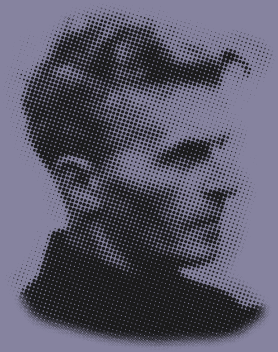

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FACETS OF REALITY

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

Organised by
Asya Passinsky (Vienna), Julio De Rizzo (Vienna)
& Benjamin Schnieder (Vienna)

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45

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Is There a Plausible Realist Theory of Fictional Characters?

Andrew Wynn Owen (Austin, USA)

Abstract

The debate between realists and anti-realists about fictional entities is important partly because it connects with debates about the nature of reference. According to the descriptivist model held by Fregeans, a name has reference to an object due to the connection of that name with a description, which is met by the relevant object. According to the causal-communicative model held by Millians, a name refers in virtue of a chain of reference linking that name to a referent. In the case of fictional entities, it is a matter of debate whether the entities in question exist or not. Traditionally, Millians have had trouble dealing with anti-realism about fictional entities. I argue for a simple realist theory, 'bare-bones artifactualism', according to which fictional entities are simple abstract 'counters'. Each of these simple abstract counters has only those intrinsic properties that other such simple abstract counters also have, except for one distinctive intrinsic property. This one distinctive intrinsic property is a number-bearing property that marks out the abstract counter's identity, distinct from all other such abstract counters. The number-bearing property allows us to do with abstract counters what spatiotemporal situatedness allows us to do with concrete counters: it allows us to treat the abstract counters as individuals. In support of such artifactualism, I discuss the following considerations: its ontological simplicity; its parallels in our other practices; and its explanatory promise.

0. Introduction

The debate between realists and anti-realists about fictional characters is important partly because it connects with debates about the nature of reference. According to the descriptivist model of reference held by Fregeans (see Frege (1892) and Russell (1911)), a name has reference to an object due to the connection of that name with a description, which is met by the relevant object. According to the causal-communicative model held by Millians (see Mill (1867)), a name refers in virtue of a chain of reference linking that name to a referent. Kripke's (1972) work influentially revived the Millian view and challenged the Fregean view. In the case of fictional characters, it is a matter of debate whether the entities in question exist or not. If they exist (as possibilia that we discover, or as actual abstract artifacts that we create), the Millian view is on sturdy ground: there are referents to which the chain of reference leads. If they do not exist, more will need to be said by the Millian in order to account for what is going on in the case of apparent reference to such entities. Traditionally, Millians have had trouble dealing with anti-realism about fictional characters.

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Here I will assess the plausibility of one realist view: a simple, bare-bones version of abstract artifact theory, which I call 'bare-bones artifactualism'.

1. Bare-bones artifactualism

According to bare-bones artifactualism, the abstract artifacts are simple abstract 'counters'. Each of these simple abstract counters has only those intrinsic properties that other such simple abstract counters also have, except for one distinctive intrinsic property. This one distinctive intrinsic property is a number-bearing property that marks out the abstract counter's identity, distinct from all other such abstract counters. On account of this one distinctive intrinsic property, the abstract counters might be described as 'quasi-counters', given that, unlike idealized concrete counters, they are not indiscernible in their intrinsic properties. However, I will not describe them as 'quasi-counters', but rather 'counters', because it seems to me that their closeness to concrete counters is sufficient to justify categorizing them under that term. The one distinctive intrinsic property, the number-bearing property, allows for us to do with abstract counters what spatiotemporal situatedness allows for us to do with concrete counters. That is to say, the number-bearing property allows us to treat the abstract counters as individuals.

It is commonly thought that abstract objects cannot be distinct duplicates, unlike concrete objects. I accept that this is probably the case. So it is not possible for abstract objects to be perfect counters on the model of concrete counters, when 'perfect counters' is taken to mean 'objects indistinguishable in their intrinsic properties'.

So the simple abstract counters are nearly indiscernible insofar as their intrinsic properties are concerned. Where the counters differ is in their extrinsic properties: these can be derived from an account of our use of them. By 'counter', I mean a simple object, indiscernible in its intrinsic properties from other such simple objects, that is used for tracking certain contextually-determined factors in a mutually-understood format (as in a game, or in our ordinary tracking of considerations about human society).

2. Is the ontology of bare-bones artifactualism strange?

Against the view that the ontology of bare-bones artifactualism using abstract counters is strange, I will present three considerations that give us good reason to believe in such an ontology: its simplicity; its parallels in our other practices; its explanatory promise. I will address each of these in turn, giving greatest attention to parallels in our other practices and explanatory promise.

2.1. Bare-bones artifactualism is ontologically simple

This is what I call 'the simplicity advantage'. The proposed ontology is far simpler, and therefore more plausible, than the ontology of other versions of artifactualism: there are existent abstract counters, but their intrinsic properties are very simple and they are uniform in this simplicity. They are not spooky, because they are so simple in their intrinsic properties. Our ontology is minimally and plausibly expanded by acceptance of their existence, in keeping with the principle of parsimony.

