

Abstract and Concrete Products: A Response to Cray

David Friedell, Barnard College

Penultimate Version: Final version forthcoming in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

Wesley Cray has written an illuminating response to my defense of abstract creationism—what I have characterized as “the view that fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter, are abstract objects that authors create” (Friedell 2016, 129). He focuses on my response to Stuart Brock’s case involving a nominalist author. I am happy to further the discussion.

I. Creation and Production

Cray helpfully distinguishes between two kinds of generation: what he calls ‘creation’ and ‘production’. *Creation* occurs when someone generates an object with an intention to generate. For instance, most tables (though, as I argue, not necessarily all) are created. *Production* occurs when someone generates an object with no intention to generate. For instance, most footprints (though not all) are produced. Cray calls produced objects ‘products’ and created objects ‘artifacts’. I adopt Cray’s terminology for this discussion.

Cray’s distinctions clarify the main moral of Stuart Brock’s Rowling case (Brock 2010, 362). Suppose J.K. Rowling, while writing the Harry Potter novels, is a nominalist. She does not believe in fictional characters and intends not to generate any. Brock thinks abstract creationists should accept that Rowling somehow generates Harry Potter. I agree. Rowling *produces* Potter. It is a mystery how this happens (a mystery Cray works toward solving). I have argued that, *pace* Brock, this mystery should not make us doubt that authors often intentionally generate fictional characters. After all, van Inwagen—who does not believe in tables—may produce a table while

intending to merely arrange simples table-wise.ⁱ This should not make us doubt that carpenters often intentionally generate tables. The mystery of production, accordingly, pertains to characters but also to tables and similar concreta: for instance, chairs, clocks, cups, and screwdrivers.

I originally described the upshot of these cases as follows:

“Surprisingly, then, one can make an artifact without intending to make anything of its kind—indeed, without intending to make anything” (2016, 134).

Given Cray’s terminology (and in particular his use of ‘artifact’), this is not exactly right. It is better to say, “Surprisingly, it is not necessary that all fictional characters, tables, chairs, clocks, cups, screwdrivers, etc. are artifacts. It is possible for instances of each of these kinds to be produced rather than created.”

This result conflicts with how many metaphysicians talk of *table*, *chair*, *clock*, etc. as *artifactual kinds*. Amie Thomasson (2003), for instance, thinks artifactual kinds are (among other things) such that, necessarily, every instance of them is *created* (in Cray’s sense). She thinks *chair* is an artifactual kind. But it turns out van Inwagen may produce (rather than create) a chair. By parallel reasoning it seems none of the kinds metaphysicians commonly claim are artifactual kinds are actually such, at least on this understanding of the term.

In the above quote I indicate the Rowling and van Inwagen cases are surprising for a more general reason: they show “one can make an artifact without intending to make anything of its kind”. Cray agrees the cases show this but argues this is no surprise. He presents three examples designed to show this phenomenon is more common than I have indicated:

ALOOF COOK

Alice intends to make a sandwich. Due to extreme absent-mindedness, she puts a bunch of vegetables in a bowl. She unintentionally creates a salad.

CARELESS POTTER

Carla intends to make a bowl with her pottery wheel. Due to a distraction, she unintentionally creates a plate.

IGNORANT WRITER

Igor intends to write a novel. Unaware his creation is too short to be a novel, he unintentionally creates a novella instead.

Some theorists might reject Cray's descriptions of these cases. Consider ALOOF COOK. Simon Evnine might deny Alice creates a *salad*. He claims one can use something *as* an object of some kind without it actually being of that kind (Evnine 2013, 415). For instance, he claims he could use a sandwich *as* a paperweight (in a desperate attempt to keep papers from blowing away) without the sandwich *being* a paperweight. Likewise, he could say Alice creates a mess—an assortment of vegetables—that she subsequently uses *as* a salad. He could similarly describe the other cases. Perhaps, Carla creates a deformed bowl (or merely arranges the clay into a particular shape) that she uses *as* a plate. Perhaps, Igor creates a deformed novel (or merely a story) that is used or treated *as* a novella. I will not defend these proposals. Still, there is room to argue against Cray's position that the three cases involve generated objects of an unintended ordinary kind.

II. HICP

Cray notes that abstract creationism (as I have characterized it) may be replaced with *abstract generationism*: “the view that fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter, are abstract objects that authors generate”. This is helpful. Authors may create or (as the Rowling case reveals) produce characters. Either way, characters are generated.

