

What kind of a creature is Sherlock Holmes?

In “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse”, John Searle explains what people do when they write about characters in fiction (Searle, 1975). According to him, when writing about fictional characters or fictional events, people are pretending to make assertions. However, he does not explain what these pretense assertions are about—which begs the question: How is it that authors, readers, literary critics, professors, and so forth, can talk truthfully about elements in fiction, and the relationships between them if the assertions made (or pretended to be made, as Searle claims) point to nothing in reality? What these pretense assertions are about is what Peter Van Inwagen attempts to show in “Creatures of Fiction”.

In his article, van Inwagen argues for the existence of what he calls “creatures of fiction”, a concept that includes (but is not limited to) characters in works of fiction. According to van Inwagen’s argument, entities such as Sherlock Holmes exist—and by that, he does not mean the detective exists in the minds of Conan Doyle’s readers—he means that Sherlock Holmes *exists*. As we will see, van Inwagen appeals to Cartesian dualism to support his claim (van Inwagen, 1977).

My objective here is to suggest a less metaphysical approach to analyze the possible existence of characters of fiction, based on Rudolph Carnap’s linguistic frameworks theory. I do not think a resolution to such a matter can be reached, and that is not my aim in this paper. I will hopefully, however, show that even though agreeing with the fact that Sherlock Holmes’s ontological status is that of a real entity might be difficult, accepting that the term Sherlock Holmes points to a vacuum might be even harder to deal with.

In “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse”, John Searle explains that to make an assertion, one must follow a few rules: the author must be conveying something truthful; she must be prepared to provide evidence for what she says; what is said must not be obvious to all parties involved; and the speaker/writer must believe what is

being said. When a newscaster says “It is raining in New York City tonight” based on information provided to her by a reliable meteorologist, she is complying with all of the rules and therefore her assertion is correct. But what was Arthur Conan Doyle doing when he wrote sentences such as “Mr. Sherlock Holmes, who was usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he was up all night, was seated at the breakfast table.” (Conan Doyle, 1902)? Although there could have been a man named Sherlock Holmes sitting at a breakfast table when Conan Doyle wrote that, it would be preposterous to think the author had any intention of being truthful or to be prepared to provide evidence or to believe in what he was saying. According to Searle, Conan Doyle was not asserting anything. But if that is the case, what was he doing? Some authors, Searle writes, try to explain what sentences in works of fiction are by the type of illocutionary act they perform—which asks for an explanation: What is an illocutionary act?

In “How To Do Things With Words, J.L. Austin introduced the concept of illocutionary acts (Austin, 1955). Unlike the act of saying something, he explained, an illocutionary act is the *performance of an act* in saying something. If someone says to another person “Don’t go there!”, for instance, she is not just performing the act of uttering the sentence (which Austin calls a locutionary act)—she is also performing the act of advising, urging, or pleading to some person not to go to a certain place. One thing Searle notes—as these examples show—is that a sentence’s illocutionary act is usually related to the meaning of the words contained in it. Some thinkers, Searle continues, claim that every sentence in works of fiction performs the same illocutionary act: the act of “telling a story”. What is being asserted—or if anything is being asserted at all, is not important—since this illocutionary acts explanation would account for what authors are doing in any work of fiction. But, Searle points out, arguing that each sentence in every work of fiction, regardless of the words contained in them, has the same illocutionary act makes little sense, as one would expect the words contained in a sentence to have at least some relation to the illocutionary act it performs.

Searle's alternative to this can be summarized in the following analogy: just like an actor in a play might pretend to slap another actor, the author of a fictional book *pretends* to make assertions to convey the story he wants to tell. According to Searle, when authors write sentences like the one by Arthur Conan Doyle mentioned above, they are pretending to make assertions. It is important to say that by the word "pretending" Searle does not mean an author is engaging in an act of deception. What he means is that, just like the actor in the play, all authors do when pretending to assert things is to engage in performative acts—to do something as if they were doing it, with no intent to deceive. From this, Searle says, it follows that whether a text is a work of fiction or not lies in its author's illocutionary intentions. There usually is nothing in the words themselves that might give it away. The illocutionary intentions of the pretense assertions are what will say it—at least in most cases, says Searle. The issue is that, for this argument to work, there are further things that need to be explained—things which, as I previously said, Searle leaves untouched. And this is what van Inwagen attempts to do in "Creatures of Fiction".

