Truth in (Impossible) Fictions

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ABSTRACT

I propose a new account of truth in fiction that better handles truth in impossible fictions than the standard Lewisean account. Lewis' solution makes use of possible worlds to capture truths unstated but implied by the fiction. In order to improve upon this account I categorize a number of impossible fictions by the difficulties they raise for any account of fictional truth and show that Lewis' account fails to handle several of them. By careful division of the fiction, one may construct a better account of truth in fiction which captures both the truths of possible fictions as well as the truths of impossible fictions.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

It is often difficult to explain why fictional statements are true. After all, since Superman does not exist, is it true that he is an alien? Philosophy has many answers to this problem, and one of them seems the most simple and powerful. This account runs into some problems with stories that contradict themselves, like many stories about time travel. However, we do still seem to understand what is and isn't true in these stories, so I provide an updated version of that pretty good account that can handle such stories and tell us what is true in them.

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To the unending patience of those who owed me none.

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1. Introduction

Looper (2012) is what David Lewis would call "the worst sort of incoherent time-travel story" (1978). The film centers around one man, Joe, who travels back in time to kill the Rainmaker (the man who killed his wife) when the Rainmaker is still a child. This involves Joe meeting his younger self. At the end of the film, Old Joe attempts to kill the child Rainmaker but is prevented from doing so when Young Joe kills himself, causing Old Joe to disappear.

Convoluted time travel plot notwithstanding, the story is otherwise quite intelligible. Viewers of the film should quite easily be able to recount the details of the story. For example, consider the following three statements:

1. Joe has killed someone.
2. Joe has never killed anyone.
3. Joe lives to at least the age of fifty.

Viewers will have little trouble with the first two statements (the first is true and the second is false), but the third is more complicated. On the one hand it is plainly true—we see Joe at least this old early in the film—but on the other it is plainly false—we see Joe die before reaching this age at the end of the film. For this reason, the story is an "impossible fiction".[1]

In this paper, I will discuss the problem that impossible fictions pose for David Lewis' account of fictional truth and suggest a more palatable solution. In Section 1, I

enumerate a list of some types of non-standard (and most likely impossible) fictions. These will be the cases with which one may test the adequacy of Lewis' analysis. In Section 2, I recap Lewis' 1978 account and demonstrate the value of maintaining a broadly Lewisian solution. Despite its shortcomings, Lewis' solution is quite powerful, at least for some fictions. In Section 3, I investigate how well Lewis' account is able to handle the non-standard fictions mentioned in Section 1. While it successfully handles accidentally impossible fictions, the other types of non-standard fictions pose serious problems. In Section 4, I suggest a more robust account of fictional truth. This account is designed to maintain Lewis' results in the case of possible fictions while also matching our intuitions in the case of impossible fictions. In Section 5, I address a number of possible objections to my account. These objections focus on the issues 'monstrous' states of affairs would pose for my account and whether or not such states of affairs are described in intelligible fictions.

2. Non-standard and Impossible Fictions

Any account of truth in fiction must be able to handle truth in 'normal' stories. While it is difficult to explain what precisely a 'normal story' amounts to, a negative characterization will be easier—a normal story is one that is not abnormal. But what will an account of truth in fiction say about abnormal stories? In this section, I provide several examples of stories that are 'non-standard' in order to provide cases by which Lewis' analysis (and my own) may be tested, as an account of truth in fiction should apply to them as well.[2]

When discussing non-standard fictions, it is intuitive to think of fictions with unreliable narrators. As these fictions will sometimes say one thing at time t_1 and the opposite at another time t_2, it would seem that these fictions are inconsistent. I wish to set these cases aside for the present. While it is true that these pose a difficult case for an account of fictional truth, it seems that we don't have clear intuitions about these cases. In particular, it is just not clear what is true in a story which contradicts itself in *this* way, so it will be very difficult to tell if an account of fictional truth correctly identifies the truth. Importantly, certain parts of these stories are not really intended to be imagined as true, but it is unclear which parts and for what reasons. For this reason, I will not be addressing these types of fictions here.

