

## Fictional Names

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### Abstract

Fictional names have been one of the most important and serious topics in the contemporary philosophy of language and metaphysics. Several questions such as “Do fictional names refer to any objects?” “Are fictional characters existent objects?” have resulted in a considerable literature of philosophy.

In this essay, we will follow two objectives. First we will describe and elaborate the ideas of three great philosophers who believe that fictional names are genuine and proper names which do refer to existent fictional characters. Second we will criticize the theories of two philosophers (Peter Van Inwagen and Saul Kripke’s theories) and will eventually defend the third i.e. Nathan Salmon’s theory of fictional names. Through the issues we will presuppose direct reference theory as our main semantic theory for proper names .

**Key Words:** empty proper names, fiction, direct reference, Van Inwagen, Kripke, Salmon.

### Introduction

Consider the following sentences:

- (1) Sherlock Holmes Exists.
- (2) Sherlock Holmes doesn’t exist.
- (3) Sherlock Holmes is more intelligent than Dr. Watson.

Do the names “Sherlock Holmes” and “Dr. Watson” refer to any object or not? If not, then how can any of the above sentences express a true or a false proposition? And if they refer, do they

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refer to existent objects or to non-existent ones?<sup>1</sup>

Fictional names constitute a subcategory of a larger category of names which are usually called “empty names”. There are other kinds of empty names, but we will confine ourselves to a discussion of fictional names (i.e. names which have been created by the authors of fictions) in this essay.

There is no doubt that if we were living in London in the 19th century, we couldn't find any Sherlock Holmes living on Baker Street. “The adventures of Sherlock Holmes” is a fiction. This is our assumption in this essay. The difference between a fiction and a lie or a myth is that the fiction-teller doesn't intend to fool or deceive people by what he says (i.e. he is not telling a lie). He also doesn't intend to write history or what he falsely but honestly thinks to be a true account of reality (i.e. he is not telling a myth); he just writes something that can be pretended to be history. Peter Van Inwagen writes:

“The ‘Fictions’ , unlike histories and like lies, are products of the imagination; unlike the lies, however, they are not intended to deceive”(Van Inwagen,1983, p.71)

A myth, on the other hand, can be defined as a “False theory”: Something which at least once was believed to be true by some people. Keeping these points in mind, even if there had been a detective called "Sherlock Holmes" in the 19th century in London, he would not have been Sherlock Holmes (i.e. he would not have been the referent of the fictional name). “To be called ‘Sherlock Holmes’”

and “to be Sherlock Holmes” are not the same.(Cf. Kripke 1971 and Kripke 1972)

In other words, there might have been someone who was called "Sherlock Holmes" or someone who had many of the characteristics we read in the fiction about the detective. Such a person even if existed is a Holmes-like or Holmesesque person (Salmon,1998,p.298), but he is not Sherlock Holmes; he is not the referent of the fictional name.

So far so good! But if Sherlock Holmes hadn't lived in the 19th century in England, are we entitled to say that the name “Sherlock Holmes” is totally non-referring? Some philosophers may be inclined to give a positive reply to this question. In that case, any statement containing the name will express a gappy proposition. A gappy proposition has the structure of a proposition but it is not complete. For example consider the following statement:

(4) Ali is Iranian.

This statement expresses the following proposition (i.e. the following proposition is the semantic content of this statement):

<Ali, Being Iranian>

Ali (the person himself) and the property of being Iranian, construct the proposition as an ordered pair. According to another formulation (the set formulation) the proposition has the following structure:

<{Ali}, {Being Iranian}>

But if we consider the following statement:

(5) Sherlock Holmes is English.

