

FICTIONAL OBJECTS ?:
A "FREGEAN" RESPONSE TO TERENCE PARSONS*

GOTTFRIED GABRIEL

Ruhr-Universität Bochum
Institut für Philosophie
Postfach 102148
D-44780 Bochum, Germany

Abstract. This article scrutinizes some of T. Parsons' arguments in favor of assuming Meinongian fictional objects. Parsons justifies his Meinongian approach by showing with respect to carefully chosen example sentences that the special paraphrases commonly used in order to circumvent the assumption of non-existent objects are not always adequate. In particular, he explores a Fregean approach that amounts to conceiving of fictional objects as intensional objects and rejects it. The present author reanalyzes Parsons' examples on the basis of Frege's original distinctions. He shows that an adequate account of fictional objects requires neither their interpretation as intensional objects nor the assumption of non-existing objects.

In the last few years there have been different rediscoveries of A. Meinong's *Jenseits* (Beyond Being and Non-Being). Among the new reconstructions of Meinong's theory of objects, several works by Terence Parsons are prominent.¹ The following remarks concern his paper "Fregean theories of fictional objects".² As the article's title suggests, Parsons examines and criticises what he calls a Fregean theory of fictional objects. One gathers from the introduction to his article that some of his critics suggested — with good reasons, I think — that the Fregean theory would present a satisfying alternative to his own "quasi-Meinongian" theory. Parsons maintains however, that there isn't as yet any Fregean theory. And, in fact, Frege himself did not comment on the possibility of fictional objects.

* Translated from the German by Ron Feemster. First published under the title "Sachen gibt's, die gibt's gar nicht.", *Sprachanalytische Bemerkungen zur Wiederentdeckung von Meinongs Jenseits* durch T. Parsons', *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 9 (1987), 67–76; reprinted in: G. Gabriel, *Zwischen Logik und Literatur*, Stuttgart, 1991, 133–146. I would like to thank Thomas Zimmermann for many friendly "dialectical" discussions about things that do not really exist, discussions which were the efficient cause of this paper. "Thomas Zimmermann", by the way, is not as famous as "Ede" although both names refer to the same (fortunately) non-fictional character.

¹Cf. especially his systematic treatment in *Nonexistent Objects*, New Haven, 1980.

²*Topoi* 1 (1982), 81–87.

However, as Parsons notes, he did offer distinctions which suggest approaches to such a theory: for example, his distinction between direct and indirect reference (*gerade und ungerade Bedeutung*). Thus one cannot really speak of a Fregean "theory", only of a Fregean "approach". And this is what the critics mentioned by Parsons probably had in mind when they advised him to look first at the Fregean theory before setting out into Meinong's *Jenseits*. Because Parsons believes there are no Fregean theories of fictional objects his first step is to give a formulation of what could be called a Fregean theory. This theory is built upon the distinctions Frege makes in "Über Sinn und Bedeutung". Then Parsons gives examples of sentences which he thinks would lead any such theory into difficulties.

I will not go into the question of whether Parsons' so-called Fregean theory is deserving of the name. Its most important feature is that fictional objects are taken to be individual concepts in Carnap's sense. The theory is thus a Frege-Carnap theory: Parsons' Frege is Carnap's Frege. This point is not especially important. I mention it because the following analysis is based on a Fregean approach which differs from the one presented by Parsons. It is a Frege-Wittgenstein approach. I therefore refrain from a detailed discussion of Parsons' version of the Fregean theory and, in particular, from asking whether this would-be theory of fiction actually gets into the difficulties complained of by Parsons. Instead I shall concentrate on the analysis of the example sentences regarded by Parsons as problematic cases and pose the following question: Do Frege's distinctions offer us a procedure that permits us to understand all sentences in which there occur fictional proper names (or other expressions which appear to refer to fictive objects) without forcing us to acknowledge fictive objects, or are there cases in which such a process fails, in which the Fregean approach cannot prevent our having to accept fictive objects?

