Waismann on Fiction and its Objects

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Abstract: In the early 1950s Waismann wrote two essays entitled 'Fiction' and 'A Note on Existence'. These were subsequently published in his *Philosophical Papers* (Reidel, 1977). In these papers he makes various claims concerning fictional objects. The point of the present paper is to discuss what he says here. I will argue that the core claims of each paper are mistaken.

1 Introduction

In 'Fiction' and 'A Note on Existence', Friedrich Waismann discusses some of the puzzles engendered by the crucial and interconnected philosophical notions of truth and existence, notably in the context of fiction.[1] The papers are remarkable. The philosophy of fiction, its ontological and alethic aspects, has since become a thriving area of philosophy;[2] but virtually nothing had been written about it at that time. Waismann's essays are therefore groundbreaking. Moreover, the essays argue for views concerning, e.g., descriptions and proper names, utterances and implicatures, which were later made much more famous by others. And, as always with Waismann, whether his views are right or wrong, they are provocative and insightful. Despite these things, I do think that the central claims of the two papers are wrong—perhaps not surprisingly, given that the papers are a foray into uncharted philosophical territory. In this essay, I want to explain how and why.

[1]The first essay was written in November 1950; the second in July 1952. Both were published for the first time in Waismann (1977), pp. 104-21 and 122-35, respectively. All page references are to this, unless otherwise noted. All italics in quotations are original.

[2]See, e.g., Kroon and Voltolini (2011).

2 Truth in Fiction

The first paper is concerned with claims of fiction, such as 'Holmes lived in Baker St', and similar claims of mythology, such as 'Centaurs have four legs'. Waismann argues that it does no justice to these to suppose them simply true, simply false, or simply neither true nor false. Instead, he suggests a more nuanced view of the whole matter.

2.1 A Simple View

It will help in what I have to say about this if I explain my own view on the matter. (And despite the fact that it is mine, I think it is a fairly common-sense view!) I illustrate these with the story *Sylvan's Box*,[3] though any story in which non-fictional people appear would do just as well for most of what I have to say.[4] The story takes place just after Richard Sylvan's death, and concerns a visit made by Graham Priest (myself) to his farmhouse at Bungendore, just outside Canberra. While examining Sylvan's papers, Priest finds an inconsistent box, which is both empty and has a figurine inside. Priest and Nick Griffin (Richard's literary executor) debate what to do about the box.

Now, first, some of the things that hold in the fiction are simply true: that Sylvan died, that Bungendore is near Canberra, that Richard's farmhouse was powered by solar batteries. Some, however, are simply false: that Priest found a box, that Griffin was amazed when he looked in it, that Sylvan's box was both empty and contained a figure.

All these claims are, however, true in the fiction. Thus, there is an operator, Φ, such that, for any fiction, F, Φ_F means 'In the fiction F...'. So if S is *Sylvan's Box*, we have the following: Φ_S Bungendore is near Canberra; Φ_S Griffin was amazed when he looked in Sylvan's box. Clearly, then, Φ_S and its like are not veridical. Moreover, the story is incomplete in many ways; for many A's we have neither $\Phi_S A$ nor $\Phi_S \neg A$: A might be 'Priest drove to Bungendore in a Holden' or 'Sylvan had exactly seven bottles of red wine in his house'. Clearly, none of this is a threat to the principle of excluded middle, however.

[3] Priest (1997).

[4] Such as Napoleon in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Caesar in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, or Turing in Tyldum's film *The Imitation Game*.

