



## Making the Lightness of Being Bearable: Arithmetical Platonism, Fictional Realism and Cognitive Command

BILL WRINGE

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# *Making the Lightness of Being Bearable: Arithmetical Platonism, Fictional Realism and Cognitive Command*

BILL WRINGE  
Bilkent University  
06800 Bilkent  
ANKARA  
TURKEY

## **I Introduction**

In this paper I wish to defend a minimalist version of arithmetical Platonism — which I shall refer to as ‘minimal Platonism’ — from an objection which alleges that an advocate of this view is committed to an unduly capacious ontology.<sup>1</sup> The objection, which I shall call the ‘Lightness of Being’ objection, runs as follows. The minimal Platonist is committed to the claim that arithmetical objects, such as numbers, exist provided that two conditions are met. The first is that terms for numerals are singular terms — where something’s being a singular

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1 For the minimal Platonist view see Wright 1983 and for an approach to metaphysical issues which supports his approach to questions about mathematical existence Wright 1992. For the objection (and its name) see Divers and Miller 1995. Cf also Hale and Wright 2002, 113 for a statement which suggests some sympathy with the objection. For a more general critique see Moltmann 2004.

term is judged on the basis of purely syntactic criteria.<sup>2</sup> The second is that some sentences in which these singular terms feature are non-trivially true.<sup>3</sup> However, the names of fictional characters are also singular terms (when judged by the metaphysically lightweight criteria used by advocates of minimal Platonism). Furthermore some sentences which feature in fictional discourse — sentences such as

(B) ‘Holmes lives in Baker Street’

and

(H) ‘Hamlet acts as though he is mad’

may plausibly be judged to be true. So, by parity of reasoning, fictional characters must exist. But this is a *reductio ad absurdum*: it offends against the ‘robust sense of reality’ which a level-headed Platonist ought to cultivate.

Divers and Miller (1995, 132-6) — to whom the objection is due — have already argued that a number of initially attractive responses to this problem do not stand up to scrutiny. These include reading sentences such as B and H as elliptical versions of

(B\*) ‘In the stories by Conan Doyle, Holmes lives in Baker Street’

and

(H\*) ‘In Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet acts as though he is mad’<sup>4</sup>,

denying that sentences about fiction have assertoric content (so that they are not in the market for truth or falsity)<sup>5</sup>; denying that such sentences have a truth-value; adopting an error-theoretic account of fictional discourse; and arguing that sentences about fiction, though having genuine assertoric content, are not typically the objects of assertion, so that their

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2 See Hale 1987 chapter 2 for an account of the relevant syntactic criteria and the claim that numerals do in fact satisfy them.

3 The reference to ‘non-trivial’ truth is important here. Minimalist Platonists do not standardly claim that the existence of the number 2 follows from the truth of sentences such as ‘Either the number 2 exists or it does not.’

4 As suggested in Lewis 1976.

5 This seems to be the view of Walton 1991 and Currie 1990.

general acceptance cannot be construed as a mark of their truth.<sup>6</sup> I shall not reproduce their arguments, which I take to be decisive, here.

Instead, I shall argue that, despite initial thoughts to the contrary, the minimal Platonist should embrace the capacious ontology which the objector takes her to be committed to. My defense of this perhaps initially alarming claim will rest on two points. The first is that the minimal Platonist should have no objection to claiming that fictional characters such as Hamlet and Superman are abstract objects. The second is that the minimal Platonist is still in a position to argue that there is a realism-relevant difference between fictional discourse and discourse about arithmetic — and hence a difference in metaphysical status between fictional characters and numbers. The difference is that fictional discourse lacks a feature that Wright (1992 chs. 3 ff) calls ‘Cognitive Command’ whereas it is plausible that discourse about arithmetic possesses it.<sup>7</sup>

Before going any further, however, I need to say something about the dialectical situation. Divers and Miller’s objection is only an interesting one if there are no conclusive reasons for objecting to the existence of abstract objects as such. If there were, the objection would be otiose. For the purpose of this paper I shall assume that there are not, and that

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6 Brock 2001 suggests a form of ellipsis account on which (H) should be read as ‘According to a fictional realist’s view of the universe, Hamlet appears to be mad.’ But although Divers and Miller don’t specifically discuss this possibility, I can’t see any reason why their arguments against elliptical readings of S and H can’t be applied to Brock’s account.

7 Those familiar with the debate may feel a sense of *déjà vu* when presented with my response to the Lightness of Being problem, since there are obvious similarities between what I say here, and what Hale and Wright (1994) have to say about the suggestion that this form of Platonism has the unwelcome consequence that the existence of members of parliament can be known *a priori* on the basis of one’s knowledge of the biconditional P:

‘A and B have the same member of parliament iff A and B inhabit the same constituency.’

So it is worth making three observations. First, the two problems seem to be different. The objection I am dealing with involves only a claim about existence, rather than about the *a priori* knowability of existence. Secondly, even those who are prepared to countenance the existence of abstract members of parliament as a response to this objection may feel that a commitment to the existence of Hamlet and Superman is ontologically extravagant (for example for the reasons discussed in section VIII below). If so, the problem is not only different, but arguably more serious. Finally, and most importantly, my strategy differs from that of Hale and Wright to the extent that the claim that fictional discourse lacks cognitive command plays an important role in defusing the objection: there is nothing similar to be found in the cited paper, or as far as I am aware, in any other place.

the dispute between minimal Platonists and nominalists is one that is open.<sup>8</sup>

This will affect how I present some of the material that follows. For example, I shall not consider strategies for objecting to the existence of fictional characters that take the following schematic form. 'Fictional characters, if they exist, are abstract objects. But there are no abstract objects. So, fictional characters do not exist.' Anyone who is in a position to assert the second of these premisses already has sufficient reason to dismiss minimal Platonism — so they do not need the Lightness of Being objection. I do not think anyone is in this position. But that is not the topic of this paper.

## II Fictional Objects

If Divers and Miller are correct, the minimal Platonist seems committed to the existence of some sort of object as the referents of the singular terms such as 'Superman' and 'Hamlet.' However, we should notice straight away that nothing commits her to any definite view about what sort of object these referents might be. It would be genuinely alarming if the truth of H committed us to the existence of a flesh and blood Hamlet (along with the rest of his dysfunctional family). However we need not think that it does. Instead we could argue that it commits us to the *fictional character* Hamlet.<sup>9</sup>

What are fictional characters? Some of the answers that one might give to this question are truistic. Fictional characters are the sorts of things we talk about when we discuss works of fiction; their doings are described by novelists, dramatists, poets and television script-writers; they can have various properties which they seem to have<sup>10</sup> in common with flesh-and-blood human beings (such as being brave, resourceful, intelligent and so on) as well as other properties which they clearly do not have in common with flesh-and-blood human beings such as implausibility, being poorly-developed and so on. These claims are not

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8 See Burgess and Rosen 1997 part 1 for an assessment of the debate that supports the view that the *prima facie* case for nominalism is far from overwhelming.

9 This suggestion is not unprecedented: it seems to date back to Kripke 1973. It is treated with some sympathy in Evans 1982 (though see below for further discussion) and Salmon 1997 (but see n. 17 below for an important difference from Salmon's account). To the best of my knowledge, however, the points I make have not been made in prior discussions of arithmetical Platonism.

10 The reasons for this cautious formulation will become apparent in section III below.

matters of philosophical dispute: they would be assented to by metaphysicians of all stripes.<sup>11</sup>

There is, however, a further claim which might be made and which is more philosophically substantial. This is the view that fictional characters are abstract objects. It is this view which the minimal Platonist ought to adopt in response to the Lightness of Being objection

One might worry that this response is *ad hoc*. If the minimal Platonist allows that 'Hamlet' refers to an object of some sort, does she have any reason to deny that it refers to the same sort of object as 'Shakespeare' — namely a flesh and blood human being? Consider a comparison between the way 'Hamlet' functions in H and 'Rupert Murdoch' functions in T:

T: 'Rupert Murdoch is the owner of the London *Times*.'

Shouldn't we say that since the two terms function in the same way then if they both refer to something, then they must both refer to the same sort of thing?

The best response to this is to draw attention not to the different ways in which singular terms function in H and T, but to differences between H and T and the bodies of discourse that they belong to. One way of doing so is to consider the very different standards of warrant which govern the two bodies of discourse. The canonical grounds on which assertions such as T can be made are very different from the canonical grounds for assertions such as H. So we should not be surprised that singular terms in the two bodies of discourse in which they occur refer to different kinds of objects.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Whether nominalists are entitled to assent to these claims is another question, but not one that I pursue here.

