

JIM HENSON AND PHILOSOPHY

Imagination and the Magic of Mayhem

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ONTOLOGY AND SUPERPOSITION

Where the Muppets Meet and Do Not
Meet Schrödinger's Cat

Rhona Trauvitch¹

Much of the charm and longevity of the Muppets is born of how readily the audience can connect to and identify with them. Despite the reality that pigs and frogs do not typically talk, let alone date, Miss Piggy and Kermit's relationship seems familiar. Undeterred by the general impossibility of the Muppets, their fans relate to them as they would to friends. Doubtless, one of the reasons for this is that throughout their six decades of existence these outrageous creatures have portrayed very real and human characteristics and problems. Aside from their forms (and the fact that they are puppets), they are as fallible, compassionate, imperfect, and vulnerable as you and I.

If we peek through the magnifying glass of philosophy, we can detect yet another ingredient of the Muppets' believability and relatability. It turns out that a large part of the Muppets' magic is accomplished by means of their ontological ambiguity. Ontology, which is concerned with the nature of being and existence, is a branch of metaphysics explored by philosophers who seek to understand reality. Ontological considerations come to bear when we attempt to determine to what extent a character exists: whether the character is fictional or nonfictional, and how fictional, with relation to other fictional or nonfictional beings.

The nature of the Muppets' being—their ontological status—is blurry because, while they are fictional characters, they are often depicted as

occupying the same ontological stratum as nonfictional beings. Rather than remain as fictional characters in a fictional setting, they continuously cross the ontological boundary and show up in nonfiction. Sometimes the Muppets appear in real-world events such as the Academy Awards or a late-night talk show (where the setting is nonfictional), and other times they appear in films, dramas, and sitcoms (where the setting is fictional). Instances of the former included Miss Piggy's guest cohosting on the 52nd Academy Awards alongside Johnny Carson² and Kermit's appearance on *The Ellen Show*,³ and instances of the latter include Kermit's appearance on *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, Kermit's and Miss Piggy's appearances on *30 Rock*, and Big Bird's appearance on *The West Wing*.⁴ When Miss Piggy appears alongside Carson at the Academy Awards, she is presumably as nonfictional as Carson. On the other hand, when Kermit shops at the Emporium, he is presumably as fictional as Mr. Magorium.

Are the Muppets fictional, nonfictional, or both, simultaneously? Because of all of their ostensibly ontologically paradoxical appearances, the Muppets seem to exist in a state that is ambiguous until the context of a given appearance of theirs is taken into account. Without this context, our idea of the Muppets' fictionality—or lack thereof—is jumbled. Only in observing the context of a given appearance can we determine the Muppets' ontological state.