



A Defense of Causal Creationism in Fiction

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In this paper I seek defend the view that fictional characters are author-created abstract entities against objections offered by Stuart Brock in his paper “The Creationist Fiction: The Case against Creationism about Fictional Characters.” I argue that his objections fall far short of his goal of showing that if philosophers want to believe in fictional characters as abstract objects, they should not view them as author-created. My defense of creationism in fiction in part rests on tying the act of creating a fictional character more closely to the act of story-telling. Ultimately I aim to show that the creation of abstract entities is not as problem-laden as some may think, and that such a view is coherent.

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Examination of ordinary language reveals inconsistencies in our talk about fiction and fictional characters. We ordinarily say things like:

- (1) Holden Caulfield is a spoiled brat
- (2) Holden Caulfield does not exist
- (3) Holden Caulfield is a fictional character
- (4) JD Salinger created the fictional character of Holden Caulfield

One has the feeling that all four of these utterances cannot be true together in any straightforward manner. One might have the feeling that (2) and (3) are contraries. One might also suspect that (2) and (4) are contradictory.

In order to deal with the difficulties that appear when considering the truth-value and semantic content of the above statements, several philosophers have proposed that fictional names refer to abstract entities.¹ On such views, fictional names are seen as rigid designators that pick out fictional characters. The exact nature of these abstract entities is a matter of dispute, but for many philosophers the abstract entities referred to by fictional names are created by the authors of the fictions in which those characters appear.²

The notion that these abstract entities are author-created is what Stuart Brock sees as the most problematic aspect of theories that attribute existence to fictional characters. In his 2010 article “The Creationist Fiction: The Case against Creationism about Fictional Characters” he argues against the position that fictional characters are causally created by their authors. He says ‘[creationism about fictional characters] suffers from the same problem as theological creationism: the purported explanation is more mysterious than the data it seeks to explain’ (p. 338). Brock argues that the notion of causal creation is flawed because there has yet to be provided a coherent account of *when* these entities come into existence that agrees with our pre-philosophical intuitions. His basic argument can be summarized as follows: There is no good account of how authors’ activities could create fictional characters. If there is none, then creationism is false (or: we have no reason to accept it). Therefore, creationism is false. As a result of this argument he concludes that if one is going to adopt a view of fictional characters as abstract entities, one should reject the position that these entities are created by the

authors of fictional works; in particular, he would see (4) as false if we believe 'Holden Caulfield' refers to an abstract entity.

I aim to defend the creationist view according to which abstract artifacts are causally created by authors of fiction. I shall argue that Brock's arguments do not conclusively show that the notion of causally creating an abstract entity is incoherent and that there are several ways one might render it intelligible: in essence Brock is attacking a straw man. Just because the ways he considers are not coherent, does not mean that there are not coherent ways that creationism might be cashed out.³ I agree with arguments offered by van Inwagen, Thomasson, Braun and others that positing fictional entities goes a long way towards explaining our discourse about fictional characters, even if it does not provide a perfect account of ordinary language use. I believe that the most coherent view of discourse about fictional characters is one in which they are created by individuals. To that end, I will begin by explaining what Brock considers to be 'creationism in fiction', explain his objections to such a view, and argue that they do not accomplish as much as he hopes. I will then sketch a few plausible alternative ways we can make sense of fictional creationism, but it is not my aim to put forward the correct view. Finally, I will consider replies that Brock might pose.

1. An account of creationism

Brock states that the typical creationist will be committed to the following theses:

Conceptual Thesis: A fictional character is an individual picked out by a name or description first introduced in a work of fiction *F*, and referred to for the first time in the context of discussing *F*.

Ontological Thesis: There are fictional characters.

Fundamental Thesis: Fictional characters, to the extent that there are any, are genuinely created by the authors of the works in which their names (or designating descriptions) first appear (p. 340).