Perhaps the main question that this account leaves open concerns the semantics of the operator Φ_F. The account itself is not committed to any particular answer to this question; but the most natural one is provided by a world-semantics. Thus, $\Phi_F A$ is true just if A is true in all the worlds that realise the story F. In particular, if A is of the form Pa, then $\Phi_F Pa$ is true if the denotation of a is in the extension of P at every world at which everything that holds in F is true. In particular, 'Father Christmas' refers to an object which is in the extension of 'has a white beard' at every world that realises the Father Christmas story. The actual world is not, of course, one of them. What properties does the object Father Christmas have at this world? The account needs to be fleshed out some more at this point. However, since Father Christmas does not exist, non-existence is certainly one of them. That is, some objects in the domain of the actual world, do not exist.[5]

2.2 What Waismann is Against

Against this backdrop, let us see what Waismann is against. He enumerates three claims and argues *against* them. These are, I quote (p. 107):

1. All fiction is lies—e.g. to say that centaurs are four-legged is false because there are no centaurs.

2. Some fictions have a sort of truth—e.g. in a way it is true to say that centaurs have four legs and false to say that they have two.

3. Fictional statements are neither true nor false—for myth and poetry belong to another kingdom, the kingdom of fancy.

Let us take these claims *seriatim*.

Re 1. The use of the word 'lie' is unfortunate. Lying is asserting something in an attempt to got the hearer to believe something the utterer takes to be false. The actual truth value of what is uttered is irrelevant. And those who tell stories do not lie: they are not trying to get the hearer to believe anything. But, as the following clause makes clear, it is really the truth value of the statement which is at issue. And here Waismann is quite right. As we have seen, some statements of fiction *are* true: Sylvan did die; Bungendore is near Canberra.

[5]For a much fuller account of the whole matter, see Priest (2016).

Waismann gives two reasons as to why one might suppose that statements of fiction are false, and attacks them both. The first (p. 108 ff.) is that we may treat names as covert descriptions, and then apply Russell's theory of definite description. So, 'Holmes lived in Baker St' becomes 'there existed exactly one smart, cocaine taking (etc.), detective, and he lived in Baker St'—which is false. Waismann attacks the view that proper names are covert descriptions. His comments contain many of the points about the matter subsequently made more famous by Kripke (1972)—and he seems on pretty solid ground here.[6]

The second reason why one might suppose that statements of fiction are false (p. 107) is that 'fictitious characters *have no existence*', and statements about such cannot be true. Now, not all statements of fiction are about non-existents, as we have already seen. But Waismann says nothing about this, and concentrates on the case where the object of a fiction is non-existent.

Waismann objects that if someone said that Polyphemus had two eyes, we would *correct* them: Polyphemus, being a cyclops, had only one eye. Now, this is not a good reason for taking our correction as literally true. When we say that Polyphemus had one eye, what really should be said is that, according the Greek myths, Polyphemus had one eye. It is *this* which is true. The operator 'in the Greek myths' functions as did the operator 'in *Sylvan's Box*'. In discourse about fiction, we frequently omit the operator, it being naturally understood.[7] In a similar way, if, in the US, I say (speaking of the role, not the person), 'The President has executive power', the prefix 'in the US' would normally be understood. A different prefix, such as 'in Germany', would have made what I said false.

Waismann is right though, that there can be (positive) truths concerning non-existents. It is true, for example, that Conan Doyle (in some sense) created Sherlock Holmes, and that Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any extant detective. Perhaps the most interesting examples of such things are ones we have met already: things like 'In the Greek myths Polyphemus had one eye'.

Re 2. Waismann is simply wrong to reject this. Certain statement of

[6]There is something slightly odd about Weismann citing this strategy. It can apply only when the sentence in question deploys a proper name. Yet, one of Waismann's own examples is 'Centaurs are four-legged', which contains no such names. And assuming that this means 'all (normal) centaurs have four legs', Russellian logic tells us that this is *true*, since there are no centaurs.

[7]See Priest (2016), 12.4.

fiction are simply true, as we have already seen. So what arguments does Waismann use? He has two.

