Doubts about One's Own Existence

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show that it is not irrational to doubt one's own existence, even in the face of introspective evidence to the effect that one is currently in a certain mental state. For this purpose, I will outline a situation in which I do not exist, but which cannot be ruled out on the basis of any evidence available to me—including introspective evidence about my current mental states. I use this "superskeptical scenario," as I will call it, to formulate an argument to the conclusion that I do not know that I exist. In order to substantiate my argument, I draw upon Terence Parsons's theory of non-existent objects. I conclude that, inasmuch as Parsons's theory is reasonable, doubts about one's own existence are reasonable as well.

Keywords: existence, skepticism, fictional objects, Terence Parsons

The aim of this paper is to dispute the claim that one cannot rationally doubt one's own

existence in the face of introspective evidence to the effect that one is currently in a certain

mental state. For this purpose, I will consider whether there is a situation in which I do not

exist, but which cannot be ruled out on the basis of any evidence available to me—including

introspective evidence about my own current mental states. At first glance, a skeptical

scenario of this kind appears to be a logical impossibility. It might be said that, since the

scenario in question has to be introspectively indistinguishable from the situation I am

actually in, the subject in the scenario's center must have, by and large, the same mental states

as I have in the actual situation; however, nobody could ever have any mental states if he or

she did not exist; thus, there could not possibly be a scenario in which the subject both has

mental states and does not exist.

As it will emerge, however, it is not *logic* that dictates such an argument, but our *ontological*

prejudices. The crucial premise is *that nobody could ever have any mental states if he or she*

did not exist. This premise, in turn, is motivated by a conviction that Richard Routley once

termed the "Ontological Assumption," according to which "nonentities are featureless, only

what exists can truly have properties."[1] As is commonly known, Meinongians not only doubt whether the Ontological Assumption is true, they have also developed consistent theories of non-existent objects over the years that cannot easily be disregarded. Therefore, at least from a Meinongian standpoint, the foregoing argument to the conclusion that there could not be a scenario in which the subject both has mental states and does not exist may be valid, but it is not sound.

Some Meinongians even go further and claim that it is easy to imagine situations in which the subject, though equipped with mental states, does not exist. According to Terence Parsons (1980), for example, fictional characters have the properties ascribed to them in their native works. Those properties typically include *mental* ones. Sherlock Holmes, for example, is said to *think* about certain crimes, to *deduce* who the culprit is or to *enjoy* to impress other people with his superior investigative skills. From Parsons's standpoint, then, a non-existent subject with mental states—even with mental states that are by and large the same as I actually have—is nothing special. Now, if one has gone so far as to recognize the possibility of a non-existent subject that has the same mental states as one actually has, then doubts about one's own existence are almost inevitable. Parsons put the problem as follows:

"Even if I don't doubt that I am something, how can I know, say, that I am not (merely) a (native) object of a very detailed and cleverly designed story? What can I learn about myself which would ensure my reality? I am human, male, brunette, etc., but none of that helps. I see people, talk to them, etc., but so did Sherlock Holmes." (Parsons (1980), p. 218)

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[1] Routley (1980), p. 22.

Parsons regards this puzzle as a "a philosophical problem that deserves to be treated seriously on a par with issues like the reality of the external world and the existence of other minds."[2] I am not sure, however, if this view is correct. It seems to me that Parsons's problem is far more demanding with regard to theoretical presuppositions than the traditional skeptical issues: while the latter can be made comprehensible even to someone who is not a trained philosopher, the understanding of Parsons's problem requires considerable theoretical background. Nevertheless, I think that Parsons's problem deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. It may not indicate that one's knowledge about one's own existence is as open to doubt as one's knowledge about the external world, but it does indicate that it is at least not irrational to doubt one's own existence in the face of introspective evidence about one's own current mental states. At any rate, this is what I try to show in this paper.

My considerations will take the following course. After recalling the classical skeptical argument against our knowledge of the external world, I outline a structurally similar argument against our knowledge of our own existence. Taking my cue from Parsons, the crucial premise of my argument is that *I do not know that I am not just a fictional character*. Since the plausibility of this premise depends on the idea that fictional characters have the properties that are ascribed to them in the relevant stories, I try hard to vindicate this idea. After criticizing both Russell's theory and the story-operator account of fictional discourse, I outline the essentials of Parsons's theory of non-existent objects. To be sure, I cannot show that Russell's theory and the story-operator account are false, never mind that Parsons's account is true. However, I hope to show that Parsons's account is at least a reasonable view to take. Thus, the crucial premise of my skeptical argument—that I do not know that I am not just a fictional character—is not wholly without force. Doubts about one's own existence,

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[2] Parsons (1980), p. 218 f.

then, are *not* irrational, even if they arise in the face of introspective evidence to the effect that one is currently in a certain mental state. They are at least as rational as Parsons's account of non-existent objects is reasonable.

Before I turn to the argument proper, allow me to briefly explain the more general philosophical motivation behind this paper. My aim here is not so much to extend the list of items that can be rationally doubted for its own sake, but rather to question the widely shared view that our beliefs about our own current mental states—"introspective beliefs", for short—have an epistemic merit that our beliefs about the mental states of other people, or even all of our beliefs about empirical matters, lack. Though it is still controversial what that epistemic merit is, many philosophers think that introspective beliefs are less open to doubt than beliefs about the world around us, including our own body and our own past and future mental states. Suppose that you have a belief to the effect that the table in front of you is brown. As traditional philosophical wisdom has it, your belief could be radically mistaken: it is not only possible that the item in front of you is neither a table nor brown, but it also might well be that the item you believe to be a brown table does not exist at all. Now, consider your belief that you are thinking about the issue of skepticism now. According to the traditional view, given that you believe that you are thinking about the issue of skepticism now, it is hardly possible that you are *not* thinking about the issue of skepticism now. Moreover, and more importantly, the traditional view maintains that, given the belief in question, it is outright impossible that the item you believe to think about the issue of skepticism—your *ego*, as it might be called— does not exist. If my considerations in this paper are sound, the latter claim is just false. Concerning the rational dubitability of their respective subject matter, introspective beliefs seem to have no advantage over other empirical beliefs.

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I. Skeptical and Superskeptical Hypotheses

Before presenting what I call a "superskeptical scenario," let us recall the classical argument that we do not know anything about the external world:

First premise: If I know that *A*, then I know that not-*SH*.

Second premise: I do not know that not-*SH*.

Conclusion: I do not know that *A*.

