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ARTICLE

Fictional Domains

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Abstract

Quantifiers frequently figure in works of fiction. But occurrences of quantificational expressions within fictions seem no more inevitably to be associated with real domains than uses of names within fictions seem inevitably to be associated with existing referents. The paper outlines some philosophical puzzles resulting from this apparent lack of associated domains, puzzles that are broadly analogous to more familiar ones raised by the apparently nonreferential nature of many fictional names. The paper argues, in the light of an important disanalogy between quantifiers and names, that the quantificational puzzles are substantive, in that they cannot be resolved merely by appealing to the possibility of empty domains. It then argues that, despite the cited parallels between occurrences of quantifiers and names within fictions, promising treatments of fictional names do not always straightforwardly generalise to provide accounts of the quantificational phenomena: the quantificational puzzles are therefore not only substantive but also distinctive. The paper provides further testament to the depth and interest of the problems involving content that are generated by fiction, by identifying a very wide range of previously neglected cases, while also helping to situate within a broader context the notoriously hard philosophical challenges posed by fictional names.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Here is the start of a ghost story by Edith Nesbit:

Excerpt 1:

There were three of us and another, but she had fainted suddenly at the second extra of the Christmas dance, and had been put to bed in the dressing-room next to the room which we three shared. It had been one of those jolly, old-fashioned dances where nearly everybody stays the night, and the big country house is stretched to its utmost containing—guests harbouring on sofas, couches, settees, and even mattresses on floors. Some of the young men actually, I believe, slept on the great dining table.¹

That passage is crammed with *domain-sensitive* expressions: phrases whose proper interpretations are customarily fixed by interactions between constant aspects of their meanings and contextually determined associations with relevant arrays of items. Quantifiers fall into this category, for instance, as do superlative adjectives and definite descriptions.²

Domain-sensitive expressions often feature within works of fiction. But their uses in telling stories—*fictive* uses of them³—seem no more inevitably to be associated with real domains than fictive uses of names seem inevitably to be associated with existing referents. And this produces some philosophical puzzles.

I'll assume that, when Nesbit wrote her story, there was no range of actual beings that she meant to form the subject matter of her tale; she was just spinning a yarn. It is therefore hard to see how truth-conditions can be associated with any of Nesbit's fictive uses of the sentences in Excerpt 1, as the sentences incorporate domain-sensitive elements that apparently float free of all existing ranges of objects. How are we to assign truth-conditions to Nesbit's fictive use of the passage's final sentence, for instance, if there is no array of things that she was thereby characterising—even if merely for the purposes of telling her story—as containing some young men who slept on a table?

That lack of truth-conditions is not, in itself, evidently problematic; we are under no great pressure to regard storytellers as always communicating truths or falsehoods. Yet there surely are truths and falsehoods that we can express 'outside of the fiction' using domain-sensitive phrases whose readings are anaphorically bound to Nesbit's fictive employments, expressions which therefore seem to require handling in an equally unmoored way. So, I might realise after reading Excerpt 1 that none of the young men who slept on the great dining table really exist; whereas you may wrongly assume that some of the young men were real people. How are we to understand the quantificational aspects of those beliefs, given their anaphoric relationships to antecedents that apparently do not range over any existing domains?

A lack of suitable domains may seem to imply that Nesbit's fictive uses of Excerpt 1's sentences do not even express propositions. But it seems that there can be genuine propositional attitudes whose contents derive anaphorically from Nesbit's fictive uses: consider again my belief that none of the young men really exist. And those attitudes seem to stand in relationships that we would ordinarily explain in terms of relationships holding among corresponding propositions and their associated domains. My belief that none of the young men exist apparently shares a common focus with my belief that, according to the above story, some of the young men slept on a table, just as my belief that some people [in England] own cars shares a focus with my belief that nobody [in England] is the POTUS, both being beliefs that are linked to a single domain.

The previous issues parallel ones involving fictional names; names, that is, like ‘Patrick Bateman’ (‘PB’) that are initially introduced via fictive uses. It is natural to hold that fictional names do not have referents. In the wake of Kripke’s work⁴, though, many philosophers are inclined to hold that a sentence featuring a given proper name has some truth-conditions, and indeed expresses a proposition, only if the name has a referent. It follows that sentences using ‘PB’ neither have truth-conditions nor express propositions. But some sentences using ‘PB’ surely do express truths and falsehoods, and we surely do bear attitudes towards propositions about PB: I know that PB does not exist, for instance.

There are some respects, however, in which the issues raised by attitudes apparently having anaphoric links to fictive uses of domain-sensitive expressions might seem potentially to be more serious than the analogous problems involving fictional names. For they are less tightly bound to relatively controversial semantic theses. The view that proper names are meaningful only if they have referents is not immediately tempting. There seem to be many meaningful empty names; and there are quite attractive approaches to names which do allow for meaningful but empty ones: descriptive views of names have some commonsense appeal, for instance, even if they also face serious challenges. By contrast, it is harder to comprehend how a use of, say, an existential quantifier can be meaningful unless there is some domain relative to which the quantifier is to be interpreted.

