Fictitious Existence *versus* Nonexistence

Nathan Salmón

A correct observation to the effect that *a* does not exist, where the '*a*' is a singular term, could be true on any of a variety of grounds. Typically, a true, singular negative existential is true on the unproblematic ground that the subject term '*a*' designates something that does not presently exist. More interesting philosophically is a singular, negative existential statement in which the subject term '*a*' designates nothing at all. Both of these contrast sharply with a singular, negative existential in which the subject term is a name from fiction. I argue that such singular, negative existential statements are false. My account of fictional characters differs significantly from Kripke's. It is shown that an objection to my account rests on a crucial misunderstanding. Finally, a crucial aspect of the account is emphasized.

I

A true, singular, negative existential assertion—a correct observation to the effect that *a* does not exist, where the '*a*' is a proper name or some other kind of singular term—could be true on any of a variety of grounds. Typically, a true, singular negative existential is true on the unproblematic ground that the subject term '*a*' designates something that does not presently exist. More interesting philosophically is a singular, negative existential statement in which the subject term '*a*' designates nothing at all. Philosophers interested in the puzzles about true, singular, negative existentials see this kind of case as the most straightforward ground for the truth of a true, singular, negative existential. Designation failure is what makes it true, for example, that the present king of France does not exist. This is so, at least on the not unpopular assumption against Russell that definite descriptions (e.g., 'the present U.S. President') are routinely designators. Philosophers have assumed that designation failure is likewise the ground

on which a negative existential invoking a name from fiction is true, for example 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist'.

There are alternative grounds on which a singular, negative existential statement can be true. A decidedly different ground is that the term '*a*' *does* designate something, but something that is nonexistent. A straightforward example of this kind of true, singular, negative existential is 'Socrates does not exist'. The name 'Socrates' is not non-designating; it designates Socrates. But Socrates is dead, and he therefore no longer exists. It may still be said, of course, that 'Socrates' is "non-designating", but only in the weak sense that there does not *exist* anything that the name designates. In a more robust sense, the name designates something, in fact some*one*: the dead white man, Socrates. I say that a term is *weakly non-designating* if there does not exist anything that it designates but there might have been something that it actually does designate (Salmón 1998). That is to say, a weakly non-designating term does not designate any currently existing thing but designates a specific possible thing. The name 'Socrates' is a weak non-designator in a very weak sense, since Socrates not only might have existed but did in fact exist. I say that a weakly non-designating term is *very weakly non-designating* if there existed, or will exist, something that the term presently designates.

On my own esoteric doctrines, there are things that exist only in worlds that are not possible, not possibly possible, not even possibly, possibly possible, and so on. I say that a term is *strongly non-designating* if there could not have existed a thing such that, nevertheless, the name actually designates.

Finally, I say that a term is *very strongly* (or *thoroughly*) *non-designating* if it does not designate anything at all—nothing that existed, nothing that will exist, nothing that might have existed but never does, nothing that could not have existed, nothing that could not possibly have

existed, nothing that could not even have possibly possibly existed, and so on. Assuming that definite descriptions are designators, the term 'the present king of France' is very strongly non-designating. It designates nothing at all.

If the proper name '*a*' is non-designating—whether weakly, very weakly, or strongly—the corresponding singular, negative existential statement '*a* does not exist' is indeed true, but only on the ground that the subject term designates something that does not exist. Only in case '*a*' is very strongly non-designating is the singular, negative existential '*a* does not exist' true, if it is, because the subject terms fails to designate anything at all. I confess, however, that it is not clear to me that such a singular, negative existential statement is genuinely true. For it seems that it is in fact without any content. If it lacks content, then it is neither true nor false. We will return to this issue.

