Citation for published version:

Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne, 'Personification without Impossible Content', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 58(2):165-179, May 2018.

DOI:

https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayy008

Document Version:

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Personification without Impossible Content

Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne, originally published in *British Journal of Aesthetics* (2018)

Personification has received little philosophical attention, but Daniel Nolan has recently argued that it has important ramifications for the relationship between fictional representation and possibility. Nolan argues that personification involves the representation of metaphysically impossible identities, which is problematic for anyone who denies that fictions can have (non-trivial) impossible content. We develop an account of personification which illuminates how personification enhances engagement with fiction, without need of impossible content. Rather than representing an identity, personification is something that is done *with representations – a matter of use rather than content – and involves only a comparison of possibilities. We illustrate our account using the personification of death in the film* Meet Joe Black*, and show that there are no grounds for taking it to be fictionally true that there is a metaphysically impossible identity between Death and death.*

Daniel Nolan[1] puts forward a novel argument in presenting personification as a problem for anybody who wants to deny that fictions can have (non-trivial) impossible content. In personification, Nolan argues, an abstract object is represented as being a person. The character Death personifies death as, for instance, someone with a cloak and scythe who comes to visit at the end of one's life. Likewise, fictions may contain personifications of war, duty, love, and so on. Nolan argues that these different personifications represent different metaphysical impossibilities. Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty* represents an impossible state of affairs 'where one and the same entity is an important moral abstraction and is also a woman with eyes, various facial expressions, and arms'.[2] Another example

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[1] Daniel Nolan, 'Personification and Impossible Fictions', *BJA* 55 (2015), 57-69.

[2] Ibid., 62.

is that of 'Britannia: a woman with a helmet, shield and trident', where Nolan argues that 'whether she is defying enemies or being a mother to personifications of British colonies, those cartoons represent the country [Britain], even though the nation does not, and cannot, shake a trident, or rest on a shield, or look disapproving'.[3]

There are two types of view that are threatened by Nolan's argument. The first is the view that, since (in classical logic) everything follows from an impossibility, all impossible fictions have the *same* content. This allows for fictions to represent impossibilities, but the content of those that do is, in this sense, trivial. Such a view would not be able to distinguish between a personification of death and a personification of duty, in terms of what is true in the relevant fiction.

The second view threatened by Nolan's understanding of personification is the view that fiction does not represent impossibility at all; that is, that all fictional truth is to be understood in terms of possibility.

Nolan's view is that the case of personification has weight for the debate over impossible content, and that it tells in favour of the position that requires non-trivial impossible fictional content. In giving an account of personification in terms of possible content, we shall disarm this argument. This removes a problem for those who understand fictional truth in terms of possible content, and for those who allow only trivial impossible content. It also lends support to the view we favour, that fiction does not represent impossibility at all, since it contributes to the project of taking cases of putative impossible content and showing that, in those cases, it is in fact possible content which is doing the work.[4]

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[3] Ibid., 62.

[4] In this respect, the aims of this paper are continuous with our project in Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne, *Time in Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

1. Personification and Metaphor

In actuality, death is the cessation of life, and death is not a person. In fiction, the character, Death, has appeared as an embodied agent, who may ride a horse, wield a scythe, wear a hooded gown, communicate, play chess, eat peanut butter. Since it is impossible for death to do the things Death does, the personification of death as Death appears to represent a metaphysical impossibility – at least, if the personification of death in fiction F means that 'Death is death' is true in the fiction F. Nolan thinks it does. We disagree. The view we shall argue for is that personification does not involve a metaphysically impossible relation of *identity* (within the fictional world), but instead involves *comparison* between a person and something else.

Our view of personification has much in common with Davidson's proposals concerning metaphor interpretation.[5] Nolan considers the option of treating personification as metaphor, and himself holds that 'many cases of the trope of personification are matters of metaphor'.[6] But, as Nolan acknowledges, the prospect of subsuming personification within a treatment of metaphor constitutes a potential objection to his account, as it appears to undercut the case for saying that personification requires 'the sort of distinctive theoretical treatments sometimes proposed for impossible fictions'.[7] To illustrate the potential objection that personification does not generate a new philosophical puzzle, Nolan writes: 'The metaphor/personification of the Sun as a king ruling orbiting planets, for example, seems no more puzzling than the metaphor of Louis XIV being the Sun King, ruling his courtiers as if they are planets.'[8]

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[5] Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), 31-47.

[6] Nolan, 'Personification and Impossible Fictions', 63.

[7] Ibid., 62-63.

[8] Ibid., 63.

Nolan makes two responses to this objection. His aim is to show that treating personification as metaphor is not a viable alternative to positing impossible content in fiction. We will counter his first response in this section, and his second in section 2. In answering these points, we shall develop an account of how comparison does all the work in personification, and how it does this without impossible content.

