

## A Problem for All of Creation

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### *Criticism*

Stuart Brock (2010) argued against abstract creationism about fictional characters: the view that fictional characters are abstract objects that authors create. I defended the view in this journal (Friedell 2016). Undeterred, Brock now criticizes my defense. In doing so he admirably clarifies both of our positions.<sup>1</sup> Here I will bolster my case in light of his comments.

#### I. BROCK'S ROWLING-EXAMPLE

Let's revisit Brock's example involving J.K. Rowling (Brock 2010, 362). Suppose that Rowling, while writing her Harry Potter novels, is a nominalist. She believes there are no fictional characters. In fact, she intends not to make any. Otherwise, she writes her novels normally. Brock claims, and I agree, that abstract creationists should think that Rowling inadvertently creates Harry Potter and other characters. The example thereby refutes a version of abstract creationism, namely the intended creation by pretense view, or ICP for short:

**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).

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<sup>1</sup> Brock, however, misinterprets my principle NOTHING NEW, as I will explain in Section IV.

ICP implies that Rowling creates no characters, because she does not intend to create any. Since abstract creationists should think she creates characters, they should reject ICP. This leaves a mystery: when are fictional characters created? That is, what conditions are necessary and sufficient for someone to create a fictional character? It's hard to say. Brock thinks this is an intractable problem for abstract creationists.

Fear not, abstract creationists! Although I have not solved the mystery, I have given a helpful analogy involving tables (Friedell 2016, 134). Suppose Peter van Inwagen still believes in simples arranged table-wise but does not believe in tables.<sup>2</sup> He may, in trying to merely arrange simples table-wise, inadvertently create tables. This example refutes a version of creationism about tables, namely the intended creation by carpentry view, or ICC for short.

**ICC:** a table is created whenever a person intends to create a table by performing certain acts of carpentry (for instance, carving wood in a certain way) and as a result perform those acts.

The upshot is that, though it is hard to say when characters are created, it is hard to say when tables are created for the same reason.<sup>3</sup> Brock's Rowling-example raises a general problem for artifacts—both abstract and concrete—not a particular problem for characters. So, we shouldn't let the example scare us away from abstract creationism.

## II. BROCK STRIKES BACK

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<sup>2</sup> Van Inwagen (1990) defends this metaphysical view.

<sup>3</sup> Evinne (2016: 144) independently makes this point.

In his reply, Brock argues that the Rowling-example is more threatening than I have acknowledged. His argument runs, roughly, as follows. The Rowling-example shows that it is hard for abstract creationists to say when fictional objects are created. Accordingly, it is hard for abstract creationists to answer questions about the identity and number of fictional objects.<sup>4</sup> Alternative theories give straightforward answers to these questions. For instance, fictionalists think there are none; we merely make-believe there are fictional objects. Some Meinongians think there are infinitely many (non-existing) fictional objects, one for each combination of properties. Brock concludes that we should reject abstract creationism in favor of a theory that answers questions about the identity and number of fictional objects.

I am unconvinced for two reasons. First, the fact that fictionalists and some Meinongians answer questions about the identity and number of fictional objects does not warrant rejecting abstract creationism. Consider an analogous case from epistemology. Thanks to Edmund Gettier (1963), it is notoriously hard to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for having knowledge. Accordingly, it is hard to answer questions about the number of propositions that are known. Unmitigated skeptics, however, give a straightforward answer to the question of how many propositions are known: *none*. But it's not enough to give *an* answer. Unmitigated skeptics must show that their answer, though counterintuitive, is nonetheless appealing. Likewise, Brock must show that an alternative to abstract creationism gives *appealing* answers to questions about the identity and number of fictional objects. Perhaps he can show this, but he hasn't.

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<sup>4</sup> Brock (XXXX) labels these questions "Identity" and "Plenitude". Identity asks, "Under what conditions is a fictional object x identical to a fictional object y?" Plenitude asks, "How abundant is the domain of fictional objects? How many fictional objects are there?"

Second, even if fictionalist or Meinongian theories give appealing answers to the relevant questions, that's still not enough to refute abstract creationism. It's worth emphasizing that the problem raised by the Rowling-example applies to creationism about *tables*. Not ether. Not ghosts. Tables! A problem for ordinary objects—indeed, for all of creation—does not tilt the scales in favor of Meinongianism or fictionalism, even if they are appealing.

Brock ostensibly anticipates this sort of response. He argues the problem raised by the Rowling-example is *not* a problem for tables. He writes:

“[...] I am tempted by the view that the property of being-a-table, is a *functional* kind.

Something is a table, on this view, just in case it has a flat surface, which serves the purpose of resting items used for eating, writing, working, and so forth. It is consistent with this view that tables come into existence in a variety of different ways, some of which involve no agency or intentions. On this view, whether or not a table exists is something that metaphysically depends on the ways it is used (or would be used). This is not an answer a creationist about fictional characters can give.” (Brock, XXXX)

In this passage Brock suggests a functionalist theory of tables. He thinks the theory explains how someone, such as van Inwagen, may inadvertently create tables. He thinks abstract creationists still cannot explain how someone, such as Rowling, may inadvertently create characters. He concludes that abstract creationists are in trouble and that creationists about tables are not.

My main objection to this line of reasoning is that Brock's functionalist theory of tables is false.

This, I take it, is his theory:

**FUNCTION:**  $x$  is a table iff  $x$  has a flat surface that is used, or could be used, for resting items, eating, writing, working, and so forth.

