Actual Properties of Fictional Objects

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Abstract

According to "modal noneism", purely fictional objects, such as Sherlock Holmes, are non-existent objects which have the properties ascribed to them by their fiction in non-actual (possible or impossible) worlds. But what properties do they have at the actual world? Beyond some obvious answers, such as that they are non-existent, self-identical, etc. The answer is not clear. I will discuss several different possibilities, perhaps most notably that most statements that attribute properties to them are neither true nor false.

1 Introduction

I want to address a certain problem concerning fictional objects—or at least a problem that arises given a certain understanding of them. This is an understanding which takes them to be non-existent objects which have the properties ascribed to them in the fictions in which they occur in worlds that realise those fictions. Being fictions, these are not the actual world. The question, in a nut-shell, is: what properties do those objects have at the actual world?

I do not expect the meaning of this question to be very clear at present. So in the first part of this paper I will give the background to make it so. I will then explain the question in more detail. Having done that, I will canvass some answers to it. The aim of the paper is not to advocate any one of these, but simply to lay them out for further consideration. I end with a few further thoughts.[1]

2 Background

So let me explain the view of fictional objects which gives rise to this question. I shall not defend this view here. I have done that elsewhere, notably in *Towards Non-Being* (hereafter, TNB).[2] The point is simply to frame the question I want to address. According to this view, fictional objects are non-existent objects of a certain kind. We will get there in due course, but let us start more generally.

2.1 Noneism

The view that some objects don't exist is *noneism* (a word coined by Richard Sylvan). It is more often called *Meinongianism*. This is poor terminology. It is true that Meinong did endorse a version of noneism, but so have most logicians in the history of Western logic.[3] And Meinong's version of noneism was a quite specific version of the view, different from many others. Calling the view *Meinongianism* is therefore like calling the view that there is a God *Thomism*.

Now, since Russell's attack on Meinong, and Quine's influential essay 'On What There Is', noneism has been considered by most anglo-philosophers as a view only slightly shy of insanity. The usual arguments against the view are, however, lame.[4]

In particular, there are no problems about quantifying over non-existent objects. Quantifiers work in the familiar fashion. The universal quantifier is *all*. Its dual, the particular quantifier, is *some*. 'All xs are P' is true if all objects in the domain of quantification satisfy 'P'. 'Some xs are P' is true if some objects in the domain of quantification satisfy 'P'. The domain of quantification may contain both existent and non-existent objects.

[1]The is a written-up version of a talk given at a one-day logic workshop at Tokyo University in January 2024, and the Seminaire "Fiction, Imagination, Vérité", Ecole Normale Supérieure, February 2024 (online). I am grateful to the members of the audiences there for their helpful thoughts and suggestions.

[2]Priest (2005).

[3]See the 2nd edn of TNB, ch. 18.

[4]See, again, the 2nd edn of TNB, ch. 18.

Since most philosophers have a knee-jerk reaction to read $\exists x$ as 'there exists an x such that'. I will write $\mathfrak{S}$ for the particular quantifier, and write $\mathfrak{A}$ for its mate, the universal quantifier, to keep it company. If one wants quantifiers that are existentially loaded, 'every existent x is such that' and some existent x is such that', one can define these in the obvious way: using a perfectly ordinary monadic predicate, Ex, x *exists*—(incorrect) interpretations of Kant[5] notwithstanding:

- $\exists xA$ is $\mathfrak{S}x(Ex \wedge A)$
- $\forall xA$ is $\mathfrak{A}x(Ex \rightarrow A)$

There is only one touchy issue concerning noneism. To see what this is, let us consider an example. Suppose that we characterise an object, x, as a detective of acute powers of observation and inference, living at 221B Baker St. Call that condition $D(x)$, and let us call the object thus characterised h. (D for Doyle, and h for Holmes.) Is it true that $D(h)$, that is, that Holmes was a detective of acute powers of observation and inference, living at 221B Baker St? It is natural to reply *yes*.

There is a general principle at issue here which we may call the Characterisation Principle (CP). This is to the following effect.

