



philosophica

[333]

philosophica

serie arancio

diretta da Alfonso M. Iacono

comitato scientifico

Stefano Petrucciani, Manlio Iofrida

Gianluca Bocchi, Giuliano Campioni

Simonetta Bassi, Giovanni Paoletti, Alessandro Pagnini

Luca Mori

Fictional characters in philosophy

A contribution to the history
and theory of a tool for thinking



Edizioni ETS



www.edizioniets.com

© Copyright 2025

Edizioni ETS

Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa

info@edizioniets.com

www.edizioniets.com

Distribuzione

Messaggerie Libri SPA

Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione

PDE PROMOZIONE SRL

via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN 978-884677389-0

ISSN 2420-9198

INTRODUCTION

When we reflect on pretence and its objects, we easily recall the fictional characters of literature, cartoons, cinema and the history of painting (such as Mona Lisa) or mythical entities, from Jupiter to Adam and Eve (Voltolini 2010). This book is focussed instead on fictional characters shaped by philosophers, who usually appear within theoretical plots (either openly stated or implied) that involve their entering the scene, where they act as narrative catalysts building up networks of arguments.

The history of philosophy is inhabited by fictional characters inspired by philosophical imagination, who cannot be identified as really existing entities, but play a key role in the development of theories.

A gallery of such characters would include, for instance, the prisoners in the cave, the philosophers-kings in Books V and VI of Plato's *Republic* and the characters of *The Laws* holding tasks that have been invented by the philosopher (such as *nomophylakes*, *euthynoi* and Nocturnal Council), Thrasymachus's and Callicles's *stronger ones* (as well as the sophists Thrasymachus and Callicles themselves, since it is Plato who gives them a voice), the clever man in Critias's *Sisyphus*, who introduced the fear of gods (DK88 B25), the *sapiens* of Stoicism, the "half-human" Cacus in Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (XIX), Philosophy personified in Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*, founders and inhabitants of utopias, Machiavelli's Prince, Descartes's almighty, deceiver God and evil genius, humans in their natural state as outlined by the conjectural histories, Simplicius in the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, Molineux's man born blind whom Locke writes about in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Rousseau's first man who enclosed a piece of ground (and those who saw and did not stop him), the Troglodytes in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (XI-XIV), as well as the authors of such letters, the main characters of the 18th-century

contes philosophiques, the Knight of Faith Kierkegaard writes about in his *Fear and Trembling*, the fully developed humans in the ripest stage of Communist society which Marx reflects on in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Nietzsche's Zarathustra and *Übermensch*, the characters under John Rawls's veil of ignorance, and the many persons involved in thought experiments in contemporary philosophy (Searle's *alter ego* in *Chinese Room*, Putnam's *brain in a vat*, the imaginary people plugged into Nozick's *experience machine*, Chalmers's philosophical *zombies*, Quine's linguist engrossed in translating the word *gavagai* from an unknown language, Davidson's *Swamp-man*, and lots more)¹.

In philosophical texts, sometimes we find fictional characters who already feature in myths or legendary works, as in the case of Achilles in the paradox that saw him chase a turtle, Prometheus in Plato's *Protagoras* and Diana and Actaeon in Bruno's dialogues *Gli eroici furori*: in cases like these, one can speak, to quote Umberto Eco, of «fluctuating» individuals, individuals that acquired «a sort of existence independent of their original scores» (Eco 2023: 97). Of them, as well as of the fictional characters invented by philosophers, we can say, in Eco's footsteps, that they are semeiotic objects, by which «an expression conveys a set of properties as its content, registered in a comprehensive encyclopaedia, provided one assumes that every expression (a word, an image or some other device) is a peg for hanging descriptions, or properties» (102), as to which «we are aware we cannot identify any instance of such objects in our physical world» (104).

Fictional characters in philosophy are a wider set of *conceptual personae* which Deleuze and Guattari write about in *What is Philosophy?*, whose purpose is to help define philosophical concepts, so one could say for instance that Socrates is the main *conceptual persona* in Platonism, as he is crucial to defining the concept of a philosopher (Deleuze, Guattari 1994: 63).

