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**Voltolini Redux: Reassessing Some Desiderata on the Metaphysics of Fictional Entities**

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**Abstract:**

Similar to mathematical entities, the discourse on fictional entities is fraught with debates and disagreements. One of the leading philosophers in the philosophy of fiction is Alberto Voltolini, who proposed seven desiderata that any metaphysics of fictional entities ought to have: (1) Nonexistence, (2) Causal inefficacy, (3) Incompleteness, (4) Createdness, (5) Actual possession of ascribed properties, (6) Unrevisable ascription, and; (7) Necessary possession of properties. In this paper, I will employ a variety of logical and metaphysical tools (Voltolini's open approach, semi-apophatic logic, Ockham's razor, and Heidi Savage's methodological constraints) in order to critically assess Voltolini's desiderata. The analysis shows that some of the listed desiderata either (a) strongly conflict with our practical experience and pre-theoretic intuitions about fiction, or (2) are contradictory with the other desiderata. From the original seven, only three genuine desiderata remain after the analysis: Non-existence, Incompleteness, and Createdness. A brief detour will be spent on the modal properties of ficta and its implications on its metaphysics. Then, all the previously established theses and desiderata are applied in order to eliminate various candidate theories. In the end, the best remaining candidates are assessed without necessarily committing to any of them, opening the door for more sophisticated studies to pursue this line of inquiry in the future.

**Keywords**: Metaphysics, Philosophy of Fiction, Alberto Voltolini

**Preliminary remarks**

This paper is a version of Chapter 4 of my undergraduate thesis, *Confusions on Fictionality: A Prolegomena to an Epistemology of Fictional Discourse*.[1] The goal of the study was to establish fertile ground for a future epistemology of fictional discourse by accomplishing the following: (1) a philosophy of language (specifically a theory of naming and reference) for fiction; (2) a conceptual analysis of "fictionality" and the logical structure of diegesis; (3) a preliminary metaphysics of fictional entities. This paper is focused on this third goal. While each chapter can, for the most part, stand as its own paper, there will be language, concepts, and arguments here that will only make sense with the context of its preceding chapters. I will provide a brief primer on this missing context in a later section.

**Introduction**

Fictional discourse (i.e. discourse about works of fiction, its events and its inhabitants) is something that we often engage with in our everyday lives. Talking to your coworker about last night's episode in your favorite telenovela, or debating with a friend about what will happen in the next comic book installment—these are ubiquitous aspects of our social life.

More often than not, we take for granted the truth-values of the claims we make about fiction. This can range from benign claims like "Harry Potter wears glasses" to more debatable ones like "Tony Soprano didn't die at the ending of *The Sopranos*." But underneath all of this talk lies a complex web of semantic, metaphysical, and epistemological issues. Questions like "What is the nature of fictional discourse? Do fictional entities exist? How do we know of such entities?" are just some of the questions we could ask. At the heart of all of this is our human desire for a complete theory of truth and meaning.

Finding the best theory of truth and meaning is one of the oldest quests in the history of philosophy. To fully appreciate how deep the problem of fictional discourse

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[1] Sarmiento, Ron Victor. "Confusions on Fictionality: A Prolegomena to an Epistemology of Fictional Discourse." Bachelor's Thesis, University of the Philippines Diliman, December 2024.

actually goes within the context of this goal, it is important to look at its implications to our theories of truth and meaning.

Before we commit ourselves to specific theories, it is important to first look into our pre-theoretic intuitions and see whether they hold after further scrutiny or not. One intuitive interpretation of meaning and truth is this:

A. Language (may it be verbal language or the language of signs) means whatever aspects or "slices" of our "world" they represent, and;

B. Our assertions are true whenever the meaning of our claims actually match what is actually "real" or "out there", in the "world".

This seems, at first glance, a fair depiction of how we typically conceive of meaning and truth. In fact, these intuitions are what seem to motivate various theories and why they persist to this day, such as direct referentialism[2] about meaning, or the so-called Correspondence theories of truth.

The oldest and perhaps the most intuitive amongst the various theories of truth are the Correspondence theories of truth. Although these theories have different formulations, they all have something in common: the notion of "correspondence" (which is captured by the pre-theoretic intuition that "truth" is when meaning "matches the world"). For now, the goal of this section is to demonstrate why the problem of fictional discourse is even a problem in the first place: the complications of the traditional theories.

Say, for example, we take Intuitions (A) and (B) to heart. What would be the implications of doing that? First, it seems that it perfectly captures our ordinary usage of truth and meaning. When I say "The cat is on the mat", I mean that there is a certain entity called 'cat', who bears a certain relationship, 'being on top of', with another entity called 'mat'. Such a claim would be true if and only if there truly exists a cat and a mat, and said cat is actually on said mat.

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[2] A direct referentialist asserts that names are nothing but 'labels' or 'stand-ins' for their actual referents. For more on this, See 'Millianism' in Michaelson, Eliot and Marga Reimer, "Reference", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/reference/>. See also: 'Direct Reference' in "Proper Names: Direct Reference and the Causal–Historical Theory" Chapter 4 of Lycan, William. *Philosophy of Language.* 3rd Ed., New York: Routledge, 2018, 49-52.

We start to encounter problems, however, when we expand our scope beyond physical entities. What do we say, for example, about mathematics and its entities? Although mathematical objects such as numbers and shapes seem to be instantiated or have specific examples in our physical world (such as humans having ten fingers and wheels being circular), the claim that the set of all these instances or examples are simply identical to their corresponding numbers or shapes is highly doubtful. Such an explanation also does not cover mathematical concepts and entities with no physical counterparts (such as higher orders of infinity, spatial dimensions beyond 3D, etc.).

Some scholars will just bite the bullet and resort to some form of mathematical Platonism[3], insisting that our mathematics actually represent abstracta (i.e. abstract entities), which are real (albeit non-spatiotemporal) entities that inhabit some abstract world. Others take a different route, such as the Formalists[4], who liken mathematics to a "formal game" instead of committing to the peculiar ontology of mathematical entities.

We can extend this argument to fictional discourse. If claims about fiction truly are truth-apt, then what makes them true? Some would take inspiration from the Platonist move and conceive of fictional worlds as concrete possible worlds[5], and thus treating ficta (i.e. fictional entities) as concrete possibilia (i.e. members of possible worlds). Of course, assuming such a position would require defending (1) the idea that fictional worlds actually are possible worlds[6], and (2) the ontology of possible worlds as concrete entities. Both claims are not uncontroversial.[7]

Akin to formalism, some have taken non-ontological routes, such as fictive operator theorists[8], who conceive of fictional discourse as having an implicit 'Within the

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[3] For more on mathematical platonism, see Linnebo, Øystein, "Platonism in the Philosophy of Mathematics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/platonism-mathematics/>.
[4] For more on formalism, see Weir, Alan, "Formalism in the Philosophy of Mathematics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/formalism-mathematics/>.
[5] For more on possible worlds and the notion of 'concrete' possible words, see 'Concretism' in Menzel, Christopher, "Possible Worlds", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/possible-worlds/>.
[6] See 'Possibilism' in Kroon, Frederick and Alberto Voltolini, "Fictional Entities", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/fictional-entities/>.
[7] See Kroon and Voltolini, "Fictional Entities", and Menzel, "Possible Worlds".
[8] For more on fictive operators, see 'Metafictional sentences and "in the fiction" operators' in Kroon and Voltolini, "Fictional Entities".

fiction' operator at the start of every fictional claim. (For example, "Harry Potter wears glasses" will be rewritten as "In the *Harry Potter* novels, Harry Potter wears glasses.") While this perspective accounts for the explicit events and entities within fictional worlds, this becomes dubious when we start talking about non-straightforward discourses about fiction. This includes (but is not exhaustive of): implicature and subtext within fiction, comparative claims between different fictions, human beliefs and attitudes about fiction, etc.

The key takeaway for this section is this: just as the metaphysics of mathematical objects disturb our traditional and intuitive notions of meaning and truth, fictional entities do the same. In the next section, I shall do a quick recap on theories and concepts previously established in earlier chapters of my thesis.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Philosophy of language: Franconian Predicativism*

The overarching philosophy of language invoked in this paper is Franconian predicativism from Gerald Pio Franco's doctoral thesis, *On the Semantic Content of Proper Names.*[9] The theory is a rather large network of claims; for our purposes, only the following list would be relevant:

1. Semantically, names are predicates, in the sense that they're metalinguistic descriptions: ergo, the name 'X' means "the bearer of the name 'X'".
2. Franconian predicativism rejects the Kripkean orthodoxy[10], which is a conjunction of the following ideas: (1) *Rigid designation theory*. Names are rigid designators; (2) *Direct Reference Theory.* Names directly refer; (3) *Referential Primacy.* Reference is prior to meaning.
3. Reference is a theoretical construct; reference already presumes a theoretical framework.
   a. Reference depends on language, not the other way around.
   b. Use of a name is not automatically committal.

