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FICTIONAL CHARACTERS AND THEIR NAMES

SUMMARY: Fictional characters do not really exist. Names of fictional characters refer to fictional characters. We should divorce the idea of reference from that of existence (the picture of the name as a tag has limited applications; the Predicate Calculus, with its existential quantifier, does not adequately reflect the relevant concepts in natural language; and model theory, with its domains, might also have been misleading). Many puzzle-cases are resolved this way (among other things, there is no problem assigning negative existential statements the appropriate truth values). And fictional characters, although not existing, have real powers through their representations, which are real.

KEYWORDS: fiction, fictional characters, fictional character names, reference, existence, negative existentials.

1. Fictional characters do not really exist.
 - 1.1. Neither do they exist as abstract entities, mental entities or other things which have been suggested.
 - 1.2. There is no need to introduce different kinds of being, like Meinong's *sein* versus *sosein* (1904), or existence versus being, and say that fictional characters have the latter but not the former. No need to ascribe to fictional characters a kind of attenuated mode of existence: they simply do not exist.

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- 1.2.1. If we were to introduce such a distinction of kinds of being, what is meant by the would-be attenuated kind of being would be defined as whatever should be ascribed to fictional characters. This might create the illusion of an explanation and prevent us from resolving what bothers us.
 - 1.3. I wrote above that fictional characters do not *really* exist, and not simply that they do not exist, because this is what we commonly say in this context. This is presumably because, when we talk of a play or story, there might be a character that is fictional in the story itself: in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz is real while Gonzago is merely fictional. When there is no such possible ambiguity involved in what we mean, we drop the qualifier “really”: “King Alfred existed, King Arthur did not” (Strawson’s example, 1974, p. 210).
 - 1.4. Moreover, to say that Hamlet did not really exist is not to imply that he had a different kind of existence, a non-real one. If a painting is not really Rembrandt it is not a different, attenuated kind of Rembrandt.
2. Names of fictional characters refer, to fictional characters.
 - 2.1. So, names of fictional characters refer to things that do not exist.
 - 2.2. And names of fictional characters *are not empty names*, since they *do* refer. To name nothing is not to name something that does not exist.
 - 2.3. Referring to things that do not exist is done, for instance, like this: “One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin”. That is, we use names, pronouns, definite descriptions, and other parts of speech in a way resembling that in which we use them when talking about real things, yet there are no real things to which we refer.
 - 2.4. “Refer” is used here as doing similar work to that done in ordinary language by “mention” and “talk/write about”, when they apply to uses of names, pronouns, definite descriptions, and demonstrative phrases. One says, “In our last class, we discussed the temperaments of fictional detectives, and mentioned Holmes and Miss Marple as examples”; or, “She wrote an excellent essay about Achilles and his attitude to Patroclus”—I am not attempting to introduce a *technical* sense of “reference”: the puzzles in the literature arise from reflection not on any technical use but on the ordinary one. In this ordinary use, we certainly refer to, mention, and talk about fictional characters.
 3. We should divorce the idea of reference from that of existence.
 - 3.1. Some have figuratively described naming as putting a tag on the thing named, and reference as pointing by means of words. “When philosophising, it will often prove useful to say to ourselves: naming something

is rather like attaching a name tag to a thing” (Wittgenstein, 2009, §15; cf. §26); “proper names serve as a long finger of ostension over time and place” (Barcan Marcus, 1993, p. 203; cf. Black, 1971, p. 629). Since tagging and pointing usually tag or point at things that exist, this might have suggested that naming and reference too pertain only to things that exist (whether concrete, abstract, or of some other kind). Instead, we should acknowledge the limitations of these pictures of naming and reference. Moreover, we tag fictional characters by writing their names under their images in a book, or point at them in a film (namely, by tagging or pointing at their representations).

- 3.2. Another misleading factor has been the formalisation of natural language sentences in the Predicate Calculus and the interpretation of these formulas according to that calculus’ standard semantics. From $\varphi(a)$ we can infer, $\exists x\varphi(x)$, in which the quantifier is considered existential, ascribing existence to something which satisfies φ . Accordingly, from “Hamlet killed Polonius”, $K(h, p)$, we can infer, *there is someone who killed Polonius*, formalised $\exists xK(x, p)$, and this is interpreted as ascribing existence to someone who killed Polonius. Similarly, from “John (a real person) admires Dumbledore”, we can infer, *there is someone whom John admires*, or $\exists xA(j, x)$, and again existence of that someone—Dumbledore—is thought to follow. The truth of statements about fiction and about fictional characters seems therefore to commit us to the existence of the fictional characters referred to in them.

