

*Reductionism, Fictionalism, and the Objects of Thought**

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In this paper I evaluate Tim Crane's distinctive form of reductionism and compare the view to fictionalism. Both reductionism and fictionalism have been put forward as ontologically modest proposals for accommodating our intuitions about fictional objects and objects of error. In *Objects of Thought*, Crane puts forward a vigorous case for reductionism and suggests that it compares favorably to fictionalism. In this paper I explore this contrast in more detail and conclude tentatively that fictionalism is the better of the two views.

Subject Metaphysics

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Tim Crane's *The Objects of Thought* (OT) is an extraordinarily lucid book, written accessibly without compromising on depth and rigor. It offers both a novel account of the nature of intentionality and a solution to problems of non-existence. The overall aim of the book 'is to reconcile the claim that there can be truths [and falsehoods] about non-existent objects with the claim that such objects are no part of reality' [OT, p. 27]. The proposed reconciliation does *not* involve postulating a realm of peculiar non-existent objects that we refer to in language and stand in substantial relations to when we think about them. Instead, it involves an acceptance that genuine truths about non-existent intentional objects must be *reductively* explained in terms of truths about what does in fact exist. I find myself agreeing with so much contained within OT. But in this paper I want to focus on one point of disagreement.

1. Realism about fictional characters

In the first chapter, Crane follows Keith Donnellan by dividing non-existent objects into two kinds: fictional objects and objects of error. While Crane admits that there may be non-existent objects that fall into neither category (my biological sister, hallucinations, future individuals, possible worlds, etc.), his focus is on fictional objects and objects of error because they provide us with the clearest and least controversial examples of non-existent objects [p. 75]. I will follow suit and focus even more narrowly on fictional objects though much of what I say applies also, *mutatis mutandis*, to objects of error.

A realist about fictional characters accepts the following two theses:

Ontological Thesis: Fictional characters (like Sherlock Holmes) exist.

Conceptual Thesis: A fictional character (like Sherlock Holmes) is an individual (or role) picked out by a name or description that (i) is first introduced in a work of fiction, and (ii) does not pick out a concrete individual in the actual world.

The Conceptual Thesis should be common ground between the realist and the anti-realist; it is merely the articulation of the subject matter under dispute. Because Crane is *not* a realist about fictional characters, he must therefore reject the Ontological Thesis. To be sure, in Chapter 3 he says explicitly:

There is a large body of opinion ... that holds that fictional characters *do* exist: this is 'realism' about fictional characters. Since I think that fictional characters do not exist in any sense, I reject all forms of realism about fictional characters [OT, p. 75].

The idea that fictional characters really exist does violence to commonsense opinion, and Crane is sensible to resist it. But Crane is also acutely aware of the reasons and arguments in support of realism. To illustrate what motivates realists, Crane considers first the following naïve argument in support of realism. Consider the following statement, which I might make in the context of a conversation with an acquaintance:

(0) Sir Ian Blair is the former Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

It should be obvious to anyone with a superficial knowledge of the recent history of the London Metropolitan Police Service that what I say

in this case is true. This is because any utterance of a simple subject-predicate sentence is true when the subject expression refers to an individual that has the property picked out by the predicate expression. Now consider another statement, which we may suppose I make during a conversation with another friend:

(1) Sherlock Holmes is a detective.

Again, it should be obvious that what I express by my utterance of (1) is in some sense true. And if the semantic story stated above is right, a realist might suggest likewise that this is because the subject expression in each case refers to an individual. As such, there must be an individual named ‘Sherlock Holmes’ and that individual is a fictional character. (*cf.* OT, p. 76).

This line of argument, however, is not compelling. The anti-realist can respond by suggesting that statement (1) is elliptical for a longer sentence about a fiction. Indeed, statements of this kind can always be interpreted as sentences beginning with the silent story prefix, ‘According to the Sherlock Holmes stories,’ or something of the sort. As such, my utterances do not force me to embrace an ontology of fictional characters because (apparent) reference and quantification within the scope of a story prefix is not ontologically committing.

Crane calls this kind of response to the realist’s challenge an ‘Implicit Operator’ response. He is hostile to this kind of response, at least if it is applied too widely. I am sympathetic to it, and have defended such a response in print (see, for example, [anonymised for blind review]). So

my aim here is to examine Crane's criticisms, and to compare the Implicit Operator view to Crane's view. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I don't think Crane's criticisms are decisive.

