

IS ODYSSEUS CUNNING?*

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What is the status of sentences about fictional entities? What is the reference of their grammatical subject? Do they possess a truth value? The paper explores possible explanations of a truth value of sentences about fictional entities. While avoiding the possible dependency on particular theories, it proceeds in accordance with the fundamental common sense and ordinary language philosophy assumptions, particularly that a statement expressed by a sentence about fiction has a truth value which is not dependent on any dynamic conditions or external changes. The paper argues that a paraphrasing strategy, which emphasises the reference to a past event of a creation of a work of fiction, is the most plausible explanation of such a state. It is not ontologically committed to any speculative metaphysics, while being justifiable both semantically and contextually, considerably simpler and not affected by the problems caused by so called meta-fictional sentences.

Keywords: Fiction – Fictional entities – Sentences about fiction – Fictional anti-realism – Common sense – Ordinary language

Introduction. Let us take a good look at the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’. It is beyond any doubt that the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ can be true especially when I have a pet dog called by that name or I know someone who uses it as his stage name.¹ Obviously, we are not going to discuss such a use of this sentence.² Let us imagine another situation. We are back in a high school and we are asked to describe Odysseus. We utter many sentences including ‘Odysseus is cunning’. However, if our teacher is a literal

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¹ According to ordinary language philosophers a sentence has no truth value and is used only to express either true or false statement, or fails to express any statement at all. Therefore, when I claim that a certain sentence is true or false I mean that a statement expressed by this sentence in a specific situation is respectively true or false. Where it is important to underline this, I use the word ‘statement’.

² Strawson differentiates between a sentence, use of a sentence and an utterance of a sentence [12]. The sentence ‘This is my cat’ is neither true nor false. However, this sentence said or uttered by Amy in her own house while pointing at a cat can serve as a vehicle for a true statement. Each utterance of a sentence is unique, but Amy can utter this sentence again in similar circumstances. While it will be another utterance, it will be also the same use of this sentence, which is referring to her own cat. Strawson’s distinction is a foundation of contextualism. For the sake of theoretical neutrality we should soften Strawson’s position by saying only that certain sentences become unambiguous in specific situations, and we don’t prejudge that a context is a necessary requirement for them to have a truth value.

follower of Russell then we are in trouble, as our proposition is false.³ On the other hand, if our teacher prefers Strawson then he is the one in trouble, as our sentence is neither true nor false and expresses no statement.⁴ Regardless, we intuitively sense that it is completely correct and appropriate to say that Odysseus is cunning. This is the problem of sentences about fictional entities. What is their subject's reference? Do they possess a truth value? Alexius Meinong postulated a world of non-existent beings that would contain fictional entities [8]. Peter van Inwagen proposed a similar, but less radical solution, usually described as creationism [14]. Both solutions boil down to acknowledging the existence of a metaphysical sphere containing fictional entities. Another heavily ontologically committed is the possibilism theory developed *inter alia* by David Lewis in accordance with his realistic account of possible worlds, in which a fictional entity is in fact a real entity in some possible world [6]. Additionally, numerous accounts of sentences about fiction were developed in the course of the realism versus anti-realism debate in the field of analytic and linguistic philosophy. Each of these solutions, strongly rooted in corresponding theories, has certain strengths and weaknesses.

The paper explores possible explanations of a truth value of sentences about fictional entities. While avoiding dependency on particular theories as much as possible, it proceeds in accordance with core common sense and ordinary language philosophy assumptions, particularly that a statement expressed by a sentence about fiction has a truth value which is not dependent on any dynamic conditions or external changes. The paper argues that a paraphrasing strategy, which emphasises reference to a past event of a creation of a work of fiction, is the most plausible explanation of such a state, as it is not ontologically committed to any speculative metaphysics, while being justifiable both semantically and contextually, considerably simpler and not affected by the problems caused by so called meta-fictional sentences.

