

Fictionally Fictional Object: the Alleged Objecthood of Nothingness

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ABSTRACT

Nothingness is inconceivable, yet at the same time it is not inconceivable because it is actually referred to. I propose several accessibility relations to illustrate that nothingness is not an object at all. The fictional object that Sherlock Holmes is belongs to the domain of some semantic context, but the fictionally fictional object that nothingness is does not. Based on this idea, I will also discuss the semantics of “Nothingness does not exist”. How is it that it is not an object, unlike Sherlock Holmes, but we attribute to it nonexistence?

KEYWORDS nothingness; impossibility; fiction; pretence; counterpart

Graham Priest pointed to the putative object nothingness, which is both inconceivable and not inconceivable by virtue of being actually conceived.¹ In this paper, I argue that nothingness is not an object. I will discuss the metaphysic, logic, and semantic of conceiving the inconceivable. I will also discuss the negative existential, and contrast fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes with some fictionally fictional objects, such as nothingness.

1. Metaphysical impossibility

Consider the following metaphysical truth about metaphysics.

- (1) For any x , any y , and any z , y is metaphysically accessible from x with z if and only if x could have been y with z .

¹ Priest (2014).

Metaphysically possible worlds are metaphysical possibilities of the actual world; they are worlds the actual world could have been. With my alternative decision, the actual world could have been a world in which I did not publish this paper in 2025. That world, therefore, is a metaphysical possibility of the actual world, and thus a metaphysically possible world. The world in which I became a robot in 2026 is not what the actual world could have been with anything, and thus that world is a metaphysical impossibility of the actual world, whereas that robot in that world is a metaphysical impossibility of me in the actual world. All and only metaphysical possibilities of something real are real, and thus belong to the real domain of quantification; metaphysical impossibilities are therefore unreal and thus fictitious. An epistemic context about something is a set of epistemic possibilities of that object² – these are the ways that an object might be given what an epistemic agent knows. If all such epistemic possibilities are real, then the epistemic context is real. If some such epistemic possibilities are fictitious, then the epistemic context is fictitious because part of it is fictitious. To be in a fictitious context which includes the worlds in which I am a robot in 2026 is to pretend that I could have been a robot in 2026 through projecting the fictitious possibilities in which I am a robot in 2026.³ For any p , I could have pretended that p without knowing that it was a pretence, such as when I mistakenly believe that I could have been a robot. The imagination is a part of the epistemic function operating on semantic states, which takes prior epistemic states into posterior epistemic states with evidence, whereas epistemic states are a set of epistemic accessibilities between worlds.⁴ For any p , to imagine that p is to conceive that p . To conceive that p puts one in the position to know about a world, typically counterfactual, in which that p . The epistemic context about that world is thus a set of epistemic possibilities in which that p .

² See Stalnaker (2014) for contexts as sets of possible worlds. He focuses on pragmatic contexts.

³ See Everett (2013) for a pretence theory of fiction.

⁴ Cheung (202Xa, in press). A state of a system is constituted by objects with accessibility among them. A function takes a prior state into a posterior state with a given input, outputting something, and is thus constituted by ordered triplets of accessibility. A system is constituted by functions, which thus encode update rules. Systems constitute the context in which they interact.

With evidence indicating q about that world, the epistemic function takes the prior epistemic state in such an epistemic context about that world into a posterior epistemic state, updating the epistemic context about it, with epistemic possibilities in which that q does not instantiate ruled out. The set of epistemic possibilities in the epistemic context about a typically counterfactual world an epistemic agent knows about at some time is the content of his imagination at that time.⁵

For me to conceive something inconceivable relative to me, I have to pretend that I have an enhanced imagination – an enhanced imagination which metaphysically possibly takes my prior epistemic state into a posterior epistemic state that I am metaphysically impossible to be in because of the metaphysical impossibility of the corresponding semantic state. This epistemic function is metaphysically impossible and thus fictitious, and in pretending that my epistemic function instantiates some fictitious properties, the epistemic context, which is about a world in which I have a metaphysically impossible imagination, is fictitious. In that world, I conceive of an object that is actually inconceivable, and the fictitious epistemic function takes my prior epistemic state into a posterior one in which I conceived of nothingness.

2. Logical impossibility

Consider the following metaphysical truth about logics.

- (2) For any x , any y , and any z , y is logically accessible from x with z if and only if z is true of x only if z is true of y .

