What are fictional characters?

Big Questions in Philosophy

Zuzanna Gnatek
Trinity College Dublin
Sherlock Holmes

Let me begin with a question. What do we know about Sherlock Holmes?

- Holmes is a detective.
- Holmes lives on Baker Street.
- Holmes is clever.
- Holmes works with Watson.
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- Santa Claus brings presents on Christmas.
- Santa Claus wears red coat with white fur collar and cuffs.
- Santa’s workshop is at the North Pole.
- Santa has a flying reindeer who pulls his sleigh.
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• However, we also know that Holmes or Santa don’t really exist.
• If so, then how can all of these sentences make sense? To whom do we attribute all these properties?
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I will simply try to explain the puzzle about fictional characters in more detail and why it is philosophically interesting.
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1. The problem with non-existence
A simple view of predication - predication involves combining terms for objects with terms for properties and relations, and the predication is true just in case the objects have the properties or stand in those relations.

As Quine puts it:
‘Predication joins a general term and a singular term to form a sentence that is true accordingly as the general term is true of the object to which the singular terms refer.’ (Quine 1960, p. 96)
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‘Predication joins a general term and a singular term to form a sentence that is true accordingly as the general term is true of the object to which the singular terms refer.’ (Quine 1960, p. 96)
Consider a sentence ‘Snow is white’.

On a simple theory, it would be formalized as:

\[ \langle a, F \rangle \]

where \( a \) stands for snow and \( F \) for being white.

\[ \langle a, F \rangle \] is true if and only if \( a \) is \( F \). That is, a sentence is true just in case the object in question - snow, in our example - has the relevant property - e.g., it is white.
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That is, a sentence is true just in case the object in question - snow, in our example - has the relevant property - e.g., it is white.
The simplicity is appealing - our singular terms pick out objects and our general terms pick out properties or relations, and when we combine them what we say is true when the objects have the properties or stand in those relations.

This way of thinking lies at the heart of elementary logic, and is one of the simple principles which many take as a starting point for a semantics of natural language.

But what if singular terms don’t refer?
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Consider ‘Holmes is clever’.

$F$ stands for the predicate ‘being clever’, but what does $a$ stand for, if there is no such object that ‘Holmes’ picks out?

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A simple theory of names (JS Mill) - names stand for/refer to objects - e.g. ‘Clint Eastwood’ stands for Clint Eastwood - there is nothing to the meaning of a name beyond this.

Whenever there is nothing that a name picks out/that we can point to when using a name, it will be meaningless.
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A simple theory

- All such words - that don’t pick out objects - are problematic, and so are sentences that involve them.
- Such sentences are said to not express anything, to be meaningless/nonsensical, to be either always false or neither true nor false, etc.
- Saying ‘Holmes is a fictional character’ is as problematic as saying ‘Burb is nonsensical’ - as they will be both represented by:

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The problem

- The problem is that we do use words that don’t really pick out any objects in a way that we understand perfectly well.

- Fictional names provide an example:
  
  Holmes is an interesting character who was created by Doyle. Holmes is more famous than any living detective; for example, Holmes is more famous than Sir Ian Blair.*

  Pegasus is a mythological winged horse; in the myth Pegasus sprung into being from the blood of Medusa, the gorgon killed by Perseus. Siegfried is one of the most unappealing heroes in all dramatic works.

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- Numbers provide another example:

  2 + 2 = 4  
  3 + 5 = 2 + 6  
  0 = 0  
  12 is larger than 4.

- And many other words: abstracta (emotions, ideas, shapes, colors); God; what we know doesn’t exist (round squares, unicorns); anything imaginary; monsters, witches; and so on.
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Negative existentials

- The problem is well illustrated by a puzzle about negative existentials—that is, sentences that say that something doesn’t exist.
- As Salmon puts it:

  ‘among the most perennial of philosophical problems are those arising from sentences involving non-referring names. Chief among these problems is that of true singular negative existentials.’ (Salmon 1998, p. 277)
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Negative existentials

Consider:
‘Holmes doesn’t exist’, or
‘A round square doesn’t exist’.

• Both sentences can be represented as:
  \( \neg(?, F) \)

• But as long as we have a ‘?’ in place of a, we cannot utter such a sentence truthfully. As soon as we want to say it truthfully, we are committed to there being the object in question - hence, the paradox.
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'In saying that there is no such thing as a round square, I seem to imply that there is such a thing. It seems as if there must be such a thing, merely in order that it may have the property of not-being. It seems, therefore, that to say of anything whatever that we can mention that it absolutely is not, were to contradict ourselves: as if everything we can mention must be, must have some kind of being.' (Moore 1953, p. 289; originally given as lectures in 1910-11)
‘Nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?’
(Quine 1948, p. 21)
2. Realism about fictional characters
Fictional realism

- Such problems provide a motivation for realism about fictional characters - a view that fictional characters do exist.