Yet in some other respects the issues just outlined may seem to be less troublesome than the ones involving fictional names. Imagine a solemn discussion between two young children about the diplodocuses now dwelling in England: ‘We are bound to see one if we leave a pile of dandelion leaves in the garden!’ England contains no diplodocuses, so the children are not quantifying over any existing things. But it would be premature to conclude that, as the quantifiers within the envisaged discussion are not associated with any real items, there are no truth-conditions associated with the children’s words and indeed that there are no propositions quantifying over the English diplodocuses that can serve as the contents of the children’s beliefs and desires. The relevant quantifiers are associated with a real domain even if there are no real items within it: the domain is empty.⁵

Philosophical worries about nonreferring names start from the observation that there are many names that do not seem to refer to anything at all. The resulting lack of referents threatens to debar the names from being meaningful. But quantifiers and other domain-sensitive expressions may relate ‘to nothing at all’—there may be no existing items within the set over which a quantifier ranges, say—while nonetheless being associated with domains, because domains can be empty. Those points might make one suspect that the earlier concerns are in fact less worrisome than their counterparts involving fictional names. For perhaps the former can be handled straightforwardly just using whatever resources are needed for tackling nonfictive uses of domain-sensitive expressions that are bound to empty domains.

To streamline things, the following discussion will concentrate upon quantifiers and, more specifically, upon the issues raised by examples of attitudes with quantificational contents that are anaphorically linked to antecedent fictive uses of quantifiers that do not seem to be associated with any domains; upon the problems raised by *attitudes towards purely fictional domains*, for short. Section 3 argues that the issues raised by those attitudes are substantive, in that they feature phenomena that cannot be explained merely by appealing to general ideas that are evidently required for handling nonfictive uses of quantifiers that range over empty domains. Section 4 argues that the problems raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains are not only substantive but also distinctive, by showing that a prominent and promising philosophical approach to fictional names does not generate straightforward solutions to them. Section 5 concludes. Before all that, though, a brief consideration of domains in general is required.

2 | DOMAINS

My belief that everyone [among the currently living humans] weighs under 5 tonnes is associated with a certain domain: ‘the humans who are alive right now’. That association may be linked to a couple of related features of the belief.

It plays a part in fixing, first, whether the belief is correct: it is correct just in case everyone within the set of people actually now alive weighs less than 5 tonnes. And the association may be viewed as bearing, second, upon the belief’s precise content: my belief that everyone [among the currently living humans] weighs under 5 tonnes might be claimed to be distinct from my belief that everyone [among the humans merely living in the U.S.A.] weighs under 5 tonnes, because the beliefs are associated with distinct domains.

One simple treatment of domains identifies them with sets. The empty set then provides us with an empty domain. This approach nicely handles the first of the two semantic functions of domains just distinguished, by providing us with arrays of items over which quantification occurs, but it is less helpful with the second.

Reconsider the two children introduced in Section 1, who were quantifying over the English diplodocuses. Consider another pair of children who are having an analogous discussion about the French diplodocuses. An identification of the associated domains with the empty set generates the right truth-conditions for some of the children’s beliefs: the belief shared by the first pair—that a diplodocus [from among the English ones] will eat some dandelion leaves—correctly comes out false, for instance, as does the corresponding belief relating to the French diplodocuses shared by the second pair.

But, while those beliefs have the same truth-value, their contents are distinct; the four children do not all believe the very same thing. One might reasonably hold that the distinctness of the beliefs’ contents flows from the fact that the beliefs are associated with different domains, even though the children are all alike in quantifying over the empty set, the domain being ‘the English diplodocuses’ in the first case and ‘the French diplodocuses’ in the second.⁶ This militates against an outright identification of domains with sets.

The point is easily accommodated. Consider my belief that everyone [among the humans now living] weighs less than 5 tonnes. The belief quantifies over a certain set of individuals. But it would have quantified over another set of beings if, say, some of the people who died yesterday had instead lived for one more day. We might therefore seek to improve upon the treatment of domains as mere sets, by moving to an alternative that invokes intensional entities which determine potentially varying sets relative to contexts.

We might identify domains with functions from contexts to sets of possible individuals, for instance. Stanley and Szabó suggest this position, asserting that ‘the domains contexts provide for quantifiers are better treated as intensional entities such as *properties*, represented as functions from worlds and times to sets’⁷. On this approach, the domain associated with a belief that every F [from among the H s in context c] is G is the function D_H that maps each context onto the items therein that are H . The belief then quantifies over the specific set $D_H(c) = \{\text{the } H\text{s in } c\}$ that results from applying the function D_H to c .

All this still gives us ‘empty domains’, as a function D_H of the specified type may map a given context c onto the empty set. If that holds, there will be no existing things that are quantified over by, say, a belief that every F [from among the H s in context c] is G . But we can now allow for cases in which two token beliefs that ‘every F is G ’ are also alike in quantifying over a single set X , even though the beliefs are associated with different domains and thus have distinct contents. For

the domains with which the beliefs are associated are functions from contexts to sets, and such functions may be different overall while nonetheless both taking appropriate contexts to X .

