Voltolini's *Ficta*

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As the subtitle "A Syncretistic Account of Fictional Entities" makes clear, Alberto Voltolini intends in this book to argue for a syncretic view of the ontology and the semantics of fiction. In the process, he offers sympathetic and clear presentations of the main contenders in the field, discussing first ontological matters (chapters 1–4) and then semantic questions (chapters 5–6), and concluding with an 'ontological' argument for the allegedly syncretic brand of realism about fictional entities he has by then endorsed. The book will therefore be very useful for all those who want to have a guided overview of the state of the art in the field, and very helpful if used as a main text for an introductory graduate course.

Syncretic ambitions in this field are understandable: philosophical views such as the ones on the ontology and the semantics of fiction constituting the Scylla and Charybdis between which Voltolini purports to steer his course have a handful of intuitions and some theoretical considerations to speak for them. Putting philosophical skepticism aside, in order to assume thereby that the views from which the syncretist takes his pick are in fact inconsistent with each other, the obvious problem that the syncretist risks is that his proposal either ends up being 'unstable', as polite philosophers say these days, or surreptitiously aligns itself with one of the contenders. I will here voice my doubts that Voltolini has ultimately avoided these pitfalls. I will thus concentrate on the chapters in which he advances his own views; some of the objections that I will raise apply *mutatis mutandis* to corresponding criticisms he makes of the alternative views that play a role in motivating the syncretist view. As I said, I think that Voltolini offers very good introductions to the alternative views, and well-taken diagnoses of their problems.

Although the book is organized so that the metaphysical issues are discussed before the semantic ones, it will be more convenient for my own presentation to begin with semantic issues before turning to the ontological argument for the existence of (allegedly syncretic) ficta with which Voltolini concludes his book.

The two opposing semantic views that Voltolini discusses are *committal* and *non-committal* accounts of fictional discourse. Voltolini is very sensitive to how

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variegated that discourse can be, although perhaps the reader may feel at times a little lost among the riches of an ever-expanding taxonomy. Here I will consider only the most important cases:

(1)   Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls
(2)   Leopold Bloom is a fictional character
(3)   Leopold Bloom does not exist

As Voltolini rightly insists, the fundamental semantic issues that fiction raises do not directly have to do with a semantic account of the sentences themselves, but rather with one of their uses. Note that here I am using 'semantic account' in an extended sense. Nowadays it is used to refer to a part of a theoretical account of natural language, distinguished from the accounts provided by syntax and especially from pragmatics. In this narrow sense, it may well be that there is no semantic account for (most, some of) the uses we are considering.

Thus, consider first an utterance of (1) by Joyce, as part of the longer utterance by him of the full discourse that, with a measure of idealization, we can think constitutes the creation of *Ulysses*. A semantic account of natural language is concerned mainly with explaining the datum of systematicity, the fact that we can understand new sentences, by providing a compositional account of the contributions of expressions, lexical units and phrases built out of them in accordance with syntax, ultimately to the content of the assertions made by default in uttering declarative sentences. That being so, it may well be that semantics should reduce itself to saying, with respect to (1), that it signifies a necessarily untrue 'gappy' content.[1] The speaker of (1) we are considering should then be interpreted as intending to do something else in addition to signifying that gappy content; but this is, say, for pragmatics to describe theoretically.

Now, semantics in this restricted sense is so-called because the theoretical account it provides deals with properties of which we have intuitive notions, such as *meaning* and *reference*, but the remaining task of accounting in a theoretically elaborated way for what Joyce intended to do, here left for pragmatics, will also appeal to theoretical elaborations of *meaning*, *reference* and their cognates. It is thus justified to appeal to a wider, philosophical notion of *semantics*, which encompasses what, in the more restricted sense, may be put in the pragmatics basket: anything theoretically sufficiently elaborated so as to provide answers to sensible questions posed in terms of those intuitive notions such as *meaning, reference* and cognates – questions *prima facie* deserving carefully researched answers.

Most philosophers nowadays would be happy with a *non-committal* account of the semantics in this wide sense of Joyce's utterance – one not committed to the

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[1] This is the view that Sainsbury (2005) forcefully argues for view.

existence of fictional entities. The most popular among such accounts are varia-tions on Walton's (1990) deservedly influential theory. On the one that I myself (García-Carpintero, 2007) like, Joyce's utterance is not an assertion, but a different speech act of pretending or make-believe, which should be understood in terms of norms stating contents that proper appreciators of Joyce's tale should *imagine*.

