

# The paradox of fictional creatures

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Louis Rouillé

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# Plan

A problem about creation

The paradox

Constructing the paradox

The uncontroversial truths

The linking principles

Solutions

The logical space

Outsiders

Creationism vs. anti-creationism: a debate

Bringing a new solution to existence

Conclusion

# Plan

## A problem about creation

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### Conclusion

## “Creationist locutions”

- ▶ Authors create fictional characters: this explains the intuitive truth of “creationist locutions” (Lihoreau (ed.) 2010: 17)...
- ▶ ... which are all over the place.
- ▶ For instance:
  - (1) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character created by Conan Doyle. He first appeared in print in 1887, in *A Study in Scarlet*.<sup>1</sup>
  - (2) When authors create fictional characters, they present them with more or less physical detail, but in the 19th-century there were authors who presented some of the characters they created with a greater wealth of physical detail than had been done in any 18th-century novel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>(Recanati 2018)

<sup>2</sup>(Kroon 2010: 207)

- (3) Some characters in novels are closely modelled on actual people, while others are wholly products of the literary imagination, and it is usually impossible to tell which characters fall into which of these categories by textual analysis alone.<sup>3</sup>
- (4) Austen might have made her character Emma less attractive by giving her a worse temper.<sup>4</sup>
- **Def:** I will say that creationist locutions are about *fictional creatures*.

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<sup>3</sup>(Van Inwagen 1977: 302)

<sup>4</sup>(Everett 2013: 195)

## Creationist locutions as metafictional talk

- ▶ Fictional creatures are typically distinct from the fictional character bearing the same name:
  - ▶ What is true of fictional creatures is *external* to the fiction;
  - ▶ what is true of fictional characters is *internal* to the fiction.
- ▶ This contrast is perfectly emphasised in (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 144):

*Who created Frankenstein's monster? One answer, from the internal perspective, is of course: Frankenstein. Only from the external point of view must the reply be: Mary Shelley.*

- ▶ **In general:** distinction between two kinds of statements involving fictional names:
  1. *fictional* statements are internal to the fiction: they typically “invite us to imagine” (Friend 2016);
  2. *metafictional* statements are external to the fiction: they typically talk about the fictional character “*qua* fictionally portrayed” (Recanati 2018).

- ▶ **Csq:** Creationist locutions are paradigmatic *metafictional statements*.
- ▶ **Caveat:** metafictional statements in general are highly controversial, so saying anything about creationist locutions is bound to be controversial.
  - ▶ My aim is to focus on creationist locutions *only* and refrain from conclusions about metafictional talk in general...
  - ▶ ... but that may very well fail.
  - ▶ For the record (and those interested in the general debate about metafictional statements), I am a die-hard anti-realist.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>See in particular (Rouillé 2021).

## The “character problem”

- ▶ Creationist locutions are *prima facie* problematic. Take the following two statements:
  - (5) Victor Frankenstein created Frankenstein’s monster.
  - (6) Mary Shelley created Frankenstein’s monster.
- ▶ It seems that (5) is a less problematic than (6):
  - ▶ In the fiction, Victor’s creating activity is *direct* in that he is FM’s maker.
  - ▶ In reality, Mary’s creating activity is *indirect* in that she essentially writes a book, and that is enough for FM to be created in the real world.
- ▶ In other words, Mary’s creature is *abstract* (contrary to Victor’s creature).
  - ▶ But the concept of “abstract creatures” (created abstracta) raise serious metaphysical doubts.
- ▶ This is the “character problem” (Deutsch 1991): is it possible to create abstract objects? and why is writing fiction a good candidate?



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# Meta-ontology

- ▶ “Meta-ontology” is the field investigating the question: “what counts as a valid ontological argument?”
- ▶ Recently, Amie Thomasson defended a very liberal answer: it is called “easy ontology” (especially in (Thomasson 2014))<sup>6</sup>
  - ▶ For her, an acceptable ontological argument is an argument that goes from an *uncontroversial truth* to an ontological claim, via a *linking principle*.
  - ▶ ex: “mathematical realism”<sup>7</sup>
    1. There are two cups on the table.
    2. If there are  $n$  Ks, then the number of Ks is  $n$ .
    3. The number of cups on the table is two.
    4. There is a number.