To Brock's credit, FUNCTION handles the van Inwagen-example. FUNCTION implies that van Inwagen creates a table, since he (inadvertently) creates something with a flat surface that is used, or could be used, in the appropriate way. That is the right result. FUNCTION, however, counts too many things as tables. I am resting some speakers and other items on my piano bench. According to FUNCTION, my piano bench is now a table. Maybe that's the right result. I do not know.<sup>5</sup> But it gets worse. My piano bench, according to FUNCTION, has always, for as long as it has existed, been a table. Even when it was not being used in the appropriate way, it *could* have been used in the appropriate way (as evidenced by the fact that it *is* being used in the appropriate way). In fact, every piano bench, every tree stump, every flat rock—no matter whether or how they have been used—is a table, according to FUNCTION. For, they *could* be used in the appropriate way. That is too many tables.

Brock may remove the "or could be used" clause from FUNCTION. This results in FUNCTION\*.

**FUNCTION\*:**  $x$  is a table iff  $x$  has a flat surface that is used for resting items, eating, writing, working, and so forth.

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<sup>5</sup> It is a controversial issue. Judith Jarvis Thomson might think my piano bench is, or constitutes, a table. She claims we may "make a desk out of a table" simply by using it differently (Thomson 1998, 164). Paul Bloom, on the other hand, might deny my piano bench is a table. He claims that sitting on a desk does not turn it into a chair (Bloom 1996, 2).

The problem now is that not enough things count as tables. Some tables sit in storage and are later destroyed, without ever being used in the appropriate way. FUNCTION\* does not count them as tables.

Since Brock has not given an adequate theory of tables, he has not explained how van Inwagen may inadvertently create tables. He has not shown that the Rowling-example raises a particular problem for characters, rather than a general problem for artifacts.

I have another concern with Brock's reasoning. In the passage quoted above he writes: "[W]hether or not a table exists is something that metaphysically depends on the ways it is used (or would be used). *This is not an answer a creationist about fictional characters can give.*" (Brock XXXX, emphasis added). He thereby denies that abstract creationists can give a functionalist theory of characters. Presumably, he thinks this because he thinks that characters, unlike tables, have no characteristic function. It seems to me, however, that characters have a function. Their function is for us to pretend things about them. We pretend, for instance, that Harry Potter is a real wizard who attends boarding school. To be clear, I am not endorsing functionalist theories of tables or characters. I reject FUNCTION for reasons stated above. My point is that, since Brock endorses FUNCTION, he should not be so quick to rule out functionalist theories of characters.

### III. FROM INDIRECT TO AMBITIOUS

Brock (XXXX) correctly takes me to have given what he calls an "indirect response" to his arguments: I have not answered "questions about the abundance of fictional objects, and specific questions about when and how they are created." I have not defended ICP, which would have

been a “direct response”. Nor have I defended a new view about when characters are created, which would have been an “ambitious response”. I have tried to show merely that the Rowling-example, while important, poses no serious threat to abstract creationism.

Where does this leave us? Abstract creationists should work toward an ambitious response. Much of my original discussion argues that ICP is immune to Brock’s other alleged counterexamples (Friedell 2016, 130-133). Perhaps, a theory in the vicinity of ICP—but designed to handle the Rowling-example—will ultimately work out. Wesley Cray (XXXX) suggests a variant of ICP along these lines. Either way, Brock has given us a goal: to discern how people may inadvertently make characters, tables, and other kinds of object that are often intentionally made. I encourage any metaphysician who thinks there are artifacts, abstract or concrete, to grapple with this issue. I know I will.

#### IV. NOT MUCH NEW ABOUT NOTHING NEW

I will close with some comments on my principle NOTHING NEW. Brock errs while discussing it. I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify it here. Here is the principle:

**NOTHING NEW:** Generally, when a fiction’s author intends for a property to be ascribed to a particular preexistent character—whether that character is originally from that work or another—the author represents that character without creating a new one. (Friedell 2016, 135).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The principle is inspired by a similar suggestion made by Amie Thomasson (1999, 67-69).

This is a rule of thumb that holds in most cases. I intended for it to explain away two of Brock's alleged counterexamples: his Jekyll/Hyde and Holmes/Watson examples (Brock 2010, 360-362).

Brock gives a variant of an example that Zsófia Zvolenszky (2016, 319) gives:

"[...] Tolstoy while writing *Anna Karenina*, was under the mistaken impression that Anna was a character in *Middlemarch*, created by George Elliot just a few years before. Let us suppose, contrary to fact, that when Tolstoy introduced of the name 'Anna Karenina,' he intended to refer to a pre-existing fictional character." (Brock, XXXX).

Brock thinks that abstract creationists should think that Tolstoy inadvertently creates Anna. He concludes the example is thereby a counterexample to NOTHING NEW.

Since NOTHING NEW is a mere rule of thumb, it is fine if there are some cases where it gets the wrong result. Even setting aside that caveat, NOTHING NEW is consistent with Brock's example. Here's why. NOTHING NEW should be interpreted *de re*. It means the following:

Generally, for any pre-existent character C and for any fiction's author A, if A intends for a property to be ascribed to C, then A represents C without creating a new character.

Although Brock correctly notes that Tolstoy intends *de dicto* to ascribe a property to a pre-existent character, Tolstoy does not intend this *de re*. That is, there is no pre-existent character C to whom Tolstoy intends for a property to be ascribed. Tolstoy has the false belief that there is a pre-existent character he is writing about. Thus, NOTHING NEW does not predict that nothing

new is made in this example. NOTHING NEW is perfectly consistent with Tolstoy (inadvertently) creating Anna.<sup>7 8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> There is a further question about whether Anna in this example is a fictional character or a *mythical* fictional character, but that is beside the point; whatever she is, she is not a *pre-existent* fictional character. See Salmon (2002) for discussion of mythical objects.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Stuart Brock and Elliot Paul for helpful comments and discussion.

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