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Vacuous Names and Fictional Entities*

One of the main concerns of my previous work (Kripke 1980)¹ is the semantics of proper names and natural kind terms. A classical view which Putnam mentioned, advocated by Mill, states that proper names have as their function simply to refer; they have denotation but not connotation. The alternative view, which until fairly recently has dominated the field, has been that of Frege and Russell. They hold that ordinary names² have connotation in a very strong sense: a proper name such as ‘Napoleon’ simply means *the man having most of the properties we commonly attribute to Napoleon, such as being Emperor of the French, losing at Waterloo, and the like*. Of course, intermediate views might be suggested, and perhaps have been suggested.

For various general terms, such as ‘cow’ and ‘tiger’ or ‘elm’ and ‘beech’, not only Frege and Russell, but Mill as well (probably more explicitly than the other two), held that they have connotation in the sense that we learn what it is to be a tiger by being given some list of properties which form necessary and sufficient conditions for being a tiger. In both these cases, both where Mill and Frege–Russell disagree and where Mill and Frege–Russell agree, I have advocated the

* The present paper (essentially a precursor of my John Locke Lectures at Oxford) was delivered at the conference ‘Language, Intentionality, and Translation Theory’, held at the University of Connecticut in March of 1973 and organized by Sam Wheeler and John Troyer. The other papers in the conference, together with the discussions afterward, were published in *Synthese* 27, 1974. The version here is based on a transcription made by the conference organizers. A general discussion of my own paper was printed in the *Synthese* volume mentioned (509–21), even though the paper itself was not. Papers were presented by many distinguished philosophers of language, who also participated in the discussion.

¹ Now this work is well known, but the present paper should be read bearing in mind that it was fairly new at the time, and hence was summarized again in part.

² Russell also speaks of so-called logically proper names. For these, his views are close to those of Mill, but he argues that what we normally call ‘names’ are not, in fact, logically proper names. It is with ordinary names that I am concerned when I speak of Russell’s views on names, and I will henceforth omit the qualification ‘ordinary’, even though according to Russell they are not ‘genuine’ names. See the discussion mentioned in note 14 below, and Russell (1918–19) generally.

view that the consensus is largely wrong; that it is reference which is much more important here than any supposed sense.³

I want to discuss one aspect of this problem today, since no consideration in favor of the Frege–Russell view of proper names has seemed more conclusive than the fact that names can sometimes be empty—that, for example, they can occur in fiction. Also, even if they do in fact refer, it is intelligible to raise the question of whether the alleged referent really exists. For instance, we ask whether Moses as a historical character really existed and the like. What can we mean by this? If the function of naming were simply reference, then empty names would seem to have no semantic function at all, but plainly they do not fail to have a semantic function, as anyone who enjoys a good work of fiction can attest. And even if they do have referents, we can ask whether, say, Moses or Napoleon really existed. When we do so we are not asking whether *that person* really existed. We are not questioning *of him* whether he really existed, because if we were asking such a question, the answer should be evident. Since everyone really exists, *that person* does also. It is unintelligible, as Russell and Frege have emphasized, to ask of a person whether he really exists.

Now to this problem the Frege–Russell analysis, and its modifications, provides a neat solution. If we have a story—for example, one involving Sherlock Holmes—to say that Sherlock Holmes really exists is to say that someone or other uniquely satisfies the conditions of the story, or at any rate, most or enough of them. To say that he does not exist is to say that this is not the case. Presumably, if this is to be the analysis of the statement, it should apply to counterfactual situations also. To say, ‘Sherlock Holmes would have existed (or might have existed) under certain circumstances’ is to say that some person would have uniquely played the role of the detective in the Sherlock Holmes story, or might have played it under those circumstances. And to say that he would not have existed in certain circumstances is to say that the story would not have been true of any such detective under those circumstances. We can then replace the names in these sentences by existential quantifiers, replacing ‘Sherlock Holmes existed’ with ‘There exists a man uniquely satisfying the conditions of the story’. And these are supposed to be necessary and sufficient conditions both about the actual world and about every possible world.

Some of you will know that I distinguish between the questions of what is necessary, whether something would have been true in a possible world, and the epistemological question of whether we know a priori that certain conditions

³ There are more recent modifications, but here I am going to lump them together with Frege and Russell: many writers—Wittgenstein (1953), Searle (1958), and others—have held that instead of a fixed list of properties forming necessary and sufficient conditions for being Napoleon or being a tiger, one should instead use a cluster of properties, most of which must roughly hold of the object. Not all of them—or at least not a lot of them—could fail. In Kripke (1980) I argued that this modification, no matter what those who made it thought, does not really overcome the most important objections to the classical view (see 31–33, 60–61, and 74–75).

must be true of the actual world. Therefore there are two questions here about the Frege–Russell analysis. First, is it true that to ask whether Moses exists in a given counterfactual situation, or whether Sherlock Holmes exists, is to ask whether the things commonly said about them would have been true in that situation? Secondly, do we know a priori, or with some sort of advance certainty about the actual world, that the existence of Moses or of Sherlock Holmes is materially equivalent in the actual world to the question of the existence of some unique person satisfying the conditions in the story? These questions are separable and distinct; Frege and Russell could be right on one and wrong on the other. At any rate, they seem to have a neat solution to all these problems that seems to fit into what we actually ask when we ask whether there really was a Sherlock Holmes—or so it may seem at first blush.

Those familiar with my previous work will know that I believe, from a battery of examples, that the Frege–Russell analysis is erroneous, as applied to natural language, for both cases. It is wrong in general about the counterfactual situations, and it is wrong about what we can say a priori about the actual world. Surely, for example, to ask whether under certain circumstances Moses would have existed is not to ask whether under these circumstances such-and-such events would have taken place. For, first, presumably Moses might have existed yet not gone into religion or politics, and therefore not done any of these great deeds. Nor need anyone else, of course, have done them in his place. Second, even had Moses never existed, perhaps someone of comparable stature would have come along to do exactly these great deeds. The statements (that is, one containing ‘Moses’ and the other containing a description typically associated with that name), which are supposed to have the same truth-value in all possible worlds, are such that neither one entails the other in a possible world. One can be true and the other false in both directions.⁴ Of course, there might be certain (extremely implausible, maybe never held) views in the philosophy of history which assert that there are great individuals uniquely called forth to perform certain tasks. This should hardly be assumed simply to follow from an analysis of existential statements and of proper names. I think then that in this case the Frege–Russell analysis must be rejected. In particular, to describe a counterfactual situation as one in which Moses would or would not have existed is not to ask whether any properties would have been instantiated.⁵ This is to oppose the

⁴ Note that in this case I am taking ‘Moses’ as the name of a real person, and even perhaps assuming the essential accuracy (if not entire accuracy) of the Pentateuchal account. I am then talking about counterfactual situations, and arguing that the existence of someone satisfying the Pentateuchal account has little to do with whether Moses would have existed in a given counterfactual situation. (The case of Moses was discussed in Kripke [1980:66–67], based on Wittgenstein’s use of this example [1953:§79].)