Suppose that the epistemic context about the actual world includes only the worlds in which Hesperus is bright. With the linguistic or conceptual object “Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun”, the epistemic function, via the logical function, takes the prior epistemic state in a given epistemic context into the posterior epistemic state with a posterior epistemic context which

⁵ The content of his imagination might be a set of epistemic possibilities of the actual world if, for example, he has the false belief that not- p about the actual world, and imagines that p .

includes only worlds of which “Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun” is true. This explains the logical entailment from “Hesperus is bright” and “Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun” to “Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun”.⁶

Suppose that the epistemic agent is in the same epistemic context. With the linguistic or conceptual object “Hesperus is not bright”, the epistemic function, via the logical function, takes the prior epistemic state with the corresponding epistemic context into the posterior epistemic state with the posterior epistemic context which includes worlds of which “Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is not bright” is true. Those are worlds in which logic has an impossible metaphysic.⁷ In accepting the sentence “Hesperus is not bright”, via the logical function, the epistemic agent is in a fictitious epistemic context to which fictitious possibilities with a metaphysically impossible logic belong. Since fictitious worlds of which, for example, “One plus one equals two and one plus one does not equal two” is true are not brought into the posterior epistemic context, acceptance or generation of contradictory sentences does not entail acceptance or generation of every sentence. This logical accessibility relation thus explains what paraconsistent logic explains with respect to logical explosivity.⁸

Suppose that the epistemic agent is in the same epistemic context. With the linguistic or conceptual object “Phosphorus is not bright”, the epistemic function, via the logical function, takes the prior epistemic state with the corresponding prior epistemic context into a posterior epistemic state with a corresponding posterior epistemic context which includes worlds of which “Hesperus is bright and Phosphorus is not bright” is true. Those worlds are fictitious because, although logically possible because their description is not contradictory, they are metaphysically impossible. Venus could not

⁶ This explanation of logical entailment assumes some idealization about the epistemic context that all relevant logical possibilities are in the epistemic context.

⁷ It might as well be Hesperus that has an impossible metaphysic.

⁸ See Priest (2005/2016) for a paraconsistent logic with a discriminatory use of disjunctive syllogism.

be both bright and not bright. Although logical impossibility entails metaphysical impossibility, metaphysical impossibility does not entail logical impossibility. A metaphysical impossibility is known by an epistemic agent to be so if his true description of it is contradictory and he knows it.

In the fictitious epistemic context mentioned in section 1, I think about my situation in terms of how I relate to some objects. The object, nothingness, relates to me in terms of being actually inconceivable relative to me. However, I am in an epistemic state in which I conceived of nothingness, and thus that object is not inconceivable. I am thus in the position to know that nothingness is inconceivable and not inconceivable. Either I conclude, based on the contradictory description, that I have mistaken some impossibility as real, or even actual, and reject that I had conceived of nothingness, or I do not. If I were to accept or generate the linguistic or conceptual object “Nothingness is not inconceivable”, I would have been in a further fictitious epistemic context in which logic has an impossible metaphysic by virtue of inferring the contradictory description of nothingness by applying both the predicate ‘is inconceivable’ and ‘is not inconceivable’. To believe that I have conceived of nothingness which is inconceivable and not inconceivable is to be in a fictionally fictional context, in which nothingness is thus a fictionally fictional object.⁹

3. Semantic impossibility

Consider the following metaphysical truth about semantics.

- (3) For any x , any y , and any z , y is semantically accessible from x with z if and only if z semantically refers to y from x .

Semantic possibilities are conceivable objects, for to conceive of something is to semantically refer to it with some linguistic or conceptual objects. Given any prior semantic state in a prior semantic

⁹ The fictional is a subset of the fictitious, with the former instantiating some beauty that constitutes its fictionality that the mere fictitious does not instantiate. See Kripke (2013) for fictionally fictional objects, or fictional fictional objects.

context, the semantic function takes the semantic agent into a posterior semantic state with a corresponding posterior semantic context which includes x with some words or concepts if and only if x is semantically referred to with some words or concepts from something in the prior semantic state given the prior semantic context, for any x . “John”, for example, semantically refers from anything to John. On the other hand, “he” semantically refers to John from John, to Peter from Peter, and to nothing from Mary. When a semantic agent conceives of John, Peter, and Mary, the word “he” semantically updates his semantic state with a posterior context that includes only John and Peter.¹⁰ If there are no words or concepts that semantically refer from something to an object, that object is inconceivable. That object is, therefore, a semantic impossibility.