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[9] Franco, Gerald Pio. "On the Semantic Content of Proper Names." PhD Dissertation, University of the Philippines Diliman, January 2024.
[10] This characterization of the Kripkean orthodoxy is mine and not Franco's. Although not packaged this way, Franco evidently rejects each of these claims in his thesis.

c. The mechanisms of reference work the same for standard (i.e. real, physical objects) and non-standard (e.g. abstract or non-existent objects) uses. The difference between the two is metaphysical rather than linguistic in nature.

These are controversial claims. It took an entire thesis chapter for me to apply it to fictional discourse (and an entire doctoral thesis for Franco to defend the whole theory). For our purposes, please consider these as background assumptions to be taken for granted.

*Literary Theory: Mikkonen's Critique*

Mikkonen speaks of a "realistic fallacy" committed by theorists of analytic aesthetics, wherein "they consider literary fiction-making a propositional act in which the story-teller's descriptions transparently depict the world of fiction."[11] This is clearly evident in approaches that treat fictional worlds as merely sets of propositions: fictions are just transparent encodings of these propositional sets. Anyone versed in literary theory ought to find this absurd, however. Fictions, in our experience, can be opaque, have an open-ended structure free of interpretation, and on occasion can be internally contradictory. Nothing about this sounds transparent.

"In composing a literary artwork, the author invites the reader to examine and enjoy the linguistic and stylistic properties of her work. (...) Moreover, the author's literary use of language, its tone and style, has admittedly a "surplus of meaning," which cannot be reduced to the propositional content of the work."[12]

Moreover, it doesn't make sense to conceive of fiction as purely forceless, given that authors can and often do use their works to make claims about the real world. "Furthermore, the author's fictive intention that is seen to invite the reader to adopt the fictive stance toward the content of the work (after the reader has recognized the author's fictive intention in the work) should not be defined in terms of make-believe—as

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[11] Mikkonen, Jukka. "The Realistic Fallacy, or: The Conception of Literary Narrative Fiction in Analytic Aesthetics." *Studia Philosophica Estonica* (March 23, 2009): 6–7. https://doi.org/10.12697/spe.2009.2.1.01.
[12] Mikkonen, 10.

pretending that something is real—but imagination (imagining that). This is not only a terminological matter, for it also has strong philosophical implications. In philosophical theories of fiction which take the fictive utterance as imitation of some sort, were it pretence or make-believe, the author's mode of speaking is generally seen to remove the bind between the speaker and her utterance, the author and the work. As these theories consider fictions subordinate to serious discourse or informative utterance, they take fictions as mere play with words. However, instead of description without referential force, the author's mode of speaking should be considered a "serious imaginative activity." Fictions often treat matters of universal human interest. They express genuine beliefs concerning philosophical, ethical, and political issues, for instance, and they have significant and distinct cognitive value and an "illocutionary force" of their own."[13]

The inseparable conjunction of the literary and fictive intentions is thus summarized by Mikkonen as the literary-fictive stance.

*Established theses*

Throughout Chapters 1 to 3, I have also established the following theses. Again, in the interest of time, I ask the reader to take these claims as background assumptions.[14]

1. *Fictionality indeterminacy theses*:
    a. *Local indeterminacy of fictionality*. The fictionality of a single sentence is epistemologically underdetermined.
        i. To understand exactly what this means, consider a sentence like "Dean is a hunter." Without additional context, it is difficult to tell whether or not this is about a real person (or perhaps about the fictional character Dean Winchester). Ergo, fictionality is not a property evident in sentences alone.

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[13] Mikkonen, 10-11.
[14] For a full exposition, see Sarmiento, 2024.

b. *Global indeterminacy of fictionality*. Without sufficient[15] contextual information, the fictionality of an entire discourse is epistemologically underdetermined.

    i. Consider the following thought experiment: Imagine if historians discovered an old journal documenting the life of a teenage girl in the 70s, not knowing that this was the girl's experiment on epistolary fiction. We would be none the wiser about its fictionality, especially if there were no contradictory data to hint us about this feature. Similarly, narrative nonfiction and historical fiction can be difficult to tell apart without supplementary information from contextual sources like the paratext.[16] Ergo, even texts as large and complex as novels can be indeterminate regarding their fictionality.

2. *Correspondence Irrelevancy*. Correspondence to reality does not make or break fictionality.

    a. Imagine if someone wrote a fictional book that, through sheer improbable chance, happened to accurately describe real historical events that actually happened in the past. Should we now consider this a non-fiction book? Surely not. Similarly, if a scientific journal contained something that was later debunked, we do not immediately classify it as fiction.

**Methodology**

This paper will be guided by these general strategies: (1) Voltolini's approach, (2) Semi-apophatic logic, (3) Ockham's razor, and (4) Practical reason.

(1) *Voltolini's approach*

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[15] For example, something as simple as "a historical fantasy by Author X" in the paratext would, practically speaking, be a sufficient indicator that the reader is not dealing with a non-fictional text. Since this will ultimately be dependent on the cultural norms of a particular literary practice, we do not need to define precise parameters on what "sufficient" exactly means.

[16] Gérard Genette's concept of the paratext: "a text that relates (or mediates) to another text (the main work) in a way that enables the work to be complete and to be offered to its readers and, more generally, to the public." It is the threshold between text and off-text. This includes but is not limited to "the title, genre indication, foreword and epilogue", etc. See Skare, Roswitha. "Paratext". *Knowledge Organization* 47, no. 6, 2020, 511-519. Also available in *ISKO Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization*, eds. Birger Hjørland and Claudio Gnoli, https://www.isko.org/cyclo/paratext.

In line with Voltolini's approach, we will consider various pre-theoretic intuitions and treat them as desiderata. The spirit of Voltolini's analysis is committed to the idea that metaphysical analysis can be done even to entities we are not fully ontologically committed to just yet.[17] This will prove to be useful in analyzing entities whose ontological status we find dubious, such as ficta.

(2) *Semi-apophatic logic*

In theology, apophatic or negative theology "is a way of approaching God by denying that any of our concepts can properly be affirmed of Him. The term [was] first used by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite in contrast with cataphatic or affirmative theology and symbolic theology."[18] The logic of this theoretical approach can be extrapolated into other metaphysical talk beyond God-talk. I use the term *semi-apophatic* in order to emphasize that the approach I will be using is notably weaker than the genuine apophatic kind. Whereas the original forbids making any affirmative claims about the entity in question, my approach instead only posits an asymmetry between affirmative and negative claims: instead of affirming claims about dubious metaphysical kinds, it is epistemologically more sound to *deny* claims about them (e.g. Ficta are not physical entities). For this reason, instead of affirming the best theory out of all, we will be pruning the potential theories about ficta until we are left with the most plausible ones (i.e. the method will be negative or eliminative in nature).

(3) *Ockham's Razor*

The most popular formulation of the Razor is about ontological parsimony: "Don't multiply entities beyond necessity."[19] When comparing two theories with similar explanatory power, the theory that assumes fewer entities is generally preferred. However, it should be noted that this is not Ockham's preferred formulation of the

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[17] Voltolini thus holds to the distinction between metaphysics and ontology. See Voltolini, Alberto. "A Suitable Metaphysics for Fictional Entities." *Fictional Objects* (2015): 129–146.

[18] Oxford Dictionary. "apophatic theology." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by Cross, F. L., and E. A. Livingstone. : Oxford University Press, 2005. https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192802903.001.0001/acref-9780192802903-e-394.

[19] Spade, Paul Vincent and Claude Panaccio, "William of Ockham", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),  URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/ockham/>.

Razor. Instead, he opts for a more general principle: "plurality must not be asserted without necessity".[20]

For Ockham, the principle of simplicity limits, more generally, the multiplication of hypotheses and not just entities. Another alternative formulation is that "It is useless to do with more what can be done with less," which implies that Ockham saw theories functionally, i.e. that they are meant to do things (e.g. explain and predict).[21] Thus, rather than mere ontological parsimony, we can broadly construe the Razor as theoretical parsimony.

Another important note to keep in mind is that unlike its contemporary use, the Razor, as Ockham originally used it, "never allows us to *deny* putative entities; at best it allows us to refrain from positing them in the absence of known compelling reasons for doing so. In part, this is because human beings can never be sure they know what is and what is not "beyond necessity"; the necessities are not always clear to us."[22] From here on out, we will stick with this modest and more authentic formulation of the Razor.

