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Sherlock Holmes Is Not Out There: Some Ideas for An Anti-Exoticist Account of Fictional Characters

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Abstract: Many philosophers include fictional objects like Sherlock Holmes in their ontological inventory. Yet, if Sherlock Holmes is part of reality, then he must be an “exotic” entity: either non-concrete or non-actual or non-existent. In this paper, I will assume that whatever there is (in reality) is concrete, actual, and existent. Accordingly, I will sketch a way to get rid of fictional entities, based on Sellars' metalinguistic strategy for nominalism. Roughly speaking, the main result can be stated as follows: when we talk about Sherlock Holmes, we are actually talking about Sherlock Holmes depictions.

Keywords: fiction, nominalism, actualism.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

FICTIONAL DISCOURSE posits some serious troubles for the metaphysician. What are we talking about when we utter (true) sentences like ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective’ or ‘Sherlock Holmes was created by A. C. Doyle’? Are we ontologically committed to such an entity as Sherlock Holmes, namely to an object denoted by the proper name ‘Sherlock Holmes’? I will distinguish two main different issues related to this kind of questions. The first one concerns the semantic value of fictional proper names:¹ (i) does a fic-

¹ It should be clear that I am talking about purely fictional proper names, like ‘Sherlock Holmes’ and ‘Mrs Dalloway’; real proper names that happen to occur in works of fiction, like ‘Napoleon’ in *War and Peace*, are not purely fictional in this sense. Unless otherwise specified, I will talk of fictional names in the sense of purely fictional names.

tional proper name refer to a (fictional) object? The second one concerns the structure of reality: (ii) should fictional objects be included in the inventory of what there is? A fictional realist is a philosopher who answers affirmatively both to (i) and (ii).

In the last decades, fictional realists have furnished several different metaphysical accounts of fictional objects. They all agree that, even if one could travel back in time and reach London in the 1890s, she would not find any detective named Sherlock Holmes at 221B Baker Street. As a matter of fact – realist *A* will argue – detectives are concrete entities (i.e., located in space-time) while Sherlock Holmes is an *abstract* entity; more precisely, it is an abstract artefact created by some human being in flesh and blood.² Realist *B* would then point out that Sherlock Holmes is not abstract at all: for instance, he smokes the pipe and plays the violin – both activities of a kind that only concrete entities are able to perform; the reason why we could not find him, *here* in the actual world, is that he is a *concrete* inhabitant of some merely possible world.³ Finally, realist *C* will provide a further explanation: Sherlock Holmes may be abstract or concrete, actual or merely possible (and even impossible!), but what really matters is that he lacks the property of existence, more or less as I lack the property of being two metres tall.⁴

In short, three different options are available for the fictional realist. This conceptual pattern may be summarised by means of the following conditional:

(EX) If Sherlock Holmes is part of reality, then he is either non-concrete or non-actual or non-existent.

In other words, were Sherlock Holmes out there, it/he would be an “exotic” entity.⁵ In what follows, I shall argue that Sherlock Holmes is not out there, since I want to endorse (and defend) a metaphysical view according to which there are no exotic entities. Anti-exoticism, as a motivation for fictional anti-realism, comes at a price: in order to keep our inventory as simple as possible, the semantic analysis of certain ordinary discourses has to be slightly complicated. I believe that, other things being equal, it is a better choice to complicate semantics rather than ontology.

² The artefactualist view is championed by (among others) Van Inwagen (1977), Thomasson (1999), and Voltolini (2006).

³ Lewis (1978) may be taken to be a supporter of the possibilist view, but there are good reasons to doubt it: cf. Sainsbury (2010, 82-3).

⁴ Neo-Meinongian accounts of fictional characters are, among others, Parsons (1980), Zalta (1983), Castañeda (1989), and Priest (2005).

⁵ I borrow this use of the term “exotic” from Sainsbury (2010, 32).

I. NOMINALISM AND ACTUALISM

Anti-exoticism can be characterised as a combination of actualism and nominalism, namely as the conjunction of the following three theses:

1. Everything exists;
2. Whatever exists is actual;
3. Whatever exists is concrete (i.e., located in space-time).

Actualism, broadly conceived, corresponds to theses (1) and (2): there are no objects that do not exist *and* there are no merely possible objects, respectively.⁶ Thesis (3) is meant to capture nominalism. We should be quite cautious here, since this ancient label has taken on slightly different meanings over the centuries. Thus, let me clarify a little bit further what I mean by (3).

