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CREATURES OF IMAGINATION AND BELIEF

1. Being and Existence

Meinong is notorious for his—in the prevailing opinion: bizarre and clearly untenable—view on being and existence. Not only did he argue that there *are* things that do not *exist*, but on his view this has as a consequence for example that there is a certain nonexistent entity which can be referred to as "the present king of France", and in his theory of objects[1] he actually went so far as to recognize impossible abstract entities like The Round Square. No wonder that this theory as a whole has few adherents today.[2] However, because of Meinong's notoriety, the very distinction between being and existence has come to share the bad reputation of his more extravagant ontological claims and is commonly labeled "Meinongian", even though Meinong was neither the first nor the last philosopher to make it. It is really a very old and dignified distinction, which has a tendency to recur in new versions as philosophical positions shift.

Aristotle distinguished between different senses of the verb "be", and he was followed by many later philosophers who made even more distinctions and developed new terminology to cover them. The present use of the verb "exist" (which in classical Latin meant to stand out or come forth) is probably due to such terminological efforts by medieval philosophers. And similar distinctions dressed in different

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[1]See, e.g. Meinong (1907). —To prevent a possible misunderstanding: What I am concerned with in this essay is not so much Meinong's theory itself, as the way this theory is usually understood.

[2]Meinong's theory is perhaps undeservedly ill-reputed: Ed Zalta has worked out a new interpretation (1984), in which Meinong's views come out as both coherent and interesting.

terminological garments have been made all the time up to now. What amounts to a distinction between being and existence is for example at the root of Carnap's view that quantification over numbers and other abstract entities implies no recognition of these entities as real, unlike quantification over physical objects.[3] Clearly, Carnap did not make the claim that numbers *are* but do not *exist* in these words. Instead he introduced the notion of a *framework of entities*, and distinguished between *external* and *internal* questions of existence relative to such frameworks: An external question of existence is one that concerns the metaphysical reality of some particular framework of entities itself, say the framework of numbers or the framework of physical objects, but according to Carnap such questions are meaningless; he argued that accepting a framework is really a matter of linguistic choice. An internal question of existence, on the other hand, is one that presupposes a certain framework of entities, and within that framework it can be given an answer that will be either analytic or synthetic dependent on the nature of the framework. Carnap further maintained that statements about abstract entities like numbers are analytic, not depending for their truth on factual matters, but only on linguistic convention, whereas statements about physical objects are synthetic, their truth or falsity dependent on extra-linguistic reality. But all this means, should Carnap be right, that the force of existential quantification must be less than that of an existential claim: the use of an existential quantifier would not then in itself entail a claim of reality for the values of the variable bound by it, and we would consequently have to distinguish between being a value of a variable bound by an existential quantifier, and being a real object; which is a distinction between being and existence as good as any other, though Carnap's views otherwise bear very little similarity to those of Meinong's. However, which words are actually used in attempting to make or refute a distinction between being and existence is of minor importance, I think, since the words "being" and "existence" themselves are far from unequivocal. What matters is what we take an existential claim to mean, and then whether we think of existential quantification as entailing an existential claim or not.

Unlike Carnap, Quine[4] thinks that existential quantification always entails an existential claim, or rather that the only way we can make sense of existential claims is to construe them as existentially quantified statements: "To be is to be a value of a variable." So on his view, which is very influential, there is no room for a distinction between being and existence. However, his argument against Carnap's position is based

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[3]This is his position in Carnap (1952).
[4]See his 1951 and 1961 essays.

mainly on his rejection of the underlying notion of analyticity. Should we then accept Quine's view on being and existence only for the reason that the analytic-synthetic distinction seems to be untenable? I think not. What we can learn from Quine is that quantifying over a certain realm of objects always commits us to recognizing these objects as objects, and this is indeed a very important insight, with far-reaching consequences, as we shall see. But it does not follow that we have to regard the objects in question as existent and real in every sense of these words. As I have suggested already, such words are often ambiguous. They may even be ambiguous in a rather interesting way, and this is what I shall try to show in the following.

