


EMPTY NAMES, FICTION AND
THE PUZZLES OF NON-EXISTENCE

EMPTY NAMES, FICTION AND THE PUZZLES OF NON-EXISTENCE

edited by
Anthony Everett & Thomas Hofweber

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Quantification and Fictional Discourse

PETER VAN INWAGEN

This paper is an application of what is sometimes called “Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment” to some questions about the ontology of fiction. Having begun with this statement, I must immediately record my conviction that there is an important sense in which no such thing as Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment. That is, there is no proposition, no *thesis*, that can be called “Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment”—and this despite the fact that several acute and able philosophers have attempted to formulate, or to examine possible alternative formulations of, “Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment.”²²⁶ Insofar as there is anything that deserves the name “Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment,” it is a strategy or technique, not a thesis.

Strategies and techniques can be applied in various contexts. Let us concentrate on the context supplied by a debate, an ontological debate, a debate between two philosophers about what there is. Argle, let us say, contends that there are only concrete material objects. Bargle points out that Argle has asserted that there are a great many holes in this piece of cheese, and calls Argle’s attention to the fact that a hole does not seem to be describable as a “concrete material object.” I trust you know how this story goes.²²⁷ It is, as its authors intended it to be, a paradigm of the application of Quine’s strategy. It has, however, a special feature. One of the characters in the dialogue (Bargle) is, as we might say, forcing the application of the strategy; but the other character (Argle) cooperates;

²²⁶See for example Church (Church 1958) and Cartwright (Cartwright 1954).

²²⁷I allude, of course to David and Stephanie Lewis’s classic paper (Lewis and Lewis 1970).

Argle does not dispute the legitimacy of the questions that Bargle puts to him. Other philosophers might not be so cooperative as Argle. Consider, for example, the late Ernest Gellner. In an article now about twenty years old, Gellner gave a very nice description of Quine's ontological strategy, and, having paused briefly to identify himself as a nominalist, went on to say

The dreadful thing is, I haven't even tried to be a serious, card-carrying nominalist. I have never tried to eliminate "quantification" over abstract objects from my discourse. I shamelessly "quantify over" abstractions and deny their existence! I do not try to put what I say into canonical notation, and do not care what the notation looks like if someone else does it for me, and do not feel in the very least bound by whatever ontic commitments such a translation may disclose.²²⁸

In an ontological debate with someone like Gellner, one would have to apply different strategies from those that are appropriate in a debate with someone like the admirable Argle. But I shall not further consider philosophers like Gellner. I have a lot to say to them, but I will not say it in this paper. Here I will simply assume that Gellner's confession comes down to this: I don't mind contradicting myself if figuring out how to avoid contradicting myself would require intellectual effort.

Those philosophers who, like Argle, admit the legitimacy of Quine's strategy in ontological debate will, I think, mostly be willing to accept the following thesis: The history of ontological debates in which all parties admit the legitimacy of Quine's strategy shows that it is harder to avoid tacitly asserting the existence of things like numbers, sets, properties, propositions, and unrealized possibilities than one might have thought it would be. If, for example, you think that there are no numbers, you will find it difficult to recast all you want to say in the quantifier-variable idiom (and to do so in sufficient "depth" that all the inferences you regard as valid will be valid according to the rules of first-order logic) without finding that the sentence

$(\exists x)(x \text{ is a number}),$

is a formal consequence of "all you want to say." It may be possible in the end for you to do this—for you to "avoid ontological commitment to numbers"—but you will not find it a trivial undertaking.

I have argued in several essays that it is very difficult to say all that we want to say and to avoid ontological commitment to "creatures of

²²⁸See (Gellner 1979), especially p. 203.

fiction"—fictional persons, buildings, cities, and so on.²²⁹ In this paper, I want to confirm this conclusion by displaying it as an all but inevitable consequence of a correct understanding of quantification.

What is the correct understanding of quantification—of the symbols " \exists " and " \forall " (or of whatever symbols we use for the quantifiers) and the variables with which they interact? Let me give two examples of how someone might answer this question. The first, in my view, is right, the second wrong.

My first answer to the question, What is the correct understanding of quantification? proceeds by showing how to introduce variables and the quantifiers into our discourse as abbreviations for phrases that we already understand.²³⁰ (This, I believe, is the *only* way—other than ostension—in which one can explain the meaning of any word, phrase, or idiom.) It will be clear that the quantifiers so introduced are simply a regimentation of the "all" and "there are" of ordinary English.

