Fictional characters

November 25th, 2002

1. "Meinongianism"

(i) There are some things that don't exist.
(ii) Mrs Gamp is one of them. Thus, there *exists* no such person as Mrs Gamp, but there *is* such a person.
(iii) Also, Mrs Gamp is a fat old woman, etc.
(iv) It is not the case that either (Mrs Gamp has an even number of hairs on her head or Mrs Gamp does not have an even number of hairs on her head)

> [This seems to entail 'It is not the case that Mrs Gamp has an even number of hairs on her head, and it is not the case that Mrs Gamp does not have an even number of hairs on her head.' And this seems to be a contradiction, of the form 'Not-P and Not-Not-P'.]

2. Van Inwagen's argument that there are fictional characters

(4) There are characters in some nineteenth-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any eighteenth-century novel. (p. 43)

Therefore, there are characters in some nineteenth-century novels.

Therefore, there are [fictional] characters.

3. Paraphrase

Since this argument is valid, to avoid the conclusion one must deny the premise—or at any rate, deny that the premise is *strictly and literally* true, true 'taken at face value'.

Van Inwagen's challenge: Surely, if (4) isn't strictly speaking true, there must be some truth that we are trying to express when we utter (4). What is this "underlying" truth? In other words, how do you propose to *paraphrase* (4)?

Van Inwagen predicts that his opponents will find this challenge impossible to meet.

4. Paraphrases using new primitive predicates

Someone could say: when we utter (4), we're expressing a certain relation between the class of eighteenth-century novels and the class of nineteenth-century novels. The only way we have in English of picking out this relation is (4), with its misleading commitment to characters. But we could introduce a word for the relation—say, 'dwelphs'. So our paraphrase of (4) is as follows:

(4′) The class of nineteenth-century novels dwelphs the class of eighteenth-century novels.

But, as van Inwagen points out, carrying out this strategy will lead us to introducing lots and lots—in fact, probably infinitely many—new unexplained predicates. For example, we'll have to paraphrase

(8) Every female character in any eighteenth-century novel is such that there is some character in some nineteenth-century novel who is presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than she is.

as something like

(8′)The class of eighteenth-century novels praphs the class of nineteenth-century novels.

Van Inwagen objects: the claim conveyed by an utterance of (4) entails the claim conveyed by an utterance of (8); when we use (4′) and (8′) to capture these claims, we can't explain this.

What about this as an explanation: necessarily, if *a* dwelphs *b*, then *b* praphs *a*.

The right objection to the strategy, I think, is that it requires us to introduce lots [infinitely many?] of new predicates without giving any explanation of how we are supposed to understand them, or why we are tempted to produce sentences like (4) and (8) to express the claims made in terms of them.

5. A "fictionalist" strategy

What about this as a paraphrase of (4)?

(4*) According to the useful fiction that there are these things, fictional characters, which come into existence whenever authors create works of fiction, there are characters in some nineteenth-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any eighteenth-century novel.

6. An argument against the existence of fictional characters

P1 No one in 1843 was old, fat, fond of gin, named 'Sarah Gamp' and had a friend called 'Mrs Prig'.
P2 If Mrs Gamp exists, then Mrs Gamp in 1843 was old, fat, fond of gin, named 'Sarah Gamp' and had a friend called 'Mrs Prig'
C Therefore, Mrs Gamp does not exist.

Van Inwagen's respone: deny P2.

7. What are fictional characters like?

(i) Mrs Gamp is a character in a novel; a theoretical entity of literary criticism; created by Dickens; a satiric villainess; 'a fair representation of the hired

attendant on the poor in sickness in 1843' (according to Dickens); 'the most fully developed of the masculine anti-women visible in all Dickens's novels' (according to S. Manning).

(ii) Mrs Gamp is not old, fat, or fond of gin; nor does she have a friend called "Mrs Prig"; she is not a woman; she has hardly any properties that a woman could have. Hence few of the sentences in *Martin Chuzzlewit* of the form 'Mrs Gamp did such-and-such' are true, taken as claims about Mrs Gamp.

(iii) However, Mrs Gamp bears a certain "intimate relation" to properties like oldness and fatness: she is *ascribed* these properties in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. A better way to put this (according to van Inwagen) is 'A(fatness, Mrs Gamp, *Martin Chuzzlewit*)', since "ascribed" is being used in a special technical sense.

8. What does 'A(fatness, Mrs. Gamp, *Martin Chuzzlewit*)' mean?

Van Inwagen officially takes this three-place predicate as primitive. Is this compulsory for the believer in fictional characters, or is there some way to explain it?

— We can't explain it as 'if there were a real woman like Mrs Gamp [as represented in *Martin Chuzzlewit*?], that woman would be fat'. This is only true if 'like Mrs Gamp' means 'has the properties ascribed to Mrs Gamp'—but then the analysis is circular.

— We can't explain it as 'The author of *Martin C huzzlewit* said of Mrs Gamp that she was fat', or 'The author of *Martin Chuzzlewit* attributed fatness to Mrs Gamp'. For one thing, it wouldn't count if the author said these things later—all that matters is what he said *in the book*. But more deeply, the problem with this suggestion is that the author didn't *say* (i.e. *assert*) *anything* when writing sentences like (1) (p. 41), and hence didn't *attribute* any properties to anything. Writing a novel is not like journalism, it's more like being in a play.

> [Van Inwagen also wants to say that when Dickens wrote (1), he wasn't *writing about* anything (p. 41). This is not obvious to me. It seems to me that when Tolstoy wrote the sentence 'In the early days of October another envoy came to Kutuzov with a letter from Napoleon proposing peace and falsely dated from Moscow, though Napoleon was already not far from Kutuzov on the old Kaluga road', he was *writing about* Napoleon and Kutuzov, although he wasn't *asserting* anything. Likewise, if I say 'Did Napoleon have blue eyes?, I talk about him without asserting anything.]

— Surely we understand what it means to say that something is the case *according to* a novel. For example, according to *Bleak House* someone dies by spontaneous combustion; according to *War and Peace* Napoleon makes no difference to the course of the battle of Borodino. (This doesn't mean that the

authors of these novels *asserted* anything!) So we should consider the following analysis of A(fatness, Mrs Gamp, *Martin Chuzzlewit*):

> According to *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Mrs Gamp is fat.

or better (to deal with cases like 'the main satiric villainess of *Martin Chuzzlewit*'):

> Mrs Gamp and fatness are such that, according to *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the former has the latter.

The proposal is that just as *War and Peace* is a fiction *about* the man Napoleon—a fiction according to which various things are true of Napoleon that are not actually true of him—*Martin Chuzzlewit* is a fiction *about* the "theoretical entity of literary criticism" Mrs Gamp, according to which various things are true of her that are not in fact true of her: e.g., that she is a woman, that she is fat, that she is not a fictional character, etc.

NB: van Inwagen does not commit himself to this view!

It's a strange view. It assimilates ordinary novels like *Martin Chuzzlewit* to strange stories like the following: 'One day, the number two woke up, got out of bed, made itself a breakfast of sausages and toast, got into its car, and drove to work. The End.'