METAPHYSICA

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR ONTOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS

ISSN 1437-2053 · e-ISSN 1874-6373

All information regarding notes for contributors, subscriptions, Open Access, back volumes and orders is available online at www.degruyter.com/mp.

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF Rafael Hüntelmann, Theodor-Körner-Str. 7, D-53819 Neunkirchen-Seelscheid,
Email: huentelmann@metaphysica.de

Uwe Meixner, Department of Philosophy, University of Augsburg, Universitätsstraße 10,
86159 Augsburg, Email: uwe.meixner@phil.uni-augsburg.de

Erwin Tegtmeier, Department of Philosophy, Mannheim University, Schloss Ehrenhof Ost,
68131 Mannheim, Email: tegtmei@rumms.uni-mannheim.de

NORTH AMERICAN EDITOR Javier Cumpa, Department of Logic and Philosophy
of Science, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, 28040, Spain, Tel.: +34 (0)913946002,
Email: jeurteseros@ucm.es, editor@metaphysica.net

JOURNAL MANAGER Friederike Winter, De Gruyter, Genthiner Straße 13, 10785 Berlin, Germany,
Tel.: +49 (0)30 260 05-376, Fax: +49 (0)30 260 05-250, Email: Friederike.winter@degruyter.com

RESPONSIBLE FOR ADVERTISEMENTS Claudia Neumann, De Gruyter, Genthiner Straße 13,
10785 Berlin, Germany, Tel.: +49 (0)30 260 05-226, Fax: +49 (0)30 260 05-264,
Email: anzeigen@degruyter.com

© 2017 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

TYPESETTING Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd., Pondicherry, India

PRINTING Franz X. Stickle Druck und Verlag e. K., Ettenheim
Printed in Germany

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Rafael Hüntelmann,

Neunkirchen-Seelscheid

Uwe Meixner, Augsburg

Erwin Tegtmeier, Mannheim

NORTH AMERICAN EDITOR

Javier Cumpa, Madrid

EDITORIAL BOARD

Laird Addis, Iowa

Brian Davies, New York

Herbert Hochberg, Austin

Ingvar Johansson, Umea

Christian Kanzian, Innsbruck

Gyula Klima, New York

Robert C. Koons, Austin

Wolfgang Künnle, Hamburg

Winfried Löffler, Innsbruck

Kevin Mulligan, Genève

Frederic Nef, Paris

Nathan Oaklander, Ann Arbor

David Oderberg, Reading

Francesco Orilia, Macerata

Alvin Plantinga, Notre Dame

Matjaz Potrc, Ljubljana

Christof Rapp, München

Maria Elisabeth Reicher-Marek,

Aachen

Richard Schantz, Siegen

Oliver Scholz, Münster

Johanna Seibt, Aarhus

Peter Simons, Leeds

Barry Smith, Buffalo

Ralf Stoecker, Potsdam

Nico Strobach, Münster

Käthe Trettin, Frankfurt/Main

Daniel von Wachter, Liechtenstein

DE GRUYTER

Manuele Dozzi*

Fictional Objects

DOI 10.1515/mp-2017-0008

Published online March 23, 2017

Abstract: The article, in the first part, aims at providing a positive answer to the ontological question about fictional objects starting from semantic reflections on the negative existential statements containing terms purporting to refer to such objects and the principle of compositionality. In the second part is proposed a Meinongian account of *ficta*, showing how it handles the problem of negative existentials without giving up neither the principle of compositionality nor our way of talking about fictional characters in the natural languages. It is also considered a particular kind of Meinongianism, namely Modal Meinongianism which seems to be the best Meinongian theory in order to explore the modal properties of *ficta*.

Keywords: fictional objects, meinongianism, ontology, metaphysics

1 Introduction

What is a fictional object? A simple answer could be that fictional objects are what is referred to by fictional terms. What is a fictional term then? A fictional term is a term occurring in a fictional work like a story, a myth or a fairy tale. However, not every term *t* occurring in a fiction is a fictional term. The term 'London', for instance, appears in the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and nonetheless it seems to refer to a non-fictional object. Typical examples of terms purporting to refer to fictional objects are: 'Sherlock Holmes', 'Hamlet' or 'Pegasus', namely terms that do not refer to anything actually existing.

Nevertheless, one thing on which almost everyone would agree is that, in one sense or another, fictional objects do not exist. This means that 'x does not exist' is made true for any substitution of the *x* with a term purporting to refer to a fictional object.