What language can tell us about the world, what it is for, and what are the acceptable ways it can be used for different purposes are questions that go back at least to Parmenides, who used thought and language as the basis for his claim that nothing ever changes (Russel, 1946). In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed that for anything to be speakable, it should be symmetrical to the logical structure of the world (Wittgenstein, 1922). In the *Philosophical Investigations*, however, Wittgenstein claimed that language is simply a tool that can be used in a series of different games, whose objectives vary widely (Wittgenstein, 1953). Despite many differences such as these, one thing seems to be agreed upon when it comes to the logical use of language: for an assertion to be deemed true or false, its components must refer to things that exist. Again, if we accept Searle's argument, the following question must be answered: What are the pretense assertions about?

Peter van Inwagen begins his article by describing two ways to analyze existence. The Meinongian view, he explains, says that there *are* things that have non-

existence as an attribute. According to a Meinongian, Sherlock Holmes is a private detective with a thin, hawk-like nose, who *does not* exist. A Meinongian, van Inwagen says, will look at the sentence “There is a detective named Sherlock Holmes, and he does not exist” and claim that the terms “is” and “exist” are not equivalent from a logical stance. According to Bertrand Russell, the word “is” in fact is used to signify different things. It denotes, for instance, identity in “Joe Biden is the current president of the United States, and it denotes existence in “There is a man named Joe Biden”. Having the same word mean such different things, Russell claimed, is something that makes for a lot of confusion (Russell 1919). However, as van Inwagen points out, in the case of the Meinongian, it is difficult to see how “is” and “exists” could mean different things. With that, he rules out the Meinongian view as a way to grant existence to creatures of fiction.

Van Inwagen then turns to another perspective, taken by many logicians and philosophers of language, which he calls anti-Meinongian. According to an anti-Meinongian, van Inwagen explains, for the term “Sherlock Holmes” in the assertion “There is a detective named Sherlock Holmes” to be a name for something that exists, that sentence would need to be paraphrased, which would lead to something of this sort: “If the stories written by Arthur Conan Doyle describing the memories of Dr. John Watson were not fiction, but a description of facts, there would have existed a detective named Sherlock Holmes”. Unlike what he says about Meinongians, however, van Inwagen does not take issue with the anti-Meinongian view’s essence. There is, he says, nothing strictly wrong with it. The problem, he claims, is that there are assertions that, to be paraphrased in a way considered adequate, would end up generating very long, cumbersome, or complicated sentences. Some assertions, van Inwagen points out, would be virtually impossible to paraphrase. Why then, he asks, go through all this trouble? It is possible, he affirms, to grant existence to Sherlock Holmes without all the hassle. To do that, he turned to René Descartes.

As a dualist, Descartes believed that our minds do not exist as a result of biological activity, but that they are something else altogether—stuff that does not

belong to the physical world (Descartes, 1641). What you and I are, wrote Descartes, are an immaterial type of substance that bears some sort of relation to our physical bodies. As van Inwagen explains, according to Descartes, a person cannot correctly be described, for instance, as being of a certain height, or having a certain eye color, and so forth. People can only be described, for instance, as being in pain, or as being in sorrow, or as animating a body. Creatures such as Sherlock Holmes, van Inwagen claims, should be understood in the same manner. Sherlock Holmes, in this case, is not a detective with a thin, hawk-like nose. He is a character in stories or is a theoretical entity of literary criticism, or was created by Arthur Conan Doyle, and so forth. Just like what you and I are to Descartes, what entities like Holmes *are* to van Inwagen have no physical characteristics. And just like you and I, entities like Holmes have what van Inwagen dubs “ascriptions”—in other words, there is a certain relationship Holmes holds to being a detective and having a thin, hawk-like nose.

