

Fictional Names

Fictional Names:
A Critical Study of Some Theories Not Committed
to the Existence of Fictional Entities

By

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P U B L I S H I N G

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For Franky

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PREFACE

Fictional names such as Sherlock Holmes, Tom Sawyer or Superman originate in fiction. We also employ them in ordinary conversations. However, when we ask what these terms refer to and what speakers think when they employ them, a host of problems arise. Whilst an anti-realist perspective will assimilate them to the broader category of *empty-names*; a realistic perspective, articulable in different ways, argues for the existence of fictional entities as their referents. Each stance faces puzzles which are difficult to resolve.

Generally speaking, if we think or talk about something when we use fictional names, what is it we are thinking or talking about? How do referential relations work in this context? If, on the other hand, we speak about nothing when we use a fictional name, how do we understand the linguistic processes which go on and which give us the impression of speaking about something?

I will provide an overview of both theoretical stances and the different problems they face; however, my focus will be on the anti-realistic perspective. Specifically, I will discuss two main ways of treating the supposed emptiness of fictional names: I will argue against the employment of the notion of ‘gappy propositions’ and in favour of Gareth Evans’ and Kendall Walton’s idea that speakers’ utterances which appear to make reference to fictional entities can be understood as acts of pretence of a certain sort.

I will in particular discuss the many objections to David Braun’s anti-realist proposal. I will consider the weaknesses of the pragmatic account built by Fred Adams, Gary Fuller and Robert Stecker around the key notion of ‘gappy propositions’. Finally, I will present Kendall Walton’s view and answer the objection of implausibility which is often aimed at it, providing an understanding of acts of pretence in terms of acts of communication.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I came across this subject as a graduate student at the University of Milan. At that time I was exploring different fields in order to have a better understanding of fiction and, more generally, of the world around me. It is in this way that I started reading courses of logic and philosophy of language and I developed the bases for a research project in analytical philosophy. I studied in depth theories of pretence, where my interest lies, and between the many engaging topics in that field I focused on the notion of *fictional names*. This thesis is the result of that initial choice. I am very grateful to the University of Nottingham for having given me the chance to pursue this research project, in particular I am grateful to the International Office for having granted me a fee-bursary. I would like to thank my supervisor Gregory Currie, for the care of my work and his regular precious comments, my parents for assisting my efforts with affection and hope and to all those people who, without understanding what I was doing or why, have been able to be sympathetic and close to me in one way or another to different degrees.

PART I

FICTIONAL NAMES

The study of the connection between language and reality provides an insight into our ability to express thoughts about the world. Words, terms and other expressions contribute to the building of such a connection. Through their analysis and through the study of the patterns of sentence structures we have reached a deeper insight into the relation between language and reality. Within this field of research my interest will be focused on some terms that look like names but seem to lack any referential connection with the world. I will call them fictional names and I will define them as a class of terms included in the broader class of empty names. The problem of empty names is a long standing one in the history of philosophy in general and in philosophy of language in particular.

At times, the study of the reference of fictional names has benefited from the light shed on it by investigations carried out within the field of theories of fiction and the nature of fictional characters. At other times it has been of interest to the ontological debate on the existence of abstract objects and the nature of quantifiers. Moreover, a related debate has been developed in philosophy of language. If we think or talk about something when we use fictional names, what is it we are addressing and how do the referential relations work? Contrariwise, if we speak about nothing when we use a fictional name, how do we understand the linguistic process which gives us the impression of speaking about something? While all these areas of study are of interest to me, the emphasis will be placed on the semantics of fictional names: what do fictional names refer to if they refer to anything? Which problems do fictional names pose to the theories of reference? Which solutions have been elaborated? Which problems do they still face?

In the next section I will explain what a fictional name is and identify the peculiarities of these terms.

Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names

What are empty names? The label “empty names” is sometimes considered a tendentious way to talk about the problem of terms that seem to lack a referent; it seems tendentious because it implies that these terms do not pick out any referent.

It is likely that this approach has been inherited by the debates that in the course of history have been developed regarding the problem of terms which allegedly lack a referent. A first version of a paradox related to non-referring terms dates back to Greek philosophy. The following is Bertrand Russell’s illustration of what has become known as Parmenides’ paradox:

“When you think, you think *of* something; when you use a name, it must be the name *of* something. Therefore both thought and language require objects outside themselves. And since you can think of a thing or speak of it at one time as well as another, whatever can be thought of or spoken of must exist at all times.”¹

However, we predicate the non-existence of something, for example uttering “Pegasus does not exist”, when the use of a name requires the existence of an object. This puzzle, known nowadays as the puzzle of non-existential statements, is still today the object of debate in ontological, linguistic and cognitive investigation.