Voltolini's syncretism accepts thus far non-committal theories, agreeing thereby that uses such as Joyce's (which Voltolini, following Evans (1982), calls 'conniving') do not involve fictional entities. However, I am not sure that he is sufficiently sensitive to the difficulties that Walton's own proposal or the related one by Evans face. Evans follows Walton's appeal to practices of make-believe, but Walton follows Evans in assuming a very strong non-descriptivist version of referentialism for (most uses of) singular terms, according to which sentences including empty singular terms lack content, whether or not they are embedded in intensional contexts. Now, even if Joyce's act is not an assertion but rather an invitation to his readers' imagination, the purported imaginings should nonetheless have contents; and non-descriptivists must tell us what, on their view, the contri-bution of names such as 'Mr. Leopold Bloom' to such contents is. Evans correctly disparages Kripke's attempts on that score in his unpublished Locke lectures, but I do not think he is ultimately more successful, and the same applies to Walton's own efforts.

Now, although Voltolini commits himself to some form of non-descriptivism in his criticisms of other views, he does not explicitly support the strong Evans–McDowell line. The reader, however, is entitled to expect some elaboration of the semantics of the conniving use of empty singular terms that dispels these doubts, but this expectation is not fulfilled. Perhaps he would repudiate the Evans–McDowell line in favour of a weaker form of non-descriptivism such as the one in Sainsbury (2005). The worry then is whether his criticisms of rival non-committal intensionalist accounts (briefly described later), which are based mainly on the descriptivist commitments of those accounts, could be defended; for weaker ver-sions of referentialism may well presuppose the descriptivist commitments those intentionalist accounts, as Voltolini in my view correctly points out, presuppose.

Perhaps the reason why Voltolini does not appreciate the potential problems for strong referentialists to account in a duly non-committal way for conniving uses lies in the fact that he allows himself to offer an admittedly metaphorical account of the semantics of those uses, whose cash value he never provides: a make-believe practice postulates "an *imaginary* "world," the "world" [*sic*: both the italics and the scare-quotes are in the original, M.G.-C.] that the story-tale mock-describes. This is the "world" [. . .] inhabited both by actual and by imaginary, typically concrete, individuals. Undoubtedly, this "world" exists within the scope of that make-believe practice, but in fact it does not exist at all and neither do its imaginary "inhabitants." [. . .] Yet, there is a sense in which that "world" can still be regarded

as a *bona fide* world given that it works as a circumstance of evaluation for (fictional) sentences in their conniving use" (p. 189).

The most popular argument these days for realism about fictional entities is van Inwagen's (1977) Quinean appeal to non-eliminable quantification over and reference to such entities in serious, truth-evaluable discourse, such as in utterances of (2) in contexts of literary criticism. As we are about to see, Voltolini does not take this to be the most important consideration for the form of realism his syncretic account assumes. But I think he would agree that these forms of argument (also deployed, for instance, in Williamson's (2001) well-known defence of the existence of *possibilia*) work at least to make us aware of what we appear to be committing ourselves to when we speak seriously in a theoretical context. One should then be wary of claims such as the one I just quoted, and immediately go on to provide a paraphrase showing clearly that one does not need to commit oneself to entities whose very existence one disowns. The book does not meet this requirement, I must say. Whenever Voltolini provides the semantics of the allegedly non-committal conniving uses of fictional names such as 'Mr. Leopold Bloom' in (1), he allows himself the same talk of utterances made in imaginary 'worlds' 'inhabited' by concrete entities that in fact do not exist, but somehow manages to make those utterances true by providing adequate circumstances of evaluation for them; see, for example, pp. 76–77.