Cray turns to the question of when (that is, under what circumstances) authors *produce* characters. He offers a tentative answer:

HICP: A fictional character is produced whenever an author (1) intends to write fiction, and (2) as a causal consequence of that intention, takes actions that would have resulted in the creation of a fictional character were that author to have had the intention to create a fictional character while taking those actions.

HICP stands for “hypothetical intended creation by pretense.”ⁱⁱ The principle is similar to ICP (“intended creation by pretense”):

ICP: A fictional character is created whenever an author intends to create a new fictional character and, as a causal consequence of that intention, pretends to refer to or uniquely identify it” (Brock 2010: 359).

Cray thinks ICP answers the question of when authors *create* characters and, in conjunction with HICP, the more general question of when authors *generate* characters. I have already discussed ICP and Brock’s criticisms of it at length. I will focus here on HICP.

HICP handles Brock's nominalist-Rowling case. Rowling produces Harry Potter. And, in accordance with HICP, she both intends to write fiction and takes actions that would have resulted in the creation of Potter were she to have had the intention to create a fictional character while taking those actions.ⁱⁱⁱ That is, holding everything else about her behavior fixed, she would have *created* Potter and the other characters had she intended to create them.

Here is another illustrative case. Imagine Rowling, solely for the fun of it, arbitrarily punches keys on a computer. Like the proverbial Shakespeare-typing monkeys, she coincidentally types a string of symbols that corresponds to what (in our world) are the words of the Harry Potter novels. Intuitively, Rowling produces no novels or characters. She produces tokens of symbols that an observer (unaware of her arbitrary process) might naturally mistake for a copy of a novel that contains characters. HICP straightforwardly handles this case. For, Rowling does not intend to write fiction. She intends to punch keys arbitrarily for the fun of it, and HICP requires that one intend to write fiction in order to produce characters.

Zsófia Zvolenzsky presents a more challenging case:

“While writing *War and Peace*, Tolstoy was under the mistaken impression that Bolkonsky, like Napoleon, was a real person. Introducing the name ‘Andrei Bolkonsky’ he intended to refer to a historical figure he thought existed” (Zvolenzsky 2015a, 181).

Plausibly, Bolkonsky in this case is not a fictional character. Bolkonsky is instead a *mythical* person, just as the Loch Ness Monster is a mythical monster and Le Verrier's Vulcan is a mythical planet.^{iv} Suppose this is right. The case might seem like a counterexample to HICP. For, (1) Tolstoy intends to write (historical) fiction, and (2) it might seem that had Tolstoy

intended to create a fictional character while introducing the name ‘Andrei Bolkonsky’, then he would have created a fictional character (as opposed to a mythical person). It might seem that, although Tolstoy produces a *mythical* person, HICP entails he produces a *fictional* character.^v

A closer look reveals, however, that HICP does not entail this. For, it is *not* true that, had Tolstoy intended to create a fictional character *while taking the actions he took*, he would have created a fictional character. The actions he actually took did not include pretending to refer to someone when introducing the name ‘Andrei Bolkonsky’. Tolstoy instead pretended certain things were happening to what he believed was a historical person he was using the name ‘Andrei Bolkonsky’ to refer to. Contrast this with nominalist-Rowling who, presumably, despite her nominalism, still pretends she uses ‘Harry Potter’ to refer to a person. For this reason, HICP handles Zvolenzsky’s case.

Given how HICP handles the above cases, it strikes me as at least a good start at explaining when authors produce characters. Perhaps, we can extend it to cover the production of tables, chairs, clocks, and other concreta. It is unclear how this should be done. Here is a first attempt regarding tables:

PRO-TABLE: A table is produced whenever someone takes actions that would have resulted in the creation of a table were that person to have had the intention to create a table while taking those actions.^{vi}

PRO-TABLE handles the case of van Inwagen producing a table. Intuitively, if he were to have intended to create a table, then (holding everything else about his behavior fixed) he would have created a table.

PRO-TABLE, however, is open to counterexamples. Imagine someone creates a piano bench that, as is true of many piano benches, looks like a table. Intuitively, if this person were to have had the intention to create a *table* while taking the same actions, a table would have been created. PRO-TABLE thus entails the person produces a table. But there is no table in this case, produced or otherwise. There is just a table-looking piano bench. This case reflects a general problem raised by similar looking artifacts. We do not want a theory that entails one produces a blanket when creating a curtain that looks like a blanket, or that one produces a vase when creating an umbrella stand that looks like a vase.