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<sup>6</sup>For the record, she considers her view to depart from mainstream meta-ontology derived from the classic (Quine 1948) and to be in line with the seminal (Carnap 1950). For a critical discussion of her view against this background, see (Yablo 2014).

<sup>7</sup>From (Thomasson 2020), and many other places.

# “Linking principles”

- ▶ *Linking principles* are clearly doing the ontological work:
  - ▶ They are, by definition, conceptual truths (or analytical entailments)
  - ▶ i.e. one should accept (or find) them reflecting on the meaning of words only.
- ▶ **In the following**, I will apply “linking principles” to fictional creatures.
  - ▶ Basically, I will try to do easy ontology on fictional creatures...
  - ▶ ... and things will get difficult because of conflicting linking principles.

# The paradox

► Uncontroversial truths:

(6) Mary Shelley created FM.

(7) FM is a fictional character.

(8) FM does not exist.

► Linking principles:

(A) (6)  $\Rightarrow$  (7)

(B) (7)  $\Rightarrow$  (8)

(C) (6)  $\Rightarrow$  not-(8)

► The contradiction:

► Suppose (6) is true.

► Then, by (A) and (B), so is (8).

► Then, by (C), not-(8).

► So, (8) is both true and false.

► Contradiction.

## Uncontroversial truth (6)

- ▶ (6) is intuitively true.
  - ▶ **Recall:** it is a paradigmatically true metafictional statement.
  - ▶ *If not convinced*, contrast (6) with the following falsity:

(9) J.K. Rowling created FM.

## Uncontroversial truth (7)

- ▶ (7) is intuitively true.
  - ▶ *Hint:* (7) says that FM is a *purely* fictional character.
    - ▶ There is a contrast between “native” and “immigrant” fictional characters (Parsons 1980).
  - ▶ All it takes for a character to be fictional is that “an author wrote a story using a name pretensefully” (Thomasson 2015)

## Uncontroversial truth (8)


- ▶ Intuitions about the truth-value negative existentials like (8) are arguably less crystal clear.
  - ▶ *However*, if we ever have intuitions about negative existentials, those about fictional characters are intuitively true.
  - ▶ Again, a contrastive judgement might help the skeptics here. Compare:
    - (8) FM does not (really) exist.
    - (10) Stacie Friend does not (really) exist.
  - ▶ *If not convinced*: Suppose your little cousin fears FM (e.g. by reading Shelley's work as non-fiction), then saying (8) is completely justified.

## Linking principle (A)

- ▶ (A) is an instance of the general schema:
  - ▶ Author X created Y.
  - ▶ Therefore, Y is (purely) fictional.
- ▶ Here is a very telling quote from (Thomasson 2015: 5):<sup>8</sup>

*“Jane Austen wrote a book pretending to use the name ‘Emma’ to refer to a woman and describe various things she did (where Austen was not referring back to any real person or prior character)” and “Emma is a fictional character in a book by Jane Austen” are redundant: any competent speaker who knows the truth of the first is, according to the standard rules of use for our noun term “fictional character”, entitled to infer the second; nothing more, no further investigation, is required.*

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<sup>8</sup>For the record, she is rephrasing and agreeing with (Schiffer 1996). 



## Linking principle (B)

- ▶ (B) is an instance of the general schema:
  - ▶ X is (purely) fictional.
  - ▶ Therefore, X does not (really) exist.
- ▶ After all, that's what fiction is all about!
- ▶ Another way of putting it consists in saying that “being fictional” is nonexistence entailing.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ **Note:** there is probably a more general schema including (B). Take for instance (Kroon 1996):
  - ▶ X is Y's imaginary friend.
  - ▶ Therefore, X does not (really) exist.