Let us move to other uses of sentences involving fictional names. There is, first, the use of sentences such as (1) that we make when we are stating the content of a fiction, for instance when we precede it with something like '*Ulysses* has it that . . .'. Given their referentialism, Evans and Walton cannot accept that these are the truth-evaluable straightforward assertions they appear to be, because, as I said before, the emptiness of 'Mr. Leopold Bloom' still renders them devoid of assertable content. And the same is true of sentences such as (4):

(4)   *Ulysses* asks one to imagine that Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls

Instead, they suggest that these uses of (1) are not assertions, but other speech-acts akin to those in which authors themselves engage; they are a form of pretence, a game of make-believe of our own that we play, as it were, going along with the one initially played by the author. Voltolini agrees that such a non-committal line can be pursued concerning some uses like those we have considered, which he also labels 'conniving'. In order to adopt a fully fledged non-committal view, Walton extends this line even to utterances of (2) and (3), which are *prima facie* even more straightforwardly truth-evaluable, indeed true assertions. My previous doubts suggest that these manoeuvres lead nowhere, because, even if they are understood as speech-acts other than assertions, Evans' views leave us without contents for the alternative acts. And aside from that, many philosophers would

reject any suggestion that the typical use of (2), or the 'content-reporting' uses of (1) we are considering, is something other than a straightforward true assertion, using this fact to mount what I described before as the most popular argument for a committal view – the van Inwagen one based on Quinean views on ontological commitment.

Voltolini accepts this, and his acceptance constitutes part of the justification for the committal side of his syncretism; he grants that there is a 'non-conniving' content-reporting use of (1). In fact, he criticizes van Inwagen and his followers for limiting themselves, in arguing for *ficta*, to uses such as (2). He argues, I think convincingly, that most ordinary truth-evaluable discourse suggestive of a commitment to fictional entities is of the content-reporting sort, and that the primary function of positing fictional entities should be to account for them, not just for cases such as (2). In accordance with this, he mounts the interesting criticism that I have already mentioned of the most popular non-committal way of accounting for those content-reporting uses, intensionalist proposals such as the very influential one in Lewis (1978), according to which those content-reporting uses of sentences such as (1) are elliptic for claims such as (4).

A problem for committal accounts of the uses of (1) we are currently considering is that fictional characters such as that allegedly referred to by 'Mr. Leopold Bloom' do not exemplify the properties ascribed to them in those uses, such as the property of *eating with relish [. . .]*, at least not in the straightforward sense in which they exemplify properties like that ascribed in (2), *being a fictional character*. Fictional characters are usually taken to be abstract entities, which do not enter into causal processes such as that of ingesting food. Among the several ways proposed by friends of fictional entities to deal with this, Voltolini judiciously chooses (rather than the alternative of distinguishing different kinds of properties) the proposal (by van Inwagen, and others) of distinguishing an 'external' sense of predication – the ordinary one, invoked on these views to ascribe properties to a fictional character in (2) – from an 'internal' one, on which a fictional character 'has' a property if and only if it is ascribed to it in a relevant fiction; this is the way to understand predication in content-reporting uses of (1). I am unclear whether this appeal to a peculiar sense of predication, explicated along the lines mentioned, does not in fact presuppose in a covert way the intensionalist proposal, and thus whether and to what extent this is coherent with Voltolini's criticisms of that proposal, forceful as they are.

Although Voltolini wants to account for the semantics of names such as 'Bloom' both in content-reporting uses of (1) and in what for the intensionalist are their more explicit synonyms such as (4) by taking them to refer to fictional characters, he stops short of a similar account of determiner or quantificational phrases in similar positions, as in content-reporting uses of (5) and (6), or their intensionalist-friendly paraphrases (7) and (8):

(5)   Molly's husband ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls
(6)   Some Dubliner ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls
(7)   *Ulysses* asks one to imagine that Molly's husband ate with relish the inner
          organs of beasts and fowls
(8)   *Ulysses* asks one to imagine that some Dubliner ate with relish the inner
          organs of beasts and fowls

The reasons Voltolini gives for resisting an account of (5), (6) or their embedded counterparts in (7) and (8), on which the determiners quantify (assuming the definite description to do so) over a domain of fictional entities are well taken: "the problem with the community of uruk-hai (as well as with that of dwarves, elves, hobbits, etc.) is that the identity of these alleged characters is totally indeterminate. How many uruk-hai are there in the fictional "world" of Tolkien?" (p. 209). Friends of fictional entities have a well-known problem with their identity conditions; Everett (2005) forcefully presses this point.

To deal with this, Voltolini cashes out the commitment to stories in his semantics for the content-reporting, non-conniving uses of (1), (5) and (6), and their (according to him equivalent) intensionalist paraphrases (4), (7) and (8), as a commitment to sets of propositions, not to worlds (p. 191). Propositions are structured entities; in the case of those corresponding to basic subject–predicate sentences they may be structured by 'internal' or 'external' predication. Although the truth of such a use of (1) requires the existence of one such singular proposition, with a fictional character in its subject-place and internal predication, (5) or (6) require merely general propositions, also structured by internal predication for all properties involved.