If he wished, Carnap could have countered Quine's attack by saying that as he used the words, "to exist" and "to be real" just mean to be a physical (or material or spatiotemporal) object, but for obvious reasons he didn't want to make that move. It would be much too analytic then to state that numbers are not real and that they do not exist. Even so, this imaginary objection has a point: Maybe one of the senses of such phrases as "exists" and "is real" as they are used in ordinary language can actually be rendered as "is a material object"? It is not so difficult to find evidence for this hypothesis. That doesn't mean that being a material or physical object makes up a very interesting concept of existence; but who said that our ordinary language use of the word "exist" should be of any philosophical interest? Anyway, there are still a few who maintain, as Carnap did in effect, that only material objects exist, but it is often not so clear what exactly they mean by it. In order to avoid triviality they ought at least to distinguish their concept of existence from that of being a material object, and further, to avoid recognizing a distinction between being and existence which most of them find unpalatable, it seems that their only choice is then to maintain that we can meaningfully quantify only over material objects. But this is a highly implausible view, since it will render the bulk of scientific theory meaningless; I think Quine has made that clear.

Grammatically the verb phrase "exists" has the function of a predicate, and the same holds true also of the verb phrase "is real", of course. These words can sometimes be used interchangeably, and in such cases it seems that they function as predicates logically as well; I don't think that is very controversial. What is more controversial is whether "exists", when used as a logical predicate, is always used as one that is presupposed to be true of everything, like the predicate "is self-identical", or whether it has a use as a predicate that can be said to be false of certain objects that are nevertheless recognized as values of our bound variables, which in my opinion is more likely. I shall argue

that the phrase "is real" is commonly used as a predicate that can be meaningfully negated of an object, and then the same must be true of "exists" when used in the same sense, which means that we actually have to recognize a distinction between being and existence of a sort. But this distinction may not be one of great philosophical interest, in so far as one sense of "is real" may just be that of "is a material object". Actually, I do regard the distinction between being and existence as trivial in a way, although far from so trivial as this suggestion would render it, and I think there is not just one, but a whole class of such distinctions to be made, for I don't think there is an absolute sense of being real, but only relative ones: To be real is always to be a real something-or-other dependent on context, say a real person or a real centaur, and to be a real something-or-other is really just to be that kind of thing. Any person is a real person, and any centaur a real centaur (or would be if there were centaurs). So in my view the use of the word "real" is for emphasis, but more often than not with just a tacit understanding of what is emphasized. When we use the word affirmatively, asserting of an object of a certain kind that it is real, we mean to stress that it is an object of the supposed kind; and when we use it negatively, asserting of some object that it isn't real, what we mean is that the object in question does not belong to a certain kind to which it appears or might appear to belong. This is how I think we ought to understand assertions of reality, and I think besides that the verb phrase "exists" is sometimes used as an alternative to "is real" to make such assertions.

2. Fiction

There is in my opinion one large class of entities of which we would say that they are not real, and therefore that they do not exist in one of the senses of that word, even though we do in effect recognize them as objects of a kind (and hence as existent in a different sense) by referring to them and quantifying over them; I am thinking now of such purely fictional characters as Sherlock Holmes, a creature of Conan Doyle's imagination. I expect everybody to agree that we would say of Sherlock Holmes and his likes that they are not real (even though this fictional character may be modeled on one or more real persons), and in my analysis this boils down to saying that they are not persons, and hence not spatiotemporal objects, as we might come to believe by mistaking fiction for reality. What is controversial here is my contention that we are actually committed to recognizing fictional entities like Sherlock Holmes as objects by apparently referring to them and quantifying

over them; many people think that this is nothing but appearance, and they cite the fact that authors of fiction like Arthur Conan Doyle only pretend to perform such speech-acts as asserting something of somebody when they talk about the likes of Sherlock Holmes; it is all make-believe. That is true, but also quite irrelevant. The question is not what the authors of fictional work assert—for they create fiction and thereby assert nothing at all—but what we as their critics assert when we talk about their work.

Some people think that what we really do when we apparently assert things about such purely fictional characters as Sherlock Holmes is to share in the author's pretense.[5] In my opinion that would only be plausible if in talking about Sherlock Holmes we were always either repeating what his creator Arthur Conan Doyle has said before in his fictional work, or saying things that can somehow be extrapolated from that fiction, as for instance that by habitually taking cocaine Holmes is damaging his health; and even if that were the case there is an obvious alternative to understanding such apparent assertions as make-believe: We can reasonably construe an utterance of a sentence like "Sherlock Holmes takes cocaine" by a critic of Conan Doyle's work as a genuine assertion by presupposing that the sentence is governed by a tacit fiction-operator, as "Fictionally, Sherlock Holmes takes cocaine".