Brock points out that while many creationists have focused on defending the Conceptual Thesis and the Ontological Thesis, little effort has been devoted to developing the Fundamental Thesis. If we are going to accept the claim that there are

fictional characters that can be referred to when discussing fiction, we are going to need an account of how they came into being. Brock argues that even if we do accept the Conceptual Thesis and the Ontological Thesis, we should reject the Fundamental Thesis because there is no satisfactory account as to when and how exactly such entities are causally created by authors.

What exactly Brock means by 'causal creation' is best represented by a passage each from John Searle (1975) and Amie Thomasson (2003):

By pretending to refer to (and recount the adventures of) a person, [the author] creates a fictional character (p. 330).

On the view I have defended, [fictional characters] are (existent) abstract artifacts, created by the creative activities of the author or authors telling a certain story, within a certain tradition... Frankenstein's monster was a creation of Dr. Frankenstein, but really it is a fictional character created by Mary Shelley (p. 210).

By either pretending to refer, or using these names in a certain way (perhaps as part of a story telling act) authors give rise to abstract entities. What these philosophers have in mind is that fictional characters are abstract, contingent entities that are brought into being by the acts that authors engage in.⁴ Brock believes the only view compatible with the Conceptual and Ontological theses is the view that if there are fictional characters, they are not created. They must be some kind of pre-existing entity that is merely picked out by authors. As the view that fictional characters are some kind of pre-existing entity is unpalatable to many proponents of fictional characters as abstract entities, if Brock's arguments are successful he will have given good reason for rejecting fictional characters as entities altogether.

2. Objections to causal creationism

One of the chief difficulties for a theory of causal creation for fictional characters will be specifying when exactly the characters come into existence. Brock plausibly claims that in order to know when a fictional character is created, we must know how they are created. But he claims this is unanswerable. His argument focuses on the pretend reference view of John Searle. He takes Searle's view to imply that the mere act of

pretending to refer creates the fictional entity. Brock then suggests possible positions that hold that the act of pretense is what creates the fictional character:

First Use Account (FUA): A fictional character is created whenever an author first uses a fictional name; every subsequent use involves a genuine case of reference to the entity created on the first use.

Intentional Creation by Pretense View (ICP): An author creates a fictional character if and only if an author pretends to pick out an individual as a causal consequence of his or her intention to create such an individual (pp. 357-360).

According to FUA, an author creates a fictional character whenever he or she uses a name for the first time within a fictional story. Brock states that such a view will end up creating an abundance of entities, and it still won't leave us with a satisfying explanation. For example, in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert Stevenson must have first pretended to refer to Mr. Hyde at time t_1 , and by FUA he will thereby have created Mr. Hyde at t_1 . Presumably, Stevenson introduced the name 'Dr. Jekyll' at a different time from when he introduced 'Mr. Hyde'. Let's suppose that Stevenson pretended to refer to Dr. Jekyll for the first time at t_2 , thereby creating Dr. Jekyll at t_2 . Given that the first use of these two names occurred at different times, then by FUA the two uses at different times must have created different fictional entities. However, according to the story, Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll refer to the same fictional character. Therefore FUA must be false—either pretending to refer to a character for the first time is not sufficient to create that character or if it is, we will have an abundance of fictional entities.

In Brock's view, his argument has an unacceptable consequence for all superhero type stories. By 'superhero' type story, I mean any story in which a character has two identities. It should not be the case that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are different fictional characters; if FUA is true we have too many abstract entities in our ontology and the theory goes against the common sense intuition that 'Dr. Jekyll' and 'Mr. Hyde' refer to the same entity. But FUA cannot account for this commonsense intuition. FUA also cannot handle unnamed characters. Frankenstein's monster is never referred to by a proper name, and so there is no fictional character corresponding to the monster. This also conflicts with our intuitions.

Brock also believes that ICP fails. ICP would allow us to avoid some of the problems associated with FUA, especially the unnamed character dilemma. A view of how abstract artifacts are created that took into account authorial intentions may also avoid the problem of too many fictional characters, as in the superhero cases. But, Brock tells us, counter examples are too easy to come by. If we are convinced by any of the following scenarios, we must reject causal creationism. I have renamed and reformulated the following scenarios for the sake of simplicity; I do not believe that anything has been lost from the argument.

