlike the lies, however, they are not intended to deceive, for, when someone tells a fiction, his audience knows that what is being told them is not a history, and he knows they know, and they know he knows they know, and so on. We could, if we had time, imagine a more primitive stage in the development of our tribe, when all their stories were either histories (perhaps containing a sprinkling of honest mistakes) or lies. We could speculate about the ways in which the institutional practice of telling fictions might have developed out of the institutional practice of reciting standardized histories (perhaps embellished just a bit with each retelling) and the contra-institutional practice of telling lies (occasionally exposed after they had gained wide popularity in the guise of histories). It is doubtful whether there would be any truth in our speculations; or at least it is doubtful whether there would be any truth in them beyond the mythical sort of truth that some people find in the story of the Social Contract. The telling of fictional narratives is almost certainly not a cultural development. It is much more probable that fiction is part of our biology, like language and the ability to recognize individual human faces. In any case, we have no time for this question. However the practice may have originated, our tribesmen tell fictions.

If they tell fictions, then, being members of our rather chatty species, they probably talk about fictions. What sorts of things might they say? How deeply

might their talk about fictions penetrate their fictions? We may distinguish two “grades of fictional involvement.” Here are some one-sentence examples of each grade.

Grade One

“That story we heard last night was hard to follow.”

“His new story was even more boring than hers.”

“There are some stories I wish would never end.”

“I fell asleep during the story.”

“His story reminds me of hers.”

Grade Two

“That story we heard last night had an intricate plot.”

“His hero was even more boring than hers.”

“When I hear certain stories, I seem to get caught up in the action.”

“I fell asleep during the story – how did it end?”

“He has borrowed her device of having a character in one’s story tell a story.”

We might say that Grade One comprises *holistic* and Grade Two *analytical* story-talk. The former treats stories as unstructured wholes, the latter as things that can be broken down and taken apart *in intellectu*. An important difference between the two grades – but not the defining difference – is that what is said in the first grade is applicable to histories (and *ipso facto* to lies, which represent themselves as histories), whereas what is said in the second grade is applicable to fiction alone. (Like most generalizations, this one needs to be qualified. We are so sophisticated, we post-Neolithic people, that we are hard to generalize about. But when we say of Field Marshal Montgomery’s memoirs that it is not hard to tell who the hero of *his* story is, or of the Wars of the Roses that their plot was very complicated, we are saying something immensely sophisticated.)

Let us turn our attention to the second grade of fictional involvement, to analytical story-talk. Analytical story-talk, if it is highly theoretical, applied to standard texts, informed by knowledge of a literary tradition, and serious in intent, we call *criticism*. (But, of course, not all criticism is analytical story-talk, since there are literary productions – lyric poems, for example – that are not stories.) It will be convenient, however, to call all analytical story-talk criticism. Thus, what we shall call criticism exists even among my primitive tribesmen, and any child of our culture who can talk of plots and characters is capable of it.

A moment ago, I backed away from the question, What are theories about fiction? I am now in a position to answer it: theories about fiction are critical theories in the present sense of the term: theories that treat stories as having an internal structure. Now critical theories, when listened to the way Quine has taught us to listen to theories, tell us something of great metaphysical interest:

that there are fictional objects — things like Mr. Pickwick. It is clear that stories themselves do not tell us any such thing. If the members of a certain tribe told fictions but never talked about fictions, or if they talked about fictions but remained within the first grade of fictional involvement, they would never say or do anything that committed them to the thesis that there are fictional objects. Contrary to what G. E. Moore said in a famous symposium, when Dickens wrote, “Mrs. Bardell had fainted in Mr. Pickwick’s arms,” he was not saying anything about someone called “Mrs. Bardell” or about someone called “Mr. Pickwick.”² He was not saying anything about them because he was not saying anything about anything. What he was doing was crafting a linguistic object that his readers could, in a certain sense, *pretend* was a record of the doings of — among others — people called “Mrs. Bardell” and “Mr. Pickwick.”³

It is critical theories alone that tell us that there are fictional objects, because it is critical theories alone that contain sentences like these:

“There are characters in some nineteenth-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any eighteenth-century novel.”

“Some characters in novels are closely modeled on actual people, while others are wholly products of the literary imagination, and it is usually impossible to tell which characters fall into which of these categories by textual analysis alone.”

“Since nineteenth-century English novelists were, for the most part, conventional Englishmen, we might expect most novels of the period to contain stereotyped comic Frenchmen or Italians; but very few such characters exist.”