Fictional sentences and sentences about fiction. The problem we are faced with requires us to clearly separate fictional sentences from sentences about fiction ([15], 105 – 107). The sentence ‘But at once beside him stood noble Odysseus’, as found in the English translation of *The Iliad*, is obviously a fictional sentence ([4], 2:244). Fiction itself does not really puzzle us. When we are reading *The Iliad*, even though we accept the possibility that some real events, people or places might have been depicted by the author, we don't really think that anything portrayed in the heroic epos actually happened as described. The status of fictional sentences was quite satisfactorily resolved at the dawn of analytic philosophy both by Gottlob Frege, who claimed that ‘the sentences in fictional discourse are truth-valueless’ ([15], 119; [3], 213 – 216), and by Bertrand Russell, who maintained that they are plainly false [10]. The question, whether sentences of a work of

³ Literal analysis in accordance with the theory of descriptions, whether we consider ‘Odysseus’ to be a proper name, as in proposition $\exists x [x = o /$ or a definite description, as in proposition $\exists x [\theta (x)$, shows that the sentence is false, as there is no such entity called ‘Odysseus’ and is cunning [9].

⁴ Literal analysis in accordance with the theory of presuppositions shows that the sentence is neither true nor false, as its presupposition ‘Odysseus exists’ is false [12].

fiction are false or just devoid of the truth value, while being a deeply technical problem of the philosophy of language, bears only a minor philosophical consequence for the epistemology and is completely of no importance for the ordinary common sense. This paper covers only sentences about fiction, epitomised by the model sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’, as uttered during a class devoted to the ancient literature.⁵

Four possibilities concerning epistemic status. Let us recall the situation described at the beginning. We are back in high school and we have been asked to describe Odysseus. We utter many sentences including ‘Odysseus is cunning’. However, as already shown, the sentence proves to be problematic for literal analysis in accordance with both theory of descriptions and presuppositions. Surprisingly, most high school teachers don’t have such problems. They intuitively sense that it is completely appropriate to say that Odysseus is cunning in such a situation and accept this characteristic as completely correct. Should we also acknowledge such an answer as true? We have just reached the first point at which our paths may go into different directions. There are four possibilities concerning the epistemic status of the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ in its aforementioned use and sentences about fictional entities in general, namely that they are always false, always true, neither true nor false, or either true or false.

The first option is that sentences about fiction are always false. However, it is a rather common belief that there is something wrong in a statement that a certain sentence is both correct, in a certain sense, and false. It definitely does not imply that the meanings of the words ‘correct’ and ‘true’, and respectively ‘incorrect’ and ‘false’, are the same. It is obvious that a sentence that is grammatically correct can be false. What is meant here is merely that it is unnatural to say that a sentence is at the same time false and correct in the sense in which the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ is correct during a class about ancient literature. Even Russell believes that some sentences about fictional entities have a truth value after we apply certain paraphrasing strategies ([10], 491). Besides that, if all sentences about fiction were always false, it would deprive them of any cognitive value. It is natural to treat the sentence ‘Odysseus was an originator of the Trojan horse scheme’ as rather informative, especially for a person who has only a faint idea about *The Iliad* and ancient literature. It is probably the reason why such a view concerning the epistemic status of sentences about fiction is not widely held.

The second option is that sentences about fiction are always true. This solution has, paradoxically, the same weakness as the previous one. If all sentences about fiction were always true, it would also deprive them of any informative value. Interestingly, such a solution is a possible consequence of various philosophical positions. For example, Meinong makes a distinction between existence and subsistence. For him a typical fictional entity is an object that has subsistence but no existence, and while it does not exist, it does have properties [8]. In other words a typical fictional entity is just a non-existent set of

⁵ In this paper sentences about fictional entities and meta-fictional sentences will be treated as subsets of sentences about fiction.

properties. Furthermore, Meinong endorses a form of idealism concerning the properties, particularly a form of Platonism. According to his Principle of the Freedom of Assumption for any set of properties there is an object that has those properties [5]. Therefore, since there is an infinite number of sets of properties, there is also a non-existent Odysseus that is cunning as well as a non-existent Odysseus that is inept. A similar situation may arise in the case of possibilism theory in which a fictional entity is in fact a real entity in some possible world [6]. Accordingly, since there is an infinite number of possible worlds, there must be certain Odysseus that is cunning in one possible world, as well as certain Odysseus that is inept in another. Therefore, as a consequence of both theories, any characterization of Odysseus is true, which is very hard to accept.⁶

