# Fictional and metafictional uses of names: an analogy with games

Louis Rouillé

Institut Jean Nicod

louis.rouille@ens.fr

May 11th 2019

# 1 The data

## 1.1 Terminology

### 1.1.1 Fictional uses

**Def:** *Fictional* uses of proper names are uses of proper names which aim at pseudo-referring in the context of a fiction.

For instance, here is the opening line of *Moby Dick* by Hermann Melville:

(1)   Call me Ishmael.

- No reference: only pretend-reference.

    - This is what fiction is all about.

    - Fiction is pretence, or make-believe (Searle 1975, Walton 1990).

- Hence, statements like (1) are neither true nor false *simpliciter*.

    - They are *fictional* (cf. Walton 1990), i.e. true or false *in the fiction*.

    - They do not express complete propositions.

- **Def:** Let us call "Ishmael-the-protagonist" (or $I_p$) the non-existent flesh-and-blood individual who is the only surviving crew member of the Pequod.

    - "Non-existent" means that "$I_p$ does not exist" is a true statement.

        * i.e.: "$I_p$ exists" is false.

    - **But**: *within the scope of the pretence*, $I_p$ is a flesh-and-blood individual doing all the things he is said to be doing in *Moby Dick*.

        * i.e.: "In *Moby Dick*, $I_p$ exists." is true.

### 1.1.2   Metafictional uses

**Def:**   *Metafictional* uses of proper names are uses of proper names *about* the fiction in a non-fictional context.

Here is a paradigmatic example:

(2)   Ishmael is a fictional character created by Herman Melville.

- Statements like (2) are true (or false) *simpliciter*.

- Hence, they express complete propositions.

  - Hence, the name "Ishmael" here genuinely refers.
    * Following a principle of compositionality.

- **Def:** Let us call "Ishmael-the-character" (or $I_c$) the existent abstract object which is the referent of "Ishmael" in metafictional statements like (2).

  - It is abstract, because it *is* a fictional character.
  - Since "Ishmael" genuinely refers in (2), $I_c$ exists.
    * i.e.: "$I_c$ exists" is true.
  - **But**: *within the scope of the pretence*, there is no such abstract object as $I_c$.
    * i.e.: "In *Moby Dick*, $I_c$ exists." is false.

## 1.2   Distinguishing Ishmael-the-protagonist from Ishmael-the-character

- $I_p$ and $I_c$ are distinct "entities" (objects of (pseudo)reference)

  - They crucially differ about what is true of them.

- **Prima facia pb**: the name "Ishmael" refers to two distinct objects.

  - Note that "Ishmael" is not ambiguous:
    * Let us try and rename $I_c$ "Bob".
    * This sounds really jarring.

- **Real pb**: There is, by the above definitions, only *one* existent object.

  - So even though there are good reasons to distinguish $I_p$ from $I_c$, they are not two distinct objects.
  - *Data*: copredication:
    * Ishmael, the main character of Melville's *Moby Dick*, is the only surviving crewmember of the Pequod.
  - *Data*: anaphora:
    * Ishmael is the only surviving crewmember of the Pequod. He is a fictional character created by Melville.

**Problem:**   What is the unified theory of these two uses?

# 2   The realism / anti-realism debate

## 2.1   Anti-realism

**Def:**   *Anti-realism* about fictional terms is the view that fictional terms do not genuinely refer.

- Anti-realists take statements like (1) to be conceptually primitive.

    - Fictional statements like (1) take their meaning (i.e. their referent) in the context of a pretence.

- Metafictional statements like (2) are thought of as *derived* uses.

    - In fact, they are thought of as involving an "extended" pretence.
    - cf. Walton 1990 (ch.10); Everett 2013 (§3.3).

## 2.2   Realism

**Def:**   *Realism* about fictional terms is the view that fictional terms do genuinely refer.

- Realists take statements like (2) to be conceptually primitive.

    - Since metafictional statements are true or false simpliciter, fictional terms refer to actual objets.
    - Given the predicates which are true of these terms, fictional terms must refer to *abstract* objects.

- Fictional statements like (1) are thought of as *derived* uses.

    - In fact, there is no genuine predication going on in fictional statements, but a precation-like relation: that of "encoding" (vs "exemplifying").
    - cf. Parsons 1980, Zalta 1983, Van Inwagen 1977, Thomasson 1999, ...

## 2.3   The debate

- Anti-realism and realism are contradictory views.

    - i.e.: One and only one of them is right (even though it is difficult to say which...)

- Each champion one "half" of the semantic data.

    - Of course, they can argue that their "half" is bigger/more important that the other's.

- Each have big trouble extending their view to their own problematic cases.

- *Hence*:

    - It is only natural to want them both...
    - ... but they are contradictories!

# 3 An analogy with games

## 3.1 Playing chess

**Imagine:**

- A plays chess against B.

    – They can explicitly refer to, say, "the first move of the game".

- D is a mathematician writing an algorithm like DeepBlue.

    ? D does cannot make reference to any move in a game.

    – DeepBlue does not make any reference to any move in the game.

## 3.2 Making bets

**Imagine:**

- A and B play a gambling card game.

    – They can explicitly refer to, say, "last round".

- D is a mathematician trying to solve the following "problem of the points":[1]

    > The problem concerns a game of chance with two players who have equal chances of winning each round. The players contribute equally to a prize pot, and agree in advance that the first player to have won a certain number of rounds will collect the entire prize. Now suppose that the game is interrupted by external circumstances before either player has achieved victory. How does one then divide the pot fairly? It is tacitly understood that the division should depend somehow on the number of rounds won by each player, such that a player who is close to winning will get a larger part of the pot. But the problem is not merely one of calculation; it also includes deciding what a "fair" division should mean in the first place.[2]

## 3.3 Analogy and interpretation

- Anti-realists should hold that the above doing mathematics must be thought of as a *derived* game (of chess, of gambling).

    – This is deeply counter-intuitive.

        ∗ Regardless of one's ontology of mathematical objects.

---

[1] This formulation is taken from the Wikipedia page.

[2] This problem was first spotted by Antoine, chevalier de Méré. It was first solved by Pascal and Fermat in their correspondance: in solving this problem they laid out the foundations of probability theory.

- **The analogy**: it seems that mathematical practice is not parasitic on game-playing *just like* it seems like metafictional statements are not parasitic on fictional statements.

  * This should be usable as an argument against anti-realism (and thus in favour of realism).

- It is in favour of realism though?

  - Realism claims something stronger: that fictional uses are *derived* metafictional uses.

    * i.e.: the game of chess / the gambling game are *derived* from the underlying mathematics.

  - One could wonder...

# References:

- Everett 2013 *The Nonexistent*, OUP.

- Parsons 1980 *Nonexistent Objects*, Yale University Press.

- Searle 1975 "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", *New literary history*, 6(2), 319-332.

- Tomasson 1999 *Fiction and Metaphysics*, Cambridge University Press.

- Van Inwagen 1977 "Creatures of fiction" *American philosophical quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1977): 299-308.

- Walton 1990 *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Harvard University Press.

- Zalta 1983 *Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*, Synthese Library.