Then if Sherlock Holmes doesn't refer, the semantic content of the statement will be as

<sup>1</sup>- Here we have presumed a free logical approach wherein “objecthood” and “existence” are not the same.

follows:

<-, Being English>

Or

<{}, {Being English}>

These are not propositions; they are only propositional structures (Braun,p.3) and are called “gappy propositions” or “structurally challenged propositions”(Salmon,1998,p.307)<sup>1</sup>

But now a problem can be proposed. Both “Sherlock Holmes” and “Dr. Watson” are fictional names. So, what is the difference between the semantic content of (5) above and (6) below?

(6) Dr. Watson is English.

The question arises because it seems that both sentences express the same gappy proposition. One attempt may be that we accept that semantically there is no difference between (5) and (6), but pragmatically they convey different information. This solution is worth considering, but we prefer alternative theories, which say that fictional names are not non-referring; they do refer to fictional objects, which are abstract and existent entities. To explain this in the terminology of free logic, we should say that fictional objects reside in the inner domain (the domain of existent objects) rather than the outer domain (which is the domain of both existent and non-existent objects).

### **Peter Van Inwagen’s Viewpoint**

Peter Van Inwagen argues three theses regarding fictional names:

1- He argues that since we truthfully and literally assert statements such as:

“There are characters in some nineteenth-century novels that are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any eighteenth-century novel.”

And since such statements can be formalized to formulas, which begin with existential quantifiers:

“There is an x: x is a character and...”

Therefore, “anyone who believes that what these sentences say is literally true and who accepts what seem to be the obvious formal translations of these sentences accepts the thesis that there are fictional characters.”(Van Inwagen, 1983,p.73)

2- He also believes that fictional names used in sentences within a fiction do not refer to anything. They do not even refer to fictional characters. For example when Doyle writes:

(7) Sherlock Holmes plays the Violin.

Or when Dickens writes:

(8) Mrs. Gamp was a fat old woman.

The names are entirely non-referring, because the author didn’t intend to talk about an abstract entity; rather, he just pretends to speak about a human being, who doesn’t exist and thus, the name remains non-referring.

But when a critic (or even the author in the preface of his book) writes:

(9) Sherlock Holmes is a well-developed character in Doyle’s novels.

Or

(10) Mrs. Gamp is the most fully developed of the masculine anti-woman visible in all Dickens’s novels.

He is speaking about the fictional character and the name refers.(Cf.Van Inwagen 1977, p. 301)

<sup>1</sup> - Though Salmon is not one of those philosophers who appeal to structurally challenged propositions in his analysis of fictional names.

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3- Van Inwagen's third thesis is to distinguish between "Having a property" and "Holding a property". According to him, when we ascribe a property to a fictional character such as "being an intelligent detective", which has actually ascribed to Sherlock Holmes in Doyle's novels, the fictional character "holds" that property but it doesn't "have" it, because an abstract entity cannot be a human or a detective (let alone an intelligent one). Van Inwagen writes:

"There must be some sense in which it is true that Mrs. Gamp was fond of gin. If you say that it is false that she was fond of gin – presumably because theoretical entities of criticism cannot drink at all – how will you distinguish between the sense in which it is false that she was fond of gin and the sense in which she was a teetotaller? If it is false that she was fond of gin, there must be a sense in which it is even more false that she was a teetotaller. This point is right, of course. I am afraid I shall simply meet it by stipulation. I shall simply introduce the word 'hold' as a term of art and say that, while Mrs. Gamp does not have the property of being fond of gin, she does hold it. Being a teetotaller, on the other hand, is a property she neither has nor holds. This is not to say that she has no properties. I would say that, like everything else, for any given property she has either that property or its negation. Here are some properties she has: being a theoretical entity of criticism; being a satiric villainess<sup>1</sup>; having been created by Dickens; being introduced in chapter 19 of Martin

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1- "Being a satiric villainess" doesn't seem to us quite in accordance with Van Inwagen's thesis about the properties a fictional character can "have"; it seems to be a property which Mrs. Gamp "holds", but the quoted paragraph is exactly what Van Inwagen has written.