12 I take this to be unsurprising for the following reason. It seems plausible that there should be some connection between the content of a concept and the canonical grounds for claiming that it holds of something (cf Peacocke 1992). Since the canonical grounds for holding that something is identical with Hamlet is very different from the canonical grounds for holding that something is Rupert Murdoch, the content of the concepts IS HAMLET and IS RUPERT MURDOCH are very different. But in that case why shouldn't the sorts of objects that fall under the two concepts be very different as well. (Notice that the minimal Platonist can avail herself of a similar account in order to explain why it is unsurprising that the number two is not a concrete object — which, if the objection to my view canvassed above is a good one, is something that stands equally in need of explanation.) This seems, incidentally, to dispose of at least one of Evans' (1982) objections to the account in question.

This helps us to understand why the arithmetical Platonist can reasonably take 'Hamlet' and 'Rupert Murdoch' to refer to different kinds of entities. However it doesn't give us any reason to think that the sort of entity that 'Hamlet' refers to is an abstract entity. Nevertheless such reasons can be given.

Abstract entities are standardly characterised as being either non-spatial, or causally inefficacious, or both.<sup>13</sup> And there are good *prima facie* reasons for taking fictional characters to have both these properties. If 'Hamlet' does have a referent it is one which we cannot interact with causally (except through encounters with representations of him in fiction.) If someone told us that they had spoken with Hamlet, or visited his grave we would not think they were telling us something that was merely highly unlikely: we would think it impossible. Equally, if 'Hamlet' refers to an object it must be an object without a spatial location. Where, after all would we expect to find the referent of 'Hamlet'? Certainly not in a castle in Denmark. In other words, if we accept the standard characterisation of abstract objects<sup>14</sup> we seem to be committed to the claim that if Hamlet does refer to an object it must be an abstract object.<sup>15</sup>

13 Cf Rosen 2001: 'If any characterisation of abstract objects deserves to be regarded as the standard one it is this: an abstract entity is a non-spatial (or non-spatio-temporal) causally inert thing.' See note 15 below for reasons why I take the first of Rosen's characterisations to be better than the second.

It is perhaps worth noticing that although Rosen takes this characterisation to be standard, he does not think it is unproblematic. However, Rosen's arguments, and particularly what he has to say about the causal inertness criterion do not strike me, or indeed their author, as conclusive. In particular, his argument against the causal inertness criterion depends on the no longer uncontroversial assumption that the relata of the causal relation are events rather than facts. See Mellor 1995, Steward 1997 for discussion.

14 Hale 1987 expresses some qualms about what I am calling the 'standard characterisation.' But the objection seems to derive from the idea that appealing to the idea that abstract objects are non-spatial in a *definition* of abstractness. One can agree with this and still hold that objects which are non-spatial and causally inefficacious, are as a matter of fact, though not of definition, abstract. This is enough for my purposes.

15 It might be objected that as well as lacking a spatial location, an object needs to lack a temporal location in order to be abstract and that although 'Hamlet' lacks a spatial location he does not lack a temporal one, since he came into existence when Shakespeare started writing about him — and continues to exist to this day. However, although this claim seems plausible we do not have to accept it. For we might think that although we usually describe authors as creating characters, we could think of them as discovering and reporting to us on the denizens of an abstract realm which exists independently of them. Or, perhaps more plausibly, we could refuse to accept the claim that abstract objects have no temporal location. (One reason for doing so is this: stories are abstract objects. But it seems needlessly

Of course, someone might raise the problem of how we can acquire knowledge of the referent of 'Hamlet,' or even have thoughts about him or form representations of him. Still, this is not a problem that the minimal Platonist — or indeed anyone committed to the existence of abstract objects — should be particularly impressed by. She needs to provide an account of knowledge, thought and representation that explains how we can have knowledge, thought and representations of other objects with which we cannot interact causally such as numbers and directions.<sup>16</sup>

### III A Problem About Knowledge

Still, there is a problem lurking in the vicinity. There seems to be a strong case for saying that if fictional characters are abstract objects then we cannot have *a posteriori* knowledge of them. Abstract objects are causally inert, whereas *a posteriori* knowledge is often thought to involve some form of causal interaction with the objects of that knowledge. Equally though, it seems initially implausible to claim that we have *a priori* knowledge of fictional characters. If we can have knowledge of fictional characters then that knowledge is presumably derived from reading fiction — and hence from a particular kind of experience — rather than from reflection on an *a priori* knowable criterion of identity, the way in which the minimal Platonist thinks we can have *a priori* knowledge of numbers.<sup>17</sup>

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paradoxical to insist that stories are discovered rather than created by their authors. So stories do seem to have a temporal location. If so there is no difficulty about saying that fictional characters do so as well.)

16 Divers and Miller have suggested that one might deal with worries of this sort about knowledge of mathematics by arguing that truth in mathematics is in some way 'response-dependent' or 'judgment-dependent' (Divers and Miller 1999). One might wonder whether the — perhaps initially more plausible — view that truth in fiction is response-dependent might be deployed in a similar way. The suggestion is at least worthy of further consideration. Still it may be worth noticing one possible difficulty. The plausibility of judgment-dependent accounts of truth for a particular domain relies on it being possible to give a substantial and non-circular account of 'ideal conditions' for making judgments of a particular kind. While I do not think there are any knock-down arguments to show that such an account could not be given, I think that it would be very difficult to develop and defend one within the space of this article. (Thanks to an anonymous referee from *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* for raising this issue.)

17 Not everyone shares the view that any knowledge derived from reading a fictional text should count as *a posteriori*. One might think that while reading the text (or



This point needs dealing with carefully. The first thing to say about it is that although the minimal Platonist may wish to say that reflection on an *a priori* knowable criterion of identity is one way of gaining knowledge of the existence of a class of abstract entities, nothing in her position need commit her to saying that this is the only possible source of *a priori* knowledge of such claims. So the apparent implausibility of the claim that this is the basis for our knowledge of the existence of fictional characters need not necessarily count against her response to the Lightness of Being problem.

This does not take us very far. Even if the Platonist pushes this line she may well feel under some pressure to explain what might give us grounds for asserting the existence of fictional characters *a priori*. So it is worth considering a bolder response. Before doing so, though, we should notice that although the minimal Platonist may be required to show that it is possible to have some *a priori* knowledge of about fictional characters, it does not require that she show that all of the beliefs about fictional characters that we have and that we typically take to constitute knowledge are acquired in this way. A comparison with the arithmetical case brings this out.

The core of the minimal Platonist account of arithmetical knowledge is that arithmetic truths *can* be known *a priori*. This modal claim is not undermined by the thought that many of the arithmetical beliefs of the man in the street might be accepted on what appear to be the most heterogeneous and apparently empirical grounds: memory, the evidence of the senses and so on. Furthermore, there are beliefs which are in some sense about numbers, such as the belief that the number of students in a lecture is smaller than the number of seats, which cannot be known *a priori*, even if some *a priori* knowable truths must figure in a justification of them.

Accounting for the relationship between these everyday beliefs and the crystalline purity of minimal Platonist logical deductions is likely to be a messy job. However there is no need to believe either that it is not in principle possible or that it is only possible if we attribute implausible logical acuity to the majority of competent arithmetical performers. What this suggests is that although the minimal Platonist may need to show that it is possible to know some truths about fictional characters on *a priori* grounds, she need not show that every knowledgeable belief

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seeing the play) is required to grasp the sense of 'Hamlet,' no further experience is required once I have grasped that sense. On this view the objection is considerably less substantial than one might at first think. (Thanks to an anonymous referee from *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* for pointing this out.)

that we might form about Hamlet or Sherlock Holmes is formed in a way which we ground a claim to *a priori* knowledge.

While this might make the Platonist's job more manageable it does not show that it can in fact be managed. To see whether it can we need to think about what the claim that we can know of the existence of fictional characters *a priori* amounts to. It should certainly not be taken as entailing that the concept 'fictional character' is innate. We might doubt that anyone who had not been initiated into the practice of story-telling could form the concept of a fictional character, just as we might suspect that only someone who had been initiated into the practice of counting could form the concept of a number.

What *is* required that anyone who does grasp the concept fictional character should be capable, on the basis of that grasp, of seeing that fictional characters exist. However, this should not seem immensely implausible — at least to anyone who is prepared to countenance the possibility that fictional characters do exist. Someone who maintains this view holds that our knowledge that fictional characters exist derives from our grasp of the concept 'fictional character' (and further *a priori* reflection). So we need to ask what is involved in our grasping the concept 'fictional character.'

