

Nevia Dolcini

This is not a book

Essays on Fictionality



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eum

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Contents

	Introduction
7	The Colors of Fiction: a Cartesian Prologue
	Chapter 1
	The World and Other Stories
13	1. The Strange Case of Mr. Kugelmass
15	2. Fictional Data
16	3. Fictional Beliefs and Beliefs on Fiction
19	4. Fictional Creation <i>vs.</i> Description of the Real
	Chapter 2
	Fictional Migration
23	1. The Metaphysics of Fiction
25	2. Fictional Discourse
27	3. The Migration <i>Datum</i>
29	4. Thomasson's Artifactualism
35	5. Voltolini's Syncretistic Theory
41	6. Orilia's Conventional Essentialism
	Chapter 3
	Degrees of Reality
45	1. Emma's Dark Hair
48	2. Fantastic <i>vs.</i> Realistic
50	3. Fictional Concreteness
52	4. New Migrations

Chapter 4

A “Kind of Glue”: Castañeda on Fiction

- 55 1. The Unity of Experience
 - 60 2. Intermezzo: Towards Guises
 - 63 3. Fiction Through the Guise-Theoretic Worldview
-
- 67 Bibliography

Introduction

The Colors of Fiction: a Cartesian Prologue

Las ruinas del santuario del dios del fuego fueron destruidas por el fuego. En un alba sin pájaros el mago vio cernirse contra los muros el incendio concéntrico. Por un instante, pensó refugiarse en las aguas, pero luego comprendió que la muerte venía a coronar su vejez y a absolverlo de sus trabajos. Caminó contra los jirones de fuego. Éstos no mordieron su carne, éstos lo acariciaron y lo inundaron sin calor y sin combustión. Con alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo. (J.L. Borges, *Las Ruinas Circulares*, in *Ficciones*)

Not only do we enjoy the company of fictional characters as we read a novel, watch a movie, or listen to a story; but we also become emotionally involved with them and their adventures. Ordinary interaction with fiction constitutes the starting point for the ongoing philosophical debate on the ontological and metaphysical status of fictional objects. Despite the many accounts of fictional objects currently on the market, there still is vagueness about the very nature of fiction. Moreover, the problem of discriminating fiction from reality has constituted a traditional issue for both philosophers and story tellers. Yet, the problem of the ontological status of fictional entities cannot be easily untan-

gled from the epistemological problem of distinguishing fiction from reality.

Reality shapes fiction. Some of our dreams actually feel real, and we *realize* that we were dreaming only when totally awake and focused on reality. Just as happens with the dream-awake dynamic, some fictional stories and characters feel like reality to the reader, yet while reading he discriminates and almost ghettoizes fiction from reality. What is the discrimination criterion, and what are its guarantees?

In the *Sixth Meditation*, after having ruled out the possibility of an evil genius, Descartes discusses a theologically uncommitted criterion for distinguishing between dream and wakefulness:

And I ought to reject all the doubts of those bygone days, as hyperbolic and ridiculous, especially the general uncertainty respecting sleep, which I could not distinguish from the waking state: that our memory can never connect our dreams with each other and with the course of life, in the way it is in the habit of doing with events that occur when we are awake (AT, VII, 89).

Unlike our dreams, the memories of our experiences while awake show a structural connection to one another. In other words, the benevolence of God is incompatible with the dream's property of being structurally connected with past waking experiences. Such panglossian view about our discriminating capacity has been hampered by Hobbes's last objection:

My question is whether it is certain that, if you dream that you are wondering whether you are dreaming or not, you cannot dream that your dream coheres with ideas of past events succeeding each other in a long chain. If this is a possibility, then things which seem to you in your dream to be events belonging to your past life can equally well be deemed genuine, no less than if you are awake (AT, VII, 195).

Thus, the structural connection turns out to be a too poor discriminating criterion since it could be dreamt, that is, it could be made up by the dreamer connecting his dreams with both his past oniric and waking experiences. Descartes's weak reply is that «dreamers cannot really connect the contents of their dreams with

the ideas of past events, although they can dream that they are making the connection» (AT, VII, 195). Yet, this would just be a mistake: «Does anybody deny that people can make mistakes in their sleep? But later, on waking up, they will readily see that they had been wrong» (*ibid.*).

After all, the very problem is not the relationship one entertains with his own dreams while awake, but rather the very possibility for a dreamer to dream of such connection. Descartes's response does not provide an effective solution to the discrimination problem. Yet, both Descartes and Hobbes would agree on what follows: our conscious mental states while awake and while dreaming do share some essential traits. The dreaming and waking experiences show uniformity, even though we know that they differ insofar as one is real and the other is not.

The Hobbes-Descartes dispute of the oniric *versus* awake experience reaches the kernel of the philosophical debate about fiction. We do experience fiction in the same way we experience reality, yet outside of the mind the ontological status of fiction and reality differ significantly. No matter what metaphysics of fiction one holds, the problem of the criterion for sorting out fiction from reality is still pivotal.

The discrimination criterion and the uniformity of the experience of fiction and reality are but the two faces of the same coin. What is the source of the uniformity of our mental states about the fictional and the real respectively? In the First Meditation, the meditator argues that our dreams are somehow anchored to our experiences while awake, since dreams always contain elements of reality.