We begin by supplementing the pronominal apparatus of English. We first introduce an indefinitely large stock of third-person-singular pronouns, pronouns whose use carries no implications about sex or personhood. These pronouns are to be orthographically and phonetically diverse, but semantically indistinguishable. Let three of them be: "*it_x*," "*it_y*," and "*it_z*;" let the others be of the same sort.

Now let us call the following phrases *universal quantifier phrases*:

It is true of everything that *it_x* is such that ...
It is true of everything that *it_y* is such that ...
It is true of everything that *it_z* is such that ...
Etcetera...
Etcetera...

Call the following phrases *existential quantifier phrases*:

It is true of at least one thing that *it_x* is such that ...
It is true of at least one thing that *it_y* is such that ...
It is true of at least one thing that *it_z* is such that ...
Etcetera...
Etcetera...

Any reader of this paper is likely to have a certain skill that will enable him or her to turn complex general sentences of English into sentences whose generality is carried by quantifier phrases and pronouns. For example:

²²⁹See (van Inwagen 1977), (van Inwagen 1983), and (van Inwagen 1985).

²³⁰The following account of quantification is modelled upon, but does not reproduce, the account presented in Quine (Quine 1940).

Everybody loves somebody;

It is true of everything that it_x is such that if it_x is a person, then it is true of at least one thing that it_y is such that it_y is a person and it_x loves it_y .

Such sentences, general sentences whose generality is carried by quantifier phrases and a multiplicity of third-person-singular pronouns, may be hard to read or even ambiguous because of uncertainty about where the "that"-clauses that follow "everything" and "at least one thing" and "such" end. This difficulty is easily met by the use of brackets:

It is true of everything that it_x is such that (if it_x is a person, then it is true of at least one thing that it_y is such that (it_y is a person and it_x loves it_y)).

When we put this miscellany of devices together, we have a supplemented and regimented version of English. (The only features of the sentences of this new "version" of English that keep them from being sentences of ordinary English are the "new" pronouns and the brackets. If we were to replace each of the subscripted pronouns with "it" and were to delete the brackets from these sentences, the sentences so obtained would be perfectly good sentences of ordinary English—perfectly good from the grammarian's point of view, anyway; no doubt most of them would be stilted, confusing, ambiguous, unusable, and downright silly sentences.) This supplemented and regimented English is obviously a bit cumbersome, in large part because of the unwieldiness of our "quantifier phrases" and the difficulty of writing or pronouncing all those annoying subscripts. We can to some degree remedy this defect by introducing a few systematic abbreviations:

- Abbreviate subscripted pronouns by their subscripts, italicized and raised to the line. (Call these abbreviated pronouns "variables.")
- Abbreviate "it is true of everything that (x is such that ...)" by " $\forall x(\dots)$ "—and similarly for the other variables.
- Abbreviate "it is true of at least one thing that (x is such that)" by " $\exists x(\dots)$ "—and similarly for the other variables.

Our example, so abbreviated, is:

$\forall x(\text{if } x \text{ is a person, then } \exists y(y \text{ is a person and } x \text{ loves } y))$.

What we have now, of course, are quantifiers and variables. We have, or so I claim, introduced quantifiers and variables using only the resources of ordinary English. And to do this, I would suggest is to *explain* quantifiers and variables.

We may attribute to Frege the discovery that if the pronominal apparatus of English (or German or any reasonably similar natural language) is supplemented in this way, then it is possible to set out a few simple rules of syntactical manipulation—rules that can today be found in any good logic textbook—such that a truly astounding range of valid inference is captured in the sequences of sentences that can be generated by repeated applications of these rules. It is these rules that give quantifiers and variables their point. The odd-looking, stilted, angular rewriting of our lovely, fluid English tongue that is the quantifier-variable idiom has only one purpose: to force all that lovely fluidity—at least insofar as it is a vehicle of the expression of theses involving universality and existence—into a form on which a manageably small set of rules of syntactical manipulation (rules that constitute the whole of valid reasoning concerning matters of universality and existence) can get a purchase. But while it is these rules that provide the motivation for our having at our disposal such a thing as the quantifier-variable idiom, they are not the source of the meaning of that idiom, the meaning, that is, of sentences containing quantifiers and variables. The meaning of the quantifiers is given by the phrases of English—or of some other natural language—that they abbreviate. The fact that quantifiers are abbreviations entails that we can give them the very best definition possible: we can show how to eliminate them in favor of phrases that we already understand.