In a rather traditional sense, nominalism amounts to the exclusion of universals from the ontological inventory; nowadays, philosophers use this word to intend the rejection of abstract objects as well. These two kinds of nominalism are certainly independent from each other, in so far as one could either reject universals but accept other *abstracta* (e.g., numbers or sets) or reject abstract entities but deny altogether that universals are really abstract. I suggest (3) as a good way to summarise both varieties of nominalism, since the characterisation of universals as non-concrete entities sounds much more plausible to me. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to characterise nominalism as the rejection of abstract objects.

The picture of reality that results from the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3), is that of a universe populated only by concrete entities, which are both actual and existent. It seems to me that this sort of anti-exoticist picture has two main advantages over its rivals. In the first place, it may seem to fit better a “naturalistic” attitude towards reality:⁷ exotic entities would be (by definition) causally isolated from the (actual) spatio-temporal world; as a consequence, it looks quite mysterious how they could play any substantial explanatory role in our theories about reality, or how we could even get to know anything about them. To be sure, exoticist metaphysicians have their own ways out of this kind of troubles; yet, if there is a way to get rid of exoticist explanations altogether, it may be worth pursuing it. Secondly, an anti-exoticist inventory promises to be more parsimonious than an exoticist one. If we have to choose between two theories with equal explanatory power and unequal ontological commitments, it is reasonable to apply Ockham’s razor and choose the less committing one.

In the rest of this paper, I will focus on two specific categories of exotic entities: universals (with a special focus on properties) and fictional objects.

⁶ I use “object” (like “entity” above) as a blanket term.

⁷ Here, “naturalism” should be interpreted in a very broad sense.

Let us begin with the former category. Realism about properties (and relations) is typically motivated on the grounds that it provides a simple explanation to a couple of widespread phenomena: predication (i.e., the fact that a certain predicate correctly applies to a certain thing, as in the true sentence ‘Socrates is a philosopher’); similarity between things (e.g., the fact that two different roses have the same colour). According to the realist, a sentence like

(J) John is modest

is true in so far as there is a certain property, namely modesty, that the individual denoted by the proper name ‘John’ exemplifies. So it seems that, in order to account for the truth of simple atomic sentences like (J), we need to posit an exotic entity in virtue of which something is *such and such*. On the contrary, a nominalistic explanation may go as follows: (J) is true because John is such and such, and we need no further entity in virtue of which John is such and such.⁸ In other words, predication and similarity are taken to be fundamental facts, which require no further explanation – not even the realist’s one, that simply consists of postulating the existence of mysterious entities, eternal and immutable inhabitants of a mysterious Platonic realm.⁹ The core idea behind this view is that explanations have to stop at some point: and what better point than a fundamental fact?¹⁰

So far so good. Still, there is a third phenomenon that seems to motivate realism about universals. I am thinking of abstract reference, which has proved far more resistant to nominalistic approaches. Let us consider, for instance, a sentence like

(M) Modesty is a virtue.

Apparently, by uttering (M), we are referring to a (first-order) property, namely modesty, in order to ascribe the (second-order) property of being a virtue to it: when someone asserts (M), she seems to be committed to the existence of exotic entities. At first, the nominalist may attempt to analyse such tricky cases by pointing out that (M) does not really concern abstract universals but only concrete particulars (more specifically, persons). Accordingly, (M) should be paraphrased away as

(P) All modest persons are virtuous persons.

Unfortunately, this strategy does not work. It is easy to verify that (M) and (P) have different truth conditions. Just imagine that John is actually modest yet he lacks any other virtue, so that nobody would say of John that he is virtuous: that is a scenario in which (M) is true and (P) is false.

⁸ The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for sentences like ‘Rose 1 and rose 2 share the same colour’, which are supposed to reflect in natural language the phenomenon of similarity.

⁹ For a detailed overview of the debate about universals in contemporary philosophy, cf. Loux (2017, 17-81).

¹⁰ Cf. Devitt (1980, 436).