Plausibly, quite a lot is involved: some (perhaps rather rudimentary) grasp of what is involved in telling a story and of the basic conventions involved in doing so; some knowledge of how a character can be introduced into a story, and of how what is true of them depends on what is said about them in the story, and so on. Once this is conceded, it should not seem particularly hard to believe that someone who does grasp the concept of a fictional character might be in a position to know of the existence of fictional characters without further experience. For someone who has such a grasp will be able to construct and understand narratives and hence to know truths about the fictional characters who figure in them.<sup>18</sup>

This may not convince someone with nominalist scruples. However, it is not intended to do so: someone with such scruples is not likely to have seen sufficient merit in the minimal Platonist position to have followed the debate to this point. It is merely intended to show that the minimal Platonist can formulate a coherent view in response to the Lightness of Being problem. Before going further, though, I need to address some objections to what has been said so far.

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18 Or at any rate, if they cannot, it will not be because of the lack of some particular kind of *experiences*.

#### IV Fictional Objects as Abstract: Further Objections

One serious objection to the suggestion that the referent of 'Hamlet' in H might be an abstract object is this. Consider the sentence

(D) 'Hamlet lived in Denmark.'

Given what Shakespeare tells us about the location of Elsinore, D seems as good a candidate for truth as H. But D says something about the referent of 'Hamlet' — namely that he lived in Denmark. How can an abstract object live in Denmark<sup>19</sup>?

One response to this objection is that if the referent of 'Hamlet' is an abstract object then the referent of 'Denmark' must be one as well. One might think that this is a mistake: surely we ought to say that although Shakespeare is writing about a fictional prince, he is writing about a real country. The strength of this objection is diminished somewhat by the thought that the Denmark which Shakespeare writes about differs from the real Denmark in many respects: for example, it contains a haunted castle, inhabitants called Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and so on. So it is plausible that Shakespeare's Denmark is as fictional as his Hamlet, and that the referent of 'Denmark' as used in D is an abstract object.

Still, we are not yet out of the woods. Consider what D says about the relationship between the referents of 'Hamlet' and 'Denmark': namely that the referent of 'Hamlet' stands in the relationship of 'living in' to the referent of 'Denmark.' The problem is that the relation of 'living in' is one that holds between human beings and countries, not between abstract objects.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the way out seems obvious: we need to hold that within the context of fictional discourse 'lives in' picks out a relation which is different from the relation that it picks out within ordinary biographical discourse.

Is this a step too far? Perhaps. For the view that fictional characters are abstract objects to be at all plausible, the move we have just made

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19 Salmon 1997 avoids this problem by saying that D is false, since Hamlet, being an abstract object, cannot live anywhere. More generally he holds that fiction and literary criticism consists of a set of sentences that, if used assertorically, would state a set of falsehoods about a class of abstract objects. As well being counter-intuitive, this move would be dialectically inappropriate as part of a response to the Lightness of Being problem, which can only get off the ground if we take S, H and D to be true.

20 This problem is hinted at by Evans 1982, 367. Evans thinks the problem can be circumvented, but it is not clear to me from whether the solution I have suggested is along the same lines as his.

will have to be generalised. Otherwise the same problem will keep arising. So we seem committed to saying that a wide range of predicates and relations (if not all) will have different referents when used in fictional discourse from the referents which they have in everyday speech.<sup>21</sup> This leaves us faced with two mysteries. First, why do we use the same words when talking about fiction as we do in non-fictional discourse? Second, why do we suppose that if someone understands certain words used in ordinary discourse, they will also understand them when used in fiction<sup>22</sup>?

Both of these points need detailed answers. However, there are two points we can make which lessen the pressure on the Platonist. First, we should notice that views of this type are not unprecedented within analytic philosophy. Frege — to take but one Platonist philosopher of mathematics — is committed to the idea that in indirect speech the reference of a word varies from the one which it has in normal speech in a systematic way<sup>23</sup>; and Russell — to take another — holds that the reference of number terms in sentences of pure arithmetic is type-ambiguous.

So much the worse for Frege and Russell, one might respond. Still, it is plausible that the worry would be relieved if it we could show that the referents of words in discourses about fiction were related in some

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- 21 Someone might worry that this leads us to say something particularly implausible about historical novels such as *War and Peace*. For they might think that it is an important fact that the action of this novel that it takes place in the terrestrial Russia, and not some abstract substitute for it. But this view seems to be untenable, if we need to say that statements such as (A) 'Prince Andrei was born in Russia' are true. (We could avoid this step if we could read statements such as A as elliptical for 'In the story, Prince Andrei was born in Russia' — but as I point out above, Divers and Miller have shown that this option is not available to the arithmetical Platonist.)
- 22 Arguably, there are two further questions that one might ask — namely, why on this account we should be interested in fiction, or think that we can learn about the real (concrete) world from it. These are clearly important issues. However, I suspect that an adequate answer to the first two questions would bring an answer to these further problems. (I am indebted to Sandrine Berges for pressing this question.)
- 23 Admittedly, there is an important difference between Frege's view and the sort of view that I am defending: Frege allows that the reference of a word may vary depending on its context of syntactic embedding (hence his view can be seen as illustrating the importance of the context principle) where as I am suggesting that it might vary depending on its context of use. Still, this does not undermine the point I am making — namely that a grasp of what we ordinarily regard as the (unambiguous) meaning of a word may (on principles which logicians are committed to) licence us to (and enable us to) assign it different references in different contexts. (I am indebted to John Divers for pressing this point.)

systematic fashion to their homonyms in non-fictional discourse (just as a defender of Russell might respond to worries about the systematic ambiguity of number terms). Working out such a view in detail would be a big job. But one way of doing so would be to appeal to the ways in which words can have their senses extended through the use of analogy.

What is noticeable about analogical uses of words is that although they seem to generate new senses, they do so in a way which is usually understandable by most people who understood the original sense of the word. Consider someone who talks about the health of the economy. It is notable that most people who have a grasp of what it is for a person or animal to be healthy do not need a new explanation of the word health in order to understand what it is for an economy to be healthy. Nevertheless, it is highly implausible that the word 'healthy' has the very same sense in both cases.<sup>24</sup>

A further objection to the view that fictional discourse involves reference to abstract objects is raised by Gareth Evans (Evans 1982 367). Evans argues that most fictional discourse cannot be correctly construed as involving reference to characters understood as a class of abstract object. On Evans' view, for someone to succeed in referring to objects of a particular class they must know an appropriate criterion of identity for objects of that class. (Evans 1975, 1982) However, most people who talk about fiction do not know a general criterion of identity for fictional characters since they are, for example, unable to answer questions about whether the same character can appear in two works by different authors.<sup>25</sup>

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24 I am indebted to several long discussions (whose upshot I may nonetheless have misrepresented) with Roger White (Leeds) for this idea. Is this view incompatible with the thought that I appear to be able to understand the sentence 'the soldiers were in the barracks' without knowing whether the context is fact-stating or fictional? Not necessarily. For there is one thing that I can know without knowing this — namely, what has to be the case for someone making this assertion in one or other context to be speaking truly. This is surely one legitimate sense of understand here. Plausibly, it is also the only one. At any rate, there is a sense in which I can be said to have misunderstood the utterance if I object to it on the grounds that there is no barracks in the vicinity, only to discover that I have been overhearing a conversation about *War and Peace* (I am indebted to John Divers for raising this issue).

25 This may be a slightly clumsy way of putting the objection. There may be no generally storable criterion of identity for fictional characters *as such*, for two different reasons. First, the appropriate criteria might be genre-dependent: they might operate differently in (say) literary novels of the twentieth century and epics transmitted through an oral tradition. Secondly, and more radically, an enormously wide range of types of entity can figure as fictional characters: human

One might hope to respond to this challenge in various ways. One which I note without endorsing is that there seem to be some cases where people appear to engage in a form of discourse without in fact having a clear grasp of the identity conditions for the objects to which they are making reference. For example, although I am fairly ignorant of chemistry there is a perfectly clear sense in which I can talk about the element uranium despite only having the vaguest grasp of how one would distinguish one chemical element from another. (For example, I might know that Uranium and Plutonium are distinct elements without having a clear grasp of the concept of atomic number.) Evans might say that in this case I do not really have a clear grasp of chemical discourse, and that my ability to engage in discussions in which such discourse is employed is parasitic on the existence of individuals who have the knowledge that I lack. But it is not obvious that we could not say something similar about reference to fictional objects.<sup>26</sup>

Someone might doubt this on the grounds that although most people know who to turn to when scientific expertise is in question, the same is not true in the case of philosophical knowledge — which is what is required for disentangling questions about the ontology of fictional characters. She might also add that people talking about fictional characters do not in general hold their use of words to be responsible to the judgment of philosophers in the way in which people talking about chemical elements hold their use responsible to that of chemists.

