

KRIPKE'S ACCOUNT OF FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

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Abstract: The following paper is concerned with finding possible Kripkean answers to the recent linguistic criticisms formulated by Anthony Everett against considering fictional entities as abstract objects. The central issue here is if Kripke can solve the problem of negative existential statements involving empty names.

Keywords: philosophy of language, Kripke, Everett, fictional entities, empty proper names.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main themes that have concerned philosophers of language in the twentieth century has been the semantics of proper names. This issue has generated many debates that have had consequences in other philosophical areas like metaphysics, ethics or philosophy of science.

An important and quite interesting, I might add, part of the literature on this subject has taken to examine how is it that we successfully use proper names to refer to fictional entities like Hamlet, Pegasus or Raskolnikov. In trying to solve this conundrum, many philosophers have tried to specify exactly what these fictional entities actually are and what their place is in our ontology.

Saul Kripke's views regarding the function and use of proper names are quite well known in the field of philosophy. For him, proper names refer directly to objects they are attached to by way of a causal chain of uses of those names since the initial act of naming. Kripke made use of possible-world

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semantics to show that names act as rigid designators across multiple worlds. This means that we can say about a certain person, Nixon¹, to use Kripke's own example, that he could have not been a politician or that he could have not been an American. This view was developed in contrast with the more popular analysis at that time of Frege and Russell in which proper names were mere abbreviations of properties of the object in question. One of the main advantages of the Frege-Russell position was its ability to explain exactly how we are able in day-to-day speak to use empty proper names, that is names that have no real referent, names of fictional entities.² Hamlet, in this case, can have no referent and be semantically meaningful because it is tied to a series of properties, even if no real person has these properties.

As we are about to see in more detail in the following pages, Kripke had to accept that fictional entities actually existed in order to maintain his view. These fictional characters and locations he considered to be abstract entities though, and, rather obviously, not real persons. To be clear, the metaphysical consequences of thinking of fictional entities as existing abstract objects aren't the focus of this paper. Kripke himself used this position to solve issues in his semantics for proper names more than anything.

In a recent article, Anthony Everett³ tried to show that philosophers who take fictional entities to be some kind of abstract things run into semantic problems when confronted with intuitively true negative existential statements. Thus, when someone utters „Hamlet does not exist“, an abstract object theorist like Kripke or Van Inwagen⁴ would have to accommodate our intuition that the proposition is true, when it is actually false, because Hamlet does actually exist, only not as a person, but as an abstract entity of some sort.

In this paper, I intend to understand exactly what bearing do Everett's arguments have on Kripke's own brand of abstract object theory. The second section of the article will feature a more in depth presentation of Kripke's position regarding empty names and fictional entities. The third section will be concerned with Everett's objections to abstract object theorists in general and how and if they apply to Kripke's views. The fourth part of this work will try to see what possible counter-arguments one could find against the issues raised by Everett. Also, I will attempt to find a Kripkean way out of Everett's puzzle. The fifth and last section of the article will contain some conclusive remarks about the whole debate.

¹ Kripke, Saul, *Numire și necesitate*; Tr. Mircea Dumitru, All, Bucharest, 2001.

² Kripke, Saul, *Vacuous Names and Fictional Entities*; in Kripke, Saul, *Philosophical Troubles*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, pp. 52-74.

³ Everett, Anthony, *Pretense, Existence, and Fictional Objects*; in „Philosophy and Phenomenological Research“, vol. LXXXIV, no. 1, 2007, pp. 56-80.

⁴ Van Inwagen, Peter, *Creatures of Fiction*; in „American Philosophical Quarterly“, vol. 14, no. 4, 1977, pp. 299-308.

II. KRIPKE ON FICTIONAL ENTITIES

One of the main advantages of the Frege-Russell approach regarding proper names is related to the problem of vacuous names. As Kripke himself recognizes¹, Frege and Russell have an elegant solution to this issue that stems from the way they analyze proper names in general. In short, the idea is that the meaning of a proper name is determined by the property or set of properties instantiated by the object to which that name refers. So, to know how to use a name is to know what are the properties associated with it and for that name to refer an object must uniquely instantiate those properties.

