Is Abstract Artefact Theory a Plausible Version of Realism About Fictional Characters?
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pp. 59-68
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Recently a friend and I found ourselves in a discussion about the character of Del-boy from the fiction of "Only Fools and Horses". We found ourselves discussing Del-boy's many characteristics and properties, from his infamous limited grasp of the French language to his various trading exploits throughout Peckham. However, Del-boy is a fictional character who seemingly doesn't exist. So how can it be that I appear to be able to seriously refer to something, or perhaps someone, that is non-existent? This is a familiar puzzle to those within the field of metaphysics and is known as the Puzzle of Non-existence. Namely this is the puzzle of how we can appear to genuinely refer to, and seriously discuss, entities that are fictional and as a result seemingly non-existent. How can it be that we in everyday discussion refer to entities that appear to be non-existent?

I will argue that Abstract Artefact theory, a variety of Realism about fictional characters – the view that fictional characters such as Del-boy really do exist and therefore can be genuinely referred to just like me, you, laws and mortgages - is not a plausible version of realism. Abstract Artefact theory, or Creationism as it is often coined, being the view which holds fictional characters exist as "abstract artefacts" that come into existence as a result of their respective authors creating them. I will argue that Creationism is not plausible as it implies fictional characters exist as some form of fictional bare particulars, as a result of the theory's reliance on the problematic notion of "property association". This leads to an issue of not being able to identify unique fictional characters as well as not being able to distinguish them from other fictional characters. I then consider Thomasson's proposed conditions for identifying/distinguishing characters and argue that they are non-plausible as they go against the very nature of fiction itself and cannot deal with problem cases such as "fictional fusion" cases.

This essay will be concerned with a metaphysically motivated analysis of the Creationist view, and will therefore deal with ontological matters rather than matters concerning semantics or reference. I will therefore proceed with one fundamental referential assumption. This being that:

"For any fictional character x along with x's various properties/exploits, x can be genuinely or seriously referred to if and only if x really exists".

I will concern myself with addressing the status of "x's" proposed existence rather than the matter of how reference to "x" would operate. Although there is certainly something to be said about a referential or language based approach when discussing the Puzzle of Non-existence or fictional characters and the matter of their existence (or lack thereof), it will not be pursued at any greater length in this paper.
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Creationism and Abstract Artefacts

Abstract Artefact theory, or Creationism as it will be referred to here, is one of the most widely-held and discussed contemporary views within the metaphysics of fiction. Brock has loosely (and hopefully not too seriously) likened this view to Theological Creationism. However, instead of God creating the world and its contents, it is literary creators and their respective actions that create fictional characters and bring them into existence. Creationism holds that authors create fictional characters when they first produce the relevant literary works that the relevant characters are initially mentioned in. It is often thought that Creationism introduces “imaginary people” into our ontology; however, it seeks to instead posit the existence of contingently created entities that ontologically depend on particular actions, literary communities and concrete objects for their continued existence - this matter of ontological dependence will be looked at in more detail later. Amie Thomasson, a supporter of Creationism and perhaps the views most ardent defender in contemporary discussion has claimed that ‘fictional names are used seriously to refer to fictional characters’, meaning that their creation brings with it their literal existence. As a result this allows such entities to be seriously referred to qua our initial referential assumption. But in what sense do these created entities exist? According to Thomasson “they are (existent) abstract artefacts” that exist “within a certain tradition”. The terms “cultural” and “tradition” are often mentioned within discussion of Creationism, by these aforementioned terms Thomasson can be viewed as claiming that fictional characters exist in a manner akin to other abstract artefacts like interest rates in Non-Sharia banking systems. Let us look back at Del-boy, in what sense can he then be said to exist? Del-boy is fictionally a freelance trader, however really he is a fictional character or an abstract artefact who cannot trade with you – as despite your desire to purchase faulted Russian video cameras at the Peckham market from him, unfortunately for you he is an abstract artefact who is incapable of trading with a seemingly concrete artefact such as yourself.

