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## Fiction and ontological independence

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### ABSTRACT

A good number of the philosophers involved in the debate on the existence or non-existence of fictional entities have, explicitly or implicitly, proposed that our linguistic expressions provide sufficient criteria for determining what exists. Such accounts presuppose a semantic route to determining what exists, suggesting that whether fictional entities exist or not depends on whether propositions in fictional discourse are committed to the existence of fictional entities. This approach fails to acknowledge that a semantic route to ontology only reveals the ontological commitment of our expressions rather than what actually exist. Thus what is required is a metaphysical approach which grounds the existence of fictional entities on a criterion regarding what actually exists rather than what our propositions are committed to. To address this challenge, the current paper has two aims. First, the paper proposes to argue that ontological independence grounded in the concept of identity provides a more appropriate metaphysical route for determining what exists. Second, the paper argues that such metaphysical grounding of the criteria of existence justifies a realist account of the ontology of fictional entities.

**Keywords:** [Ontological Independence](#), [Artefactualism](#), [Constitutive Fictional Realism](#), [Existence](#).

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### 1. Introduction

The debate about whether fictional entities exist or not has remained intractable for a long time in the history of metaphysical discourse. One of the major motivations of this debate arises from the problem of proper names in Philosophy Language. As John Searle asserts, the role of proper names in ordinary language is mostly to refer to particular objects.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that proper names are tools that simply pick out objects that exist independently in reality. This understanding of the character of proper names raises questions about the nature of fictional entities which are believed by common sense positions to be non-existent, even though they are identified using proper names. This has led to the dispute between metaphysicians about whether fictional entities actually exist as independent referents of fictional names or not.

Traditional attempts to address the problem of the existence of fictional entities can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, fictional realists have argued that fictional entities exist as

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<sup>2</sup> John R. Searle, "Proper Names" *Mind, New Series*, Vol. 67, No. 266 (Apr., 1958), 170.

independent constituents of reality. For instance, Alexius Meinong argues that fictional entities are non-actual entities, subsisting in a world of non-actual objects. They are simply discovered by authors who introduce them in their works of literature.<sup>3</sup> For David Lewis, fictional entities are possible objects existing in their relevant possible worlds.<sup>4</sup> For yet other realists, fictional entities are constituents on our actual world. They are created by authors and, once created, begin to exist as part of our world.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the disagreement about the nature of these entities, these fictional realists are united by their common position that fictional entities are real independent constituents of reality. On the other hand, fictional antirealists align with the common sense position to deny the existence of fictional entities. Perhaps an intuitive motivation for this position is the perceived lack of concrete empirical evidence to support the existence of fictional entities. One other motivation for the antirealist position is suggested in the popular antirealist argument that propositions involving apparent reference to fictional entities do not actually commit us to the existence of such entities.<sup>6</sup>

This paper examines the debate between fictional realists and antirealists on the ontological status of fictional entities. In order to address the issue between these two traditional positions, the paper notes that there is a need to articulate a plausible metaphysical notion of existence. Developing such a notion of existence will help to ground the arguments for or against the existence of fictional entities within a proper metaphysical framework. Thus, the paper adopts the methodology of conceptual clarification and philosophical argumentation. Following this approach, the paper finds that grounding the notion of existence in the concept of ontological independence presents a more plausible metaphysical approach to the question of existence. This is contrary to the deficient semantic approach that is suggested in the traditional debate. Given this grounding of the notion of existence in ontological independence, this paper has two aims. First, the paper argues that ontological independence grounded in the concept of identity provides a more appropriate metaphysical route for determining what exists. Second, the paper argues that such metaphysical grounding of the criteria of existence justifies a realist account of the ontology of fictional entities. Thus, the paper argues that fictional entities exist as abstract artefacts whose ontological independence is justified on the basis of having a determinate identity.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section 1 presents the introduction and background to the debate on the existence of fictional entities. Section 2 examines traditional attempts to address the problem of the existence of fictional entities. The section discusses the presumption of these traditional attempts that language legislates what exists. The section thus highlights the need to adopt a metaphysical approach to the question of existence of fictional entities rather than the semantic approach presupposed by the traditional attempts. Section 3 argues for a metaphysical grounding of the notion of existence in the concept of ontological independence. Sequel to this, section 4 argues for the existence of fictional entities as independent entities in reality. The section argues that these entities are created by authors through acts of stipulation. In conclusion, the paper notes that the fictional realism presents a more plausible account of the ontology of fictional entities.

## 2. Artefactualism and the question of existence

The intractability of the debate between fictional realists and antirealists on the existence of fictional entities suggests a need to re-examine the criteria for determining what exist which is presupposed by these disputants. A good number of the philosophers involved in this debate have, explicitly or implicitly, proposed that our linguistic expressions provide sufficient criteria for determining what exists. Such accounts propose a semantic route to determining what exists suggesting that whether fictional entities exist depends on whether propositions in fictional discourse are committed to the existence of fictional entities. Thus, on the one hand, fictional realists affirm that expressions in fictional discourse are necessarily committed to the existence of fictional entities thus

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<sup>3</sup> Alexius Meinong, "The Theory of Objects". *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, (ed.) Roderick Chisholm (New York: The Free Press, 1967)

<sup>4</sup> David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986)

<sup>5</sup> Saul Kripke, *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); John R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" *New Literary History*, 6(2), 1975, 319-332

<sup>6</sup> Richard M. Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism*, (New York: Routledge Publisher, 2010); Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

committing us to the existence of fictional entities. On the other hand, fictional antirealists maintain that propositions in fictional discourse are not committed to the existence of fictional entities, thus arguing that fictional entities do not exist. While examining the arguments proposed by these disputants, this paper argues that the disputants fail to acknowledge that a semantic route to ontology only reveals the ontological commitment of our expressions rather than what actually exist. This raises a need to develop a plausible metaphysical route to determining whether fictional entities, or any other kind of entities, exist.