An alternative response to Evans would be to argue that someone can possess a sufficient grasp of the criteria of identity for a class of objects to make it legitimate for her utterances to be construed as refer-

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beings, mythical beasts, God, computers, items of furniture, and (in one work by Douglas Adams) highly intelligent shades of the colour blue. Given that it is inappropriate to ask for a criterion of identity for entities in general, it might be equally inappropriate to ask for a criterion of identity for kinds of object in general.

Nevertheless, I take it that Evans' point would be answered equally well by the suggestion that competent readers of fiction grasp a range of different criteria of identity corresponding to different fictional genres and different kinds of fictional character. Thanks once more to John Divers for helpful discussion.

- 26 Some readers have been so incensed by this suggestion that they have failed to notice that my discussion contains an alternative, independent response to the objection two paragraphs later. But I am not entirely sure why the suggestion should be seen as inflammatory. It's certainly not *obvious* that division of linguistic labour can only occur when physically locatable objects are in play — though many of the most common examples are of this sort. But the idea that a mathematical dunce's reference to, say, the Riemann delta function could exhibit some of the same features as Bush's reference to uranium is one which, although unlikely to recommend itself to the convinced nominalist, is surely not obviously absurd.

ring to objects of that class even if they are not able to answer every possible question about the identity of such objects that might conceivably arise. On an account like this, if someone is able to distinguish between and count characters within individual fictions, then they have sufficient grasp of the identity conditions of characters to be construed as referring to characters, even if they cannot answer questions about whether the Sherlock Holmes who appears in the Conan Doyle stories is the same fictional character as the Sherlock Holmes who is played on film by Basil Rathbone. Since most people do have this fairly minimal competence they can indeed be taken to be referring to fictional characters.

This suggestion is attractive because it also allows us to preserve the intuitively plausible belief that people can succeed in referring to composite material objects and to persons even though they are unable to produce adequate resolutions of the Ship of Theseus paradox or to the sorts of problem cases about personal identity which have been widely discussed by Parfit (Parfit 1986) and others. They can do so because they have an ability to discriminate objects or persons which is adequate in most of the cases in which such an ability is called upon — even if under certain extreme cases this ability might break down.<sup>27</sup>

## V Allism: Navigating Some Shallows

At a number of points in their ‘Lightness of Being’ paper, Divers and Miller suggest that the minimal Platonist position may be vulnerable to the complaint that it supports a commitment to something they call an ‘allist’ ontology (Divers and Miller 1995, 130). ‘Allism’ is, of course, not a precisely defined philosophical term. At one point, Divers and Miller characterise it as a commitment to ‘all such objects as may appear to constitute the subject matter of any discourse in which we indulge or

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27 It is plausible that our ability to refer to numbers without being able to say whether the 2 of the natural numbers is the same number as the 2 of the rationals or the reals is an instance of the same phenomenon. Arguably it is more dialectically effective too: while some people seem happy to concede that the upshot of problem cases about personal identity is that there are really no persons, I have yet to see anyone argue that most people do not succeed in referring to numbers because of their difficulty in answering questions of this sort. But the issues here are not sufficiently independent of the issues that are under discussion here to provide a reliable source of independent support for the position I am defending.

could contrive.’ (Divers and Miller 1995, 130). I shall christen this view ‘Indiscriminate Allism.’

Indiscriminate Allism seems untenable. However, as Divers and Miller effectively concede, one can consistently accept an argument for the existence of fictional objects, while disavowing Indiscriminate Allism (Divers and Miller 1995, 131). For some putative discourses may fail to sustain standards of syntax and discipline which warrant us in taking them to be even minimally truth-apt.<sup>28</sup> If this line of thought is correct, someone who accepts the minimalist argument for fictional objects has argumentative resources that will allow them to avoid commitment to the existence of, say, Cartesian private objects, selves, possibilities and the like, and thereby to escape being saddled with a commitment to Indiscriminate Allism.

Still, one might take the minimalist Platonist to be committed to a less extreme view than Indiscriminate Allism, which I shall call ‘Moderate Allism.’ The Moderate Allist is not committed to the existence of ‘all such objects as may *appear* to constitute the subject matter of any discourse in which we indulge or could contrive,’ (italics mine) but only to those that in fact constitute the subject matter of discourses sustaining appropriate standards of syntax and discipline. I take it that the minimalist Platonist *is* committed to Moderate Allism. But, while Divers and Miller appear to take it that a commitment to ‘Moderate Allism’ is no less problematic than a commitment to ‘Indiscriminate Allism,’ I shall try to show that it is less problematic than one might think.

We can distinguish three different sources of objection to Moderate Allism. One is based simply on the fact that the Moderate Allist is committed to the existence of fictional characters (in precisely the way I have been arguing in this paper.) Divers and Miller’s choice of fictional characters as *paradigms* of the sort of objectionable ontology that minimal Platonists might find themselves committed to suggests that they may have some sympathy with this as an objection to Moderate Allism. But whatever the truth of this speculation about Divers and Miller’s intentions, this line of thought is unapt at the present point in the dialectic. It is simply circular to claim that a commitment to the existence of fictional objects is problematic on the grounds that it entails a commitment to Moderate Allism, and then say that what is wrong with Moderate Allism is that it entails accepting the existence of fictional characters. The defensibility of this sort of resistance to Moderate

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28 It is, of course, a presumption of the ‘Lightness of Being’ objection that discourse about fictional characters is not such a discourse. See Divers and Miller, 131-2 for brief discussion



Allism is entirely dependent on their being independently grounded objections to the claim that fictional objects exist.<sup>29</sup>

A second sort of resistance to Moderate Allism may be based on the perceived extremism of the view. Those who embrace it may find themselves met by David Lewis has characterised as an 'incredulous stare.' But as Lewis himself remarks, *a propos* of reactions to his own someist, but still populous ontology, 'an incredulous stare is not an argument.' (Lewis 1973 86). We are in the business of considering arguments, not facial expressions.

In any case, it is worth observing that in the current context, the incredulous stare lacks force. For on the Moderate Allist line, answers to questions about what sorts of object exist depend on prior answers to questions about precisely which discourses exhibit the appropriate standards of syntax and discipline. Since this is the case, it is far from being obvious what the incredulous starrer is actually staring at, and whether the incredulity of the stare is warranted.

A third source of objection to Moderate Allism deserves more serious consideration. This is that accepting Moderate Allism might be tantamount to adopting a 'quietist' attitude to metaphysical disputes, where quietism is understood as the view that 'significant metaphysical debate is impossible' (Wright 1992, 205).<sup>30</sup> Whatever one's views about the merits of quietism, this line of thought is an effective *ad hominem* against Wright's own adherence to the minimalist Platonist viewpoint.<sup>31</sup> For Wright takes a commitment to quietism to be mistaken.

Two points need to be made about this. First, the existence of a distinction between Indiscriminate and Moderate Allisms already leaves open a space in which significant metaphysical debate can take place. Second, when taken at a purely *ad hominem* level, the argument misfires badly. For it trades on a contentious and highly suspect conception of what substantive metaphysical debate has to be like, and one that Wright explicitly rejects. The mistaken conception depends on the idea that substantive metaphysical debate must involve looking into our apparent ontological commitments in order to see which of them are genuine and which spurious.

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29 I take myself to have dealt with the most significant such objections elsewhere in my paper. (see in particular sections III, IV and X)

30 I take it that Wright has in mind here specifically debates about what sorts of things exist — one might, for example, be a quietist according to Wright's terminology but still have quite firm views about, for example, the nature of the composition relation, or whether causation is metaphysically prior to laws.

31 As Divers and Miller themselves point out: Divers and Miller 1995, 137.

Wright has argued — in more or less explicit objection to this conception of what metaphysical debate must be like — that there are (at least) four realism-relevant tests which we can apply to a body of discourse whose judgments are truth-apt.<sup>32</sup> First, we can ask whether the discourse possesses a property that Wright calls Cognitive Command. Second, we can ask whether true judgments made using the concepts characteristic of the discourse are response-dependent. Third, we can ask about the range of states of affairs into which true sentences in the discourse are capable of explaining. Finally, we can address the question of whether truth in the discourse is verification transcendent. Since a commitment to Moderate Allism is compatible with the view that we can ask any of these questions about any discourse, and since defending any answer to any of them entails a commitment to substantial metaphysical debate it is simply false that a commitment to Moderate Allism entails a commitment to quietism.<sup>33</sup>

## VI Cognitive Command and Fictional Discourse

In the previous section I argued that the threat of allism did not constitute an overwhelming objection to the view which I have been advocating. However, significantly more can usefully be said at this point. For I take there to be an important metaphysical intuition underlying the ‘someist prejudice’ which Divers and Miller display in their discussion of allism. This is that it is outrageous to hold both that numbers exist and that they are no more real than fictional characters.