In the case of empty names, the meaningfulness of propositions containing such expressions is easily explained by those who adhere to a type of Frege-Russell analysis. Take something like this, for example:

(1) Hamlet is utterly bonkers.

We have no difficulty in understanding this sentence, because we understand what „Hamlet“ means. We know that Hamlet should have at least some of the following properties: *being the Prince of Denmark, having played the role of Gonzago to spite his uncle, having spoken to his dead father's ghost* and so on. The fact that the name is actually empty only means that there is no object that uniquely satisfies those properties. (1) is actually true, because the descriptions that give meaning to the name „Hamlet“ we find something that informs that he is actually insane, despite the fact that it has no real-world referent.

As we know from Kripke's „Naming and Necessity“², but also from his other writings, many examples can be found that pose problems to the general Frege-Russell family of views with respect to proper names. I won't go through them, as they are not needed for the purposes of this paper and are also quite well known in our field. The general idea is that, using possible-world semantics, we can express counterfactual statements using proper names that can in principle deny all the properties that an object has in the actual world. Those statements would be meaningful because names actually do refer directly to the objects they are tied to through a causal chain of uses from the initial naming of that object. So, we know who Leonardo Da Vinci is because we can, at least in principle, retrace the usage of his name all throughout history since his birth. We need no contingent properties to be able to understand what the name „Leonardo Da Vinci“ means when uttered.

The problem is that if we throw the Frege-Russell analysis out the window, we are left with this rather difficult problem of empty names. How is it exactly that we are able to successfully use them in natural language and

¹ Kripke [2011], p. 53.

² Kripke [2001] pp. 27-65.

how are we able to transmit meaningful content despite the fact that we are not talking about real-world entities? The answer Kripke gives is two-folded. Firstly, he talks about something that one could call the semantics of pretense and, secondly, he urges us to accept that fictional entities actually do exist as abstract objects like nations or, maybe, numbers.

It all begins with something Kripke calls the pretense principle: „What happens in the case of a work of fiction? A work of fiction, generally speaking of course, is a pretense that what is happening in the story is really going on. (...) The principle I have roughly stated here, just as applied to works of fiction, we can call the pretense principle. What goes on in a work of fiction is a pretense that the actual conditions obtain.“¹ What this means is that we cooperate with the author of the work of fiction we’re enjoying and pretend that what she is telling us has really happened in the world. We will be employing names that we pretend to have a reference and we will be using pretend propositions.

The reason that the proper names occurring in works of fiction can’t refer and are not rigid designators is, in Kripke’s opinion, the fact that we cannot build counterfactual situations for them.² I can’t ask what would’ve happened if Hamlet really existed. It does not make sense, because if I were to have all the properties that belong to Hamlet, I still would not be Hamlet – I would only, as Kripke says, „play the role“ of Hamlet. We must not forget that we are only pretending that Hamlet is a rigid designator, but in fact it is not a real name, as it does not pick a person from the actual world and can’t be used in counterfactual situations.

A further issue arises though, as the pretense principle only works in the case of the effective use of proper names in works of fiction. It does not work however when we have propositions like the ones below:

- (2) Hamlet was created by William Shakespeare.
- (3) No other fictional character is like Hamlet.

What is happening here is that we seem not to be talking about the pretend referent of the name „Hamlet“, but we are talking about something that we commonly call a fictional character. Even more problematic, (3) includes an existential quantification that could be regarded as forcing us to accept these rather mysterious entities in our ontology. „Hamlet“ in these cases does not seem to be an empty name, but rather one that actually refers, though not to a person, but a fictional object. What could these kinds of beings be? Kripke thinks they are abstract things that actually exist and can be talked about. „The fictional character can be regarded as an abstract entity which exists in virtue of the activities of human beings, in the same way that nations are abstract

¹ Kripke [2011], p. 58.