For the first, he concedes that some claims of fiction do have a certain truth, such as that Polyphemous had one eye; but, he claims, this is a special case. One will accept such things as true only if the fiction 'has become part of the national heritage, such as the Bible or Shakespeare' (p. 115). This is a strange view. To be part of the national heritage is for the story to be common knowledge. Common knowledge of what a text says, would seem to be quite independent of whether what it says is true or false. I suppose that the basics of Newton's theory of gravity are common knowledge—at least to most educated people; but the claims are wrong for all that, as the General Theory of Relativity has taught us. Conversely, the basics of the General Theory of Relativity are hardly known by many people, let alone common knowledge. But they are, as far as we can currently tell, true.

However, and in any case, there is a simple confusion here. If we are dealing with a fiction, and one of its claims, A, is not literally true, then it is *still true in the story*. That is, as we have seen, if F is the story $\Phi_F A$ is true, and literally so. And this has absolutely nothing to do with how well the story is known. It is just as true for the Bible, as for the most recondite of contemporary novels.

Oddly enough, Waismann even seems to take the above points. He says (p. 116):

> If we do employ it, the word 'true', when used e.g. to refer to something in the Bible, can mean two things—true in the *ordinary* sense (the Flood did really happen),[8] or true within the Bible. In the latter sense it would be 'true' to say that the Flood was sent by the Lord as a punishment for the sins of man, just as, in a different frame of reference, it would be 'true' to say that Achilles avenged the death of Patroclus.

Quite so. The scare quotes in the second half of the quotation, and the emphasis of 'ordinary' in the first, tell all.

Waismann's second reason as to why the claims of fiction are not true, is that they may well be intended as lies (p. 116). Waismann's illustration is the tale of Baron Münchhausen, who tells complete whoppers. Now, of

[8] There is no closing bracket in Waismann's text. I have corrected what is obviously a typo by inserting it where it seems to make most sense.

course characters in a story may lie. We may know this pretty much from the start, as with the Baron; or we may learn it only as the plot develops, as with a character in an Agatha Christie story. But this does not make Waismann's point. It is literally false to say, e.g., that the Baron went to the moon; it is equally literally false to say that *in Rasp's tale*, the Baron went to the moon. What is true is that in Rasp's tale, the narrator (the Baron) claims that he has been to the moon. And that is literally true.

We see, then, that some claims of fiction can be (literally) true; and others, A, can have a 'sort of truth'—namely, for the appropriate F, $\Phi_F A$ is true.

Re 3. Let us turn to Waismann's final point: his rejection of the claim that statements of fiction are neither true nor false. Now, we may certainly agree with Waismann's rejection, simply on the basis of the examples of 2.1. 'Sylvan lived in Bungendore' is true 'Priest found a box that was both empty and contained something' is false.

One reason against this argument is suggested (though not endorsed) by Waismann, as he motivates the view that he is about to reject. He says (p. 117):

> what happens in fiction is this—the pointing parts [of a sentence], amongst them the proper names of the characters, are only dummies: they *pretend* to point, but they do not... Even if a name, e.g., Henry VIII, does refer to a real person, it is not meant to do so in Shakespeare's play.

Now, it is not names that pretend, but people; and when I wrote *Sylvan's Box* I was not pretending to use the name 'Sylvan' to refer to Richard: I *was* using the name to refer to him. And he is exactly the person I meant. Indeed, as the causal theory of names tells us, the name 'Sylvan' refers to Richard Sylvan. The fact that it is used in the context of a fiction changes nothing about the fact. Richard was an old friend of mine, and the story is about *him*, even though it is but a story. Similarly, the Greek myths concern the Mediterranean—that very sea—even though they are just myths about it.[9]

[9]Waismann, it would seem, agrees. In Ulysses (p. 114, f.) 'Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, fictitious characters, are placed in a *real setting*, that of Dublin, as it stood on June 16th, 1904. The narrative of the episodes, thoughts and dialogues, all of them imaginary, is everywhere interwoven with references to actual things—the town and

Be that as it may, Waismann does not reject the claim that fictional statements are truth-valueless for the sorts of reasons I have given. He rejects it simply by invoking the principle of excluded middle. It is of the very essence of a statement that it is either true or false: if it were not, it could not say anything (p. 117).

