

# Existence and Qualification

Matt Mandelkern

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mandelkern@nyu.edu

## 1 Fictional Excluded Middle

*A Study in Scarlet* doesn't settle Holmes' handedness. Consider:

- (1) a. Sherlock Holmes was left-handed.
- b. Sherlock Holmes was not left-handed.

There is an external reading on which (1-a) is false and (1-b) true. Blumberg and Holguín (2025) argue that there is also an internal reading on which we leave open that each is true. We can:

- have *non-zero credence* in both;
- *wonder* whether (1-a) or (1-b) is true;
- say 'we don't know';
- *hope* SH is left-handed.

Two more observations:

- we accept that SH *might* be left-handed and *might* not be;
- we talk about what follows if SH *was* left-handed, in the *indicative*.

B&H argue that observations like these support:

**Definition 1.1.** *Fictional Excluded Middle (FEM):*

For any proposition  $p$  internal to fiction  $f$ , either  $p$  or  $\neg p$  is true in  $f$ .

## 2 Specific fiction operators

How to capture FEM? B&H work in a Lewisian framework on which internal fictional claims are interpreted in the scope of a (possibly covert) fiction operator.

However, on Lewis's account of fiction operators, both (1-a) and (1-b) are certainly false, since Lewis's fiction operators quantify over, roughly, the closest worlds compatible with the fiction.

B&H's fix is to have fiction operators quantify over *just one* world: *the* world that would have been the case, were the fiction true.

Say a fiction operator  $\Box_f$  is *specific* when  $\Box_f p \vee \Box_f \neg p$  is valid.

Following Williams and Woodward 2021, I call claims like (1-a) and (1-b) *incomplete fictional propositions*.

Williams and Woodward (2021) make the same observation.

Lewis 1978. That is,  $p$  is true in  $f$  iff  $\Box_f p$  is actually true, where  $\Box_f$  is a (possibly unpronounced) "fiction operator" indexed to  $f$ .

which will include both left-handed and right-handed worlds

This is compatible with it being indeterminate which world is the world of *ASIS*.

### 3 Against fiction operators

The *prima facie* strangeness of specificity is, for me, greatly reduced by comparison to a related debate about the principle:

**Definition 3.1.** *Conditional Excluded Middle (CEM):*

For any  $p, q$ : If  $p$ , then  $q$ , or if  $p$ , then  $\neg q$  is true.

CEM corresponds to the assumption that for any conditional antecedent  $p$ , there is a unique world that would be the case if  $p$  were true.

If CEM is valid, then specificity for  $\Box_f$  is not metaphysically outlandish: for any fiction  $f$ , CEM *already* commits us to the existence of a unique world that would be the case were  $f$  to be true.

Like many, I have been convinced of the (surprising) validity of CEM; so my worry about specificity does not arise from its apparent outlandishness.

See e.g. Stalnaker 1980; Higginbotham 2003; Williams 2010.

But many *overt* fiction operators are *not* specific. These all seem false, as do their internal negations:

- (2) a.  $ASIS \left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} \text{says} \\ \text{records} \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$  that SH is left-handed.
- b.  $ASIS$  depicts SH as being left-handed.
- c. According to  $ASIS$ , SH is left-handed.
- d. It's fictionally true in  $ASIS$  that SH is left-handed.

Williams and Woodward (2021) take this last judgment for granted, though it's not completely clear to me.

There *are* specific fiction operators, e.g. (given CEM) *If  $f$  were true, then . . .* But why is *this* complex operator the (only) covert one?

There are independent reasons to worry about fiction operator approaches to internal fictional truth:

- other kinds of modals *cannot* be unpronounced, at least not without a *lot* of contextual set-up. Compare:

- (3) a. ~~My cousin thinks~~ windmills cause cancer.
- b. ~~Maybe~~ windmills cause cancer.
- c. ~~It's certainly false that~~ windmills cause cancer.

- *mixed statements*: SH is a detective only fictionally, and famous only non-fictionally; so there is no placement of a fiction operator that can get the true reading of a mixed claim like (4):

Kripke 2013

- (4) SH is a detective created in 1887.

- *cross-fiction*: Poirot and SH inhabit different fictional worlds, so no placement of a modal can get a true reading of:

Fine 1982b

- (5) Poirot and SH are both detectives.

## 4 Life without covert fiction operators

How do we explain internal vs. external readings without covert operators?

### 4.1 Eschewing “truth in fiction”

Williams and Woodward (2021) develop a Waltonian approach, characterizing attitudes towards incomplete fictional propositions as *analogues* of ordinary ones; fictional truth plays no role. Could that be enough? I think not.

- Fictional content embeds:

(6) SH would’ve lived longer if he hadn’t taken cocaine.

We need an account of fictional truth where ‘SH doesn’t take cocaine’ is actually false, but could have been true.