"*A*" stands for any perceptual belief and "*SH*" for some skeptical hypothesis. An instance of a perceptual belief is the belief *that I am preparing a paper now*. I have this belief because I am undergoing sense experiences that suggest that I am preparing a paper now: I see a keyboard on a desk, I feel its keys being manipulated by my fingers, I hear the subtle sound of the hard disk, etc. A skeptical hypothesis, on the other hand, is a description of a situation—a so-called skeptical scenario—in which my perceptual experiences would be just as they actually are, but in which most of my beliefs about the external world were false. A famous example of such a hypothesis is the claim that I am actually a brain in a vat connected to a computer whose program generates exactly those perceptual experiences which I am currently undergoing. This example vividly illustrates the classical argument against our knowledge of the external world:

First premise   If I know that I am preparing a paper, then I know that I am not a brain in a vat.

Second premise: I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat.

Conclusion: I do not know that I am preparing a paper.

I do not want to enlarge upon this argument since my aim is not to defend skepticism concerning knowledge about the external world but to show the reasonableness of doubting one's own existence. However, there is a point I want to stress here: the classical skeptical argument is not easy to refute. Attacking the first premise, for example, is tantamount to denying the principle of closure. In the eyes of many contemporary epistemologists, however, this is a desperate deed: Keith DeRose finds the denial of the principle of closure "intuitively bizarre,"[3] Richard Feldman thinks it is "one of the least plausible ideas to come down the philosophical pike in recent years,"[4] and Laurence BonJour takes it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of any theory that embraces it.[5] Likewise, attacks against the second premise are not recommended. How do you know that you are not a brain in a vat? There is not the slightest difference between the evidence that is available for you in the skeptical scenario and the evidence that is available for you in the normal case. Both situations are indistinguishable from the first-person perspective. So, how do you know that you are in the one, but not in the other situation?

Provided the strength of the classical argument, it seems to be a good strategy to base my claim that doubts about one's own existence are reasonable on an argument that is structurally analogous to the classical skeptical argument. Thus, I need an equivalent to the skeptical hypothesis that I am a brain in a vat. However, such an equivalent is not easy to find—for it has to meet the following condition: it has to describe a situation in which I do not exist, but which—from a subjective point of view—is indistinguishable from the situation I am actually in. Let us call a situation of this kind a "superskeptical scenario" and the corresponding description "superskeptical hypothesis" (SSH). If we use "SSH" as a dummy that represents

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[3] DeRose (1995), p. 201.

[4] Feldman (1995), p. 487.

[5] Cf. Bonjour (1987).

the superskeptical hypothesis for which we are looking, we are in a position to formulate at least a preliminary version of an argument to the conclusion that I do not know that I exist, which is analogous to the classical argument against our knowledge of the external world:

First premise: If I know that I exist, I know that not-*SSH*.

Second premise: I do not know that not-*SSH*.

Conclusion: I do not know that I exist.

The crucial question is: is there a situation that would qualify as a superskeptical scenario and whose description could stand in for "SSH"? To get an idea of what a superskeptical scenario might look like, let us employ the movie *Stranger than Fiction*, which is about a tax official named Harold Crick—played by Will Ferrell—who one morning comes to believe that he does not exist, but is merely the hero of a very detailed and cleverly designed story. Crick is afraid he is going insane and consults a psychiatrist. To his surprise, the psychiatrist refers him to professor Hilbert—played by Dustin Hoffman—who is an expert in literary studies. With Hilbert's help, Cricks tries to find out what is the matter with himself. It transpires that Crick was right: he does not exist, but is, in fact, merely a character in a novel. There is much more that might be said about the plot, but for my purposes only one thing is important: the film hands us a superskeptical scenario on a plate. Crick has perceptual experiences, he thinks, he doubts, he hopes, he worries, he falls in love; in short, he leads a full-blown mental life. But he does not exist.

Thus, my proposal for a superskeptical scenario is as follows. As a matter of fact, I do not exist. What exists—among other things—is a novel titled *The Runner in the Wheat*, a worldwide bestseller written by a most prominent author named Joseph Schlesinger. In *The Runner in the Wheat*, Schlesinger tells a story about a mediocre philosopher, Jason Mayfield,

who tries to make the most of his limited talents. As chance would have it, Jason leads a life indistinguishable from mine.[6] *The Runner in the Wheat* not only contains an accurate description of my "outer life"—the things I do and the things happening to me in the actual world—but also of my "inner life"—the things I think, experience and feel in the actual world. Schlesinger does not only tell, for instance, that Jason is preparing a paper titled "Doubts about One's Own Existence" in March of 2014, but he also tells that Jason thinks this and feels that while preparing it. Thus, *The Runner in the Wheat* reads as if it were my private diary. With this scenario, it is possible to fill in the blanks in the preliminary version of my argument:

First premise: If I know that I exist, I know that I am not just the main character of Schlesinger's *The Runner in the Wheat*.

Second premise: I do not know that I am not just the main character of Schlesinger's *The Runner in the Wheat*.

Conclusion: I do not know that I exist.

II. Does Pegasus Have Wings?

But why on earth should one accept the second premise of my argument? Why should one accept that one cannot know that one is not a fictional character? It seems, on the contrary, that it is very easy to show that the second premise is false. One might say: "The main character of Schlesinger's story, Jason Mayfield, does not in fact have any substantial

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[6] For the sake of consistency, suppose that, according to Schlesinger's story, Jason himself thinks that his name is "Wolfgang Barz."

properties,[7] for he is a non-existent object. If he does not have any substantial properties, he surely does not have any mental states. But I *do* have mental states—that much is clear. Thus, Jason Mayfield lacks certain properties that I possess. Therefore, he is not identical with me. So I *know* that I am not Jason Mayfield—I *know* that I am not just a fictional character."

The crucial point, however, is whether it is true that the main character of Schlesinger's story, due to his non-existence, *does not in fact have any substantial properties*. But why suppose that? Think of Pegasus. He, likewise, is a non-existent object. But this does not prevent us from attributing the property of *being winged* to him. Consider the sentence

(1) Pegasus has wings.

According to common sense, (1) is true. Furthermore, it appears that (1) is of the logical form "$F(a)$." Combined with the semantic truism that sentences of the logical form "$F(a)$" are true if and only if a has the property of *being F*, it follows that Pegasus indeed has the property of *being winged*. An analogous argument can be applied to Jason Mayfield. Consider the sentence

(2) Jason Mayfield thinks on Friday, March 7, 2014, 11:10 am, that he is preparing a paper now.