Hence, when we're assessing the theories, we are neither definitively denying nor asserting the existence of these supposed entities. When we're pruning the candidate theories, the only thing we can say is that whether or not such entities exist, we can be certain (or at the very least assured) that these are not the entities we actually engage with in our actual fictional discourses.[23]

(4) *Practical reason*

This term is used in this paper in both a broader sense and a more rigorous, secondary sense. Firstly, the broad sense. Although this is not an empirical study, I still aim for the findings to reflect (or at the very least not contradict) our actual practices in fictional discourse. Ergo, this method will function as a razor of "common sense",

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[20] William of Ockham. "The Possibility of a Natural Theology." *OCKHAM: Philosophical Writings.* Edited by Fray Philotheus Boehner O.F.M.Thomas. Published by Nelson and Sons Ltd. 1957, p. 110.
[21] Kaye, Sharon. "William of Ockham (Occam, c. 1280—c. 1349)." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, iep.utm.edu/ockham/. Accessed 19 Dec. 2023.
[22] Spade and Panaccio, "William of Ockham", 2019.
[23] For example, imagine if our analysis leads us to the conclusion that construing ficta as possibilia does not align with our actual fictional discourses. It could still hypothetically be the case that, for example, Sherlock Holmes is a possible entity. It just so happens that "Holmes" the ficta and "Holmes" the possibilia are two distinct albeit similar entities.

trimming away any point that wildly deviates from how we humans actually engage with fiction. This commitment is defended with more theoretical rigor (the second sense) by Heidi Savage. She requires a methodological constraint, "a coherence requirement on any theory of meaning. That is, theoretical hypotheses and speakers' overt linguistic behavior need to "mesh.""[24]

What Savage's methodological constraint provides us is twofold: (1) a commitment to ordinary language use with regards to fictional discourse, and (2) the truth aptness of fictional discourse. The second point is a clear consequence of the first: if we are going to commit to ordinary language use as a metric, then it becomes apparent that ordinary speakers treat fictional discourse as truth-apt (e.g. the ordinary sense in which claims like "Sherlock is a great detective" are treated as true). Indeed, the entire article is an excellent defense for the truth-aptness of fictional discourse. This now gives us the following thesis:

(Fictive Truth-Aptness) Fictional discourse is truth-apt.

Careful attention will also be given on whether our metaphysical talk appropriately reflects the kinds of discourses we actually do with fiction. Additionally, if a putative thesis conflicts with a more straightforward and intuitive thesis previously established, then *ceteris paribus,* the putative thesis shall be dropped, given a certain cost-benefit analysis (for example, between ontological costs and predictive/explanatory power).[25]

With these four principles established, we can now begin examining Voltolini's desiderata.


**Results**

Earlier, we have introduced Voltolini's approach, which takes into consideration various pre-theoretic intuitions about ficta and treats them as preliminary "data" for our metaphysical analysis. The thrust of the approach is that it is *prima facie* better to preserve as many of our pre-theoretic intuitions as possible unless given good reason

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[24] Savage, Heidi. "The Truth and Nothing but the Truth: Non-Literalism and The Habits of Sherlock Holmes." *Southwest Philosophy Review* 36 (2), 2020, 15.
[25] Note that the eliminative nature of (2) and (4) doesn't necessarily contradict with the modest nature of (3). The elimination of candidate theories doesn't necessarily imply the denial of their proposed entities.

not to do so (e.g. the intuitions are contradictory). To begin, let us look into the list of Voltolini's desiderata:

1. The nonexistence of fictional entities;
2. The causal inefficacy of such entities;
3. The incompleteness of such entities;
4. The created character of such entities;
5. The actual possession by ficta of the narrated properties;
6. The unrevisable ascription to ficta of such properties; and
7. The necessary possession by ficta of such properties.[26]

Instead of just uncritically mirroring Voltolini's list, I would first like to question whether or not these so-called "intuitions" are actually legitimate (and thus worthy of being preserved as desiderata). We will now look into each of these in detail.

*Non-existence*

Voltolini notes that there are two potential readings to this. The first, taken up by the Antirealists, is the *ontological* reading, which considers "the general inventory of what there is", and thus concludes that "there are no such things as fictional entities."[27] Voltolini rejects this reading for its inability to differentiate genuine versus purported fictional characters. He gives the example of Mickey Mouse as opposed to "Pickey Pouse". While Mickey ontologically doesn't exist, there is a sense in which "unlike Pickey—there is such a thing as Mickey, yet it has the special feature that it does not exist."[28] A theoretical language that makes such a distinction is called the *metaphysical* reading. I will choose to follow Voltolini and use the latter, which has the advantage of consistently allowing that certain entities have salient metaphysical properties while simultaneously being ontologically non-existent.[29]

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[26] Voltolini, 133.
[27] Voltolini, 133-134.
[28] Voltolini, 134.
[29] Note that endorsing the metaphysical reading doesn't immediately commit us to (Neo-)Meinongian metaphysics and quantification. The distinction could plausibly be explained by a plethora of other things (e.g. causal-historical, institutional, or mental explanations).

We can thus think of the debates on fictional ontology (between antirealists and realists) as follows: Either fictional entities don't exist (in all senses of the term), or they "exist" in some special (metaphysical) way (e.g. abstracta, possibilia, mental files). From this reading, we can see that both realists and antirealists agree that, on the ordinary ontological reading (which is typically construed as spatiotemporality), ficta definitely do not exist. The real controversy occurs in the metaphysical reading, especially since some (e.g. nominalists[30]) do not want to be committed to certain metaphysical kinds like abstracta. We can thus summarize this thesis as:

> (Non-Existence) Ficta are not included in the ordinary (extensional) realm of existents.

This is a good pre-theoretic intuition to begin with, given its relatively uncontroversial nature. We will set aside the more controversial metaphysical version for now.

*Causal inefficacy*

We will now dip our toes into more controversial waters. According to Voltolini, for something to be causally efficacious, it must both (A) produce effects, and (B) be causally affected.[31] Although he grants that ficta (controversially)[32] can cause effects in human behavior and emotions, he asserts that:

> (...) *nothing can causally modify a fictional character*. No spectator can prevent Puccini's heroine Tosca from jumping out of Castel Sant'Angelo and dying. If (in Stephen King's famous novel *Misery*) the psychotic Annie Wilkes doesn't want the fictional character Misery to die, she has to prevent the writer Paul Sheldon from publishing a story to the effect that Misery dies. For once the writer has

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[30] See Rodriguez-Pereyra, Gonzalo, "Nominalism in Metaphysics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),        URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/>.
[31] Voltolini, 134.
[32] Whether or not the emotions elicited by fictions are "genuine" emotions or not is still quite a hot topic of debate under the umbrella of "the paradox of fiction". See Tullmann, Katie, "Emotional Responses to Fiction", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/fiction-emotion-response/>.

published such a story, there is nothing Annie can do to prevent such a death. In sum, fictional characters are causally inefficacious.[33]

Firstly, we can question whether or not causal efficacy necessarily has to be a conjunction between (A)[34] and (B). Voltolini cites[35] two of Frege's works[36][37] to justify this claim, but does not provide explicit argumentation of his own. Unfortunately, I am only able to access an English version of one of them, *Der Gedanke*. After reading the work (which for the most part goes into the peculiarities of thought and abstraction), I personally do not see any cogent argument for the necessary conjunction of the two properties[38].

Secondly, we can interrogate what exactly it means to be causally affected. If this concept is construed broadly, then createdness (which is a property of being caused) will count as being causally affected. Ergo, the desiderata of Causal Inefficacy and Createdness will be contradictory. Voltolini seems to have a narrower conception of causal affectedness, given his phrasing above: causal *modification*. Certainly, it is intuitively plausible for there to be something causally created but causally unmodifiable after its creation. However, Voltolini does not provide any justification as to why this narrow reading is to be preferred. Without one, the claim is open to objection.

Thirdly, his claim about the unmodifiability of ficta seems to contradict our actual practices and experiences about fiction. We will explore this argument in more detail in the later section on Unrevisable Ascription.

Lastly, his argument against the causal modifiability of ficta assumes (6) and (7): the Unrevisable Ascription and Necessary Possession theses. In fact, it's the entire argument; causal unmodifiability is nigh identical to the Unrevisable Ascription thesis.

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[33] Voltolini, 134.

[34] For an argument defending the causal efficacy of abstracta, see Friedell, David. "Abstracta Are Causal." *Philosophia* 48, no. 1 (2019): 133–142.

[35] See Footnote 16 in Voltolini, 134.

[36] Frege, Gottlob. 'Le Nombre Entier.' In *Kleine Schriften*. Hildesheim: G. Olms: 1967, 211–19.

[37] Frege, Gottlob. 'Der Gedanke.' *Logische Untersuchungen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht: 58–77. (Translated by Peter Geach and R.H. Stoothoff in The Frege Reader, edited by Michael Beaney. Oxford: Blackwell: 1986, 325–45.)

[38] Although admittedly, I am not the most prolific scholar on Frege. If I missed anything, I am open to hearing alternative readings from more seasoned Frege scholars.

Therefore, if we reject the two, Voltolini's argument ultimately fails. I will show exactly how to do these in the later sections.

*Incompleteness*

Completeness is a concept borrowed from metalogic. "In proof theory, a formal system is said to be syntactically complete if and only if every closed sentence in the system is such that either it or its negation is provable in the system. In model theory, a formal system is said to be semantically complete if and only if every theorem of the system is provable in the system."[39] We can thus categorize completeness as follows:

- Syntactic completeness (also called negation completeness): For every sentence P, either P or not P is provable within the system.[40]
- Semantic completeness (also called deductive completeness): All truths/theorems of the system are provable within the system.

Because fictions typically are not airtight logical systems, the concept must be appropriately translated. Voltolini's depiction of incompleteness seems more akin to syntactic completeness: "there are many features that *ficta* appear neither to possess nor to fail to possess, precisely when the relevant tale is silent on the matter. Sherlock Holmes appears neither to have a mole on his left shoulder nor to fail to have one. For in telling his story, Conan Doyle has neither said nor implied anything about such a mole."[41] Therefore, instead of the stronger, proof-theoretic notion of provability, a more appropriate equivalent would be something akin to textual or evidential support.

