Introduction

In everyday language we frequently make statements about objects we do not believe actually exist whether it is a character in a film or a figure from mythology. This seems to be an important part of human culture and with no apparent adverse effects on our conduct in reality. We should be able to explain logically how such assertions are made and verified. In order to be considered true an assertion must be about something, the reference, and there must be conditions under which it could be considered true, the truth conditions and these must actually be the case. Non-real objects like fictional characters don't seem to satisfy the first two requirements as they refer to objects which have no instantiation in reality and consequently there don't seem to be real empirically testable truth conditions. Accounting for these statements raises questions of ontology: Can we sensibly speak of things which do not exist in reality? Or can we claim that fictitious characters exist in some other sense with reference and truth conditions? The former question raises the Platonic problem of non-being; I argue that this problem has largely been solved and we can make true assertions about the non-existence of these characters. However, this result has disappointingly limited scope given our vast seemingly sensible everyday discussion of these objects. I argue that we need a change of strategy in order to give a full account of this practice; I attempt to adapt Mackie’s concept of Minimal Existence to this purpose with use of my concept of anchoring according to which
the totality of sources about a character gives it a literal existence and provides the basis of evidence necessary for truth conditions.

**The Problem of Non-Being**

The basic puzzle of non-being lies in the apparent need to assume something has existence in order to deny it. According to traditional views of subject-predicate sentence referencing, in the statement, ‘Zeus does not exist,’ the object of reference seems to be Zeus and so the statement seems to be referring to Zeus. If Zeus does not exist then on this understanding there is nothing for this statement to refer to. Obviously a statement about nothing can be dismissed as meaningless in the style of Frege (Frege 41), however sometimes we do wish to assert the non-existence of objects, Richard Dawkins frequently asserts the non-existence of gods as a premise for arguments against the existence of the Christian God. This is only possible if non-existence statements can be true, not just meaningless.

Some like A.J. Ayer would argue that such statements lack truth conditions and as such cannot be true and are rightly considered meaningless (Ayer 20-24, 119). There are two problems with this approach: first it tends to misconstrue the nature of fictional characters, assertions about whom do not generally suppose their literal existence. Secondly it does not deal with the basic problem of non-being since, ruling all statements of the form, ‘X does not exist,’ meaningless, it simply ignores it. While Ayer’s principle of verifiability appears useful for the scientific ontology he wishes to construct, even science sometimes needs to assert non-being. For example, before oxidation was understood scientists thought there was a

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1 Though, Frege wouldn’t necessarily class this statement as meaningless, as he allowed concepts to be references.
substance called *phlogiston* that was released from objects during combustion. When this notion was disproved it was crucial for scientists to be able to assert truly, ‘Phlogiston does not exist.’ You could argue that's not necessary because instead you could positively assert what *does*, in reality, exist but this produces further problems; first, in science non-existent objects are often rejected before there is a replacement (the humours in pre-enlightenment medicine). Secondly, this approach would lead to confusion and probably the question, ‘Where does phlogiston fit in?’ bringing us back to the original problem.

It is frustrating that the lack of discernible truth conditions which renders a statement of non-being meaningless, is due in part to the fact that the object does not exist, the very fact that would render the statement true! This problem was neutered by Bertrand Russell with his *theory of descriptions*: Russell held that names were abbreviations of definite descriptions; these descriptions do not refer to objects; instead they specify the conditions for labelling an object with that name (Russell 483-484), so:

1. ‘Zeus does not exist’

becomes

2. ‘It is not true that ‘There is one and only one entity such that it is the King of the Greek Gods’.'

The expanded definite description, ‘the King of the Greek Gods,’ identifies the conditions under which an object would be Zeus. As there is no object satisfying this description the second assertion is true without requiring the referring use of the name of a non-existent object. Under this theory all assertions have a truth value including those about the fictional and mythological characters. However the appeal of Russell’s theory for this case is superficial, it facilitates true assertions of non-
existence in reality but beyond this any statement involving an object without an instantiation in reality will automatically be rendered false. Russell’s most famous example (Russell 490) illustrates this point:

3. ‘The current King of France is bald.’
4. ‘There is one and only one entity such that it is now the King of France and is bald.’