2. Crane's Criticisms of the Implicit Operator View

Crane's criticism of the Implicit Operator view is given first in Chapter 3. He says:

There seem to be many truths which cannot be given an 'in the fiction' operator interpretation. Consider the sentence, 'Sherlock Holmes is more famous than Miss Marple.' No simple 'in the fiction' operator should be part of the correct truth conditions for this sentence, since there is no fiction in which they both appear. One might be tempted by some *ad hoc* paraphrase along the lines of 'the Sherlock Holmes stories are more famous than the Miss Marple stories' or some such. But apart from the fact that our original sentence does not talk directly about stories but about detectives, it is hard to see how there can be any systematic way of generating such paraphrases. [OT, p. 81]

Later, in Chapter 5, Crane reiterates the same basic objection. To make the point, he asks us to consider the following sentences:

- (2) Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any living detective; for example, Sherlock Holmes is more famous than Sir Ian Blair.
- (3) Pegasus is a mythological winged horse; in the myth, Pegasus sprung into being from the blood of Medusa, the gorgon killed by Perseus.
- (4) Siegfried is one of the most unappealing heroes in all dramatic works.

All sentences are true, or at least appear to be true. So the question is: what explains their truth? Crane denies that the Implicit Operator view has the resources here to give a satisfactory answer. He says:

[W]e should not generally construe claims about fictional characters as containing an implicit operator, ‘In the fiction ...’. It certainly isn’t implicit in claim (4), about Siegfried—for it is not something true in the fiction, that he is unappealing. Nor can we find it in claim (3) about Pegasus: it is not true that in the myth, Pegasus was a mythological winged horse. Nor in claim (2), about Holmes and Sir Ian Blair: there is no such fiction which says this, but it is nonetheless true ... My objection to the implicit operator approach is not that it never works, but that it cannot be a general solution to the problem [OT, p. 120-1].

Crane’s objection, then, starts by getting us to recognize that there is a distinction to be made between three kinds of claims we might make about fictional characters, each of which may be true, and each of which raises distinctive puzzles of its own. There are (a) *negative existentials*, claims to the effect that a certain kind or entity does not exist, (b) *fictional* claims, claims like (1), about the content of a literary fiction, and (c) *critical* claims, claims like (2), (3) and (4), which are not claims about the content of a literary fiction, but are true *in virtue* of the content of such a work in the sense that, were the fiction not to exist, the relevant claims would not be true.

Crane suggests that *critical* claims cannot be given the same kind of anti-realist gloss as fictional claims—they cannot be understood as straightforward elliptical claims about the content of the literary fictions in which the relevant characters appear. Understood in this way, all three

claims would be false, not true.

It is important to note here that Crane is *not* claiming that it is impossible to find paraphrases for critical claims. He concedes that it is possible to provide suggestive (if not entirely satisfactory) paraphrases of statements (2)-(4), and presumably of other critical claims as well. Such paraphrases might even involve a fictional prefix. To illustrate, consider the following proposed paraphrases of the critical claims considered above:

- (2*) According to the Sherlock Holmes stories, Sherlock Holmes is a detective and those stories are more well-known than any living detective; for example, the Holmes stories are more well-known than Sir Ian Blair.
- (3*) According to the ancient Greek myth, Pegasus is a winged horse; according to that myth, Pegasus sprung into being from the blood of Medusa, the gorgon killed by Perseus.
- (4*) Characteristics X, Y, and Z are very unappealing characteristics; according to *the Ring Cycle*, Siegfried is a hero with characteristics X, Y, and Z; and few dramatic works postulate characters with characteristics X, Y, and Z.

Nonetheless, Crane notes that there are two problems associated with this kind of suggestion. First, the paraphrases of critical claims are put forward on a piecemeal basis, making the anti-realist's theory look *ad hoc* and inviting the suspicion that similar paraphrases may not be available for all critical statements. Second, such paraphrases are clumsy and awkward. And because elegance and simplicity are theoretical desiderata,

this is a significant cost associated with the view.

3. Fictionalism about Fictional Characters

Brock (2002) defends a view he calls ‘Fictionalism about Fictional Characters.’ It is an account of what makes our claims (apparently) about fictional objects true, which takes seriously Crane’s concerns about paraphrase approaches. It is an attempt to provide the required systematic method for paraphrasing critical claims, a proposal in the same spirit as the Implicit Operator proposal for analyzing *fictional* statements—statements like (1).

According to the Implicit Operator view, fictional claims are often true, but when they are, they cannot be taken at face value. Such claims are about the content of a story. (1), for example, is a statement about the content of the Sherlock Holmes stories. The fictionalist’s idea is to suggest the same sort of thing is going on when we make critical claims. But in such cases we are not appealing elliptically to the content of a myth or a literary fiction. Instead we are talking about the content of a *theory*, namely the realist’s theory of fictional characters. The proposal, then, is to paraphrase every critical claim *C* as ‘*according to the realist’s theory of fictional (or mythical) characters, C.*’ So, for example, the fictionalist will take (2), (3) and (4) quite straightforwardly as elliptical for the following sentences (which make the operators explicit):

- (2F) According to the realist’s theory of fictional (and mythical) characters, Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any living detective; for example, According to the realist’s theory of

fictional characters, Sherlock Holmes is more famous than Sir Ian Blair.