However, as may already be apparent, the minimal Platonist need not find herself forced into this position. She has resources that enable her to make sense of an important motivating intuition that underpins the objection, without accepting the objection on its own terms. In order to argue that numbers are more ontologically robust than fictional characters, the minimal Platonist need only argue that arithmetical discourse

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32 Wright 1992 *passim*

33 This deals with the objection at an *ad hominem* level. But it has only been answered substantively if one agrees with Wright that his tests are indeed realism-relevant, and that discussion of them therefore involves significant metaphysical debate. I think there is some evidence that Divers and Miller would agree that they are. While there is no space in this paper to discuss all of Wright’s tests in detail I give a brief account of why Wright takes Cognitive Command to be realism-relevant in the following section. For further discussion see Wright 1992 *passim*, Edwards 1994.

passes, and fictional discourse fails one of Wright's four tests. During the remainder of this paper, I shall develop this idea at more length, arguing in particular that fictional discourse lacks the property Wright calls Cognitive Command.<sup>34</sup>

Wright characterises Cognitive Command as follows:

a discourse exerts cognitive command if and only if it is a priori that differences of opinion formulated within the discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness in a disputed statement, or in the standards of acceptability or variation in personal evidence thresholds .... will involve something which may be properly regarded as cognitive shortcoming. (Wright 1992 144)<sup>35</sup>

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- 34 Width of cosmological role is not a good test because nominalists like Field might deny that numbers enter into best explanations of any facts. Issues about verification transcendence are also dialectically unworthy of pursuit — although it may be plausible that superassertibility is the ground of truth in fictional discourse, mathematical antirealists of a Dummettian stripe will want to claim that the same is true of mathematics.
- 35 Clearly this characterisation places a lot of weight on the question of what can properly be held to count as a *cognitive* shortcoming. Wright is not particularly forthcoming about this: his official view (from which I dissent — see footnote 39 below) seems to be that the onus is always on those who claim a discourse does possess cognitive command to sketch a plausible epistemology according to which errors of the relevant sort (i.e. those not due to vagueness in meaning or standards of acceptability, or variation in evidence thresholds) can be shown to be cognitive (149). But whether this kind of burden shifting is acceptable might well be thought to depend on the contours of a particular debate. In particular, it might be thought that in the context of the current debate the onus was on the advocate of my view to give some reasons for thinking that no such epistemology was likely to be forthcoming. Wright's discussion of comic discourse (148 ff) can be seen as providing a paradigm of how such a discussion might go: his claim is that no epistemology of the sort that an advocate of the view that discourse about what is funny would need to provide is to be expected because of the way in which such discourse is sensibility-involving (5-7). To anticipate somewhat: what I say below might be characterised as trying to make the conclusion that fictional discourse is sensibility involving seem equally plausible — and as arguing that this is all that is required here. (Of course, one might respond that the fact that a discourse is sensibility-involving is not itself reason to take it to lack Cognitive Command — as proponents of a neo-Humean view of moral judgments such as David Wiggins (Wiggins 1987) would no doubt protest. What one needs as well are reasons to think that sensibilities differ and lack of reason to think that the discourse possesses means of bringing these differences under control. It is arguable — though it does need to be argued (and has been) that moral discourse possesses these resources. I see no reason to think that comic, and, more importantly for the purposes of this paper, fictional discourse does, - and give my reasons for this in the main text below.)

Whether or not a discourse exerts Cognitive Command is a metaphysically substantial matter, on Wright's view. For, he claims, it is only if a discourse passes this test that we can see judgments which are framed in its characteristic vocabulary as representations of a reality which is independent of those who make the judgment (Wright 1992, 88-94).<sup>36</sup>

*Prima facie* it is highly plausible that discourse about arithmetic possesses cognitive command.<sup>37</sup> So the minimal Platonist should argue that fictional discourse lacks this property. This claim also seems plausible. Consider two critics who disagree about whether Hamlet is genuinely mad. The dispute need not be down to vagueness in the term 'mad' — what is at issue is not, for example, whether some twentieth century clinical diagnosis is applicable to him, but whether or not he is merely feigning madness. Nor need it be a matter of differing standards of evidence, if this is taken to mean differences about how strong the evidence has to be before someone is convicted of madness, or before literary critical statements can be accepted. Finally, it is not obvious — and

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36 I have said that on Wright's view passing the Cognitive Command test is a necessary condition for viewing representations in a particular form of discourse to be viewed as representations of some form of independent reality. This seems plausible. However, it might seem less clear whether it is a sufficient condition. However, I take it that Wright views his test not as providing evidence for the idea that some realm has independent existence but as an informative explication of what claims about independence come to. If this is right, then once we have settled the question of whether a discourse passes the Cognitive Command test, there is no further question to be asked about whether we can regard claims formulated in its characteristic vocabulary as claims about an independent reality.

37 For the record it is worth noting that Wright's official view seems to be that we can *never* simply assume that a discourse possesses Cognitive Command (Cognitive Command has to be earned). But this seems like a mistake. It is true is that the question of how arithmetic discourse comes to possess Cognitive Command is a genuine one which an adequate philosophy of mathematics needs to provide an answer to. But that is no reason for regarding the question of whether it has that property as open. (Note that the claim being made here is restricted to discourse about elementary *arithmetic*. Given the independence of the Axiom of Choice and Continuum Hypothesis, from other axioms of ZF set theory and the existence of disagreements among mathematicians, it is not clear that we can assume with the same degree of *insouciance* that set theoretic discourse possesses Cognitive Command.) As John Divers has pointed out to me, if we restrict our attention to quantifier-free arithmetic, we can go further and say that it is not merely plausible, but certain that it possesses Cognitive Command. For it is decidable, and decidability entails Cognitive Command. (But one might conceivably wonder whether a quantifier free discourse possesses a sufficient degree of syntax and discipline to build a case for reference/existence on.)

certainly not obvious that it is *a priori* — that anything clearly describable as a *cognitive* shortcoming must be involved in the dispute.<sup>38</sup>

Suppose that the difference of opinion turns on a difference about what is the most coherent overall interpretation of the play. If, as may well happen, there is, overall, no clear case for preferring one interpretation to the other then it seems reasonable to say that the dispute over the truth value of 'Hamlet is mad' involves no cognitive shortcoming.

It is sometimes suggested that in order to be able to tell whether Wright's test is a significant one and whether or not particular stretches of discourse pass it we need to be able to provide a detailed and, perhaps, independently motivated account of what it is for a certain kind of shortcoming to be a cognitive shortcoming (Williamson 1994, Sainsbury 1996). If this demand were reasonable, this would place a heavy burden on someone who wanted to defend the view I am defending. Producing such an account is no trivial matter.

However, I am not sure that the demand is reasonable. It is reasonable to ask for some explanation of what the distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive is supposed to amount to in this context, and why one should think that particular cases fall on one side or the other. One way of doing this would, of course be to produce a full and independently motivated account of the cognitive.

However, it seems to me that in the case under discussion we can make do with less. What we need is some kind of account of how disagreements about fictional discourse might arise in ways which we did not want to put down to cognitive error (or vagueness, or differences in standards of acceptability or evidence thresholds.) It might still be open to an opponent to say that contrary to appearances, errors that arose in the specified ways were nonetheless cognitive errors. Such responses would have to be assessed on their merits, of course. But their bare possibility need not show that we need a complete articulation of the notion of the cognitive in advance.