The syntactic incompleteness of fiction is another one of the intuitive and (relatively) uncontroversial theses about fiction. Indeed, unlike their real counterparts, ficta seem to be truly "bound" to their fictions; without evidential support from the

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[39] Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Completeness | Proof Theory, Formal Systems, Semantics." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 3, 2009. https://www.britannica.com/topic/completeness-logic. For a more thorough exposition, see Manzano, Maria, and Enrique Alonso. 2013. "Completeness: From Gödel to Henkin." History and Philosophy of Logic 35 (1): 50–75. doi:10.1080/01445340.2013.816555.

[40] Note that this is distinct from the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM), which states that for any sentence P, either P or not P is true. LEM is a truth/semantic principle, while negation completeness is a syntactic/proof-theoretic principle. LEM can be interpreted as a strong semantic completeness.

[41] Voltolini, 134.

primary text or its supplementary material, certain claims just cannot be confirmed or denied about ficta.

Interestingly, there are (relatively unsuccessful) attempts to establish semantic completeness (or even stronger, the Law of Excluded Middle) in fiction. For example, Stacie Friend defends a generation principle for the truths within fiction called the *Reality Assumption* (RA), which can be fully articulated as:

> For any fiction *f,* every proposition *p* that is true in the actual world, we are invited to imagine as part of *f* (i.e. *p* is true in *f*), unless *p* is excluded (in some sense) by another *primary* or *secondary* truth in *f*.[42]

Hence, fictions "inherit" actual truths unless stated otherwise. For example, since it is a physical law that nothing can go faster than lightspeed, the same statement is true within all fictions (except stories that allow faster-than-light travel, thus excluding this law). Ergo, if one believes that physical reality obeys the Law of Excluded Middle, then by virtue of the Reality Assumption, all fictions obey the law as well.

However, as Ben Martin notes, there are multiple problems to this approach. The most notable ones are:

1. The empirical evidence Friend cites fails to support her thesis over other weaker generation principles.[43]
2. The Reality Assumption suffers from a theoretical inconsistency because it conflicts with Friend's commitment to a pretence theory of fiction.[44]
3. Finally, "Neither interpretation of 'exclusion' which can be drawn from Friend's own discussion of the RA then seems suitable for her purposes. While the strict interpretation places too great a constraint on our interpretation of works of fiction, the weak interpretation fails to respect the RA's intended reality bias."[45]

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[42] Martin, Ben. "Absorbing Reality into Fiction: The Challenge of Reading Fiction with Reality in Mind." In *Objects of Inquiry in the Philosophy of Language and Literature*, edited by P. Stalmaszczyk. Studies in Philosophy of Language and Linguistics, Peter Lang Series. November 30, 2024, 7. https://www.academia.edu/35630883/Absorbing_Reality_into_Fiction_The_Challenge_of_Reading_Fictio n_with_Reality_in_Mind_Penultimate_Draft_Forthcoming_in_Objects_of_Inquiry_in_the_Philosophy_of_L anguage_and_Literature_Peter_Lang_Series_.
[43] Martin, 7-14.
[44] Martin, 15-18.
[45] Martin. 21.

To really hammer in the point, let us provisionally entertain the idea that fictional worlds are, like classical propositional logic, consistent and complete in all senses. Therefore, finding fictional truths would be just as simple as verifying whether or not the content of such statements are contained in the worlds of specific fictions. This, of course, fails to account for two things: (1) inconsistent works (e.g. unreliable narrators, conflicting authorial intent, etc.) and (2) the intuitive open-endedness of fictional entities (i.e. the fact that the claims we make about fictional entities which are neither affirmed nor denied by the work are neither true nor false).

Therefore, as things stand, I am inclined to reject both syntactic and semantic completeness regarding ficta.

(Full Incompleteness) Fictions (and by extension, ficta) are syntactically and semantically incomplete.

This indeterminacy is not only epistemological but metaphysical in nature. Unlike ordinary representations whose inadequacies stand in friction with reality, fictions have no such equivalent. Whereas reality ordinarily determines and restricts the kind of representations we make about it, the relationship is reversed in fiction: it is representation alone that makes up fictional reality. Another way of putting this is: reality is ontologically prior to ordinary representation, while fictions are ontologically prior to fictional reality.[46]

One might object that there is still one absolute ground of authority regarding fictional truth: authors and their intentions. I raise two important objections to this point: (1) Authors and authorial intent are fickle grounding for fictional truth, and (2) Indeterminacy is a core feature of fiction.[47]

Firstly, let's consider a hypothetical. Imagine an author who forgot the original intentions of their work decades after writing it. They decide to reread their own work to jog their memory and reflect on their own thoughts, ultimately arriving at a reconstruction of their original intentions (e.g. "Humanity is a lost cause"). Unbeknownst

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[46] At least if we construe fictions as genuine creations rather than abstract objects we discovered.
[47] These and other similar objections are explored in more detail in Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* and the subsequent scholarship that followed. See Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text* (1977): 142–148. https://letras.cabaladada.org/letras/death_author.pdf.

to them, their beliefs have evolved over time; the reconstruction does not match their original intentions (e.g. "Humanity is not a lost cause").

Whose intent matters more? The author who originally wrote it or the current living author who changed their mind about their own work? Does intent get "crystallized" somehow? Authors are known to forget things, be wrong about their own work, be mistaken about facts of the world, change their mind, or lie to their audiences. If we're lucky, we'll have historical data on the author's previous views and detect the mismatch. Without available sources of evidence, we will be none the wiser about such a shift (especially if both readings are well-justified by the text).

This brings us to the second point: indeterminacy is part of the game. Part of the appeal of fiction is that it allows (and even encourages) multiple possible readings of a single text. If you wanted to be interpreted as clearly and univocally as possible, you should've written an essay or manifesto instead of a fictional work. To insist that fictions are singularly bound to authorial intentions would be to completely mischaracterize our actual practices of storytelling. Ergo, incompleteness is here to stay.

*Createdness*

This is another intuitive thesis about fiction: that fictional works and their inhabitants ultimately owe their existence to their creators. Rather than natural objects we discover, they are products of our creative activities. Voltolini phrases this relation as follows: "we clearly speak of *ficta* as the creations of an author, in the sense that *ficta* depend for their existence on the existence of their authors or on some mental activity on their authors' part. Carlo Collodi is Pinocchio's creator. Had Collodi not conceived of him by writing a tale that concerns him, Pinocchio would not have existed."[48]

We can make this concept more precise. While I am yet to commit to an artifactualist stance, I do recognize how useful its theoretical language is in elaborating on our intuitions about fictions and creation.

"In her book, *Fiction and Metaphysics* Thomasson displays several types of ontological dependence, we will take up only two main kinds, namely historical and

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[48] Voltolini, 134.

constant dependence, and both have their roots in Ingarden. Ingarden distinguishes, among other, between the following sorts of dependence:

- Contingency: the dependence of a separate entity on another in order to remain in existence. Corresponds to Thomasson's constant ontological dependence.
- Derivation: the dependence of an entity on another in order to come into existence. Corresponds to Thomasson's historical ontological dependence."[49]

We can further distinguish between dependence and reliance. Fontaine and Rahman writes: "X requires Y if in every world in which X exists, also Y exists. X depends on Y if X requires Y but Y does not require X. Note that under this definition, both Holmes and Watson depend on Conan Doyle. What is more, supposing that according to the oeuvre of Conan Doyle, Holmes and Watson are without exception co-existent, we must conclude that Holmes requires Watson and that Watson requires Holmes. Just because of their symmetrically requiring each other, we avoid the undesirable conclusion that one of the two characters depended on the other. Observe also that by this definition, any object requires itself, but no object depends on itself. Now, actually we should add a temporal aspect, it is surely the case that in no world may Holmes's occurrence precede Conan Doyle's occurrence the temporal aspect, yet it is surely the case that in no world may Holmes's occurrence precede Conan Doyle's occurrence. Notice that the approach is ontological rather than epistemological. We might not know who the creator of the table I am writing on is, but I acknowledge that someone must have done it."[50]

I am personally not persuaded by attempts to dismiss the Createdness thesis. Just because our standard theoretical tools cannot straightforwardly explain the phenomena of fictional creation does not mean we get to just deny our *prima facie* intuition that fictions (and by extension, ficta) genuinely are creations. We summarize this thesis as follows:

(Fictive Createdness) Ficta are creations (i.e. they are constantly and historically ontologically dependent on fictional works and their creators, respectively).

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[49] Fontaine, Matthieu and Rahman, Shahid. "Fiction, Creation and Fictionality : An Overview." *Methodos : savoirs et textes, Savoirs textes langage* - UMR 8163, 2010, 22-23. 10.4000/methodos.2343.halshs-01227945.
[50] Fontaine and Rahman, 24.