Is that treatment of domains—on which they are identified with *domain-intensions*, as I'll say—better than an identification of domains with mere sets? This does not seem like a deep question. Some may insist that domains are no more and no less than those arrays of items over which quantification occurs. And that is a reasonable conception of domains; it may also be a common one, given the way in which the term 'domain' is used within the semantics of first-order logic. Others may wish to bind domain-identity more tightly to content, leading naturally to the functional treatment of domains as domain-intensions.

Everyone should recognise, however, that the contents of quantificational beliefs are partly determined by their associations with elements that determine potentially varying sets of items relative to contexts, where those contextually determined sets then contain the particular items over which quantification occurs in token beliefs with the relevant contents. The question whether 'domains' are the former aspects of content or rather the latter sets is just terminological; the fundamental phenomena are the same either way. For the purposes of what follows, I have chosen to follow Stanley and Szabó in identifying 'domains' with the aspects of content, as modelled by domain-intensions, rather than with the sets. But this is just a verbal choice that is driven by minor considerations of expository convenience.

Do the previous general ideas about domains generate a satisfactory treatment of attitudes towards purely fictional domains, using mechanisms that are anyway required for the treatment of nonfictive quantification over empty domains?

3 | A SUBSTANTIVE PROBLEM?

Excerpt 1's second sentence says that nearly everybody stayed the night in the country house after the fictional Christmas dance. When we read the text's final sentence, saying that some young men slept on the great dining table, we somehow link its existential quantifier to the quantifier featuring in the earlier sentence. Putting the point in the most natural way—although one that is philosophically puzzling, given that there is no apparent domain over which the sentences in Excerpt 1 are quantifying—we take it that the young men who slept atop the table are among the individuals previously identified as having spent the night in the country house.

The cited quantificational sentences thus seem to share a common focus, just as do the various sentences using 'PB' within *American Psycho*. And there seem to be, as we have already seen, attitudes 'outside of the fiction' that share a common focus with the former quantificational sentences. Maybe we can understand all this common focusing as follows: the second sentence of Excerpt 1 is associated with a certain domain-intension D , where the final sentence is associated with D too, as also is, say, my belief that none of Excerpt 1's young men really exist, with the result that a common focus is shared by them all.⁸

That suggestion is too simplistic. Compare somebody's belief that someone [among the inhabitants of the U.S.A. in context c] is the POTUS to another person's belief that somebody [among the inhabitants of the U.S.A. in context c'] is the POTUS. The contents of those beliefs are associated with the same domain-intension, the function D that takes each context to the beings within it who live in the U.S.A. Do the beliefs' contents therefore share a common focus? Not necessarily. For maybe $D(c) \neq D(c')$: the beliefs' contents may therefore be quantifying over distinct sets, even disjoint ones.

We can easily sort out that issue, though: we just need to add, alongside the condition that the contents of the relevant sentences and the relevant belief are all associated with a single domain-intension D , the assumption that those contents all involve D 's application to the same context c . This gives that the relevant contents all quantify over the same set of items—the empty set, as it might be—which does provide them with a common focus.

But that schematic proposal immediately raises further questions. How exactly are we to associate the quantificational elements of Excerpt 1, and the quantificational components of suitably anaphorically-related attitudes like my belief that none of the relevant young men exist, with domain-intensions and contexts? One obvious strategy for handling the domain-intensions involves directly recycling descriptive materials contained within the fiction itself, perhaps along with additional descriptive components that are made contextually salient by our awareness of the fiction's Edwardian origins.

Excerpt 1's final sentence, for instance, features the quantificational phrase 'some of the young men'. Maybe the story's descriptive elements, and the circumstances of its creation, generate an association between, first, that fictive use of a quantifier and, second, the domain-intension that maps each context onto the set of those individuals therein who attend an Edwardian Christmas dance of appropriate character. If we appeal to descriptive domain-intensions in this manner, though, what contexts should we regard as further underwriting the focal relationships noted above?

No actual contexts are suitable. My belief that none of Excerpt 1's young men really exist certainly is not the belief, for some actual context c , that there are [among those people present in c and who attended a suitable Edwardian Christmas dance] no young men. Nor is there some actual context c such that Excerpt 1's final sentence states that some young men [among those people present in c and who attended a suitable Edwardian Christmas dance] slept on a table: writers of fictions are not condemned always to write about actual examples of their fictional scenarios.

An appeal to nonactual contexts may now look to be just the ticket. But that move does not, on its own, solve anything. For what determines the identity of the specific nonactual context with which a given fictive use of a quantifier is associated?

To dramatize the point, imagine that two authors within a single society and at a single time were secretly and accidentally to write stories that match word-for-word, where Excerpt 1 contains the verbal materials that form the shared start to their hidden tales. My belief, upon reading one of resulting fictions, that none of the young men who slept on the great dining table really exist, need not share a common focus with your belief, upon reading the other one, that 'none of the young men who slept on the great dining table really exist': the secret stories may not feature the very same cast of fictional partygoers.⁹ But that holds even if the accidental correspondences between the stories mean that our beliefs are associated with the same descriptive domain-intension.