The notion of the *conceptual persona* in Deleuze and Guattari, moreover, acquires its specific meaning in relation to a conception of philosophy as *constructivism* and to the notion of the *plane of immanence*, understood as a prephilosophical presupposition for the

¹ About the role of some of these fictional characters within the framework of thought experiments, cf. Stuart *et al.* (2018b).

creation of concepts (the non-philosophical element at the heart of philosophy). In this framework, the case of Descartes's *cogito* features, for example, what Deleuze and Guattari call the *conceptual persona* of the Idiot, «the Idiot who says “I” and sets up the cogito»: «The idiot is the private thinker, in contrast to the public teacher (the schoolman): the teacher refers constantly to taught concepts (man – rational animal), whereas the private thinker forms a concept with innate forces that everyone possesses on their own account by right (“I think”). Here is a very strange type of persona who wants to think, and who thinks for himself, by the “natural light”. The idiot is a conceptual persona» (62).

In examining the fictional characters of philosophy, this book adopts a distinctive approach. Rather than entering the analytic debate on fiction and its objects, it reflects on the theoretical functions of the figures that philosophers have shaped – whether invented or reinterpreted – and placed at the heart of their arguments. To call the characters under discussion “fictional” is to highlight that they are products of philosophical reasoning and imagination, much like figures molded in clay by a sculptor (*factor* and *figĕre* in Latin). These fictional characters are not necessarily human, nor can they be identified with actually existing beings. At times, the fictional status of these characters is itself controversial, and their very existence becomes a philosophical question *per se*. Yet, through the ways they feel, think, or act, they raise and embody pressing theoretical problems. Here, the notion of “fictional” is deliberately broad: the wide range of cases considered in this book will gradually trace more precise boundaries within the domain of the philosophical recourse to fiction.

In the background lies the broader debate concerning what can be learned from fiction, from any kind of fictional work². In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Kant includes fictional characters from novels and plays among the aids of anthropology, alongside history books and biographies. He argues that, although these characters appear in invented situations and often display exaggerated traits – as in a dream – they still refer to what can be observed in real life, and thus can help us better understand human beings. This anticipates a position taken more recently in a study on fiction and thought experiments, which argues that literature can,

² See, for example, García-Carpintero 2016.

in some measure, enhance our «knowledge or understanding of the extra-literary world» (Elgin 2014: 221).

It should be noted that the value of employing such characters in philosophy has occasionally been contested. Evidence of this can be found in Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, where the author feels the need to disprove the epicurean Colotes and those who mocked Plato's use of myths (*“Platonis fabulam”*, *In Somnium Scipionis* I, 2, 1; Cicero, *De republica*, VI 7 [7]). Colotes had claimed that the *fabula* is not suited to philosophers and that one should not resort to any kind of fiction when unearthing the truth (*«quoniam nullum figmenti genus veri professoribus conveniret»*: *In Somnium Scipionis* I, 2, 4; Cicero, *De republica* VI 7 [7]). Speaking of the Myth of Er, the objection made to Plato concerns Cicero's dreamer as well: the truth should be told in simple, straightforward statements, keeping the plane of the argumentation (acceptable in philosophy) clearly distinguished from that of fiction. In response to the objection, Macrobius distinguishes three kinds of stories: stories that only aim at entertaining the listener, such as Menander's comedies; fictional stories (*«argumentum ex ficto»*) that, though interwoven with falsehoods, still provide readers with some semblance of virtue (*«virtutum speciem»*), such as Aesop's Fables, and, lastly, those that can be defined as *narratio fabulosa* instead of *fabula*, since the fabrication disguises the truth and a truthful subject (*In Somnium Scipionis* I, 2, 7-11). Then, standing out among the latter, though there is no one way to tell the truth through fiction (*«non unus repperitur modus per figmentum vera referendi»*, I, 2, 10), are those philosophical stories in which «divine things» are disguised by a respectful veil of inventions (*«sub pio figmentorum velamina»*).

