Referential Indeterminacy in Fiction

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Abstract

In this paper I'll develop a criticism of Woods' *Truth in Fiction*, concerning the book's epistemicist treatment of issues of referential indeterminacy raised by the account of truth and reference in it. The criticism is meant as a challenge for the author to elaborate on the view of reference and the account of indeterminacy advanced in the book. I'll proceed by outlining a contrasting view on those issues that I take to be otherwise close to those in the book, in that it validates the data that it wants to honor, as summarized in the précis, in very similar terms to those favored in the book.

1 Introduction

In this paper I'll elaborate on a criticism of Woods' *Truth in Fiction* ('TiF') that I succinctly presented in my NDPR 2018 review, https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/truth-in-fiction-rethinking-its-logic/. The criticism concerns the book's epistemicist treatment of issues of referential indeterminacy raised by the account of truth and reference in it (not rehearsed in the précis above). I don't have a knock-down argument against the views I'll question. I'll just proceed in the way I think best in philosophy in general, i.e., abductively: I'll present a view on those issues that I take to be close to those in TiF in that it validates the data that the book wants to honor, summarized in the précis, in very similar terms to those favored in the book, and I'll explain why it is preferable. The view in question, which I'll call *Fictional Contextualist Realism* ('FCR'), like Woods' rejects the "Fiction Law", IV in the *précis*. I myself don't endorse FCR. I am what Woods calls a *pretendist* about

fiction and a fictionalist about fictional objects and apparent reference to them,[1] and I thereby endorse the Fiction Law. But as I have explained elsewhere,[2] FCR is a very convenient fiction in the path to getting hold of the right view on these matters, only to kick off the ladder once that is achieved. I'll present FCR in the next section, and then I'll move to present the indeterminacy objection.

2 Fictional Realist Contextualism

I'll start by circumscribing our topic. Let us assume that an assertion is what is done by default by means of declarative sentences: "[i]n natural language, the default use of declarative sentences is to make assertions" [69, p. 258].[3] It is a feature of assertions that we evaluate them as correct or otherwise depending on whether they are *true*. Let us thus consider three sorts of *prima facie* assertoric uses made with declaratives in discourses involving fictions:

1. When Gregor Samsa woke, he found himself transformed into a gigantic vermin.

2. According to *Metamorphosis*, when Gregor Samsa woke, he found himself transformed into a gigantic vermin.

3. Gregor Samsa is a fictional character.

Consider first an utterance of (1) by Kafka, as part of the longer utterance by him of the full discourse which, with a measure of idealization, we can think constitutes the act of putting forward his *Metamorphosis* for us to enjoy. I'll assume Woods' *précis logico-semantic* "default data" in characterizing these fictional uses of declaratives, which I will call *textual*:[4] even when, taken literally as assertions, they contradict what we believe, we don't find any tension in accepting them and we wouldn't find it plausible to criticize Kafka on this regard.[5]

The other two types differ in that they fail to have this feature. There is, firstly, the use of sentences such as (1) to report on what goes on in a fiction, that is, the character of the *fictional world* it presents, its *plot*. I will call these plot-reporting

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[1]García-Carpintero [19, 20] offer recent presentations of the versions of these views that I subscribe. I'll also borrow from the latter.

[2] Cf. García-Carpintero [16, 20, 21].

[3]Cf. García-Carpintero [22] for elaboration and defense.

[4]I borrow this and the other two related labels from Bonomi [3].

[5]My own pretendist take on this adopts instead Currie's [9] view that such acts are speech acts proper, with specific force and contents (*fiction-making*, as he calls them), cf. García-Carpintero [19]; but, as indicated, for most of the paper I'll put that aside.

uses *paratextual*; according to Lewis [32] and others, they are simply elliptic for intuitively equivalent ascriptions of propositional content like (2), which on such grounds I'll also count as paratextual. Readers of *Metamorphosis* would count (1) in such a use as straightforwardly, actually true, as they would (2), and reject the results of substituting 'rat' for 'vermin' in them. Finally, I will call the uses of sentences such as (3) *metatextual*; they also intuitively are truth-evaluable vis-à-vis actuality but not content-reporting, in that they are not (obviously) equivalent to explicit content ascriptions like (2).