The previous observation can be handled, while allowing that the relevant fictions and our resultant beliefs are not associated with domains of actual things, if we assume that our beliefs, and the corresponding sentences that prompt them, are distinguished by the application of a shared domain-intension to *distinct* nonactual contexts. Yet by what feasible process do different nonactual contexts get linked to corresponding fictive uses of quantifiers within the matching fictions just considered?

The need to answer those sorts of questions illustrates a crucial point. We cannot use the current relatively simple descriptive approach to domain-intensions to draw the sting from the puzzles raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains, without introducing additional specialised and controversial philosophical machinery. In carrying us to mysterious links to specific nonactual contexts, this account of domain-intensions has borne us firmly into the realms of highly

speculative philosophical theory, in just the manner that philosophical investigations into fictional names are wont to do. It hardly provides a treatment of the issues raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains that shows the latter clearly to be amenable to treatment just using tools that are required for handling nonfictive quantification over empty domains.

Similar remarks apply to other moves that might be made at this juncture. It might be suggested, for instance, that the previous descriptive approach to domain-intensions employed was too flat-footed: perhaps Excerpt 1's fictive uses of quantifiers are associated with domain-intensions that map contexts onto sets that contain beings that are *characterised by the story* as meeting certain descriptive conditions, rather than onto sets whose members *themselves satisfy* descriptive materials culled from the fiction. But that revision to the earlier treatment of domain-intensions does not help much, unless it is again coupled with controversial metaphysical commitments.

Suppose, in particular, that actual concrete objects are to supply all of the candidates for being items that are represented by Excerpt 1 as being this-or-that way. Now imagine that you were to discover, contrary to what I have been assuming, that *some but not all* of the young men who slept on the great dining table really do exist. (Suppose that the story's later characterisation of them, along with facts about Nesbit's own life, make it clear to you that she has popped certain real people into the party as an in-joke.) No actual context contains any nonexistent concrete things. Hence your belief that some but not all of the young men really exist cannot be treated as the belief, for some actual context *c*, that some but not all of the [concrete items in *c* that Excerpt 1 represents as being] young men exist.¹⁰

One might call again upon specific nonactual contexts at this point; I will not consider this move further. Or it might be claimed that we should invoke a more capacious account of the actual items that fictions represent as being this-or-that way, by following some treatments of fictional names in identifying any putatively 'nonexistent' fictional characters with suitable abstract objects. Domain-intensions may then map actual contexts onto sets containing both concrete items and abstract fictional characters, where those last are to be invoked in paraphrasing the contents of various troublesome claims relating to fictions.

The next section will consider that strategy more fully. But, whether or not it is helpful, the current need to bring abstract fictional characters onto the stage further supports the main contention of this section, by underlining the genuinely problematic nature of attitudes towards purely fictional domains. Any philosophical quandary whose solution might reasonably be taken to require either the postulation of abstract fictional beings or of connections to specific nonactual contexts is *ipso facto* pretty serious. In particular, the relatively anodyne point made towards the end of section 1—that attitudes can quantify over empty domains—certainly hasn't sorted everything out.

4 | A DISTINCTIVE PROBLEM?

A striking feature of the issues raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains is the way that they parallel considerations relating to fictional names. The reader might consequently suspect that, even if the difficulties generated by the former cannot swiftly be resolved using ideas evidently needed to handle quantification over empty domains, there are nonetheless no new problems here. This section will test that hunch, by investigating whether a recent and well-developed version of an influential general approach to fictional names provides the resources to tidy things up.

As noted briefly above, some philosophers have suggested that wholly fictional characters are a distinctive variety of abstract object ('Fictional Characters') and that uses of fictional names may refer to the relevant items: Abell, Kripke, Salmon, Thomasson, and van Inwagen all endorse views of this kind, for instance.¹¹ Philosophers of this stripe differ quite widely, however, on precisely which occurrences of fictional names are claimed to refer to Fictional Characters: there is general agreement on their utility in handling intuitively plausible metafictional claims—'PB is a fictional character in *America Psycho*', 'PB does not feature in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*', and the like—but there is disagreement on whether, for instance, fictive uses of fictional names refer to Fictional Characters.¹² It is thus rather hard tidily to discuss 'appeals to Fictional Characters' in a generic manner. The more detailed discussions to follow will concentrate on Abell's recent theory.

The obvious way of putting Fictional Characters to work in relation to attitudes towards purely fictional domains is by taking the former sometimes to be included in the sets ranged over by the quantifiers figuring in the contents of the attitudes, where those sets are taken to contain items that are characterised by relevant fictions as meeting appropriate conditions, in the way suggested in the previous section. Whether this strategy is going to help at all with the issues raised by the attitudes will depend, however, upon exactly what Fictional Characters there are to put into the sets.

Abell's theory provides a helpfully detailed ontology of Fictional Characters, one that reflects the appeal of Fictional Characters as a device for handling phenomena linked to singular and plural reference. The concept of a *specific representation* is crucial: '[s]pecific representations are those whose role is to refer to a particular entity or entities. They may be singular, such as "my mother", or plural, such as "my parents".' Some aspects of this concept are unclear¹³ but Abell's discussion generally suggests that proper names and definite descriptions fall within the class of specific representations, whereas I take it that existential and universal quantifiers do not.