By defending at least one kind of fiction, however, Macrobius is merely presenting it as a sort of an outer cloak for the truth and for sacred notions. Other texts, though, suggest that, in philosophy, imagination and its fictional characters may serve far different purposes, that are not purely superficial nor merely instrumental to the development of a theory.

This book aims to show that the fictional characters of philosophy function as instruments of thought: they can serve to render certain perspectives more perspicuous, to interrogate one or more standpoints (including one's own), to probe the premises and practical implications of alternative conceptual frameworks, to subject a theoretical po-

sition to a decisive test or *experimentum crucis*, to articulate objections, and to open up new levels of generalization and abstraction.

We may also say that fiction always entails a «re-semantisation» or «re-description of our own world», since in fiction «we invent from what we find, and we discover in what we invent» (Ferrarin 2023: 284-285; my transl.). For this to occur, invention must not simply replicate what we find; it must instead open a space of discovery that goes beyond invention itself. This space emerges from the tension between invention and the world it departs from, and from the questions that tension makes possible.

If we examine the purposes that can be attributed to fictional characters in philosophy – so heavily *theory-laden* as they are – and those of thought experiments in which they often appear, we find that reason and imagination must interact in order to extend the space of the thinkable. Like portions of maps of the possible and the imaginable, fictional characters and thought experiments cast us into “intermediate” worlds that are not our world, yet just because of that – through the changes they bring about in the existing and in the known – they allow us to capture and think up new aspects of our world, since intermediate worlds are «worlds that imitate the existing ones, that by imitating them replace them, and that by replacing them keep referring to them» (Iacono 2010: 3).

Acknowledgments. I am deeply grateful to Alfonso Maurizio Iacono for welcoming this book into his series and for our many conversations that helped shape this work. I am especially thankful for two seminars dedicated to my research, organized at the Department of Civilization and Forms of Knowledge (University of Pisa) and at The Prisma Lab (University of Parma). For the suggestions and inspiration I received on these and other occasions, I wish to express my gratitude to: Roberto Alciati, Carlo Altini, Alberto Barbieri, Luca Bellotti, Irene Binini, Luisa Brotto, Francesco Cagnin, Mauro Capocci, Bruno Centrone, Guido Cusinato, Cristina D’Ancona, Rossella Fabbrichesi, Alfredo Ferrarin, Alessandra Fussi, Lucilla Guidi, Wolfgang Huemer, Roberta Lanfredini, Antonio Lucci, Laura Anna Macor, Danilo Manca, Matteo Marcheschi, Antonio Masala, Marco Matteoli, Daniele Molinari, Enrico Moriconi, Marcello Musto, Veronica Neri, Giovanni Paoletti, Gianni Pellegrini, Francesco Pelosi, Valentina Petrolini, Maria Michela Sassi, Federico Squarcini, Giacomo Turbanti.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
List of fictional characters mentioned in the text	11
1. Plato and the invention of fictional characters in philosophical discourse	17
1.1. Introduction	17
1.2. Socrates and the tradition of Socratic dialogues	19
1.3. Fictional interlocutors in Plato's dialogues	21
1.4. Thrasymachus, Callicles, and the "stronger"	24
1.5. Paradigmatic figures	28
1.6. Plato's relation to myth	32
2. Dialogical agents as embodiments of confliction perspectives	37
2.1. Perspectives on religion, reason, and politics	37
2.2. Changing the way we see the world	40
2.3. Some insights from Hume and Diderot	44
3. Idealizations: thinking the limits of human potential	49
3.1. The Stoic sage	49
3.2. Founders and inhabitants of utopias	54
3.3. <i>Specula principis</i>	61
3.4. Montesquieu's Troglodytes	66
3.5. The Knight of Faith and the Schopenhauerian ascetic	68
3.6. Marx and the fully developed human being	72
4. Conjectural narratives on the historical becoming of the human being	81
4.1. Reason, memory, and imagination in conjectural history	81
4.2. Human beings in Hobbes's state of nature	87
4.3. Human beings in Locke's state of nature	91
4.4. Human beings in Rousseau's state of nature	93
4.5. Montesquieu contra Hobbes	97