Now, whether or not the principle of excluded middle is true, Waismann's ground for it is not a good one. Suppose that we follow Frege in 'Sense and Reference' and take statements concerning fictional entities to have a sense but no reference. Then, 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' is, indeed, neither true nor false.[10] Yet it says that Odysseus was set ashore, none the less. So Waismann's reason for rejecting point 3 is moot.[11]

2.3 What Waismann is For

So much for what Waismann is against. What is he for, concerning claims of fiction? According to him, there are different kinds of truth, ordinary truth, truth in some fiction or other, and maybe others. 'True', then, is ambiguous.[12]

Each meaning—or each (disambiguated) truth predicate, as we may say—has both a formal aspect and a material aspect. Its material aspect is how that kind of truth is verified. That is, the material aspect of the predicate (p. 120):

> is the *procedure for checking* a statement, i.e., the method of *establishing* its truth. In this respect different kinds of statement

its local landmarks, the people of Dublin (who are called by their real names), political incidents of Ireland of the time, and so on. The story is saturated with allusions of this sort.

[10]Geach and Black (1970), p. 62.

[11]I note that there is nothing in the account of 2.1 that requires someone to reject the principle of excluded middle—certainly not the fact that fictions are incomplete, as I noted there. As far as the account goes, there is no reason why objects—even non-existent ones—must be incomplete (that is satisfy neither P not $\neg P$, for some P). Of course, though, the account is compatible with there being such objects. Thus, one might think that some of the predicates in the language are vague, and that if P is such a predicate, and a is an object in its border-area, a is incomplete. That, however, is a wholly different matter.

[12]'[T]he kind of truth a statement has varies with the kind of statement it is' (p. 120). '[T]he term "true" acquires a multiplicity of meanings' (p. 120). Waismann's account is, then, a fore-runner of pluralist theories of truth made popular much more recently by Wright, Kölbel, and others. See Pedersen (2013) for references and discussion.

> behave very differently—for instance, a plain statement of fact, or the ascription of the specific motive to a person, a physical law, the theory of evolution, or what not—(not to mention such things as a proverb, or an aphorism, which raise peculiar questions of their own). Now the way in which truth is established in each of these cases, and whether it can be established at all, conclusively or not, has a bearing on the notion of truth itself, and changes and modifies it in ways which deeply colour its signification.

Thus, to check whether 'Holmes lived at 221B Baker St' is true, *qua* statement of Holmes fiction, I leaf through the pages of the Doyle stories;[13] to determine whether it is true, *qua* statement of history, I check the historical records of the City of London; and so on.[14]

All truth predicates share the same formal features, however. I quote (p. 119 f.):

> What is formal in the notion of truth are those things which are matters of logic. What is required for the matter of logic is, *au fond*, only an *abstract* division of statements into two classes 'true' and 'false' from which any relation to the *content* of these notions has evaporated, and further the fact that the transition from the one class to the other is governed by certain rules and operations. Thus it is a formal feature of truth that the negation of a true statement leads to a false one, that what follows from a true statement is true, etc.

Logic, then, constrains any verification procedure.

[13]Of course, this is glossing over a huge problem. What exactly makes something true in a fiction? There is more to what holds in a work of fiction that what is written in its pages (plus what what follows from these). Unstated assumptions (which?) are imported from the real world. And of course, there may be less as well. As already noted, some of the explicit content may be lies.

[14]One might note here similarities to both Carnap's (1950) theory of linguistic frameworks, and Wittgenstein's (1950) notion of language games. I note that a few paragraphs later, Waismann says, slightly oddly, 'It is in this way—detached from reality, unconnected with any method of checking, in short, *free*—that bits of [fictional] narrative must be regarded' (p. 120). I assume that he means that one may freely create a work of fiction with no regard to the facts. There are, of course, criteria for something being true in the Holmes stories, as Waismann himself has emphasised.