The third option is that sentences about fiction are neither true nor false. It is probably most natural to associate such a concept with Austin's speech acts theory, which was further developed by Searle [1]. The theory assumes that factual and fictional assertions are completely different speech acts governed by separate sets of rules. Fictional assertions, such questions or commands, do not acquire a truth value, despite the fact that their appearance is similar to factual assertions. This, however, does not extend to sentences about fiction. On this matter Austin is unanimous with Ryle, who believes that sentences about fiction are factual assertions referring to books or their authors [12]. Of course we can try to conceive a putative form of speech acts pluralism in which a sentence about fiction would be devoid of a truth value. Maybe even the correctness and incorrectness of sentences about fiction could be somehow explained then, for example by the compatibility between various meanings contextually defined in a work of fiction? There is some evidence that Frege had a similar solution in mind ([3], 215 – 216; [15], 106 – 107). Nevertheless, there is a good reason, explained below, not to pursue such a solution.

Either true, or false. Finally, the last option is that sentences about fiction are either true or false. Let us imagine the following situation. We are once again asked to describe Odysseus. Unfortunately, we are not prepared for the class and in frustration we reply 'Odysseus is inept'. Reactions to our statement may vary. However, it is definitely possible and natural that someone, for example the class bookworm, can reply 'It is not true, because Odysseus is cunning' or 'You are wrong, Odysseus is not inept, he outwitted the Trojans', followed by a confirmation from the teacher. Generally speaking it is rather obvious that an ordinary educated man may hesitate when asked 'Is it true that Odysseus exists?'. However, the same ordinary man when asked 'Is it true that Odysseus is cunning?' will confirm without any hesitation that Odysseus is cunning. Even philosophers, after doing a small *epoché* of their philosophical knowledge, should be able to intuitively sense that the sentence 'Odysseus is cunning' is closer to the truth than 'Odysseus is inept'. It is the most natural and widely held view.

⁶ Various forms of Meinongianism and possibilism may avoid this consequence by maintaining distinct identity of fictional entities. They cannot, however, escape the consequence that the fictional entities are prior to the creative effort of an author.

So let us take it for granted that the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ is true. However, it was said that an ordinary educated man may hesitate when asked ‘Is it true that Odysseus exists?’. In fact it is most likely that his answer would be negative, assuming he had not in mind a real person whose actions became the inspiration behind a fictional character. Bearing this in mind, we can safely assume that there neither exists nor existed such a physical entity that the word ‘Odysseus’ refers to in our sentence. Therefore, we must answer the following question. *How is it possible that the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ is true while its grammatical subject has no reference?* All we can do is to look for the best explanation of this situation. It is obvious that many completely different and incompatible theories can successfully explain this puzzle. When choosing between these theories we are limited to such ambiguous criteria as explanatory power, simplicity or convenience. However, we can divide possible theories that are able to explain the problem into two classes, ontologically committed theories and paraphrasing strategies.

Ontologically committed theories. What is common for ontologically committed theories is that they acknowledge a certain metaphysical realm that contains fictional entities. These theories vary in the degree of persistence and objectivity of the mentioned realm and its contents. However, the general idea is always the same and goes along the lines that a sentence about fiction is in fact about a certain entity that really exists in a certain metaphysical realm. Therefore, there is no problem with the reference of the grammatical subject of the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’.