Chuzzlewit; not being a woman; not being made of flesh and blood; holding the property of being a woman. But what is this holding? I cannot define it. I can only give examples." (Van Inwagen 1983, p.75)

### **Saul Kripke's Viewpoint**

Kripke has presented his theory of empty names (in general) and fictional names (in particular) in his paper entitled "Reference and Existence" which has not been published, but a good account of it can be found in Nathan Salmon's "Nonexistence".

In general, Kripke's theory is a more complex version of Van Inwagen's theory. Actually he agrees with all of the three theses which Van Inwagen suggests. The difference lies behind the multiple ambiguities, which Kripke proposes in his analysis of fictional sentences such as (7) above.

The first ambiguity, which Kripke proposes is the ambiguity of the fictional names such as "Sherlock Holmes".

"On this account, the name 'Sherlock Holmes' is ambiguous. In its original use as a name for a human being – its use by Conan Doyle in writing the fiction, and presumably by the reader of the fiction – it merely pretends to name someone and actually names nothing at all. But in its nonpretend use as a name for the fictional character thereby created by Conan Doyle, it genuinely refers to that particular artifactual entity. In effect, there are two names. Though spelled the same, they would be better spelled differently, as 'Holmes1' for the man and 'Holmes2' for the fictional character. Neither names a real man. The latter names an abstract artifact, the former nothing at all." (Salmon 1998,

p. 294)

The second ambiguity is related to the perspective from which (or the discourse in which) the sentence is uttered. The sentence “Sherlock Holmes plays the violin” may be considered either within the fiction and the discourse of pretence or as a sentence in the real world and out of the fiction and pretence.

Consider the following different cases:

(11) “Holmes1 plays the violin.” (taken within the fiction)

(12) “Holmes1 plays the violin.” (taken within the reality)

(13) “Holmes2 plays the violin.” (taken within the fiction)

(14) “Holmes2 plays the violin.” (taken within the reality)

(15) “According to fiction, Holmes1 plays the violin” (taken within the reality)

According to Kripke’s multiple ambiguities theory, 11 is true; 12 is neither true nor false (and thus untrue) because it doesn’t express any proposition; (13) and (14) are both false because an abstract entity cannot play any musical instrument and (15) is also true as a paraphrase of 11.

Furthermore, he proposes an idea very similar to Van Inwagen’s distinction between “having” a property and “holding” a property according to which there is an extended sense of predicates (example: “playing the violin within the pretence”). On the basis of this extended sense of the predicate, a fictional and abstract character (like ‘Holmes2’) can “hold” a property which is ascribed to it in the fiction. Thus 14 will be also true in this sense. Using Van Inwagen’s

terminology, we can say that in Kripke’s theory, the statement “Holmes2 has the property of playing the violin” is false, but the statement “Holmes2 holds the property of playing the violin” is true.

As mentioned above, according to Kripke, 12 is neither true nor false because the name “Holmes1” fails to refer. But now let’s change the predicate and consider 2 instead of 7. Applying Kripke’s multiple ambiguities theory, one possible reading of 12 will be 16:

(16) “Holmes1 doesn’t exist.” (Taken within the reality)

One expects Kripke to evaluate 16 neither true nor false in the same way that he evaluates 12, but he replies in a different way. He doesn’t feel comfortable with assessing 16 to be neither true nor false; thus he says that whenever we utter negative sentences such as 12-when it is negated- and 16, the sentences can be paraphrased in the following way:

(12’) There is no true proposition that Holmes1 plays the violin.

(16’) There is no true proposition that Holmes1 exists.

The general idea behind this move is to let the proposition “there is not true proposition that P” be true without any need to the falsity of P. Kripke thinks that 16’ can be true on the basis of the non-existence of the proposition Holmes1 exists.