Statement 4 is rightly considered false but this is solely on account of the non-existence of the current King of France. A statement about the current King of France being in exile could be something monarchists may want to say but replacing ‘is bald’ with ‘is in exile’ would not affect the assertion’s truth value. It seems any discussion of the characteristics of fictional characters would immediately be rendered false because they lack real existence:

5. ‘Hamlet is a man mad from oedipal repression.’
6. ‘There is one and only one entity such that it is the son of King Hamlet and a man mad from oedipal repression’

That sentence 6 is obviously false is at odds with the fact that sentence 5 expresses a tenable opinion and an interesting debate in the study of Hamlet. The irrelevance of the content of such assertions to their truth or falsity shows that Russell's approach is unsatisfactory for our purposes.

Quine follows Russell’s system of descriptive expansion, characterising the yielded descriptions involving quantifiers (some, all, none etc) as the ‘variables of quantification’(Quine 32-33). The expanded assertion commits us to the existence of the values of all of the variables which are necessary for the assertion to be true. Thus sentence 6 is still commits to the existence of Hamlet (or rather to ‘the son of King Hamlet’), however, unlike Russell, Quine does not seek to judge the validity of
others’ ontologies (Quine 38). This leads him to a position where assertions about mythological characters require him to admit ontologies containing innumerable non-existent objects, for example, ‘Pegasus is a winged horse,’ commits the speaker to the existence of both Pegasus and a winged horse. Quine is clear that existence isn’t necessarily spatio-temporal (Quine 23) and affords abstract existence to elements of mathematics. However it is clear, first, that one of Quine’s intentions is to limit the number of non-existent objects people commit themselves to and secondly, that any form of existence that was afforded to Pegasus (Quine states that it is not merely one of an idea) would not be comparable to the existence of entities which play an irreducible role in mathematics. Quine’s method enables a wide scope of assertions about fictitious and mythological characters and his ‘Semantic Plane’ (Quine 35) to some extent acknowledges the reality and necessity of discussing such objects. Yet Quine’s does not dwell on the truth of such assertions and so on this issue, his system is no more satisfying than Russell’s.

A Change of Strategy

Although Quine opened the door to assertions about fictional characters and abstract existence it is clear that we need a change of strategy. Instead of focussing on assertions about non-existents, we should question what we mean by existence here. Is there some sense in which characters of fiction and mythology exist?

The best candidate is the concept of Minimal Existence devised by Mackie (Mackie 259). This form of existence is distinguished from literal existence, or existence in reality (or a certain causal influence over it). Characters in literature can be regarded as having minimal existence in the sense that their existence is contingent on the literal existence of their source, which has a role I describe as the
anchor. This anchor is crucial; contains the entirety of information that comprises the fictional character, thus the character exists as an object of reference within it and truth conditions can be constructed in deference to this source of information. This explanation seems to fit our talk of fictional characters: we talk about Hamlet and sensibly pick out a meaningful object without asserting that a man matching Hamlet’s description ever existed. Importantly, in discussions of literature statements about Hamlet can be judged true or false in reference to the play. The truth conditions of these assertions are like ordinary truth conditions except that the range of quantification is a restricted domain concerned with the source literature rather than other sections of the real world. The anchors of these characters, whether they are a single book, a collection or some other form of record, all literally exist. This places the evidence relevant to any truth conditions within the real world.

One might argue that the existence of such objects is existence in a different world, or a second-order existence. But it is clear that the literal existence of the content of such objects is within our reality: the words were written within our reality and remain in existence here. Fictional characters are simply the sum of all these words (the anchor needn’t be a singular work) and to the extent that they exist, they exist in our reality. As far as 'second-order existence' goes, fictional characters are significant objects, endowed with all their descriptions in a full and literal manner, only they exist minimally, that is, within the confines of their anchor. However, through this anchor’s place in reality they possess a literal existence as fictional characters. What this means is that we should not consider Hamlet a literal prince of Denmark or even a literal person but rather a character in a work of fiction that literally exists.
Tethered Gods: Accounting for True Assertions about Fictional Characters

The application of this strategy to mythological figures is more complex: unlike Hamlet, Zeus was once considered a literally existing entity. In virtue of this, we are able to see the problems that occur when literal and minimal existence conflict or become blurred. Consider the assertion:

7. ‘Zeus is generous.’