⁵ Of course, one could invent a property, ‘Mosesizing’, as frequently proposed by Quine. See Quine (1940:149–50) and Quine (1960:176–80), and my comment in Kripke (1980:29). Such an artificially invented property is not in question here, and is not in and of itself objectionable.

technical meaning that Frege gave to the doctrine that existence is not a predicate. An apparent singular statement of the form ‘Moses exists’ is *not* equivalent to any statement of the form ‘Such-and-such properties are instantiated’, unless you take the property of being Moses as the property in question. But if you did so, this would be written out in the form that Frege did not like. It would mean, essentially, ‘There is a y , such that y is Moses’.

Russell also held that existence is not a predicate.⁶ Explicitly what bothered him about this property is that it would be trivially true of everything. As Russell says, ‘There is no sort of point in a predicate which could not conceivably be false. I mean, it is perfectly clear that, if there were such a thing as this existence of individuals that we talk of, it would be absolutely impossible for it not to apply, and that is the characteristic of a mistake’ (Russell 1918–19:211). The premise Russell is using here can be construed to be correct. It *is* necessary that everything exists, or that for every x there is a y , such that y is x . It by no means follows that existence is a trivial property, in the sense that everything has necessary existence. Symbolically, the difference is between $\Box(x)Ex$ (the fact that Russell invokes) and $(x)\Box Ex$, which does not follow. Only if the second formula were true would the predicate attributing existence to individuals be trivial. I have discussed this confusion as a modal fallacy in a technical paper on modal logic (Kripke 1971:70)⁷ If, in fact, the existence of a particular object is contingent, we can say of that object that it might not have existed and *would* not have existed under certain specified conditions. For example, I would not have existed if my parents had never met. So Moore is right in saying, as against Russell, that one can say of a particular that it might not have existed under certain circumstances and mean nothing that has to be analyzed out in terms of whether certain properties might or might not have been instantiated.⁸

⁶ Both Frege and Russell think that existence cannot be a predicate of individuals but identify it with the ‘higher level’ property expressed when we attach an existential quantifier to a one-place predicate. Frege said that the error of regarding existence as a predicate of individuals rather than (in his terminology) a second-level concept is the fundamental error of the ontological argument (see Frege 1997:146, note H). Russell’s view is in fact similar to Frege’s, though formulated in terms of his theory of descriptions, so that the illusion that there is a predicate of individuals can be connected to the illusion that the descriptions are terms referring to objects. This is clear from Quine, who writes: ‘Russell undertook to resolve the anomalies of existence by admitting the word “exists” only in connection with descriptions, and explaining the whole context “($\exists x$)(... x ...) exists” as short for “($\exists y$)($x = y$. \equiv x ...)”... This course supplies a strict technical meaning for Kant’s vague declaration that “exists” is not a predicate; namely, “exists” is not grammatically combinable with a variable to form a matrix “ y exists”’ (1940:151, citations omitted). But it is hard to see how Frege or Russell could deny that ‘($\exists y$)($y = x$)’ is a ‘first-level concept’ (or predicate of individuals) that defines existence. See the discussion below about necessary existence, and Moore’s argument against Russell in note 8.

⁷ As I said in Kripke (1980:157–58), in which some of the views I am now stating are already summarized, the use of ‘Sherlock Holmes’ as the name of an actual but not possible individual now seems to me to be mistaken.

⁸ Moore writes:

[I]n the case of every sense-datum which any one ever perceives, the person in question could always say with truth of the sense-datum in question ‘This might not have existed’; and I cannot see how

Now turn to the actual world. The view of Frege and Russell would assert that to ask whether Sherlock Holmes really existed is to ask whether the story was substantially true of someone (uniquely); and to ask whether Moses existed is to ask whether the story was substantially true of someone. Let's first take the case where it is not a work of fiction, where historians have concluded that the characters really existed. I have discussed this case in Kripke (1980:67–68). In the case of Moses existing, does an affirmative answer imply that the story was substantially true of someone? I think that here again Frege and Russell have gone wrong, even in talking about the actual world. They fail to distinguish between a legend that is completely a tissue of whole cloth about a mythical character and a legend that grew up about an actual character. In the latter case we may say that the stories which have reached us are legendary and were true of no one, yet Moses or whoever else is mentioned in the story really existed. In fact, I quoted a biblical scholar who says exactly that about Jonah.⁹

As I have emphasized about these cases, the reason that we can say that Jonah really existed, though the stories which have reached us about him are substantially false, is that there is a historical chain of communication in which the name, with perhaps linguistic changes, has reached us, leading back to the man Jonah himself and the stories which were erroneously asserted about him.

Suppose the Sherlock Holmes stories were all true of one unique detective: does that amount to concluding that Sherlock Holmes really existed? The dust-jackets of many books of this type contradict such a thesis. The opening page may say 'The characters in this work are fictional and any resemblance to anyone living or dead is purely coincidental'. What is meant by this is that even if by some bizarre accident the stories told in this work are substantially true of some particular people, and even true of them uniquely, the resemblance is purely fortuitous and was unknown to the author. (Actually, we might be suspicious of such a claim, but surely it is not conceptually impossible.) They are not the referents of the names that occur in the story, and it is just a coincidence that the story is substantially true of them. If one of these people about whom the story was true sued in court for invasion of privacy, or perhaps slander or libel, he would not win the case *solely* on the basis of establishing that the story was

this could be true, unless the proposition 'This does in fact exist' is also true, and therefore the words 'This exists' significant (1959:126).

Moore's argument would obviously apply to a much larger class of objects than sense-data. (I think the reason he is concerned with sense-data involves Russell's ideas on logically proper names, in particular that 'this' is always used as a logically proper name of a sense-datum.) And if one thought that some objects (say, numbers) *did* have necessary existence, this would be a significant fact about each such object and should imply a fortiori that the object exists.

⁹ I could have stuck to Moses himself. The famous biblical scholar Martin Noth believed that there really was a Moses but that (in contrast to Wittgenstein 1953:§79, quoted in Kripke 1980:31) he had nothing to do with the exodus from Egypt or most of the best-known things related of him in the Pentateuch. (The true core about him is 'guidance into the arable land'.) This information was probably unknown to me when I gave the present paper.

substantially true of him. The judge, if the coincidence were really established, would rule against the plaintiff and against Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Searle.¹⁰ The reason, once again, lies in the lack of any historical connection to an actual person, even though the beliefs are substantially true of the person.

