

The Ontology of Fictional Characters

From the perspective of philosophical semantics, fictional characters raise the following puzzle: It is an empirical fact that people utter sentences which seem to be declarative sentences about fictional characters, e.g., “Lieutenant Columbo owns a Peugeot 403”. Moreover, it seems that people who utter sentences of this kind claim truth for what they say; and, thirdly, some of these sentences seem to be true. Thus, it seems that indeed Lieutenant Columbo owns a Peugeot 403 (instead of, say, a Renault). These data, however, seem to be in conflict with some fundamental and widely (though not universally) accepted logical principles and/or empirical data: How can it be true that Lieutenant Columbo owns a Peugeot 403 if Lieutenant Columbo does not exist?

In this paper, I sketch a realist ontology of fictional characters, and I argue that characters cannot be reduced to works and/or stories. The bulk of the paper is dedicated to a discussion of various identity problems concerning fictional characters: problems of character identity within a work or story, problems of character identity across different works or stories, and problems of character identity across different episodes of a series (or across an original work and a sequel of it).