If I am right, then the appropriate demand to make of someone defending my view is that they give a plausible explanation of why fictional discourse should lack cognitive command. I think this can be done. The key point is this. Fictional discourse involves more than registering what is strictly entailed by sentences in a text. It also in-

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38 This is not to deny that in some — perhaps most — cases, disputes about what the best interpretation of a text is *may* be down to cognitive shortcomings. What is at issue is whether it is *a priori* that all such disputes *must* be.

volves using them as props for imaginative elaboration.<sup>39</sup> We can see this in the Hamlet case: Shakespeare never tells us clearly whether or not Hamlet is mad: the question is left to the spectator to ponder. Of course, not every imaginative elaboration is as good as every other: there are constraints of psychological plausibility and consistency to be obeyed as well as other more local constraints determined by the genre of text under consideration. However, it does not follow from the fact that interpretations are subject to some constraints that these constraints must determine a unique answer to every psychological fiction, still less that this is true *a priori*. In fact, given the ways in which people's imaginative responses vary, it would be very surprising if it were true at all.<sup>40</sup>

## VII Logical Scruples (1) — Truth-Value Gaps

One way of denying that fictional discourse lacks cognitive command is to suggest that in the envisaged case the correct thing to say is that Hamlet is neither mad nor feigning. If so, then both participants to the dispute above can be represented as committing an error — namely the error of thinking that there is a definite answer to the question of whether Hamlet is mad or sane, when in fact there is not.

Tempting as this suggestion might be, we need to be careful just how we put the point. As I shall try to show, we cannot allow it to stand in the somewhat crude terms that I have just formulated. In addition to this, the most natural reformulation is one that is not available to someone who is pushing the Lightness of Being objection. So either the objection lapses or the defense succeeds.

Suppose the person maintaining that fictional discourse possesses Cognitive Command takes the most obvious line and suggests that we should assent to

(N): 'Hamlet is neither mad or feigning.'

It would be reasonable to protest that assent to N is untenable. For while it might be the case that it is consistent with the text of Shakespeare's

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39 The idea of fictional texts as props for imaginative elaboration is drawn from Walton 1991, though I do not think he would endorse anything else I say here.

40 In effect I am arguing that (an important subclass) of judgments about fiction are sensibility-involving, just as for Wright, judgments about what is comic — his prime example of a discourse lacking cognitive command — are.

play that Hamlet is mad and equally consistent with the text that he is feigning, it is surely not consistent with the text that he is neither. So we should surely deny N.<sup>41</sup>

This might lead one to think that the point should be expressed thus: While we should deny N and instead assert

(V): 'Hamlet is either mad or feigning.'

we should still deny both

(M): 'Hamlet is mad.'

and

(F): 'Hamlet is feigning.'

But we are still not out of the woods. Typically a disjunction is only true if one of its disjuncts is true.<sup>42</sup>

Plausibly, the point the objector wants to make might be put thus<sup>43</sup>: what we should be concerned with are not statements like D, M, and F, but statements such as FD, FM and FF as follows:

FD: 'In the fiction it is true that Hamlet is either mad or feigning.'

FM: 'In the fiction Hamlet is mad.'

FF: 'In the fiction Hamlet is feigning.'

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41 Assuming that consistency with the text is a necessary, if not sufficient condition for fictional truth, at least in the case of texts which are not themselves internally inconsistent.

42 There are cases where this principle seems to fail. For example, there are treatments of vague predicates on which we can say that 'Those curtains are red' and 'Those curtains are orange' both fail of truth, even though 'Those curtains are either red or orange' is clearly true. One way of accommodating this is to appeal to a supervaluational semantics for vague predicates. So we might wonder whether a similar idea would work in the case of fictional discourse. I am not sure that it would. Notice that as well as being able to provide a satisfactory formal treatment of the discourse in this way, we would have to motivate it in a way which did not give us grounds for thinking that 'true' was ambiguous as between statements about fiction and statements about arithmetic and that the statements like M did not possess hidden quantificational structure (so as to be elliptical for something like 'In every acceptable interpretation of the story...'). If either of these provisos were ignored there would be a danger of the Lightness of Being objection lapsing.

43 Cf. Lewis 1976.

Arguably, FD should not be read as a simple disjunction of FM and FH. If so, the option of assenting to FD while assenting to neither of FM and FH remains open.

If this option is available the Lightness of Being objection lapses. If statements such as M and F are to be read as elliptical in this way, then there is no reason for thinking that in asserting M one is genuinely committed to the existence of Hamlet, any more than would be in asserting S: 'Shakespeare made up a story about someone called "Hamlet" who was mad.'<sup>44</sup>

But in fact, as Divers and Miller (1995, 132-3) have pointed out, this response is not available to the arithmetical Platonist. It requires us to read sentences like 'Hamlet is mad' as elliptical for 'In the fiction Hamlet is mad.' If she allows that this is possible then she will need good grounds for holding that M should be read elliptically while denying that a similar elliptical reading can be given to sentences about mathematics. For fictionalists about mathematics (such as Field 1980) will be quick to urge on her the merits of reading P: 'There are three prime numbers between 5 and 17' as elliptical for FP 'According to the standard story about numbers there are three prime numbers between 5 and 17.' On such a reading, the apparent commitment to the existence of numbers which we evince when making assertions about arithmetic appears to vanish.

The most obvious way of circumventing this challenge — and one which should certainly be attractive to an arithmetical Platonist of Wright's stripe is to insist that in the arithmetical case we need to focus on the surface syntax of sentences which appear to involve singular terms. If this is so in the arithmetical case, then - as Divers and Miller point out, the arithmetical Platonist cannot appeal to an elliptical reading of M, H and the like to avoid commitment to the existence of fictional characters. But equally, someone who wants to press the objection cannot make claims about fiction which rely on the elliptical reading in order to rebut the claim that fictional discourse lacks cognitive command.

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44 This might look like weaseling: someone might want to say that even under the elliptical reading 'Hamlet' operates like a singular term. If so, it looks embarrassing for the arithmetical Platonist. But the Platonist has no need to worry provided that we deny that 'in the fiction' provides a factive context. I am indebted to Erik Koed — who remains unconvinced — for discussion of these points.



### VIII Logical Scruples (2) — Cognitive Command and Epistemically Constrained Truth

Shapiro and Taschek, and also Mark Sainsbury, have pointed out that there seems to be an inconsistency in holding that truth in a particular area is epistemically constrained, and holding that discourse about that area lacks cognitive command. (Sainsbury 1996, Shapiro and Taschek 1996).<sup>45</sup> Wright (2001) suggests that the argument can be formulated as follows. Suppose that A believes *p* and B believes not *p*, and suppose that there is no cognitive shortcoming in either case. Now suppose that *p* is true. Since truth in this domain is epistemically constrained, *p* is knowable. Since *p* is knowable, and B believes not *p*, B suffers from a cognitive shortcoming: he fails to know something he could have known, contrary to our initial assumption. So the assumption that *p* leads to contradiction. Since this is the case, we can take it that not *p*.

But if not *p* is true, then again, it is knowable that not *p*. So A fails to know something she might have known, and has an epistemic shortcoming. Again we have a contradiction. Upshot: On the assumption that A believes *p* and B believes not *p*, and truth is epistemically constrained, we generate a contradiction from the claim that neither A nor B have any cognitive shortcoming. So that claim must be false.

As Wright has pointed out, every step in the reasoning which generates a contradiction from the combination of 1) A believes *p*; 2) B believes not *p*; 3) Neither A nor B has a cognitive shortcoming; 4) the truth as to whether *p* is knowable; is intuitionistically acceptable (Wright 2001 60-1, 85). However, Wright (2001 p85) also goes on to point out that the move from this contradiction to the further claim: 'Either A or B has some kind of cognitive shortcoming' involves an inference that someone with a commitment to intuitionistic logic might take exception to. If we are intuitionists we can't infer directly from the fact that the claim that neither A nor B has a cognitive shortcoming leads to a contradiction that either A or B has a cognitive shortcoming. We can only infer that it is not the case that neither A nor B has a cognitive shortcoming.

Does this point help to show that a discourse can lack cognitive command while still being epistemically constrained? Wright's point is that if we are only entitled to use intuitionistically acceptable logical moves we cannot show that the existence of disagreement

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45 This line of argument only presents a problem if we take it for granted that the truth-predicate for discourse about fictional characters is epistemically constrained. I take it to be implausible to deny this. Cf. Miller 2004.

entails cognitive shortcoming, even in the presence of epistemically constrained truth. But why should we think that we are only entitled to intuitionistic logic? The answer is presumably that that we should adopt an intuitionistic logic in areas where truth is epistemically constrained, and that *ex hypothesi* it is so constrained in this case.

However, there is one slight wrinkle that needs to be considered. To block the Sainsbury/Shapiro & Taschek worry, we presumably need to show that it is appropriate to use an intuitionistic logic not for reasoning about claims about a fiction, but for reasoning about claims about individual's epistemic shortcomings about fiction. It is at least not obvious that the truth predicate for this rather restricted domain might not be one that made classical, rather than intuitionistic, logic valid.