In the early sixteenth century the debate on the reference of terms that allegedly lack a reference found new life thanks to the contribution by a group of logicians at the University of Paris.²

The epistemological supposition in post-medieval semantics was that the ability to speak a language depended on the possession of concepts derived by the appropriate experience of objects external to speakers. The reference of the term “Chimera” is assumed to be an impossible object; and, if a speaker’s ability to use language relies on the possession of concepts derived by the experience of external objects, given that a speaker cannot have experience of a chimera nor can they have a concept of it, ultimately, they shouldn’t be able to understand or use the term

¹ Russell, B. (1956) *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillian Company.), 49. In this study I will not discuss the problem of *eternal existence*, mentioned by Russell in this paragraph.

² For appreciating the shape and the main lines of the arguments available at the time see Ashworth E. Jennifer, “Chimeras and Imaginary Objects: A Study in the Post-Medieval Theory of Signification,” in *Studies in Post-Medieval Semantics* (London: Variorum, 1985). The main references were medieval authors (Robert Holkot, John Buridan and Marsilius of Inghen) and the discussion was centred on their proposals.

“Chimera”. However, sentences such as “I imagine a chimera” seem to be meaningful and no difficulties seem to arise in understanding it.

At the beginning of last century the work of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell posed the basis for the contemporary debate in analytical philosophy. They inherited the puzzle as concerning terms which lack a referent or bearerless names and this was of particular interest both within the study of the reference of proper names, and in the metaphysical debate. In the former debate, these logicians elaborated different proposals; in the latter debate Russell rejected the Meinongian thesis of an ontology comprising non-existent objects, as did Frege, though Frege did not explicitly refer to Meinong.

Although Frege’s and Russell’s analyses of the reference of proper names led to two very different proposals, they both endorsed the view that terms which allegedly lack reference are empty names, i.e. names without a referent. However, nowadays, the fact that these terms are bearerless is not taken for granted any longer. In fact, in the contemporary debate it is possible to recognise two main standpoints: those theories which state the emptiness of terms which seem to lack a referent in contrast to those theories which state that empty names are not empty, but rather refer to something. Therefore, before taking one or the other stance it seems appropriate to avoid any bias by starting with the question: are there any such things as empty names?

When thinking about which individuals names such as ‘Vulcan’, ‘Sherlock Holmes’, ‘Papa Goriot’, ‘Pegasus’ etc., would pick out, we may not find any. Consequently we would legitimately conclude that they are all empty, i.e. they do not refer to anything. This conclusion is well supported by common sense, for example, if I were in the unfortunate circumstance of needing to go to the police to ask for a detective, I would not ask for Sherlock Holmes because there is no Sherlock Holmes. Although these terms are empty, they seem to cover the same syntactic role as proper names but rather than semantically contributing an individual they would not contribute anything to the proposition expressed.

Notwithstanding the apparent conclusiveness of such arguments, the study of how and in which context these terms originated have provided, according to some philosophers, more elements for the understanding of their semantics³ and for answering the question about their alleged

³ Kripke, S. *John Locke’s Lectures*, unpublished; Amie Thomasson, A. (1999) *Fiction and Metaphysics*, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Salmon, N. (1998) Nonexistence. *Noûs*, Vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 277-319; Braun D. (2002) Cognitive Significance, Attitude Ascriptions and way of believing propositions.

emptiness. For example, Nathan Salmon puts forward the distinction between terms that have been introduced within a fiction, rather than names that derive from a mythological story or names that allegedly refer on the basis of an erroneous theory or an act of misperception. I will adopt this distinction which seems to me to be a more detailed systematisation of the problem in contrast to an underspecified category such as *empty names*.

It is possible to distinguish between *fictional names*, names that originate in works of fiction; *mythical names*, names that originate within a story such as a myth or an erroneous theory; and merely *non-referring names*, terms introduced by stipulation with awareness that they are lacking a referent. For example, ‘Sherlock Holmes’ and ‘Papa Goriot’ are names which originated from works of fiction. Doyle and Balzac introduced these terms in their novels and they are employed as proper names in the fiction. By reading the relevant books and talking or writing about them, the use of these terms might have spread outside of the fiction in assertive utterances about the novels or in general statements such as ‘Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any real detective’. Because of their origin, we may call this type of term *fictional names*.

‘Vulcan’ has been brought into use in cosmology with the purpose of naming a planet between Mercury and the Sun whose existence has been later denied by further studies. The name has come into use through a false story about the universe. These types of story are *myths*, and we may call these names *mythological names*⁴. A *myth* may also have been the origin of the use of ‘Pegasus’ and therefore it may be considered a mythological name as well.

A different case of non-referring names may be provided by the following example. Consider that Claire, walking back from the library one wintery evening, wonders whether someone is waiting at the campus bus stop that is currently out-of-use. Though she does not think that there is a person who is waiting, she stipulates the name ‘Molly’ for the person that is waiting at the out-of-use bus stop. According to some philosophers⁵, the name ‘Molly’ is genuinely a non-referring name but is also neither fictional nor mythical. Claire does not believe that there was

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⁴ I adopt here for *myths* and *mythical names* the terminology introduced in Salmon N. (1998) Nonexistence. *Noûs*, Vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 277-319. Adopted also in Braun, D. (2005) Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names. *Noûs*, Vol. 39, pp. 596-631.