Such sentences can be vehicles of objective truth as surely as can the most humdrum sentences about rocks and chemicals and numbers. Therefore, surely, those of us who are interested in the nature of fiction will want to accept theories that contain these sentences — or if not *these* sentences, then others having essentially the same ontological implications. But these sentences, if they are translated in the obvious way into the language of formal logic, will yield sentences that begin “ $\exists x$ x is a character and” Therefore, anyone who believes that what these sentences say is literally true and who accepts what seem to be the obvious formal translations of these sentences, accepts the thesis that there are fictional characters. Of course, someone who employs such sentences as these may want to say that his use of them is merely a manner of speaking and that he does not believe that fictional characters *really* have any sort of being. But then we are within our rights if we ask him how he would rewrite or paraphrase such sentences to remove their misleading implications. Whether it is in fact possible to produce paraphrases of such sentences — that is, of sentences that, read *secundum litteram*, say there are fictional characters — in such a way that the paraphrases seem intuitively to “say the same thing as” the originals and yet do not even appear to say that there are fictional characters, is a question in purely

technical philosophy that we cannot attempt to discuss here. (It is at least very hard to produce such paraphrases.)

Instead of discussing this question, let us raise the question why anyone should want to do this. Why not simply accept the thesis that there are fictional objects? (Presumably, any argument that showed that there were characters would show that there were fictional objects other than characters: fictional places and buildings, for example; but let us restrict our discussion to characters.) The answer would probably be something like this: "Well, let's look at a particular fictional character — say, Mrs. Gamp. If there was such a person as she, then people in London in the 1840s ought to have been able to look her up and talk to her. But there was no Mrs. Gamp for them to look up — nor was there any Mr. Pecksniff; nor has there ever been any Pickwick or Anna Karenina or Tom Sawyer. In short, there are no fictional characters. Each of these characters, if he or she had any sort of being, would have a certain spatio-temporal location and would display at that location a certain set of properties, a set that could be extracted from various descriptive passages of fiction. But it is obvious that if we could visit the location any of these characters is supposed to occupy, we should find no one in it with the required properties."

This is a real difficulty. Many philosophers who believe in Mrs. Gamp et al. will find it less of a difficulty than does someone who accepts Quine's meta-ontology. Some philosophers think there are things that do not exist, in which category they would place Mrs. Gamp. They will say: "The reason why we could not have found her in London in the forties is that she did not *exist*. Of course one cannot 'find' nonexistent things." But this resolution of the difficulty is not open to those who maintain that existence and being are identical, that there is nothing that does not exist. Other philosophers will say: "Mrs. Gamp exists, but she enjoys a mode of existence, *fictional* existence, that is different from yours and mine. That is why we could not have found her." But this resolution of the difficulty is not open to those who maintain that existence is univocal, that existence does not come in types or kinds or styles.

The latter of these proposals is hard to take seriously. To postulate unexplained "modes" of existence is to prefer theft to honest toil. But the former — the proposal to separate being from existence — is worth taking seriously. It seems to be the position that one is driven to if one cannot answer the objection we are considering. Various considerations have been alleged in support of it, but only fiction, in my view, presents us with a really good argument for believing in the nonexistent. Earlier, I recommended a short way with typical attempts to give examples of nonexistent things. If someone puts forward, say, Meinong's golden mountain as an example of something nonexistent, one should reply as follows: "There is no golden mountain and therefore you cannot put it forward as an example of *anything*; it is not there to be put forward." But if someone puts forward Mrs. Gamp as an example of a nonexistent thing, one cannot dismiss her

so easily. *I* cannot dismiss her at all. For, in my view, she *is* there to be put forward.

What am I to say? Logic leaves only one course open to me. I say Mrs. Gamp exists (in the only sense of “exists” there is); I concede that in London in 1843 there was to be found no fat, old, tippling, umbrella-wielding nurse called “Sarah Gamp,” with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had a remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of it. Therefore, I must conclude that Mrs. Gamp had, or has — one’s tenses tend to get a bit muddled in discussions of the properties of fictional characters⁴ — none of the properties on this list. Nor, in my view, is it strictly true that she is human, made of flesh and blood, or even an inhabitant of the physical world.

Well, what is she then? In philosophical jargon, she is a theoretical entity of literary criticism. Her ontological status may be compared with that of a plot, a rhyme scheme, a narrative passage, or a recurrent pattern of imagery. She is such stuff as they are made on.