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<sup>9</sup>For this reason, some think that it cannot be a predicate following the standard (Russell 1919). I do not want to commit to any particular view of predication here, so I am likely to backtrack if pressed on taking this expression literally.

## Linking principle (C)

- ▶ (C) is an instance of the general schema:
  - ▶ X created Y.
  - ▶ Therefore, Y (really) exists.
- ▶ The intuition is that part of what “to create” means is something like “to bring into existence” or “to cause something new to exist”.
- ▶ **Remark:** interestingly, (C) abstracts away from fiction and is thus more general than (A) or (B)...
  - ▶ ... consequently, it is also more fragile.
  - ▶ As you might have guessed, this is where I think one can place a wedge and hammer a solution to the paradox.
  - ▶ But first, let's look at what's on the table.

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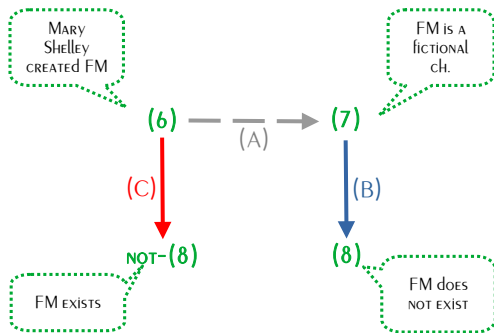
Conclusion

# Structural remarks

- ▶ One can always solve a paradox by allowing contradictions.
  - ▶ This is not *completely arbitrary*, since fictional creatures are known to breed contradictions anyway (Priest 1997), (Berto 2017) – and fictional creatures are arguably good candidates for being contradictory, intentional objects in general (Parsons 1980), (Priest 2006).
  - ▶ But I think it is fair to say that it would solve the paradox without explaining the subtleties of *creation*.
- ▶ Another non-starter would be to deny that  $\Rightarrow$  is transitive.<sup>10</sup>
  - ▶ But, there are *independent* reasons to think that (6) and (7) are uncontroversial truths.
  - ▶ Interestingly, this last remarks helps clearing the logical space of solutions.

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<sup>10</sup>Note that one might, in the same spirit, want to teak negation so as to block double-negation. In other words, intuitionists may not be moved by my paradox.



### Logical space of solutions:

- ( $\alpha$ ) Deny (6): it is not the case that Mary Shelley created FM.
- ( $\beta$ ) Deny (7): it is not the case that FM is a fictional character.
- ( $\gamma$ ) Deny (8) and (B): FM really exists, and “being fictional” is not non-existence entailing.
- ( $\delta$ ) Deny (C): to create does not entail to bring into existence.

# Neo-meinongianism ( $\alpha$ )

- ▶ *Basic idea*: consider the paradoxical reasoning to be a *reductio* argument on (6) (Parsons 1980: 188)

*I have said that, in a popular sense, an author creates characters, but this [...] is hard to analyse. It does not mean, for example, that the author brings those characters into existence for they do not exist. Nor does he or she make them objects, for they were objects before they appeared in stories.*

- ▶ **Pb**: Neo-meinongian should then explain why (6) *seems true* but in fact is not true.
  - ▶ **Usual response**: fictional creatures are not *created*, but *discovered*:
    - ▶ (Zalta 1983) argues that fictional characters are “roles” which are independent of authors, and that author “choose” them.
    - ▶ (Priest 2010) argues that fictional characters are nonexistent concrete individuals, and that authors “mentally point” to them.

# Against neo-meinongianism

- ▶ It is usually objected that the claim that fictional characters pre-date their fictional work of origin is a big bullet to bite.
- ▶ In principle, neo-meinongian hold that there is no special relationship between the author's creative process and the fictional creatures.
  - ▶ But creation as “mental pointing” is a little too easy, isn't it...