² Kripke [2011], p. 59.

entities which exist in virtue of the activities of human beings and their interrelations. A nation exists if certain conditions are true about human beings and their relations; it may not be reducible to them because we cannot spell them out exactly (or, perhaps, without circularity). Similarly, a fictional character exists if human beings have done certain things, namely, created certain works of fiction and the characters in them."¹ Kripke seems to subscribe here to a subclass of the abstract object theories usually called in the literature „creationism“ – which is the theory that considers fictional characters abstract entities that have their origins in the creative act of the fiction’s author.

Peter Van Inwagen subscribes to a similar view in his article „Creatures of Fiction“. In there, he says there such things as theoretical entities of literary criticism and that fictional characters are a subcategory of these objects. „(...) if what is said in a piece of literary criticism is to be true, then there must be entities of a certain type, entities that are never the subjects of non-literary discourse, and which make up the extensions of the theoretical general terms of literary criticism. It is these which I call ‘theoretical entities of literary criticism’.“²

For both Kripke and van Inwagen, accepting that there are such things as fictional characters is the only way to make sense of sentences like (2) and (3). To be clear, if I were to quote a novel or some other work of fiction, the names in that paragraph would not be referring to fictional characters. We would only pretend that they refer and not to some abstract entity, but to an actual non-existing person.

The challenge for these types of theories, as we will see in the next section, is to give some criteria of demarcation in the contexts of negative existential propositions that seem intuitively true like „Hamlet does not exist.“ Here Hamlet actually refers to the person described in the book that has the quality of not being real. How would Kripke’s view account for the different use of the name „Hamlet“ here?

III. ANTHONY EVERETT’S OBJECTIONS

The first part of this section will be concerned with presenting Everett’s objections to abstract object theories in general, while the second part will see if any of these criticisms apply to Kripke’s views regarding fictional entities.

While he accepts that taking fictional characters as abstract objects has the advantage of explaining how can sentences like (2) or (3) be meaningful in natural language, Anthony Everett³ maintains that there is, unfortunately, a certain class of propositions that pose serious issues to any abstract object theory. We are talking about negative existentials that involve fictional

¹ Kripke [2011], p. 63.

² Van Inwagen [1977], p. 303.

³ Everett [2007], pp. 57-58.

names. In this section we will be moving on from poor old Hamlet as the subject of our examples to the even more tragic Raskolnikov, as this is the character that is used in Everett's examples.

Take the following sentence:

(4) Raskolnikov does not exist.¹

Our intuitions about it seem to say that it must be true, as there is no real Raskolnikov roaming the world under the guilt of his actions. However, if, like Kripke, we consider „Raskolnikov“ to be an abstract entity, namely a fictional character, we can't agree, at least *prima facie*, that this proposition, without any qualification, is actually true. The issue here is to find a plausible way to distinguish between the uses of „Raskolnikov“ as a name for a pretend person and as a name for a fictional character.

One way we could do this is by postulating a distinction between the behavior of fictional names in negative existential contexts as opposed to the situations described by sentences like (2) and (3). I will agree with Everett in considering such a way out only an ad-hoc solution that seems forced.² Consider the following occurrence of „Raskolnikov“:

(5) Raskolnikov is just a fictional character and consequently does not really exist.³

Using the distinction drawn above we would have to find some kind of explanation of how can that occurrence of „Raskolnikov“ have semantic content and, if you will, no semantic content at the same time. It is a name for a fictional character and it is also empty, which make no sense, showing that the distinction drawn earlier is wrong.

Everett argues that the only way to solve this puzzle regarding fictional names and negative existential statements is by saying that „utterances of [(4)] may be straight-forwardly used to express the false claim that the Raskolnikov-object does not exist. But she must maintain that utterances of [(4)] may also be used to express some sort of true claim which is compatible with the existence of the Raskolnikov-object. The reason we take utterances of [(4)] to be true could then be explained in terms of our understanding them in this second, rather than the first, manner.“⁴ Everett's point is that the abstract object theorist must recognize that in fact (4) is actually false, but certain features of the sentence also allow an interpretation that makes it true.

¹ The numbering of the sentences in this article does not respect the numbering in Everett's article.