Let us suppose, then, that we are dreaming, and that all these particulars – namely, the opening of the eyes, the motion of the head, the forthputting of the hands – are merely illusions; and even that we really possess neither an entire body nor hands such as we see. Nevertheless it must be admitted at least that the objects which appear to us in sleep are, as it were, painted representations which could not have been formed unless in the likeness of realities; and, therefore, that those general objects, at all events, namely, eyes, a head, hands, and an entire body, are not simply imaginary, but really existent (AT, VII, 19-20).

The analogy between oniric images and images represented in paintings can be further developed framing the Cartesian soliloquy as a dialogue between the meditator himself and his skeptical *alter ego*.

Antiskeptic: Paintings can be shaped only in resemblance [*similitudinem*] to something real, as the eyes, the head, the hands and the rest of the body.

Skeptic: Yes, but it is also possible for a painter to represent imaginary figures with extraordinary and bizarre shapes, such as Sirens and Satyrs.

Antiskeptic: I agree, yet the shape and nature of such figures are not totally new, since painters create them by extracting parts from different real animals.

Skeptic: Nevertheless, those painters whose imagination is particularly extravagant might still paint “something totally new, which does not resemble to anything seen before” [*adeo novum ut nihil omino ei simile fuerit visum*].

Antiskeptic: All right, but even in such highly creative activity, it must be admitted that certainly at least [*certe tamen ad minimum*] the colors composing those figures have to be real. Thus, if there isn’t a limit to the painter’s representational activity, there still is a limit to its chromatic representation.

In this book I’ll address the issue of the *colors* of fiction, that is, its continuity with reality. The uniform experience we have of the real and of the fictional is a *symptom*, which philosophers and aestheticians have sometimes taken into account. Notwithstanding that, the philosophical debate on fiction throughout the last century has been dominated by a special concern over the ontological and metaphysical status of fictional objects. Ever since we began to think and speak of fictional objects, philosophers have been faced with the problem of the reference of fictional terms and of sentences containing them. In this respect, the very well known Russell-Meinong dispute on non-existent objects offers the paradigmatic starting point for the current debate on fiction, which is still focused on the ontology of fiction. Philosophers working on fiction endorse views ranging from realism to irrealism, and the theories of fiction currently on the market show an exceptional variety of positions. Yet, the symptom mentioned above, if properly considered, reminds us of the relevance of the epistemological problem of fiction.

The four essays here collected constitute a dialogue with the contemporary debate on the ontological status of fiction, while offering a perspective sensitive to the problem of the criterion for discriminating between fiction and reality. Although these works do not explicitly endorse any of the currently dominant views on fiction, the reader will easily recognize my view on fiction as somewhat sympathetic with the intentionalist approaches, with a particular attention to Hector-Neri Castañeda's contribution.

In the first chapter, I provide a bird's eye of the most relevant instances challenging the various theories of fiction currently found on the market, while offering a classification of the relevant data on fiction.

The second chapter analyzes the phenomenon of fictional migration, that is, the capacity of fictional objects to migrate from one story to another¹. As a matter of fact, we are used to thinking of the Ulysses whose adventures are narrated in the *Odyssey* as the *same* Ulysses that guides the expedition past the Pillars of Hercules in Dante's *Inferno*. Many sentences of everyday usage seem to assert the possibility of a fictional character *migrating* from one story to another. How can we make sense of such a migration? In order to answer this question, two interwoven issues need first to be investigated, namely the metaphysical status and the identity conditions of fictional entities. Depending on their ontological and metaphysical preferences, philosophers conceive of fictional entities as abstract platonic entities, cultural artifacts, sets of properties, conventional essences, intentional objects, etc. Any particular metaphysical approach directly affects the identity conditions of fictional characters, hence their ability to migrate from one story to another and to *survive* somehow the fictional work that first gave birth to them. In the chapter, different approaches to fictional objects will be evaluated with respect to their accounts of the problem of migration: a purely artifactualist, a syncretistic, and an essentialist one.

¹ A version of Chapter 2 was published in Dolcini 2010.

The third chapter deals with some problems of the Meinongian approaches to fiction². In particular it presents the reader with an analysis of the consequences of considering fictional objects as sets of properties. Moreover it tackles the issue of the metaphysical differences between the real world and the fictional world.

The last chapter devotes particular attention to Hector-Neri Castañeda, and discusses his general approach to fiction, according to which there is no sharp discontinuity in ontology between the fictional and the real. I consider some of the cognitive issues raised by Castañeda, and the consistency of the very notion of “unity of experience” that is at the core of his approach. Finally, I discuss some controversial consequences triggered by the guise theory – Castañeda’s most important contribution to ontology – when applied to fiction.

² Chapter 3 develops some ideas first presented in Dolcini 2005.

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Not only do we enjoy the company of fictional characters as we read a novel, watch a movie, or listen to a story, but we also become emotionally involved with them and their adventures. Ordinary interaction with fiction constitutes the starting point for the ongoing philosophical debate on the ontological and metaphysical status of fictional objects. This book addresses the contemporary debate on the ontological status of fiction, while offering a perspective sensitive to the problem of the criterion for discriminating between fiction and reality.



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