II

In *Reference and Existence* (Oxford University Press, 1973, 2013), Kripke advances a theory of fictional characters. On his theory, the names from fiction are ambiguous, having both a primary and a secondary use. Kripke distinguishes separate "stages" in considering a work of fiction. At the first stage, the storyteller goes through the motions of making assertions about various individuals. At this stage, the storyteller does not actually make any assertions about any things. The sentences that make up a written fiction express no propositions. It is all merely a pretense. In particular, fictional names like 'Sherlock Holmes that occur in the fiction, in their primary sense, do not designate anything in reality. By contrast, some names that occur in the fiction, e.g., 'London', do designate. Still whereas according to the stories Holmes resides in London, the storyteller—in this case, Arthur Conan Doyle—only pretends to assert that Holmes resides in London. Indeed, Conan Doyle pretends to be Dr. Watson, and thereby pretends that he

also resides on Baker Street in London. But whether Conan Doyle actually resides in London is completely beside the point. The pretense concerns Holmes and Watson; it does not concern Conan Doyle. Rather Conan Doyle and his readers cooperatively engage in the same pretense.

At a later stage, a domain of fictional characters is posited. In particular, a fictional character, who might as well be designated as 'Sherlock Holmes', is posited—not a man made of flesh and blood, but an existing abstract object created by Conan Doyle. The name 'Sherlock Holmes' in its secondary sense designates the fictional character. The name in its secondary sense would be better spelled with a subscript of '2': 'Homes$_2$'. At this meta stage, critics and theorists make various true-or-false assertions about the abstract character—for example, that the character of Holmes was inspired by a real-life figure (Joseph Bell). According to Kripke's theory, the Holmes stories invoke the name 'Holmes' only in its primary sense. In that sense, the stories are about Holmes$_1$.

My own account of fiction overlaps with Kripke's in some respects, but deviates from Kripke's in some important respects. I agree with Kripke that fictional characters are real things though not real people. Fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes are created by the storyteller.[1] I can also agree with Kripke's distinction among stages concerning a fiction. However, I contend that the abstract objects that are the fictional characters are already present at the initial,

---

[1] In telling a story according to which there are F's (e.g., Martians), does the storyteller thereby create fictional F's? Sometimes, but not always. In telling a story about a particular in-the-story detective, the storyteller thereby creates and designates that fictional detective. However, merely by making it a part of the story that there are unspecified pedestrians walking along a street, the storyteller does not thereby create particular fictional pedestrians. It is an interesting question how much specificity is required to create a fictional character. The answer is evidently along the lines of 'Some but not very much'.

storytelling stage. Perhaps the most important difference between Kripke and me is this: Kripke

holds that the names like 'Holmes' and 'Watson' as they occur in telling the story (e.g., in the

pages of a particular printing of the story) do not designate anything. They are empty singular

terms. By contrast, on my view the author's fictional characters actually populate the fiction that

the author created. On Kripke's view, Conan Doyle's stories do not make reference to anyone.

On my view too, the stories are not about any person. But they are about *something*, something

that is quite real. They are about the character, Holmes, a real, existing thing. The stories depict

Holmes as a detective. Holmes is not a detective. He—really *it*—is a fictional detective. A

fictional detective is like a toy duck, in that the toy is not a duck but a kind of simulation, a

representation of a duck. The word 'fictional' in the phrase 'fictional detective' is like the 'toy'

in 'toy duck'. Holmes is, in reality, not a kind of detective, but a kind of abstract object. But

never mind; according to the stories, Holmes is a detective. On my view, the abstract object is

depicted as a human being with extraordinary powers of deduction. In a very real sense, the

stories are about the abstract object—the stories make reference to that object—and they are

therefore wildly inaccurate.

One inaccuracy is the time of Holmes's inception. According to the stories, Holmes was

born in 1854, delivered from his mother's womb, presumably conceived approximately nine

months earlier. In reality, Holmes was created at least thirty years later, the brainchild of Conan

Doyle's fertile imagination. But this discrepancy is only the tip of the iceberg. The differences

between the real Holmes and the fictional Holmes—or rather, between Holmes and how he is

depicted in the stories—are vast. The real Holmes never played violin, never took cocaine, never

solved a crime, never even had a thought. The real Holmes was never alive, never human, never

a person, never a detective. The real Holmes was the property of Conan Doyle—not a slave but intellectual property. Yet the stories are in a very direct and literal sense *about* the real Holmes.