My answer to this question will not amount to a defence of an alternative theory of fictive objects. Rather, I indicate a Fregean way of "getting around" such objects and the type of theory represented by Parsons' account. The general approach underlying this method can be spelled out fairly simply. Sentences of the type considered are analysed in such a way that their reference to fictive objects is replaced by reference to fictional names, fictional texts, fictional senses or combinations of these three. Fictional senses of the individual type, i.e. senses of fictional singular terms, deserve special attention here. They take over the role of the Carnapian individual concepts, except in one respect. The additional nuance is that senses are to be conceived as understandings necessarily connected to linguistic signs (texts). This does not mean that a particular sense is bound to exactly one particular sign. When, in the following analysis, sentences dealing with such understandings are used in such a way that the sentences state something about the understandings, this does not amount to acknowledging these understandings as intensional objects in an ontological sense. Taking these understandings (senses) as the topic of a sentence does not imply hypostatizing them. On the other hand, indispensable use is made of the notion of senses and thereby of intensions. No sort of extensional nominalism is defended here. This general basic idea, that we will come back to later, should be kept in mind when Parsons' sentences are analysed. The sentences are as follows.

(1) Sherlock Holmes is a fictive detective who is more famous than any real detective, living or dead.

(For Parsons, Sherlock Holmes is a fictional, not a fictive, detective. I distinguish 'fictive', a predicate applying to objects, from 'fictional', a predicate applying to texts, stories, discourse, and what have you. The distinction is important, for the question at issue in this paper is really whether the term 'fictive object' is eliminable in favour of the term 'fictional discourse'.)

(2) A certain fictive detective is more famous than any real detective.

(3) Some fictive characters who are based on real people are less lifelike than others who are entirely products of their author's imaginations.

(4) Things would be better off if certain politicians who (unfortunately) exist only in fiction, were running this country, instead of the ones we now have.

The numbering of the sentences is not that of Parsons; the sentences (1) – (4) are sentences (4) – (7) in Parsons 1982. When in the following, we follow Parsons' usage and discuss the analysis of sentences, we shall be concerned, in the strict sense, with the assertive use of these sentences. In the case at hand this might seem obvious. But in other cases the failure to distinguish the fictional from the assertive usage of the same sentence (for example, "Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street") leads to confusion.³ Parsons maintains that for sentences (1) – (4) there are no ordinary paraphrases that enable us to avoid acknowledging fictive objects. He understands by a paraphrase (as is usual) the translation of the entire sentence into a "logically perspicuous notation". As I see it, the most problems are created by sentences of the type (2). I will primarily be concerned with them in what follows.

To begin with, let us try to determine the peculiarity of sentences of this type. In the first place, this consists in the sentences being "mixed": a fictive character is compared with a real person. However, this is not the crucial reason why the usual paraphrases are not successful. For example, the mixed sentence

(5) Freud analysed Oedipus

creates no difficulties. This is the case because Freud actually analysed not a fictive person called "Oedipus" but a fictionally represented piece of behavior and event accessible through the text of Sophocles' tragedy. The statements made by Freud about Oedipus are thus statements of this type: according to Sophocles' drama ...; (5) can be paraphrased in the usual way as

(5*) Freud analysed what Oedipus did in the drama "Oedipus".

And even when, analogously to (2), we bring fiction and reality into a "real" relation, we can offer a paraphrase. If we replace the two-place predicate in (2) "is more famous than" with "is smaller than"

³ Cf. G. Gabriel, "Fiction – a semantic approach", *Poetics* 8 (1979), 245–255.

(6) A certain fictive detective is smaller than every real detective.

(6) can be paraphrased as

(6*) The height assigned by certain detective stories to a certain detective is less than that of every real detective.

When we try to analyse (2) in the same way we discover that this does not work. We cannot, in place of (2), say:

(2*) The fame assigned by certain detective stories to a certain detective is greater than the fame of any real detective.

We are unable to say this because the fame we are concerned with in (2) is not the fame "in the stories". Because our difficulties cannot be reduced to the fact that we are dealing with a mixed sentence, we may suspect that the two-place predicate "is more famous than" is the real difficulty (in connection, of course, with the fact that the arguments chosen for the predicate result in a mixed sentence). The circumstance that (2) is a quantified sentence is irrelevant, for the quantifier can be moved in other cases (as shown by example 6) so that in the last analysis fictional texts and not fictive objects are what we quantify over. Thus (6*) and thereby (6) can be paraphrased as

(6**) There are certain detective stories according to which there is a certain detective whose height is less than that of any actual detective.