These entities are also “abstract” meaning that they are non-concrete in their nature and are not found located within space or time like chairs, arachnids or human beings. They are also “cultural artefacts” in the sense that they exist as cultural creations in the same way that the U.S. Constitution or mortgages exist. Although fictional characters are abstract they are crucially different to the likes of Platonic abstracta, which often come to mind when thinking of abstract objects such as universal properties, since abstract artefacts are created as opposed to discovered. Instead of this Platonic process of discovering necessarily existing abstract universal properties like redness, the Creationist view holds that fictional characters exist contingently and therefore can cease to exist. What the process of creation for fictional characters involves is a disputed matter amongst Creationism advocates. Thomasson’s account of the creation process simply holds that fictional characters are created as a result of the intentional mental acts of their respective authors, who create literary works that are then read by a literary community of whom have the relevant language ability and cognitive faculties to understand such works. The character is then taken to exist as long as the works

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1 (Brock, 2010), p. 337.
2 (Thomasson, 2003), p. 205.
3 (Thomasson, 1999), pp. 5-23.
5 (Thomasson, 1999), pp. 5-23.
and relevantly able community exists, hence it exists contingently. For example, as long as there remains at least one copy of Irvine Welsh’s “Trainspotting” as well as the relevantly abled literary community to understand the work then the abstract artefact of Mark Renton exists and will only cease to exist once the aforementioned copy and community cease to exist or understand such a literary work. The same can then also be said for Del-boy and the other characters that appear in “Only Fools and Horses” amongst other various fictions.

It will now be useful for us to look at the aforementioned ontological dependence relation between fictional characters and literary works prior to looking at an argument against the view. Thomasson elaborates that the character is “rigidly and historically” dependent on the relevant literary works it appears in. Such dependence is “rigid” as characters are dependent on the specific intentional mental acts of their respective authors to come into existence. It is also a “historical” dependence as character depends on the continued existence of said literary works and the able community to remain in existence. Fictional characters therefore depend on the existence of literary works just as the U.S. Constitution depends on the relevant regulations, paperwork and legal processes.

The Creationist view is rather attractive prima facie, as it seems to fall in line with our common belief that fictional characters are created entities that have certain properties relative to the fiction. It also rules out cases of accidental or unintentional fiction such as the infamous chimp case where it is said that if we place an infinite amount of chimps into a room with infinite typewriters, they will eventually replicate the entire works of Shakespeare. Creationism rules out such cases since chimps would seemingly lack the intentional mental acts or able community that is required to bring such characters into existence. Whether it is problematic for non-human organisms to create abstract artefacts is, however, another matter.

Creationism is likely to be the most similar metaphysical stance to that of the common person’s stance on fictional characters. In most areas of fiction related discussion we more than often find ourselves treating fictional characters as creations, and if we were to push the common person into telling us how such entities were created it is likely that they would also appeal to the likes of literary works, mental acts of authors and literary communities. It is a view that everyday language, thought and discussion supports. For instance, we typically speak of Shakespeare creating characters such as Macbeth and for the most part regard him as a literary great, by virtue of the compelling fictional characters that he created. The separation of Creationism from the common person’s stance, comes when such characters are taken to really exist, therefore entering realist territory. So although the common person may agree with the spirit of Creationism, it is doubtful that they will fully commit to its realist conclusion. In summary Creationism is the view that fictional characters are literally created by their authors and continue to exist relative to certain dependence conditions, therefore they can be genuinely referred to – the Puzzle of Non-existence now appears to be swept away to one side.

6 (Thomasson, 1999), pp. 5-23.
7 Thomasson, 1999), pp. 24-34.
Identification, “Property Association” and Fusion Cases

I will now argue that Creationism is not a plausible version of realism as it implies that fictional characters exist as fictional bare particulars, of which leads to an issue of identifying and distinguishing between characters. Furthermore, this raises questions as to how, if at all, characters are related to their ascribed properties. I will then look at Thomasson’s view of “property association” and her proposed conditions for identifying and distinguishing characters. I will also look at a unique case of “fictional fusion” and argue that Thomasson cannot account for such a case, which given the very nature of fiction, is problematic.

It would appear that the Creationist view avoids any issue of character identification altogether, meaning that we can simply refer to a particular fictional character or abstract artefact “x” without confusing it with any other fictional character “y”, as they would differ in their respective properties, creators and works that they appear in. When we discuss Del-boy’s various exploits and properties there is no question as to which Del-boy we are referring to. It would simply be the case that I am referring to “The Del-boy character that John Sullivan created in the latter half of the 20th century” or something along these lines whenever I refer to Del-boy. However, the Creationist view is not exempt from issues of character identification or distinguishing fictional characters from one another and it is these issues that I will argue to render Creationism as a non-plausible version of realism.