We can divide such theories into strongly and weakly ontologically committed according to the persistence and objectivity of entities from the postulated realm. If those entities are eternal and completely independent from their physical vehicles, such as minds or books, then we are speaking about strongly ontologically committed theories. The most natural examples of such theories are, obviously, the already mentioned Meinongianism and possibilism. As previously stated, Meinong’s theory of objects treats fictional entities as non-existent but subsistent objects having multiple properties [8], while for David Lewis they are real entities existing in some possible world [7]. However, if those entities are dependent on minds or books and perish when there are no vehicles carrying them, we are speaking about weakly ontologically committed theories. The most natural examples of such theories are various forms of creationism. For instance, Peter van Inwagen holds that fictional entities are in fact abstract posits of literary criticism [14], while for Amie Thomasson they are abstract artefacts created by their respective authors [5]. In both cases fictional entities, residing in a certain conceptual sphere, are dependent on the existence of their vehicles, or in other words on our minds, books and other sources. This brings us to a major problem of weakly ontologically committed theories.

Let us imagine a following situation. There was a certain extinction level event that wiped out most of humanity and our modern civilization is lying in post-apocalyptic ruins. As a result all the copies of *The Iliad* were lost. Moreover, people who survived were concerned more about securing their basic needs than passing on their knowledge about the ancient literature to their offspring. After several generations people have only a faint idea of the epos. They know only that Homer is the author of *The Iliad*, that this epos

portrays a war between the Greeks and the Trojans, and that Odysseus fought on Greeks' side. In such circumstances, would the sentence 'Odysseus is cunning' be still true? On the grounds of weakly ontologically committed theories the answer is negative. However, this violates ordinary common sense, according to which any sentence that was once true should be true regardless of any dynamic conditions or external changes. To be more precise, the truth conditions of a statement expressed by a sentence in a particular context will never change and will always be either met or not.⁷ To make this point even more self-evident, let us consider the case of Napoleon. Even though we are not sure whether Napoleon was poisoned or not, we certainly know that one of these sentences 'Napoleon was poisoned' or 'Napoleon wasn't poisoned' is true. The truth conditions of these sentences correspond to past facts, which are ontologically incapable of change. The same applies to the sentence about Odysseus. Weakly ontologically committed theories cannot guarantee that sentences about fiction will always retain their respective truth values, which is a serious flaw.

This criticism does not apply to strongly ontologically committed theories according to which fictional entities are either eternal, such as a Parmenidesian being, or actual. Especially idealistic solutions like Meinongianism and Neo-Meinongianism stand up very well against various modern criticisms. We can of course argue that such theories either ignore the creative efforts of authors or do not explain sufficiently how the creation of a work can populate a metaphysical realm with the entities that figure in it. These arguments have, however, very limited strength. Basically, the only way in which we can oppose strongly ontologically committed theories is to invoke Quine's 'taste for desert landscapes' [9]. Each of the strongly ontologically committed theories overpopulate the universe with an infinite number of fictional entities stored in a metaphysical realm. While we cannot disprove such a possibility, as we usually cannot disprove any speculative metaphysics, we can always try to find an alternative explanation following Ockham's razor and the quest for simplicity. This paper argues that such an alternative explanation can be successfully delivered by a certain paraphrasing strategy.

Paraphrasing strategies. What is common for paraphrasing strategies is that they uphold unconditional antirealism with regard to fictional entities. Fictional entities such as Odysseus simply do not exist. Such strategies paraphrase sentences such as 'Odysseus is cunning' in a way that retains their truth values but does not commit us to the existence of fictional entities. There are many paraphrasing strategies and more are constantly being developed. This paper argues, however, that an even simpler paraphrasing strategy can

⁷ Note that this does not necessarily commit us to Fregean crypto-idealism, which postulates eternal propositions floating in 'the third realm'. It is a purely metaphysical question, whether the statement would be true even if completely all knowledge about ancient literature were lost. In such an event nobody would be able to even precisely refer to Homer or *The Iliad*. For the same reason we can only generally refer to authors whose identity and works were erased from human memory. It is most likely that the phrase 'unknown authors living between 1000 and 500 BC' is not an empty description, but it doesn't allow us to say anything about a particular work of a particular forgotten author.

successfully account for the truth values of sentences about fiction.