² Everett [2007], p. 59.

³ Everett [2007], p. 59.

⁴ Everett [2007], p. 60.

Thus, our intuitions about (4) are motivated by the fact that we usually understand it in the interpretation that makes it true. The challenge is now to explain how is it that a sentence like (4) can have two alternative readings. What are the semantic features of the sentence that permit such an event.

There are three possible theses that may be held by an abstract object theorist in this regard, from Everett's point of view at least.¹ There's the Ambiguity Thesis that takes the verb „exists“ as ambiguous expression. A second one could be called the Contextual Thesis and it argues that „exists“ is a contextually sensitive expression. Thirdly we have the Pragmatic Thesis, where (4) is seen as being false, but generating a type of general conversational implicature that leads us to believe it is true.

Everett dismisses the Ambiguity Thesis because it generates counter-intuitive semantic consequences.² For example:

(6) Bush exists, but Raskolnikov doesn't exist.

If the Ambiguity Thesis is true and if we take (6) also to be true, then the two occurrences of „exists“ have different semantic values. We use „exists“ in the, let's say, classical sense in the case of Bush and in the intuitively true, but factually false sense in Raskolnikov's case. The problem is that, if this were true, then we should not be able to successfully utter the following:

(7) Bush exists, but Raskolnikov doesn't.

As it is quite obvious we can state something like the contraction in (7) without any issue. Moreover, it's quite clear that we take (7) to say that Bush, the ex-president of the United States of America, does exist, while Raskolnikov is not a real human being. Thus we are using the one occurrence of „exist“ in (7) to successfully express both of the meanings that we were trying to differentiate – something we should not be able to do, at least in Everett's opinion.

With this thesis down and out, Everett³ moves on to rejecting the second solution an abstract object theorist could have for the negative existential puzzle he has proposed. The Contextual Thesis states that „exist“ is a context-sensitive expression. Now, it would seem that one could apply the same kind of objections like in the case of the Ambiguity Thesis, but Everett considers that there is a type of „sloppy“ reading that this thesis allows and that could accommodate „exists“ have two different semantic values. Let's look at his example that I think illustrates best this point:

¹ Idem.

² Idem.

³ Everett [2007], p. 61-62.

(8) John washed his car and so did Fred.

Given different contexts we could understand this proposition in two ways. Either we have what Everett calls a strict reading telling us that John washes his own car and Fred helps along or we have the „sloppy“ reading informing us that John washes his car, while Fred cleans his own vehicle. It’s important to understand the source of this phenomenon, that is, the anaphoric expression „his“.¹

To show that the Contextual Thesis is also wrong Everett complicates a bit the examples to prove that something like a mixed reading between the sloppy and the strict one can’t exist. Let’s look at this sentence:

(9) John washed his car and so did Fred and Bill.

The strict reading in this case says that Fred and Bill helped John wash his car and the sloppy reading says that John, Fred and Bill washed their own respective cars. The problem is that (9) does not seem to allow a mixed reading that would tell us that John and Fred washed John’s car, while Bill washed his own automobile. If the abstract object theorist accepts this, then the consequences are rather dire, as Everett gives the following example:

(10) Bush exists, but Raskolnikov and the round square don’t.

If the Contextual Thesis was right then we would need to have something like mixed reading to make sense because the strict reading would force Raskolnikov out of existence in the same sense as the round square, which, if we take fictional characters to be abstract entities, is wrong, while the sloppy reading would indicate that the round-square is non-existent in the same way as Raskolnikov, which would be, again, wrong. On the view Everett is suggesting, however, a mixed reading that would allow Raskolnikov and the round square to not exist in their particular ways is not possible, so the Contextual Thesis fails.

We are left with the Pragmatic Thesis which states that the actual reason why a sentence like (4) can be true despite the fact that Raskolnikov is considered to be an existent abstract object is because (4) generates a conversational implicature that we interpret as referring to Raskolnikov the pretend-person. Everett argues² that the only type of conversational implicature that we could have in mind for this job is a generalized conversational implicature. This type of conversational implicature does not require particular contextual information for it to be generated; it just appears independent of the context it’s uttered in.