One thorny philosophical difficulty that arises on Kripke's theory of fiction is solved on my own theory. He and I agree that according to the Holmes stories, Holmes was a brilliant detective. What is it, then, that is so according to the stories? The answer: That Holmes was a brilliant detective. On the surface, that Holmes was a brilliant detective is a proposition. But on Kripke's theory no such proposition is so according to the Holmes stories. For on that theory, there is no such proposition, at least not in the usual sense. At best, on Kripke's account, there is what is sometimes called a 'gappy proposition' (what I have called a 'structurally challenged proposition')—a would-be proposition but for a gap or blank spot, a cavity that is supposed to be filled by an individual thing. The problem now is that the proposition that Holmes was a brilliant detective is the same gappy proposition as the proposition that Mickey Mouse was a brilliant detective. Yet it is not true according to the Holmes stories that Mickey Mouse was a brilliant detective. It is thus completely mysterious what the claim that according to the Holmes stories Homes was a brilliant detective could amount to on Kripke's account. By contrast, there is no such problem on my account, or even any related problem. What is so according to the Holmes stories is a genuine, albeit false, proposition that Holmes was a brilliant detective. On my view, the real Holmes does in fact have a related property, entirely by virtue of the fact that according to the stories Holmes was a brilliant detective. Holmes is a thing that according to the stories was a brilliant detective. Being a thing that according to the Holmes stories was a brilliant detective is a genuine property, and Holmes—the fictional character—genuinely has it.

What I have said above concerning fiction and its characters goes as well for what I call 'myths', i.e., for mistaken theories that have been believed. The luminiferous ether is a mythical

substance, the medium through which, according to the myth, light waves propagate. In reality, the ether is an abstract object. Light waves do not propagate through it, but it does have the property that according to the myth, light waves propagate through it. Likewise, Vulcan is a mythical planet that was hypothesized by Babinet and LeVerrier. It is not a real planet, but it has the property that, according to the myth, it is a planet whose orbit is inside that of Mercury. For some reason, this account of names from myth is significantly more controversial than my proposed account of fictional names. Some philosophers that are prepared to accept my account of fiction, or at least to consider it as a live contender, flatly reject my account of myth. For the life of me, I do not see any philosophically relevant difference between the two. A myth is simply a story, except one that has been mistaken for the truth.

III

Consider the statement 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist'. On my account this statement is, contrary to popular philosophical opinion, *not* a true, singular, negative existential. It is a singular, negative existential, to be sure, but I contend it is simply false. Holmes exists. He (really: *it*) is a fictional character, one that has existed continuously ever since his creation by Conan Doyle (who long ago ceased to exist).

Given that Sherlock Holmes exists, why do we feel the intuitive pull to say that he does not? My proposed answer is that it is due to a kind of misinterpretation. Unlike Kripke, I do not maintain that the fictional name 'Sherlock Holmes' is ambiguous. Rather, I say, the name univocally designates the fictional detective. However, there is a temptation to misinterpret the name as a kind of abbreviated definite description, perhaps an abbreviation of the description 'the person who both is Sherlock Holmes and also is more or less as Holmes is depicted in the stories'. This description is improper, in the technical sense: There is nothing that uniquely

answers to it. In particular, the fictional character of Holmes does not. The singular, negative existential is thus assimilated to a case like 'The present king of France does not exist'—a singular, negative existential in which the subject term does not designate. That is, the description does not designate something that does not exist, nor something that does exist, not even a fictional character, but designates nothing at all.[2]

As I intimated earlier, it is generally taken for granted by philosophers that a singular, negative existential '*a* does not exist' in which the subject term '*a*' designates nothing at all is a paradigm case of a true, singular, negative existential. However, there is a real question whether this is correct. Consider the unnegated form: '*a* exists'. If '*a* does not exist' is true and the adverb 'not' is ordinary internal (or "choice") negation, then '*a* exists' is false. On the surface—and, I contend, in point of fact—'*a* exists' is an atomic subject-predicate sentence of the form '*Fa*', with the verb 'exists' being the monadic predicate. Arguably—and, I contend, in point of fact— an atomic subject-predicate sentence '*Fa*' is not simply false if the subject term '*a*' designates nothing at all. Rather, such a sentence would seem to be without truth-value, neither true nor false. And if it is neither true nor false, then so too is its ordinary negation '~Fa'. If that is correct, then my proposed explanation of the stubborn but wayward intuition that 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist' is true cannot be the whole story. If the name 'Sherlock Holmes' is confused with the improper description 'the person who is both is Holmes and more or less as Holmes is depicted', why then does the singular, negative existential not seem to be untrue?

