

Centaurs, Pegasus, Sherlock Holmes: Against the Prejudice in Favour of the Real

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Abstract Meinong's thought has been rediscovered in recent times by analytic philosophy: his object theory has significant consequences in formal ontology, and especially his account of impossible objects has proved itself to be decisive in a wide range of fields, from logic up to ontology of fiction. Rejecting the traditional 'prejudice in favour of the real', Meinong investigates what there is *not*: a peculiar non-existing object is precisely the fictional object, which exemplifies a number of properties (like Sherlock Holmes, who lives in Baker Street and is an outstanding detective) without existing in the same way as flesh-and-blood detectives do. Fictional objects are in some sense *incomplete* objects, whose core of constituent properties is not completely determined. Now, what does it imply to hold that a fictional object may also occur in true statements? We shall deal with the objections raised by Russell and Quine against Meinong's view, pointing out limits and advantages of both perspectives.

Keywords Ontology of fiction, Meinong, classical quantification, Quine, meta-ontology.

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1. Fictional Objects. Why Should We be Interested in Them?

A fictional object is an object that occurs in fictional discourse, such as novels, scripts, short stories, created by the author's imagination, so that we cannot find it in our actual world. Typical examples of fictional objects are a centaur, Pegasus, Sherlock Holmes. Critics, commentators or students through their external comments might also distinguish the

fictional discourse made by an author in his fictional work from the discourse about fictional objects that is made. For example, when we say: “Shakespeare’s Hamlet is the most complex character in the history of literature”, we are dealing with a fictional object (Hamlet) in an external way, attributing him an extra-fictional property such as complexity.

Now, *why* should we be interested in fictional objects? Why is it significant to provide a rigorous account of them? I shall suggest that fictional objects issue a challenge to our ontological categories, since to provide an account of them also means to deal with the notorious problem of non-being and, in particular, with the fact that it seems possible to assert true things about non-existent objects. Indeed, if we consider the sentence:

(1) Sherlock Holmes lives in 221b Baker Street,

this seems to be intuitively true. We also make various *external* assertions about fictional objects that seem likewise intuitively true, such as “Arthur Conan Doyle invented Sherlock Holmes”. But can I really say true things about something (Sherlock Holmes) that seems *not* to exist? Am I here really *positively* talking about non-existence?

Fictional objects appear to be borderline cases situated on the confines between ontology, epistemology, psychology and philosophy of language. We have to redefine our concept of object, being and non-being, in an attempt to give an account of them. The questions about fictional objects involve the problem of the relationship between things and words, of how we can refer to something that seems not to exist. We might reformulate our initial problem in the following way: why should we be interested in non-being?

We are actually interested in non-being because some of the assertions about it are not trivial. Consider for example the discovery that the planet “Vulcan” does not exist. Vulcan was a small planet whose existence between Mercury and the Sun was hypothesized in order to explain some perturbations of Mercury’s orbit. In the 19th century the astronomers’ community maintained that there was a planet being-thus-and-so: only with Einstein’s theory of relativity it became apparent that Vulcan did not exist, although it had a clear, well determined nature. To assert “Vulcan

does not exist” assures scientific progress: in this case non-existence makes the difference.

So it seems that an object can have some features without existing. This is Alexius Meinong’s position: he defines as “object” whatever has a set of constitutive properties, regardless of its ontological status¹. Objects have a nature, a being-thus-and-so [*Sosein*], regardless of (1) whether or not they exist; (2) whether or not they are actually intended (represented, thought, desired etc.)². An object is independent from our psychological apprehension of it as well as from any ontological consideration: that means that there are also impossible objects like a round square, which is both round and square even if it cannot exist, and even if we do not think about it.

Against “the prejudice in favour of the real”³, Meinong rejects the idea that to be an object means to exist, identifying different kinds of being. As well as existing real objects like tables and trees (which have a peculiar spatio-temporal determination), there are also *ideal* objects, like “limit”, “lack”, “connection”, “number”⁴, that although they do not exist in the same sense as a table, somehow “are” or “subsist” [*bestehen*]. Furthermore, there are even objects that have no kind of being at all: for instance, the round square, the number 0 or a non-extensive surface, are all objects which maintain their properties regardless of their non-being, whose theoretical investigation has to be included into a more general theory of objects. In this extra-ontological domain, for which Meinong coined the term *Aussersein* (*extra-being*), the object is given *a priori* before our apprehending it and before we decide on its being or non-being⁵. In this sense, “object theory in the realm of *Aussersein* offers an

1 Meinong’s associate E. Mally first formulated this principle of the “independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*”.