- A) Change in authorial intention version A: It is possible that Stevenson did not originally intend for 'Dr. Jekyll' and 'Mr. Hyde' to name the same character. He might have written each name for the first time with the intention that each name refer to a different character. But when he finished the story, his wife told him it was rather boring. So he jazzed it up with a twist at the end in which Dr. Jekyll really is Mr. Hyde, and he modified the plot to accord with this later intention. Yet we would still say that both names refer to the same character.
- B) Change in authorial intention version B: We may have thought all along that Conan Doyle intended to create two different characters, Holmes and Watson. Really, Doyle had planned on revealing in a final book that *Watson was Holmes*. Unfortunately, Doyle died before he could do this. Yet, contra Doyle's intentions, we would still say that Holmes and Watson refer to different characters.
- C) An author who does not intend to create anything: It is possible that there is a philosopher-novelist who holds a strong view which denies the existence of abstract entities. Therefore, this author does not believe that the act of writing creates fictional characters. Furthermore, if he or she thought that writing fiction created fictional characters, the author would have never engaged in it. Despite the authorial intentions, we would still say that the author created fictional characters.

Brock's basic point is the following: Given any one of these three scenarios, the philosopher who holds the belief that names from fiction refer to fictional characters will have to divorce that belief from the view that authors create said fictional

characters. Those who want to posit fictional characters would most likely maintain that considerations like those in A-C should have no effect on whether or not there are fictional characters. Yet this intuition cannot be squared with ICP. Given our intuitions about the above cases, we should conclude that both FUA and ICP cannot explain how fictional characters are created. If we are going to believe in fictional characters, we will have to adopt some kind of Platonist view in which authors individuate pre-existing abstract entities.

3. Replies

The first thing to note is that Brock only considers one possible view as to how a causal creationist might account for the creation of abstract entities. There are certainly other views which Brock just lumps together, like that of van Inwagen mentioned above, and that of Salmon, whose view does not exactly fit the mold. It is possible that fictional characters are created in a variety of ways.⁵ For now let us accept this account that it is by the act of pretense that fictional characters are created. Even so, I don't see how Brock's problems follow, even in the strong formulations I have given them.

One might think that we can respond to Brock's argument against FUA by simply stating that Stevenson created Jekyll and Hyde at the same time because Jekyll is identical with Hyde. I do not think that Brock would see this as a legitimate solution to the problem based on the way he has formulated FUA. Suggesting that Jekyll and Hyde were created at the same time, or that Jekyll is identical with Hyde, needs to take into account intentionality: Stevenson has to intend that for whichever name was used second at t2 to have the same reference as the name first used at t1. FUA makes no mention of intentionality; on FUA, a first use of a name by an author creates an abstract entity regardless of intention. According to FUA, in any situation where we have two names being introduced at separate times and used, we will have a fictional character corresponding to each name's use. It may be possible to conceive of two separate strings of letters being put to the exact same use; but it is clear that in the Jekyll and Hyde cases the names are not being used in the exact same way. In superhero type stories in which we have an ordinary person who gains superpowers or takes on a superhero identity, we will have one name being introduced and first used for the character before a second, superhero name, is later introduced and used to refer to that same character.⁶

That fact is enough to generate problems for the account according to Brock; on FUA, if we have two distinct names each being used for the first time in a story, then those two uses will generate two characters precisely because FUA does not take into account intention.

This is not as problematic as Brock supposes. In superhero cases, it is very natural to say Clark Kent is the alter ego of Superman, and the case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is no different. So we may naturally think of them as having distinct properties. In fact, in fictions like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the reader is meant to be deceived about the very nature of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The use of 'Mr. Hyde' created one abstract object and the use of 'Dr. Jekyll' created another abstract object with different properties ascribed to each. Part of finding out that Dr. Jekyll is Mr. Hyde is finding out that Dr. Jekyll transforms into Mr. Hyde. So now we have two abstract entities which are ascribed⁷ the property of transforming into each other. They do not literally transform into each other, but this seems like a relatively tidy explanation: we have two different abstract entities referred to by two different names, but we are also told that the entity named by 'Dr. Jekyll' transforms into the entity named by 'Mr. Hyde'. Or, put another way, we find out that Dr. Jekyll can take on the properties ascribed to Mr. Hyde and vice versa. I don't find this as fundamentally off-putting, nor will it result in an overabundance of entities: for each alter ego there is an abstract entity which is said to have the property of transforming into another entity; it does not literally transform into anything, but we should imagine that it does.