The ordinary understanding of the character of reference consists in the fact that we use words to say certain things about objects in the world around us. Many of the things we say about these objects appear to be meaningful because some of our word tokens are used to match the objects in reality. It is in realization of this that Marga Reimer and Eliot Michaelson state that “[r]eference is a relation that obtains between certain sorts of representational tokens (e.g., names, mental states, pictures) and objects.”<sup>7</sup> This understanding of the character of reference suggests that not less than two elements are involved in reference. On the one hand, the representational tokens (linguistic expressions, pictures, etc.) and, on the other hand, the objects in reality to which the representational tokens relate. Notice that this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of having other elements mediating the relation between these two basic elements.

While it is generally accepted that expressions such as proper names and descriptions are commonly used to refer to, or identify, objects in reality, explaining the exact nature of the relation between these expressions and the objects they refer to is a long standing problem in the Philosophy of Language. A problem which has led to the formulation of various theories of proper names ranging from the causal-historical theories of J. S. Mill and Saul Kripke, to the Descriptive Theories of Gotlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Tyler Burge, and John Searle, to the hybrid theory of Gareth Evans.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of these various theories seem to acknowledge the fact that the appropriate use of proper names suggests the existence of entities to which the names refer. As such, proper names are ordinarily supposed to refer to specific individual objects which are their only meaning. However, there is a challenge about how proper names exactly relate to their referents which has formed the crux of the debate among these various positions. The difficulty encountered in addressing the problem of reference is more pronounced when the alleged object of reference is not open to empirical verification. Such objects include fictional and mathematical objects. Underlying this difficulty is the puzzle about whether such objects actually exist in reality. This is the basis of the metaphysical problem of the ontological status of fictional entities which has attracted arguments from various metaphysicians. Attempts to address this problem has elicited a lot of arguments from fictional realists and antirealists.

The debate between fictional realists and fictional antirealists, with regards to the existence of fictional entities, has a long history in Metaphysics. While antirealists align with the common sense view that fictional entities do not exist, fictional realists take a much radical stance by insisting that fictional entities are part of the stuff that make up reality. Fictional antirealists acknowledge the fact that many of our discourses involving talks about fictional entities appear to commit us to the existence of such entities. What they deny is that such ontological commitments are genuine. For instance, R. M. Sainsbury argues that we can paraphrase propositions containing fictional expressions in such a way that the apparent commitment to the existence of fictional entities will disappear. The possibility of having such a paraphrase, for antirealists, is an indication that our talks about fictional entities do not necessarily commit us to the existence of such entities.<sup>9</sup> In other words, we can talk meaningfully using fictional expressions without actually presupposing the existence of fictional entities. For some other antirealist, propositions in fictional discourse are pretend assertions. The apparent ontological

<sup>7</sup> Eliot Michaelson and Marga Reimer, "Reference", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/reference/>>.

<sup>8</sup> John Stuart Mill, (1881), "Of Names" In *The Philosophy of Language*, (ed.) A. P. Martinich & David Sosa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29-34; Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001); Gotlob Frege, "Sense and Reference" *The Philosophical Review*, 57(3), (May, 1948), 209-230; Bertrand Russell, (1919), "Descriptions." *The Philosophy of Language* (eds.) A. P. Martinich and David Sosa. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 114-120; Tyler Burge, "Reference and Proper Names." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 70(14), 1973, 425-439; John R. Searle, "Proper Names"; Gareth Evans and James E. J. Altham, "The Causal theory of Names" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 47, (1973), 187-225

<sup>9</sup> Richard M. Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism*, p. 121; see also Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction*

commitment in such propositions are not genuine.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the antirealist sustains the common sense view, leaving the burden of proof to the realist to show that such entities actually exist.

In a bid to address the foregoing challenge, fictional realists take a position that stands contrary to the common sense denial of the existence of fictional entities. In this regard, fictional realists attempt to argue for the independent existence of fictional entities in reality. However, these realists differ in their account of the nature of fictional entities and how they are purported to exist. Some of these fictional realists argue that fictional entities are subsisting non-actual entities. This view is usually referred to as *meinongianism* or *non-actualism*<sup>11</sup>. For some other fictional realists, fictional entities exist as possible entities. This position is known as *possibilism*<sup>12</sup>. There is something common to non-actualism and possibilism. Aside the fact that they both affirm the existence of fictional entities, they also presuppose that the existence of fictional entities is not dependent in any sense on the activities (physical, mental, or linguistic) of human beings. This suggests that fictional entities exist in their own right and their existence predates any reference to them by the author of the fictional work in which they appear. They are merely *discovered* by such authors.