When I intended to conceive of nothingness, I pretended to have a metaphysically impossible imagination. The corresponding fictitious epistemic function takes my prior epistemic state given my prior epistemic context, via the semantic function, into a posterior semantic state with a corresponding posterior epistemic context that includes nothingness. However, I did not actually conceive of nothingness; I only pretended to do so. Fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes are actually conceived of, with its reality included in the corresponding fictional context, but nothingness is not conceived of whether within or without any fictional context. Nothingness, by virtue of being a semantic impossibility, is actually inconceivable relative to me. Although it is metaphysically possible for me to conceive that I conceived of nothingness, nothingness is only fictionally conceivable without being metaphysically conceivable, or really conceivable. Therefore, in actuality, I did not conceive of nothingness, even though I conceived of Sherlock Holmes in a corresponding fictional context. I project Sherlock Holmes from a real context into a fictional context, fictionalising the original real context; I metaphysically impossibly do similar thing with nothingness.

¹⁰ See Kaplan (1989) for linguistic objects the semantic value of which is a variable function, and Kripke (1972/1980) for linguistic objects such as proper names, the semantic value of which is a constant function.

4. Ontological impossibility

In a real context, we refer to an object and attribute to it some properties with descriptions, and thus express a proposition. Through such epistemic predication, the proposition expressed is the set of possible worlds in which the object instantiates those properties. Those possible worlds are real, because it is metaphysically possible for that object to instantiate those properties. Within a fictional context, such as one that includes Sherlock Holmes, it is metaphysically possible that we referred to Sherlock Holmes and attributed to it some properties with descriptions, and thus express a proposition. For example, we describe Sherlock Holmes with the sentence “Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street”, and thus express the proposition that is the set of worlds in which Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street. However, since those worlds include a fictional object, Sherlock Holmes, those worlds are fictional, and thus fictitious. The proposition, being a set that includes fictional possibilities, is also fictional. It is in pretending that those fictional possibilities exist that we express a proposition in such a fictional context. The sentence, therefore, only pretends to express a proposition, or merely expresses a fictional, or fictitious, proposition.¹¹

This raises the problem of the informativeness of the negative existential. Consider the following allegedly true sentence.

(4) Sherlock Holmes does not exist.

In a real epistemic context, the subject term has no reference and thus (4) does not attribute some properties to any object to express a proposition. In a fictional epistemic context that includes Sherlock Holmes, (4) refers to the fictional object Sherlock Holmes and attributes to it nonexistence.¹² In terms of its informativeness, it rules out fictional worlds in which Sherlock

¹¹ See Kripke (2013) on pretended propositions.

¹² I could have also referred to some worlds and attribute to them the property of not including Sherlock Holmes, given my assumption that existence of objects is a property of worlds. The property of including Sherlock Holmes is a fictional property because Sherlock Holmes is fictional. Such worlds fictionally include Sherlock Holmes, and given such a fictional property, they are also fictional because of this. It is ontologically impossible that Sherlock Holmes belonged to a real domain, and thus metaphysically impossible that a corresponding real world included it.

Holmes exists. This, therefore, explains the fictional informativeness of the negative existential.

However, in the real epistemic context, the sentence did not refer to any object to express a proposition. It is in this way that it does not actually have a semantic value, but is merely fictionally informative, and thus illusorily informative.¹³

For any x , an epistemic counterpart to x is an object that is epistemically indistinguishable from x .¹⁴

If an epistemic agent were to form a fictionally false belief that Sherlock Holmes was born in the United States of America based on his evidence about the actual world, such as in misidentifying an actual detective born in the United States of America as Sherlock Holmes, the content of his fictionally false belief includes the fictional worlds in which Sherlock Holmes was born in the United States of America, with that actual detective in the actual world being an epistemic counterpart to Sherlock Holmes in those fictional worlds.¹⁵

Given that fictional objects do not exist, and we only pretend that they exist in some fictional contexts, nothingness, as a fictionally fictional object, also does not exist. Consider the following allegedly true sentence.

(5) Nothingness does not exist.

Whereas (4) pretends to express a proposition, (5) pretends to pretend to express a proposition.

Although we metaphysically possibly conceive of the possibilities of which (4) is false and thus explains its fictional informativeness through ruling them out, it is metaphysically impossible to conceive of the possibilities of which (5) is false.