An example of what I mean by 'non-standard' fictions is that of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories.[3] Setting aside the main plots of these stories, it is said on at least two occasions that Watson was previously wounded in Afghanistan. At one point, Watson's war wound is said to be on his shoulder while it is later described as being on his leg.[4] From the context it is clear that Watson has only one war wound, but its description is bizarre. I will call cases like this **accidentally impossible fictions**. As the author was not writing a story where wounds which move are commonplace, it seems most charitable to call this a simple mistake by the author. Nevertheless, the text tells us that the wound is on the shoulder and the text tells us that the wound is on the leg. An account of fictional truth ought to be able to answer (among other related questions) "Where is Watson's war wound?"

Next, consider another class of impossible fictions: **temporally impossible fictions**. I here mean those fictions which Lewis called "the worst sort of incoherent time-travel story" (Lewis, 45). Returning to our initial example of *Looper* we see how difficult such cases may be. Did Joe live to the age of 50? On one hand he did (we saw him do so), while on the other he clearly did not (we saw him die before doing so). An account of fictional truth must answer this question concerning Joe's age, among others. These fictions may seem like accidentally impossible fictions, as often they are only impossible due to some sloppiness of writing, but *Looper* draws this into question. Not by being precise, but by recognizing its own sloppiness and calling attention to it.

This occurs early in *Looper*, when (old) Joe and (young) Joe meetup for a discussion in a diner. Young Joe then asks (in effect) how all of this time travel is supposed to work. Does old Joe know what's going to happen? Has he done all of this already? Old Joe instantly shuts the conversation down by saying "I don't want to talk about time travel," as that the conversation would be boring and time consuming. In the fiction, this is a perfectly normal conversation, but on a meta-textual level the writers are clearly drawing attention to the impossibility of the story. This is a clear case of 'lampshading' the problem, when a writer draws attention to some absurdity in the story and then moves on. Clearly it is not an accident that the film is impossible, but still the cases seem similar.

Now, consider what I will call **spatially impossible fictions**. In *House of Leaves* (2000), horror begins when the characters find that the house they are living in is larger on the inside than it is on the outside. Clearly this is impossible, for nothing is bigger on the inside than the outside, but it is not clear that these fictions are entirely described by the categories we have just discussed. An account of truth in fiction would need to tell us how big this house is, and would also need to tell us whether the house was bigger on the inside than it was on the outside.

Lastly, there are those fictions which directly (and blatantly) contradict themselves, which I will call **self-contradictory fictions**. In Graham Priest's *Sylvan's Box* (1997), the main character, Graham[5], encounters a box that is empty but also has

something in it. Clearly it is not possible that such a box exists, and the contradictory nature of the box is important to the plot. Priest points out (in commenting on the story) that the box was also not shot off to the moon, and any account which says that it was will have misrepresented the story. This point is raised to discount certain accounts of truth in fiction which call everything true in impossible fictions. So an account of fictional truth must tell us whether the box is both empty and not empty and it must also tell us whether or not the box was shot to the moon.

In these examples we see that these divisions I have drawn are fuzzy as well as non-exclusive. Many fictions (even those I mention here) may well fit under multiple categories. *Looper* is obviously a temporally impossible fiction, but its sloppiness makes it similar to the accidentally impossible fictions. *Sylvan's Box* clearly deals with a sort of spatial impossibility, but the directness of the contradiction sets it aside from other fictions of that kind. One could imagine many other fictions that fall into multiple categories. Nevertheless, these divisions will be helpful in highlighting specific problems impossible fictions can raise.

The preceding examples are also not meant to be an exhaustive list of non-standard fictions; rather, they are simply a list of difficult problems that an account of truth in fiction must be able to handle. There are many other types of cases one may choose to examine, but that is beyond the scope of this work. For example, consider a fiction which says that the intentional killing of innocents without reason is always

morally right. In some sense this seems to be describing a morally bizarre situation. Similarly, many nonsense fictions pose interesting questions about fictional truth. Consider the poem *Jabberwocky* (1899): is it true that the borogoves were mimsy? Even more work refers to (or fails to refer to) creatures which some have argued are themselves impossible.[6] Each of these seems to pose hard questions for accounts of fictional truth, but they must be addressed elsewhere.