I must say I cannot see how this helps. Talk of sets of propositions as opposed to worlds, by itself, can hardly do the trick, given that for many philosophers worlds are just sets of propositions. As Voltolini rightly insists, the proposition corresponding to the content-reporting use of (1) is true *tout court*, true in the actual world (remember, it is structured with internal predication, which conveys the point that the relevant fact, albeit obtaining in the actual world, states only that the story, *Ulysses*, ascribes the property to the character). But the same should apply to the propositions corresponding to the content-reporting uses of (5) and (6), especially because we want the propositions to account for entailment relations from (1) to (6), say, on the assumption that Bloom is a Dubliner. Even if we grant that the structuring is internal, I cannot see how this does not commit Voltolini to the quantifiers *actually* having an adequate domain, including entities such as the referent of 'Bloom', even if they are only internally assumed to instantiate properties such as *being a Dubliner* or *eating with relish*; and thus to there really being in the actual world those entities whose identity conditions he himself grants are unclear, such as the many uruk-hai of which the *Lord of the Rings* talks.

In summary, I have so far raised doubts about whether Voltolini can really give a non-committal account of conniving uses, given his endorsement of referentialism; and, most worryingly, about whether he can keep his commitment to fictional entities in his account of non-conniving uses without embracing the problematic fully-fledged form of fictional realism he wants to keep away from. I have suggested that metaphorical talk of non-existing worlds, even when it is cashed out in terms of commitment to structured propositions, may obscure this.

Let us now consider the metaphysical side of Voltolini's syncretism. Here the syncretism lies, I take it, in the rejection of Meinongian and Platonistic forms of realism in favour of a realism according to which *ficta* are entities dependent on concrete practices: *ficta* are thus created entities. Voltolini's view is weaker than other forms of creationism, such as Thomasson's (1999) and Schiffer's (2003) now popular view. Although Thomasson and Schiffer contend that it is the activities of the author of the fiction that bring about fictional entities, Voltolini argues that it is only 'outside' them that *ficta* are created (cf. pp. 85–86): the practices bringing them about are, I take it, those speech-acts that, according to his semantic proposal, do commit one to fictional entities, such as non-conniving content-reporting uses of (1), or utterances of (2). This is not crystal clear in the book; for instance, on p. 79 we read that two independently necessary conditions, a make-believe process (which, I assume, can consist merely in conniving utterances) and a set of properties 'mobilized' in it are jointly sufficient to constitute a *fictum*. Mostly, however, the book makes claims closer to the view as I have presented it: "a fictional individual is a compound entity consisting of both a make-believe process-type and the set of properties mobilized in that process, *as a result of seeing that process-type as regarding that set*" (p. 89, my italics; note that Voltolini uses 'type' in a, to my ears, peculiar sense, according to which causal-intentional relations are part of the identity conditions of types, so that those 'types' are concrete entities, cf. pp. 70–71).

This view is a bit peculiar. The identity of a fictional entity is given by (i) a concrete make-believe process, constituted by the conniving uses of the author and perhaps others causal-intentionally related to them, such as conniving content-reporting uses by the author's audience, and (ii) the properties ascribed in that process, explicitly or implicitly, relying on inferences. (To account for intuitions concerning modal properties of *ficta*, say, whether or not it is essential to Holmes that he lives in a certain street, Voltolini allows for the identity conditions of *ficta* to depend not on the whole – but vaguely defined – make-believe process, but only on some parts of it; this makes an already vague notion vaguer, but it might be intuitively accurate.) The problem is how all this fits with a realist stance. Throughout the book, Voltolini expresses well-taken reservations about what he calls

'intentionalism', the view that seemingly referential thought (including daydreaming, imagination and so on) requires the existence of the entities it is about. He criticizes Thomasson's creationism on the same basis; to the extent that daydreaming that one is in the company of elves does not require the existence of elves, make-believe assertions about Holmes by Conan-Doyle or by his readers do not require the existence of Holmes, the fictional character. But why, then, does "seeing a make-believe process as regarding a set of properties" require the existence of that set-plus-process entity? I put aside worries that anybody (aside from Voltolini and those he manages to convince) has ever been involved in 'seeing' any make-believe process 'as regarding' any set of properties; I assume that Voltolini would take a deflationary attitude here, assuming that whenever any ordinary speaker engages in a non-conniving use of fictional discourse, she is involved in such an act.