Despite the wide agreement on the fact that fictional objects do not exist, philosophers deeply disagree on how a negative existential statement has to be understood and analyzed, and consequently on the ontological status of such (non)entities like fictional objects.

*Corresponding author: Manuele Dozzi, Department of Legal Science, University of Udine, Udine, Italy, E-mail: manuele.dozzi@phd.units.it

My goal here is to try to show how, according to a well-established line of argumentation, fictional terms can be conceived of as referring to fictional objects starting from semantic reflections on the statements that contain those terms and the truth conditions by means of which we evaluate them. I deal mainly with the plausibility of a positive answer to the ontological question about *facta* by analyzing and trying to question the main objections that have been moved against it. In the last section I consider the Meinongian account of fictional objects and try to answer some questions such as: How are them to be conceived?; What general characteristics, if any, do they share? In short: after answering the ontological question about fictional objects positively, I attempt to answer the metaphysical one: What are they like?

2 Compositionality

How is language possible? How is it possible, from a finite and learnable stock of basic vocabulary in a language, to form indefinitely many novel utterances, new propositions expressing thoughts which have not previously been framed? (Read 1995, 121)

The answer to Read's question, as he himself writes, is that we are able to form and understand an infinite number of sentences from a limited set of lexical terms because of the *Principle of Compositionality*. This principle was first introduced by Frege who, because of his distinction between sense and denotation, thought of it in a twofold way: one for senses and one for denotations. I am most interested here in the latter, namely the compositionality of denotation. In this preliminary section, I state the principle using the term 'meaning' in order to obtain a more general formulation:

- The meaning of a complex linguistic expression is a function of its structure and of the meanings of its parts.

This principle seems to constitute the best explanation we have for the fact that we are able to understand and formulate a great number of sentences knowing a limited number of terms. In other words, we are able to construct new expressions from those that we already know by applying to them the syntactic rules that govern our language. The result is surprising. From a small set of rules and a relatively small set of lexical terms we can form an infinite number of new expressions.

Another important semantic principle worth mentioning for the sake of my argumentation is called *Dependence of Truth from Denotation* (Spolaore and

Giaretta 2008). It says that a true statement must contain denoting terms and that a statement containing a term without denotation lacks denotation itself. Before stating this principle precisely, it is useful to give a formulation of the *Compositionality of Denotation*:

- The denotation of a complex linguistic expression is a function of its structure and of the denotations of its parts.

The principle of the *Dependence of Truth from Denotation*:

- If e is a linguistic expression lacking denotation then any complex linguistic expression e_i containing e lacks denotation.

Consider the statement 'Abcd is a mammal'. This statement lacks denotation since 'Abcd' lacks denotation, and hence we are not able to decide whether its referent belongs to the class of mammals or not. We cannot decide whether it is true or false. Its absence of truth-value seems to be due to the absence of denotation of 'Abcd'.¹

From the two principles mentioned above, namely the *Compositionality of Denotation* and the *Dependence of Truth from Denotation*, it seems to follow that if a statement is true then its terms must be denoting.

3 Negative Existential Statements

A negative existential statement is an expression of the form 'x does not exist'. By substituting 'x' with a singular term, we obtain a statement that is either true or false. If the substitution '[a/x] x does not exist' is false, it means that the term 'a' by means of which we instantiate our formula refers to an object that exists. But what happens when '[a/x] x does not exist' is true?

It seems like it lacks denotation, namely a truth-value since it contains an empty term and, therefore, it cannot be a denoting expression. That is because, according to the *Compositionality of Denotation* and the *Dependence of Truth from Denotation*, the following statement seems to be true:

- If either 'a exists' is true or 'a does not exist' is true, then 'a denotes' is true.

This seems to imply that if 'a does not exist' is true then the same statement is false and so it must be false.

In a more general form:

¹ Here I assume the Fregean view for which the denotation of a statement is its truth-value.

1. Each complex expression has a denotation only if each of its constituents does.
2. No complex expression that is a true statement lacks denotation.
3. **Hence:** No true statement contains non-referring expressions.

Maintaining premises 1 and 2, and considering the statement 'Cthulhu does not exist' true, as nobody has ever seen the giant Lovecraftian deity, we can derive that no component of our statement is non-denoting and so 'Cthulhu' denotes something. Yet Cthulhu does not exist!