But, of course, what we can and do say about Sherlock Holmes is not limited in this way. One thing that is often—and truly—said about Sherlock Holmes is that he is one of the best-known protagonists of detective stories (that's why I use him as an example). To say this is clearly not to engage in any sort of pretense; it is an assertion as genuine as you get them. How are we to construe such assertions to avoid admitting that they make reference to purely fictional characters? This is one major challenge to those who want to defend the view that fictional characters are not objects that we make assertions about, and Meinong's bad reputation is no good as an argument here.[6]

We also often talk about fictional characters by quantifying over them rather than mentioning them by name. It can be said for example—and this is doubtless another assertion, true or false—that most of Hemingway's female characters are without depth. How can we explain such apparent quantification away, and how can we avoid

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[5] This is G. Evans's view (1982), and the same view is defended by K. Walton (1990).

[6] Walton's attempt to defend such a view forces him to construe statements about fictional characters in ways that appear more comic than convincing to me. Besides, his view has the highly implausible consequence that much of literary criticism must be regarded as a kind of fiction itself, and not as theory in the proper sense.

admitting that making quantified assertions like this one commits us to counting purely fictional characters among our objects of discourse?

The problem is basically the same as that of explaining away quantification over numbers, but there are in fact some additional difficulties, as we shall soon see. In the case of numbers, if we limited ourselves to talking only about rational numbers—a very unrealistic limitation, indeed—we could apparently understand quantification substitutionally, for to every rational number there actually corresponds a numeral or numerical expression ("16387" and "two thirds" are random examples) so that a quantified assertion about rational numbers of the form "$(\exists x)Fx$" will be true if and only if for some numerical expression, n, "Fn" is true. So far it seems that the semantic function of the numerical variable "x" can be explained by taking only its substitution instances into account and leaving objects as values on one side. Further, since numerals apparently have a nonreferential use, as in "May has 31 days", and it is not entirely clear that they function referentially in an assertion like "$7 + 5 = 12$" either, it might seem again—within our artificially limited number theory—that objects as values of numerical variables are not called for. So were it not for real numbers[7] beyond the rational ones, to which there do not in general correspond finite numerical expressions, and the holistic nature of the body of mathematical theory, which as a totality obviously presupposes a realm of abstract objects to make sense, quantification over numbers might have been construed substitutionally. As it is, we have to understand it objectually: A numerical variable must be understood as ranging over a domain of objects it can take as values.

Construing quantification over fictional characters as substitutional will not be possible either, and for more than one reason: First, in the case of fiction the natural counterpart of numerical expressions, i.e. the possible substitution instances of our variables, should be names. Does every fictional character bear a name, then? Certainly not. Many fictional characters are not given names by their authors, but are spoken of by (fictional) description only, for instance as a sleepy storekeeper, say, in some imagined situation. But obviously, the expression "the sleepy storekeeper" cannot be used as it stands as a substitution instance of a variable in discourse about fictional characters; it is too ambiguous, and in more than one way. And it would clearly be of no

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[7]The designation "real number" and its correlate "imaginary number" are of some interest in connection with the issue of reality and existence we are concerned with: Real numbers were originally called "real" because they were thought to really be numbers, as opposed to imaginary numbers which were thought to be only imagined as numbers, and hence to be nonexistent in a certain sense.

help to replace this fictional description with a less fictional and more precise description, say "the character that is described as a sleepy storekeeper on page 79 in the novel *Questionable Characters* by Julia Nightshade", for that would, given Russell's treatment of definite descriptions, be circular in an account of quantification as substitutional, and it would at any rate commit us to recognizing this character as an object, or so it seems. Second, even if all fictional characters had names we would still have to show how these names can function nonreferentially in genuine assertions, and to show that is really more difficult for proper names than for numerals, since the normal function of a proper name is exactly that of referring to an object—I have already mentioned this difficulty. The problems with an understanding of quantification as substitutional in this field are indeed at least as hard as in any other, but I shall not go further into them; I shall take it for granted that where quantification over a certain kind of entity cannot easily be explained away (say as metaphorical) which seems clearly not to be the case for fictional characters, it can in general only be made sense of as objectual quantification, with the Quinean consequence that the use of an existential quantifier entails an existential claim of a sort. So when we quantify over fictional characters we have indeed to recognize them as objects of a kind; the question is only what kind of object.[8]

It has been suggested that fictional characters are nothing but the pieces of text that describe them. Is that plausible? Obviously not, because they can and do have properties which we would never ascribe to pieces of text as such, for example the property of being described by the author as a cocaine addict. Even if fictional characters could somehow be said to consist of text, they would not reduce to mere pieces of text; there would at least be something more to them.

