

## Harold and the Purple Crayon

### Can You Get Wet Swimming in an Imaginary Ocean?



Can you get wet swimming in an imaginary ocean?

On the very first right-hand page of Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, we see Harold, a young toddler, standing with his body facing to our left but with his head turned slightly to the right. He is looking behind himself with his eyes slightly raised and wearing one of those one-piece pajamas with booties for toddlers, a fact denoted by the single brownish line with which the picture of them is drawn. His hands and head are distinguished from the pajamas by being shaded a light gray. In his right hand, Harold holds his large and, as we shall see, very special purple crayon. At this point, Harold seems to have only scribbled with this crayon on a piece



of paper or, perhaps, a wall, making a large abstract drawing that we see depicted in the left-hand page of the book with a thickish purple line.

The reason Harold's head is cocked becomes clear when we read the accompanying text, for it says that it's now evening and Harold has decided to go for a moonlit walk. Harold's head is turned because he is looking for the moon, which unfortunately is nowhere in sight. How can he go on a moonlit walk if there is no moon? Our attempt to answer this question will require us to dive right into the most abstract of philosophy fields, *metaphysics*.

The book's next spread provides a first indication of what's unusual about Harold's crayon. From the text, we learn that Harold not only needs the moon to take his moonlit stroll, but also a path to walk on. The images convey something more significant, for Harold uses his purple crayon to make simple line drawings of these two objects.

Drawing the very objects he needs for his walk doesn't explain how Harold will be able to embark on his excursion. After all, if you want to go on a moonlit walk, just drawing pictures of the moon and a path in the margins of this book would not suffice. You need both the real moon and a real path for your walk. But in the fictional world created by *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, Harold's drawings suffice for his adventures. How can this be?

As we quickly learn, Harold's crayon has the special property of making drawings whose objects become real things. Your drawing of a path is just that, a drawing. And while you can walk all over it, when you do so, you won't be walking on a path but at most on a drawing of one. Your path exists only *as a drawing* or, to use the more general philosophical term, a *representation*.

A representation of an object is a sort of stand-in for that object. It denotes or refers to the real thing, but is not itself that object. For this reason, metaphysicians going all the way back to **Plato** treated representations as metaphysical second-class citizens. A representation of a bed is not real in the same way that an actual bed is.

Representations come in a variety of different forms. The most prolific are images. Drawings, paintings, digital images, even sculptures are representations when they have images that denote real things. Thus, the image of the path printed on the third spread of *Harold and the Purple Crayon* is a representation of a real path, something that might exist in the real world.



### Metaphysics

Are the path and the moon that Harold has drawn real? What about the moon you see in the night sky? Or the inhabited ones in science fiction movies? And if the inhabited movie moons aren't real, as most people believe, how can we even perceive them? These are the sorts of puzzles that delight *metaphysicians*.

Metaphysics was traditionally the most basic area of philosophy, for its questions had to be resolved before questions in other areas could be tackled. Only once you knew what existed, could you wonder about questions of knowledge, conduct, or any of the other issues that puzzle philosophers.

One of the chief goals of metaphysics is to establish which things among the vast riches that populate our world are really real, have "first-class" being. Consider what philosophers call "the bent stick illusion." A straight stick like a pencil placed into a glass of water appears bent, but, once you withdraw it, it returns to its original shape. How can a stick do this?

The answer is that the stick merely *appeared* to bend in the water because of the difference between how water and air reflect light. The bent stick is thus placed into the category of less real things, for it is merely an *appearance* of the stick, which is itself fully real.

Beginning with **Plato**, philosophers have relegated all sorts of things to the realm of appearances, things that lack first-class reality. For Plato, everyday objects were not fully real, a theory known as *idealism*. The Roman philosopher-poet **Lucretius**' *materialist* viewpoint denied that minds were among the ultimate constituents of reality. Cartesian *dualism* (see **Descartes**) treats both minds and matter as equally basic, though it has the problem of explaining their interaction.

A related metaphysical distinction is between things that are real and things that are merely imaginary. While metaphysicians agree that unicorns and mermaids are less real than things that actually exist, such as the horses, fish, and people from which the elements of these imaginary things are derived, they puzzle over how things that don't exist can be thought about at all.



Of course, the image itself does exist as an object in our world just as a painting does. But the objects in Harold's drawing or in a painting are just representations, not the full-blooded physical things that they represent.

This brief excursus into metaphysics gives us a better way to characterize Harold's world: The objects Harold draws don't only exist as representations, but acquire the first-class metaphysical citizenship that real things have. And that's why Harold is able to set off on a moonlit walk: When he makes a drawing, the objects he draws morph from mere representations into real things. So off he goes for his walk – carrying his purple crayon.