2.2. Counter-use is familiar from other areas of human life

Bare-bones artifactualism using counters is plausible because there are analogies for such counter-use in other areas of human activity: notably, in games. When humans involve themselves in games, which may be very complex, they tend to have counters that they use to individuate possessors for the various properties in operation in those games. Moreover, in games, there is typically some 'boardspace' or 'playing area' within which the counters interact: we place counters on a board or cards on a table. Such areas, which are of significance to the use of counters in the game, are temporally extended: the counters enter them at a certain point in time, and leave at another. They are also, more obviously, spatially extended, allowing for various relations within that space, settled by the rules of the game. For example, counters sometimes preclude co-occupation of a square on a board, as in backgammon or chess. At other times, counters can co-occupy a square on a board, as in certain versions of pachisi (in which counters from the same team can co-occupy).

It should not be thought that counter-use is confined to the concrete. Consider two chess-players playing chess without a board. The game still takes place with counters, with various extrinsic, encoded properties (e.g. the knight moves in an L-shape, the bishop diagonally), but it takes place abstractly. Such

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chess is sometimes said to be played 'in the head' and by this it is meant that it is played abstractly. The two players take it in turns to say their moves: 'c4', 'e6', 'Knight to f3', 'd5', and so on. When one plays (or attempts to play) such chess, one is aware of abstract counters and an abstract boardspace within which they operate. 'Blindfold chess', as it is sometimes known, has a long history: Murray (1913: 817) records that Ruy Lopez played it in Spain in the sixteenth century, and it probably goes back much further.

The same game-abstraction can be achieved for simpler games. The same abstract use of counters and boardspace can be achieved, for example, by children playing *Noughts and Crosses*. All it requires is some familiarity with the game. It seems probable that a person could play the abstract version of *Noughts and Crosses* (though probably not chess, due to the relative complexity of the game), without ever having seen a concrete boardspace or set of counters.

The widespread and commonsensically-recognized occurrence of such concrete and abstract counter-use in human life is a reason to view the further occurrence of abstract counter-use for fictional characters as plausible. It may be that, in the history of human evolution and/or in the course of human maturation from childhood to adulthood, either concrete or abstract counter-use precedes the other. My guess is that concrete counter-use precedes abstract counter-use, both in the history of human evolution and in the course of human maturation, but this is an area for further consideration, and one that is likely to be heavily dependent on empirical investigation. In any case, concrete counter-use preceding abstract counter-use (or vice versa) would not, as far as I can see, diminish the plausibility of fictional characters being simple abstract counters.

2.3 Counter-use has explanatory promise

As said, counter-use is ontologically simple and familiar from other areas of human life. But what explanatory work does counter-use do? Counter-use provides a solution to a coordination problem: the problem of how we organize our considerations of and discussions about fictional entities. Positing counters goes a long way to explaining how we achieve, where fiction is concerned, the kind of multi-character, multi-property, multi-event tracking that we do.

Imagine the game of *Snakes and Ladders* (known as *Moksha Patam,* in the original, Indian version) without counters, but with the aspects of the game that are brought about by the properties intrinsically or extrinsically possessed by counters in the normal game still in operation. How would we coordinate such complicated activity, without individuals to which to affix properties? In normal *Snakes and Ladders*, a counter has various extrinsic properties, provided by the game: when a die is rolled, it moves forward the relevant number of squares; when it lands on a square with a snake or a ladder, it respectively descends or ascends the board; when it reaches the end of the board, it results in victory for the associated player.

A version of *Snakes and Ladders* without the property-bearing, including spatiotemporal situatedness, provided by individual counters is either impossible or beyond ordinary human capabilities. I am not sure which of these is the case, but will outline the two possibilities that I envisage. It may be impossible: it may be that, without individual counters to bear the relevant properties, it would not be possible for the imitated game to functionally resemble the original. Alternatively, it may simply be beyond ordinary human capabilities: it may be that, even if it is possible for some other kind of being, our own capabilities are outmatched by the prospect of playing a version of the game that does not include individual counters to bear the relevant properties. On balance, I think it is probably impossible for there to be a version of *Snakes and Ladders* functionally identical to *Snakes and Ladders* and lacking the counters, but I am unsure on this point. In any case, certainty about this is not needed for my point about the implausibility of such a version of the game to go through.

Now imagine a novel in which there are no fictional characters, no counters to keep track of. I do not mean a novel in which various bits of speech and/or description are available, and the reader is challenged to gather them into world-resembling arrangements, and then does so by inventing individuals to which to attribute the various grouped patterns of speech and description. I mean something far more challenging: I mean a novel in which, at the outset, the reader has her capacity to track individual entities frozen. This is even stranger than the imitated version of *Snakes and Ladders*. It is hard to see how such a novel could be produced, let alone allow for our varied achievements in thought and discussion about fictional entities.

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3. Objection: Is there an explanatory drawback concerning authorial creativity, due to the simplicity of the counters?