Secondly, why should we think the first time a name is written down that that act represents its first use? There are several possible candidates for when a name is first used that have little to do with the first time it is inscribed. We can grant that an author creates a character when he uses the name of the character to refer to that character for the first time, but it is not clear that writing down a name for the first time *is* a referring use of that name. Given that Brock is basing his criticism on Searle's proposal, we should consider the fact that Searle claims that the author of fiction pretends to perform a *series* of illocutionary acts (1975, p. 325). So we might claim that an author never uses the name of a fictional character until the work is complete; that is, when the author has completed the series of acts. Alternately, we could hold that a fictional name minimally needs to be used in a series of sentences for it to create an abstract entity. Perhaps the name at first has an incomplete meaning or refers to various possible characters (the author has yet to record whether this character is a man or

woman), and we could plausibly maintain that the author does not use the name to refer in the very first act of writing.⁸ As a result, we would not have a creation of entities until the story was finished, when Stevenson would thus subsequently use 'Jekyll' and 'Hyde' to refer to the same completed entity for the first time.

We should also consider that an author must do a good deal of revising as he writes his fiction. We can either take a view that different abstract entities are created and destroyed in this writing and editing process or we can take a view that the act of writing a fiction is similar to the act of building a structure. If we do take FUA as our view of fictional causal creation, then the simple act of writing a name in a pretense-ful way is enough to create a character. If creation comes so cheaply, why should destruction be so difficult? Seemingly all we should have to do is erase our first entry of the name. If we take a view that each use within the fiction builds up the character, then no abstract object is created until the author says, 'the end' or something along those lines. This is surely artificial, but there must certainly come a point when an author has become satisfied with the plot of their work, and when the plot is in its final form our abstract entities are born. There does not seem to be anything mysterious about this: the characters are inextricably tied to the plots in which they appear, so why should we hold them to be complete entities before the plot is complete?⁹

Many causal-creationists hold a view closer to that expressed in ICP: An author creates a fictional character if and only if an author pretends to pick out an individual as a causal consequence of his or her intention to create such an individual. Brock sees ICP as just as problematic as FUA if not more so. If ICP cannot be adequately defended, there is no hope for the causal creationist.

Brock motivates counterexamples A-C by employing an analogy that the causal creationist herself likes to employ, that of an artisan to an author. Artisans engage in intentional, purposeful behaviors in order to create some artifact and we have good reason to suppose that the intention of creating a table plays a causal role in the creation of a table. In the same way we might say that an author creates a character if and only if she intends to create a character; when she intends to create a character she engages in pretense-ful reference, knowing that this particular act of pretense-ful reference will produce a fictional character. But A-C show that ICP must be wrong, as entities are either being created against the authors intentions, or there is a paucity of entities despite the author's intentions. Once again, keeping in mind that the act of creation is

closely tied to the entire act of creating the story should help steer us clear of these difficulties.

In the case of counterexample A, we have the original intention to create two separate characters. If we think of the act of writing the story as the *process* through which these entities are created then there does not seem to be much of a problem. Just as an artisan may be intending to make a table but when nearing the end of his project realizes the legs are far too short, he can change his intentions into those of making a bench. A carpenter buys some wood, starts cutting it, pieces it together, stops at a certain point and says (or perhaps his wife says, to stick with Brock's example) 'This isn't much of a table.' He can then change his intentions and rework his table into a bench. In fact, the analogy can do more work for us, not less. To make things even closer to the set up that Brock gives us, we can imagine that a carpenter builds two distinct tables. Then his wife comes in and says, 'Some tables; they look like they were made by a child. Take your time and draw some plans for once!' So he dismantles both tables, takes the wood and combines it into one fine piece of craftsmanship. His wife says, 'Not bad.' The same could hold in the Stevenson case. He has created two boring characters. He then reworks the attributes of those characters into one character. If we cannot accept abstract entity destruction, he simply discards those original characters and creates a new character, reinterpreting the names of his old characters to refer singly to this new one. This does not mean there is no *particular time* fictional entities come into being; we can settle on the moment the author considers the work complete, or we can settle on the suggestion that the entity does not come into being until the name is uttered outside the context of the completed story. Surely we can settle on a few typical times without necessarily settling on the first writing of a name or the first semi-formed intentional writing of a name.