This is enough by way of softening up. If the Frege–Russell theory is wrong, then, of course, some account must be put forward in its place. But if their theory (as standardly conceived) does not give an account of the problems of existence and apparently empty names that is intuitively correct, then these problems do not, in themselves, argue in favor of their theory as opposed to one emphasizing reference rather than descriptive sense.

Let me take a stab at what a true account should be. There are really two different issues. One is what kind of proposition is expressed using an actual name, a name that really has reference: what is expressed when we make an existential statement using that name? Assume that the name ‘Moses’ refers to a certain man. When we say truly that Moses did exist, or if we said falsely that Moses did not exist, or counterfactually, what would have happened if Moses had not existed, we are always talking about *that man*. Existence is in this sense a predicate. Of course, if the man is around he has got to satisfy the predicate, and that makes it a very special one. But although we could analyze this as ‘ $(\exists y)$ ($y = \text{Moses}$),’ we shouldn’t try to replace it by anything involving instantiation of properties. When we say, ‘Moses might not have existed and under certain circumstances would not have existed’, we are saying something about a certain person, not about whether his deeds would have been accomplished under certain circumstances. Quantified sentences, such as ‘Every (actual) person might not have existed at all’, make perfect sense, and existence is a predicate governed by a quantifier.

As I have warned with respect to analogous cases in Kripke (1980), it doesn’t matter that if Moses had not existed, people would not have been able to make the negative existential assertion. Rather, since we can refer to Moses, we can describe a counterfactual situation in which Moses wouldn’t have existed. It matters not at all that in that situation people would not have been able to say, ‘Moses does not exist’, at least using ‘Moses’ the way we are using it here. Indeed, I can describe a counterfactual situation in which I would not have existed, even though if that were the case I wouldn’t be around to say it. It would be wrong to identify the language people *would have*, given that a certain situation obtained, with the language that *we use to describe how circumstances would have been* in that situation. (I have sometimes run across this confused identification, both in the published literature and in discussion.)

¹⁰ I have later been told that my assertion would not be true in English libel law, which is very favorable to plaintiffs, but would be true in U.S. law. I have not checked up on the matter. The conceptual point I am making is not really affected (even if English law imposes something like ‘strict liability’ here).

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. To write a work of fiction is to imagine—spin a certain romance, say—that there really is a Sherlock Holmes, that the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ as used in this story really refers to some man, Sherlock Holmes, and so on. It is therefore presumably part of the pretense of the story that the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ is really a name and really has the ordinary semantic function of names. If one mistakenly believed the name to be non-empty rather than empty, it would be part of the mistake that this is a name having the ordinary semantic function of names. This 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.¹¹ A work of fiction need not even say that the names used in it are the ‘real names’ of the characters, the names that their parents gave them or the correct ‘family name’, or what their friends call them, and so on. In *Lolita* (Nabokov 1955),¹² in fact, it is stated that the names have been changed to protect the innocent. And that, too, is part of the pretense.

¹¹ Many other people have held something like this. But when I gave this talk, and even the subsequent John Locke Lectures, I was simply unaware that this principle is enunciated by Frege. See the following passage:

Names that fail to fulfill the usual role of a proper name, which is to name something, may be called mock proper names [*Scheineigennamen*]. Although the tale of William Tell is a legend and not history and the name ‘William Tell’ is a mock proper name, we cannot deny it a sense. But the sense of the sentence ‘William Tell shot an apple off his son’s head’ . . . I characterize . . . as fictitious.

Instead of speaking of ‘fiction’, we could speak of ‘mock thoughts’ [*Scheingedanke*]. . . . Even the thoughts are not to be taken seriously as in the sciences: they are only mock thoughts. If Schiller’s *Don Carlos* were to be regarded as a piece of history, then to a large extent the drama would be false. But a work of fiction is not meant to be taken seriously in this way at all: it is all play. Even the proper names in the drama, though they correspond to names of historical persons, are mock proper names; they are not meant to be taken seriously in the work. . . .

The logician does not have to bother with mock thoughts, just as a physicist, who sets out to investigate thunder, will not pay any attention to stage-thunder. (Frege 1897:229–30)

There are various puzzles created by this passage, but the exegesis of Frege is not the main point here. Three things, however, should be noted. First, Frege is the first author I am aware of to have emphasized that empty names in fiction, and the sentences that contain them, are pretenses. Second, were the passage I am quoting to be given in full and expounded, it would not be clear that what I am calling the ‘Frege–Russell’ view was really Frege’s view of the senses of names in fiction. Something like it does appear to be Frege’s view of names of historical characters; it also appears to be the view of certain contemporary Fregeans, such as Alonzo Church, for legend and fiction (see his remarks about ‘Pegasus’ in Church 1956: 7, note 18). However, the view of names in fiction one might deduce from the passage quoted will be considerably different. (There is some difficulty understanding the passage, making it self-consistent or consistent with what Frege says elsewhere.) Third, in the passage Frege says that when a historical figure appears even by name in a fictional work, the name is only a “mock proper name”. If this means that it is not truly a name of the figure in question, or that it fails to refer to him or her, I don’t think this is right. When in *War and Peace* Tolstoy mentions Napoleon, and has him as a character in the work, he is talking about Napoleon (See Chapter 9.)

¹² In the preface, the supposed editor of the manuscript says that the names are not real. For example, ‘Humbert Humbert’, the name of the narrator and main character, is a pseudonym.

If this is so, the name, of course, doesn't *really* have any referent, it is *pretended* to have a referent; and if some view like Mill's is right, and the semantic function of naming is reference, then it follows that here we are only *pretending* to refer to a certain person and say something about him. The propositions that occur in the story, then, are not genuine propositions saying something about some particular person; they are instead merely *pretended propositions*. This is not to say that the sentences that occur in the story are meaningless in the strongest possible sense, because one knows, so to speak, what kind of propositions they are pretending to express. It could be (though maybe the supposition is fantastic) that in fact Doyle had not written stories but historical accounts of actual events. In this case we would be mistaken in believing that these sentences expressed no proposition. In fact, we could in principle say that they did express a proposition. But they don't, on the view I'm suggesting, express any proposition at all if in fact the names don't refer. In particular, it should be required of a genuine proposition that we should be able to say, of each possible world, whether the proposition allegedly expressed by the sentence would or would not have been true under the circumstances in question. If this test fails for the sentences in fiction, then they do not express genuine propositions. And to my mind this test does fail for the sentences in fiction.