Having made the distinction of our three kinds of fictional discourse, I will henceforth set aside the last two in order to focus on textual uses, which I take to be what TiF is mostly about — the two pieces of default data (*logico-semantic* and *psycho-epistemic*) that the précis highlights as explanatory goals concern them. In order to explain them, Woods thinks that we need to treat textual uses as assertoric, as putting forward true claims.[6] As indicated above, this is a view that has been advanced before. Thus, Ludlow [33], Manning [34], Martinich and Stroll [36] and Orlando [39] hold related views. But I want to focus here on the contextualist views defended by Predelli [42], Recanati [45, pp. 213–226], Reimer [47] and Voltolini [64].

The context in which 'The battle happened here.' is uttered might require us to evaluate the assertion not with respect to the place where the utterance occurs but another, contextually provided location. This notoriously applies in "answering machine" cases, in free indirect speech and other cases. On the authors' views, the context of textual uses of (1) similarly leads us to evaluate their truth not at the actual world, but at a counterfactual or imaginary one, "the" world of the fiction — actually, a plurality thereof if this is theoretically explicated by means of standard possible worlds ideology.[7] Predelli [42] only considers examples involving real names, but he extends the view to cases involving fictional names, arguing that they refer to *ficta* — actual abstract created existents [43].[8] Which entities are these?

Kripke [29, based on talks originally delivered in 1973] argues that a proper account of metatextual uses requires interpreting names such as 'Gregor Samsa' in them as referring to fictional entities. Van Inwagen [63] provides an influential Quinean argument for such realism about fictional entities. For both Kripke and van

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[6]Woods might cite in support empirical evidence from Piccinini and Scott [41].

[7]To insist once more, I don't think it is a good idea to count textual uses as assertions, to be evaluated as literally true or untrue, except that not at the actual world but at "the" world of the fiction (see Urmson [62], Walton [66, pp. 41–2], Everett [12]). I find it more accurate the "pragmatic" view that they are simply not assertions, but alternative acts to be evaluated with respect to norms other than truth vis-à-vis the character of "the" fictional world they represent.

[8]Reimer [47] disclaims ontological commitments for her view, arguing that fictional utterances have truth-conditions but not propositional contents; Martinich and Stroll [36] suggest a similar view. My (minimalist) view of contents doesn't allow for that distinction.

Inwagen, such *ficta* are abstract existent entities of various sorts, Platonic *abstracta* like Wolterstorff's [71] or Currie's [9] roles, or rather created artefacts, as in Salmon [50], Thomasson [58, 59] or Schiffer [52].[9] Such realists think of fictional characters as having an ontological status analogous to that of the fictional works in which they occur (Thomasson [58, p. 143]; Walters [65]), and I'll assume something similar.[10] Fictional works result from the communicative acts of fiction-makers; they are social constructs, abstract created artefacts with norm-regulated functions.[11] They have a complex structure, grounded on the vehicles that express them; they are in part composed of singular representations (more on this below, ¶3). It is these singular representations what I'll take fictional characters to be: on the proposal, terms like 'Gregor Samsa' in textual uses of (1) have as semantic value a singular representation associated with that name, which is a constituent of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. (1) makes a true assertion about it, even if in some sense it is also about its (non-existent, in this case) referent.[12]

There is a well-known wrinkle in this proposal. While the entities that realists posit may well instantiate the properties predicated of them in metatextual uses like (3), this is not so clear for the two other uses. Such entities are not easily taken to be the sort of thing capable of waking or going to sleep, for these capacities appear to require having causal powers that abstract objects, created or Platonic, appear to lack. We will deal with this in a standard way, by distinguishing two types of predication, *having* and *holding*. The subject-predicate combination in (1) does not mean that the semantic value assigned to the subject-term truly instantiates (*has*) the property expressed by the predicate, but merely that the former *represents*

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[9]Kroon and Voltolini [31] offer helpful discussion and further references.