Imagine that, in the counterfactual world described at the end of section I, (2) has a status that is similar to the status that (1) ("Pegasus has wings") has in the actual world. As nearly everyone in the Western Hemisphere of the Earth of the actual world is familiar with the

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[7] By "substantial properties," I mean properties such as *being red*, *being human*, or *being winged*. Examples of non-substantial properties are *being such that x=x*, *being such that p or not-p*, or *being such that x either exists or not*. Admittedly, the distinction between substantial and non-substantial properties is somewhat vague. However, I think this is tolerable, since nothing in what follows depends on this distinction.

character of Pegasus, nearly everyone in the Western Hemisphere of the Earth of the counterfactual world is familiar with the main character of Schlesinger's *The Runner in the Wheat*—Jason Mayfield. And as nearly everyone in the actual Western Hemisphere knows that Pegasus is winged, nearly everyone in the counterfactual Western Hemisphere knows that Jason Mayfield thinks at Friday, March 7, 2014, 11:10 am, that he is preparing a paper now. (To facilitate imagination, let us suppose that *The Runner in the Wheat* contains a key scene in which Mayfield thinks on Friday, March 7, 2014, 11:10 am, that he is preparing a paper now.) Thus, according to the common sense of the people *in the counterfactual world*, (2) is true. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suppose that (2) is of the logical form "$F(a)$"—at least if "a" is taken to represent the name "Jason Mayfield" and "F" the complex predicate "thinks on Friday, March 7, 2014, 11:10 am, that he is preparing a paper now." Combined with the semantic truism that sentences of the logical form "$F(a)$" are true if and only if a has the property of *being F*, it follows that, in the counterfactual world, Jason Mayfield indeed has the property of *thinking on Friday, March, 7 2014, 11:10 am, that he is preparing a paper now*. Therefore, Jason Mayfield, despite his non-existence in the counterfactual world, *has* mental states there.[8]

By generalizing the argument from Pegasus and the argument from Jason Mayfield, one can conclude that fictional characters have at least some substantial properties—to wit, those substantial properties for which they are well known.

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[8] Notice that the scope of this argument is limited to the counterfactual world that I consider as a superskeptical scenario. I do *not* claim that (2) is true according to common sense of the people *in the actual world*—never mind that Jason Mayfield *actually* has the property of *thinking at Friday, March 7, 2014, 11:10 am, that he is preparing a paper now*. In the actual world, the novel *The Runner in the Wheat* does not exist. Thus, there is no fictional character named "Jason Mayfield" at all. In the actual world, then, most people would just shrug their shoulders when asked whether (2) is true. The most likely reaction by inhabitants of the actual world would be the counter-question: "Who the hell is Jason Mayfield?"

To be sure, the foregoing considerations depend heavily on the assumption that common sense is right in assuming that sentences such as "Pegasus has wings" are true. But this assumption can be disputed. So, in order to assess the reasonableness of the claim that fictional characters might have substantial properties, let us take a closer look at two influential accounts according to which sentences such as "Pegasus has wings" are *false*: Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions and the well-known story-operator account. It will emerge that both theories face some serious difficulties. The assumption that common sense is right in assuming that sentences such as "Pegasus has wings" are true should not simply be dismissed because there are compelling alternatives to it. On the contrary, in the face of the deficiencies of Russell's theory and the story-operator account, the assumption that sentences such as "Pegasus has wings" are true appears quite reasonable. Consequently, the claim that fictional characters have at least some substantial properties, problematic as it might be, remains reasonable as well.

According to Bertrand Russell, most expressions that appear to be proper names are disguised definite descriptions. Thus, the expression "Pegasus" is just a proxy for a definite description, for example, "the horse that sprang full-grown from the blood of Medusa after Perseus beheaded her." If, for brevity's sake, we let "*P*" stand for the property of *being a horse that sprang full-grown from the blood of Medusa after Perseus beheaded her*, the sentence "Pegasus has wings" turns into:

(1*)   The *P* has wings.

Applying Russell's theory of descriptions, (1*) in turn goes into logical notation as:

(1**) $\exists x \, (x \text{ is } P \wedge x \text{ has wings} \wedge \forall y \, (y \text{ is } P \rightarrow y = x))$

According to the orthodox reading of the existential quantifier, (1**) is true if and only if

there exists a unique instantiator of P that has wings. However, the unique instantiator of P

does not exist. Thus, (1**) turns out to be false—regardless of whether the unique instantiator

of P has wings or not. But if (1**) is false, (1) is false, too. So the argument from common

sense that Pegasus has the property of *being winged* is blocked.

However, Russell's account is seriously flawed. First, it is doubtful whether *any expression*

that appears to be proper name is a definite description in disguise. Didn't Kripke show that

even ordinary proper names are rigid designators and thus cannot be analyzed with recourse

to definite descriptions? Second, even if we grant that Russell's treatment of ordinary proper

names as disguised descriptions is correct, paraphrases such as (1**) are still problematic.

Suppose that I believe that Pegasus has wings, but that I deny that Pegasus exists. In this case,

the sentence

(3)   W. B. believes that Pegasus has wings

is undoubtedly true. However, if we put this sentence through Russell's mill it becomes

(3*)   W. B. believes that $\exists x$ (x is $P \land x$ has wings $\land \forall y$ (y is $P \to y = x$))

According to the orthodox reading of the existential quantifier, this implies that I believe that

the unique instantiator of P exists. But this is not what I believe. So the paraphrase (3*) is

inadequate in that it imposes a belief on me that I do not hold.

It might be objected that there is second reading of (3) that does better—to wit:

(3**) $\exists x$ (x is P ∧ W. B. believes that x has wings ∧ $\forall y$ (y is $P \rightarrow y = x$))

According to the orthodox reading of the existential quantifier, however, (3**) implies that the unique instantiator of P exists. But this is false. So (3**), too, is inadequate in that it turns a truth into a falsehood.[9]

In the face of these difficulties, one might ask: "Why not just drop the orthodox reading of the existential quantifier? Why not read '$\exists x$ (Fx)' as 'There is something, *whether it exists or not*, that is F'?" Of course, as will be seen, this is a perfectly coherent option. However, it is not available for Russell. Russell's aim is to transform sentences that seem to commit us to the view that non-existent objects have substantial properties into sentences that do not commit us to such a view. If Russell would admit an ontologically neutral reading of the existential quantifier, however, his whole cause would be lost. To see this, consider (1**) again. According to the ontologically neutral reading of the existential quantifier, (1**) is true if and only if there is a unique instantiator of P that has wings—whether it exists or not. In the ontologically neutral reading, then, (1**) is certainly true, since there is a unique, albeit non-existent, instantiator of P that has wings, namely, Pegasus. So, if the ontologically neutral reading of the existential quantifier is taken as fundamental, paraphrases such as (1**) do not succeed in keeping us from the view that non-existent objects have substantial properties. On the contrary, it seems that they encourage us to hold on to this view.