Under what circumstances, to mention the case that I noted before, would Sherlock Holmes have existed, given that the name in fact has no referent? Well, not simply if someone or other would have done these things in the story, because the name 'Sherlock Holmes' is supposed to refer to a particular person rigidly. One cannot say, 'Well, it does not designate a real person, but just a (merely) possible person', whether one likes such an ontology or not, because many possible people might have done the things in the story. In fact, some actual people might have done the things in the story, if the circumstances had been different, in another possible world. Charles Darwin, if had he decided to go into another line of work, might have made an excellent detective around London at the time and fought with some analogue of Moriarty. This is not to say of him, or of anyone else, that he would have been Sherlock Holmes or might have been Sherlock Holmes. He could have *played the role* of Sherlock Holmes, he could have fulfilled the stories that are told about Sherlock Holmes. But if the pretense about Sherlock Holmes is that 'Sherlock Holmes' designates someone rigidly, one cannot say which person would have been designated. There is no criterion to pick out one as opposed to another; one should just say that this name does not designate.¹³

I want to say something further about this question of pretense. Aside from the philosophical doctrine of pretended propositions that I have, it seems to me

¹³ See Kripke (1980:156–58). Recall that when this talk was given, the lectures were fairly recent. This section begins with a mythical natural kind term ('unicorn'), but continues with 'Sherlock Holmes'.

obvious that any theory has got to start with the fact that these pretenses in fiction are pretenses. It seems that people have worried and puzzled about empty names as if their existence is a great paradox, and that it is very hard to find a theory that can possibly account for the possibility of such things. 'If the function of naming is reference, how could we have empty names?' On the contrary, one has virtually *got* to have empty names because given any theory of reference—given *any* theory of how the conditions of reference are fulfilled—one can surely *pretend* that these conditions are fulfilled when in fact they are not. Thus the existence of pretended names (in fiction) cannot possibly adjudicate among different theories of names.

The question of whether empty names are possible particularly agitated Russell. He wanted to get rid of the possibility of an empty name (for his notion of logically proper names; names in the ordinary sense were supposed to be abbreviated definite descriptions, could be empty, and were not really names; see note 2). He restricted logically proper names to names of our immediate sense-data, whose existence was supposed to be indubitable, but was also very fleeting.¹⁴ It was then an indubitable truth that the things so named exist. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* (1961) makes the objects his names refer to part of the necessary furniture of the world. Thus it is not possible that the things in question should have failed to exist. These two strategies come from, of course, the same motivation: in fact, as we know, they were working together.

It is interesting to point out that the conclusions to which they were led are not identical but, in fact, incompatible and show the trouble of switching from epistemic to metaphysical considerations. For surely our own immediate sense-data do not have any kind of necessary existence. Their existence is as contingent as anything could be. I right now am receiving all sorts of visual impressions. Had I not entered this room at all, or had I entered it blindfolded, these visual impressions would never have existed. Their existence is therefore contingent.

¹⁴ As the following exchange shows:

Q: If the proper name of a thing, a 'this', varies from instant to instant, how is it possible to make any arguments?

Mr. Russell: You can keep 'this' going for about a minute or two. I made that dot [he had then put a dot on the blackboard] and talked about it for some little time. I mean it varies often. If you argue quickly, you can get some little way before it is finished. I think things last for a finite time, a matter of some seconds or minutes or whatever it may happen to be.

Q: You do not think that air is acting on that and changing it?

Mr. Russell: It does not matter about that if it does not alter its appearance enough for you to have a different sense-datum. (Russell 1918–19:180)

Russell already thought in 'On Denoting' (1905) that the constituents of our propositions must be objects of acquaintance, but what we are allowed to be acquainted with gradually became more and more restricted as his work progressed. So-called names of things that are not objects of our acquaintance are really disguised descriptions. The theory proposed in Russell (1918–19) is more restrictive than earlier ideas. To Gideon Makin (well after this lecture was delivered) I owe the point that for Russell sense-data were actually something physical, not strictly speaking to be identified with visual impressions, as I tend to do in the text. This doesn't affect the point that they are fleeting entities, as the cited interchange attests.

Lots of exegetes have wondered whether the objects of the *Tractatus* were in fact the Russellian sense-data. Aside from internal evidence, one thing we can say is that if they were, they would not fulfill the conditions laid down for objects in the *Tractatus*.

At any rate, Russell hardly succeeds in avoiding the mere possibility of empty names. If names are restricted to our own immediate sense-data, perhaps it is the case then that one cannot doubt whether objects so-called exist. But one can still spin a story, imagining oneself naming sense-data using pretended names, which in the story are stated to be Russellian logically proper names, though in fact they are the names of sense-data that one doesn't have. Suppose, for example, one such name were 'Harry', and 'Harry' is the name of some particular sense-datum. It will then be true for me to say outside the story that Harry does not exist, that there is no such sense-datum as Harry. So even Russell's theory does not avoid this difficulty. It seems to me impossible to imagine that this difficulty could conceivably have been avoided; given that we have a theory of reference, it can be part of the pretense of a story that the conditions for this theory are fulfilled, even when in fact they are not. (It might be possible to avoid any mistake as to whether one is really naming, but not the possibility of fiction or pretense.)

So to get clearer about this problem, one must stop tying oneself up in knots; one must recognize that pretenses that the conditions for semantic reference are fulfilled will always be possible, regardless of what theory of reference one may espouse. The degree of meaningfulness that a story has depends on our knowing what is being pretended. In the case of Sherlock Holmes it is being pretended that the name refers to a certain man and that certain things are being said about him. That is not to say that the sentences which occur in the story express genuine propositions in the sense that we can say under which counterfactual circumstances they would have been true, because we cannot. What I'm saying about pretense could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to mistakes and other cases like that—error as opposed to pretense or fiction. (Russell does, perhaps, by his certainty condition, avoid the possibility of mistake.) And one should not regard it as strange that such errors can exist—one should regard it as natural and inevitable.

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. It has been argued in the literature—for example, by Hintikka (1962)—that, regarded as a logical inference, 'I think, therefore I am', as stated by Descartes, would be fallacious. For, Hintikka says, replace 'I' with 'Hamlet'. Hamlet thought many things, but does it follow that Hamlet existed? The sort of usage that Hintikka presumably has in mind is on a true-false English test, where one asks:

Hamlet was married—true or false?
 Hamlet was indecisive—true or false?
 Hamlet thought—true or false?

To mark the latter one false would be to call him a mindless character, which is not the intent of the play. But what Hintikka's argument fails to recognize is that in this sense—in this special usage, where one is reporting on the play—'Hamlet existed' would be true also, because within the play there really was such a person as Hamlet. This is not trivial; sometimes on such a true–false test such a statement should be marked 'false'. For example, it is probable that according to the play Macbeth's dagger did not exist. Was the ghost of Hamlet's father real, or was Hamlet merely imagining things? In that case, I think the intent of the play is that the ghost was real. In this sense, surely Hamlet really did exist, though if he really thought there was a rat behind a curtain, there was no such rat. So the inference '*A* thinks, therefore *A* exists' holds up perfectly well against this alleged counterexample to the inference pattern.¹⁵

In the play *Hamlet* they put on a play called *The Murder of Gonzago*. Let's suppose that, according to the play *Hamlet*, this isn't supposed to be about any historical character.¹⁶ One can then say, speaking within the play *Hamlet*, that such a real person as Gonzago never existed and that Gonzago was merely a fictional character. Since Hamlet was a real person within the play, it would be false to say that about Hamlet. So Gonzago was merely fictional; Hamlet was a real person. Whatever reasons there may be for free logic, the case of Hamlet (as cited in Hintikka's paper) is not one of them.¹⁷

Sometimes we say not that 'Hamlet' is an empty name, but that 'Hamlet' is the name of a fictional character. That seems to give the name a referent. Now, should we take this as a misleading mode of speaking, or should we attribute to ordinary language an ontology of things called 'fictional characters'? Well, the scary phrase 'things called "fictional characters"' suggests a negative answer. Are there going to be ghostly entities around?