[10]To be clear about the extent of my fictionalism about the fictional characters I'll take FCR to assume, let me say that I share a point Everett [12, p. 143] makes: "I do not mean to deny that in some cases the entities invoked by certain fictional realists, who then go on to identify these entities with fictional characters, genuinely exist. My complaint is simply that, in these cases, the relevant entities are not fictional characters; the identification made is wrong"; cf. also Brock [4, pp. 352–3]. I don't have ontological qualms about Thomasson's fictional characters, but I don't think we need to take referential expressions in textual discourse to refer to them to understand how they work. As I'll indicate below (fn. 17), like Thomasson [61, p. 262] I am not much disturbed by Brock [4] main criticism of created fictional characters. Everett and Schroeder's [13] alternative proposal that they are spatially discontinuous concrete "ideas for fictional characters" is insightful. I cannot go here into the reasons why I think the social construct account is more apt, nor address the intuitions that they (*ibid.*, 284-5) marshal against it.

[11]There is no difference in these respects with other communicative acts; they also generate (when they don't misfire) social constructs of that kind, cf. García-Carpintero [23].

[12]For reasons I have provided elsewhere (García-Carpintero [24], if we think of textual uses of declaratives as assertions as suggested so far, we should take both expressions like 'Pierre Bezhukov' in *War and Peace* which don't pick out any actual person, and those like 'Napoleon' in there which do, as equally having representations as semantic values.

something to which the latter is ascribed in its encompassing fiction (*holds*). This helps with a point that Everett [12, pp. 163–178] emphasizes, that there are many mixed cases such as (4) below:

4. At the start of *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa — an emotional *alter ego* created by Kafka for that novel — finds himself transformed into a gigantic vermin.

Following Everett and Schroeder [13, pp. 286–8]; Walters [65] and Recanati [46], we explain such mixed cases in that they involve a form of independently well-attested metonymy-induced, "regular" polysemy, as when we straightforwardly apply 'lion' and 'ferocious' to a lion-representation that literally, primarily is not a lion, like a sculpture of one; for we also naturally find similarly mixed cases there. Thus, a sculptor can say this of one of her creations:

5. That lion is the best sculpture I've made this month; it is as ferocious as the one we saw yesterday at the zoo.

FCR similarly takes the inserted metatextual claim in (4) to involve straightforward, *having* predication, while the one in the main clause is rather of the *holding* variety: we are just saying of the relevant Samsa-representation that it represents someone to which, in the work, the predicate applies — the way the statue is metonymically said in (5) *to represent* a ferocious lion.

I take the outlined FCR view to be close to Woods'. In his preferred "Aristotelian" way of accounting for the *logico-semantic* datum, truth is relativized to "respects", which I take to be truth-making situations playing the theoretical roles of possible worlds. This is what FCR suggests: taken as a standard assertion, (1) is about the actual world and would be untrue, but taken with respect to *Metamorphosis* fictional world, it is true. Woods doesn't elaborate at length on how his view accounts for the *psycho-epistemic* datum, but, as I have argued elsewhere (García-Carpintero [25]), FCR also helps here. The "intense and physically manifested emotions about things that they know never happened" the datum concerns are an aspect of what psychologists call "transportation" to or "immersion" into the fictional world of a story. Some writers (e.g. Stock [54]) have suggested that the imaginings prompted by fictions have the "direction of fit" of beliefs; I have pointed out (*op. cit.*, see also Chasid [8] for a related view) that this is straightforwardly so assuming FCR — for such imaginings would then just be beliefs about the fictional world — and that it affords a good explanation of immersion, hence of Woods' datum. Needless to say, I don't take this explanatory fact as ultimately favoring realism; as I explain in the referenced work, a pretendist stance of the kind I hold affords an at the very least equally good explanation.

3   Indeterminacy Worries about Fictional Reference

I move now to present my objection to TiF. It relates to one of the main reasons I have to prefer irrealist views to proposals like the just outlined FCR. Realist views raise well-known indeterminacy concerns, echoing Quine's [44, p. 23] indictment of one of its versions: "the possible fat man in that doorway; and, again, the possible bald man in that doorway [. . .] [a]re they the same possible man, or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible men are there in that doorway? Are there more possible thin ones than fat ones? How many of them are alike?" Everett [11], [12, Ch 8] and Kroon [30] provide good elaborations; Bueno and Zalta [6, pp. 761–4] acknowledge this as a main concern. In what remains I'll explain how the problem arises for FCR, how it may be addressed by it (and even better by the fictionalist final mutation that I support), and why it challenges Woods' alternative epistemicists suggestions.