2. SELLARS' STRATEGY GENERALISED

A much more promising strategy for nominalism was developed by Sellars (1963), along the lines suggested by Carnap (1959). In § 2.1, I will present a simplified version of this strategy (in fact, I will ignore a problem about translation, which Sellars solves by improving the notational system, because it is not relevant to our purposes). Then, in § 2.2, I will show that Sellars' strategy can be straightforwardly generalised in order to analyse fictional discourse as well.

2.1 *How To Dispose of Universals*

Let us consider (M) again. At first glance, as we just underlined, (M) seems to concern merely extra-linguistic entities (i.e., *abstracta* like properties or *concreta* like persons). But maybe it simply concerns linguistic entities like words (and, more specifically, predicates): it seems reasonable to analyse sentences like (M) as concerning language itself rather than (extra-linguistic) reality. For instance, (M) may be paraphrased away as follows:

(W) 'Modest' is a virtue-word,

where 'virtue-word' (or 'virtue-predicate', for that matter) could be seen as a mere label which allows us to record certain linguistic conventions of the community we belong to. Clearly enough, these conventions are not *arbitrary* in so far as they actually reflect some objective facts about reality (after all, our nominalist is not meant to be a *radical* one): for instance, the (fundamental) fact that there are certain similarities among different objects (so that people happen to gather them all under the label 'modest' or 'modesty'), and the (equally fundamental) fact that there are (second-order) similarities among different clusters of objects (e.g., modest objects, courageous objects, etc., so that people happen to gather them all under the label 'virtue' or 'virtuous').

However, it should be clear that the nominalist cannot treat '*modest*', in (W), as a singular term referring to a word type: otherwise, her efforts against universals (or exotic entities in general) would be neutralised all of a sudden.¹¹ Thus, she has to point out that (W) does not concern word types but only word tokens – particular modest-inscriptions or modest-utterances. Therefore, (M) is better paraphrased away as

(W*) All modest-words are virtue-words.

More precisely, all modest-words *compliant with a certain linguistic tradition* (namely, canonical English) are virtue-words (compliant with that tradi-

¹¹ It is controversial whether types should be conceived as universals or not (see Wetzel (2018, § 3). Anyway, they would not satisfy the anti-exoticist requirements outlined in (1), (2), and (3).

tion). (W*) can be used as a paradigm for systematic nominalistic paraphrase of our ordinary talk about properties (and relations). In what follows, I will propose that we naturally extend this kind of analysis in order to account for our ordinary talk about fictional characters as well. For this purpose, it is required to widen our focus from words and linguistic practices to depictions and *representational* practices in general.

2.2 How To Dispose of Fictional Objects

Sellars' metalinguistic strategy for ordinary talk of universals is widely recognised as the most successful one. It seems to me that the analogy with the case of fictional discourse is quite straightforward. People use sentences like (M) in order to record (and convey) certain linguistic conventions; in the same way, people use sentences like

(S) Sherlock Holmes is a detective

in order to record (and convey) certain narrative – and, more generally, *depictive* – conventions. Accordingly, (S) should be paraphrased away as

(S*) All Sherlock|Holmes-depictions are detective-depictions.¹²

More precisely, all Sherlock|Holmes-depictions *compliant with a certain depictive tradition* are detective-depictions (compliant with that tradition). As a matter of fact, we can trace back the very beginning of the relevant tradition, so identifying the human being who initiated it (namely Sir A. C. Doyle). By the way, this is what the artefactualist actually talks about when she claims (by means of a powerful metaphor) that Sherlock Holmes was created by A. C. Doyle.

3. FICTIONAL CHARACTERS AS (CLUSTERS OF) FICTIONAL DEPICTIONS

What has A. C. Doyle really done, then? I suggest that, instead of having created (or, even worse, discovered) an exotic entity, he simply manufactured (both mentally and materially) the first Sherlock|Holmes-depictions ever. Thus, when we talk (or think) about Sherlock Holmes, we simply talk (or think) about Sherlock|Holmes-depictions – i.e., fictional depictions produced within a certain depictive tradition. In other words, we use the fictional proper name 'Sherlock Holmes' in order to convey some information about a specific cluster of fictional depictions (e.g., that each member of the relevant cluster is a detective-depiction). Besides, when we quantify over fictional characters, as in the well-known Van Inwagen's sentence

¹² I use the symbol “|” just to separate different words.