Nolan's first argument is that there are cases of personification which are not metaphorical:

'Clearly metaphor and personification are closely related, and my own view is that many cases of the trope of personification are matters of metaphor. It is not as clear to me that extended use of personification in storytelling need be primarily seen as metaphor. A story of a resourceful farmer tricking Death when Death comes for his wife does not seem different in kind from a story of a fiddler cheating the Devil when he meets him on the road: neither seems primarily metaphorical, even though the character of Death is understood to be closely connected with death and the character of the Devil is understood to be closely connected with evil and damnation. If there are cases of personification that are not just metaphorical uses, we will need a story of personification in fiction that covers more than cases of metaphor.'[9]

Nolan's argument relies on thinking that the second story (about a fiddler cheating the Devil) is not a case of metaphor: although the Devil is 'understood to be closely connected with evil and damnation', he does not function, or not 'primarily', as a metaphor for evil and damnation. The argument is then that since the first story, about cheating Death, 'does not seem different in kind', we ought not to identify this case of personification as a case of

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[9] Ibid., 63.

metaphor, any more than we identify the use of the character of the Devil as a case of metaphor.

How to take the argument depends on whether Nolan thinks the Devil is a personification or not. If he does not, then one reason to hesitate over accepting this argument is that it risks proving more than Nolan wants it to. Nolan notes the following parallel between Death and the Devil: 'the character of Death is understood to be closely connected with death and the character of the Devil is understood to be closely connected with evil and damnation.' But, on the assumption that the Devil is not a personification, Nolan must maintain that the nature of the 'close connection' is quite different in the two cases. He thinks that Death is, fictionally, *identical* with death; whereas the Devil is not, fictionally, identical with evil and damnation. Why not conclude, from the observation that the stories do not 'seem different in kind', that since the Devil is not to be identified with evil and damnation, neither is Death to be identified with death? Nolan would require a further argument to allow him to place exactly the amount of weight he needs on the stories not seeming different in kind – just enough to say that the story of Death is like that of the Devil in being non-metaphorical, but still unlike the story of the Devil in involving an impossible identity, as opposed to the Devil's form of 'close connection' with damnation and evil. In the absence of such an argument, Nolan's appeal to the *general* similarity between the stories does as much to threaten as to support his point.

If, on the other hand, Nolan does think the Devil is a personification of evil and damnation, then the point of the argument is different. It involves holding that this character (the Devil) is one instance of personification that we do not treat as metaphor, and then observing that the kind of engagement we have with this character's behaviour – e.g., we follow the deals he makes and the ways others try to trick him – is also found when we

encounter another personification, Death. From this similarity, the argument concludes that neither instance of personification is a case of metaphor.

It is true that we can engage with the characters of Death and the Devil in their own right, without taking them, instrumentally, as a means to appreciating something about death or damnation. We can be interested in what kind of deals they make and in the battle of wits between them and other persons. But to assume that *in* engaging in this way, we are treating them *as* personifications (rather than simply as bad guys, tricksters, or cunning and dangerous people) would beg the question against an account of personification as metaphor. The defender of that account can agree that there can be non-metaphorical elements to engagement with Death or the Devil, but still maintain that what *makes* these personifications lies in how they can be treated as metaphors.

One reason Nolan's claim that the story of Death and the farmer is not metaphorical is plausible is that we can engage with the story without making comparisons between Death and death. We can follow, as interesting in its own right, how the tricks and deceptions play out and who gets the better of whom, with the understanding that it is true in the fiction that if the farmer wins he will avoid dying and if he loses he will die. But, in that respect, we are not treating Death as a personification of death. A strong version of this claim would be that this is simply not a case of personification. But we need not make that strong claim. A weaker, better version is that the element of personification is backgrounded. We may take it for granted that Death is a personification of death because we know that the representation can be used in that way, even though we are not using it in that way when we engage in the manner Nolan has in mind when he describes the story as not 'primarily' metaphorical.

The fundamental difference between Nolan's view and the view we propose is that Nolan treats personification as a truth *within* a fiction, namely, that there is an identity (for example, between Death and death), whereas our view is that personification should instead

be understood as something which is *brought to* engagement with the fiction. Personification is something that is *done with* the characters, and with whatever they personify, by engaging with them in a certain way. Personification is not a feature of the *content* of the representation, but of its *use*. Similarly, for Davidson, metaphor 'belongs exclusively to the domain of use'[10], and is one 'among endless devices that serve to alert us to aspects of the world by inviting us to make comparisons'.[11] We propose that personification is another such device.