It seems as though we are caught in Plato's beard! This is how Quine (1953, 2) in his "On What There Is" dubbed the problem we are struggling with, namely the apparent impossibility of expressing genuine negative existential statements. Now what alternatives do we have?

One solution could be the rejection of *Compositionality of Denotation* and of the *Dependence of Truth from Denotation* and with them the best explanation we have for our linguistic abilities of understanding and formulating statements. Another way out is trying to give a different interpretation to negative existential statements and their semantics.

4 The Psychologistic Way

The first solution one may come up with is the psychologistic solution, namely identifying the referents of terms in the position of subject in a negative existential statement with mental representations. So 'Cthulhu' would denote an idea in the mind of men! But mental representations exist and so it would be false to say that Cthulhu does not exist.

1. 'Cthulhu does not exist' is true iff Cthulhu does not exist.
2. Cthulhu is an actual mental representation.
3. All actual mental representations exist.
4. **Hence:** 'Cthulhu does not exist' is not true.

The conclusion is therefore clearly unacceptable, and so the best thing we can do is try to dispute one of the premises. The best candidate I think, since it is the least plausible, is precisely premise 2, namely the psychologistic premise.

Another consequence of accepting a psychologistic semantics for fictional terms is the fact that things get bizarre when we analyze them in a modal framework. Suppose for the sake of argument that 'Cthulhu' denotes my representation of Cthulhu. Given Kripke's (1972) account of proper names, 'Cthulhu'

rigidly denotes my representation. That means that 'Cthulhu' denotes my mental representation in every world in which it (Cthulhu) exists. But since my representations are not separable from me, it follows that 'Cthulhu' refers only in some worlds where I exist, and that if it refers then I must exist. I think this is a really counter-intuitive conclusion since we can conceive a possible situation in which I do not exist, but people can still use the term 'Cthulhu' in propositions that are either true or false.²

A variation on the psychologistic theme could be to identify Cthulhu with a set of representations, namely that of the representations of Cthulhu. This solution does not make the situation any better; rather it makes things worse. If Cthulhu is the set of all the mental representations of Cthulhu, since a representation exists only if its bearer exists, then it does not denote in all the worlds in which the actual individuals who represent Cthulhu in their minds do not exist or never think of it. If we identify it with the set of the representations in every world, then it follows that it does not denote if nobody thinks about it and that 'Cthulhu' is no longer a rigid designator.³

Besides the arguments mentioned above, I consider valid the stand of Frege (1918) against semantic psychologism in general. His argument seems to go like this:

1. If there is some common knowledge resulting from the contribution of many, then thoughts are not mental representations.
2. There is a common knowledge resulting from the contribution of many thinkers.
3. **Hence:** Thoughts are not mental representations.

Even though Frege's argument is intended to be a refutation of the idea that thought is a mental phenomenon, I think it is well suited, with the right adjustments, also for the task of defending the position that fictional entities are not mental representations. I believe this could be done, by accepting the theory of direct reference for proper names, and with it the idea that the

² The fact that 'Cthulhu' refers only in worlds where Cthulhu exists presupposes a multiple domain semantics *a la* Kripke. However, things are no better with a single domain semantics in which 'Cthulhu' refers also in worlds where Cthulhu does not exist because, even if it refers to my non-existent representation, it seems quite implausible that my representation could possibly be a giant monster.

³ Here the objection is again based on Kripke's semantics for modal logic. However, as in the former case, a single domain semantics will not help since, intuitively, a set of representations cannot possibly be a giant monster, but that the referent of 'Cthulhu' could actually be a giant monster is exactly what we say when we say 'Cthulhu could exist'.

contribution of proper names to the meaning of an expression is their denotation.

Another very strong argument against semantic psychologism is the following: if I fear the man next door, the object of my fear cannot be a mental representation, since, if it's true that there is something that is a man and I fear it, then what I fear cannot possibly be a mental representation since mental representations cannot be men. In other words, nothing satisfies the formula 'x is a man and I fear x' if it is interpreted over a domain of mental representations.

5 Possible Paraphrases

Another way to try and solve the problem of negative existential statements is that of attempting to paraphrase them away in a non-problematic way. This approach is often on a par with the idea that existence is to be understood differently from the way it is suggested by the use of 'Exist' in the natural language.

The first to undertake such an approach was Gottlob Frege who, not trusting the natural language, was working on a symbolic artificial language in order to make the links between the contents of judgments more explicit without allowing for any psychological intromission in reasoning. Frege's aversion to psychology is common among those, like him and Bolzano, who stand in the tradition called by J. A. Coffa (1991) the "Semantic Tradition".