The illusion of informativeness, even fictional or fictionally fictional, is explained using epistemic counterparts. When I putatively conceive of nothingness, there is an object that plays the role of

¹³ See Kripke (2013) for the sentence to have a semantic value by virtue of expressing the proposition that there is no true proposition that Sherlock Holmes exists.

¹⁴ Cheung (202Xa, in press).

¹⁵ See Cheung (202Xa, in press) for doxastic content using epistemic counterparts.

nothingness in being actually inconceivable relative to me. That object is not metaphysically identical with nothingness, but is merely epistemically indistinguishable from the putative object of nothingness. That object might be, for example, the eternal *Dao*, which is real.¹⁶ When I falsely believe that I conceived of nothingness, which is actually inconceivable, the content of my such false belief includes possibilities in which I conceive of some epistemic counterparts, which are believed to be actually inconceivable, to nothingness. Such epistemic counterparts might be real, such as the eternal *Dao*, or fictional.¹⁷ Furthermore, fictional epistemic agents with a metaphysically impossible imagination are also epistemic counterparts to me, such that the content of my false belief that I conceived of nothingness includes also the fictional possibilities in which some epistemic counterparts to me conceived of nothingness. The fictionally fictional informativeness of (5), therefore, is explained with updating a prior epistemic state in a prior epistemic context that includes the fictional possibilities in which I conceived of those epistemic counterparts to nothingness believed to be actually inconceivable, and might as well include fictional possibilities that include some fictional epistemic agents, which are epistemic counterparts to me, conceived of nothingness into a posterior epistemic state with a corresponding posterior epistemic context that does not include those fictional possibilities.

This indicates that we ought to conclude from the contradiction of the description of my relation to nothingness that I did not conceive it. Consider the description “inconceivable”. Any object that this description refers to is actually conceived of with this description, and thus is not inconceivable. Therefore, any such putative object is not an object, and thus “inconceivable” refers to no objects at all, although it is meaningful and expresses the empty set even in the broadest semantic context.

¹⁶ See Cheung (2024) for the reality of the eternal *Dao*.

¹⁷ See Cheung (202Xb, in press) for Neo-Daoism as a reconstructive interpretation of the *Daodejing*.

“Inconceivable” expresses the property that is the empty set,¹⁸ and no objects – real or fictional – instantiate such a property.

This raises the following issue. If the universal quantifier – “everything” – quantifies over all objects in an unrestricted domain, and only conceivable objects are quantifiable, then conceivability exhausts objecthood. If the semantic relation of satisfaction, or being true of – used in logical accessibility – is identical with the semantic relation of reference, or being referred to or conceived – used in semantic accessibility – then the truth of any universal quantification entails the conceivability of any such truth-maker. That “inconceivable” expresses the empty set presupposes this.

(6) Nothing is inconceivable.

is therefore true, because no objects belong to the empty set. Holding the domain constant, (6) is logically equivalent to the following sentence, given that “inconceivable” is logically equivalent to “not conceivable”.

(7) Everything is conceivable.

Semantics draws the boundary of all objects, such that no objects are beyond it. There are no semantic impossibilities.¹⁹

5. Conclusion

When I conceive of nothingness, I pretend that my imagination is metaphysically impossibly enhanced. Nothingness is thus not actually conceived, but merely fictionally conceived. When I think about my imagination, I describe the fictionally conceived object as both inconceivable and

¹⁸ Notice the set conception of property in relation to the set conception of proposition. It does not reduce the property of inconceivability to the empty set. At best, it identifies the set with the property. Emptiness is the essence of nothingness in that in virtue of pretending nothingness to be an object, given a property instantiation conception of objecthood, we approximate its metaphysical impossibility of instantiating any property with emptiness. By pretending its possibility of belonging to any world, we rule such pretence wrong.

¹⁹ See Priest (1996) for an interpretation of a similar argument as an argument for idealism.

not inconceivable, and thus I am in a further fictional context with a metaphysically impossible logic. As such, nothingness is at best a fictionally fictional object. Fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes are in the domain of quantification in the broadest semantic context, but not all fictionally fictional objects are in this domain because some of them are semantic impossibilities. Nothingness, being a semantic impossibility, is not in the domain of quantification even in the broadest semantic context. Therefore, nothingness is not an object in the broadest semantic context. If such a context includes all objects – real or fictional, or even fictitious – then nothingness is not an object at all.

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