I shall now try to explain what kind of entity fictional characters must be. The question is which properties they have, and how their identity is defined by these properties.

First, every character of fiction is constituted and identified as a fictional character by fictional characterization. We have to recognize attribution of a fictional characterization to an entity (but not the characterization itself, of course) as predication, ascribing a property to it, to the same extent as we recognize that entity itself as an object

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[8]P. Van Inwagen is one of the few philosophers who have so far seen—and expressed their view—that we have to recognize fictional characters as theoretical entities of literary criticism, and hence as objects, for some of the reasons I cite. See Van Inwagen (1977) to whom I am indebted for parts of my argument. However, Van Inwagen does not employ the notion of a fiction operator, which is central in my theory of fictional objects.

of discourse by counting it among the values of our variables. The predicates that are true of a fictional character as fictional are then primarily of the type "is fictionally characterized by its author NN as being so-and-so", i.e. predicates that consist in a description governed by a fiction operator, and in the normal case[9] a character of fiction can be distinguished from every other object, and hence identified, by uniquely satisfying one or more predicates of this type. So in general there seems to be no lack of identity criteria for fictional entities.

Second, nonfictional characterization of fictional entities on the level of literary criticism, like the description of Sherlock Holmes as a classic protagonist of detective stories, counts in itself as predication, ascribing properties to objects. Such descriptions are not, unlike fictional characterizations, constitutive of the entities they describe, but instead they show, importantly enough, that fictional entities are indeed objects in the sense that properties can be ascribed nonfictionally to them, and, additionally, fictional characters can often be identified by nonfictional descriptions of this kind.

Third—and this is very important—not all fictional entities are purely fictional: An author can write fiction about real objects like persons and places and events, and this is very often done. Indeed, it is rare to come across a work of fiction where everything is purely fictional; real objects are as a rule imported into fiction. For example, in Conan Doyle's stories figure not only the purely fictional characters called "Sherlock Holmes" and "Dr. Watson", but also the real city of London (where we are to imagine many of the fictional events to have taken place) and a host of other objects imported from real life. Certain other works of fiction are actually centered around some real person; I don't know how many novels are written about Napoleon for instance, but there are a few. In such cases we have to do with entities which are fictional to the extent that they satisfy predicates that consist in descriptions governed by the fiction operator, but real in the sense that they are also—and more fundamentally—individuated by uniquely satisfying certain nonfictional descriptions as well. We have to distinguish between fictional entities that are purely fictional, constituted by fictional characterization alone, and fictional entities that are in addition real objects of the kinds they are fictionally presupposed to belong to. It is this fact that explains our use of the predicate "real" in connection with characters of fiction. When someone asks if Sherlock Holmes is

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[9]The only exception is when the author wants his readers to remain in doubt as to whether he has meant to let a certain description hold fictionally true of a certain character or not, which may happen; but I think I am justified in leaving this complication out.

real, what he wants to know is whether this fictional character is purely fictional or imported from reality; he wants to know if Sherlock Holmes was a real person Conan Doyle wrote fiction about, or a mere creature of the author's imagination.

But we should not conclude from this that for a fictional character to be real just means being a person or some other kind of spatiotemporal object, for the question may also arise whether something is a real fictional character or not. What about the character I said was described as a sleepy storekeeper in Julia Nightshade's novel? Does it exist? You may have your doubts as to the existence of the author Julia Nightshade and her work, thinking that this was just an example I made up, and then you will obviously doubt the reality of the sleepy storekeeper as a fictional character as well, and not only as a storekeeper.

You are right; I did make up the example of Julia Nightshade. The example is pure fiction, and Julia Nightshade is nothing but a creature of my imagination, even if, unbeknown to me, there should in fact be someone named "Julia Nightshade" who has written a novel called "Questionable Characters". —I am saying this to state clearly, what is probably obvious in itself, that it is not sufficient for a fictional character to be real that it bear some similarity, however strong, to some nonfictional object. This similarity may be one of sheer accidence. And bearing a degree of similarity to a certain nonfictional object is not even necessary for a fictional character to be identical to that real object; what is necessary and sufficient is that the author of a fictional work succeed in making clear his intention of fictionally portraying something or somebody which exists outside of his fiction.

