

Peter van Inwagen, “Existence, Ontological Commitment, and Fictional Entities”  
(The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics, 2003)  
Fabrice Correia, 16/04/2008

Against Meinongianism, in favor of the existence of fictional entities, and against Wolterstorff and Thomasson.

**vI against Meinongianism**

1. Consider:

- (1) There is no such thing as the round square.

Supposing (1) is true, the semantical thesis:

- (2) There are subjects such that the result of writing ‘there is no such thing as’ and following this phrase with any of these subjects is true,

is also true. Can we infer:

- (3) There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects,

a “material mode” version of (2), from (1)? If we can, then supposing (1) is true, (3) will be true.

One reply. (1) can be reformulated as ‘ $\exists x \neg \exists y (y = x)$ ’, and this is a logical falsehood; therefore (1) is false; so if we take (1) to be true, we must say (3) doesn’t follow from (1). Given that (1) is true, we just have to reject the inference from (1) to (3).

2. Consider:

- (4) There is a fictional character who, for every novel, either appears in that novel or is a model for a character of that novel.

It seems to entail:

- (5) There are fictional characters.

It seems that from (5) we can infer (3), for fictional characters don’t exist. Problem: (4) is true (that’s what vI claims), and by the previous argument, (3) is false!

3. The way of the two quantifiers: read ‘there is / are’ in (4) and (5) as ‘ $\exists$ ’ and (3) as ‘ $\exists x \neg \mathbf{E}y (y = x)$ ’. ‘ $\exists$ ’ is absolutely unrestricted, and ‘ $\mathbf{E}$ ’ is restricted to objects which participate in being. vI says: I don’t understand that distinction. He rejects the inference from (5) to (3).

**vI’s Theory of Fictional Entities**

4. Why believe in fictional characters? vI: I think sentences like (4) are true; once translated in the idiom of 1st order logic, they entail ‘ $\exists x x$  is a fictional character’; I have no paraphrase of such sentences which, once translated in the idiom of 1st order logic, do not entail ‘ $\exists x x$  is a fictional character’. [Is he asking for systematic paraphrases?]

5. *Having* a property versus *holding* a property. Sherlock Holmes *has* the property of being a fictional character, he *holds* the property of being a detective. (P. 149, vI says he’s unable to define ‘holding’.) [What shall we say about fictional *properties*?]

6. ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’ may in some contexts used to say something true—but in these case, the proposition expressed is not the apparent one.

## vI on Nicholas

### 7. NW:

- The world of a work is the conjunction of the propositions true in that work;
- A proposition includes a kind iff its truth entails that the kind has members;
- Kind  $A$  incorporates kind  $B$  iff it is impossible for something to be of kind  $A$  not to be of kind  $B$ ;
- A kind is maximal within a work iff it is included in the world of the work, and no other kind included in that work incorporates it;
- A fictional character is a person-kind which is maximal within a work.

Incorporation  $\sim$  vI's holding.

[Clarification: Sherlock Holmes is a person-kind, the kind corresponding to the property of *being Sherlock Holmes*. Objection: What about a story where one can read 'there is a person', full stop (or something more complicated). On NW's account, the kind 'person' is a fictional character. Remark: Fictional objects can be (in fictions) fishes, tables, etc.]

### 8. vI's five objections:

- 'Joe DiMaggio'. Real persons named in a novel are characters; [I don't see that.]
- 'Robinson twins'. If in a story one talks about 'the Robinson twins' but says nothing to differentiate them, then there is just one person-kind, maximal in the story, that incorporates the kind 'being one of a pair of twins named "Robinson"'; [I don't see that.]
- Every property incorporated by a character is essentially incorporated by it; [vI's argument that this is a problem presupposes that every property attributed to a character in a work corresponds to a kind it incorporates—but NW's theory as presented above doesn't imply that.]
- If a character incorporates inconsistent properties, it incorporates all properties;
- Characters are eternal, necessarily existent objects, they are not created by their authors.

## vI on Amie

9. AT: Characters are neither eternal nor necessarily existing, they are created by their authors; they hold many of their properties accidentally; they are abstract artifacts.

10. vI's objection: one may agree that certain abstract objects can be brought into existence by us (e.g. certain sets); but AT wants these abstract objects to be brought into existence merely by being represented as existing, and there are no such things.