If our explanation of the meaning of the quantifiers—and of the existential quantifier in particular—is correct, the sentence

$\exists x(x \text{ is a dog}),$

is an abbreviation for

It is true of at least one thing that it_x is such that it_x is a dog.

That is,

It is true of at least one thing that it is such that it is a dog.

That is,

It is true of at least one thing that it is a dog.

That is,

At least one thing is a dog.

That is,

There is at least one dog.

The existential quantifier therefore expresses the sense of "there is" in ordinary English. (As an opponent of any form of Meinongianism, I

would say that the existential quantifier is appropriately named—for the reason that, in expressing the sense of “there is” in English, it *thereby* expresses the sense of “exists” in English. But that is another story.)

I turn now to the second promised answer to the question, What is the correct understanding of quantification? Since this explanation is rather complicated, I am going to present it very informally, by means of an example. A real presentation of this explanation would be a generalization of the example. Consider the sentence

$$\exists x \forall y \exists z (x \text{ is taller than } y \text{ and } y \text{ is taller than } z).$$

What does this mean? Well, first, if this sentence is meaningful at all, then the open sentence “ x is taller than y and y is taller than z ” must have an *extension*, a set-theoretical object whose ultimate members are drawn from a certain domain of quantification. The extension of a sentence that, like the one we are now considering, contains three free variables, would normally be understood to be a set of ordered triples: in the present case the set containing all and only those triples whose first element is taller than their second element and whose second element is taller than their third.²³¹ (The members of the triples must belong to the domain of quantification. In the sequel, I’ll leave it to you to supply appropriate references to a domain of quantification.) The result of prefixing “ $\exists z$ ” to this open sentence is a new open sentence

$$\exists z (x \text{ is taller than } y \text{ and } y \text{ is taller than } z).$$

If our original open sentence had an extension, this one does too, and its extension is determined by the extension of the original: on the particular (and usual) set-theoretical understanding of “extension” that we have employed, the extension of this sentence is the set of all ordered pairs whose first member is taller than their second member and whose second member is taller than something. The result of prefixing “ $\forall y$ ” to this second sentence is a third open sentence

$$\forall y \exists z (x \text{ is taller than } y \text{ and } y \text{ is taller than } z).$$

The extension of this third sentence is determined by the extension of the second sentence: it is the set of all objects that are taller than *everything* that is taller than something (and this will of course be the empty set, since, given that there are things taller than something, nothing can be

²³¹The objects in each triple in the extension do not have to be deployed in the order tallest-intermediate-shortest. They could as well be deployed in the reverse of that order or even in the order intermediate-shortest-tallest. What is important is that they be deployed in the same order in each triple and that, if they are deployed in, say, the order intermediate-shortest-tallest, the variable “ x ” in the open sentence be correlated with the third member of each triple, the variable “ y ” with its first member, and the variable “ z ” with its second member.

taller than all of them, owing to the fact that nothing can be taller than itself).

Finally, prefixing “ $\exists x$ ” to this sentence produces a fourth sentence, (not, this time, an *open* sentence) whose extension is “truth” if *something* belongs to the extension of the third sentence and “falsity” otherwise—for it is useful to stipulate that closed sentences have extensions, and that their extensions are their truth-values. And, since the extension of “ $\forall y \exists z x$ is taller than y and y is taller than z ” is, as we saw, the empty set, the extension of our final sentence is falsity—that is, it is false.

This demonstration that “ $\exists x \forall y \exists z x$ is taller than y and y is taller than z ” is false by a sequential examination of the extensions of the sentences

- x is taller than y and y is taller than z ,
- $\exists z x$ is taller than y and y is taller than z ,
- $\forall y \exists z x$ is taller than y and y is taller than z ,
- $\exists x \forall y \exists z x$ is taller than y and y is taller than z ,

and an explanation of the way in which the extension of each succeeding sentence is determined by the extension of its predecessor, displays the meanings of the quantifiers. Each of the quantifiers is an extension-transforming operator. (Or, to be pedantic, each quantifier-*phrase*—a quantifier followed by a variable—is an extension-transforming operator.) To explain the meaning of a quantifier is to explain how it transforms extensions.