There is a great deal which one might say about Weismann's views; and here is hardly the place to say much of it. I will restrict myself to two main points, which bear directly on the relation of Waismann's view to fiction.[15]

The first point is that it sells fiction short. Given the formal aspects of truth, truth in fiction is bound by logic. Waismann notes this himself, concluding his essay with (p. 121):

> even mythology dares not go so far as to say that Polyphemus was, and yet was not, Poseidon's son.

Yet this is exactly what fiction *can* do. As I have noted, in *Sylvan's Box* it is true that the box was empty and not empty.[16] One of the features of fiction—at least modern fiction—is that it is adept at breaking all kinds of rules.

The second point is that it sells truth short too. Given the material aspects of truth, one cannot know whether or not something is true unless one knows the genre in which it is embedded. Not so. I am browsing in a bookshop. In the remainder bin, I come across a book entitled *The Death of Julius Caesar, Roman Emperor*. The dust jacket has been lost, and there is nothing which indicates whether this is a novel or a history book. The author tells the story of Caesar's death, and enumerates the conspirators, which include Mark Anthony. I do not need to know anything else to know that this is false: Mark Anthony was not one of the conspirators. Of course, I also know that if the book is a work of fiction then (unless something else strange is going on), it is true in that work of fiction that Mark Anthony was one of the conspirators. But that is quite a different matter.

One might reply that what I really know in the first case is only that *if* this is a history book, its claim about Mark Anthony is false. But *this* is just false. Whether the book is a history book or a fiction, that Mark Anthony was one of the conspirators in Caesar's assassination, is just plain false. If one doesn't understand the difference between truth *simpliciter* and truth in a fiction, one is heading for a mental hospital.

It is just the distinction between truth *simpliciter* and truth in a fiction which is the lynch-pin of the account of 2.1. And once this is drawn,

[15]For a more general discussion of the problems with truth pluralism, see Pedesen (2013).

[16]Of course, if one is a dialetheist, and so subscribes to a paraconsistent logic, this will not be a violation of logic. But whatever one takes the correct logic to be, it seems to me, one could write a story the internal logic of which was different from that, allowing for things to happen which are impossible by the lights of the true logic.

everything else falls into place, including all of Waismann's observations concerning 1-3 in 2.2, to the extent that these are well grounded. The account of 2.1 therefore seems much more plausible.

3 Pointing and Existence

Let us then turn to Waismann's second paper. This concerns locutions of the form 'this↓ exists'. The downward arrow indicates that the utterance is accompanied by an act of pointing.[17] After an extended discussion of the locution, including a long discussion of G. E. Moore, Waismann formulates his considered opinion. Such locutions are always true, yet they are odd since, in normal circumstances anyway (so, jokes, rhetoric, etc, aside), they would be out of place. Similar considerations, I presume, would apply to other demonstratives, such as *that*, and to *he*, *she*, used as demonstrative pronouns.

3.1 Pointing

Explaining the first part of his view, Waismann says (p. 133):

> 'This exists' is indeed true whenever I utter these words—either pointing at some object or other, or, as in the case of an after-image, performing its mental equivalent, namely, paying heed to it. For everything hinges in the end on the manner in which I was pointing. Was I pointing, or was I not? If the object of my pointing did not exist, my pointing could not have been done properly—it *was* not pointing, but mere pretense. But if I point 'in earnest' and not just for the fun of it, and moreover if I am not in *delerium tremens*, in the presence of a mirage, under the effect of hypnosis, etc., in short, if what I do is done in normal circumstances, then the existence of what I am pointing at is already included in the idea of pointing. ... Hence, every time I say 'This↓ exists' I am speaking the truth; more accurately, my use of the word 'this' together with the act of pointing *creates* a situation in which what I am saying cannot be untrue.

[17] The notation is Waismann's, though I have taken the liberty of reorienting Waismann's horizontal arrow, which risks suggesting that the pointing is to the next word in the sentence.