⁵ Salmon, N. (1998) discusses the example of the term “Nappy”, pp. 305-307.

someone at the bus stop (unlike Le Verrier who believed in the existence of Vulcan) and she does not pretend to use the name for a person (unlike Doyle with 'Holmes'). According to Salmon, who considers cases similar to this one, this would be a case of a *genuine non-referring name*.

Make no mistake though; I am not stating that genuine non-referring names are the only example of empty names – as some philosophers propose⁶. We may come to the conclusion that *fictional*, *mythical* and *genuine non-referring names* all lack a referent or contrariwise they do not. I am only pointing out that for each one of these types of terms we can recognise its own specificity. Whichever will be our conclusion, taking into account the different context in which these terms originate and are employed provides elements for a better understanding of their semantic role.

A new systematisation of the problem does not mean that we have found an answer to it. The problem of the alleged reference without referents is still to be faced. The focus of this study will be on *fictional names*. I will discuss different theoretical views selecting and applying their proposals to the problem of the reference of these terms and, addressing the specificity of *fictional names*, I will provide an insight into what is fiction, what is a fictional context and how it works.

Let Us Start From Frege and Russell

At the origin of the contemporary debate on terms that allegedly lack a referent, Frege's and Russell's proposals stand out as our starting points. Despite the fact that their contributions on the theory of reference of proper names are only a small part of their own work as philosophers and logicians, these proposals have become part of the common background in this domain.

According to Frege, a proper name refers to an object⁷ and conveys a sense that, at least partly, can be associated to a descriptive mode of presentation of the object. For Frege, the meaning of a name cannot be reduced to its referent, but instead it consists of a layered notion of meaning, one which involves recognition of its 'reference' and 'sense'. Employing the notion of sense, a descriptive mode of presentation of the object designated, Frege provided an answer to many of the Millianist's

⁶ This view is suggested in Salmon, N. (1988) in *Nonexistence*. *Noûs*, Vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 277-319.

⁷ 'Object' is here intended in its most comprehensive use, comprising individual as well.

problems. Mill's theory of the reference of proper names was at the time the leading one. It states that proper names function as tags; their meaning is the object to which names are *allocated*. As Frege pointed out, this theory was encountering various difficulties, for example in the case of the problem of bearerless or empty names, the problem of informativeness or cognitive significance and the problem of substitution into belief contexts.

For example, many people may not know that names such as 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' have the same referent, however they may still be able to understand the identity statement 'Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens'. If the only contribution of a proper name were to be its referent, to understand the above identity statement one should already know the reference of the names and at that point 'Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens' would be tantamount to 'Mark Twain is Mark Twain'. However, whilst the former is informative the second is not and we can understand the former one even without being aware that the two names designate the same individual.

Furthermore, let us consider the case in which Claire, a young literature student, does not know anything about Mark Twain apart from the fact that he is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*. It would not be difficult to state that 'Claire believes that Mark Twain is Mark Twain' is true, given that the that-clause is a tautology. However, the truth of 'Claire believes that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens' cannot be taken for granted in the same way; in fact it is false, given that Claire does not know that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens. The assumption that the meaning of a proper name is constituted only by its designatum would lead us to the wrong conclusion, namely that the sentences 'Claire believes that Mark Twain is Mark Twain' and 'Claire believes that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens' have the same truth-value conditions.

Finally consider the following example as an illustration of the problem of bearerless names. For Mill the explanation of a sentence such as 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' would have been problematic. To what does 'Odysseus' refer? Allegedly, to nothing at all, but if the referent is the only semantic property that the proper name contributes to the proposition then that sentence does not express any proposition and is thus, meaningless. However, this does not seem to be the correct conclusion, given that everyone can grasp the meaning expressed by that sentence. For Frege, given that he introduced a two-layered notion of meaning distinguishing between reference (*Bedeutung*) and sense (*Sinn*), a sentence such as 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' would have expressed a thought while it lacked a truth-value. For thoughts have components that are senses, but there is no

referent of which the predication is true or false. The problem of bearerless or empty names, the problem of informativeness and the problem of substitution into belief contexts all seemed to find a resolution through Frege's move.

According to Bertrand Russell, ordinary proper names such as "Socrates", "Bertrand", but also including fictional names such as "Odysseus" or "Sherlock Holmes" and so on, are not genuine names. Proper names are disguised definite descriptions, for example 'Socrates' or 'Odysseus' are disguised descriptions such as respectively 'the teacher of Plato and husband of Xanthippe', 'the Theban king who set out to conquer Troy'. In contrast with a Fregean view that would assume that they contribute a sense to the thought expressed, Russell said they are on a par with definite descriptions; incomplete symbols that are eliminable under analysis.