But as Salmon has correctly shown that, Kripke is wrong here. He writes thus:

“The motivation of Kripke’s intensional ascent is obscure. In any event, the account fails to solve the problem. The ‘that’ clauses ‘that Holmes1

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plays the violin' and 'that Holmes<sup>1</sup> exists' are no less problematic than 'Holmes<sup>1</sup>' itself. Kripke concedes, in effect, that if  $\alpha$  is a thoroughly non-referring name, then propositional terms like the proposition that  $\alpha$  is bald are also thoroughly non-referring. The account thus analyzes a negative existential by means of another negative existential, generating an infinite regress with the same problem arising at each stage: If  $\alpha$  is a thoroughly non-referring name, how can there is no proposition that  $\alpha$  is bald express anything at all, let alone something true (let alone a necessary truth)?"(ibid.,p.297)

Note that Kripke's account is not a semantic ascent; rather, it is an intensional ascent. However, shifting from intensional ascent to semantic ascent will not solve the problem either. Instead it will generate other difficulties. The semantic ascent version will be something like this:

(16") There is no true sentence "Holmes<sup>1</sup> exists" in English.

This account is apparently inappropriate because it is subjected to all known difficulties of every semantic ascent theory. 16" is by no means a synonym for 16 because it contains additional information about a language (i.e. English language) and also depends on existence of that language.

Semantic ascent theories have another difficulty regarding proper names. Consider the following sentences:

(17) Peter is a pianist

(18) "Peter is a pianist" is true in English.

(19) The person called "Peter" is a pianist

18 and 19 are two semantic ascent versions of

17 but they fail to express 17. In other words they are not synonymous with 17. Consider a possible world in which Peter exists but is not called "Peter". In such a possible world 17 is still true, but 18 and 19 are not true. To be Peter and to be called "Peter" are not the same and thus 19 simply fails to express what 17 expresses. The phrase "in English" is of course helpful to dispel one other difficulty. If we omit that phrase an additional problem will arise. There may be a language with the same words of English language but having a different meaning for each word. Thus the phrase "in English" is needed to prevent this additional problem but it cannot solve other difficulties of semantic ascent.

One other difficulty of semantic ascent is exposed by Alonzo Church in his well-known "translation argument"( Church 1950, pp. 97-9 ). Consider 17 and 18 and translate them to another language (say, French):

(20) Peter est le pianist.

(21) "Peter is a pianist" est vrai en anglais.

Church argues that 20 and 21 are not synonymous with each other, because 20 doesn't contain all the required information to infer 21. In other words, 21 contains different information from 20; it speaks about a sentence (rather than a person) that it is true in a language.

Kripke, who was well-aware of the difficulties of semantic ascent theories, tried intensional ascent instead; but surprisingly he failed to see that if "Holmes<sup>1</sup> exists" fails to express any proposition because the name "Holmes<sup>1</sup>" is non-referring, then "There is no proposition that Holmes<sup>1</sup> exists" also fails to express any proposition for the same

reason. If “Holmes1” fails to refer in “Holmes1 exists”, it will also fail to refer in “There is no proposition that Holmes1 exists” or in “According to the stories, Holmes1 plays the violin”, unless Kripke is ready to shift back to indirect reference theory of the Fregean type.

Salmon elaborates this point as follows:

“[Kripke’s] account as it stands seems to invoke some sort of intensional use of ‘Sherlock Holmes’, whereby the name is not only ambiguous between ‘Holmes1’ and ‘Holmes2’, but also accompanying the former use is something like an ungrade use, arising in constructions like ‘According to the stories, Holmes1 plays the violin’, on which the name refers to a particular concept \_ presumably something like: the brilliant detective who performed such and such exploits. Kripke acknowledges this, calling it a ‘special sort of quasi-intensional use’. The account thus ultimately involves an intensional apparatus. Indeed, it appears to involve industrial strength intensional machinery of a sort that is spurned by direct-reference theory, and by the very account itself. Further, the intensionality seems to get matters wrong. First, [contrary to what is claimed] it seems to give us after all a proposition that Holmes1 plays the violin... worse, depending on how the ungrade use of ‘Holmes1’ is explained, it could turn out that if there were someone with many of the attributes described in the Sherlock Holmes stories, including various exploits much like those recounted, then there would be true propositions that Holmes1 existed, that he played the violin, etc... The theory threatens to entail that the question of Holmes’s authenticity (in the intended

sense) would be settled affirmatively by the discovery of someone who was significantly Holmesesque, even if this person was otherwise unconnected to Conan Doyle.”( Salmon,1998,p. 298)