Consider this example of identifying a particular object - in this case a concrete object. We typically identify a particular arachnid specimen, and therefore distinguish it from non-arachnid specimens by virtue of a particular specimen having such properties that are essential for it being an arachnid; call these “essential arachnid properties”. A particular arachnid specimen “x’s” holding of the essential arachnid properties “F” (such as having eight legs, being an arthropod, and so on so forth) serve as conditions we use to determine whether x is an arachnid or not. The upshot of this is that a particular specimen’s possession of the essential arachnid properties is used to identify which specimens are arachnids and to then distinguish them from non-arachnids. For instance; suppose that I am crossing the arid drylands of Chile without having ever observed an arachnid specimen yet I however have a firm grasp of what the essential arachnid properties and therefore know the particular features a specimen must have to be an arachnid. Imagine I then come across a particular creature crawling past my feet. I begin to then check that the creature has eight legs, is an arthropod and so on so forth. I then identify the particular creature as an arachnid qua its possession of the essential arachnid properties and proceed to reasonably conclude that this is an arachnid specimen. This may seem rather tedious. The key idea we should take from this being that we appear to identify and distinguish particular objects from other kinds of objects qua their possession of the respective properties they hold – the fact that a particular object “x” is an F, or Fx, is determined by x really possessing the relevant features that make it an F – as seen in this arachnid case.

This seemingly works fine for concrete particulars like scorpions, tarantulas or harvestmen. However, if we look at how a Creationist could lay out such conditions for identifying fictional characters, by virtue of their held properties, then this becomes problematic. The reason for this being that Creationism claims characters do not really have such properties as those mentioned in literary works. So although Del-boy is a trader relative to the fiction, he doesn’t
really have the property of being a trader as he is an abstract artefact that is incapable of holding such a property - only a concrete entity could be a trader. A Creationist view maintains that there is no “intimate” or formal relationship between a character and its ascribed properties. Thomasson acknowledges this and claims that there is some form of “association” between a character and its ascribed properties although it doesn’t really have or possess such properties in the same way that say a scorpion really holds the essential arachnid properties.

I find Thomasson’s comments unhelpful, as they appeal to a notion of “property association” that poses more questions than it provides resolutions. A particular’s holding of a property is not a borderline notion. Rather, it is black and white, in the sense that either a particular entity possesses a property, or else it lacks that same property. The chair I am currently sitting on either has the property of being wooden, or it doesn’t. The idea of some mid-ground of “association” where the character doesn’t really hold properties but at the same time isn’t completely exempt from them either is deeply mysterious or a notion that Creationism fails to sufficiently address.

This is problematic; as any particular which is exempt from any properties is taken to be a bare particular. The existence of bare particulars is ontologically controversial on the grounds that it is simply difficult, if not impossible, to think of a particular of which has no properties. Try thinking of the aforementioned chair and start to slowly remove all of its related properties such as its woodenness and four-leggedness. What, if anything at all would be left here? What would a bare particular be like? Concrete bare particulars are questionable enough as it stands; as to what a fictional or non-concrete bare particular would actually be like is far more puzzling and mysterious. Suppose that we take Del-boy and strip him of his ascribed fictional properties such as his wearing of a gold ring, his location in Peckham and so on in a similar manner to my chair. What would be left? Like in the case of a concrete bare particular seemingly nothing would be left. But if fictional characters are then just numerically different fictional bare particulars then what would make Rodney, Del-boy’s half-brother, different from Del-boy if they are both property-less? It is problematic then as to how we can at least qualitatively and not just numerically, although even this appears difficult (as quantifying nothingness isn’t an easy task so I’m told), distinguish between different fictional characters. Since Creationism seeks to establish that authors create different and unique characters to whom we then make reference to, this is a problem that requires addressing in order for Creationism to be a plausible version of realism.

Goodman appears to anticipate this sort of issue, and comments that ‘All talk here of ‘adding’ or ‘attaching’ properties is, of course, metaphorical. But I simply do not know how to speak literally. What is meant here is just what is meant when I say I ‘added’ the property of redness to my chair by painting it red’. Although it is not necessarily clear what Goodman means here, given my interpretation he takes this discussion of properties to be a linguistically related matter. It is simply the case that we have no other way to discuss property association without literally speaking about

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8 (Van Inwagen, 1977).
9 (Thomasson, 1999), pp. 55-70.
10 (Goodman, 2004), p.145.
something really having properties. Goodman seems to also anticipate that Creationism seems to posit the existence of fictional bare particulars, as he makes mention of a 'bare abstractrum which holds the property of being fictional just as a chair holds the property of being red'.

However, it is rather unclear what Goodman seeks to develop from this in terms of identifying or distinguishing characters. This still wouldn’t help us in terms of individuating Del-boy from Rodney, since they would both be “bare abstractum” or bare particulars and identical by virtue of their absence of any truly held properties, they would therefore be indistinguishable. This is implausible as it entails that if Del-Boy and Rodney are indistinguishable then how would we know that we are referring to Del-boy and not to Rodney, or to any other fictional bare particular or abstract artefact for that matter? The answer would appear to be that we would have no means of knowing that we are referring to Del-boy and not Rodney, this is problematic on the grounds that we would want a plausible version of realism to be able to provide an account of what differentiates Dracula from Tom Sawyer.