- (3F) According to the realist's theory of fictional (and mythical) characters, Pegasus is a mythological winged horse; According to the ancient Greek myth, Pegasus sprung into being from the blood of Medusa, the gorgon killed by Perseus.
- (4F) According to the realist's theory of fictional (and mythical) characters, Siegfried is one of the most unappealing heroes in all dramatic works.

In this way the fictionalist can give a systematic paraphrase of all critical claims without committing herself to a realm of fictional objects. Arguably, the fictionalist's paraphrase strategy is more systematic and less *ad hoc* than the realist's proposal for paraphrasing away critical claims. This might seem surprising given that the realist will take many critical claims at face value. But to see that she cannot take them all at face value, consider the following true claims that might be made in the context of a critical discussion about the Holmes stories:

- (5) Sherlock Holmes is taller than Tyrion Lannister.
- (6) Sherlock Holmes was created by Conan Doyle.

Every realist claims either that all fictional characters are abstract or alternatively that characters like Sherlock Holmes and Tyrion Lannister are concrete. But if fictional characters are all abstract, they have no height at all. And so, if 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Tyrion Lannister' as they occur in (5) name fictional characters, the statement appears false. If, on the other hand, fictional characters were concrete entities, they would not

be the sorts of things created by authors as they write their novels. Indeed, if the world described in Conan Doyle's stories is a causally isolated concrete possible world inhabited by concrete possible individuals, then Holmes presumably was created by his mother and father; Conan Doyle had nothing to do with his birth. On such a view, statement (6) looks false. Consequently, at least one of statements (5) or (6) must be paraphrased away by the realist. Which one will depend on the general metaphysical framework the realist adopts.

And so, according to the realist, there will always some critical statements that cannot be taken at face value; even the realist will have to provide a paraphrase of some such statements. As a consequence, realism looks vulnerable to the same sort of objection as that facing the anti-realist, albeit with respect to a more limited range of cases.

To what extent do fictionalism and Crane's view differ? Is Crane's view an improvement on fictionalism? These are the questions to be addressed in the final section.

4. Reductionism

Crane does not aim to give a paraphrase of fictional claims like (1) and critical claims like (2)-(6). Instead, Crane provides a reductive explanation of why critical claims are true. The reader may, however, be surprised to learn that reductive explanations are not held to the same standards as operator views like fictionalism. In Chapter 5, before sketching a reductive explanation of (2)-(4), Crane says:

The explanations offered by reductionism will have a piecemeal character to them, because of the nature of the phenomena being explained [OT, p. 134]

This is supposedly because, in a sense, the reductivist program is less ambitious than the fictionalist programme. Why? Earlier in Chapter 5, Crane says:

The point of reductionism is to explain why these things are true, without assuming that such an explanation must take the form of a *translation* or a *paraphrase* of the truths in question [OT, p. 132]

Before looking closely at Crane's positive proposal, it is worth pointing out that the fictionalist need not think of her own project in the way Crane conceives of it. She may not intend her paraphrases to provide literal translations of the original claims. Indeed, as Kendall Walton insightfully points out, fictionalist paraphrases of this kind may instead 'seek to capture ... what speakers say in uttering the sentences cited, not what the sentences themselves mean or what propositions *they* express, if any.' [Walton, 1990: 417; 2015: 111]. Walton's point is that speakers can convey all sorts of information using sentences like Statements (4)-(6). What the *speaker* says or communicates in a context by an utterance of (4)-(6) need not be what the *sentences* themselves literally mean in English. And if the paraphrases capture standard speaker meanings (pragmatics) rather than literal sentence meanings (semantics), we should not impose a systematicity requirement on the fictionalist paraphrases any more that we should on a reductive explanation.

Crane's own solution to the problem of non-existence relies on the following thoughts. Fictional names have no referent, yet simple sentences containing a non-mentioned occurrence of a fictional name are

meaningful; sometimes they are true, and sometimes they are false. In order to ascertain when they are true, on Crane's view, one must recognize that fictional objects cannot have substantial existence-entailing properties; they can only have pleonastic properties, (i.e., they can only have the property of non-existence *or* representation-dependent properties).