Now actually I think that the answer to my question is yes, and that fictional characters are *not* ghostly entities or merely possible entities—they are entities of a certain sort that exist in the real world. We seem to existentially quantify over

¹⁵ H. P. Grice told me that this was his view also, though I do not vouch for every detail.

¹⁶ When I made such a supposition, I was only showing my own ignorance. Apparently, in fact, the House of Gonzaga was an important group of Italian noblemen who ruled in Mantua and elsewhere. (Why it is spelled 'Gonzago' in Shakespeare is unclear to me.) Years ago I talked to a Shakespeare expert, who told me that a real Gonzago (presumably, a member of the House) was, in fact, murdered, though there was no such play as *The Murder of Gonzago* as far as anyone knows. However, I have been unable to verify this conclusively. In the text, I have let stand my supposition that historically there was neither a murdered Gonzago, nor a play about such a murder.

¹⁷ In free logic the general inference pattern *Fa*. '($\exists x$) *Fx*' is invalid. Also, ($\exists x$) (*x=a*) is neither valid nor does it follow in general from *Fa*. Whatever the motivations may be, the case of 'Hamlet thinks', taken within the play, is no confirmation of the need for free logic.

them when we say, 'There was such a fictional character as Hamlet'. Statements of this form—they are not within the story, because within the story Hamlet is not a fictional character, though Gonzago is—are also not trivial, just as within the story the affirmative existence statements using 'Hamlet' are not trivial. Here we can ask, 'Was there such a fictional character as Hamlet?', and the answer is 'Yes'. Was there such a fictional character as Gonzago? The answer is 'No', because it is only the play *Hamlet* that says that there is a play *The Murder of Gonzago*. There really isn't any such play, and therefore there isn't any such dramatic character as Gonzago to appear in *The Murder of Gonzago*. Speaking inside the play, we would say that Hamlet is a real person and Gonzago a fictional character. Speaking *outside* the play, we say that Hamlet is a fictional character and not a real person; Gonzago, on the other hand, is not a fictional character. That is, in a work of fiction there is said to be such a fictional character, but not outside that work of fiction.

It is important to see that fictional characters so called are not shadowy possible people. The question of their existence is a question about the actual world. It depends on whether certain works have actually been written, certain stories in fiction have actually been told. 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 entities which exist in virtue of the activities of human beings and their interrelations.¹⁸ 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.

In ordinary language, we very often quantify over fictional characters. Perhaps such quantification could be eliminated if it were always possible to replace the original (quantified) sentence with a sentence describing the activities of people.¹⁹ But, for example, here is a conversation I once had. You have probably heard how in the Bible the Israelites are often condemned to sacrificing their children to an evil deity called 'Moloch'. There are biblical scholars who hold that taking 'Moloch' to be the proper name of a deity was a mistake.²⁰ There was

¹⁸ Van Inwagen (1977, 1983) seems to have rediscovered a very similar theory. I myself now vaguely recall hearing a lecture by Michael Dummett that mentioned a distinction between empty names and names of fictional characters. If my recollection is correct, it could well have influenced my ideas. Also, already in his paper 'Imaginary Objects', Moore (arguing against Ryle) says that, of course, various fictional statements of Dickens really are 'about Mr. Pickwick', but does not draw any explicit conclusion about an ontology of fictional characters. Nor does he seem to be defending a Meinongian ontology. See Moore (1959:105).

¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is true that there are fictional characters with certain properties, and anyone who denies this is wrong.

²⁰ In fact, among them was Otto Eissfeldt, and those who accepted his theory (see Eissfeldt 1935). I think that Eissfeldt's theory may be less popular now than it was when I spoke, but this in no way affects the example. The much earlier theory, attributed by Eissfeldt to Abraham Geiger,

not, in fact, any such pagan deity, and ‘Moloch’ meant a type of sacrifice, like a burnt offering.²¹ And ‘to Moloch’ should really be translated ‘as a Moloch’, the kind of sacrifice. So the idea that there was such a pagan deity was just a mistake. I was explaining this to someone²² once and saying that on this account there was no such god, and he said to me, ‘Of course there was not such a god. You don’t believe in pagan deities, do you?’ This response reveals an ambiguity in what I had said: one construal involves quantification over real gods, in which it is presumably already guaranteed that there is no such a god as Moloch; the other construal involves quantification over mythical entities, as in ‘Was there such a (mythical) god?’ The answer might have been ‘yes’, but according to this particular theory, turns out to be ‘no’. The term ‘god’ turns out to be ambiguous. It may be used in such a way that only a pagan believer of the right kind would recognize the existence of the gods on Mount Olympus. But usually we use it otherwise—for example, when we ask, ‘How many Greek gods were there?’, ‘Can you name any of the Greek gods?’, and the like.

Phrasing the question in terms of the existence of fictional characters, the answer to the question ‘Did Hamlet exist?’ is affirmative, and we are not reporting on what the story says. In the same way, the answer to the question ‘Was there such a deity as Moloch?’ may be affirmative, contrary to Eissfeldt. One has to make sure what kind of entity one is talking about here. If one asks, ‘Was there such a fictional character as Hamlet?’ the answer is ‘yes’. And, of course, one can ask of a fictional character referred to as *A* and a fictional character referred to as *B* whether they are the same fictional character; that makes sense, too. In a rough and ready way the apparatus of quantification and identity over these fictional characters is available to us in ordinary language. They are *not* ghostly possible entities; they are abstract entities of a certain sort that exist in virtue of the activities of people.

Many people have gotten confused about these matters because they have said, ‘Surely there are fictional characters who fictionally do such-and-such things; but fictional characters don’t exist; therefore, some view like Meinong’s, with a first-class existence and a second-class existence, or a broad existence and a narrow existence, must be the case’.²³ This is not what I am saying here. The name ‘Hamlet’ as used in the story is not purporting to refer to a fictional character, it is purporting to refer to a person; and only when we speak *outside* the story can we

would also have the consequence that ‘Moloch’ was not the name of a pagan deity but came from a misvocalization of ‘melech’ (‘king’ in Hebrew). Some recent commentators I have read (long after this paper was delivered) accept that ‘Moloch’ did indeed name a pagan deity.