Consider the alternative, fully non-committal view that I myself consider correct, along the lines of the proposal in Yablo (2001); this seems to me the natural stance for anybody sharing Voltolini's general doubts towards positing intentional objects. On this view, when we appear to be committing ourselves to fictional entities in non-conniving uses we are just 'hypostatizing' (i.e. using metaphorically the referential apparatus of our language) the referential feature conventionally associated with proper names, indexicals, and (perhaps merely non-conventionally) with definite descriptions, together with the quantificational expressions inferentially linked to them. We are not seriously referring to anything, which is why we (unlike Voltolini, if the worry expressed above is well founded) do not need to fret about how many fictional uruk-hai our non-conniving discourse about *The Lord of the Rings* commits us to, or about indeterminacies such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, as Everett (2005) rightly insists. Last but not least, we can provide an intuitively straightforward account of the truth of (3); Voltolini (pp. 218–220) thinks he can deal with this by following suggestions by Thomasson and others, but he should not be so confident, as Everett (2007) argues.

Now, what is Voltolini's argument for preferring his view to such a "fictionalism about fictional entities" (Brock, 2002)? He concludes the book with a chapter that gives an ontological argument for the sort of *ficta* he posits. I am not sure I have fully understood it; my doubts are related to the previous ones about his variety of creationism. This is how I take the argument to go. He considers a 'Menard' case. In Borges' original story, the make-believe activities of Pierre Menard are causal-intentionally related to those of Cervantes; and Menard writes at a different time. This, as Borges suggests, explains why the content of the story he ends up writing, even though word-by-word identical to the one produced by Cervantes, nonetheless differs from the latter; for the implicit side of content depends in part on inferences relying on what is mutually known when the author

writes. In Voltolini's example, the activities of the two Menard-like authors are independent of each other, and they occur more or less at the same time, so that the relevant presuppositions are the same. Voltolini assumes that we have a firm intuition that the stories thus produced are still different. This might already be questioned, but let us grant it. Then he argues that this cannot be accounted for merely by appeal to the different make-believe processes, individuated in a non-semantic way. They must be individuated semantically; and this is supposed to require singular terms such as 'Don Quixote' to refer to fictional entities: "If we admit a certain kind of entity, we cannot but admit all the other entities that figure in the identity conditions of such an entity. We admit fictional works; so we cannot but also admit fictional objects because they figure in the identity conditions of fictional works" (p. 241).

As I said, I am not sure I understand this argument. According to Voltolini, a make-believe process by itself does not bring fictional characters into existence; it is only when someone adopts non-conniving attitudes towards it that these are created. In possible worlds in which, after their fiction-making activities, the two Menards put their manuscripts in a drawer, neither they nor anybody else ever think non-connivingly about them, so no new Don Quixote has been created. However, I assume that their two processes are not just 'syntactic' entities; the acts in which they engage have contents, already constitute different fictional works, and thus they have a semantic characterization that does not require the existence of fictional characters. So, I am not sure, under Voltolini's assumptions, even granting his premises, why the conclusion he wants follows. Perhaps the idea is that, to the extent that we think of a fictional work, we are already adopting a 'non-conniving' attitude, which thus requires the fictional work to be individuated in part by fictional characters. But what about the possible world previously considered? Do the two make-believe processes constitute different fictional works even there? These problems would evaporate if Voltolini embraced the more standard form of creationism defended by Thomasson and others, but then his criticisms of Thomasson's very similar argument for *ficta* (pp. 241–245) would of course be unwarranted. And the bunch of considerations I have offered throughout this review in favour of a fictionalist alternative would still remain unanswered.

In spite of doubts like these (which, of course, any interesting philosophical work would provoke), I would like to conclude by repeating the recommendation I gave at the beginning. The book has many merits that I have not been able to explore. For instance, the first two chapters discuss the merits of the various realist theories already on the market, with respect to a set of well-selected pieces of data that theories should account for; and chapter 4 contains a very interesting discussion of whether or not non-empty names, such as 'Napoleon' when used in *War and Peace* or in relation to it, refer as they do in ordinary assertions. I hope I

have conveyed to the reader the many virtues of the book that justify that recommendation.*

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