This is a familiar dialectic from the literature on expressivism.

- We have attitudes towards mixed contents:

(7) My credence that SH and Dummett were both left-handed is .025.

- We report attitudes towards real and fictional contents with elision:

(8) I hope that SH was left-handed and that Dummett was too.

### 4.2 Qualified existence

The alternative picture I want to develop starts from pairs like (9):

- (9) a. SH is not a detective *qua figment of ACD’s imagination*.  
 b. SH is a detective *qua fictional character of ASIS*.

I think what explains the internal/external distinction is *qualification*.

The internal reading of ‘SH is a detective’ arises from the qualification ‘as a fictional character’; the external one, from the qualification ‘as a figment of ACD’s imagination’, ‘as an actual entity’, etc.

Cf.: ‘To say that unicorns have an existence in heraldry, or in literature, or in imagination, is a most pitiful and paltry evasion... to maintain that Hamlet, for example, exists in his own world... is to say something deliberately confusing, or else confused to a degree which is scarcely credible’ (Russell, 1919). But to deny that Hamlet is real *as a character of Hamlet* is to put him on par with Gonzago, who, indeed, is only fictional as a character of *Hamlet*.

### 4.3 Qua-qualification vs. fiction operators

Qualification yields a better account of fictional truth than operators:

- Qualification can be implicit, so having to posit implicit qualification is not an extra theoretical cost. Suppose Susie is corrupt in her role as judge but fair in her role as a referee. In a judicial context, it is natural to describe her simply as corrupt; in an athletic context, simply as fair.

Not necessarily as a syntactically realized constituent.

- Making fiction operators overt tends to obliterate the judgments that supported *FEM*; by contrast, making qua-fiction overt doesn't change judgments:

(10) SH was lefthanded [qua character of *ASIS*].

The probability of (10) isn't affected by the presence of overt qualification.

- Mixed and cross-fictional statements are unproblematic, because the modulation on this approach is of properties, not propositions:

- (11-a)/(12-a) get the true interpretations made explicit in (11-b)/(12-b):

- (11) a. SH is a detective created in 1887.  
       b. SH is a detective (qua character of *ASIS*) created in 1887 (qua creation of ACD).
- (12) a. SH is a detective and he isn't.  
       b. SH is a detective (qua character of *ASIS*) and he isn't a detective (qua figment of ACD's imagination).

- Susie is corrupt as a judge and Mark is corrupt as a referee, so they are both corrupt. Likewise, Poirot is a detective as a character of *Death on the Nile*, and SH is a detective as a character of *ASIS*; so they are both detectives.

In addition to explaining why covert modals in general have such limited distribution.

The closest view I know in the literature is Liebesman and Magidor 2025, Ch. 14, Ch. 9.8. The view is not so far from Meinongianism and its modern descendants (Parsons, 1974; Zalta, 1983). But rather than making an ad hoc distinction in modes of predication or kinds of properties specifically to characterize truth in fiction (as in also van Inwagen 1977), we are adverting to a very general device, (implicit) qua-qualification. I also don't know any version of Meinongianism that validates *FEM*.

The account also works for "empty names". 'Analysts say the Cartel de Los Soles does not exist as a concrete organization' (*New York Times*, January 3 2026)

## 5 Qua-qualification and *Fictional Excluded Middle*

Given the picture developed so far, we need a theory of qua-qualification on which (13-a) or (13-b) is true whenever  $a$  is a character of  $f$ .

- (13) a. Qua character of  $f$ ,  $G(a)$ .  
       b. Qua character of  $f$ ,  $\overline{G}(a)$ .

$\overline{G}$  is the property of being not  $G$ . I'm construing 'character' very broadly here to include events, space-time regions, etc.

What explains the validity of *FEM*? We could try to derive it from the meaning of 'qua character of  $f$ ', but I think it rather follows from a more general schema:

**Definition 5.1.** *Qua Excluded Middle (QEM):*

$G(a)$  implies  $F\text{-}qua\text{-}G(a)$  or  $\overline{F}\text{-}qua\text{-}G(a)$ .

It's not clear if the converse holds. Being fake as a gun or non-fake as a gun doesn't obviously imply being a gun (Annina Loets, p.c.), but it's a bit controversial.

## 5.1 Loets on qua

Loets (2021a) argues that  $a$  is  $F\text{-}qua\text{-}G$  iff  $a$  is a  $G$  which bears  $F\text{-}qua$  to  $G$ , where  $F\text{-}qua$  is a function from a property to a new property.

Loets suggests that there is no systematic rule for deriving  $F\text{-}qua$  from  $F$ , comparing compound nouns ('milk truck', 'fire truck', 'steel truck', etc.).