²¹ In fact, as I recall, it meant human sacrifice.

²² Harry Frankfurt.

²³ At any rate, this is how Meinong is characterized by Russell in ‘On Denoting’. I confess that I have never read Meinong and don’t know whether the characterization is accurate. It should be remembered that Meinong is a philosopher whom Russell (at least originally) respected; the characterization is unlikely to be a caricature.

say that no such person exists. When we say ‘There was such a fictional character as Hamlet’, we are not referring to a ghostly person—we are referring to a fictional character, one who really does exist, because people have written works of a certain sort. As I said, fictional characters are abstract entities of a certain kind. There are also alleged fictional characters that don’t exist—Gonzago is an example. However, there can be *fictional* fictional characters, such as Gonzago. The predicate ‘fictional’ can be iterated, and Gonzago is a genuine fictional fictional character. There really is such a fictional fictional character, even though there is no such fictional character.²⁴

The properties of fictional characters can be various. Many are not those of people (Meinongian or otherwise). Thus a fictional character can be widely popular or little read about, much discussed by literary critics, found in several Shakespeare plays, invented by Conan Doyle, and so on. On the other hand, a convention of our language allows us to elliptically²⁵ attribute to them properties in the works where they occur. Thus there was a fictional detective who lived on Baker Street, could draw conclusions from small details, and so on. There is a fictional character who was given a mission to kill his uncle, but there isn’t one given a mission to kill his great-grandmother. (Or maybe there is; too many works have been written, and quite likely I just haven’t heard about a relevant work. Still, if there is such a work, I can say with confidence that the respective fictional characters are not equally famous.)

Two sorts of things remain. First, I should mention, especially in light of the fact that Putnam emphasized these cases, my views about imaginary substances, as, for example, a magic elixir or unicorns. There, too, I would hold that one cannot intelligibly say, as is usually said in the literature, that though there are in fact no unicorns, unicorns might have existed. Why do I say that we cannot say this? Well, unicorns in the myth are supposed to refer to a certain species, a certain natural kind of animals. The term ‘tiger’ does not just mean ‘any old animal that is yellow in color with black stripes’. An animal, whether existing in fact or only counterfactually, even though it looked just like a tiger on the outside, would not, if it were a reptile on the inside, be a tiger, as I have emphasized (Kripke 1980:119–21, and elsewhere).²⁶ Similarly, of course, something with a different chemical composition from water would not be water. Hence the statement ‘water is H₂O’ is a necessary truth.

If one is referring to an actual animal, one may of course pick it out by what Putnam calls a ‘stereotype’ (Putnam 1975a), without knowing what its internal structure is or how to differentiate it from other bogus things like fool’s gold or

²⁴ Recall (see note 16) that the example is apparently incorrect, but I have kept up the pretense that it is correct. Correct examples plainly do exist. Note that if Eissfeldt is right there is no such fictional character (god) as Moloch, but there is no such fictional fictional character either.

²⁵ I mean that such a phrase as ‘in the relevant stories’ can be, and usually is, omitted.

²⁶ The dictionary definition to which I refer is given there in full.

fool's tiger. David Lewis once mentioned marsupial tigers to me, which might come along. One need not be able to make the differentiation as a layperson, and one may leave it up to the scientists, who may take a long time to do so, but we can still refer to tigers. That is because tigers are around; we have historical causal connections to them in the real world by virtue of which we can refer to them. Those properties that determine their essence can be discovered empirically later; when they are discovered, we can say which possible (or actual) animals resembling tigers wouldn't have been (or are not) tigers.

The same thing, I say, holds of unicorns. If the story about unicorns had really been true, then of course the animals would really be around and we could refer to them and discover their internal structure later. But suppose the story is completely false, that there is no connection with any actual animal. Then one should not say that 'unicorn' in this story simply means (let's say this is all the story tells us) 'that animal which looks like a horse and has a single horn'. One should not say that 'unicorn' simply means *any old animal like that* because then it would not be a pretended name of a species. In fact, one might well discover a new fragment of the story that explains how sometimes people were misled by animals that looked just like unicorns and mistook them for unicorns. These fool's unicorns commanded a high price on the market until their internal structure was discovered. The story, however, does not specify the differences in internal structure. 'Unicorn' is supposed to be the name of a particular species. We are given a partial identification of them; there are other criteria that would pick them out from fool's unicorns, but we are not told what these criteria are. Nor can we say 'Well, let's wait for the biologists to find out', because biologists cannot find anything out about unicorns. Thus of no possible animal can we say that it would have been a unicorn. One can merely say that it would look the way unicorns are supposed to. If a possible world contained two very different species, both fully conforming to the aforementioned story, one could not say which of them would have been unicorns.

Speaking of the actual world, I want similarly to say that a mere discovery that there were animals that answered entirely to whatever the myth says about unicorns would not, in and of itself, constitute a discovery that unicorns really existed. The connection, unlikely though this may be, could be purely coincidental. In fact the myth may say, 'The species mentioned in this myth is mythical, and any resemblance to any species extant or extinct is purely coincidental'. Let us suppose it does in fact say this. This shows that what one needs is not merely the fact that the animals in the unmodified myth satisfy everything that unicorns are supposed to satisfy, but that the myth was *about* them, that the myth was saying these things about them because the people had some historical and actual connection with them.

There are, then, two distinct theses here. First, we could find out that unicorns actually existed, but to find this out we would not just have to find out that certain animals have the properties mentioned in the myth. We would have to

discover a real connection between the species and the myth—at least in the case of a species that is highly biologically unspecified. If a precise biological specification of it were given, the answer might be different. A complete description of the internal structure (and perhaps a specification of its place on the evolutionary tree, genetic inheritance, and the like) might lead us to say, ‘By accident it turns out that there is a species exactly like that’. But that is not what usually goes on in stories and myths. Moreover, the way I have been putting it may be too epistemic. I am not really talking about what we could ‘find out’. I am giving requirements for it to be *true* that unicorns actually existed, contrary to what we normally think.²⁷ However, were the specifications precise in the terms that I have just mentioned, then, if a kind meeting these specifications (structure, position on the evolutionary tree, etc.) actually existed, the story might arguably be true, and genuine propositions about the kind in question might be expressed, even in the (unlikely) case that the connection is purely coincidental.