Having just laid out various cases of non-standard fictions, I will now turn to Lewis' account of fictional truth. I will examine the strengths of the account using 'standard' fictions in the following section to better understand the account's intended function, and then in Section 3 we shall return to these non-standard cases. There, I show that Lewis' account fails with regard to the questions and challenges raised by some of these cases. In Section 4, I propose an account of fictional truth designed to handle the problems presented above while maintaining the positive features of Lewis' account.

3. Lewis' Account

Lewis begins his account of truth in fiction by explaining how it is that any fictional proposition may be said to be true. Consider the sentences "Sherlock Holmes is a man" and "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a man." While both are true, they seem to be true in different senses. Lewis explains that when we make claims like the former we implicitly append the phrase, "In the fiction, …" to the start of the sentence. Accordingly, this sentence is true because *in the fiction* it is true that Sherlock Holmes is a man. The latter is true not according to the fiction, but according to certain facts of the actual world. But the further question remains: why is it true *in the fiction* that Sherlock Holmes is a man? Here is Lewis' first account of fictional truth:

> A sentence of the form "In fiction f, φ" is true iff φ is true at every world where f is told as known fact rather than fiction (1978, 41).

This account relies on the use of possible worlds to make sense of fictional claims. It does not, however, rely on any particular interpretation of possible worlds, so one need not accept Lewis' position on possible worlds to make sense of this theory.

Notice that, according to Lewis' earlier claim, all claims about fictions implicitly take on this form. In order to understand the virtues of this analysis, let

us see what it finds to be true in a simple fiction like Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). Consider the following claims:

1. It was too cold to play ball.
2. The cat has some number of hairs.
3. It was not too wet to go out.
4. The fish cannot speak.
5. Sally is five years old.

What do our intuitions suggest about these claims? (1) is true in the fiction; we are explicitly told this in the text. (2) is also true, though this is not stated anywhere in the text. Everything has some number of hairs (even if that number is zero) and the cat is no exception. (3) is false in the fiction as we are explicitly told otherwise in the text. (4) is false as well, but unlike (3), this is unstated. We know that the fish can speak because the fish does speak—we do not need to be told of his ability to do so. Intuitively, we don't think that (5) is true, as Sally's age is never said to be five in the text, but we also don't have reason to think that (5) is false, as the negation of that claim is also never mentioned or implied.

Now let us see how Lewis' account responds to these claims. (1) is true, as every world where the fiction is told as known fact is one which it was in fact too cold to play ball. Similarly for (2); even though the text does not mention hair, every world where the fiction is told as known fact is one in which all things have some number of hairs. As this

would apply to the cat in question, (2) is also true. (3) is false, as any world where the fiction is told as known fact is one at which it *is* too wet to go out, as this is stated in the text. Accordingly, there are no worlds where the fiction is told as true where (3) is also true, so the claim is false. (4) is false in the fiction for the same reason, as in order to tell this story as truth it must also be true that the fish *can* speak.

The alethic status of (5) is a complicated case for Lewis' account. (5) is not true, as there are worlds where the story is told as known fact and Sally is some other age. But the same can be said of this claim's negation! The claim that "Sally is *not* 5 years old," fails to be true for the same reason. Therefore, the claim is also not false. This is a valuable feature of Lewis' analysis: when a proposition is underdetermined by the text, Lewis' account says that the claim is neither true nor false in the fiction. This is worth maintaining, as there are many cases in stories where things are importantly underdetermined. Consider the fiction of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: why *is* a raven like a writing desk? We are not told in the text, and just like Alice, the confusion we feel is important to understanding the story. Similarly, stories with ambiguous endings are (often) importantly underdetermined with respect to what happens at that moment. In such cases we recognize that certain claims really are neither true nor false.