But that leaves a problematic lacuna: nothing constrains how  $F$  and  $\bar{F}$  are transformed by  $qua$ , so nothing guarantees that  $F\text{-}qua\text{-}G$  and  $\bar{F}\text{-}qua\text{-}G$  exhaust  $G$ .

In fact, nothing guarantees that  $F\text{-}qua\text{-}G$  and  $\bar{F}\text{-}qua\text{-}G$  don't overlap, so nothing rules out:

- (14) SH is left-handed, qua fictional character, and not left-handed, qua fictional character.

Likewise, nothing explains the validity of:

- (15) Susie is beautiful and nimble as a dancer  $\rightarrow$   
Susie is beautiful as a dancer.
- (16) Susie was a cat as the main character of the play  $\rightarrow$   
Susie was an animal as the main character of the play.

In general:

**Definition 5.2.** *Qua Left Monotonicity:*

If  $H$  follows from  $F$ , then  $H\text{-}qua\text{-}G$  follows from  $F\text{-}qua\text{-}G$ .

Note that the companion right monotonicity principle is *false*:

**Definition 5.3.** *Qua Right Monotonicity:*

If  $H$  follows from  $G$ , then  $F\text{-}qua\text{-}H$  follows from  $F\text{-}qua\text{-}G$ .

A different approach posits distinct 'qua objects' as the subjects of qua-qualification (SH qua fictional character, SH qua historical entity; see Fine 1982a; Landman 1989; Fine 1999; cf. Kripke (2013)'s ambiguity theory of 'SH'). The view has been well-criticized; see especially Loets 2021b on Fine and Salmon 2011 on Kripke. Simple point: 'F qua G' is not a DP; 'Mark qua detective and John' is not well-formed. Relatedly: SH has two properties, being famous and being a detective; it doesn't help make sense of that to point to two distinct objects, each of which has one of those properties.

To get *Qua Excluded Middle*, we can assume that  $G$  is equivalent to  $\top\text{-}qua\text{-}G$ .

Being beautiful as a dancer doesn't entail being beautiful as a person.

## 5.2 The logic of subsective modification

Parallel issues arise in the domain of adjectival modification:

- Some modification is *intersective*: to be a red ball is to be red and a ball.  $FG$  is intersective iff  $\llbracket FG \rrbracket = \llbracket F \rrbracket \cap \llbracket G \rrbracket$
- Some modification is *subsective*: to be a beautiful dancer is not to be beautiful and a dancer. But a beautiful dancer is always a dancer.  $FG$  is subsective iff  $\llbracket FG \rrbracket \subseteq \llbracket G \rrbracket$ .

But this is not a lexical distinction, for (17) has two readings:

- (17) Fabricio is a beautiful dancer.

- Fabricio is beautiful and is a dancer;
- Fabricio dances beautifully.

the *intersective* reading

the *subsective* reading

This looks like a *structural ambiguity*, not two meanings of ‘beautiful.’

Note that the second reading is the (unambiguous) reading of (18):

(18) Fabricio is beautiful, qua dancer.

My suggestion is that *qua* is a mechanism for disambiguating these readings, and generalizing the grammatical type of the first argument.

There is much more to say about what this second reading is. But the key point for our purposes is that *F* has its usual meaning, and hence usual logic, in *F-qua-G*; ‘qua’ does not transform the meaning of *F*, but rather serves to disambiguate two modificational structures.

For extensive arguments to this effect, see Martin 2022.

Cf. Ockham’s and Buridan’s theories of reduplication (Bäck, 1996).

## 6 Dekker’s First Principles

The best way to make sense of the distinction between internal and external readings is by positing (implicit) qualification that can change the nature of the predication in question.

This avoids a range of serious problems for the fiction operator analysis, problems that are only sharpened by the validity of *FEM*.

Questions about truth in fiction reduce to questions about the nature of qualification, *not* modality. These are difficult but interesting and general questions.

- *First Principle 1: Everything is, and there is no thing that does not exist.*
- *First Principle 2: There is thought and talk about things non-existent.*

If ‘SH is a detective’ is interpreted in the scope of a fiction operator, we don’t need to worry about the *actual* reference of ‘SH’. By contrast, if the internal reading arises from qua-qualification, ‘SH’ is interpreted *univocally* in external and internal fictional claims.

That means ‘SH’ needs to mean something.

Referring need not imply existence. But why not think there is just context-sensitivity here? While we can say ‘Matt’s dog does not exist’, we can equally say:

- (19)    a. Matt’s dog exists only in John’s mind.  
           b. Matt’s dog exists only as a figment of John’s imagination.

If these are true, then Matt’s dog must exist *in some sense*, namely, in John’s mind. Why not treat this as a kind of existence?

- *First Principle 3: Intentional objects may only intentionally exist.*

I think that this is true, but the validity of *FEM* may deprive it of some of its force. Intentional objects’ properties may far outstrip the relevant intentions!

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