Princess Elizabeth of the Palatinate, a philosopher who corresponded with Descartes famously asked him how is it that an immaterial substance acts on a material substance. With that, she posed a problem that to this day awaits a convincing answer from defenders of dualism. Van Inwagen’s dualistic account seems immune from this specific type of criticism since what is being animated by the immaterial substance is not material as well. Even so, agreeing with this view requires a certain degree of metaphysical flexibility that many modern philosophers would not abide by. But there is still, I submit, a way to grant existence to creatures of fiction without having to resort to the kind of stuff the first Wittgenstein would call the unspeakable (Wittgenstein, 1922).

In “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”, Rudolph Carnap introduced his theory of linguistic frameworks (Carnap, 1950). According to Carnap, to be able to talk (in whatever language) about certain entities, one needs to accept a specific linguistic framework. Asking, for instance, whether numbers exist, Carnap claims, only makes sense if the question is posed after a linguistic framework of numbers has been accepted by the person asking the question. What he means is that, only once one has

accepted the framework of numbers, it makes sense for her to ask questions about elements that constitute that framework. From the moment a framework is adopted, different theories about how its elements behave, what relations they bear to each other, and so forth can be proposed, accepted, or rejected. Sticking to our numbers example, once that linguistic framework is accepted, we can, for instance, ask what is the square root of 239, theorize about how we can prove that $2+2=4$, or explore in how many ways Pythagoras' theorem can be demonstrated. On the other hand, Carnap claims that asking if the number 5 (or any other number) exists before accepting a numbers linguistic framework is to ask a pseudo-question. In Carnap's view, philosophers who ask questions regarding the existence of numbers without accepting a linguistic framework for numbers, i.e who ask not whether there is a number named 5 within the framework, but who speculate about the ontological status of 5 outside of it, wondering whether 5 possesses a metaphysical characteristic called reality before accepting the framework, are not being scientific about their investigations. This is why analyticity is so important for Carnap's theory. Analytic propositions allow us to formulate assertions that are true due to the meaning of their words, without the need for empirical observation for them to be confirmed. That is what allows for linguistic frameworks to be constituted, and why existence of its elements cannot be questioned "from the outside." Then, once a framework is accepted, different theories proposed within it can be confirmed or refuted through empirical observation.

Yet, not every possible linguistic framework should be accepted. Acceptance, said Carnap, should occur through "the introduction of a framework of new forms of expressions to be used according to a new set of rules" (Carnap, 1950). Two initial steps, Carnap continues, are necessary to constitute a new framework. First, a higher-order predicate makes it possible for us to say a certain entity belongs to a certain kind. "X is a creature in a fictional story" would complete this first step in the case I am trying to make. The second step, Carnap elaborates, is the introduction of variables of the new type. New entities are values of these variables, such as "Sherlock Holmes is a creature in a fictional story" or "Dr. John Watson is a creature in a fictional story". One point worth bringing up is that van Inwagen claims that not only "human" creatures are

to be considered creatures of fiction. To use an example he offers, Professor Moriarty's book *Dynamics of an Asteroid* is also a creature of fiction. By connecting it to Carnap's higher order predicate, we have "Professor Moriarty's book *Dynamics of an Asteroid* is a creature in a fictional story". The question, then, becomes whether such a framework is acceptable or not. The acceptability of a framework, says Carnap, should also be judged in terms of how fruitful and helpful it is for the objectives for which its language is intended. Asking if Sherlock Holmes exists before adopting a creatures of fiction linguistic framework is asking something with no cognitive value, something which is but nonsensical speculation. Someone who disagrees with Carnap might say that this is equivalent to accepting Sherlock Holmes' existence platonically. To that a Carnapian might reply that, based on the same line of reasoning, physicists—who accept a Physics linguistic framework, accept the existence of things like space-time and the wave function platonically as well.

Consider these two questions: Do chairs exist? Does the United States of America exist?