While Lewis' account of fictional truth is largely successful, even Lewis points out that it has major shortcomings. For instance, if something must be true at *every* world where the fiction is told as true in order to be considered true in the fiction, then only

extremely obvious things will be true. If, for example, Sherlock Holmes were to walk into his home dripping wet, carrying an umbrella, and commenting on the weather, there would still be worlds where he had merely fallen into a puddle. Hence, it would not be true on this analysis that it was raining, despite this being obviously implied by the text. Though Lewis' first account is unable to say that such a claim about the weather would be true (were it to appear in the text), it is for this reason that Lewis develops two further accounts of fictional truth.

Though these accounts are better in various ways, they are more complicated to explain.[7] I have elected here to refer exclusively to Lewis' first analysis in what follows. For most of our purposes, appealing to Lewis' first account will do the job. Importantly, the problems raised by these non-standard fictions are not solved by these updated accounts. But in those instances where my reliance on this Lewis' first account causes problems for my own related account, one may easily update Lewis' (and therefore my own) with his later analyses. This will become especially relevant in Section 4, where I put forward my own account of impossible fictions based on Lewis' own account. Nevertheless, Lewis' account (while importantly flawed) is good enough for our discussion here.

Overall, Lewis' account of truth in fiction is quite powerful. It matches our intuition in basic cases where the truth is stated in the text (cases (1) and (3)), and it also correctly realizes that many things are merely implied by the text (cases (2) and (4)).

These things are true according to Lewis as they are true at all of the worlds where the fiction is told as true. Furthermore, Lewis properly responds to cases when the text is silent on certain matters (case (5)). But while Lewis' account is successful in these cases, we must return to the questions posed by the non-standard cases from the previous section.

4. Lewis on Non-standard Fictions

Before returning to our cases from before, it must be noted that Lewis preempts this discussion with an addition to his theory. Lewis notes that, according to his own theory, anything whatsoever is true in an 'impossible fiction' (or a fiction which is told as true at no possible world).[8] As we have previously discussed, there are fictions with impossible plots which are nevertheless intelligible, and it is certainly not the case that everything is true in these fictions. This is the issue highlighted by *Sylvan's Box*, where a box is importantly not shot off to the moon. Any account which says that it was (as Lewis' unmodified account does) is mistaken. In light of concerns like this one, Lewis amends his account.[9]

First, one must form consistent revisions of the text. Lewis focuses on the case of the *Sherlock Holmes* fiction, so we shall use that as an example. For this fiction there is one inconsistency which we have previously discussed: the location of Watson's war wound. It is described as being in two distinct locations, so this fiction admits of two consistent revisions: one where all mentions of Watsons wound's location say that it is on the shoulder, and another where all such mentions point instead to his leg. Beyond these edits the text remains unchanged in each consistent revision. Then what is true in the fiction is what is true in all consistent revisions of the fiction (and what is true in a consistent revision of the fiction is determined according to Lewis' previous analysis).

According to Lewis' theory then, it is true that Watson's wound is either on the leg or the shoulder, as this disjunction is true of every consistent revision of the fiction. But it is not true that the wound is on the leg (as there is a consistent revision where this is false) and the same follows concerning the shoulder. This is Lewis' amended analysis of truth in fiction meant to deal with impossible fictions.[10]

Let us test this theory against the examples of non-standard fictions discussed in Section 1. Lewis intentionally amends his analysis to account for a specific instance of an **accidentally impossible fiction**, and as a result his theory can deal with these cases fairly well. In response to the question "Where is Watson's war wound?" Lewis can say, "Watson's war wound is either on the leg or the shoulder." However, it is not true that the wound is on the leg, nor is it true that the wound is on the shoulder. Though this answer is not as direct as one might wish, it does seem to match our intuition. It is natural to say that (if the author merely made an error) the wound is in one of two locations, but that it is not actually located at either. Lewis' analysis can handle accidentally impossible fictions.