In a purely fictional example I have made use of an allegedly fictional character, the sleepy storekeeper. But this means that the storekeeper actually is a fictional character of a sort; it is in fact a character that is doubly fictional by figuring as a fictional character in a fictional example. And for that reason it lacks reality in a double sense: First, the storekeeper is not a real fictional character in the sense that it does not figure in a fictional work outside of my imagination. Second, within the fictional reality of my example it is a purely fictional character, not imported from that fictional reality. (But it could have been; I could have changed my example to the effect that the sleepy storekeeper should be imagined as a real person—storekeeper or not—Julia Nightshade wrote fiction about.)

What is important here is, as I have said before, that there is no absolute sense of being real: When we affirm or deny reality of a certain entity it is always in a relative sense, relative to what kind of entity it

seems or might seem to be. Purely fictional characters are not objects of the kinds they are fictionally described as essentially belonging to; that is why they are labeled "purely fictional" and are said to lack reality or to be nonexistent. Even so, they may be real fictional characters of a certain kind and existent in another relative sense, or they may lack reality as characters of a particular fiction as well. In any case they are real objects in being entities that we can refer to and quantify over.

My conclusion so far is that we have to recognize fictional characters—whether purely fictional or not—as objects of our discourse, individuated as fictional characters by properties that consist in their being fictionally characterized in a certain way. This means that they do exist in a fundamental sense, namely in the Quinean sense of being values of our bound variables, even though they may not be real and hence not exist in certain other senses of these words, but that is of minor importance in so far as it is their status as objects as such that is concerned, and not their status as objects of a particular kind.

3. Belief

Belief is different from make-believe, but in spite of that there is a certain affinity between the two: Thinking that something is the case and just imagining it are similar in more than one way, and there may consequently be some interesting parallels between theory as expressed belief on the one hand and fiction, its make-believe counterpart, on the other. Now I want to exploit these parallels in a discussion of belief and its objects.[10] Though the view I am going to develop and defend is clearly different from Meinong's, it can be said to have a certain Meinongian flavor; but this should not in itself count as a weighty argument against it.

What I want to do is to clarify the notion of being an object of belief, and my starting point will be the distinction between the contents of beliefs and their objects: A belief always has a propositional content in the sense that what is believed can be expressed in a statement, but this content is clearly not an object the belief is about. A belief need not as such be about any particular object at all; it can be general in the sense that an expression of its content will be a quantified statement. I can believe that there are spies, for instance, without believing of somebody in particular that he or she is a spy. This is parallel to fiction, which can be general in the same way. Further, holding the general belief that there are spies, and the likewise general belief that two people

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[10]The conception of belief presented here is worked out in much more detail in Asheim (1992).

are never of exactly the same height, I will naturally also entertain the belief that there is a spy who is the tallest of them all,[11] and I may believe in addition that the tallest spy is, say, an athlete, thinking that tall people are as a rule athletic; but this is yet another general belief about spies, and not a belief of a particular spy (even though it can be said to concern a particular person in so far as there actually is a tallest spy). To make that clear, let us imagine that my neighbor John, of whom I neither believe that he is a spy nor an athlete, is in fact a spy, and taller than any other. There seems to be a difference, then, between just believing *that* the tallest spy is an athlete, and believing *of* the tallest spy that he is an athlete. This is the difference that is reflected in the common distinction, dating back to Abailard, between belief *de dicto* (of what is stated) and belief *de re* (of the object), also respectively called *notional* and *relational* belief. There is, however, no general agreement as to what this distinction really amounts to and what the characteristics of a belief *de re* should be to distinguish it from a belief *de dicto*, or whether it is a valid distinction at all. There are people who hold that belief is always basically notional, and relational only in a derivative sense, with the consequence that belief *de re* must be generally reducible to belief *de dicto*,[12] but this is not my view. In developing my theory of objects of belief I shall presuppose a distinction between beliefs *de re* and *de dicto* which can be characterized in the following way:

Every belief is *de dicto* in a basic sense, i.e. in the sense that it has a propositional content, but it is purely *de dicto* if and only if an accurate expression of its propositional content is a quantified statement, and *de re* otherwise. Now there is a special way of reporting a belief as being *de re*, by saying explicitly that the belief is *of* an object—an example of a *de re* belief report is

(1)   Ralph believes of his next-door neighbor that he is a spy.