- 3.2.1. We can see this reasoning at work in Kripke’s writings. Kripke gives convincing examples which lead him to think that with respect to “fictional entities, such as fictional characters”, “ordinary language has the full apparatus of quantification and identity”. With this I agree. However, the applicability of this apparatus makes him claim, “everything seems to me to favor attributing to ordinary language an ontology of fictional entities”, namely, “that there are certain fictional characters in the actual world, that these entities actually exist” (Kripke, 2013, pp. 69–70). It is clear that, for him, either the terms do not designate or they designate existing things:

So in this sense, instead of saying that the name “Hamlet” designates nothing, we say that it really does designate something, something that really exists in the real world [...]. When we talk in this way, we use names such as “Hamlet” to designate abstract but quite real entities. (Kripke, 2013, p. 78)

Earlier, Kripke mentioned the inference from $F(a)$ to $\exists xF(x)$ (Kripke, 2013, p. 56; see also Kripke, 2011, pp. 62–63). But this reasoning is flawed in several ways.

- 3.2.2. The Predicate Calculus does not represent adequately the logic of quantified sentences in natural language. I have argued for this in my work on the Quantified Argument Calculus and elsewhere (Ben-Yami, 2004; 2014; 2021), and here I shall be concise. The Predicate Calculus merged three structures which are distinct in natural language: particular quantification; “there is” sentences; and ascriptions of existence.
- 3.2.3. Natural language has no existential quantifier. Particular quantification has no *existential* import but *instantial* one, namely, it presupposes that the noun following the quantifier has instances, not that these instances exist. (This presupposition is not specific to particular quantification but is a common feature of quantification). “Some characters in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* did exist, but some did not” is idiomatic, and it assumes that “characters in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*” has instances, not that all these characters existed.
- 3.2.4. The interpretation of “there is” sentences as ascribing existence is also problematic. Consider, for instance, the idiomatic “There are several Biblical characters who never existed”. Accordingly, interpreting “There is someone who killed Polonius” as ascribing existence to someone is not mandatory. If we are talking about reality, as we do when we say, “There was someone who murdered Caesar”, then the murderer *is* supposed to have existed; but if we are talking about fiction, this need not be the case. Although existence is occasionally implied by the *topic* of discourse, it is not part of the meaning of the “there is” sentence.
- 3.2.5. “There is” statements amount to different things in different contexts. “There are prime numbers greater than 10”, “There are good reasons for living in Europe”, “There are circumstances one should avoid”, “There are keys in the drawer”: the kinds of being—if this is how we should call it—which these statements ascribe to their subjects differ widely. And likewise, the kind of being which “There are many literary characters who committed suicide” ascribes to literary characters is of yet another sort, namely, being mentioned in fiction.
- 3.3. Tarskian model-theoretic semantics might also have been misleading in this respect, because it assumes that reference involves a domain that contains the referents; accordingly, if we refer to fictional characters there must be a domain containing them. Construing this domain on the model of a domain of real things, the conclusion then is that if we refer to fictional characters they must exist in some sense. However, *if* we wish to use Tarskian semantics, we should also allow domains to contain things that do not exist, for instance the “worlds” of stories and

mythologies. In addition, if truth-valuational semantics is instead used, the very temptation to postulate a domain of objects containing the things talked about, whether existent or not, does not arise (see Ben-Yami, 2022 on truth-valuational semantics).

4. Many puzzle-cases are resolved this way.
 - 4.1. *In* fiction. When Tolstoy writes, “Anna Karenina was ...” he is referring (writing about), and to the fictional character he invented, Anna Karenina. We do not consider what he writes as either true or false, probably because there is no independent fact to which it should answer. It is *the substrate* of truth and falsity as related to fiction.
 - 4.1.1. Fictional characters and their fictional worlds are only partly determined by what is said and assumed in the story, they are not partial descriptions of some fully determined possible characters. Moreover, although the story often describes a possible situation, sometimes it contains contradictions, either intentionally or not, and then the story does not describe a possible situation or world. But even then, a character might still be a possible character, if it would have been the same character even if the author had not included a contradiction in its description.
 - 4.1.2. (I am not using the idiom of possible worlds as adopted from the extension of model theory to modal logic. I think this semantics does not provide an adequate representation of our ordinary modal discourse and is therefore at least not helpful for our purposes here. My reservations are due to more general considerations than those specific to fiction discourse, and I shall therefore not elaborate on them in this paper).
 - 4.1.3. Tolstoy is not *pretending* to refer to Anna Karenina, nor does fiction generally involve pretence, if by that we mean “a way of behaving that is intended to deceive people” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). If the fiction is intended to mislead and be taken as history, then it does involve pretence, but this is rare.
 - 4.1.4. When a character within a story says something, this can be true or false, in the story, according to the way the author builds the story. Here there may be facts according to the story that determine truth and falsity.
 - 4.1.5. There are more and more complex cases. For instance, the author might put in the mouth of a character something intended as a reflection on life not only as it is in the play but also in reality. When Macbeth asserts, “Life’s but a walking shadow ...”, we might understand this as a claim which not only expresses Macbeth’s view in the play but Shakespeare’s as well, and assess it as such. Also, an actor in a play can address people in the audience