Fictional Characters are claimed to be abstract items that come into existence when creators of fictions use specific representations without an accompanying intention to refer to anything.¹⁴ Abell regards the existence of Fictional Characters as essentially bound to specific representations. She writes, for instance, that 'a fictive utterance of "Muscovites wear warm hats" does not create a fictional entity because it does not involve the fictive utterance of a specific representation' and that 'the existence of fictional entities requires the grounding conditions for facts about the existence of fictional entities to be met ... [t]hat is, it requires authors to utter specific representations that fail to speaker-refer to anything[.]'¹⁵

Once Fictional Characters are yoked to specific representations in this way, however, the idea that we might handle the problems raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains by populating suitable sets with Fictional Characters starts to look less promising.

Consider the following passage:

Excerpt 2

There were four of us, one of whom passed out very quickly and had to be carried into an empty boxroom. It had been one of those depressing new-fangled Christmas dances where everybody flees the scene as soon as possible, and after which a small bungalow is left in ruins. Some young men actually dismembered a table.

That paragraph studiously avoids the explicit use of any specific representations. Abell's theory therefore does not appear to provide us with even one Fictional Character that Excerpt 2 characterises as being, say, a young man who participates in table-wrecking ('a table-wrecker'). Given

that there are also no concrete items that Excerpt 2 depicts in that way, the trivial truth of every universal claim about Excerpt 2's table-wreckers follows.¹⁶ But one might have hoped that the introduction of Fictional Characters would allow for more discrimination than that, partly to avoid the positing of otherwise unmotivated distinctions between metafictional claims that seem, on the face of it, to be rather alike.

Suppose, for example, that someone reads the ghost story that begins with Excerpt 1, wrongly believing that it is drawn from a later prequel to *American Psycho*. Abell's approach allows for the incorrectness of the person's ensuing belief that *American Psycho* contains the first appearance in fiction of each of the people who attended the Christmas dance, which seems like a nice result. But it does this only because the story happens to contain fictive uses of certain specific representations: the theory implies, for instance, that the fictive uses towards the story's close of the phrase 'Mabel's baby' yield a Fictional Character that Excerpt 1 characterises as the girl at the dance who fainted, but about which *American Psycho* is silent. The approach must therefore provide a totally different treatment of other cases that seem to belong squarely with that one, but which are linked to fictions that lack suitable fictive uses of specific representations: compare the incorrectness of the previous belief with the supposedly trivial correctness of someone's belief that *American Psycho* contains the first outing in fiction of each of Excerpt 2's table-wreckers.

One response would be to revise the account, by allowing that suitable fictive uses of existential quantifiers are like appropriate uses of specific representations, in generating Fictional Characters. It might then be claimed that Excerpt 2's final sentence creates some Fictional Characters that are portrayed by the fiction as being table-wreckers.

This path leads straight to sticky questions about the resulting beings. It is completely arbitrary, for instance, to claim that Excerpt 2 produces any particular number of Fictional Characters which it characterises as table-wreckers. Rather than making the troubling claim that the fiction brings into existence an indeterminate number of such Fictional Characters, an option here is to hold that the fiction generates a single fictional character that it portrays somewhat indeterminately as being *some table-wreckers*. Indeed, Abell makes this elegant move in reply to indeterminacy concerns raised by Everett.¹⁷

But that response does not really help. The move provides us with a single Fictional Character that is portrayed within Excerpt 2 as being a group of table-wreckers; we are thereby able to see how one might account for the falsity of, say, the claim that the collective of Excerpt 2's table-wreckers features in *American Psycho*. Yet we still do not have any Fictional Characters that are individually portrayed by Excerpt 2 as being table-wreckers.¹⁸ Hence we are unable to account for the incorrectness of any universal claims about each of Excerpt 2's table-wreckers, despite the falsity of various more esoteric propositions concerning the corporate Fictional Character *the table-wreckers*.

A concluding suggestion. While Excerpt 2 may contain no explicit uses of specific representations, it might be held to involve some implicit uses of them. In particular, perhaps we implicitly relate its quantificational expressions to terms that could serve, outside of fictional contexts, to identify potential domains. Maybe, for instance, we read Excerpt 2's final sentence as stating that there are table-wreckers [among *those people who attended a certain Christmas dance*]. The implicit relationship between the excerpt's final sentence and the italicised specific representation might be claimed to generate a distinctive kind of Fictional Character, in line with Abell's overall theory: one that is portrayed within the fiction as being a domain.

This manoeuvre is worse than the previous ones. Those other responses at least promised to supply us with domains relative to which we could interpret, say, beliefs to the effect that none of Excerpt 2's table-wreckers really exist. But this latest move does not provide us with domains; it

merely gives us Fictional Characters that are portrayed within fictions as being domains, which is not the same thing at all. The proposal therefore leaves untouched the issues explored earlier. For those problems arose from an apparent absence of *domains* that were to be associated with appropriate quantificational attitudes. A shortage of Fictional Characters that were merely portrayed as domains was never the issue.