It is, at any rate, not immediately clear that truths about epistemic shortcomings are in general epistemically constrained. For example, it seems plausible that a reliabilist talking about knowledge might well think that there were some (in principle) unknowable truths about which processes are reliable, and hence that there were some unknowable truths about individuals failing on a particular occasion to instantiate those processes, without exposing her view to knockdown refutation.

Luckily, though, a defender of the idea that there may be truth predicates that lack cognitive command does not need to make a claim as strong as this potentially problematic one. It is enough for her purposes if she can show that the truth-predicate for attributions of cognitive shortcomings about whichever domain it is that she takes to lack cognitive command is epistemically constrained. In this particular case, then, what is required is a defense of the view that claims about cognitive shortcomings with respect to truths about works of fiction are epistemically constrained.<sup>46</sup>

On the face of it, the view seems fairly plausible. If someone is going wrong about Hamlet, it ought to be possible to give some sort of account of what they are missing, and how they have come to miss it. This seems to be little more than a corollary of the suggestion that truths about fiction are epistemically constrained. This line of thought can be fleshed out a little with the help of the following argument. Suppose A is wrong about *q*, where *q* is some question about a fictional text, and it is not knowable that A is wrong about *q*, and suppose the answer to *q* is knowable. Then presumably it is possible for A to know what he thinks about *q*, and to tell others — and in particular those who know

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46 Given that the truth about works of fiction is similarly constrained: if not, the Sainsbury/Shapiro & Taschek argument doesn't get off the ground.

the truth about  $q$ .<sup>47</sup> So it is knowable that A has a cognitive shortcoming with respect to  $q$ .

If this line of thought is correct, then the Sainsbury/Shapiro and Taschek worry does not undermine the view I have been advocating.<sup>48</sup> Let us turn to other worries.

## IX Lewis on Truths about Fiction

It might be suggested that my claim that fictional discourse lacks cognitive command depends on a very naïve account of what it is for sentences such as H and M to be true. Furthermore one might suspect that a more sophisticated account along lines suggested by David Lewis (Lewis 1983)<sup>49</sup> would undermine the argument here.<sup>50</sup> However, I do not think that this is so.

Lewis's account runs as follows<sup>51</sup>: Define a B-world as a world in which all the mutual knowledge of the story-teller's intended audience

47 Notice that the argument here — such as it is — requires only intuitionistically acceptable steps: I have in effect provided a recipe to transform knowledge of the truth about  $q$  into knowledge of A's epistemic shortcomings with respect to  $q$ . (Incidentally, one might think that considerations about individual knowers having epistemic blindspots could cause problems here: suppose it is impossible for A to know what the answer to  $q$  might be, and also impossible for anyone who knows A's answer to  $q$  to be knowledgeable with respect to  $q$ . For example, suppose A is sufficiently sure of herself not to be capable of entertaining an alternative answer, and sufficiently persuasive to be invariably capable of compelling agreement.) Then the truth about A's cognitive shortcoming might be unknowable—because unbelievable — without there being any epistemically unconstrained truths about fictions.

However, while I think that considerations of this sort might undermine an argument that tried to show that wherever truth about X is epistemically constrained, truth about cognitive shortcomings with respect to X is similarly constrained, I also take it to be reasonable to think that there are no individuals who are so equipped as to generate this sort of blindspot in the particular case of knowledge about fiction. Many of us are just too opinionated to allow that to occur.

48 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* for alerting me to a problem with a prior draft of this section.

49 Wolterstorff 1976 gives a similar account.

50 Lewis avoids commitment to fictional characters as abstract objects by adopting an elliptical reading of statements such as M. But this part of his view strikes me as being independent from his views about the truth conditions of such statements, however they are best construed.

51 Leaving out complications about inconsistent fictions and fictional carry-over (both of which Lewis notes and discusses). It seems to me that an account amended

is true, and an S-world as one in which the story teller is really doing what he purports to be doing when he tells the story. 'In the fiction, p' is true provided that p is true in the closest S-world to the closest B-world to the actual world.<sup>52</sup>

However convincing this analysis may be as an account of the truth-conditions of sentences such as H and S, it is not clear that it provides support for the claim that fictional discourse possesses Cognitive Command. There are three reasons why this so. One of them has to do with the identification of the B-world. The other two have to do with questions about what the appropriate metric on possible worlds might be in this context — in other words on questions about which world is the closest S-world to the B-world.

The first thing to notice is that since it may be indeterminate exactly what the author's intended audience is, there may be consequent indeterminacies as to which possible worlds are B-worlds. The sort of case which I have in mind here is one in which the author may have no settled view as to exactly which groups of people his work is aimed at. Consider the case of an English-speaking novelist whose work is published in England and only subsequently in the United States and Canada. It may be that he intended his audience to consist of English, American and Canadian novel-buyers. Or it may be that his immediate intended audience was only the English novel buying public, and that Americans and Canadians stand in the same sort of relation to it that late twentieth-century readers stand to the works of at least some nineteenth century novelists — that is, as people who need to think themselves into a set of slightly alien assumptions if they are to make correct judgments about what (beyond what is explicitly mentioned in the text) is true of characters in the novel. Or, as in the case in which I am interested, the novelist may have no fixed intentions here — he may for example, never have considered the question, and when it is put to him, be genuinely unsure how to reply.<sup>53</sup>

This will only matter (as far as determining which worlds are B-worlds is concerned) if there are differences in what counts as common knowledge among the different possible candidates for being the

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along the lines which Lewis discusses may give a plausible account of fictional truth, but one that is no more likely to secure Cognitive Command about fictional discourse than the simplified account considered here.

52 The actual world may not be a B-world, since on Lewis's account of mutual knowledge some items of mutual knowledge may not be true — see Lewis 1983.

53 This is only one sort of reason there might be for thinking that the author's intentions may leave the question of what his intended audience is indeterminate.

intended audience. It is hard, though, to think of any good reasons why such differences should not exist. This will be particularly true when we bear in mind that different intended audience candidates may vary in age, cultural background, level of education and well- or ill-informedness about other members of the intended audience candidate and that potential items of common knowledge among intended audience members may relate to moral values, plausible kinds of motivation and very general beliefs about which sorts of enterprises are likely to succeed and which are likely to fail.

Indeterminacies in the intentions of the author vis-à-vis his audience may make it indeterminate which worlds are B-worlds, and hence which B-world is the closest B-world to the actual world.<sup>54</sup> Even if we put this aside, though, and assume that this question receives a determinate answer, there may also be no determinate answer to the question of which S-world is the closest to a given B-world. Two reasons for this need to be considered. The first is that, as in the closely related case of counterfactuals, the appropriate metric on possible worlds does not exist independently of the concerns and interests of the people to whom a given utterance is addressed. So the indeterminacies that we encountered when trying to say which worlds were B-worlds will return to plague us here.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly for my purposes, it is arguable that in the case of fiction, questions of aesthetic appropriateness may be relevant to judging the distance between possible worlds. Consider again the case of two individuals discussing the vexed question of Hamlet's sanity. Questions about what is likely to have been common knowledge among Shakespeare's intended audience may be relevant to satisfying this question. Plausible answers to such questions will help us to settle which worlds are B-worlds for Hamlet, and even which B-world is the closest world to the actual world. But even so, it seems permissible to think that the question of whether an S-world in which Hamlet is mad is closer to this B-world than an S-world in which he is not may turn on questions about which situation makes for a more aesthetically satisfying story.<sup>55</sup> To say this need not be say something which is incompatible with Lewis's account of fictional truth, but only to say that the sorts of world which count as close when we are trying

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54 That is to say, there will be some worlds of which it is indeterminate whether they are B-worlds or not. There may be other worlds where this question receives a perfectly determinate answer.

55 Clearly the notion of something's being aesthetically satisfying is one that needs further explication.

to determine what is true in a fiction may be very different from the sorts of world that count as close when we are trying to assess a real world counterfactual.<sup>56</sup>

Do the points that I have made constitute grounds for thinking that, even on Lewis's account, fictional discourse lacks cognitive command? Someone might doubt it for the following reason. There is an important difference, she might say, between sentences in a discourse being indeterminate in truth-value, and that discourse lacking cognitive command. Suppose that certain sentences in an area of discourse are indeterminate in truth-value, and suppose that two individuals differ in their assignments of truth-values to them. It is a *non sequitur* to say that the difference between them does not involve one of the parties in cognitive error. In fact, both parties can be convicted of such error precisely insofar as they are committed to assigning truth-values to a sentence whose truth-value is in fact indeterminate.