The presupposition that fictional entities predate their introduction in fictional works is hard to defend. For instance, as noted by Fiora Salis, one major drawback for these versions of fictional realism is that they do not present an acceptable account of the creative role of authors. Suggesting that authors merely pick out one of many pre-existing non-actual or possible entities through description or stipulation does not genuinely represent what authors of fiction do in the introduction of fictional characters. This is because authors of fictional works do not see themselves trying to describe any independent reality when they introduce fictional characters and situations. This corroborates Kripke's claim that one cannot say of any possible person that he *would have been* Sherlock Holmes, had he existed. This claim is clearly stated as follows:

Several distinct possible people, and even actual ones such as Darwin or Jack the Ripper, might have performed the exploits of Holmes, but there is none of whom we can say that he would have been Holmes had he performed these exploits. For if so, which one?<sup>13</sup>

Salis suggests that authors of fiction introduce new entities into our discourses, and "this is the idea involved in the intuitive notion of the creation of fictional characters."<sup>14</sup> The idea that authors create fictional entities thus forms the defining foundation for another version of fictional realism known as *artefactualism*. Artefactualism proposes that fictional entities are artefacts created by authors of fiction when they are introduced in fictional works. Thus, it denies the presupposition that the existence of fictional entities predate their introduction by authors of fiction.<sup>15</sup> Proponents of artefactualism affirm the importance of the role of authors of fiction in the ontology of fictional entities by insisting that these entities owe their existence to the very acts through which authors introduce them. By this affirmation, artefactualism acknowledges the intuition that authors create fictional entities. Also, artefactualism explains the impossibility of affirming or denying propositions about fictional entities on the basis of our discovery, actual or possible, of any fact about any entity whose existence is absolutely independent of the acts of the creator of the relevant fictional entity.

One major implication of the artefactualist proposal is that fictional entities are human artefacts whose existence depends on certain activities of human beings. These kind of entities exist because they have been created, deliberately or inadvertently, by human activities just as concrete entities like tables, cars, etc., are created. However, the tools available for the creation of fictional entities are unlike the tools available for the creation of concrete artefacts. This essentially differentiates fictional entities from concrete artefacts which are made out of concrete tools. Since fictional entities are not made out of concrete materials, these entities themselves are not concrete entities. They are abstract,

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<sup>10</sup> Kendall L. Walton, "Pictures and Make-Believe" *The Philosophical Review*, 82(3): 1973, 283-319

<sup>11</sup> Alexius Meinong, "The Theory of Objects"; Terrence Parsons, *Non-existent Objects* (Westford, Mass.: Murray Printing Company, 1980); Graham Priest, *Towards Non-being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

<sup>12</sup> David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*; David Liggins, "Modal Fictionalism and Possible-worlds Discourse" *Philosophical Studies*: 138(2), 2008, 151-160

<sup>13</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 157-158.

<sup>14</sup> Fiora Salis, "Fictional Entities" *Online Companion to the Problems of Analytic Philosophy* (eds.) João Branquinho and Ricardo Santos (Lisboa: Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, 2013), 9

<sup>15</sup> Saul Kripke, *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures*; Zsófia Zvolenszky, "Inadvertent Creation and Fictional Characters" *Organon F* 22 (Supplementary Issue), 2015, 169-184

not spatially located, and not empirically perceptible. Thus artefactualists describe fictional entities as abstract artefacts.

While artefactualism avoids the pitfall into which both non-actualism and possibilism fall, it is faced with a great challenge of justifying the affirmation of the existence of entities that are introduced through the activities of authors of fictional works. Barring the metaphysical debate on physical object ontology, it is ordinarily presumed that concrete artefacts exist as part of the things that make up reality because they are empirically perceptible, directly or implicitly.<sup>16</sup> This is not the same with abstract artefacts like fictional entities. It appears that artefactualists have a burden to show that fictional entities, in spite of their dependence on linguistic tools, actually exist. Notice that fictional entities are not the type of common sense objects that are empirically perceptible. Thus, the presumption of the existence of fictional entities will not work in the manner in which we presume the existence of concrete entities. This then is the basis of the ontological dispute about whether fictional entities exist.

The problem about determining whether certain entities exist suggests a need for some criteria for determining what exists. In his assessment of the debate between Platonism and Nominalism, Guido Imaguire states that “in order to decide whether or not the disputed entities exist, Platonists and nominalists must first agree on the criteria for existence”.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Russell Marcus states that “the debate over whether we should believe that mathematical objects exist can quickly lead to the question of how we should determine what to believe exist”.<sup>18</sup> It appears that the criteria for what exist is required in resolving the dispute on the ontology of fictional entities, as much as it is required for resolving the dispute on the ontology of platonic abstract entities and mathematical objects. Once the criteria are set, one can further determine whether fictional entities meet the set criteria.