Unfortunately, **self-contradictory fictions** are especially troublesome for Lewis' account. The example mentioned before (*Sylvan's Box*) was designed by Priest to be a counter-example to Lewis' account. After the text, Priest points out first that there are some things which are false in this fiction (specifically, that the box was shot off to the moon).[11] However, if we use Lewis' unmodified analysis of truth in fiction, we will find

that everything is true in this fiction. Even Lewis' modified account fails, as Priest points out: Lewis is able to say that the box is either empty or not empty, but this is not enough. It is vital to the plot that the box is *both* empty and not empty. According to Lewis this is not true, and so his theory has not properly handled this type of fiction.

We will find that a similar fate awaits Lewis' analysis when confronted with **spatially impossible** and **temporally impossible fictions**. In the case of *House of Leaves*, with its house possessing bizarre dimensions, Lewis is unable to say that the house is both one length on the outside and another (shorter) length on the inside. Similarly, with *Looper*, Lewis can say that Joe either does live to the age of fifty or he does not, but Lewis cannot say either disjunct is true. Once again, it is important to the plot that both are true.

Now we have seen the partial failing of Lewis' account of fictional truth. Lewis is unable to account for truth in many impossible fictions even with his amended account. As such, we need a new account that both maintains the power of Lewis' account (that certain implications of the text are true and certain underdetermined claims are neither true nor false) and does not retain the explosive results of Lewis' unmodified account when applied to impossible fictions. In the next section I devise such a solution based initially on Lewis' own analysis.

5. Truth in Impossible Fictions

I take impossible states of affairs to be—in most situations—combinations of various possible states of affairs.[12] I am not alone in this understanding. For instance, on a view developed by Kit Fine, an impossible state, "is, so to speak, a fictitious fusion of states, which is to behave in exactly the same [way] as the fusion were it to exist" (Fine, 6). It is in this spirit that my own analysis of fictional truth is motivated. My first goal will be the division of fictions into a collection of possible states of affairs and the eventual recombination of those states. By doing so we can construct an account that is better equipped to handle impossible fictions.

However, it is not entirely clear how a fiction might be divided. Consider the *Sherlock Holmes* fiction; surely it could be divided into the various stories that make up the fiction, but that is far too large a division for our purposes. Even dividing fictions up into sentences may not be fine grained enough in increasingly complex situations, but at this level problems begin to appear. For example, let us take a "part of a fiction" to be any single sentence of that fiction (staying for the moment in the realm of written fictions). Is it then the case that, if one character tells a lie, that *that* sentence is true? Surely not.

While I cannot give a full analysis of what a part of a fiction is, I do wish to capture the intuition that stories can be divided into smaller parts. For this purpose, I

suggest that a part of a fiction may be understood as any selection of the text that is suitably interpretable on its own. This understanding of parts is meant to exclude overzealous divisions of the text, say parts consisting of only a single word or letter. These would obviously not be interpretable by themselves.[13] Likewise, direct quotations appearing in the text (without the relevant attribution) would oftentimes not be suitably interpretable in the way meant here: in the context of the fiction, they are not necessarily intended to be imagined as true. This also allows us to divide sentences apart as needed, as (in certain cases) individual clauses might well be suitably interpretable.

For example, let us look again to the opening of *The Cat in the Hat*. The poem begins by saying that, "the sun did not shine." This sentence would make a perfectly suitable part of the fiction. As would the sentence, "we sat in the house all that cold, cold, wet day." One might even carefully divide that sentence to make smaller parts, such as "we sat in the house," or "we sat." But certain divisions, such as "the house all," or "-hat cold co-" would not be suitable as parts of the fiction, as neither is interpretable on its own. But this understanding need not be limited to written fictions, for surely films have parts as well. For example, a single film in a series would often be suitably interpretable on its own, just as single episodes of television programs often are. Individual scenes and perhaps even shots may fit this requirement as well, which will allow us to better analyze visual fictions. Once again, I do not mean to suggest that this is the only way one may divide works into parts, but for these purposes it shall do.