They are incomplete symbols whose semantic contribution to the proposition expressed may be understood only by virtue of a deeper analysis of the sentence beyond its grammatical surface into its logical form. According to this view, they semantically behave as quantificational expressions and sentences involving fictional names express a proposition that can be caught analysing the logical form of the sentence. Consider the following analysis:

(a) Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep.

'Odysseus' being a disguised definite description may be substituted in (a) for example with 'the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*' in (b).

(b) The hero of Homer's *Odyssey* was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep.

An analysis of (b) may be provided accordingly with Russell's analysis of definite descriptions. Let us employ 'N' to translate the predicate '... is a hero of Homer's *Odyssey*' and 'M' to translate the predicate '... was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' in representing the proposition expressed by (b) in its logical form (b'):

$$(b') (\exists x) (Nx \wedge (\forall y) (Ny \equiv x=y) \wedge Mx)$$

As displayed in (b') Russell assimilates definite descriptions to quantificational expressions, which can be understood, roughly speaking, as an existential statement (where existence is thought of as a second order

property of properties) which state the existence of a certain x , the uniqueness of x and the fact that x bears the properties expressed in the sentence. Given that ‘The hero of Homer’s *Odyssey*’ does not satisfy the first requirement of the conjunction expressed in (b’), (b’) is false.

Frege’s and Russell’s analyses of the problem of empty names were very different, yet notwithstanding those differences, for both of them the problem was a problem of emptiness. Terms such as ‘*Odysseus*’ were, for both logicians, names which lack a referent.

The idea of a descriptive content that names were to contribute to the proposition expressed was taken up by logicians and philosophers in the first half of the last century, and was developed into different versions of what has been called *Descriptivism*. Proper names have come to be understood as clusters of descriptions attributable to an individual⁸. As a result of this move, philosophers have included within the view that part of the meaning of a proper name corresponds to a descriptive content, the idea that the reference of proper names is also fixed by the description associated with the name. This has made the theory vulnerable to strong objections and therefore far from conclusive. In fact, since the 1970s the descriptivist stance has been effectively rejected.

Different versions of the direct reference theory have been elaborated by logicians and philosophers within their area of research⁹. The so-called “new theory of reference” deposed the descriptivist view on the basis of very strong arguments, often referred to as the semantic, epistemic and modal arguments.

The crux of the semantic argument is that there is a semantic aspect of descriptions that seems not to fit with the semantic function of proper names. Descriptions do not uniquely designate a referent¹⁰ since more than one object may have the same attribute, therefore if the reference of a proper name were fixed via the description associated with it, the proper name might fail to designate a specific individual. Moreover, the argument has been further developed in light of the case of descriptions that are erroneously associated with a certain individual. For example, someone

⁸ See Searle, J. (1958) Proper Names. *Mind*, Vol. 67, pp. 166–173.

⁹ See Kripke, S. (1980) *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Donnellan, K. (1972) Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions, in D. Davidson and G. Harman, eds., *Semantics of Natural Language*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, pp. 356–79; Kaplan, D. (1989) Demonstratives/ Afterthoughts, in J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein, eds., *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 481–614.

¹⁰ There are some exceptions for example in descriptions such as “the successor of 2”, but for the moment I do not consider these particular cases.

may think that Albert Einstein is the inventor of the atomic bomb and she may associate this description with that name. However, that use of the name would not designate the individual picked out through the description, the actual inventor of the atomic bomb being Oppenheimer. But surely the person still refers to Einstein when she uses the name “Einstein”.

The core of the epistemic argument is the following: if the meaning of a proper name is given by its associated description, the proposition expressed by a sentence that contains a proper name would have the same epistemic profile as the sentence where that proper name is replaced with its associated description. However, this is not the case. Consider the two following sentences: (i) if the mentor of Alexander the Great exists, then Aristotle is the mentor of Alexander the Great; (ii) if the mentor of Alexander the Great exists, then the mentor of Alexander the Great is the mentor of Alexander the Great. It is possible to associate the description ‘the mentor of Alexander the Great’ with the name ‘Aristotle’, it being the case that the Greek philosopher was indeed Alexander’s mentor. However, if the description associated with the proper name were the meaning of the name, we may replace the name ‘Aristotle’ with the description ‘the mentor of Alexander the Great’ without altering the epistemic profile from (i) to (ii). Therefore, given that it is knowable a priori that if the mentor of Alexander the Great exists, then the mentor of Alexander the Great is the mentor of Alexander the Great; it would be knowable a priori that if the mentor of Alexander the Great exists, then Aristotle is the mentor of Alexander the Great. However, the truth of (i) is a posteriori not a priori, in fact one may gain that knowledge studying Alexander or Aristotle’s life, but not as a self-evident truth.

