

Reply to Voltolini

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Reply to Voltolini

When a story-teller tells a story he pretends to report facts (Lewis 1978). But those facts are not really facts ; they are fiction. In particular, when the characters that are mentioned as part of the fiction do not really exist, the story-teller does not really refer to them — he merely pretends to do so.

Fictional names are empty names, because they 'refer' only fictively. It follows that the fictional sentences issued by the story-teller, insofar as they involve such names, do not really express singular propositions, but merely pretend to do so.

What about metafictional sentences, such as 'In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean worries about Cosette' ? The names 'Jean Valjean' and 'Cosette' are both fictional names — they refer only fictively. Neither Jean Valjean nor Cosette exist. Does it not follow that the metafictional sentences themselves lack content and fail to express the singular propositions they pretend to express ? I think that consequence follows, unless one accepts to drop at least one of the following principles:

- Names (including fictional names) are directly referential expressions.
- A sentence such as 'Jean Valjean worries about Cosette' (and each of its constituents) keeps the same meaning in all of its occurrences ; in particular, the sentence has the same meaning whether it occurs in isolation or as a constituent in a more complex sentence.
- There is no context-shifting operator in English.

The problem is that there is a strong intuitive difference between a fictional sentence as it occurs in, say, *Les Misérables* ('Jean Valjean worries about Cosette') and the corresponding metafictional sentence ('In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean worries about Cosette'). The former arguably lacks content and only pretends to express a singular proposition, hence it is not truth-evaluable ; but the latter seems to say something true or false about the fiction. This suggests that there *is* something wrong with at least one of the two principles listed above.

The principles are not sacrosanct, but we may be reluctant to give up either of them. Assuming that is so, what can we do ? In 'Talk about fiction' and *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta*, I sketched a possible solution, which Alberto Voltolini criticizes. According to that solution, metafictional sentences *also* rest on pretense. They are not literally truth-evaluable. Like fictional sentences, they fail to express a definite content whenever the names they contain are empty. The intuitive difference with fictional sentences is due to the fact that, in the metafictional case, the pretense at stake is of the 'shallow' type (Crimmins 1998) : it is unavailable to consciousness because it is built into our ordinary ways of speaking and thinking. This is similar to certain sorts of metaphor that are not perceptible because they permeate our ordinary talk. Thus we say that the mountain range 'goes from Mexico to Los Angeles', without even realizing that we use a motion verb to describe a static relation (Talmy 1996).

The pretense at work in metafictional sentences I call the Meinongian pretense. It consists in treating existence as a property which some things (the 'real' objects) have and others don't. We do as if there were two sorts of objects in the world: the real objects, which exist, and another sort of object —fictional objects, intentional objects, etc. — that are ghostlike in that they lack the property of real existence but have other properties nonetheless. Thus a fictional character such as

Jean Valjean does not really exist, but that does not prevent us from referring and ascribing properties to him, as in metafictional talk. Were it not for the Meinongian pretense, we could not do that. Jean Valjean's nonexistence would block any reference to him.

By relying on the Meinongian pretense and saying something that is not literally truth-evaluable (because the names do not really refer), we manage to communicate something that *is* true or false. Thus by fictively referring to Jean Valjean and Cosette and saying that, in the story, the former worries about the latter, we ascribe to the story properties which it really has : the property of featuring two individuals *x* and *y* with a certain number of properties (including the property of being called respectively 'Jean Valjean' and 'Cosette'), such that *x* worries about *y*. Similarly, when I say that my four-year old child believes that Santa Claus will come tonight, I rely on the Meinongian pretense to ascribe to a nonexistent individual (Santa Claus) the property that my child believes he will come tonight ; and by thus fictively ascribing to my child a singular belief, I manage to convey something true about the state of mind he is in. As I put it in OOR, 'the fictive ascription of a singular belief... amounts to the factive ascription of a pseudo-singular belief' (Recanati 2000 : 226). (The fictive/factive terminology, as well as the 'mountain range' example of fictive motion, comes from Talmy 1996.)

Voltolini thinks this account goes too far, or not far enough, depending upon the cases. In some cases, he argues, there is indeed pretense, but there is nothing more. He gives the following example :

Suppose I mishear a sentence saying that war is terrible, by taking "war" as a proper name of someone. Requested of writing what I heard, I scribble: "War is terrible" (note the majuscule), using "War" as proper name and misconceiving it as referring to someone I do not know. (...) If someone said of me: "A.V. believes that War is terrible" this sentence would not have real truth-conditions, hence a real truth-value, but merely fictive truth-conditions, hence a fictive truth-value.