In other words, if I am really pointing at something, it must exist to be pointed at. What is to be said of this?

First, a couple of preliminary points. Even if there is physical pointing, merely orienting your finger in a certain direction is not enough. It must be accompanied by an intentional act. In the direction of my finger may be a cat, its body, a shape, a colour. An act of intention is required to determine which of these is referred to.

Next, in the appropriate context, the intentional act alone may suffice, with no physical pointing. You and I are watching the television. On the news, the presenter reports that a scientist has found a new kind of sea-creature. It is able to turn itself inside-out, so that its alimentary canal is on its outside. I say to you, 'Well, this↓ is an amazing creature!'. No physical pointing is involved. You know exactly what I mean. A use of the word 'this' picks out something salient to the parties involved. Physical pointing may certainly make something salient, but it may be quite unnecessary.

Having got these points straight, we can now come to the main claim: that what is pointed to must exist. Not so: I can point to things that do not exist. You tell me that you are writing a story about two completely fictional characters, and you ask me which one I like better. 'The first', you say, 'enjoys her life, but doesn't really do anything with it.' 'What about the other?' I say. You reply, 'Well, she enjoys her life too, but, she spends a lot of time helping other people'. 'Ah, this↓ one', I say. The *this* here clearly refers to the second character, and that character does not exist. Indeed, I may go on and say 'It's a pity that *that*↓ one does not exist'. Note, moreover, that the situation is quite normal: no mirages, hallucinations, jokes, etc.

The existence or otherwise of the object of the story is, in fact, completely irrelevant to the success of the pointing. The story could have been about any two characters; they may or may not exist; I may not even know whether they exist. The demonstrative still works in the same way.

At one point, Waismann suggests that one cannot really point to fictional characters; one just pretends to. He says (p. 125):

> [C]an one point to something imaginary? Suppose that I am a playwright, and, fired by my own imagination, 'see' the characters of my play standing around me: beaming and laughing I enter a gesticulating conversation, saying funny things, complementing the one on his success, pointing at another one and chaffing him on his state, making repartees to imagined questions—in short I

> treat them as if they were present in the flesh, and while doing this, for the moment almost believing in them. How are we to account for that? The answer is clear: I do not really point, I only profess to do so—though there wouldn't be much difficulty in describing them to a T.

Now, in the situation Waismann describes, he could fairly, indeed, be described as pretending. But this is quite different from the case I have described. I am not pretending there. I *would* have been pretending had I really preferred the other character, but didn't want to admit it. What I said is perfectly sincere.

A second example: You say, 'People have many strange beliefs about gods. There is a tribe in South America who believe in a god who will destroy the world if people ever try to get to the Moon. Of course, people have been to the Moon, and we are still here. So *that*↓ god cannot exist!' I don't think I need to rub the point in again.

Of course, one might object. Non-existent objects cannot causally interact with speakers. How can there be a pointing if there is no causal interaction? (Even in the case of the novel sea creature there is a causal chain from it, to the scientist, to the news reader, to you.) A causal chain is necessary to secure reference. Otherwise one would have to suppose some miraculous mental ability. As Hale puts it, a relation of reference between a speaker and a non-existent object:[18]

> is, I've already suggested, indecently obscure... To insist that an 'act of pure intention' can single out an object without the aid of discriminating information or causal contact, and if we find that hard to swallow, this is just 'the nature of the beast', does nothing to blunt the force of the objection.

Putnam dubs the relation a 'mysterious faculty of mind', and Lewis dubs the connection 'noetic rays'.[19]

Of course, it is exactly the thought that causation is necessary to secure reference that is refuted by the examples above of the two fictional characters, and of the the fictional god. Naturally, the question of how reference is secured in this case is a good one, and nothing I have said here addresses this matter.[20] But the thought that there is some intentional magic in causation

[18]Hale (2007), p. 107

[19]Putnam (1980), p. 4; Lewis (1984), p. 72.