This tradition arises, according to Coffa, as a reaction to the Kantian view and its psychological overtones. Indeed, Kant accepted in fact, like many of his contemporaries, the notion of representation as one of the basic logical concepts. This allowed for an unhealthy intermingling between logic and psychology, since that of representation was also a basic psychological notion.

Despite his rejection of Kantian semantics, Frege incorporated a treatment of existence in his language that is inspired by a Kantian intuition, i.e. the existential quantifier defined as a second-order function: a function whose arguments are first-order functions. This idea seems to be deeply influenced by Kant's rejection of existence intended as a real predicate or a predicate of things. In Kant's view 'A is' means that an object corresponds to our concept/representation A.

Frege dismisses the psychologic part and keeps the idea that existence is not something predicable of things, but rather of properties. The existential quantifier allows us to express statements like 'At least one thing falls under the property F' or 'At least one element of the domain satisfies the formula φ '. In

this sense, existence, being conceived in terms of quantification, is a second-level property or a property of properties. So when we say 'Elves do not exist', we are saying that there is no such thing in the domain capable of satisfying the function 'x is an elf'.

However, what about singular terms? It seems as though existence is no longer predicable of individuals because to take a singular term as an argument for a second-order function would be a violation of the syntactic rules. Consider again our Lovecraftian deity Cthulhu. How are we supposed to say that it, like any fictional character, does not exist? An elegant solution is to say 'There is nothing equal to Cthulhu', meaning that for every element of the domain none satisfies the formula $x = \text{Cthulhu}$. Problem solved!

Not really. In fact the principle of *Dependence of Truth from Denotation* says: If a complex expression contains a sub-expression that lacks denotation, then the whole expression lacks denotation. 'Cthulhu' here seems to lack any denotation and so do all the expressions containing it. An alternative solution proposed by Frege is that of interpreting negative existentials through a metalinguistic analysis, according to which the sentence 'Cthulhu does not exist' is tantamount to the sentence 'Cthulhu' does not refer'. In this way no term of the paraphrase is non-denoting and the problem seems to be solved. Despite its *prima facie* plausibility, the exposed solution does not seem satisfying to me, for two reasons. Firstly, it is too reformative of our way of speaking. Secondly, it has troublesome consequences: In fact, if a statement affirming that a certain term is non-denoting is true, then any expression containing such term must be non-denoting and this means that, for instance, 'Cthulhu is a giant monster' is neither true nor false. I think that this clashes against our common sense and our intuitions about fiction according to which the statement considered above is somehow true. Nevertheless for Frege, who distinguishes between two semantic levels, the fact that a sentence lacks a truth-value does not imply that it lacks meaning at all. For him 'Cthulhu' may be a non-denoting term, but it still has a sense by which we partly understand what 'Cthulhu is a giant monster' means, even though it turns out to be neither true nor false.

Another influential approach is that put forward by Bertrand Russell (1905) in his groundbreaking article "On Denoting". Here he proposed a technique to paraphrase definite descriptions and a solution to the problem of negative existential statements. Russell's strategy is based on two main premises:

1. His technique to paraphrase definite descriptions.
2. The adoption of the descriptivist theory of names.

The technique proposed by Russell starts from the Fregean idea that natural language is deceptive and obscures the real logical form of statements. The fact

that in statements like 'The present king of France does not exist' reference seems to be made to some entity which would be the referent of 'The present king of France'. This is due to the deceptive structure of the grammatical form of the statement. The real logical form of a definite description like 'The present king of France' is 'There is only one thing that is king of France' or 'There is at least one x such that x is king of France and for every y if y is king of France then $y = x$ '. In this way, we have to deal only with general terms and a couple of quantifiers, one with a wider scope and another with a narrower scope that is employed to express the clause of unicity.

It is now easy to see how one can deny that there is a present king of France without generating a paradox. We just say 'It is not the case that there is only one thing that is the king of France'. By rephrasing the problematic statements in a non-problematic way, we seem to have solved the puzzle of negative existential statements. Have we really, though?