¹ Everett [2007], p. 62.

² Everett [2007], p. 62-64.

Everett maintains that even this position has some serious problems. He asks us to consider a world w in George W. Bush does not exist and to consider the following two statements:

- (11) Bush doesn't exist in w and Raskolnikov doesn't exist in w .
- (12) Bush and Raskolnikov don't exist in w .

It seems clear that (11) is true: the claim of the non-existence of George Bush in w is not a negative existential statement about a fictional entity so it's not problematic, while the claim about Raskolnikov's non-existence is solve through the Pragmatic Thesis, that is to say it generates a generalized conversational implicature the points us in the intuitive direction. In Everett's own words, „the question is whether it is possible for a claim to with a plural subject like [(12)] to generate a generalized conversational implicature which applies to one, but not the other, of its subjects.”¹ As he has done in the previous two theses, he will give an example that will cast a doubt over this possibility. Here are the statements that invalidate the Pragmatic Thesis:

- (13) Mary got married and had a baby and Sally had a baby and got married.
- (14) Both Mary and Sally got married and had a baby.

In (13) the two propositions generate two different generalized conversational implicatures. Thus, we understand that Mary got married before she had a baby, while Sally had a baby before she got married. The problem here for the abstract object theorist is that it is quite obvious on the other hand that (14) cannot generate the correct generalized conversational implicature just for Mary, while leaving Sally alone. If there is generalized conversational implicature arising from (14), it is one which says that both Mary and Sally got married before they had each their own baby. I'd like to state beforehand that I do consider this to be quite a weak argument and, as we will see in the following section, I'm not the only one.

These three theses being eliminated, it's easy to see that there is a linguistic argument to be made against the position that fictional entities are abstract objects. It's quite useful to note that Anthony Everett is not the only philosopher that supports this point of view. Stuart Brock, for example, has a similar thing to say on the subject: „Because the abstract realist is an actualist, she is not required to explain the distinction between being and existence, or existence and actuality. Unlike the concrete realist, the abstract realist does not make a distinction where common-sense tells us there is none. This concession to common-sense, however, might seem to come at a cost.

¹ Everett [2007], p. 63.

If there is no ambiguity inherent in our (apparent) idioms of quantification, it seems that there will be little room for the abstract realist to give a sense in which sentences like ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’ are true.”¹ He goes on to argue, like Everett, that those who hold fictional characters to be abstract things are forced to say that negative existential statements like the one mentioned in the citation are not to be taken at face value. As we have seen above, there seems to be a strong case against this option.

It’s easy to see that this type of counter-argument does apply also to Kripke’s view. He holds, as we’ve seen in the second section of the article, that there are such things as fictional characters and they are abstract objects. Regarding negative existential statements, we shall see in the following section whether we can extract a defense against attacks like the one devised here by Everett.

IV. CAN KRIPKE ACCOUNT FOR NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL STATEMENTS INVOLVING EMPTY NAMES?

In the first part of this section I will examine Kripke’s conception of fictional entities to see if we can find some arguments against the objections raised in the previous section. In the second part, I will try to find out if there is any way out of this conundrum for the abstract object theorist and whether the way out would be something that Kripke could approve. While he discusses the problem of negative existentials in these papers, there is no clear indication of how are we supposed to differentiate between the case in which a negative existential statement containing the name of a fictional entity is used to deny its existence as a concrete object and the case in which it is used to falsely deny its existence altogether.

In „Philosophical Troubles“ there is this interesting passage: „Now to get a correct view on this matter, one has to separate the case of names occurring in fiction – where, using them correctly, we can say that the character doesn’t exist: for example, ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’ – from cases where, on the contrary, the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ is used in such a way that it is true to say that Sherlock Holmes does exist.”² If I understand this passage correctly, Kripke seems to say when we talk about the pretend person Sherlock Holmes as a non-existent entity we are using „Sherlock Holmes“ as an empty name, while there are other cases where the names can be used to affirm the existence of Arthur Conan Doyle’s character.

