Review of Stefano Predelli’s *Fictional Discourse: A Radical Fictionalist Semantics*

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Stefano Predelli’s *Fictional Discourse: A Radical Fictionalist Semantics* presents a view of the uses of language in making fictions and talking about fictions. Examples are drawn from novels and short stories. This view is called ‘radical fictionalism’. As Predelli notes, it might be misleading to describe radical fictionalism as a semantic theory: one of the points of the book is that fictional discourse does not have important consequences for semantics, or for metaphysics, because fictional discourse is importantly different from ordinary discourse.

In chapter one, Predelli briefly states his preferred semantic theory which is of a type familiar to philosophers of language, especially those who have read Predelli’s other work. According to the theory, names have objects as their contents, except when they are ‘empty’ and lack such contents. Predicates have properties as their contents. Sentences, in context, have structured propositions as their contents, except when they contain empty names, in which case they have gappy propositions as their contents.

There are well known treatments of empty names within the theory that Predelli favours (Donnellan 1974; Braun 1993; Salmon 1998). One standard view has been to treat occurrences of names in fictional discourse as empty names (except where they refer to actual objects), and then apply the theory of empty names to fictional discourse. Another has been to treat them as names of actual objects: fictional characters, or ‘creatures of fiction’ (van Inwagen 1977, 299). The main argument for this view, other than to treat fictional discourse in a way compatible with the view that names are devices of reference, is that talk about fiction quantifies over such objects and that we should believe in the entities that our quantifiers range over. Sometimes these views are combined: many of those who offer theories of empty names also think that at least some names in fictional
discourse refer to fictional characters.

Predelli rejects both views. Instead, he says that names in fictional discourse are not names, unlike empty names which are; compare the fact that stone lions are not lions at all, while hungry lions are a type of lion. In the same way, the sentences of fictional discourse containing fictional names are not sentences. Names in fictional discourse are not names, and do not name anything. Therefore, they do not name fictional characters. Predelli does allow some role for fictional characters in chapter eight, but not that one.

Chapters one through four state the radical fictionalist account of fiction-making: the part of fictional discourse where authors display sentence-types in order to present a storyworld. Chapter one gives the background semantics. Chapter two introduces the idea that authors display sentence-types, rather than utter sentence-tokens. Chapter three introduces the distinction between periphery and storyworld, separating the teller from the author and any ordinary fictional inhabitant of the storyworld. Chapter four discusses the importation, with an ‘o’, of actual semantic properties into the periphery of the fiction. These ground the impartation, with an ‘a’, of claims about the storyworld. For example, the fictional name ‘Felix Hoenikker’ imparts what any name does: that there is an individual bearing that name. Fictionally, sentences containing that name encode singular propositions about the bearer of the name. That is why we understand what the fictional teller is fictionally telling us about the storyworld when they fictionally use such a name.

Predelli introduces his distinction between the storyworld and periphery as part of developing radical fictionalism; this distinction is the core of radical fictionalism. Part of what is fictional is that there is a ‘teller’ who is the fictional speaker of the sentence-types displayed by the author of the fiction. Fictionally, these sentence-types are uttered as descriptions of the storyworld. Actual semantic facts about the displayed sentence-types determine the fictional contents of the teller’s fictional utterances. Fictionally, names in sentences displayed by authors are ordinary names which refer to objects in the storyworld. The consumer of the fiction interprets the teller in order to work out what the storyworld is like, i.e., what is fictional. The periphery is important, because it provides a place to evaluate the sentence-types displayed by the author which is neither the actual world, where they are not sentences, or the storyworld, where they might not occur. This allows a distinction between the teller and the author, who, according to Predelli, is not even fictionally telling us about the storyworld.

The rest of the book is an extension of radical fictionalism to other forms of fictional discourse. Chapter five introduces a new kind of fictional discourse: as well as fiction-making we engage in fiction-talk about fictions. This seems to be descriptive rather than creative. Chapter six discusses audiences’ interpretations of fictional tellings, and discusses the possibility of unreliable tellers and inconsistent storyworlds. Chapter seven considers critical discourse, which is like both fiction-talk and interpretation but goes beyond both. Chapter eight posits the existence of fictional characters of a particular sort; this chapter, like some sections of earlier chapters, is marked with an ‘*’ to indicate an extension of the core radical fictionalist position.

Predelli’s approach to fiction-talk and critical discourse is a useful contribution
to the current debates about fiction. Such talk has been a standard motivation for positing fictional characters, and identifying them as its subject, in order to account for the intuition that fiction-talk aims at truth. Predelli offers an interesting alternative picture. Fiction-talk is a retelling of a fiction. It is faithful when the storyworld is as the fictional reteller tells it to be. Faithfulness, rather than truth, is the goal of such fiction-talk. Critical discourse is another kind of retelling, with its own distinctive goals apart from faithfulness; these goals are based on the norms of critical discourse as a cultural practice.

Such a view raises questions about what fixes what the storyworld is like. One might first think that the storyworld is just as the teller describes it; this will include both their fictional sayings, and fictional impartations, and perhaps also what they fictionally convey non-literally. However, it seems clear that certain actual facts are imported too, but not all actual facts. And, it is clear that not all fictional tellers are correct in what they say about their storyworlds. Given the importance of storyworlds, and faithfulness, for Predelli’s account, it would be good to know what determines storyworlds and thereby grounds faithfulness. Predelli discusses a range of cases, and raises some interesting puzzles, but does not offer many general principles.

Predelli makes a good case that a lot of fiction-talk can be theorised without much metaphysical or semantic theory. For example, his radical fictionalist position does without an ontology of fictional objects which inhabit storyworlds and elided ‘in fiction X . . .’ operators. This suggests a question that Predelli does not engage with: why should we want to do without these pieces of philosophical machinery?

The question arises when considering Predelli’s engagement with Lewis’s view (Lewis 1978). Lewis’s view is committed to possible individuals and to propositions; but, according to Lewis, such things exist, and Predelli agrees about at least propositions. Similarly, there seem to be operators in natural languages which shift the point of evaluation for embedded clauses, and the semantics Lewis posits is based on the treatment he proposes for conditionals. Lewis is therefore using ideas that he already has in his metaphysical and semantic theories to explain what he takes to be the data about fiction-talk. This (alleged) data is about the truth of some sentences, which are of the sort that Predelli takes to be faithful. Predelli prefers his ‘way of retelling’ to the ‘way of truth’, but he also says that the way of truth is a viable option compatible with many of his core ideas.

One possible answer to the question is that it is, other things being equal, better to explain what is going on in some collection of cultural practices without making semantic or metaphysical commitments that are novel relative to our existing theories. But, this would not explain why it is better not to make use of ideas that are already required elsewhere, as Lewis does. Another possible answer is that the specific proposals by Lewis, or other theorists, fail to explain what is going on. Predelli does make use of the second sort of answer; the question remains whether or not he endorses the first, and, if so, how he would justify it.

Fictional Discourse will be of interest to philosophers working on fiction, truth, and reference. Some might be disappointed that it does not aim to talk about
semantics, or metaphysics, except negatively. Instead, it presents a view of a particular collection of cultural practices, and does so without using the resources of semantic or metaphysical theory. These practices are relevant to the interests of philosophers, but, according to Predelli, are not best understood as part of a general theory about semantics or metaphysics.

References