### 3. A Criterion for what exists

Many philosophers have tried to address the challenge of determining the criteria for what exists by relying on commitments from our ordinary language. These philosophers have affirmed or denied existence of entities on the basis of whether our linguistic practice imposes a commitment to the existence of such entities on us. This explains why a number of fictional realists have built their arguments on the presupposition that realist semantics is required for our discourses about fictional entities to be meaningful. These realists insist that propositions in fictional discourses forces commitment to the existence of fictional entities on us. Thus, Meinong for instance, argues that we would be unable to determine the truth value of propositions if there were no objective to which the proposition referred.<sup>19</sup> It also explains why some fictional antirealists like Sainsbury, Currie, etc., have expended considerable intellectual energy trying to refute the claim that discourses involving reference to fictional entities commit us to the existence of such entities. For a good number of the proponents of both fictional realism and fictional antirealism, it appears that ordinary language is sufficient to determine the entities to which we are ontologically committed.

W. V. O. Quine rejects the proposal that our ordinary language can legislate correctly with regards to existence. He proposes instead that a formal language like the language of logic is more suited for such a task. Within the framework of Quine’s proposal, to determine the ontological commitments of any theory of ordinary language, the theory must be translated into the formal language of logic. However, we still look unto ordinary language to provide the expression that strictly carries ontological commitment. This expression is adopted directly into the formal language of logic. It is the regimented expression that determines ontological commitment of any theory of ordinary language. Quine argues that the ordinary language quantifier (which introduces a bound variable when translated into the formal language of logic) is the expression that best serves the purpose of determining the ontological commitment of a theory. Thus, this expression is adopted into the formal language of logic to determine the ontological commitment of any theory. According to Quine, “this is,

<sup>16</sup> Karen Bennett, “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology” *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38-76

<sup>17</sup> Guido Imaguire, “The Platonism vs Nominalism Debate from a Meta-metaphysical Perspective” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 71(2/3), 2015, 377

<sup>18</sup> Russell Marcus, “The Eleatic and the Indispensabilist” *Theoria*, 30(3), 2015, 415

<sup>19</sup> Meinong, A., “The Theory of Objects” 90

essentially, the only way we can involve ourselves in ontological commitments: by our use of bound variables".<sup>20</sup>

Quine notes that the appeal to quantifiers to determine what exists addresses the ontological question of what exists on a semantic plane. In other words, quantifiers suggest what our propositions or discourses are ontologically committed to, not what exists. However, he argues that this semantic ascent is preferred because it presents a common conceptual ground for disputants on the ontology of certain entities to discuss.<sup>21</sup> While Jody Azzouni accepts the distinction between the ontological commitment of propositions and what exists, he disagrees with Quine's view that ontological disputes can be resolved satisfactorily from a semantic plane. This, for Azzouni, is because the mere presence of objectual quantifiers in the logical analysis of an idiom does not necessarily entail ontological commitments. We have to examine how the semantic claims couched in objectual quantifiers are made true before we can convict the quantifiers of ontological commitment.<sup>22</sup> This requires appeal to extra-linguistic entities which such claims are about. Thus, a metaphysical route to setting the criteria for what exists is more appropriate than the semantic route adopted by Quine and some of his predecessors.

The metaphysical route to setting the criteria for what exists consists in identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for what exists. Having considered four possible candidate criteria that may be inferred from available literature, Azzouni proposes *ontological independence* as the most plausible criterion.<sup>23</sup> Azzouni's choice of ontological independence is in spite of his insistence that there are no purely metaphysical arguments to motivate the adoption of this criterion. However, he chooses ontological independence on the strength of what he tags the common sense intuition that whatever is dependent on linguistic or psychological processes do not exist because they are ontologically dependent on other things to subsist. To prove the acceptability of this criterion, fictional entities are selected as examples of things that are ordinarily considered to be nonexistent because of their dependence on linguistic and psychological activities. Since fictional entities are merely stipulated, quantification over such entities cannot be convicted of ontological commitment because "the author isn't required to square what's attributed to such entities with anything"<sup>24</sup>. There are no entities discoverable to confirm the truth or falsity of propositions in fictional discourse. Those alleged entities are simply made up by stipulation using linguistic devices. They are thus inevitably dependent on the mind and linguistic activities of authors, and cannot be said to exist in any serious sense.

Two aspects of Azzouni's argument for proposing ontological independence as the metaphysical criterion for determining what exists deserves closer look. First is his glorification of, and reliance on, common sense intuition. While common sense positions (where such positions are clearly discernable) may make vital contributions in addressing a number of philosophical issues, they also require some justification and may not necessarily be taken as given. Second is the choice of fictional entities as the obvious model of non-existent entities. On one hand, viewed from the perspective of justification of common sense views, the claim that fictional entities are ordinarily taken as non-existent because they depend on linguistic and psychological processes is suspect. As Azzouni himself seems to note, artefactualist will deny the claim that language dependence, in the manner in which it is attributed to fictional entities, entail non-existence. Thus, such a claim requires some non-trivial justification before it can be adopted as a basis for making further inferences. On another hand, viewed from Azzouni's perspective that fictional entities are created by stipulation, to argue that entities thus created cannot be said to exist in any serious sense is to presuppose a too narrow account of what we can do with words; a narrow account of the relationship between language and ontology.