Harold's subsequent bedtime adventures all follow the same pattern. Initially, Harold is confronted by a problem, such as how to take a moonlit walk in the absence of the moon and a path on which to walk. He solves his problem by drawing a picture that contains the objects he needs, the moon and a path in this case. Because of the peculiar metaphysics of his world, these objects solve his problems when they morph from drawings into real things. But the reality of the morphed objects repeatedly confronts Harold with new problems: In this case, he does not know where he is going on the path he now stands upon. How can he keep from getting lost? So the cycle repeats itself as Harold draws his way to a new solution that presents a further problem, and so on.

One very amusing example of this pattern occurs when Harold draws a dragon. Previously, Harold had drawn a tree and worried that something would eat all the apples growing on it. Harold solves that problem with his dragon drawing. Resorting to a dragon for apple-guard-duty could only occur to a creative young child whose world is richly populated with such imaginary creatures. Harold's drawings put us in touch with his fecund imagination and are a source of enjoyment for us.

But Harold now has to face the fact that the apple-protecting dragon scares him. When Harold made his drawing of the dragon, he certainly didn't expect it to scare *him*. But once he sees his own creation – now morphed into a real dragon – he becomes so scared that his own shaking hand holding his beloved purple crayon inadvertently draws an ocean in which Harold almost drowns.

Harold's drawing of and subsequent encounter with a dragon illustrates the ingenuity with which Crockett Johnson, the book's author and illustrator, creates Harold's adventures. But these adventures are not merely a source of enjoyment for us as we follow their twists and turns. They also provide an entryway into the imaginary world Harold inhabits before bedtime.





Do we really enter into Harold's imagination when we see what happens with his drawings? Think about it. Harold really is in bed, trying to get to sleep. So off he goes on an imaginary journey. What's first? How about a moonlit walk? But there's no moon out and no path. No problem. All he has to do is to imagine them and himself in the sparse landscape created by his imaginings.

If this sounds plausible to you as a way of understanding the book, you'll probably also agree that the purple crayon is a very concrete stand-in for Harold's imagination. When we see Harold making a drawing with his purple crayon in an illustration by Crocker Johnson, we are witnessing the workings of Harold's imagination.

There are a number of interesting philosophical claims that the book presents about the nature of the imagination. The first is that the products of the imagination can become as real to us as the objects that we normally take to be real. Most of the time, when you imagine something – like what it would be like to have a million dollars – you are very aware that there is a difference between the reality of, say, the chair you are sitting in and the reality of those million dollars. Philosophers in the *empiricist tradition*, like **John Locke** and **David Hume**, attempted to characterize the difference by means of the intensity of our perception of the objects. The real objects that we perceive give us a more lively and vivacious perceptual experience than those we imagine, they held.

*Harold and the Purple Crayon* suggests a problem with that view. Even if we mostly imagine things with less intensity than we perceive them, that's not always the case. Harold's encounters with an ocean and a dragon appear to have the same intensity as his usual perceptual experiences. If that's right, then this thought experiment shows the inadequacy of the empiricist attempt to distinguish real things from imaginary ones on the basis of the intensity of our experience of them.

Now you might be thinking that only children experience imaginary things with that much intensity. While children might be able to take the products of their imaginations to be real things, we adults know the difference between reality and the imagination.

There are problems with this idea. Although children used to be thought of as not having a firm grasp on the distinction between real things and imaginary ones, recent research in cognitive science has shown this not to be true. Very young children know, for example, that the stuffed animal they are playing with is not real even as they conduct their imaginary play with it.



In addition, there are certain contexts in which we adults experience imaginary things as equally real. When you go to a movie, watch a play, or, even more intensely, play a computer game, your involvement sometimes becomes so complete that it seems to you that the things you are seeing (and hearing) are not merely representations but real things.

When this happens, the metaphysical distinction between real things and merely imaginary ones dissolves for you, just as it does for Harold, and it is as if things that are merely representations acquire full-blooded reality. Think about when you were watching a scary movie and found yourself scared by, say, a purely imaginary knife being plunged into what is only the image of an actor's body, not even really that of the character he is playing. Wasn't that knife real at that specific moment? (This is a topic we will discuss further in chapter 9, when we talk about the philosophy of art.)

Or think about what it's like to play a computer game. You are represented in the game world by an avatar, a computer image that stands for you. Your avatar moves through the imaginary world of the game and has to confront various obstacles that it/you must overcome. While you are absorbed in the game, you simply are your avatar and what happens to it happens to you, so the game world assumes the status of the real world for you at that moment.

Harold's world as depicted in the book is like what you experience while absorbed in watching a scary film or playing a computer game, only his entire world is created by his purple crayon. In the imaginary world of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, the imaginary things he draws become real.

Although we often think of children on a sort of deficit model as lacking important skills and capacities that adults have, there are a number of ways in which children actually outstrip adults. One is the power of their imaginations. *Harold and the Purple Crayon* is a testament to the power of children's imaginations, their ability to give reality to things we adults can only dream about. Think of how a child talks to their favorite stuffed animal and holds it tight. When they do so, they are using their imaginations to make something real, as real as anything else in their world, something we adults normally lack the power to do.