To illustrate our proposal, consider a drawing of a skeleton with a scythe. We might, with a certain degree of success, consider the skeleton as personifying any of the following: capitalism or austerity policies, academia or a logical positivist approach to philosophy, disease, the meat industry, certain forms of panel-show comedy, time, social media. Each of these has some features that can meaningfully be compared with features of the skeleton, so that the skeleton can be used to highlight certain features of the thing personified (its significance, its possibilities, its limitations, its effects, and so on), and the thing personified can be used to change what features we interpret the skeleton as having (whether we think of it as, e.g., ruthless, insubstantial yet powerful, efficient, systematic, decluttering, undiscriminating, (un)accountable, disgusting, performing unpleasant but necessary acts, unsympathetic, amoral, immoral, destructive).[12]

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[10] Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', 33.

[11] Ibid., 40.

[12] When Davidson talks about devices that 'serve to alert us to aspects of the world by inviting us to make comparisons', his formulation allows, rightly, that the things compared need not belong to the same world as each other, but also gives the misleading impression that there is only one world whose aspects the comparison serves to alert us to. Either we should take care to read 'the world' as including the fictional as

Of course, to call the skeleton 'Death', e.g. in the work's title, would indicate that the artist finds comparisons with death productive and that the work has been tailor-made to support these comparisons. But even if this is by far the *best* use to be made of the representation, that does not make it part of the content. Likewise, sometimes it may be by recognising the artist's use of the representation to personify death that we recognise a possibility of using it as a personification of something else (say, social media), e.g., where seeing that other thing in comparison with death plays a part in how we characterise it as destructive. Here, one process of comparison feeds into another, and again, this does not mean that either should be treated as a feature of content rather than use.

Depending on what authority is to be given to artists' intentions, we could say, if we wished, that the only *permissible* use of the work is that indicated by the artist. Then we might say that if the title calls the skeleton 'Death', taking it as a personification of anything else is a misuse. This issue about titles, intention and authority cuts across the question of whether personification is a matter of use rather than content, so we will not take a stand on it here.

Where we do take a stand is in holding that a title might contribute to interpretation of a picture without contributing or reflecting content. Kendall Walton says that 'typically, some combination of titles and like signs, artists' intentions, and other causal relations, together perhaps with a certain degree of correspondence'[13], plays into determining what a given representation represents. A neat illustration of his view that a title can bring out pictorial content is given by his argument that 'a pillar-of-salt picture labeled *Lot's Wife*' pictorially represents Lot's wife because 'it is fictional that we see her (in the form of a pillar of

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well as the actual, or (our preference) it should be replaced with 'worlds', since what we are alerted to may be an aspect of a fictional world.

[13] Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 112. Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting a discussion about how our view compares to Walton's.

salt) when we see the picture'.[14] Suppose the picture of the skeleton were called 'The arrival of death'. Would this, similarly, bring out pictorial content that the skeleton's arrival is death's arrival? Our proposal about personification has it that this case should be treated not in the way Walton treats *Lot's Wife*, but more in the way he treats René Magritte's *L'Annonciation*, which he says 'hardly depicts the Annunciation, despite the title … It may be in some way "symbolic" of that event but is not a picture of it.'[15] Walton allows that some titles function to introduce something to interpretation that is not part of what is represented. We would say the same about 'The arrival of death', with the addition that what is introduced, specifically, is a prompt to bring to the work comparisons between what is represented and the arrival of death.

How rewarding an attempt to use a character as a personification is depends on how much the comparison illuminates the thing personified, as well as how much it enriches our engagement with the work. This is not to say that all personifications must be rewarding. What *makes* something a personification is the process of comparison between the fictional thing and the thing personified, but how *engaging* a personification it is depends on what the process of comparison delivers.

Some personifications seem 'thinner' than others. This might be thought to cause difficulties for our account. One example which has been suggested to us (by an anonymous referee) is Aesop's fable of the North Wind and the Sun. In this story, North Wind is an agent who blows and Sun is an agent who can choose to generate heat. (They are thus unlike actual wind and the actual sun, which are not agents.) They agree to test which of them is more powerful by seeing who can remove a man's coat. North Wind blows hard on the man, but the man holds his coat tighter. Sun gradually warms the air, and the man takes off his coat. The

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[14] Ibid, 297, footnote 7.

[15] Ibid, 111-112.

objection is that North Wind and Sun are personifications of wind and the sun, but do not alert us to anything particularly interesting.

What is true is that the characterisation is simple. North Wind and Sun are characterised almost solely in terms of the powers of blowing and heating. The invitation to compare these powers to the powers of wind and the sun is also very apparent, both because of the obvious equivalence in the powers, and because of the names of the characters – using them as personifications of wind and sun is almost unavoidable. But if this does have the consequence that the personifications do not alert us to much of interest, that is not a problem for our account. Our account does not rule out boring personifications, for the same reason that Davidson's account does not rule out boring metaphors. Some comparisons are more worthwhile making than others. If comparing the wind to a blowing agent and the sun to an agent who can choose to generate heat does not prove to be an illuminating way to think about natural or agential power, then the personification was boring – but still a personification, and still, we say, a personification in virtue of the comparison with the wind and the sun that is brought to engagement with the fictional characters.