It might seem silly to most people asking if chairs exist. But from a Carnapian perspective, the question cannot be silly because it is not even a question—it is a sentence devoid of cognitive meaning, which can only be asked once a linguistic framework for, say, macroscopical physical objects has been accepted. Then, and only then, one can ponder, for instance, if all there exists are particles called fermions and bosons which make up all of the atoms in the universe, which in turn make up every living being or object we can observe. Chairs and any other macroscopic object, many physicists will say, are emergent—they are not part of what fundamentally describes physical reality. However, many physicists will also say, it is fine to talk and theorize about macroscopic objects because that is useful for us to understand how things around us behave, and how to make accurate predictions about how they will behave in the future. To use Carnap's terms, it is useful and fruitful to navigate the world to speak in terms of chairs and other macroscopic objects. This does not mean accepting a certain framework equals granting existence to its internal entities. Accepting a

framework, Carnap would say, is the first step of a process where its elements will be discussed, investigated, debated, measured, and so forth. With time, some frameworks will prove to be more useful than others, and that is how we should judge whether a framework should continue to be accepted or not.

What about the United States of America? Does it exist? Again, Carnap would say, asking the question before accepting a linguistic framework for geopolitical entities like countries would be to ask a pseudo-question. But this linguistic framework, I submit, is acceptable as it allows us to better understand, predict, and navigate the world and the relationships between its peoples. Think about how complicated the life of a person who's skeptical about the existence of countries would be. There is, however, another element particular to countries that I find important to discuss and to connect with my final point about creatures of fiction. For that, I will go back to Austin's concept of illocutionary acts.

States don't utter sentences. But there are people such as senators, judges, and police officers who can speak and write on behalf of a State. When an American cop says "You are under arrest", he is not just a person uttering words. He is also a mouthpiece for The United States of America. And a State's illocutionary acts have a very specific kind of power. If I tell someone to stay home, I am performing an illocutionary act of ordering, urging, pleading, or asking that person to stay at home. Whether that illocutionary act has any effect varies widely depending on the circumstances. But when a police officer says someone is under arrest, those words have a real and immediate effect on the person to whom they are being directed. It changes their status in society. The same for when an officiant declares two people to be married, or when senators and congresspeople declare war on another country. Sentences coming from States contain illocutionary acts whose effect is undeniably real, and that can shape the physical reality we live in.

But what about Holmes, Holden Caulfield, Anna Karenina, and so many others? Is a linguistic framework for creatures of fiction to be accepted? I believe so. It is

certainly possible to establish a framework where there are logical relationships between such elements. We could argue that if it weren't, every literary critic, book club member, student, and faculty in the Humanities would be doing nothing but blabbering when discussing fiction—which very well might be! But again, from that perspective, we could argue that physicists are blabbering when discussing string theory, or that UN General Assemblies consist of diplomats speaking nothing but gibberish. What van Inwagen calls creatures of fiction contain elements that reflect the structure of the world. Fiodor Dostoievski is an example of an author who could extract certain “truths” about people, conceptualize them, and then convey them in stories that, although fictional, reflect reality in powerful ways. (I use the word truths between quotation marks because it is arguable whether there are any truths about the human condition at all. What I mean by that are certain patterns of behavior that exist, are observable, and that, if absorbed, can teach us how to predict and identify certain situations, and guide us to potential ways to navigate them.) Finally, I believe that much like a State, creatures of fiction can perform illocutionary acts that have the power to change reality. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” once met with Abraham Lincoln. Legend has it that he told her “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war”. True or not, Stowe’s book was the second best-selling book in the U.S. in the 19th century (behind only the Holy Bible), and it helped galvanize the abolitionist movement in the North in the years leading to the Civil War. Creatures of fiction alter reality. They reshape language. Have you ever been in a catch-22 or knew someone who wore a scarlet letter? These are literary terms that shape how we describe the world.

As for Holmes, he is the reason why the image of a man wearing a hat and holding a pipe in his mouth is what pops into the minds of so many people when they think about a detective. He has shaped the world’s collective imagination. And even though we all know no one with this name ever lived on 221b, Baker Street during the Victorian era, we can still say, as I believe Carnap would agree, that Sherlock Holmes exists.

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