The Russellian treatment of ordinary proper names, however, is not the only way to block the argument from common sense to the conclusion that Pegasus has the property of *being*

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[9] My argument here draws heavily on Routley (1982), p. 166.

winged. A second approach, which is becoming increasingly popular, is to paraphrase sentences about fictional objects by making use of a story-operator. The story-operator account agrees with the Russellian account insofar as both maintain that a sentence such as "Pegasus has wings" is, strictly speaking, false. The accounts differ, however, in that, in contrast to the Russellian account, the story-operator account provides an *explanation* as to why most people are inclined to accept sentences such as "Pegasus has wings" as true. The explanation is that such sentences are elliptical for longer sentences that are formed by prefixing the phrase "according to the relevant story..." to the original sentences. The troublesome sentence "Pegasus has wings," then, turns into an undeniable truth:

(1^+)   According to Greek mythology, Pegasus has wings.

Our inclination to accept (1) ("Pegasus has wings") as true is explained by the fact that, in most contexts, we use (1) as shorthand for (1^+)—or so the story-operator account goes. Now, the truth of (1^+) does not commit us to the view that non-existent objects might have substantial properties—for in contrast to (1), (1^+) does not ascribe the property of *being winged* to Pegasus. Instead, it tells us something about an existent item: Greek mythology.[10]

However, the story-operator account is not free of difficulties either. First, there is a problem in determining exactly *which* sentences about fictional objects can be amended by an appropriate story-operator without changing their meaning. One might say, "All sentences about fictional objects, across the board." But this is untenable. Compare "Pegasus is a fictional character" with "According to Greek mythology, Pegasus is a fictional character":

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[10] For a classical formulation of the story-operator account see Lewis (1978), p. 38: "[I]f I say that Holmes liked to show off, you will take it that I have asserted an abbreviated version of the true sentence 'In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Holmes liked to show off.' As for the embedded sentence 'Holmes liked to show off,' taken by itself with the prefixed operator neither explicitly present nor tacitly understood, we may abandon it to the common fate of subject-predicate sentences with denotationless subject terms: automatic falsity or lack of truth value, according to taste."

while the first sentence is undoubtedly true, the second is undoubtedly false. But if it is inappropriate to regard "Pegasus is a fictional character" as shorthand for "According to Greek mythology, Pegasus is a fictional character," why should it be appropriate to regard "Pegasus has wings" as shorthand for "According to Greek mythology, Pegasus has wings"?

At this point, a proponent of the story-operator account might bring into play the distinction between *inside* and *outside* statements, which was once made by Charles Crittenden. According to Crittenden, examples of inside statements about Sherlock Holmes are: "Holmes smokes a pipe," "Holmes lives in 221B Baker Street," and "Holmes solves crimes." As examples of outside statements, Crittenden cites "Holmes is a fictional character" and "Holmes is created by Arthur Conan Doyle."[11] Referring to Crittenden's distinction, then, one might say: Sentences about fictional objects can be amended by an appropriate story-operator without a change of meaning if and only if they express *inside statements*.

But how should one determine whether a given sentence expresses an inside statement? Crittenden proposes the following criterion: a sentence expresses an inside statement if and only if it could be amended by an appropriate story-operator without change of meaning.[12] This criterion, however, is not available in the present dialectical context. Recall that we are looking for an answer to the question as to which sentences about fictional objects can be amended by an appropriate story-operator without change of meaning, and that the preliminary answer was: all and only sentences that express inside statements. Now, if a sentence expresses an inside statement if and only if it can be amended by an appropriate story-operator without change of meaning, the preliminary answer turns out to be quite circular—for it amounts to something along the following lines: "All sentences that are such

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[11] Cf. Crittenden (1973), pp. 298-99.

[12] Cf. Crittenden (1973), pp. 298-99.

that they can be amended by an appropriate story-operator without a change of meaning can be amended by an appropriate story-operator without change of meaning."

However, even if it is granted that there is a non-question-begging way of specifying what inside statements are, the story-operator account still has its problems. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that a survey of the literature shows that Pegasus is philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object. Thus, anyone who is aware of this fact, and is warranted to accept "Pegasus has winged" as true, will likewise be warranted to accept that

(4)   Philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object has wings.

Viewed from the standpoint of the story-operator account, however, the acceptance of (4) is *not* warranted. Recall that, according to the story-operator account, we are warranted in accepting "Pegasus has wings" as true only insofar as we take it as an abbreviation of "According to Greek mythology, Pegasus has wings." Notice that the latter sentence is *intensional* in the sense that replacement of singular terms that occur in a true statement of identity may result in a change of truth-value. So, even though

Pegasus = philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object

is true, we are not allowed to replace the term "Pegasus" with the term "philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object" within "According to Greek mythology, Pegasus has wings." If, as the story-operator account maintains, "Pegasus has wings" is just shorthand for "According to Greek mythology, Pegasus has wings," then what is true of the latter has to be true of the former. That is, we are not allowed to proceed from "Pegasus has wings" via the true identity statement "Pegasus = philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object" to "Philosophers'

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favorite example of a fictional object has wings." However, it seems that our inclination to accept (4) as true is due to the fact that we have indeed drawn this very inference. Hence, we are not warranted in accepting (4) as true, since our acceptance is based on an *intensional fallacy*. I, for one, find this conclusion quite counterintuitive.[13]

Now, suppose for the sake of argument that the proponent of the story-operator account is willing to grant that, even though (4) is, strictly speaking, false, we are warranted in accepting (4) as true. But why, according to the story-operator account, are we warranted in accepting (4) as true? It won't do to say that we are warranted because we take (4) as an abbreviation of "According to Greek mythology, philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object has wings"—for the latter sentence is undoubtedly false. Greek mythology does not mention any philosopher who gives an example of fictional objects—it just tells us about a winged horse named Pegasus. Neither will it do to say that we are warranted because we take (4) as an abbreviation of "$\exists x$ (x is philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object $\wedge$ according to Greek mythology, x has wings $\wedge$ $\forall y$ (y is philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object $\rightarrow y = x$))"—for this is false as well. The reason is that the latter sentence implies that philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object, i.e., Pegasus, *exists*—which is at odds with truth. So, viewed from the standpoint of the story-operator account, there is no answer to the question why we are warranted in accepting (4) as true. Thus, the proponent of the story-operator account faces the following dilemma: either he is forced to maintain that we are not