In any case, whilst we allow for uninteresting personifications, we do not agree that Aesop's North Wind and Sun are among them, and our account brings out why this particular personification is richer than the objection takes it to be. The story gets us to think about natural power (of the sun and wind) by comparison with agential power (of the individuals Sun and North Wind), and vice versa, in order to generate a moral about power and power dynamics. North Wind is boastful about his strength. When the contest has been won, Sun concludes that it has been shown that there is power in gentleness. It is by seeing the likenesses between the natural forces of wind and sun and the characters of North Wind and Sun that we come to see that both in agency and in the natural world, power might manifest itself in different ways, and the ability to displace things is not always the most effective

manifestation of power. Even a simple characterisation can prompt a rewarding process of comparison.

2. Impossibility and Metaphor

Nolan's second argument regarding personification and metaphor is that:

> 'classifying personification as metaphor would not be the end of the philosophical
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> story. Just as there is a puzzle of impossible fictions, there is a puzzle of
>
> impossible metaphors. Sometimes the literal interpretation of a metaphorical
>
> claim will describe a metaphysical or logical impossibility'.[16]

Thus, treating personification as metaphor as a supposed alternative to countenancing non-trivial impossible content in fiction would simply push back the problem, leaving the opponent of non-trivial impossible content having to account for the apparent non-trivial impossible content conveyed in the literal meanings of some metaphors.

The first thing to note is that an account of metaphor which takes metaphor as, say, elliptical simile might allow us to treat the literal content of metaphors as representing only possible scenarios. Nolan takes metaphors such as 'life's a bitch' and 'Bill is a pig' to have impossible literal content. But an account which treats metaphor as elliptical simile could take their literal content to be that of 'life's like a bitch' and 'Bill is like a pig'.[17] Although Nolan acknowledges this (in a

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[16] Nolan, 'Personification and Impossible Fictions', 63.

[17] Nolan also includes 'duty is a heavy burden' in his list. Whilst we know what death, life and pigs are, we are not sure what duty is supposed to be and thus, whether such a thing is possible. If it is not, then even 'duty is like a heavy burden' would not represent a possibility. But, we suggest, rather than representing an impossibility, it represents nothing. How some contentless sentences can be the basis of metaphors is something we discuss below.

footnote), he does not offer a response, and so it remains as a possible objection to his argument. But let us set this aside, because even with an account of metaphor which does not take 'life's a bitch' or 'Bill is a pig' to be elliptical – such as Davidson's – we can explain the functioning of the metaphors without turning to impossible literal content. Our preference is for a Davidsonian account of metaphor, and we develop our account of personification in these terms. The task here is not to give a general defence of a Davidsonian account over any other account of metaphor, but to show how its resources can be employed in an account of personification which avoids impossible content.

On a Davidsonian account of metaphor, literal content guides the process of metaphor interpretation by determining what we should direct our attention to (Bill and pigs, for instance). This role can be fulfilled, we suggest, even if, on the grounds that it fails to represent a possible scenario, one denies that a sentence like 'Bill is a pig' has literal content. For the reason this sentence fails to represent anything is the literal meaning of the *components* of the sentence when taken individually. The fundamental differences between Bill and pigs are why no identity relation can be represented by putting 'Bill' and 'a pig' either side of 'is'. Though the sentence combines its components in a way that fails to be contentful, its construction can still enable the sentence to secure a particular use. After all, other such sentences fail to represent for different reasons: the reason 'Bill is a dung heap' fails to represent has nothing to do with the literal meaning of 'pig' and everything to do with the literal meaning of 'dung heap'. There are many different ways of saying nothing, and the key to understanding the role of literal content in metaphor is to see how the particulars of a well-chosen metaphor facilitate a provocative way of failing to represent. By having, on the surface, the appearance of an attempt to assert an identity, the utterance invites us to try to

see the properties of Bill (say) in light of the properties of pigs (say), in the hopes that this will lead us to notice new things about what Bill is like.[18]

Against the view that 'all sentences that specify absolute impossibilities represent alike (e.g. because there is only one impossible proposition)', Nolan objects that:

> 'the literal content of these claims cannot obviously be of much help in guiding us
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> to the metaphorical content of the claim. If 'Bill is a pig' has the same content as
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> 'Bill is a chihuahua' or 'John is a workhorse', it is hard to see how the content of
>
> the first sentence could guide us to the proposition that Bill is a glutton or
>
> uncultured, rather than, for instance, the content that John is hard-working.'[19]

Note that a Davidsonian approach would reject the idea of 'metaphorical content', and the associated claim that metaphors function by guiding us to *propositions*. But the argument can be reframed as a question about how, if there is no difference in literal content, 'Bill is a pig' and 'John is a workhorse' (for instance) invite different processes of making comparisons between things. In any case, what Nolan's argument overlooks is the relevance to interpretation of the fact that 'John is a workhorse' and 'Bill is a pig' are *different ways* of arriving at what is, so far as the level of literal meaning goes, the same result (whether that is to represent the single impossible proposition, or, as