- a/the x such that P is indeed P

P is any condition. *a* and *the* are indefinite and definite description operators. The indefinite operator is simpler,[6] and I will use it in what follows. If one writes this as ε, the CP can be written:

- $P(\varepsilon xPx)$

The CP might well appear analytic. However, no one, noneist or otherwise can endorse it in unrestricted form. Triviality follows with a two-line argument. Let B be any statement. Consider the condition $x = x \wedge B$. (If you don't mind vacuous quantification, the first conjunct may be dropped.) Write t for $\varepsilon x(x = x \wedge B)$. Then the CP gives $t = t \wedge B$, from which B follows. (This argument is, in fact, what is behind Russell's more specific criticism of Meinong.) Yet, clearly, some instances of the CP are true. For example,

[5]See Priest (2019), §2.3.

[6]Definite descriptions just add a uniqueness clause to the behaviour.

it is true that a thing which is a federal capital of Australia (Canberra) is a federal capital of Australia. So how is the general CP to be qualified?

A standard answer is that it holds provided some existent thing satisfies P:

- $\exists x Px \to P(\varepsilon x Px)$

This is Hilbert's version of the principle.[7] However, it will not do for a noneist. The x in question may not exist.

We may replace the $\exists$ with $\mathfrak{S}$, and the result is right enough; but it doesn't help us. We need to know, for a given P, whether the antecedent of the conditional is true. Thus, we wanted to know whether Holmes, that is, $\varepsilon x Dx$, is such that $D(\varepsilon x Dx)$. If it does, some non-existent object satisfies $D(x)$. But to suppose that $D(\varepsilon x Dx)$ would obviously beg the question. This is, in fact, the fallacy behind the Ontological Argument.[8]

2.2 Modal Noneism

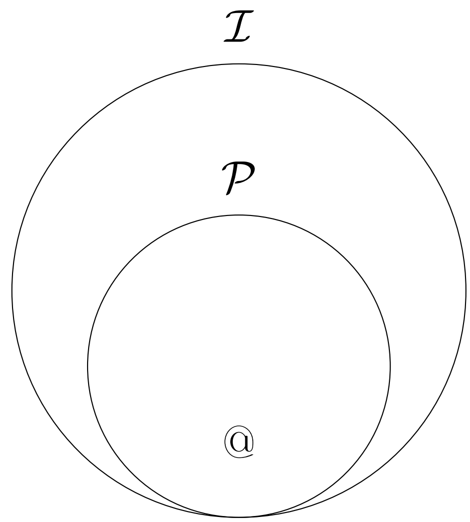
So when does something characterised in a certain way satisfy the characterisation? Meinong himself never, in fact, answered the question cleanly. There are currently three relatively well worked-out answers proposed by contemporary noneists.[9] One involves a distinction between characterising and non-characterising conditions; one involves a distinction between two forms of predication; one uses a world semantics. This last is *modal noneism* (often called *modal Meinongianism*), and is the one we will be concerned with here.

According to this, there is a plurality of worlds. Some are possible; some are impossible; and one (of the possible ones) is actual:

[7] And if we require there to be a unique existent that satisfies P, and use a definite description operator, we get Russell's.

[8] See Priest (2018).

[9] See Reicher (2022).



$\mathcal{P}$ is the set of possible worlds; $\mathcal{I}$ is the set of impossible worlds; @ is the actual world.

According to this view, if one characterises an object in a certain way, the object *does* have its characterising properties—but not necessarily at the actual world (though it may). It has them in the situation one envisages when one thinks of the object; that is, at those worlds that realise the situation. (There may be more than one of these, since the situation envisaged may be under-determined in many ways.)

Thus, Doyle characterises Holmes in a certain way; and when we read his stories we imagine the situations he describes. Holmes has his characterising properties in those situations, that is, worlds. The worlds required for this understanding may be possible or impossible worlds. Thus, in the story 'Sylvan's Box',[10] Graham and Nick find a box that is both empty and has something in it. That is a contradiction; so the worlds that realise the story are impossible worlds. (I am assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that the correct logic is not a paraconsistent logic. However, the point does not depend on this. Whatever one takes the correct logic to be, there can be a story in which logically impossible things happen.)

