

Anthony Everett. *The Nonexistent*. Oxford University Press 2013. 256 pp. \$69.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199674794).

The question concerning the (non-) existence of being and objects has been central to metaphysical (and philosophical in general) research since, at least, Parmenides, through Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Martin Heidegger, to, at least, Graham Priest and Saul Kripke. Recently there has been a revival of work, from very different standpoints, on the existence of fictional characters. Anthony Everett defends in his recent book ‘the commonsensical view that there are no such things as fictional characters’, arguing that the view claiming the existence of fictional characters and mythical objects requires us ‘to invert the relationship between representations and what they represent in a way which ultimately impedes our understanding of our talk and thought about fictions and the nonexistent in general’ (1). In defending his view, Everett provides ontological arguments against fictional realism, and he develops a pretense-theoretic approach, arguing that talk and thought of fictional objects takes place within the scope of a pretense, and it cannot be ‘genuinely about, or involve quantification over, fictional objects’ (1). In his discussion, Everett assumes that proper names, indexicals, and demonstratives are devices of direct reference, and he adopts the Russellian view that propositions are identified with structured complexes of objects and properties; he also assumes that we can have singular thoughts which lack a referent.

In chapter 2, on fiction and the imagination, Everett compares and contrasts belief and imagination. In doing so, he applies the cognitive account developed by Shaun Nicholas and Stephen Stich, develops his own approach to pretense, and introduces a framework enabling a more formal discussion of pretense or games of make-believe (inspired by the work of Gareth Evans and Kendall Walton), together with the sentential *in the pretense* operator: “[*f P*]*f*” to be read as “in the pretense *f, P*” (19). Saul Kripke has observed, in *Naming and Necessity*, that ‘Possible worlds’ are *stipulated*, and not *discovered* by powerful telescopes; it might be fruitful to consider the pretense operator as a mechanism of possible world stipulation (this, however, is not a framework considered by Everett).

Everett also suggests that ‘our engagement with fiction involves our engaging in a pretense or game of make-believe’ (37). This approach is further elaborated in chapter 3, on talking through the pretense. Everett starts by observing that we may speak within the pretense in order to convey information about the real world, and following the terminology of Mark Richard, notes that we ‘*piggyback* claims about the nature of the real world upon the claims we make within the pretense’ (38). Everett provides examples from attribution of psychological states to real individuals involved in make-believe games, and also meta-fictional utterances; he also explains why we talk and think as if there are fictional objects, especially in reporting the attitudes of those involved in games of make-believe: ‘our folk-psychological practices of typing and reporting psychological attitudes involve taking such attitudes to have a content or object’ (46). Further in this chapter, Everett applies his formalized approach to the distinction between the real and the fictional, and to a discussion of meta-representation (the way we represent and report the contents of our imaginings). In discussing the possible readings of adjectives *fictional* and *famous* in sentences like ‘Anna Karenina is a fictional creation of Tolstoy’ (65), Everett provides necessary principles of generation; however it is not clear how the analysis would apply to a simpler (though semantically very close) sentence, i.e., ‘Anna Karenina is a creation of Tolstoy’. Interestingly, the pretense-theoretic account assumes that in the interpretation of some meta-representative sentences we engage ‘in a more complex pretense which [...] extends the domain of the make-believe to include further real objects’ (68).

Chapter 4 is devoted to truth, content, and aboutness. Everett discusses possible views on the interpretation of utterances of fictional characters, and provides possible explanations for considering utterances of some fictional character sentences as true (including noncognitivist accounts of different types of discourse, interpretation of metaphors and generalized conventional implicature). Next, he presents his motivation for regarding them as false or lacking truth value (though they may convey veridical information), claiming that methodological considerations ‘strongly favor a simple and straightforward semantics on which utterances of fictional character sentences are either assigned incomplete truth conditions (if they contain non-referring expressions) or truth conditions that the world does not satisfy (if their truth requires that the domain of quantification contains fictional things)’ (82). However, Everett’s other claim, that ‘strictly speaking... mental representations that purport to be about fictional entities are empty’ (88) seems to be too strong, especially as the author does not provide details of his theory of mental representations (be it cognitive or non-cognitive) which would empirically support this claim. Even though it is plausible to assume that the appropriate mental states involved in expressing sentences of fictional character discourse are not beliefs but imaginings (cf. 119), this shift does not provide automatic support for the emptiness of mental representations in question. A nontrivial question would concern the possible contents of the mental state involved in the act of pretense.

In chapter 5, Everett discusses (and rejects) objections to fictionalist accounts of various forms of discourse voiced recently by Jason Stanley. He once again stresses that ‘the mental states ordinary people express when they utter sentences of fictional character discourse have the functional profile of make-beliefs rather than beliefs’ (118). Chapter 6 is devoted to fictional realism; Everett presents the semantic, inferential, and metaphysical arguments in favor of this approach, and the principal varieties of fictional realism (Meinongian theories and abstract-object theories). Within the Meinongian account of intentional objects, fictional objects are nonexistent entities that lack any form of being whatsoever; in contrast, in abstract-object theories fictional objects are actually existing abstract objects. Additionally, in the artifactual abstract-object theory, a fictional object is considered to be some sort of artifact or created entity ‘whose existence depends on, or supervenes upon, the relevant works of fiction or literary practices’ (140). According to Everett this latter approach has significant advantages over the Meinongian one.

Whereas chapter 6 discusses arguments in favor of fictional realism, in chapter 7 Everett introduces his objections to this approach. He argues that fictional realism does not provide an adequate account of discourse about fictional characters (with important remarks on the status of fictional negative existentials), he once again denies the existence of fictional objects, and argues for the already mentioned shift of interpretation: ‘Rather than think about whether linguistic reference to fictional characters is possible and how it might occur, we should instead consider whether mental representations can refer to fictional objects and, if so, how they might come to do so’ (178). Everett’s pretense-theoretic account sees ‘our talk and thought of fictional characters as simply an extension of the way we talk and think when we imaginatively engage with the relevant fictions and talk and think as if the worlds they describe are real’ (207).

The last chapter focuses on metaphysical problems and consequences met by fictional realism. Everett carefully analyses and rejects the proposals put forward by Benjamin Schnieder, Tatjana von Solodkoff, and Amie Thomason, and claims that ‘we are left with no reason to accept realism but good reasons to reject it, for a pretense-theoretic account... does a better job of capturing the way normal people talk and think about fictional characters’ (208). Once again, it would be most interesting to see some empirical data confirming such strong claims. And one more controversial

issue: Everett occasionally contrasts his examples of fictional constructions with what he calls ‘real examples’, i.e., examples taken from literature (e.g., Murakami, Nabokov)– his approach implicitly assumes a hierarchy of fictional entities/discourses, with examples provided by established authors more ‘real’, than the ones invented by the researcher.

Anthony Everett’s book is an important (and demanding) contribution to metaphysics and philosophy of language, with huge potential for research within philosophy of literature. It would be most interesting to compare and contrast his views on the ontological status of fictional characters with reflections of, on the one hand scholars applying different research methodologies (e.g., Allan Palmer, Manuel García-Carpintero, Lubomír Doležel, and Thomas Pavel), and writers (e.g., Mario Vargas Llosa in his *Letters to a Young Novelist*) and literary scholars (e.g., Umberto Eco), on the other. Everett’s pretense-theoretic approach may also have interesting implications for any serious discussion of impossible objects.

Piotr Stalmaszczyk, University of Lodz