As far as it goes, this response is justified. The fact that a discourse contains sentences whose truth-value is indeterminate does not show that it lacks cognitive command. Consider two critics who disagree about Hamlet's shoe-size — we can surely say that both have made the 'cognitive error' of thinking that there is a determinate answer to this question when in fact there is not.

On the other hand, it is not obvious that it follows from the fact that certain sentences do not have a determinate truth-value that any disagreement about them involves something worth describing as *cognitive* error. It all depends on why the discourse admits sentences whose truth-value is indeterminate. Consider Wright's paradigm case of an area of discourse that lacks cognitive command: judgments about what is funny. Suppose two otherwise competent judges disagree about whether a particular joke is funny. This difference in their judgments may be explicable in terms of a difference in sensibility — a difference between two people's senses of humour. This difference is, in the hypothesised case, sufficient to explain the difference in judgment. We do not need to refer to the claim that the sentence has indeterminate truth-value to explain it. So the fact that the two individuals have made a mistake in this respect is irrelevant to the question of whether discourse about what is funny possesses Cognitive Command or not.

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56 In claiming that this view is compatible with Lewis's analysis, I do not wish to commit myself to the claim that Lewis would have endorsed the points that I am making, but only that they are consistent with (at least the letter of) his analysis.

Of course, Wright's formulation of his Cognitive Command criterion does seem to allow a response to this. The idea that a difference of opinion has to 'involve' cognitive error is very undemanding, and does seem to leave room for the idea that if two people have different views on a sentence whose truth value is in fact undetermined then some sort of cognitive error is concerned. Taking a sentence that has no determinate truth-value to have one is clearly an error of some sort. Someone who wants to deny that it is properly called 'cognitive' is likely to have their work cut out in giving a non *ad hoc* characterisation of what is cognitive that avoids this outcome.

However, there is an alternative strategy that may be more likely to succeed. If we read Wright's account in such a way as to require that cognitive error be not only 'involved' in any difference of opinion in the discourse but also involved in the explanation of such differences of opinion, then we can see how the claim that comic discourse lacks cognitive command can be salvaged.

Bearing this in mind we can now return to the question of whether, given an account like Lewis's, sentences about fiction can be regarded as lacking cognitive command. The key point is that although the first two sorts of consideration that I identified earlier as generating indeterminacy as to what is true in the fiction may not be sufficient for generating breakdowns of cognitive command, the third is. If the argument above carries any weight, then Lewis's account still leaves room for aesthetic sensibilities to play a role in determining what is true in a fiction. And since there is no reason to regard differences in aesthetic sensibility as involving cognitive error any more than differences in sense of humour, this seems to have the consequence that sentences about what is true in a fiction lack cognitive command.

The sorts of sentences that are likely to lead to there being a breakdown in cognitive command in fictional discourse are, then, ones in which what are, broadly speaking, aesthetic criteria such as overall coherence, interest, and so on play a role in determining their truth. Plausibly, sentences about whether Hamlet is really mad or not fall into this category in a way in which sentences about Hamlet's shoe-size or hair colour do not.<sup>57</sup>

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57 Shakespeare scholars please note that nothing is supposed to hang on the *exact* choice of example here, but only the type of example.

## X Fiction and Schmiction

One might still attempt to press the lightness of being objection by making the following move. Suppose we grant that our actual fictional discourse lacks cognitive command. Still, we could imagine beings whose imaginative responses to fiction did not vary in the ways that ours did. Such creatures, one might think, would be able to engage in a form of discourse — let us call it schmictional discourse, which would not lack cognitive command. Nevertheless, the Platonist ought to have qualms about allowing the schmictional character Hamlet the same ontological status as the number two.

As it stands, the objection fails. Although it might be true that disagreements about schmiction could always be traced to vagueness, different evidential thresholds, or vagueness, it would not necessarily be the case that this was true *a priori*. But one might think that this problem could be overcome, by supposing discourse about schmiction to be regimented in the following way: no sentence of superschmictional discourse is acceptable if any competent schmiction-consumer demurs from it. Clearly superschmictional discourse would not be bivalent — there would be sentences in it for which neither they nor their negation would be true. But it seems as though it would possess Cognitive Command. For it would follow from the rules of superschmictional discourse — and thus be *a priori* — that any disagreement about the truth of a superschmictional claim would involve cognitive error on the part of *both* participants. For both participants would be mistaken about their belief that the claim they were making was acceptable to all participants in the discourse.

Should the Platonist be worried? I think not. There are two points she can make. First of all, she might try to beef up the Cognitive Command criterion by insisting that the cognitive errors referred to in Wright's formulation should be errors about matters other than the judgments of other speakers. This reformulation need not be *ad hoc*. Something like it will be needed if Cognitive Command is to survive as a realism-relevant test. Without it, any area of discourse that lacks Cognitive Command can be conceived of as potentially possessing a more objective shadow.

Second, she can point out that to the extent which they have been fully sketched out here both schmictional and superschmictional discourse differ from real fictional discourse so much that it is not clear that our intuitions about the ontological status of superschmictional characters carry much probative force. One way of fleshing this point out would be to point up the analogies between the ways in which superschmictional discourse has been endowed with cognitive command, and the way in which some forms of legal discourse could similarly be



endowed with it. A hypothetical intuition that legal entities have little ontological standing carries much less weight than a similar intuition about fiction.<sup>58</sup>

## XI The Objection from Pretence

One final objection to the arithmetical Platonist needs to be considered. I shall call it the objection from pretence.<sup>59</sup> It runs as follows. ‘Essentially, when we tell a story, we are engaged in an act of pretence. But you can’t bring something into existence just by pretending. However, if we adopt the account of fictional entities proposed here, this is exactly what we are doing. So there must be something wrong with the account.’

We need to notice two things about this objection. First of all, it is not true, strictly speaking, that we cannot bring *anything* into existence just by pretending. Suppose it is true that fiction essentially involves acts of pretence. Then, on the assumption that stories are objects in good ontological standing,<sup>60</sup> stories are objects that we create by engaging in acts of pretence. So are acts of pretence themselves. There is nothing particularly paradoxical about this.

To be compelling, the objection must be based on the idea that we cannot bring objects into existence just by pretending that those very objects exist. Despite its initial plausibility, this is a claim that the Platonist can deny. How is this denial to be made plausible?

There are two closely related things that can be said. First, although fiction is closely related to pretence, it is not just pretence. Someone who tells a story can only do so in virtue of a large number of background conventions: not just linguistic conventions, but conventions

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58 Note that this point is consistent with denying that legal or superschmictional entities have as much ontological standing as stones or elementary particles. We can appeal to Wright’s Wide Cosmological role criterion here. However, for reasons I have already given, I don’t think the Wide Cosmological Role test is especially helpful for the arithmetical Platonist.

59 Evans 1982 argues that an account of the sort that I have been advocating runs into difficulties since it denies the obvious element of pretence that enters into talk about fictional characters. But it is possible to concede — as I am doing here — that such discourse depends on pretence without necessarily claiming — as Evans wants to that it consists solely of pretence, and that the apparent assertions which occur in it are merely pretend assertions.

60 Since stories can be the referents of singular terms, this is something that anyone who is at all attracted by the minimal Platonist view ought to concede.

about what counts as telling a story, what sorts of background assumptions about the characters in it can safely be made, what inferences one may make about aspects of the story that are not explicitly mentioned, and so on. It is only against the background of this set of conventions that the pretence that constitutes story-telling gains its ontologically inflationary powers.<sup>61</sup>

Second, once the dependence of fiction on prior conventions is accepted, it is possible to see analogies between the claim that the Platonist makes about fiction and other areas in which linguistic action has surprising ontological power. Again, legal contexts provide a useful comparison. Consider the act of setting up a legal corporation. This is something that can be accomplished by a series of linguistic transactions — but, again, not by bare linguistic acts, but by acts performed in the appropriate context and with the appropriate conventional backing. Seen in this light, the idea that we can bring fictional characters into existence just by talking about them seems less singular and less paradoxical.

## XII Conclusion

I have argued that the minimal Platonist has nothing to fear from the lightness of being objection. My argument has had two strands to it. The first is that fictional characters are of less obviously dubious ontological standing than the objector supposes. The second is that the Platonist need not say that there are no significant differences of ontological status between numbers and fictional characters. Like sixth-century neo-Platonists (though no doubt for very different reasons!) modern arithmetical Platonists should hold that reality comes in degrees.<sup>62</sup>

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61 This seems to me to be in the spirit of Lewis 1983, 276.

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