It is worth underlining the limited nature of this section's ambitions. The previous arguments have not demonstrated that Fictional Characters cannot be used in addressing the issues raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains. But the discussion of Abell's view does suggest the forlornness of any hope that we might tackle those problems just by positing Fictional Characters as referents for singular and plural terms and then populating appropriate domains with the resulting beings. It seems clear that decent attempts to use Fictional Characters to illuminate attitudes towards purely fictional domains will need to incorporate specific mechanisms for connecting Fictional Characters to quantifiers, rather than merely to the members of a category like Abell's specific representations. The problems raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains are thus not only substantive but also distinctive.

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper began by outlining some philosophical worries arising from the apparent possibility of attitudes whose contents are anaphorically derived from prior fictive uses of domain-sensitive expressions, but where there do not seem to be any domains relative to which the latter are correctly to be interpreted. The relevant problems are analogous to more familiar ones involving fictional names; but an important difference between the two sets of phenomena was noted, arising from the possibility of nonfictive quantification over empty domains. This led to a consideration of the question whether it might be possible fairly swiftly to resolve the putative issues raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains, using general ideas that are clearly needed to handle quantification over empty domains. The question was answered negatively.

The puzzles raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains may be substantive but are they also distinctive? In particular, are they at all independent of the analogous perplexities featuring fictional names? Section 4 explored that question by considering a recent and relatively detailed instance of a leading approach to fictional names. Various ways of using Fictional Characters to accommodate attitudes towards purely fictional domains were criticised, supporting the overall conclusion that it certainly cannot be assumed that philosophical accounts of fictional names will contain the resources needed to take care of the issues raised by the attitudes.

There are numerous theories of fictional names that have not been discussed here. And maybe some of them generalise more smoothly to handle the issues raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains.¹⁹ But uses of domain-sensitive expressions are generally somewhat independent of uses of names and other referring expressions; we commonly quantify over multiplicities containing items that we cannot single out individually, for instance. It is therefore tempting to conjecture that section 4's examination of Fictional Characters illustrates a broader moral: that the proper philosophical treatment of attitudes towards purely fictional domains will need to appeal to more than such fiction-derived 'singular' attitudes as one's belief that PB does not exist.

That thought is further corroborated by a brief consideration of some interesting ideas about quantification that bear upon uses of fictional names.²⁰ Hofweber suggests that various tricky philosophical issues can be illuminated by recognising that natural language quantifiers are 'semantically underspecified', with both an 'internal' and an 'external' reading.²¹ The 'external'

reading is objectual: an external reading of ‘something is F ’ requires that an F exists within the relevant domain of quantification. But the ‘internal’ reading is substitutional: an internal reading of ‘something is F ’ makes it ‘truth-conditionally equivalent to the [potentially infinitary] disjunction over all of the instances that are supposed to imply it’²².

Reconsider Excerpt 2. Upon reading that passage, someone might quite naturally hazard the assertion that some of those who attended the fictional Christmas dance do not really exist. Using Hofweber’s framework, it might be suggested that the belief expressed should be given an internal reading rather than an external one, and that it is indeed correct, on account simply of the truth of one or more relevant singular instances. The lack of proper names within the story means that the instances will presumably have to call upon definite descriptions—but so what? The belief’s truth might be held to follow from, say, the truth of the statement that *the person who passed out* does not exist, rather than from any facts about quantificational domains.²³

How is that approach to be generalised, though, to handle the claim that none of Excerpt 2’s table-wreckers exist? Even if we are allowed to call upon definite descriptions, the lack of fictional information provided makes it hard to see what constellation of true singular instances could yield an exhaustive survey of Excerpt 2’s table-wreckers. It might be suggested that we should just invoke plural descriptions to handle all of the table-wreckers in one fell swoop: maybe the truth of my belief that none of Excerpt 2’s table-wreckers exist just flows from the truth that *the young men who dismembered the table* do not exist.

But this last move—in fact, the whole manoeuvre of relying upon instances constructed using definite descriptions rather than names—puts us right back where we started. For definite descriptions themselves feature prominently within further examples of the troublesome phenomena examined previously. Someone’s belief that *the young men who dismembered the table do not exist* bears upon someone’s belief that *none of Excerpt 2’s table-wreckers exist*, for instance, only if the plural descriptive component in the former is somehow interpreted as ‘relating to the same things’ as the quantification in the latter. Yet a central aspect of what we have been seeking to understand all along is how to make sense of that general idea in relation to cases like the one just sketched.²⁴

The problems examined in this paper may well be importantly different from the problems associated with fictional names; but it is tempting to suspect that the two sets of concerns are at bottom closely related. That might be wrong: perhaps the analogies between the sets of difficulties are merely superficial and the problems demand solutions of fundamentally different sorts.²⁵ However everything pans out, though, the issues raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains provide further testament to the depth and interest of the puzzles about content that are generated by fiction, while also helping to situate within a wider context the notoriously hard philosophical challenges posed by fictional names.²⁶

Notes

¹Nesbit (1995), p. 544. The quotation is from Nesbit’s story ‘The Shadow’, a 1910 variant of her 1905 story ‘The Portent of the Shadow’; the story proper begins with Excerpt 1, after a short preparatory paragraph that provides no background information whatsoever.