What about proper names? Take 'Cthulhu' for instance. How are we supposed to rephrase it in order to avoid the reference to a giant marine monster? Here it is necessary to consider the second point of Russell's strategy, namely the descriptivist theory. It says that what we call proper names are not genuine proper names but rather disguised definite descriptions. So 'Cthulhu does not exist' has to be rephrased as 'The giant marine monster of the Lovecraftian universe does not exist', given that this description is what the name expresses in our linguistic community. In this way, it seems as though in the end Ockham's razor has prevailed over Plato's tangled beard.

Even though Russell's solution is clever, and had a great following in the analytic tradition, a couple of problems seem to undermine it. The first one is Kripke's rejection of the descriptivist theory. The second is deeply connected with fictional discourse.

Kripke's rejection of descriptivism, namely the doctrine underpinned by Frege and Russell according to which given any proper name there is a description synonymous to that name, is based upon the acceptance of the theory of rigid designation of proper names. In Kripke's view, names rigidly refer to their denotation and do not change referent in modal contexts. When we say: 'It's possible that Morgan Freeman was born in Canada', by 'Morgan Freeman' we refer to the actual actor and evaluate the counter-factual situation in which he, the very same individual, is born in Canada. If 'Morgan Freeman' was synonymous of 'the actor who interprets God in Bruce Almighty', that would imply that in a possible world in which the same role is played by another actor, that other actor is Morgan Freeman. However, when we evaluate a possible situation about Morgan Freeman, we want to talk about the same Morgan Freeman of the actual world, not about the actor who plays the role of God in *Almighty Bruce* in

another world. Hence names seem to be rigid designators whereas definite descriptions are not rigid, and that means that they have different referents in different worlds. This is not however true of all the descriptions: numerical expressions seem to be rigid designators like ' 2^2 ', which denotes the number 4 in every possible world. Perhaps a world in which $2 \cdot 2$ is not equal to 4 is an impossible one. The point here is that if proper names are rigid designators and definite descriptions are not, the latter cannot give the meaning of or be equivalent to the former.

The other problem with Russell's theory of descriptions is that it provides the wrong truth-values for fictional statements. All of us would agree on the fact that, in some sense, 'Superman was born on Krypton' is true; however, according to Russell, this has to be rephrased as 'There exists an x such that x is the only superhero allergic to kryptonite and x was born on Krypton'. This second statement is false because in the domain of quantification there is no element capable of satisfying the quantified formula. Also, Russell's theory makes any statement containing fictional terms false and thus 'Superman has super strength' and 'Superman is an invisible cucumber' acquire the same truth value, namely false. From a Fregean perspective, things are no better since in his view, statements containing fictional terms are all meaningless or rather have a sense, but not a reference which means that they lack truth-value.

An attempt to save Russell's approach is that of introducing what Maria Reicher (2006) calls a story operator S , the scope of which is an entire statement and which serves as a domain switcher so that what follows it is evaluated over a fictional domain: ' S ' means 'In the story $X(p)$ ' where ' X ' is a variable for stories and ' p ' is a propositional variable. Consider 'Gandalf the gray is a sorcerer'. This statement becomes, following Russell's treatment: 'There is an x such that x is the gray wanderer and x is a sorcerer'. This statement is false, but if we use the story operator it becomes 'In the story *The Lord of the Rings*: There is an x such that x is the gray wanderer and x is a sorcerer'. This solution seems to be respectful of the way we talk about fiction, even though I am unclear as to what it means to evaluate a formula over a fictional domain. In fact, it seems to me that the fictional domain is to be conceived either as constituted of mental representations or of self-subsistent fictional objects. The former account, as I attempted to show, is problematic; the latter is not acceptable for a Russellian approach. Nevertheless, although the story operator strategy seems to work well for what Maria Reicher (2006) calls internal fictional statements, this is not true for what she calls external fictional statements. Examples of the former are sentences like 'Sauron is a servant of Morgoth' that describes a fictional fact; examples of the latter take the form 'Gandalf is a character of Tolkien's universe'. These are statements that seem to presuppose a sort of interaction

between real world and fictional objects, and the story operator is not helpful here since 'In the story *The Lord of the Rings*: Gandalf is a character of Tolkien's universe' is false. Hence this strategy, although clever, does not provide the right-truth values to external statements.

6 Another Existence

As we have seen in the former section, the paraphrase strategy works only at the cost of rejecting a great part of our discourse as meaningless or false, as in the cases of Frege and Russell respectively. This strategy is based on the idea that existence is a property of concepts, and that it is to be interpreted in terms of quantification. This, however, generates some difficulties when we want to claim that a determinate individual does not exist. In particular, this is rather evident when considering fictional objects that seem to be a paradigmatic case of non-existent entities, and it gets no better given the widely accepted idea that proper names lack connotation and that their contribution to the meaning of a sentence is their denotation.