*Actual Possession*

Voltolini defends the view that ficta actually possess the properties fictionally ascribed to them through an argument from explanatory power. According to him, accepting the thesis would solve two things at once: (1) the aforementioned "paradox of fiction"[51], and (2) transfictional[52] discourse. He writes: "we want the features we ascribe to *ficta* in the stories about them to be actually *possessed* by them. Anna Karenina is a woman, Sherlock Holmes is a detective. Perhaps Anna is not a woman in the same way as Penelope Cruz is, but she is nonetheless a woman. It would be hard to explain why we are moved by her sad fate, if her fate did not *actually* affect her. This actual possession of properties enables us to perform both interfictional and crossfictional comparisons, as when we say that Holmes is cleverer not only than another fictional character such as Hercule Poirot, but than any real full-blooded detective."[53]

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, I am not willing to commit to a thesis unless the explanatory power it offers outweighs its theoretical and ontological costs. I am not inclined to accept this thesis for the following reasons:

- I do not see why it ought to be necessary for ficta to actually possess their ascribed properties for us to feel things about them. In fact, there are plenty of alternative theories[54] (e.g. make-believe, simulation, etc.) that can equally explain our emotional responses to fiction without assuming that ficta have to actually possess their ascribed properties.
- Similarly, there are multiple theories that can explain transfictional discourse without needing to assume ficta's actual possession of properties (e.g. type theory[55]).

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[51] See Tullman, 2024.
[52] Defined in this paper as: discourse that involves subjects both within and outside a certain fiction. E.g. "One Punch Man is stronger than the Hulk."; "Sherlock is more popular than any real detective."
[53] Voltolini, 134-135.
[54] See Tullmann, 2024.
[55] Terrone, Enrico. "On Fictional Characters as Types." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 57, no. 2 (January 30, 2017): 161–176. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayw091.

In short, I don't believe Voltolini succeeded in establishing sufficient reason for accepting the thesis. Note that I am not claiming that it is impossible for ficta to actually possess their ascribed properties[56]; I am only denying the necessity of Voltolini's picture in our theory of fiction.

*Unrevisable Ascription*

We now proceed to the last two, which are by far the most controversial. According to this thesis, the narrated properties of ficta are unrevisable. To see what exactly Voltolini means by this, let us see what he has to say:

> [O]f course there are many discussions between critics about which features a character really possesses, notably in cases where an author of a story concerning such a character has not explicitly said anything on that matter. We know that Gertrude, the unhappy nun of Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, had intercourse with the mischievous guy Egidio, but there is debate about whether it was *sexual* intercourse. Yet once consensus has been found on the matter, the only kind of evidence that could dismantle the consensus is the discovery of another more authoritative version of the relevant story where the author says something explicitly to the contrary. Nothing like *empirical* evidence could lead us to revise our ascriptions, as happens with respect to concrete entities. It cannot, for example, turn out that Holmes is a transsexual, as may happen with concrete humans; the only thing that can emerge is a more authoritative version of the Holmes stories where Doyle makes this claim. For the author is the ultimate authority as to whether a *fictum* possesses certain features, so that, unlike concrete entities, no revision of feature ascriptions may take place. Again, Sherlock Holmes is a detective. Why so? Because Doyle decided to tell the story about him thusly. Had he decided to tell the story differently, Holmes would have had different features. Could it turn out that Holmes is not a detective? Certainly not in the sense in which we may discover that a concrete

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[56] For example, in a multilayered story-within-a-story fiction, some of the ficta would be ascribed the property of being a fictional character, which would be true both intrafictively and extrafictively.

human e.g. merely pretends to be such. Holmes can turn out not to be a detective only if we find some more authoritative version of Doyle's stories in which he is not a detective.[57]

I will now present some objections to this thesis. Consider the following:
- It seems intuitive to us that authors can freely modify the properties of ficta both pre-publication (through drafts and revisions) and post-publication (through sequels with character development or retcons[58]). In fact, both authors and audiences (through fanfiction) seem to repeatedly engage in these kinds of counterfactual discourse.
- It seems as though the "unmodifiability" he claims that ficta possess applies more to the fictional work than to ficta themselves. Take the phenomena of sequels and retcons, for example. While authors cannot truly unrelease their work from the public once it's out, subsequent works can plausibly revise the previously established properties of ficta.

Regarding these points, Voltolini actually concedes to these objections and basically just bites the bullet regarding these claims. He writes: "Given the rigid identity conditions it posits for fictional entities, it breaks ontological parsimony. Because, for Syncretism, a fictum is a correlate of a set of properties, as Orthodox Neo-Meinongianism holds, then if one merely changes, subtracts or adds one property to the set in question, even a particularly unimportant one, you get an utterly different fictional entity."[59]

Instead, he holds the claim that ficta do not persist across works (which goes against our practical and phenomenological experience of fiction). He explains this through the notion of character fission and fusion. "Character fission occurs when one and the same fictional character in a story (or a version of it) corresponds to different

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[57] Voltolini, 135.

[58] "*Retcon* is a shortened form of *retroactive continuity*, and refers to a literary device in which the form or content of a previously established narrative is changed." See: Merriam-Webster. "A Short History of 'Retcon.'" *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, October 4, 2021. https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/retcon-history-and-meaning.

[59] Voltolini, 138.

fictional characters in another story (or another version of the same story). Character fusion is the inverse phenomenon, when different fictional characters in a story (or in a version of it) are matched by one and the same fictional character in another story (or another version of the same story). These phenomena clearly threaten fictional characters' identity across stories (or versions). To be sure, this does not mean that the 'persistence'- conviction is completely misguided, but that it has to be reinterpreted."[60] While I find this line of reasoning intriguing, it is hard to knock off the deep-seated intuition that ficta persist across works under the same series. Voltolini needs to provide more forceful arguments in order to convince me on this point.

*Necessary Possession*

Lastly, Voltolini claims that fictional entities necessarily hold their properties. He writes: "a character appears to have its properties, the properties by means of which it is characterized in the relevant story, *necessarily*. I might have been, say, an F1 pilot but Holmes could not have been. Of course, Doyle might have written the Holmes stories differently, stating, for example, that Holmes wasn't a detective but an F1 pilot. Yet in such a counterfactual situation, Doyle would have been writing about an utterly different character (with the same name)."[61]

I will support my rejection of (6) and (7)—the Unrevisable Ascription and Necessary Possession theses—using Luis Galván's paper on counterfactual claims about fictional characters.[62] According to Voltolini's desiderata, ficta necessarily possess their properties. Galván argues, however, that construing properties of ficta as all necessary makes it impossible to make modal claims about fictional characters, which is a vital part of our practices in literary interpretation and criticism. He writes:

> "The standard reading of Don Quixote has it that the main character's excessive
> imagination inflicts him with perceptual errors, reaching perhaps to hallucinations,
> such that he mistakes an inn for a castle, windmills for giants, sheep flocks for

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[60] Voltolini, 138-139.
[61] Voltolini, 135.
[62] Galván, Luis. "Counterfactual Claims about Fictional Characters: Philosophical and Literary Perspectives." *Journal of Literary Semantics* 46, no. 2 (2017): 87–107.

armies, and so forth. However, Edwin Williamson has forcefully argued that Don Quixote perceives reality like anybody else, without any errors or hallucinations; his madness lies rather on the level of understanding or judgment. [...] Don Quixote's perceptions are decisive ingredients of his actions. If we assume that he is suffering hallucinations, his action may be taken prima facie as belonging to the class of (attempted) chivalric deeds; whereas, if we assume that he, perceiving what is in fact there, wants to interpret it in a particular way, then the corresponding action is an attempt to set up a proof of the correctness of the interpretation. This example shows then that there is no clear-cut limit between determinacy and indeterminacy in fiction: the indeterminacy of a property not stated in the text — perceptual correctness or error — undermines the apparent determinacy of the narrated events and the character's properties."[63]

"Consequently, the well-known phenomenon of the indeterminacy of fiction leads us to admit modal properties for the characters. So much can be said: sentences about possible properties of fictional entities do make sense[.]"[64]

Hence, if the properties of fictional entities aren't locked into necessity (given the rich realm of possible properties aforementioned), then fictional entities do not necessarily possess all their properties. Ergo, Voltolini's desiderata (6) and (7) are incompatible with desideratum (3) (i.e. the desideratum of incompleteness).

*The Final Desiderata*

After the assessment, it appears that only three of Voltolini's theses survived as genuine desiderata: Non-existence, Incompleteness, and Createdness. Let's see if we can reintroduce more desiderata. Firstly, all of the previous theses established in the preceding chapters ought to influence our theorizing here.

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[63] Galván, 97.
[64] Galván, 99.

For our purposes, one of the relevant ones stems from Mikkonen's critique of the realistic fallacy: fictions cannot be reduced to just sets of propositions. We can summarize this as follows:

(Non-propositionalism) Fictions are better conceived as models/representations, not sets of propositions.

Another one stems from the intentionality of fiction. Imagine two distinct authors who, by sheer chance, happened to pen the exact same novel, down to every word and punctuation. Would we say that fans and scholars engaging with the two works are engaging in the same fictional discourse? Surely not. Since fictional works are intentional objects, the sole fact that they're made by different authors prompts us to consider them distinct works. This means that fictionality is also sensitive to causal chains of discourse. We can summarize this as follows:

(Fictive Causality) Part of what makes ficta distinct is their causal origin.