To this question I would reply that the adverb 'not' is also reinterpreted, as so-called external (or "exclusion") negation: *it is not the case that*. This form of negation converts any

---

[2] The assimilation may be quite unconscious. Those who so misinterpret can be completely aware of doing so, and might even sincerely dissent from a formulation that captures their misinterpretation.

untrue sentence, whether it be false or without truth-value, into a true one. In short, I propose that the sentence 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist' is often misused or misinterpreted as meaning this: *It is not the case that the person who is both Sherlock Holmes and more or less as Holmes is depicted in the stories exists*. That proposition is true, and obviously so given that no one is in reality as Homes is depicted in the stories.

Of course, the ambiguity of negation may be inherited by such negative expressions as 'nonexistent', insofar the speaker uses 'Holmes is nonexistent' as shorthand for 'Holmes does not exist'. Also of course, names from fiction are not always univocally misused as if the name was a disguised improper definite description. Sometimes the name is used correctly while the predicate is abused. For example 'does not exist' may be used as if it meant *is not as depicted in the story*. Sometimes a name from fiction is used both correctly and incorrectly, as for example in the confusing sentence 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist and is merely a fictional detective'. Considered as a paraphrase for a conjunction, the left-hand conjunct employs a misuse of the name while the right-hand employs a correct use. The double use results in a (nearly) inconsistent sentence. Many other forms of misuse are possible. Human beings (including philosophers) can be enormously creative without trying or knowing.

IV

Abstract objects are not the sorts of things that solve mysteries, smoke pipes, are addicted to cocaine, etc. Such sentences as 'Sherlock Holmes is a brilliant detective' are not only false; they are impossible, necessarily impossible, necessarily necessarily impossible, and so on. Although such sentences are impossible with respect to the actual world, they may be true with respect to a fiction. It is true according to the stories that Holmes is a brilliant human being, is addicted to cocaine, etc. Normal uses of a sentence like 'Holmes is a detective' are to be seen as

elliptical for such variants as 'According to the relevant stories, Holmes is a detective'. So-called mixed sentences are to be accounted for similarly. For example, normal uses of 'Holmes is a fictional character who is a brilliant detective' is elliptical for 'Holmes is a fictional character who, according to the relevant stories, is a brilliant detective'.

Several readers have objected to this account of fiction on the ground that they find it excessively far-fetched to suppose that a fiction represents an abstract object as a person, let alone as a brilliant detective. Tobias Klauk (2014) raised such an objection against Edward Zalta's account of fiction, which, though quite different from the present account, shares with it the recognition that fictional characters are existent abstract entities rather than things that are somehow flesh-and-blood human beings but also non-existent. Klauk complains that the criticized account "seems to commit us to the view that fictions prescribe recipients to imagine *de re* of some fictional objects that they have properties which they actually cannot have" (paper abstract). He objects that on the criticized view, if uses of the sentence 'Rick Blaine is cynical' are interpreted as elliptical for 'In *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine is cynical', then it

> would not mean any more that an abstract object is cynical, but that according to some movie, an abstract object is cynical. However, this is not persuasive. One way to see this is by remembering that recipients are typically prescribed to imagine whatever is the case according to the fiction. But viewers of *Casablanca* are not prescribed to imagine an abstract object that has a property (being cynical) that it actually cannot have. (p. 241)

The objection is reminiscent of Russell's account in "On Denoting" of the touchy yacht owner's response to his tactless guest's insensitive remark on first seeing the yacht:

Guest: "I thought your yacht was larger than it is."

Owner (indignantly): "No, my yacht is not larger than it is."

What the guest meant is given by a wide-scope reading ("primary-occurrence"): 'The size of your yacht is such that I thought: that the size of your yacht was greater than *that*'. The owner insists on misinterpreting the guest as meaning the uniformly narrow-scope reading ("secondary-occurrence"): 'I thought: that the size of your yacht was greater than the size of your yacht'.[3] The present objection is analogous to the conversation continuing with a further volley:

Guest (exasperated):   "What I meant is that I thought *of* the size of your yacht, *de re*, that your yacht was larger than *that*."