The modal argument has a similar structure to the epistemic argument. If the meaning of ‘Aristotle’ is given by the associated description ‘the mentor of Alexander the Great’, replacing the former in (i) with its associated description in (ii), (i) should have the same modal profile as (ii). However, this is not the case. In fact, (ii) is necessarily true, namely it is true in every possible world; while (i) is not. There may well be some possible world in which Aristotle is not the mentor of Alexander the Great.

On the basis of these arguments, there has been a radical turn back towards the idea that the meaning of a proper name is its referent. One of the core features of Descriptivism, the idea that the reference of a name may be fixed through a description, has been overturned by what has been called the “new theory of reference”. This collates different versions of the direct reference theory and, notwithstanding the popularity it gained since

the 1970s, still faces some old problems: the same ones Frege tried to solve by introducing the notion of ‘sense’.

In conclusion, on the one hand, if fictional names contribute a descriptive content to the proposition expressed they do not behave as proper names, e.g. rigid designators, although they cover the same syntactic role. We would need then to explain on which grounds fictional names are an autonomous syntactic category assimilated to quantified expressions¹¹. On the other hand, it may be held that fictional names behave exactly as proper names.

One of the main challenges in the contemporary debate consists in reconciling the idea that fictional names are proper names with either the idea that they refer to something or that, although they are names, they lack a referent.

Realism vs. Anti-Realism

Anti-realism or Irrealism, in this context, is the theoretical stance that does not recognise fictional characters as having any ontological status; according to this view, fictional names are genuine non-referring terms. In contrast, a realistic perspective on fictional objects will endorse the general view that there is something designated by fictional names.

Philosophers such as D. Braun, R. Stecker, F. Adams and G. Fuller try to reconcile the role of fictional names as proper names with their supposed emptiness. All these philosophers accept and employ the notion of ‘gappy propositions’; a substitute for a “full-fledged” proposition, which corresponds to the content expressed by sentences containing fictional names, where those names are considered to be empty¹². A different proposal which endorses the emptiness of fictional names has been developed within theories of fiction. The idea, sketched by G. Evans and developed by K. Walton¹³, consists in understanding fictional names

¹¹ G. Currie puts forward a proposal on these lines in *The Nature of Fiction*, 1990.

¹² K. Taylor endorses a solution which supposes the emptiness of empty-names in a proposal which resembles the one developed by Adams, Stecker and Fuller. See Taylor, K. (2000) Emptiness without compromise. *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-Existence* edited by Everett, A. & Hofweber, T., ed. Stanford: CSLI Publications. See also Taylor, K. (2009) “The Things We Do With Empty Names,” presented at the BW6 conference at the University of Barcelona 17-19 June 2009.

¹³ See Evans, G. (1982) *The Varieties of Reference*. ed. Oxford: Blackwell. For a semantics of fictional names developed on these lines see Walton, K. (1990) *Mimesis and Make-Believe*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, part 4.

within a broader understanding of our participation in the pretence; a pretence in which we for the first time engage with these terms and with their use.

Both realistic and anti-realistic views will face problems concerning the relation between language and thought and language and reality. In fact, if when we think we think of something and when we use a name, it must be the name of something, fictional names become an interesting case to investigate from both perspectives. What is it we think about and what do we name – if we name anything – when employing fictional names? A realistic and an anti-realistic perspective will face different difficulties in providing coherent answers to these fundamental questions.

Let us start from the problems met endorsing an anti-realist perspective; we can then see which are the answers provided by different realistic proposals and consider which questions are in need of an answer assuming this latter point of view.

Language and Thought, Language and Reality

The proposal according to which fictional names are empty names and have the same semantic role as proper names gives rise to a variety of problems. One problematic conclusion is that fictional names do not contribute anything to the proposition and therefore no proposition is expressed by sentences containing fictional names. Let us label this, “the problem of nonsense”. Given that a sentence containing fictional names does not express any proposition, that sentence would not have propositional sense. Formulated in this way the problem concerns the connection between language and thought, as in order for a sentence to be understood one grasps the thought expressed. If no proposition is expressed no thought is expressed either, therefore that sentence is not understandable. Yet a sentence such as ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective’ is, or seems to be, completely understandable.

A second problem is “the problem of different cognitive values”; this concerns the difference, in what Frege called “cognitive value”¹⁴, between sentences containing different fictional names. Since these types of sentences would fail in expressing any proposition, we would not notice any difference in the content expressed by sentences such as ‘Macbeth loves Desdemona’ rather than ‘Desdemona loves Iago’. However, not only

¹⁴ Frege, G. (1952) On Sense and Reference. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege* edited by P. Geach and M. Black, ed. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 56–79.

do these sentences have meaning and if meaning is the proposition expressed, then they express a proposition, but the propositions expressed also seem to differ in cognitive value, as regards to who loves whom. This problem ultimately seems to pertain to the connection between language and thoughts, for two sentences which differ in cognitive value seem to be related, at least in part, to the thoughts one grasps in using them.