“But, look. There must be some sense in which it is true that Mrs. Gamp was fond of gin. If you say that it is false that she was fond of gin — presumably because theoretical entities of criticism cannot be said to drink at all — how will you distinguish between the sense in which it is false that she was fond of gin and the sense in which it is false that she was a teetotaler? If it is false that she was fond of gin, there must be a sense in which it is even more false that she was a teetotaler.”

This point is right, of course. I am afraid I shall simply meet it by stipulation. I shall simply introduce the word “hold” as a term of art and say that, while Mrs. Gamp does not *have* the property of being fond of gin, she does *hold* it. Being a teetotaler, on the other hand, is a property she neither has *nor* holds. This is not to say that she *has* no properties. I would say that, like everything else, for any given property she has either that property or its negation. Here are some properties she *has*: being a theoretical entity of criticism; being a satiric villainess; having been created by Dickens; being introduced in Chapter 19 of *Martin Chuzzlewit*; not being a woman; not being made of flesh and blood; holding the property of being a woman.

“But what is this holding?” I cannot define it. I can only give examples. But we all understand it well enough. There is an intimate relation that the main satiric villainess of *Martin Chuzzlewit* bears to the property *being fond of gin*. There is an intimate relation she bears to the property *being introduced in Chapter 19*. The latter, of course, is the relation called *having* in everyday speech; the former is obviously not the same as the latter; I have chosen the name “holding” for it.

We have been calling Mrs. Gamp “she” despite the fact that she does not have the property *being female*. In doing this, we have been following a convention according to which it is usual to talk about fictional characters as if they had the properties they held. This same convention underwrites our use of the “is” of

predication in sentences like "Mrs. Gamp is fat." This convention is an obvious and natural one. If authors in laying their stories before the public are, in a certain sense, pretending to have produced histories, then it is not surprising that critics should at least sometimes pretend, in that sense, to be discussing histories. And, of course, if one is pretending to discuss a history, one will use personal pronouns and the "is" of predication.

This, in very broad outline, is a theory about the metaphysical nature of fictional characters: like everything else, they exist; they are theoretical entities of criticism, as are plots, digressions, and asides to the reader; they do not *have* such properties as you and I have, but only "literary" properties like being a villainess or being a minor character, though they bear another sort of relation (which I arbitrarily call "holding") to such properties as you and I have. There is a lot more that would need to be said to give a complete exposition of this theory.⁵ My purpose, however, has not been to present a fully developed theory, but to show how fiction presents a problem to the metaphysician and how one metaphysician has attempted to come to grips with it. Let me close by pointing out an advantage of this theory.

Consider the famous question, How many children had Lady Macbeth? One traditional line of thought runs as follows: *Any* definite answer to this question would be wrong. ("None" would be wrong, "One" would be wrong, "Two" would be wrong, and so on.) But, according to the rules of logic that we apply to ordinary, nonfictional beings, some definite answer would have to be right. Therefore, ordinary logic is not applicable to fiction, and a special "logic of fiction" must be devised if we are to know how to evaluate reasoning about fiction. According to the theory proposed above, however, no such drastic expedient is forced upon us. We need only point out that: (1) Lady Macbeth *has* the property *having no children*, since she is a theoretical entity of criticism and thus not the sort of thing that could have children, and (2) she *holds* neither this property nor its negation (the property of having one or more children). The Law of the Excluded Middle requires that, for every property, an object *have* either that property or its negation. But neither this law nor any other principle of logic says anything about what properties an object must *hold*. (A fictional object may hold a logically inconsistent set of properties. Barsetshire, for example, holds an inconsistent set of geographical properties: that is why one cannot draw a coherent map of it.) Therefore, there is no need for a special logic of fiction. Since this article has been an application of Quine's ideas about ontology to a special topic, the ontology of fiction, this is an appropriate point at which to end it. For we have now partly repaid Quine for his service to the ontology of fiction by showing how worries about the need for a special logic of fiction can be prevented from doing a disservice to Quine's philosophy of logic, one central tenet of which is that no subject-matter requires a special logic of its own.

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1. Quine's meta-ontological views are scattered throughout his writings. A famous systematic exposition of them can be found in "On What There Is" in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953). But this article is far from being a complete statement of Quine's meta-ontology.
2. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 12 (1933): 55-70.
3. Here I follow Kendall Walton. See his article, "Fiction, Fiction-making, and Styles of Fictionality," in this number of PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE.
4. There are some interesting reasons for this tendency, which I cannot go into here. See Felix Martinez-Bonati, "Representation and Fiction," *Dispositio* 5 (1980): 19-33.
5. For a fuller development of various aspects of the theory outlined here, see my article "Creatures of Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977): 299-308.