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[13] One might object that my diagnosis is incorrect. The reason we are not warranted in accepting (4) as true, one might say, is *not* that we have committed an intensional fallacy, but that our inference is based on a false premise—for, contrary to what I have suggested, the identity statement "Pegasus = philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object" is not true. According to Russell's theory of descriptions, for example, the identity statement dissolves into "$\exists x$ (x is philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object $\wedge$ Pegasus $= x \wedge \forall y$ (y is philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object $\rightarrow y = x$))," which is false, since philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object, Pegasus, does not exist. I do not find this convincing. Notice that the Russellian paraphrase of "Pegasus = philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object" is open to exactly the same objections that I have already raised against the Russellian paraphrase of "Pegasus has wings." Suppose that I believe that Pegasus is philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object. Then "W. B. believes that Pegasus = philosophers' favorite example of a fictional object" is true. However, there seems to be no Russellian paraphrase of the latter sentence that keeps its truth.

warranted in accepting (4) as true—which is counterintuitive; or, if he grants that we are warranted, his account does not offer any explanation as to why this is so—which is undesirable for a theory that claims to provide an adequate model of discourse about fictional objects.

Of course, nothing I have said so far is sufficient to show that the story-operator account is untenable. There might be ways of rebutting my arguments straightforwardly or refining the story-operator account such that it will be immune against my objections. However, the preceding considerations are not meant to deal a deathblow to the story-operator account. Recall the dialectical situation in which the discussion of these matters is embedded. My aim here is to establish the thesis that it is reasonable to doubt one's own existence even in the face of introspective evidence to the effect that one is currently in a certain mental state. It emerged that, in order to accomplish that goal, I have to show that it is reasonable to suppose that fictional characters might have substantial properties. In order to show that, however, I am not committed to prove that all theories that claim the contrary are *false*. Rather, it suffices to show that those theories are fraught with problems in such a way that it is not unreasonable to hold on to the idea that is at stake: that fictional characters might have substantial properties. So, I suggest that we leave the criticism of Russell's analysis and the story-operator account behind and devote ourselves to something more constructive and positive: let us take seriously the idea that fictional characters might have substantial properties and see where it will lead us.

III. Toward a Meinongian View of Fictional Characters

Of course, the most pressing problem with the idea that fictional characters might have substantial properties is that it seems to conflict with what we know about reality and, in the long run, to infringe the law of non-contradiction. Consider the case of Pegasus again. Start with the premise that Pegasus actually has the properties of *being a horse* and *being winged*. Now, what is true of a particular thing has to be true of something. Thus, one is justified in inferring that there is something that actually has both the property of *being a horse* and the property of *being winged*, i.e., that there actually are winged horses—a claim that will be ardently disputed by zoologists.

Almost the same applies to the case of Jason Mayfield. Start with the premise that, in the counterfactual world I have envisaged, Jason Mayfield has a good number of the properties that are attributed to him by Schlesinger's story. Now, what is true of some particular thing has to be true of something. Thus, one is justified in inferring that, in the counterfactual world in question, there is a mediocre philosopher who prepares a paper titled "Doubts about One's Own Existence" in March of 2014, etc. However, the inhabitants of the counterfactual world will ardently deny that there is such an individual among them. Instead, they will inform us that Jason Mayfield is just a fictional character.

It seems, then, that someone who maintains that fictional characters have the properties for which they are well known is forced to claim that *there are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects*—a thesis for which Alexius Meinong is notorious. Meinong's thesis seems weird indeed, at least if we look at it through the translation rules that were drummed into our heads during introductory courses to formal logic. Didn't we learn there to translate

the phrase "there are" into the existential quantifier? By applying this rule to Meinong's thesis, we obtain a contradiction:

$$\exists x \neg \exists y \, (y = x)$$

However, things are not quite so bad as they appear at first glance—for we are not *forced* to interpret Meinong's thesis this way. On the contrary, one might free oneself from logical orthodoxy and translate only the *first* occurrence of "there are" into the existential quantifier and read the *second* occurrence as the existence-predicate:

$$\exists x \, (\neg \text{E!}x)$$

Formalized along these lines, Meinong's thesis is consistent. In order to really understand Meinong's thesis, however, it is necessary to grasp the difference between the idea of *being*,[14] symbolized by the existential quantifier, and the idea of *existence*, symbolized by the predicate "E!".

In my view, the best account available thus far is that given by Parsons (1980).[15] So, in order to plumb the depth of the idea that fictional characters have the properties for which they are

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[14] Perhaps it would be better to use Meinong's notion of *Aussersein* here, since, according to Meinong, the domain of quantification extends over all kinds of objects—even over those that have no being whatsoever. However, in order to be in accordance with Parsons's theory—which I will outline immediately—I will stick to the notion of *being* throughout this paper.

[15] Routley (1980) presents a similar view, though it is less systematically developed. Jacquette's (1996) account has much in common with Parsons's theory. In contrast to Parsons, however, Jacquette prefers a many-valued logic in order to handle incompleteness, a fact which, in my opinion, renders his account less attractive. In addition to that, Reicher (1998), p. 171 f., has noticed that the postulation of a third truth-value is not even necessary, since Jacquette already distinguishes between sentence and predicate negation—which is enough to make incompleteness manageable within the framework of a two-valued logic. To be sure, there are many other philosophers who consider themselves Meinongians as well. However, seen from the view of the present paper, the theories of those philosophers all have some disadvantages. According to Priest (2005), for example, Pegasus does not have wings in the actual world, but has wings in some non-actual worlds, to wit: in those worlds that realize the way Greek mythology represents things to be. To give another example, Zalta (1988) suggests

well known, I would like to briefly outline the essentials of Parsons's theory of non-existent objects. To forestall possible misunderstandings, let me emphasize that I do not intend to claim that Parsons's theory is *immune against any objection*. Instead, my aim here is just to show that Parsons's theory is *reasonable*—for this is all I need in order to justify doubts about my own existence.

As a first step, Parsons prefers to determine the extension of the existence-predicate "E!," not by giving a clear-cut definition, but by enumeration of all and only objects that exist. To avoid the charge of being biased, Parsons leaves this task to those philosophers who are hostile towards the distinction between being and existence. Let us assume, then, that only objects that have received approval by Frege, Russell, and Quine will be listed. In this way, we obtain a list of all and only those objects that are in the extension of "E!" and, at the same time, make up the universe of discourse of Frege, Russell, and Quine (henceforth: FRQ-list).