All versions of artifactualism have what I call 'the creativity advantage', which anti-realist and Meinongian realist accounts do not. On artifactualist views, the creator of a fictional character can genuinely be credited with having created something. Bare-bones artifactualism retains this advantage. However, there is a caveat. Such simple artifactualism may be seen as having this advantage to a lesser degree than versions of artifactualism that situate the created artifact as a more complicated object, one with more intrinsic properties. Simple abstract counters may not, on the face of it, appear to be the kind of thing that authors create: it may seem that what authors actually create are more complex, intrinsically-characterful abstract objects.

This is not a major drawback for bare-bones artifactualism because the apparently-missing explanatory work can be done by extrinsic properties. Imagine someone saying, as a challenge to the bare-bones artifactualist, 'Simple abstract counters do not sound at all like what I think of fictional characters as being.' Let us call this the 'abstract-counters-are-the-wrong-things objection'. In answer to this objection, the bare-bones artifactualist can simply reply: 'I don't think that anyone, pre-reflectively, has ordinary or special insight into the ontological status of fictional characters.'

In fact, the bare-bones artifactualist is here using a defence that many artifactualists will probably adopt at some point, in response to a slightly different objection. That objection is raised by Sainsbury, as a concern about abstractness for artifactualism in general: 'on abstract artifact theories, fictional characters just are not the kinds of things we want them to be' because we do not think of fictional entities as abstract (2009: 111). I will call this the 'abstracta-are-the-wrong-kinds-of-things objection'. In elaborating this objection, Sainsbury writes, 'Authors, who ought to know, would fiercely resist the suggestion that they [fictional characters] are abstract. Abstract artifact theory entails that producers and consumers of fiction are sunk in error' (111). Let us call this supporting point the 'error hypothesis'. Sainsbury makes a normative claim about authorial knowledge ('ought to know') but the error hypothesis might also be couched as a simple statement of what is probable: it

seems probable that authors are not mistaken about fictional characters in this way. So there are normative and probabilistic versions of the error hypothesis. I will focus on the authorial, rather than the readerly, aspect of the error hypothesis, because it seems to me that, when the hypothesis is raised, it is to authors, rather than readers, that greater knowledge about what is going on with fictional entities is likely to be attributed.

In answer to the error hypothesis, I say that I do not think that authors ought to know what they, the authors, are doing in this regard; nor is it probable that they know. There is no special normativity and/or likelihood, for authors, when it comes to knowing the reality-status of fictional characters. In general, there are certain kinds of knowledge about the nature of the raw materials one is using in a project that are not required for successful completion of that project. For example, there is no special normativity and/or likelihood for those working on many aspects of the construction of buildings to know, simply by dint of engaging in those activities, the chemical composition of the materials that they are using. It may be that modern workers in that field do come to possess such knowledge, either as a matter of interest or in support of specialised aspects of their work, but it is not relevant to large aspects of the fundamental activity. For most of human history, the vast majority of those working on the construction of buildings did not have such knowledge, and yet the construction of the buildings was achieved. I believe there is an analogy here with what authors do. In fact, I think the analogy is generalizable to other domains: those working with certain raw materials, where the work involves the arrangement of those raw materials in time and space, and in other ways relative to one another (as in, for example, the social relations of a novel), typically are not likelier than the average person to know about the intrinsic nature of those raw materials. In general, I do not think that authors, mathematicians, or moralists have special insight into the debate about realism, anti-realism, and irrealism concerning the things with which they operate (be they fictional characters, numbers, or moral properties). These are distinctively philosophical questions and they do not routinely arise in pursuit of the relevant practices, though they are surely of interest for those concerned with foundational issues related to those practices.

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4. Conclusion

I defended a view that I call 'bare-bones artifactualism', according to which the abstract artifacts created by authors are very simple: they are counters, which are indiscernible insofar as their intrinsic properties are concerned. Where they differ is in their extrinsic properties.

I said that I do not think the ontology of bare-bones artifactualism using abstract counters strange. On the contrary, there is good reason to see it as what is going on. This is based on certain considerations about bare-bones artifactualism: its ontological simplicity; its parallels in our other practices; and its explanatory promise. Above all, I would like to emphasize the account's explanatory promise: abstract counter-use shows how we might be keeping track of the many things we have to be keeping track of in order to achieve the kinds of thought about and discussion of fictional entities that we do achieve.

I then addressed an objection: is there an explanatory drawback for bare-bones artifactualism, relative to other artifactualisms, due to the simplicity of the abstract counters? I said that the view that bare-bones artifactualism is at a disadvantage here relative to more elaborate versions of artifactualism is based on the incorrect supposition that there are categories of person who have special insight, where the debate about realism arises, into the ontological status of the objects of our thought and language.

It may be that the bare-bones model of artifactualism that I have outlined here remains unpersuasive. There is more that might be said about counter-use, but even an extended account might fail to convince the reader. For those who find even the existence of simple abstract counters implausible and yet also wish to retain the advantage (which is usually the preserve of the realist) of maintaining reference as something that we do in cases concerning fictional entities, Sainsbury's (2009) irrealism is a good alternative view.

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