FCR offers a theoretically coherent semantic account of textual discourse; although I haven't gone into it here, it can be implemented in the best developed current formal proposals. For such semantics to be vindicated, FCR needs an adequate metasemantics (García-Carpintero [22]). The one I recommend (García-Carpintero [26]) gives a central role to Williamson's [69, p. 246] default, "flat-out" assertions, assuming with him that they are constituted by an epistemic, truth-entailing norm, and the knowledge-based Principle of Charity that Williamson [70, p. 264] promotes on that assumption. Roughly, the metasemantics has it that semantic value is to be assigned to lexical items in a way that properly explains, along teleological lines, how such a factive epistemic norm has come to be in force for them in our communities. This involves actual cases in which speakers obeyed the norm, and hence put forward knowledgeable, true claims. I'll stick to my assumed fiction by granting that FCR can be vindicated along these lines: utterers of textual discourse like (1) obey truth-involving norms on assertion, putting their audiences in a position to acquire knowledge, because the context with respect to which they should be evaluated is to be shifted to a fictional world.

How would this validate the semantics outlined for 'Gregor Samsa' in a textual use of (1), on which its semantic value is the very associated singular representation found in the work? In my work on reference, I have been promoting a version of a view that it is by now standard in current semantics (cf. García-Carpintero [26, and references there]). On this view, referential expressions like indexicals and proper names carry *presuppositions of acquaintance*, or *familiarity*. This is to be cashed out by assuming that contexts include discourse referents, which we may think of as shareable singular representations that may well not pick out anything.[13]

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[13]Instead of characterizing the singular representations FCR takes fictional characters to be in

For proper names, the relevant discourse referents are crucially defined by naming practices (distinct ones for the 'David' that picks out Lewis and the one that picks out Hume); typically already existing ones, but in some cases created with the very discourse including the name. For indexicals, they might be constituted by perceptual information, or information present in previous discourse to which the expression in anaphorically linked.

FCR (and the fictionalist view that uses it as a convenient presentational device that I endorse) holds that all this carries over to textual discourse. The singular representations that FCR takes to be the semantic value of referential expressions are thus to be individuated by such discourse referents.[14] There a long tradition that associates some descriptions with entities of the kind we are positing, *roles* (see Rothschild [49] and Glavaničová [27]) like the *president of the USA* or *the mayor*, and explains the intuitive difference between descriptions with rigid and non-rigid readings in such terms (the latter intuitively define roles). For purposes of formal modeling, roles can be understood as Carnapian individual concepts picking out their occupiers relative to worlds, to the extent that we think of them as merely partial functions (cf. Stokke [55]). If we model the fictional world by means of standard possible worlds, the role that we are taking as the semantic value of 'Gregor Samsa' will pick out different individuals in different such worlds.

The 'Samsa' example would be quite adequate to explain how the indeterminacy worry arises for the brand of fictional realism that I am assuming,[15] but I'll present it with a more dramatic illustration. The great Honduran writer Augusto Monterroso produced excellent micro-stories; one of his most celebrated, *The Dinosaur*, consists of just one sentence:

6. When he awoke, the dinosaur was still there.

What exactly is the shape of the semantic value that FCR ascribes to 'he'? Which

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terms of *discourse referents* we could invoke *mental files*, insofar as we think of them as public and normatively characterized; cf. Orlando [39], Terrone [57]. What about expressions of plural reference, like 'the Hobbits', or 'the Dwarves' (Kroon [30])? I assume these could be handled in a related way, given an adequate semantic account for them; cf. Moltmann [38] for discussion of how such an account should look like.

[14]This semantic proposal for referential expressions in textual discourse, which FCR extends to paratextual discourse, is rather close to Frege's view that referential expressions shift their semantic values in intentional contexts to what in extensional contexts are their senses. If all paratextual uses of referential expressions occur (implicitly or explicitly) in intensional contexts, as on Lewis' [32] view, the parallel is immediate. Textual uses would also straightforwardly fit the bill if they were also elliptical for some operator-involving analogue of (2), as Devitt [10, p. 172] defends, cf. Orlando [39] for a related recent proposal. This is objectionable, however, as Bertolet [2] and Predelli [42] pointed out; FCR gets essentially the same result without positing implicit operators.