However, the same belief could apparently also be reported *de dicto*, as

(2)   Ralph believes that his next-door neighbor is a spy.

But this doesn't mean that the belief reported must therefore be essentially *de dicto* and not *de re*; what it means is that the belief report (2), containing a definite description, is scope-ambiguous: It can be understood as reporting an essentially *de dicto* belief, as

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[11]I have borrowed this example from Quine (1983).

[12]This seems to be Quine's position, and a similar view is expressed by Searle (1983).

(2a)   Ralph believes that there is one and only one man who is his
        next-door neighbor, and that this man is a spy,

or as reporting a *de re* belief, as

(2b)   There is one and only one man who is Ralph's next-door
        neighbor, and Ralph believes that he is a spy.

The belief report (1) seems to be equivalent to (2) in the sense of (2b),
but not in the sense of (2a), and that is why we speak of it as a *de re*
report. As to belief reports which contain proper names rather than
definite descriptions, like the report

(3)   Ralph believes that Ortcutt is a spy,

it seems that they must invariably be taken to report *de re* beliefs
(though in a *de dicto* way), and not purely *de dicto* ones—provided
that proper names are, unlike definite descriptions, genuine referential
terms, behaving logically in the same way as variables; many of us hold
this view. In that case the question of scope doesn't arise for them—
genuine referential terms always take maximum scope, as it were—and
the *de dicto* belief report (3) will then be unambiguously equivalent to
the *de re* report "Ralph believes of Ortcutt that he is a spy". The ques-
tion whether there are genuine *de re* beliefs is because of this twofold:
First, are proper names genuine referential terms (or are there any gen-
uine referential constants at all)? If so, belief reports containing such
terms must be understood as reporting *de re* beliefs. Second, and apart
from that, are *de re* belief reports really reports of beliefs as such, re-
porting the complete propositional content of a belief, or are they just
indicating the propositional content in an incomplete way? We have
to assume the latter—in addition to denying proper names the status
of being genuine referential terms—in order to maintain the view that
no belief is irreducibly *de re*. As I said, this is not my view.

   I shall presuppose, then, that some beliefs are irreducibly *about*
objects. Now, in so far as an object is an object of a belief of this
kind—technically a *doxastic object*, or *intentional object*, as I shall also
say, since belief and similar attitudes are classified as intentional—what
are its characteristics? What is characteristic of a doxastic object is
that it is constituted as doxastic by being believed by one or more
persons to be such-and-such, i.e. by having properties that consist in
descriptions governed by a belief operator—this is parallel to characters
of fiction again. And I think that such doxastic properties will always
suffice to individuate an object as doxastic; hence also to identify it as
an object. Besides, in my conception, most doxastic objects are in fact

just ordinary objects, for instance people, which some subject holds certain beliefs about. (I can see no good reason for keeping intentional and ordinary objects apart as entities of separate kinds; I think that this only leads to unnecessary complications.) So we have here yet another parallel to characters of fiction, which, as I think I have made clear, can be ordinary objects that also happen to figure in a fictional work.

In my view many (but far from all) ordinary objects are doxastic or intentional objects as well, in being believed by someone to have certain primary properties that they may or may not have; as doxastic objects they then have and are individuated by the secondary properties which consist in their being believed to have the primary ones. But I think that there is besides a class of doxastic objects that are merely doxastic, or purely intentional, lacking all the significant[13] primary properties they are believed to have, so that they can only be identified by their secondary, i.e. doxastic, properties; this is once more parallel to characters of fiction. Of such doxastic objects we will naturally say that they are not real, in the same sense as we say it of purely fictional entities.