- What are they exactly? Two main ideas:
  a) nonexistent concrete objects
  b) existent abstract objects

- The latter is much more common nowadays. It is famously represented by Amie Thomasson.
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Amie Thomasson

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- Thomasson argues for the existence of fictional characters in a number of works:
  a book *Fiction and metaphysics* (1999) and numerous articles, e.g. ‘Speaking of Fictional Characters’ (2003), ‘Fiction, Existence and Indeterminacy’ (2010); her recent book *Ontology made easy* (2015) - although discusses fictional characters too, concerns her approach to ontology (called ‘easy’) more broadly.
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Amie Thomasson’s realism

- Thomasson believes that fictional characters exist and that they are abstract.
- More precisely, they are abstract artifacts created by authors.
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‘(...) fictional characters are abstract cultural artifacts, relevantly similar to other social and cultural entities including particular laws of state (the U.S. Constitution, the Miranda Laws), works of music (Nielsen’s Symphony No. 4, Op. 29, “The Inextinguishable”), and the works of literature in which fictional characters appear (Tolstoy’s War and Peace). These things are all abstract in the sense that they lack any particular spatio-temporal location, but unlike the Platonist’s abstract entities, they are artifactual – created (not discovered) at a certain time, e.g. through the author’s activities in writing a work of fiction, and are contingent (not necessary) entities that might have never been created.’ (Thomasson 2003, p. 220)
Realism about fiction

- A great advantage of realists view about fiction is that they explain how to make sense of sentences like ‘Holmes is a fictional character’. They account for statements made within literary criticism.
- A great problem is posed by laws concerning identity.
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A great problem is posed by laws concerning identity.
3. Fictional characters and identity
‘No entity without identity’

- Ordinary objects are associated with clear identity criteria by which we may identify them and distinguish between them.
- It is possible to say whether two objects are distinct or if they are actually one and the same; it is possible to say how many objects there are, etc.
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It cannot be indeterminate whether a is b (an argument from Evans).

- Suppose that it was indeterminate as to whether a was b.
- Then b would have the property of being indeterminately identical to a.
- But, since a is determinately identical to a, a does not have the property of being indeterminately identical to a.
- So there is a property which b has but a lacks.
- So by Leibniz’s Law $a \neq b$. 
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Identity of fictional characters?

Fictional characters lack such identity criteria.

- Intertextual identity.
- Different imaginary representations.
- Author’s descriptions.
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E.g. is Marlowe’s Faust the same as Goethe’s Faust?

What about different representations of Holmes?
Intertextual identity

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Intertextual identity
Different imaginary representations

Similar problems arise even within one and the same (e.g. the original one) description of a character.

Places of indeterminacy (Ingarden):
- a literary description of a character involves places of indeterminacy – it is often simply left indeterminate what a character had for breakfast, how far she or he sat from the table, or even what her or his color of eyes was, etc.;
- such places are filled in by an individual interpretation, by the reader’s imagination in reconstructing the work;
- two people will represent one and the same character differently, even one person’s representations may differ, if they read the same text on two different occasions.
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- two people will represent one and the same character differently, even one person’s representations may differ, if they read the same text on two different occasions.
• Finally, author’s descriptions of some characters may intentionally be such that they flout laws of identity.
• Everett - a philosopher who holds an anti-realist view about fictional characters came up with two stories to show that: ‘Dialethialand’ and ‘Asymmetriville’.
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• Everett - a philosopher who holds an anti-realist view about fictional characters came up with two stories to show that: ‘Dialethialand’ and ‘Asymmetricville’.
When she arrived in Dialethialand, Jane met Jules and Jim. This confused Jane since Jules and Jim both were, and were not, distinct people. And this made it hard to know how to interact with them. For example, since Jules both was and was not Jim, if Jim came to tea Jules both would and wouldn’t come too. This made it hard for Jane to determine how many biscuits to serve. Then Jane realized what to do. She needed both to buy and not to buy extra biscuits whenever Jim came. After that everything was better.
• In this story the law of non-contradiction fails - Jules both is and is not Jim.
As soon as he got up in the morning Cicero knew that something was wrong. It was not that he was distinct from Tully. On the contrary, just as always he was identical to Tully. It was rather that while he was identical to Tully, Tully was distinct from him. In other words, some time during the night (he could not tell exactly when) the symmetry of identity failed. This had some rather annoying consequences. When Cicero got paid Tully could spend the money but not vice versa. Tully got fat off the food Cicero ate and gave up dining himself. And Tully was praised for Cicero’s denunciation of Catiline although he himself had slept through the whole affair. It was enough to test Cicero’s Stoicism to the limits. Then something happened that changed everything. Cicero’s political enemies who knew that Cicero was Tully mistook Tully for Cicero and murdered him. At first it seemed as if Tully had died. But then Cicero realized that since he was alive and he was Tully, Tully was alive too. Tully was understandably grateful and reformed his ways. After that Cicero and Tully lived together happily.
In this story, the symmetry of identity fails - Cicero is Tully though Tully is not Cicero.
• Such logical incoherences make it difficult to say which (or how many) characters there are.
• Moreover, fictional realist seems committed to objects that flout laws of logic and identity.
Logical incoherence

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4. The opposite view: anti-realism
Fictional anti-realism

- Such problems with realism about fictional characters motivate the opposite view - anti-realism about fictional characters - by which there aren’t any (abstract or concrete) fictional objects.
- But if there aren’t any fictional characters, then we are back to our initial problem - how can we engage with something that there is not?
- Some believe that a form of pretense explains this.
- Pretense theory - a form of anti-realism about fiction - is famously represented by Anthony Everett.
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Our engagement with a fictional text involves our pretending that the world is as that fictional text describes.

Just as little Jimmy pretends that his bicycle is a horse, and just as little Sally pretends that she is a Native American, when we read about Holmes, we pretend that we are reading a factual narrative and we imagine that what we read really took place.

This gives a simple account of such sentences as

- Holmes is a detective.
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