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<sup>20</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, "On What There Is" *From a Logical Point of View* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1961), 12; see also, Quine, W. V. O., *Philosophy of Logic* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 89. Quine puts this point more formally by stating that "[a] word *W* designates if and only if existential generalization with respect to *W* is a valid form of inference. Quine, W. V. O. "Designation and Existence" *The Journal of Philosophy*, 36(26), 1939, 706

<sup>21</sup> Quine, "On What There is", 15-16

<sup>22</sup> Jody Azzouni, *Deflating Existential Consequence: A Case for Nominalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 57-62. A similar view to this is expressed by Howard Robinson who argues that to determine what exists, we should be able to look beyond our conceptualizations to determine whether the things under dispute are really available to match the concepts used to characterise them. see Howard Robinson, "Are there any Fs? How we Should Understand This Question" *Hungarian Philosophical Review*, 56(4) 2012, 55-68

<sup>23</sup> Observation, Causal Efficacy, Spatio-temporal location, and ontological independence are considered as possible candidate criteria. Azzouni rejects the first three candidates because it is logically possible that some things exist which do not satisfy these criteria.

<sup>24</sup> Azzouni, *Deflating Existential Consequence: A Case for Nominalism*, 93

Let us examine the first issue. The reliance on common sense to provide a basis for justifying ontological claims is understandable. The attraction of this approach is succinctly presented in the words of Maria J. Frapolli as follows. “It is true that philosophy is not common sense, but if it [philosophy] has to enlighten our comprehension of the world, it should be informed common sense”.<sup>25</sup> This is because common sense positions represent the way we intuitively suppose things to be, and they are usually accepted even by non-philosophers, and so we hope that our theories help us to confirm these intuitive suppositions. We are desperate to hang on to these intuitions unless there are very serious reasons to abandon them, and when serious reasons are provided to necessitate abandoning our common sense views, we do so with so much reluctance. Lots of reasons have been adduced for such allegiance to common sense by a number of philosophers. Notable among these reasons is the observation that allegiance to common sense views is an evidence of trust in ourselves, as epistemic agents, that we are capable of directly apprehending the way certain things are in reality.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of our great trust in common sense positions, one problem with such positions is that there is usually an explanatory gap between these positions and the ontological facts they seem to represent. This gap is characterised by R. C. Osborne as the absence of an “appropriate, non-deviant explanatory connection between our common sense beliefs and intuitions about which kinds of object exist and the facts about which kinds of objects exist” [emphasis mine].<sup>27</sup> Owing to this gap, it is possible, as it has sometimes been shown, that some of the positions that are aligned with common sense turn out to be false. It used to be a common sense view, for instance, that the shape of the earth was flat until more advanced scientific explanations and observations refuted that common sense account of the shape of the earth. This example points to the fact that common sense positions, like any other theoretical position, cannot be taken as foundation for grounding a theory unless such common sense positions have been independently justified.

The foregoing shows why grounding the criteria for existence of entities simply on the basis of its allegiance to common sense position is fallible. It is important to note at this point that the failure of common sense justification does not necessarily imply the rejection of ontological independence as a criterion for affirming existence. What is suggested is that an alternative metaphysical route for grounding the criterion may be required. In other words, proposing ontological independence, as suggested by Azzouni, is not the problem. Rather, what seems to be the problem is the fact that Azzouni grounds ontological independence in a common sense ontology which is itself unjustified. This is to suggest that ontological independence can be adopted as a plausible criterion for determining what exists. Whatever things there are that exist in reality, one would expect that such things enjoy some kind of subsistence which is detached from other things. For instance, I am ordinarily convinced of the existence of my laptop because it is constituted in a certain way that makes it a determinate object. As such, I am able to visually identify it distinct from other objects. If the laptop were not distinguishable in this manner, its independent existence will be in doubt. Thus, the perceptual field that characterizes my experience when I am acquainted with the laptop presents the ontological grounding for affirming the ontological independence of the laptop. This ontological independence, in turn, justifies the affirmation of the existence of the laptop. Thus, what is required to justify ontological independence as a criterion for determining what exists is an alternative metaphysical grounding. As earlier argued, common sense ontology cannot present such a grounding.

It appears that such a metaphysical route is available. It is intuitively appealing to grant that different kinds of entities that exist have distinct identities, whether in practice or in principle. In other words, if an entity *x* exists, we should be able to identify *x* in such a way that it can be determined about *x* whether it is different from, or identical with, some entity *y*. From the foregoing, a principle can be adopted that all and only entities that have determinate identity exist. Put differently, an entity *x* exists if and only if *x* has a distinct or determinate identity. The case is fairly obvious for concrete entities. The reason that our common sense intuition seems so comfortable with affirming the

<sup>25</sup> Maria Jose Frapolli, “Non-Representational Mathematical Realism” *Theoria*, 30(3), 2015, 341 [my emphasis]

<sup>26</sup> Brian Grant, “The Virtues of Common Sense” *Philosophy*, 76(296), 2001; Eli Hirsch, “Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 70(1), 2005, 67-97; Howard Sankey, “Scientific Realism and Basic Common Sense” *Revista de Filosofia & Ciencia*, 10, 2014, 11-24

<sup>27</sup> Robert Carry Osborne, “Debunking Rationalist Defenses of Common-Sense Ontology: An Empirical Approach”, *Rev. Phil. Psych.*, Vol 7, (2016), 200

existence of concrete entities is that the identities of these entities are clearly defined, since their identity is open to empirical verification. Even when such entities are not directly perceived, we can identify them through the causal relations they have with other directly perceived entities. Entities that are distinguishable in this manner can be said to be independent of other entities. Thus, determinate identity presents a more plausible metaphysical route for grounding ontological independence as the criterion for determining what exists.