Purely intentional objects are indeed needed to make sense of belief *de re*, as I see the matter. For belief *de re* to be a genuine and separate kind of belief as such, and not a kind of essentially *de dicto* belief which happens to concern a particular object when it is (at least partly) true, it should follow from the very fact that someone is in the mental state of holding a certain belief of this kind that there exist an object the belief is about, I think. But I do not think that it can follow from the fact alone that a person is in a particular mental state that, say, another person exists. So what in my view follows from the fact that a subject holds a certain belief *de re*, is just that there is a doxastic object the belief is about; and whether this object is merely doxastic or a real object of the particular kind it is believed to be, for instance a person, is dependent on the extra-mental circumstances that determine the truth of that belief. A belief *de re* may be fundamentally wrong, and this means that the object the belief is about is merely doxastic, i.e. purely intentional. We can talk about such purely intentional objects as creatures of belief—parallel to creatures of imagination, but also quite different from them, since a purely fictional character is the product of an act of imagination with the intention to create it, while a merely

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[13]They still have a lot of primary properties, but these are mostly negative, consisting in the negations of the primary properties they are believed to have, and in addition they must, being objects, necessarily have some primary properties that no object can be without, as for instance the property of being self-identical.

doxastic object is created by mistake as the nonintended product of a false belief.

There seems, however, to be an additional problem with belief *de re*: It is apparently possible to hold different and incompatible beliefs about one and the same object, taking it to be more than one; and this greatly complicates the issue. According to Frege's famous example,[14] the ancients held different beliefs about the heavenly bodies they respectively called "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus", thinking for example that Phosphorus is visible on the morning sky while Hesperus is not, even though in fact Hesperus and Phosphorus are both identical to the planet Venus, as Frege will have it. As I see the matter, such beliefs should not be construed as being both about the same object in the *de re* sense; there are alternative ways of analyzing such a situation: One belief, or both, may not be *de re*; the expressions "Phosphorus"—literally "the light-bringing star"—and "Hesperus"—literally "the evening star"—can be treated as definite descriptions. If we take both of them to be *de re* we don't have to take them both to be beliefs about the same object—at least one of the supposed heavenly bodies concerned may be a purely intentional object and not a real heavenly body in spite of the fact that they can both be said to bear a relation of "correspondence" to the planet Venus. This relation need not be identity. In a different but similar situation one of the doxastic objects concerned might be regarded as merely doxastic, and the other one as real, coinciding with the extra-doxastic object they both "correspond" to, but in the situation described by Frege there is nothing to justify a different treatment of the two doxastic objects, and we then have to regard both of them as merely doxastic in so far as we take the beliefs concerned to be *de re*. In any case, the situation is satisfactorily described by just saying that to account for their astronomical observations the ancients posited two heavenly bodies where there is in fact only one, whether they entertained *de re* beliefs about these posited objects as well or not. We ought to avoid the unnecessary complications that follow from Frege's example when it is interpreted as an example of contradictory beliefs *de re* concerning one and the same object; and these complications are indeed unnecessary since they can easily be avoided—I hope I have made that clear.

In my view, then, we need the notion of doxastic objects (which can be ordinary objects as well, but also merely doxastic) to make sense of belief *de re*, and given this notion we can also account for such problematic cases as Frege's without assuming that a person may hold

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[14]See Frege (1892).

contradictory beliefs in a situation where these beliefs seem perfectly compatible to her or him.

Others hold a different view, thinking that a belief *de re* is something else or something more than just a mental state: Whether a mental state of apparently believing something of a particular object really is a belief is according to them dependent on the extra-mental condition whether this object does in fact exist in the sense of being the kind of object it is believed to be. It seems to follow then that for example the existence of a particular person can be inferred from the fact alone that another person entertains a certain *de re* belief after all. On their assumption of an extra-mental condition for beliefs to be *de re* it also makes sense to say that a person holds incoherent beliefs of an object without being able to detect the incoherence. This view leads to a number of problems, however.

One of them is that we have to give up the principle of first-person authority as to the content of a belief *de re*, and even as to whether a certain belief of this kind is held at all, leaving the decision to circumstances beyond the control of the person who takes himself to hold the belief in question; but most of those who take this externalist position on belief do that gladly.

Another problem is how to construe negative existential statements about apparent objects of belief: How can we make sense of saying about the object someone takes himself to believe something of that it doesn't exist without thereby reducing belief *de re* in general to belief *de dicto*? It seems clear that the subject must then believe *something*, holding a belief that is at least *de dicto* whether it is also *de re* or not according to an extra-mental criterion; and how can we state this criterion so as to avoid the consequence that the belief must be regarded as being purely *de dicto* in any case? This is the challenge to externalism. But I shall not go further into these problems here.