Peter van Inwagen discusses an interesting strategy using a conditional or hypothetical paraphrase ([14], 39). According to this strategy, the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ should be paraphrased as ‘If what is written in *The Iliad* was true, then Odysseus would be cunning’. However, this leads to even more problems. As Peter van Inwagen points out, Odysseus, like all fictional characters, is not described in infinite detail and there will always be aspects that are undetermined. As a result the sentences ‘Odysseus has an even number of hairs’ and ‘Odysseus has an odd number of hairs’ can pose a serious problem connected with ontological indeterminacy.⁸ Another problem may be caused by intentional or unintentional contradictions in a work of art. It is possible that a certain character is described in a novel as left-handed on one page and as right-handed on another. It is also possible that the author of a poem or a novel intentionally chooses to describe an entity as having incompatible properties, for instance a round square. Then, however, paraphrasing sentences would be self-contradictory. Another problem is that the hypothetical paraphrase ‘If what is written in ... was true, then ...’ relies on the existence of an entity in which something was written. This obviously begs the question what is that entity? Is it a particular copy of a book? It leads us inevitably to problems associated with weakly ontologically committed theories. Moreover, this paraphrasing strategy is artificial and in the simple sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ there is nothing suggesting a conditional paraphrase, Homer or *The Iliad*. Although, of course it can be explained on the ground of contextualism. All the above mentioned problems can be avoided by using a different paraphrasing strategy.

An event-referring paraphrase. The roots of the proposed paraphrasing strategy can be found in Russell, who claims that ‘if “Apollo” has a primary occurrence, the proposition containing the occurrence is false; if the occurrence is secondary, the proposition may be true’ ([10], 491). In other words the sentence ‘Apollo is the sun-god’ might be true if understood as something like ‘According to Greek mythology Apollo is the sun-god’. Also Gilbert Ryle suggested a similar possibility by claiming that “the proposition ‘Mr. Pickwick is a fiction’ is really, despite its *prima facies*, about Dickens or else about Pickwick Papers” ([12], 149 – 150). All these solutions use a paraphrase which focuses on what certain authors say. I propose a small modification which focuses the paraphrase strategy on the event of creation of a work of fiction.

To rationalise such a paraphrase strategy let us once again take a closer look at the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’. We have already assumed or established several things. First, the statement expressed by this sentence in the context of a class devoted to ancient literature is true. Second, the grammatical subject of this sentence does not have a referent. Third, the statement expressed by this sentence will be true even if all copies of *The Iliad* and

⁸ If what was written in *The Iliad* was true, then Odysseus would be an entity that is excluded from the contradiction principle, as its substitution $\forall_x [E(x) \vee \dots]$ where means that x has an even number of hairs, would be false.

The Odyssey, as well as all human knowledge about ancient literature, are lost. Assuming the correspondence theory of truth the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ is true if it corresponds to a *fact*. Now we must find this fact. There are plenty of facts that could justify ascription of the truth to our sentence.⁹ But only one of them is able to do so plausibly and also meet all our requirements. This fact won't change no matter what happens in the future. This fact is that Homer, whoever he was, created during a certain period of time two works of art called *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in which he described Odysseus as cunning.

Therefore, by saying ‘Odysseus is cunning’ during a class devoted to ancient literature we are not saying anything about Odysseus. Neither we are saying anything about the work of art in general nor a certain book lying before us. We are saying something about a certain person who in a certain period of time performed a certain act. *The sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ should be correctly paraphrased as ‘Odysseus was described as cunning’ which in fact means the same as ‘Someone described Odysseus as cunning’*. To better show the reference to the past event we might even use Davidsonian analysis of action sentences ([2], 48 – 50). The sentence ‘Someone described Odysseus as cunning’ can be therefore analysed into ‘There was an event *x* such that *x* was a description, *x* was performed by someone and *x* was performed in such a way that it describes Odysseus as cunning’. This paraphrase is particularly important, because it allows us to shift our attention from a non-existent fictional entity to an actual past event.¹⁰

We could of course paraphrase ‘Odysseus is cunning’ more precisely into sentences like ‘Homer described Odysseus as cunning’ or ‘Homer described Odysseus in *The Iliad* as cunning’, and respectively analyse them into ‘There was an event *x* such that *x* was a description, *x* was performed by Homer and *x* was performed in such a way that it describes Odysseus as cunning’ and ‘There was an event *x* such that *x* was a description in