We are nearly at the point where I can explain the problem I wish to discuss, but one further observation will be useful. As just observed, an object that is characterised in an inconsistent way requires there to be inconsistent worlds. It might be thought that, dually, an object that is described in an

[10]TNB. 6.6.

incomplete way requires incomplete worlds. This, however, does not follow. It is true in the Doyle stories that Holmes is either right-handed or left-handed (or maybe ambidextrous); but Doyle does not tell us which. So the characterisation is incomplete. It does not follow that worlds that realise the story are such that Homes is neither right-handed nor left-handed. In some he is the one; in some he is the other.

3 The Issue

We are now at the point where I can explain the exact problem I want to address. Again, let us use Holmes as our example. We know quite a lot about Holmes' properties at some worlds—those that realise the Doyle stories. But those worlds are not the actual world: the stories are fiction, not history. What properties does Holmes have at the actual world?

We know some of these of various kinds:

- *Other-Wordly Properties*: It is not (actually) true that Holmes lived in Baker St. What is true is that in the worlds that realise the Doyle stories Homes lived in Baker St. So Holmes actually has the property of *living in Baker St in the Doyle stories*. Hence non-existent objects may have actual properties inherited from their fiction.

- I*ntentional Properties*: I have thought about Holmes. So Holmes has the actual property of having been thought about by GP.[11] Hence non-existent objects may have actual properties generated by the intentional relations to cognitive agents.

- *Status Properties*: Homes actually has the property of being non-existent and, as described, of being a possible object (unlike Sylvan's box, which has the property of being an impossible non-existent object). So non-existent objects may have properties in virtue of their existential status.

- *Logical Properties*: Holmes has the properties of being self-identical, $\lambda x(x = x)$, being something, $\lambda x(\mathfrak{S}y\, y = x)$, and so on. So non-existent objects can have properties simply in virtue of logic.

[11] One may balk at calling such things properties. However, I mean by 'property' nothing more than what are often called *abundant properties*. That is, the extensions of some condition or other.

- *Negations of Existence-Entailing Properties*: If it were true that Gladstone (actually) kicked Holmes or that Holmes (actually) kicked Gladstone, then Holmes would have entered into a causal process, and so would have existed. So these statements are not true. Hence Holmes has the property of *not having kicked (or having been kicked by)* Gladstone. Generally, if Px entails that x exists then a non-existent object has the property $\lambda x(\neg Px)$. Whether a certain property is existence-entailing may be a matter of dispute.

- *Properties that Follow from These*: What is true at the actual world is closed under logical consequence. So a non-existent object can have properties that follow logically from the above. Hence Holmes has the property of *being non-existent and self-identical*.

Possibly there are other kinds of properties that non-existent objects actually have. But even if there are, it would seem that they are going to leave a lot of questions open. Is Holmes actually right handed? Is he a detective? Does he live in Beijing? Is he even a person? Those matters appear indeterminate. What is to be said about them? That is the question I wish to raise.[12]

In the next section I will turn to some possible answers. But let me end this section with an observation concerning another approach to the characterisation problem. The approach is that. espoused by Terry Parsons and Richard Routley/Sylvan. This depended on a distinction between nuclear/characterising conditions and non-nuclear/non-characterising conditions. The CP is legitimate for and only for nuclear/characterising conditions.[13] Parsons and Routley coupled this account with an account of fictional objects according to which whatever holds of a fictional object in a fiction is actually true, provided that what that is is characterising. Clearly, this account answers a lot of the questions concerning the actual properties of non-existent objects which are left open my a modal noneist account: Holmes is a detective, lives in London (not Beijing), is a person. It may be thought that this gives such an account an advantage over a modal noneist account. This would be too fast, however.

For a start, the account faces the problem that no one has ever given a definition specifying which properties are nuclear/characterising, and which

[12] Of course, if any of these properties is existence-entailing, that would settle the matter—though whether a property is existence entailing is a question on which there may be reasonable disagreement.