A third problem is the “problem of the proposition believed”. This concerns the belief one may state when uttering a sentence containing a fictional name. For example, if no proposition is expressed by a sentence such as ‘It is not the case that Sherlock Holmes exists’, no one could use this sentence to communicate something that she believes. In fact, one may indeed believe that it is not the case that Sherlock Holmes exists. Thus, this problem ultimately concerns the relation between language and thought, for the proposition one believes and expresses using a sentence is the thought that one grasps.

A final problem is “the problem of truth”. This concerns the truth values of the sentence containing fictional names. In fact, it being the case that the truth value of a sentence derives from the proposition that it expresses, if no proposition is expressed then no truth value can be assigned to the sentence. However, it seems that for a sentence such as ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective’ it is possible to assign a truth value. The assignment of truth values to sentences institutes the connection between language and reality, therefore ‘the problem of truth’ ultimately concerns this connection.

When Fictional Characters Do Exist...

A realistic stance will be able to offer a straightforward solution to some of the foregoing problems. Firstly, if fictional characters do exist, sentences containing fictional names will express a proposition, namely the one in which the fictional name names the appropriate fictional character. Secondly, the matter of who loves whom will be soon sorted out given that Macbeth, Desdemona and Iago are three different characters, therefore the problem of different cognitive values would not arise given that each fictional name would refer to a different fictional character. Thirdly, the problem of the proposition believed would not be a problem, in fact the belief that it is not the case that Sherlock Holmes exists is just a false belief. Finally, we would be able to assign a truth value to sentences containing fictional names, given that they express a proposition, even if it may not be what we expected it to be. For example we may think that it is true that Sherlock Holmes is a detective, but if we think that fictional

characters are abstract artefacts we will conclude that Sherlock Holmes is not a detective, given that abstract artefacts are not detectives.

New puzzles arise for a realistic stance with the same directness with which answers are provided to the problems faced by anti-realistic views. First of all, on which grounds can we justify the importation in the ontology of a new type of entity? Secondly, what sort of things are fictional characters? To what ontological category do they belong? Thirdly, whilst we may say that from a realistic point of view “It is not the case that Sherlock Holmes exists” is false, the interpretation of a negative existential statement, such as “Sherlock Holmes does not exist” is problematic. Finally, does a fictional character bear properties such as ‘being a detective’ or ‘being in love with someone’ or ‘being a person’ at the same time as ‘being abstract’ or ‘being non-existent’?

The variety of questions to ask the realistic scholar reveals in itself the variety of approaches in which a realistic stance can be articulated. A categorisation of a realistic stance will inevitably overlook important differences between different proposals and it can only be a temporary one, considering that the area of study concerning fictional characters seems to be in rapid development. However, to give a general outline, we can differentiate between four approaches: a creationist, a cognitive, a possibilistic and a Meinongian one.

Creationistic Views

Creationists are all those scholars who believe that fictional characters are abstract artefacts created by authors in the process of the creations of their stories¹⁵. The introduction into our ontology of such abstract cultural entities is based on the fact that characters are creatures of fiction bearing the same status as novels, plots or symphonies and so on. Moreover, Peter Van Inwagen offers an argument in which a statement such as “There are fictional characters in some 19th century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any 18th century novel”¹⁶ translated into the idiom of formal logic shows that a quantification occurs over fictional characters and, according to Van Inwagen, in order for something to be bound to a quantification its existence is required.

¹⁵ Philosophers such as S. Kripke, P. Van Inwhagen, S. Schiffer, A. Thomasson, N. Salmon would probably all agree with this very general statement, even though each account presents different tenets.

¹⁶ Van Inwagen, P. (1979) Creatures of Fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 299–308.

Once it is accepted that fictional characters are objects of our ontology, their nature may be then defined in terms of abstract entities, abstract cultural artefacts or roles, whose names are introduced by authors in the relative fictions and from the works of fiction the use of their name is exported to talk about the fictions, to compare different characters, to speculate in literary criticism about the moral or aesthetic values those works and those characters bring forward. A fictional character is then abstract, can be representative of a certain set of values or maybe a historical period or a way of thinking, is created by a certain author in a certain story, and yet often fictional characters are in love, live somewhere, seek something and sometimes they die - they can even die many times. In fact, for the existence of a character to cease once and for all, not one trace, be it written, oral or in anyone's memories about *its* story, needs to be found. The use of the impersonal pronoun 'its' is yet more evidence of the shift from the reference to an abstract object and a *fictional persona* for whom we would use a personal pronoun such as 'he' or 'she'. For example: "Ophelia loves Hamlet, but her love is unrequited", it would not sound correct to say "Ophelia loves Hamlet, but its love is unrequited". To make the point straightforwardly, the ascription of certain types of properties to fictional characters which the author ascribes to the *fictional persona* within the story can be problematic from a creationist point of view. If fictional names refer to abstract entities, how can we explain speakers' uses of these names to ascribe properties to fictional characters which they normally would predicate of people? To reformulate the point consider Reina Hayaki's example: the corpus of Sherlock Holmes' stories is (partly) about the friendship between Holmes and Watson and Holmes and Watson are actual abstract objects; but, the Canon is not about the friendship between two abstract objects.¹⁷