²It is a background assumption throughout most of this paper that various uses of quantifiers are domain-sensitive and objectual; but see this paper’s concluding section 5 for brief discussion of an alternative substitutional approach to quantification. It may be held that the domain-sensitivity of superlative adjectives and definite description flows from the domain-sensitivity of quantifiers: Russell (1905) proposes a quantificational approach to definite descriptions, for instance, whereas Frege viewed them as more like functional expressions (see Linsky

and Pelletier (2005) for a thorough investigation of Frege's views). The domain-sensitivity of definite descriptions briefly arises below; see again the discussion of substitutional quantification in the final section.

³This useful form of words is borrowed from Abell (2020). It is natural to assume that fictive uses of language generally mimic sincere ones—that fictive employments of indicative sentences often amount to pretend assertions, for instance—but the following discussion does not assume any particular account of the nature of fictive usage.

⁴See Kripke (1980) and (2013).

⁵The model-theories of standard first-order and indeed some free logics (ones that are not 'inclusive') start from the assumption that domains are nonempty. But no major obstacles stand in the way of making systematic sense of the possibility of quantification over empty domains (see, for instance, Quine (1954)); and the fact that it clearly does happen means that it needs to be accommodated regardless of the *status quo* (for further discussion see Oliver and Smiley (2016), pp. 194–9).

⁶One might instead hold that the beliefs do involve a single domain—the empty set—but that the beliefs' contents differ due to their involving distinct modes of presentation of it. This approach may be modelled using the ideas introduced shortly, by identifying the relevant modes of presentation with domain-intensions (see below) and by identifying domains with the sets in the ranges of those functions. The view is thus also covered by the discussions in later sections.

⁷Stanley and Szabó (2000), p. 252. The functional treatment of domains just sketched faces versions of standard objections to related treatments of intensional entities like propositions within possible worlds semantics, but the resulting issues are irrelevant to what follows. I will also put aside very fair questions about the precise nature of the intensional functions that are meant to be involved in the proposal: the approach sketched can be combined with the standard set-theoretic reduction of functions to sets of ordered n -tuples, for instance, only if there is an appropriately diverse universe of 'possible individuals' to populate the sets featuring in the ranges of the functions. (Many thanks to one of the anonymous referees for this last point.)

⁸This proposal—like most of the others to be considered below—attempts to capture the common focusing present within relevant anaphorically-related quantificational contents via the assignment of a recurrent domain of quantification, where that domain is then also to feature in the contents' truth-conditions. But one might try to treat the common focusing and the truth-conditions separately. Some researchers associate 'discourse referents' with anaphorically-related singular terms (including indefinite descriptions), for instance, where the relevant singular terms may nonetheless be empty, in the sense of lacking any external referents which uses of the terms contribute to truth-conditions: see Karttunen (1976) for the introduction of discourse referents into the literature, plus Cumming (2013) for a very helpful examination of some of their potential uses and of their place in semantic theorising more generally; see also Kamp (2015) and Maier (2017) for work exploring their application to issues involving empty names. Some work on discourse referents does, in fact, deal with anaphoric relationships holding among quantifiers, by associating occurrences of quantifiers with discourse referents that stand to assumed 'co-quantification' as the discourse referents assigned to occurrences of singular terms stand to assumed co-reference: see, for instance, van den Berg (1996), plus Polanyi and van den Berg (1999). Space does not permit the exploration and development of these ideas that would be needed properly to assess their bearing on the current concerns, but the general approach does still face the problem of accounting for the apparent *correctness* of, say, my belief that none of Excerpt 1's young men really exist. For the introduction of a quantificational discourse referent in the way suggested will not itself provide us with any truth-conditions for the previous belief, as the discourse referent may not itself yield a set over which the belief's content can be taken to quantify. (There are similar issues in relation to applications of discourse referents to fictional names, leading Kamp to postpone providing a proper account of fictional names until another time (Kamp (2015), fn. 38) and Maier to confess that 'in the end, we do need a model-theoretic ontology that includes existing and non-existing entities', where the 'non-existing' items are akin to the Fictional Characters discussed in section 4 below (Maier (2017), fn.31).) (Many thanks to one of the anonymous referees both for noting the relevance to the current paper of work on discourse referents and for very helpful pointers to germane literature.)

⁹This is an analogue of a point applying to fictional names: Thomasson, for instance, emphasises that, given appropriately independent but verbally identical fictional works that are alike in featuring uses of a single fictional name, it is intuitively wrong to regard the relevant works as therefore featuring a recurrent fictional character that is denoted by the relevant name within both works (see Thomasson (1999), p. 6 and p. 56ff).

¹⁰This case illustrates an important point that is potentially obscured by the nature of the cases that have been used to drive the discussion up to now: philosophically problematic examples of attitudes towards purely fictional

domains are not restricted to examples of attitudes that do not quantify over any real things. In particular, fictions whose characters include real people, but not all of whose characters really exist, are apt to generate attitudes that are just as tricky to handle but which do quantify over some existing items.