In my view, there is a lot of truth in this second account of what the quantifiers mean. The quantifiers *are* normally extension-transforming operators, and I think that this account is precisely right about what extension-transforming operators they are. I say that the quantifiers are *normally* extension-transforming operators because there are undeniable cases in which they are meaningfully prefixed to sentences the haven’t got extensions. Consider, for example, the sentence “if x is an ordinal number, then y is an ordinal number and y is greater than x .” This sentence has no extension, and neither has

$$\exists y (\text{if } x \text{ is an ordinal number, then } y \text{ is an ordinal number and } y \text{ is greater than } x).$$

But the sentence

$$\forall x \exists y (\text{if } x \text{ is an ordinal number, then } y \text{ is an ordinal number and } y \text{ is greater than } x),$$

is just true.

Nevertheless, it seems evident to me that our second answer to the question, “What is the correct understanding of quantification?” does

give a correct account of how the quantifiers transform extensions *when that is what they do*. My problem with the second answer is simply that it isn't an answer to the question that it is supposed to be an answer to: It doesn't provide an *understanding* of quantification. It doesn't tell us what the quantifiers mean. It just tells us how they transform extensions. And that wouldn't be an explanation of what the quantifiers meant even if it weren't for the difficulty raised by the fact that they are sometimes meaningfully employed when there are no extensions to be transformed. The first answer, however, *does* explain what the quantifiers mean: it tells us how to turn sentences containing quantifier-variable constructions into sentences not containing these constructions, sentences containing only words and constructions of which we have a prior grasp. Someone may protest that the first account of the meaning of a sentence containing quantifiers does not, in the words of David Lewis, tell us "the first thing about the meaning of the... sentence: namely, the conditions under which it would be true."²³² But, really, the conditions under which a sentence would be true, are not the first thing about the meaning of a sentence. The first thing about the meaning of a sentence is what the sentence means. And that's just what the first account tells us about sentences containing quantifiers—at least it tells us this about a given sentence containing quantifiers if we know what all the other items (all the predicates and connectives and so on) in the sentence mean.

If you want to be told the conditions under which a sentence containing quantifiers is true (or, if it's an open sentence, under what conditions it has which extensions), the second proposed answer to our question—which I say is not an answer to our question at all—provides a very beautiful (if, as we have seen, incomplete) answer to your request for information. I think that it's the correct answer—as far as it goes: when it does tell you that a sentence containing quantifiers is true or is false, it will be right. (And that is a useful thing to have. If we know how the quantifiers transform extensions, we can use this knowledge to prove that that "manageably small set of inference rules" I referred to earlier are in technical but intuitive and useful senses valid and complete. No doubt the fact that so many logicians and philosophers of logic have thought that the way to explain the meanings of the quantifiers is to show how they transform extensions is explained by the fact it is the extension-transforming powers of the quantifiers—this feature of the quantifiers and no other—that plays a role in model-theoretic proofs of theorems about logical systems whose language contains quantifiers.)

²³²Lewis's complaint was directed at the "semantic marker" method of doing semantics for natural languages, see his (Lewis 1970).

Instead of calling the second answer to our question by the incorrect name "the second answer to our question," let us call it the objectual truth-theory for quantifier-sentences. There are, of course, alternative truth-theories for quantifier-sentences. There is the substitutional truth-theory for quantifier sentences. There are also truth-theories for sentences containing quantifiers in a more general sense—things that look a lot like quantifiers but which bind "variables" that have the syntax of sentences or predicates. I cannot discuss these here.²³³

Now assume that our first answer to the question, What is the correct understanding of quantification? is right. What are the consequences of this assumption for an understanding of fictional discourse? Since our time is limited, I will proceed straight to a special part of fictional discourse, the part I think is of the greatest ontological interest. By fictional discourse I mean not the sentences that are contained in works of fiction but rather sentences spoken or written about works of fiction—whether they issue from the pen of F. R. Leavis or from the mouth of the guy sitting beside you on the plane who is providing you with an interminable defense of his conviction that Stephen King is the greatest living novelist. The sentences of fictional discourse that I want to discuss are those that have the following four features:

- (i) they are existential quantifications, or at least look as if they were;
- (ii) they have complex quantificational structures (e.g., $\exists \forall \exists$)—or look as if they do;
- (iii) the inferences from these sentences that standard quantifier logic endorses for sentences that have the quantificational structures these sentences appear to have are valid—or at least appear to be;
- (iv) they contain not only predicates such as you and I and our friends might satisfy (predicates like "is fat," "is thin," "is bald," "is the mother of") but also "literary" predicates like "is a character," "first appears in chapter 6," "provides comic relief," "is partly modeled on," "is described by means of the same narrative device the author earlier used in her more successful depiction of," and so on.