# Fictionalism ( $\alpha$ ) and ( $\beta$ )

- ▶ The standard *fictionalist* line of response consists in denying that both (6) or (7) is true *simpliciter* but only in some relevant pretence or game of make believe.
  - ▶ **Catch phrase:** metafictional talk is sophisticated fictional talk.
- ▶ The relevant pretence has been construed as:
  - ▶ “an unofficial game of make believe” (Walton 1990: 410-411 for (6); 428 for (7));
  - ▶ a “realist or meinongian pretence” in (Brock 2002);
  - ▶ an “extended pretence” (Everett 2013: §3.4);
  - ▶ a “disavowal / denial pretence” in (Yablo 2021)...



# Against fictionalism

- ▶ Fictionalism suffers from the same departure from intuition than neo-meinongianism *and more*:
  - ▶ One should reject both (6) and (7).
  - ▶ And thus explain away our intuitions: how come “true in the relevant extended pretences” feels like “true *simpliciter*”?
- ▶ “Extended pretences” are clearly *too strong* a notion:
  - ▶ This notion addresses metafictional talk in general and cannot single out creationist locutions.

# Artefactualism ( $\gamma$ )

- ▶ (Creationism) Fictional creatures are *abstract artifacts*
  - (Kripke 1973/2013), (Searle 1975), (Van Inwagen 1977), ...
  - (Schiffer 1996), (Salmon 1998), (Thomasson 1999), ...
  - (Terrone 2017), (Recanati 2018), (Abell 2020), ...
- ▶ Artefactualists argue against both neo-meinongians and fictionalists:
  - ▶ The abstract realm is causally related to us (contra the traditional neo-meinongian tenet);
  - ▶ (6) and (7) are to be taken very seriously (contra extended pretences).

# Why creationism?

- ▶ Solution ( $\gamma$ ) is in fact the most revisionary solution in our framework.<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ It leads to meta-ontological debates, for their argumentative strategy consists in holding firm that (6) so as to deny (8) (contrary to appearances).
  - ▶ They basically have to show that (6) + (C) = fictional characters exist; despite (B).
- ▶ So one needs to motivate the value of (C) over that of (B).

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<sup>11</sup>Contrary to what Thomasson very, very strongly claims in many, many places! ◀ ≡ ▶ ≡ 🔍 ↺

# Anti-creationism ( $\delta$ )

- ▶ Arguing against creationism is actually a lot easier!
  - ▶ No need to be revisionary about the intuitive truths.
  - ▶ One must simply reject a linking principle: (C)
- ▶ *Standard anti-creationism*: (C) is not so good in general:
- ▶ A counter-example to the generality of (C) from (Deutsch 1991: 210):

*It is surely possible, for example, for two composers independently and at different times to create exactly the same melody. If creating a melody entails bringing it into existence, we are hard pressed to explain how the composer composing at the later time could have created anything. The statement that  $X$  is caused to exist at  $t$  entails that, during some interval immediately prior to  $t$ ,  $X$  does not exist. If  $t$  is the time at which the later composer creates the melody, we have no reason to suppose that such an interval exists.*


# Talking past each other

- ▶ The last discussion shows that (C) is in fact ambiguous between a *descriptive* and a *normative claim*.:
  - ▶ Artefactualist say that (C) is *normatively* good: people *should* infer existence.
  - ▶ Anti-creationists say that (C) is *descriptively* false: people just do not go from (6) to not-(8).
- ▶ There is thus a stronger version of anti-creationism: saying that (C) is *normatively* bad.
  - ▶ There are hints towards this view in (Deutsch 1991: 201) and (Kroon 2010), but the view has never been fully developed.
  - ▶ This new solution can be seen as an interesting mix of ( $\alpha$ ) and ( $\delta$ ).