¹¹ See Abell (2020), Kripke (2013), Salmon (1998), Thomasson (1999), and van Inwagen (1977). Friend (2007) provides a helpful overview of the terrain.

¹² Kripke, for instance, invokes Fictional Characters in strikingly few contexts, denying that fictive uses of fictional names refer to them, while Abell and Salmon disagree with him: see Kripke (2013), p. 148ff; Abell (2020), p. 141; Salmon (1998), p. 300ff.

¹³ Abell (2020), p. 127. ‘Specific’ representations are contrasted with ‘general’ ones; the latter ‘have the role of picking out whichever entities happen to possess certain represented attributes, such as “the largest pebble on the beach”’ (p. 127). That contrast is puzzling, however: a descriptive treatment of nouns like ‘my parents’ is fairly attractive, and ‘the King of France’ is in fact almost immediately provided in Abell’s text as an example of a nonreferring specific representation. I have therefore taken definite descriptions to be associated with Fictional Characters: any resulting boost in the range of Fictional Characters associated with fictions certainly will not harm the approach’s ability to handle attitudes towards purely fictional domains, as the discussion below will make clear.

¹⁴ Abell (2020), p. 128.

¹⁵ See Abell (2020), p. 135 for the first quotation and p. 155 for the second.

¹⁶ The reasoning here treats the cited belief as involving objectual quantification. This fits with the views of the Fictional Character theorists of whom I am aware: advocates of the approach commonly emphasise its relatively straightforward handling of quantificational inferences (see, for instance, van Inwagen (1977)), as flowing from its commitment to a distinctive range of objects over which objectual quantification may then occur. But one might wonder, just quite generally, whether appeals to nonobjectual quantification will help with some of the issues discussed in this paper: see section 5 for brief discussion of a substitutional approach in particular. (Many thanks to one of the anonymous referees for noting the potential relevance of substitutional quantification.)

¹⁷ Abell (2020), p. 145, responding to objections voiced in Everett (2013).

¹⁸ In a similar vein, Abell (2020), p. 145 explicitly exploits the fact that the characterisation of a Fictional Character within a fiction as being *a group of Fs* does not thereby entail the existence of any individual Fictional Character that is characterised within the fiction as being *an F*.

¹⁹ Some approaches do promise to generalise more easily than others, but they tend to be ones that are already inherently very general. Walton’s approach to fictional names in terms of acts of metalinguistic pretence falls into this category, for instance, because there is very little in the account that is specific to names rather than, say, predicates and quantifiers. That view faces powerful general objections of its own, though, some of which become more forceful when the theory is extended to treat the phenomena currently being examined, such as worries deriving from the complexity of the metalinguistic acts of pretence to which Walton appeals. The question whether ‘pretence-theoretic’ machinery can handle the phenomena discussed in the text obviously deserves much more extended discussion than I can provide here, however: see, for instance, Yablo (2021) for arguments purporting to show that Walton’s views can be rid of their metalinguistic cast.

²⁰ Many thanks to one of the anonymous referees for noting the relevance of what follows.

²¹ See, for instance, Hofweber (2000, 2005).

²² Hofweber (2005), p. 274.

²³ Compare Hofweber (2000), p. 268, on the inference from ‘Santa doesn’t exist’ to ‘there is something that doesn’t exist, namely Santa’.

²⁴ Somewhat relatedly, the puzzles rehearsed in this paper raise potential difficulties for theories that appeal too blithely to properties that putatively feature in the contents of fictions. For ostensible specifications of these properties often use expressions in ways that rely upon exactly the sorts of anaphoric relationships to prior fictive uses of quantifiers and the like that have been central to the previous discussion, making it quite unclear just how the relevant attempts to identify fictional ‘properties’ are really to be understood. To take a very recent example, Connolly (2022) makes a nice case for the advantages of ‘characterisations’ over Fictional Characters but applications of his view may still face the foregoing problem. Connolly’s claim (see his fn. 11) that Trollope’s ‘Slope’-characterisation includes ‘the property of lusting after a woman called “Signora Neroni”’ seems to open the door to it, for example, by employing a quantifier that will surely need to be read as related anaphorically to Trollope’s fictive uses of domain-sensitive language. Similar points apply to theories that seek to understand the

metaphysical natures of Fictional Characters in terms of the properties that they are characterised within fictions as having (varieties of ‘internal’ realism about Fictional Characters, to use the terminology of Friend (2007), p. 147).

- ²⁵ My own hunch is that a unified approach to the two sets of problems is right, but there are some striking differences between the two sets of difficulties. In particular, philosophical puzzles involving fictional names generally have relatives involving empty names outside of fictional contexts (‘Vulcan’ and the like). But I have not been able to find really compelling nonfictional counterparts of the issues raised by attitudes towards purely fictional domains, because of the possibility of interpreting the nonfictional analogues as involving quantification over domains that happen to be empty.
- ²⁶ Very many thanks to Rosanna Keefe for invaluable discussion of earlier versions of this material; her remarks led to a major overhaul of the paper’s initial sections in particular. And many thanks to two anonymous referees for the current journal, whose very constructive, intelligent, and well-informed comments substantially improved the final result.

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