Given the principle of identity of indiscernibles, there is a one-to-one correspondence between each object on the FRQ-list and a certain set of properties: each object correlates with the set of properties it exemplifies. If we write down the objects on the left hand side and their properties on the right hand side, we obtain the following table:

a_1	$\{F: a_1 \text{ is } F\}$
a_2	$\{F: a_2 \text{ is } F\}$
.	.
.	.
.	.
a_n	$\{F: a_n \text{ is } F\}$

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that Pegasus might possess the property of *being winged*, but not in the same way existent objects possess this property. Pegasus, as Zalta says, *encodes* the property of *being winged*—which, according to Zalta, is not the same as *exemplifying* this property.

In order to grasp the idea of an object that is there but does not exist, Parsons proposes to expand the right hand column by any sets of properties we like that are not on the list yet, for example: {x has wings; x is a horse}.[16] The point here is that each additional set corresponds to exactly one new object, or so Parsons says. So, in addition to every new entry in the right hand column, we are allowed to make an entry in the left hand column. It should be clear that none of these new entries in the left hand column represents objects that exist. For the FRQ-list is already complete. The new entries in the left hand column, then, stand for objects that are there, but do not exist.

If we keep going this way and add *all* sets of properties that are not on the FRQ-list, we get a rather good grasp of the distinction between being and existence:

a_1	{F: a_1 is F}
a_2	{F: a_2 is F}
.	.
.	.
.	.
a_n	{F: a_n is F}
a_{n+1}	{x has wings; x is a horse}
.	.
.	.
.	.
a_{n+m}	{…}

The realm of existence is composed of the objects in the bright area (the former FRQ-list). In contrast, the realm of being is composed of *all* objects, i.e., not only of the objects in the bright area, but also of the objects in the dark area—the domain of non-existent objects.

This is not the whole story, however. There are some complications—sometimes more dramatic, sometimes less—which force Parsons to modify his account in certain respects.

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[16] Unlike Parsons, I represent properties by means of open sentences. Parsons considers the restriction to non-empty sets to be unnecessary. If we admit the non-empty set, however, we have to postulate a "zero object" that does not exemplify any property. Cf. Parsons (1980), p. 22.

According to the unmodified or naive account, as one might say, existence is a property of objects. Thus, it could not be stopped from appearing in the set of properties characterizing an object. Now, consider the set {*x* has wings; *x* is a horse; *x* exists}. If the naive account were true, there would be an object that has wings, is a horse, and exists. Again, the zoologists will protest (and this time they strike a harsher note than before). Even if we are willing to concede that there might be winged horses—in the thin Meinongian sense of "to be there" which is relevant here—, we certainly should not be willing to concede that winged horses *exist*.

For this reason, Parsons modifies the naive account by suggesting that the set of properties that characterize an object should include only *nuclear* properties. Nuclear properties in turn are understood to be those properties that undoubtedly apply to individual objects, for example:

x is a horse

x has wings

x gallops

x carries someone on its back

Jones kisses *x*

Nuclear properties stand in contrast to *extranuclear* properties. The latter are properties in regard to which the philosophical community is divided over whether they apply to individual objects or not.[17] Examples of extranuclear properties are:

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[17] Parsons's distinction between nuclear and extranuclear properties is oriented towards Meinong's distinction between "konstitutorischen" and "außerkonstitutorischen" features of objects. Cf. Meinong (1915), p. 176. In fact, Parsons says: "[I]f everyone agrees that the predicate stands for an ordinary property of individuals, then it is a nuclear predicate and it stands

x exists

x is a fictional character

x is possible

Meinong believes that *x* is a horse

Jones is afraid of *x*

It is not the case that *x* gallops

x is blue or *x* is green[18]

Now, we are in a position to phrase Parsons's modified account without the idea of lists and correlations:

(PAR) $\forall x \exists y \forall z \, [(x$ is a set of nuclear properties $\rightarrow y$ has all and only those nuclear properties belonging to $x) \wedge (z$ has all and only those nuclear properties belonging to $x \rightarrow z{=}y)]$[19]

The restriction to sets of nuclear properties not only solves the problem connected with {*x* has wings; *x* is a horse; *x* exists}, but also enables Parsons to cope with contradictory objects. Consider the set {*x* has wings; ¬(*x* has wings)}. From (PAR) it does not follow that there is an object such that it has wings and it is not the case that it has wings, since the logically complex predicate "¬(*x* has wings)" stands for an extranuclear property.

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for a nuclear property. On the other hand, if everyone agrees that it doesn't stand for an ordinary property of individuals (for whatever reason), or if there is a history of controversy about whether it stands for a property of individuals, then it is an extranuclear predicate, and it does not stand for a nuclear property." (Parsons (1980), p. 24.)

[18] Properties of the kind to which the last two examples belong—call them logically complex properties—are not explicitly cited by Parsons. The text clearly indicates, however, that logically complex properties count among extranuclear properties. This becomes particularly obvious in the course of Parsons's discussion of Platonic forms (cf. Parsons (1980), pp. 227-28).

[19] My formulation melts together two principles that Parsons prefers to keep apart. Cf. Parsons (1980), p. 19.

The distinction between nuclear and extranuclear properties, however, is not the only measure that has to be taken to protect Parsons's account against contradictions. Additional problems are generated by the incompleteness and logical openness of many non-existent objects.[20] An object is incomplete if there is a nuclear property F such that the object in question lacks both F and non-F. An object is logically open if there is a nuclear property F such that the object in question has F but lacks some nuclear properties that are entailed by F. Consider the object that corresponds to the set {x has wings; x is a horse}. According to (PAR), this object, let us call it "א," has exactly those nuclear properties that are included in the set with which it is correlated. Since the nuclear property of *being a mammal* is not included in this set, the following is true:

(5)   א is a horse ∧ ¬(א is a mammal)

On the other hand, we have the intuition that there is a close connection between the property of *being a horse* and the property of *being a mammal*, which is expressed by the following universally quantified conditional:

(6) $\forall x$ (x is a horse → x is a mammal)

(5) and (6), however, imply a contradiction:

(7)   א is a mammal ∧ ¬(א is a mammal)

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[20] Cf. Parsons (1980), pp. 19-22. Parsons adopts the idea of incompleteness and logical openness from Meinong. For an interesting discussion of incomplete and logically open objects cf. Meinong (1915), pp. 170 ff.