Let us return to the special character of the expression "is more famous than". This special character becomes more clear when we compare the two (presumably true) non-mixed sentences:

(7) Frege is more famous than Meinong

(8) Meinong was taller than Frege.

One difference between these two sentences obviously consists in the fact (presupposing the truth of both sentences) that Frege has his greater fame in the hearts and minds of others while Meinong has his height for himself. In other words, people are famous with respect to a "public opinion" while a person's height is independent of any such opinion. This circumstance leads us to think that predicates like "more famous than" create indirect contexts. Such a point is frequently made, as Parsons himself mentions. As a counter-argument he refers to the fact that the *salva-veritate*-principle is valid for substitutions into contexts containing occurrences of "more famous than", so that these could not be indirect. Indeed, these are not indirect contexts in the ordinary sense: nonetheless, it must be borne in mind that "fame" is an opinion-relative predicate and that this predicate applies to objects when and only when a certain opinion is current. But matters are more complicated. Let us look more closely at what this opinion ranges over.

§ Modern Logic ω

A criterion for the correct understanding of fame-sentences might be (under application of the well-known Wittgensteinian sense-criterion) verifiability: how can these sentences be verified if someone calls their truth into doubt? Consider as an example the sentence (7).

I maintain that a verification of this sentence cannot succeed other than through the empirical proof that more people know the name "Frege" than the name "Meinong". The name as linguistic object obviously is not sufficient, for then everyone named Smith would be more famous than Frege. An understanding of the name must be added to the acquaintance with the name. The various theories of naming have different things to say about what the nature of this understanding is. These differences need not trouble us here. The decisive point is that determining whether one person is more famous than another depends essentially on a public's acquaintance with the name. Let us look at another sentence in comparison.

(9) The founder of modern propositional and predicate calculus is more famous than the founder of the theory of objects.

I doubt that we could make a claim of this sort if the names of the two founders remained unknown, if we didn't know who these founders were. In such cases we compare, at best, the fame of the things (theories) with one another.

(10) The modern propositional and predicate calculus is more famous than the theory of objects.

The following example emphasizes the absurdity of anonymous attributions of fame.

(11) The inventor(s) of the wagon wheel is (are) more famous than the inventor(s) of the wagon itself.

(11) strikes us as so absurd just because no one knows the names of these people.

What I have said here about the two-place predicate "more famous than" is, of course, also true of the one place predicate "famous". Whether or not someone is famous, or more famous than someone else, can only be decided relative to how well each name is known. The relevant public's acquaintance with the name is a necessary condition for making such a determination. The public with respect to which the fame is to be determined must, that is, be able to use the name. From this it follows that the extensionality assumed by Parsons to hold of fame sentences is only apparent. Substitution *salva veritate* is only possible under the tacit assumption that the name is known.

At this point it must be added that corresponding conditions hold when the persons (characters) are not given (introduced) by name, but rather by descriptions.

(12) The seven dwarfs are more famous than the seven wonders of the world.

(13) The princess who slept on a pea is more famous than any real princess.

Some additional examples provide further support the analysis offered so far.

(14) The husband of Margarethe Lieseberg (born on Feb. 15, 1856) is more famous than the founder of the theory of objects.

(14) is true in case (7) is, for the expression "the husband of..." is a description of Frege. In order to tell if (14) is true, the person checking the truth of the fame sentence and the members of the community being questioned (which represents public opinion), have to know that the statement is about Frege. More exactly they must know that both the name 'Frege' (coupled with an appropriate understanding) and the description "the husband of..." refer to the same person. Such knowledge is not necessary for the determination of the truth or falsity of a sentence like

(15) The husband of Margarethe Lieseberg (born on Feb. 15, 1856) is taller than the founder of the theory of objects.

