

Topics in Philosophy of Language: Empty Names, Negative Existentials, and Fictional Discourse (6AANA048)

1. Module Description

How do we talk about that which doesn't exist? For instance, if names' meaning is what their reference, then how can empty names be meaningful? Yet the fact that Pegasus and Sherlock Holmes don't exist seems like an important part of our knowledge. Hence, there is more than just prima facie pressure to allow that sentences like "Pegasus does not exist" are meaningful. As we shall see, data such as these put pressure on some popular views in philosophy of language: in particular, the 'causal theory' of names and the widespread assumption that the logic of natural language is something like our first-order logic. In the course of exploring the range of possible responses, we shall ask a number of related questions: what are fictions? Are there truths in fiction? And, if so, can those truths offer a plausible account of not just what we recognize as stories and myth, but also perhaps of certain topics of distinct philosophical interest, like ethics and mathematics?

2. Assessment

This course will run as a seminar. That means that there is no lecture component, but rather 2 hours per week of discussion. After the first meeting, students will be asked to volunteer to begin the class with presentations on the readings. All students are expected to have read the relevant texts ahead of time. Assessment will be via a single, 4,000 word summative essay.

3. Secondary Texts

- Michael Devitt and Richard Hanley (eds.), 2006. *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- A.P. Martinich and David Sosa (eds.), 2012. *The Philosophy of Language*, 6th edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Outline of Weekly Topics and Readings

N.B. This schedule is tentative and may have to be adjusted to accommodate class visits or Skype sessions with some of the relevant authors. All listed readings are mandatory unless otherwise noted.

- Week 1: Reference and Existence I
 - Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, Lectures I & II
- Week 2: Reference and Existence II
 - Kripke, *Reference and Existence*, Lectures III & VI

- Week 3: Speaking of Nothing
 - Keith Donnellan, “Speaking of Nothing”
 - David Braun, “Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names”
- Week 4: Free Logic & Names
 - Mark Sainsbury, *Reference Without Referents* Ch.’s 2 & 3
 - Mark Sainsbury, “The Same Name” (Recommended)
 - Mark Sainsbury, “Representing Unicorns” (Recommended)
 - N.B. Assuming that we can coordinate our schedules, we shall be having a 1-hour Skype Q&A with Mark Sainsbury sometime during week 4.
- Week 5: Artfactualism
 - Amie Thomasson, “Fictional Characters and Literary Practices”
 - Kendall Walton, “Restricted Quantification, Negative Existentials, and Fiction”
- Week 6: Fiction
 - David Lewis, “The Truth in Fiction”
 - Tamar Gendler, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance”
- Week 7: Fictionalism about Mathematics
 - Stephen Yablo, “The Myth of Seven”
 - John Burgess, “Mathematics and Bleak House”
 - Stephen Yablo, “Non-Catastrophic Presupposition Failure” (Recommended)
- Week 8: Fictionalism about Morality
 - Richard Joyce, “Moral Fictionalism”
 - Mark Kalderon, “Moral Fictionalism, the Frege-Geach Problem, and Reasonable Inference”
- Week 9: Textor I (Class visit by Mark Textor)
 - Mark Textor, “Vacuous Names in Early Analytic Philosophy: Frege, Russell, and Moore”
 - Mark Textor, “Sense-only-signs: Frege on fictional proper names”
- Week 10: Textor II (Class visit by Mark Textor)
 - Jessie Munton, “Frege, Fiction, and Force”
 - Tyler Burge, “Sinning Against Frege”

5. Sample Formative Topics

- How do empty names present a particular problem for the ‘causal’ theory of names?
- What are negative existentials? Why are they puzzling?
- What should the causal theorist say in response to the problem of empty names?
- Are there truths in fiction? Why or why not?