# Analysis of “to create”

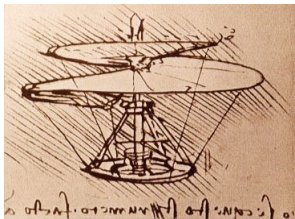
- ▶ To create =<sub>def</sub> to invent + to realise<sup>12</sup>
- ▶ A *creator* is someone who (usually, but not necessarily) designs what they want to produce first, and then sets up to make a thing which (usually, but not necessarily) corresponds to the design.
- ▶ Consequently, when the two stages of creation are radically distinct, it is difficult to tell who is the creator.

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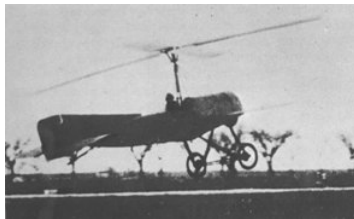
<sup>12</sup>There are alternative terminologies: “to invent” can be thought of as synonymous with “to plan”, “to thought up”, “to make up”, “to imagine”...; while “to realise” can be thought of as synonymous with “to make it the case that”, “to bring into existence”, “to produce”... 

# Evidence

- ▶ Let us define “helicopter” as a specific type of aircraft which can hover, take off and land vertically.
- ▶ The following seem both infelicitous:
  - (11) Leonardo da Vinci created the helicopter in the 1480s.
  - (12) Juan de la Cierva created the helicopter in the 1920s.



The “aerial screw”



The “autogyro”

## “To create” ≠ “to invent”

- ▶ The meaning of “to create” cannot conceptually be reduced to that of “to invent”, and it is arguably more on the side of production as far as meaning alone is concerned.
  - ▶ **Caveat:** one can pragmatically conflate the two expressions in certain contexts of utterance, as in Lamarque’s quotation.
  - ▶ **Note:** as remarked in the beginning, Victor Frankenstein in the story is a full-fledged creator (no pb here!).
- ▶ If “to create”=“to invent”,
  - ▶ then “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” would mean that God simply made a technical drawing.<sup>13</sup>
  - ▶ then Plato’s demiurge is not a creator, since he is explicitly not inventing.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ref: Genesis 1:1.


<sup>14</sup>See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/demiurge>: “1.a. the creator of the universe”.



# The last word with the artefactualist

- ▶ *Invention is already something*: inventors produce in some sense, and the inventor's output (an *invention*) are precisely what is meant to be captured by the idiom “abstract artefact” (Terrone 2017).<sup>15</sup>
- ▶ *Response*: Maybe inventions are something to consider, but I think their claim to existence is quite weak compared to full-fledged creations.
  - ▶ Again, this artefactualist line abstracts away from (B) and presupposes that (C) is a stronger linking principle.
- ▶ Given (B), the natural thing to do is rather *to restrict (C) to creations* (perhaps to some other non-fictional inventions?)
  - ▶ Looking at Leonardo, my take is that (C) is an *empirical* inference pattern if applied to inventions;
  - ▶ i.e. it is not enough to look into the meaning of “to invent”, one must also look at what place the inventor's output has in the outside world.

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<sup>15</sup>Think of the expression “created abstracta” we started with. 

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The paradox

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**Conclusion**









## Solving the paradox

- ▶ Predicted ambiguity:
  - (6) Mary Shelley created FM.
    - a. Mary Shelley invented FM.
    - b. Mary Shelley invented and realised FM.
- ▶ According to restricted (C):
  - ▶ (6a)  $\not\Rightarrow$  not-(8)
  - ▶ (6b)  $\Rightarrow$  not-(8)
- ▶ Indeed, Leonardo invented the helicopter in some clear sense, but the helicopter did not exist until Juan de la Cierva realised one.
- ▶ Now, (6b) is clearly false. So (6) should be disambiguated as (6a).
- ▶ Paradox solved.
- ▶ **Comment:** this solution can be seen as a middle ground between solution ( $\alpha$ ) and ( $\delta$ ).
  - ▶ (6) is not true *strictly speaking* for one needs to disambiguate (akin to ( $\alpha$ ));
  - ▶ (C) is restricted to full-fledged creations (a normative variant of ( $\delta$ )).








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