Here is an example:

There is a fictional character who, for every novel, either appears in that novel or is a model for a character who does.

²³³But see my (van Inwagen 1981) Unfortunately, I can't refer you to my paper, *Why I Don't Understand Quantification into Non-nominal Positions* because I haven't written it. I could talk you through it, though.

(This sentence would express a truth if, for example, Sancho Panza served as a model for at least one character in every novel but Don Quixote itself.) This sentence is (i) an apparent existential quantification; (ii) complex in its apparent quantificational structure; (iv) contains the literary predicates: "is a fictional character," "appears in," and "is a model for." Moreover, (iii) it certainly appears that the inferences licensed by quantifier logic for sentences with the apparent quantificational structure of the above sentence are valid. It appears, for example, that we can validly deduce from the above sentence the sentence

If no character appears in every novel, then some character is modeled on another character.

Many philosophers deny the reality of fictional characters. Kendall Walton is a good example, and I will use him as one.²³⁴ (But the questions I direct to him are meant to be directed at anyone who denies the reality of fictional characters. Walton is, by the way, my source for the words "deny the reality of fictional characters;" at any rate he contends that one of the selling points of his own theory of fiction is that it does not "threaten to force the reality of fictional characters upon us.") I would ask Walton three questions. First, how would he paraphrase these two sentences? Secondly, does his paraphrase of the former allow the deduction of the latter by quantifier logic alone—or, at any rate, by quantifier logic plus a few intuitive rules governing the logic of his special operator?—for his answer to the "paraphrase" question involves the introduction of a special operator, a "fictional truth" operator. Thirdly, if his paraphrase of the former sentence does not allow the formal deduction of the latter, how will he explain this?

In short, I am asking Walton for a way of paraphrasing complex existential quantifications that appear to assert that there are fictional characters, and I am asking that either his method of paraphrases be "valid-inference-preserving," or else that he tell us why it is all right for it not to be valid-inference-preserving.

I do not by any means want to contend that Walton and other philosophers who deny "the reality of fictional characters" cannot meet this challenge. But, so far as I can see, none of them *has* met it. From my point of view, the matter is very simple. The first sentence obviously entails the second, and the explanation of the obvious fact is that the two sentences can be correctly translated into the quantifier-variable idiom as follows:

$\exists x(x \text{ is a fictional character} \ \& \ \forall y(y \text{ is a novel} \rightarrow (x \text{ appears$

²³⁴See his (Walton 1990), especially chapters 10 and 11.

in $y \vee \exists z(z \text{ is a fictional character} \ \& \ z \text{ appears in } y \ \& \ x \text{ is a model for } z))$).

$\exists x(x \text{ is a fictional character} \ \& \ \forall y(y \text{ is a novel} \rightarrow x \text{ appears in } y)) \rightarrow \exists x \exists y(y \text{ is a model for } x.)$

And the second sentence is a formal consequence of the first. And the thesis that these two translations are correct does not seem to be in any way implausible or far-fetched. They certainly *look* correct.

A second formal consequence of the first sentence is " $\exists x x$ is a fictional character"—that is to say:

It is true of at least one thing that it is such that it is a fictional character.

Or, more idiomatically, "There are fictional characters." And, since fictional names like "Mr Pickwick" and "Tom Sawyer" (when they occur in what I am calling fictional discourse) denote fictional characters if there are fictional characters, Mr Pickwick and Tom Sawyer are among the things that are—an assertion that we anti-Meinongians regard as equivalent to the assertion that Mr Pickwick and Tom Sawyer are among the things that exist. (It should be noted that, at least in certain circumstances, ordinary speakers are perfectly willing to apply the word "exist" to fictional characters. Consider: "To hear some people talk, you would think that all Dickens's working-class characters were comic grotesques; although such characters certainly exist, there are fewer of them than is commonly supposed." "Sarah just ignores those characters that don't fit her theory of fiction. She persists in writing as if Anna Karenina, Tristram Shandy, and Mrs Dalloway simply didn't exist.")

There is an obvious objection to this conclusion. It might be stated as follows: There are characters in some novels that are witches—for example, in John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*. Van Inwagen's line of argument, therefore, would lead us to accept

It is true of at least one thing that it is such that it is a fictional character and a witch,

which, of course, formally entails that there are witches—and there are no witches. For an adequate reply to this objection I must refer you elsewhere.²³⁵ The essence of the reply is that we must distinguish between those properties that fictional characters *have* and those that they *hold*. Fictional characters have only

- (a) "logical" or "high-category" properties such as existence and self-identity,

²³⁵See (van Inwagen 1977) and (van Inwagen 1983).