Likewise, Harold inhabits the make-believe world created by his crayon so completely that he is able to interact with its objects. Or so Crockett Johnson's drawings – themselves drawn as if Harold had actually made them – show. When Harold is drowning in the ocean he accidentally drew, he really is immersed in it, both in Johnson's drawing and in Harold's imagination. Johnson depicts the contents of Harold's imagination so that we literally see him embedded among the objects he draws.



A somewhat different way of representing the world that children inhabit is used by Bill Watterson in his wonderful *Calvin and Hobbes* comics. In some strips, Watterson first draws panels that present the world that Calvin imagines, only to remove all the features due to Calvin's imagination in a later panel. What's so unique about *Harold and the Purple Crayon* is that we never see the world as it "really is," but only the world as structured by Harold's imagination.

There is only one incident in which the book shows us reality and not just Harold's imaginings. Harold is ready to go home so he can sleep. To find his room, Harold draws some windows, hoping to find the window of his bedroom. But no matter how many windows he draws – he ends up drawing a small city with skyscrapers – he can't find the right one. Suddenly he remembers something that distinguishes the window of his room from all the other windows he has seen: His window is always "right around the moon." Harold once again has the solution to his problem: he simply draws the moon inside a square that symbolizes a window, thus making that square become the window of *his* bedroom. Once he has encircled the moon in the square that is his window, Harold is suddenly located inside his room. This is because he has drawn the view he always sees from *inside* his room. So when he recreates that view with his purple crayon, Harold is transported from the world outside his house to the world inside his room.

This shows that the imagination not only has the power to depict objects that seem completely real to us, but also has the power to take us wherever we want to go. Even so, sometimes you can imagine that you are exactly where you really are.

And this is what happens to Harold in the final pages of the book. He imagines himself not only inside his room, but also actually in his bed. His final act is to *draw up* the covers of his bed – notice the pun on "drawing" here – and this allows him to go to sleep. When we see the final picture of Harold, he is asleep in his bed, but he has not drawn himself sleeping. He really is sleeping and we see that by his closed eyes, a feature of the world that he has not drawn. And this explains why Harold is himself depicted differently by Johnson than all the objects that Harold draws.

This brings us back to the question of whether there is a criterion that allows us to distinguish real objects from imaginary ones. Unlike Crockett Johnson's drawing, the world does not present imaginary objects to us in a distinctive style that provides us with a way to determine that they are products of the imagination, as we have just seen. Does this mean we are





stuck in the skeptical position of not being able to say what makes an object real instead of imaginary?

Fortunately, I think not. **Immanuel Kant** proposed a different type of criterion that I think works well. Instead of relying on intrinsic differences between real objects and imaginary ones, Kant thought that real objects were simply those that cohered with other real objects to make up the world that we inhabit.

I think that Kant's account is correct. Most of the time, the objects you perceive – such as the page or screen on which you are reading this book – count as real because you fit them into a more general pattern with other objects you take to be real. You also know that the death of Marion Crane, the character played by Janet Leigh in *Psycho*, is not real because, when the film ends, her death doesn't fit with all the other events and things you take to be real, except when you take it to be something that happens in the film's imaginary world.

This is a *coherentist* account of the distinction between reality and the products of the imagination. The criterion it posits for judging an experience to be real is not based on any intrinsic quality of the experience, but on its connection to other experiences that also are real.

Before leaving *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, I feel compelled to discuss something that distinguishes it from most other picture books. It's no surprise, of course, that much of the charm of picture books comes from the wonderful drawings and illustrations that populate their pages. But delightful as they may be, a picture book's illustrations are not always necessary for understanding their stories. While we may love to look at the pictures in "Cookies," to choose the story I will discuss in chapter 12, we can understand the events that make up its story simply by paying attention to the words.

The pictures in *Harold and the Purple Crayon* play a more substantive role in our comprehension of the book's plot. The text alone does not fully communicate Harold's world to us. We only gain access to the imaginary world in which his bedtime adventures take place through the illustrations depicting his drawings, for they show us the world as he imagines it to be. Without them, the world of the story would be radically incomplete.

Thus, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* gives us an introduction to the metaphysical distinction between real and merely imaginary things, and even criticizes one attempt to develop an account of that distinction. It's time now to leave that distinction behind as we move on to the next chapter, where we'll concentrate on the metaphysical structure of those real things themselves.





### Discussing Metaphysics with Children

Children love to think about the difference between real and imaginary things. Since the objects in Harold's drawings become real, consider beginning a discussion by asking them if they could have their hunger satisfied by eating drawings of pies, like Harold does. This can launch you into a discussion of what's peculiar about Harold's drawings and, hopefully, the difference between real things and imaginary ones. You might even ask whether they think Harold gets wet when he falls into the ocean he's drawn.

