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## SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE: A Theory of Human Discourse and Its Objects

**Mortimer Adler**

*Can we discourse about imaginary objects that  
are never objects of perception or memory?*

The power of the imagination is not limited to making objects of entities that have existed, do exist, or can exist in reality. It can construct and produce objects that no one can remember or perceive because they are entities which have never existed, do not now exist, and cannot exist. Let us call such objects “Imaginary objects” in contradistinction to imagined objects, including among the latter not only an object like the wallpaper which one person perceives, another remembers, and a third imagines, but also the imagined apparatus which, when produced by Its inventor, will have real existence in the future.

Imaginary objects, which can also be called “fictions of the imagination,” are entities which have only one mode of existence—intentional existence. That in itself does not prevent them from being common objects of discourse. What is an imaginary object for one person can be an imaginary object for another, if one person’s

power of verbal description is capable of instigating in another person the constructive acts of imagination required for producing it. The only person for whom an imaginary object is an object of acquaintance rather than an object of description is the person who is its author—the person by whose imagination the imaginary object was originally constructed. Anyone else will have to depend upon the author's verbal description of the imaginary object in order to produce it for himself; and when it is so produced it will be an object of description rather than of acquaintance.

Let us consider first an example which I have touched on in another connection—the case of the patient suffering *delirium tremens* and having the hallucination that there is a pink elephant or a purple tiger in a menacing posture in the corner of his room. The attendant psychiatrist listens to the patient's description of the imaginary object produced involuntarily by hallucinosis. Depending on the vividness and the detail of that description, the psychiatrist may be able to conjure up either the same imaginary object or a fairly close approximation to it, sufficient for the purpose of a conversation between the patient and the psychiatrist about the pink elephant or the purple tiger. That conversation, of course, cannot go beyond reference to this or that characteristic or changing feature of the imaginary object they are discussing. While the hallucination is in progress, the psychiatrist will not be able to convince the patient that the pink elephant or purple tiger is only an imaginary object and not a perceptual one.

Of all the creative arts, literature alone, because language is its medium, produces imaginary objects or fictions of the imagination which can be communicated descriptively. The poet, novelist, or dramatist describes a fictional character which is the product of his imagination (Captain Ahab, for example, in *Moby Dick*, or for that matter, the white whale itself); or he describes some imaginary entity or place (the stately pleasure dome of Kubla Khan in Xanadu) which his imagination has produced. Depending on their powers of imagination, and the assiduity of their efforts, the readers of his work will be able to produce for themselves the same imaginary objects, or at least to achieve close approximations to them, sufficient for the purposes of conversation.

Such conversations take place, in manifold forms and myriad instances, whenever human beings talk to one another about books they have read. The fact that Captain Ahab or that the singular white whale does not really exist, and never will exist, does not prevent persons from talking about these objects as common objects of reference, just as they talk about the incumbent President

of the United States, or about Abraham Lincoln, or the white horse that George Washington rode, or the crossing of the Delaware at Valley Forge. If it were thought to be impossible for persons to converse about the imaginary objects initially produced by poets and writers of fiction, one would be forced to the contrafactual conclusion that a teacher of literature and his students could never engage in a discussion of a work that all of them have read. One need only think of the countless hours which have been devoted by students, teachers, literary critics, and others to the discussion of the character and actions of Shakespeare's Hamlet, to dismiss as preposterous even the faintest suggestion that imaginary objects cannot be common objects of discourse.

The mention of Shakespeare's Hamlet raises for us one final question about objects in the realm of the imaginary. Some of them, like the fictions of mythology (e.g., Cerberus or Charon), bear proper names that do not appear in the pages of history; but some, like Hamlet and Julius Caesar, appear in Shakespeare's plays and also in writings that are usually not regarded as fictional. The proper name "Hamlet" can be used to refer not only to the character created by Shakespeare, but also to refer to what may be regarded as his prototype in the *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus, a twelfth-century Danish historian; in addition, if the account of Saxo Grammaticus is reliable, "Hamlet" was the proper name of a singular prince of Denmark, who lived at a certain time and was involved in regicide, usurpation, incest, rape, and all the rest of it. So, too, "Julius Caesar," as a proper name, refers to at least three different singular objects: (i) the leading character in a play by Shakespeare, (ii) an historical figure described in one of *Plutarch's Lives*, and (iii) the Roman general who lived at a certain time, who conquered Gaul, wrote a history of his battles in that province, crossed the Rubicon, and so on.

