
SHERLOCK IS LAW ABIDING

DOMINIC MCIVER LOPES

Philosophy, University of British Columbia, Canada.

`dom.lopes@icloud.com`

A deliciously implicit conceit of *Truth in Fiction* is that Sherlock Holmes is not law abiding [1]. In recent years, the pleadings for the defense have had it that Holmes does not fall entirely within the jurisdiction of the laws. John Woods mounts a far more radical defense. He urges his readers to refuse to convict, thereby nullifying the laws. To make the case, he deploys a theoretical concept, the concept of truth *in situ*. The concept suggests another, cake-and-eat-it, defense of Holmes. On this defense, the laws retain their authority and their full jurisdiction over Holmes, but the chap is innocent. Sherlock is law abiding.

The laws upon which Holmes stands indicted are three:

- I. the something law: everything whatever is something or other
- II. the existence law: reference and quantification are existentially loaded
- III. the truth law: no truth-evaluable sentence that discomplies with the something law or the existence law can be true.

We read that Holmes mustered the Baker Street irregulars. Since Holmes does not exist, the existence law pronounces that the sentence cannot refer to him. Since the sentence cannot refer to him, the truth law pronounces that the sentence cannot be true. Generalizing from Holmes and *The Sign of the Four* to all fictions and their creatures, the corollary is a fourth law:

- IV. the fiction law: there is nothing to which the sentences of fiction refer and nothing of which they are true.

If the fact of the case is that there is no Holmes, the laws dictate our reasoning from that fact.

Those whom Woods calls “pretendists” stipulate to the fact of the case and accept the authority of the laws. The sentence about Holmes and the Baker Street irregulars cannot be true. Yet the sentence is not in the same boat as any run of the mill sentence that is false by reference failure. Sentences known to be false by

reference failure leave us emotionally untouched and cognitively disengaged. We award them a big shrug. By contrast, knowing that there is no Holmes, and that the bit about the irregulars cannot be true, we nevertheless find ourselves very much turned on emotionally and cognitively. We care. We want to know more. We turn the pages. Attuned to these data, pretendists propose that the jurisdiction of the four laws is only partial and that fictions and their creatures also answer to another authority. In Kendall Walton's version of the proposal, fictions function as props in regulated games of make-believe [2]. In these games, we are prescribed to imagine that there is a Holmes and that he called in the Baker Street irregulars. Our so imagining is thought to explain our emotional and cognitive engagement.

Woods shares the pretendists' deep respect for reader responses, but he doubts that regulated acts of imagining or make-believe adequately explain the contours of readerly life. He also shares the pretendists' aversion to joining the Meinongians in contesting the fact of the case, that there is no Sherlock Holmes. So, he defies the laws. The fiction law must go. With it goes the truth law and the existence law. The something law is harmless and may tarry.

Philosophers have been wary of this kind of move for several reasons. Some have nothing to do with fiction in particular: they concern the laws' general plausibility or methodological power across the board. For the record, Woods is not sympathetic, but set that aside. Holmes's defiance of the laws raises a more acute problem. The fact of the case is that there is no Holmes, but the truth is that Holmes summoned the irregulars. Indeed, "Holmes" refers to Holmes. Inconsistencies loom. And inconsistencies trouble us. Woods therefore endeavors to remove our troubles. One remedy, a strong dose of paraconsistent logic, is not the preferred cure. The better cure is to embrace an idea that Woods finds in Aristotle, the idea of truth in a respect, or truth *in situ* [3].

Truth is one thing and "true" is not ambiguous; but, all the same, truth-makers vary. Take these inconsistent sentences:

W. Holmes is a fictional character.

S. Holmes mustered the Baker Street irregulars.

(W) is made true by the extra-story world, while (S) is made true by Doyle's act of telling the story. We may say that (S) is true *in situ* the story, meaning by that just that Doyle's story telling makes it true. The payoff is, first, that readers implicitly grasp the relation between the truth of (S) and its truth *in situ* the story. The idea is empirically plausible: readers are aware of — constantly reminded of — the source of sentences like (S). Second, our sensitivity to the relation between the truth of (S) and its truth *in situ* the story inoculates thinkers against making inferences where the inconsistency between (S) and (W) threatens to wreak havoc.

So concludes the case for nullifying the laws. Turn now to cake-and-eat-it. The claim will not be that cake-and-eat-it dominates nullification. As noted, Woods is unsympathetic to the laws, quite apart from Holmes's predicament. The claim is only that Woods should welcome cake-and-eat-it as a contender, especially in so far as it leverages and clarifies the theoretical concept of truth *in situ*.

The concept is just the same as one that comes to life in other philosophical contexts, notably the debate about predicates of personal taste [4]. When it comes to matters of taste, faultless disagreements abound. For example:

Dom: Durian tastes heavenly.