⁹ Ascription of the truth to the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ can be justified on the basis of many facts. For example the fact that I think that Odysseus is cunning. Unfortunately this solution not only deprives our statement of much of its cognitive value, but also leads to many relativistic issues. Other possible facts are that in a certain copy of *The Iliad* lying before me Odysseus is described as cunning, or that in all existing copies of *The Iliad* Odysseus is described as cunning, or that the majority of those who read *The Iliad* think that Odysseus is cunning. Because it is possible that in future all knowledge about ancient literature is lost these solutions are also unable to meet our requirements. It gets more interesting when we use past fact such as that majority of those who had read *The Iliad* in twentieth century thought that Odysseus is cunning. This fact, providing that it is a fact, won't change no matter what. The only problem is that there is nothing in the sentence ‘Odysseus is cunning’ that would indicate this specific period of time. However, we can still use a broader past fact that the majority of those who had ever read *The Iliad* thought that Odysseus is cunning. Although very unlikely it is still ontologically possible that in future it won't be a true assertion. Therefore this solution is also unable to meet our requirements. All the above mentioned examples can be essentially divided into three classes, which contain probably every fact that can be plausibly used to justify ascription of the truth to our sentence. All except one.

¹⁰ A very similar method of avoiding ontological commitments is invoked by Ryle in the case of intelligence and his logical behaviorism. For Ryle intelligence is not an attribute of a mind, understood as an entity existing in a mental world, but an attribute of an action. If someone says that we are intelligent it means that we performed an action or a series of actions intelligently, or that in general we are capable of it [11].

The Iliad, x was performed by Homer and x was performed in such a way that it describes Odysseus as cunning'. Both sentences have the same structure but differ in the precision of their predicates. This difference is of no consequence as all of these sentences are true because of the very same event and the precision has nothing to do with their truth or falsehood. We can equally truly say that 'Gilgamesh is brave' even though we don't know who the author of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was, for the same reason for which we can truly say that 'Someone stole my car' without knowing who it was.

Green Dragons. It might be preferable to paraphrase the sentence 'Odysseus is cunning' as 'Someone described Odysseus as cunning' instead of 'Homer described Odysseus in *The Iliad* as cunning', as *semantically* there is nothing in the former sentence that hints or indicates Homer or *The Iliad*. On the other hand it is possible to make a semantically justified step from 'is cunning' to 'is described as cunning' when we consider that Odysseus is a fictional entity. It is also possible to semantically justify a step from 'is described as cunning' to 'someone described ... as cunning', basically because if something is described there must be someone who performed this act of description. Therefore, the phrase 'someone', although imprecise, might still point us to Homer.

However, there is a certain problem. Let us imagine a following situation. Two fantasy enthusiasts discuss dragons. One utters the sentence 'Dragons are green' while the other disagrees, claiming that they are black. They also disagree on how many heads and wings dragons usually have, what their eating habits are and so on. According to our paraphrasing convention the sentence 'Dragons are green' should be understood as 'Someone described dragons as green'. However, the sentences 'Someone described dragons as green' and 'Someone described dragons as black' are equally true. In numerous works of fiction dragons were portrayed as green, black, red, gold, etc. The problem is that virtually any sentence about fictional entity can be true due to the enormous amount of works of fiction. The short sentence 'Someone described Odysseus as cunning' taken out of context has incomparably broader truth conditions than the sentence 'Homer described Odysseus in *The Iliad* as cunning'. But an ancient literature teacher is hardly interested in a description of a character from a Japanese anime. This is not a problem for contextualism, as both 'Homer' and '*The Iliad*' are provided by the context of the class devoted to ancient literature. However, at the same time such an addition might not be possible on the grounds of semantic minimalism, unless we acknowledge that 'someone' is an indexical. As a result, the proposed paraphrasing strategy might not be entirely compatible with all theories of language. This might be either a limitation or just an argument against such theories.

