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## What can fictional disagreements tell us about fictional truth?

I begin with two orthogonal distinctions. One, taken from Kölbel 2004 “Faultless disagreement”, between faulty and faultless disagreements. *Faulty disagreements* are situations in which the two parties hold incompatible views, and at least one of them is at fault (of course, both can be at fault at the same time). *Faultless disagreements* are situations in which the two parties hold incompatible views, and it is possible that neither of them is at fault: paradigm examples of faultless disagreements involve two people disagreeing about a matter of taste. Some philosophers do not accept this distinction, but I will not argue in favour of this distinction here.

The second, inspired by Friend 2011 “The great beetle debate. A study on imagining with names”, distinguishes between real and fictional disagreements. *Real disagreements* are disagreements about the truth-value of a proposition whereas *fictional disagreements* are about the fictionality of a proposition. The truth-value of a proposition is grounded on worldly facts, or the knowledge we have thereof. The fictionality of a proposition, by contrast, boils down to what is prescribed to be imagined by a work of fiction.

I think the logical space thus defined is not uniform: fictional, faulty disagreements are problematic in a way that the three other types of disagreements are not. In order to confront this intuition, I analyse what seems to be a perfect example of a fictional, faulty disagreement: the great beetle debate. The great beetle debate is a disagreement between two literary critics who hold incompatible readings of the first sentence of *the Metamorphosis*: this controversy was started by Nabokov in teaching a course on Kafka at Cornell in the 50s.

I pursue two lines of analysis: taken for granted that the great beetle debate is fictional, I argue that it is certainly faultless. This line of thinking ends up in taking stocks about a more general problem about the possibility of co-reference using empty singular terms: how is it possible to co-refer using singular terms having no referent? (Fictional terms are generally thought of as a special case of empty terms.) The great beetle debate, if fictional, essentially involves a fictional term. If faultless to boot, what is happening is, arguably, that the two parties do not refer to the same Gregor, which is counter-intuitive. I think this line of analysis puts the debate in the position of being a crucial test for solutions to this more general philosophical problem.

On the other hand: taken for granted that the great beetle debate is faulty, I try and argue that it is most probably not fictional. This line of thinking ends up speculating about the nature of the norms involved in reading fictions, the rules guiding the reader’s imagination. I argue that these norms are, in principle, understandable as a constitutive part of the work of fiction. Hence, these norms are not fictional. So the great beetle debate, if faulty, is parasitic on a real disagreement about how one should read Kafka’s text.

This twofold analysis of the great beetle debate as a complex form of disagreement sheds interesting new lights on the traditional problem of “truth in fiction” (we should rather say, following Walton 1990, the *fictional*: “truth in fiction” not being a kind of truth, the expression is somewhat misleading). The great beetle debate shows that what is fictional, ultimately, has to be relative to a reader’s capacity and willingness to imagine. This view I call *pluralism*, according to which some fictional events are left for the reader’s free choice to imagine.

This view about fictionality is to be contrasted with relativism and absolutism. *Relativism* is the view that all fictional events are relative to a reader’s free choice of interpretation; it is false given many examples of mistaken readings. *Absolutism* is the view that none of the fictional events are relative to a reader’s free choice of interpretation; I think it is false, the great beetle debate as I analyse it being a good argument against it. Pluralism, simply put, says that the semantic content of

a fiction depends on the reader to a certain extent. Pluralism of interpretation, I contend, is a hallmark of the fictional as opposed to the non-fictional.

Pluralism, if true, puts forward an important and difficult distinction to be made between the *generalities* and the *details* of a fictional character or event. The details, contrary to the generalities, are up for debate. This distinction is important because it corresponds to well known effects, for instance the so-called phenomenon of “imaginative resistance” (as in Walton 1994); but it is difficult, because the line between the two is extremely difficult to draw precisely. In fiction, just as in reality, the devil is in the details.

#### Selected References

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