It seems we should add a condition to PRO-TABLE analogous to HICP's first condition that states an author must intend to write fiction in order to produce characters. But it is unclear what the analogous condition for tables (and other concreta) should be. We should not state that someone must intend to create tables in order to produce tables, since the whole point of the van Inwagen case is that he does not intend to create tables. In fact, he does not intend to create anything. With this in mind, here is an attempt to fix PRO-TABLE:

PRO-TABLE*: A table is produced whenever someone (1) intends to bring about a result that will serve the same function as a table would, and (2) as a causal consequence of that intention takes actions that would have resulted in the creation of a table were that person to have had the intention to create a table while taking those actions.^{vii}

This seems to handle the van Inwagen case. It seems he intends to bring about a result (namely, simples arranged table-wise) that will serve the same function as a table would (for example, that one can rest objects on the simples as one would with a table). This intention causes him to take

actions (say, carving wood in a certain way) that would have resulted in the creation of a table were he to have had the intention to create a table while taking those actions.

PRO-TABLE*, however, is open to a general problem with functional analyses of artifacts. As Paul Bloom notes, one can create a boat with the desire that it never be placed in water (1996, 5). Likewise, imagine van Inwagen desires the simples arranged table-wise *not* serve a table's function. He desires merely that the simples arranged table-wise impress his friends. Intuitively, he still produces a table. This is a problem for PRO-TABLE*.

I am unsure how to account for the production of tables (and other concreta). HICP suggests that a counterfactual—about whether someone *would* have created a table had they intended to while taking actions they actually took—might play a role. But the counterfactual does not tell the whole story. We are left with a peculiar result. If HICP accounts for the production of characters (I am unsure it does—but it might), and if we do not know how to account for the production of tables and other concreta, then the production of characters, *pace* Brock, might be *less* mysterious than the production of ordinary concreta! Either way, Cray's proposal warrants further consideration for thinking about the production of characters and ordinary concreta.^{viii}

REFERENCES

- Bloom, Paul. 1996. "Intention, History and Artifact Concepts." *Cognition* 60, 1-29.
- Brock, Stuart. 2010. "The Creationist Fiction: The Case Against Creationism about Fictional Characters." *Philosophical Review* 119, 3: 337-364.
- Evnine, Simon. 2013. "Ready-mades: Ontology and Aesthetics." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53, 4: 407-423.

- Evnine, Simon. 2016. *Making Objects and Events: A Hylomorphic Theory of Artifacts, Actions, and Organisms*. Oxford University Press.
- Friedell, David. 2016. "Abstract Creationism and Authorial Intention." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74: 129-137.
- Salmon, Nathan. 2002. "Mythical Objects." In *Meaning and Truth: Investigations in Philosophical Semantics*, edited by Joseph Keim Cambell, Michael O'Rourke, and David Shier, 105-123. New York: Seven Bridges Press.
- Thomasson, Amie L. 2003. "Realism and Human Kinds." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67, 3: 580-609.
- Zvolenzsky, Zsófia. 2015a. "Inadvertent Creation and Fictional Characters." *Organon F* 22: 169-184.
- Zvolenzsky, Zsófia. 2015b. "Artifactualism and Inadvertent Authorial Creation." *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 7: 579-593.

ⁱ Evnine (2016) independently makes this point.

ⁱⁱ As I have learned from hearing Cray say 'HICP' in conversation, it has an awesome pronunciation. It is pronounced like 'hiccup'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brock never specifies that Rowling intends to create fiction, but I agree with Cray that she must have this intention in order for Potter to be a fictional character, as opposed to, say, a mythical person.

^{iv} Zvolensky (2015b, 587) claims Bolkonsky is a fictional character but acknowledges he might instead be a mythical person. See, for instance, Salmon (2002) for general discussion of mythical and fictional objects.

^v I am grateful to Sam Cumming for pushing me to think about this sort of case.

^{vi} PRO-TABLE, like HICP, is about production. Of course, it would be nice to have a story about when tables are *created*. Brock (2010, 259-260) suggests a story that is analogous to ICP: a table

is created whenever someone intends to create a table by performing certain acts (such as, carving wood in a certain way) and as a result of that intention performs those acts.

^{vii} I suggested something similar to the first condition of PRO-TABLE* when I suggested that “van Inwagen makes tables, because he intends, roughly, for people to do the sorts of things that commonly count as using tables—e.g. placing lamps on them, eating meals near them, etc.” (Friedell, 2016).

^{viii} Thanks to Wesley Cray and Sam Cumming for helpful comments and discussion.