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[18] We depart slightly from Davidson here, since although he says that metaphor 'is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words' – which we agree with – he goes on to add, 'and hence on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise' (Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', 33). We deny that there is any ordinary meaning to some such sentences, but our strategy in this paper shows that it is nevertheless possible to give an account of the role the sentence plays in generating the metaphor by prompting comparisons. It is this that we think is crucial to a Davidsonian account of metaphor, so our proposal can be read as a way to make the Davidsonian approach work for someone who denies impossible content.

[19] Nolan, 'Personification and Impossible Fictions', 63.

we prefer, to represent nothing). 'Bill is a pig' directs our attention to Bill and pigs, and 'John is a workhorse' directs our attention to John and workhorses, in virtue of the fact that one employs the particulars of Bill and of pigs to represent nothing and the other the particulars of John and of workhorses. Whether we treat the speaker as stating non-trivial impossible content, or as choosing a particular way of stating trivial impossible content, or as choosing a particular way of stating nothing, we can adopt a Davidsonian account of what the utterance is inviting the hearer to do: appreciate certain comparisons.

Thus, we think Nolan is wrong to conclude that a treatment of personification as metaphor would depend on a commitment to non-trivial impossible content. The purpose of this argument is not only to show that somebody who did want to take the route of treating personification as metaphor would not thereby be committed to impossible content. The point also has a more nuanced application within our own account.

Our proposal has been that personification is like metaphor in that it is to be understood as a prompt to attend to things through comparison. This does not mean that when a representation is to be used in personifying something, that representation must be a metaphor. For example, contrast 'death stalks' and 'Death stalks'. The first is a metaphor which is appreciated by comparing death with a stalking creature; the connotations of menace, hounding and casting a shadow over whatever is stalked help to construct a picture of death as unwelcome, unavoidable, and repressing enjoyment of life. The second, 'Death stalks', is not a metaphor. It simply states a fictional truth about the person, Death. Nolan claims that 'Death could not stalk'[20], but on our account, this is clearly false, regardless of the fact that 'death could not stalk' is true. But if Death is a personification of death, then the sentence 'Death stalks', whilst not metaphorical, nevertheless invites a process of comparison like that the metaphor 'death stalks' invites.

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[20] Ibid., 68.

Seeing that metaphors can function without having literal content also explains how sentences like 'Britain walks hand in hand with the USA', and sentences which appear to express identities, such as 'Britannia is Britain', can be appropriate ways of voicing cases of personification. 'Britannia is Britain' can be a useful, even though contentless, metaphor to utter. It may be expeditious, as a prompt to the kinds of comparisons the audience should be making, to utter such sentences, even though to do so is not, *contra* Nolan, to report fictional truths (or to have said anything at all).

3. The Role of Personification

We have argued that someone who denies that fictions can have non-trivial impossible content can avoid Nolan's objections concerning personification, by understanding personification as something that is done with a representation, instead of as a further piece of content. Personification involves drawing comparisons between a fictional person and whatever it is they personify, without it being fictional that there is an identity between these things.[21] This answers Nolan's objections.

Although Nolan offers many examples of personification, there is no detailed discussion which relates his proposal (that personification be treated as involving metaphysically impossible fictional truths) to the use which is made of personification in any particular fiction. By attending to the details of fictions involving personification, we can gain an appreciation of its nature, against which a theory of personification can be judged. So this is what we shall now do, in order to further support our account. Our view is that positing metaphysically impossible content plays no part in understanding personification, and that this general point can be illustrated by attending to the

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[21] This approach could be extended to other cases where what we take from a fiction arises from the use we put it to, rather than being part of its content. Allegory, satire and parody may all be understood in terms of comparison. Detailed exploration of these is a project for elsewhere.

details of a paradigm example of personification, such as the personification of death in the film *Meet Joe Black*.[22] The details of how personification is achieved will differ slightly from one fiction to another, depending on the particulars of the case. But by working through this paradigm example, which illustrates many of the typical and important features which enable something to be treated as a personification, we will be able to disarm some additional apparent evidential and explanatory data which might have led one to claim, as Nolan does, that 'death is Death' (or some variant) is fictionally true. Of course, working through this one case does not prove that our account of personification captures all cases. What we intend it to do is to illustrate how to apply the proposed account to one paradigmatic case (which also provides an indication of how the account might go in other cases).