[13] For discussion and references, see Priest (202+).

are not. Both Parsons and Routley just give a list of examples, and hope that the reader with catch on.

That is bad enough, but the account of fiction provided has specific problems of its own. We are still faced with questions such as whether Holmes was left-handed or right-handed. This is no trivial problem. Given the account in question, it is actually true that he was either left- or right-handed. To suppose that he was one or the other would seem to be arbitrary. But to suppose that 'Holmes was right-handed' and 'Holmes was left-handed' are neither true nor false—or even worse, simply false—means that we have have a true disjunction where neither disjunct is true. There may be ways to handle this fact; for example, by applying some kind of supervaluation technique. But doing so forces a rejection of standard logic, which a modal noneist account does not.

Matters do not end there. According to such accounts, 'a detective lived at 221B Baker St' is actually true. But we know that 'no detective (in particular, Holmes) has ever lived at 221B Baker St' is actually true. So we have a contradiction concerning Baker St. And whatever is to be said about the thought that some contradictions are true, there is nothing to be said for this one.

At this point one might be tempted by the thought that when authors of fictions appear to talk of actually existing objects, like Baker St, they are not referring to the real object, but to some fictional *dopplegänger*.[14] This is a move of desperation. When Doyle used the words 'Baker St', he did not change their meaning, or *a fortiori* their referent, any more than he changed the meaning of the words 'detective', 'revolver'.[15] When I wrote 'Sylvan's Box' I was referring to Richard, my old friend. Some of the things said about him in the story are actually true. Some are only true in the fiction. I was referring to him none the less.

4 Possible Solutions

Let us now turn to some possible solutions to the problem. My aim is not to endorse any one of them, but simply to lay them out and discuss aspects of the plausibility of each.

[14]The moves made by Parsons and Routley are more sophisticated than this, but in the end equally inadequate. See Priest (202+).

[15]See Priest (2019).

Solution 1 is a robust realism. For each non-existent object, a, and each property, P, except those canvassed in the previous section, either Pa or $\neg Pa$, though there is no way of ever determining which. This is the case if one is a realist about existent objects. One may simply maintain a realism about non-existent objects.

If someone insisted on this solution, I don't know that I would have any good arguments against it. A constant domain semantics is already committed to a certain kind of realism about non-existent objects anyway.[16]

However, I confess to feeling uncomfortable with this solution. There is a natural pull toward the thought that non-existent objects—especially fictional objects—are, in some sense, our own creation. The thought that they might have properties that are, in principal and for ever, beyond our ken is jarring.

Solution 2 is perhaps the simplest. The attribution of every such property is neither true nor false. Technically, this is easy. One just takes the logic of the actual world to be FDE. And the main cost is, of course, that it forces a move away from classical logic to a logic with truth value gaps. Perhaps there are other good reasons to do this; perhaps not. But the consequences have to be reckoned with. Note that this solution does not suffer from the same problem as the gappy account required by the nuclear/characterising-property solution to the characterisation problem which I discussed in the last section. Sherlock Holmes is either left handed or not in the worlds that realise the Doyle stories, but these are not the actual world.

I note that having truth value gaps does no require identity to be non-classical. It could be the case that at possible worlds (and so @) the extension of $=$ is $\{\langle d, d\rangle : d \in D\}$, where D is the domain of quantification,[17] and its antiextenson is the complement of this. That does raise the question of when to characterisations of non-existent objects are of the same object. But that issue may be addressed in some way or other.[18]

However, one might take it that one should allow for identity statements that have no truth value. In that case, the anti-extension of $=$ would be a proper subset of the complement of its extension. It might then turn out that the identity 'Holmes = Pegasus' is neither true nor false—though this would be counter-intuitive.

[16] As is pointed out in TNB, 2nd edn, ch. 14.

[17] Or strictly speaking, the set of identities. See TNB, 2.9.

[18] TNB, 4.4, gives an answer appealing to what it calls the *Principle of Freedom*.