[20]It is discussed further in Priest (2016), ch. 11.

I find somewhat naïve[21] (which is not to say that causation is never relevant to the object intended). Suppose that I see a tree. Light rays from the tree are bombarding my retina; but so are light rays from all over the place. And the ones from the tree do not bear a message 'Hey, think of my origin'. And of course, I can think of something which has no direct causal impact on me at all. I can think, for example, of Julius Caesar. If there are causal chains between him and me, they are mediated by hundreds of years, thousands of kilometers, and countless numbers of people. To parody the parody, it would seem that the noetic rays must track backwards down the relevant causal chains, like some heat-seeking missiles, to land on their origin.[22]

3.2 Speaking of Existence

Which brings us to the second part of Waismann's view, that utterances of the kind in question are out of place. If 'that↓ does not exist' can be perfectly in place, as we have seen it can, then so can 'that↓ exists'. You tell me about two sea creatures. One is a fish with feathers. I say, 'Well, that↓ certainly does not exist'. The other is a creature that can turn itself inside out. I say, 'Surprisingly enough, that↓ *does* exist'. Hence, Waismann's analysis of why such utterances are out of place cannot be correct.

So what is his reason? Waismann explains (p. 134):

> An existential statement is a statement *faute de mieux*. As a rule, such statements are made only if more precise information is not available. Thus, I may say 'There is a fox somewhere in the wood', 'there are pikes in the pond, lions in the desert', or again 'there is somewhere an article on the use of oracles in symbolic logic, only I can't remember where'. Once I have hunted down the fox, got the pike on the line, run into the lion, spotted the article, there is no need any longer, nor any point, in saying that it exists—unless, of course, I am availing myself of the case in hand to warrant an existential statement previously made by me. But if so, the 'exists' carries reference to that statement—it makes sense only if

[21]Not to mention the fact that causation cannot be applied to abstract—and for a platonist, existent—objects such as numbers, where reference clearly can be secured.

[22]For a critique of the view that causal connection is either necessary or sufficient for reference-fixing, with the outlines of a different account, and a nod in the direction of non-existent objects, see Jeshion (2002).

> seen in its proportion to the whole context. Generally speaking, an existential statement asserts that something of such-and-such a description exists without betraying where it is. It is like saying, 'There is buried treasure, but I am not going to tell you where. ... But what can it mean to assert existence of something that stares me in the face? There it is, and that is an end of it. There is no longer any need to go in search of it. I have started with the end.

As is clear, Waismann is talking of phrases such as 'there is' and 'there exists'. Indeed, he takes such locutions to be the ones involved in expressing existence.[23] And his point is then that it is out of place to make such an existential generalisation if one can instantiate it.

This seems correct. Starting in about 1975 Paul Grice made famous a theory of conversational implicature.[24] He noted that conversation is governed by certain maxims, which allow people to draw inferences, not just from the content of what has been said, but from the fact that the utterer has said it. One of these is the Maxim of Quantity: give the maximum relevant information.[25] Thus, if you ask me of which country Quito is the capital, and I say 'It's either Peru or Ecuador', you are entitled to infer that I don't know which, or I would have said it. If I do know, what I have said is misleading—out of place.

Now, to assert an existentially quantified sentence when I am in a position to assert an instance, is exactly to violate the Maxim of Quantity in this way. Waismann, then, is right thus far.

What is wrong, is Waismann's parsing of 'This↓ exists'. 'Exists' here is what it appears to be, a simple monadic predicate, not a quantifer phrase. So the Gricean point is beside the point.

Of course, I am well aware that there is a common view in philosophy to the effect that there is no monadic existence predicate.[26] The view is commonly sheeted back, quite mistakenly, to Frege. It was certainly endorsed by Russell in his *Lectures on Logical Atomism*, and his arguments there are

[23]Earlier in the essay (p. 124), he expresses 'this↓ exists' as '$(\exists x).(x$ is this↓)'. He does not endorse the view explicitly in that passage, but nowhere does he criticize it or suggest an alternative.