With this background, it is possible to give the promised explanatory reduction. On Crane's view, a reductive explanation of critical claims will do two things. First, it will identify what in reality makes it the case that such statements are true, and second, it will show how these facts only about what exists explain why the statements are true. The facts about reality described in each case will be of *psychological* (and therefore representational) states on which these truths supervene. Such explanations need to be given on a piecemeal basis. But to illustrate the idea, consider Crane's reductive explanation of (2). He says:

To say this claim is true is to say that Holmes stands in the pleonastic relation of *being more famous than* to any real detective, and that *a fortiori* he is more famous than Sir Ian Blair. Fame is a property which comes in degrees, that existent and non-existent objects can have. Your degree of fame is (roughly speaking) a matter of how many people have heard of you, know something about you, or can otherwise represent you more or less correctly. For Sherlock Holmes to be famous is for many people to have heard of him; for him to be more famous than Ian Blair is for more people to have heard of him than have heard of Ian Blair. For people to have heard of Sherlock Holmes is for them to have heard of ... the stories, or to know about other representations of Holmes ... For all these things to be true, all that needs to exist are the Holmes stories, people's representations of Holmes, and Sir Ian Blair [OT, p. 135].

Because Crane claims that fictional characters can only have representation-dependent properties (other than the property of non-existence), Crane must claim that *relative fame* is a representation dependent property. And of course Crane would be right to suggest it is. (As he points out, ‘a person can only be famous if people somewhere think about, talk about, or in other words represent that person’ [OT, p. 135].)

However, it is not clear that a reductive explanation in terms of actually instantiated representation-dependent properties is going to be possible for all true claims about fictional characters. To illustrate the worry, consider again the following fictional claim:

- (1) Sherlock Holmes is a detective.

Because *being a detective* is a substantial and existence-entailing property, if (1) is to be taken at face value, Crane is forced to say that it is false. In order to accommodate the intuition that it is true, Crane gives it—and presumably all other fictional claims—a fictionalist gloss [cf. OT, pp. 80-1]. Crane emphasizes, though, that a fictionalist gloss cannot be extended to explain our intuitions about the truth of many claims about fictional objects. Without saying so explicitly, his proposal may be to give a fictionalist gloss of fictional claims but to give a reductionist explanation of critical claims about fictional objects. But this principled division of labor will not obviously do the trick. For consider again the following critical claim:

- (5) Sherlock Holmes is taller than Tyrion Lannister

Being taller than also looks like a substantial and existence-entailing property. If it is, (5) too must either not be taken at face value, or else Crane must say it is false. And even if *being taller than* turns out to be a representation dependent property, I suspect that other critical claims can be found that do only appeal to substantial existence-entailing properties. For example, consider the following:

- (7) Sherlock Holmes is less clumsy than Inspector Clouseau
- (8) James Bond is more of a womanizer than Sherlock Holmes
- (9) Sherlock Holmes walks faster than Bran Stark

The comparative properties of *being less clumsy* or *being more of a womanizer* or *being a faster walker* than someone else also seem like substantial and existence-entailing properties. And this is because they are closely related to the non-comparative properties of *being clumsy*, *being a womanizer*, and *being a walker*. All of these monadic properties are, by Crane's own lights, existence-entailing properties; according to Crane, anything that has these properties must exist. As such, Crane may feel compelled to give a fictionalist gloss of each of (7)-(9) as well.¹⁾

Every time Crane gives such a gloss, the prospects for fictionalism look

1) In response to this concern [2015 Pacific Division APA conference], Crane suggested that the implicit operator view may face similar objections to those faced by other forms of prefix fictionalism, such as Gideon Rosen's modal fictionalism (see Rosen, 1990). In particular, it might be thought that fictionalism about fictional characters potentially faces a problem like the Brock-Rosen problem for modal fictionalism (see Brock 1993, cf. also Nolan & Hawthorne 1996). But because fictionalism about fictional characters is not a form of reflexive fictionalism—that is, because it does not analyze one kind of operator (e.g., a modal operator) in terms of another (i.e., a story prefix), it is hard to see how such an objection could get traction.

better. For fictionalists, just like reductionists, do not suggest that their account can be applied universally to explain all claims apparently about fictional objects. Instead, fictionalists make a modest proposal that *many* such claims are best understood as containing an implicit operator. The disagreement between the fictionalist and Crane is over how widely applicable a fictionalist analysis is. He claims that its scope is limited. I claim that its scope is much wider than Crane maintains.

Whether or not I am right about this though, I hope I have said enough to convince you that Crane's latest book on intentionality and the problem of non-existence is worthy of serious attention. *The Objects of Thought* is a ground-breaking contribution to the literature on the problem of non-existence and about intentionality more generally. It is likely to be discussed for years to come.²⁾

2) I am very grateful for comments on an earlier draft of this paper from Tim Crane and anonymous referees for this journal.

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