(V) There are characters in some 19th century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any character in any 18th century novel,¹³

we actually quantify over clusters (or pluralities) of fictional depictions: after all, as I want to suggest, fictional characters are nothing but *these* clusters (or pluralities) of fictional depictions.¹⁴

Therefore, let me clarify a little bit further what exactly I mean by “depiction” and in which cases a depiction ought to be taken as a fictional one. First of all, I call *depiction* anything that is supposed to depict or represent something else (sometimes, so to speak, things that do not exist), without any restriction on the kind of language (verbal or not) and of medium (mental or material) employed. Accordingly, drawings and paintings, verbal descriptions and narrations (like those occurring in Doyle’s stories or in my mind right now), films, and even purely instrumental musical compositions, count as good examples of depictions in this very broad sense. At this point, we still need a criterion that allows us to distinguish between fictional and non-fictional ones.

As is well known, Tolstoj’s *War and Peace* is a work of fiction in which both Bezuchov (a purely fictional character) and Napoleon (a historical figure) are depicted. Intuitively, though, one would say that Tolstoj’s Bezuchov-depictions are as fictional as Tolstoj’s Napoleon-depictions: they both belong to a work of fiction; one would not say of an “inaccurate” Napoleon-depiction that it is false, she would just say that it is fictional (hence, not supposed to be true or false *simpliciter*). As a rough approximation, the criterion we are looking for could thus be stated as follows:

(C) A depiction *D* is fictional only if either *D* is not meant to depict an existent object or *D* is not meant to depict an existent object in a truthful way.

The disjunction in (C) is supposed to account for the intuition that there can be fictional depictions both of fictional characters and of real persons (or objects whatsoever). Still, the condition expressed in (C) is not a sufficient one: there can be cases in which the condition is fulfilled for a depiction *D*, yet *D* is not fictional but rather *mendacious*. For instance, lies and deceits are depictions of this sort. On the contrary, the kind of fiction we are talking about is always *declared*, given that its purpose is not to deceive people but to entertain them.¹⁵ Also, the author of a work of fiction may happen to produce, by pure coincidence, truthful depictions of existent objects (like individuals, states of affairs, and so on); still, as our criterion assures us, they would count as fictional, since

¹³ Van Inwagen (1977, 302).

¹⁴ As in the case of words, it should be clear that we are talking about depiction *tokens*.

¹⁵ Cf. Walton (1990) for a comprehensive account of fictional practices as games of make-believe.

the author did actually mean to create fictional depictions. After all, it seems that knowledge of the author's intentions is enough to decide whether a depiction is fictional or not.

So far, then, I have just sketched a way to get rid of a special category of exotic objects, namely fictional objects. Unfortunately, (S*) above does not work as a general paradigm for systematic anti-exoticist paraphrase of our ordinary talk about fictional characters. As a matter of fact, it only works for a specific subclass of fictional sentences: those which convey information about what is true *inside* the relevant stories. On the contrary, fictional sentences that convey information about what is true *outside* of the stories, like

(F) Sherlock Holmes is famous,

do need a slightly different treatment. In fact, while (F) seems true, it does not seem true that all Sherlock|Holmes-depictions are famous (it seems that they are *collectively* famous). In order to analyse *external* fictional discourse, some further tool is actually needed.

However, the core idea still holds: even in the case of (F), we use the fictional proper name 'Sherlock Holmes' in order to talk about a certain cluster of fictional depictions. In particular, we say of this cluster that its members are collectively famous – more or less as we say of an orchestra that it is famous, even if not every member of the orchestra is famous. In other words, it seems that we can account for the intelligibility of fictional proper names by taking the relevant clusters of fictional depictions as their semantic values.¹⁶ I believe that, along this path, it is possible to provide a complete analysis of fictional discourse which requires no exotic entity in the ontological inventory. At the same time, this kind of analysis would represent a good alternative to the most widespread variety of fictional anti-realism (i.e., fictionalism about fictional characters),¹⁷ since it does not need to assume that people are involved in some sort of pretense when they utter sentences like (F): they *actually* talk about something, namely (clusters of) fictional depictions.

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¹⁶ More precisely, the relevant cluster of fictional depictions would be a *secondary extension* (as GOODMAN 1949 would call it) of a fictional proper name, while its primary extension (namely its referent) would be just empty. I will not go into this now, since it falls outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ Cf., among others, Walton (1990), Brock (2002), and Everett (2013).

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