A fictional entity owes its identity conditions partly through their groundedness in the historical chains of discourse initiated by the author, not necessarily because of some essential set of properties. For example, a person talking about Dean Winchester may attribute to him properties that wildly deviate from the source material, but we can still nevertheless identify which character they are talking about by virtue of their rootedness to the original material, typically through some metatext (e.g. the tags of the post, or the tags of an archive).

**Discussion**

Let us now consider the implications of these desiderata and what theories they rule out.

*Possibilism*

Firstly, let's address the theories that conceive of ficta as possibilia or possible entities. Traditionally, the logical theory behind such theories construe worlds as (1) sets of propositions, which are (2) consistent and complete. Right away, we can see how such theories are immediately ruled out by Incompleteness and Non-propositionalism.

Unless the logical theory behind such theories are significantly revised, they will fall short on capturing the metaphysical properties of ficta. Such attempts are actually done by impossibilists, who instead use the logical theory of impossible worlds which, as long as they are construed as non-maximal, can completely avoid the problems of traditional possibilism.[65] However, even impossibilists might come into friction with Mikkonen's critique against propositional views of fictions. Hence, I feel safe abandoning worlds-based theories in general.

*Platonism*

Another candidate for assessment would be Platonic theories, which conceive of ficta as eternal abstracta. This would make ficta more akin to entities like mathematical objects. "This position (it might be called "abstractionism with respect to fictitious objects") comes in two varieties. The first one might be characterized, in a somewhat simplified fashion, as follows: To every set of properties, there is/exists a corresponding abstract object. These abstract objects exist necessarily. Some of them occur in fictional stories, and these are what we call "fictitious objects". Thus, fictitious objects are necessarily existent objects that have been somehow "discovered" or "selected" by the authors of fictional stories. (For this position, see, for instance, Parsons 1975, Zalta 1983 and 1988, Jacquette 1996, Berto 2008 and Priest 2011.)"[66]

The problem with such theories is their conflict with the Createdness and Causality theses. Firstly, eternal abstracta are not created objects, but are more akin to "discovered" objects. This of course conflicts with our phenomenological experience with ficta. Secondly, unlike fictional objects, mathematical objects (the prototypical kind of eternal abstract object) are the same referents of every mathematical discourse around the globe, regardless of their causal chains. Unlike eternal abstracta, ficta are deeply attached to their causal chains.

*Meinongianism*

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[65] For a technical exposition, see Berto, Francesco, and Mark Jago. *Impossible Worlds*, 2019. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nous.12051/full.

[66] Reicher, Maria, "Nonexistent Objects", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.),  URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/nonexistent-objects/>.

Meinongianism is the thesis that being and existence are independent. Another way of putting this is that certain beings have the property of non-existence. While it neatly sidesteps the problem of fiction, Corsano warns us of the attractiveness of this option. As Corsano explains: "

> The fundamental doctrine of Meinongianism, which can be phrased as "so-being is independent of being", is a statement about what it is to be an object in general. And from this view also stems a normative thesis on the purpose of logic. It wishes for logic to conform to the way our speech and thoughts are organized, while by holding quantification to imply existence, Quine wants it to conform to the way the world is. "Shakespeare is a writer" and "Sherlock Holmes is a detective" have the same grammatical form, but the question is if their logical form should be the same as well. This question, to which Russell and Meinong gave different answers, is prior to the question of fictional objects, so Meinongianism is not a theory of fictional discourse in a more or less classical logical and metaphysical framework; it is itself a different logical and metaphysical framework, in which fictional discourse does not present the same problems as in strict quantification.

> It does not make any more sense to become a Meinongian just to avoid a particular group of problems. I don't believe that it is possible to conclusively argue for the primacy of either strict or permissive quantification, since being logical and metaphysical frameworks; they lack a common logical and metaphysical framework, in which such an argumentation would take place, unlike in the case of the possibilist and abstract artifactualist theories for example. It is of course possible to point out difficulties in both frameworks, as many people have been doing, but this is only reason for fine tuning (as for example Parsons and Zalta did), and not abandoning them. Trying to sell meinongianism as a theory that successfully solves the metaphysical problems of fictional discourse misses the point, because the problems presented by

consistently explaining discourse of types (I-IV) are exclusive to strict quantification."[67]

Ergo, rather than dissolving the problem entirely, a Meinongian approach simply shifts into a different domain entirely: a domain in which the problem doesn't exist in the first place. It also violates the deep-seated intuition that Garson describes about the existential quantifier ontologically committing us to the variables they bind.[68]

*Fictionalism/Antirealism*

If none of these theories are working, one might be tempted to just raise the white flag and be a fictionalist or antirealist about ficta and the discourse about it. However, this is not just an easy escape route. "Many versions of fictionalism are prone to the "phenomenological objection": external talk about fictitious objects—to mention one of the applications of the fictionalist strategy that is particularly relevant in the context of the present entry—does not feel like "make-believe"; introspection does not reveal that we are engaged in any kind of pretense when we say things like "Sherlock Holmes is one of the most famous characters of popular literature" and the like."[69] Simply put, such strategies run out of luck when dealing with transfictive, metafictive[70], and other extrafictive[71] discourses.

**Confusions on the Modal Properties of Ficta**

We are now done with the negative/eliminative aspect of this paper. Before we move on to more positive approaches, let us take an important detour into modal talk about ficta. Consider the following hypothetical conversation:

Adam: So, what do you think? Could Holmes have been a criminal? Could he have been something other than a detective?

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[67] Corsano, Daniel. "Meinongianism as a Theory of Fictional Discourse." Academia.Edu, January 22, 2015, p.18. https://www.academia.edu/10282639/Meinongianism_as_a_Theory_of_Fictional_Discourse.
[68] See: Garson, James. *Modal Logic for Philosophers*. 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.276.
[69] Reicher, "Nonexistent Objects."
[70] Defined in this paper as: discourse that discusses fictions/ficta in critical, "distanced" terms. E.g. "Hamlet is a well-written character."
[71] Defined in this paper as: any discourse outside the scope of the "in-the-story" operator, i.e. not immersed in the fictional world or under "suspension of disbelief". E.g. transfictive, metafictive.

Sam: Well, of course, according to the story, Holmes has the same modal properties as any other ordinary person, and their careers are not essential to them. So, yes, he could very well have been something other than a detective.

Adam: But Sam, don't you think there is some sense in which Holmes would not be Holmes if he was not a detective? I mean, what properties make Holmes what he is, outside of those decided upon by Doyle? Without Doyle's act of penning the stories, Holmes would be nothing at all. And one of the properties he deemed Holmes had was being a detective.

As we can see, in conversation 3, there are two different interpretations in play when discussing the modal properties of Sherlock Holmes — the story operator interpretation, and another interpretation concerned with Sherlock Holmes's actual modal properties.[72]

Intradiegetically[73], Sherlock could have been something other than a detective. In our pretense, Sherlock is a human, and being a detective isn't a necessary property of humans. Part of the make-believe game of fiction is imagining the characters as actual beings of the world. Since we don't tend to view regular humans as bound to a closed, necessary set of properties, we tend to imagine that fictional characters have the same "open-endedness" as real inhabitants of the world.

Extradiegetically[74], it's complicated. On the one hand, Sherlock could not have been anything other than a detective. All the properties and relations encoded to him by Doyle are necessary, in the sense that Holmes is nothing *but* the penning of Doyle. We can ask: what are the properties that make Holmes what he is, outside of those decided upon by Doyle? Without Doyle's act of penning the stories, Holmes would be nothing at all. And one of the properties he deemed Holmes had was being a detective.

On the other hand, when considering the affairs and possibilities of the actual world, Sherlock could have been something other than a detective, in the sense that

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[72] Savage, Heidi. "The Truth and Nothing but the Truth: Non-Literalism and The Habits of Sherlock Holmes." *Southwest Philosophy Review* 36 (2), 2020, 10-11.
[73] Read as: intrafictive. Nuances of the terminology are explored in detail in Chapter 3 of Sarmiento, 2024.
[74] Read as: extrafictive.

Doyle's penning of Holmes was a contingent fact of the world and not a necessary truth. Doyle *could* have written Holmes differently (although one could object that this wouldn't really be the same "Holmes" anymore).

When we say "Sherlock is essentially a creation of Doyle", what exactly do we mean? Surely we can imagine another world where instead of Doyle, another person penned the exact same words of the Holmes novels. However, while the two Sherlocks are intrafictively the same characters with the exact same properties, we intuitively recognize that part of Sherlock's extrafictive properties is his causal-historical rootedness in Doyle and Doyle's penning of him.

To see exactly what this means, imagine a table in front of you. Now imagine an alternate world where another carpenter built a table in the exact circumstances as the former (i.e. exactly the same material down to its subatomic particles; the same spatiotemporal location of creation; the same technique of creation, and so on). The only thing that differs between the two tables are their creators. The "internal" properties of the two are exactly the same, which tempts us to assert that the two are identical. However, a part of us also recognizes that part of the "external" properties that makes the table unique is its rootedness in their creators.