Owner (still indignant): "It is not true of the size of my yacht that my yacht is larger than that."

The owner parrots the guest's *de re* locution, yet continues to misinterpret the guest as meaning something *de dicto* (narrow scope): 'I thought: that regarding the size of your yacht, your yacht was larger than that'.[4] David Kaplan suggested a clever way for the guest to short-

---

[3] Russell unfortunately misformulates how his theory of scope applies to the case. The formulation here is correct.

[4] Let 'S' symbolize the predicate 'is a size of the yacht'. Let $\ulcorner S!\alpha \urcorner$ be an abbreviation for $\ulcorner \forall \beta (S\beta \leftrightarrow \alpha = \beta) \urcorner$, where α and β are distinct individual variables (i.e., $\ulcorner \alpha$ is uniquely a size of the yacht $\urcorner$). Then following Russell, the infelicitous dialog might be diagrammed as follows:

Guest's remark:	Owner's misinterpretation:
$\exists x(S!x$ & I thought: that $\exists y(S!y$ & $y > x))$	I thought: that $\exists x(S!x$ & $\exists y(S!y$ & $y > x))$
$\exists x(S!x$ & $\lambda z[$I thought: that $\exists y(S!y$ & $y > z)]x)$	I thought: that $\exists x(S!x$ & $\lambda z[\exists y(S!y$ & $y > z)]x)$

circuit the owner's determination to speak past her. She could name the yacht's size (Kaplan 1973, at p. 501).[5]

> Guest: "Look, let's call the size of your yacht a 'russell'. What I thought was that your yacht was larger than a russell."[6]

One can do much the same thing in the present instance: one can resort to using the character's name. Sherlock Holmes is not in fact a consulting detective; in reality, Holmes is a fictional detective, an abstract object. Conan Doyle does not tell a story according to which there is an abstract object that is a brilliant human being. That would be a surreal fiction indeed. He tells a story according to which Holmes is a human being, and a brilliant detective.

As already noted, fictional characters and human beings are two very different kinds of things. Fictional characters are created by storytellers; human beings are created by biological reproduction, and so on. Nothing of one kind could have been of the other. That is not a reason to suppose that there is not a widespread practice of imagining of things of the first kind that they are things of the second. There is indeed such a practice. It is called 'fiction'. Any number of scholars have noted that fiction crucially involves pretense. Engaging in the practice requires one to imagine of the fiction, in a special sort of way, that it is not fiction. One imagines that it is fact. A fictional character is an artifact. Its function is precisely to be portrayed in a story as a person, to whom certain things happen and who does certain things. People can also perform this

---

[5] I have taken poetic license altering the guest's gender. (The reader may choose to take further license.)

[6] But does this help? See footnote 4.

> Guest: Let us stipulate that $r = \imath x S x$. I thought: that $\exists y (S!y \ \& \ y > r)$.

Judging from past behavior, how will the owner interpret this further installment?

function (in historical function, for example), but fictional characters are created precisely for that purpose.

The objection commits the straw-man fallacy. It is based ultimately on a scope fallacy of the very sort that Russell limned in his example. (*Cf.* Salmón 1998 at p. 316*n*45; Teresa Robertson Ishii 2003.) It is not true that according to the corpus of Holmes stores, some abstract object is a brilliant detective. What is true is that there is an abstract object *x*—specifically the fictional character, Sherlock Holmes—such that according to the fiction, that very object *x* is not an abstract object at all, but a brilliant detective, a man made of flesh and blood. Conan Doyle intends for the reader to imagine exactly that about the character.

To rebut the full objection, we need to consider the following complex sentence:

D: Conan Doyle intends that the reader imagine that an abstract object is a brilliant human being.

As Russell taught us, *D* is multiply ambiguous, owing to the scope of the determiner ("denoting") phrase, 'an abstract object'. The three relevant readings are given by the following:

D$_1$:   There is an abstract object *x* such that Conan Doyle intends: that the reader imagine that *x* is a brilliant human being.