Instead I want to go into some interesting consequences of the theory of belief I prefer. Let us consider a somewhat special example of belief, namely religious faith, and the status of God as a doxastic object. As we all know, there is no general agreement on this: To a believer, on the one hand, God exists, and being—in the believer's view—the one and only god, creator of the world and hence the very source of reality, he is utterly different from any fictional character. To an atheist, on the other hand, God does not exist, and because of that he must appear to the atheist as being very similar to a purely fictional character, as not being real in the sense of not being a god. So the two of them disagree fundamentally. On my theory of beliefs and objects

their disagreement can be construed as a difference in opinion as to whether God as a doxastic object is merely doxastic or not.

Whether God is real is clearly a question of the truth of certain beliefs. A believer is a person who holds these beliefs himself, and because of that he is committed to the reality of God. But not everything he believes about God will be equally important in this respect. Normally he will be able to give up some of his beliefs *about* God without giving up his belief *in* God. Normally there will also be some beliefs he cannot give up without losing his faith, for instance that God is the god; I shall talk about beliefs of the latter kind as *constitutive beliefs*. Whether a doxastic object is more than merely doxastic is then in general dependent on the truth of the constitutive beliefs concerned.

An atheist is a person who holds that the constitutive beliefs about God are false (or at least that they are not true), which might in itself be considered as holding a different set of beliefs about God, but since his beliefs are the opposite of being constitutive, he is clearly not committed to the reality of God as a god by entertaining them. The views of the atheist may not even commit him to the reality of God as a (merely) doxastic object, it seems: He need not regard the religious belief in God as being *de re*. He can regard it as the purely *de dicto* belief that there is a supreme being, creator of the universe and so on, or he can declare the belief to be meaningless. There are people whose atheism consists in holding one of these views. However, in so far as the atheist wants to engage in a dialog with the believer in order to convince him of the falsity of his religious beliefs by arguing against them, he must necessarily respect these beliefs as meaningful, and then he must also, I think, recognize the reality of God as an object of belief— the intentional object of a set of beliefs he doesn't share. In this case his own belief that God is a merely doxastic object may well be *de re*, and he and his religious opponent can both be considered believers, then, differing in holding different and incompatible beliefs of the same object. But clearly, they are not believers on the same level; there is the additional and very important difference between them that while none of the atheist's beliefs is constitutive of God as a doxastic object purely and simply, some of the religious believer's are. In return, on my construal of the controversy, some of the atheist's beliefs are in fact constitutive of what he calls "God" as a supposed object of religious belief—as a doubly doxastic object, that is. And these constitutive beliefs may again be fundamentally wrong: The intentional object which is thought of as "God" by the atheist and believed by him to lack reality, may by mistake be nothing but the supposed object of a belief that is actually held by nobody. Parallel to the case of fictional characters

once more, it will then make sense to ask not only whether a doxastic object is real or merely doxastic, but also whether something is a real doxastic object or merely believed to be one. So in the field of doxastic objects it still holds true that there is no absolute sense of being real.

Leaving the controversy between the atheist and his religious opponent behind, let us now turn to the comparative study of religion, which can be regarded as the study of belief systems of a particular kind. It is also similar to literary criticism in several respects, and there is in fact no clear border line between religious myths and similes on the one hand and pure fiction on the other. Now in so far as a theory of fiction must recognize the reality of fictional characters as such, the similar ought to hold true of a theory of religious beliefs as well, concerning the reality of objects of belief. The professional attitude to various religious beliefs taken by a student of the theory of religion should of course be as neutral as possible. Regardless of his personal views he should not, as a professional, take sides in a religious debate when it can be avoided. In my view his professional position must then be one of recognizing all the gods and other supernatural beings that different creeds are about as doxastic objects while holding back his judgement on their reality beyond that.

If a student of religion doesn't take the course I am recommending, and fails to recognize doxastic objects in my sense, in which they are taken to be objects even though they may be merely doxastic, he will not, for instance, be able to answer the question whether Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in the same god or not without committing himself to a belief in supernatural beings. I think the answer to that question should be yes, although for historical reasons concerning the common origin of these creeds alone, independent of their truth or falsity. This commits me to recognize the existence of the doxastic object called "God" which I think is common to the three religions as their central object of worship, but it does not commit me to share their common fundamental belief in the reality of that object as a supreme being and creator of the universe.

Religious belief is an example of belief that can be considered *de re*, and I think this example shows some of the advantages of my approach to objects of belief in general.

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