5. Personifications: concepts transformed into characters	101
5.1. Virtue and Vice	101
5.2. Philosophy	104
5.3. Folly, Peace, and Reason	107
6. Fiction and philosophical narratives	111
6.1. Introduction	111
6.2. Humans and Extraterrestrials	115
6.3. Selected fictional characters from Voltaire and Diderot	120
6.4. The first man who tried to philosophize	133
7. Fictional embodiments of philosophical puzzles	137
7.1. Introduction	137
7.2. Anselm's <i>Insipiens</i>	141
7.3. Hobbes's Fool	143
7.4. Rousseau's independent man	147
7.5. Kant's moral politician	149
7.6. Zarathustra and other Nietzschean characters	150
7.7. <i>Homo oeconomicus</i>	154
8. Protagonists of thought experiments	159
8.1. Introduction	159
8.2. The omnipotent deceiving God and the evil genius	171
8.3. Avicenna's Flying Man	177
8.4. Arnobius's man in the cave	179
8.5. Molyneux's problem	181
8.6. Condillac's statue	184
8.7. Mind, memory, and identity	187
8.8. Individuals behind the veil of ignorance	191
Conclusion	195
Bibliography	197

L'elenco completo delle pubblicazioni è consultabile sul sito

www.edizioniets.com

alla pagina

<http://www.edizioniets.com/view-Collana.asp?Col=philosophica>



Pubblicazioni recenti

- 333. Mori Luca, *Fictional characters in philosophy. A contribution to the history and theory of a tool for thinking*, 2025, pp. 220.
- 332. Farinella Simone, *Su Hegel e il misticismo ebraici*. In preparazione.
- 331. Gamba Matteo, *L'essere è tempo. Coscienza, storia e percezione in Husserl, Heidegger e Merleau-Ponty*. In preparazione.
- 330. Griffero Tonino, *Essere un corpo vissuto*. In preparazione.
- 329. Salvadè Anna Maria, *Il disordine del mondo. Letteratura e catastrofe tra Sette e Ottocento*. In preparazione.
- 328. Morelli Ugo, *L'attesa*. In preparazione.
- 327. Cuttone Alessia, *Cura e resistenza. Dall'ecofemminismo occidentale alle prospettive indigene*, 2025, pp. 132.
- 326. De Filippis Renato [a cura di], *Oltre le frontiere linguistiche. La sfida delle traduzioni di opere filosofiche fra il "Lungo Medioevo" e il Contemporaneo. Atti del Convegno 4 e 5 luglio 2022*. In preparazione.
- 325. Bucci Paolo, *Il Genio che scopre e occulta. Galileo nella cultura austro-tedesca fra Otto e Novecento*, 2025, pp. 140.
- 324. Gagliasso Elena, Pollo Simone, Severini Eleonora [a cura di], *Origini e attualità dell'Origine dell'uomo. Scienza, etica, letteratura*, 2025, pp. 124.
- 323. Massimo Serena, *Danzare la relazione. L'esperienza vissuta del danzare tra spontaneità e "making sense"*. In preparazione.
- 322. Marin Francesca, *Le tre Grazie dell'etica: vulnerabilità, cura e gratitudine*, 2025, pp. 224.
- 321. Tomasi Gabriele, *Dall'Io assoluto all'Io poetico. Estetica, poesia e conoscenza in Friedrich Hölderlin (1794-1800)*, 2025, pp. 388.
- 320. La Bella Laura, *Martin Heidegger. Il movimento della vita umana. Le radici greco-cristiane dell'Ontologie des menschlichen Lebens*, 2025, pp. 224.
- 319. Tumminelli Angelo, *Pathos e logos dell'umano. Una Teor-Etica dell'esistenza in prospettiva interale*, 2025, pp. 256.

Edizioni ETS

Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa

info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com

Finito di stampare nel mese di ottobre 2025