The following consideration speaks in favour of our analysis as well. If it were discovered that Frege did not himself write the works for which he became famous (in philosophical circles) the truth of (7) would remain unchanged. Perhaps Frege would even become famous in non-philosophical circles — thanks to the scholarly scandal. People are famous with respect to what they are taken to be, not with respect to what they really are. People can be undeservedly famous. What is important is only that members of the circle representing public opinion associate something with the name. It matters neither what this is nor whether it is true. Assuming that there were a scandal such as the one mentioned above, it would turn out that (9) rather than (7) is not true. And if the actual founder of modern propositional and predicate calculus remained unknown, that would also lead to no changes in the analysis. In that case we would only have recourse to the formulation in (10). Sentence (7) is another matter altogether: its truth would survive not only the scandal mentioned but the dissolution of the historical person, Frege. If the person, Frege, were to remain in the dark, so that the type of historical and causal accounts favoured by Donnellan and Kripke also failed, the truth of (7) could remain unaffected. A better example of this would be a corresponding statement about the fame of Lao Tse, the mythical author of the *Tao Te Ching*, whose historicity remains in doubt.

Let me summarize the results so far. Fame-statements create indirect contexts because they are not statements about the persons in question but about their names and the understanding presumed to be associated with these names. The relevant public's acquaintance with the names is of primary importance. This can be seen by noticing that the understanding associated with the names can remain very indefinite. If we return to the Frege-Carnap theory examined by Parsons, the replacement of fictive objects by individual concepts, we see that Parsons' arguments from statements of fame cannot confute this approach: statements of fame are in no case simply statements about objects, be these actual or fictive. The difficulties which Parsons constructs for his "Fregean" theory, are not difficulties for the theory, but rather for his own suggestion that fame-statements refer directly to objects. The "Fregean" holding the type of theory Parsons describes can reply by interpreting Parsons' statements (1) and (2) not as direct statements about individual concepts but rather as statements about names and the indefinite understandings associated

§ Modern Logic (ω)

with them. This, of course, also means that the introduction of individual concepts remains unnecessary at this point. The suggested analysis thus results in:

(1*) "Sherlock Holmes" is a fictional detective-name which (coupled with a indefinite understanding) is more famous than the name (coupled with an indefinite understanding) of every actual detective.

(2*) A certain fictional detective name (coupled with an indefinite understanding) is more famous than the name (coupled with an indefinite understanding) of every actual detective.

Let us then look at an example that, although it is not offered by Parsons, could be cited by him as a counter-example.

(16) The fictive main character of the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle is more famous than every real detective.

It seems that an analysis of the type used so far cannot help us here. A reformulation such as "the name of the fictive main character" raises the question of whether such talk of fictive literary characters does not in fact force us to acknowledge fictive objects. At this point the Frege-Carnap theory of Parsons would seem to suggest the way out: literary characters could be conceived of as individual concepts. This solution is regrettable because it leads to a reification of sense. We do avoid acknowledging fictional objects but only at the price of acknowledging intensional ones. People understand Frege's idea, that the indirect meaning (reference) of expressions is their normal sense, in such a way that the senses coordinated with proper names and descriptions become intensional objects in indirect speech. Although Frege sometimes suggests this interpretation, it is still a step in the wrong direction. The distinction between sense and reference is a distinction between semantic roles and semantic roles should not be confused with ontological objects. From the fact that people speak of senses in indirect speech, one cannot without further argument conclude that these senses are ontological objects of a special kind.

Now in order to avoid acknowledging intensional objects, one can analyse references to senses as references to meaningful occurrences of linguistic expressions (references to understandings of linguistic expressions or references to meaningful uses of linguistic expressions). Within these limitations, fictive figures can be conceived of as senses constituted by the corresponding fictional texts. When considered as a statement about senses which are only accessible on the basis of the relevant text, a statement like

(17) The character of the fictive narrator in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* embodies a contradiction

does not even force us to acknowledge intensional objects, let alone fictive ones. This is so because, taken exactly, it is the meaningful fictional narrator-description of which the contradictoriness is predicated. This conception is useful when analysing sentences with text-external object determinations.