In order to cope with this problem, Parsons suggests that universal quantifiers that occur in sentences like (6) have to be restricted to objects that exist.[21] According to Parsons, then, our intuition concerning the connection between the properties of *being a mammal* and *being a horse* is not as universal as it seems to be. It applies to existent objects, but not to non-existent ones. (6), then, is false and has to make way for

(6') $\forall x\,[E!x \rightarrow (x\text{ is a horse} \rightarrow x\text{ is a mammal})]$

Now, recall that ℵ is not only logically open, but also incomplete. This raises another problem. According to (PAR), ℵ has only those nuclear properties that are included in the set with which it is correlated. Since neither the nuclear property of *being brown* nor its negation *being not-brown* is included in this set, the following is true:

(8) $\neg(\aleph\text{ is brown}) \wedge \neg(\aleph\text{ is not-brown})$

According to logical orthodoxy, predicate and sentence-negation are equivalent—a thesis that is expressed by

(9) $\forall x\,[x\text{ is not-}F \leftrightarrow \neg(x\text{ is }F)]$[22]

Again, (8) and (9) imply a contradiction:

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[21] As far as I can see, Parsons (1980) does not deal with this exact problem. I extrapolate his reaction from the discussion of an analogous case on pp. 38-42.

[22] Cf. Russell (1919), p. 43: "[W]hen the word 'not' occurs, it cannot be taken as a qualification of the predicate. For instance, if you say that 'This is not red', you might attempt to say that 'not-red' is a predicate, but that of course won't do [...]. The proper expression would be 'not: this is red'; the 'not' applies to the whole proposition 'this is red' [...]."

(10)   ¬(א is brown) ∧ א is brown

Once more, Parsons feels compelled to restrict the universal quantifier in the crucial premise.[23] According to him, equivalence of predicate and sentence-negation only applies to existent objects:

(9') $\forall x$ [E!x → (x is not-F ↔ ¬(x is F))]

(9') nicely illustrates Parsons's concept of *nuclear negation*. The nuclear negation of F, Parsons tells us, is the nuclear property that existent objects have if and only if they don't have F.[24] The point here is that, in the case of non-existent objects, lacking F does not go hand in hand with having not-F. This can be spelled out in two ways. First, the fact that a non-existent object lacks the property of *being F* does not imply that it has the property of *being not-F*. Second, from the fact that a non-existent object has the property of *being not-F*, it does not follow that it lacks the property of *being F*. This sounds complicated at first, but it is simpler than it seems. Let α be some existent object that is brown all over, let β be some existent object that is white all over, let א be the non-existent object that corresponds to the set {x has wings; x is a horse}, and let ב be the non-existent object that corresponds to the set {x is brown; x is not-brown}. Then one has the following assignments of truth-values:[25]

	α	β	א	ב
… is brown	T	F	F	T
… is not-brown	F	T	F	T
¬(… is brown)	F	T	T	F
¬(… is not-brown)	T	F	T	F

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[23] Parsons (1980) does not explicitly deal with this problem. I reconstruct his reaction from his remarks about nuclear negation on p. 19 and pp. 105-106.

[24] Cf. Parsons (1980), p. 19.

[25] The entries in the four last rows of the column second from left gives the truth-values of "α is brown," "α is not-brown," "¬(α is brown)" and "¬(α is not-brown)" (and similarly with the other entries).

On Parsons's account, there is just no object that has both a "T" in the first and the third row or both a "T" in the second and fourth row, respectively. Thus, Parsons need not resort to many-valued logic in order to cope with incompleteness. He can handle sentences about incomplete objects within the classical two-valued framework without the risk of contradiction.

To sum up, there are at least three measures Parsons has to take in order to protect his account against inconsistency. First, he has to distinguish between nuclear and extranuclear properties; second, he has to deny that to have the property of *being F* is to have all properties that *F* entails; third, he has to claim that lacking the property of *being F* is not the same as having the property of *being not-F*. Notice that Parsons does not revise any fundamental laws of logic. In particular, he does not infringe the law of non-contradiction. Thus, the original problem with the view that fictional characters have the properties for which they are well known, i.e., the problem that it drives us into the arms of Meinongianism, proves less dramatic than expected—for Meinongianism is not as bad as it is often claimed to be. Quite the contrary, Meinongianism is a perfectly coherent position.

IV. Where Is Pegasus? And Where Am I?

Let us take stock for a moment. Parsons gives us a consistent theory of non-existent objects. What do we need it for? For understanding the distinction between *being* and *existence*. Why distinguish between *being* and *existence*? Because we need to make sense of Meinong's thesis that there are objects about which it is true that there are no such objects. Why is that needed? Because we have assumed, on a trial basis, that Pegasus has wings, though he does not exist.

Why assume that? Because we are interested in constructing a superskeptical scenario in which a person has certain mental states, even though he or she does not exist. In short, Parsons's theory was employed to defend the thesis that it is at least reasonable that, in the counterfactual world in question, Jason Mayfield, though a fictional character, has the same mental states as I actually have.

However, we are not home and dry yet. Consider Pegasus once again. Of course, Parsons's theory provides us with plenty of non-existent objects. But it is far from clear *which* non-existent object Pegasus is. Consider the following segment of the dark area of Parsons's list:

a_{n+1}	{x has wings; x is a horse}
a_{n+2}	{x has wings; x is a horse; x was tamed by Bellerophon}
a_{n+3}	{x has wings; x is a horse; x was tamed by Bellerophon; x was born from Medusa's head}
.	.
.	.
.	.

Which object is identical to Pegasus? Since (PAR) gives no answer, Parsons supplements his account with a principle that enables us to identify fictional objects: a fictional object A is identical to the object that corresponds to the set of all and only those nuclear properties that are attributed to A in the story in which A was created.[26] Certainly, this principle leaves many questions unanswered. For example, which nuclear properties does Faust have according to Goethe's play? More importantly: which story is the one in which Faust is created? Besides Goethe's play there are a good many other literary works dealing with Faust: Spies's "Volksbuch," Marlowe's "The Tragical History of D. Faustus," Klinger's "Fausts Leben, Thaten und Höllenfahrt." and so on. Or will it turn out that Faust is not a fictional character at all, but an actual person who lived at the beginning of the sixteenth century? But philosophy

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[26] Cf. Parsons (1980), p. 55.

cannot answer all questions. So Parsons is well advised to leave the answers to literary studies.

Nevertheless, there is an issue here that Parsons should address. Many stories describe situations in which non-existent objects interact with existent objects. For example, according to Greek mythology, Pegasus returned to Olympus after Bellerophon's death. According to Parsons's account, it is true, then, that Pegasus has the property of visiting Olympus at least once in his lifetime. And if that is true, it seems that it must also be true that Olympus has the property of being visited by Pegasus. However, Olympus does not have this property. Olympus never had (and never will have) the pleasure of being visited by Pegasus—for Pegasus does not exist.