[15]Just consider the debate between Nabokov and a critic that Friend [14] rehearses.

features define the relevant role, determining its denotata in the worlds constituting the fictional world? Answers will depend on the proper metasemantics for textual discourse: perhaps it is Monterroso's intentions that we should take into consideration, or those among them that competent readers can discern in the work, or what our current conventional interpretative practices would settle on. But whatever the proper choice is, it is manifest that there is room for a lot of indeterminacy here. Actually, we should start arguing about the assumption that the awaking character is male, induced by the translation I got from Wikipedia, which is at least explicitly absent in the Spanish original (*Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí*). There is much more room for indeterminacy in addition: what is the spatiotemporal location for the objects the discourse referent picks out in the worlds constituting the fictional world? Earth when dinosaurs roamed it? Mexico when Monterroso lived there, 'the dinosaur' being metaphorical for the PRI, as some suggest? And so on and so forth.

Note that — as Everett [11, 12] emphasizes — on the realist assumptions we are granting the indeterminacy at stake here appears to affect objects themselves, and not just the linguistic expressions signifying them: it is the semantic value we have ascribed to 'he' in (6) itself that appears to be indeterminate, with respect to whether or not is to be individuated by properties like those we mentioned. Now, as the discussion of Everett's arguments has made clear, we should be very careful in moving from indeterminacy in the contours of the fictional world, to indeterminacy in the fictional characters themselves — in our case, the semantic values we are ascribing to referential expressions in textual uses.[16] Nonetheless, I think the previous considerations show that fictional characters — roles — themselves are indeterminate.

The outlined FCR proposal to individuate fictional characters in fact provides a principled reason to go along with a suggestion made by Schnieder and von Solodkoff [53] in response to Everett, considered by Thomasson [60, p 142], which has been questioned as arbitrary (Caplan and Muller [7]). Everett [11, 12] uses the principle that (roughly) indeterminate identity in the story entails indeterminate identity in the character themselves. Schnieder and von Solodkoff reject it. They argue that, although in the world of the *Frackworld* story that Everett [11] makes up it may be indeterminate whether Frick and Frack are identical, the characters themselves are different and hence the principle is false. To the extent that the relevant discourse referents are different, the FCR proposal presented here provides a principled reason for this.[17] The proposal also validates Thomasson's [60, p. 135] rejection of

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[16] Cf. Thomasson [60, pp. 132–243] for a good discussion.

[17] Kroon [30, pp. 165–6] suggests an alternative, which, like the one here, may have the effect that

another principle of Everett's: it may be determinate that a fictional character (say, Tolstaya's *Slynx*) exist, while it is indeterminate whether there is something it picks out in the work's fictional world.

The ontic vagueness thus espoused by FCR, however, is not an isolated issue affecting fictional contents, as I have shown in a critical discussion of a notorious argument by Schiffer against supervaluationism based on related concerns (García-Carpintero [17, 21]). It arises for any ascription of contents expressed by means of referentially indeterminate expressions like 'there' ('it was there that Alex danced') or 'Kilimanjaro': to the extent that 'there' is meant to refer to precise locations, there is a plurality of candidate referents for the adverb in the relevant utterance; the same applies to 'Kilimanjaro', if it is meant to pick out precise quark-constituted mountains — just consider a quark in a candidate boundary for the mountain, and the two aggregates including and excluding it. Now, what about the contribution of the same expressions when we use them to report on what was said in the relevant occasions (Schiffer [51])?

