

A prophesier can't be wrong. Not once.

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Critique of Kripke's Ontology of Fictional Characters

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Outline for the talk

1. Kripke's tenets

- 1.1 Do they exist in some secondary world?
- 1.2 What gives credence to their properties?
- 1.3 Must they necessarily exist, such as some external entity?
- 1.4 What about story-in-a-story?
- 1.5 Do they exist independent of people?

2. Critiques

- 2.1 Vagueness
- 2.2 Nonsense fiction
 - 2.2.1 Jabberwocky
- 2.3 Contradictory fiction
 - 2.3.1 A simple example
 - 2.3.2 "This isn't a real story, no content..."
 - 2.3.3 "Exceptions are limited to obscure works, still holds generally..."

3. Conclusion

Kripke's tenets

Do they exist in some secondary world?

Everything seems to me to favor attributing to ordinary language an ontology of fictional entities, such as fictional characters, with respect to which ordinary language has the full apparatus.

'Ah,' so it is said, 'so you agree with Meinong after all! There are entities which have only a secondary kind of existence.' No, I don't mean that. I mean that there are certain fictional characters in the actual world, that these entities actually exist. [1]

Kripke's tenets

What gives credence to their properties?

On the contrary, it is an empirical question whether there was such and such a fictional character. Was there a fictional or legendary character who married his grandmother? (There, of course, was a famous one who married his mother.) If there was, this will be true in virtue of appropriate works of fiction or legend having been written, or at least told orally, or something of the kind. If there is such a fictional work, then there is such a fictional character. [1]

Kripke's tenets

Must they necessarily exist, such as some external entity?

...their existence is not like that of numbers, abstract entities which are said to necessarily exist, independently of empirical facts. A name such as 'Hamlet' might have been said to designate nothing, or only to pretend to designate something; one also now speaks of it as designating a fictional character. There is such a fictional character, if an appropriate work of fiction has been written. Thus there is such a fictional character as Hamlet, and there is no such fictional or mythical god as Moloch, if the theories I have been mentioning are correct. [1]

Kripke's tenets

What about story-in-a-story?

Only in the play Hamlet, or let's suppose so, it is said that there is such a play as The Murder of Gonzago. If so, we can say that there is no such fictional character as Gonzago. Here we are not reporting on what is in the play, because the play does say that there is such a fictional character as Gonzago. We are speaking now about the real world... There is, however, a fictional fictional character called 'Gonzago'. This is true in virtue of the existence of the play Hamlet. [1]

Kripke's tenets

Do they exist independent of people?

It is a fact that certain fictional and mythological characters exist, just as it is a fact that certain people exist. No fictional characters would exist if people had never told fiction; no pagan gods would ever have existed if there had never been paganism; and so on. It is a contingent empirical fact that such entities do in fact exist: they exist in virtue of the concrete activities of people. [1]

Kripke's tenets

Do they exist independent of people? (contd.)

*There might have been, of course, no fictional characters at all, had no fictional works been created. The only way in which one might say that they have a different kind of existence from anything else would be parallel to the way **nations** have a different kind of existence from people, the way in which more abstract entities exist, as opposed to more concrete ones. **If this is regarded as a different sense of existence, then the existence of fictional characters is different too, because they exist merely in virtue of the activities of people. [1]***

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Comparison to nations

What would we define as a nation? Is an ant colony a nation? If yes (since it is formed by the activities of entities), then can certain activities of non-human entities such as ants write works of fiction as well? Where does one make the distinction?

This may seem as a moot point, but it simply goes to show the problems caused by lack of rigour.

Jabberwocky

Lewis Carroll

'Twas bryllyg, and the slythy toves
Did gyre and gymples in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”



Jabberwocky

This is a (now famous) poem written by Lewis Carroll, which utilises nonsense words to narrate a story. Such writings rely on the interpretative powers of humans to extract and build narratives out of gibberish.

Suppose we present this work to someone not well versed in such skills of interpretation. Then could they even recognize whether characters have been presented in the first place?

If this case is treated moot due to an incompetent agent, where does one draw the line on "interpretable" fiction, and nonsensical fiction?

A simple example

Written by Kaul Sripke, Featuring Saul

The story is as follows:

This is the story of a man named Saul. Everything which Saul says in this story is true, and has always been true right from the beginning of the universe.

Saul: "I do not exist."

- How can Saul exist in any definition of the word when it contradicts the story itself?
- **Saul is an example of a contradictory character.** This is a sentence that is *actually* true, outside any realm of fiction. But how could this be the case if fictional characters exist? For we would have to attribute some property of existence to them, leading us back into the contradiction.

A simple example

- Even meta-claims now become problematic. Who is the narrator? Who is saying the first few lines of the story? It cannot be the reader since the reader did not conceive these words by themselves. (This is avoiding problematic explanations such as these become the reader's words when they read them, or that these words come into existence when the reader reads them.) If it is some narrator, where is this omniscient narrator? Is the narrator the author himself, or associated with any external world? If yes, then what if we insert this line before Saul's dialogue:

Saul has just finished writing "Juliet and Romeo".

Now what can we say about the narrator of "Juliet and Romeo"?

"This isn't a real story, no content..."

Featuring House of Leaves

Take House of Leaves, written by Mark Z. Danielewski.

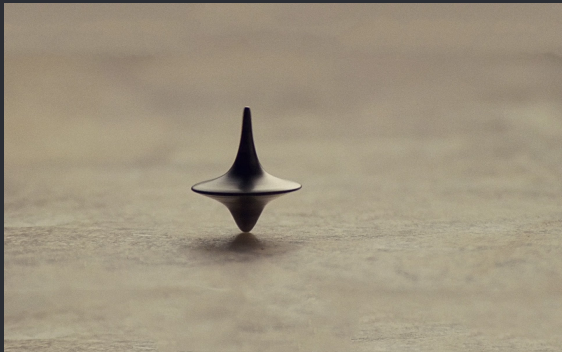
Excerpt from Wiki

The novel is written as a work of metafiction focusing on a fictional documentary film titled the Navidson Record, presented as a story within a story discussed in a handwritten monograph recovered by the primary narrator, Johnny Truant... Truant's footnotes chronicle his efforts to transcribe the manuscript, ... House of Leaves maintains an academic publishing format throughout with exhibits, appendices, and an index, as well as numerous footnotes including citations for nonexistent works, interjections from the narrator, and notes from the editors to whom he supposedly sent the work for publication.

"Exceptions are limited to obscure works, still holds generally..."

Featuring Inception

Need I say more?



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Although Kripke does well in laying the groundwork for his theory, the lack of true formalism and the overdependence on examples and analogies causes the theory to fall short from being comprehensive.

Bibliography

- [1] Kripke, Saul A., Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures (Oxford Academic, 26 Sept. 2013)