Accordingly, I propose the following analysis of fictional truth:

> A sentence of the form "In fiction f, φ" is true iff (i) there exists some consistent sub-fiction of f in which φ is true, or (ii) φ is a conjunction of sentences, each of which is true in sub-fictions of f.
>
> A sentence of the form "In sub-fiction A, φ" is true iff φ is true at every world where A is told as known fact rather than fiction.

A sub-fiction is just a conjunction of parts of a fiction. Notice here that Lewis' proposed solution to the problem of impossible fictions makes use of sub-fictions as consistent revisions of the original text. A consistent revision on Lewis' account is a sub-fiction composed of all those parts of the original fiction such that (1) no included part contradicts another or itself, and (2) no part is repeated. My solution also only deals with consistent sub-fictions, or sub-fictions such that no part of it contradicts any part of the sub-fiction, and this is to maintain the power of Lewis' analysis in possible fictions (and possible sub-fictions). By doing so we can still apply Lewis' analysis to sub-fictions as it works fine when the fictions (or sub-fictions) are consistent. Therefore we maintain the ability to find unstated truths (implication) as well as the proper response to underdetermined states of affairs (that they are neither true nor false).

As pointed out earlier, Lewis realized that his own account needed updating, and he did provide at least two further accounts. I will continue to refer to Lewis' first account of fictional truth purely for ease of discussion, but remember that Lewis' later accounts of fictional truth are updated to deal with only those worlds closest to the actual world (in the case of his second analysis), and only those closest to the collective belief worlds of the original audience (in his third analysis). These updates solve the problem of extremely distant possibilities being considered which prevents obvious implications, as well as the problems caused by instances where the audience has widespread mistaken beliefs. As my account may be easily updated in the same way, these sorts of problems shall not concern us here.

My solution differs from Lewis' in that Lewis claims that what is true in a fiction is what is true in *all* sub-fictions which are consistent. This difference is the reason that Lewis' account cannot claim of *Sylvan's Box* that it is true that the box was both empty and not empty. While it is true in some sub-fictions that the box was empty and in others that the box was not empty, the conjunction is true in no sub-fiction. However, my analysis can make such a claim. With this example, there exist sub-fictions where "the box was empty" is true and sub-fictions where "the box was not empty" is true. The fact that these are different sub-fictions need not concern us. According to my account, it is true in the fiction that the box was empty and it is also true that the box was not empty. Then, by the second clause, a conjunction of facts may be formed, such as "the box was

empty and not empty". Therefore, it is true (on my account) that in *Sylvan's Box* the box was both empty and not empty.

I have previously judged Lewis' analysis of fictional truth by its performance with a number of test cases, and it is only fair that my own analysis be held to the same scrutiny. As I've just shown, my analysis handles **self-contradictory fictions** easily. My analysis properly identifies those things which are true in the fiction, unlike Lewis' analysis. Furthermore, it is not the case that everything is true in this fiction according to my analysis. For example, it is not true that the box is shot off to the moon. This is because it is true of no sub-fiction that the box was shot to the moon. Of course, as truth in sub-fictions is determined according to Lewis' possible worlds analysis, there may be worlds where it is true that the box was shot to the moon, but it will not be true at every world where that sub-fiction is told as known fact.

Spatially impossible fictions are also easy to handle, as our analysis is very comfortable saying that the house is two different sizes at the same time. It will be true in (at least) one sub-fiction that the interior of the house is a certain length and it will be true in (at least) some other sub-fiction that the exterior of the house is another length. As before, these two facts are therefore true in the fiction as a whole. By conjoining these facts, it is clearly true in the fiction that the house is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. So too can **temporally impossible fictions** be handled. It is true in *Looper* that

Joe lives to at least the age of fifty, it is true that he dies before reaching that age, and it is true (by way of conjunction) that Joe does and does not live to the age of fifty.

Perhaps controversially, how this account deals with **accidentally impossible fictions** may be a matter of taste. If one is inclined to believe that such fictions are truly impossible fictions, then one will be content with my analysis as it currently stands. For example, my analysis says that Watson has one scar, it is on his leg, and it is on his shoulder! As the present text does indicate that this is the case (at least, it does say these things), I am inclined to favor this interpretation of such fictions, but I imagine some may prefer Lewis' consistent revision strategy. I believe that in these cases where the most likely explanation of the impossibility is a mistake by the author, some revision strategy may be acceptable.