The first step of Parsons's response is to reframe the problem by applying a certain notational device. If "$x \mathrm{V} y$" is an open sentence expressing the relation of visiting, then let "$x[\mathrm{V}y]$" be an open sentence expressing the monadic property of visiting-y and let "$[x\mathrm{V}]y$" be an open sentence expressing the monadic property of being-visited-by-x. The problem, then, is raised by a transition from

(11)   Pegasus [V Olympus]

to

(12)   [Pegasus V] Olympus

This transition, however, is valid only if we subscribe to an additional premise:

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(13) $\forall x \forall y \forall R \, (x[Ry] \leftrightarrow [xR]y)$

And there's the rub. Once again, Parsons makes a case for the restriction of universal

quantifiers and claims that (13) has to make way for

(13') $\forall x \forall y \forall R \, ((E!x \wedge E!y) \rightarrow (x[Ry] \leftrightarrow [xR]y))$[27]

After this slight digression, let us return to the question as to where Pegasus is. According to

Parsons's account, Pegasus is neither identical to a_{n+1}, nor to a_{n+2}, nor to a_{n+3}. Instead, he is

identical to the object that corresponds to the set of all and only those nuclear properties that

Pegasus has according to Greek mythology (whatever those nuclear properties are):

a_{n+1}	{x has wings; x is a horse}
a_{n+2}	{x has wings; x is a horse; x was tamed by Bellerophon}
a_{n+3}	{x has wings; x is a horse; x was tamed by Bellerophon; x was born from Medusa's head}
.	.
a_{n+x}	{F: According to Greek mythology, Pegasus is F}
.	.

Now, what does all this mean for the question as to whether the counterfactual world, in

which the most prominent author Joseph Schlesinger has written a novel titled *The Runner in*

the Wheat, is a superskeptical scenario? Imagine that Frege, Quine, and Russell pay this

counterfactual world a visit and take stock of all and only the objects that exist there. Of

course, *I* would not appear on their list. However, in the dark area of the extended list would

appear an object that is the spitting image of me: the object that corresponds to the set of all

and only nuclear properties attributed by Schlesinger to the main character of his *The Runner*

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[27] Cf. Parsons (1980), pp. 59-60.

in the Wheat, i.e., Jason Mayfield. According to Parsons, Jason Mayfield *literally has* all the

nuclear properties attributed to him by Schlesinger. Just as Pegasus literally has the properties

of *being a horse*, *having wings*, and *being tamed by Bellerophon*, Jason Mayfield literally has

the properties of *preparing a paper titled "Doubts about One's Own Existence"* and *thinking*

this and feeling that during preparing it. That is, Jason Mayfield believes exactly the same

things as I do now. Moreover, he is undergoing exactly the same visual experiences, thinking

exactly the same thoughts, feeling exactly the same bodily sensations, and enduring exactly

the same emotions as I. In short, Jason Mayfield leads a mental life that is introspectively

indistinguishable from mine. This raises the question of how I am supposed to know that I am

not Schlesinger's creature. How would I know that my entry is on the *bright* side of the list,

and not on the *dark* side?[28]

Where am I?
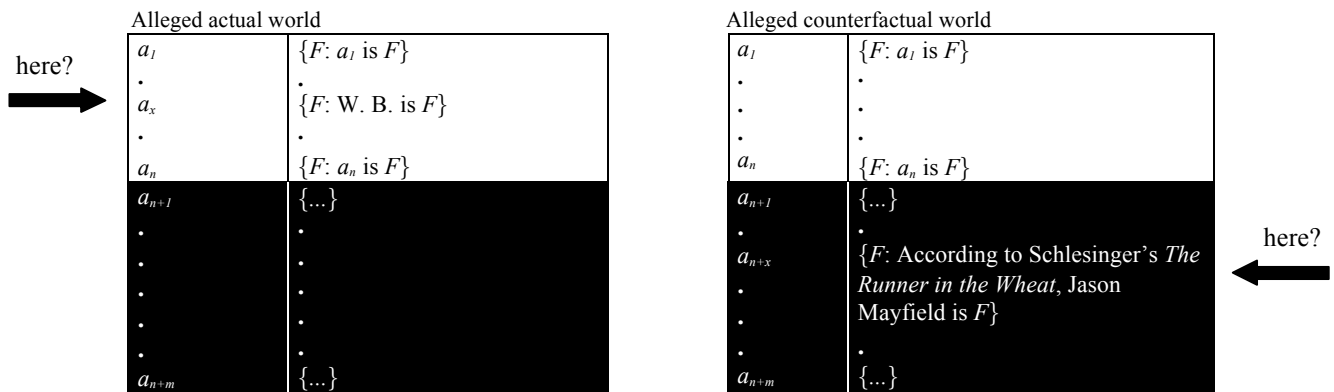
All this may seem bizarre. One is tempted to say, "What kind of stupid question is this? I *feel*

and *see* my own body; I *have* thoughts and emotions; I *experience* a rich variety of perceptual

sensations. This is exactly what makes me sure that I am *not* on the dark side of the list." The

problem with this reasoning should be clear. Exactly the same applies to Schlesinger's creature:

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[28] Cf. Parsons (1980), pp. 217-219, where the general idea of this problem is developed.

he, too, is feeling and seeing his body; he, too, is having thoughts and emotions; he, too, is experiencing a rich variety of perceptual sensations; and he, too, is firmly convinced that he himself is not on the dark side of the list.

One might try another line of attack: "Fictional objects typically are incomplete; since all existent objects are complete, it is impossible for you to be identical with Schlesinger's creature. So, you don't need to be worried about your own existence." But this objection begs the question. The issue is not whether existent objects could ever be identical with fictional objects—of course, they cannot. Rather, the issue is *how I would know that I exist*. By presupposing that I am complete, the objection presupposes that I exist and thus presupposes what is currently in dispute.

V. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me rehearse the "superskeptical" argument that I formulated at the end of section I:

First premise: If I know that I exist, I know that I am not just the main character of Schlesinger's *The Runner in the Wheat*.

Second premise: I do not know that I am not just the main character of Schlesinger's *The Runner in the Wheat*.

Conclusion: I do not know that I exist.

The burden of my paper has been to show that the second premise is a reasonable one. Since its reasonableness depends heavily upon the reasonableness of the idea that the main character

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of Schlesinger's *The Runner in the Wheat* has the same mental states as I have, I have tried to show that it is reasonable to suppose that fictional characters have at least some of the properties for which they are well known. For this purpose, I drew on Parsons's theory of non-existent objects, which states that fictional objects have those nuclear properties that are attributed to them in the relevant works of fiction. Parsons's view, though far from being beyond criticism, proved to be a reasonable position to take. Therefore, I conclude that, in contrast to what is often supposed, there is indeed *rational support* for doubting one's own existence—even in the face of introspective evidence to the effect that one is currently in a certain mental state.

Acknowledgements

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