[24]Grice (1975).

[25]For full details, see Davis (2014).

[26]See Nelson (2012) for a review and discussion.

absolutely frightful. This↓ is not the place to go into these matters.[27]

The passage from Moore which Waismann discusses, however, is from an exchange between Keale and Moore (1936)—which Waismann must therefore have known about—which contains an oft cited argument for the claim that "existence is not a predicate". Let us look briefly at this.

There is, supposedly, a difference between the logical forms of:

- Tame tigers growl.
- Tame tigers exist.

The second sentence is existentially quantified; the first is not. Now the first sentence is ambiguous. It can mean that some tame tigers growl, that all do, or that (generically) all normal tame tigers do. It is the first of these which is relevant here. This has the form:

- Some x is such that x is a tame tiger and x growls.

The second sentence is not ambiguous. It means simply that there exist tame tigers:

- There exists an x such that x is a tame tiger.

However, the "existential quantifier" may be defined from the particular quantifier—'some'—and the monadic existence predicate, in the obvious way. ('There exists an x such that ...' = 'Some x is such that x exists and ...'.) Deploying the definition, the last sentence becomes:

- Some x are such that x exists and x is a tiger.

There is now no difference of logical form between this and the growling tiger sentence, or even of truth value.

To those who claim that *some* means *some existent*, I would merely point to the pair:

- Some characters that occur in works of fiction do not exist.
- Some existent characters that occur in works of fiction do not exist.

The first is true; the second is patently false.[28]

[27] On which, see Priest (2016), 18.3.2 and 18.3.4.

[28] For more on the whole matter, see Priest (2016), especially ch. 18.

4 Conclusion

Let me draw some of the threads of my discussion together by bringing both of Waismann's papers together. Both concern, in their own ways, fictional objects. It sees to me that the views that emerge concerning these in the two papers are incompatible.

Take a purely fictional name, such as 'Holmes' or 'Polyphemus'. Does it or does it not have a referent? It would seem that it cannot. For how could it achieve such a reference? How was it that the object was baptised by that name? As we learned from Waismann's first paper, the name is not a covert description, so the baptism cannot be achieved by description. The only other possibility would seem to be that it was achieved by an act of pointing of some kind. But his second paper tells us that this is impossible.

However, it would also seem that it does have a referent. If 'Polyphemus has one eye' is true in *some* sense, then Polyphemus, that very object, does, in the appropriate sense, have one eye. 'Polyphemus', then, refers to that object. Waismann seems to take the point (p. 106 f.):

> A child first learns to understand a *true* story before he learns to understand an imaginary one. He discovers much later, after attaining a certain sophistication, what a thrill he can get from giving [free] rein to his imagination, either in thinking up, or merely in following, a fanciful tale. To appreciate a fantasy requires a new technique—namely that of *disconnecting* words from reality. The child has first learned to connect names to actual objects, and he has now to learn to disconnect them and, instead, to connect them to imaginary beings. ... It is not that what a novel depicts is false; it describes something unreal—which is very different from describing something real but describing it falsely.

In the passage I have omitted, Waismann describes this use of names as an 'as if' one; that is, merely as an act of pretense. Sometimes, perhaps, the use of a such a name does involve an act of pretense. However, in many cases of non-existent objects, there is no pretense. After all, the Greeks, at least at one time, believed the Homeric myths to be true. And the scientists who believed that there was a sub-Mercurial planet which caused the precession of Mercury's perihelion, and called it 'Vulcan', were not pretending either. And it cannot be the case that the Christian God and the Hindu Brahman

both exist. But neither Christians who believe the *Bible*, nor the Hindus who believe the *Vedas*, are pretending. (Ask them!)

As is clear from what I have said, my own view is that such names do refer to objects—non-existent ones. But a detailed defense of that view is not to be attempted here.[29]

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