In *Meet Joe Black*, Death visits those who are about to die, including Bill Parrish. Death is particularly interested in Bill and thinks that spending some time with Bill will allow him to have some interesting experiences and learn what it is like to be human. For these purposes, he comes to Bill embodied in human form, and strikes a bargain with him. Although there is nothing Bill can do to avoid dying, he agrees to entertain Death so that he can stay alive a little longer. Once Death has experienced enough of what Bill can show him, however, Bill must die. Bill has to pretend that Death is a business colleague called Joe Black because if Bill tells his family who Joe really is, Bill will die.

Is there any reason to say, in addition, that 'Joe Black is death' (or 'Death is death') is a fictional truth? One might be tempted by what the characters say in the film. Consider this early exchange:

> *Bill*: You are –
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> *Death/Joe Black*: Yes? … Who am I?
>
> *Bill*: Death. You're death?

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[22] 1998, dir. Martin Brest.

> *Joe Black*: Yes.
>
> *Bill*: Death.
>
> *Joe Black*: That's me.

Joe also seems to self-identify as death when he describes himself as 'me, the most lasting and significant element in existence'. And later, when Bill berates Joe for having a relationship with his daughter, Bill (apparently) says 'my daughter has fallen in love with death'.

The first point to note here is that, since the characters speak rather than write their words, we might just as well take Bill to be asking 'You're Death?' rather than 'You're death?', and to say 'my daughter has fallen in love with Death' rather than 'my daughter has fallen in love with death'.[23] Equally, we might just as well take Death to think that Death (not death) is 'the most lasting and significant element in existence'. So this evidence is rather inconclusive. What *is* fictionally true is that when Joe decides it is time for someone to die, they will die. Bill's bargaining with Joe relies only on its being the case that Joe will determine that Bill dies when he does. So, while Bill treats Joe as something which has the power to influence deaths, there is no reason to say he treats Joe as death itself. It is also fictionally true that when people die, Joe *does* something. In one scene, he closes his eyes at the death of a hospital patient, whereas, in another scene, Bill dies after Joe escorts Bill over a bridge. What these acts signify – bringing about death, acknowledging death, or something else – is not spelled out, but what is true is that characters describe Joe as 'taking' people. Initially, this might look like a reason for positing an identity. We think that it is – but *not* between Joe and death. For to think of death as something that 'takes' us is *already* to personify it, or at least to approach it through a metaphor of agency. That is, given our account above, it is to invoke a taking agent with which death is to be *compared*. The identity is between Joe Black and the agent who takes. Clearly,

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[23] For what it is worth, the English subtitles packaged with our version of the film represent Bill as saying 'Death' rather than 'death'.

this falls short of there being an identity between Joe Black and (non-agential) death, which is what is required for a metaphysical impossibility.

Meet Joe Black offers us a typical personification, but positing an impossible identity relation in order to accommodate this is unnecessary and, indeed, a distortion. Rather, what makes Joe Black a personification are the *comparisons* that can be made between Joe and death. What makes this an effective personification is that the comparisons are fruitful. Joe is a character who is, by and large, straight-talking, matter-of-fact, detached, impartial, unemotional, disinterested. He is non-malicious but (for much of the film) feels no compulsion to accommodate others' preferences. He is dignified. Joe's being there enables Bill to focus on what is of most importance to him. Unlike some other characters, Joe never wrongs Bill by deceiving him, and when Bill is angry with Joe, it is simply because of his inability to control Joe. Any of these things could be used to reflect on the nature of death.[24]

Do Joe's properties give us a reason to say that 'Joe Black is death' is true in the fiction? Certainly, Joe Black satisfies many of the descriptions which we associate with death. For instance, we may think of death as 'a thing that is in common between all endings of life'. This description is satisfied by death in the actual world, and by Joe Black (and also by death) in the fictional world. Thus, Joe Black satisfies descriptions we expect death to satisfy. But it does not follow from this that there is an identity between Joe and death in the fictional world.[25]

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[24] Note that there is nothing to say that Bill could not be doing the same thing. His response to Joe may be as rich as an audience's in terms of the comparisons he draws between Joe and death. The important point is that, like the audience, he need not posit an impossible identity to do the work.

[25] As noted at the end of section 2, 'Joe Black is death' may remain a useful (though contentless) metaphor to utter. This point could also facilitate alternative readings of some of what the characters say: for instance, when Joe says 'me, the most lasting and significant element in existence', we could take the most lasting and

Further, notice that in using Joe as a personification of death we may pay attention to properties of Joe which allow him to satisfy *inaccurate* descriptions associated with death, not just accurate ones. We may think of death as 'what you experience when your life ends'. In the fictional world, Joe satisfies this description (at least for Bill), as Bill sees Joe at the end of his life. Death itself could not satisfy this description, since death (perhaps unlike dying) is not an experience, but it may be a common misconception of death (or at least it may be commonly thought that it is a common misconception of death) to associate this description with it.