In this section I am to set out, following a well established path among Meinongians thinkers like Parsons, Zalta and Priest, a different way of dealing with the problem of negative existential statements that makes no attempt to rephrase such sentences, but takes them as they are formulated in the natural language, and thus does not lead to the troublesome interpretation of existence as a second-order property. Such is the Meinongian approach that allows for the possibility that some objects do not exist.

In this philosophical framework, negative existential statements are not problematic as to say that 'Cthulhu does not exist' means that the referent of 'Cthulhu' is an object that does not exist. That means that 'Cthulhu' does not lack denotation, but it refers to a non-existent object. So *Compositionality of Denotation* and the *Dependence of Truth from Denotation* are no longer a problem, since every term in the sentence has a denotation.

Existence here is treated as a first-order property, something that can be directly predicated of individuals. So statements like 'Cthulhu does not exist' are of the form 'not- $F(a)$ '. Here other problems seem to arise. If existence is a first order predicate of the form ' $El(x)$ ', we can draw some problematic inferences:

- ' $\text{not-}El(a)$ ' implies that 'For some x not- $El(x)$ '
- 'not- $El(a)$ ' implies that 'For some x , $x = a$ '

These two principles are *Existential Generalization* and the *Predication Principle* respectively. They state that if a has the property F , then something has the

property F and that if a has the property F , then there is something that is identical with a .

Hence from the assertion that Cthulhu does not exist we can infer that something does not exist and that something is identical with Cthulhu. This could seem at first glance a paradox, but it is not so; if we take 'some' and 'exist' to have different meanings. In this case, 'exist' applies only to a subset of the domain of quantification, whereas the quantifier ranges over a wider domain containing also non-existent objects, namely those objects non-belonging to the extension of the existence predicate.

The Meinongian theory seems to work rather well in providing a semantics for terms purporting to refer to fictional objects. Since apparently ' x does not exist' seems to be made true by any substitution of ' x ' with a fictional term, it is reasonable to assume that *ficta* are non-existent objects. A Meinongian solution seems to resolve rather well the problem of negative existentials in general and not only for fictional objects. Consider the classic example of Vulcan. To say that Vulcan does not exist means that the referent of the term 'Vulcan' lacks existence and hence compositionality is preserved. The same holds for entities that once existed but that do not exist anymore like, for instance, Plato or Alexander the Great.

Let us go back to *ficta*. To provide an argument in favor of the fact that fictional terms refer to fictional objects, we could employ a Fregean strategy:

1. If a true statement contains a term purporting to refer to a fictional object, then that term refers to a fictional object.
2. There are true statements containing terms purporting to refer to fictional objects.
3. **Hence:** There are terms purporting to refer to fictional objects that refer to fictional objects.

Frege here would have rejected premise 2, since, from his perspective, all statements containing fictional terms lack truth-value. However, his conclusion is based upon his convictions about the deceptiveness of natural language and so he goes with a "too bad for the natural language". I think that a point in favor of the theory of non-existent objects is the fact that it somehow conciliates an elegant semantic solution to the problem of negative existential statements with our intuitions as language users.

The identification of fictional objects with non-existent objects also has the advantage of making the aforementioned question of internal/external statements unproblematic. In fact, the interaction between existents and non-existents is not problematic from a Meinongian point of view. Cthulhu has the properties that Lovecraft attributed to him and has some relational properties such as being known by a lot of fans of horror stories.

One thing I find attractive about the Meinongian account of fictional objects is the idea that fictional entities somehow precede their appearance in a novel, myth or fairy tale. Even if this could be seen as an undesired aspect that diminishes the authorial contribution in the construction of a story I find it very appealing. It is hard, in my view, to conceive the idea of a creation *ex nihilo*. I believe that a novel is, borrowing an example from Meinong, something like a melody. A melody is a sequence of notes, and by that I don't mean a mere set of notes, but a set of notes, which are played in a given order, so that if the same notes were played in different order we would have a different sequence. In my view, a melody is not a creation of the musician, but rather a discovery. Once the musical system has been established, all the possible melodies are already given. As in the case in which we write a melody in a minor key and want to play it in a major key; once the minor one is written, the major version is already there. The composer, in my mind, does not create his music from scratch, but comes to conceive an already given possibility, just as, in a Fregean sense, we do not produce thoughts, but rather recognize them. In the same way, when we describe a character in our stories, we are defining a set of properties to which some object, which was already there, correspond.