D$_2$:   Conan Doyle intends: that there is an abstract object *x* such that the reader imagines that *x* is a brilliant human being.

D$_3$:   Conan Doyle intends that the reader imagine: that there is an abstract object that is a brilliant human being.

The widest-scope reading *D*$_1$ is precisely what the present account holds, no more and no less. The narrowest-scope reading *D*$_3$ is false—in fact, preposterous—but it obviously does not follow from *D*$_1$. Depending on Conan Doyle's philosophical views concerning the ontological

status of fictional characters, the intermediate-scope reading D_2 is very plausibly also false, but it also does not follow from D_1. The likely falsity of D_2, and the spectacular falsity of D_3, have no bearing whatsoever on D_1.

<p style="text-align:center">V</p>

A final point concerns the distinction between specific and generic names. Upon my birth, my parents named me after my paternal grandfather, whose name was, like mine, 'Nathan Salmón'. The name that my grandfather and I share is a generic name. I daresay, others might also have been given that same generic name. The name 'Nathan Salmón' used to designate me is a specific name rather than a generic one, whereas the name 'Nathan Salmón' used to designate my grandfather is a *different* specific name. Analytical minded readers are wont to distinguish the two specific names by means of subscripts, or by some other syntactic mark, as for example 'Nathan Salmón the Younger'.

In telling his iconic stories, Conan Doyle introduced a specific use for the generic name 'Sherlock Holmes'. The specific name 'Sherlock Holmes' which Conan Doyle introduced designates the fictional character of Sherlock Holmes. However, in telling the stories, Conan Doyle did not use the specific name he introduced in order to designate Holmes and to assert a mountain of falsehoods about the character. Conan Doyle did not assert anything in telling the stories—at least not in a robust sense of 'assert' on which one is committed by one's assertions to their truth. The corpus of Conan Doyle's Holmes stories have the unusual feature that the sentences are put forward not from the point of view of an omniscient narrator but rather from the point of view of a character in the stories: Dr. Watson. In telling the stories, Conan Doyle engages in a pretense. In particular, he portrays himself as Watson, much as an actor on a stage might portray the character. According to the story, Watson asserts many things about Holmes,

as well as many things about himself. Conan Doyle himself, in portraying Watson, does not actually assert anything at all. Conan Doyle thereby repeatedly writes the specific name 'Holmes'. But nowhere does Conan Doyle actually use the name to designate anything at all. Rather, he writes the specific name, pretending thereby to designate a living, breathing human being. (*Cf.* Salmón 2011 at pp. 75-77.)

There is a difference here between fiction and myth. Unlike the storyteller, the mistaken theorist asserts falsehood. LeVerrier intended to use the name 'Vulcan' as a specific name for an intra-Mercurial planet. However, in uttering the name he referred to the hypothesized planet. Unlike the case of Neptune, in this case the hypothesized planet is not a planet. It is a mythical planet In uttering a French sentence for the English 'Vulcan is the closest planet to the Sun', LeVerrier did not assert anything about any real planet; he asserted something about the mythical planet, something false. In so doing, unbeknownst to him, LeVerrier used 'Vulcan' to refer to a supposed planet, something that is, in reality, an abstract object.

REFERENCES

Kaplan, David, "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice," in J. Hintikka, J. Moravcsik, and P. Suppes, eds, *Approaches to Natural Language* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1973), pp. 490-518.

Klauk, Tobias "Zalta on Encoding Fictional Properties," *Journal of Literary Theory*, 8, 2 (2014), pp. 234-256.

Kripke, Saul, *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures* (Oxford University Press, 1973, 2013).

Robertson Ishii, Teresa "(In the Fiction/Myth) the Number Seventeen Crosses the Rubicon," in *Southwest Philosophical Review*, 19, 1 (2003), pp. 125-134.

Salmón, Nathan, "Nonexistence," *Noûs*, 32, 3 (September 1998), pp. 277-319.

Salmón, Nathan, "Fiction, Myth, and Reality," in A. Berger, ed., *Kripke* (Cambridge University Press,

    2011), pp. 49-77.

University of California
Santa Barbara, CA 93106
USA
nsalmon@ucsb.edu