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Talking about Hamlet
(Abstract)

- Full-length article in: JLT 8/2 (2014), 219–133.

One argument for fictional realism, the view that there are such things as fictional characters, proceeds by arguing that we need to accept there are fictional characters in order to provide an adequate account of intuitively true and meaningful reports containing fictional names, reports such as »In *Hamlet*, Hamlet equivocates«. For, granted some plausible assumptions, it seems that the truth and meaningfulness of such reports requires that the names they contain genuinely refer to fictional characters. However I argue that the fictional realist herself faces problems providing an account of certain other forms of intuitively true reports. These are reports that intuitively seem to be about fictional characters but where the apparent reference to the fictional character is achieved, not via a fictional name, but rather descriptively. I consider, in particular, reports involving specific uses of indefinite descriptions, such as the report »In *Hamlet*, a certain prince equivocates«. The problem facing the realist is that the truth of this report requires the indefinite description »a certain prince« to denote the fictional character Hamlet. And this, in turn, seems to require that the fictional character Hamlet satisfies that description, and hence that the fictional character Hamlet genuinely be a prince. However I argue against the view that fictional characters genuinely have the properties ascribed to them in the fictions where they occur. In the play *Hamlet*, Hamlet is characterized as being a human and being a prince. But, I argue, even if we accept that there are fictional characters and that Hamlet is one of them, we shouldn't take the fictional character Hamlet to genuinely be a human or a prince. I then consider and reject various other strategies the fictional realist might adopt to try and provide an account of descriptive reports. I argue that, ultimately, the realist must take such reports to be made within the scope of a make-believe or pretense that there is a world which is as the play *Hamlet* describes. For, while the realist shouldn't accept that the fictional character of Hamlet is really a prince, she can nevertheless grant that it counts as one within the scope of the make-believe that *Hamlet* correctly describes a real world. And she can maintain that the intuitive truth of such reports depends upon whether the sentences they embed count as being true within the scope of the relevant make-believe. However I note that this account is also available to the irrealist who denies there are fictional characters. For, while the irrealist denies that really there is anything corresponding to Hamlet, she nevertheless grants that, within the make-believe, there is such a thing and it is a prince. Moreover it is very natural to extend this strategy to cover the sorts of reports containing fictional names, such as »In *Hamlet*, Hamlet equivocates«, that were invoked by the argument for fictional realism initially considered. However, if we adopt this strategy, we can explain our intuitions concerning these reports without our having to accept there are fictional objects. And so the argument for fictional realism that we initially considered is undermined. The very apparatus the realist invokes to provide an account of »In *Hamlet*, a certain prince equivocates« allows the irrealist to provide an account of »In *Hamlet*, Hamlet equivocates« without invoking fictional objects.

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2015-08-01

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

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How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Anthony Everett, Talking about Hamlet.

In: JLTONline (01.08.2015)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-002982

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-002982>