Do proper names, such as "Hamlet" and "Julius Caesar," used in the triplicate manner indicated above, refer to one singular object or to three? The fact that the same word is being used as a proper name in all three cases does not give us the answer. The same words, functioning as proper names, are frequently repeated in a telephone book, and we know that they denote different actual persons from the fact that, attached to each of the seventy-five John Smiths we find, there are different addresses and telephone numbers. Just as we use an address that we know to be his, in order to select the one John Smith we wish to telephone from all the others, so we must use definite descriptions to identify the singular object we wish to talk about when the proper name of that object is also capable of being used for other, quite distinct, singular objects.

If we wish to talk about the character and actions of Julius Caesar as portrayed in the play of that title by Shakespeare, we must identify the imaginary object of our discourse by a definite description of it as “the character of that name in a play by Shakespeare, with the title, ‘Julius Caesar,’ first produced on such a date, etc.” It would be confusing, in deed, if one of two persons who are engaged in a conversation about Julius Caesar used that proper name to refer to Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and the other used it to refer to Plutarch’s Julius Caesar. They might get to the point of making contradictory statements about the apparently common object of their discourse, only to find that they did not have a common object, but were in fact talking about different objects—objects which resembled one another in certain respects, but which differed in others.


That Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar is an imaginary object of discourse, no one will question. The fact that there are certain resemblances between Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and Plutarch’s and also between Plutarch’s Julius Caesar and Rome’s Julius Caesar, who was general, first consul, and temporary dictator in the years 59B.C.-47B.C., does not change the status of Shakespeare’s invention. His Julius Caesar is a fiction of the imagination no less than Cerberus and Charon. Are we, by the force of this argument, led to the same conclusion about Plutarch’s Julius Caesar and, therefore, about all of the historical personages described by historians and biographers?

The same difference exists between Rome’s Julius Caesar and Plutarch’s Julius Caesar as exists between Rome’s Julius Caesar and Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. If we believe that a singular man, named Julius Caesar, actually lived in Rome at a certain time, performed certain actions and occupied certain offices, then we also believe that Rome’s Julius Caesar was once an object of perception. Other men were directly acquainted with him, and the object with which they were directly acquainted was also an entity which had real existence. But Plutarch’s Julius Caesar, like Shakespeare’s, can only be apprehended by description, never by acquaintance. To that extent they are alike as imaginary objects—fictions of the imagination. However, they are also unlike Captain Ahab in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, or Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The latter, as fictions of the imagination, have no prototypes in historical personages, whereas both Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and Plutarch’s Julius Caesar do.

In making this last point, I am passing from the consideration of the character of objects as apprehended to the state of our knowledge about the objects in question. Viewed strictly as objects apprehended, Greek mythology's Cerberus and Charon, Plutarch's Julius Caesar and Shakespeare's, Melville's Captain Ahab and Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, are all imaginary objects—fictions of the imagination. None, precisely as described, ever was or can be an object of perception. But we do affirm, as a matter of historical knowledge, that there was a singular historical personage, bearing the proper name "Julius Caesar," who was an object of perception at a certain time in the city of Rome. In contrast, we do not affirm, as a matter of historical knowledge, that there ever were such personages as Captain Ahab or Raskolnikov. Therein lies the difference between one type of imaginary object and another. It is not a difference in the object as apprehended, but rather in the judgments we make about them: for example, that Shakespeare's Julius Caesar resembles, in certain definite respects, Plutarch's Julius Caesar; and that these points of resemblance include characteristics which the best historical evidence available has established as matters of fact.

One other difference between the poet and the historian should be noted. Shakespeare invented a dramatic character to which he gave the name "Julius Caesar" and whom he portrayed in a certain definite way. Understanding his craft as poetry rather than history, Shakespeare nowhere made any existential assertions about his Julius Caesar, nor did he offer any evidence to support the truth of statements made about him. In his play, the proper name "Julius Caesar" has referential meaning only, no existential denotation: it functions solely to signify a fiction of the poet's imagination. But Plutarch, in his life of Julius Caesar, does offer evidence of the truth of statements of historical fact about the man whose biography he is writing; and so, either explicitly or in effect, Plutarch makes existential assertions about Julius Caesar. Therefore, in Plutarch's biography, the proper name "Julius Caesar" has both referential meaning and existential denotation—referential meaning as signifying an imaginary object constructed by Plutarch but not purely a fiction of his imagination; and existential denotation when it is used as the subject in propositions having existential import, which Plutarch asserts.

There has been little difficulty in showing that imaginary objects can be common objects of discourse. However, in the course of establishing that point, we have discovered certain difficulties to be overcome in discourse about such objects, particularly in those cases in which the same word or set of words is used as a proper

name for a number of different imaginary objects, and for both an imaginary object and an object which once was an object of perception. 

From his book, *Some Questions About Language*

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