Counterexample B is an objection that can be leveled at any artifact or artwork that was constructed with some intentions, and this weakens its force. To take a mundane case, let's say Brock and I go to a rummage sale and see what looks like a table. I say, 'That table would look great in my kitchen.' Brock might respond, 'How do we know that the artisan intended for that to be a table? What if she planned on shortening the legs and turning it into a bench?' There is nothing I could say to this, except that right now it appears the artisan created a table. Based on the finished work from Arthur Conan Doyle, it appears he created two separate characters.

We treat the story as if it contains two central characters; in many respects the story would not make sense if Watson and Holmes were really one character. So let's turn counterexample B on its head. Let's suppose after Conan Doyle's death a final Holmes novel is released. In it we are told that Watson is Holmes. This information does not seem to be consistent by any stretch of the imagination with the other books (let's say). What would we say? I think there are many things we might say, like: 'Conan Doyle could not have really written this' or 'This can't be what Conan Doyle intended in the other stories' or 'Conan Doyle must have gone senile,' but I do not think we would be very inclined to say 'I guess Sherlock Holmes really was Watson after all, even though this makes the other four books completely unintelligible.' Another perfectly acceptable solution for me, but Brock would call this an overabundance of entities, is to simply claim that it is a different Sherlock Holmes and Watson in this new story. The characters are tied to the stories in which they appear.

Counterexample C seems at first easy to imagine, but on closer examination becomes quite difficult to really work out. Brock neither offers an alternative explanation of what it is he thinks authors are doing when writing fiction, nor does he suggest a way for us to handle fictional works. So he does not suggest what the author who does not believe in fictional characters intends to be doing (p. 339). So let's say that JD Salinger did not believe in fictional entities. He intends for the name 'Holden Caulfield' to be empty. There are difficulties. Even if these are his intentions, we could still hold the view suggested above, that it is the act of completing a story that creates the abstract artifact. So even if he did not intend to create anything, when the story was finished several abstract entities came into being: the story itself along with all the characters. We can certainly cause things despite our best intentions. A person causes vibrations in the air when they speak despite any intention they may have had regarding air vibrations.¹⁰ Secondly, surely even *Salinger* would say that the sentence 'JD Salinger created Holden Caulfield' is true. How else could Salinger explain the appearance of the name 'Holden Caulfield'? Surely statement (4) is true, even if Salinger denied this. The burden is on Brock to explain how one should understand such a sentence, or if it really is false, why it is false.

4. Further considerations and conclusion

My defense of causal creation is open to some criticism. A clear difficulty is how abstract entities are destroyed. Brock states:

[W]e don't suppose that Stevenson has created two characters and then decided to destroy one. We don't suppose that Stevenson created two characters and then in a further creative act fused the two into one. We don't suppose that Stevenson created two different characters and ascribed to these distinct individuals the impossible property of being identical to one another (p. 361).