Voltolini denies that, in such a case, the sentence 'A.V. believes that War is terrible' acquires factive truth-conditions on top of its fictive truth-conditions. In the described circumstances, the ascriber does not believe anything, Voltolini holds, even if he takes himself to believe something. The ascriber takes himself to believe a singular proposition involving the individual named 'War', but there is no such individual, hence there is no singular proposition either. It follows that no (first-level) belief can be seriously (i.e. nonfictively) ascribed to the subject in such circumstances.

I think this criticism misses its target. When I say that, in such circumstances, the fictive ascription of a singular belief amounts to the factive ascription of a pseudo-singular belief, I explicitly acknowledge the fact that no *genuine* singular belief can be ascribed to the subject. By 'pseudo-singular belief' I mean a state of mind that is precisely *not* a genuine belief, because it lacks a definite content. By overtly pretending that there is an individual, named 'War', of whom A.V. believes that he is terrible, the speaker manages to communicate that A.V. takes *war* as a proper name of someone and (spuriously) 'believes' of that person that 'he' is terrible. All this, which is true and could be spelt out in a more technical vocabulary (without scare quotes), is conveyed through the pretense. This is what I mean when I say that the fictive ascription of a singular belief amounts to the factive ascription of a pseudo-

singular belief.

Voltolini grants that, in some cases, we definitely want to ascribe beliefs to the subject even though the names at stake do not refer to flesh-and-blood individuals. Thus we really want to ascribe to my son a belief to the effect that Santa Claus will come tonight, even though Santa Claus does not exist. In such cases a 'factive' ascription is made, which can be evaluated as true or false. Whenever that is so, Voltolini points out, this shows that « the name is not empty after all ». It does not refer to a flesh-and-blood individual, but it refers to something nonetheless : a fictional individual or 'character' in the Jean Valjean example, or an 'intentional object' in the Santa Claus example. No 'Meinongian pretense' needs to be appealed to to account for such cases: we do not have to 'pretend' that fictional and intentional objects are part of our ontology, because they *are* part of our ontology. That is Voltolini's line.

I confess that I have some sympathy for this view, at least if the 'ontology' we're talking about is the actual ontology that underlies our ordinary way of speaking and thinking. As Godehart Link wrote in a very influential paper, « our guide in ontological matters has to be language itself » (Link 1998 : 13). That is why Link decided to posit 'plural objects' in the ontology alongside ordinary objects. Thus the coins on this table are (formal semanticists tell us) an object distinct from the individual coins which are its parts even though they are 'materially' identical. If we are prepared to say that, we should also be prepared to say that Superman and Clark Kent are two distinct objects even though, in some sense, they are the same individual. According to Crimmins (1998), we 'do as if' Superman and Clark Kent were two distinct objects : a pretense is involved. But if the pretense is so 'shallow' and natural that we are not even conscious of it, why not simply decide to enrich the formal ontology with the relevant sort of objects ? Why not accept guises and personalities and fictional objects alongside ordinary individuals ?

In the case of fictional objects, we can't do without pretense, for fictional objects exist only through the pretense which is constitutive of story-telling. In story-telling, we pretend to be referring to flesh-and-blood individuals. Yet, it can be maintained, this very activity *creates* fictional characters to which we can factively refer. In this regard there is a useful convention : whenever a fictional character has come into existence through the fictive use of a name NN in story-telling, it is possible to use the same name NN factively to refer to that fictional character. Fictional names therefore turn out to have a dual use : in the pretense-internal use they fictively refer to flesh-and-blood individuals that do not really exist ; but in the pretense-external use they factively refer to fictional individuals which do exist (as entities distinct from flesh-and-blood individual). This means that we give up the second of the three principles mentioned above : the name 'Jean Valjean' does not behave in the same way in the fiction (where it is empty and only pretends to refer) and outside the fiction (where it is not empty, but refers to a character). This I take to be Voltolini's position, and, again, I have sympathy for it. After all, many words have distinct, though related, uses. For example, the word 'wish' has a psychological sense (meaning *desire*). That sense is at work in the optative use of the verb in sentences such as 'I wish that you will soon recover'. Now that optative use gave rise, through 'delocutive derivation', to a new sense for 'wish' : the sense *express wishes*, as in 'He wished me good luck'.¹ Something similar to delocutive derivation may account for the transition from the fictive to the factive use of fictional names.

¹ See my *Meaning and Force*, chapter 4, and the references cited therein.

Between the two theories – the pretense-based theory, and the true Meinongian theory – the difference is not as big as one might have thought. I am not even sure that they are not notational variants, for two reasons. First, the fictional objects which the Meinongian posits as part of our ontology supervene upon our simulative practices targeted toward ordinary objects. This gives them a derived status which deprives them of first-class citizenship in our ontology. Second, even the pretense-based theory as stated in OOR acknowledges something like a dual use for fictional names ; for the metafictional use of fictional names rests on a different sort of pretense (the Meinongian pretense) than that which underlies their fictional use.

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