In other words, there is a serious difficulty in both Van Inwagen and Kripke’s theories. They evaluate 15 as ‘true’ when taken within the discourse of reality and out of the pretence. But as Salmon has mentioned, if “Holmes1 plays the violin” does not express any proposition because “Holmes1” is non-referring, then 15 cannot express any proposition for the same reason.

“On the account proposed by Kaplan, Kripke and Van Inwagen, object-fictional sentences, like ‘Sherlock Holmes plays the violin’ have no genuine semantic content in their original use. This renders the meaningfulness of true meta-fictional sentences like ‘According to the Sherlock Holmes stories, Holmes plays the violin’ problematic and mysterious. On Kripke’s account, it is true that according to the stories Holmes1 plays the violin... But how can this be if there is no proposition that Holmes1 plays the violin...? What is it that is the case according to the stories...? If object-fictional sentences like ‘Holmes1 plays the violin’ express nothing and only pretend to express things, how can they be true with respect (or “according”) to the fiction, and how can meta-fictional sentences involving object-fictional subordinate clauses express anything at all, let alone something true?”( *ibid*, pp. 297-8)

### **Nathan Salmon’s Viewpoint**

Nathan Salmon’s theory of fictional names seems

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to be the most acceptable one. Since his criticisms of Kripke's theory have been explained in the previous section, the reader of this essay is already more or less familiar with Salmon's viewpoint.

Salmon agrees with Van Inwagen and Kripke that fictional names are not non-referring rather refer to fictional characters which are constituents of our collected literature. They are existent and abstract (i.e. non-concrete) entities.

However, Salmon doesn't accept Van Inwagen's other two claims. He rejects Van Inwagen's thesis about the distinction between "having" and "holding" a property. Sherlock Holmes doesn't have the property of playing the violin in any sense. He also rejects Van Inwagen's other claim that the names within a fiction are non-referring for the same reasons that he rejects Kripke's thesis about "Holmes1" as a non-referring name. Either we should say that Conan Doyle has not used the name to state any genuine statement or we should admit that the fictional name is genuinely used within the fiction.

If we take the first option, then since the author of the fiction has not even used the name to state any statement (he has just asked us to pretend that he is using the name) the question that the name is referring or non-referring won't even arise. Moreover, we cannot claim that a meta-fictional sentence such as "According to the stories Sherlock Holmes plays the violin" is true; because if the fictional sentence "Sherlock Holmes plays the violin" doesn't express any proposition, the meta-fictional sentence cannot express any proposition either. (ibid, p.299)

On the other hand, if we take the second option,

then the name refers to the abstract entity despite the fact that the author might have not noticed that he was referring to an abstract entity or even was not aware of a theory of abstract objects. The author's philosophical ignorance should not be taken as a factor in assessing the semantic content of the name.

Salmon is not very explicit in endorsing either of the two mentioned options; he is mostly concerned with showing the flaw in Van Inwagen and Kripke's theses (ibid., pp.297-8). However, we think that the second option is preferable and we believe the second option is what Salmon would also endorse. Sentences within a fiction express literally false propositions. The author of the fiction knows that he is expressing false propositions (though he may not be aware that he is referring to abstract entities) and also knows that his readers know that he is expressing false propositions.