However, Thomasson does provide us with some conditions for identifying whether two characters within the same literary work are identical or not as she provides both a formulated sufficient condition as well as a necessary condition—a sort of fictional variety of Leibniz’s Identity of Indiscernibles. Supposing that fictional characters are some form of “bare abstractum” then the question lies as to how Del-boy is different from Rodney if they are both fictional bare abstractum with no truly held properties. Thomasson’s proposed sufficient condition for identification can be characterised as follows:

“x and y are the same fictional object F if x and y are ascribed exactly the same properties in the work”

Thomasson comments from this that ‘we require that x and y are ascribed exactly the same properties only so that we can distinguish different characters that appear in the same literary work’. For example, the ascribed properties of Jekyll being the same as Hyde’s and Hyde’s ascribed properties being the same as Jekyll’s is a sufficient condition for us to reasonably conclude that Jekyll is Hyde. It is further claimed by Thomasson that although this is not a necessary condition for distinguishing between characters within the same work, this sufficient condition would be enough to reasonably conclude that Del-boy isn’t identical to Rodney and that they are then distinguishable. Thomasson’s intuitive reasoning behind this being that if two things are non-identical then this entails that they are distinguishable. However, as this isn’t a necessary condition it doesn’t guarantee such a conclusion, instead it provides us with sufficient justification to reasonably conclude such. Thomasson therefore aims to resolve the problem of identifying and distinguishing characters by looking at their associated properties as they are ascribed in the works that they appear in. This does however beg the question as to what exactly this relation of “property association” is. As although these works may specify that characters have such properties, we are told that it is false that they...
really have these properties and that instead they are somehow "associated" with their
ascribed properties. Again this appeals to a notion of property "association" which is
mysterious and requires more elaboration by Thomasson.

Let us suppose that Thomasson can provide a functional sufficient condition for
distinguishing characters in this case and that the notion of "property association" is plausible.
Let us now consider a more difficult case. How then could we account for cases where the
same character appears in multiple works, perhaps with different associated properties? For
instance, Del-boy first appears as an adult male in "Only Fools and Horses", however in the later
created prequel "Rock and Chips" he appears as an adolescent male. This would look like a
case where the author intends to import a character from one work into another. In such a
case Thomasson can only provide a necessary condition. This being a necessary condition as
opposed to a sufficient condition on the grounds that if the associated properties were
"radically different" then the importation wouldn't be successful regardless of the author's
intentions, think of this as a sort of bi-conditional relation:16

"x and y are the same fictional object only if the author of the second work W * is
competently acquainted with x of the previous work W, and intends to import x into W * as
y"

Although this can account for the same character appearing in multiple works - such as Del-
boy's importation into the prequel of Rock and Chips given that the script writer is
"competently acquainted" with Del-boy's associated properties in Only Fools and Horses - it is
an unnatural implication for fiction. I say this in the sense that it imposes a strict condition or
limitation on fictional characters appearing in multiple works even if they do have "radically
different" properties. The idea of there being such a strict condition imposing itself on the
abilities or intentions of authors that limits what they can create, or articulate, within fiction
looks wrong. Given the nature of fiction shouldn't authors simply be allowed to do what they
want as it were? Shouldn't an author be able to import the same character from one literary
work into another even if the character radically differs in its properties? Surely the boundless
and open nature of fiction would permit this. To illustrate this limitation of authorial creative
control as well as to demonstrate that Thomasson cannot account for "fusion" cases; consider
a hopefully familiar but reconstructed example:

"Suppose that in the fiction "The Fly" or W, the literary work ends when Brundle, x, steps
into one biological fusion pod and the common house fly, y, hovers into a second biological
fusion pod. Now suppose that in a separate work by a different creator "The Fly 2" or W *, the
literary work opens or begins at the exact point where the fusion pods have been activated
and the hybrid "Brundle Fly" or z, emerges from the machine"

In the linearity of the whole "The Fly" fiction or franchise we have x and y from W fusing to
become z in W *. However, it should be noted that there is no genuine or at least relevant
linearity here since these are - at least as far as we are supposing - two distinct works which
were made at distinct different times by different creators. Brundle Fly is the fictional fusion
of Brundle and the common house fly and is therefore the fusion of their respective properties