John: By Jove, it does not!

Neither party to the exchange is at fault. Each has ample and vivid evidence for their take on durian. Moreover, the exchange is not pointless, for they know that they share useful information [5]. So the exchange is faultless, but it is also a disagreement. Dom's view on the topic is at odds with John's. The question is how to understand such cases of faultless disagreement. "Contextualists" maintain that what Dom asserts is the proposition that durian tastes heavenly-to-Dom and John asserts the proposition is that durian does not taste heavenly-to-John. On this view, John does not deny the very proposition that Dom asserts. The propositions are consistent. The task is then to recover a sense in which the exchange is a genuine disagreement. By contrast, "truth relativists" contend that Dom asserts the proposition that durian tastes heavenly and John denies the very same proposition. Yet their disagreement is faultless because Dom speaks truly and so does John. Needless to say, truth is one thing; "true" is not ambiguous.

Why not think that Dom's assertion is true *in situ* Dom and John's is true *in situ* John? The thought is perfectly natural. A fact about Dom — his having his taste — makes what he says true, and a fact about John — his having a different taste — makes true what he says. Relativists about predicates of personal taste do not use the "*in situ*" phrase. They say that in exchanges like these, a sentence is true in a context of assessment set by a personal taste parameter. What Dom says is true in the context of assessment set by Dom's personal taste and what John says is true in the context of assessment set by John's personal taste, but one asserts and the other denies the very same content.

Truth relativists have worked out the details, but their semantic tools have not been applied to fiction [6]. Why not try out a truth relativist approach to fiction, seeing if it puts meat on the bones of the concept of truth *in situ*? After all, truth relativism seems to deliver just what Woods wants. Return to (W) and (S). (W) is true if and only if (W) is true in a context of assessment where the extra-story world sets a truth-maker parameter. By the same token, (S) is true if and only if

(S) is true in a context if assessment where a story sets a truth-maker parameter. In addition, (S) is true in the same sense of “true” as is (W). Watch out, though! The meaning of (S) is not given either by the proposition “in the story, Holmes summons the irregulars” or by the proposition “it is true in the story that Holmes summons the irregulars”. The meaning of (S) is given quite simply by the proposition “Holmes summons the irregulars”.

Truth is one thing, but every truth has a truth-maker, and there are different truth-makers. “Holmes summoned the irregulars” is true *in situ* something (*The Sign of the Four*) and “Doyle made Holmes up” is also true in situ something (the extra-story world). In other words, Woods should green light a new law:

the location, location, location law: no sentence is true unless it is true
in situ some context of assessment.

Again, the LLL law does not identify truth with truth *in situ*. It merely acknowledges that every truth is made true by something. There is the cake; now we can eat it too. The fact of the case is that there is no Sherlock Holmes. The proposition that there is no Sherlock Holmes is plainly true *in situ* the extra-story world. Woods concedes the something law. The existence and truth laws are consistent with the LLL law. One may hold both that no truth-evaluable sentence that discomplies with the something law or the existence law can be true, and that no sentence can be true unless it is true *in situ* some context of assessment. The truth law and LLL law together imply that “Holmes” refers in (S). Presumably, “Holmes” refers to Holmes *in situ* *The Sign of the Four*.

More importantly, the conjunction of the three cardinal laws with the LLL law no longer implies the fiction law, namely that,

there is nothing to which the sentences of fiction refer and nothing of
which they are true.

What would imply the fiction law, given the conjunction? The answer is, instructively, throwing in

the one site hypothesis: there is exactly one context of assessment, the
extra-story world.

The problem is not with any of the three cardinal laws; the problem is with the hypothesis. Woods denies the one site hypothesis anyway, in company with anyone driven by cake-and-eat-it proclivities. Even better, denying the hypothesis is reasonable as long as we have the LLL law. The appeal of the hypothesis was that we want to understand the “world” and we must guard against a bunch of made up

stuff interfering with that empirical project as we run our inferences. A recognition of how darn good we are at keeping our locations straight means we need not fear much interference from fiction as we run our inferences. It also explains why we are not foolish to be so interested in truths in fiction. The impulse to explore is not spent at the boundaries of the extra-story world.

Reading Woods, I found myself appreciating how apt it is, when thinking about the problems of fiction, to craft viable new positions. The remarks above are offered in the same spirit as animates *Truth in Fiction*. Eventually we must narrow down the options. Part of me hopes that is no time soon.

References

- [1] John Woods. *Truth in Fiction: Rethinking Its Logic*. Cham: Springer, 2018.
- [2] Kendall Walton. *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- [3] Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1005b: 19–20.
- [4] Dominic McIver Lopes. *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 166–75.
- [5] E.g. Andy Egan. Disputing about Taste. *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 247–92.
- [6] Esp. John MacFarlane. *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.