2 The Meinongian theory of objects defends its independence not only from traditional metaphysics (considered as the science of the existent), but also from psychology, that treats of objects only as far as they are apprehended by our intentional acts.

3 Meinong, 1904, 485.

4 See Meinong, 1899.

5 In this sense the doctrine of *Aussersein* does not imply any recourse to a third type of being in addition to existence and subsistence.

extra-ontological semantic domain of all mind-independent objects of thought and language, existent, subsistent, beingless”⁶.

Although Meinong does not provide us with a comprehensive theory of fictional objects, his theses on object theory might prove themselves to be useful in order to develop a sound ontology of fictional discourse. We shall now draw attention to those rare passages where Meinong explicitly deals with fictional objects, considered as a specific subclass of non-existent objects.

2. Meinong’s View on Fictional Objects. Explicit References

It is matter of fact that people are able to think about non-existent things: we might admire Sherlock Holmes’ cleverness, fear a horrible character in a movie or imagine golden mountains. But how is it possible to think about something without ontological commitment? It seems that when we judge about something we always have to admit its existence: according to Meinong, “a person who judges believes something: [...] to judge is to believe”⁷.

Since Meinong ties up each feature in the realm of objects with some feature in the interior life of the subject, it might be helpful to provide here a brief overview of the Meinongian concept of intentionality. Indeed, it is not by sheer chance that his manifesto “*Über die Gegenstandstheorie*” [On Theory of Object] begins with an explicit reference to this concept of intentionality:

“That knowing is impossible without something being known, and more generally, that judgements and ideas or presentations [*Vorstellungen*] are impossible without being judgements about and presentations of something, is revealed to be self-evident by a quite elementary examination of these experiences”⁸.

6 Jacquette, 1996.

7 Meinong, 1910; 1983, 10. So, conviction is the first thing that anyone will grant as being present in judgements: the second thing is “a definite position within the antithesis of yes and no”, which definitely distinguishes judgements from representations.

8 Meinong, 1904, 483; 1960, 76.

The direction towards an object is regarded as the mark of mental acts. Meinong identifies four experiences through which an object can be apprehended: representation, thought, feeling and desire. In particular, within the thoughts are included not only judgements but also assumptions, defined as “an intermediate domain, the one between representation and judgement”⁹, “a convictionless affirmation and negation”¹⁰. This concept of assumption is extremely important in order to explain our apprehension of fictional objects, as far as we make assertions about them without affirming their existence. For example, we may say:

(2) Sherlock Holmes is an excellent detective,

even though we are perfectly aware of the non-existence of Sherlock Holmes¹¹, only because “our assuming is manifestly something that is not influenced in the slightest by the presence of a contrary conviction”¹². This means that any fictional discourse is matter of inducing the reader to make specific assumptions: according to Meinong, the intellectual attitude of a child playing is something less than judgement but more than mere representation. It is hence an attitude of assuming. Since “fiction is just assumption”¹³, assuming also have a quite fundamental position in the mental processes of the actor practising his profession: an actor, playing his part, does not simply copy the external aspects of the behaviour of the person to be portrayed, but he rather puts himself “in the position of the one being portrayed”¹⁴. In other words, the actor *assumes* that he is the person being portrayed. Assumptions not only play a fundamental role in the intellectual attitude, but they also serve

9 Meinong, 1910; 1983, 11.

10 Meinong, 1910; 1983, 11.

11 Meinong rejects the idea that we are in a state of delusion during our fictional activities: even “children at an early age know how to distinguish between play and earnest” (Meinong, 1910; 1983, 83).

12 Meinong, 1910; 1983, 11.

13 Meinong, 1910; 1983, 86. Our thought is actually unlimited in its free assumption of objects: this is Meinong’s thesis of the unrestricted freedom of assumption [*unbeschränkten Annahmefreiheit*], which is the condition of possibility of any thought and assertion about fictional objects.

14 Meinong, 1910; 1983, 85–86.

“to bring the emotional side of the assuming subject into a high degree of sympathy. Here again we have evidence of the significance of assumptions, a significance that goes far beyond the intellectual domain”¹⁵.