One advantage of adopting determinate identity for grounding ontological independence as a criterion for existence is that it does not initially presuppose the existence or non-existence of any kind of objects. This is unlike the common sense approach adopted by Azzouni. Notice that the common sense approach simply presupposes the non-existence of entities like fictional entities without adequate justification for this presupposition of their non-existence. Adopting determinate identity avoids this error. It presents a kind of grounding that accounts for the ontological independence of concrete entities, and by implication their existence, on the basis of their determinate identity which explains how our perceptual fields are able to apprehend them. This route can be extended to cover non-concrete entities. Assuming that there are such entities, we should be able to determinately identify them independently of other entities. Subsequently, it will be shown how some non-concrete entities like fictional entities meet this criterion.

#### 4. The ontology of fictional entities

The fallible character of common sense positions, as earlier suggested, also has an implication for the second aspect of Azzouni's argument under review; namely the claim that fictional entities are ontologically dependent because they depend on linguistic and psychological processes. Once we have seen that the alleged common sense view is largely unjustified, the issue about the existence/non-existence of fictional entities is reopened. It is true that fictional entities depend on linguistic stipulations for them to be created. However, the true claim that fictional entities are language dependent does not imply that they are ontologically dependent. The error of presuming that language dependence implies ontological dependence is informed by a narrow conception of the relation between language and ontology.

It is generally believed that linguistic expressions, especially propositions, are essentially used to communicate beliefs. They are the objects of beliefs and the primary bearers of truth values.<sup>28</sup> Owing to this general idea of the role of language, ordinary language users, linguists, and even philosophers tend to presume that linguistic expressions are simply logical tools which are expected to conform to certain logical norms in performing their roles. Thus, we assess linguistic expressions on the basis of their truth, coherence, consistency, etc. Few Linguists/philosophers reflect on the fact that linguistic devices can also be considered to be an ontological category. Interestingly, considering linguistic devices as partly ontological presents a better understanding of the nature of fictional entities. The idea that linguistic devices have ontological properties is advanced by John Searle in *The Construction of Social Reality*. Having argued that institutional facts depend essentially on linguistic devices for their creation, Searle notes as follows:

But symbolization creates the very ontological categories of money, property, points scored in games and political offices, as well as the categories of words, and speech acts. Once the categories are created, we can have the same sense/reference distinctions that we have for evening stars, etc.<sup>29</sup>

Searle's argument indicates that speakers sometimes use linguistic devices to play roles that are different from the roles traditionally attributed to them. This is applicable, not only to institutional facts, but to the creation of fiction as well. The usual presupposition that linguistic devices only represent reality, and are to be assessed on the basis of how well the representation is done, is a major obstacle in understanding the nature of fiction and fictional entities. Philosophers have labored to assess propositions in fiction on the basis of whether and how they represent reality. Because there is no such reality which these propositions represent, many are driven to conclude that the propositions are not genuine propositions. Authors of fiction are merely described as pretending that they make the

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas J. J. Smith, "A Theory of Propositions." *Logic and Logical Philosophy*, 26, 2016, 83-85

<sup>29</sup> John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*. (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 75



propositions occurring in their fictional works.<sup>30</sup> This approach to the understanding of fiction is erroneous as it misplaces the nature of what authors of fiction do with the aid of linguistic devices.

It has been difficult to sustain the pretense account of fiction. It seems that this difficulty persists because any pretense account of fiction is likely to contain some significant gap. What seems to be correct in the pretense account is its recognition of the fact that the speech act performed by authors of fiction is different from the speech acts performed by authors of non-fiction. However, bringing pretense into the explanation is not adequate. Searle attempts to clarify the conception of 'pretense' relevant to fiction; where the author has no intention to deceive. For him, "the pretended illocutions which constitute a work of fiction are made possible by the existence of a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world"<sup>31</sup>. In this way, propositions in fiction, though non-conforming with the normal convention for use of words, are different from lies or deceit.

There is one major evidence to show that the pretense account is not successful. This evidence is the fact that the explanation of fictional reference built on it are somewhat incoherent. Scholars have derived either of two alternative conclusions from the pretense account. On the one hand, fictional antirealists like Walton and Currie have gone on to conclude that such entities do not exist, and our meta-fictional talk about (and even emotional response to) fictional characters, like that of the author, is pretended or make believe; a simple extension of the author's original pretense game. The non-plausibility of such accounts have been well argued in the literature. For instance, Noel Carroll argues that the pretend account throws away the phenomenology of the state of emotional response to fiction for the sake of logic.<sup>32</sup> Carroll premises his claim on the fact of our relative lack of choice when it comes to our emotional responses to fiction. Many times, the audience could not choose to be moved or unmoved by the characters and actions presented in fictional works. To describe an act as pretense or make-believe, even when deceit is not involved, is to presuppose some level of choice in relation to the act. This is not true of our attitude towards fictional characters. Thus, explaining the role of authors in the creation of fiction as involving pretense is inconsistent with the genuineness of our linguistic and non-linguistic (phenomenological) attitudes towards fictional entities.