Therefore, the debate about the modal properties of Holmes stems from different understandings of the modal discourse we are engaging in. Intrafictively, it is a fact that Holmes is not necessarily a detective. Since Holmes is a human, and no human is necessarily tied to their job, Holmes is not necessarily a detective intrafictively. The real problems stem from the non-intrafictive readings. We can lay this down as follows:

1. Necessity of createdness
    a. In the abstract sense, being penned by Doyle is merely an accidental property of Holmes. He would still be the same entity if another person penned him. (He's an eternal abstracta "found", or just happened to be instantiated in this world by Doyle)
    b. In the causal sense, being penned by Doyle is a necessary property of Holmes; otherwise he would be a different ficta entirely. (He's a time-bound artifactual object; similar logic with the table example)

2. Necessity of properties
    a. In the abstract sense, Holmes holds all his properties necessarily; a single change of property means that it is a different abstracta entirely.
    b. In the causal sense, Holmes would still be the same ficta even with some modifications so long as he is still embedded in the same causal-historical fictive game.

In one reading, "Necessarily, Holmes was penned by Doyle" would be true. Would this also mean that a necessary property of Doyle is his penning of Holmes? Surely not. Hence, the modal operator cannot take a wide scope ("Necessarily, Doyle penned Holmes"). Thankfully, this issue is resolved by the distinction between constant and historical ontological dependence introduced earlier, which has a more narrow *de re* reading rather than a wide *de dicto* reading.

Between the two senses, which is the correct one? In terms of both createdness and properties, the causal reading is more persuasive, but I am not fully committed to this stance just yet; my skepticism of the abstract reading is strong, but does not guarantee that the causal reading is right. I am deeply skeptical of the abstract reading and the concepts it invokes given the earlier objections on Necessary Possession and Platonism. If I am going to provisionally hold the causal reading, it becomes pertinent to ask: How do we explain the fact that the abstract reading, in one way or another, has an inkling of sense to it? To understand this, let us briefly tackle the notion of counterfactual or derivative worlds in fictions.

*Necessity and Fanfictions*

One thing to keep in mind is that even in counterfactual or derivative worlds, at least one property from the original is preserved. You can read a fanfiction where Sherlock is a serial killer who hates Watson, but you can still conceivably think of this derivative character as an alternate version of Holmes because of at least one commonality: their names. If I changed literally everything about this derivative character, no one in their right mind would conceive of it as a fanfiction of Sherlock

unless I tagged it as such (and even then, the tags as a metatext is there to signal the fanfic's indebtedness to the original).

Therefore, we can think of the properties of ficta as jointly necessary. However, there's a specific network of properties that make ficta recognizable. For example, if I change everything about Sherlock (including his name) except the property of being a detective, the character would not read as Sherlock.

Phrased differently, we can ask "When examining a character in a derivative work, how much do we identify them with the character they were based on from the original work? Do we think of them as the "same" characters in alternative possible worlds? Or completely distinct characters entirely?"

This is merely a rough sketch, but we seem to engage in modal discourse about ficta through a variety of approaches:

1. Absolutism. All the properties and relations that a fictional entity bears are necessary.
2. Essentialism. A specific set of properties and relations that a fictional entity bears is identified as "essential". (Note that what is deemed "essential" would differ from audience to audience.)
   a. Story essentialism. All the properties and relations that a fictional entity bears that cannot be changed without significantly altering the story are necessary. (For example, changing the colors of a character's shoes in a minor scene would likely not affect the story, and thus should not be considered necessary. On the other hand, Sherlock not being a detective would significantly alter the course of events in the story, and is thus a necessary property of the character.)
   b. Personality essentialism. All the properties and relations that a fictional entity bears that cannot be changed without significantly altering the character's personality are necessary. (For example, we can plausibly imagine Sherlock doing another job; we don't typically think of jobs as essential properties of people. A version of Sherlock who works as a forensic chemist instead, but still possesses the same wit, inquisitiveness

and all the other personality traits of the original Sherlock could conceivably be considered as "the same" Sherlock, but in alternative circumstances. Note that there are certain personality traits that would entail other facts about that world. For example, Dean Winchester's love and protectiveness over his brother Sam would mean that the existence of Sam Winchester is a necessary component of all alternative worlds that preserve this fraternal love as a property of Dean.)

      c.  Physicality essentialism. Physical traits are necessary properties of fictional entities.

      d.  Name essentialism. Names are necessary properties of fictional entities.

3.  Anti-essentialism. None of the character's properties are necessary.

Notice how the approach can differ depending on which properties are present or absent. For example, in a genderbend fanfiction, Dean Winchester can become Deanna Winchester, changing both the character's name and gender. Here, we are willing to drop the character's name and gender as necessary properties in order to engage with the hypothetical, "What if Dean Winchester was a girl?" and how it would impact the overall story. Meanwhile, a pretence like "What if Superman was evil and not a hero, but a mass murderer instead?" With such drastic changes, Superman's name and appearance become more necessary than before; otherwise, he would not register as an alternate-version of Superman but a whole new character entirely. Hence, the "necessity" of certain properties of ficta is interest-relative and context-dependent. This explains our seemingly conflicting intuitions about ficta and necessity earlier.

**The Best Candidate Theories**

I will now present what I believe to be the best candidate theories for a metaphysics of fiction. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but from what I know, these are the most promising ones.

*Artifactualism*

Artifactualism, also known as abstract artifact theory, holds that ficta are abstract artifacts: *abstract*, in the sense that they're not physical objects, and *artifacts*, in the sense that they're intentional objects with temporal origins. Right away, we see how this differs from the earlier abstractionist theory, Platonism, which conceives of ficta as eternal (non-spatiotemporal) abstracta. Abstract artifacts, at the very least, have a location in time (i.e. a moment of creation), even without a location in space. The prototypical examples of abstract artifacts are marriages, laws, nations, and so on (i.e. entities that sit between the purely physical and purely mental).

One clear advantage of artifactualism is its accordance to all the previously established theses, especially Createdness. However, some might object that artifactualism violates Non-Existence. For example, when assessing the statement "Sherlock exists," the artifactualist, unlike the antirealist or the Meinongian, is allegedly committed to saying that this is true in some reading because even abstract artifacts are supposedly part of the ontological count of the universe. There is an easy way to address this, however. Friedell writes:

"Although abstract creationists accept that Holmes exists, they deny he is a real person walking around London. He (or perhaps *it*) is abstract and a *fictional* person. A fictional person is no more a person than a toy duck is a duck (Kripke 2013, 80). Another issue is that abstract creationism rejects the traditional view that abstracta—paradigmatically numbers— are eternal and causally inert. If characters come into existence, they are not eternal. And if authors cause them to exist, characters stand in causal relations. This tension might also not be a huge cost. After all, treaties, contracts, languages, novels, and symphonies are plausibly abstract artifacts. It is not a big leap to accept that fictional characters are abstract artifacts and thus neither eternal nor causally inert (Thomasson 1999, 139–153)."[75]

Another advantage of the theory is its ability to provide a unified explanation for both fictional and extrafictional (i.e. metafictional and transfictional) discourse. Unlike antirealists, artifactualists can clearly explain how statements like "Sherlock is more

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[75] Friedell, David. "Abstract Creationism and Authorial Intention." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (April 1, 2016): 129. https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12271.

popular than any real detective in history" is true not within fictions, but "here" in the actual world. However, there are other objections to artifactualism. I will only consider the more relevant ones here.

Firstly, one might question how exactly we can refer to such peculiar entities. This is obviously sidestepped by Franconian predicativism, which permits reference to all kinds of entities, so long as the conceptual weave allows it (since reference is a theoretical construct).

The second objection is about the allegedly "mystical" nature of the creation of abstract artifacts. This can be addressed by appealing to some notion of institutionality. Consider something deeply familiar to our everyday life: money. How come that certain pieces of paper and metal have a special kind of value? There are no atoms of money, or some other equivalent. When I send money from one digital bank to the other, what exactly is being "transferred"? With all this mystical fluff surrounding money, it might as well not exist. But surely we recognize the absurdity of this; although it might not be "real" in a physical, atomic sense, we clearly recognize money as real in a social and practical sense. Money is real because we, as a collective, "agreed" that it's real, thus making it real. We are embedded within social institutions that have the normative force (and if we deviate, even coercive force) to make certain phenomena have a social and practical reality. (The ethics of this setup is another matter entirely.)

Friedell tackles this alleged mystery quite well:

"Suppose Peter van Inwagen has stayed faithful to his views about composition (van Inwagen 1990). He thinks there are no tables. There are merely simples arranged tablewise. His musings have sparked an interest in carpentry. Every weekend he carves wood in his garage. To any nonphilosophical observer it would appear he makes tables. But he is not intending to make tables. He is trying to arrange simples tablewise. Intuitively, van Inwagen still creates tables. Just as a nominalist storyteller may create fictional characters, a nihilist carpenter may create tables.