Secondly—and this is another thesis—given that there are no unicorns, we *cannot* say that unicorns might have existed or would have existed under certain circumstances. Statements about unicorns, like statements about Sherlock Holmes, just *pretend* to express propositions. They do not really express, but merely purport to express, propositions. In the case of species, at least, this is true when the myth has not fully specified a hypothetical species, as I have mentioned in the previous paragraph. One cannot say when these sentences would have been true of a counterfactual situation, and therefore no proposition can have been expressed.²⁸

However, something else should be said. Just as Sherlock Holmes was a fictional character, and there might or might not have been a mythical god referred to by the biblical ‘Moloch’,²⁹ so there really is such a mythical kind of animal as ‘the unicorn’. This does not name a natural kind—even a Meinongian

²⁷ If the term ‘unicorn’ does in fact go back to some real kind of animal, there are two possibilities. One would be that unicorns really existed after all. Another is that a mythical kind of animal is historically connected to a real kind. In the case of individual people, an analogue is Santa Claus, a mythical character tracing back to a real historical person, Saint Nicholas (see Kripke 1980:93). Exactly when we should say, in the case either of animal kinds or of persons, that what is now a mythical case grew out of a real one or whether misconceptions grew up about an actual historical person or kind of animal is delicate. There may be borderline cases. We need not deal with this further here.

²⁸ Probably I ignored a nest of special technicalities when here, and in Kripke (1980), I talked very informally of animal natural kinds, and even used the term ‘species’ in a relatively informal way. There have been problems and disputes in the taxonomic literature on how ‘species’ should be defined and how larger and smaller natural kinds of animals should be defined. Moreover, I pay no attention to species where the male and the female may have very different internal structures (there is always going to be some difference). Although I am not an expert in the chemical case either, talk of chemical substances probably involves fewer issues. But here the examples of mythical species are too good to pass up, and I hope that a rough and ready treatment gives a reasonable idea for these cases.

²⁹ Outside the Pentateuch itself, probably ‘Moloch’ occurs in later religious literature and *is* used for a mythical god. My statements really should be confined to the Pentateuchal usage.

natural kind—but once again an actual abstract entity, a ‘mythical beast’, as I think I have seen in one dictionary.

Let me mention perhaps the stickiest point about the doctrine of pretending to express a proposition. One may feel, very strongly, ‘How can the statement that unicorns exist not really express a proposition, given that it is false?’ Against this, I would say first that it is not sufficient just to be able to say that it is false; one has to be able to say under what circumstances it would have been true, if any. And there seems to be no clear criterion here. Nevertheless, there remains the question of why we call this false. Why do we *say* ‘unicorns don’t exist’? Similarly, of course, in the case of Sherlock Holmes.

I am not entirely sure of the answer to this, but I will say what I can. First, I think the argument that ‘unicorns exist’ cannot express a proposition, or that ‘Sherlock Holmes really exists’ cannot express a proposition, is fairly conclusive. Here, when I talk about ‘Sherlock Holmes really exists’ I am not using ‘Sherlock Holmes’ to refer to the fictional character; under this interpretation the name does purport to refer to an existing entity. Nor am I using the sentence under the convention that what counts as true is what the story says.

Suppose I am using the sentence to express an alleged proposition about a detective, given to us by the story. Then I cannot say of a counterfactual situation that it is correctly describable as one in which ‘Sherlock Holmes was fond of cricket’, ‘Sherlock Holmes was a detective’, or ‘Sherlock Holmes exists’. This is because when I think about them I cannot understand under what circumstances they would have been true—let alone any other propositions about Sherlock Holmes, like ‘Sherlock Holmes was the best detective of all time’. Some of these statements are true and do express propositions when we are just reporting on what is said in the story, but, as I said, that is not the sort of usage in question here. (Similarly, sometimes one uses the statement just to say that the story says or implies that *p*, but that is a different sort of usage.) Nor am I talking about statements about fictional characters. These have truth-value in describing actual or counterfactual situations; in particular, such a fictional detective does in fact exist, but we can easily suppose counterfactual situations in which that detective wouldn’t have existed, namely, situations where neither Doyle, nor (perhaps) anyone else, wrote or conceived such stories.³⁰

³⁰ It would have been very tempting to fall back on the fictional character, so that the problem of ‘Sherlock Holmes’ as an empty name would disappear. Moreover, statements with ‘Sherlock Holmes’ have multiple ambiguities, on my view. They can be evaluated according to the story, or be about the fictional character (and such a character does exist); but, as we have seen, predicates applying to people can attach to that abstract entity in a derivative way.

Nevertheless, not all empty names are also used as names of fictional characters, nor am I sure that there is always an analogous class of entities. In any event, ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’ does look as if it has a usage under which it is true. Note, however, that this is a philosopher’s tenuous usage. We are inclined really to say ‘Sherlock Holmes never existed’, similarly for ‘Vulcan’ (the planet). To me ‘George Washington no longer exists, though he once did’ seems to be a reasonably natural expression about a dead person, but I would be disinclined to put it as ‘George Washington

Nevertheless, one may feel very strongly that one should truly say ‘Unicorns don’t exist’. I feel equally strongly, in fact, that one should say the same thing about bandersnatches, the animals Lewis Carroll mentions in ‘Jabberwocky’ (1872). Presumably, the bandersnatch is a fictional beast. According to the story, it is also a very dangerous one. Of course, there is no such animal as a bandersnatch; we can say ‘There are no bandersnatches’. But surely no one would claim here that we can say that under certain circumstances bandersnatches would have existed—that we are just not told enough about them. They are just some dangerous sort of animal. Better get out of their way! They are also ‘frumious’. But who knows what that means (though no doubt it is a dangerous or undesirable trait)? This does not prevent us from asserting ‘bandersnatches don’t exist and never did’ or ‘there are no bandersnatches’. Then the argument attempting to establish that ‘unicorns exist’ expresses a proposition on the basis of an intuition that the sentence is false surely cannot be conclusive. Just because we say ‘unicorns don’t exist’, it does not follow that we can compare possible worlds with a concept of unicorns and declare that in it unicorns would have existed or not. In the case of bandersnatches, the situation is even more blatantly obvious.

Please do not say that bandersnatches would have existed if someone—even Lewis Carroll himself, say—had written this very poem about a real animal, for example, tigers, and so bandersnatches would have been tigers. This means that as language would have developed in that counterfactual situation, the sentence ‘bandersnatches really existed’ would have expressed something true. Of course that is the case, but that is talking about the language that Carroll *would* have used in that situation. It is not talking about Carroll’s *actual* language as applied to that situation. Plainly, using ‘bandersnatch’ as it is used in the poem, one cannot say that this is a situation in which tigers would have been bandersnatches (or that the sentence ‘tigers would have been bandersnatches’ is true). Tigers would have been *called* ‘bandersnatches’, but one cannot say that they would have *been* bandersnatches. We cannot say when something would have been a bandersnatch any more than when some animal would have been ‘frumious’.