I will now address a number of objections to this analysis. It is my intention that by exploring the potential pitfalls of this approach and the ways in which my analysis avoids them one may more easily understand my account of truth in all fiction. These objections focus primarily on my account's division of impossible situations into groups of possible situations and the problems this could cause.

6. Monsters

In the previous section, I proposed a solution that makes use of the division of impossible states into conjunctions of possible states. While I do believe that this is possible in most cases, this is not an uncontroversial position. Some might suggest that there are certain impossible states that are not so easily divided. These "monsters" are impossible states of affairs, yet they are not divisible into possible states. According to my analysis, such monsters would never be true in a fiction, as they would not be included in any consistent sub-fiction, and even if they were, they would be true at no possible world. If there were intelligible fictions in which such a monstrous state obtained, it would be a serious issue for my analysis.

I do not believe that such fictions exist. Though a proof of this (if one is even possible) is far beyond my ability to produce here, I do wish to give some reason to doubt their existence. Let us consider a number of pseudo-monstrous cases. Each of these might well be included in a fiction, but I doubt that any of them is in fact a monster:

1. The house was 32' 9 ¾" long on the outside and 32' 10" long on the inside.
2. The village barber shaves everyone in the village who does not shave themselves.
3. Graham was surprised that the box was empty and not empty.

Let us begin with (1). Though I do not believe that this line appears anywhere in the text of *House of Leaves*, one could easily imagine it doing so. I suggest that we split this

sentence along these lines: “the house was 32’ 10” long on the inside”, and “the house was 32’ 9 ¾” long on the outside”. The conjunction of these two gives us the original sentence (or at least a functional equivalent). This is a simple case, but it highlights what we earlier discussed: that parts of a fiction may be smaller than individual sentences of the fiction, and that some parts may themselves be easily divided.

Case (2) is more difficult than the first, but again this impossible situation may be broken into parts. This too describes an impossible situation, but it is only impossible in that the barber is also a member of the village. If the barber lived elsewhere there would be no impossibility. So we can make that its own part of the fiction: “The barber lives in the village.” Though this is unstated in the original text it is nevertheless implied (by “the *village* barber”). Our second part of this sentence can be as broad as “The barber shaves everyone in the village who does not shave themselves.” In this part no claims are made as to the barber’s place of residence, so we are left with only possible states. Once again, the conjunction of these states is equivalent to the original.

The third example (like the first) is also a misquote/summary, this time of *Sylvan’s Box*. Though the sentence does not appear in the text, it does accurately describe a situation in the story that is certainly impossible. This sentence also does not obviously divide into parts, but nevertheless acceptable parts may be found. I suggest this division: (1) “Graham was surprised by the state of the box,” (2) “The box was empty,” and (3) “The box was not empty.” Once again, by conjoining these three parts one gets the

original sentence (or a functional equivalent), but one may worry (as Priest did) that conjunctions of only two parts will lead to some problematic cases. I shall now address this concern.

At least one of Priest's criticisms of Lewis' account has not yet been handled by my own updated account. At the end of *Sylvan's Box*, Priest lists several morals that this text was meant to teach. Among them, the fourth is the most relevant to the current project. Priest says, "Nor can we simply break the information up into (maybe maximally) consistent chucks and infer from each of these. If we could, we would have to infer that the characters were astonished by the fact that the box was empty and/or by the fact that it had a figurine in it, which they most certainly were not" (Priest, 580).

Priest is concerned that my analysis (by virtue of its strategy of analyzing the text in parts) commits us to certain bizarre conclusions in some impossible fictions.[14] As previously discussed, in his fiction two characters encounter a box that is empty *and* has something in it, and they are surprised by this. According to my analysis, it will be true that Graham was surprised by the contents of the box, that the box was empty, and that the box was not empty. Additionally, it is true according to my analysis that Graham was surprised by the state of the box and that the box was empty. Priest here says that this is wrong, as it is not the fact that Graham saw an empty box that surprised him, but the presence of a contradiction. My analysis (Priest fears) is unable to realize this fact.