and say something about them, and again this can be true or false. There is no exhaustive list of what can be done with fiction.

- 4.2. When someone says *of* a fiction, “Hamlet killed Polonius”, they are referring to Hamlet and Polonius, and what they say is true or false according to what is written in the play.
 - 4.2.1. There are differences here in possibilities of truth values compared with talk about real things. While “Hamlet knew Rosenkrantz” is true, because this is how it is according to Shakespeare’s play, “Hamlet was taller than Rosenkrantz” is neither true nor false, because the play does not contain anything explicit or implicit about it. This kind of indeterminacy does not exist with respect to real things.
 - 4.2.2. It is not that “Hamlet killed Polonius” has an implicit operator preceding it, say “according to the play”, the sentence’s logical form being “according to the play, Hamlet killed Polonius” (whatever might be meant by “implicit operator”). Rather, the sentence has the same form as “Brutus killed Cesar”, but while the latter is determined as true or false according to what really happened, the former is determined as such according to what is said or implied by the play.
 - 4.2.3. When there are several stories about the same character, all equally authoritative (e.g., different versions of the legends of King Arthur), we relativise and consider the statement true according to this story but false according to that one: the statement is not simply true or false.
 - 4.2.4. This relativization to a version again does not show the existence of an implicit modifier, “according to the story”, when there are not several versions of the story. Rather, the non-modified sentence, “Hamlet killed Polonius”, can be said to *presuppose* a unique authoritative fiction.
 - 4.2.4.1. Many statements presuppose some facts for them to make sense. By presupposing these facts, they do not claim them to hold. For instance, when I say “The soup is delicious!”, I presuppose an agreement in taste between people, but I do not claim that people agree in their tastes. If it turns out that someone else does not like the soup, I might replace my former statement by, “The soup is tasty for me”, but this does not mean that an adverbial modification like “for me” is in some sense implicitly present already in the former statement. Rather, the former statement was made on certain assumptions, which, if shown wrong, might make it necessary to retract it and replace it by a relative assertion.

- 4.2.5. There are also cases such as reality vs. fiction, or authoritative version vs. fanfiction, in which a modifier is not needed when making statements about the former, but it is for statements about the latter. For instance, “Although Sharon Tate was murdered by Charles Manson’s people, in Tarantino’s *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, she was not”. It is not that the first conjunct involves, in some sense, an implicit “in reality” modifier.
- 4.3. When one says, “The Romans worshiped Jupiter”, one is referring to that mythical god, Jupiter, who did not really exist, and says something about the Romans’ attitude to him. This is either true or false.
- 4.3.1. The fact that this reference does not involve any commitment to existence allows us to say in one and the same statement, “In this temple, the Romans worshipped both Jupiter and Augustus”, referring to a real as well as to a mythical object of worship, without any ambiguity in the verb we use.
- 4.4. Negative Existence Statements. “Hamlet did not really exist”; “King Alfred existed, king Arthur did not”: as reference is independent of existence, these are non-problematically true. We refer, e.g., to Hamlet, that non-existent fictional character, and truly say of him that he did not exist. Similarly, we might be wrong in an affirmative existential when we say, for instance, “Noah did exist, although Adam and Eve did not”.
5. The Power of Fiction. We say of fictional characters that they have influenced our culture and people’s life. How can non-existent things have such powers? Fictional characters affect real people and events through their *representations* in art, religion, and possibly other practices. (By contrast to fictional characters, real people influence us not only through their representations). The representations, unlike the fictional characters, *are* real, and can unproblematically have real effects. This is what we count as real powers of fictional characters. And the representations are themselves produced by real people.

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