On the other hand, philosophers like Searle and Kripke, among others, move from claiming that authors of fiction are involved in pretense to the conclusion that fictional entities or characters exist. The problem with this move is that the conclusion that fictional entities exist is incoherent with the claim that authors merely pretend. If it is accepted that Conan Doyle merely pretended that Sherlock Holmes is a detective, there is an unfilled gap between the pretense act and the existence of the fictional character. In other words, how acts of pretense create existing fictional entities is unexplained. To argue that an entity is created simply because an author pretends to talk about something is not plausible unless something much more than pretense, something creative, has happened. What is required is an account of how authors' acts actually create fictional entities.

Thus, in presenting an acceptable account of the nature of fiction, our primary concern is to present a correct account of what authors of fiction do. Authors of fiction are not involved in pretense or make-believe. Contrary to Currie's claim, it doesn't appear that they are even trying to influence the attitude of the audience, even though this turns out to be a consequence of their act. It is even possible that an author creates a fictional work without having any particular audience in mind for the work. Authors may create fictional works which they never hope that any audience will have access to. So the concepts of pretense or make-believe does not really represent what the author is doing. The concept of "making-up" or "stipulation" better characterizes what authors of fiction do. That authors of fiction do not intend to represent anything in external reality is generally acknowledged. In creating a fictional work, an author simply utters the sentences s/he does thus making up the characters and plots in such works. Conan Doyle simply makes up the Sherlock Holmes stories, including the characters in the stories, using linguistic devices. Doyle did not intend to play a game of pretense or make-believe.

<sup>30</sup> Kendall L. Walton, "Pictures and Make-Believe" *The Philosophical Review*, 82(3): 1973, pp. 283-319; Kripke, *Reference and Existence*; John R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse"

<sup>31</sup> Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", 326

<sup>32</sup> Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 1990), 74

The concept of making-up was introduced by Azzouni, even though he seems to take it as a synonym for pretense or make-believe. Partly because Azzouni does not recognize the fact that linguistic devices can be viewed from an ontological perspective, and partly because he equates making-up with make-believe, he argues that fictional entities do not exist because they are totally made-up by authors' stipulations. However, once it is realized that linguistic devices also have ontological capabilities, and that authors make-up fictional entities using linguistic devices, it becomes evident how fictional entities are created by authors of fiction as distinct ontological entities. It is also clear how these entities, though language-dependent, meet the criterion of ontological independence. Like concrete artefacts, which are made up from concrete devices, fictional entities are non-concrete artefacts made-up from non-concrete (linguistic) devices. One implication of this view is that language dependence of an entity is not inconsistent with the ontological independence of such entity. In other words, some entities can be language dependent while they are ontologically independent, if the linguistic tools on which they depend are those used to create them as is the case with fictional entities.

To better understand the idea of the ontological independence of fictional entities, it is important to draw a distinction between the creation and existence of artefacts. This distinction is similar for both concrete and non-concrete (abstract) artefacts. The act of creating an artefact requires the activities of certain pre-existing beings. I use 'being' here to avoid holding a prejudiced position that only humans are capable of creating artefacts. For instance, we may want to consider the anthill as a sophisticated kind of artefact which can be likened to artefacts created by human beings. In creating an artefact, the creator picks certain pre-existing materials. S/he works on these materials to form a particular object, bringing such objects into existence. This is more obvious in the case of concrete artefacts where, for instance, a carpenter picks some plank and fashions them into the table. By so doing, the table comes into existence as a result of the activities of the carpenter. To this extent, the table, as an artefact, is dependent on the carpenter for its creation. However, once the table has been created, its existence becomes independent of the carpenter. Thus, the table, though dependent on the carpenter for its creation, is ontologically independent of the carpenter. It has its determinate identity and its existence as an entity is distinguishable from the existence of the carpenter who created it, as well as from other objects in reality.

The case of fictional entities is similar. An author picks linguistic devices such as proper names, descriptions, etc., and uses them to stipulate the properties of certain entities. This very act of stipulating properties of entities, using linguistic devices that are playing an ontological role, creates the very fictional entity which is thus stipulated. Thus, the linguistic devices are the materials from which the fictional entity is created. The linguistic devices determine the properties, albeit abstract ones, which the fictional entity possesses. Once created in this manner, the entity, though dependent on the author for its creation, becomes ontologically independent of the creator. Thus, we can refer to such an entity independently of the author who created it. The ontological independence of the fictional entity explains why it is possible for such entities to have a life of their own, migrating across various fictional works and across various non-fictional contexts, shaving off some of their extant properties and acquiring new properties as they migrate.