As explained in the previous section, Salmon doesn't accept Kripke's thesis about the ambiguity of fictional names either. For Salmon, a fictional name (if genuinely used) always refers to the abstract fictional character and never to anything else. In other words, Kripke's "Holmes2" is the only acceptable reading of the name "Sherlock Holmes". Therefore, according to Salmon "Holmes exists" is true and "Holmes does not exist" is false (except we mean that he doesn't have concrete existence, which is true) and "According to the stories, Holmes plays violin" is true, since the very sentence "Holmes plays violin" is false and, on the other hand, those stories tell false sentences. So it is as if we are saying "Those stories tell false



sentences about Holmes” which is true. We agree with Salmon.

### **A Possible Objection and our Reply**

Some commentators may try to criticize the whole idea that fictional characters exist by making a question such as "how is a fictional character created?"

The gist of such a criticism may be as follows:

1- For a name to be referring something must already exist to be the referent of the name.

2- When the procedure of writing a fiction is not yet completed, the fiction and the fictional characters do not exist yet.

3- Thus a fictional name cannot be referring.

This argument is not valid. First of all, we should note that the question "how are fictional characters created?" is an epistemic question and is basically irrelevant to our semantic discussion about the reference of fictional names; because even if we reply this epistemic question with a simple "We don't know" nothing serious might happen against our semantic claims.

Nevertheless, we will not reply with "we don't know"! The sentence no.1 in the argument above is a false and misguided principle. Reference doesn't require the existence of the referent as a prerequisite. As Nathan Salmon has correctly mentioned, "Reference precedes existence"(Salmon,1987,p.94). A name can be referring even if its referent is a non-existent object. In other words, we embrace free logic.

Expectant parents who don't yet have a child usually choose a name for their future child and speak about it. The name is fully referring though

it refers to a non-existent object. When the child is actually born, the same name refers to that person who is now an existent object. This is exactly what happens during writing a fiction (and this is the answer to the second line of the mentioned fallacious argument). The period in which the fiction is not yet completed, is analogous to the period in which the expectant parents wait for their child to be born. In that period, the fictional name refers to a non-existent object. When the fiction is completed the character comes to existence and the name refers to it. In both periods the name is fully referring.

### **Conclusion**

Although Van Inwagen and Kripke's argument concerning the existence of some abstract entities as the referent of fictional names is correct, their ideas about non-denoting of names in fiction and the truth-values of sentences in fiction are incorrect. Salmon, accepting free logic – which differentiates between existence and objecthood – correctly infers:

1- Fictional names are not non-referring; they refer to fictional characters.

2- Fictional characters do exist and have several properties, though they lack almost all of those properties which are assigned to them inside the fictions.

3- Fictional names are not ambiguous

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### چکیده

بحث از اسامی تهی، در حال حاضر از مهمترین موضوعات در فلسفه زبان و متافیزیک می‌باشد. مسائلی از قبیل «آیا اسامی تخیلی بر اشیایی دلالت دارند؟»، «آیا شخصیت‌های تخیلی (داستانی) موجودند؟» موجب توسعه چشمگیری در مباحث فلسفی شده است. در این مقاله دو هدف را دنبال می‌کنیم. اول، به توضیح دیدگاه سه فیلسوف بزرگ معاصر می‌پردازیم که معتقدند اسامی تخیلی از زمره نام‌هایی هستند که واقعاً به شخصیت‌های تخیلی موجود اشاره دارند. دوم، نظریه‌های دو فیلسوف (پیتر ون اینواگن و سائول کریپکی) را در این زمینه نقادی کرده نهایتاً از نظریه فیلسوف سوم یعنی نی تن سمن دفاع می‌کنیم. در کل مباحث، نظریه دلالت مستقیم در مورد معناداری اسامی خاص به‌عنوان پیش فرض فراروی ماست.

**کلیدواژگان:** اسامی تهی، تخیل (داستان)، دلالت مستقیم، ون اینواگن، کریپکی، سمن

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