Meinongianism seems problematic in the face of issues related to the modality of *facta*, i.e. the problem of establishing whether fictional objects are possible objects or not. Some fictional objects are certainly impossible, e.g. fictional objects, which are described by means of properties that are incompatible with each other. In these cases, we are clearly dealing with impossible objects. Not all Meinongian objects are impossible, though in fact, some objects lack existence only contingently like, for instance, the first black Pope or objects that ceased to exist like David Bowie. However, given the naive Meinongian comprehension principle,⁴ for any set of properties there is an object having exactly those properties. This means that there is an object, for instance, whose only property is to be blue. Such an object is clearly impossible, since nothing that has a color could lack the property of having a surface. Yet, at a first glance, it seems plausible to me that the Homeric character Hector could have been a real man (for a different position see Kripke 2013), but problems arise if we conceive fictional objects as Meinongian objects that possess only the properties by means of which they are described like the blue object mentioned before. So

⁴ The comprehension principle is the core of any Meinongian theory. It is called so in virtue of its analogy with what, in the naïve set theory, was called the comprehension principle for sets which states that, given any condition or property, there is a set of all and only the things that satisfy that property or condition. The comprehension principle for objects, in its first formulation, says that for any set of properties there is some object possessing those properties.

conceived *facta* would be impossible objects, since, in order to exist, an entity must be determined down to the finest detail (Reicher 2006). However since, for instance, having a mass is not a property explicitly attributed to Sherlock Holmes by Conan Doyle, it seems as though our detective would be a man without mass and that is clearly impossible. Hence at this point, the question is: Are all fictional objects impossible objects? If so, should our intuitions about fiction weigh against Meinongianism? Furthermore, the notion of an object possessing exactly one or two or n properties appears to be inconsistent. If the object possessing only the property of being blue has exactly that property, then it also has the property of having exactly one property. If we think about that object, then it has also the property of being thought by us. Nevertheless, a complete rejection of Meinongianism would be an extreme solution. Those like Parsons and Zalta who tried to save the Meinongian approach worked on a better formulation of the comprehension principle trying to solve all the problems affecting the original doctrine. Parsons (1980) developed a theory based upon the distinction between nuclear and extra-nuclear properties, whereas Zalta (1983) proposed what is known as the double copula strategy. Both these positions have their virtues and their weaknesses, but I'm not going to discuss them here.

A neo-Meinongian approach I want to consider is found in in Francesco Berto (2013). Following Graham Priest, Berto embraces the idea that fictional objects possess the properties by means of which they are described in some world and proposes a new Meinongian approach called Modal Meinongianism. In this view, fictional objects possess the properties ascribed to them in the fiction, but also the properties the possession of which is implied by those explicitly expressed. For instance, the golden mountain possesses the property of being golden, of being a mountain and of having a mass, a surface and a weight, even though these last three are not explicitly mentioned in the fiction. Even if Hector does not actually exist, existence seems possible for him (it does not contradict properties he actually has), and so he has the property of possibly existing, i.e. he exists in some possible worlds.

I find the idea that, intuitively, some stories and legends (those not inconsistent) could have been true very appealing even though some problems seem to arise from this perspective. In particular, the solution by Berto presupposes a possible-worlds semantics, in view of which – as Kroon and Voltolini (2011) point out – fictional objects do not actually possess the properties by means of which they are described in the fiction. This upshot is problematic in some cases such as:

- (1) Holmes is cleverer than any actual detective.

In Berto's account of fictional objects, Sherlock Holmes does not actually possess the properties ascribed to him by Conan Doyle, but rather possibly possesses them and so (1) becomes:

(1P) Holmes is *possibly* cleverer than any actual detective.

Then Kroon and Voltolini go on to say:

But no such cross-world way of reading (1) matches the way we would read any other sentence involving a comparison between individuals. Take:

(2) Stalin was crueler than any other actual dictator.