It is not just in finding similarities between Joe Black and death that we reflect on death by engaging with *Meet Joe Black*, but also by finding the differences. Consider the title of the film. Death cannot literally be met. Unlike Joe, it cannot be confronted or communicated with. It is important to notice that even though reasoning with Joe cannot ultimately enable Bill to avoid death, there is an opportunity to try to reason with Joe – something that does not apply to death. It is also crucial to engagement with the fiction to recognise that life with Bill and his family does change Joe, making him empathetic – again, something that could not possibly be achieved for death. All of this draws our attention to aspects of Joe that we might feel we *wish* could be ascribed to death, but that we are aware *cannot* be. Unlike in the case above (of death being misdescribed as 'what you experience when your life ends'), we take it that attributes of empathy and reason-responsiveness are not thought to be commonly misascribed to death, and that recognising that we take Joe to be different from death in these respects is part of our engagement. (That is not to say that someone who recognises that death is not experienced could not engage with that aspect of Joe in a similar way. If they think the fact that death is not experienced is an important one, they may find that difference between Joe and death worth reflecting on.) Thus, the personification of death can engage us in thinking about death by alerting us to what death *is not* like, as well as what

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significant element in existence to be death, and take Joe to be speaking metaphorically about himself, inviting Bill to think about Death through comparison with death.

it is like. The fact that we cannot confront death is part of our thinking about it, brought into relief by the possible scenario the fiction represents, that of confronting Joe Black.

Our claim here is not that a defender of Nolan's account could not offer their own version of this point, along the lines of saying that death in the fiction is different from death in the actual world. The point here is rather that whichever way one goes, it is the sustained *comparison* between the person and the thing personified which does all the work in personification, not the question of their fictional identity or distinctness.

Does positing a fictional identity between Joe Black and death explain any important features of the fiction which our alternative proposal does not? One thing that might need explaining is the humour of certain moments. Why, for example, is it funny that Joe Black likes peanut butter, if not because there is something incongruous in the idea that *death* likes peanut butter? Set aside all the features that may contribute to the amusement, but which could be found funny independently of the fact that Joe is a personification of death: a serious person being charmed by peanut butter; an adult being childlike in discovering a pleasant but commonplace experience; the way he licks his spoon like a lolly; the fact that he is unsure about how quickly to eat it; the fact that he wants it instead of his dinner, and that he wants it by itself, not even on toast. The pertinent question for our purposes is whether there is any humour to be had *specifically* from an identity between Joe and death.

There is an aspect of the humour that relates particularly to the personification of death. But, again, it is *comparison* that does the work here, not an impossible identity. The humour lies in the inappropriateness of *liking peanut butter* as a meaningful point of comparison with death. Peanut butter is neither liked nor disliked by death, and there is nothing in death that is comparable to the liking or disliking of peanut butter. What explains why this is humorous is that, unlike the other discrepancies between Joe and death mentioned above, it does not *matter* that death fails to be similar to Joe in this respect. It matters to us that death cannot be appeased, but it does not

matter to us that death cannot enjoy peanut butter. This point of comparison thus generates humour, rather than, as in the other discrepancies, gravity. (Indeed, the fact that Joe regards his new-found liking of peanut butter as a matter of such gravity may enhance this.)

The project of personification becomes incongruous here. One might have expected of Joe, as a person, that he would like peanut butter and that eating it would come to be something he values highly. After all, peanut butter is a popular food, and people tend to become very attached to their favourite foods. One would not have expected of Joe, *as a personification*, that he would like and value peanut butter. After all, one may expect a personification of death to bear salient comparisons to death (be it through similarity or through dissimilarity), and liking peanut butter is not one of these. Thus, again, it is personification as comparison which is doing the work here; positing a fictional identity between Joe Black and death would be redundant for the purposes of explaining the humour.

The other feature of the fiction that might seem to require explanation is the correlation between deaths and Joe's presence, or rather, certain of his actions, such as closing his eyes whilst the hospital patient dies, or taking Bill over the bridge. The question of why Joe Black's acts are correlated with death can be divided into two parts: what is the explanation for the fiction representing a correlation, and what is the fictional explanation for the correlation? The answer to the first part is that it makes the story interesting, not least because it assists in making Joe usable as a personification of death. The correlation is one of the major ways the film invites us to make the relevant comparisons. The answer to the second part is that it is left indefinite what the fictional explanation is. And this will be so whichever account we favour: it is not as if taking 'Joe Black is death' to be fictionally true would offer an explanation of why people die when he closes his eyes, or takes people over a bridge. Either way, the fiction is not concerned with specifying a fictional mechanism that links closed eyes, crossed bridges and deaths.