Meta-fictional sentences. According to the strategy advocated in this paper the sentence 'Odysseus is cunning' should be understood as 'Homer described Odysseus in *Iliad* as cunning'. Fictional realists claim, however, that similar strategies cannot be used to paraphrase certain meta-fictional sentences such as 'Odysseus is a fictional character' or 'Odysseus is an archetype of a traveller' because obviously Homer didn't say a thing about Odysseus being a fictional character or an archetype in his eposes [5]. It is considered to be a serious argument against such paraphrasing strategies. Is it a valid argument? Not

necessarily. The core idea behind the proposed solution that sentences about fictional entities are in fact about a certain past event or an action performed by a real person. Therefore, the sentence ‘Odysseus is an archetype of a traveller’ simply means that Homer described Odysseus in a such way that this description has properties conventionally ascribed to an archetypical traveller. Therefore, there is nothing wrong in the paraphrase ‘Homer described Odysseus as an archetype of a traveller’ or ‘There was an event x such that x was a description, x was performed by Homer and x was performed in such a way that it describes Odysseus as an archetype of traveller’. It is possible even though he literarily did not do this for the same reason why the sentence ‘Homer described Odysseus as promiscuous’ is possibly true even though we won’t find the word ‘promiscuous’ in the eposes. All meta-fictional sentences containing technical terms of literary criticism can be explained in such a way.

There is, however, a certain class of ‘meta-fictional’ sentences that cannot be accounted for in such a way. The sentence ‘Mickey Mouse is a pop-culture icon’ is true even though the way Mickey Mouse was portrayed in Walt Disney’s pictures does not have properties conventionally ascribed to a pop-culture icon [5]. To elucidate this problem let us consider what it means to be a pop-culture icon. According to most definitions it means that a certain object is simply recognised by the majority of people as a distinctive and important element of the popular culture. Therefore the sentence ‘Mickey Mouse is a pop-culture icon’ means more or less that the majority of people recognise Mickey Mouse as a distinctive and important element of popular culture. This, however, is not a meta-fictional sentence referring to a fictional entity, work of fiction or the author of a work of fiction, but an entirely factual sentence referring to a certain mental state shared by the majority of people. And that non-existent entities can be subjects of our mental states is a claim that does not need any further justification.

Conclusion. The paper argues that it is commonsensical to view sentences about fictional entities such as ‘Odysseus is cunning’ or ‘Dragons are green’ as true or false, and tries to explain how it is possible despite the fact that the grammatical subjects of these sentences have no reference. Several proposals on how to deal with this issue are discussed in the literature. One option is to assume the existence of a metaphysical realm containing fictional entities. It is argued that such a solution results in the overpopulation of the mentioned realm. Additionally, if fictional entities cannot survive without their physical vehicles like books or minds, such a solution cannot guarantee the future truthfulness of the sentences about them, which contradicts plain common sense. Another solution is a strategy according to which sentences about fiction should be paraphrased according to the template ‘If what is written in ... was true, then ... would be ...’. It is shown that this strategy results in a number of problems.

Thus, in the paper, a different solution is proposed. It is argued that a paraphrase according to the templates ‘Someone described ... as ...’, ‘... described ... as ...’, or ‘... described ... in ... as ...’, all analysable in a Davidsonian fashion focusing on a past event, is superior to all the previously mentioned solutions. By referring to a past event of a creation of a work of fiction, the sentence retains its truth value no matter what without being

ontologically committed to any dubious metaphysics. Additionally, in order to accommodate non-text based media, the word ‘described’ can be replaced by any other action verb, such as ‘portrayed’ or ‘displayed’. The only known limitation of the proposed solution is its heavy reliance on the context of an utterance in case of more precise paraphrases.

In short, the proposed solution allows sentences about fictional entities (1) to retain a truth value, which is natural to the ordinary language, (2) to avoid ontological commitment to any speculative metaphysical realms and entities, (3) to remain both semantically and contextually justifiable, (4) and finally to accommodate meta-fictional sentences. It is a purely anti-realistic account of sentences about fiction.

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