Solution 3 is to take every atomic sentence, Pn, of the kind in question to be false, and then use the truth/falsity conditions of a gap-free logic. This procedure has a certain naturalness, and retains Excluded Middle. A cost is in determining which sentences are atomic. This is not, of course, a problem for formal languages. That is given by the syntax. But when we apply the semantics to a natural language, problems arise. Thus, *is transparent* and *is opaque* are both syntactically atomic, though each is equivalent to the negation of the other. Moreover, there would seem to be no natural way of justifying the thought that one is more basic, the other to be defined from it. Perhaps the simplest solution is to take both as atomic. The cost of this is having to give up the natural thought that one is equivalent to the negation of the other. Perhaps this is no loss, since one can still maintain this for existent objects:

- $\forall x(x$ is transparent $\leftrightarrow \neg x$ is opaque$)$

One might suggest that the biconditional already has to be limited to physical objects. Maybe non-existent objects are a certain kind (perhaps abstract objects?) such that the application of mundane predicates to them, such as *is transparent* or *lives in Baker St*, are simply category mistakes. The restriction then makes perfectly good sense. However, since we *can* apply such predicates to the objects at other worlds, the thought does require us to suppose that category mistakes are world-dependent. This is not so plausible.

Solution 4 is that there is more than one actual world. We noted that one is not committed to the thought that a fictional object is perforce gappy at a world that realises the fiction. There may be many worlds that realise the fiction, and the indeterminacy may go one way at some of these and the other way at others. We now use the same idea, except that we suppose that there is more than one actual world, the apparent indeterminacy going one way in some of these and the other way in others.

The thought that there is more than one actual world was, in fact, advocated by Richard Sylvan.[19] I confess that I find this solution unpalatable. There is only one actual world. For better or for worse, this is it. If there is more than one world that one might be inclined to call actual, I think this just shows is that they are all parts of one big actuality.

Solution 5 There is more than one Holmes. Specifically, the characterisation picks out different objects at the different worlds that realise the Doyle

[19]Sylvan (1997).

stories. For every relevant P, some of these are P at the actual world and some of them are $\neg P$ there. This does not solve the problem. We still want to know of any particular Holmes whether P or $\neg P$ actually holds. In particular, we want to know this of the object that Doyle picked out with the characterisation.

Solution 6 is that there is more than one Holmes at the actual world. The semantics of TNB allows for the truth value of identities to change across worlds. So the semantics allows for two things, call them Holmes_1 and Holmes_2, such that at any world, w, which realises the Doyle stories, $Holmes_1 = Holmes_2$; but at @, $Holmes_1 \neq Holmes_2$. At @, Holmes_1 is left-handed and Holmes_2 is not left handed. And so on for all the other undetermined predicates.[20] This solution saves the phenomena, but seems to me to do so in an entirely *ad hoc* manner.

5 Conclusion

I have been discussing a noneist account of fictional objects based on modal noneism. My question was: what properties do non-existent objects have the actual world? The framework of modal noneism tells us some of these, but leaves the answer concerning many other properties open.

We have seen that there are several ways one might go about answering the question in such cases. I have not tried to adjudicate between them; but for what it is worth, Solution 2—giving up Excluded Middle–seems the simplest. If one wishes to endorse Excluded Middle, Solution 3 seems the simplest way to go.

The rest I leave for further reflection.

References

[1] Priest, G. (2005), *Towards Non-Being*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2nd edn, 2016.

[20]As given in TNB, the semantics enforces the constancy in truth value of identity statements at possible worlds. (See TNB, p. 4.5.) However, one may simply drop the constraint which enforces it.

[2] Priest, G. (2018), ‘Characterisation, Existence, and Necessity’, pp. 250–269 of G. Oppy (ed), *Ontological Arguments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[3] Priest, G. (2019), ‘Fictional Objects Fictional Subjects’, ch. 7 of D. Rudrum, R. Askin, and F. Beckman (eds.), *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[4] Priest, G. (202+), ‘Non-Existence: the Nuclear Option’, ms.

[5] Reicher, M. (2022), ‘Nonexistent Objects’, in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonexistent-objects/.

[6] Sylvan, R. (1997), *Transcendental Metaphysics: From Radical to Deep Plurallism*, New York, NY: White Horse Press.