Now, what is the ontological status of the fictional objects that we apprehend through assumptions? Trying to answer this question, Meinong profoundly disagrees with the thesis that fictional objects are just representations in our mind: on the contrary, they have a peculiar objectivity regardless of our apprehending them. Consider this passage:

“Suppose that today someone judges that Pallas Athena is Zeus’ daughter. What is this judgement about? [...] Am I here really talking about an “idea” [*Vorstellung*]? Here I am rather talking about Pallas Athena, the Cyclopes, the Phlogiston; I am not talking about any ideas [*Vorstellung*]. Here, after all, these objects are associated with the idea of this or that person, so with something real. [...] Nonetheless, such a reference to something real does not change the fact that the objects of the judgements in question are nothing real. The nature of such facts might become even clearer when we take into account judgements about what a character of a certain drama or novel does: under normal circumstances nobody will think about author’s ideas. A connection to reality is present in all the cases in question. [...] But that so determined object does not consequently exist, nor its non-existence is involved in the judgement in question: the judgement is simply *daseinsfrei*”¹⁶.

15 Meinong, 1910; 1983, 86.

16 [*My translation*] “Gesetzt, jemand urteilt heute, Pallas Athene sei Zeus’ Tochter, von welcher Wirklichkeit handelt dieses Urteil? [...] Aber spreche ich hier wirklich von einer ‘Vorstellung’. Das, wovon ich rede, ist Pallas Athene, die Kyklopen, das Phlogiston, aber keine Vorstellung. Dabei werden immerhin diese Gegenstände mit den Gedanken dieser oder jener Menschen, also mit Wirklichsten in Verbindung gebracht. [...] So kann derlei Anlehnung an eine Wirklichkeit nichts daran ändern, dass die Gegenstände der betreffenden Urteile eben doch nichts Wirkliches sind. Noch deutlicher wird vielleicht das Wesen solcher Sachverhalte, wenn man Urteile darüber heranzieht, was diese Person eines gewissen Dramas sagt, jene Person eines bestimmten Romans tut u. dgl., wo unter gewöhn-

According to Meinong, fictional objects are not merely mental contents of our assumptions, but authentic mind-independent objects *towards which* our assumptions are directed. Nonetheless, fictional objects like Athena or Phlogiston cannot be defined as “real” [*wirklich*] as the desk I am working on or as the cat I am currently stroking: if we look closer at the assumptions we formulate about fictional objects, we might notice that they deal neither with their being nor with their non-being. In this sense these are *daseinsfrei* sentences, as far as the ontological status of those objects is not in question and they are free from any existential commitment. According to the principle of independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*, an object can exemplify certain characteristics regardless of its ontological status, so that we can formulate correct assertions about Athena’s cleverness, – or we can define the Phlogiston as a sort of anti-oxygen, – regardless of their being or non-being. In this sense, the *Sosein* of any object – the object’s having the characteristics it has – is not affected either by its *Sein* or *Nichtsein*. Fictional objects are *ausser-seiend*, since they stand beyond being and non-being.

To sum up, there are three Meinongian theses which can be useful to build a solid theory of fictional objects:

- The principle of independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*;
- The idea that there are [*es gibt*] objects that do not exist;
- The idea that fictional objects might have real effects on our inner life.

We might also add a fourth point, which Neomeinongian philosophers have drawn from the second one:

- The idea that we can have a kind of quantification that does not entail any ontological commitment¹⁷. This point will become clear with the next paragraph, where we shall discuss the main views against Meinong’s theory of objects.

lichen Umständen gewiss niemand an die Vorstellungen des Dichters denkt. Eine Verbindung mit der Wirklichkeit fehlt in keinem der einschlägigen Fälle. [...] Der so vorbestimmte Gegenstand aber existiert darum noch keineswegs, und auch von seiner Nichtexistenz wird in dem betreffenden Urteil durchaus nicht gehandelt: das Urteil ist eben *daseinsfrei*”. (Meinong, 1907, 254–255).

17 See Routley, 1982.

3. The “Received View” about Non-Being: Russell, Quine and Plato’s Beard

We shall briefly discuss here the so called “received view” about non-being developed by Russell and Quine, which successfully imposed itself against Meinong’s view.

Russell deals with the problem of reference to non-existent entities in his famous article “On denoting”, where he proposes his theory of definite description, that makes apparent that all our sentences about (alleged) non-existent objects are false.

“The whole realm of non-entities, such as “the round square”, “the even prime other than 2”, “Apollo”, “Hamlet” etc., can now be satisfactorily dealt with. All these are denoting phrases which do not denote anything. A proposition about Apollo means what we get by substituting what the classical dictionary tells us is meant by Apollo, say “the sun-god “. [...] So again “the round square is round” means “there is one and only one entity x which is round and square, and that entity is round”, which is a false proposition, not, as Meinong maintains, a true one”¹⁸.