A widespread strategy in answer to this problem consists in supposing that fictional names are ambiguous which requires us to distinguish between the way they work within the fiction or outside the fiction. Whilst fictional names within the fiction are non-referring terms, outside the fiction they name abstract objects. In the literature developed in this domain, it is quite common to find a threefold distinction between conniving, metafictional and nonfictional uses¹⁸. Fictional names are non-

¹⁷ I found this way of reformulating the problem very effective. See Hayaki, R. (2009) Fictional characters as abstract objects: some questions. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 141-149.

¹⁸ I adopt here the classification developed in Everett A. (2000) Referentialism and Empty Names. *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-Existence* edited by Everett, A. & Hofweber, T., ed. Stanford: CSLI Publications. The idea of a three-

referring terms in their uses within the fiction, there is no intention to refer or commitment to the truth in writing fiction, thereby we talk here of conniving uses. Fictional names are employed in talk about fiction, hence metafictional uses in which the fictional name contributes a descriptive content to the proposition expressed and the proposition expressed is evaluated within the fictional context. Therefore, “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” is interpreted as “In Doyle’s stories, Sherlock Holmes is a detective”, where ‘Sherlock Holmes’ can be replaced by a set of properties predicated of the *fictional persona* within the story¹⁹. Finally, fictional names are employed in non-fictional uses²⁰, sentences such as “Sherlock Holmes is smarter than Poirot” or “Sherlock Holmes is smarter than any real detective” or “Sherlock Holmes does not exist”. In these cases, fictional names are supposed to refer to fictional characters, these being different sorts of abstract entities; abstract cultural artefacts, roles or creatures of fiction. However, any creationist who supposes a reference to a fictional character will have to provide an explanation of how to read a negative existential statement, such as “Sherlock Holmes does not exist”²¹.

Amie Thomasson²² adopts Donnellan’s²³ solution of a *metalinguistic* reading of the negative existential statement. Generally speaking, a fictional name N refers to a prior use of N that the speaker intends to be wrong. The speaker suspects that some mistake has been made, e.g. where past speakers have intended to use the name to refer to a person, as when a

fold distinction is already presented in Currie G. (1990) ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ This idea is developed in D. Lewis (1978). A more articulated account of metafictional uses of fictional names can be found in G. Currie (1990), where fictional names are associated to theoretical terms. See Currie, G. (1990), pp. 158-171.

²⁰ I am borrowing here the terminology proposed by A. Everett (2000a). Different terminologies are available in the literature on fictional names, G. Currie distinguishes between *fictive*, *metafictive* and *transfictive uses*; see G. Currie (1990).

²¹ A broad literature has been produced about the puzzle of negative existential statements, I report only two representative strategies of answering the problem from a creationistic point of view. A more complete account of the different approaches to this puzzle is provided in Sainsbury, R. M. (2010), *Fiction and Fictionalism*. ed. London: Routledge.

²² The work of A. Thomasson is a crucial reading for the understanding of the idea of fictional characters as abstract cultural artefacts. See Thomasson, A. (1999) *Fiction and Metaphysics*. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²³ Donnellan, K. S. (1974) Speaking of Nothing. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, no. 1, pp. 3-31.

child has exclaimed “Santa Claus is coming tonight!” and we correct him by saying “Santa Claus doesn’t exist”. In making a nonexistence claim, the speaker does not herself intend to use the name “Santa Claus” to refer to a person; rather she exploits prior uses of it that (she thinks) were made with that intention.

Nathan Salmon suggests that in a negative existential statement the use of the fictional name is not literal, and although in his view fictional names are non-ambiguous names for fictional characters, in this case speakers use the name as they sometimes use ordinary names in various descriptive ways so as to express a proposition “as when it is said that so-and so is a Napoleon, or a Nixon [...] or even a Romeo, an uncle Tom, etc.. [...] we may use ‘Sherlock Holmes’, for example, to mean something like: *Holmes more or less as he is actually depicted in the stories*[...].”²⁴ It is then completely acceptable to state that Holmes as he is actually depicted does not exist.