(18) The fictive narrator in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* is married.

(18*) The fictional narrator-description in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* includes the characterization "married".

Not all possible objections to the strategy adopted here can be anticipated. It can however be said, that likely-looking counter-examples are best sought in the vicinity of the odd Parsonian sentences discussed previously. Other types of sentences seem to present no difficulties, as the analysis of (5) and (6) shows. In the same way, for example, a sentence like

(19) Sherlock Holmes is a fictive detective who is better than any real detective, living or dead

can be paraphrased as

(19*) The quality of detective work performed by Sherlock Holmes according to the fictional detective stories, is greater than the quality of detective work performed by any real detective, living or dead.

When one considers that (19) is obtained from (1) by the seemingly minimal substitution of "better" for "more famous" it becomes clear that it is precisely sentences like Parsons' fame-sentences that are most likely to present problems. The key point to grasp when considering these sentences is that mere senses cannot be smaller or better than real persons but that they really can be more famous.

In the fame-sentence cases considered so far, we could (and had to) take into account that the fictive characters were introduced into texts by names or descriptions. We saw that the sentences could be handled essentially by making reference to the name. Thus, we get the following analysis of (16).

(16*) The fictional main-character name in the Conan-Doyle stories is (coupled with an indefinite understanding) more famous than the name (coupled with an indefinite understanding) of every detective.

What the main-character names are in the stories is often not stated explicitly in them, it can however be determined on the basis of the texts.

There remains for discussion the special case in which characters are introduced into the texts neither by name nor by definite description. What happens when a character appears only indexically? Consider the example of a first-person narrator who is never addressed by name by the other characters in his narrative. An appropriate literary example is the first-person narrator in A. Schnitzler's "Leutnant Gustl" provided that we ignore the fact that the name of the main character is given in the title, and the fact that the character addresses himself by name in his inner monologues. I have been told that a still better example is the first-person narrator in Dashiell Hammett's "Red Harvest". Consider in analogy to (16) the sentence

(20) The fictive first-person narrator in D. Hammett's "Red Harvest" is more famous than every real narrator.

Fame-sentences were represented above as statements about connections of names and indefinite understandings of these names (that is, senses). Where, instead of proper names or definite descriptions, text-external determinations like "the main character..." or, in our case, "the fictive first-person narrator..." are used to introduce characters, reference can be made to the descriptions which are given by the texts and which constitute senses. It is enough to do this because, according to my analysis, fame-statements are never statements about objects themselves, not even in non-fictional cases. Therefore, I should like to suggest the following analysis for (20).

(20*) The fictional first-person narrator-description in D. Hammett's "Red Harvest" is (coupled with an indefinite understanding) more famous than the name (coupled with an indefinite understanding) of any real narrator.

It remains only to show how Parsons' cases (3) and (4) are to be handled. He himself tries to show once again on the basis of these examples how difficulties emerge for a Frege-Carnap theory which assumes individual concepts instead of fictive objects. We need not here consider whether Parsons' objections are justified. In particular, we need not ask whether or not they would be true of the modified Fregean theory of senses presented above. For there are "harmless" analyses of (3) and (4) at hand in any case.

(3*) There are fictional person-descriptions which are based on real persons but these descriptions are less life-like than other fictional person-descriptions which are entirely products of their author's imagination.

(4*) Things would be better off if certain politician-descriptions which are (unfortunately) only fictional were not fictional and if politicians of whom these descriptions are true, were running this country, instead of the ones we now have.

Let us note in summary that the arguments given above consist of two parts. First, I have tried to show that so-called fictive objects in so far as they are needed at all can be captured as senses (intensions). And exactly this is what Parsons denied. Second, I added an interpretation of senses which avoided conceiving them as intensional objects in the ontological sense. Intensions are linguistic, not metaphysical objects. It is possible both to accept the first part without accepting the second and to accept the second without the first. It is therefore not surprising that, independently of its applications to problems concerning the semantics of fiction, the non-ontological conception of senses (intensions) is relevant to such traditional philosophical discussions as the nominalism Platonism debate. The position defended here can be characterized as non-psychological conceptualism.