Russell proposes to paraphrase each sentence containing any reference to non-existent objects in terms of sentences in which the definite descriptions in question have all disappeared: for example, the sentence “the present King of France is bald” might be transformed into “there is one and only one entity which is the present King of France, and he is bald”, a phrase that is obviously false since we cannot find any existing object that exemplifies these properties. Thus any sentence attributing existence to some non-existent objects is false.

This idea that only sentences about existent objects are true is shared by Quine too, who reformulates the “ancient enigma of non-being” as follows:

18 Russell, 1905, 91.

“nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not? This tangled doctrine might be nicknamed Plato’s beard; historically it has proved tough, frequently dulling the edge of Occam’s razor”¹⁹.

In his article “On What There Is” Quine imagines a controversy between two fictitious philosophers, McX and Wyman, who draw a sharp distinction between two different kinds of being, existence and subsistence:

“Wyman is one of those philosophers who have united in ruining the good old word ‘exist’. Despite his espousal of unactualized possibles, he limits the word ‘existence’ to actuality - thus preserving an illusion of ontological agreement between himself and us who repudiate the rest of his bloated universe. [...] However, Wyman, in an ill-conceived effort to appear agreeable, genially grants us the nonexistence of Pegasus and then, contrary to what *we* meant by nonexistence of Pegasus, insists that Pegasus is. Existence is one thing, he says, and subsistence is another”²⁰.

Although in Quine’s intentions McX and Wyman are obviously two “Meinongian” thinkers, the similarities between Meinong and them are actually rather superficial: in particular, they do not seem to share that account of *Aussersein* developed by Meinong, which allows us to consider non-existent objects like Pegasus from an *extra*-ontological point of view. Now, what is exactly Quine’s position about non-existent objects?

According to Quine, it is the theory in use what decides on the existence/non-existence of an entity: “what there is” is included in the domain of the quantification requested by the theory in question. Quine, appealing to Russell’s theory of definite descriptions, proposes to substitute the proper names (for example Pegasus) of the original sentence with definite descriptions (such as “flying horse”).

19 Quine, 1953, 2.

20 Quine, 1953, 3.

“Now what of ‘Pegasus’? This being a word rather than a descriptive phrase, Russell’s argument does not immediately apply to it. However, it can easily be made to apply. We have only to rephrase ‘Pegasus’ as a description, in any way that seems adequately to single out our idea; say, ‘the winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon’. Substituting such a phrase for ‘Pegasus’, we can then proceed to analyze the statement ‘Pegasus is’, or ‘Pegasus is not’, precisely on the analogy of Russell’s analysis of ‘The author of Waverley is’ and ‘The author of Waverley is not’²¹.”

The sentence “Pegasus exists” might be reformulated into: “there is exactly one x which is a flying horse”, reformulation that requires a definite description for each proper noun occurring in the sentence. Anyway, if we are not able to translate the word into a description,

“if the notion of Pegasus had been so obscure or so basic that no translation into a descriptive phrase had offered itself along familiar lines, we might still have availed ourselves of the following artificial and trivial-seeming device: we could have appealed to the *ex hypothesi* unanalyzable, irreducible attribute of being Pegasus, adopting, for its expression, the verb ‘to be-Pegasus’, or ‘to pegasize’. The noun ‘Pegasus’ itself could then be treated as derivative, and identified after all with a description: ‘the thing that is-Pegasus’, ‘the thing that pegasizes’²².”

The ontological commitment of the sentence depends on the variable, and not on Pegasus. That’s why Quine coined the famous slogan: “to be is to be the value of a variable”²³; we have now a sort of ontological immunity, so that, essentially, the only way we might involve ourselves

21 Quine, 1953, 7.

22 Quine, 1953, 7-8.

23 Quine, 1953, 15

in ontological commitments is by our use of bound variables²⁴. In short, the enigma of non-being is reduced to a question of quantification.

Yet, we still have to understand how we might decide among different possible ontologies. For Quine the choice among alternative theories rests on pragmatic reasons, so that we might choose the simplest or the most comprehensive one.

“Wyman’s overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes, but this is not the worst of it. Wyman’s slum of possible is a breeding ground for disorderly elements”²⁵.

In this sense Quine’s proposal is developed from an extra-ontological perspective: Quine assumes an external point of view, providing a method, an instrument such as the quantification, that we might use to make *explicit* the ontological commitments of a theory. Two different theories, with different conceptual schemes, will quantify in different ways: they both give an account of what there is in the world from their point of view, and it is a practical question to decide which theory is the best one.