Surprisingly, then, one can make an artifact without intending to make anything of its kind—indeed, without intending to make anything. This renders it mysterious when characters are created. But the same is true of tables and other concrete

artifacts—for example, teapots and watches. Recall that Brock's argument relies on the claim that abstract creationism is more mysterious than the phenomena it is trying to explain, namely, our intuitions about certain sentences (for example, 'Rowling made Harry Potter' and 'Harry Potter is a fictional character'). His argument should not persuade us to reject abstract creationism if the mystery surrounding fictional characters applies also to tables. Brock is trying to show that fictional characters are uniquely mysterious, or at least that they are more mysterious than mundane concrete artifacts. He has not succeeded."[76]

We can make sense of this by appealing to social or institutional backing. Even if I didn't intend to create a table, for all intents and purposes, I have built a structure within a social context where such a structure would function table-wise, regardless of what I think or feel about it.

Thirdly, there is the problem of artifactual creation.. If all the characters in a fiction count as ficta, then each and every one of them counts as artifacts, which means that they are all intentionalia. But clearly authors do not mentally attend to every single entity in their works (for example, when introducing a mob or crowd in their fiction). Wesley Cray solves this by introducing a distinction between creation and production. Consider:

"Suppose I am working with my pottery wheel and have the intention to make a clay bowl. I get distracted and make some careless mistakes. I end up making a plate, despite having intended to make a bowl. To my ears, at least, this sounds like a plausible outcome, rather than a claim resulting from conceptual confusion. Similarly, it seems plausible that I can intend to write a novel, but, due to my own misunderstanding of literary classifications, write a novella instead. (...) I propose that we distinguish two kinds of *generation*: *creation* and *production*. The former is coupled with an intention to generate; the latter is not. So, when speaking loosely, I might *say* that I "created" footprints in the snow or a small scattered arrangement of dead skin cells or that my furnace "created" warmth, but really what I *mean* is that my furnace and I engage in mere *production*, rather than genuine *creation*. The footprints in the snow are

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[76] Friedell, 134.

unintentional *products* of my activities, rather than my *creations*. The footprints would thereby fail to be *artifacts*, but I still made them."[77]

Hence, artifactualism is a promising theory; the big question is whether its explanatory power outweighs its ontological costs.

*Mental files theory*

Another promising family of theories is mentalistic theories. These theories construe ficta as some kind of mental phenomena. Such theories are typically less controversial than artifactual theories, since people are way more willling to accommodate mental objects into their ontology as opposed to abstract artifacts. This is likely due to the fact that materialist reductions of the mind are more available and well-known; thus, even the most hardcore nominalists or physicalists have ways to accommodate mental phenomena into their ontology.

One iteration of this type of theory is mental files theory, according to which each significant ficta corresponds to a mental file dedicated to tracking their properties and relations.[78] Like artifactualism, mental files theory passes all the previously established theses and desiderata. Although one may object as to whether or not mental files are "created" in the same way that artifacts are, the important metaphysical properties that Createdness requires are causal, intentional, and temporal origins, which mental files certainly have.

One important advantage of this theory is how it neatly fits into our theory of fictionality, which already invokes mental phenomena like meta-representation and intentionality. Hence, it would be incredibly parsimonious if the two are subsumed into one cohesive mentalistic theory.

Another advantageous property of mental files theory is its ability to explain even transfictive and metafictive discourse. Each branch in the taxonomy of fictional discourse corresponds to a specific mental location or stance. The context of interpretation for each of them can be characterized as internal deictic shifts: in fictive

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[77] Cray, Wesley D. "Abstract Generationism: A Response to Friedell." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75, no. 3 (July 1, 2017): 290. https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12377.
[78] See: Orlando, Eleonora. "Files for Fiction." *Acta Analytica* 32, no. 1 (June 3, 2016): 55–71. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-016-0298-8.

discourse, my mental avatar is "inside" the fictional world, whereas in non-fictive discourse, I am "outside."

There are, of course, objections to mental files theory. One concern is that mental files theory isn't actually parsimonious, because it unnecessarily multiplies ficta. Since each person conceives of a fictional character slightly differently from another, this would imply that they're engaging in completely different ficta entirely. This is counterintuitive, because part of the reason why we have disagreements over our interpretations of characters is that we are talking about the *same* character, and we think the other person is incorrect.

There are multiple ways to address this. The first is to just bite the bullet and accept that fiction is inherently a practice where we talk past one another; we are talking about different ficta entirely.. This is an unattractive option, so let's look at the other strategies. Another way to escape this is to invoke an ontological hierarchy between authorial mental files and audience mental files, giving primacy to the former. However, the minds of authors can be fickle, inconsistent, and unreliable.

Hence, while it's generally easier to adopt mental phenomena into our ontology, it is not free from its own theoretical issues.[79]

*Terronean type theory*

With the two precursory theories out of the way, it is finally time to introduce what is likely my favorite metaphysical theory of ficta: Terrone's type theory. According to the theory, "fictional characters are abstract artefacts in the sense that they are types. On my account, this means they are principles of construction of like purported tokens, that is, fictional individuals to whom suitable recipients of fiction purport to refer through public mental files. The tokening of a fictional character by a fictional individual requires the construction of a mental file, and this construction is carried out by a work of fiction. More specifically, the construction of a fictional individual is carried out by the part of a work of fiction that specifies the features of that individual. I have called this part of the work of fiction a template of the fictional character."[80]

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[79] For a more sophisticated mentalistic theory, see Chakravarty (2020).
[80] Terrone, 174.

While types are typically construed as eternal abstracta, Terrone's types are of the Strawsonian kind. "By contrast, in the account of fictional characters as Strawsonian types that I have proposed, types are conceived of as historical entities, not as eternal and immutable Platonic Forms. My account explains how such types can be created, instantiated and possibly modified within our cultural practices, and to that extent takes the type view a step further."[81]

Terronean type theory accomplishes something incredible: (1) it passes all the previously established theses and desiderata; (2) it inherits the advantages of both artifactualist and mentalist theories, and (3) manages to avoid the problems of both. While this is starting to sound like Terronean type theory is the theory that I ultimately endorse, I cannot immediately jump the gun. Since this study is simply a prolegomena to an epistemology of fictional discourse, I cannot close all doors until I am absolutely certain of the answer.[82] While I am fairly confident with Terronean type theory, I am not fully committed to it.

*Reflections*

I will end this section by explaining my own intuitions on this matter. This is not yet a fully formulated theory, so I only hold these ideas provisionally. Firstly, I suspect that ficta are produced mentally but sustained socially, akin to the distinction introduced by Ingarden and Thomasson.

Let us consider a hypothetical novel whose language medium eventually died out. Even with remaining copies of a text, if no one can read the texts anymore, then the corresponding ficta are, for all intents and purposes, destroyed. Similarly, in a future where physical bills still exist but without existing institutions to acknowledge their monetary value, then practically speaking, it's not money anymore. Physical bills are only tokens that represent something more abstract, which is exchange value.

Like Terronean type theory, this proposal combines the intuitions of artifactualism and mental files theory. In fact, it's extremely plausible that this account is

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[81] Terrone, 175.
[82] This means that all the previous ideas that are affirmed or rejected are done so due to a reasonably high confidence in their truth or falsity.

co-subsumable with Terrone's type theory. I only refrain from fully endorsing Terrone's account given my current agnostic stance on the candidate theories.

Another alternative proposal I have is the idea that authors truly only produce artifacts (fictional works), and everything else that follows are simply our mental abstractions from the work. In this view, fictional *works* are abstract artifacts, but *ficta* (i.e. the inhabitants of fictional works) are mental files. It can genuinely be said that authors create fictional works, but they only "create" ficta in a weaker sense: by starting the chain of discourse that leads to the mental construction of ficta in the minds of audiences. In this account, disagreements about fiction still make sense; we instantiated different mental files from the same artifact and are now arguing over which one is the more appropriate instantiation. "Appropriate" is the key word here; there are no "correct" or "incorrect" theories of fiction (since fictions often allow or even encourage multiple readings), only supported and unsupported claims. As long as an interpretation is justifiably derivable from the material, it is an appropriate reading.[83] Unlike the previous one, this is incompatible with Terronean theory, which conceives of ficta as artifacts. This layered account could hopefully resolve our conflicting intuitions about ficta.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this chapter, I employed a variety of logical and metaphysical tools in order to critically assess Voltolini's desiderata. From the original seven, only three genuine desiderata remained after the analysis: Non-existence, Incompleteness, and Createdness. A brief detour was made in order to reflect on the modal properties of ficta. Then, all the previously established theses and desiderata are applied in order to eliminate various candidate theories. In the end, the best remaining candidates are assessed without necessarily committing to any of them, opening the door for more sophisticated studies to pursue this line of inquiry in the future.

One of the interesting findings in this study is the inverse nature of truth and justification in fictional discourse. In ordinary discourse, justification is metaphysically and epistemologically grounded on truth (i.e. reality); a piece of evidence is good

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[83] Terms such as "appropriate" and "justified" deserve their own thorough analysis in a proper epistemological study of fiction.

justification if it actually points us to the truth. Meanwhile, fictional truth is grounded on fictional justification: what is true within fictions are whatever we can justifiably infer from the fictional material. There is neither a real nor abstract world floating out there that somehow holds all the truths of a certain fiction. A parallel here could be made with Brouwer's intuitionism and the constructivist project in mathematics. A future study could be dedicated to examining this peculiar inversion and its implications.

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