It would clearly be incorrect to read (2) as:

(2P) Stalin was *possibly* crueler than any other actual dictator. (Kroon and Voltolini 2011)

The case presented by Kroon and Voltolini is certainly genuine, but probably it needs not to tell against the cross-world reading of fictional statements. Rather, it can be seen as suggesting that relational sentences like (1) and (2) need really two different treatments when they involve fictional objects and when they deal with actual ones. After all, there are some properties and powers that objects can manifest or exercise in the actual world only if those objects are actual. This feature seems to be captured by Berto's theory, which accounts for the fact that when we ascribe some property to a character in a story, that same character does not really possess the property ascribed to him, but it possesses it only in some world corresponding to the story. A reply to the cross-worlds objection is found in Priest and Berto (2014) where the aforementioned interpretation of statements like (1) is proposed as an alternative to literalism, the doctrine that says that fictional objects literally possess the properties by means of which they are described, and where it is shown how such a doctrine is not acceptable. In fact, literalism commits us to accepting that sentences like 'Sherlock Holmes lives in London' are literally true, but this is evidently not the case.

The availability of this possible line of reply makes Modal Meinongianism a very promising framework in order to elaborate a satisfying characterization of fictional objects in a way that is as respectful as possible of the way we, as language users, normally talk about them. I find it particularly suited for the analysis of the modal properties of fictional objects and a good framework in which trying to develop a theory affirming that at least some *facta* are *possibilia*. I think it is worth mentioning that even though fictional objects, in general, will turn out to be impossible objects, this will not undermine their Meinongian account at all, since it allows that some objects are impossible and hence non-existing. Finally, I find Meinongianism in general attractive because it accounts for the intuition, which I strongly believe to be plausible,

that we do not create fictions, but rather discover them. Given Modal Meinongianism, we come to conceive a world, possible or impossible, where our stories are realized.

7 Conclusions

In conclusion, I think that given the *Principle of Compositionality* and the rejection of any psychological account of the semantics of fictional terms, there are two possible ways of dealing with the problem of negative existential statements. One is the solution, favored by Frege and Russell: paraphrasing away such statements in a non-problematic way. This solution is based on the idea that existence is a second-order predicate that cannot be predicated directly of individuals; it is instead a property of properties. This way of understanding existence does not make justice of our way of talking about fiction and presupposes a sort of deceptiveness of natural language. On the other hand, it is ontologically inexpensive even though semantically problematic. Another way of dealing with negative existential statements is the Meinongian way. It is semantically elegant and simple but ontologically expensive since it is committed to admitting that there are non-existent objects. The main difference with the Frege/Russell approach consists in the fact that existence is here treated as a first-order predicate that is directly predicable of individuals. This allows the Meinongian approach to avoid paraphrases of the natural language that can result problematic. Even though I am inclined to give a positive answer to the ontological question about fictional objects, I am nevertheless aware of the fact that they need to receive a better characterization and that a lot of work lies ahead for Meinongian thinkers on the metaphysical ground.

References

- Berto, F. 2013. "Modal Meinongianism and Actuality." *Humana Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25:155–176.
- Coffa, J.A. 1991. *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap: To the Vienna Station*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.
- Frege, G. 1918. "Der Gedanke: Eine logische Untersuchung." *Beiträge zur Philosophie des Deutschen Idealismus* 2:58–77. (Thoughts, English tr. by P. T. Geach and R. H. Stoothoff. In: Brian McGuinness (ed.), *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984.)
- Kripke, S. 1972. "Naming and Necessity." In *Semantics of Natural Language*, edited by D. Davidson and G. Harman. Dordrecht: Reidel (Nome e Necessità, Italian tr. by

- M. Santambrogio. Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1999. Selected pages reprinted in: *Nomi e riferimento*, in AAVV, *Filosofia del linguaggio*, Paolo Iacona and Elisa Paganini (eds.), Raffaello Cortina editore, Milano, 2003).
- Kripke, S. 2013. *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- Kroon, F., and A. Voltolini 2011. "Fiction." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/fiction/>.
- Parsons, T. 1980. *Non-Existent Objects*. Heaven, CT: New Yale U.P.
- Priest, G., and F. Berto 2014. "Modal Meinongianism and Characterization Reply to Kroon." *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 90:183–200.
- Read, S. 1995. *Thinking about Logic*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- Reicher, M. 2006. "Nonexistent Objects." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/nonexistent-objects/>.
- Russell, B. 1905. "On Denoting." *Mind* 14 (56):479–493.
- Spolaore, G., and P. Giaretta 2008. *Esistenza e identità*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis Edizioni.
- Quine, W.V.O. 1953. "On What There Is." In *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P.; Revised Edition, 1980.
- Zalta, E. 1983. *Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*. Dordrecht: Reidel.