But I disagree with Priest that such a conclusion is unacceptable. Rather, it simply is true in the fiction that the box being empty surprised Graham in the story. After all, if I knew a box to have something in it, it would be very surprising to find that the same box was empty. Furthermore, while it is true (according to my analysis) that Graham is surprised that the box is empty, it is also true that Graham is surprised that the box is not empty! By way of conjunction of all three parts, we can see that Graham was surprised that the box was empty and not empty, the very conclusion that Priest endorses. For we see that the box is both empty and not empty (by the second and third parts), and furthermore that this state of the box is the cause of Graham's surprise (by the first part). Priest's concern (about the surprise of an empty box) misses the broader point, that the rest of the story supplies the (supposedly) missing third part of the sentence.

7. Conclusion

David Lewis (by his own admission[15]) did not take impossible fictions too seriously. In this text, I have aimed to improve Lewis' account of truth in fiction to rectify this mistake. In Section 1, I categorized a number of impossible fictions and the problems they pose for an account of fictional truth. In Section 2, I summarized Lewis' own account in order to highlight its strengths. In section 3, I explored Lewis' potential responses to the problems I raised in Section 1. In Section 4, I developed my own account of truth in fiction that can handle both "normal" fictions as well as impossible fictions like those discussed in Section 1. Finally, in Section 5, I addressed a number of possible objections one might raise to accounts of fictional truth like mine, which relies on division of the fiction into parts. In doing so, I hope that I have taken impossible fictions seriously.

End Notes

1. Lewis defines an impossible fiction as one which "there is no [possible] world where it is told as known fact rather than fiction." (Lewis, 45) This definition will become relevant in Section 3.

2. I call these fictions here 'non-standard' and 'abnormal' as it is not clear which fictions are impossible, but I believe that these are plausible candidates.

3. Note that the term "fiction" as I have used it here refers to all that work that makes up a collected story, so the Sherlock Holmes fiction includes a number of stories frequently contained in disparate books. Similarly, the Mission Impossible fiction is spread across a number of films.

4. See Doyle's A Study in Scarlet (1887) and The Sign of Four (1890), respectively.

5. As I will refer both to the main character and the author of Sylvan's Box on a number of occasions, I will refer to the character as "Graham" and the author as "Priest" henceforth.

6. See Kripke 2013 for a discussion on the possibility/nonexistence of unicorns (and the problems this poses for reference) and Yablo 2020 (MS.) for related issues in fictional reference.

7. They concern both the closeness of possible worlds as well as collective belief worlds of the original intended audience (Lewis, 42 & 45).

8. Lewis, 45.

9. Lewis is not the only writer to amend his account. In particular, it has been suggested by Berto and Jago (2019) as well as Berto and Badura (2019) that Lewis' account may be improved by appealing to impossible worlds. While such a suggestion is interesting, there may be virtue in not appealing to impossible worlds. Afterall, impossible worlds are metaphysically troublesome for a number of reasons. For this reason the accounts focused on here will only make reference to possible worlds even for fictions which are themselves impossible.

10. Lewis makes a brief reference to applying a principle of charity to this amendment, but I have decided to ignore this for ease of discussion. Lewis suggests that if the majority of references to (to maintain our example) Watson's wound had it on the leg then we ought only look to those consistent revisions when deciding what is true in the fiction over all. Unfortunately, this addition does not help Lewis with the issues that we will discuss.

11. Priest, 579.

12. I address an objection to this idea in the following section.

13. I do not see how a single word "part" of a fiction could ever be interpretable on their own. While this is not true in our real life conversations, fictions lack the available context given by the real world. Thus, while the command, "Slab!" might be interpretable in the actual world, the same sentence would make no sense when analyzed on its own.

14. I am indebted to Priest for this criticism and his comments on an early version of this analysis.

15. Lewis, 46.

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