In the unpublished John Locke Lectures³ he states that „Hamlet“ as an empty name is situated on a certain level of language, while Hamlet the

¹ Brock, Stuart, *Fictionalism about Fictional Characters*; in NOUS, vol. 36, no. 1, 2002, p. 4.

² Kripke [2011], p. 61.

³ Kripke, Saul, *John Locke Lectures*; Unpublished.

existent fictional character is sitting on a whole different level. It should be remarked that this is quite in line with Van Inwagen's „theoretical entities of literary criticism“ that are employed only on a certain portion of human discourse. In analyzing the following statement:

(15) Hamlet doesn't exist; Hamlet is merely a fictional character.

Kripke has to say that on the one hand, there is no referent for the name on the level of language of persons, but that there is a referent for the name „Hamlet“ in the realm of fictional entities. Also, returning now to „Philosophical Troubles“, we can see he recognizes that while considering fictional names as abstract entities solves some problems regarding negative existentials (merely by making some of them false), this is not a complete solution, because it is true that sometimes we just want to say that „Hamlet never existed“, meaning that there are cases where we don't mean to refer to the fictional character, but to the pretend person from the play. He writes about this: „What gives us any right to talk that way? I wish I know exactly what to say. But the following is a stab at it. We can sometimes appear to reject a proposition, meaning that there is no true proposition of that form, without committing ourselves to mean that what we say expresses any proposition at all.“¹ What he seems to be saying in this fragment is that I can somehow utter „Sherlock Holmes is not giving a creepy look right now.“, without presupposing the existence of the proposition „Sherlock Holmes is giving a creepy look right now.“ However, it is wholly unclear to me why this happens, and Kripke doesn't go into much detail on this subject. It seems to me quite clear that Kripke needs to give an argument which should prove that rejecting the existence of a true proposition can also do, at least when empty names are present, the same thing regarding its false variant.

After looking at what Kripke has to say about negative existentials involving fictitious entities, I will venture and say that Kripke does not seem to offer any avenues to reject Everett's critique. The reason is that Everett manages to catch abstract object theorists red handed with the lack of a clear and unproblematic demarcation criterion for the cases where negative existential statements refer either to the pretend-person or the fictional character. How we are to know on what level of language is an utterance of „Sherlock Holmes does not exist“ situated, without further clarification from the speaker. And yet, in real world situation, we manage to understand each other rather easily when talking about fiction. I suspect though, that if Kripke wanted to defend against Everett's objections, considering his work on speaker's reference and his tendency to use what we call today pragmatics, he would probably try to use something that's similar to the Pragmatic Thesis. Interestingly

¹ Kripke [2011], p. 71.

enough, that is exactly the point where Everett's critique has been recently attacked.¹ It seems that it is not that clear that negative existentials that involve fictional characters actually do generate generalized conversational implicatures. The fact we intuitively perceive a sentence like „Hamlet doesn't exist“ as true when it is thrown out of the blue in front of our eyes is not really a good justification for considering the negative existentials that concerned us all along this article as generating generalized conversational implicatures. I think David Spewak is quite right to say that what actually happens is that different contexts generate different implicatures even in the case of the type of sentences that have been the focus of this paper.

V. CONCLUSION

To summarize, I have presented Kripke's view on fictional names and characters and I have taken into discussion Anthony Everett's recent objections to any kind of view that sees fictional entities as abstract objects. I have tried and failed to find anything in Kripke's writings on this subject that could be used to reject Everett's criticism and I have tried to provide, by way of David Spewak, a possible solution to this problem.

As a closing remark I would like to add that I am actually in agreement with abstract object theorists and that I can't see any better way to talk about fictional entities as some other the some kind of abstract things. All this being said, I do recognize that negative existential statements to pose problems that must be circumvented. In my opinion, the best way to this must involve pragmatics.

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¹ Spewak, David, *Everett's Linguistic Criticism of Fictional Characters as Abstract Artifacts*; 16 April 2010, CUNY 13th Annual Philosophy Graduate Student Conference.

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