- (b) properties expressed by what I have called "literary" predicates—being a character in a novel, being introduced in Chapter 6, being a comic villainess, having been created by Mark Twain, being modeled on Sancho Panza, and so on.²³⁶

Properties that strictly entail the property "being human"—being a resident of Hannibal, Missouri, being an orphan who has a mysterious benefactor, being a witch—they do not have but *hold*. (Of course, if a fictional character holds the property *F*, then it has the literary property "holding the property *F*.") It is therefore not true in, as they say, the strict and philosophical sense, that any fictional characters are witches—or that any of them is human, female, or a widow who lives in Eastwick, Rhode Island. What we should say in, as they say, the philosophy room, is this: some of them *hold* the properties expressed by these predicates.

But what about our firm conviction—everyone's firm conviction—that, e.g., Tom Sawyer and Sherlock Holmes do not exist? Let us consider two cases in which someone might use the sentence "Sherlock Holmes does not exist." Consider, first, a frustrated detective who says in exasperation, "It would take Sherlock Holmes to solve this case, and unfortunately Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist." Consider, next, an amused London cop who is responding to a flustered tourist who can't find 221B Baker Street ("You know, Officer—where Sherlock Holmes lived"). "Lord bless you, sir, Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist and never did. He's just a chap in a story made up by someone called Conan Doyle." It seems to me that the first use of "Sherlock Holmes does not exist" expresses the proposition

No one has all the properties the fictional character Sherlock Holmes holds (nor has anyone very many of the most salient and striking of these properties).

The second use of "Sherlock Holmes does not exist" expresses—I would argue—something like the following proposition.

Your use of the name "Sherlock Holmes" rests on a mistake. If you trace back the use of this name to its origin, you'll find that it first occurs in a work of fiction, and that it was not introduced into our discourse by an "initial baptism." That is, its origin lies in the fact that Conan Doyle wrote a

²³⁶Or, rather, these are the only properties they have other than those that may be prescribed by a specific theory of the nature of fictional characters. Compare: "Numbers have only logical properties like self-identity and arithmetical properties like being prime or being the successor of 6." There is no doubt a sense in which this is true, but we must recognize that a specific theory about the nature of numbers may ascribe further properties to them—like being an abstract object or being a set.

story in which one of the characters held the property "being named 'Sherlock Holmes,'" and we customarily refer to fictional characters by their fictional names. (That is to say: if *x* is a name, and if a fictional character holds the property of being named *x*, we customarily use *x* as a name of that character.) You have mistaken this story for a history or have mistaken discourse about a fictional character for discourse about an historical figure—or both.

The difference between these two examples is this: In the first example, both the speaker and the audience know that Holmes is fictional and the speaker is making a comment that presupposes this knowledge in the audience; in the second, only the speaker knows that Holmes is fictional, and is, in effect, informing the audience of this fact. The lesson I mean to convey by these examples is that the non-existence of Holmes is not an ontological datum; the ontological datum is rather that we can use the sentence "Sherlock Holmes does not exist" to say something true. (Or something false.²³⁷) Different theories of the ontology of fiction will account for this datum in different ways. According to one ontology of fiction, the reason we can use this sentence to say something true is that "Sherlock Holmes" does not denote anything. According to another, the reason is that "Sherlock Holmes" denotes something non-existent. I prefer a third account, the rather more complicated account I have briefly outlined. These ontologies should be compared and evaluated not simply by seeing how well they explain our reactions to special and isolated sentences like "Sherlock Holmes does not exist;" they should be compared and evaluated by seeing how well they explain our reactions to the whole range of sentences we use to talk about fiction—and our ability to integrate these explanations with an acceptable philosophy of the quantifier and an acceptable general ontology.

²³⁷It is five hundred years in the future. Sally is being examined on her Ph.D. thesis, *The Detective in British Popular Fiction before the First World War*. A pompous (and ill-informed) examiner speaks as follows: "This thesis appears most impressive. But it is concerned largely with the appropriation by the popular imagination of a fictional detective called Sherlock Holmes. I know the popular fiction of the period well, and I'm sorry to have to tell you that Sherlock Holmes does not exist. Conan Doyle never created any such character. The author simply made him and his supposed popularity with the public up. Apparently she believed that no one on this committee would, know the period well enough to expose her fraud."