In contrast to the wider approach, according to which fictional names are ambiguous, Salmon argues for the non-ambiguity of these names. According to his view, fictional names name fictional characters and this is true regardless of whether they are employed within or outside the fiction. One main objection to this view is that it misunderstands the nature of fiction which is not a collection of untrue propositions about abstract entities. Salmon recognises that Doyle’s writing does not consist in asserting false propositions about fictional objects, but rather he is writing with the intention that his readers pretend that what he has written is true. However, according to Salmon, within this process the author builds a fictional character which is a constitutive part of the fiction and what is said to happen in the fiction is a constitutive part of the fictional character. On this basis, according to Salmon, we can explain the apparent truth of sentences of the Sherlock Holmes stories when “they literally make reference (although the author may not) to the fictional character, and literally express things about that character (mostly false)[...]”²⁵.

A Cognitive Approach

Finally, I would consider Anthony Everett’s proposal as representative of a cognitive approach to the reference of fictional names. This proposal collates different elements and it is a starting point for a cognitive approach to fictional characters in terms of mental representations.

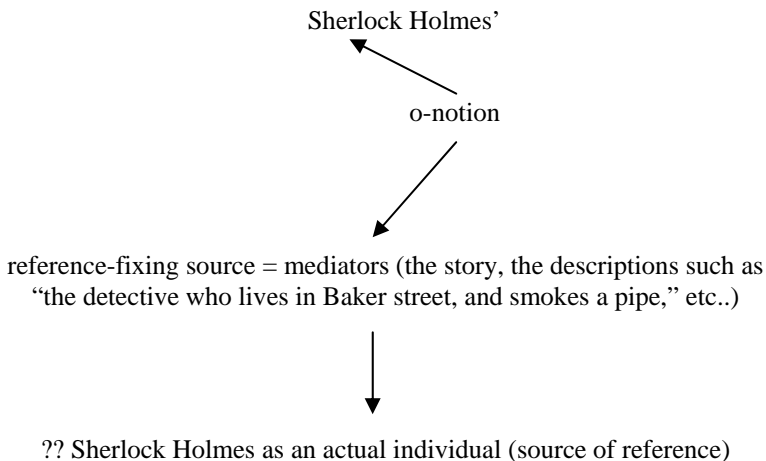
²⁴ See Salmon N. (1998).

²⁵ See Salmon N. (1998), pg. 302.

Everett, adopting a cognitive background theory developed by Perry and Crimmins, develops a referential framework where the use of fictional names is meaningful given that it harks back not to an object but to an object-type, what technically is called an o-notion, derivable by the participation in the pretence, in which the name is used to refer to that object.

Consider for example the fictional name ‘Sherlock Holmes’. The referential framework provided for ‘Sherlock Holmes’ lacks a referential source, but it supplies a reference-fixing source. Consider how the Sherlock Holmes-notion has been introduced. Readers, engaging with the fiction, imagine that someone is telling them a story about a certain individual called Sherlock Holmes in relation to whom they introduce a notion. Reading the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’, they introduce a notion of an individual that will be developed according to the set of descriptive conditions provided by the story. Therefore, SH-notion will be a mediated notion introduced on the basis of a set of descriptive conditions that will count as a reference-fixing source. Mediators, these descriptive conditions, will take the place of the reference source in fixing the reference of the fictional name.

‘Sherlock Holmes’ reference-fixing source²⁶:



²⁶ The arrows represent the relations between the elements of a sort of causal chain that explains how the name originates.

This set of descriptive conditions provides an object-type, which may be called the concept of Sherlock Holmes. Could this concept of Sherlock Holmes be associated with the idea of a fictional character?

Possibilism

Possibilism is the view according to which fictional characters are not actual objects but possible objects. Sherlock Holmes is not an actual individual or entity but is rather a possible individual. This view is based on a possible-worlds metaphysics in which we can contemplate the existence of infinite possible worlds along with the actual one²⁷. Some of these worlds are story-worlds, namely worlds in which a given story is told as a true fact²⁸. Fictional names will then refer to those individuals, in those story-worlds, who are and do what is said of them in the story. Therefore, the fact that we ascribe to Sherlock Holmes the property of being a detective is not problematic from a possibilistic point of view, given that the possible Sherlock Holmes is a detective in that world. However, this view faces two main serious problems. Firstly, we can have examples or contemplate impossible stories, stories in which contradictions intentionally or unintentionally are part of the story-content. In this case possible worlds by definition are not suitable candidates as story-worlds²⁹. Secondly, even if the problem of impossible stories can be overcome, the identification of fictional characters with possible individuals faces the problem of transworld identity. In fact, in different story-worlds we may have different Sherlock Holmes who are all alike for what has been predicated about Holmes in the story, but they may differ for what has not been specified in the story. Which one of these would the name “Sherlock Holmes” pick out?

²⁷ This could be a controversial supposition, but I am assuming a realistic stance toward possible worlds.

²⁸ For an articulated definition of story-worlds see Currie G. (1990).

²⁹ An answer to the problem of impossible fiction can be found in Lewis, D. (1983) Postscripts to “Truth in Fiction”, in Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, vol.1, pp. 276-280.