In his discussion of personification and gods, Nolan considers and rejects the view that fictions involving personification represent simply a metaphysically possible scenario where 'there are people *associated* with phenomena like duty, war, or death, and … these people … [have] special powers'.[26] He takes gods to be the paradigm of this association. Nolan's first objection to this view is that the relationship between a personification and the thing personified is 'more intimate'[27] than this association. His second objection is that we can distinguish between a god and a personification; so personifications should not be assimilated to gods. We agree with both of Nolan's objections to the proposal that personification reduces to associations of these kinds, but not with his conclusion that in cases of personification there must be some other relation (identity) *in the fictional world*. Nolan's assumption here is that whatever personification is, it must be a matter of fictional truth; that is, of what is represented by the fiction. But personification, we have argued, is a matter not of what is represented, but of what we use the representation to do. It is important to distinguish our proposal, then, from the proposal that personification is association. Personification is not a feature of the fictional world, but something that is brought to engagement with the work. *Meet Joe Black* does represent associations of some kind between Joe Black and death, but this is not what it is for Joe Black to be a personification of death. Personification is *extra*-representational: it involves using Joe to personify death.

Fictional relations such as those Nolan calls 'associations' may, of course, prompt us to make the relevant comparisons, or they might give us interesting features of the character to feed into the comparison between that character and the thing they personify. Associations are not unique in this, however. Those roles can also be played by other fictional truths, by characters' names, or by titles of works, for example. Whatever the impetus to personify, the crucial point is that personification is not determined by fictional facts. No fictional fact could determine that Joe is a personification of

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[26] Nolan, 'Personification and Impossible Fictions', 64.

[27] Ibid., 65

death; rather, we use Joe to personify death. Personification is never a feature of what is represented, always a feature of what is done with a representation.

Gods need not be used as personifications of what they are associated with. What makes a character a god are the fictional truths – e.g. the fictional character may qualify as being the 'god of' something by having authority over that thing, along with some extraordinary powers – whereas what makes a character a personification is using it in a particular way. If the qualities of the god are not used to engage in a comparison with the qualities of the thing it is a god of (or vice versa), then it is not a personification of the thing it is a god of. Of course, this does not preclude a god *also* being a personification of the thing it is a god of, since it may be used as a personification whilst also being a god. So whilst Nolan is right that association and personification are two different things, this does not mean that personification calls for a different relation (identity) *in the fictional world* between a person and the thing it personifies.

Relatedly, we should reject Nolan's claim that Dürer's woodcuts of Death 'are depictions not just of an unusually dangerous skeleton, but of the phenomenon of death'.[28] They are depictions just of an unusually dangerous skeleton, but that unusually dangerous skeleton invites comparisons which not all unusually dangerous skeletons do (for example, the unusually dangerous skeletons in *Jason and the Argonauts*[29] do not). So Dürer's personification is not *just* depiction of an unusually dangerous skeleton, even though what is depicted in Dürer's personification *is* just an unusually dangerous skeleton.

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[28] Ibid., 62.

[29] 1963, dir. Don Chaffey.

4. Conclusions

From his argument that personification involves representing impossibilities, Nolan concludes that

we have 'more evidence for the case that we must and can discriminate between different

representations of impossibility', and for the case that 'a theory of fiction should not restrict itself to

accounts that can only handle possibilities'.[30] Moreover, the use of personification in mainstream

fictions shows that 'impossible fictions are not a peripheral case caused by unusual experimentation

with fictional devices, but can be found in traditional and widespread kinds of cases'.[31] Thus,

impossible fiction cannot easily be put aside as an experimental form which deliberately reacts

against the philosophical principles of fictional truth, and a theory cannot convincingly claim to have

dealt with the 'standard case' of fiction if it excludes impossible fiction. Finally, Nolan hopes to

generalise beyond the case of fiction: 'If discriminating between impossibilities is a common part of

engagement with fiction, this suggests that it might be common elsewhere in our representative

repertoire. It at least suggests that we should take at face value the appearance that we can usefully

discriminate between different impossible beliefs and desires, or different conditionals about what

would be the case if impossibilities were to eventuate.'[32]

Addressing the challenge posed by personification as Nolan understands it is thus an

important task for any version of the view that fiction does not represent impossibilities. Nolan

suggests that, given the problems he has raised for the lines of defence he has considered, 'those

not antecedently committed to the Procrustean project of making all non-trivial fictional content the

representation of possibility will not find any of those lines of resistance very plausible'.[33] We have

shown how to avoid Nolan's objections, by developing a positive account of how personification

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[30] Nolan, 'Personification and Impossible Fictions', 68.

[31] Ibid., 68.

[32] Ibid., 68-69.

[33] Ibid., 68.

works, which treats personification as something that is done with a representation of possibilities, rather than as a representation of an impossibility. Far from being 'Procrustean', an account of fiction in terms of possibility can be progressive in the importance it gives to the differences between fictions. Our account of personification as involving comparison of possibilities *is* sensitive to how personification, in particular, plays into and enhances our engagement with fiction, and it makes the particulars of an individual instance of personification crucial to how personification is achieved.[34]