Although we can say ‘there are no bandersnatches’ or ‘bandersnatches don’t exist’, this plainly does not imply that we would know what it would be like for bandersnatches to have existed. Nor is an impossibility of the ordinary kind involved, such as the necessary nonexistence of round squares. We do say ‘bandersnatches don’t exist’, and thus a certain sentence about bandersnatches seems to have a truth-value, but this does not mean that sentences containing ‘bandersnatch’ express ordinary propositions. And this I regard as a very substantial problem; perhaps the commentators will have something to say about it. They might just say that I’m wrong. David Kaplan, however, has expressed views

does not exist’. (I am taking it that here there isn’t a problem of an empty name either.) I might have thought about this example after listening to a talk by Nathan Salmon.

very similar to mine at various points, and so it will be a problem for him, too. So I don't think he would be likely to say that I'm just wrong.

What can one say here? The same question arises for 'Sherlock Holmes'. We want to say, 'Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist'. One proposal might be to interpret it metalinguistically rather than as about a person. Thus, one might say that 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist' should be analyzed as meaning: 'The name "Sherlock Holmes" has no referent'. Then 'Sherlock Holmes does exist' should be analyzed as meaning 'The name "Sherlock Holmes" does have a referent'. And if one has a particular theory of reference, say a historical one, one might continue the analysis further and say 'Sherlock Holmes exists' means 'The chain goes somewhere' and 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist' means 'The chain goes nowhere'.

I reject this on a bunch of grounds, already stated in effect above. Let me say first what I accept. Although it may not be a priori, it is close enough to a priori for present purposes that Moses exists if and only if the name 'Moses' has a referent, and that Sherlock Holmes exists if and only if the name 'Sherlock Holmes' has a referent. That is the condition for the reference of the name. In general, relationships like these hold and the material equivalence of metalinguistic statements and corresponding statements in the 'material mode' is automatically accepted.

However, neither in the case of the name 'Moses' nor in the case of 'Sherlock Holmes' does this metalinguistic translation give an analysis that would apply to counterfactual situations also. Counterfactually speaking, Moses might have existed even though the name 'Moses' had no referent. This would be the case if neither he nor anyone else had ever been called 'Moses'. It is also true that the name 'Moses' might have had a referent, where that referent might not have been Moses.³¹ However, my greatest emphasis, stated above, has been this. If we say, counterfactually, 'If Moses had not existed, then such and such . . .', or 'If his parents had never met, Moses would not have existed', or simply 'Moses might not have existed', we are speaking about *this man* and asking what might have happened to *him*.

Our problem, then, is this. If we use negative existentials, hypothetically, counterfactually, or whatever, we are normally supposing that we are talking about a referent and asking what would have happened if it had not existed. On the other hand, if we make the same statements categorically, we appear to be

³¹ When I said these things, I was really ignoring many complications. First, many people may in fact be called 'Moses', and this is irrelevant. I would have to speak more carefully of 'the referent', and say something about the referent of the name as we use it in certain discourses, or in the King James translation, or whatever. I shouldn't be implying anything about whether he was, or anyone would have been, himself called 'Moses' in the ordinary sense of 'called'. The name appears to be ancient Egyptian, and is translated into Hebrew in the biblical original. It wasn't really 'Moses', and similar adjustments are needed for a literal description of the corresponding hypothetical situations. But none of this matters very much.

repudiating the object itself and saying that the name used only purports to be a name. Nor can we tell, simply by looking at a work, whether the Pentateuch or Doyle's stories, which strategy is appropriate. But don't we wish to give the statements in question a univocal analysis?

What I have said above about fictional characters gives us some respite. A name of a fictional character has a referent. One might then suppose that the name definitely has a referent (the fictional character). It will be a matter of empirical investigation, concerning a given work, whether it is about a fictional character or a real person.

However, I find myself uneasy about invoking this as a complete solution. There is an inclination to say 'Sherlock Holmes never existed'. Atheists have often been inclined to deny the existence of God, and perhaps sometimes they mean to use it as an empty name.³² To use the example mentioned above, there is the denial of Moloch that I quoted from Eissfeldt, but if Eissfeldt is wrong, one could imagine two ancients arguing, with one saying that he believes in Jupiter but not in Moloch (and the usage of a follower of Eissfeldt must be explained, too, denying the existence of a particular mythical being). 'The bandersnatch' stands for a genuine fictional species or kind of beast, but we are inclined to say 'there are no bandersnatches', meaning in this instance to deny the existence of the kind (even though no one can say what a bandersnatch would have been).

What gives us any right to talk that way? I wish I knew 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. Thus, without being sure of whether Sherlock Holmes was a person, or whether we can speak of hypothetical situations under which 'Sherlock Holmes did such and such' correctly describes the situation, we can say 'none of the people in this room is Sherlock Holmes, for all are born too late, and so on'; or 'whatever bandersnatches may be, certainly there are none in Dubuque'. Here we should, strictly speaking, be able to say that there is no true proposition to the effect that there are bandersnatches in Dubuque, without committing ourselves to the existence of such a proposition at all. Then 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist', 'there are no bandersnatches', and so on, are limiting cases of the same principle, really denying that there could be propositions of a certain kind at all.

In sum, I have stressed the following:

First, existence is a real predicate of individuals. Even though it may be trivial that everything exists, many things have only contingent existence and might not

³² There might be some question about the term 'God' (see Kripke 1980:26–27). Here I am taking it to be a name. However, it might be taken to be a description, 'the unique divine being', and, if so, a Russellian analysis might be applied. (I am inclined to favor the first view, even if the reference is fixed by description.) There has traditionally been an uncontroversial proper name for God, but it is rarely found on the lips of ordinary speakers today.

have existed. Statements of this type should not be reduced to statements about the fulfillment of properties.

Second, whether a work is truth or fiction is not equivalent to whether existential statements asserting that some events occurring in the narrative did or did not happen (or whether some properties instantiated in the narrative did or did not get instantiated). The coincidence may be strange, but it is not impossible that things like these could have happened but had no connection with the work.

Third, when one evaluates what is true according to the story, existential statements have to be evaluated the same way as any others (not differently, as in Hintikka's case of 'Hamlet thinks' versus 'Hamlet exists' discussed above, Macbeth's dagger, etc.).

Fourth, questions of the existence of fictional characters, and other fictional objects, are empirical questions like any other, and sometimes have affirmative or negative answers. They depend on what fictional works exist. Thus, there certainly was a fictional detective, widely read about at the time he was described to exist, living on Baker Street, and so on. We have given examples, however, where the existence of various fictional or mythical objects can be dubious or controversial, and have remarked that the term 'fictional' can be iterated. We may mistakenly believe in the existence of a fictional character. Perhaps the most striking case (not mentioned above) would be a case where we took something to be a work of fiction when it was actually genuine history, written and so intended.

Finally, I had a residue of questions that appear to involve genuinely empty names and real assertions of nonexistence. These have just been discussed.³³

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