Depending on perspective, this statement could be absolutely false or possibly true. The difference lies in the type of existence given to Zeus here. Literal existence would lead to absolute falsehood as Zeus does not literally exist whereas whether Zeus has minimal existence depends on interpretation of Zeus’ anchor. While it might seem strange to consider Zeus as having literal existence, it would not be for God, and Zeus was considered no less real in ancient Greece. The problem this presents is whether ambiguities about the basis of the existence of these characters undermine the coherence of the minimal existence concept and thus the ability to make testable assertions.

This issue becomes clearer if we expand the consideration of sentence 7 to include two plausible contexts: a) the statement as written by a Fifth Century BCE Olympian priest out of gratitude for great prosperity following a sacrifice to Zeus; b) the statement as written by a 21st Century historian of mythology who uses the priest's statement as evidence for a description of Zeus. This can occasion a very troubling error in reference as the priest's statement is about an action of an entity -- the prosperity is attributed to Zeus, which thus is his generosity -- whereas the mythologist's statement concerns the nature of a mythological character. The trouble is that the historian’s statements seem to ascribe minimal existence: he refers to a mythological character anchored to reality by a literally existing source. This constitutes a case of Evans’ Mouthpiece Syndrome (Evans 199-203, 206-207) in
which the speaker uses a received reference inaccurately; Evans’ classic example is of a speaker using ‘Kingston’ to refer to the literal capital of Jamaica after overhearing a racist comment that ‘Kingston [upon-Thames]’ is the capital of Jamaica. In virtue of this similarity, anchoring is vulnerable to Evans’ attack on causal theories of reference: the context of the anchor in the example above is not well considered by the historian and consequently he ends up referring to something he doesn’t intend to. As a ‘mouthpiece’ he refers to what the Olympian priest believed was a literal, generous act of Zeus, bestowing prosperity on Olympia, rather than the intended reference: a general characteristic of Zeus.

Conflicts in reference needn’t present a problem for our ability to make true assertions about mythological characters however cases such as this demonstrate the often disparate nature of anchors. Evans handles this Mouthpiece syndrome with the concept of dominance; the evidence, qualitative and quantitative, about a name dictates which of the conflicting references has the dominant connection to the name; this is then the correct reference. The approach is similar to the use of literature about historical figures, such evidence is a mere tool to identify the reference of the name or historical figure. For example, when researchers seek to identify the man we know as 'Jesus,' they look for a man pointed out by the dominance of the evidence about this name.

Unfortunately this approach is not applicable to minimally existing characters. The anchoring concept means that a fictional character’s existence is limited to its tools of evidence; as we have seen, the sources of the anchor include both the evidence about a character, and the character itself. While literature about a historical figure may help to identify the figure in a conflict of reference, the nature of minimal existence makes it hard to isolate evidence about a character from the
character itself. Conflicting interpretations of the anchor, especially when they come from multiple sources, can easily lead to a situation where we are referring to different characters rather than just dealing with conflicting interpretations of the same character. Unlike with a historical figure, there is often no necessary connection between disparate elements of a character’s anchor; for instance, the varying interpretations of the character Dracula have made it very difficult to make true assertions about him: in the film Dracula 2000, for example, he was revealed to be Judas Iscariot! This shows that, in line with Mackie’s instruction (Mackie 259), our assertions about fictional characters have to be precise in reference to ensure disparity does not preclude testable proof conditions.

The ability to make true assertions requires a reference and satisfaction of truth conditions. The problem of non-being as a barrier to asserting non-existence has been removed by Russell’s theory of descriptions however his mantra that logic is about the real world blinds him to consideration of other important issues. Mackie’s concept of Minimal Existence combined with my emphasis on the anchor to literal existence provides us with an ontological basis that is both consistent with the real world and enables full scope for making assertions about fictional and mythological characters by way of providing the source material for constructing truth conditions. Discussion of fictional and mythological characters is an important part of human culture and the human pursuit of knowledge. Such discussions require assertions and statements about these objects and for this practice to be meaningful, the assertions must be too. As the last section shows, minimal existence is vulnerable to disparity in anchors but this simply means that we should be careful in our use of minimal existence, making sure to refer to a character anchored in a definite body of information.
Bibliography


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