

“Truth in fiction”: A problem for truth or for fiction?

Louis Rouillé

Institut Jean Nicod

louis.rouille@netc.eu

The problem of “truth in fiction” consists in explaining the following contrast:

(1) Hamlet is a human being. (true)

(2) Hamlet is a crocodile. (false)

Since neither (1) nor the denial of (2) is explicitly in Shakespeare’s text, the problem of “truth in fiction” is a problem about inferences. But in fiction, inferences can go astray: there are fictions in which princes of Denmark are crocodiles...

In the philosophical literature, one can find two families of solution to the problem, and they contradict each other. The first I call the “modal account”, which can be traced back to Lewis 1978, says quite literally that “truth in fiction” is truth at a fictional world. The second I call the “functionalist account”, which is associated with the work of Walton, says that what is “true in a fiction” is rather an appropriate “move” in a corresponding game of make-believe. The two accounts are contradicting each other: according to the modal theorist (1) and (2) actually differ in their truth-value; according to the functionalist, they differ in their fictionality, a technical notion which is analogous but distinct from truth. Consequently, the problem of “truth in fiction” is a problem for a general theory of truth if you are a modal theorist, but it is a problem for the philosopher of fiction only if you are a functionalist.

My contribution to the debate in this talk is to analyze a real controversy between literary critics over “what is true in a fiction”, this example will provide an argument against the modal account and a challenge for the functionalist. The “great beetle debate”, as Stacie Friend calls it, comes from Nabokov’s lecture on Kafka, when he was teaching at Cornell in the 50s.

References: • Friend, S. 2011. The great beetle debate: A study in imagining with names. *Philosophical studies* 153(2). 183–211. • Lewis, D. 1978. Truth in fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15(1). 37–46. • Walton, K. L. 1990. *Mimesis as make-believe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. • Woods, J. 2018. *Truth in fiction. Rethinking its logic*. Heidelberg: Springer. • Woodward, R. 2011. *Truth in fiction*. *Philosophy Compass* 6(3). 158–167.