There is no one way to go about writing fiction and the non-prose writer may know little about the process, so the idea that Jekyll and Hyde started out as two characters might be strange or unexpected, but that does not make it 'mysterious'. As stated above, I find no real objection in supposing that Jekyll and Hyde are two characters. I suggested that we ascribe to them the property of transforming. Brock suggests that we would have to ascribe them the impossible property of being identical. He says this, I take it, because it is impossible for two distinct things to be identical. However, if he is taking 'ascription' in van Inwagen's sense, then he should know that being ascribed a property is not the same as *having* a property:

I shall not attempt to give a definition of [ascription]. This three-place predicate must be taken as primitive.... We are saying something true about the relations that hold between the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the main satiric villainess of that novel, and the property fatness when we say, "Mrs. Gamp, a character in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, is fat." And I think we are not saying that the relation of *exemplification* holds between Mrs. Gamp and fatness when we say this, since this would not be *true*...(van Inwagen 1977, p. 306)

Perhaps no abstract entity can exemplify or *have* an impossible property; I do not see why an abstract entity cannot be ascribed an impossible property in van Inwagen's sense. One may not understand this primitive property of ascription, but if we do have a rough idea of what van Inwagen means, I think we are in need of an argument as to why such a property cannot be ascribed. Second, it is not clear that we *should* think of Jekyll and Hyde as identical. They are certainly described as having different properties. If we don't care for impossible properties, we can say that they are ascribed the property of being the same person, or inhabiting the very same body. The same

could be said for Clark Kent and Superman, if we regard them as separate characters – they are two different characters ascribed the property of inhabiting the same body.

Given Brock's scenario, we can also take the view that Stevenson destroyed one (or both) of his characters by changing the plot of the story in which they appear. Although Brock states that he does not see how a character could be destroyed, if we take their creation to be dependent on plot, this becomes easier to make sense of. *Even if* we take the existence of plots to be dependent on being written down somewhere, Stevenson simply has to destroy the original manuscript and start fresh. We could even conceive of a scenario in which Stevenson throws the original version in the corner and starts writing anew. He creates a new use for the names 'Dr. Jekyll' and 'Mr Hyde' in which they now refer to a single new character. In this scenario there are the separate fictional characters, Mr. Hyde and the Dr. Jekyll, who we do not oft refer to or hear about because that story was never published. But we *do* often refer to one character with the two names 'Dr. Jekyll' and 'Mr. Hyde' because this is a much better known story and as a result, use. Such a scenario is not implausible.

Although I have not sought to settle the question as to exactly how abstract entities are created, I hope to have shown that one intelligible way to understand them is as by-products of the act of storytelling. Conceivably there may be no uniform way in which abstract entities are created. The force of the above criticisms is not enough to lead one to abandon the view that if abstract fictional entities exist, they are created by authors. Taking such a view may not give us perfect results for explaining ordinary language, but it gives us on balance, better results.

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¹ See Parsons (1980), Salmon (1998), Searle (1975), Thomasson (2003), van Inwagen (1977).

² Salmon, Searle, van Inwagen, and Thomasson all hold a creationist view, along with others, such as David Braun in his (2005).

³ At the end of his paper, Brock includes a footnote to the effect that he should not be taken as making the strong claim that there is no way to explain creationism; however that is clearly the goal of his argument. He states that he suspects that the creation conditions of fictional characters will not be sorted out even once we remove the sources of ambiguity and vagueness that cloud the issue.

⁴ van Inwagen (1977) has a similar view, but it is a bit more complex. It seems to go like this: authors write down names in stories that do not refer to anything. It is the act of discussing literature that gives rise to fictional characters. This is a causal creationist view, but not as straightforward as the views of Thomasson and Searle, although Brock lumps him in with the others cited above. It does not seem as susceptible to Brock's criticism, but van Inwagen would still have a hard time specifying the exact moment a fictional character comes into being.

⁵ For an example, see Amy Thomasson's (1999); especially pp. 46-49

⁶ Brock makes explicit reference to the order of introduction of the names; see p. 358.

⁷ In van Inwagen's sense of 'ascribe'. See below.

⁸ This is something like Salmon's view

⁹ This line of thought is comes in part from Edward Zalta's (2003): "Part of the puzzle about how it is we refer to such characters may be due to a desire to refer to them before we even have a story to refer to, or due to a desire to refer to them independently of any story... [O]ne cannot establish the identity of a fictional character without establishing the identity of the story in which the character is involved" (p. 250).

¹⁰ This example is from David Braun's (2005) although used with a different purpose.