Barnes and Williams [1] make a good case that supervaluationist techniques can be used to articulate an intelligible version of the notion of vagueness *in the world*, or vague objects, and I (García-Carpintero [17, 21]) have recommended that option to deal with Schiffer's arguments.[18] Similarly, it is (on the version of FCR on offer) the role assigned to 'he' in (6) itself that can be precisified in different ways, so that it always picks out in the world of the fiction a referent for which (6) is true. Needless to say, any worries that my tactical espousal of FCR and the ontic vagueness that comes with it might create would ultimately dissipate if we could establish my true view that these entities — abstract created roles — that we are ascribing to referential expressions in textual discourse are nothing but fictions

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Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are two different characters, even though they determinately represent the same person in the fictional world — the ordered pair <*Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde*> *has* non-identity, even though it *holds* identity. This is a result he welcomes, and I follow suit — although my view allows also that the *prima facie* two discourse referents, and hence the two roles/fictional characters should be merged (to put it in mental files ideology), and are thus in fact one. Brock's [4] main argument against creationism raises related concerns. The argument depends on an assumption that I don't share, that creation is a causal process. Rather, on my view creation is constitutive — it should be conceptualized along the lines of the relation between apt declarations, like 'you are out' uttered by a referee, and their institutional products. Nonetheless, Brock raises genuine problems the form of creationism I am fictionally endorsing here, related to the ones I myself voiced (García-Carpintero [16, pp. 150–1]). A proper response requires to go into the nature of fictional works, which I cannot do here.

[18]García-Carpintero [18] defends it for indeterminacies about future contingents. Of course, it may well be that a more traditional form of supervaluationism as modeling semantic indecision can also handle issues of referential indeterminacy (cf. Merlo [37], Rohrs [48], Sud [56]). That would not affect my challenge to Woods, quite the contrary.

themselves.[19]

This concludes my exposition of FCR, a view that I have argued can get the explanatory credits that Woods' claims for his own. It was meant to set in relief a convenient abductive contrast for the criticism I am finally in a position to make. In response to indeterminacy worries like those just rehearsed, Woods contends that fictional entities like Sherlock Holmes are fully determinate objects. He relies on a variety of the "Reality Principle" that Lewis [32] and Walton [66] take authors and readers to assume for specifying "the site" of the story. Woods' version (80-1) looks to me closer to Friend's [15, p. 29] *Reality Assumption* that "everything that is (really) true is also fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work".

I take this to be a non-starter. Woods claims that our deficit when it comes to determining "how many strands of hair Sherlock had at 9:30 a.m. on February 14th, 1887" is exactly of the same nature as when it comes to the application of the same property to Gladstone at the same time, or France's head of state at 9:30 a.m. on February 14th, 2018: a merely epistemic matter, as opposed to an ontological one (80, 118). It doesn't take any worrying form of verificationism to dismiss Williamson's [68] epistemicism about vagueness; this can be done on the basis of the metasemantics I barely outlined above. I don't think that Williamson's suggestions about how linguistic use might fix the ontically fully determinate extension of 'sort of slightly bald' may withstand metasemantic scrutiny (cf. Weatherson [67], Heck [28]). I'll leave it at that here, but this worry glaringly magnifies when we confront Woods' application to realism about the fictional characters mentioned in textual discourse.

Since, on Woods' view, Doyle's decisions are the primary truth-makers for claims about Sherlock, how could the world come to the rescue to determine one way or another the facts about Sherlock's hirsuteness? We are entitled to surmise that Doyle never considered Williamson's line, but, even if he did, that wouldn't help. The problem lies not with the vagueness of any particular term, but with how the world might fix the number of Sherlock's strands of hair at a given time, in the absence of any indications from Doyle's intentions on the matter, from our interpretative practices, or from any feature that any plausible metasemantics I am aware of has canvassed.[20]

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[19]Thomasson [60, pp. 142–3] also suggests that ontic vagueness is unproblematic in this case given her "easy ontology" perspective — which might give further reason to think, as I have suggested (García-Carpintero [20]), that perhaps the differences between it and the Yablonian fictionalism I subscribe are not that substantive (Everett [12, p. 48, fn 12]; Zalta [72]). See also Paganini [40] for a related view.

[20] The concern had in fact been anticipated by Lewis [32, p. 270]: "Is the world of Sherlock Holmes a world where Holmes has an even or an odd number of hairs on his head at the moment when he first meets Watson? What is Inspector Lestrade's blood type? It is absurd to suppose that

I cannot thus see how Woods might have a plausible answer to this concern. In any case, I leave the question as a challenge for him; it is also meant as an invitation to elaborate on his ontological views about fictional characters, in addition to his metasemantics for textual discourse including apparent reference to them.

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these questions about the world of Sherlock Holmes have answers."

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Received October 2019