It is proper at this point to summarize the account of the ontological status of fiction that has been presented so far. Fictional entities exist. They are abstract artefacts created using the very linguistic devices that authors use to introduce them in fictional works. Such an act of creation is possible because the speech acts performed by authors of fiction is specifically to create, stipulate, or make-up the fictional entities using the linguistic devices. What this suggests is that many of the expressions that appear in fictional works are not propositions. Rather, they are abstract ontological elements which are essential tools in creating the entities that they introduce. But how are such entities ontologically independent? In other words, do entities created in the manner that has been suggested have distinct identity that makes them ontologically independent? The answer to this is affirmative. Notice that it is not merely the linguistic devices that determine the identity of a fictional entities. Rather, it is the linguistic devices attached to particular intentional acts of particular authors. The intentional act is important because it determines whether the use of linguistic devices on the occasion is logical or ontological. Thus, it is the properties stipulated of a fictional entity, attached to a particular intentional act, that determines the identity of a fictional entity. This suggests that an adequate

account of the ontology of fictional entities requires an understanding of the role of intention and intentionality in the creation of fictional entities, as well as in determining their identity. While noting that author's intention plays a central role, the current discussion will not go into a full discussion of the role of intention. The paper rather focuses on the relation between language and ontology. The role of intentions in this creative act is subject for another discussion.

Fictional entities are distinctly identified by the very acts that create them and stipulate their properties. The distinct identity of these entities is responsible for the possibility of distinct reference to them. Just as Searle notes in relation to the ontology of institutional facts, once these fictional entities are created in the manner explained above, reference to them becomes possible. It also explains how fictional co-reference, inter-fictional discourses, and intra-fictional discourses, are possible. Once fictional entities have been created, we can genuinely refer to them, and even genuinely compare them with other fictional entities, as well as with non-fictional entities. The view that fictional entities are created by authors of fiction also justifies our basic intuitions that authors of fiction do not make assertions. At the same time, it explains how we can talk meaningfully and literally about fictional characters, especially in meta-fictional contexts.

## 5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion reveals that the realist account of the ontology of fictional entities is more plausible. This is in spite of the inconsistency of the realist viewpoint with the common sense denial of the existence of fictional entities. The discussion however reveals that certain presuppositions of some traditional versions of fictional realism are not justified. For instance, the presupposition of non-actualism and possibilism that authors of fiction merely discover the fictional entities to which they refer is unjustified and unnecessary. This view is particularly unjustified because it misrepresents the data on the role of authors in bringing fictional entities to existence. What is intuitively clear is that, whatever account we propose for the coming to be of fictional entities, authors of fictional works play a significant role. As such, any account that undermines this creative role of authors is implausible. Again, the pretense account presupposed by some artefactualists and some fictional antirealists is also unwarranted. As noted earlier, authors of fiction do not pretend to refer to the entities they introduce in their fictional works, and there is no need to suppose that they pretend. Authors simply create the fictional entities by stipulating the properties possessed by the fictional entities. Thus, the linguistic devices that the author uses are the tools for creating the entities they so introduce.

The foregoing indicates a distinction between the existing fictional realist positions and the account being proposed here. However, even though the view proposed differs slightly from the traditional realist positions, it is important to note that what is proposed here is some slightly modified version of the artefactualist position. This is so because it retains the primary artefactualist claim that fictional entities are abstract artefacts created by authors of fiction. Thus, it shares the basic presuppositions of artefactualism, namely that the existence of fictional entities does not predate the introduction of these entities by authors in their fictional works, and that the creative role of authors is essential in understanding the ontology of fictional entities. Because the idea of pretense is discarded on the current view, the gap earlier noted in the traditional artefactualist position disappears. In other words, the move from pretense to existence of fictional entities which is left unexplained in the traditional artefactualist account becomes irrelevant. Thus, in order to distinguish the current account from the traditional pretense-artefactualist account, I propose to call it Constitutive Fictional Realism (CFR). This is because it is a realist account that claims that the stipulations of authors of fiction create or constitute fictional entities, and these stipulations determine the properties of the relevant fictional entities.

Given the proposal of constitutive fictional realism, we are able to address a good number of the challenges that have been facing both fictional realists and antirealists in the analysis of the ontology of fictional entities. For instance, we are able to explain how it is that propositions in fiction do not make assertions because there are no fictional entities to serve as the subject of such propositions, while propositions in meta-fictional contexts and discourses make assertions because they have real fictional characters as their subject. The explanation consists in acknowledging that propositions in fiction are ontological tools which create fictional entities. Having being thus created,

these fictional entities are the potential subjects of propositions in meta-fictional contexts and discourses. This explains the possibility of referring to such entities.

It is important to note that the view that fictional entities exist as creatures of authors of fictional works aligns our intuitions about the role of proper names as alluded to earlier in the paper. Since fictional entities exist, they are the independent referents of fictional names. Thus, adopting this realist position helps to address the challenge about how proper names work in fictional contexts. This helps to avoid proposing differing accounts of the role of proper names when we compare fictional contexts and non-fictional contexts. On the current view, there is no need to propose such differing accounts since proper names work in the same manner in those contexts. Proper names, in fictional contexts, are simply names that refer to fictional entities. Again, this realist position helps to account for how we are able to easily make cross-reference to fictional entities across varying contexts. Such cross-referencing is possible because there is an independent and determinate entity which is the subject identifiable with such cross-referencing. For instance, the mention of Sherlock Holmes across varying contexts easily picks out a particular fictional entity because such an entity actually exists.

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