Now, how exactly does the “received view” defended by Russell and Quine affect Meinong’s position? For Russell and Quine, non-existent entities cannot be authentic reference of our discourse. Sentences, which apparently make reference to non-existing objects, have to be paraphrased through quantification and uniqueness conditions, in order to eliminate definite descriptions and proper names. Consequently, any statement about non-existent objects is *false*. Russell’s and Quine’s conclusion that sentences about fictional objects cannot be true comes from two premises:

- (I) If $F(a)$ is true, a exists;
- (II) If $F(a)$ is about a fictional object, a does not exist,

24 Quine, 1953, 12.

25 Quine, 1953, 4.

where F stands for any predicate and a for any entity. In order to claim that a sentence such as ‘Sherlock Holmes lives in 221b Baker Street’ is true, it is therefore necessary to contest either the first or the second premise.

Firstly, following Meinong’s principle of “the independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*”, we might uphold that it is not necessary to claim the existence of an object in order to formulate sentences about it: an object might exemplify properties even if it does not exist.

We might therefore replace the premise I) with the premise:

I.2) if $F(a)$ is true, a is given [*es gibt*],

introducing in this way a wider account of “being” which includes also a level of “givenness”/ “subsistence”/ “extra-being”, that does not entail any “flesh-and-blood” existence. We might also notice that classical quantification cannot be applied to Meinong’s sentences about non-existent objects, since the quantifier always implies the existence of the object involved and cannot say anything about other ontological dimensions upheld by Meinong, such as subsistence or extra-being²⁶.

Finally, we might attempt to argue that the second premise is false, and claim that a fictional object *exists* exactly in the same way as any real objects. In this sense, a fictional object might be defined as an existing abstract object, about which we can formulate true sentences²⁷. Still, in this second strategy we need to find out how exactly can the same property be attributed in the same way to an abstract object and to a material one: in what sense does Holmes smoke a pipe? In what sense can an abstract object exemplify the properties normally attributed to concrete objects?

26 Richard Routley makes a distinction between an existentially loaded quantification and an existentially neutral quantification, one that takes into account modes of being that do not entail any “existence”: in this second sense, existentially neutral, if I maintain that “there is x ”, I do not mean “ x exists”. (See Routley, 1982).

27 See van Inwagen, 1977; Thomasson, 1999; Reicher, 2015.

4. The “Received View” vs Meinong’s View: Limits and Advantages

We might identify two orders of problems that any Neomeinongian theory about fictional objects has to face: Quine’s demand for clear identity conditions for non-existent objects, and the accusation of being “redundant”.

Firstly, Quine’s demand for clear identity conditions for non-existent objects is a particularly insidious question for Meinong’s view. In Meinong’s opinion, even fictional objects never depend upon our thinking: we just select them “from the infinite depths of the *Ausserseienden*, beyond being and not-being”²⁸. Now, how can we select the *right* Sherlock Holmes? We really have too many possibilities at our disposal: for instance, there is the first Sherlock Holmes with n -many hairs, the second one with $(n+1)$ -hairs; then the third one who is taller than Michael Jordan and the fourth who is shorter than him. And we might infinitely continue this process taking into consideration any aspect that lays undetermined in Sherlock Holmes’ description given by A.C. Doyle. This is the problem arisen by Quine in “On what there is”: the demand for clear identity conditions, when there are a lot of possible objects that are equally suitable for the identification with our fictional object.

“Take, for instance, the possible fat man in that doorway; and, again, the possible bald man in that doorway. Are they the same possible man, or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible men are there in that doorway? Are there more possible thin ones than fat ones? How many of them are alike? Or would their being alike make them one? Are no two possible things alike? Is this the same as saying that it is impossible for two things to be alike? Or, finally, is the concept of identity simply inapplicable to unactualized possibles?”²⁹

Quine points out how difficult it is to identify stable identity conditions for fictional objects, which are at best merely possible. Nonetheless,

28 Chisholm, 1967, 261.

29 Quine, 1953, 4.

the Meinongian thinker might answer: there is no number n such that Sherlock Holmes has a determined number of hairs, because Sherlock Holmes is in itself an *incomplete* object, which lacks the property “to have a determined number of hairs” as well as many other properties³⁰. A Neomeinongian theory’s of fictional objects might be developed in this way, considering fictional objects as incomplete entities³¹. Such a perspective might prove itself to be useful in order to clarify the relationship between *intra* and *extra* fictional properties. For instance, if we consider the fictional character of Napoleon as outlined by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, that is to a certain degree implicated into the real Napoleon: his variable degree of possibility depends on his proximity to the *complete* Napoleon, – the one who actually existed as flesh-and-blood historical figure.