Is Abstract Artefact Theory a Plausible version of Realism about Fictional Characters?

that are depicted in W. However, Brundle Fly is radically different to both the house fly and Brundle as within the fiction Brundle Fly is a biological anomaly. It is a physical monstrosity, a biological anomaly that is unrecognisable to both x and y despite being the sole fusion of x’s and y’s properties, it bears no tangible resemblance to either a common house fly nor an adult male particle physicist such as Brundle.17 It would appear obvious then, that in some sense x and y are imported into W * and somehow live on through the unrecognisable amalgamation of Brundle Fly. Yet given z’s radical difference to both x and y, Thomasson’s necessary condition would conclude that they are not imported due to their radically different properties to z. They therefore fail to satisfy this necessary condition. However, this is problematic as z is said in W * to be the sole hybrid of x and y and not a distinctly created entity. Instead it is the fusion of two previously created fictional entities. Despite this, Thomasson’s condition would treat z as a uniquely created character despite z being the sole fusion of x and y, as opposed to some new creation due to z’s “radical difference” to both x and y.

Thomasson’s account then cannot deal with problem cases like this fusion case. But why should this be problematic in the first place you may ask? As previously mentioned given the very nature of fiction as an imaginative wonderland where authors are defined and valued by their non-restricted ability to create and do as they please with fictional characters, there is something inherently wrong about Thomasson imposing such limitations on character importation and the actions of authors in general. The providing of conditions within the realm of fiction simply looks to be wrongly placed. Perhaps such conditions are more aptly placed when providing an account of how one may distinguish concrete particulars from each other-such as arachnids from non-arachnids - than they are in discussion of abstract artefacts.

Takashi Yagisawa has noted that there is simply no way to discuss fictional characters and fiction in general without the entailment of non-existence.18 From this it could then be argued that Creationism and realism about fictional characters in general cannot do justice to the open and boundless nature of fiction. Creationism here attempts to treat fictional characters in a similar manner to concrete objects, which leads to the providing of unnatural conditions in order to deal with problems of identifying and distinguishing characters. It further cannot deal with fusion cases and imposes unnatural conditions onto the abilities of authors, of which runs in juxtaposition to the nature of fiction.

To sum up, the two issues that we have looked at here are; first that x and y are said to not be imported into W * despite z being the sole fusion of x and y. This would be a case of fusion rather than creation, yet Thomasson implies it is a case of the latter. The other issue, that Thomasson’s conditions seem to unnaturally impose on the open and wild nature of fiction, which simply looks wrong and for lack of a better term “un-fictional”. Why can’t literary creators freely import, create or fuse characters together, surely the boundless nature of fiction should allow for this? In summary Creationism is too mysterious to be a plausible version of realism. I mean this in the sense that it appeals to “property association” without

17 For a useful illustration of this see Brundle Fly as depicted in Cronenberg’s production of “The Fly” as opposed to the rather comical depiction found in Neumann’s.
sufficient explanation as to what this really is. It also implies that fictional characters may exist as fictional bare particulars, which is problematic for distinguishing characters.

Moreover, Thomasson’s proposed conditions to resolve this issue render Creationism as a view that is out of touch with the very nature of fiction.

**Final Considerations, a Meinongian Solution?**

Perhaps the most glaring issue faced by Creationism and realism about fictional characters in general has been noted by Yagisawa, in that there is simply no way that a fictional character could exist as the claim that something is fictional entails it’s non-existence. It is simply incorrect to say that a fictional character really exists given the very nature of fiction.\(^\text{19}\) Existence and fiction are just incompatible by virtue of their contrasting natures – ‘there is no way to understand the fictionality of fictional individuals without making them non-existent’.\(^\text{20}\)

Although this may render Creationism as a non-plausible version of realism, this doesn’t necessarily entail that there is no plausible version of realism about fictional characters. Meinongianism is a version of realism which holds that since non-existent objects such as fictional characters can be and are seriously referred to: they then "subsist" as non-existent objects and have properties such as those depicted within literary works.\(^\text{21}\) In short according to a Meinongian view fictional characters exist as non-existent yet subsistent objects within some realm or world of non-existent or impossible objects. If we believe Yagisawa to be correct in claiming that there is no plausible way to understand the existence of fictional characters without making them non-existent – and as I believe my argument against Creationism to support - then it is possible that Meinongianism may be a plausible version of realism since it appeals to subsistence rather than existence. However, this possibility will not be pursued to any length here. I do not appear any further forward in deciding on the nature of Del-boy’s existence, yet his supposed exploits continue to amuse me nonetheless.

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References