A second problem faced by Meinong’s theory is the accusation of being against any principle of economy. Meinong’s ontology seems to be redundant, postulating an “overpopulated universe”, as Quine claims, including fictional, impossible, even contradictory objects. Since Meinong’s view cannot accept the classical theory of quantification, any Neomeinongian view needs a different kind of quantification, namely an “ontologically neutral” one³², in order to include those modalities of subsistence and *Aussersein*, which do not entail any existence. In this sense existentially neutral, if I say “there is x ” it does not mean “ x exists”.

Though the lack of economy, the Meinongian account of fictional objects seems much more intuitive, if compared to the “received view”. Indeed, when we say:

(2) Sherlock Holmes is an excellent detective

30 In *Über Möglichkeit und Wahrscheinlichkeit* Meinong defines an object as “a collective of determination of so-being [Kollektiv von Soseinsbestimmungen]”, whose amount might vary between zero and infinity (Meinong, 1915, 167).

31 Venanzio Raspa proposes such an analysis of fictional objects in terms of incomplete objects. See Raspa, 2005.

32 A neutral quantification might be distinguished from an existential one. “Pegasus does not exist” could be rendered as “ $\exists x(\neg E!x)$ ”, where “E!” is the existence predicate. (See Reicher, 2015; Routley, 1982).

according to the principle of independence of *Sosein* from *Sein* we are here referring to a non-existing object with peculiar properties, so that this assertion is true. On the contrary,

(3) Sherlock Holmes is a stone

is false, because “to be a stone” does not belong to Sherlock’s *Sosein*. This is an intuitive way to attribute different truth-values to different assertions concerning the same non-existent object, while according to the “received view”, sentences (2) and (3) are both false, since they deal with objects that do not exist.

Nonetheless, even if *intuitiveness* could be an advantage of Meinong’s view, this still remains a “non-economic” account, considering that it requires a peculiar theory of quantification, “ontologically neutral”, against the classical one. A good compromise between intuitiveness and simplicity might be found in a different approach to the question of fictional objects, according to which fictional objects *exist* like any other object in the world: they are social products, created by author’s imagination³³. In this sense, in opposition to the received view we shall maintain that our references to fictional objects are authentic, so that we do not need any paraphrase in order to eliminate them; at the same time, against Meinong’s view, we do not need any special kind of quantification, since we do not need to distinguish between different kinds of being. According to this theory, fictional objects are abstract, theoretical objects of literary criticism, as much as electrons are theoretical objects of physics³⁴: Sherlock Holmes isn’t a concrete object but rather an *abstract* object which exemplifies peculiar properties, such as the property to be an excellent detective according to Doyle’s novels. This view has therefore two apparent advantages:

- it considers references to fictional objects as authentic references, so that a paraphrase in the Quine’s way is not requested;
- it does not require any change in the classical use of quantification, – a significant advantage compared to a Neomeinongian account.

33 See Van Inwagen, 1977; Reicher, 2007; Thomasson, 2003.

34 See Van Inwagen, 1977.

Unsurprisingly, we might find nonetheless objections also to this account of fictional objects: we might notice for example that it cannot treat the intuitive difference between these two sentences: 1. my desk exists; 2. Pegasus exists. More important, this realist theory always has to consider false the sentence: “Sherlock Holmes does not exist”, which seems intuitively true. Finally, this account still has to explain how an abstract object can exemplify properties that are normally attributed to concrete objects.

It is now worth noticing that we might find objections against all kinds of theories about fictional objects considered so far: fictional objects seem to slip out of our theories, issuing a challenge to our ontological categories. That’s why it is so difficult to develop a consistent theory about them. As pointed out by Thomasson, “we want to say in one breath that Sherlock Holmes is a detective, but also that is a fictional character. [...] Since there are apparent inconsistencies, any consistent theory must give up appearances somewhere”³⁵. Any account of fictional objects challenges our attempts to frame them into a coherent theory. We would like to secure our intuitions about fictional objects within the most parsimonious theory, but this seems unattainable: we have to give up something, either in terms of intuitiveness or in terms of elegance. Eventually, as Quine claimed, we face here a metaontological question: different ontologies of fiction will quantify in different ways, and it is a practical question to decide which theory is the “best” one.

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³⁵ Thomasson, 2003, 205.

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